

“I Wish That He Hit Me”:

**The Experiences of People Who Have Been Psychoemotionally Abused and have
Psychoemotionally Abused Others**

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Abstract

Methods of psychological and emotional abuse have typically been studied either independently or interchangeably. This research implemented a critical community psychology framework to address them together under the notion of psychoemotional abuse and develop a conceptual model that was grounded in 20 participants' experiences of perpetrating and receiving various forms of psychoemotional abuse. The model depicted a psychoemotionally abusive relationship as one that was characterised across four dimensions by an insecure social environment, an unequal balance of power, disrespectful attitudes and self-serving behaviour.

The participants' experiences were also employed to categorise five distinct patterns of psychoemotional abuse: withdrawal, oppression, restriction, disintegration and abuse through a secondary source. The motives that propelled each pattern are examined in detail. While the participants disclosed that two of every three psychoemotionally abusive incidents occurred in their homes, they also received and perpetrated psychoemotional abuse in various roles across a range of public places.

A strengths-based approach was used to investigate methods the participants adopted to withstand, resist and protect themselves from psychoemotional abuse and stop themselves from abusing others. The research developed a series of pragmatic models for practitioners and concluded that a multi-layered mix of interventions is required to prevent psychoemotional abuse and minimise its harm. While individual and small group strategies remain essential, a range of broader social, cultural and

political factors that inadvertently excuse many incidents of psychoemotional abuse also need to be remedied.

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

I, Peter John Streker, declare that the PhD thesis entitled “I Wish That He Hit Me” is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

Date

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I also owe a large debt of gratitude to the staff at Victoria University who have kept community psychology alive as an academic pursuit in Australia. The skills I have learned from my studies there have proved extremely valuable to my work.

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List of Publications and Awards

Curnow, R., Streker, P. & Williams, E. (1998). *Male Adolescent Sex Offending and Treatment Literature Review*. Melbourne: Juvenile Justice

Grace, C. & Streker, P. (1998). *Domestic Violence as a Community Safety issue: The Central Role of Networks and Partnerships in Local Action*. Paper presented at World Health Organization conference on International Healthy Cities, June , 1998, Athens, Greece.

Streker, P (2001) *Too Close to Home: The Politics of Psychological and Emotional Abuse*. Conference Paper at the 7th Trans-Tasman Conference in Community Psychology. April, 2001, Melbourne, Australia.

Streker, P. (2001). Moving beyond Libraries and Dog Licences: How Local Governments are addressing problematic drug use among the homeless and roofless. *Parity*, 14(8), 83-84

Streker, P. (2005). Getting out of Power Struggles. In: N. Belfrage (ed.) *Journeys in Fatherhood: An Anthology* (pp. 112-120). Richmond, Australia: No To Violence

Streker, P. (2006). *Learning to Grin and Bear It: Nurturing a social movement of neighbourhood friendliness from the footpath up*. Paper presented at the 10th Trans-Tasman Conference in Community Psychology, April, 2006, Sydney, Australia.

Streker, P., Curnow, R., Broders, M, London, Z., Fiala, N., O'Donnell, K & Krautschnedier, A. (1996). *Personally Speaking: Moving to a Better Service System for People with Severe or Borderline Personality Disorder & Substance Use*. Melbourne: Author

Wood, B. & Streker, P. (2005) Municipal dimensions and opportunities for improving food security in an urban area. *Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 14, 38.

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Wood, B. & Streker, P. (2006). Identifying food security dimensions for creative and sustainable communities. *Nutrition and Dietetics* 63(1), A55

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Psychological and emotional abuse is a slippery concept, both in theory and in practice. Despite the finding of many researchers that psychological and emotional abuse is the most prevalent and one of the most damaging forms of interpersonal abuse (Arias & Pape, 1999; Brassard & Hardy, 1996; Burks, 2006; Dutton, Goodman & Bennett, 1999; Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Hart & Brassard, 1992; Jory & Anderson, 1999; Matud, 2007; Outlaw, 2009), they are also generally understood to be the most under-acknowledged, under-reported and least researched types of abuse (Berzenski & Yates, 2010; Glaser, 2002; Hamerman & Ludwig, 2000; Hart & Brassard, 1992; Iwaniec, Larkin & McSherry, 2007; Jewkes, 2010; Loue, 2005; O’Leary, 1999; Street & Arias, 2001; Tomison & Tucci, 1997; Trickett, Mennen, Kim & Sang, 2009).

However, this position has begun to change (Brassard, Hart & Hardy, 1993; Chamberland, Laporte & Lavergne, 2005), as the seriousness of psychological and emotional abuse has been recognised by an increasing number of researchers and practitioners (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2005; Lewis, Griffing & Chu, 2006; O’Leary, 1999; Tomison & Tucci, 1997; Wathen & MacMillan, 2003). Indeed, Glaser (2002, p. 710) stated that “[t]he cumulative list of difficulties found in children subjected to emotional abuse and neglect reads like an index of a child psychiatric textbook." Some researchers estimated that these forms of abuse are up to five times more prevalent than physical abuse in the communities they studied (Brassard & Hardy, 1996). Others now regard psychological and emotional forms of abuse as a central component of all abuses (Hart, Brassard & Binggeli,

2002). These types of abuse appear to have a critical role in the development of psychological and emotional ill-effects in all other forms of abuse and exert a powerful influence before, during and after the process of other abusive acts (Garbarino, Eckenrode & Bolger, 1996; Eyo, 2006; Sanders & Becker-Lausen, 1995; Tomison & Tucci, 1997; Tueth, 2000). For example, Henning and Klesges (2003) found that 80% of the 3370 of the women they sampled who appeared before US courts after being physically assaulted by their partners had been previously psychologically abused by them as well. Psychological abuse had occurred in 93% of the women who had been assaulted more than once. Some suspect that psychological and emotional abuse are becoming more popular means of establishing power and control over others, as sanctions against physical abuse become more widespread (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Sears, Byers & Whelan, 2006).

The recent attention paid to psychological and emotional abuse does not mean that these issues have only just been recognised (Follingstad, 2007). They have often emerged as core themes in relationship counselling and have been indirectly referred to in the texts of psychoanalysts and developmental psychologists for decades (Klosinski, 1993). For much longer, they have been cloaked as constructs such as being cruel, rude, coercive, teasing, humiliating, bullying, insulting, harassing and shaming; and colloquially understood in phrases such as “mind games”, “brainwashing”, “put-downs”, “the cold shoulder” and “the silent treatment”.

I became aware of the potency of psychological and emotional abuse while I was co-facilitating groups that aimed to stop men behaving violently or abusively towards members of their family. During discussions I had with the group members’

partners and ex-partners, I became reasonably confident that the men’s behaviour change groups helped many men reduce or stop perpetrating physical abuse against others; although I was less sure that the levels of psychological and emotional abuse reduced in similar proportions. I searched for research and practical information to help me address these forms of abuse and found little assistance.

In another context, I listened to episodes of psychological and emotional abuses pervade thousands of narratives from women and men who experienced difficulties with their drug use. The following powerful example, was recounted by a man in his early 40s who was repeatedly arrested for stealing bottles of methylated spirits or cans of aerosol spray (usually fly spray) from local supermarkets and consuming the substances until he became unconscious:

When I was six, dad used to come home drunk from the pub, wake me up, get me out of bed and chase me around the house with his shotgun.

I can still remember running, screaming through the paddocks when it was pitch black, with dad shining his spotlight on me, shooting just over my head.

I used to hide in the bush until he had gone. Then I would sneak back to the house, watch him through the window and wait for him to pass out.

Other people told me that they felt as if they were under psychological siege 24 hours per day, everyday. One woman, who turned to alcohol to cope with the impact of an ex-boyfriend’s treatment, described her experience in the following words:

He kept at me like a woodpecker. Constantly. Peck, peck, pecking away. All the time. It was like he was chipping off pieces of who I was.

I was trying to gather the pieces together, but as I was picking the pieces up off the ground, he was on my back still pecking away. Even when he wasn’t there, he was still in my head. I just couldn’t escape him.

When I reflected on my own personal life, I realised that I also harboured experiences in the roles of both perpetrator and victim of psychological and emotional abuse in a broad range of settings. Indeed, I am now aware that while I was a young boy growing up in a working class culture, psychological abuse was one of the most dominant methods of communication used within my peer group.

The further I extended my professional and personal investigation into this phenomenon, the more I realised how prevalent and prominent experiences of psychological and emotional abuses were within many people’s lives. I was also surprised at how often these experiences were covered up and concealed. People often remarked on how they had not been able to share these experiences with others.

Yet, the body of research typically focused on psychological and emotional abuse committed on and by a narrow spectrum of the population, namely, those involved with family violence and child abuse services.

This research aims to provide a fresh perspective on this ancient topic by exploring the perspectives of a range of people who have been abused or have abused others in this manner, or who have worked with people in either of these categories. It will attempt to contextualise these understandings within considerations of the broader social and cultural constructs that support, maintain or deter psychological and emotional abuse.

The first part of the title of this thesis, “I Wish That He Hit Me”, was extracted from a quote offered by a female participant in this study as she explained that it would have been easier for her to seek help and validation if she had been physically assaulted. This comment represented an emblematic experience of many of the participants and does not intend to represent the scope of all of the relationship types studied in this research, such as abuse against women in heterosexual relationships or men in homosexual relationships. The scope of psychoemotional abuse studied in this thesis was not confined exclusively to intimate relationships.

A Note on the Terminology used in this Thesis

This study focused on the phenomenon variously known as psychological abuse and emotional abuse in the psychological literature. The term “psychoemotional abuse” was coined in this thesis to describe them as a united

concept. However, specific terms are used when referring to their use in original studies to maintain the author’s intent and context. More detail on the rationale for this is explained in the literature review.

Terms such as “domestic violence”, “family violence”, “violence against women” and “intimate partner violence” have also been used differently throughout the body of literature to describe violence that occurs in people’s own homes or between people in intimate relationships. Each carries slightly different political connotations that appeal to different audiences. Domestic violence describes the location of the violence, while family violence broadens the net a little wider to capture violence that occurs among family members who do not necessarily cohabitate, such as violence committed against elderly parents or former spouses. Violence against women was introduced to specify the gendered patterns of violence and more recently “intimate partner violence” has emerged to focus on violence between adults in an intimate relationship together, that include couples attracted to the same sex and dating couples who do not live together.

The concept of “family violence” is used throughout this thesis to describe psychoemotional abuse that occurred among all family members. Even though all of the participants in this study identified that they were involved with intimate heterosexual relationships at some time, this study uses the term “family violence” to include same sex couples and their children. The term “family violence” is predominantly used to describe the therapeutic programs that half of the participants were recruited from. The thesis covers psychoemotionally abusive acts that occurred beyond the family violence realm, such as abuse at work and in the public domain.

Similar political debates have been held to describe the people who have received family violence from others and who have used it against others. Some argue that a “victim” is an appropriate term for a recipient of family violence as it signifies that they had no choice in the matter. Others have argued that “victim” implies passivity and the term “survivor” should be preferred to recognise that they successfully withstood the abuse. Some researchers use the term “target” as a more objective attempt to describe the behaviour of the person who uses the abuse; although this could be interpreted by others as dehumanising. Other researchers have attempted similar goals, using the slightly more humane “recipient”; although that too may offend some who think that notion implies that there has been some cooperation on the part of the “victim/survivor/target.” There is a contrasting debate on the other side surrounding the use of terms such as “perpetrator”, “deliverer”, “offender” and “abuser”.

This thesis employs a mixture of these expressions throughout the following pages for two main reasons. First, I believe that certain expressions suit some contexts better than others and that they can all be used respectfully if applied sensitively and accurately in specific contexts. For example, the concept of victim may be used to highlight an experience of being avalanched by abuse; whereas the use of the term survivor may be better suited to a passage on the person’s process of recovery. Secondly, I mixed the terms to avoid the monotonous repetition of the same phrases throughout the thesis. The range of terms enabled more flexibility in the writing and more capacity to use the terms in a finely-tuned manner when it suited the context.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Conceptual Challenges

The difficulty of arriving at universally accepted conceptual and operational definitions of either psychological or emotional abuse may partly explain why this phenomenon has not been researched as prolifically as other forms of abuse, such as physical and sexual abuse (Black, Slep & Heyman, 2001; Garbarino, et al., 1996; O’Leary, 1999; Schumacher, Slep & Heyman, 2001). Given the positivist traditions of psychological research, it is likely that concepts that were more easily measured appeared more attractive to researchers. Physical abuse, for example, typically occurs as an easily definable act during a conflict, leaves a tangible aftermath (e.g., bruising) and has long been outlawed in many cultures (Arias & Pape, 1999; Garbarino et al., 1996; Sheehan, 2006).

An act of psychological or emotional abuse, on the other hand, need not be performed during an interpersonal conflict, and is often disguised as an expression of love, caring or humour by the deliverer (Keashly, 2001; Marshall, 1999). Sometimes the action may not be perceived as directly offensive at the time it occurs (Keashly, 2001). Abusers may exploit the knowledge that a person is emotionally or psychologically vulnerable about a particular issue (e.g., their bodyweight), and merely plant subtle seeds of doubt or insecurity to psychologically or emotionally unsettle the recipient (e.g., talking about how successful others are at managing their weight). These doubts may be nurtured and gradually consume the recipient’s confidence and sense of self over time (Marshall, 1999). It is possible that in some

circumstances, the deliverer may not be aware that he or she has been abusive or the recipient may not be aware that he or she has been abused (Loring, 1994; Marshall, 1999).

Indeed, the expression of psychological and emotional abuse may take many forms – it may be overt or covert, obvious or subtle, an action that is enacted or neglected (Garbarino et al., 1996; Marshall, 1999; Smullens, 2010). Certain acts may be considered psychologically or emotionally abusive in some contexts, but not in others (DeHart, Follingstad & Fields, 2010). For example, a statement may be perceived as humorous in one context and degrading in another (Garbarino, et al., 1996).

Legal and practical implications

Recent legislative changes in France that made “psychological violence” between cohabitating couples an offence that could imprison offenders for up to three years were so extraordinary that they made worldwide news (Davies, 2010). The official definition of psychological violence was “repeated acts that could be constituted by words, including insults or repeated text messages that degrade one’s quality of life and cause a change to one’s mental or physical state.” (Samuel, 2010, p. 9). While this was a bold move by French politicians that aimed to protect thousands of its citizens from harm, many of the nation’s judges were reported as being sceptical about the applicability of the law as the definition of an insult was too vague (Samuel, 2010).

The inherent relativity of acts that are perceived as psychologically or emotionally abusive makes it difficult to foster a consistent and unified legal and professional response (Burks, 2006; Burnett, 1993; Glaser, 2002; Iwaniec, 1996; Murphy & Hoover, 1999). A good example of this point was demonstrated by Follingstad and DeHart's (2000) survey of 449 US psychologists, who were asked to rate 51 scenarios of husbands' psychological abuse towards their wives. Overwhelming agreement was only found on a small number of items. Another survey of undergraduate students a decade later by DeHart et al. (2010), found that the behaviours considered to be more consistently psychologically abusive among the sample were those that clearly harmed the recipient. Other contextual factors such as demographic characteristics and traits or attitudes did not significantly influence the participants' ratings.

The range of definitions offered to capture the phenomenon of psychological or emotional abuse has compounded this confusion further. Some definitions restrict the acts or the contexts so tightly that certain behaviours are overlooked. Research that focused exclusively on particular relationships, such as parent-child (Iwaniec, 1996; Tomison & Tucci, 1997) or husband-wife (e.g., Pipes & LeBov-Keeler, 1997), tended to limit the boundaries of abuse to these relationships alone. Other researchers disregarded certain actions in other ways. For example, it is arguable that the definition of psychological abuse, “verbal and non-verbal acts which symbolically hurt the other, or the use of threats to hurt the other...”, offered by Arias and Pape (1999, p. 55) omits neglect, if one regards neglect as a non-act. Follingstad (2007) noted that some definitions of psychological abuse, such as those that mentioned a

“potential to abuse”, were so loose that they virtually brought almost every behaviour into question.

Arias and Pape (1999) are joined by others whose definitions are so broad in their scope that they fail to distinguish emotional or psychological abuse from other forms of abuse. For example, definitions of emotional abuse, such as Loring’s (1994, p.1) “an ongoing process in which one individual systematically diminishes and destroys the inner self of another” and Iwaniec’s (1996, p. 14) “hostile or indifferent parental behaviour which damages a child’s self-esteem, degrades a sense of achievement, diminishes a sense of belonging, prevents healthy and vigorous development, and takes away a child’s well-being” could just as easily be describing physical or sexual abuse as emotional abuse.

Legal and professional decisions are complicated further by a debate regarding whether some psychological and emotional acts are universally abusive or whether they are tempered by different cultural contexts. Some researchers believed that cultural differences account for acts that would be considered as psychologically or emotionally abusive by many people in other cultures (Iwaniec, 1996, 1997; Tomison & Tucci, 1997). For example, the praise of children is regarded as appropriate in some cultures, yet in others it is seen as encouraging arrogance and conceit. Similarly, in some cultures threats are regarded as reasonable ways of controlling undesirable behaviour (Sneddon, 2003).

However, others claimed that some acts harm fundamental conditions of any person’s well-being (Brassard & Hardy, 1996; Glaser, 2002) and that too often

cultural differences have been used to explain and ultimately accept emotionally abusive practices (Ali 2007). Brassard, Hart and Hardy (1993, p.716), for example, found that “forms of psychological hostility and neglect were related to adverse developmental outcomes in children in every culture studied.”

Even though these positions seem to disagree, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It would be just as naive to deny that different standards and meanings of abuse exist between (and within) cultures, as it would be to deny that humans as a species have particular developmental needs, such as affection, stimulation and approval (Iwaniec, 1996), that cross all cultures. Despite different cultural contexts, there have been many documented accounts of people suffering from similar psychologically abusive acts in Chinese (Yan & Tang, 2001), Japanese (Nagata-Kobayashi, Sekimoto & Koyama 2006; Yoshihama & Sorenson , 1994; Yoshihama, Horrocks & Kamano, 2009), African (Shumba, 2001, 2004), Middle Eastern (Ahmad & Shuriquie, 2001; Elbedour, Abu-Bader, & Onwuegbuzie, 2006; Elbedour, Center, Maruyama, & Assor, 1997), European (Baldry, 2003; Kent & Waller, 1998; Klosinski, 1993; Matud, 2007; May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005; Trowell, Hodges & Leighton-Laing, 1997; Wijma, Schei & Swahnberg, 2003), North American (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Fritz & O’Leary, 2004; O’Hearn & Davis, 1997; Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Sears, Byers & Whelan, 2006; Wathen & MacMillan, 2003) and Australasian cultures (Hutchinson, Vickers, & Jackson, 2006; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans & Herbison, 1996; Semple, 2001; Tomison & Tucci, 1997; Webster, 1991). In relation to the protection of children, Glaser (2002) asserted that just because an act may be culturally appropriate, does not mean it is not harmful in developmental terms.

Others argued that while the dilemmas of inconsistent definitions are important, complex behaviour cannot always be neatly packaged into a definition that suits the needs of positivist, empirical research (Follingstad, 2007; Iwaniec, 1996). Further, the requirement of many legal and other professional authorities to produce tangible evidence may inadvertently leave vulnerable some of those most at risk of ongoing abuse (Burks, 2006; Iwaniec, 1996; Trowell et al., 1997).

With psychological and emotional forms of abuse, proof is difficult to obtain, as the acts (including acts of neglect), unless florid, are often not directly observed or comprehensively understood by independent witnesses, the damage inflicted on the victims may often render them unable to speak articulately about the abuse, and the symptoms are often non-specific or may not appear until well after the act (Keashly, 2001; Loue, 2005; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010; Trowell et al., 1997). Some people (e.g., children) may not be able to articulate what is happening to them or recognise that the other person is responsible for the abuse (Sheehan, 2006).

Wilding and Thoburn (1997) have stated that in practice, it is common to see referrals framed in terms of emotional or psychological abuse steered away from both child protection services and other support services because of the difficulties associated with substantiating these types of claims. Child protection authorities and other professionals generally do not seem as confident about intervening with emotional abuse cases as they do with forms of abuse that are easier to substantiate, unless the episodes of emotional abuse are accompanied by physical or sexual abuse as well (Trickett, et al., 2009). Thus, there appears to be a relatively high prevalence

of psychological and emotional abuse in the population; and a relatively low prevalence among substantiated cases in child protection systems (Iwaniec, 1997; Loue, 2005; Sheehan, 2006; Thompson & Kaplan, 1996, 1999; Tomison & Tucci, 1997; Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004).

Moeller et al. (1993) estimated that only a tiny amount of physically, sexually or emotionally abused children (ie. 5-7%) were dealt with by North American authorities. In the Australian state of Victoria, Sheehan (2006) observed that the numbers of child protection notifications for emotional abuse or neglect grew by 15% and 29% respectively between 1995-6 and 2000-1. Despite this growth, very few cases were substantiated, unless they were heard in conjunction with charges of physical or sexual abuse. Sheehan reasoned that parents in these situations were more likely to accept a charge of emotional abuse than one of physical or sexual abuse as it carried less risk of stigma and criminal implications. In 2006-7, the Victorian child protection system was notified of 23,931 cases of emotional abuse and neglect, investigated 5,959 and substantiated 4,210 or 17.6% of the notifications. These figures have been relatively consistent for several years (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2011). As a means of providing greater protection to vulnerable children, Trickett et al. (2009) recommended that all children should be screened for emotional abuse, as soon as they interact with child welfare services.

Some authors have suggested that there are cultural influences behind the low substantiation rates in court. Sorsoli (2004) argued that legal courts have historically favoured the use of physical injury and pain as evidence and systematically delegitimised the validity of emotional trauma and pain. It is difficult to determine

whether this tradition reflects a masculine bias or has more to do with the courts having more confidence in establishing proof through the relative tangibility and professional consensus of the assessment of physical pain. Hamarman, Pope and Czaja (2002) discovered that inconsistent definitions led to a 300-fold variation in the rates of emotional abuse across the states of what are largely otherwise the United States of America. In contrast, there were no significant differences in the inter-state rates of sexual or physical abuse.

The recipients' trepidation about disclosure indicates that certain cultural norms exist that make it difficult for survivors of psychoemotional abuse to be taken seriously. Mills and Malley-Morrison (1998) suggested that the application of psychological abuse may be more culturally acceptable than other forms of abuse, as the participants (at least 87% of whom had experienced one or more incidents of psychological abuse from dating partners) in their study, rated psychologically abusive behaviours as more acceptable than physically or sexually abusive behaviours.

Often recipients of psychoemotional abuse do not seek legal or professional assistance unless their abuse has been accompanied by a more tangible form of abuse (Dutton et al., 1999). This behaviour may reflect recognition that legal authorities and other professionals have traditionally neither been willing nor able to confidently address psychoemotional abuse and have often accepted a range of excuses to dismiss or minimise the seriousness of the behaviour and its impact (Dutton et al., 1999; Follingstad & DeHart, 2000, Keashly, 2001; Sorsoli, 2004).

In Keashly's (2001) study of emotional abuse in the workplace, even when an organisation's senior manager did accept the employee's claims of abuse, they rarely acted to rectify the situation. Instead, the managers tended to work around the issue, made hollow promises or placed responsibility for action back with the recipient. In some cases, management attacked the recipient by criticising their work performance and character (e.g., by labelling them as a “troublemaker”). Keashly's (2001) participants also reported that when the perpetrator was in a more powerful position in the organisation than they were, their sense of vulnerability and inadequate range of opportunities to defend the abuse was exacerbated. This sense of powerlessness, impact of the secondary attack (ie. from the organisation's indifference or contempt) and invisibility of emotional abuse compounds the recipients' distress (Raphael, 1998).

The battery of excuses that are often used to legitimate psychoemotional abuse include attempts to contextualise the behaviour as an out-of-character, isolated incident (e.g., “it was said in the heat of the moment”), as a humorous act (e.g. “Can't you take a joke?”) or as a valid disciplining procedure, (e.g., “I had to teach her a lesson”, “It will toughen him up”, “He needed to be brought back to Earth”) (Garbarino et al., 1996; Hyman & Snook, 1999). These excuses aim to portray the abuse as an anomaly or place responsibility for the abuse or its effects with deficiencies associated with the abused.

It seems that punchlines receive their title for good reason. Studies on humour provide an additional insight into the assimilation of psychoemotionally abusive processes within the mainstream cultural practices of Western cultures. Results from

Wiseman and colleagues' Laughlab experiment discovered that people from different countries preferred different styles of jokes (Radford, 2002). For example, British, Irish, Australians and New Zealanders found more humour in jokes that included a play on words; French, Belgians and Danes preferred surreal and Freudian punchlines; while North Americans laughed most at jokes where one group demonstrated its superiority over another. Even though superiority-oriented humour was more popular in Northern American countries, the use of humour to reinforce superiority appears to be a cultural practice that is deeply entrenched within many other societies. This blend of fun, peer reinforcement, ease of application and the opportunity for a quick boost of power over another person lays fertile cultural ground for the seeds of psychoemotional abuse.

Other modes of cultural support for psychoemotionally abusive practices have been advanced through advice on raising children. For example, Loader (1998) suggested that it may be useful at times for parents to evoke the emotion of shame from their children for the benefit of the children's development, as it helps form virtues such as humility, modesty and respect.

This point raises an interesting issue. On the one hand, it is doubtful that many would approve of parenting or teaching methods that attempted to satisfy every desire and whim of children. It seems fair to say that children will need help to deal with experiences of frustration, guilt, disappointment and sadness that arise throughout the course of living. Yet, on the other hand, Loader's (1998) position is a quite dangerous one to uphold, as his logic, if taken slightly further, could imply that children's

developmental needs may also be served by the evocation of other emotions such as guilt, jealousy, and perhaps, terror.

However, while the details of this debate deserve more attention elsewhere, it is hard to disagree with Kohn’s (1992, pp. 119-120) view that

The idea that we are best prepared for unpleasant experiences by being exposed to unpleasant experiences at an early age is about as sensible as the proposition that the best way to help someone survive exposure to carcinogenic substances is to expose them to as many carcinogens as possible in early life.

Kohn’s (1992) statement is supported by research findings that declared that adolescents who experienced less emotional abuse were more resilient to other traumatic symptoms, compared to adolescents who had suffered higher levels of emotional abuse (Brassard & Hardy, 1996). Others found that people who experienced emotional abuse and neglect during childhood were much more vulnerable to a host of serious conditions during adulthood, such as chronic or recurrent depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder and a lifetime of suicidal behaviour (Bifulco, Moran & Baines, 2002; Spertus, Yehuda & Wong, 2003).

Thus, rather than deliberately provoking unpleasant experiences, there seem to be ways of “teaching” children lessons that are more constructive and mutually beneficial for both adult and child. Indeed, it seems advantageous for the perpetrator

to deliberately provoke unpleasant experiences in others, as this can accentuate power imbalances and relocate the responsibility for the abuse with the victim.

In addition to those victims who absorb responsibility for psychoemotional abuse by regarding the effect as a personal flaw (e.g., being “over-sensitive”) (Marshall, 1999), others may feel too embarrassed or subordinated to seek help because they perceive their symptoms to be less important than those suffered by people who have experienced “higher status” (i.e., physical or sexual) forms of abuse (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000). Recipients of psychoemotional abuse are often threatened if they attempt to seek assistance and will commonly choose to protect themselves in the short-term by remaining silent or compliant (Jory & Anderson, 1999; Keashly, 2001).

Conroy’s (2000) observations of the role that broad social responses play in the enabling of politically motivated torture – situations in which some of the most profound examples of psychoemotional abuse are showcased – also apply to practices of psychoemotional abuse more generally: “It is easier to torture if the broader society sanctions what you are doing or looks the other way. The torturer feels absolved of responsibility...” (p.21). Godrej (2000) added that part of the successful torturer’s operations involves the acquisition of a complicit, silent community. He advocated that: “In order to act against torture we must be ready to bear witness to it, no matter how insignificant we may consider our contribution to be” (p. 11). There may also be additional reluctance to disclose violence and abuse in sub-communities that are already subjected to broad social prejudice (e.g., gay and lesbian or minority ethnic communities), due to the fear that the information will be used by other sectors of the

community to patronise, pathologise and fuel new attacks on the minority group (Tuel & Russell, 1998).

Follingstad (2007, 2009) recently provided a series of powerful critiques of the conceptual difficulties involved in the study of psychological abuse. She argued that the inadequate, superficial definitions and simplistic models and measurement tools used by most researchers increased the risk that the field would form unsophisticated and misleading conclusions.

Follingstad (2007) claimed that one of the fundamental flaws in the field’s development rests with researchers who study psychological abuse by applying the same model and assumptions that are used for the study of physical abuse.

Follingstad posited that many of these assumptions may not hold as psychological abuse is a much more ambiguous and complex phenomenon to interpret.

Many researchers have used behavioural checklists in an attempt to provide an objective perspective of this phenomenon. However, Follingstad (2007) noted that checklists and many other studies of this phenomenon often ignore the contexts that surround the behaviour, do not consider the type or severity of injury that occurred from the act and rely exclusively on the victims’ perspective. This leaves the data that is collected very vulnerable to errors, inconsistent interpretations and biases.

Follingstad (2009) noted that there is no standard practice on how aspects of the acts’ severity and frequencies should be weighted into assessments, and consequently, the field has struggled to deal efficiently with inconsistencies between the perspectives of abuse recipients, initiators and observers.

Follingstad (2007, 2009) also believed that collecting the frequency or spread of checklist items is not empirically sufficient to determine the “degree of psychological abuse” that one has suffered. Follingstad thought it was problematic that many checklists concluded that someone was a psychological abuser whether a single act or multiple acts were checked against them. The checklists also typically did not distinguish mild, occasional patterns from severe, chronic patterns. It is possible that some infrequent behaviours marked on a checklist are easily forgiven and do not create problems for a relationship at all.

Most checklists and surveys that Follingstad (2007) reviewed did not seek the respondent’s views on whether they regarded the act as abusive or not. If the item was checked, the researcher drew that conclusion on the respondent’s behalf. According to Follingstad (2007), the establishment of a threshold of psychological abuse demands a much more sophisticated analysis than is currently being mustered by many checklists and their simple, quantitative data sets. In her more recent critique, she commented that some measurement tools do not adequately distinguish psychological abuse from “boorish, inept, unskilled, or even aversive actions,” except for extreme cases (Follingstad, 2009, p. 272).

Follingstad (2007) called for the development of normative data to differentiate egregious psychological abuse from other communication methods that aimed to influence another person’s behaviour, manage conflict, maintain psychological security, defend oneself or express humour, but are not necessarily abusive. This data needs to incorporate the individual’s interpretation of the items,

but be careful to guard against the possibility that abusive behaviour may be the norm in some places at some times, as smacking children used to be a generation ago and sledging still is in some sports. Follingstad and Edmundson (2010) have recently trialled a measure of 17 dimensions of psychological aggression with the range of mild-moderate- severe and perceptions of abuse, intent, extent of harm, awareness of harm and the recipient's own contribution to the act.

Until this point, the recipient's contribution to the act of psychoemotional abuse has not featured in either the assessment tools or the body of research. Follingstad (2007) is of the opinion that researchers are generally squeamish about offering analyses that are based upon more than a complete, uncritical acceptance of the victim's perspective, as they are concerned about being accused of victim blaming. She asserted that researchers should be less worried about unfair accusations of victim blaming and more concerned with their attempts to increase the accuracy, honesty and realism of the phenomenon. She also posited that it is possible for victims to “mishandle” situations (p. 448) which would lead to innocent actions being unfairly deemed abusive by the victim, and subsequently, others such as the researcher and the research's audience. While Follingstad acknowledged that the recipients' perspectives are vitally important, they should not stand alone as the sole authority on the event.

The practical implications of this position are that it challenges the orthodoxy among many counsellors and researchers who have been generally encouraged to always believe the clients' stories and work with that material. This stems from a long history of abuse victims either rarely being believed or too easily dismissed and

inadvertently re-traumatized by judgemental therapists and other professionals, such as police (Bass & Davis, 1991; Herman, 1992). Victims of sexual abuse, in particular, were also often subjected to horrendous cross-examinations in and out of court.

The provision of a safe therapeutic space is an essential part of establishing client-therapist rapport on sensitive issues and helping the client recover. Many therapists reason that any embellishments that are suspected in the clients' stories are either not as important as the general process of healing or can be worked on during therapy. However, if the client was challenged too early, there is a high risk that they would disengage from treatment and receive no benefit. Worse still, a judgemental therapist could harm the victims during a time when healing their pain should be the highest priority (Herman, 1992).

In a therapeutic setting, any moves to challenge the authority of the victim's initial account would need to address this historical development extremely sensitively. It seemed that the next stage of the field's development is to carefully prepare it for what Follingstad (2007) referred to as a "more savvy approach" that can increase accuracy of our understanding of the phenomena and cause no additional harm to the victim. Although Follingstad (2007) conceded that this topic of research will probably always bear some dose of healthy controversy. The themes of Follingstad's critique that fall within the scope of this research will be responded to in the discussion section.

Bridging the conceptual gap

The challenge of developing definitions that satisfy the various needs and interests of multiple stakeholders, such as researchers, therapists and legal practitioners is complicated by the inherent relativism of the concepts of emotional and psychological abuse. Some have addressed this by ranking acts along a sliding scale that grades actions from “obviously to less obviously” abusive and “obviously not abusive” (Iwaniec, 1996; Klosinski, 1993). The continuum model enables a combination of discrete actions to be advanced within a more flexible framework that shades the actions in context to one another. However, decisions will always be easier at the poles of this spectrum. It is the middle where the most contentious parts of the debate will continue to flare (Follingstad, 2007).

Others, such as Hart and Brassard (1992) and O’Leary (1999), have stated that a broad common understanding of psychological and emotional abuse has emerged among researchers. Although not universally accepted, many researchers (e.g., Glaser & Prior, 1997; O’Leary, 1999; Tomison & Tucci, 1997) seemed to agree that emotional or psychological abuse has occurred if at least one of the following broad set of conditions has been satisfied:

- (a) the behaviour occurs as a durable pattern rather than a single event;
- (b) the perpetrator intends to harm; and
- (c) the victim perceived that he or she has been harmed by the act.

Follingstad and DeHart (2000) also found that assessments of the victim's character (e.g., whether they were perceived to be under- or over- sensitive to the behaviour inflicted upon them) heavily influenced psychologists' judgement of the existence of psychological abuse. The psychologists also were generally more comfortable making judgements on information that contained less subjective data, and were most likely to disregard an act as abusive when alternative explanations could be offered for the actions. A later study by Follingstad, DeHart & Green (2004) concluded that psychologists did not use the behaviours' duration, perpetrators' intent or victims' perception of harm to distinguish acts of psychological abuse from other acts. However, they did find that psychologists were more likely to rate particular behaviours as more likely to be psychologically abusive and more severe if they were conducted by a husband compared to the same act conducted by a wife. Another study unveiled that the judgements of lay population were different from the psychologists (Follingstad, Helff, Binford, Runge & White, 2004). The members of the general population were more likely to determine that acts were either “always” or “never” psychoemotionally abusive; whereas the psychologists cast more doubt into their judgements and were more inclined to regard the same acts as either “always” or “possibly” abusive.

In relation to child abuse, Garbarino et al. (1996) have posited that the development of a child's competence is likely to be sabotaged when any of the following four principles of psychological maltreatment are enacted:

- (a) The child's normal behaviour (e.g., smiling, exploration) is punished;
- (b) Caregiver-infant attachment is discouraged;

- (c) The child’s self-esteem is punished; or
- (d) The child’s interpersonal skills are punished.

Keashly (2001) sought definitions from a different vantage point – that of people who had received emotional abuse. She compared these definitions against those created by researchers and found that while both groups required the behaviour in question to be repetitive, unsolicited, harmful to the recipient, and exploit an existing power differential between the perpetrator and recipient, for it to constitute emotional abuse; the recipients did not regard the perpetrator’s intent as a defining feature of an abusive act.

The relationship between psychological and emotional abuse and similar concepts

There has also been discord among researchers regarding the relationship between the notions of psychological and emotional abuse and other similar constructs. Terms such as emotional blackmail (Forward & Frazier, 1997), nonphysical abuse (Outlaw, 2009), mental or psychological torture (Loring, 1994), mental cruelty, psychological maltreatment, emotional neglect, mental injury, psychological battering, and coercive family processes have also been used to describe the phenomenon, although psychological and emotional abuse are the most widely understood and applied (Tomison & Tucci, 1997).

Some authors (e.g., Buchanan, 1996; Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Garbarino et al., 1996; Hyman & Snook, 1999) used the concept

of maltreatment rather than abuse because they believed that maltreatment includes acts of omission or neglect as well as overt acts of abuse. Follingstad (2007; 2009) later preferred the phrase ‘psychological aggression’ to ‘psychological abuse’, as it carried a lower threshold of proof and did not depend on the recipients’ perception of the act, the actors’ intent or the level of harm inflicted. She reserved the term ‘psychological abuse’ for the severe end of the spectrum of psychological aggression where serious harm had clearly resulted and used the terms psychological aggression and maltreatment interchangeably to cover the full range of problematic psychological actions. Slep, Heyman, and Snarr (2011). also differentiated “emotional aggression” from “emotional abuse” by declaring that the act constituted “aggression”; while the act combined with the impact constituted “abuse”.

These new conceptualisations have improved the depth of the lexicon of terms used to describe this phenomenon; however, the term “abuse” will be used in this study for several reasons. First, it can be and has been used to cover acts of commission and omission. Second, in Western cultures at this time, “abuse” implies serious connotations and thus has the potential to provide this topic with more political leverage, than the less urgent sounding term of maltreatment (Glaser, 2002). Third, the concept of abuse also more clearly demonstrates the relationship between psychological and emotional abuse and its sibling concepts, physical and sexual abuse. The alternative approach of using the terms physical and sexual maltreatment, seems to significantly alter the nature of the concepts.

Fourth, the notion of aggression seems to draw focus onto the attitude or style of the deliverer rather than the event itself. An examination of similar concepts such

as physical aggression, for example, would still require detail of the acts. Fifth, an argument could also be made that not all psychological abuse is overtly aggressive, and that psychological aggression is a form of psychological abuse. This becomes clearer when an attempt is made to include covertly aggressive or “passive-aggressive” behaviour into this conceptualisation. Passive aggression has long been regarded as a form of psychological abuse by many therapists (Forward & Frazier, 1997).

There may be valid places to use “aggression” instead (Follingstad, 2007), such as when appealing to a lay audience who may be fearful of the implications of admitting to and dealing with the serious connotations of “abuse”, but may be more willing to address “aggression”. “Psychological aggression” could also be a very useful means of distinguishing less severe acts from those that are more severe. “Psychological assault” may develop into another useful definitional nuance, however, it also risks failing to capture passive-aggressive acts, such as withdrawal.

Stark (2007) used the concept of ‘coercive control’ to describe a pattern of behaviour that men employ to entrap and subordinate women and prevent them from “freely developing their personhood, utilising their capacities, or practicing citizenship” (p. 4). Robertson and Murachver (2011) noted that while coercive control has been associated with physical violence, it can also occur without physical violence and include behaviours such as controlling the other person’s finances, telling them what to wear, monitoring their social networks or threatening physical assault.

Stark (2009) recommended that coercive control should be treated differently to physical assault and called for coercive control to become recognised as a criminal behaviour in the same manner as other ‘capture crimes’ or liberty crimes (Williamson, 2010), such as kidnapping or hostage-taking are. Stark noted that the violence in coercive control is cumulative, designed to punish, hurt or control and frequently ends in severe injury or death. The micromanagement of the victims’ behaviour typically leaves them “free and subjugated at once” (Stark, 2007, p, 209).

Stark (2007) has also contrasted coercive control from the gender-neutral language of ‘power and control’ that has been commonly used to explain intimate partner violence and claimed that the domestic violence field’s focus on individual acts restricts its acknowledgement of the social and cultural structures that underpin men’s behaviour and constrain women’s freedom of choice, action and movement. Stark (2007) claimed that it is important to analyse this behaviour through a gendered lens, as men use coercive control to target women’s devalued roles in relationships, such as homemaker, caretaker and sexual partner, in a manner that it is impossible for women to reciprocate due to the gendered context of structural controls and consequences of resistance (e.g., threats of violence). While women may conduct similar behaviours such as checking their husband’s emails, they perform these acts within a backdrop of much less social power. Others have noted that the framing of coercive control as an inherently gendered construct complicates advocacy efforts, as changes to legislation and practice depend on the decision makers adopting the whole theory of gendered structural inequality to justify the establishment of different laws for men and women (Arnold, 2009).

Some researchers regarded the notions of psychological and emotional abuse as synonymous (e.g., Doyle, 1997; Garbarino et al., 1996; Loring, 1994); whereas others viewed them as distinct (e.g., Iwaniec, 1997; O’Hagan, 1995). Brassard and Hardy (1996) considered the terms as synonymous, but preferred to use the concept of psychological abuse because it better incorporated cognitive, affective and interpersonal conditions. Others believed the term emotional abuse more accurately captured the range of emotional and psychological behaviours (e.g., Doyle, 1997; Iwaniec, 1997; Loring, 1994).

O’Hagan (1995) contended that psychological abuse is often similar but not synonymous with emotional abuse. According to O’Hagan, a person can be severely emotionally abused by another person and still have his or her “cognitive faculties intact” (p. 451). For example, parents may ignore their child, but send him or her off to the finest boarding school for cognitive development. Alternatively, a person can be psychologically restricted by another person who has an ideal relationship with them emotionally (e.g., loving parents who enforce a particular ideology on their child).

O’Hagan (1995), like many other researchers in this field, did not acknowledge that abuse, psychological or emotional, may be regarded as both a process (verb), as well as an outcome (noun). His first example focused on two separate actions, a primarily emotional process (ie. ignoring) and a primarily psychological outcome (ie., cognitive development at a fine school). It seems quite plausible that psychological processes were active in the ignoring (e.g., thoughts or statements such as “I have more important things to do”) and emotional processes

were active in the choice of school (e.g., feelings of responsibility). Even though O’Hagan offered this as an example of emotional abuse, it would be difficult to imagine that psychological processes were not involved in its execution and that the abused person in the example would have not been at times psychologically plagued with cognitive experiences such as self-doubt resulting from his or her parents’ treatment.

Similarly, the act presented in the second example, enforcing an ideology, was described as a form of psychological abuse because the outcome psychologically restricted the child. However, it is arguable that strong emotional aspects were central to the strategy, such as passion for the ideology and the feeling of attachment to their child. Likewise, there would be strong psychological aspects to the loving relationship the parents offered their child. It appears that O’Hagan (1995) has highlighted either exclusively psychological or emotional elements of processes and outcomes and ignored the other to sharpen his argument.

It is therefore proposed that psychological and emotional components of these forms of abuse are inextricably linked (Glaser, 2002). At times, the dominating process or effect may be either psychological or emotional, but both are always co-existing, interdependent entities that are mutually determined (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). Thus, from this point on, this process of abuse will be referred to as psychoemotional, except when other researchers’ positions are being referred to. Their original context will be safeguarded.

As humans constantly respond to surrounding stimuli psychologically, emotionally, and physically it would seem that these processes have to be involved in interactions with other people. All attacks have the capacity to elicit responses that are psychological, emotional and physical, although some are more obvious than others are. For example, when boys verbally abuse other boys by questioning their masculinity or sexuality, they use physical (ie. talking or yelling), psychological, emotional, sexual and political means to exercise their abuse.

Therefore, it appears as though we cannot but respond in at least a psychoemotional way to praise or abuse. It is just that some processes and effects are more pronounced at times than others (e.g., being punched in the nose, tends to leave one acutely conscious of physical pain). Psychological mechanisms can be a means to emotional effects and vice-versa. One reason why they are so readily conceptually interchanged may be that they are so practically intertwined.

Table 1 below summarises samples of the main conceptualisations of psychological and emotional abuse and related terms that have been described in this review. The comments in the final column summarise the definitions' limitations.

Table 1. Definitions of Psychological and Emotional Abuse and Related Concepts

| Term | Sample Definition | Comments |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Psychological violence | “repeated acts that could be constituted by words, including insults or repeated text messages that degrade one’s quality of life and cause a change to one’s mental or physical state.” (Samuel, 2010, p. 9). | The existence of psychological violence under this definition depends upon repeated acts and the change of one’s state |
| Psychological abuse | “verbal and non-verbal acts which symbolically hurt the other, or the use of threats to hurt the other...” (Arias & Pape, 1999, p. 55) | This definition omits neglect |

Table 1. Definitions of Psychological and Emotional Abuse and Related Concepts
(continued)

| Term | Sample Definition | Comments |
|------------------|---|---|
| Emotional abuse | <p>“an ongoing process in which one individual systematically diminishes and destroys the inner self of another” (Loring, 1994, p.1)</p> <p>“hostile or indifferent parental behaviour which damages a child’s self-esteem, degrades a sense of achievement, diminishes a sense of belonging, prevents healthy and vigorous development, and takes away a child’s well-being” Iwaniec’s (1996, p. 14)</p> | <p>These definitions could just as easily be describing physical or sexual abuse as emotional abuse.</p> |
| Coercive control | <p>“reducing the spouse’s power to make decisions, limitations of the spouse’s relationships with others and independence in daily activities, and diminution of his or her self-image and ego-strength.” (Robertson & Murachver, p. 2011)</p> | <p>This is limited to a smaller range of behaviours and relationships than those covered in this study.</p> |

The concept of psychoemotional abuse seems to defy a fixed, all-encompassing, watertight definition (Follingstad, 2007), although there are numerous threads of consistent information lined through the literature (Kelly, 2004). Indeed, instead of restricting our understanding of this phenomenon from within the narrow bounds of an empirically-sound definition, it is possibly best considered under a broader conceptual framework that acknowledges psychoemotional abuse as a heterogeneous construct that involves a process which continuously changes and unfolds as relationships between individual actors and contexts shift and are renegotiated (Glaser, 2002; Labonte, 1997; Street & Arias, 2001). The application of a broader conceptual framework would provide people with a general understanding of how this form of abuse operated, while simultaneously enabling room for more refined definitional judgements to be made as the context requires (e.g., for legal or professional interventions). The case for a dual-threshold conceptualisation that can accommodate research and therapeutic needs, as well as legal and forensic needs, is put forward later in the thesis.

This study will utilise a conceptualisation that focuses on the development of pragmatic therapeutical models, rather than definitions that are useful for judicial decision making. To be consistent with other forms of abuse, it is proposed that a broad conceptual framework should refer to psychoemotional abuse as a process where one or more people, via a wide range of means (e.g., verbal, the enactment of legislation or policy), use primarily psychological or emotional processes to overpower another and gain advantage from the other's subordinate position (ie. the psychoemotional hit). The aftermath of the process (ie. the psychoemotional bruise) should be described by other concepts such as anxiety and lowered confidence.

Types of Psychoemotional Abuse

Another vein of research has sought to differentiate various forms of psychoemotional abuse and ascertain whether particular types lead to unique effects. Even though more work is needed in this area before firm conclusions can be drawn (Glaser, 2002; Marshall, 1999), the preliminary work yields interesting findings. At the very least, it seems that the diverse compilation of behaviours regarded as psychoemotionally abusive do not exert homogeneous effects (Outlaw, 2009; Smullens, 2010).

At a basic level, Outlaw (2009) argued that three types of “non-physical abuse”, which she labelled “emotional abuse”, “social abuse” and “economic abuse” needed to be treated distinctly, as they displayed different patterns of prevalence. Emotional and social abuses were more prevalent than economic abuse and also predicted a greater likelihood of physical violence.

Researchers, such as Garbarino et al. (1996) and Tolman (1992), were among the first to develop typologies that have since been frequently used to scope the behaviours captured in the conceptual net of psychological abuse. Garbarino et al.’s categories of psychologically abusive behaviours included spurning; terrorising; isolating; exploiting/corrupting; denying emotional responsiveness; mental health, medical and educational neglect. In contrast, Tolman proposed the creation of fear, isolation, monopolisation, economic abuse, rigid sex role expectations, psychological destabilisation, contingent expressions of love, emotional withholding and degradation.

These and similar psychologically and emotionally abusive behaviours have also been catalogued and presented on measurement instruments such as the Abusive Behavior Inventory (Mills & Malley-Morrison, 1998), the Child Abuse and Trauma Scale (Kent & Waller, 1998; Sanders & Becker-Lausen, 1995), the Childhood Experience of Care and Abuse (Moran, Bifulco, & Ball, 2002), the Psychological Maltreatment Inventory (Swift & Gayton, 1996), Psychologically Violent Parental Practices Inventory (Gagné, Pouliot-Lapointe & St Louis, 2007), the Emotional Abuse Scale (Murphy & Hoover, 1999), the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (Tolman, 1999) and the recently developed, Measure of Psychologically Abusive Behaviours (Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010).

Some of the most interesting historical work in this area was conducted by Murphy and Hoover (1999) on their Emotional Abuse Scale. Their sub-scales were formed around the following clusters of abusive behaviours:

- (a) restrictive engulfment,
- (b) hostile withdrawal,
- (c) denigration, and
- (d) domination/intimidation.

The cluster of restrictive engulfment involved emotionally abusive behaviours such as extreme jealousy, possessiveness, and isolation from social contacts. Murphy and Hoover (1999) posited that people who have an insecure attachment and compulsive need for nurturance use this type of behaviour to narrow the recipient's alternative sources of emotionally fulfilling relationships or activities and increase

their dependency on their relationship with the restrictive engulfer. The researchers found this cluster of behaviours to be highly related with interpersonal dependency and somewhat independent of the use of physical abuse.

People who were more likely to use hostile withdrawal as a behavioural pattern were prone to withholding emotional contact from their partners in a hostile fashion. It was speculated that this style of behaviour enabled the user to punish their partner and increase their partner's insecurity and anxiety about the relationship. As this cluster had a low to moderate association with physical aggression, it may also serve as a protective mechanism against the use of physical aggression for some (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). That is, people who are concerned about the effects of perpetrating physical abuse may express their aggression towards others in ways that avoid physical contact.

The third cluster, denigration, had a moderate to strong association with physical abuse and a moderate association with attachment insecurities. According to Murphy and Hoover (1999), this pattern of behaviour seemed to be used to reduce the partner's self-esteem, via the use of tactics such as humiliation, degradation, domination and vindication.

The final cluster of domination/intimidation demonstrated the strongest association with physical aggression and a moderate association with attachment insecurities. Dominating and intimidating behaviours such as threats, property violence and intense forms of verbal abuse were used to produce fear and submission in the other person (Murphy & Hoover, 1999).

Moran et al., (2002) produced the following nine subcategories of psychological abuse in their Childhood Experience of Care and Abuse (CECA) scale:

- (a) humiliation/degradation
- (b) terrorizing
- (c) cognitive disorientation
- (d) deprivation of basic needs
- (e) deprivation of valued objects
- (f) extreme rejection
- (g) inflicting marked distress or discomfort
- (h) emotional blackmail
- (i) corruption/exploitation

The most common forms of psychological abuse the participants experienced as children were humiliation/degradation (38%), deprivation of valued objects (24%), deprivation of basic needs and extreme rejection (both 16%) and inflicting marked distress or discomfort (14%). The other forms were experienced by less than 10% of the sample. Most people only reported one form of psychological abuse (76%), but just under a quarter of participants received more than one form of abuse in complexes.

Follingstad and Edmundson (2010) used the Measure of Psychologically Abusive Behaviours to survey a national sample of US citizens. Participants answer a series of questions that are splits into 14 categories and ranked at three levels of severity: mild, moderate and severe. Participants that receive higher scores have

reported a higher frequency of psychological abuse and/or a higher emotional or behavioural impact.

The categories were:

1. Sadistic behavior;
2. Threats to intimidate;
3. Isolation;
4. Manipulation;
5. Public humiliation;
6. Verbal abuse;
7. Wound regarding sexuality;
8. Treatment as inferior;
9. Hostile environment;
10. Monitoring;
11. Wound regarding fidelity;
12. Jealousy;
13. Withhold emotionally and physically;
14. Control personal decisions

Smullens (2010) used her extensive clinical experience to develop the following five categories to describe the emotional abuse committed by parents towards their children. This categorisation provided a series of therapeutic focal points. The categories are listed below with a brief explanation:

- (a) Rage – a parent’s uncontrollable rage terrorises, threatens or demeans the child and leaves them frightened, unable to think for themselves, trust their own judgements, and sometimes interferes with their ability to handle the legitimate emotional reactions of others;
- (b) Enmeshment – the adult cuts the child off from socialising with others, leaving them dependent on the other person and ill-equipped to form meaningful relationships with others;
- (c) Rejection/Abandonment – the parent or caretaker withdraws love to corral the child into certain behaviours
- (d) Severe neglect – a severe lack of emotional closeness and deprivation that results in the child feeling lonely and devalued
- (e) Extreme overprotection and over indulgence – the parent feels compelled to protect the child against harm and lives vicariously through their child; while the child becomes anxious and fearful of separation

Pence and Paymar’s (1993) power and control wheel has been a tool used extensively by family violence practitioners over the past two decades to raise awareness of some of the more subtle forms of abuse. The wheel diagram outlines many psychoemotionally abusive behaviours, such as coercion, threats, intimidation, isolation, using male privilege, economic mechanisms or children, to exert control and power over others. It educates its audience by providing specific examples of

behaviours that constitute various types of psychoemotional abuse (e.g. making all the big decisions, destroying her property and controlling what she does or who she talks to). An alternative wheel is provided to demonstrate specific behaviours that promote relationships where the power is distributed more equitably.

A different approach was adopted by Jory and Anderson (1999), who focused upon the ethical context of psychological abuse. Their study explored how ethics that promoted healthy relationships, such as mutuality, reciprocity and accommodation, were sabotaged by the psychologically abusive strategies of deception (e.g., twisting information to suit one's own needs and covering information up); entitlement (ie. a sense that one's partner is always in one's debt) and systematic devaluation (ie. the inflation of one's own importance and the demeaning of one's partner). Jory and Anderson found that many of the abusive men they interviewed thought that processes of psychological destabilisation were harmless.

Sackett and Saunders (1999) found that women who attended a family violence shelter were significantly more likely to have been subjected to ridicule and jealous controlling behaviours compared with women who had been physically abused and had not attended a shelter. They also discovered that ignoring behaviour was a strong predictor of low self-esteem.

Some researchers have separated stalking behaviour from psychological or emotional abuse (e.g., Basile, Arias, Desai & Thompson, 2004; Mechanic, 2000, 2004). This is possibly because stalking typically occurred after an intimate relationship has ended; whereas psychological abuse has typically been assessed

within a relationship. However, it could be argued that these boundaries are artificial, as stalking is a type of psychological monitoring behaviour that can also occur prior to or within a relationship (Brewster, 2003); or among strangers (Logan, Cole, Shannon & Walker, 2006).

Logan, Leukefeld and Walker (2000) found that psychological abuse during a relationship predicted stalking behaviour in male and female undergraduate students after the relationship ended. Dye and Davis (2003) examined the similarities between psychological abuse and stalking and concluded that they could both be predicted by factors such as harsh parental discipline, anxious attachment and the need to control one's partner. However, relationship dissatisfaction also predicted psychological abuse; whereas the level of anger-jealousy over the break-up, particularly when one was the recipient of the breakup and had high levels of passion predicted stalking behaviour.

Davis and Ace (2002) stated that from the stalkers' perspective, the degree of stalking is highly connected to expressions of love and level of anger, jealousy and obsessiveness. Stalking was more likely when a high number of breakups and a strong emotional reaction to being told that the relationship was over were present, as they influenced the level of courtship persistence.

Another type of emotional abuse that was documented in the literature involved an indirect line of communication. For example, Klosinski's (1993) study on particular types of emotional abuse that were used by divorcing parents against

their children, included abduction, using the children for the parents' needs (e.g., as a substitute partner for the lone parent), abusing the other parent in front of the children, and various other processes that heightened the child's separation anxiety and guilt. Beeble, Bybee and Sullivan (2007) found that 88% of the 150 mothers who had recently experienced intimate partner violence they interviewed, stated that their children had been used against them by their assailant. Witnessing family violence can be very distressing, and possibly traumatic, for many children and leave lasting effects (Diamond & Muller, 2004; Milletich Kelley, Doane and Pearson, 2010). Indeed, Milletich et al. (2010) found that female college students who had witnessed interparental violence as children were more likely than others to report victimization in dating relationships. The same trend followed for male college students, but only when they witnessed father-to-mother violence. Other men have deliberately harmed or killed pets as a means of inflicting psychological abuse on their female partners (Faver & Strand, 2007).

It seems reasonable to conclude that the duration and patterns of abusive relationships vary considerably and that information on the context in which the abuse operates is a vital component of any form of meaningful interpretation (Glaser, 2002; Swan & Snow, 2002). The point that the process of psychoemotional abuse is often heavily entwined within other processes of abuse and moments of pleasure makes it very difficult to determine that trauma-related symptoms or other particular effects are directly caused by specific incidents of psychoemotional abuse (Doyle, 1997; Glaser & Prior, 1997; Kent & Waller, 1998; Tomison & Tucci, 1997).

Even though the complexity of humans and their relationships to one another may preclude a conclusion that particular effects are exclusively and universally the result of specific forms of abuse, there appears to be sufficient evidence in the expanse of abuse research and practice to conclude that abuse generally negatively affects human well-being and psychoemotional processes play a critical role in some of the most destructive aspects (Stevenson, 1999). Follingstad (2009) called for higher quality empirical research to shift this from a general conclusion to one that can be specifically asserted without the shadows of various confounding variables lurking in the background. She also called for research to examine whether specific subcategories of psychological abuse result in unique patterns of harm that are strong enough to be reliably predicted.

Political dimensions of the conceptualisation of psychoemotional abuse

The central role that power plays in this conceptualisation means that, like other abuses, psychoemotional abuse is as much a political act as it is a psychological or emotional one. As with Prilleltensky and Gonicks' (1994) conceptualisation of oppression, there seem to be internal and external dynamics at play during the process of psychoemotional abuse. An example of how psychoemotional and political processes operate simultaneously is provided when socially constructed racial or gender-stereotypes are used as a strategy to gradually widen the power imbalance between people with particular traits (Wesely, 2002).

Another important aspect of the politics of psychoemotional abuse involves the role that professionals play. At times, professionals conduct vital interventions

that undoubtedly protect people who have been psychoemotionally victimised, assist their recovery and prevent future suffering. Yet, at other times, the work of professionals appears to inadvertently protect abusers and reinforce streams of abuse. For example, the application of a definition of psychological or emotional abuse that included the conditions many professionals broadly accept as evidence for such abuse (ie. a pattern of the behaviour, rather than a single event; the perpetrator’s intent to harm; and the victim’s perception of harm) excuses and effectively legitimates countless abusive actions, leaving the recipients even more vulnerable to further abuse.

It seems that many authors prefer to conceptualise psychoemotional abuse as a pattern, rather than a single act, presumably to avoid over-reactive interventions and litigation. That seems to be a sensible approach that is in accord with a legal maxim in English-speaking Western countries of assuming one’s innocence until proven guilty. Yet on the other hand, it would arguably seem to excuse the majority of psychoemotionally abusive behaviour as an aberration. The excuse of a single act is not accepted in the context of either physical or sexual abuse and should not be legitimated with regard to actions of psychoemotional abuse either.

It is also worth noting that a person may suffer not only from a pattern of abuse inflicted by a particular individual, but potentially also from the aggregated acts of many people using similar themes, such as race, gender, intelligence, or aesthetics. Single, seemingly isolated, acts of abuse can be much more powerful than they superficially appear (Keashly, 2001). Moran, Bifulco, Ball, Jacobs and Benaim (2002)

reported that in their study of 301 women, approximately one-third of the items rated as “marked” in severity were single attacks.

The conceptualisation of psychoemotional abuse preferred in this paper supports the position of a number of authors (e.g., Glaser, 2002; Keashly, 2001; Marshall, 1994; Webster, 1991) who believed that intent should not be used to judge the existence of abuse. Morally, the actions of somebody who intends to harm may appear quite different to the actions of somebody who does not. However, practically, the effects may be much less disparate. It may be useful to consider intent to improve one’s understanding of the dynamics involved with potentially abusive actions, but it should not be regarded as an essential determinant of the existence of psychoemotional abuse.

Follingstad (2007) developed a grid to aid the accuracy of assessment of psychological aggression that contained the actor’s intent as a key component. However, she acknowledged the incredible difficulty of determining a person’s motives with any certainty. Often those with a vested interest in hiding their motives are easily able to do so, by directly lying or couching their actions in contexts that create ambiguously jumbled possibilities (e.g., a joke, an act in the other person’s “best interests”). It is also possible that some people who commit acts of psychoemotional abuse are genuinely well-intended and ignorant of the damage of their actions. Pragmatic progress in this field may be best achieved by not considering intent in the judgement of psychoemotional abuse, as it is too often presented in a way that disguises the intention of the abuser and exploits the judge’s “benefit of doubt.”

Further support for a broader conceptualisation was provided by Marshall's (1999) study on the effects of subtle and overt psychological abuse on low-income women. Marshall concluded that psychological abuse is often part of the “normal” process of everyday interacting and not just the result of major conflictual incidents. The abuse need not cause trauma or psychological suffering in an immediate sense, as it often exerts its most powerful impact when the actions form into habits that persistently erode the confidence and security of the other person – a form of psychoemotional death by one thousand cuts. Marshall found that the people who were abused were more likely to internalise responsibility for the abuse (ie. there is something wrong with me) when covert tactics were used, and externalise responsibility when the tactics were overt (ie. there is something wrong with him). Therefore, if the victim's perception of harm was relied on to determine the existence of abuse, subtle and potentially more sinister forms of psychoemotional abuse are likely to be missed - particularly if they were isolated from reliable, alternative views.

It is also possible that the capacity of people who experience emotional abuse to accurately report the incident and its impact could be impaired. In Raes, Hermans and Williams' (2005) study, survivors of emotional abuse retrieved less specific memories than others, with those who had not received any post-abuse support faring the worst. Goldsmith and Freyd (2005) found that people who had experienced emotional abuse and neglect had great difficulty identifying feelings, even after the sample was controlled for depression, anxiety, dissociation and lifetime series of traumatic effects. Only a very small number of those who had provided details of abusive experiences, self-identified as having been “abused”.

Moreover, if the definition is at least partly dependent on the victim's response, then people who are able to withstand the abuse absorb the offensive behaviour and absolve the abusers from responsibility for their actions. This effectively blames the victim for the result, as any damage that occurs is accounted for by his or her personal weakness or inadequacies, rather than the actions of the person performing or neglecting the act itself (Glaser & Prior, 1997; Keashly, 2001). If the victims internalise and own the blame for this experience, as many seem to, their perception of the abuse is likely to be significantly different than if they externalised the blame for the abuse with their assailant (Doyle, 2001; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). Glaser (2002), for example, noticed that some emotionally abused children believed negative attributions that were cast upon them and acted out these expectations accordingly.

Even though the perceptions of the victims should be valued, many have been subtly conditioned to excuse, accept or feel as though they deserve abuse (Loring, 1994; Marshall, 1999). Relying heavily on perceptions that have been skewed in such a way assists the abuser, at the expense of the victim. Other victims may experience transient or sub-clinical effects that are easily dismissed.

Follingstad (2007) suggested that there should ideally be some consensus among professional assessors regarding the severity or type of injury that is necessary to constitute psychological abuse. While this position may develop some consistency that could help prevent vexatious claims, waiting until damage has occurred before naming abuse potentially places enormous numbers of people at great risk of

psychoemotional harm (Glaser, 2002). In some cases, signs of harm that can be traced to the abuse may not become apparent until years after the abuse (Loue, 2005).

Thus, the conceptual understanding of psychoemotional abuse presented here aims to improve detection rates and capture more abuse than the definitions of many others (Sneddon, 2003). If broadly adopted, this stance may sharpen an awareness of the dangers of potential and actual acts of abuse and place a heavier burden of responsibility onto all people to refrain from both careless and deliberate acts of harm.

To prevent harm, the field may consider adopting a conceptualisation that contains at least two thresholds for action – one for therapeutic means, the other for legal and forensic means. The first threshold may use a broad definition to draw enough attention to an incident to warrant an investigation and report and prevent the incident from continuing (ie. a “netting” or “alarm” phase). The second threshold may tighten the definition to pass legal or regulatory judgement on the perpetrator (ie. the “sanctioning” phase). As the field develops more sophisticated assessments, refinement of this definition should follow. Follingstad (2007) recommended a process that uses professionals to base sound decisions on an analysis of the dynamics between the participants; the sequence of behaviour influencing the behaviour in question; the history of the participants’ behaviour and the history of their relationship. While this would be ideal, it may be very difficult to develop.

This double-threshold conceptualisation may ease the tension between therapists - whose broad definition helps their primary aim of protecting and providing remedial treatment to their clients - and the legal decision makers, who aim

to make decisions that concurrently prevent harm and false incrimination. Some researchers seemed to get caught attempting to satisfy both sets of needs and either eagerly assumed that the netting is conviction without implementing finer judgemental filters; or overlook the importance of the netting as an alarm setting mechanism that can stop and prevent abusive behaviour.

Table 2 below demonstrates how the dual threshold model could be applied using examples of the assessment criteria raised in the literature. More refinement is required to determine the best criteria and threshold points of harm. It is understood that some of this evidence, such as intent or impact, will be difficult to acquire or substantiate, threshold 1 may be useful for therapists who need to assess which intervention is required to help their client become aware of the risks of harm if the behaviour they are describing escalates; whereas threshold 2 could be useful for legal decisions, such as those needed to determine whether a child needs to be removed from a parent’s custody. The model could be developed to include other thresholds.

Table 2: A Sample of the Dual Threshold Model of Psychoemotional Abuse

| Rating: | Threshold 1: Mild | Moderate | Threshold 2: Severe |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Sample Assessment Criteria | | | |
| 1. Duration (Number of Incidents) | Once | Four to Ten Times | Chronic More than 20 times |
| 2. Length of Episode | Short | Medium | Long |
| 3. Impact | Unclear | Impact, but unsure how much relates directly to the abuse | Unambiguous impact from the abuse |
| 4. Witness validation | No witness validation | Witness validates most | Complete witness validation |
| 5. Intent | Not directly targeted, Unclear | Directly targeted at victim | Confessed |
| Conclusion | Unlikely to exhibit long term harm | May be harmful over the long term | Highly likely to exhibit long term harm |

Table 3 summarises the major conceptual issues in the text and how the dual-threshold model attempts to address them.

Table 3: Summary of the Major Conceptual Issues Raised in the Literature

| Issue | How the Dual Threshold Model Addresses the Issue |
|---|---|
| <p>1. Judgement of the severity of the abuse requires a large amount of information about the context of the incident</p> | <p>The multiple assessment criteria require a large amount of data. If that data is not available then the abusive act cannot be substantiated.</p> |
| <p>2. Proof is difficult to obtain for legal judgements as most courts require tangible evidence</p> | <p>This model also requires a relatively large amount of evidence, although some of the other factors, such as frequency and length of the events can add weight to the judgement, whereas previously they may have been dismissed as irrelevant.</p> |
| <p>3. Survivors do not trust the complaint mechanisms</p> | <p>This model provides a lower threshold that can build their confidence that the abuse occurred and help them understand the other factors that will build the adjudicator’s confidence that the abuse occurred, such as witness validation.</p> |
| <p>4. This issue is not well understood in the community</p> | <p>This model can be developed into a method that is widely used in different settings, which will help raise awareness.</p> |

Table 3: Summary of the Major Conceptual Issues Raised in the Literature

(continued)

| Issue | How the Dual Threshold Model Addresses the Issue |
|---|--|
| <p>5. Follingstad (2009) noted that poor definitions have the potential to lead the research into misleading conclusions</p> | <p>This model legitimates multiple definitions for different purposes, which may help align the most appropriate definitions with the research findings (e.g., research on therapy can use a lower threshold).</p> |
| <p>6. The conceptual terrain covers an extremely wide variety of actions that need to be contextualised by information such as the frequency and the severity of the acts and the perceptions of those involved</p> | <p>This multi-dimensional assessment tool requires a large amount of data.</p> |

Table 3: Summary of the Major Conceptual Issues Raised in the Literature

(continued)

| Issue | How the Dual Threshold Model Addresses the Issue |
|---|---|
| <p>7. Where do minor incidents fit in to this spectrum and how are they differentiated from incidents where people are simply unpleasant to each other?</p> | <p>Depending on the context, minor incidents may be included at the lower threshold, but will not make it to the higher threshold where punishment and more serious harm occurs.</p> |
| <p>8. The survivors’ accounts tend not to be critiqued</p> | <p>This model requires witnesses to validate the survivor’s account wherever possible, but it does not exclusively depend on this to substantiate the claim.</p> |
| <p>9. Single acts can be abusive</p> | <p>This model allows for this possibility.</p> |
| <p>10. Subtle acts are often not detected</p> | <p>This model allows for this possibility. It should be accompanied by a spectrum of potentially abusive acts, which could be easily added in a menu if the model was computerised.</p> |
| <p>11. The survivors may have difficulty articulating their feelings</p> | <p>The spectrum of potentially abusive acts that would accompany this model could help survivors find the terms that best describe their experience.</p> |

Table 3: Summary of the Major Conceptual Issues Raised in the Literature

(continued)

| Issue | How the Dual Threshold Model Addresses the Issue |
|---|---|
| 12. The survivors may internalise the blame for the act | The spectrum of potentially abusive acts that would accompany this model could help survivors acknowledge that the acts were committed by another person. |

Potential problems with this study’s conceptualization of psychoemotional abuse

In practical terms, a broader conceptualisation of psychoemotional abuse may create a new set of problems for some people. The workload of child protection workers and courts may increase. Comedians and satirists are likely to bemoan restrictions to their creative license and many in powerful social positions will have some of their most important and effective tools of influence blunted.

Advocacy for a wider conceptualisation of psychoemotional abuse also carries a risk that the seriousness of the concept will gradually erode and that non-abusive people may be caught in the net (Follingstad, 2007). However, at this point in time, it seems more apt to challenge potentially abusive behaviours by applying more seeds of doubt, than continuing to enable abuse with the benefit of doubt. Being cast as someone who psychoemotionally abuses other people need not be a label tattooed forever. It is an experience that is common to most people (Arias & Pape, 1999). Widespread adoption of a broader conceptualisation should heighten all parties’ awareness of the seriousness of actions that are too often misinterpreted as benign,

and lead to a reduction of legitimated excuses. Such a conceptual shift has the potential to prevent enormous amounts of harm, as it should foster conditions where people are encouraged to take more personal and collective responsibility for their actions.

It is also accepted that the processes and outcomes of abuse cannot be easily compartmentalised into types such as psychological, emotional, physical, sexual and financial (Tomison, 2000). As Mullen et al. (1996, p.8) stated, “Focusing exclusively on one form of abuse is to risk giving a spurious prominence to the chosen form of victimisation.” However, if psychoemotional abuse is a central component of the field of abuse research as some authors have proposed (e.g., Aosved & Long, 2005; Garbarino, et al., 1996; Tomison & Tucci, 1997), the development of a more thorough understanding of this concept is likely to benefit research and practice relevant to all other types of abuse.

The Impact of Psychoemotional Abuse

The debate over the conceptualisation and the relative paucity of research on psychoemotional abuse does not diminish the abuse’s impact. Recipients of psychoemotional abuse have reportedly experienced a range of traumatic symptoms that affected them psychologically (e.g., suicidal thoughts, post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociation, low self-esteem), physically (e.g., retarded growth, eating disorders, suicidal action, illicit drug use), emotionally (e.g., depression, constant fear) and socially (e.g., diminished social networks, isolation, attachment difficulties) (Brassard & Hardy 1996; Doyle, 1997, 2001; Festinger & Baker, 2010; Glaser, 2002;

Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001; Jewkes, 2010; Kelly, Warner, Trahan & Miscavage, 2009; Kennedy, Ip & Samra, 2007; Mullen, et al., 1996; Queen, 2007; Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Solomon & Serres, 1999; Straight, Harper & Arias, 2003; Swift & Gayton, 1996; Tuel & Russell, 1998; Waller, Corstophine & Mountford, 2007).

Contrary to the widely cited proverb “sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me”, psychoemotional abuse appears to exert a profound impact on many of its recipients (Butany, 2003; Cadmus-Romm, 2004; Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Iwaniec, 1996, 1997; Mullen, et al. 1996). According to Mullen, et al. (1996), emotional abuse tends to exert a long-term impact on children, and increases their vulnerability to developing other complications in adulthood, such as mental illness or drug problems.

Lobbestael and Arntz’s (2010) results suggested that different forms of personality disorder develop for children who had been emotionally abused (ie. paranoid, schizotypal, borderline) or neglected (ie. histrionic and borderline); compared to other forms of abuse, such as sexual abuse (ie. paranoid, schizoid, borderline and avoidant). Sansone, Dakroub and Pole (2005) found that the effects of childhood emotional abuse undermined many adults’ long-term employment prospects and significantly increased the chances of being dependent on a disability allowance for income. Brassard and Hardy (1996) proposed that only incidents involving the death of a loved one are likely to incite a more devastating impact on children than psychological abuse.

Some researchers, such as Riggs (2010), Berzenski and Yates (2010) and Burns, Jackson and Harding (2010) stated that children exposed to emotional abuse develop an increased risk that they will learn an insecure attachment style that impairs their ability to regulate their emotions for years afterwards and leads to a range of other problems including lowered self-esteem and poorer quality romantic relationships. Garbarino et al. (1996) concluded that psychologically maltreated children developed a sense of reality “dominated by negative feelings and self-defeating styles of relating to people” (p.101). Children who are psychoemotionally abused by a parent may be particularly confused about how to successfully relate to others, as they are also heavily dependent on their abuser for other needs such as protection, shelter and food (Garbarino et al., 1996; Hart & Brassard, 1992). Indeed, it is possible that psychoemotional abuse could more directly inflict injuries on a person’s evolving sense of self than other forms of abuse, as its primary operations are based in language – the same mode that plays a critical role in constructing self (Ali, 2007).

There is also some evidence that the effects of childhood emotional abuse can also be passed on to the next generation. Jovanovic et al.’s (2011) study of African Americans on low incomes found that children whose mothers scored highest on the emotional abuse components of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire had more symptoms of anxiety than other children.

Recent studies have found that the types of psychological maltreatment that a child’s mother experiences can determine the effect on the child. For example, de la Vega, de la Osa, Ezpeleta & Granero (2011) declared that children who witnessed

their mothers being spurned (e.g., being rejected, ridiculed, criticised) experienced the most detrimental effects; compared to witnessing their mothers being either denied emotional responsiveness (e.g., ignoring their emotional needs) or terrorised (e.g., threats to injure, kill or abandon). Although acts that denied emotional responsiveness also increased the risk of the child’s emotional impairment and internalising psychopathologic conditions.

Several researchers have studied the effects on children when they witness domestic violence between their parents and have found that many of these children are more likely to develop mental health issues, such as symptoms of PTSD, anxiety and depression; although the pathway is not straightforward (Gunnlaugsson, Kristjansson, Einarsdottir & Sigfusdottir, 2011; Milletich, Kelley, Doane and Pearson, 2010). Russell, Springer and Greenfield (2010) suggested that the frequency of exposure mattered when studying depression among young adults. Only those who saw many incidents of violence in the home developed depressive symptoms.

Other researchers have found that children who have witnessed intimate partner violence have experienced significantly more symptoms of PTSD than their respective control groups; although this depended on the child also being abused as well (Feerick & Haugaard, 1999; Kulkarni, Graham-Bermann, Rauch & Seng, 2011). Those who witnessed the abuse, but were not abused themselves did not experience the same effects. Asher (2011) found no relation between the experience of witnessing domestic violence and the potential to abuse others during adolescence.

However, this is not to say that these children were not at greater risk of harm. Hamby Finlehor, Turner & Ormrod (2010) calculated in their study of more than 4,500 youth, that children who witnessed partner violence were also approximately four times as likely to have been abused themselves within the past 12 months compared to children who had not experienced this.

Kelly (2004) posited that there is strong evidence that victims of psychological abuse are likely to exhibit increased levels of anxiety and depression and therefore, practitioners should investigate their clients’ experience of psychological abuse when either of these conditions presents. Jewkes (2010) recommended that pregnant women should be screened and, when necessary, treated for emotional abuse during antenatal care, as a means of preventing up to 10% of cases of post-natal depression. When discussing the impact of all forms of violence on women, Astbury and Cabral (2000, p. 78-79) concluded that

Accumulating evidence suggests that the relationship between violence and depression and anxiety is causal, although a randomized controlled trial can never, for obvious ethical reasons, be carried out...Not only do women who have ‘ever’ experienced violence differ significantly in their rates of psychological disorder from those never abused, but women who have been doubly or multiply abused have significantly higher rates again.

Doyle’s (1997) finding that suicide and self-harm were present in all her sample groups of emotionally abused people challenged the misconception that

psychoemotional abuse is rarely fatal. Indeed, many authors believed that psychological and emotional forms of abuse may be generally more destructive than physical (Arias & Pape, 1999; Baldry, 2003; Elliston, 2002; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001; Murphy & Hoover, 1999; O’Leary, 1999; Roby, 2001; Street & Arias, 2001) and sexual abuse (Brassard & Hardy, 1996; Mullen et al., 1996). For example, Stevenson (1999) has reported that survivors of emotional abuse are 11 times more likely to commit suicide than those who have been sexually abused. However, Follingstad (2009) asserted that more work was required to disentangle the effects of psychological abuse from physical and sexual abuse, as they often co-existed in the samples studied. She recommended that more research was required to investigate the impact that threats of physical violence had on effects that were attributed to psychological abuse. She also concluded that while the association between psychological abuse and physical health effects, such as sleep and alcohol problems, seemed to be a viable area of investigation, studies so far have over-relied solely on self-reported effects and vague conceptualisations of physical health conditions, such as “stress”.

Doyle (2001) has suggested that people have more capacity to fight back against or escape from physical and sexual abuse as they become adults. However, there is more potential for psychoemotional abuse to continue through adulthood, as the execution of this form of abuse is less dependent on the exploitation of advantages over the targeted person’s size and age (Doyle, 2001). It is also arguable that, compared to physical and sexual abuse, the application of psychoemotional abuse is less constrained by the dimensions of time and space. With regards to time, memories can be dredged to inspire guilt and atrocities can be predicted to arouse fear.

Spatially, psychoemotional abuse can be transmitted across virtually any communication channel and it is possible for one well-publicised act to insult millions globally.

It is highly likely that the devastating effects of psychoemotional abuse are clouded by the attention researchers and practitioners have paid to the more tangible types of abuse (Iwaniec et al., 2007; Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Stevenson, 1999). While examining the effects apparently presented as a result of physical and sexual abuse, many seemed to overlook the powerful role that psychoemotional abuses almost inevitably played in setting up and justifying physical or sexual attacks and preventing the victim from seeking assistance or retribution (Iwaniec, 1996; O’Leary, 1999).

Brassard, Hart and Hardy (1993, p.716) supported this position by concluding that “it is the psychological concomitants, more than the severity of the acts themselves, that constitute the real trauma and are responsible for the damaging consequences of physical and sexual abuse.” When Vissing, Straus, Gelles and Harrop (1991) controlled for “verbal aggression” in their study on children, the effects of interpersonal difficulties that may have been initially attributed to physical abuse, practically disappeared. O’Leary (1999) also formed the view that physical abuse without psychological abuse was virtually non-existent.

It seems that abusive psychoemotional processes can facilitate the development of a wide range of severely damaging long-term impacts, such as traumatic symptoms, stigmatisation and pervasive feelings of betrayal, powerlessness,

inadequacy and guilt (DeRobertis, 2004; Dutton, et al., 1999; Elliston, 2002; Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; Sanders & Becker-Lausen, 1995; Stevenson, 1999; Street & Arias, 2001; Tomison & Tucci, 1997; Webb, Heisler & Call, 2007).

Part of the reason why psychoemotional abuse may promote such devastation, could be that it appears to be the most prevalent form of abuse. Researchers who used broader conceptualisations of psychoemotional abuse found that very high proportions of their samples reported such an experience. For example, Matud (2007) found that more than 90% of adolescents and young adults used ‘verbal violence’ towards someone they were dating. The prevalence figures were also very high among some specific samples. Stolz, Shannon & Kerr (2007) discovered that 87% of their sample of young drug-using prostitutes had suffered emotional abuse, which was more than the sample’s rates of physical abuse (73%) and sexual abuse (32.4%).

As either the conceptual definition tightened or the general population was surveyed, the proportions experiencing psychoemotional abuse dropped, but still created cause for alarm. Stosny (2006) estimated that up to one-third of USA women live in an emotionally abusive relationship with their husband or boyfriend. May-Chahal and Cawson’s (2005) study of 2,869 young adults in the UK reported that, as children, a total of 17% suffered serious emotional abuse, received an absence of care or supervision, compared to figures of 7% for physical abuse and 11% for sexual abuse (the participants may have reported experiencing more than one form of abuse in this survey). When overviewing the same figures, Hobbs (2005) concluded that most of psychological abuse is hidden or denied.

Researchers who have examined violence trends over time, have concluded that while the prevalence of physical violence in their samples has decreased over the past decade or so, the rates of psychological abuse and aggression have either not significantly changed (Fritz & O’Leary, 2004) or increased (Sears, Byers & Whelan, 2006; Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004).

The impact of psychoemotional abuse relative to other forms of abuse could also be proliferated because the recipients tend to stay in abusive relationships longer compared to recipients of physical or sexual abuse (Arias & Pape, 1999; Dutton, et al., 1999). Some forms of psychoemotional abuse, such as stalking, can continue beyond the relationship. Stalking has been associated with psychological effects, such as stress, depression and substance abuse (Dressing , Gass & Kuhler , 2007; Mechanic, 2003); with the impacts becoming more severe with the frequency of the stalking (Mechanic, Uhlmansiek, Weaver & Resick , 2000).

The extra exposure provides more opportunity for the abuse to shape the recipients’ long-term responses, gradually increases their tolerance for abuse, diminishes their self-perceptions and simultaneously normalises abusive relationships (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; Morse, 2003; Pipes & LeBov-Keeler, 1997). Some have stated that they felt captive and under the constant threat of terror (Queen, 2007). Indeed, Herman (1992) has suggested that complex traumatic stress response may be a more accurate way to describe the experience of many victims of chronic violence and psychological terror, than typical diagnoses such as anxiety and depression.

More evidence of psychoemotional reconditioning was provided by Loring (1994) who reported that the survivors of emotional abuse she interviewed found it difficult to perceive that non-abusive relationships were possible. Hamberg, Johansson and Lindgren (1999) explained that it was very difficult for the survivors of abuse that they interviewed to disclose their experiences because they felt shameful, feared an adverse response from the listener or feared potential repercussions from the person who perpetrated the abuse. The survivors reduced the risks of these negative experiences by minimising, “sugar-coating” or re-framing their stories; or by coding their stories with subtle hints that they thought an “understanding listener” may decipher.

Keashly (2001, p. 239) summarised the arduous task of disclosing emotional abuse as “describing the indescribable”. By this phrase, she captured the subtle, yet powerful, impact that the abuse had on undermining the recipients’ “certainty of and trust in their own senses which is necessary for them to relate their experiences to others” and disabled their “abilities to discern exactly what was going on” (p. 240). Some reported that they were not aware of what was happening at the time; which inferred that the abuse only came into focus when they were able to remove themselves from the situation and reflect on the package of treatment they received. Often the perpetrator would send mixed messages and be very skilled at avoiding detection. The recipient’s focus was also sharpened if they could draw from other experiences of being abused by the perpetrator, or from knowing that the perpetrator had a history of being abusive to others. Such information was vital to the stabilisation of the recipients’ perception and helped them remove, or at least manage, shadows of self-doubt.

Some researchers have also concluded that it is often extremely difficult for people who endured psychoemotional abuse to terminate their relationship with their abuser, as their self-image and confidence deteriorates (Marshall, 1999; Morse, 2003; Pipes & LeBov-Keeler, 1997), they gravely fear abandonment (Loring, 1994) and are prepared to make short-term sacrifices for the long-term benefits of the relationship (Jory & Anderson, 1999). Termination of an abusive relationship may be more difficult if the recipients are subjected to psychoemotional strategies that isolate them socially and restrict their opportunities for successful relocation into other relationships (e.g., false rumours about the recipient are spread to their friends, the abuser forbids the recipient to socialise with certain people) (Pipes & LeBov-Keeler, 1997).

In most cases, the experience of psychoemotional abuse does not occur as a constant stream, but is peppered with enjoyable moments (Kasian & Painter, 1992). As well as being the recipient's main source of abuse, the abuser may also be their main source of love and pleasure. Some abusive actions may be camouflaged in a joking, loving or playful style (Marshall, 1999).

Twaite and Rodriguez-Srednicki (2004) described the process of the Helplessness Syndrome, which suggests that people who have been chronically abused have been conditioned to expect the worst outcomes and consequentially either do not bother seeking help or do not take advantage of any help on offer. This phenomenon challenges the notion that all people have complete freedom to choose their lifestyle.

Thus, it also seems quite plausible that the process referred to as the Stockholm Syndrome extends to situations beyond those involving political hostages (Graham, Rawlings & Ihms, 2001; Loring, 1994). The Stockholm Syndrome describes the intuitively contradictory phenomenon where hostages become passionate advocates for captors who have unlawfully imprisoned and tortured them. Although it is not a universal experience, it is hypothesized that some hostages are psychoemotionally transformed as a result of factors such as the intimacy of their captive relationship, various intentional and unintentional “brainwashing” techniques and a dependency on the captors for basic emotional and physical needs (Loring, 1994). Thus, even though the hostages recognised they were treated poorly; they experienced enough moments of caring to pardon their abuse. This is consistent with Kasian and Painter’s (1992) conclusion that a person’s negative behaviours can be excused, dismissed and minimised if positive behaviours are present as well. They found the termination of relationship was more likely as a result of the omission of positive behaviours rather than presence of negative behaviours. Other research has demonstrated that strong affection can be the motive for the psychoemotional abuse, as is seen in cases where people attempt to control the behaviour of others who they love (Murphy & Hoover, 1999).

In her critiques of the body of research, Follingstad (2007, 2009) argued that the field was unable to confidently assert that psychological abuse caused certain, incontestable results such as mental or physical health problems due to the relatively small number of studies, methodological problems and regular co-occurrence of physical violence. This is not to say that these effects are not plausible, nor even

likely to result from particular patterns of psychological abuse; but rather that the assessment has been inadequate, and the data is still infested with too many confounding variables. For example, she cited some studies that claimed that psychological abuse led to anxiety, but did not clarify whether they were referring to clinical anxiety or general anxieties, such as standard types of fears and worries. She also argued that at this point in the field's development, causal pathways to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) should be reserved for physical and sexual abuse, or at best, certain types of psychological acts, such as threats to harm or kill or some types of intimidation.

Follingstad (2007) cautioned that it is very difficult to establish causal links between an outcome, such as anxiety or depression and psychological abuse as no clear causal path models have been documented. However, these paths are often assumed in the literature when correlational relationships are found. Follingstad (2009) warned readers to interpret results from the literature with great care, as almost every conclusion was based on correlational data, which cannot confidently establish causality. In Follingstad's view, the most consistent, methodologically sound association reported in the literature was between psychological abuse and relationship changes, including relationship termination, but this focus has not received as much attention in the body of research as mental and physical health impacts.

Follingstad (2009) posited that certain demographic characteristics that have not been controlled in many studies are likely to influence the research outcomes. For example, there may be important differences in the dynamics involved in relationships

involving dating college students compared to long-term married or cohabitating couples with children. These differences could influence vital aspects such as the impact of the abuse, the pressures to stay in the relationship and the resources available to escape it. Follingstad strongly recommended more longitudinal research needs to be conducted into the enduring patterns of egregious psychological abuse and its moderating or mediating variables, such as personality traits. This line of research will help determine whether certain characteristics shape some people’s interpretations of the abusive events and make them more or less vulnerable to serious harm.

Theoretical Explanations of Psychoemotional Abuse and the Research Pathways they Encourage

Mainstream Psychological Theories

Psychologists and other social scientists have attempted to explain psychoemotional abuse from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Some who focused on child abuse believed attachment theory provided a viable explanation of the development of effects that result from psychoemotional abuse (Gormley & Lopez, 2010; Gray, 2003; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Iwaniec, 1996; 1997; Oates, 1996; Rada, 2002; Riggs, 2010). For example, Rada (2002) was able to predict insecure attachment and dissociative experiences among adolescents based on the extent of their parents’ verbal aggression. Iwaniec (1997) proposed that children exposed to emotional abuse from their primary care givers are at risk of failing to thrive (ie. “failing to grow in terms of weight gain and develop, according to the norms, in a

healthy and vigorous way”, p. 375). Oates (1996), another author who drew on attachment theory, suggested that it is premature to make such a connection between non-organic failure to thrive and emotional abuse, until studies have controlled for food intake.

Oates (1996) and other authors favoured explanations based on “normal” developmental processes, such as psychosocial stage theory, human needs theory and parental acceptance-rejection theory (Loue, 2005). Researchers, such as Garbarino et al. (1996), have charted the “normal” mental, emotional and social development of humans and explained how psychoemotional abuse corrupts this process.

Even though attachment and developmental-style theories might assist our understanding of the importance of early childhood psychoemotional development and help explain the consequences of abusive interactions, they appear insufficient as a comprehensive explanation as they do not account for the effects people experience who have been psychoemotionally abused as adults.

Occasionally, adaptations of social learning theory have been offered as an explanation (Pipes & LeBov-Keeler, 1997). Some described psychoemotional abuse as an inter-generational behaviour learned from one’s parents (Iwaniec, 1996); whereas others described effects, such as low self-esteem, in terms of a cognitive-behavioural adaptation to one’s environment (Buchanan, 1996).

It would seem that attempts to explain the adoption of psychoemotional abuse purely as skills learned from one’s parents are over-simplified. Not only do people

learn from social roles other than one's parents, assumptions of the ongoing inevitability of intergenerational abuse do not hold for all people (Doyle, 2001; Pipes & LeBov-Keeler, 1997). An emphasis on cognitive-behavioural aspects of psychoemotional abuse also tends to restrict the focus to an individual level, and shifts attention away from the broader social and cultural factors that contextualise the abuse.

Others attempted to explain psychoemotional abuse by appealing to individual characteristics or deficits of either the abuser or the abused. These theories have ranged from biological (e.g., neurological deficiencies) and psychiatric (e.g., a subconscious inner drive for abuse) hypotheses (Buchanan, 1996; Shaw, 2005), to socially developed personality characteristics, such as the development of a hostile worldview (Stevenson, 1999). Psychoemotional abuse committed by parents against their children has been attributed to the parents' lack of knowledge (Oates, 1996) or response to stress (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995).

Henning and Klesges (2003) described men who were more psychologically abusive than others as being antisocial, having employment problems, recent substance abuse and deviant peer relations, although there were no significant differences among their age, race or income level. Zavala and Spohn (2010) identified an association between the amount of alcohol consumed by men and their likelihood of committing emotional abuse against their female partners. Gormley and Lopez (2010) found that college men's stress levels were the strongest predictor of perpetration of emotional abuse against their female romantic partners.

It is understandable why many find these explanations intuitively appealing. Most psychologists have been trained to address social problems by attempting to search for and remedy individual cognitive or behavioural deficits (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997). While this approach may have yielded some success, when it is presented as a self-contained solution it also carries the risk that victims become blamed for their own circumstances. For example, a focus on the victim's coping skills may shift responsibility away from those whose actions forced the duress or the conditions that enabled the duress.

An approach that is centered on an individual's deficits can also minimise or draw attention away from the strengths and competencies that are also present in the individuals themselves and their surrounds (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997). Many of the female survivors of psychoemotional abuse in Tuel and Russell's (1998) study, for example, commented on how they valued the inner strength they gained from surviving their ordeals. Reports such as these could be much more inspirational and pragmatically valuable to people in similar situations than reports that drip with lists of deficiencies.

Coping Styles, Remedial Interventions and Recovery

Theories that focus on an individual's strengths and weaknesses and the differential influence that abuse has on people has led some researchers to explore the role of coping as a buffer against the detrimental effects of abuse. Arias and Pape (1999) concluded that emotional-focused coping strategies (e.g, having wishes about how things might turn out) were less effective means of dealing with the impact of

psychological abuse than problem-focused strategies (e.g., making a plan and following it through). Indeed, emotion-focused coping strategies predicted Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); whereas problem-focused strategies did not. A similar, but slightly different pattern was obtained by Varia, Abidin and Dass (1996), who found that those who minimised the psychological abuse they had endured, suffered more detrimental outcomes than others who acknowledged their abuse. Although a follow-up study (Varia & Abidin, 1999) suggested that “minimisers” reported warmer and more affectionate relationships with their mothers and fewer difficulties in adult relationships than the “acknowledgers”. The authors speculated that this might reflect the “minimiser’s” normalisation of abusive relationship dynamics.

A study of 50 adults who perceived that they were emotionally abused as children, found that those who developed cognitive styles with a heightened fear of criticism and rejection were more likely to develop major depression as adults (Maciejewski & Mazure, 2006). Thus, it is quite likely that particular types of psychoemotional abuse can shape the style of a person’s personality, cognitive and emotional functioning, especially during their developmental years, and leave them vulnerable to certain conditions such as chronic depression, anxiety or personality disorders.

Iwaniec, Larkin and Higgins (2006) noted that some emotionally abused children cope by becoming compulsively, but often superficially compliant. They emotionally detach, suppress their feelings and inhibit their anger. Others protect themselves by becoming overtly resistant and constantly become involved in

confrontations with people who they perceive as threatening. The children in Georgsson, Almqvist and Broberg's (2011) study on witnessing intimate partner violence typically coped with unwanted memories trying not to think about them.

Allen, Wolf and Bybee, (2003) mapped out four typical coping response patterns that children generally used after seeing their mothers physically or emotionally abused. Some become overprotective of their mothers; while others avoid or ignore the abuse. Children who lived in the same house as their mother were most likely to aggressively intervene against the assailant and seek help. Those who did not respond much at all were the children who witnessed less violence than others in the sample. No links were found between any of the response patterns and the children's wellbeing.

Indeed, the association between coping strategies and wellbeing seems to be more complex than some researchers acknowledge. Some women and children may need to adopt more passive coping patterns to ensure their safety, at least in the short-term, while they work towards longer-term safety and recovery strategies. In some situations, assertive coping methods such as engaging with or challenging the assailant may increase a person's risk of serious harm (Lewis, Griffing & Chu, 2006). It is plausible then, that some people fluctuate between emotional-focused and problem-focused coping strategies depending on the situation that confronts them.

Sneddon (2003) declared that the individual variations of successful coping largely depended on five factors:

- (a) the nature of the abusive act – including the type of act, its combination with other abusive or supporting acts. People will generally find it easier to cope if they are exposed to fewer, less intense abusive acts, over a shorter time (ie. its frequency, duration and intensity). The timing of an act is also important. Some acts will have different effects at different stages of a person’s development (Iwaniec et al., 2007)

- (b) the individual characteristics of the victim – Each person carries multiple attributes that can influence their likelihood of receiving psychoemotional abuse and their ability to cope (e.g., their age, propensity to accept blame, membership of a minority culture, and typical response to adversity).

- (c) the nature of the relationship between the victim and perpetrator – The durability of the source of power the perpetrator has over the other person will frame the coping options available. For example, it is more difficult to escape or avoid parents than strangers.

- (d) the responses of others to the abuse – A person’s treatment by others (e.g., parents, colleagues, counsellors, police, friends, teacher) when they report abuse can have a profound impact on their wellbeing.

- (e) other factors correlated by the abuse – Some factors that are entwined with the abuse, such as family breakdown, may amplify its effects.

Sneddon (2003) also suggested that, while no one can be completely resistant to stressful events, people had a better chance of demonstrating resilience if they experienced higher socioeconomic status and good self-control; had no neurobiological problems, early losses in life or traumas; had a calm temperament, high self-esteem and IQ; were skilled at solving problems, planning, had a good sense of humour; and were autonomous, socially aware, and empathic. Some authors (e.g., Iwaniec et al., 2007; Morimoto & Sharma, 2004; Sneddon, 2003) recommended the development of a framework of risk and protective factors that could prevent psychological abuse or minimise its harm. This would require an integration of specialised skills across many disciplines.

Another line of research has investigated therapy for people who have experienced psychoemotional abuse. The subtle nature of psychoemotional abuse makes it very difficult to design effective interventions (Marshall, 1999), and recovery from this form of abuse tends to be slow and careful (Trowell et al., 1997). Tragically, it seems that people who suffer from psychoemotional abuse are more prone to dropping out of therapy and therefore receive less therapy than those who have been physically abused (O’Leary, 1999). For some, this phenomenon may be symptomatic of their damaged sense of trust in others, damaged confidence in self and heightened need for self-protection.

It is perhaps not surprising then, that the major therapeutic themes that emerge from the literature include efforts that attempted to restore the person’s self-image and esteem (Iwaniec, 1996; Loring, 1994 Skogrand, DeFrain & DeFrain, 2007), and to (re)construct healthy relationships with others (Iwaniec, 1996; Iwaniec et al, 2006;

Oates, 1996; Stevenson, 1999; Tomison & Tucci, 1997; Wilding & Thoburn, 1997). Others, such as Forward and Frazier (1997), Engel (2002), Elgin (1995), Jantz and McMurray (2003), Stark (2007) and Hirigoyen (2000) have developed a series of counter-strategies that can be used to defend against psychoemotionally abusive approaches.

When Doyle (1997, p. 338) asked survivors of emotional abuse “what would have helped?” they commonly replied “Someone to talk to, to listen to me, to believe me.” Doyle found that what was most critical for survivors was “at least one person who gave unconditional, positive regard; someone who thought well of them and made them feel important” (p.338). The survivors used siblings, aunts, other adults, same-age friends, religious groups, pets, toys and books as mental and spiritual lifelines (Doyle, 1997, 2001). Doyle (2001) also reported that the non-abusing parent was rarely a major source of support; and some siblings, peers and teachers only exacerbated the abuse. Some survivors sought professional help, although most recruited help from within their existing resource pool. Others used drugs and alcohol, developed eating disorders or attempted suicide to cope with the residual pain.

Some studies on the role of social support have found that it can moderate the risks of developing poor mental health from psychological and psychological abuse (e.g., Coker, Smith & Thompson, 2002; Iwaniec et al., 2006); while others did not find this association unless tangible support was present as well (Kocot, 2001). Choi (2004) suggested that professionals also need to develop more sophisticated approaches when recommending that people who have been traumatised seek social

support. She found that social support does not significantly buffer people from the effects of recent traumatic events; however, social undermining does have a significant accelerating impact on the development of post-traumatic stress symptoms. Thus, social support structures need to be carefully selected. Some people may recover better alone than if they were connected to a person who may be supportive sometimes, but undermine their efforts of recovery at other times.

A few researchers have also explored therapeutic techniques with people who have psychoemotionally abused others. Jory and Anderson (1999) advocated for interventions that encouraged the clients to be honest and open, and highlighted hypocritical junctures in the clients' moral framework (e.g., “Are you saying it is okay to deceive others, but not for others to deceive you?”). Others (e.g., Garbarino et al., 1996; Iwaniec, 1997; Iwaniec et al, 2007) suggested a therapeutic program for parents who psychoemotionally abused their children that includes problem solving training, stress management, attachment work and family therapy.

It is difficult to judge the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions for people experiencing psychoemotional abuse. At this point in the field's development, there are a lack of thorough evaluations that provide convincing evidence in terms of what constitutes appropriate therapy for survivors and perpetrators of psychoemotional abuse (Stevenson, 1999; Tomison & Tucci, 1997). Although it does seem that psychoemotional abuse is very resistant to treatment (Brassard & Hardy, 1996), possibly because it is so deeply embedded within people's communication habits, patterns of relating to others and sanctioned by multiple layers of cultural norms.

Alternative theories

A mainstream psychology that strives for the ideals of pure, objective, unbiased empirical science has traditionally refused to embrace the political ambitions of feminist theories. Thus, while feminism has undoubtedly been one of the most popular and influential theories for psychologists working in the field of violence and abuse, its theories are categorised as alternative here because feminism still struggles to gain acceptance among mainstream psychology's institutions, unless it reforms into the politically diluted “psychology of women” (Wilkinson, 1997).

Feminist theories have been used to account for psychoemotional abuse on the basis of structural and power inequities between men and women (Buchanan, 1996; Pipes & LeBov-Keeler, 1997). From this perspective, men use a variety of means, including violence and abuse, to gain and maintain power and control over women. These strategies of control lead to women experiencing a series of widespread disadvantage across many fronts. For example, women often carry the burden of protecting their families from abuse and experience twice the rate of depression, anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder than men (Astbury & Cabral, 2000). Ali (2007) has been particularly critical of the research into emotional abuse for failing to consider the gendered aspects of the phenomenon.

Feminist theoretical frameworks have contributed to some excellent work on the interface between women's personal experiences of abuse and men's macro-manipulation of cultural systems (Walkerdine, 1997; Wesely, 2002). For example, Wesely (2002) skillfully explored female exotic dancers' experiences of abuse,

exploitation, power and powerlessness which fluctuated and co-existed within an environment where cultures of male entitlement and social constructions of sexual attractiveness objectified and fragmented women’s bodies.

There appears to be little doubt that gender-based power differentials have an important influence on many women’s experience of psychoemotional abuse and on the factors that frame that abuse (Astbury & Cabral, 2000). However, the central tenets of feminist theories do not account for female to female, male to male or female to male abuse; and as such do not provide a comprehensive explanation for the full range of psychoemotionally abusive experiences. Post-feminists have also argued that it is also time to move on from theories that inadvertently erase or homogenise other differences, such as class and culture; prescribe how women should express their sexual identities and eternally cast women in the role of “victims” of patriarchy (Phoca & Wright, 1999; Sim & Van Loon, 2001). It is also entirely understandable that some feminists may not be willing to adopt post-feminism until it becomes clear that society has become post-patriarchal.

Other authors have preferred to use cultural or systematic dynamics that do not nucleate from gender relations as their primary explanatory mechanism. Buchanan (1996) cited socio-economic models that focus on poverty as the cause for violence; status inconsistency theory, which posits that people whose status is high in one context and low in another are prone to be abusive; and theories that relied on norms and values of cultures or subcultures to explain abusive behaviour, as symbolic examples.

Models that exclusively focussed on systemic issues also tended to provide a convenient blanket explanation to complex social issues. Even though it seems clear that more collective responses to psychoemotional abuse are warranted, it would seem remiss to discredit all individual approaches and interventions, and forgo some excellent opportunities to perform useful work at the individual level.

As a response to the tensions between macro and micro approaches, some researchers preferred to combine theoretical perspectives and develop multi-leveled explanations. Buchanan (1996), for example, has developed a four-tiered model that incorporated socio-political, cultural, psychological and biological factors that are involved in intergenerational child maltreatment. It has become more common for researchers to acknowledge influences from various levels of analysis (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Glaser, 2002; Hart & Brassard, 1992, Keashly, 2001; Schumacher et al., 2001; Swan & Snow, 2002).

A corollary from this theoretical position has been the development of models of risk and protective factors that act as early indicators of psychoemotional abuse. Preliminary research in this area indicated that children are at greater risk of experiencing psychological or emotional abuse if they live in households with a relatively large family size, their parents are often in conflict, there is a change in caregivers, a child in the family dies, there is a lack of money for essentials, there are accommodation, mental health, or parental alcohol problems (Doyle, 1997); and they lack a close friend or a close relationship with their mother (Mullen, et al., 1996). In addition, Fortin and Chamberland (1995) proposed that children’s risk of being psychologically maltreated increased in the presence of certain cultural expectations

(e.g., high tolerance of violence), socioenvironmental stress and a lack of opportunities (e.g., high unemployment, tenuous work conditions), and familial dysfunction.

Schumacher et al. (2001) could not find firm evidence to support the view that one's socio-economic status or experience of aggression in one's family of origin influenced one's propensity to be more psychologically abusive than others. Although they did conclude that individual traits such as habits of self-defeating beliefs and relationship styles that involved demand/withdrawal and fearful attachment patterns provided promising starting points to build preventive interventions from.

Fortin and Chamberland (1995) and others believed that the impact of risk factors could be attenuated or completely counteracted by protective factors such as access to support systems (Garbarino et al., 1996), good parenting skills, problem solving skills, and high self-esteem (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000).

Even though these models may be useful mechanisms for earlier screening of psychoemotional abuse, some recipients will not display the classic symptoms of abuse (Stevenson, 1999) and may be inadvertently “sentenced to a lifetime of unabated abuse, only to become symptomatic later in life” (Burnett, 1993, p. 451), particularly if the abuse is subtle and prolonged. Thus, in some cases, screening devices that create target groups may overplay the risks and protections associated with certain characteristics, and actually delay interventions to those the model does not consider to be in need of assistance.

Overtly Political, Preventive and Multi-layered Interventions

While much of the research has focused on the clinical approaches to psychoemotional abuse, such as therapy for victims and abusers; a number of researchers have argued for a wider range of interventions at the systems, community or cultural level to complement this form of treatment, as they believed that multiple interventions are likely to lead to more effective and sustaining change (Brassard & Hardy, 1990; Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; Iwaniec, 1997; Mullaly, 2002).

Astbury and Cabral (2000) noted that time pressures may limit many professionals' ability to do much more than treat symptoms that present before them. If the primary focus of these practitioners remains on the individual, isolated case before them, longitudinal perspectives that understand the cyclic nature of interpersonal abuse are less likely to be addressed.

Examples of broader based interventions may include advocacy for children's rights (Doyle, 1997; Fortin & Chamberland, 1995), or using conscientization to raise the community's critical awareness of the processes and effects of psychoemotional abuse (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). Widespread political efforts by practitioners and their allies seem to be required to move beyond the dominant treatment ideologies of crisis intervention and remediation and acquire more resources for the implementation of preventive interventions (Fortin & Chamberland, 1995).

A General Critique of Previous Research

The dominance of static, dichotomous models

Most of the research that has been conducted on the phenomenon of psychoemotional abuse has focused on either male psychological abuse against women or parental abuse against children (Garbarino et al., 1996; Grasamkee, 2007; Levensky & Fruzzetti, 2004; Sackett & Saunders, 1999). In both contexts, a relatively static, dichotomous model of a dominating perpetrator abusing a subordinate victim has been presented to describe the process. This model fixes the actors' identities to their roles and implies that the perpetrator exerts power over the victim at all times, in all contexts (Brassard & Hardy, 1996).

While this dichotomous model of dominant-subordinate relationships has been a useful means of assigning responsibility for the abuse, it does not reflect the intricacy and dynamism of interpersonal communication and over-simplifies the complexity and fluidity of people's identities (Follingstad, 2007; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001; Keashly, 2001; Swan & Snow, 2002). It would be difficult to find an adult, particularly a parent, who has neither been a victim nor a perpetrator of at least a low level psychoemotional abuse or psychoemotional aggression (Arias & Pape, 1999; Fortin & Chamberland, 1995; O'Hagan, 1995; Tomison & Tucci, 1997).

Tavris (1992) was alerted by another problematic dimension of this model. She expressed concerns that women in abuse survivor support groups gain solidarity and strength around the identity of victim and the language of victimhood becomes

the “sole organising narrative of their identity” (p. 329). She feared that while this identity becomes more powerfully internalised and individualised among women, no substantial, systemic changes occur.

Loring (1994) alluded to the complexity of identity when she described the women in her study, who were subjected to emotional abuse and had committed violent actions, such as murder, as “victim-perpetrators”. However, while she accepted the women’s victimization as an explanation for their perpetration; she assumed quite different explanations (ie., malicious, power hungry and self-centered) for male perpetrators: “The abuser’s comfort is the only organising theme of his (sic) thoughts and actions” (Loring, 1994, p. 3). While Loring attempted to stretch the identities of victims and perpetrators beyond their original dimensions, unfortunately she did so in an over-simplified way that merely looped to a slightly different set of rigid stereotypes.

The fluidity of victim and perpetrator identities has been explored in other settings, such as Bertram, Hall, Fine and Weis’ (2000) study with young women in the United States who experienced oppression on the basis of their socioeconomic and gender status on the one hand, and racially oppressed people from minority ethnic groups on the other hand. After analyzing the results of 146 surveys conducted by women in long-term cohabiting relationships, Grasamkee (2007) concluded that many women in the general population shared the experience of receiving and perpetrating psychological abuse. In Moran et al.’s (2002) study of 301 women’s experience of childhood psychological abuse, 90% of the perpetrators were parents. The other 10%

comprised teachers, their mothers’ boyfriends, other relatives and strangers. Half of the abuse was inflicted by women, 45% by men and 5% by men and women together.

Several researchers (e.g., Gormley & Lopez, 2010; Harned, 2001; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001; James, West, Deters & Armijo, 2000; Kaisan & Painter, 1992; Mills & Malley-Morrison, 1998; Murphy & Hoover, 1999; O’Hearn & Davis, 1997; Sears, Byers & Price, 2007; Zurbriggen, Gobin & Freyd, 2010), recognised that male and female students have claimed being both abusive and abused in their dating relationships. When the Conflicts Tactics Scale was applied to a sample of heterosexual male college students, Simonelli and Ingram (1998) found that approximately 90% reported receiving emotional abuse from their female partner while in dating relationships. In Harned’s (2001) survey of 874 university students, 82% of women and 87% of men reported being psychologically abused by their dating partner. Sears, Byers and Price (2007) also discovered that boys and girls used many forms of violence during dating in their study of 633 secondary school students. The researchers suggested that the type of violence the students’ used was predicted by their attitudes towards violence, their experiences of violence and social scripts associated with their respective gender roles – boys were more inclined to use sexually abusive behaviour and girls were more likely to use of psychologically abusive behaviour.

Outlaw (2009) noted that non-physical abuse has a more complicated relationship to gender than physical abuse, as some of the women in her study were either equally or more likely to non-physically abuse their partners than men. Follingstad and Edmundson (2010) concluded that the exchange of psychological

abuse between intimate couples was common among their national sample of 649 US citizens, even in the most egregious forms of abuse. While they expected that minor forms of psychological abuse may have been readily exchanged as couples negotiated arguments and engaged in small conflicts, they did not expect to see the more severe forms of psychological abuse so readily reciprocated. They also found that the participants typically reported perpetrating less psychological abuse than they received and also contextualised the psychological abuse they perpetrated as less problematic than the abuse of the other party in their relationship. Follingstad (2009) suggested that it would be useful for future research to investigate the issue of reciprocity and psychological abuse and explore the conditions in which it may occur more reciprocally than unilaterally.

Hines and Malley-Morrison (2001) investigated psychological abuse against men in intimate relationships, and observed that men stayed in abusive relationships for essentially the same reasons as women do: some are committed to the principles of marriage; some are reluctant to sacrifice their current standard of living; some fear leaving the children with their partner; while others are “psychologically dependent on them [their partners] and excuse the abuse as being the result of certain circumstances, such as alcohol intoxication” (pp. 81-82).

Some may be tempted to interpret these findings as support for the view that men and women are equally abusive. However, when one looks beneath the headlines of studies on psychoemotional abuse perpetrated by women and received by men, a very different picture emerges.

While Tuel and Russell (1998) estimated that between 81 and 95% of lesbian women received emotional abuse from their partners; they also acknowledged that women in heterosexual relationships reported significantly more physical and non-physical abuse. Swan and Snow (2002) discovered a broad range of relationship dynamics in their study of women's use of violence against men. Their sample of 108 women who had used violence against their intimate male partners within the 6 months prior to the research were classified by the researchers into three categories: (a) women who were predominantly victims in their relationship; (b) women who were predominantly aggressors, and (c) women in partnerships where both parties exchanged abuse. The researchers concluded, “Even in relationships where women were the aggressors, the women usually experienced significant violence from their partners” (p. 310). Indeed, the women in this sample were approximately three times as likely to be identified as victims as they were aggressors, and many women who had been arrested for family violence had been extensively abused. Compared to men, women were much more likely to be sexually assaulted, receive physical injuries and fear being hurt in fights. Swan and Snow also commented that men could apply more harmful leverage than women with particular forms of abuse. For example, men were able to terrify women with subtle gestures or looks that signified the threat of physical or sexual violence, in ways that women could rarely use against men.

Seamans' (2003) study of female perpetrators of family violence found that most were defending or retaliating against their partners' physical abuse, psychological abuse or controlling behaviour. Hines and Malley-Morrison (2001) added that any assumption that men and women are equally abusive ignores the

complexities of conditions that generally provide men with economic, social and political advantages over women.

It seems that the dynamics of abusive relationships vary markedly. Swan and Snow (2002) described the most common form of abusive relationship as one that involves one or both members of a couple intermittently abusing their partner in response to the occasional conflict that occurs during the course of everyday life. In other abusive relationships, one partner may be violent, but does not control the relationship; while others are characterized by one partner (almost always the male) committing frequent, severe acts of violence that escalate over time. In more rare instances, both partners are mutually violent and controlling.

Swan and Snow (2002) also mentioned how male and female patterns of abuse may differ according to the presence or absence of opportunities to advance or defend their positions – opportunities that are shaped by powerful sets of cultural norms and traditions. For example, men may be more likely to be physically violent as they exploit advantages in physical strength over some women, whereas women may be more limited to gaining power over men via non-physical methods (Outlaw, 2009). A man who is separated from his family may interrogate his children about his ex-partner's behaviour; while a woman may be in a position where she can deny contact between her ex-partner and the children. The authors stressed that if abuse is to be meaningfully understood, it must be examined in consideration of the dynamics of the relationship within which it occurs as well as its broader social and cultural context.

FitzRoy (1997) highlighted this point when she acknowledged the complexities of the interaction between an individual's identity and culturally supported opportunities to express power. She noted that women (and presumably all other genders) “participate in and perpetuate power relationships which maintain the hierarchical ordering of superior/inferior members of the social world” (p. 3) (e.g., white/black, First world/Third world, rich/poor).

It appears that while some features that characterize a person's identity, such as gender or race, seem more stable than others, such as knowledge or punctuality; opportunities to exercise power are largely determined, not by these elements in and of themselves, but by the way that they interact with particular social, economic, political, historical and cultural contexts. Opportunities to exploit a power advantage may shift according to the particular context and situation of the relationship. For example, a person may be more powerful than another in several aspects (e.g., physical size, speed, mathematics ability, cooking ability) and less powerful than another on other aspects (general intelligence, strength, knowledge of the other's vulnerabilities, martial arts skill).

This thesis holds the view that the identities of victims and perpetrators of psychoemotional abuse are more complex and dynamic than typically realised in much of the psychological literature. It seems plausible that women may feature more prominently as perpetrators of psychoemotional abuse in some studies, as many streams of this type of abuse are less dependent than physical or sexual abuse on bodily characteristics such as physical strength (Follingstad, 2009). It is also probable that the majority of studies in this body of research have characterised males as

perpetrators of psychoemotional abuse, because the researchers have focused on fixed gender identities of masculinity and femininity (FitzRoy, 1997) and have combined their study of psychoemotional abuse with explorations of more explicitly controlling and dominating behaviours such as physical and sexual abuse – two forms of abuse that men are much more likely than women to conduct (Dutton et al., 1999; Mills & Malley-Morrison, 1998; Mullen et al., 1996; Moeller et al., 1993).

Having said that though, this thesis agrees with Harned’s (2001) and Simonelli and Ingram’s (1998) position that just because research explores abuse received by men does not mean that it attempts to equate, justify or legitimate male violence or abuse against women and children. Men are often socially, culturally and historically located in more powerful positions than women merely by virtue of the political positions of their gender and appear to have many more opportunities to exploit these positions to the detriment of women (Astbury & Cabral, 2000). This thesis supports research that attempts to capture more abuse committed against all people regardless of the gender, race or other feature of the perpetrator or the victim; while considering the context of the abuse.

Family violence centric

Another feature of the body of research on psychoemotional abuse is that most studies were located within family violence settings. This bias is understandable given psychoemotional abuse’s frequency in the home and its pivotal role in the perpetration of other forms of abuse. However, a lack of research of the phenomenon in other settings appears to have limited an understating of its actual prevalence and influence.

Reports on psychoemotional abuse that have broken ground in alternative contexts have exposed psychological and emotional abuse in the workplace (ACTU, 2000; Brush, 2002; Daus, 2004; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Fox & Spector, 2005; Fretz, 2005; Gabriel, 1998; Hirigoyen, 2000; Keashly & Harvey, 2006; Neales, 1997; Tomazin, 2006; Yagil, 2006), in primary and secondary schools (Casarjian, 2000; Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001; Hyman & Snook, 1999; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006; McKenzie, 2009; Schuchert, 1998; Shumba, 2002, 2004), in universities (Nagata-Kobayashi, Sekimoto & Koyama 2006), in nursing homes (Harris & Benson, 2006), in the military (Forbes, 2001; Gordon, 2003; Marino, 2001) and in sports arenas (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). It also appears frequently in some nations' meetings of parliament.

The threat of psychoemotional abuse even finds its way into the most unlikely of places. Webster (1991) cautioned that emotional abuse of people who are particularly vulnerable to harm, has occurred during therapy sessions. She cited a number of examples where therapists abused their clients; and called for therapists to be more responsible for eliminating practices that may be interpreted as disrespectful, patronizing, and objectifying.

In the workplace, psychological bullying and harassment has been described as one of the most serious of all work-related stressors (ACTU, 2000) and the most frequent form of abuse at work (Keashly, 2001). Some professions, such as human services workers or parking inspectors, are vulnerable to being routinely subjected to psychological aggression from their clients or members of the public (Shields & Kiser, 2003). However, in Keashly's (2001) study, psychoemotional abuse was more

likely to be perpetrated by people who work within the organisation than by people from outside. “Initiation practices” or “rites of passage” that involved the psychoemotional abuse of apprentices have been an entrenched part of many workplaces’ culture for decades and have only recently been taken seriously in Australia after some apprentices successfully sued their former employers for damages (Neales, 1997). Some professions, such as the military, have been particularly keen to stamp out brutal, informal initiation ceremonies (also known as bastardisation, hazing or ragging) in their workforce in recent times (Forbes, 2001; Marino, 2001). The Australian armed forces have implemented an anti-bastardisation awareness program for almost 50, 000 sailors, soldiers, airmen and airwomen (Marino, 2001).

In Yildirim and Yildirim’s (2007) survey of 505 Turkish nurses, 86.5% stated that they had faced ‘mobbing’ behaviour in their workplaces within the previous 12 months. The authors described mobbing as “the presence of systematic, directed, unethical communication and antagonistic behaviour by one or more individuals...that includes workplace terrorizing, pressure, frightening and belittling” (p. 1444). Ten per cent of the respondents who had experienced this phenomenon considered it to be so serious that they had occasionally thought about committing suicide.

An Australian study by Hutchinson et al. (2006) also described abusive forms of indoctrination among nurses. Dominating and controlling tactics involving public humiliation and exclusion kept some nurses in powerful positions and destroyed the reputations of others. Often these practices involved cliques of nurses working

together in alliances and were actively supported by management. Many nurses reported that a culture of tolerating abusive behaviour developed within the workplace, as their attempts to complain were minimized, trivialized, ignored and denied by senior staff. Even though the hospitals formally encouraged their staff to report instances of bullying and harassment, one nurse was told by her manager, “Oh, don’t worry about her [the bully]...you’ll get over it...you’ll eventually learn to live with it” (p. 232). The nurses felt that their unsuccessful attempts at resolution placed them at greater risk of being attacked and effectively silenced them as it decreased their confidence that something could be done to stop the abuse. As a consequence of feeling trapped in this ‘psychic prison’ (p. 235), many nurses resigned or left the profession entirely and one reportedly committed suicide. Others began to accept their manager’s judgment and internalized the blame for the abuse, seeing themselves as “weak and deserving of what they got” (p. 234).

In a detailed study of organisations’ responses to employees’ complaints of emotional abuse, Keashly (2001) discovered that all of her participants were dissatisfied with the way their organisations’ dealt with the situation. Indeed, many people’s experiences of notifying authorities of the abuse were so distressing that they were reluctant to speak out if they were emotionally abused at work again.

Blase and Blase (2004) reported that some US teachers are also subjected to systemic, long-term mistreatment from their principals. However, teachers have also been cited as those responsible for committing the abuse. Indeed, McEachern, Aluede and Kenny (2008) noted that the classroom is where many people will be first exposed to this form of behaviour and others have found that psychological abuse is

extremely common within school classrooms (Casarjian, 2000; Hyman & Snook, 1999). Approximately one out of every three students of Khoury-Kassabri's (2006) sample of 17,465 Israeli students in grades 4-11 had been emotionally maltreated by school staff. The demographic groups who suffered disproportionately poor treatment were boys, Arabs, and children in the poorest neighbourhoods.

Casarjian (2000) surveyed 700 students in 6th, 7th and 8th grades in schools in the USA and found that more than two-thirds reported being psychologically abused by their teacher since the beginning of the school year. Psychological abuse from teachers was the strongest predictor of the students' self-reported aggression towards their teacher and correlated negatively with the students' emotional and behavioural engagement within the classroom and valuation of the subject.

Hyman and Snook (1999) estimated that between 1-2% of the general population develop PTSD from psychological harm by educators at school, and that many more people are left with vivid memories of psychological maltreatment that occurred in school, which haunt them well into adulthood. Hyman and Snook called on educators, researchers and policy makers to be more attentive to the extent of psychoemotional abuse in schools, as the students' receipt of teacher- and colleague-initiated abuse conflicted with the schools' moral, legal and historical obligations. Elbedour, Center, Maruyama and Assor (1997) claimed that an ideology based on ensuring student control was at the heart of teachers' abuse of students. Some authors have suggested that school counselors have a pivotal role in working with students and staff to prevent psychoemotional abuse in educational settings (McEachern, Aluede & Kenny, 2008; Doyle, 2003).

Some researchers have explored the effects of psychoemotional abuse of students in tertiary education settings (Kassebaum & Cutler, 1998; Schuchert, 1998). Schuchert (1998) found that the amount of verbal abuse medical students in his study suffered correlated with the students' level of confidence regardless of their age, race, gender or level of ability (ie. the greater the abuse, the lower their confidence). The majority of 276 medical students (ie. 52.8% of males and 63.3% of females) across six Japanese universities declared that they had been verbally abused during their clinical clerkships. More than 54% of female students and 14% of male students were also sexually harassed. Only 8.5% of these students reported abusive incidents to authorities (Nagata-Kobayashi et al., 2006).

Psychoemotional abuse also featured in research on school bullying and the psychological and emotional manipulation of vulnerable people who have been persuaded to join cults or indoctrinated into particular ideologies. This research has stimulated a growing collection of programs and self-help books that aim to improve an individual's resilience against psychoemotional assaults. Unfortunately, while these fields of research are undoubtedly related to a study of psychoemotional abuse, a more detailed review of the school bullying and cult indoctrination fields of literature is beyond the scope of this research (see Samways, 1994, for more information on cult indoctrination; and Rigby, 2007, for more information on school bullying).

Children are also vulnerable to experiencing psychoemotional abuse in extra-curricular activities, such as sports. Gervis and Dunn (2004) studied the treatment of 12 young elite British athletes from six different sports and found that all had been

belittled and shouted at by their coaches. The majority had also been threatened, humiliated and scapegoated and half had been ignored or rejected. Many reported that these behaviours occurred frequently. All respondents said that their coach's behaviour changed for the worse once they had been identified as an elite athlete. One child commented “[My coach] became very intense and driven, it almost happened overnight, it was like it was his sport now and his career, not mine” (p. 221).

Other researchers have drawn attention to various forms of systems abuse (Bretherton, 2004; Hart & Brassard, 1992; Loring, 1994; Tomison & Tucci, 1997). Systems abuse is a form of psychoemotional abuse performed at the organisational or societal level, such the design and implementation of abusive laws, policies and programs or media reporting that psychologically or emotionally disadvantages certain people (e.g., stereotyping) (Tomison & Tucci, 1997). This form of abuse, which is built into the institutions and cultures of society often has a critical, yet stealthy, role in legitimating other psychoemotionally abusive practices at a micro-level (Bretherton, 2004).

Individualistic

In accord with the flavour of most other areas of psychological investigation, an individual orientation has been the predominant perspective adopted by researchers of psychoemotional abuse. More comprehensive information on the ways that the broader social context interfaces with individual behaviour to support, resist, and

influence incidents of psychoemotional abuse will assist the development of multi-layered interventions (Bretherton, 2004; Iwaniec et al., 2007; Kelly, 2004; Sneddon, 2003). Indeed, when overviewing the literature on psychological abuse, Kelly (2004) declared that a major gap was the lack of research conducted on the experience of abuse recipients within their cultural contexts. For example, Twaite and Rodriguez-Srednicki (2004) noted that many cultures have adopted social norms that support the view that people should be tough enough to be unaffected by insults, as aphorisms such as “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me” encourage. They suggested that these norms collectively condition a mindset that reduces empathy towards victims of abuse.

In addition, it seems clear that many factors outside of the health care system are required to produce positive health outcomes for people who have been psychoemotionally abused. These include cultures that do not tolerate abuse and provide a range of supports for the victims; legitimate opportunities to experience success and build confidence through mechanisms such as education, employment or sport; and safe housing options for victims to escape their experience of abuse and rebuild their lives (Astbury & Cabral, 2000).

A Focus on Deficit and Damage

Another theme that filters through the compilation of research on psychoemotional abuse is, but for few exceptions (e.g., Doyle, 1997, 2001), the fact that the study of survivors is focused exclusively on damage that results from this form of abuse. It is clear that this work is important, as it highlights the detrimental

impact of psychoemotionally abusive practices and helps explain how many survivors develop psychoemotional conditions, such as anxiety or depression. However, a virtually exclusive focus on this aspect overlooks other tactics that survivors exercise to resist victimisation. Detailed information on resilient behaviors may ultimately be more valuable to practitioners and potential victims, as this can be used to develop strategies for preventing or reducing future abuse. For example, Bell, Cattaneo, Goodman and Dutton (2008) assessed the accuracy of psychological abuse survivors' predictions of the likelihood of them receiving future psychological abuse within the next 18 months. They concluded that while the results varied, the majority of the 244 women sampled were more likely than not to accurately predict future psychological abuse. They suggested that survivors' self-assessments be incorporated as valid components of formal risk assessment procedures.

O'Neil, Anderson and Britner (2005) found some promising results in their evaluation of a psychoeducational intervention aimed at preventing psychological abuse among college students that combined drama with an explanation of the historical context and research findings on psychological abuse. Promising results were also found in Chamberland, Fortin, Turgeon, and Laporte's (2007) study of three groups of men: (a) those who were in a treatment program for family violence (b) those who had finished a family violence program and were no longer physically violent, and (c) a lay group who had not entered a group or been physically violent. The researchers found that while members of all groups had been verbally aggressive towards their wives, those who had finished their program were better at recognising emotionally abusive behaviours than others. There was a general tendency for men to

downplay the violence they committed and often portray themselves as the victim in violent incidents.

Parallel Contributions of Critical Psychology

The conceptual framework of critical psychology

A fresh branch of the psychological literature that opens up new possibilities for conceptualising and studying psychoemotional abuse is the rubric of psychological theories that can be loosely connected under the theme of critical psychology. Critical psychology theories include contributions from community psychology (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997); feminist psychology (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990; 1997), gay and lesbian psychology (Kitzinger, 1997), narrative (Kirkman, 1999) and discursive psychologies (Parker, 1997;1999).

Prilleltensky and Fox (1997) noted that critical psychologists differ from mainstream psychologists in several ways. For example, critical psychologists aim to explicitly declare their value and moral commitments rather than assume a value-free stance; approach phenomena in a holistic manner that incorporates social and psychological factors, rather than concentrate on intrapersonal or interpersonal factors; and promote social justice and transformative social change, rather than ameliorative change that maintains the social status quo. Critical psychologists openly acknowledge their role in subjectively creating and politically using knowledge and are sensitive to the functional, pragmatic, and ideological repercussions of their theories and practices; whereas mainstream psychologists often

use positivist methods to attempt to acquire objective, apolitical facts, and generally comment less on the broader political implications of their work.

Applications of critical psychology to research on psychoemotional abuse

One of the most vital contributions that critical psychology can make to the study of psychoemotional abuse is the re-conceptualization of power. Unlike the unidimensional, all-or-nothing view of power that is typically presented in the empirical body of research, a Foucaultian notion of power has been represented in the critical psychology literature (Foucault, 1994). Power is not viewed as a dramatic force that emanates exclusively from one position to another (e.g., from the perpetrator to the victim) by many critical psychologists, but rather as a fluid, dynamic, omnipresent and relational concept that has the capacity to be exercised oppressively, as well as emancipatorily, through multiple channels in everyday practices (Parker & Burman, 1993; Prilleltensky, 2001).

Many discursive and narrative theorists have argued that the operation of power is threaded through language, discourses, technologies and networks of social systems (Morgan, 1999). Power processes give rise to particular concepts and lace them into their respective social and historical positions (Willig, 1999). These concepts provide people with the foundations upon which they shape their perceptions and experiences of self, other and the world (Parker & Burman, 1993).

This perspective is of particular significance to the study of psychoemotional abuse in a direct sense, as one of the primary mechanisms for this type of abuse

appears to be the use of language and social systems to shape reality, value and identity.

An application of the principles of critical psychology is also significant in a conceptual sense, because it:

- (a) invites greater tolerance for uncertainty and complexity in psychological research;
- (b) challenges the fixed, binary models of victim and perpetrator and encourages the exploration of more dynamic identities (e.g., a victim/perpetrator);
- (c) opens the possibility for the exploration of people’s abuse of power in multiple, non-traditional roles, locales and contexts;
- (d) supports the investigation of a broader perspective that studies strengths as well as deficits; and
- (e) promotes the development of complex models that incorporate holistic connections, such as those between local and global, individual and social.

Aims of the Research

This research aims to transcend the traditional, individualistic model of psychoemotional abuse and draw on the conceptual framework of critical psychology

to explore the phenomenon’s dynamic aspects and the broader social and cultural contributions that establish the context for the perpetration, continuance and prevention of psychoemotional abuse. The research also aims to extend the domain of understandings of psychoemotional abuse beyond intimate or family relationships into broader social and political relationships and other locations such as schools and workplaces.

The specific aims of this research are presented in the left column of Table 4 below. The theoretical rationale of each aim is listed in the right column.

Table 4: The Aims and Rationale of the Research

| Aims | Rationale |
|--|---|
| 1. To explore the dynamic process of psychoemotional abuse | To move beyond the static model of one person exerting power over another person in all contexts at all times |
| 2. To explore the different contexts of psychoemotional abuse | To move beyond an exclusive focus on the family violence setting |
| 3. To explore the mechanisms that facilitate resilience and resistance against psychoemotional abuse | To move beyond the detrimental effects of abuse |
| 4. To acknowledge the broader social and cultural factors that contribute to psychoemotional abuse | To move beyond the individualistic, intrapsychic model |

Chapter 3: The Methodology

An Introduction to the Methodological Framework

The design of this methodology has been shaped by multiple influences, not only from within the philosophies of critical and community psychology, but also by the ideas of intellectuals outside of psychology. Indeed, as one would expect, it has often been the critical resources acquired from beyond mainstream psychology’s realm of expertise that have exerted the most powerful role in challenging psychology’s traditional notions and assumptions (Parker, 1999). The consequences of these influences can be found in the ethical and pragmatic decisions that were made on methods and processes of data collection and data interpretation. Each of these influences will be elaborated upon in the following sections of this chapter.

In contrast to a typical empirical study, the methodology developed to support the aims of this research does not attempt to arrive at unequivocal or finite positions on narrow aspects of psychoemotional abuse. It primarily attempts to seek information that opens new questions, understandings and fresh lines of inquiry (Rappaport & Stewart, 1997). In particular, this methodology seeks to construct a new lens through which psychologists can advance their understanding of the phenomena of psychoemotional abuse – a lens with a scope both broad enough to capture issues such as social and cultural contributions and sensitive enough to magnify the seemingly invisible aspect of power relations (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000).

As Rappaport and Stewart (1997) wisely forewarned, the research methodologies used in critical psychology do not produce techniques for avoiding ironies, tensions and contradictions; but rather are techniques that attempt to accommodate these aspects into the design. The art of settling on positions among the many research tensions seems to be metaphorically similar to the process of tuning a stringed musical instrument such as a guitar or a harp. After careful trial and consideration of the outcomes of alternative positions or tunes, the tuner needs to settle on a particular point of tension and play it. The tune composed for this research need not be fixed forever, nor need it be music to everyone else's ears, but it should ideally harmonise with neighbouring strings and be open to further fine-tuning. The following sections detail the methodological dilemmas I confronted and decision points I settled on for key aspects of this research.

The Type of Data Required

The majority of psychological research on psychological and emotional abuse has utilised empirical and experimental data to quantitatively measure the relationship between specific variables, such as demographic characteristics of the participants and the extent of abuse they received and assess the prevalence of psychoemotional abuse in different populations. The data produced from this style of research has helped legitimise the phenomenon of psychoemotional abuse within the conventional parameters of psychology and has alerted authorities, such as government policy makers, to tangible trends. In the current context of public service delivery, quantitative data seems vital for those who are responsible for improving the

distribution of limited program resources towards targeted interventions. The use of quantitative data to produce empirically valid and reliable psychological scales has also helped raise the profile of the topic and formally highlight the seriousness of the experiences of people who have suffered psychoemotional abuse.

However, an exclusive dependence on quantitative data also carries the potential to divorce the phenomenon’s relationship from the context in which it occurs and generate overly mechanistic findings (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). When qualitative processes have been applied in studies on this topic, they have largely complied with the positivist assumptions championed by mainstream psychology.

As this research aimed to explore the dynamic connections between complex issues related to psychoemotional abuse, qualitative processes (i.e., individual interviews) were used that were cradled within the philosophical framework of critical psychology. This standpoint enabled me to stretch the phenomenon’s political and intellectual terrain by trialling a flexible, holistic research process that wove macro, meso and micro issues and power relationships (Kidder & Fine 1997). This provided both an extra capacity to integrate complex, multiple and interacting themes (Kirkman, 1999), and an opportunity to incorporate subjectivity and bias as extra data in the reflections section, rather than perceive them as burdens. I was also liberated from being locked into a set of preconceived hypotheses that sought linear cause and effect relationships (Kidder & Fine 1997), as I regularly reviewed my initial stance as new information and perspectives were considered and interpreted.

This liberation, however, was not without a price. The focus on depth rather than breadth in much qualitative research usually means that qualitative research typically struggles more than empirical quantitative research to provide samples that adequately represent the population and are generalisable (Henwood, 1996; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). This study accepts that limitation and does not assume that the samples selected provide a solid platform for generalisability. Instead, it focuses on local, contextualised knowledge that meets the criteria for ‘trustworthiness’ in the findings (Kvale, 1992).

Qualitative research methods have also been accused of resting upon bias, leading questions and subjective interpretations (Kvale, 1992). Kvale (1992) countered these accusations by suggesting that notions of bias, leading questions and subjective interpretation are often raised by people who hold a naïve version of empiricism. That is, those who believe there is an objective social world where objective investigators can find truth ripe for the picking. He supported the view held by many critical psychologists that bias and subjectivity are present in all research. For Kvale (1992), biased subjectivity becomes problematic when researchers selectively ignore or diminish evidence that refutes their opinions and only highlight evidence that supports their preconceptions. The issue becomes more one of ensuring that rigorous and scholarly methods are applied, than it is about eradicating bias and subjectivity. However, I concede that non-positivist methods do not have the advantage of following the pre-constructed scholarly safeguards designed for positivists. Non-positivists must be prepared to spend more energy constructing, testing and defending the rigour, scholarship and value of their methods (Kidder & Fine, 1997).

This study will use qualitative data to actively search for conflicting pieces of evidence, paradoxes and complexity. It also acknowledges the possibility that statements may elicit more than one correct meaning and that several interpretations of the same text may be seen as a strength rather than a weakness (Kvale, 1992).

On the point about leading questions, Kvale (1992) argued that leading questions are a necessary part of many questioning procedures and may actually improve the reliability of interviews as they can check the consistency and reliability of a person’s statements. The important issue is ensuring that the method of the leading is ethical and the direction leads to development of knowledge on the phenomenon. Other difficulties with using qualitative data methods and the ways that I dealt with them are elaborated on in specific sections that follow (e.g., interpretation).

Participant Selection

In an attempt to broaden the study of psychoemotional abuse beyond its traditional scope of abused women and abusive men, the range of participants who were sought included people from groups that have been associated with perpetrating and receiving psychoemotional abuse and others who had not participated in such groups. My experience in talking to members of the general public about psychoemotional abuse led me to believe that a rich source of information about psychoemotional abuse lay relatively untapped among people who did not fit into the

traditional targets of research on this topic. This research took the opportunity to bring some of these stories into the professional domain.

I conducted 20 individual interviews with people on their personal retrospective experiences, contexts and meanings of psychoemotional abuse. I interviewed:

- (a) five men who had participated in family violence counselling for perpetrators of abuse
- (b) five men who had not participated in family violence counselling for perpetrators
- (c) five women who had participated in family violence counselling for survivors of abuse; and
- (d) five women who had not participated in family violence counselling for survivors

I categorised the participants on the basis of their gender, as gender featured strongly as a defining factor in the body of literature. The men were aged between their early 20s and late 40s; and the women were aged between their early 20s and early 50s. All participants lived or attended counselling in the Melbourne metropolitan region. More information about the context of their lives (while preserving their confidentiality) will be provided in the following section. All of the participants were asked about their experiences of receiving and delivering psychoemotional abuse, irrespective of the group that they were originally recruited from.

Given the ethical and psychoemotional sensitivities of this topic, I recruited the participants involved with family violence programs through their respective program coordinators. I discussed the ethical and pragmatic issues related with this form of research with the coordinators and asked for their help to introduce the project to potential participants whom they believed were at a stage where they would be able to discuss psychoemotional abuse without becoming re-traumatised. The therapists also kindly offered to be available to assist if any difficulties arose during or after the interviews.

I found it much easier to recruit men than women from therapy groups. All of the men belonged to one group in suburban Melbourne. Three had recently completed a 20-week course, another had been involved in the program for just over one year. The fifth man completed his formal therapy several years ago and was now working as a volunteer, peer facilitator in groups with other men.

In contrast, I approached several female groups who help women recover from male abuse before I could find five women who were willing to be interviewed. The women originated from four independent groups spread across the suburbs of Melbourne. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the group of women typically had much more distance between the abusive acts and the interviews than the men did. Most of the men had recently completed a 20-week therapy group; whereas all of the women who participated discussed events that happened more than two years prior.

The participants who were not involved with a program were invited to participate via brochures posted on public poster-boards at tertiary educational settings, medical centres, community health centres and community agencies. Participants were also recruited via the researcher’s formal and informal networks, although the researcher’s direct family and friends were not interviewed. None of the participants had met the researcher prior to the interviews, except for the participants in the professional group, of which four had known the researcher previously for four years. No couples or ex-couples were interviewed. A copy of the participants’ Plain Language Statement is attached as Appendix A.

I decided to restrict the sample size to twenty primarily because this number provided sufficient material to analyse and develop new lines of enquiry (Patton, 2002). The sample size provided sufficient levels of saturation for much of the material, although some of the more obscure aspects of the wide spectrum of psychoemotional abuse, such as death threats, were represented but their rareness meant that they did not reach the point of saturation (Mason, 2010). Such behaviours are relatively scarce in the population. These issues are discussed further in the “Reflections on the Limitations of the Study” section of the final chapter of this thesis.

It was also difficult to recruit people to share their experiences about such a painful topic, particularly people who had been subjected to severe psychoemotional abuse over an extended period of time. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is quite common for survivors of this form of abuse to experience confusion, lack self-confidence, and not realise the full extent of what has happened to them until a

significant amount of reflecting and processing have occurred. Thus, the pool of women who were appropriate for these interviews was relatively small. I had approached and exhausted the available avenues in Melbourne. It is quite probable that a female researcher may have been able to recruit more female participants. The researcher-participant gender dynamic will be discussed in more depth in the discussion section.

At the completion of the 20 individual interviews, I decided to supplement the information I had acquired with some fresh perspectives from a group of six professionals who worked with clients who experienced mental health and drug problems. This focus group was commissioned to provide some professional insight into the themes that had emerged during the individual interviews and was useful on several other fronts. I wanted an understanding of the professionals' working definition of psychological abuse and their estimation of the prevalence of psychoemotional abuse among their clientele. I was interested to learn more about some of the processes and outcomes of psychoemotional abuse that have been presented to these professionals and discover how their clients coped. I also wanted to investigate the issues that are involved with the perpetration of psychoemotional abuse in the situations presented to these workers and explore their thoughts on the perpetrator's intent to harm. Finally, I was looking for their insights into the broader social factors that may contribute to psychologically empowering or abusive relationships and explore the individual and collective possibilities for prevention of psychological abuse. I wanted to check if the patterns that emerged through the stories of the other participants also resonated with this group.

I deliberately sought service providers who had experience working with this phenomenon, but did not specialise in family violence counselling to extend the exploration of psychoemotional abuse beyond its typical boundary of expertise and to check if the topic may be directly relevant to other therapeutic specialisations. Thus, the family violence counsellors who assisted with the recruitment of the other participants in this study were not also recruited as participants in this focus group. Service providers in associated fields were considered appropriate given Muellen et al.'s (1996) observation that emotionally abused children often develop complications such as mental illness or drug problems in adulthood.

All of the participants in this study have been provided with aliases to protect their identity.

The Women from a Family Violence Program

Belinda

Belinda originates from a Greek background and was aged in her late 30s at the time of the interview. She raises her two children - one son and one daughter – by herself after divorcing her ex-husband a few years ago.

Belinda reported that she has experienced psychoemotional abuse directly from many men through her life and had sought various forms of therapy before finding the women’s support group. At the time of the interviews, Belinda was studying and planned to work in the welfare sector.

Sarah

Sarah was a university student in her 30s who lived with her son in hiding from her ex-husband. Sarah reported exposure to the most extreme forms of psychoemotional abuse of any participant in the sample. Her ex-husband intimidated her by shooting loaded weapons within the property, threatened to murder their child, tortured the family pet and blocked Sarah from seeking any professional help, including veterinary care for the cat and medical care for herself.

On a more subtle level, Sarah claimed that her ex-partner dominated her mental space. He would often control her by putting her down, criticising and ridiculing her, before coming to her rescue with patronising attempts at lifting her spirits and feigning support. The extensive list and duration of the psychoemotional

abuse that Sarah endured had a severe impact on her mental and physical health and she developed a complex range of coping skills to survive her ordeal and help her reconstruct her self-identity.

Helen

Helen is a woman in her 40s whose ex-husband typically acted to build tension in the house. He would not let dramatic incidents occur which kept the tension constantly high. For example, she would receive the “silent treatment” for months at a time. Helen described being on an emotional roller-coaster during that time, as he constantly built the family’s expectations up with promises, but would chronically let them down.

He removed, silenced, and devalued those who might help her, although she was unaware of this at the time. He selected the family’s friends and “used to behave in a way that appeared normal and reasonable on the surface, but he would make people feel uncomfortable, so that they wouldn’t come back.” Therefore, she could not form close relationships with other people and became conditioned to feeling guilty when she wanted to visit friends. He also coded his behaviour, so that people other than Helen could not detect the double meanings of his abusive comments. Helen and her two sons eventually left him on their fourth attempt.

Sally

Sally also spoke about living with a “Jekyll & Hyde” husband, who appeared quite reasonable to others, but was different to her, their son and daughter within the privacy of the family home. He was particularly prone to unpredictable outbursts that left the family highly anxious when he arrived home.

Sally spoke about suffering a “double layer of pain” - the first layer resulted from the abuse; the second and more painful layer, from friends, family and professionals who did not believe or support her and trivialised or dismissed her. In the years during and shortly after the abuse, she lost many friends, felt increasingly isolated and became so confused that she lost faith in her ability to trust what she was seeing and to survive without him.

When she eventually did leave she was stricken with guilt for a long-time because she blamed herself for not seeing the abusive patterns and preventing it earlier. However, now in her 40s, she realises that she did her best and did not understand what was going on at the time.

Since her marriage ended, Sally has studied many books and spoken with many people who specialise in helping people recover from family violence and remain resilient. Sally vowed to do something constructive with her experience and has set up a support group for women who suffer from family violence, largely due to her frustration that doctors and psychiatrists did not recognise the issue as serious when she approached them during her marriage. She now works full-time and is

constantly inspired by the strength of women who have survived psychoemotional abuse.

June

June also left an abusive family setting where she was subjected to constant put-downs and lies over 14 years. June was in her late 40s at the time of the interview and lived with her daughter, while working full-time.

June described the experience of being chronically deceived by her husband. The deceptions included an affair with another woman and the concealment of some of the family's finances. June also spoke about feeling betrayed by society's poor response to her circumstances, as she felt that people did not want to address the abuse she experienced and preferred to pretend that it did not happen.

Over time, June lost friends, her job suffered and she became ill. She took time off work and tried desperately to save the marriage, but the damage and deception was deeply entrenched. She managed to leave the relationship and seek professional support to rebuild her life.

The Women from the General Population

Allison

Allison’s ex-husband exerted his authority over her in many ways. She reported that he would tell her whether she was allowed to go to a party or not, how she should clean the kitchen and that she needed to lose weight, even though she was very slim. He even gave her nickname of “Chubba” to put her down in a manner that was disguised as playful. Allison was in her early 50s when interviewed, worked full-time and had no children. One of her regrets was that she was in this relationship during her prime child-bearing years, but did not want to raise children in such an unstable environment and consequently missed the opportunity to have children.

Allison described a pattern of her ex-husband constantly abusing her in a misogynistic low-grade manner that was irritating, but not serious enough to mark a defining moment over which the relationship would end. One example was his pattern of withdrawing from engagements at very late notice, which often put her in awkward public situation. The compounding effect of this over many occasions damaged the relationships with their friends. Allison stated that she was also hit by him a number of times, but felt the psychological abuse was worse.

Even though the relationship ended more than a decade ago, Allison still experiences headaches, particularly when she is reminded of the poor deal she received in the property settlement. She believes that she still struggles with the battering her self esteem received during that time.

Amanda

Amanda is a tertiary student in her early 20s with no children. The main abusive relationship she disclosed was with a former manager who would constantly put her down in front of her work colleagues, then claim that it was just a joke among friends. Amanda became humiliated and increasingly isolated at work as these put-downs also happened behind her back. She tried ignoring the behaviour and later tried to talk about it with others at work, including her manager, but found that no-one wanted to take the issue seriously. Eventually she resigned.

Naomi

At the time of the interview, Naomi was a young mother in her 30s who lived with two children and a partner. Naomi’s main experience of psychoemotional abuse occurred during her childhood when she was often told what to think by her strict father which resulted in constant arguments in the family home. His oppressive manner forced Naomi and her siblings to all leave home at a young age. Naomi developed anorexia nervosa during her teens, which she thinks was linked to her oppressive home life. She now works part-time as she raises her children.

Joanne

Joanne was in her late 40s and had separated from her husband several years before the interview. Joanne was raising her two teenage children by herself on a single mothers' social security benefit.

Joanne said that her husband would constantly tell her what to think and put her down with comments such as “You are a terrible housekeeper”. She saw a psychologist who suggested that she leave home. Joanne has experienced long-term mental health issues, including bipolar disorder, severe depression and has attempted suicide 13 times. During her marriage, she often felt overwhelmed, confused, defeated, and helpless. She used a range of methods to cope with the psychoemotional abuse, including keeping quiet, agreeing with him to defuse the situation or taking medication to dull her pain.

Lisa

Lisa, who was in her 30s, with a partner and no children at the time of the interview, stated that her partner often ignored her all day while he played computer games, which was annoying, but not necessarily distressing. She was more distressed by childhood memories of watching her parents fighting; describing it as a frightening experience that made her upset and insecure. Lisa said that she still avoids bringing up some difficult issues with friends and tip-toes around them to avoid conflict. Lisa was also haunted by the experience of teasing her sister about her nose as a child; only to find out years later that her sister had plastic surgery on her nose to re-shape it.

The Men from a Family Violence Program

Eddie

Eddie is a man in his 40s who works full-time and is married and living with his wife, their baby and three of her children from a previous marriage. Eddie described his typical pattern as giving people “a bit of their own medicine”.

He suggested that arguments at work and home “just flare up” and that part of his aggressive stance comes from frustration he feels about not being able to get his point across verbally. His main strategy of coping is withdrawing from the relationship: “I switched off and didn’t want to know about it.”

Sam

Sam is a salesman in his mid-30s who is married with two children. Sam spoke about “playing mind games” with others at home and at work and is heavily committed to being successful in a very competitive work environment. He expressed a strong belief that “if someone burns you, [you] make them pay for it.” Sam wants to reduce the amount of aggression he displays as he believes it contributes to an unhealthy family environment and he has started to notice that his 9 year old son is copying his aggressive behaviour.

Tony

Tony is a man in his early 40s, who is married with one step-daughter and one daughter to the relationship. Tony spoke about being subjected to psychoemotional abuse from 3 main sources: mates who “take the piss out of you”; his father who used to deliver Tony some “pretty heavy hidings” with a strap; and his partner. He dealt with his mates’ abuse by yelling and severing his relationship with them but regretted his actions: “Because I went off at them, I looked like an idiot”. In hindsight, Tony wished he had spoken with them about how he felt.

Tony said that his marriage developed into a pattern of blame and counter-blame - a series of conflicts that left him feeling “totally disgusted”, affected his health, his partner’s health and the wellbeing of people around him.

Tony confessed to being very loud, abusive and intimidating, particularly when he is exhausted from work and does not feel heard. He harbours many regrets about how he raised his teenage daughters and has now learned to slow the pace of his life down, take full responsibility for his behaviour, stay calmer and not react as suddenly to other people’s comments.

Bill

Bill, a man in his late 30s who works full-time, focused on the remorse he felt for the abuse he inflicted on others. He has separated from his wife and has no children. Bill used to train to prepare for fights and found himself always on guard, even in social circumstances:

I was always violent...if I thought that someone upset me enough, I would clout them...I'm not proud of that, but that's where my thinking took me. I was very narrow minded...Today I don't let things build up. I deal with problems as they arise. So I certainly don't fire up..

He found that stock phrases that he learned in the men's behaviour change group very useful methods of changing his thinking patterns (e.g., “how will this affect me in years to come?” “Put yourself in the other person's shoes” “How important is it really?”).

Ian

Ian is a shift worker in his mid 40s, married with two children. Ian couched the abuse that he received as “general arguing that goes too far”. He disclosed that his wife would rate “one out of ten” on a scale of abusiveness towards him; whereas his abusiveness towards her would rate 10 out of 10. Ian changed schools 12 times when he was growing up.

He described times when he felt buried deep in his thoughts and determined to win a battle: “I don’t surrender...I don’t give. I’m not lenient.” He said that this is largely a “defensive mechanism” to prevent him from being hurt and that he needs to learn to become more comfortable being vulnerable and humble.

The Men from the General Population

Greg

Greg is a young man in his mid 20s who works full-time, has no children, but lives with his girlfriend. Greg’s main issues raised during the interview related to being treated by his office colleagues in a cold and condescending manner. He felt uncomfortable and ultimately didn’t want to be there. As Greg became more confident he realised it was the culture that was problematic and not him after meeting up with others outside of work. He also discussed occasions where he was abusive towards his father.

Mike

Mike is a single, unemployed man in his late 20s with no children who reported that he was involved in many arguments with his dad, but his worst experiences were at school where other children threw things at him, subjected him to constant threats and degrading acts, such as “being told you are shit for six years by everybody”. He stated that his teachers did not protect him from the verbal abuse of his fellow students and on one occasion even stood and watched it happen. He felt

trapped, expecting that he would receive worse abuse if he retaliated. At times he would “explode” to defend himself and regretted joining the mob on occasions to abuse others.

Tom

The receipt of psychoemotional abuse was not a common experience for Tom, a thirty year old man, working full-time, in a relationship with no children. He recalled a time when he had been abused by his girlfriend when she was drunk. He responded by questioning the value of staying in the relationship and doubted his own judgement for starting it. Tom said that he had difficulty addressing this issue and looked for excuses to explain it. He had also lied to another partner about his future plans in order to avoid a difficult conversation, which ultimately intensified the conflict and the hurt he caused his partner.

Nick

Nick is in his mid 40s, works full-time and is married with two children. He stated that, “on a personal level, I have very little conflict in my life”, but recounted being in very heated, twisted industrial relations conflicts with unions at work. He said that he could not communicate effectively as the other side only was locked into battles viewing him only in his role as manager and never really trusted him. Nick dealt with the situation by “shutting out” the union official to reduce her impact.

Alan

Alan is single and has no children. He is aged in his early 30s and works part-time. Alan primarily spoke about being given false impressions by ex-girlfriend he had been going out with for three years. He believed that she was stringing him along with future hopes of living together in another state, but she really wanted to stay home and go to school. He felt manipulated and duped, as he was busy making plans for a new life with her in mind and her last minute rejection had shattered his dreams and wasted his time. As retaliation, he had an affair, and then a series of one-night stands after the relationship ended: “I tried to capture in lust, what I lost in love.”

The Professional Counsellors

The focus group of professional counsellors included three psychologists, two social workers and a family therapist. The professional counsellors had between eight and 31 years of experience each in counselling people across a broad spectrum of issues, including drug and alcohol issues, sexual abuse, mental health, relationships counselling, child and youth counselling. Table 5 below displays their professional background, years of experience, areas of expertise and preferred theoretical framework.

Table 5. A Description of the Professional Counsellors

| Counsellor | Professional Background | Years of Experience | Areas of Expertise | Preferred Theoretical Framework |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Psychologist | 9 | Sexual abuse, trauma, drugs | Narrative, trauma focussed |
| 2 | Social Worker | 11 | Youth, drugs, homelessness | Generalist, client-focused |
| 3 | Psychologist | 31 | Prisoners, drugs, violence | Cognitive behaviour therapy |
| 4 | Social Worker | 14 | Health, drugs | Generalist |
| 5 | Family therapist | 25 | Relationships, trauma, drugs, | Family therapy |
| 6 | Psychologist | 10 | Mental health, Group work | Generalist, person-focused |

The professional counsellors were all asked the same questions and provided responses in equal proportions. A response was elicited from each counsellor before the next question was asked. The themes of their responses were presented in this study, except for when particular comments were highlighted.

The counsellors stated that at least 80% of their clients had been psychoemotionally abused and approximately the same number had psychoemotionally abused others; although only 5 to 10% of clients identify it as their most pressing issue in therapy. Their clients' psychoemotional abuse occurred in multiple settings, such as at school, home, at work and in intimate relationships. Their clients typically have been rejected and criticised constantly: “There has been no acknowledgment for any achievement, just constant criticism. Some have been pressured to live up to very high expectations by other people. They have expected to be successful...and [experience a] constant sense of failure if they're not.”

Others never feel like they are validated and their experiences are denied, even when they are sick or in pain. Some suffer from being treated differently from their siblings or being scapegoated for the family's problems.

My Position in Relation to the Topic

I have worked in family violence field since 1995 as a counsellor to men who have committed abuse against members of their families. During that time I was quite confident from conversations with the men's partners that our team's work helped

reduce, and in most cases, stop the men’s physical abuse against others. Most women reported that their male partners had positively changed his attitudes and behaviour at home, often citing a marked reduction of physical abuse. I was less confident though that the changes in psychoemotional abuse were as profound. I suspect that this was partially because some partners may have found it more difficult to notice or articulate, particular forms of psychoemotional abuse. Some partners reported that although the hitting had stopped, the verbal put-downs, unsettling questioning and intimidating glances continued. From a practitioner’s perspective, I quickly became aware that psychoemotional abuse was an extremely damaging and difficult form of abuse to eradicate from the men’s repertoire of abusive behaviours and often covered their acts with sophisticated methods of disguise. I soon became more wary of the clients who were charming than those who presented as bullies.

At the time, some critics suggested that these programs actually increased the level of psychological and emotional abuse against women and children, as the men learned more subtle methods of maintaining their dominance from the groups. The thought that I was contributing to increased abuse horrified me and motivated me to focus more on the prevention of psychological and emotional abuse.

The seriousness of psychoemotional abuse was also highlighted to me during my work as a drug and alcohol counsellor. I heard thousands of sombre stories of this form of abuse, some of which will stay with me forever, including those described in the introduction: the child being chased and fired upon by his drunken father; and the woman who felt that a woodpecker was on her back constantly pecking at her, tearing off strips of her confidence.

The more I researched the topic and sought strategies for tackling it, the more I realised that there was not a lot written about psychoemotional abuse in the psychological literature. I also became more sensitive to its pervasiveness in popular culture. I easily spotted it in venues outside of the family violence setting. It was prevalent on the sporting field, in political arguments, on roads, in parking lots, at schools and in workplaces. It happened between people of all kinds, between friends and among strangers. When I raised the topic in informal conversations, virtually everyone had a story to tell. The case for studying it mounted.

As I reflected on the stories of psychoemotional abuse that I heard in the men’s groups, I was reminded of some of the tactics I had received and used on others over my lifetime. Indeed, I recalled it as the predominant form of communicating with my working class, male peers during my teenage years. It was at once a free, instant and easily available method of asserting my superiority over others and created cheap entertainment. I found it to be particularly powerful when performed in front of a group of others. The others could amplify the humiliating impact by simply supporting the degrading comments with a laugh or a smile. I remember enjoying the intellectual challenge of “mastering the art” of psychoemotional attack and defence. It was only when I became aware of the real consequences of these actions that I began to refrain from behaviour that I thought was essentially harmless.

Interview Schedule Design

A series of questions were developed to investigate the aims of the research. The interview schedule aimed to examine the phenomenon of psychoemotional abuse

from multiple angles by encouraging the participants to address various contexts, positions and counter-positions, such as psychoemotionally abusive and empowering experiences, individual and social influences.

The questions are listed in Table 6 to the right of the research aims that they addressed and the rationale of the method upon which they were based.

Table 6: The Aims, Method and Corresponding Research Questions for the Individual Interviews

| Aims | Method | Questions |
|--|---|--|
| 1) To explore the dynamic process of psychoemotional abuse | The interview includes questions that require the participants to consider themselves as a contributor to psychological empowerment (e.g., Q2); victim and perpetrator of psychological abuse (e.g., Q6 & Q9) | <p>Q2. Could you please tell me about some of the experiences you have had during a psychologically healthy time in a relationship?</p> <p>Q6 Could you please tell me about some of the experiences you have had during a psychologically abusive time in a relationship?</p> <p>Q 9. Can you talk about some experiences you have had when you have been hurtful or even abusive to others?</p> |

Table 6 (Continued): The Aims, Method and Corresponding Research Questions for the Individual Interviews

| Aims | Method | Questions |
|--|--|---|
| <p>2) To explore the different contexts of psychoemotional abuse</p> | <p>The interview includes questions that require the participants to consider their experiences in relationships outside of their family. (e.g., preamble for Q2 & Q6)</p> | <p>Preamble: In many relationships, there are times when the relationship would be perceived as (psychologically) healthy and other times when it would be perceived as psychologically or emotionally abusive. I’m going to encourage you to think about many different relationships that you have been involved in. For example, the relationship might not just be with an intimate partner. It may be with friends, with your parents or children, at school or at work, or something like that. Or you may consider yourself as a member of a group in relationship with another group of people. Could you please tell me about some of the experiences you have had during a psychologically healthy (Q2)/abusive (Q6) time in a relationship?</p> |

Table 6 (Continued): The Aims, Method and Corresponding Research Questions for the Individual Interviews

| Aims | Method | Questions |
|---|---|---|
| <p>3) To explore the mechanisms that facilitate resilience and resistance against psychoemotional abuse</p> | <p>The interview includes questions that require the participants to consider times when they have stopped, coped or prevented psychological abuse. (e.g., Q7, Q8, Q 10). It also asks participants to construct a model of a psychologically empowering relationship (e.g., Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4).</p> | <p>Q7. How did you cope with that situation at the time? Q8. How do you try to protect yourself from being psychologically abused? Q 9. See above Q10. How do you try to stop yourself from being hurtful or psychologically abusive nowadays? Q1. How would you define or describe a (psychologically) healthy relationship? Q2. See above Q3. How do you try to maintain (psychologically) healthy relationships? Q4. What social factors do you think are relevant for promoting healthy relationships?</p> |

Table 6 (Continued): The Aims, Method and Corresponding Research Questions for the Individual Interviews

| Aims | Method | Questions |
|--|---|--|
| 4) To acknowledge the broader social and cultural factors that contribute to psychoemotional abuse | The interview includes questions that require the participants to consider the broader aspects of the phenomenon of psychological abuse. (e.g., Q4 & Q11) | Q4 – see above Q11. How do you suggest that psychological abuse can be prevented a) At an individual level? (abuser and abused) b) At a societal level? |

The phrase ‘psychological abuse’ was originally scripted into the interview questions, as this term seemed to be more widely understood than either emotional or psychoemotional abuse. However, during the interviewing I developed the practice of saying “psychological and/or emotional abuse”, as both phrases were understood by the participants and were used interchangeably throughout their responses.

An additional question, Question 5, was used in the interviews but is not listed in Table 6. It asked the participants for their definition or description of a psychologically unhealthy (ie. psychologically and emotionally abusive) relationship.

This question explored whether the people involved in the behaviour had a similar conceptual understanding to that used in the professional literature. The participants’ definition also helped contextualise their responses to the other questions.

All 20 participants in the individual interviews were asked the same set of questions. Participants interviewed in other studies on psychoemotional abuse have typically been categories as those who have “perpetrated abuse”, “survived abuse” or belong to a “lay” group, and it is rare for them to be asked the questions about times when they have received and perpetrated abuse.

As this research sought to explore the dynamic interplay between receiving and perpetrating psychoemotional abuse and the contexts in which this behaviour occurred, I also was interested in exploring times when the traditional roles may have reversed (ie. when people who are often identified as “abusers” have been subjected to psychoemotional abuse from others and when people who were identified as “survivors” may have psychoemotionally abused somebody else). Asking the participants who were not involved in family violence groups about their experiences in both situations also attempted to investigate this phenomenon among the general population.

The questions varied slightly for the focus group of professionals as I wanted to consider the observations and understandings they had arrived at during their work with people who have been both psychoemotionally abusive and abused. The aims of their interview and corresponding questions are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: The Focus Group Aims and Corresponding Questions

| Focus Group Aims | Questions |
|--|--|
| | Definitions & Incidence |
| 1. To gain a sense of the professionals’ working definition of psychological abuse | 1) How would you define or describe a psychologically abusive relationship? 2) How would you define or describe a psychologically healthy or empowering relationship? |
| 2. To access an estimate of the prevalence of psychological abuse among their clientele. | 3) Approximately what percentage of your clients would have experienced receiving psychological or emotional abuse? 4) What proportion identify this as their main issue? 5) Approximately what percentage of your clients would have perpetrated psychological or emotional abuse? 6) What proportion identify this as their main issue? |
| 3. To discover some processes of abuse that have been presented to these professionals | Experiences 7) Can you please tell me about some of your clients’ experiences of psychological or emotional abuse? (be conscious of confidentiality) |

Table 7 (continued): The Focus Group Aims and Corresponding Questions

| Focus Group Aims | Questions |
|--|--|
| <p>4. To discover some outcomes of psychological abuse</p> | <p>Consequences</p> <p>8) What are some of the effects you have seen as a result of this form of abuse?</p> <p>A) for the abused?</p> <p>B) for the abuser?</p> |
| <p>5. To scope some of the methods of coping among their clientele.</p> | <p>Coping</p> <p>9) How have they coped? What have been important factors in their coping?</p> |
| <p>6. To gain a sense of the issues that are involved with the perpetration of this form of abuse.</p> | <p>Sources</p> <p>10) What are some of the dynamics or mechanisms that would lead people to emotionally or psychologically abuse others?</p> |

Table 7 (continued): The Focus Group Aims and Corresponding Questions

| Focus Group Aims | Questions |
|---|--|
| <p>7. To explore the issue of the perpetrator’s intent to harm</p> | <p>Intent:</p> <p>11) Do you believe that the abuser always conscious of what he or she is doing and intends to harm the other?</p> |
| <p>8. To explore the broader social factors that may contribute to psychologically empowering or abusive relationships.</p> | <p>Social factors</p> <p>12) What social factors reinforce or help maintain psychological abuse?</p> <p>13) What social factors reinforce or help maintain psychologically empowering relationships?</p> |
| <p>9. To explore individual and collective possibilities for prevention of psychological abuse.</p> | <p>Prevention</p> <p>14) What can individuals do to prevent psychological abuse?</p> <p>15) What can we as a society do to prevent psychological abuse?</p> <p>16) In virtually every interview people have said that we need to increase education and awareness to prevent psychological abuse. How do you suggest that we do this?</p> |

The individual interviews and the focus group each ranged from 50 to 130 minutes in duration.

Quality of data

The rumblings of the debate on whether the quality of qualitative data should be evaluated using empirical research assessment constructs of reliability and validity or not still reverberate across the field and into this research. Tension on one side of the debate is held by theorists who believe that empirically founded notions such as reliability and validity are unreliable and invalid methods of appropriately assessing the quality of qualitative data (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1998 and Merrick, 1999).

Another side of the tension harbours positivists who are firm in their view that the scientific rigour of qualitative data is best demonstrated by establishing the researcher's objectivity and their data collection instruments' reliability and validity (Merrick, 1999).

Robson (2003) encouraged the qualitative researcher to continue to use a framework that comforts the empiricists, fearing that avoidance of the traditional concepts risked making qualitative studies vulnerable to attacks from those eager to dismiss qualitative methodologies as neither reliable nor valid and therefore of little or no value. Robson advocated the use of new techniques from within this broader framework to gently stretch the tightly-guarded concepts of validity and reliability to include the positions held by more radical theorists and practitioners.

This section, while not motivated by the slightly defensive position of Robson, will adopt Robson’s explanatory framework of nesting newer approaches of authenticating the quality of qualitative data under conventional rubrics, as this seems to be a useful style of interpreting the approach of this study to audiences tuned into any of the rumblings above.

The first point to be stressed is the notion that reliability and validity are properties only present within research tools themselves (Merrick, 1999). I was also mindful of how these aspects featured in the relationships between the researcher, the researched, the research methods and those who interpret the researcher’s work (Merrick, 1999). The following section will attempt to demonstrate how the processes and products of this research strived to be valid and reliable, or as some qualitative researchers prefer, credible, dependable and transferable.

I sought to demonstrate reliability and dependability, by transcribing the data verbatim from audiotapes (Silverman, 2000). I developed an audit trail of the procedures of data collection and analysis, which, in conjunction with knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings disclosed in other parts of this thesis, will help others trace my conclusions’ antecedents. Thus, the methods of this research should be able to be reproduced consistently by other researchers or by the same researcher at other times.

Even though there appears to be no watertight method of guaranteeing validity, I implemented several strategies to increase the credibility of the research. Perhaps the biggest challenge that arises for qualitative researchers is convincing

others that more than just well selected examples from the data were incorporated into the material for analysis, otherwise known as “anecdotalism” by Silverman (2000).

Silverman (2000) argued that the common responses to anecdotalism - triangulation and respondent validation were flawed. Using triangulation to acquire “true” data is fundamentally flawed because it “assumes that there is a ‘fixed point’ or ‘object’ that can be triangulated” (Richardson, 1994, p. 522). Kirkman (1999) argued the participants’ stories have value in their own right, and extra accounts merely signify the presence of extra interpretations and perspectives, not truth. Moreover, the participants’ accounts are constructed in collaboration with the researcher’s prompts and follow-up questions and are embedded within a cultural, historical and social context. There seems to be more than two or three sides from which to approach the world (Richardson, 1994).

Seeking validation of the data from the respondents assumes they “have privileged status as commentators on their actions” (Silverman, 2000, p. 177), which may not necessarily be the case. It is not uncommon for a person’s actions to be interpreted differently by others. I used member checking with full transcriptions to ensure that the data I received was an accurate and complete reflection of the participants’ intent and provided the participants with an opportunity to add or delete more information before the data collection was finalised. However, even though I attempted to ensure the data was an accurate representation of the participants’ perspectives and meanings, I believe it is the work of the researcher to author an interpretation of this data within the context of the whole collection of perspectives and a theoretical framework (Merrick, 1999). I elaborate on this point later.

Other methods are also required to demonstrate the credibility or internal validity of the research. This research followed Silverman’s (2000) suggestions of applying the following band of five methods to provide some insurance against charges of anecdotalism: the refutability principle, the constant comparative method, comprehensive data treatment, deviant case analysis, and the use of tabulation where appropriate.

The refutability principle asserts that researchers should refute their initial assumptions about the data as all knowledge is provisional and evidence should be subjected to additional scrutiny. As new items from the interview data were analysed, they were compared against the emergent findings to see if they could refute other findings. To satisfy the condition of the constant comparative method, all aspects of the data that emerged from a single case were inspected and compared to other cases and tested against emerging conclusions to help validate the evolving findings.

Comprehensive data treatment simply involves incorporating all of the data in the analysis, which was performed by transcribing the interview data, member checking and rigorously attending to every detail in every response, including the discrepant evidence and deviant cases in the analysis. Conclusions were formed after this process had been followed.

In contrast to quantitative data analysis, where researchers are primarily concerned whether the majority of the data aligns with the hypotheses or not, these methods aim to account for all of the deviance in the data and make the researcher’s

interpretation more transparent (Caulley, 1999; Silverman, 2000). Deviant cases were incorporated into the analysis and often led to valuable insights that improved the depth of the models that were developed.

Tabulations were also conducted where appropriate during the analysis to help track patterns in the data. I trialled these methods while analysing a small part of the data and expanded as the trends grew stronger. An example of this occurred as the roles and locations that the participants were in during the abuse they revealed in their interviews were tallied and the percentage of cases that fell into each category was calculated.

In order to ensure that the interpretation was drawn from, rather than imposed on the data in a predetermined manner, I have declared my philosophical framework, considered alternative explanations of the phenomenon in question and constantly monitored how this interacted or interfered with the data. I have also been sensitive to other influences, such as reactivity (ie. how my presence contributed to the setting), and respondent biases that may result in data that is obstructive, incomplete or constructed in a favourable light (Merrick, 1999). More reflections on these points are provided in the discussion chapter.

The external validity or transferability of this research is very limited. Guba and Lincoln (1998) suggested research that emanates from a foundation of critical theory may be generalised across settings if certain circumstances and values are similar (e.g., the social, political cultural, economic, ethnic and gender mix).

However, Robson (2002) doubted that direct replication would be possible as it would be extremely difficult to recreate identical conditions.

While this form of study may not be generalisable in a pure sense, its methods, data and findings may provide useful analytical or theoretical insights that can be projected onto other contexts or settings (Robson, 2002). If a more pragmatic approach to transferability is adopted, it can be argued that most researchers, even those bound to strictly empirical conditions, build their knowledge base by comparing the trend of particular findings across similar and different contexts, much as how people assess information in everyday situations (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998). Although these samples are too small for positivists to make statistically significant comparisons, the research will attempt to break new ground and encourage themes to emerge that can be followed up by those who would like more statistical rigour in subsequent studies.

However, despite my best intentions it may be wise to consider Phillips' (1987, p.21) caution that “in general it must be noted that there are no procedures that will regularly (or always) yield either sound data or true conclusions. If there were such procedures, then steady progress in human understanding would be guaranteed.” This research is not interested in obtaining one position of truth, but aims to develop information that will eventuate in pragmatic change.

In addition to the traditional notions of validity, this design also attempted to satisfy conditions of psychopolitical validity and its components, epistemic and transformative validity (Prilleltensky, 2003). The research was designed so that it was

“attuned to issues of power at multiple levels of analysis – personal, relational and collective” – ie. epistemic validity (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005, p. 285). This is demonstrated in the next section on the TIP form of data analysis. It also has been designed to stimulate action aimed at transforming social structures – ie. transformative validity. This becomes more apparent in the discussion chapter. Evidence of whether the research actually results in action or not will only emerge after the research becomes public.

The TIP Method of Analysis

Many critical and community psychologists have used various forms of discourse or narrative analyses to examine their data, as they bring broader aspects such as power relations, cultural and social conditions into consideration (Harper, 1999; Hepburn, 2003; Parker, 1999; Willig, 1999). Kirkman (1999) suggested that discourse analyses distinguished themselves from narrative analyses by focusing more on the language used in the data; whereas narrative analyses concentrated more on the data’s actors, plots and time lines. These styles of analysis are helpful in detecting how large scale socio-political processes make their way into “little stories of everyday life” (Parker, 1999, p. 292).

Others find discourse and narrative analyses attractive because they can be used as interventions in their own right. The methods can expose political interests that are served by constructions of language and stories, problematise the central pillars of these positions and develop new possibilities for the people in the stories

who were previously disadvantaged or oppressed by the stories’ grip on the status quo (Harper, 1999; Parker, 1999).

This potential makes it a particularly befitting technique for research on psychoemotional abuse, as discourse is one of the most prominent modes of inflicting, deflecting and recovering from this form of abuse (Willig, 1999). Words and the plots formed with them are used to shape identities, include or exclude, provide or diminish status and value (Hepburn, 2003; Parker, 1999). However, interventions based on language or plot alone are unlikely to be adequate methods of establishing long-term improvements. The social, political, cultural and material conditions that helped shape these experiences must be considered and addressed as well (Hepburn, 2003; Parker, 1999).

This thesis trials a method that analyses the data at three interacting levels: the Text, Interpretation and Power relations (TIP). The aim of the TIP1 methodology is to study the relationships among the texts (transcripts) and the contexts that enable, restrict and locate them, while making my interpretation of the sub-text transparent. The TIP was heavily influenced by Prilleltensky’s (2001) VIP (values, interests, power) methodology and critical discourse analysis; and to a lesser extent by the methodologies of other critical theorists and researchers such as Parker and Burman (1993); Walkerdine (1997); Kirkman (1999) and Flyvbjerg (2001). Some positivist methodologies, such as thematic analysis, were also influential. The following sections highlight how these influences helped form particular methods at each level of analysis.

¹Aside from its methodological qualities, the word that forms the acronym TIP seems to be appropriately symbolic, as it produces multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is used.

Analysing the Text

The TIP’s first component, Text, focused on a surface analysis of the interview transcripts. Tables and matrices were developed to map out the themes, topics, insights, contradictions and comparisons across participants intra- and inter-textually. Examples of the analytical questions at this level included:

- (a) How are these stories constructed and constructive? (Hepburn, 2003)
- (b) What claims are repeatedly drawn on? (Hepburn, 2003)
- (c) How do they function?
- (d) Do they function differently at other times and places?
- (e) What tensions exist and how are they handled?
- (f) What are the macro-, meso- and micro – conditions that form the context of the story?
- (g) What are the opportunities for change?
- (h) Where are the points of resistance or facilitation?

Exposing the Interpretation

The Interpretation component focused on analysing issues that were metaphorically below the surface of the text (ie., the sub-text), such as the researcher’s and participants’ interests, motives and values and their connection to broader social practices and contexts. This level of analysis primarily explored my

interpretation of the forces that propelled or restrained the presentation of particular issues in the text and investigated potential interpretations of the participants’ intended meaning.

While some researchers believe it is empowering for the participants to let the data “speak for itself”, I agree with Kidder and Fine (1999) that researchers need to do more than merely transcribe the information they receive. Researchers also need to listen to the meaning of the participants’ narratives and use a particular methodological and theoretical framework to critically interpret the data within its social and historic circumstances. This is particularly important when studying a topic such as psychoemotional abuse, where stories of perpetration have traditionally been manipulated to minimise the impacts and deflect attention that may result in some form of punishment.

Another problem with leaving the data uninterpreted and treating all data as equal is the risk of what Harper (1999) called “epistemological gerrymandering”: that the unlimited positions of the research defaults into a disinterested inquiry that paralyses further informed interventions. The TIP method aimed to guard against the risk of producing useless findings where “anything goes”. This component of the analysis sought to expose my reading of the text and impressions of the interviews, based on my understandings of previous research and theoretical perspectives, and my personal and professional experiences.

A bank of questions that facilitated this level of analysis included:

- (a) What issues are presented?
- (b) What propels the presentation?
- (c) What propels my interpretation of the information presented?
- (d) What other interpretations are possible, given my understanding of other information (e.g., other research and experiences)?
- (e) What meaning is intended?
- (f) What other meanings are possible?
- (g) How are the stories used as a resource to achieve particular ends? (Hepburn, 2003)
- (h) Are the gaps and silences telling me anything? (Walkerdine, 1997).
- (i) If I look through a broader cultural, social and historical perspective what other meanings emerge and what may drive them?
- (j) How are public practices and conditions expressed through the private stories? (Hepburn, 2003)
- (k) How do social practices express themselves as psychological phenomena? (Walkerdine, 1997)

Accounting for Power

The Power component of the analysis examined the multiplicity of force elements that influence the location and shape of the text, its actors, ideas and interpretation. These forces have the capacity to connect, reinforce ideas and experiences or keep them apart, concealed or subverted (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Parker, 1999). Particular focus will be placed upon the social, structural and historical contexts, the relationship between global and local issues, and the process by which

power is exercised in relationships, such as those involving the researcher and the participant; the participant and the people in their stories (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

I used the following prompts to navigate the power-based patterns in the text and interpretation:

- (a) How do different actors express power in language? (Wodak, 1997)
- (b) What resources are called upon to account for or discount particular issues?
- (c) What resources are used to keep people or ideas into position? (e.g., Are people scapegoated? How?)
- (d) What are required for them to shift position? (e.g., how do outsiders become insiders?)
- (e) What power processes are institutionalised? (Harper, 1999)
- (f) What structural factors influence individual actions? (Flyvbjerg, 2001)
- (g) What are the structural consequences of particular power arrangements? (Flyvbjerg, 2001)
- (h) How is power exercised in the interpretation? (Flyvbjerg, 2001)
- (i) Who gains and loses from particular mechanisms of power? (Flyvbjerg, 2001)

The power dynamics are reported in two places in this thesis. The power dynamics that were mentioned through the participants' interviews are analysed in the findings of research aim that explored the different contexts of psychoemotional abuse, and power dynamics between the researcher and the interviewees are explored in the reflections section of the discussion. Reflections on the whole TIP method are

also included in the discussion chapter and a summary of the steps that were followed to analyse the data is reported in the next section.

The Process of the TIP Method of Analysis

The transcripts were first read without critique to gain a sense of the style of speech and interconnections among patterns raised through the interviews. After reading each transcript, reflective notes were taken and important quotes were highlighted. The text from the interview transcripts was then split into a separate, uniquely numbered, row for each sentence and placed into the first column of a four column table on an analysis sheet. The other three columns provided space to record comments that related to the text, the interpretation of the data and the power relationships of the characters mentioned in the text or between the interviewer and the researcher (see Appendix B for an example).

The interviewees' statements were re-read through the filter of the analytical questions listed in the sections above and the researcher's responses were recorded in the appropriate columns on the analysis sheets. Comments that charted the common and unique topics and themes, or significant statements raised in the interview were recorded in the “Text” column. The notes in this column formed the bulk of the information used to develop the participants' conceptualisation of psychoemotional abuse and outline their experiential responses to the research aims, such as the patterns and impacts of psychoemotional abuse and the locations where it occurred.

The information recorded in the “Interpretation” column was used to develop a deeper understanding of the motives and framings people referred to in the interviews, explain individual and group differences and contextualise the topics and themes. It was also used to record how my values, beliefs and assumptions interacted with the participants’ narratives. For example, some of the values that I brought to the analysis included a focus on pragmatic outcomes that were based upon the real-life experiences of participants, rather than a focus on fine, rhetorical distinctions. I respected the position that the researcher was not the only person in the interaction with expert knowledge, as participants offered their own valuable type of expertise; and believed that social change and social justice are best advanced through a combination of individual and structural change. Another example occurred when I also approached the data with the belief that people’s perspectives of their own abusive behaviour should not necessarily be taken at face value, as my experience as a counsellor of men who have been psychoemotionally abusive was that they often covered up or minimised their anti-social behaviour. I expected that at least some comments were likely to be framed to increase the prospect of social approval and was consequently on guard for that possibility.

The final column, which contained analytical commentary of the Power dynamics, was primarily employed from a more comprehensive exploration of the roles people were in when they received and perpetrated psychoemotional abuse and investigate the cultural and social influences that institutionalise psychoemotional abuse. This column focused on ways in which the actors in the stories were referred to in relation to the story-teller. The power dynamics between the interviewees and the researcher is also considered in the reflections section in the discussion chapter.

The transcripts and analytical commentary was then split into 11 separate documents – one for each of the questions that were asked – and grouped according to how the questions corresponded with the research aims. The data was then re-analysed again across the different layers of subgroups: family violence therapy participants cf. participants from the general population; female cf. male; professionals; and all of the subgroups against each other. Whenever it was appropriate, tables and matrices were developed to help structure these comparisons, such as the analysis of the locations where abuse occurred and the roles people were in during these events. Examples of these analysis sheets are attached as Appendices C, D and E.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The results of the TIP analysis have been incorporated into the findings to address the four research aims. The findings of the first research aim – the participants’ experiences of receiving and delivering psychoemotional abuse – are outlined and developed into a new model that categorises types of psychoemotional abuse according to their movement patterns. This section examines the motives that drive particular forms of psychoemotional abuse and concludes with an exploration of how psychoemotional abuse is applied in conjunction with other forms of abuse.

The second and third research aims are then addressed via sections that map the settings where psychoemotional abuse occurred and the strategies the participants’ used to resist against psychoemotional abuse. This includes exploration of themes that emerged through the interviews such as the catalysts that ended abusive relationships, methods of protection against psychoemotional abuse and methods of stopping psychoemotional abuse towards others. This chapter is completed with work that examines the fourth research aim: the participants’ views of the social and cultural factors that could feed or starve psychoemotional abuse. This includes participants’ ideas for social, cultural and individual changes that promise to reduce and prevent psychoemotional abuse.

In addition to the research aims, the findings begin with the participants’ conceptual understandings of the notions of psychoemotional abusive and

psychoemotional healthy relationships. The major themes are drawn together and developed into a model that will be compared with academic definitions in the discussion.

The Participants’ Conceptualisation of Psychoemotionally Abusive Relationships

While researchers across the globe continue their struggle to determine a unified definition of psychological and emotional abuse, the interviews of this study commenced by asking the participants how they framed the concept of a psychologically abusive relationship. This helped to set the context for their subsequent responses and provided an insight into how this topic is conceptually grasped by people in the general population. As I mentioned in the methodology section, the term “psychological abuse” was preferred over “psychoemotional abuse” in the interviews as it was a more commonly understood phrase; however the phrase “psychoemotional abuse” will be used throughout this text to keep the terminology consistent. The findings below are viewed through a gendered lens to explore how psychoemotionally abusive relationships may be conceptualised differently by men and women. Differences were also noted in the responses provided among the subgroups who had received therapy for family violence and those from the general population.

The women who completed therapy for the violence they had suffered held the most articulate and sophisticated understandings of all of the subgroups of the nature of psychoemotional abuse and its subtleties. They presented a combination of

personal and political descriptors in their conceptualisations. For example, June spoke of different grades of abuse in an attempt to capture the depth of the terrain. She differentiated what she called “low level” psychoemotional abusive acts such as gossip, criticism and isolation from “higher level” acts such as explicitly calling someone an insulting name or manipulation.

Most women from the family violence subgroup spoke from their experiences about being controlled, disrespected and shut down by another person via concepts such as “not being allowed to speak freely”, “one opinion is regarded as more important than another”, “becoming dominated by another so that one’s self-esteem and wellbeing is dependent upon another’s judgement” and being expected to fulfil gender stereotyped roles such as “a nurturer and pleaser of men”. One woman from this group stated that financial abuse was a form of psychoemotional abuse.

Women from the general population drew similar positions from their own experience. The main theme of their collective response centred on unequal power relations and actions that increased power differentials, such as being denigrated, belittled, used, disrespected and put down. One added that a feature of psychoemotional abuse occurred when a person dominated another and expected that balance of power to be the norm. This group of women referred to psychoemotional abuse occurring over an elongated time scale through phrases such as “niggling, constant tension”, “feeling blocked and stuck” and “persistently worn down over time”. Comments such as “hidden agendas” and “lack of honesty and openness” indicated that deceitful communication methods were also a core theme of psychoemotional abuse.

Other women from this group presented a different framing when they discussed poor quality communication within relationships. Some described psychoemotional abuse in terms of the relationship providing “unequal input and output” or their partner failing to address issues, addressing them indifferently, or responding only to “keep the peace” rather than genuinely attempting to resolve the problem at hand.

Interestingly, some of the men who had completed a family violence program concurred with this angle. Tony spoke about “masking pain, avoiding what is going on in the relationship and taking no responsibility for making the relationship work.” Four of the five mentioned the central theme of controlling the other person and elaborated on this perspective with phrases such as “demanding”, “unequal” and “making unilateral decisions”. Bill alluded to the unconsciousness of this behaviour when he included “taking things for granted” and “selfish habits” in his definition.

Sam, who was also from the male family violence group, couched the abuse in terms of the relationship itself when he described psychoemotional abuse as “a battlefield environment” where there are “lots of arguments, disagreements, tension, conflict and unhappiness.” This implied that elements of psychoemotional abuse could be conceptualised in broader terms than merely the behaviour of an individual.

The men from the general population also raised the issue of fraudulent behaviour when they discussed concepts such as relationships festering due to people “not addressing or facing the real issues”, distrust, lying or withholding truth from

each other. Tom, from this group, provided further insight into the issue of false or fraudulent communication, when he suggested that the motive behind not expressing one’s genuine feelings could be a fear of hurting others. Another claimed that it was abusive to remain in a relationship for too long simply because you felt like you owed the other person something. A couple of men included the concept of an unbalanced relationship where one party perceived themselves to be superior; and another commented on a lack of respect.

The focus group of professionals defined psychoemotional abuse as an act that occurs:

...anytime when a person uses their power to hurt someone else.

Emotional abuse and psychoemotional abuse is part of any abusive relationship, whether there is also physical or sexual aspects to the abuse, there is always a psychoemotional and emotional impact. It’s more like manipulative behaviour.

A summary of the most popular clusters of the concepts included in the participants’ definitions are listed below in order of frequency and unpacked along gendered lines of support thereafter:

- (a) Restricting, Controlling and Manipulation (22 responses)
- (b) Unequal/Dependent on One Person (7)
- (c) Tension or threat (6)
- (d) Avoiding issues/taking no responsibility for the relationship (6)
- (e) No respect (4)

Behaviours that were described as restricting, controlling and manipulating were most commonly seen to be important features of a psychoemotionally abusive relationship, across the spectrum of participants. Indeed, these descriptors were more than three times as popular as any of the other descriptors and were twice as likely to be mentioned by women in the sample. They included actions by one person to restrict the freedom or put down another, such as silencing, blocking, financial control, domination, using gendered stereotypes to constrain another person, wearing another person down, demanding and making unilateral decisions on behalf of the partnership.

Manipulative behaviours such as blaming or using the other person, a lack of honesty and openness were also cited by the female participants. For men, manipulative behaviours centred around the ways in which honesty and dishonesty were used. For example, men spoke of the dishonesty associated with males masking their pain through aggressive behaviour or emotionally distancing from other people; and considered it abusive to both withhold truth from others and, in one case, to use it against others. Tom thought it was reasonable to withhold the truth from others if it protected them from becoming hurt.

The next most popular notion was the sense that a relationship was unequal, unbalanced, or dependent upon one party. Interestingly, this response had reasonably equal representation across the subgroups. In contrast, the presence of tension or frequent threats in the relationship were largely mentioned by men and expressed through phrases such as “living in fear”, niggling and festering.

Two women and one man from the general population spoke about the harm of avoiding issues in a relationship and three men from the family violence group reflected on the damage of taking the relationship for granted or accepting no responsibility for “making the relationship work”. Later in their interviews these men revealed that they were referring to their own flaws. The absence of respect was portrayed as a critical feature of psychoemotionally abusive relationships by a few participants – half of whom were women from the family violence group.

When all of these themes were drawn together, it can be concluded from the information above that the participants in this study would collectively conceptualise a psychoemotionally abusive relationship in the following manner:

A psychoemotionally abusive relationship requires that at least one of its parties disrespects the other’s rights to an equal reward from the relationship; and acts to psychoemotionally dominate the other parties.

A psychoemotionally abusive relationship is typically enacted through dishonest or manipulative communication patterns that can include the avoidance of important issues that would otherwise support the other parties’ needs.

This often produces a tense environment and restricts the other parties’ freedom to express him or herself in a way that might satisfy their needs.

Conflicts in psychoemotionally abusive relationships are often either resolved

through force or are never satisfactorily addressed to at least one parties’ standards and the tension is subsequently prolonged.

Participants in a psychoemotionally abusive relationship may act out of ignorance or insensitivity and not necessarily intend to hurt the other person and many grades and intensities of the scale of psychoemotional abuse may exist.

The Participants’ Conceptualisation of Psychoemotionally Healthy Relationships

The participants were also asked for their conceptual understanding of a psychoemotionally healthy relationship to provide another point of contrast. This understanding also illuminated some insights into the behaviours and characteristics of relationships that people valued and believed should be encouraged in relationships. The list below contains the concepts that emerged most often in order of popularity.

- (a) Non-violent and safe (9 responses)
- (b) equal (9)
- (c) respect (7)
- (d) honesty/trustworthy (6)
- (e) good communication (5)
- (f) support (4)
- (g) speak your mind (3)

The antonyms of some of the concepts used to articulate psychoemotionally abusive relationships were seen among these responses. The notions of “respect” and “equal” directly contrasted against “no respect” and “unequal”. Some described aspects that need to be absent from the relationship for it to be psychoemotionally healthy, such as manipulation, passive forms of abuse and force; which also directly align inversely against the definitions they provided of a psychoemotionally abusive relationship.

Representatives across the four subgroups nominated concepts such as equality, good communication, honesty and trustworthy. However, all apart from men in the family violence program included the term “respect” in their understanding of a psychoemotionally healthy relationship. Indeed, the concept of respect was more than twice as popular among women as men (ie. 5 cf. 2). It may be argued though, that men did mention terms that were practical incarnations of respectful behaviour, such as “support”, “understanding” and “listening, non-judgementally”. Two male members of the general population articulated the related concepts of empathy and accepting one another.

Similarly, while the actual notion of “equality” was twice as popular among women as men (i.e. 6 cf. 3), terms that related to the application of equality, such as sharing, reciprocity and support also were mentioned by participants across the subgroups. Terms such as “non-violent” and “safe”, were used to describe environmental conditions as well as individual behaviour and were almost evenly split between men and women and received representation from all the subgroups.

A variety of terms clustered around the concept of good communication such as “sorting out problems without arguments”, “negotiating” and being “non-judgemental”. The participants acknowledged the role of honesty and trustworthiness that highlighted the characteristics required to provide reliable information in healthy relationships. The concepts of “good communication”, “honesty”, “trustworthiness” and “being able to speak your mind” were also spread relatively evenly across all groups. Two representatives each from the women in the general population and men

from the family violence program raised “support” as an important ingredient of psychoemotionally healthy relationships.

Sarah, from the family violence subgroup, stated that having physical and psychoemotional space to pursue one’s own interests was an important element of a healthy relationship. This perception suggested that the relationship is not confined to the times when the parties are together, but also when they are physically apart. Typically, the notion of psychoemotional abuse has referred to the actions in a direct exchange; but the impact of a relationship can clearly be carried well beyond direct and immediate interaction. Concepts that were less frequently mentioned included “getting on” (2 responses), “accepting” (2), “fun” (2), “sharing” (2), “having things in common” (1), and “commitment and dedication” (1).

When asked later in the interview for a personal example of a psychoemotionally healthy relationship, the women who had been through a family violence program presented a range of three different types of relationships compared to other subgroups, who all presented five examples. Three of the women from the family violence group spoke of psychoemotionally healthy relationships with their children; one with a former partner and another made a general reference to relationships. This compared to the women from the general population and men from the family violence group whose relationships included a spread of children, parents, current partner, friends and general references; and men from the general populations who offered examples of relationships with their children, sister, parents, current partners and former partners. These patterns will be discussed in the following chapter.

The professionals stated that a relationship is psychoemotionally healthy when each person “is given free choice and are allowed to feel good about those choices; when both parties feel safe in the relationship and their self-confidence is promoted. There is mutual trust and each person feels valued. There are also no threatening negative consequences for certain behaviours, whether they are overt or implied.”

A summarised version of this sample’s conceptualisation of a psychoemotionally healthy relationship follows:

A psychoemotionally healthy relationship requires its parties to hold a respectful attitude towards each other and an understanding that all parties’ needs are equally valuable.

A psychoemotionally healthy relationship needs to be enacted through clear, trustworthy, honest communication that supports the other parties’ needs and enables them to have a safe space to express themselves and resolve conflicts to the satisfaction of all other parties without force.

Ideally parties have a commitment to the relationship, have things in common and enjoy each others’ company.

A Non-Academic Model of Psychoemotionally Abusive Relationships

The information in the two sections above indicates that the following four dimensions are important in this sample’s understanding of psychoemotionally abusive relationships:

- (a) The Balance of Power in the Structure of the Relationship: Is it unequal or equal?
- (b) The Person’s Attitude toward the Other Partner(s): Is it disrespectful or respectful?
- (c) The Person’s Behaviours towards the Other Partner(s): Does it aim to achieve one’s own goals at the others’ expense or support and encourage the other person?
- (d) The Environment created by the Relationship: Is it insecure or secure?

The range of responses offered by the participants are mapped out along these dimensions in Table 8 below.

Table 8. Samples of the Participants’ Responses Mapped Across the Four Dimensions of Psychoemotionally Abusive Relationships

| | Psychoemotionally Abusive | Psychoemotionally Healthy |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Power | Unequal: | Equal |
| Structures/Balance of Power | Unbalanced; being dominated by another; Unequal input/output; power imbalance ; making unilateral decisions; perceived superiority | |
| Attitude | Disrespect: No respect; taking things for granted; lack of respect; one’s opinion is more important than another | Respect: Accept one another; empathy; commitment and dedication towards each other |

Table 8 (Continued). Samples of the Participants’ Responses Mapped Across the Four Dimensions of Psychoemotionally Abusive Relationships

| | Psychoemotionally Abusive | Psychoemotionally Healthy |
|------------|---|--|
| Behaviours | <p>Achieve own goals at others’ expense: Selfish habits; manipulate; restrict; control; feeling obliged; hidden agendas – lack of honesty and openness; systemic forms of control, such as gender stereotypes (women as nurturers and pleasers of men); cast their wellbeing as dependent on the needs of men; financial control; judgemental; being used, belittled, put down; not addressing issues; dishonest dialogue to merely keep the peace; denigration; threats; demanding; verbal abuse; blaming others; masking pain; avoiding; lying; distrust</p> | <p>Support and encouragement: Sharing, reciprocity, good, clear communications, listening, have things in common, getting on, non-judgemental, no force, don’t pick on each other, no passive abuse or manipulation, sorting out problems without arguments, teamwork</p> |

Table 8 (Continued). Samples of the Participants’ Responses Mapped Across the Four Dimensions of Psychoemotionally Abusive Relationships

| | Psychoemotionally Abusive | Psychoemotionally Healthy |
|-------------|--|---|
| Environment | <p>Insecure:</p> <p>Constant tension; threats; avoiding responsibility; not allowed to speak freely; dependent on others’ views and construct self-esteem based on this; feeling blocked/stuck; cycle of violence; lots of arguments and disagreements; living in fear; festering; not addressing issues, not facing real issues; tension builds; tearing bonds apart; physical violence is threatened; niggling; persistently worn down over time; battlefield environment; not saying genuine feelings</p> | <p>Secure :</p> <p>Speak mind freely, express your thoughts, non-violent, safe, honest and trustworthy (maybe in behaviours), fun, enjoy each others’ company</p> |

The four elements of this model demonstrate important interactions. The behaviours enact the attitudes and exert power that shapes the structure of the relationship and the environment it exists within. Even though the model is structured into a binary shape, each element is dynamic, fluid and has the capacity to change quickly.

In many relationships, the balance of power and the degree of respect one has for another can frequently shift as the context changes. The ratio of behaviours that are genuinely enacted for the benefit of the relationship compared to those purely enacted for individual gain can also vary with circumstance.

However, having said that, it appears that most of the content listed in the table above refers to long-term patterns rather than isolated incidents and that there seems to be a conceptual correlation between the overall balance of power, the degree of respect shown towards the other party, the quotient of behaviours that are performed to advance one's own position over their partners' position, compared to the number that advance the position of both parties and the strength of the emotional security that is built around the relationship.

Models that attempt to delineate psychoemotionally abusive relationships from psychoemotionally healthy relationships are complicated by the presence of facades in many psychoemotionally abusive relationships. Some of these appear as unintended consequences of indirect communication patterns. For example, the relationship may display a secure outlook in public and be insecure in private, as one of the partners avoids topics that will spark an argument. Alternatively, it may appear secure before

some topics that the parties have general agreement on, but become dangerously insecure when more sensitive topics are raised, such as one’s in-laws or family finances.

There is also the possibility that some attitudes or behaviours may be perceived differently by the parties involved or observers. For example, the provision of advice may be regarded as helpful by the advisor and as patronising by the receiver. However, there are other occasions when participants in this study have noted the presentation of certain attitudes and behaviours are deliberately vague, ambiguous or coded. The complexities of facades and interpretations become more apparent later in this chapter.

Research Aim 1: To explore the dynamic process of psychoemotional abuse

This section examined people’s experiences of receiving and perpetrating psychoemotional abuse. It covered various facets such as the types of strategies used, their effects, impacts and differences among the subgroups. Other aspects such as the role of witnesses and thresholds of abuse are explored later in the section.

Strategies and Patterns of Psychoemotional Abuse

The data demonstrated that psychoemotional abuse took many forms and was applied with multiple motives and degrees of intensity. Some incidents were quick and isolated; others constituted part of a punishing, pre-meditated campaign.

The strategies of psychoemotional abuse seemed to be enacted through a small range of distinct patterns of movement. The first pattern, psychoemotional withdrawal, involved one party moving away from, ignoring or abandoning the other. The second pattern, psychoemotional oppression, occurred when one party moved to crush another down into an inferior position for a prolonged period of time. The third pattern of psychoemotional restriction was implemented on occasions when one person's freedom of thought or movement was systematically constrained or trapped by another. Psychoemotional disintegration is a category that summarises the fourth pattern, which was seen when a person was directly psychoemotionally attacked for a short, intense period of time. These four categories have similarities to the broad categories of psychoemotional abuse outlined by other researchers, as demonstrated in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Sub-Categories of Psychoemotional Abuse

| Researcher | Murphy & Hoover (1999) | Garbarino et al. (1996) | Tolman (1992) | Smullens (2010) | Streker |
|------------|---------------------------|--|---|---|--------------------------------|
| Category 1 | Hostile withdrawal | Denying Emotional Responsiveness | Emotional withholding | Rejection/ Abandonment Severe Neglect | Psychoemotional Withdrawal |
| Category 2 | Domination & Intimidation | Terrorising Exploiting/ Corrupting | Creation of Fear Contingent Love Monopolisation | Enmeshment | Psychoemotional Oppression |
| Category 3 | Restrictive Engulfment | Isolation Neglect Economic Abuse | Isolation Rigid sex roles | Extreme Overprotection & Overindulgence | Psychoemotional Restriction |

Table 9. Sub-Categories of Psychoemotional Abuse (continued)

| Researcher | Murphy & Hoover (1999) | Garbarino et al. (1996) | Tolman (1992) | Smullens (2010) | Streker |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|------------------------|---|
| Category 4 | Denigration | Spurning | Degradation Psychological destabilisation | Rage | Psychoemotional Disintegration |
| Category 5 | | | | | Psychoemotional Abuse By a Secondary Source |

However, the data in this study highlighted an additional fifth category that exhibited a unique pattern of motion: psychoemotional abuse by a secondary source. This occurred when one person indirectly attacked another via a third party. More details about these patterns are found in the following sections.

Psychoemotional Withdrawal

Psychoemotional withdrawal occurred when one person removed their contact or support from another person. Sometimes this involved physical relocation, but the physical relocation was always accompanied by social dislocation or a refusal to respectfully communicate with the victim of the abuse. At other times, the person may have been physically present but psychoemotionally and socially disengaged. The motion of psychoemotional withdrawal is displayed in Figure 1 below. The green circle represents the position of the victim and the purple circle the position of the perpetrator of the psychoemotional abuse. The arrow indicates the direction of the movement of the abusive action.

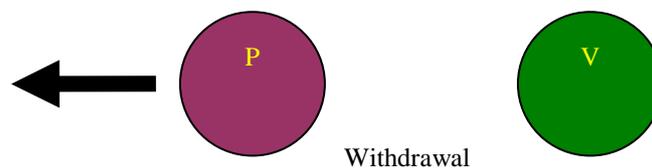


Figure 1: The Movement Pattern of Psychoemotional Withdrawal.

Arguably the most famous method of psychoemotional withdrawal is known colloquially as the “silent treatment” where one person acts in a passive aggressive manner, completely ignoring other people and refusing to speak to them. The silent treatment can be applied generally, by not talking to anyone; or specifically towards the person that is targeted. One woman in the sample stated that her partner had treated her like this for several months. Another woman from the same subgroup mentioned that her ex-husband would not talk to her for many days after an argument. It was left to her to always approach him and apologise, even when she did not believe that the conflict was her fault, as the tension was too much to bear any longer. It is likely that her ex-husband received another ‘pay off’ through this approach, as the act of pressuring the other person to always apologise requires them to perform a subservient role, and thus always be placed in a subservient position in the relationship.

Another woman from the same group claimed that her husband’s whole family ignored her and would not speak English in front of her even though they could all speak English perfectly well. They knew she did not understand their native language but deliberately set up this communication barricade to exclude her. She said that this made her feel anxious and unsettled as she often wondered if they were talking about her.

Another strong example occurred when a woman from the family violence group stated that her ex-husband had psychologically abandoned his children during the break up of their marriage. Consequently, her husband and their children have not spoken to each other since he left home.

A third woman from the family violence group noted that her ex-partner used to withdraw his affection as a form of manipulation when he wanted something from her. Another woman from the family violence group recounted a more subtle example of psychoemotional withdrawal from her ex-husband. He would pull out of social engagements at the last minute which would leave her in awkward public situations with her friends. She stated that if it had only occurred once or twice, it would have not affected anybody, but the compounding effect of this pattern created damage to the relationships within their social circles. Their friends started concluding that they were unreliable guests and reduced their invitations. In a slightly different example, another woman from the general population said that her ex-husband would make her friends so uncomfortable by his moodiness and rudeness that they stopped coming back to the house. Although she did not realise it at the time, she retrospectively understood this behaviour to be part of his strategy of socially isolating her from others.

Other examples of this style of psychoemotional abuse were offered, such as Lisa's partner ignoring her all day as he played his computer games; Greg's cold treatment from his office colleagues and Sally's partner dropping out of relationships counselling because he did not receive the professional validation that he expected for his views.

Psychoemotional Oppression

Psychoemotional oppression occurred when one party used psychoemotional strategies to construct a dominant position over another. The strategies were typically maintained over longer time periods and were less intense than those seen in the incidents that constituted psychoemotional disintegration. Psychological oppression’s pattern of movement is displayed diagrammatically in Figure 2 below.

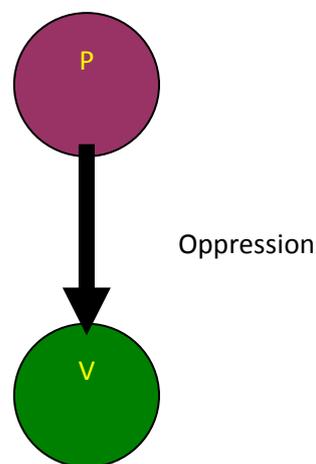


Figure 2. The Movement Pattern of Psychoemotional Oppression

The most common examples of psychoemotional oppression are referred to colloquially as “mind games”. These included various forms of tricks and deceptions, such as lying, “shifting the yardstick” (ie. setting mutually understood goals and then unilaterally and unpredictably changing the goal after others had worked towards achieving it) and “double standards” (ie. demanding high standards of others, but either not living up to that standard oneself, or not implementing the same penalties or rewards equally to all parties).

One method of deception was described by some women as a “Jekyll and Hyde” technique, where their husbands would craft themselves as reasonable and appear perfectly normal, loving and caring in front of others; and then turn into an abusive person when others were not around. In Sally’s words, “On the surface, he appeared normal and reasonable, but underneath... His face would change and would become a totally different person.”

As Dr Jekyll, they would attempt to seduce the jury of their social circle to create the illusion that all was well in the relationship. This caused huge difficulties for Sarah, who stated “People didn’t believe me as they saw him as a different person [a nice person]. I saw the core, they saw the shell.” When Sally complained to her family about her treatment at home, her ex-husband told them, “Look at our beautiful house. Why would she stay for so long if she was unhappy?”. She said that her family thought that he was completely devoted to her, indeed that he “idolised her”; which undermined the authority of her cries for help and diminished her capacity to gain support. Sally remembered her mother blaming her for receiving the abuse and blocking any potential for the family’s assistance with the unsympathetic comment, “You made your bed, you need to sleep in it.”

Helen stated that in her situation, the psychoemotional abuse was coded:

A lot of the things that were said and done were things that most people would think are quite innocent; but from past conditioning, to me they meant something else.

The coding disguised the abusive intent from witnesses and kept Helen under psychoemotional tension. She commented that “I would have liked a few things to blow up, but they didn’t” to explain that a loud argument would have publicly unmasked the abuse and helped her to find a point that would draw attention to Helen’s husband’s behaviour. Instead, however, the coding set up conditions where his behaviour appeared innocuous to others. Under these circumstances, she would have appeared irrational if she “blew up” in public; which would have reinforced the view that the problem rests with her reactions, not his behaviour.

Thus, the subtleness and complexity of some methods of psychoemotional abuse are starkly demonstrated through the construction of facades. At one level the behaviours that constitute the facade are essentially inoffensive, and, indeed, may be regarded by many as noble. They form a critical component in the process of prolonged psychoemotional abuse as the screen of socially acceptable behaviour reduced monitoring, increased doubt and created space for psychoemotionally abusive acts to thrive. These screens make the detection and prosecution of psychoemotional abusive acts much more difficult. This psychoemotional process also is a common method found in grooming and covering up behaviours that constitute sexual and physical abuse and many other illegal and immoral acts, such as government corruption. The people surrounding the victim are often groomed as well as the victim to cut off the possibility that the victim is believed, which may reduce the prospects that they will receive appropriate support.

June expressed a similar experience when she described how her family and the broader culture complemented the oppression:

I had the added pressure of not only coping with the manipulation, but then I would go out in society and deal with people who pretended that everything was all right... we have people who see [abusive] things and do not do anything about it.

This implied that people were either oblivious to the existence of psychoemotional abuse, or could see it, but either did not care about its effects or did not know how to behave appropriately. June effectively described the psychoemotional equivalent of the well-researched “bystander effect,” where people watch horrible events and fail to assist as they assume others will deal with it instead.

The destabilising impact of chronically broken promises and agreements was mentioned by other participants. Allison said that her former husband had strung her along with false hope before regularly letting her down: “The highs and lows made it tough. He was quite charming in lots of ways...He had me believing that I was absolutely wonderful at first and then he would cut me down to size.” This kept her on a rollercoaster of emotional experiences and made it easier for her to minimise, excuse or deny the bad times, which prolonged both the relationship and her exposure to psychoemotional abuse.

Alan said that he had also felt manipulated and duped by a former girlfriend who gave him false impressions. He said that she raised his hopes that they would live

together in another state, but she really wanted to stay home and go to university. If Alan had known he would not have wasted months of his life preparing for this move. Sally spoke of her husband unpredictably working against some of the agreements they had negotiated, such as one that involved them calmly talking with their child who had been in trouble at school. Instead, he undermined their strategy by yelling at the child and reduced the likelihood that they could all work on the issue constructively.

Some people described dealing with the unpredictable behaviour of other family members as like living with a time bomb in the house. For example, Sally described the intimidating routine of her ex-husband when he arrived home from work. The rest of the family did not know what to expect from him as he walked through the doorway, as he could change suddenly from being calm one second and then erupt with anger the next. Sally said that her ex-husband would also plant psychoemotional landmines, by deliberately teasing the children until they exploded with anger; which he would use to try to justify hitting them. According to Sally, he never said sorry as he believed he never did anything wrong. Another version of setting the bomb, would occur when she became upset with his behaviour and he would ridicule her response with a comment such as “What’s wrong with you?”

The data also unveiled the application of ideological positions of dominance, such as sexist and misogynistic stances. For example, Allison remembered her ex-husband screaming at her “you have defied me!”, which implied that it was her duty as his wife to follow his command. Other women reported being treated as servants by their husbands who assumed the role as their masters. Some were told by their

partners how to properly clean a kitchen and whether they were allowed to go to parties or not. Allison also recounted that her ex-partner developed a strategy of putting down her family subtly, by inferring that her table manners were wrong. Other women were always blamed if anything went wrong, even when it was clearly their partner's fault; including one example, where Sally was blamed by her ex-husband for the couple's late arrival at a function, in spite of her reminding him to get ready several times.

Sarah experienced the most extreme examples of psychoemotional oppression. She described the strategies used on her as an “orchestrated series of manoeuvres to keep him in privileged position.” These behaviours included obvious comments designed to crush her confidence, such as “You’ll never be any good...”; which were followed up with patronising statements such as “Gee, you’re really trying hard” and patterns of putting her down, then rescuing her, such as “You’re possessive. You’re emotionally unstable. Are you all right?”

In addition, her reality was often defined by him, through comments such as “you are over-reacting.” He attempted to excuse his abusive behaviour, by tying it to a test of her love for him (e.g., “If you really loved me, you would...”) and used central aspects of her identity to provide the logic for her to change her behaviour in accordance with what he wanted. For example, he would attempt to coerce her into agreeing with his decisions through statements such as, “I thought you were an open-minded woman”. Her ex-husband also undermined her singing performance by deliberately singing over the top of her; or distracting the audience or loudly packing

up equipment while she was still singing. He de-valued her art as unworthy unless it was commercially viable.

He also created a climate of fear by storing loaded weapons in the house and periodically waved them around and fired them within the property. He also frequently dropped loaded statements about what life would be like for them without their son, which raised her suspicions that he was planning to kill the child.

Sarah’s husband’s efforts to keep her in highly vulnerable state also included actively sabotaging her treatment for her eating disorder and deliberately triggering new episodes during treatment. On occasions, he denied her access to therapy and to an abortion by physically blocking and restraining her. He also participated in the rather unusual tactic of “gaslighting” where he would deliberately hide items from her, such as her wallet or keys, before stating: “Gee, you’re always losing things”. After at least half an hour of searching, he would “find them” in an obvious place such as the middle of the kitchen table and declare: “I don’t know what’s wrong with you. They were here all the time.” This pattern continued for a long time before Sarah caught him in the act of returning the keys when he thought she was not watching.

It appears that psychoemotional oppression is the most subtle form of psychoemotional abuse and consequently, the least likely to be acknowledged at the time of its application. It also poses the lowest risk for the oppressor, as it is difficult to detect its pattern without a long-term perspective. As Allison declared, “He was irritating, but no incident was serious enough for me to stop [the relationship]”.

Thus, psychoemotional oppression survives best when it is unnoticed, easily excused, exists below the threshold upon which others take serious action to stop it, and becomes the norm in the relationship’s dynamic. The longer that an obviously abusive act can be avoided, the longer the tension can be built and maintained, the longer the “mind game” of power, control and domination can continue.

Indeed, on face value, certain strategies are developed to appear that the oppressor does nothing that would necessarily be construed as abusive. For example, he or she may simply apply pressure and wait for the other person to crack or make a mistake. As Sarah put it, the oppressor merely needs to cast out “a dangling, threatening proposition” and let it play on the target’s mind. The target is likely to be affected in a way that somebody who has not been conditioned to previous patterns of psychoemotional abuse may not.

Some strategies of psychoemotional oppression are similar to those used in sports such as tennis, where one person applies continuous and gradually increasing amounts of pressure or tension upon their opponent, until the latter becomes worn down or is pressured into conducting a mistake. The accumulation of mistakes generally erodes the opponent’s confidence and their status within the relationship declines. The oppressor may pounce onto the moral high ground and highlight the target’s failure, or if the targets are well conditioned, they will self-administer punishment through intense emotional responses such as guilt, insecurity or remorse.

Psychoemotional Restriction

Psychoemotional restriction is similar to psychoemotional oppression as it is also a long term strategy of dominance over others. However, psychoemotional restriction occupies a narrower focus as it specifically involves limiting another person’s opportunities to connect with others or lead the life they want. The psychoemotional restrictor often behaves in a more demanding, overt and aggressive manner than the oppressor. As Figure 3 below shows, the motion of the abuse is one of entrapment or containment.

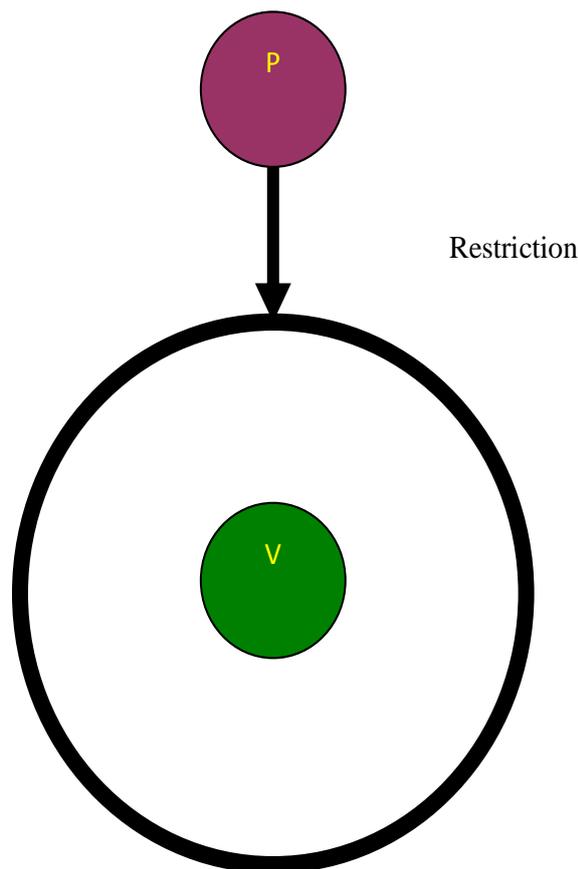


Figure 3. The Movement Pattern of Psychoemotional Restriction

Some forms of restriction disclosed during the interviews were obvious as the perpetrator would simply forbid others to perform certain tasks, such as listening to their favourite music, sitting in particular chairs or reading the newspaper before their father. If they disobeyed these demands, they risked psychoemotional or physical punishment.

A couple of women from the family violence group recounted stories of their ex-husbands determining who should be classed as the friends of the family which was a more overt stand than those who made it unpleasant for others when they came over to the family house. This strategy also included behaviours such as applying “guilt trips” on their partners to block their movements and allow them with little or no time to socialise. For example, some women claimed that their husbands would criticise their mothering skills if they were not completely devoted to attending to all of their children’s demands at home. Others attempted to remove, silence, and devalue friends, family members and professionals who might have offered their partners some support. Helen explained that:

If I ever wanted to visit friends or see someone, I was never told that I can’t but I always felt guilty...The things he said and the ways that he responded to things was all very subtle. Nothing was said outright, “You don’t do this or don’t do that”, but I knew I wasn’t entitled to go and visit my friends for a couple of hours.

Various forms of financial abuse were enacted to restrict many of the female participants in the interviews, so that they could not purchase items that they needed

or wanted to use for enjoyment, such as coffee or art supplies. June said that her ex-husband concealed significant portions of the family’s finances from her, so that she was never sure what resources they had jointly owned at any particular time. This made it very difficult for her to plan to leave the relationship, and when she finally did; the divorce proceedings were very complex as much of the family’s money could not be traced. The quality of Belinda and her children’s lifestyles were restricted after her ex-husband provided her with no practical or financial support with raising their children after separation.

Sarah’s ex-husband kept her under severe surveillance by constantly checking her wallet, phone calls, car and business cards; and making surprise visits home and checking in via the phone multiple times throughout the day. He also denied Sarah opportunities to improve herself (e.g., music lessons) and sabotaged the treatment of her eating disorder. The chronic demeaning of her attempts at parenting restricted the care the child received. For example, she was told that she was coddling and spoiling the child even when the child’s nappy clearly needed changing.

Psychoemotional Disintegration

Acts that have been categorised within the bounds of ‘psychoemotional disintegration’ were the most common types of abuse reported by the participants in this study. They are relatively obvious acts of psychoemotional abuse, as they presented as the psychoemotional equivalent of punching another person. Sometimes the punch would be intense and land a shattering knockout blow; at other times it glanced and inflicted a less serious injury. In all cases, the participants clearly

identified that they were under attack from another person. In some situations this occurred once and never again. However, the phrase ‘disintegration’ was chosen to reflect the point that even a glancing blow could create an impact. The data demonstrated that incidents that may have seemed small and insignificant at the time could compound and gradually slice away, break down or dismantle the victim’s mental wellbeing. In some situations, people were subjected to severe attacks of psychoemotional disintegration over a series of years. This happened to two participants from the general population: Joanne stated that she had been put down by others for 14 years and Mike claimed he had been told at school that he was “shit for six years by everybody”.

Figure 4 below illustrates that the pattern of psychoemotional disintegration is more a spearing motion than a movement that crushes (i.e., oppression), restrains (i.e., restriction) or abandons (i.e., withdrawal).

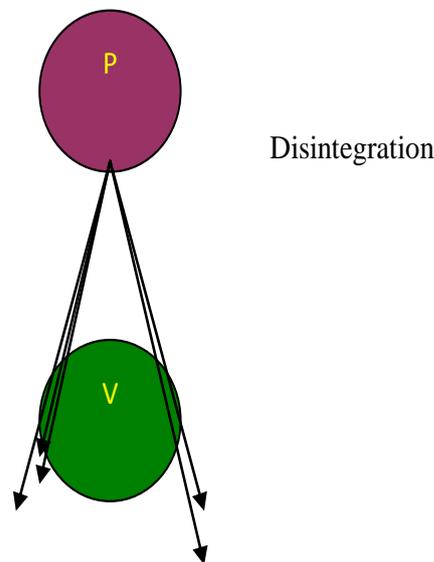


Figure 4. The Movement Pattern of Psychoemotional Disintegration

The most frequently reported form of psychological abuse within this category is colloquially known as a “put down” – a statement that ridicules or insults the recipient and attempts to lower their relative status. Participants across every subgroup mentioned that they had been put down by others. Interestingly, most of the men’s reports were couched in general terms, such as comments about mates “taking the piss out of them”, drunken girlfriends abusing them, or “very heated, twisted industrial relations conflicts with unions at work”. In contrast, many of the women’s stories included details about the specific angle of the abuse. Examples of this included the following:

“He used to tell me that I was the common denominator [for all problems in the relationship] because I’d broken a marriage before.” (Allison)

“He targeted my weight, even when I was slim. He gave me the nickname ‘Chubba’ and disguised it as a joke.” (Allison)

“He told me that if I left, I’d never get another guy. I’d never survive by myself” (Sally)

“There was always something else [that he thought was wrong]...you feel like you were the punching ball” (Sally)

Another popular method of psychoemotional disintegration was the use of threats to coerce, frighten or intimidate the other person. Amanda spoke about her job

being threatened by her manager for reasons not justified by her work performance. Some participants were subjected to constant threats and degrading acts. Sometimes the threats involved self-harm, such as when Helen was warned by her ex-husband that he would kill himself if he had to leave home. The threat of suicide is an intriguing tactic of psychoemotional abuse due to the extremity of the act. Even though the man in this case was prepared to bear the physical harm of this threat, his wife was targeted with the heavy, long-lasting psychoemotional burden not only surviving the traumatic act, but also being blamed for it. Suicide can be a devastating weapon of psychoemotional abuse when used in this manner, as it serves to stop intense psychoemotional pain suffered by the person committing the act and shifts intense psychoemotional pain onto others.

Helen also received more subtle threats about the topic:

...he would say, ‘Oh, you have a nice life, haven’t you?’ You know, that sort of thing. And in one way that could appear quite innocent, but it’s the way it was said. And also the last time he actually spoke to me he made the point of reminding me of the number of incidents which had happened recently, at that stage, where fathers had killed all the children. He stated it as a casual part of the conversation, but I also knew it was there as a threat...He never said things as a direct threat, but he would make sure that you remembered or were aware of it.

Objects also featured as important tools in some threats. Women from the family violence group recalled that doors were threatened to be smashed down,

weapons fired within the property and objects were smashed in front of children.

Eddie from the family violence group said that his wife threw an object at him that he was searching for.

For some participants, it was the aggressive style of communication that drove their perception of abuse, rather than the content of the communication, per se. For example, two women from the family violence group mentioned that their respective husbands would erupt with anger when they opened envelopes containing bills. Another member of the same subgroup recalled sad memories of seeing her children being yelled at.

Not all forms of psychoemotional disintegration were coated in anger though. Some people explicitly commented that their abuser would make their degrading comments in a light-hearted manner or under a mask of friendship. For example, Amanda remembered that her boss would joke about her in front of her work colleagues that she was a few beers short of a six pack, implying in a light-hearted way that she was stupid; Allison received a nickname that implied that she was fat; and men would often construct psychoemotional abuse among them as a light-hearted game of “taking the piss out of each other”.

Psychoemotional Abuse via a Secondary Source

The final pattern of abuse occurred when one person indirectly attacked another via a secondary source. The act was often styled as psychoemotional

disintegration, although the fact that the pathway of the abuse detoured through a different channel which made it worthy of a distinct movement pattern. The secondary source was generally used to relay the message to the intended target or be enticed into supporting the abuse of the target. Occasionally, the secondary source became co-abused with the same act. Figure 5 below depicts the indirect trajectory of -psychoemotional abuse via a secondary source.

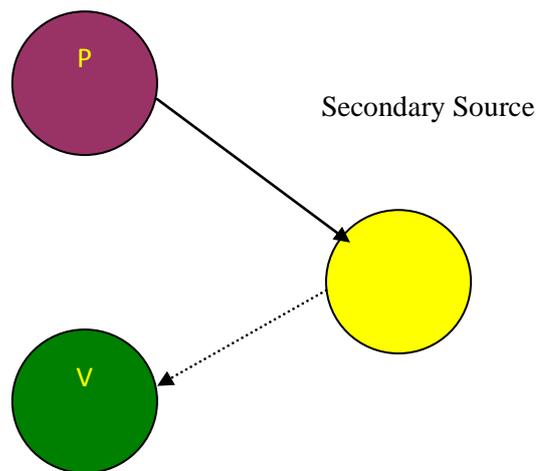


Figure 5. The Movement Pattern of Psychoemotional Abuse via a Secondary Source

This form of abuse is perhaps most often colloquially expressed through phrases such as “backstabbing” and “poisoning others’ minds”. The backstabbing that was raised through the interviews occurred at work and in family situations. In Helen’s case, her husband had co-opted his friends and family to pressure her into staying in the relationship and they contacted Helen after he had left the house, in an attempt to get him back in.

Some women from the family violence group also declared that while their children were visiting their estranged husbands, the children were exposed to abuse and fed distorted stories designed to hurt or wedge the children against their mothers. Belinda’s father abused two generations of his family with the one comment, when he told his grand-daughter, “You’ve got a big mouth like your mother”.

Sarah recounted a horrific story of her husband’s abuse of their son and their cat as a means of torturing her. Sarah’s husband attempted to drown their son, cut his eye, dislocated his arm, dropped him on his head, burnt him by putting him on very hot tarpaulin that had been in the sun all day, and left him in his dirty nappy until his skin blistered. The cat was systematically starved and veterinary care was blocked. Sarah eventually had to kill the maltreated cat to stop its suffering.

Belinda spoke of witnessing her parents fighting when she was a child. Even though her parents may not have intended to hurt her through their fight - indeed, at least one, could have been fighting on behalf of the child - it is possible that witnesses to abuse may experience distress or the effects of trauma. When the motive is removed from the equation and the outcome is focussed on, situations that produce collateral damage such as this can be included as examples of psychoemotional abuse through a secondary source. It is also plausible that some people may intend to intimidate witnesses to their abusive behaviours against others, but it was not clear that this was the case here. The role of witnesses is a very important element in the process of psychoemotional abuse that will be discussed later in the thesis. The next section explores psychoemotional abuse from a different perspective – that of the abuser.

The Experience of Psychoemotionally Abusing Another Person

Compared to their reports of receiving psychoemotional abuse, the participants offered fewer examples of incidents where they had psychoemotionally abused others. This section details the catalogue of abusive incidents that were confessed by the participants and explores the motives behind their use. Incidents are categorised according to the patterns depicted in the previous section. No participants provided an example that would qualify under the category of psychoemotional restriction.

Psychoemotional Withdrawal

Four of the sample admitted to psychoemotionally withdrawing from others in an abusive manner. All of these incidents occurred while the participants were adults with people who were either their partners or family members. In the first of the incidents, Sam cited an example of when he was cold towards his family when he arrived home from work. He would storm around the house cleaning items up, which implied that he has been let down by the family's poor standards of tidiness and that they have left it up to him to do the cleaning on top of the long day of work he had just completed. He mentioned that without uttering a word,

...it's saying, 'Hey. The house is not tidy.' I'm not saying anything verbally. I'm just going through and doing things in a manner where she can pick up that I'm not happy.

Greg confessed that he offered everyone in the room a cup of tea, except for his father, with whom he was in the midst of an argument. He conceded during the interview that this was a petty behaviour that ultimately made him feel foolish. Nick said that he chose to stay in a pool rather than give a speech and support his girlfriend at her 30th birthday party. In the final example, Tony made a general statement that he “wasn’t emotionally supportive” during his relationship with his partner.

None of these men offered a detailed explanation for their behaviour. Of all the records in this dataset, psychoemotional withdrawal was only carried out by men.

Psychoemotional Oppression

Some men from the sample stated that they used strategies that have been subsequently categorised in this thesis as tactics of psychoemotional oppression. Most of the incidents below involved men psychoemotionally oppressing their partners, except for a situation where Alan lied to his family when he was a teenager and Sam played ‘mind games’ with his family and work rivals.

Bill described his attempts to dominate his previous relationship through the following passage:

I was controlling. I would have to have the last word...[the tension] would escalate and build up. I would not be rational or cooperative...I would not get my own way and think that I had not been heard... It

was frustration mainly...I didn't care about others. I was more concerned about myself.

Tony reiterated this self-centred focus when he declared that “While things were bad, I didn't want to give. I put up a barrier. You know this mask that you wear. You are always on guard and defensive.” The description of being “on guard” seems rather apt, as it is quite likely that others around Tony would have felt somewhat imprisoned by his edgy posturing.

Sam spoke very openly about playing ‘mind games’ with his wife and business rivals. He did not elaborate on the details of how this occurred at home, except for the example he provided in the section on psychoemotional withdrawal, when he applied pressure on the family to keep the house neat through attempting to make them feel ashamed. However, he provided much more detail about how he used methods of psychoemotional oppression in the workplace and stated that “mind games” were integral to the corporate culture that he was involved in. Indeed, he stated that forms of psychoemotional abuse were part of doing business:

My beliefs are corporate beliefs. You know, the company belief. I have a job to do and that's what I am doing. But, you know, we're playing games. When I'm presenting to him [a rival], or to his board or whatever, I'll make sure that I've thrown something in that's not blatant, but I'll throw it in there; where he knows that I'm having a dig at him. It's not blatantly obvious. And he'll do the same thing to me and my boss.

He described a couple of experiences where he had refused to let go of grudges he had against clients who had “burnt” him. In one case, Sam was still finding ways to punish a client who complained after Sam had given him some free Grand Prix tickets in 1986. The client was upset that the ticket was for the lead-up days and not the main race and called Sam a prick. Sam had never forgiven this client and has found subtle ways of keeping the pressure on him, such as excluding him from offers that he has provided for others. Sam rationalised this behaviour by elaborating on the importance in business of standing strongly against certain principles to protect your reputation:

I don't bullshit...Sometimes people tell me to just leave things and let them lie. But the way I have been brought up is that if someone burns you, you never forget them... Basically, if someone burns you, make them pay for it.

...Sometimes I might take it too far. This is probably not the best thing to say, but it might actually cost the company some volume, but it's about making a point. But it's important to be able to say “enough is enough.” ... it's sometimes better to lose a bit of volume, if you can protect your integrity in the marketplace and your strength and power. When I say strength and power, I mean their relationships in the marketplace, because if you have people walking all over you, then you are a soft cock. Basically your relationship or your rapport in the

marketplace is soon dwindled. I'm happy to lose a sale to protect my guys' credibility... It's short term pain for long term gain.

Tom was also hoping that short-term pain would bring him long-term gain, when he began lying to his partner to avoid arguments and keep the peace. Tom developed a pattern of going along with whatever his partner wanted, even when he did not agree with her. This pattern borders on a type of psychoemotional withdrawal, but has been categorised as psychoemotional oppression as the movement pattern was not one of disengagement, but instead, an act of fraudulent engagement. Tom explained his behaviour and its consequences below:

I wasn't representing the truth of what I thought or what the relationship really deserved. I was going along with things that in the end, or even in the shorter term, I knew that I wouldn't be able to go along with. Like moving states and moving jobs and things that I wasn't happy about, but I went along with it because I thought 'Oh well, this will be all over soon.' When it did come, because I hadn't really addressed that or dealt with it earlier, it became a much bigger issue and much more hurtful.

Alan recalled that he had hurt his family when he lied to them when he was a teenager. He used his extra boost of teenage hormones to justify his actions: “It was a case of me being a really brash and pig-headed little teenager... I think it was more about the testosterone... I had no intention to hurt anyone, but it came out without thinking.”

Psychoemotional Disintegration

Psychoemotional disintegration was the most common form of abuse that was discussed from the perpetrators' perspective. Members from each subgroup disclosed at least one incident where they had used this form of abuse on others. It occurred at home, at work, in public settings and at school against a broader range of targets than seen in other categories. Many of the stories were accompanied with insights into the thoughts, feelings and philosophical positions that underpinned the application of psychoemotional abuse.

Some of the men from the family violence subgroup understood their abuse as a strategy of winning or defending an argument. Eddie and Bill both stated that they had been abusive when they struggled to get their points across to their partners. As Eddie said: “It just flares up...You know exactly what you are trying to say, but you can't seem to get the words across. It just gets frustrating you know.” He spoke of using psychoemotionally disintegrating tactics to retaliate against the other's abuse: “It's like an eye for an eye... I feel hurt, so I want them to feel the same way, I suppose. While you give it to me, I'll give a bit back. The next day you sit down and think “Why the hell did I do that for?” However, later in the interview he admitted that he initiated most of the abuse in the relationship.

Bill mentioned that he “was never physically abusive, but verbally – I had a tongue...I'd name call [if I didn't get my way]”. He later conceded that his strategies of name calling were designed to hurt his partner: “I would question my partner's weight...it was her weak spot, certainly.” The comparison of his behaviour to

physical abuse seemed to be an attempt to reduce the impact of his behaviour in his story and present it in a brighter light. A client of one member of the professional focus group used similar strategies of minimisation, when she excused her psychoemotionally abusive behaviour with the comment, “Well, it’s better than how I was treated as a kid. I don’t bash them.” It was reported that she was later horrified when she realised that her behaviour towards her children was mimicking behaviour that she had been subjected to herself. Strategies of minimising perceptions of the impact of psychoemotional abuse will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Tony explained that the psychoemotional abuses he had perpetrated against his family and friends could be often traced back to the convergence of philosophical and emotional triggers. As he described below, his sense of being treated unfairly raised his anxiety.

When I have been abusive I find that my heart rate increases and all of my senses come into play. I start getting incredibly anxious. If I feel that someone has done the wrong thing by me I feel that I need to go straight to the source and make it known. And unfortunately, if I am upset, it has accelerated in the past to the point where I can be very loud, very abusive, I can swear and be very intimidating. I straight away feel as though I am not going to be heard. I feel like it is going to be a lost cause and a rational thought doesn’t even come into play. Even though I think there are a lot of rational thoughts up there, a lot of it is not real rational. It’s just a lot of thoughts stacked on top about ‘how dare they do that to me? Cop this!’ So I basically turn into a

quite intimidating person. In hindsight, I wish I had gone back to them and spoken like I am speaking to you now – off the cuff, this is how I feel. But I handled it in the complete opposite way, where I have looked like the idiot.

Ian also provided a detailed account of the inner workings of his mind during a time when he had yelled at his wife for taking the wrong direction in the car:

...as for feelings and what I am thinking, I just let it out, and bury myself deeper and deeper. I do know it and I can't stop myself...I just have a quick thought, thinking 'I'm losing it' and then [claps hands once] it's gone. No 'what have I learnt from the course?', time out or anything like that, I just go back to my old self...I get excited very quick. I'm very emotional.

Ian thought that at least some of his use of psychoemotional abusive behaviour stemmed from a need to protect himself: “I think, well I have been hurt by these people in the past. This is a defensive mechanism...It's a way of getting in first. I don't know any better and I'm used to doing it.”

Some of the women who suffered prolonged periods of psychoemotional abuse also mentioned using methods of psychoemotional disintegration as a means of defence. Sarah remembered times when she was abusive in an attempt to match, counter and defend her ex-husband's aggression. Helen said that she scorned her son a couple of times for acting like his abusive father, after he had upset her. Comments

such as these seem to be designed as much to warn her son of the consequential path that is behaviour may be leading him, as it is about defending Helen from behaviour that has hurt her.

Joanne crafted a more unique strategy. She said that she developed a defensive habit of swearing at people to stun them and win arguments: “I have found that if you really swear abusively at someone and personally, then they become flabbergasted and don’t have a comeback, and that wins the argument.”

The psychoemotional abuse from other participants in this study appeared to be born from their sensitivity towards people who showed initial signs of abusing them. For example, June recalled that she “was very aggressive to another woman who I thought was trying to control me, but she was just being assertive with me... Instead of being assertive, I was shooting anger in her direction every now and then, and that was hurting her very badly and I could see that she was being hurt.” In another example, Belinda gave her work supervisor a sarcastic remark and a dirty look after she felt that she had been spoken to like a child. The argument that followed saw her supervisor tell Belinda that she was scared of her and Belinda apologise, explaining that she will not “play games” as she has experienced enough of that treatment from her ex-husband.

Sam conceded that he had “lost control” at home and consequently spent a lot of effort repairing his family relationships. Throughout his interview he reiterated that he staunchly applied principles of honour, toughness and integrity in every arena

of his life. However, his application led to some regrettable events, including this remarkably symbolic incident on the roads, a few years ago:

There were a heap of guys in a mini bus. There were three lanes going into one leaving the car park, and I thought “Okay. It’s my turn to go.” And the bloke driving the bus was being egged on by his pissed mates and he kept going. And I thought well this is not my car and I kept going and ran into him. It was a stupid thing to do. They could have all jumped out of the bus and punched the shit out of me, but it was my turn. I was pissed off because it dented the car, but it was just the principle that it was my turn.

Mike implied that his school’s highly competitive culture has also contributed to a large degree of psychoemotional abuse. Indeed, he suggested that even those who did not want to be part of it, were corralled into compliance as a means of self-protection:

... when you are at school you just end up following the crowd. If you’re not the one being attacked, you often will just end up supporting the abuse, because if you don’t you end up copping it too. It’s like if you don’t join in, then you’re one of them... I never actually hit anyone. But if someone made a joke and others laughed you would join in and add to it.

Bill spoke of psychoemotional disintegration being part of the culture at his workplace too, but had a different perspective on the motive behind it: “We give each other a bit of flak throughout the day, as entertainment.” It is possible that the nature of the cultures that Mike and Bill described were very similar, though the motives that Mike and Bill assigned to them were different due to their personal approach or their respective status in the cultures’ hierarchy. It is also worth noting that Bill, who was more comfortable in a climate where the psychoemotional abuse flowed constantly throughout the day, ended up in a family violence program; whereas Mike, who was clearly uncomfortable in this environment, did not. While the sample is too small to draw strong conclusions from, this speculation may lead to another line of research enquiry.

Another interesting new line of enquiry is the proposition that one of the motives behind psychoemotional abuse is the need to test somebody else’s character. This issue was raised during Sarah’s interview, when she discussed an experience of being sexually abused by her brother after he was told by their cousins that he was not a “real man” until he had sex with his sister. Sarah described below how and why she joined in the taunting:

... I don’t understand why, but I baited him, goaded him, teased him and just absolutely whipped him with words until he abused me. And that made me feel powerful and I could see that he didn’t like it. And I liked that he didn’t like it because I wanted him to feel the shame of what he was doing.

I wanted to test him... people do a lot of things on the name of testing that are right on the edge of cruelty...to test their loyalty, because they want to believe that they can't [trust them] until they test you out...You'd give them a push and you'd wait to see if they'd come back from this.

Sarah later explained that her actions also amounted to a means of punishing herself – a self that she despised at the time. She wanted to test whether her brother would live up to her standards: “when they fail you can say that you were justified in not believing them.”

Using a similar motive, Joanne admitted to showing her “worst side” to people she had just met to test their character: “...if they still want to associate with me, then I think they are worthy of my friendship, because they have accepted the worst possible side of me. And if they judge me on anything, then I won't like them either. So it clears things up straight away... it's probably also so I don't get hurt.”

Some of the other women in the sample stated that they hurt others' feelings as they attempted to help or do favours for them. For example, Allison said that she would “correct” her first husband in public and Belinda told her son that he needed a wash because he “was a bit smelly”. Naomi inadvertently hurt the feelings of her sister by inviting her to become part of Naomi's bridal party. As she extended the invitation, Naomi mentioned that their deceased mother would have loved her sister to be involved. Naomi's sister believed that Naomi had only offered the invitation because their mother had insisted on that arrangement; not because Naomi genuinely

wanted her sister to be involved, took offence and declined the offer. This resulted in Naomi feeling aggrieved that her sister could deliver such an accusation against her.

Other women told of experiences where they had put others down during arguments. For example, Amanda recalled saying “some really nasty things that I probably shouldn’t have said” to a close friend, while they were on holiday in Thailand. She explained that the comments represented an angry eruption of months of her ruminations on a “long string of issues”. The relationship took six months to repair after the incident. Lisa stated that she has joked “with or about people...poke fun or shit-stir someone” while she has been in a “really revved up mood” and “might overstep the mark a bit”. She added that “Most people are used to me doing that and they don’t get too stressed by it, but sometimes I do think about things afterwards and I do go and apologize to people.” She also referred to a time when her teasing resulted in heavier consequences for her younger sister. During her adolescence, Lisa constantly taunted her sister with the nickname “big nose”, claiming that she would verbally strike her sister “because it made me feel good to feel that I was better than her”. However, a few years ago these feelings turned to shame when Lisa discovered that her sister had surgery to reduce the size of her nose: “I still feel a bit sad about that. I haven’t talked to her about it, but I often see her and think ‘Oh, I did it. I was a horrible older sister to you when I was a teenager’...I cried when she told me that. I was so upset that she had gone and had surgery because I had been such a bitch to her.” Lisa reconciled this situation by believing that she was immature at the time and “probably a product of my environment and I probably didn’t have much control over what I was doing and now I do have control and I am a better person.”

Incidents of psychoemotional disintegration were not only the most commonly reported form of psychoemotional abuse from the abuser’s perspective; they also presented the largest ranges of motives. The psychoemotional abuse that was reported did not necessarily occur during conflicts, and was at times intended to be an act of love, caring, or humour. Tactics were also explained as methods of winning arguments, defending positions, counter-attacking, seeking justice, doing business, self-protection, testing others, helping others, having fun, teasing that “went too far” or “overstepped the mark” and responding to socio-cultural conditioning.

This style of psychoemotional abuse may have been confessed most often as the incidents’ overt and vivid nature may have made them easier to recall than more subtle forms of abuse. They could be also more easily excused as a “one-of-a-kind incident” that was “out-of-character” or defensible given the circumstances before them, which enables the participant to remove the prospect that they identify as an “abusive person”. Some of the other patterns of psychoemotional abuse imply a longer, more calculating strategy of hurting others.

Sally thought that the motives and power dynamics behind psychoemotionally abusive acts were crucial aspects of determining whether the acts should be excused or punished. She held the strong view that a distinction needed to be made between acts that hurt other people’s feelings that were motivated by love compared to those motivated by the acquisition of power: “I don’t find that that’s a problem, when it’s done with a balance of power. When it is done to actually hurt that person and to claim that power, is when it’s a problem.”

Psychoemotional Abuse via A Secondary Source

The only example of psychoemotional abuse through a secondary source occurred when Tom, from the general population, spoke of deceiving his girlfriend when he had an affair with a previous partner who he was “not over yet”. While Tom’s intent did not appear to be to harm his current partner, the effect of his deception would have.

Even though the movement patterns of psychoemotional abuse were separated to examine their details, they were often used in concert to intensify the impact on their target. These combinations are explored in the next section.

How these strategies of psychoemotional abuse worked together

Even though the forms of psychoemotional abuse have been separated into five movement patterns in the previous sections, the stories in the interviews highlighted that they were often applied in combinations with each other. For example, psychoemotional withdrawal can be an important strategy for psychoemotional oppressors, as it enables them to apply pressure to another person through a low profile, often silent, manner. This method can also be applied selectively, where the withdrawer speaks in front of others in public, then resorts to the silent treatment at home. Psychoemotional restrictors can also withdraw from public appearances, pressuring their targets to withdraw with them or risk appearing disloyal.

There is also a strong link between psychoemotional withdrawal and psychoemotional disintegration as the withdrawal often occurs after an episode of conflict as a method of protest. The withdrawal is often presented as a strong symbol of dissatisfaction with the outcome of the conflict and can be applied in an attempt to coerce their opponent to back down. Psychoemotional withdrawers can also isolate themselves or their targets from secondary parties; or apply pressure to secondary parties to also withdraw from the target.

The tactics of psychoemotional restriction and disintegration can also be used subtly and form part of a longer-term campaign of psychoemotional oppression. For example, the oppression of the targets can be prolonged by restricted opportunities to spend time with others and gain their professional or personal support. This effectively increases the oppressor's control and reduces the likelihood that the pressure they have applied onto the target will be relieved. Tactics of psychological disintegration can also be applied by psychoemotional oppressors to reinforce their dominant position over their target and chip away at the target's confidence.

The psychological oppressor can also use secondary sources to add pressure onto the target. Secondary sources can also be persuaded to dismiss or devalue the target's complaints and protect the abuser from detection or retribution. Tactics of psychoemotional disintegration, such as backstabbing, are often used with secondary sources and psychoemotional restrictors can reduce the contact their target's have by attempting to make friends, family and guests feel uncomfortable or unwelcome at the target's home, or at other places that the target frequents. Tactics that are

psychoemotionally disintegrative can also serve to assist the psychoemotional restrictor dominate and psychoemotionally contain their target.

Table 10 lists the patterns, a popular example or two from each pattern and some of the potential motives that emerged from the interviews, the literature review and my 15 years of work with men who have abused family members. The information in is table can be drawn upon to demonstrate how different forms of abuse can be used to serve the motives of others.

Table 10. Potential Motives for Different Patterns of Psychoemotional Abuse

| Psychoemotional Abuse Pattern | Popular Example | Possible Motive |
|-------------------------------|------------------|---|
| Withdrawal | Silent treatment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Punishment • Psychoemotional Abandonment • Retreat from conflict • Protest • Application of strong pressure without physical or verbal abuse • Attempt to win an argument when believe the opponent has superior verbal skills • Signal dissatisfaction to another • Create space to calm down or think of next tactic |

Table 10. Potential Motives for Different Patterns of Psychoemotional Abuse (cont.)

| Psychoemotional Abuse Pattern | Popular Example | Possible Motive |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Oppression | Mind games | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control • Fear/insecurity • Entertainment at another’s expense (e.g., joy or satisfaction from tricking others) • Dominate • Keep a low or subtle profile • Stay undetected or invisible |
| Restriction | Hyper-surveillance (frequent checking-up) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restrain other(s) • Control • Dominate • Jealousy • Insecure attachment • Possessiveness • Compulsive nurturance |

Table 10. Potential Motives for Different Patterns of Psychoemotional Abuse (cont.)

| Psychoemotional Abuse Pattern | Popular Example | Possible Motive |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| | | • |
| Disintegration | Put-downs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hurt or humiliate others • Feel better by beating others • Win or defend an argument, position or conflict • Self-protection/counter-attack • Humour • Teasing • Test someone’s character |
| Secondary | Back-stabbing; poisoning others’ minds | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use others to apply pressure upon the target • Use to intimidate people other than the direct targets • Use others to disguise, rationalise, support or excuse the abuse • Use to gain support |

The next chapter will elaborate on the WORDS model that has been developed from these findings. The acronym WORDS represents the first letters of the five patterns of psychoemotional abuse discussed above – withdrawal, oppression, restriction, disintegration and secondary abuse. It can be remembered by the old

phrase that attempted to help children establish a psychological fortress against the impact of psychoemotional abuse: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” The information gathered through this research demonstrates that in spite of the noble intent of this aphorism, WORDS can and do hurt people.

How Psychoemotional Abuse Related to Other Types of Abusive Behaviour

Several accounts of physical and sexual abuse were recorded during the interviews – each incident intertwined with some form of psychoemotional abuse. For example, two women from the family violence subgroup disclosed incidents of sexual abuse – one mentioned being sexually abused by her brother as a child and the other was raped multiple times by her ex-husband. Each of these women gave examples of how methods of psychoemotional abuse surrounded these incidents, either as ways of heightening the victim’s fear, suffering or dismissing their objections to the assaults.

Representatives from across the subgroups spoke of an occasion where a physical assault they were involved with was accompanied with a form of psychoemotional abuse. Some of the men in the sample described situations where a barrage of psychoemotional abuse escalated conflicts they were in to a point of physical assault. Sarah said that her ex-husband attempted to fill her with fear by using tactics that were executed both physically and psychoemotionally. For example, he made a terrifying psychoemotional statement when he slammed her fingers in drawers, twisted her arms and bent her over furniture and grabbed her neck while threatening to “snap her in half like a leaf”. She also recalled him deliberately bumping her into doorways while telling her “there was room for the two of us to get

through”, which implied that the collision was due to her clumsiness. The physical abuse seemed to be part of a deliberate campaign to destroy her confidence, control and manipulate her. Sarah concluded that, “the physical abuse was rather mild. It was the controlling behaviour that was the worst. It was really carefully orchestrated.”

Other women, who did not necessarily see themselves as victims of such a carefully orchestrated campaign, reached similar conclusions when reflecting on the difficulty they had of dealing with psychoemotional abuse compared to the relative clarity of physical abuse. One mentioned that the psychological abuse was harder to deal with than physical abuse as it was more gradual, more constant and continued over a longer period of time. Some of the quotes that illustrate others’ experiences follow:

He did hit me, probably 6 or 8 or 10 times or so. But people cannot understand it when you say this, but that was not actually that bad. I suppose because it was not that extreme. I did suffer bruises and things, but the reason that it was not all that bad was because it was easier to deal with. It was more obvious. The psychological abuse was more gradual and much, much more harder to deal with. It went over a longer period of time. It was more constant. And it was the thin end of the wedge. The first couple of things you get irritated by but you don’t take a stand on. (Allison)

Although, if he belted me that would be different, because I would think “Hang on, I’ve just been hit.” But this other stuff was less

obvious. There was nothing visible on the surface. Nothing you could touch or physically feel. An emotional black eye – nobody sees it. You look in the mirror and you can’t see it either.

(Helen)

I used to think, ‘I wished that he’d hit me.’ Because then if someone saw a broken arm or a bruise, they’d believe me. My kids had some bruises. They were not black and blue, but they were bruised from him doing things. But I feel that physical is a lot easier. It sounds terrible, but it’s more recognizable. When the damage is psychological, they don’t see it as much...I wished that he’d hit me.

A couple of times he had his hand like this [drawn back ready to hit], and I said to him ‘Come on. You know you want to hit me. Hit me.’ I mean I know it was urging him on to do it, but I wanted him to do it. Then I would have been able to say to people, ‘See! This is how I have been living.’ For god’s sake, someone sit up and listen.

(Sally)

These comments highlight the powerful role that psychoemotional abuse plays in not only supporting other forms of abuse, but also in keeping people trapped in unhappy relationships. The next section explores more details about the impact that psychoemotional abuse exerted on the participants of this research.

The Impact of Psychoemotional Abuse

The participants listed an extensive range of psychological, emotional, physical and social impacts that they reported had resulted from their exposure to psychoemotional abuse. Many of these impacts have also been reported in other studies. There was a general trend through the data of this study that showed that the people who experienced most psychoemotional abuse also exhibited the most severe impacts; although the sample was too small to conclude that it would be likely that there would always be a graded association between the frequency and severity of the abuse and the frequency and severity of the consequences.

All of the women from the family violence group reported psychoemotional impacts such as shattered self-confidence and low self-esteem as a direct consequence of the psychoemotional abuse they received from intimate partners. Other women reported developing serious mental health issues, such as prolonged bouts of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Indeed, one woman experienced a traumatic flashback during the interview as she recalled some of the details of the abuse she suffered. It took her a minute to regain her composure from the shock of the visual and emotional sensations that were invoked by the memories.

Many said that they were conditioned to become chronically anxious through the relationship, even during the good times, as they were anticipating that another episode of abuse could happen soon. Some women commented on the experience of chronically being on edge as they carefully monitored their behaviour, as the slightest slip could have been used by their partner to trigger and justify psychoemotional

abuse against them. One woman described this experience as “walking around on eggshells”; while another noted that “It means that you spend a lot of time tip-toeing around, which is quite exhausting.”

Sarah’s fear was even more intense. She stated that she was in chronic fear that her children would be harmed and possibly killed. At one stage, Sarah was afraid to go to sleep in case her husband harmed their children during the night and would wait until he fell asleep before she went to bed, which led to a sleeping disorder.

Sarah also developed anorexia nervosa during her marriage, which she subsequently believed was a means for her to maintain some sense of personal control in a situation where her husband dominated the relationship. Naomi offered a similar explanation for her eating disorder. She developed anorexia nervosa during her teenage years, which she attributed to the psychoemotional treatment from her father. Naomi suggested that her illness was a method of crying out to her father to stop his abuse: “I guess my coping mechanism was getting sick with anorexia, as punishment to him... Maybe I [wanted him to] feel bad and maybe that would be a wake up call to him to stop it.” Her psychologist at the time insisted that she leave home to break the dynamic between Naomi and her father. One of Sally’s children also developed an eating disorder that Sally attributed to the psychoemotional abuse that her husband directed towards the members of the family.

Joanne stated that psychoemotional abuse triggered many of her 13 suicide attempts. Others such as June recalled that the psychoemotional abuse led to physical

illnesses that kept her away from work; and Tony stated that the psychoemotional abuse that he committed led to deterioration in both his and his wife’s health.

Some participants mentioned that the enjoyable parts of the relationship made it either difficult to detect that they were being abused or easy to excuse the abuse as atypical behaviour. Allison expressed this experience as being on an emotional roller-coaster where she was uplifted with hope and promise for several weeks, but ultimately chronically let down. Sarah framed this sense of being gradually unsettled by the psychoemotional ploys of her ex-husband before she found herself in a very confused position as the “give and take in the relationship eventually push[ing] one off centre until they are way off centre.”

Most of the women from the family violence group recalled that central components of their self-identity shifted as a result of the psychoemotional abuse. Those who had suffered long-term deception and many episodes of psychoemotional oppression began to seriously doubt their intuition and judgement. Some lost confidence in their ability to be assertive and subsequently agreed with what others wanted, to avoid conflict and “keep the peace”. A few mentioned the surreal experience of becoming confused about what was real and what was not. Some reported becoming increasingly dependent on other people’s opinions as the confidence in their own opinions diminished. This left those who were isolated from others increasingly dependent upon their partners’ view of life. In every case where this happened in this study, it was their partner who was their main source of abuse.

Sally mentioned that this situation led her to doubt her ability to survive without her husband and re-partner if she left him. She stated that a lack of concrete

evidence for the abuse and no support from professionals reinforced her sense of self blame. Sarah became convinced that everything that went wrong in the household was her fault: “even when I knew I wasn’t wrong, I felt as though I was wrong.” After 14 years of deception, when June’s ex-husband denied he was in a relationship with another woman, June doubted herself even when she had hard evidence of her husband’s secret relationship on their answering machine tape. She had to listen to it more than twice to feel convinced. She explained that “...it was like a bomb had gone off in my head, because I thought ‘God. I’m wrong again. What is going on here? Am I going crazy?’ It took me about 10 minutes or so... And then I remembered the tape. I listened to it 3 times and then I calmed down.” She described the infliction of fourteen years of psychoemotional abuse as “virtually like killing the person” as the person becomes so damaged and degraded that they lose a sense of who they are and what they stand for.

Sarah provided the following description of this phenomenon:

... shifting the yardstick was a mental mindfuck. To distort your own perception of who you are and what skills you have, so that you cannot see yourself clearly and you end up feeling like everything you do is a childish attempt and that you are still a little girl under the patronage of a master...If he’d clamp on one area, I was kind of like a bowl of jelly, I’d go and do something else and he’d try to get me there. I was searching for any solid ground and searching for anything that could pin a firm belief of myself on, as an anchor against that reshaping of who I was. It was like I was a spirit, it was my capacity, my potential,

my power to be able to change, to decide, to create, and evolve my own life was very seriously spiritually undermined.

Some women reported that they turned into people who they did not respect. A couple of women became angry at themselves for not doing enough to escape the abuse earlier, although they now realise that they did the best they could at the time. Others mentioned that they became jealous, insecure and lowered their moral standards. Sarah said she presented as bright, happy, light and plastic to avoid talking to anyone in any depth. She wanted to mask her pain and low self-esteem from the world. Allison commented that her self-confidence has been lowered for 14 years after the relationship ended, implying that the events have changed her sense of self in a way that she has not yet recovered from. In particular, she stated that she still has trouble socialising with other people. June also insinuated that she carried long-term effects from the abuse when she made the following comment:

I suppose the other thing is there is still a... predominantly the fear of attack is from men. I think that influences relationships as well, in terms of just walking the street. You see a big 18 year old and feel scared, which is just ridiculous.

In June's situation, this confusion hampered her ability to make decisions about her entitlements during their divorce settlement. Her husband provided her with no information on the assets that they jointly owned, so she had no solid ground to build legal arguments against him. At the time she wanted to end the relationship

as quickly as possible and start a new chapter in her life, so she settled at a disadvantageous financial position. She now regrets that these entitlements will never be recovered. Allison said she is also still tormented with headaches when she thinks about being exploited during her property settlement after her marriage dissolved.

The respondents also reported a wide range of shorter term emotional responses to their abuse. Some of the women mentioned that treatment they received left them frequently upset, insecure and regretful of the time and child bearing opportunities they lost while they were in the ‘prime years’ of their lives. In contrast, the men in the sample expressed that as a result of receiving psychoemotional abuse they felt ‘burnt’, manipulated, awkward, uncomfortable, frustrated that they had not been heard, angry, disgusted, nervous, overwhelmed by thoughts, devastated by shattered dreams, blocked out of effective communication, trapped, upset and vengeful.

Some people, such as Sally, Amanda and Mike, mentioned that other people’s refusal to address the psychoemotional abuse was particularly painful. In Mike’s case, a teacher at his school who witnessed him receiving abuse did not intervene. He felt unprotected and vulnerable, knowing that he was left to his own devices to deal with the abuse and trapped by the perception that the situation would intensify if he retaliated. Amanda encountered a similar experience at work after being bullied by her manager. When she attempted to address the issue, she was silenced by both senior management and her colleagues and quickly realised that her treatment would deteriorate if she pursued her complaint.

Sally described her experience as being dealt a “double layer of pain”: the first layer was the abuse itself; the second layer was the hurt that was attributed to her friends, family and professionals not believing her and dismissing her cries for help. She stated that the second layer may have hurt more than the first, as it increased her isolation and destroyed her confidence in her friends’ judgement.

Many people also stated that the psychoemotional abuse affected other people around them. Sally mentioned that her husband’s abuse led to two of their children becoming suicidal. The intense emotions she experienced through that ordeal, such as fear, distress, desperation and a sense of helplessness added to the impact of her husband’s abuse on her. Many years later, her son still interrogated Sally with the withering question, “Mum, why didn’t you do anything?” She has decided not to take these barbs personally as she knows that she did as much as she could at the time, and reconciled that such comments are a good sign that he is at least talking about that horrible period of his life now.

Belinda also claimed that her children were terrified of their abusive father and Naomi said that all of her siblings left home at a young age due to their father’s abusive behaviour. Sam, from the family violence subgroup, regretted that his 9 year old son was demonstrating some of the aggressive characteristics he recognised in himself.

Other men from the family violence subgroup stated that they were embarrassed about the way they looked in front of others and found they ended up in many unnecessary arguments and lost friends. Bill lamented that when he was at his

worst, he did not care about anybody other than himself, which had a devastating effect on his social network.

Four women from the family violence subgroup reported losing friends as well. Helen summarised the sentiment of this impact through the following comment: “[I] could not let good people get close to me, as if they did, my husband would attempt to block my relationship with them.” Instead, she reported becoming absorbed into the world of his extended family, who were very cold towards her and ultimately ostracised her.

Sally said that her family thought that her husband was completely devoted to her, indeed that he “idolised her”; which undermined the authority of her cries for help and diminished her capacity to gain support. She remembered her mother blaming her for receiving the abuse and blocking any potential for the family’s assistance with the unsympathetic comments.

The impacts of psychoemotional abuse were also reported to have affected some participants’ employment prospects. Sarah’s abuse was so severe that she needed time off work, while June’s work suffered as a result of the abuse she received at home. Amanda had to leave her job as a result of the psychoemotional abuse, isolation and humiliation she received from her manager and her organisation’s reluctance to address the issue. She found that her next workplace was very supportive, which reassured her that she was not the problem.

The professional group echoed much of what was disclosed in detail by the other participants. They reported that their clients who had been psychoemotional abused developed a wide range of mental illnesses including depression, anxiety, suicide attempts and self-mutilation. Others exhibited other behavioural problems such as drug and alcohol addictions and other addictive behaviours such as gambling and compulsive shopping; self-hate and a chronic fear of rejection, which leads to difficulties maintaining long-term intimate relationships. One professional recounted that some of her clients have become so anxious about being rejected that they reject their partner when the relationship is going well, to avoid the prospect that they will be ultimately rejected instead. They stated that this pattern was particularly evident in clients who had a long history of being rejected, chronically criticised and set up to fail by their parents' high expectations. Some of these clients reported that they had never felt validated – their experience has been denied even when they were legitimately ill.

The professionals also reflected their insights on the complexity of the “victim-abuser” identity that many of their clients were confronted by. One professional commented that some of her clients who had been psychoemotionally abusive were heavily “invested in seeing themselves as a victim”, which leads to them abdicating responsibility for any personal reform, as they always blamed other people for their actions. Another member of this group added that it was often the clients who had experienced high levels of abuse – sexually and physically, as well as psychoemotionally – who were horrified when they realised that actions they thought were protective, were also abusive, as it raised the prospect that they were no better than the people who had abused them. The professionals suggested that people who

live within an environment where psychoemotional abuse was the norm were at high risk of being abusive as well, as this form of interaction was the standard currency of influence in this culture.

Research Aim 2: To explore the different contexts of psychoemotional abuse

The literature on psychoemotional abuse has traditionally focussed on family violence in people’s homes; though it has branched out into other locales in recent years. This study found that the psychoemotional abuse disclosed during these interviews occurred in many public and private locations; while the participants occupied many different roles and were at many different stages of life.

It is important to note that the events presented below only represent a sample of the participants’ complete catalogue of encounters with psychoemotional abuse. It is very likely that many more encounters of psychoemotional abuse were experienced by the participants during their lives, but were not presented during the interviews. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that this data accounts for the participants’ full range of experiences. This section studies the sites where the abusive incidents took place and does not attempt to compare the intensity or impact of each incident. Moreover, the distribution of events and roles in the following sections do not claim to represent the whole population, given the small number of people sampled in this thesis.

Where Did the Psychoemotional Abuse Take Place?

The participants expressed incidents of psychoemotional abuse committed both against them and by them in the following locations:

- (a) At their home when they were a child

- (b) At their home when they were an adult
- (c) At their workplace
- (d) At their school
- (e) In general public spaces

The range of roles and relationships the participants were in during the incidents are displayed in Table 11 below. In addition to this range, the professionals mentioned that their clients had reported psychoemotional abuse at work and school, as well as at home; and that some clients who were heavily abused at home may be more vulnerable in other settings.

Under each locale in Table 11, the number of incidents reported as a victim and as a perpetrator has been tallied. The figures do not attempt to provide a statistical analysis of the data, as the numbers are too small to permit reliable generalisation. They are presented to describe the data's shape, proportions and patterns.

Table 11. Locations of Abuse and Roles Involved

| Role | Home | | Work | | School | | Public Space | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| | Abused by | Abuser of | Abused by | Abuser of | Abused by | Abuser of | Abused by | Abuser of |
| Child | 0 | 3 | | | | | | |
| Sibling | 3 | 3 | | | | | | |
| Current spouse or partner | 4 | 6 | | | | | | |
| Former Spouse or partner | 9 | 4 | | | | | | |
| Parent | 8 | 2 | | | | | | |
| Cousin | 0 | 1 | | | | | | |
| Union | | | 1 | 0 | | | | |
| Work colleague | | | 2 | 2 | | | | |
| Customer | | | 1 | 1 | | | | |
| Employer | | | 1 | 1 | | | | |
| Work competitor | | | 1 | 1 | | | | |
| Student | | | | | 3 | 1 | | |
| Friend | | | | | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Not specific | | | | | | | 1 | 4 |
| Total | 24 | 19 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 8 |

In general, the participants reported receiving psychoemotional abuse more often than they reported perpetrating it. The only location where participants disclosed perpetrating abuse more than receiving it was in public against friends or non-specific targets.

More than 40, or almost two out of every three, psychoemotionally abusive events reported during the interviews occurred in the place where the participant was living at the time. Another 11 events occurred in workplaces, 10 in public spaces and 5 in schools.

The women from the family violence support groups reported that they were at home during nine of the ten incidents when the psychoemotional abuse occurred. The other occasion happened at school. The locations where they abused others were more mixed: five at home; three in public settings and two at work.

The women from the general population showed similar trends, as they were at home during seven of the ten examples they provided of being on the receiving end of psychoemotional abuse. One incident occurred at school, one in public and another at work. They were also home during three of the times when they abused others and in public spaces the other three times.

The male groups exhibited a slightly broader spread of locations. While the men from the family violence groups disclosed committing abuse at home in six of their nine incidents; they also stated that they received psychoemotional abuse at home while they were home in five of their ten reports. These men spoke about

receiving abuse at work three times, at school once and in public once; and told two stories about abusing others in public and at work.

In contrast, the men from the general population had a slightly higher ratio of abusive incidents at home: five out of the seven they committed and three out of the six they received. They were subjected to abuse twice at work and once in public and abused others once at work and once at school.

What roles were the participants in during the psychoemotional abuse?

The participants described 13 different roles during the psychoemotionally abusive encounters. The full list is provided in the first column of Table 11 above, although the former and current spouses were regarded as one category of spouse in this analysis. The other descriptors related to the status or timing of the relationship, not the role as such. Participants occupied a spread of twelve roles while they abused other people, which included all of those listed in Table 11 except for the role of union representative.

When talking from the perspective of a receiver of psychoemotional abuse, the participants identified that people abused them across eleven roles. They were not abused by cousins or by children while the participants were adults. They were also only involved in one incident of being abused by people in a non-specific role, which was when Naomi was abused for a stranger for parking in a disabled parking space. She explained that she requires the disabled parking permit because one of her children has a disability, and she needs to transfer him easily in and out of buildings.

People have abused Naomi in the street because she does not have a disability herself, and do not bother to find out the details of her circumstance. Every other encounter where they received abuse included a specific person in a specific role. The participants took on ten of the roles in stories from both victims’ and perpetrators’ perspectives.

Spouses or partners were the most common targets and proponents of psychoemotional abuse mentioned during the interviews, which is understandable given that half the participants emerged from counselling groups where dealing with experiences of family violence was the primary aim. Those who had experienced family violence counselling identified incidents involving spouses and partners in slightly more than one third of their examples, which was a very similar proportion to people interviewed from the general population.

A clearer divide emerged when the data was viewed from a gendered perspective. Women reported psychoemotional abuse from a spouse or partner in 8 of the 20 incidents they recalled (40%) compared to 5 out of 16 incidents reported by men (31%). Conversely, men reported psychoemotionally abusing a spouse in 8 of their 17 incidents (47%) compared to only 2 of the women’s 16 encounters (12.5%).

Every woman from the family violence sample was psychoemotionally abused by their ex-partner. In addition, they also recounted three examples when they were abused by one or both of their parents, one example of psychoemotional abuse from a sibling (that also involved sexual abuse) and an example of abuse from another student when they were at school. They provided the largest range of targets of

abuse, speaking twice of being abusive towards their children and friends; and gave one example each of abusing a cousin, work colleague, employer, ex-partner and a non-specific target.

Women who completed a family violence program were also most likely to be abused at home, predominantly by their ex-partner, but also by their fathers and brothers. None spoke of psychoemotionally abusive incidents at work or by members of the general public; although one spoke of abuse they received at school. It is possible that they were involved in incidents in other venues but recalled the experiences with their ex-partners during these interviews, as they were the most powerful within recent memory and may have had the most profound influence on their lives. The range of patterns and intensity of these incidents at home appeared to be the most severe compared to other groups, in terms of the volume, the effect and the amount of effort required to move to a safer place.

One woman from the family violence group reported being abused by five different people, although the others primarily told of their experience with their ex-partner. Three of the women from the general population described two or more different perpetrators, as did two of the men from the family violence group. Only one of the men from the general population described being abused by more than one person – his father and work colleagues.

Compared to other women from the family violence group, the women from the general population sample reported a similar volume of psychoemotionally abusive incidents, though they were abused by a broader spread of people and they

abused a narrower spread of people. Their siblings featured twice as targets and twice as aggressors. They were also psychoemotionally attacked twice by parents and ex-partners and once each by a spouse, employer fellow student and a stranger. They mentioned abusing an ex-partner once, a friend once and non-specific target twice. The scale and intensity of the abuse was generally not as severe as the stories told by women who graduated from family violence courses; although patterns in two of the women's stories were very similar to the experiences of those who completed family violence counselling. Some women from the general population sought therapy for the effects of these interactions, but framed the experiences differently (e.g., relationship or marriage guidance counselling).

The roles noted in the men's stories were almost perfectly weighted between abuser and abused. As perpetrators of abuse, the five roles targeted by the men from the family violence group included their spouse five times, and their children, customers, friends and non-specific target once each. The men from the general population identified abusing their ex-partners and parents twice each and spouses, work colleagues and fellow students once each. The members of the former subgroup spoke of being abused by people occupying six different roles. In three cases they received abuse from their spouse, in two cases each it was from their friends or parents and other roles mentioned once included the work roles of colleague, customer and competitor. The men from the general population recalled receiving psychoemotional abuse from ex-partners twice, and parents, union representatives, student and work peers once each.

Men were also more likely to report work and school peers or friends as sources of abuse than the women. It is unclear whether the men in this sample spent more time at work than the women in the sample, or that these experiences may feature more prominently for them, as they did not report receiving as much psychoemotional abuse at home. Two of the three men who cited their wives as sources of psychoemotional abuse, added that the abuse they received was not as bad as the abuse they perpetrated towards the same person. As one man (Ian) stated, “On a scale of 1 to 10, I’m ten and [my wife] is one.”

Slightly less than one-third of the incidents participants recalled occurred when they were either a child or a student, even though some of these incidents occurred at least two decades ago. Reports of being psychoemotionally abused as a child were three times more common as reports of being abusive as a child. Of those who the participants did abuse while they were children, four out of five were people of relatively equal status, such as siblings, cousins or school peers. Only one reported psychoemotionally abusing their parent. However, when disclosing abuse that they received as a child, eight of the fifteen incidents involved abuse from a parent. The remainder of the abuse was instigated by school peers or siblings.

The most common role, other than spouse or partner, mentioned through the examples was that of the parents. They were identified eight times as abuser of the participant and twice as the victim of the participants’ abuse. Fathers were consistently cited as a psychoemotional abuser across all category groups. Two women spoke about witnessing their fathers abuse their mothers. Only one person

explicitly stated they received abuse from their mother, although another talked of his parents collectively.

Siblings were mentioned six times each - three times each as the abuser and the target of abuse. One woman from the family violence group was raped by her brother. The rape was disclosed to and denied by her father, which served to inflame the impact of the assault on the victim.

Friends were also nominated six times in examples, but were more likely to receive abuse than perpetrate it (four times to two). Other roles mentioned four times included peers at work, peers at school and the category where no role was specified. Of these roles, the participants were most likely to be victimised at school, where they received abuse in three cases and perpetrated it in one. At work, they reported abusing their colleagues in two cases and being abused by them during the other two. They only mentioned being victimised once by non-specified people, but made general references four times when talking about their own abuse against others.

The respondents reported only four incidents out of the total of 36 where they received abuse from somebody they would not regard as close to them. One involved abuse from a customer, another involved a work competitor, a third abuse from a union and the fourth involved a comment by Naomi about members of the public abusing her for parking in a disabled car park. Other than these cases, the vast majority of incidents typically involved psychoemotional abuse from family members, friends, school or work colleagues - the people with whom most time is shared and most effort is spent jostling with for power, status or resources.

The participants also collectively confessed to abusing people they knew well in twenty-nine of the 33 incidents disclosed. The other four incidents involved general comments of treating people from the general public poorly.

Power Dynamics

The data showed that the participants occupied many roles during abusive incidents and that the role did not necessarily determine whether they were psychoemotionally abusive or abused. Ten of the roles discussed featured in experiences from both perspectives.

The role in and of itself means little until it is put into the context of the interaction with the other parties involved in the incidents. Some of the roles carried historically powerful structural authority over others, such as the role of the parent over the child. Other roles mentioned during the interviews have less positional authority, such as the roles of friends, siblings and peers at work or school.

Arguably the most traditionally dominant role that contains an increased capacity to reward or punish the other parties is that of the parents. The participants reported eight incidents where they were psychoemotionally abused by their parents and an additional three occasions when, as parents themselves, they abused their children. In contrast, the participants psychoemotionally abused their parents twice in the stories, but both times the abuse occurred after the participants were adults themselves.

Discussions involving psychoemotionally abusive interactions with the other most traditionally powerful role of employer produced more mixed results. There was one report each of psychoemotional abuse from and to an employer, although a participant in the role of an employer mentioned that he was also subjected to abuse from a union delegate. This may suggest that the power dynamics may change when employees join together. Interestingly, teachers were not mentioned at all during the interviews, except when they were referred to as points of contact or witnesses during disputes with other students.

Given that the critics would quickly gather regardless of whether the husband-wife or male partner-female partner relationship was described as partnership among equals or as one where the male carries a traditionally dominant role, a method of avoiding this contention is to present the patterns as they appeared through the data. The women in the sample spoke of being the victims of their male partners' psychoemotional abuse eight times and males disclosed an additional eight incidents when they abused their female partners. When the roles were reversed, men claimed they received psychoemotional abuse from their female partners five times and women noted that they had perpetrated psychoemotional abuse against their male partners twice.

If the participants from the family violence groups are removed to avoid the obvious bias (ie. people selected for their experiences of being psychoemotionally abused or abusive), the figures still stack in the same direction. The data showed that women from the general population were victims of their male partners' abuse three

times; whereas the men from the general population reported abusing their female partners an additional three times. There was only one occasion reported of women from the general population psychoemotionally abusing their male partners; while the men from the general population spoke of being abused by their female partners twice.

Most of the roles described carried no clear structural authority over the other person involved. For example, the participants reported a relatively equal number of times that they were abused by friends (ie. 3) and abused friends (ie. 4). They were abused by and abusive of work colleagues two times each and three times each in relationships with siblings and cousins, if these incidents were combined together.

Stories involving school colleagues were told through the mouths of the victim three times and through the perpetrator's mouths once. Two of these incidents, including the one from the perpetrators' perspective involved gangs or groups of students targeting another student, which supports the shift in power dynamic when people join together. Various other roles, such as union representative and work competitor were mentioned only once.

While roles with more equal power structures of provided no clear advantages for either the psychoemotional abuser or the victim of the abuse, roles are only part of the dynamic of the interaction. It is quite likely that other factors such as communication styles (e.g., aggressive or passive) and differences in attributes such as age or physical size would have affected the interaction.

Research Aim 3: To explore the mechanisms that facilitate resilience and resistance against psychoemotional abuse

This section explores the tactics and strategies participants employed to counter the negative impacts of psychoemotional abuse. It begins with an examination of the wide range of coping methods participants used when they were subjected to psychoemotional abuse, before focusing on the turning points that signalled the end of abusive relationships.

The participants then shared some tried and tested strategies of protecting themselves against psychoemotional abuse and told how they have stopped themselves from being psychoemotionally abusive towards others.

Mechanisms of Coping With Psychoemotional Abuse

The participants collectively disclosed dozens of methods of coping with psychoemotional abuse. Each person offered a unique cluster of coping mechanisms which was tailored to the extent and type of abuse they experienced, their skills, level of confidence, personality, motives and the benefits and risks they predicted from applying these techniques in certain situations compared to other options.

For those who were severely punished and considered themselves to be effectively trapped within a psychoemotionally abusive relationship, strategies that involved escape, distraction, revenge and salvaging some self control featured strongly. In some circumstances, these strategies may have served as important tools

for psychoemotional survival or saved the participant from physical violence. In other circumstances, some of these strategies may have eased the immediate tension, but contributed to long-term harm as they applied no direct pressure that would stop the behaviour of their abuser. For example, Joanne responded to methods of psychoemotional abuse in her relationship, such as being put down by her husband and told what to think, by keeping quiet or agreeing with him to try to minimise the harm. This pattern of domination left her feeling chronically defeated, and she rationalised her strategy of placation when she stated “when you are losing the whole fight the whole time you think: Forget it. Why bother?”

On some occasions, Joanne responded to her distress by taking psychiatric medication – one time deliberately taking an overdose after she felt rejected by her partner. Belinda said that she also used drugs in an attempt to deal with the pain from the abuse she experienced at various times from her ex-husband, brother and father. This led to new problems for her as she became dependent on marijuana and used it heavily every day. Drug use was a common method of coping that the group professional counsellors encountered during their working week, which was not surprising given that they specialised in drug counselling. They mentioned that other clients who had received psychological abuse coped by withdrawing “from society and other people as a way of keeping themselves safe.” One counsellor revealed that some of her male clients who had been psychologically abused kept themselves extremely busy with work and sought to become high achieving “super-people” to distract themselves from uncomfortable feelings or prove their critics wrong. She stated that other men told her that they had deliberately changed their physical

appearance, by adding tattoos, piercings or intimidating haircuts to scare people away from them and, thus, restrict their social contact with people.

Members of the professional focus group also cited that forms of dissociation and eating disorders were employed by their clients who had suffered psychoemotional abuse. Some women in the sample of participants in this study, such as Sarah and Naomi, claimed that they subconsciously responded to the abuse they received by becoming ill with anorexia nervosa. Naomi reflected that after many futile fights and arguments with her father, her illness may have emerged as an expression of her desperate attempts to communicate with him:

I guess my coping mechanism was getting sick with anorexia, as punishment to him... Maybe I [wanted him to] feel bad and maybe that would be a wake up call to him to stop it.

Sarah also cited her experience with anorexia nervosa as an important method of coping with the psychoemotional abuse she received. Indeed, in hindsight, she referred to it as a source of strength for her as it symbolised her resistance against oppression:

Me defying God, defying my body's need to eat, to sleep, to feel pain - literally defying God by pretending to be invincible. Later on that sense of being invincible and inexhaustible is exactly what you have to put into the physical hard work into rebuilding your life from the ground up.

Sarah also developed a method of dissociating her mind from her body to manage her pain. She viewed this retrospectively as an invaluable strategy that

enabled her to push past barriers of pain and continue to function. She recalled an example of using dissociation to construct a mental image of an alter ego, whom she named 'Wise Woman'. Wise Woman was created to counter the nasty, harsh psychoemotionally abusive treatment Sarah received from her husband. The alter ego provided her with a gentle, compassionate alternative voice that she could receive stable direction from amidst the constant stream of confused messages she was processing. She explained that Wise Woman provided:

...the capacity to hear layers of self talk and then to decide to create one stable voice with which to follow - one stable voice which is reliable, trustworthy, dependable and most importantly - only ever has the deepest desire to honour your soul.

...by recalling anyone who had ever said anything nice, compassionate or gentle to me and then seeing their face, then seeing another one and then transmuting this into the face of benevolent mother. This visualised face I would then ask myself - what would my closest friend who cared about me - and knows me - what would she say? How would she understand this situation, accepting that she knows your true deep intentions - the gentle ones to desire peace, and harmony and joy? She does not say things the same way he does. That different language, that different perspective - of compassionate judgment and positive regard allows the space for unacknowledged feelings. From those unacknowledged feelings comes the one that is buried deep - the "that's not fair". This capacity to hear something other than what is currently around you is an unassailable source of strength for he cannot touch

those memories, nor hear what she says, nor become like her. The Wise Woman sees him and knows him, and she is opposite to him. The nastier he gets the more compassionate the Wise Woman becomes.

Sarah coupled this mental imagery with artwork and creative writing to anchor herself to an alternative narrative that was caring and supportive. In effect, Sarah imagined the experience of being supported by a parent, trusted friend or counsellor, even when they were physically absent. Wise Woman, thus, became a crucial part of her survival and recovery. Sarah also used imagery to minimise the power her attacker had over her. For example, she mentioned that she pretended her attacker was a “midget when he was being condescending to her.”

Sarah had to work hard at claiming small pockets of psychoemotional refuge to develop Wise Woman and other methods of coping. For example, she would purposefully make ten minutes of what she described as “off load time”, where she drove to a nearby paddock, locked herself in her car and wrote in her diary. The writing was all coded, so that her husband could not judge her writing and use it against her if he found the diary. For Sarah, it was not the words that mattered so much, it was the act of writing itself that gave her some power and a sense that she was being defiant.

Sarah also detailed an elaborate system of what she called “avenues of retreat”, which were the psychoemotional equivalent of heavily disguised escape tunnels in a prison camp. She noted that she was able to salvage occasional moments

of freedom to give herself small breaks from her oppressive treatment and maintain her sense of self, such as writing in her diary, developing her art, listening to songs on the radio, walking in the bush or feeling the sunlight through the car window. She would also draw inspiration from sneaking into a bookstore and reading a few paragraphs from an uplifting book for a few minutes before she had to return home to face her husband. She gave herself permission to play with her son, crawl on the floor with him and imagine the world again through a child’s senses. The simple act of watching birds flying held a particular significance for her, not only because of their flight symbolized freedom, but also because of important memories it invoked of times when she felt free during her childhood:

I used to sneak out of the house at dawn and watch the birds at the beach as a young girl. The memory of this stolen freedom was my salve, my nourishment during the hopeless nights and my hope. I knew, once, what it felt like to be free... I told myself - I would have that again.

In addition to her psychoemotional escape tunnels, Sarah developed a series of disguises within the home, such as the “good wife” and the “good cook” - all of which contained double meanings for her. For example, Sarah stated that she kept her home immaculately clean to present a façade to others that all was well. The spotless home also reduced the prospect of criticism from her husband or her family. Sarah said that she used these roles to appear as though she was fulfilling duties for her husband, but actually claimed the opportunity as a buffer of time and space in which she could both pacify him and stay away from him. She would use this space to perform tasks in a manner that she had control over; which served as a minor, but important, act of

resistance. Becoming a perfectionist helped her muster the sense that she could reclaim some control of some aspects of her life and helped her re-create her identity internally. Sarah also mentioned that she used smiling as a disguise that kept her ex-husband at bay. She would smile at him while secretly despising him; and reason to herself that “he can have my body, but he can never have me”.

Sarah also coped with the demoralising impact of psychoemotional abuse by learning to reach for small goals. She figured that even though she may not be able to easily shift major problems in her life, she could try to change one small aspect at a time. Sarah concentrated on setting realistic, achievable goals and developed a fall-back mechanism to keep her spirits up during difficult times. If she could not achieve her original goal, she would attempt to reach half of the target, so there was still some movement forward. This process helped re-build her identity, as it conditioned her to form new habits, such as asking herself “what do I want to do for me?”, listening carefully to her own grievances and body signals, looking for alternative perspectives, changing her self-talk and learning to trust her instincts again.

Another set of skills in Sarah’s repertoire of psychoemotional survival techniques included those that minimised harm through distraction. For example, she stated that she used sex to distract her husband from hurting their son, as this was one of the only tactics that she could successfully use to curtail his abusive behaviour. At other times, she used tactics to avoid having sex with her husband, such as wearing tight clothes to bed, not treating thrush, pretending to be drunk, angry, hostile or upset; or deliberately nagging him to put him in a bad mood. On other occasions she would seek revenge by urinating on his toothbrush or making sure he was 'out of his favourite things' on nights when the local shops closed early. Sarah emphasized that

she found that “even in an abusive relationship there is still power, and there is not a straight line of total control”.

Sally handled her situation differently. She attempted to moderate her husband’s psychoemotionally abusive behaviour and “make life as easy and comfortable as possible” by behaving in a way that aimed to please him. She also declared that she bought him presents to “buy his love, or his nice moods, at least”, but that strategy ultimately did not work over a long period of time as his patterns of abusive behaviour were deeply ingrained. She would often try to minimise conflict between her husband and their children by keeping them “out of his way”, particularly when he was in a bad mood.

Ultimately, Sally found that caring for her children provided her with a focus that transcended her own state of confusion and steeled her determination to stop taking responsibility for his abuse. Over time, Sally realised that she had no option but to survive for their sake and drew inspiration from the stories of her Jewish relatives who had survived the Holocaust.

I felt very responsible that I put my children through this and I needed to work very hard to make them as stable as I could and to help them through it. I read a lot of books. I learnt early on that it was his problem and I tried to be very positive. I did a lot of writing. I’d write something on a piece of paper and I kept all the paper... because I was scared that I was going to forget.

Children were also central to Naomi’s story of coping with psychoemotional abuse. The following statement explained how Naomi was inspired by her children to focus on recovering from the effects of the abuse from her father:

I’ve got kids. I can’t be crying every minute of the day... because then what am I showing my children? That the world is all doom and gloom and all these bad things happen. I don’t want to wreck their lives at this young age.

Several participants, such as June, Naomi and Helen used the support from close family members or friends to help them cope. Helen eventually found solidarity with a friend’s abused wife, but mentioned that she suffered social isolation through the most abusive period. Helen explained her husband’s subtle control of her social life in more detail in the section on psychoemotional restriction. During this time of her marriage, it was the people who she chatted to casually while waiting to pick up her children after school, who became a lifeline for her:

...those people probably didn’t realise how important that was. I’d have a casual chat waiting for the kids. Those sort of things became very important for me, but I couldn’t let those people close. I knew on one level that those people couldn’t be close to me in my life.

However, some participants found that the guidance they received from family members was not always constructive. In fact, if it were followed at certain times, it could have led to more harm. For example, Sally’s mother effectively blamed her for being in an abusive relationship and explicitly told her that she had no option but to stay in it. It soon became apparent to Sally that her mother was struggling to cope with the prospect of Sally breaking the marriage and the potential shame that may bring to the family in the eyes of the other family members and the broader community.

Allison’s mother-in-law seemed to have similar motives of attempting to keep the public image of the family neat, by encouraging strategies that excused the abuse and placated the abuser. Allison received advice from her mother-in-law that the best way for Allison to deal with her husband’s abuse was to always apologise to him, regardless what happened, otherwise his behaviour would get worse. Allison explained the implications of this advice:

...there were all these games I was supposed to play, and it didn’t feel right to me...I was supposed to bounce back up to the surface like a cork after something happened, which is all very well, but it’s kind of denying your feelings and acting like it didn’t happen...I don’t think you should just be expected to turn the other cheek. That’s not a good strategy at all...it doesn’t stop them from doing that. That’s the main thing...It’s all very well to pretend that it hasn’t hurt you, but for someone like [second husband], he would just try harder to hurt you the next time. He’d find some other way that was even more severe.

Given her warnings that her son would become more abusive if he did not receive an apology, it seems quite probable that Allison’s mother-in-law had a long history of receiving similar forms of abuse from her son and found that placating him was the most successful method of reducing further disruption to the family and its public image – even if it did have a personal cost and reinforce his behaviour. These examples highlighted that the effects of psychoemotional abuse ripple beyond the direct target and often have detrimental impacts on at least one other layer of people, such as family, friends or employers. Whether they like it or not, these people are required to implement coping strategies as well.

Some people sought professional assistance to help them cope with the repercussions of psychoemotional abuse, including obviously, the five women recruited to this study from women’s support groups. However, many participants’ encounters with professional counselling often commenced after the worst episode of the abuse had stopped. Belinda initially tried to use self-help books to help her cope with the psychoemotional abuse she received, but later sought professional help through women’s support groups, which she found extremely valuable. She also found strength from a belief that her journey to recovery was guided by a “higher power” and later enrolled in an intensive personal self development course, but left as she found the trainers “too pushy.” With the benefit of a lot of hindsight and a metaphor of boxing training, Belinda re-framed her experience of living in an abusive relationship as ultimately a positive one:

It’s as if, like, you’ve been in that ring. You know how you have boxers who do all that training and hard work? It’s strenuous and sometimes people break down. But I think to myself, that I’m grateful that I’ve had all that, because imagine what I’m capable of in the future.

Sally went one step further than her personal recovery and established a support group for women who had suffered family violence. She tailored it for women who had experienced psychoemotional abuse, because she found that these women’s stories were often dismissed in other professional and social settings. She discussed the importance of the group and its role of normalising and validating individual’s experiences below:

... one of the best things was support. Talking to other women who have been through the same thing to make you realise that you are not alone and that all these thoughts are not just your thoughts. Other women from different areas of life – different social areas, different education – they’ve all got the same thought. I think that is very important.

Counselling helped many of the female participants resolve to take a stand against psychoemotionally abuse by emphasising the need to set clear boundaries around what they regarded as acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. For some women, this support helped them take a stand against their family’s pressure to stay in the abusive relationship and suffer to keep the family intact. The skill of setting clear boundaries enabled Belinda to continue to invite members of her family who had been previously abusive towards her over to her house on the condition that they behaved respectfully and honoured her request to leave her home if they did not. She found this to be a much more satisfying method of dealing with her family than banishing some members completely, or inviting some, but not others. Belinda was delighted one day when she heard her daughter reject an abusive request by Belinda’s father, as it signified that the skills Belinda had learnt had been transferred onto the next generation. This incident gave Belinda enormous confidence that her daughter would be well equipped to ward off psychoemotional abuse throughout her life.

The counselling and support groups also assisted many of the female participants who had suffered prolonged periods of psychoemotional abuse to take practical steps to break the patterns of contact with their abusive partner, such as moving to a new location, changing contact details and taking legal action to serve an

intervention order that prevented the person who has been abusing them from contacting them or their children. This step was extremely difficult for some women, as they regarded their ex-partners as very dangerous. They were concerned that such a strong step may subject them to physical violence and a prolonged campaign of psychoemotional abuse, which threatened to make their situation worse. Belinda mentioned that she originally did not want to stop her ex-husband from seeing their children as she believed that he had the right to see them. However, she changed her mind when her counsellor mentioned that the children also had a right not to be abused and while they were in her care, it was her duty to protect them from harm.

Counsellors also trained some of the women to learn to gain more control over negative or unproductive thoughts by treating them as if they were intruders. Sally stated that she learnt to shut out such thoughts with the following tactic: “if something comes into my mind about the past I just say to it, ‘Get out of here. You’re not welcome’.”

Many also learned to slow down their thinking and take time to reflect on comments through questions such as “how am I going to take this?” Belinda mentioned that she would sometimes think through her potential responses for days before executing the most constructive option.

As Naomi has grown older and experienced some distance away from her father, she has moved from a position of where she hated her father and fought vigorously against his strict control over her, to one where she now has reflected on the circumstances that shaped her father into the type of person he presented as. After looking at their relationship through the lenses of this broader context, she has faith that he thought he was raising his family responsibly, given his own strict upbringing

in a European family during the Second World War. This may not excuse his abusive behaviour, but Naomi’s recontextualisation has removed some of the barbs that hurt her. She now concludes that her father’s controlling behaviour was probably not meant as a personal attack on her, but as a means of protecting her from harm.

Reflecting further on the other person’s motives also helped Lisa cope with episodes of psychoemotional abuse. She stated that she has occasionally become very upset by some comments that she falsely interpreted as abusive. Lisa learned to cope with this by attempting to insulate herself from that pain by firstly, checking that her response was not based on her insecurities, and secondly, being empathic towards other people and attempting to understand their circumstances before taking the comment personally.

The participants who tried to cope with psychoemotional abuse by ignoring the behaviour found that tactic was not very useful, as more often than not, the tension would rise and the behaviour would continue. Amanda commented that she would pretend that abusive comments at work did not affect her, but she really was hurt by them and lost self-esteem over time. Mike said that he coped with a psychoemotionally abusive schoolyard environment by keeping his mouth shut and his head down, as anyone who protested was instantly psychoemotionally or physically punished with more severe treatment. This meant that he became part of the abusive culture by default. At times when the pressure became very intense, he exploded with anger in an attempt to get others who were abusing him to back away. He reasoned that within this culture, counter abuse seemed to be the most effective method of avoiding harm, as more intelligent and mature methods were largely ineffective with this group of teenage boys.

Greg also declared that he did not challenge an abusive culture in one of his workplaces and resorted to becoming a part of the toxic climate. He believed that he needed to “leave the environment to change it” as it was a force too powerful to reckon with from his position.

Sally noted that she taught both her children to ignore her husband’s teasing, hoping that if they did not react, it would extinguish their father’s behaviour and would teach them to become more resilient. This method worked for one child, but not the other as he suffered badly under the mounting pressure. Tom also attempted to ignore behaviour that he hoped would stop, when he recounted failing to directly address abuse he received from his girlfriend while she was drunk. He reflected that skirting the real issues in that relationship did not help either of them, prolonged the distress and ultimately became the most influential factor in their eventual separation.

Allison reflected that she would typically excuse her ex-husband’s abusive behaviour with rationalisations such as “Oh, we’re just going through a tough time”, or “He just has a different expectation of the relationship” and believed in hindsight that she should have raised stronger objections. Alan avoided directly raising feeling rejected by his ex-girlfriend and said that he reacted by having an affair for a month and later a series of one-night stands with other women, explaining that “I tried to capture in lust, what I lost in love...if someone could give me just one night or one month of actually wanting me, even if it is just physical, then that’s cool, because I mustn’t be that bad a person.” Afterwards he stated that this strategy was very unsatisfactory and left him feeling “rather tacky”.

Some of these coping strategies mentioned above that attempted to ignore, minimise, or excuse incidents of psychoemotional abuse indicated that it is difficult

and at times frightening for many to confront psychoemotional abuse, as they were genuinely concerned about the risk that confrontation may ignite more intense, damaging or prolonged abuse. While the participants mentioned that these extinguishing strategies did not stop the long-term pattern of abuse, they may have protected some people from immediate harm when they were first executed.

Other participants, however, believed that it was better to fight fire with fire. Indeed, it was the men from the family violence group who were more likely to include an aggressive response as one of their primary coping strategies, possibly because they were least fearful of the consequences of entering into psychoemotional battle with others. Some, such as Eddie, Sam and Tony, believed that a quick counter attack helped protect them from future abuse as it demonstrated to the initial abuser that they would not be a soft target. A fierce reputation was effectively regarded as insurance against future attacks. Ian explained during his answer how this staunch position, became part of his identity: “I don’t surrender...I don’t give. I’m not lenient.”

The men who used these methods of coping with or defending psychoemotional abuse often employed clichés to minimise the sense of damage that their behaviour created. The clichés included phrases such as “giving them a bit of their own medicine”, “giving it back to them”, “giving them a serve”, “having a dig at him”, “making them pay” or “telling them where to go.” Bill was more elaborate when explaining how his violent reputation shielded him from other people’s abuse:

I was always violent...If I thought that someone upset me enough, I would clout them. That’s very unhealthy. I’m not proud of that but that’s where my thinking took me. I was very narrow-minded. Today I

just don't let things build up and deal with problems as they arise, so I certainly don't fire up.

...I used to train and be fit and strong and I thought that “well if anyone ever upset me enough, I was capable of being dangerous”, but that attitude won't get me very far today... But now I don't carry things around... That's the key for me. That's the biggest change I've made.

Bill said that the men's behaviour change group has taught him to delay his immediate response to other people's comments and think more broadly about the other person's perspective; how the incident will affect him in years to come and its importance in context to other things in his life, such as a successful marriage and happy family life. Other men who had responded to receiving psychoemotional abuse with counter abuse or physical violence explained how they learned to respond non-violently in the section on stopping psychoemotional abuse later in this chapter.

For many participants though, the most effective method of stopping psychoemotional abuse against them was to terminate their relationship. The next section explores the catalysts that brought some of the participants' abusive relationships to their end.

Catalysts for Ending Abusive Relationships

It can be difficult for people who have not experienced prolonged abuse in their intimate relationships to understand why others do not simply leave their spouses or partners when abuse occurs. However, for many participants in this study, leaving

their relationship was not an easy solution to settle on, and even more problematic to implement.

Other researchers such as Elliston (2002) have found that the abuse is only one of a long list of considerations that need to be taken into account when deciding to leave an intimate relationship or not. One of the most critical considerations involves a person's predictions about whether leaving would place them or others such as their children at greater risk of harm than they are experiencing now. The period immediately after a relationship ends can be particularly volatile, as desperate attempts are made to change the mind of the partner who plans to leave. Some of these attempts include intimidating threats of harm and acts of violence (Mouzos, 1999). Mouzos (1999) concluded that leaving a violent relationship was the trigger for approximately 40% of the murders of women in Australia between 1989 and 1998.

As well as managing the prospect of these threats, the participants had to weigh up other serious considerations including an assessment of their children's welfare, the anticipated reaction from others, the potential loss of other local friendships, the impact on their family's reputation, the cost of moving out of their community and losing various other benefits. Those who had personally committed to separating only as a last resort mentioned that they spent a large amount of time and energy trying to repair an abusive relationship.

Sarah reflected that she stayed in abusive relationships longer than she should have because she idealised the notion of love and expected that her dreams of true

romance and living happily ever after would win through in the long run. Helen said that she stayed because she believed that her treatment was not too bad as others “had it worse than her.” While Helen held onto this conclusion, she managed to successfully punish herself for complaining about the treatment she received and dismiss the option of terminating the relationship. This point was also raised in the professionals’ focus group, when one participant commented that one of her clients rationalised her partners’ abuse by suggesting that “at least he doesn’t hit the kids.”

Some participants in this study mentioned they experienced a “roller coaster” of emotions that kept their hopes for a successful resolution alive, even during times of prolonged psychoemotional abuse. This glimmer of hope was often enough to forgive abusive behaviours and channel the abused person’s energies towards rebuilding the relationship, rather than moving away from it.

Others stated that they lost confidence in their own judgment, particularly when their partner chronically undermined their decision making processes. This lack of confidence was further intensified if they were isolated from friends, families and professionals who may have supported either their decision to end their relationship, or even their right to make a decision. As Helen said:

It took me a long time before I started to realize that he was really doing things intentionally to harm me and the children. I was frustrated that other people couldn’t see what he really is, but then it was explained to me that it took me that years and years before I could see

what he really was and I was probably the closest person to it. I spent more time with him than probably anyone else.

Helen reflected that she would have left her husband earlier if he had physically abused her, but the psychoemotional abuse made her decision more difficult. In Allison’s case, physical violence was the catalyst for her leaving her marriage, even though she said the psychoemotional abuse was much worse to deal with:

He hit me...the thing about physical violence is that you can just walk out and leave, because it is clear and dramatic. But it’s hard to walk out and leave when someone calls you ‘fat’ or tells you that you have an untidy kitchen.

Allison added that even though she had enough strength to leave when she did, her husband had more psychoemotional power over her than she realised, which shocked her because she thought of herself as a strong person. However, Sally had a different perspective on the strength of people who suffer through abusive relationships:

I know that deep down women who are in these relationships are very strong. You’re not weak. It’s a sign of strength, because for you to survive and stay... you have to be a very strong person. And then to get out in that world, with all of your friends and family doubting you, because they don’t believe what you are saying, you have to be very strong again.

Some abusive relationships discussed through the interviews were only terminated after the abused person's suffering was validated by an external party. Some participants told of experiencing the “Oh my God, that's me!” syndrome when reading books, articles or checklists on a brochure about family violence and seeking help straight away. Another woman left her relationship after she learnt about typical cycles of abuse and realized that she was at a higher risk than she thought of being re-abused.

Sally stated that the seriousness of her predicament was heightened when one of her children's teachers noticed the effects of her husband's abuse on their child. Sally's need to protect her children from being hurt by their father abuser stimulated her to take action to protect herself as well. She stated that during the relationship, she was so busy trying to look after the children that she did not have time to think about her own needs. As she reasoned in the previous section, she eventually understood that if she could not survive, neither would they. Sarah also mentioned that the crucial motivating force behind her leaving her marriage was her need to protect her son from the prospect of murder after the cruel torture and death of her cat. For both Sally and Sarah, it was the process of viewing their husbands' threats and actions towards others that stimulated a deeper awareness of the treatment they had received and acclimatised to.

Other participants reflected that they had not realized how badly they had been treated until they moved into a new environment. For example, Naomi's anorexia nervosa improved once she had moved out of home and away from her controlling father when she was 16 years old. Amanda contextualized the depth of her former employer and work colleagues' nastiness towards her only after she changed jobs and

was treated respectfully at her new workplace. Amanda also reached the point where she could not continue a friendship any further during an overseas holiday – the fact that the abusive behaviour continued in a foreign environment highlighted that the abusive behaviour was the consistent factor behind her misery, not stress at home or at work. This retrospective validation seemed to be an important aspect of many participants’ experience of healing as it located the abusive behaviour with the other party and allowed them to re-calibrate themselves as normal again.

Some participants were inspired to take action after feeling the effects of the abuse personally. For example, Tony stated that he only sought to change his abusive behaviour after he felt some pain: “I have hurt a lot of people, but I didn’t do anything until I hurt myself.”

Thus, people in this study reported that their decisions to leave psychoemotionally abusive relationships were very difficult to make when they were

- (a) scared of worse ramifications if they left,
- (b) hopeful that they could prevent future abuse and rescue the relationship,
- (c) lacked a clear marker of behaviour that they would no longer tolerate,
- (d) lacked confidence in their own judgment,
- (e) dependent on another person’s opinion who had a vested interest in the relationship continuing as it was,
- (f) conditioned to the pattern of behaviour,

- (g) unaware of the potential harm of the abusive behaviour until they saw its impact on others, or
- (h) of the belief that the behaviour was not as bad as others, and therefore within the bounds of acceptability.

Once they were out of their abusive relationships many of the women from the family violence group developed strategies to protect themselves from psychoemotional abuse in the future. These strategies and those of the other participants are detailed in the section that follows.

Protection from Future Psychoemotional Abuse

Many women in this study who had been psychoemotionally abused regarded the acquisition of knowledge of the subtle patterns of this style of abuse as one of the most important steps towards greater protection. The new words, theories and concepts they learned through books and counselling deepened their understanding and increased their sensitivity to the psychoemotionally abusive behaviours which may have otherwise seemed innocuous or ambiguous. Their new vocabulary also improved their ability to confidently articulate their protest and gain assistance from others when it was required.

Learning to detect the early warning signs of psychoemotional abuse was particularly important for these women. They were taught how to watch and listen to other people's behaviours with more care and suspicion both by counsellors and by their peers in the women's support groups they attended. For example, Sarah said that she now recognized that some phrases, such as those that demanded that she should

do something right now, alerted her to the prospect that the other person could be trying to use the urgency of the statement to control her, rush her response and restrict her freedom of choice.

Sarah added that her experience has changed her fundamental assumptions of how humans should be approached. She has learned to no longer automatically assume that people have good intentions, are trustworthy or that the world is safe.

Some women noted that although they felt safer when they were able to tune into the subtleties of manipulation and psychoemotional abuse with more powerful “antenna”, as June phrased it, this heightened sensitivity also carried the risk of setting off many false alarms – some of which had other social consequences. For example, Sally stated “I just hope that that doesn’t go on the flip-side, because I haven’t been in a relationship since, that I go too far the other way, and read into things that are not there.” She told of a time when she warned her daughter that her daughter’s new boyfriend was exhibiting controlling behaviours. This led to Sally’s daughter attacking Sally for overreacting, sparking an argument between them. Sally said that at one point she thought, “Oh gee. She might be right. What a terrible person I’ve become,” although Sally’s analysis was ultimately vindicated.

June said that her new sensitivity towards psychoemotionally abusive behaviour reinforced her fear of beginning new relationships. She understood that the avoidance of social contact may protect her from more bouts of abuse, but it has also restricted her opportunities for social enjoyment. Allison also mentioned that this extra sensitivity was “not always a good thing” because the experience of interacting with people through a suspicious filter was not the manner in which she preferred to live her life.

In contrast, some participants who have been conditioned differently, such as Alan, Lisa and Tony, said that they have protected themselves from becoming engaged in psychoemotionally abusive conflict by learning to watch and listen to others more carefully. Thus, they have recalibrated their sensitivity to psychoemotional abuse in the other direction to avoid misinterpreting what they would have typically heard as an abusive comment. They reasoned that learning to give others the benefit of doubt reduced the prospect that they would retaliate abusively themselves. Tony explained:

I try to see where that person is coming from. I try not to react, because in the past I have reacted and made the situation worse. If I feel I am being attacked, I'll come back and that can make the whole thing worse. Now it doesn't matter if they are right or wrong...

Two of the participants mentioned that they had learned to master the vital skill of not responding to comments straight away, even if the comments were abusive. They have learned to pause, sit with the emotions that are triggered by the other person's comments, move away from the situation and think carefully about their best choice of response. Sometimes they would let the comments pass and take no further action. At other times, they responded in a more constructive manner at a later time. Even though some conceded that they were not always able to implement this new process perfectly, it has seemed to help short-circuit old patterns of counter-abuse and prolonged conflict.

Some women from the family violence subgroup were more conscious about the importance of setting safer social and physical boundaries with others. Sarah mentioned the importance of creating a safe space for herself at home – a place where

she could find sanctuary and retreat when she needed it. Part of the guarding of this space involved arranging to meet some people outside of the home in neutral spaces such as cafes. Sarah mentioned that it is vital to have the power to control who you invite into those safe spaces – a statement that for many would seem self-evident, but probably reflects the lack of power and control Sarah had over her personal space during her marriage.

During the interviews, Sarah and Belinda spoke of how they reconstructed their confidence as they learned to apply assertiveness skills they were taught through their counselling and associated readings. A critical skill that Sarah learned was the persistence to steel herself to endure the implementation of an assertive task after being challenged by others several times. As she explained:

...psychological defence comes in when you do not crumble on the second or third rejection when you have said no before. When you have said yes and then no, it may take six times before the person gets the message. And you also need to steel yourself and be able to say “no” more. To allow yourself to feel uncomfortable and show him you’re saying no.

Naomi proclaimed that her world changed as she changed herself from an introvert who would accept poor treatment from others to an extravert who was not afraid to speak her mind and tries not to worry about what others think about her. She said that her aim is to “get a harder shell, but still keep her soft centre”.

Other participants, such as Amanda and June also stated that they tried to protect themselves against psychoemotional abuse by being assertive, but found it difficult to be consistently assertive. June disclosed that she does not have the

confidence to be as assertive as often as she would like. She typically behaves passively and goes along with others to “keep the peace” the first time conflict arises; but will assert herself if it arises again, once she has mustered more confidence and investigated the situation more thoroughly. Mike conceded that he still puts up with abusive behaviour most of the time, and typically thinks of what he could have said ten minutes after the event.

Some women declared that they developed stronger protective mechanisms after they began viewing themselves differently. For Helen, this occurred when she gained more respect for herself. Along a similar vein, Naomi formed a protective shield by learning not worry as much about what others thought about her. Sarah learned to separate herself from other people’s perspectives and draw her self esteem from non-assailable, intrinsic aspects of her life. Both Sarah and Bill mentioned how understanding the concept of “owning their own emotions” helped them reclaim more control over their personal responses to external events.

Joanne and Lisa said that they had protected themselves against psychoemotional abuse by actively removing themselves or dissociating from some people and situations. For example, Joanne mentioned recently cutting off communication with a person she had been friends with for 14 years “because she kept siding with my husband.” Nick mentioned reducing conflict in his life by containing most of his social contact to a small circle of trusted friends. Others, such as Greg, Bill and Amanda, found that the support of other people was a valuable resource that they could draw upon to double-check their interpretations and seek alternative perspectives on sensitive social interactions.

Two of the men stated that remaining positive helped buffer them against an abusive interaction, while two other men mentioned using humour to defuse interpersonal tension. Other men said that they protected themselves by learning to calm down and trust their instincts in social interactions. Ian, on the other hand, relied on his aggressive reputation to protect himself. When told by one of his men’s group facilitators that she was frightened by him, he thought:

Sometimes I like that. I think “Good, I’m coming across in the way that I want to come across.” You know, that’s when I’m not thinking straight. I’ve got them where I want them to be. It’s not controlling, I just want the situation to work out...maybe it is control... I think, well I have been hurt by these people in the past. This is a defensive mechanism. But to change my stripes, I need to change that too. I need to be vulnerable, humble. It’s a way of getting in first, I don’t know any better and I’m used to doing it.

Indeed, all of the men who completed the behaviour change course had to make themselves more vulnerable to some extent as their abusive patterns were exposed in the group and their behaviour was monitored by program staff outside of the group via a phone call to the man’s partner or ex-partner. These men and the other participants discuss the strategies they have implemented to stop themselves from being psychoemotionally abusive towards other people in the next section.

Stopping Psychoemotionally Abusive Behaviour Towards Others

The participants provided many insights into the techniques they employed to stop themselves from being psychoemotionally abusive towards others. Their methods fell into one or a combination of the following four categories:

- (a) They sought external help to learn new ways of behaving more respectfully
- (b) They implemented a method to short circuit old patterns of abusive responses
- (c) They implemented a non-abusive response while they were under a great amount of pressure
- (d) They prepared methods of preventing psychoemotionally abusive behaviour in advance

All of the men from the family violence subgroup completed a 20 week program designed to help them stop their abusive behaviour towards others. The group was led by one male and one female facilitator and typically contained between 5 and 15 other men. The group worked on changing individual patterns of thinking, behaviour and communication through a mix of practical strategies, peer support and challenge. It also educated the men about issues relating to gender politics, power and control and encouraged them to express a broader range of emotions than they previously recognised and understand the emotional triggers of their violence (e.g., shame, fear, anxiety). The men were also encouraged to construct new identities as

people who can successfully resolve difficult interpersonal conflicts without becoming violent or abusive. It should be noted that the style and content of the group work can vary markedly among groups. While many of the features described in this program may also be present in other men’s behaviour change programs, it is not necessarily representative of all of them.

Aside from these men, it was the women who had completed family violence survivors’ courses who made the most suggestions about stopping abuse towards others by seeking external help and education via books, counsellors or other positive role models.

Bill said that he found the clichés and stock phrases that he learned from men’s behaviour change group very useful to guide his response at critical times when he would have typically become psychoemotionally abusive. Questions such as “How will this affect me in years to come?”, “How important is it really?” and reminders to “put yourself in the other person’s shoes” helped him change the framing of comments from other people which he would have otherwise interpreted as provocative. Learning to view the world through these new perspectives made it easier for him to exercise restraint and be more sensitive about the impacts that his behaviours had on others.

Some participants found the themes from this training or guidance helpful when it came to preparing and implementing strategies in advance. For example, some mentioned that greater awareness of their psychoemotionally abusive patterns of behaviour and sharp reminders of the results of this behaviour served as important awakenings for them. Once these participants could recognise the trigger-points and early stages of these patterns, they could predict that they were at high risk of heading

down an abusive pathway. Sam mentioned that many of his abusive incidents occurred on Sundays and consequently prepared himself to be more careful with his words and closely monitor his moods when he interacted with his family members on Sundays.

Others changed some of the conditions of their life to reduce the likelihood that they would be abusive. For example, when Tony started to take responsibility for monitoring his patterns of behaviour, he found that he was able to focus on altering conditions in his life that he said contributed to his irritability. He deliberately attempted to slow his lifestyle down, reduce his stress levels and break out of his grumpy, tired moods; which in turn reduced the likelihood that he would offend others.

I recognize that in the last few years that I am prone to burnout and overworking myself. When I am down on energy – bang! Grumpiness sets in. These are no excuses for getting grumpy and losing it, but hey, your body is telling you something. You are out of balance, out of whack. So many blokes go down that path. And then we justify and we reason... “Oh yes, because this, because that...” We blame everything. I’ve been doing that for years. But I have stopped now. ...I reckon lots of blokes suffer from this...walking around burnt out.

Naomi chose to only socialise with a smaller, carefully selected circle of friends. She stated that limiting most of her social interactions to those who she had deep friendships helped her be herself and reduced the amount of conflicts she was involved with. The people she chose to be around were those who understood her well

allowed her the freedom to be herself. Naomi also prepared her audience for the prospect that potentially offensive comments may be on the horizon by announcing to them that she had a “weird sense of humour”. She warned the company that she was with that “...if something does come out, don’t take it to heart, because I wouldn’t intentionally say something if I knew it was going to hurt your feelings.”

Most of the sample, however, reported stopping their psychoemotionally abusive behaviour by changing their mental approach to their interactions with other people. Some people reappraised the costs and benefits of behaving abusively towards others. Bill from the family violence group said that he learned to remind himself when he approached a difficult situation that he valued his relationships and good communication as more important than whatever the content of the argument was about. This helped him reduce both the list of issues that bothered him and the psychoemotional abuse he perpetrated onto others. Bill also re-assessed the value of his position in relation to others when he confessed: “I am not as important as I thought I was. It’s hard to say this, but I had to grow up and humble myself.” Lisa also took a long-term perspective to the value of psychoemotional abuse when she reasoned:

...the leverage you get out of saying something hurtful and seeing someone crumple is a short-lived thing. It is a sort of hollow victory because you might feel it for a few seconds or for the time when you have been angry...but then afterwards you have done more damage...

Other men from the general population spoke about being mindful about approaching people with respect and reducing the risk of offending others by not being opinionated about certain topics. Tom stated that he made an effort to create a

reputation as a caring person, which helped others trust him and realise that he was not attempting to hurt them. This reputation also helped bring him the benefit of doubt, whenever a potentially offensive comment or volatile moment arose. Alan claimed that his belief in Karma shaped his approach towards abusing others: “I reflect on what it’s like for others (and) don’t want it coming back to me.” Whereas Mike spoke of being able to strongly tell people his views and leaving the responsibility of “handling it” or not with them. He referred to employing a “tactical withdrawal” of backing away from conflict when he realised that others were not going to listen to him.

At least one representative from each subgroup mentioned that it was essential to catch the critical moment they faced when they were about to be abusive and create more time to make a careful decision. This was expressed as “taking a breath”, “making space”, “self awareness”, “being mindful of other circumstances”, or “pausing to buy time”, thinking, or delaying their response. Joanne summarised her strategy as “I just pull my head in”. For these people, the micro-skill of deliberately interfering with their automatic, learned response to a trigger was a vital method of breaking the circuit of their psychoemotional abuse.

While the claiming of this extra time was mentioned across all sub groups, it was a particularly strong response among women from the family violence group. It is quite feasible that the training they received about good communication skills in highly sensitive environments or their experience of being extremely cautious when responding to abusive or provocative situations had heightened their awareness of subtle, yet powerful techniques that can de-rail a barrage of psychoemotional abuse.

Most people who mentioned that they made a firm decision to stop being abusive towards others also detailed the alternative, non-abusive behaviour they implemented instead. Men from the family violence group conveyed the largest range of options here. Indeed, they offered more than twice as many non-abusive behaviours as the members from any of the other subgroups. Some of these behaviours were framed as general statements about taking full responsibility for their own actions or thinking more positively. In other situations, the behaviours that created the most change could be summarised as methods of holding their nerve under pressure and not reacting abusively. These men claimed they had most success when they were able to not “just fly off the handle” as a first response; “let things go”, rather than inflame the situation; spend more time to thoroughly assess the situation, often by listening more carefully to the other person and concentrating harder on the meaning of the what the other person was saying. Ian reflected that even though he was still occasionally psychoemotionally abusive towards others, he developed skills to reduce the amount of damage he inflicted: “I come down quick from fighting now...I feel like I’m improving in that area.”

Some men from the general population also substituted psychoemotionally abusive behaviour with behaviours that sought deeper understanding and acceptance of opinions that differed from theirs. Greg mentioned that he stayed open-minded and reserved judgement until he has spent a long period of time getting to know the other person. This method not only helped him reduce conflict, but he also reduced the risk that he might “miss out on a great friendship”.

The women from the family violence group implemented different behaviours. When some felt the urge to utter a psychoemotionally abusive comment, they chose to

gain more clarity on the issue that provoked this urge, either by direct communication with the other person or by writing their thoughts down. The act of writing slowed the process down, concretised their thoughts and feelings and helped them make more careful decisions on how to respond. Naomi noted that the application of humour had changed her perspective about the issues that were happening before her and lightened a tense situation. June explained that she realised that her trigger for being abusive towards others occurred when she felt as though others were treating her as a victim. She said that she is now able to deal more constructively when that situation arises and has learnt other methods of re-asserting her control. Sally learned to recognise when others were trying to cajole her into performing tasks for them by making her feel guilty and has now learned to assert her rights through statements such as “With all due respects, I’m allowed to have my own life.”

Some of the women from the general population mentioned that they implemented non-abusive behaviours such as attempting to stay calm during conflicts, and were alert to other issues in their relationships that might fuel the conflict. Amanda said that she often reminded herself to say things nicely if she expected a better outcome; whereas Joanne signalled that the arguments she became involved with are clear and clean: “I’m the sort of person who if I have an argument with somebody, then it’s finished. That’s the end of it. There’s no carrying on.”

Not everyone, however, can neatly conclude arguments involving psychoemotional abuse using Joanne’s style. Often the acts of individuals are constrained by the social and cultural contexts they occur within. The next section explores the influence that these elements have on extinguishing or facilitating psychoemotional abuse.

Research Aim 4: To acknowledge the broader social and cultural factors that contribute to psychoemotional abuse

The final section of this chapter canvasses the participants’ thoughts on the changes that are required to prevent psychoemotional abuse and support psychoemotionally healthy relationships.

Prevention at the Societal Level

When asked about the social factors that could aid the prevention of psychoemotional abuse, the participants’ themes split into three discrete tracks:

- (a) education;
- (b) cultural change; and
- (c) professional support

Most people in this sample believed that our society’s best chance of preventing future incidents of psychoemotional abuse rested with educating our youngest generation. Sarah’s comment was typical of many participants’ views: “It starts in childhood... Teach your children that they deserve to be respected.”

Some spoke about incorporating the topic into the general school curriculum; whereas others suggested that it should be taught at school via lessons on ‘relationships’, ‘self-esteem’, ‘conflict management’ or ‘assertiveness’. These topics could be established as important frameworks from which to teach children about

their rights, how to make wise choices, how to set personal boundaries and defend themselves against psychoemotional attacks.

Alan thought psychoemotional abuse could be addressed in schools if children were taught ‘deep thinking’ skills such as philosophy and psychology, as they are in some European countries. One woman from each of the female subgroups noted that boys needed to be taught how to constructively express their feelings. Another woman from the family violence subgroup stated that an early intervention program on psychoemotional abuse was required for children who had come before the attention of child protection services.

Another wave of comments recommended that adults were also taught more about the perils of psychoemotional abuse. Sarah thought that there should be more information on the topic available for women in family violence shelters. Another participant thought that general practitioners and other health professionals needed more information about the issue to help them detect problems early and make more appropriate referrals. Indeed, one of the professionals claimed that she was not aware of psychoemotional abuse until she studied psychology and had experience working with it. Other participants supported the inclusion of the topic in educational material for parents and teachers. Some believed that adults could mentor children who are struggling with psychoemotional abuse or should have greater awareness of their power as a role model to children.

There was also strong support for the provision of increased public awareness of the topic through community education campaigns. Helen commented that

Most people don't realise what it is or the extent of the damage. People accept that physical abuse happens and that it is wrong and is damaging, but they don't realise that psychological or emotional abuse can be far more difficult to cope with.

Indeed, several people commented on how popular culture had “dumbed down” over the past decade or two and contributed to the promotion of psychoemotional abuse. Sarah noted how the media, and popular television programs in particular, had become increasingly cruel, insensitive and exploitive. News was often sensationalist and reality game shows on commercial TV would often set their participants up for public humiliation, highlight conflicts and then require the audience to vote participants off the show and expel them, while the show financially profited from the voting process and bragged about how democratic and empowering it was for the audience. She noted that this style contained a cruel streak that was not present previously in public television that promoted ganging up on one person and outcasting them. Sarah suggested that “[It's] considered a cool thing to do – to outcast someone from a circle. It's not hard to see an extension of that and to do that in a relationship.”

Allison expressed similar views:

In the past month there has been a lot of talk about kids in the classroom being voted out of their social group. There was one teacher on the radio, in the post-Big Brother debate, talking about girls getting

together and voting other girls out of their friendship group. And I hate that sort of thing. I guess it's a form of emotional bullying.

I think it's a bit of a fallacy that women are better at relationships.

They might value relationships because we've been trained to believe that they are important, but we can also be very selective, very bitchy, very nasty. And not getting over things in the way that guys do. I can have a cross purpose with a guy and then get over it. You don't often know where you stand with women... I notice that a lot of women don't do all that well from other women. It's not necessarily across the board though. [laughs]. It's a bit like betraying my own sex isn't it?

One member of the professionals' focus group agreed with the sentiments of this perspective as she cast a broad critique upon popular culture:

As a society, we are modelling incredibly poor, abusive behaviour. [It is] very punitive, very isolating, very much about divide and conquer. Very much into labelling, very moralistic and there's a tendency to blame the victim...as a society now we have isolated families. It's everyone out for themselves. There's not that strong feeling of community or neighbourhood...we torment the victim and we don't believe them.

Others suggested that macho culture and the social restrictions of gender stereotypes needed to be addressed. Sarah highlighted that boys are often emotionally

under-developed; their action-based heroes and other characters have no emotional depth; and their clothes and toys are extremely limited. In Sarah’s view, boys’ clothes typically do not have the same range of bright colours available to their sisters and many of their toys or games have violent or aggressive undertones. She also mentioned that there was subtle stereotyping at other levels. For example, she thought the “anti-stereotypes” such as the “wimpy Sensitive New Age Guy” or the “butch bitch” helped contain the genders within their traditional roles as they “do not encourage adaptation of or exploration with those roles.” Sarah concluded that “We need to develop expansive roles and contexts to explore the full repertoire of gendered experiences.”

One of the professionals highlighted the difficulty that some of her clients had of challenging or even escaping psychoemotionally abusive sub-cultures, such as the traditional macho sub-culture or the drug sub-culture.

Other participants thought that various forms of pressure, such as financial pressure, the fast pace of life or peer group pressure placed people in vulnerable positions where they may be more likely to be either abused or abusive. If these pressures eased, they predicted that a more respectful culture may develop. Nick, from the general population subgroup, stated that “Those pressures [of being broke] would be enormous... I have seen the other side of the world and have found that enormously stressful.”

The final major theme that emerged centred around more professional support for people who had been psychoemotionally abused. Some wanted the establishment

of systems and mechanisms for survivors of psychoemotional abuse to ensure that their complaints are taken seriously and they received no social repercussions when they did muster the courage to report offences. Members of the professional group stated that victims will continue to remain silent until serious action is taken by authorities to thoroughly address psychoemotional abuse.

Other participants suggested that survivor support groups should be developed that dealt exclusively with psychoemotional abuse to give the topic more credibility. One participant had a similar concept in mind, when he called for specialised professional treatment for psychoemotional abusers. Finally, some people wanted higher profile promotion of the buffering effect of the general support provided by networks of friends and family.

The Social Factors that help build Psychoemotionally Healthy Relationships

The sample also formed strong themes around social and cultural aspects such as role modelling, media images and norms; and the need for psychosocial and political education when they spoke about building psychoemotionally healthy relationships. However, there was less discussion about the influence of professionals, implying that their role was more clearly defined when relationship problems arose than it was during the production of good relations.

Many participants saw that it was important to have a range of role models available for people to draw from and not just present the traditional male and female roles as the only way of living. Some of the comments on gender stereotyping were outlined in the previous section. Mike yearned for “real role models”, not just the “anorexic TV stars” that are visually consumed by most people daily. Tony thought that it was important that those who represented the ideals of popular culture, such as the media, should showcase the value of a cross-section of people – particularly men - across different fields:

I think too much emphasis is placed on war heroes and sports people. There are a lot of people out there who are great writers, great people in the creative arts, great scientists. We’ve been a country of knockers for too long I think.

Belinda commented that the culture of hyper-critique had inhibited people from feeling free to express themselves and called for the establishment of a new cultural norm of free expression. Others acknowledged that a person’s cultural backgrounds, family expectations and upbringing played an enormous role in shaping their sense of and what they accepted as just and healthy in a relationship and how they were expected to perform. These sentiments can be seen in the comments from men from both subgroups below:

I got most of my guidance on building relationships from observing my dad, probably more subconsciously than anything. I had a Serbian basketball coach in Year 7 who was influential. He was more open to showing affection in public. The stereotypical Aussie guy doesn’t show much emotion. He showed me that there was more than one way to act in public. (Greg, general population subgroup)

My father was my number one role model, but he was a workaholic who was never in touch with his own feelings and with his kids because he was always dog-tired from working. I think the only way we are going to get good role models is if men do not push themselves so hard on a work level. I’ve seen too many men burn out from going off and doing the work bit. This crazy work ethic that I find males are going for is just not the way to go. There’s got to be a better balance. I think it has to be less on work and more on family. When the going gets tough, men go to work. (Tony, family violence subgroup)

I guess with my upbringing it was: The man went to work and the woman stayed at home and looked after the house. And that belief got me into trouble, because I followed in my father’s footsteps. (Bill, family violence subgroup)

Others, such as Tom, noted that representations displayed through the media exerted a major influence on the manner in which people relate:

I think certainly the way relationships are portrayed in the media has an influence on people’s aspirations and how they think it should be and that, I suppose, becomes great peer group pressure in a wider sense, in a societal sense...it permeates into everybody’s psyche. It’s part of the way you frame that relationship, whether it be an individual or group.

Three women from the general population shared the opinion that television programs and movies can promote bullying and violence. One declared that there is a need to address the nasty emotional bullying among girls and women, which has been encouraged by some television programs. Naomi’s comment below captured the broader flavour of this theme:

There’s too much violence on the TV, particularly for kids. That is a big influence, because the kids sit so much in front of it...Even the cartoons have become horrific...then there’s the way that kids relate to each other and that people relate to each other. You just have to walk down the street sometimes...I have a child with a disability, you

actually cop a lot of lip from people that I don't even know. I have a disabled park for my car. And many times, people have taken on the view that I am a young mother with two kids who can't be bothered walking, because my son can walk. People have got these pigeon holes that they like to fit everything in and if it doesn't measure up to what their thought of it is, then they come down on you.

Many participants thought that it was essential that children were educated with the skills of relationship development. These skills included humility, listening, accepting others' right to a point of view without necessarily agreeing with it, refraining from swearing, understanding and respecting other cultures, property and the elderly. Bill said that he had learned to stop assuming what was important to others and double-check with them to ensure that he had clearly understood their opinions.

Others believed that personal development skills would ultimately contribute to healthier relations with others. These skills included those that developed more responsibility for one's own actions; self-esteem and a political awareness of gender issues and concepts such as feminism and male privilege.

Representatives from the professional group stressed that while personal skill development and community education were needed, it was essential that resources are dedicated to long-term issues such as adequate housing, employment and health care, as satisfaction of these essential needs helps to boost people's psychoemotional health and strengthen their relationships with others. They also advised that a culture

that encourages people to build strong connections with their family, neighbours and broader community can help insure against the ill-effects of psychoemotional abuse, as strong networks can help people take a stand against the abuse and potentially recover more quickly.

Prevention at the Individual level

When asked about the preventive interventions that could be initiated at an individual level, it was interesting to find that the men provided many more responses to this question (13 comments) than the women did (2 comments). This probably reflects the fact that five of the men had completed a course where they had learned a series of techniques to stop their abusive behaviour.

Most participants suggested that improved communication skills and strategies, such as listening, “I statements” (ie. speaking strictly from one’s own perspective, rather than blaming others or assuming the intent of others’ actions) and looking at issues from the other person’s perspective, were important methods of personally preventing psychoemotional abuse. One man from the general population subgroup stated that it is important for people to receive feedback on their behaviour as many do not realise they are behaving abusively.

Tony, a veteran of the family violence program, reflected below on how the accepting of personal responsibility for his actions and facing the stigma of being known as an abusive man was the most important component of his change:

At an individual level, I think we need to own our own stuff. That penny's dropped for me. While you are still justifying and denying, you are really stuck and going backwards. It's only when you acknowledge the fact that “Hey, things aren't working out here...” The only way I think to stop the individual, is that guys who have been to a program like this...it's two hours per week, which isn't much, but it's pretty hard for guys to dedicate this to themselves. I think it's going to have to come from blokes teaching blokes, instead of women having to worry about trying to get them in [to these groups].

It's backing down the stigma. I mean, we were all shit scared coming here for the first time. We were all surrounded by a bunch of cave dwellers here. You don't know what to expect. But whether the guy has just got out of the slammer [jail] or whether he has been abused or has been violent or whatever it might be, it's all shit. It's all unacceptable.

I reflected for many years about my behaviour. I mean it's a health thing too. It's not only a threat to your partner; it's your own longevity. You're just going to go down the gurgler.

I think there's a lot of suppressed suffering out there from the male perspective. I believe that most guys I know are wearing masks. We are just covering up so much stuff. They are all a bit scared to talk about it. I think that as the years go on, the older you get, the more

desperate you become and the more unhealthy you become. That is the thing that I worry about mainly. When I was going through my really angry, really blaming period, my health was real bad.”

Two the men from the family violence group recognised that they needed to show more respect to others; while another man from the general population group felt that the building of more self-respect would assist the task of preventing abuse, as people who felt better about themselves would be less likely to resort to putting others down.

The men also offered several comments about the importance of exercising better self-control and being more effective at managing the stresses of life, such as the comments offered by Sam below:

I’ve just got to learn not to be on edge all the time. I’m just go, go, go from the time I get up until the time I go to bed. It’s 100 miles per hour and I’m doing 101 things at once. I really have to look at myself and work out what the priorities in my life are, and basically family needs to be number one and work number two...It’s best to not get stressed and to ensure that my family life is a happy environment. I’m the only one who can change that because I’m the one who is contributing to making it a sad environment, by being verbally abusive...I’ve got to back off with those mind games.

Thus, it seems likely that if more people in the population followed Sam’s commitment to “back off with the mind games” and understand the contribution this makes to the social environments they live in; learned and practiced more empathy and sophisticated communication skills, such as those mentioned earlier in this section; significant amounts of psychoemotional abuse could be prevented.

Moreover, the participants strongly believed that the prevention of psychoemotional abuse also rested upon educating society about the serious implications of this form of abuse. They reasoned that a culture that was more equipped to understanding these implications, would be less likely to tolerate and excuse it, and more likely to implement strategies to help protect people against it.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Introduction

The findings outlined in the previous chapter have shed new light onto issues raised in previous research on psychoemotional abuse. This final chapter re-examines the major points of these studies with the aid of this light and attempts to clear intellectual space for subsequent avenues of research into this phenomenon.

This research was designed to address some of the limitations of the previous body of research by exploring the participants’ multiple roles and identities, rather than the remaining grounded in the traditional stance of perpetrator-victim; investigating incidents of psychoemotional abuse in the family setting and in other settings, rather than in one or the other; attending to social and cultural factors that play a role in psychoemotional abuse, not exclusively focusing on individualistic factors; and examining methods people used to constructively deal with the psychoemotional abuse they encountered, rather than concentrating exclusively on their deficits and the damage caused by the incidents. The findings also presented some models that should help practitioners who work to prevent psychoemotional abuse or support people recovering from its impact.

This re-equipped exploration begins at the base camp of conceptual understanding of psychoemotional abuse. It examines how the conceptual understanding of psychoemotional abuse offered by the participants in this study measures up against the professional versions that circulate through the academic

world. It then checks whether the perspective of the participants’ conceptual understanding of psychoemotionally healthy relationships provides a new angle that adds depth to current conceptual understandings and definitions of psychoemotional abuse.

After forming a position on what psychoemotional abuse is, the discussion connects the other pieces of the thesis’ information together to provide a deeper exploration of the patterns of psychoemotional abuse, the experiences of being psychoemotionally abused and abusive, the places where it happens, how people cope with it, protect themselves from it and stop themselves from abusing others. Finally, the discussion provides insight into the impacts of psychological abuse and individual and cultural strategies for protection, prevention and recovery.

The Participants’ Understanding of the Concept of Psychoemotional Abuse

It was important to ask the participants about their understanding of psychoemotional abuse for two reasons. First, the parameters of their understanding helped to contextualise their responses to the remainder of the questions in the interview; and second, a sense of how this concept is understood by people who have not been professionally trained in this area could provide valuable insights into the body of literature and inform practising professionals about the aspects of the phenomenon that resonate most strongly with members of the public. These insights can help professionals frame their communications, warnings and therapeutic responses using language and models that either match the general population’s understanding or use that understanding to introduce a more sophisticated model.

This study was designed to gather perspectives from some members of the public who had already been exposed to professional interventions, discussions and literature on the topic and contrast those perspectives with those from people with less exposure to the professional discourse. The conceptual understanding that was developed from the participants’ responses in the findings, needed to be formed broadly enough to encapsulate the diversity of their offerings. Many of the participants’ conceptualisations of psychoemotional abuse drew from their own experiences of being abusive to and receiving abuse from others, as other material in their interviews confirmed. For example, women from the family violence sub-group included themes of safety and boundaries in their statements, which is not surprising given their experience of how these have been violated in the past. Other groups did not specify these notions. Members from both the family violence sub-groups spoke about sorting out problems calmly without force; whereas the respondents from the general population did not. Men and women from the general population mentioned concepts such as “both people feeling happy and enjoying the other’s company” - a prospect that may have been quite foreign or even unimaginable to those whose intimate relationships have been overwhelmingly tense and difficult.

Interestingly, the comments that featured most prominently in their collective conceptual understanding of psychoemotional abuse included descriptions of controlling and manipulating behaviours more frequently than those describing verbal assaults. The participants also raised subtle notions such as power differentials, tension, threats, avoiding issues and disrespect. The women in the sample were twice as likely as their male counterparts to note these subtleties.

The summarised conceptualisation also included outlying data or comments that were unique to a single respondent. For example, one of the men who had been part of the family violence program mentioned that psychoemotional abuse can include taking things for granted and taking no responsibility for making the relationship work. The integration of this notion added depth to the conceptualisation.

It was generally concluded that the people in this sample determined that an unequal balance of power in a relationship; disrespectful attitudes, behaviours that satisfied one party's goals at the expense of the other, and an insecure social environment created conditions where psychoemotionally abusive behaviours were likely to flourish. These four dimensions were drawn from the participants' conceptualisation to create a model that layered through intrapsychic (attitudes); individual action (behaviours); relationship (power dynamics); and sociocultural (social environment) phenomena. The binary concepts of respectful/disrespectful, balanced/unbalanced, mutual needs/own needs, and insecure/secure were used to mark the boundaries of the model.

The participants were also required to provide a conceptualisation of a “psychologically healthy” relationship to provide a contrasting perspective that enabled a deeper understanding of a “psychologically abusive” relationship, and help construct the model mentioned above. It was useful to include the extra angle of analysis, as these ideas pegged the other end of the binary concepts in the four dimensions mentioned above. Some concepts were perfect antonyms of each other; others were slightly different, though still useful. This may be due to the fact that a

“psychologically healthy” relationship is not perfect antonym of a “psychologically abusive” relationship. Concepts such as “non-abusive”, “loving”, “respectful”, “praising” or “approving” were considered as alternatives, however, “healthy” was selected as it could encapsulate many of these concepts, was widely understood and had more potential than the others to be used therapeutically as it could be applied to a broader range of relationships. Thus, some technical accuracy was sacrificed to enhance participation and provide a counter model that could be useful therapeutically when working with either victims or perpetrators of psychoemotional abuse. Future research may explore alternative angles of this concept by trialling other terms or phrases.

Aside from the inclusion of a “psychoemotionally healthy relationship” as a counterweight, the conceptual understanding of psychoemotional abuse offered by the participants of this study had several differences from the conceptualisations developed among academic circles. Indeed, the main similarity that emerged was that neither group was able to provide a watertight, fixed definition of psychoemotional abuse. It appeared as slippery for this study’s participants as it has been for others.

Compared to definitions offered by researchers such as Iwaniec, (1996), Tomison and Tucci (1997) and Pipes and LeBov-Keeler (1997), the relationship described in the participants’ conceptualisation of psychoemotional abuse was not confined to one particular type of relationship, such as parent-child or husband-wife. The participants’ conceptualisation also differed from Loring’s (1994) definition, as the participants believed that psychoemotional abuse could involve an interaction between more than two individuals. They conceived that more than one party could

be psychoemotionally abusive and more than one party could be harmed by a single act.

The participants’ conceptualisation of psychoemotional abuse was also quite different from the three common criteria that some researchers, such as O’Leary (1999) and Glaser and Prior (1997), have used to define psychological or emotional abuse – a durable pattern of action; the perpetrator’s intent to harm and a perception by the victim that they have been harmed by the act in question. As the participants were asked to comment on their understanding of a psychoemotionally abusive relationship rather than an encounter, their summarised conceptualisation carried an inherent sense of durability. Some of the characteristics mentioned in the conceptualisation, such as tension and patterns of communication, conveyed the likelihood that the relationship had survived more than one encounter.

However, in spite of the inherent bias towards a longer time perspective carried by the concept of ‘relationship’, the word ‘incident’ could easily replace it in the first two paragraphs of their conceptualisation to accommodate single acts of psychoemotional abuse among strangers. The final two paragraphs could also be rephrased to account for isolated incidents of psychoemotional abuse, without compromising the integrity of their sentiments. Therefore, while the participants in this study implied a sense of duration within their conceptualisation of a psychoemotionally abusive relationship, the core elements of their conceptualisation could also apply to single incidents of psychoemotional abuse.

This frame of psychoemotionally abusive relationships was offered to the participants to encourage them to consider psychoemotional abuse from a wider perspective than a single event. In order to describe a relationship, they needed to consider a wider timeframe, which invited thinking across a potentially wider scope of incidents than the most obvious examples of psychoemotional disintegration, such as insults. This helped elicit a deeper understanding of the range of examples that comprise this phenomenon. While there was certainly a risk that requesting a description of a psychoemotionally abusive relationship might overlook single acts of abuse, what eventuated was the opposite. The comments offered by some of the female participants trapped patterns of subtle, small events, which may have been otherwise dismissed as irrelevant or trivial, if they were not contextualised within the patterns over a long-term timeframe. For example, some comments are unlikely to be picked up as part of an abusive pattern when seen in isolation, such as when Sarah’s husband asked her to contemplate life without their son – this could only be seen as a veiled death threat within the context of his other menacing behaviour over time (e.g., shooting arrows just over the child’s head).

The conceptualisation offered by the participants also made it clear that the participants thought that psychoemotional abuse could be established even when the perpetrators did not deliberately intend to harm the other parties. To them, acts born of ignorance or insensitivity were still regarded as abusive. The participants’ conceptualisation confirmed the findings of a similar piece of research by Keashly (2001) who also asked members of the general population for their definition of emotional abuse. Her group did not regard intent as a factor that distinguished abusive from non-abusive acts either.

This is not an attempt to dismiss the issue of intent from these studies. While intent may not matter when it comes to the determining the establishment of the psychoemotional abuse or its effect; it certainly does matter when people are required to manage the incident, such as those seeking forgiveness, or administering punishment. Indeed, the intent that potentially drives various patterns of psychoemotional abuse is such a central aspect of understanding this phenomenon that it is discussed at some length later in the chapter.

The perception of the person being harmed was not explicitly mentioned as a condition of psychoemotional abuse in the participants’ summarised conceptual understanding. The experience of people who were either unaware that they were being abused or abusive was common among the stories that arose during the interviews, supporting previous findings by researchers such as Keashly (2001), Loring (1994) and Marshall (1999). Some participants were confused by the ambiguity of some of the behaviour that was directed towards them and had diminished confidence in their own judgement – particularly if they were isolated from other reliable alternative views. Others did not understand the context of the behaviour until they could witness it from a different vantage point, such as the participant who remarked “The old man never showed any anger to anyone else except for me, in hindsight.”

Participants were also exposed to some forms of “grooming”, where relatively innocuous remarks would lay the foundations for subsequent abuse (e.g., “I thought you were an open-minded woman”). Thus, there appeared to be some configurations

of psychoemotional abuse that were constructed like a jigsaw puzzle - piece by piece – with the full picture unveiled over time. Therefore, there is a risk that a greater volume of harm from abusive acts may be enabled if the recipients’ perception of harm became a precondition of psychoemotional abuse, or if single acts were dismissed (Keashly, 2001; Moran et al., 2002).

The participants’ conceptualisation introduced some fresh ideas that have not been seen in academic definitions of psychoemotional abuse reviewed in this thesis. The first of these was the notion of one’s rights to equality in a relationship. Their summarised statement declared that equality was a fundamental condition of a relationship, and that acts that breached that condition were abusive. The issue that was raised through their conceptualisation of having sufficient space in a relationship to freely pursue one’s own interests highlighted the point that psychoemotional abuse could occur over a broad range of time and space; which makes it different from physical and sexual forms of abuse. The psychoemotional abuser can condition their targets so that they suffer a restricted lifestyle, even when the abuser is absent.

The participants’ conceptualisation also introduced the notion of “avoidance” into the lexicon; which varies slightly from the more common concept of “neglect” (Garbrino et al., 1996; Glaser, 2002). Avoidance implies some deliberation and evasive action; whereas negligence can be enacted through carelessness and oversight.

They also highlighted the quality of the security of the social environment as an important component of psychoemotional abuse, which loosely aligns with the

hostile environment category in Follingstad and Edmundson’s (2010), Measure of Psychologically Abusive Behaviours survey. Thus, the participants noticed the stage as well as the actors. The inclusion of “tension” probably reflected one of the most outstanding effects that they remembered from their direct experience with the phenomenon.

The notions of “dishonest and manipulative communication patterns” in the participants’ conceptual understanding of psychoemotional abuse implied styles of behaviour that included some form of strategy to take advantage of another person. The phrasing was broad enough to capture passive, aggressive or passive aggressive actions, such as ignoring, lying or stonewalling. A focus on dishonesty and manipulation also suggested that honesty was the expected standard in relationships. Interestingly, the participants, such as Sam, who regarded their relationships as a “game”, were more likely to describe manipulative strategies as not methods of abuse, but as pragmatic tactics necessary to either win the game or defend against others’ strategies. This suggests that when manipulative or dishonest communication patterns are the norm in some sub-cultures, they may not be regarded as abusive by the people involved.

The conceptual understanding developed by the participants also addressed several issues raised by Diane Follingstad (2007, 2009) in two of the most important papers on this topic in recent years. One of Follingstad’s concerns is that the study of psychoemotional abuse has been developed using the same assumptions and models as physical abuse. She argued that this is inappropriate, as unlike a reasonably unambiguous act of physical abuse, an act of psychoemotional abuse may have many

interpretations. For example, an act of silence could constitute psychoemotional withdrawal, restraint from uttering something offensive or a pause as the person is thinking of a sensible response.

I agree with Follingstad's (2009) view that it is important that psychoemotionally abusive behaviour can be disentangled from persuasive, but respectful communication methods. For example, attempts to persuade others to change their mind on a topic, or respectful expressions of humour, or assertively managing conflict should not be regarded as abuse. I also agree that normative behaviour would be an important interpretive tool to help frame the social context that surrounds the act.

However, the establishment of a satisfactory body of normative behaviour will be difficult to obtain, due to the multiple nuances, power relations, cultural and sub-cultural interpretations and oscillating perceptions of the victim, perpetrator, witness, expert and judge regarding issues such as the meaning of the act; and the appropriateness of the interpretation and reaction of the victim. The use of normative behaviour may also be problematic if psychoemotionally abusive behaviour is the norm in culture where the behaviour took place (e.g., harsh parenting styles where it is common to smack and belittle children, or sports where insulting opponents is considered part of the game).

There is also a risk that the layers of complexity that would need to be unravelled to simplify legal decision making may place some of the more subtle forms of abusive behaviour into doubt and create new loopholes that could prolong

cases to the point where they are too expensive to pursue. At the very least, normative standards should sharpen adjudicators’ focus on acts that are more clearly psychoemotionally abusive (e.g., acts of psychoemotional disintegration, such as racist or sexist remarks) and provide more context around acts that are murkier (e.g., acts of psychoemotional oppression or withdrawal).

While I generally agree with Follingstad’s point that there are problems with attempting to transpose models of psychoemotional abuse from the standard models used for physical abuse, I think that the physical abuse model can serve as a useful metaphor for the “striking” patterns of psychoemotional abuse, such as psychoemotional disintegration and some forms of psychoemotional abuse through a second party. The main problems arise when it is used as a metaphor for all types of psychoemotional abuse, as it does not quite capture the essence of other patterns such as psychoemotional withdrawal, oppression and restriction.

The development of both a denser body of normative standards of psychoemotionally abusive behaviour and more sophisticated models of the subtler patterns of psychoemotional abuse are sorely needed directions for future research. Hopefully the models drafted through this study can help contribute to these developments.

Follingstad bravely mentioned that the prospect of the client’s “over-sensitivity” to certain comments or actions was the elephant in the room that many professionals had been tip-toeing around for decades. I support her position that the field needs to develop to a more mature platform where issues such as over-sensitivity

can be discussed without fear of immediately being accused as a victim-blamer. However, we need to remain mindful of what is at stake and who is likely to suffer most if the pendulum swings too far the other way. Adjudicators need to be very careful when assessing issues such as the “over-sensitivity” of a victim’s reactions, as it is critical that they do not compound the abuse with “insensitive remarks” themselves. Those who have studied or worked with survivors of any type of abuse or trauma will be very conscious of the notion of ‘victim-blaming’ and the risks of re-abusing clients by dismissing or trivialising recipients’ perspectives. Indeed, some of the participants in this study stated it was the experience of not being believed by others or not being protected by society that hurt as much, if not more, than the act of psychoemotional abuse itself. This was supported by the professionals who were interviewed and by researchers such as Ullman and Filipas (2001) who found that victims of sexual abuse who received negative social reactions were more likely to develop severe PTSD symptoms than those who were more effectively supported.

I believe that the victim-blaming notion has enough political currency now to develop a more mature public position on this topic, so that the field is not publicly caught between extreme positions that either argue that all statements should be believed at face value or that people complaining about psychoemotional abuse are weak, over-sensitive or are merely looking for unwarranted sympathy or compensation. A common practice for many therapists is to accept the clients’ comments non-judgementally early in the therapy and challenge comments in later sessions as the trust in the relationship grows stronger. More research exploring the issue of “sensitivity” would be an important step forward in the field’s development, as the threat of being labelled “over-sensitive” may also prohibit treatment or action

that would stop psychoemotional abuse. Some of the participants in this study regretted that they were reluctant to seek help or lodge formal complaints as they did not want to appear as though they were over-reacting.

Another of Follingstad’s concerns was that the field is at risk of over-estimating psychoemotional abuse through loose measuring tools, such as checklists, that relied solely on the self-report of recipients of abuse. This practice may unfairly over-label people as psychoemotional abusers, when the incidents actually caused little or no harm. There is undoubtedly a risk of overstating the incidence of psychoemotional abuse and over-labelling abusers, when simplistic checklists are used as the only source of investigation. Indeed, there is a bitter irony that this mislabelling could constitute a form of psychoemotional abuse in itself. One of the main reasons why interviews were used in this thesis was that they provided extra information on the context of the psychoemotionally abusive acts that enabled a richer understanding of the participants’ experiences. This is not to say though that surveys cannot be useful as initial screening devices, or as tools that help raise awareness of psychoemotional abuse, but it is important that their results are treated with caution, if no other information on the context of the act supports them.

This research sought conceptual understandings and examples of psychoemotional abuse from the perspectives of perpetrators as well as recipients, which is a small advance, though it still ultimately relied on self-reporting. Different approaches were considered for the design of this research, such as interviewing both parties of a dispute to seek contrasting versions, but the ethical risks of the interviews or subsequent material sparking more conflict was deemed too risky. Perhaps future

research could be designed so that incidents of psychoemotional abuse are examined from multiple perspectives. For example, the self-reporter’s version could be sensitively cross-examined by different witnesses as well.

Follingstad’s (2007) point that much of the behaviour that may be deemed as abusive through the surveys may be infrequent and not necessarily problematic for the recipient or the relationship also raises some interesting issues. As the focus of this study was on incidents that were harmful and did not investigate the full scope of psychoemotionally abusive acts, these results can neither confirm nor refute the position that infrequent psychoemotional abuse is not damaging for most people, most of the time. Indeed, this position may well be correct. Anecdotally, it seems as though some people do enjoy playing psychoemotional games or teasing each other, and appear to suffer no long term damage. Aspects in the four-dimensional model, such as respect, the power balance, behaviour that supports both parties’ needs and the security of the social environment may help practitioners determine the difference between “safe” playing behaviour and unsafe abusive behaviour. It is quite possible that certain elements of those four dimensions are critical protective factors against the ill-effects of psychoemotional abuse. Elements of this model could become integrated into the development of a framework of risk and protective factors that have been advocated by researchers, such as Iwaniec et al. (2007) and Sneddon (2003).

However, researchers and practitioners need to be very careful about dismissing “low-grade” incidents of psychoemotional abuse too readily. The information that was gathered through this study demonstrated that single incidents of

psychoemotional abuse can hurt (Moran et al., 2002); and infrequent, subtle acts may set up the conditions of future abuse (e.g., the laying of psychoemotional landmines) or influence the culture of the social environment and establish norms where abusive behaviour is easily excused (e.g., “it’s just part of the game”). Thus, there are socio-political reasons as well as therapeutic reasons why professional attention should be drawn to a larger spread of behaviours than just those which are most obviously abusive. Once attention has been drawn to these behaviours, the qualitative differences among them and contextual circumstances surrounding them can be assessed using models that chart the actions along a continuum.

This is why I advocate for a multi-layered definition – one that suits the purposes of therapy and one that is useful for legal and forensic pursuits. The conceptual understanding that was summarised from the words of this study’s participants will probably not allay Follingstad’s concerns that the whole field is open to errors due to one-sided measurement, as her focus was on tightening the definition and measurement for legal and forensic purposes. The purpose of this study was to assist practitioners gain a better understanding of how people in the general population understand the concept, how they dealt with it and how they think it can be prevented. This study also attempted to move beyond an exclusive focus on victims’ perspectives, as all of the participants were asked about their experiences of times when they have subjected psychoemotional abuse onto others as well. Thus, the conceptualisation offered in this thesis comes as much from a perpetrators’ perspective as it does a victims’.

Even though psychoemotional abuse may never be satisfactorily measured via a paper and pencil format as Follingstad suggested, this predicament does not need to stymie progress in the field in arenas outside of the courtroom. There is much that can be practically applied and learned without a watertight definition. Thus, I think a multi-layered definition, or series of definitions of psychoemotional abuse may work best: a tighter definition for legal purposes and a broader definition for therapeutic and educational purposes. The focus of this research has been on developing the latter, but the four dimensional model may introduce parameters that help the construction of the former. Before this occurs though, further research will be required to test the legitimacy of these dimensions. Another line of future research could explore where the notion of a ‘psychoemotional attack’ could become a useful distinction from psychoemotional abuse. For example, the attack could describe the act towards the target; whereas the abuse could describe a broader notion that also includes the effect of the act.

The development of a graded definition of psychoemotional abuse (as modelled in Table 2) may help legal requirements. Different experiences of psychoemotional abuse could be graded using a system similar to the grading of burns or murders: first, second and third degree psychoemotional abuse depending on conditions such as the clarity of the act. Future research could be dedicated to developing such a system or assessing the outcomes of French legislation that addresses psychological violence.

Until such research progresses, the model developed here aims to live up to the standards of statistician, George E. Box’s truism: “All models are wrong, but some are useful”. Even though it is still embryonic, there seem to be several pragmatic uses of the dual threshold model and the four dimensional model of psychoemotional abuse.

The first is that the model can be used as a simple method of raising community and political awareness of the complexities and subtleties of psychoemotional abuse. The use of four dimensions and spectrums pegged at either end by binary concepts keeps a complex concept contained. The model has been packaged in the language of non-academics, which may help facilitate its communication to others in the broader community and provide them with early warning signs of psychoemotional abuse.

The model also presents four layers within which relationships can be assessed. The model attempted to provide a template that could be used by therapists to check for relationship patterns that would indicate the presence of psychoemotional abuse in a relationship and chart the aspects that needed to be worked on for the relationship to become more psychoemotionally healthy. The model could be developed into a simple diagnostic tool that could quickly assess the risks of psychoemotional abuse in a relationship. For example, the following questions could be answered along a range of options on a likert scale that spans the choices of never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always:

- (a) How often does your partner treat you as an equal in your relationship?
(‘partner’ could be replaced with other relationship types)

- (b) How often does your partner behave respectfully towards you?

- (c) How often does your partner do things to advance his or her own needs over the needs of the relationship?

- (d) Do you feel able to speak your mind freely and express who you are in the relationship?

If the responses to the questions are “never”, “rarely” or “sometimes”, the likelihood of a pattern of psychoemotionally abusive practices may be high. This model could be developed into a useful tool to help therapists working with people who are not willing to contemplate that they are behaving in a psychoemotionally abusive manner towards others; but would concede that they could be more respectful, supportive and willing to build a more equal and secure social environment. The brief diagnostic test could help the therapist move past the clients’ defensive barriers and prompt conversations about how concepts such as respect, support and equality connect with the broader topic of psychoemotional abuse.

The four dimensional structure provides some checks and balances against rash diagnoses. For example, if the relationship’s social environment is insecure, but the balance of power is equal, the attitude is respectful, and the behaviour seeks to

advance both parties' goals, then the insecurity may be due to other factors, such as past experiences that one or more of the parties have brought into the relationship.

Thus, where one dimension may have failed the brief diagnostic test, a pass in the other dimensions can provide some context around the behaviour. For example, if one person sought to achieve their own goals at the expense of the mutual goals of the relationship, but the other three dimensions in this model were positive (ie. respectful attitudes, equal balance of power and secure environment), the relationship may not necessarily be psychoemotionally abusive. It is possible that some relationships are set up so that the goals of one party take prominence over the other party's and that this is accepted by all people involved. Thus it may not cause tension if both parties agree to this arrangement for the sake of other benefits it brings (e.g., financial reward, status).

The model may also help detect other subtle patterns of vulnerability. For example, if one person's attitudes are disrespectful, but the other three dimensions are positive, then the relationship may be psychoemotionally abusive, but the abuse may be disguised. A person in this relationship may be at greater risk of some of the more subtle forms of psychoemotional abuse, such as psychoemotional oppression or restriction. In another example, some cults may produce secure environments, behaviours that appear focused on a mutual interest, and attitudes that appear respectful, but the power structures are clearly unequal (Samways, 1994).

It is quite plausible that one or a combination of some of the four dimensions may predict a higher risk of abuse, and that the other dimensions may predict some

form of protection. A model of a “psychoemotionally healthy” relationship could be used to assess the standards of relationships and provide an image of how the relationship could evolve if certain attitudes, behaviours, power dynamics and environments changed.

It is difficult to account for the full spectrum of relationships within any model and thus it certainly does not attempt to claim to completely resolve the debates on the definitional problems inherent in the study of psychoemotional abuse. At this point, it is unclear whether the conceptualisations of psychoemotional abuse raised in this thesis are necessarily improvements on other versions, but they are certainly worth exploring with a range of future studies. The model is still very rudimentary and its various configurations and nuances will need to be tested further and refined with subsequent studies.

One of the difficulties inherent in any model of psychoemotional abuse is the prospect of adequately addressing deceptive behaviour. Often the abusive behaviour disclosed by the participants was masked in front of witnesses, and only became apparent behind closed doors or in hindsight. This makes the behaviour difficult to identify, difficult to prove and difficult to research. The sub-text that formed the binary points of each of the four dimensions contained many descriptions of deception, with terms used such as “not staying genuine”, “masking pain”, “manipulate”, “being used”, “hidden agendas”, “not facing real issues”, “lack of honesty and openness”, and “dishonest dialogue”. There is plenty of scope for future researchers to use creative methods to investigate this fascinating aspect of psychoemotional abuse in more depth.

One of the major limitations of the four dimensional model is that some relationships, such as relationships involving parents and children, or employers and employees involve inherently unbalanced structures of power. This does not suggest that these structural power imbalances make these relationships inherently abusive, although it may mean that the model suits some relationships (e.g., intimate adult relationships) better than others (e.g., teachers and students). Future studies could test whether the other three dimensions can still determine psychoemotional abuse in structurally unequal relationships. Future researchers could also explore examples of how power is used in relationships that are structurally unequal.

The structures of power and distribution of resources that could influence or threaten to influence the behaviour of the other party (e.g, ability to terminate employment or take away privileges) can disadvantage one party and make them more vulnerable to psychoemotional abuse, but what actually matters is how this power is applied. For example, even though a parent-child relationship may be structurally unequal, it need not be psychoemotionally abusive if the parties demonstrate respect, the actions are vested in both parties interests and all parties feel that the social environment is secure. It should also be noted that power has been described in this study as a dynamic entity. Children can exert power over parents or teachers and employees can exert power over employers. It is the patterns repeated over time that create an impression of stability. The notion of equality was a very important concept for the participants in this study when they considered the psychoemotional ‘health’ of a relationship. At the very least, the perception of equality seemed to matter, especially in relationships involving peers, such as friends

or intimate partners. It may not be a concept that is so familiar to children and other notions such as fairness may prove to be better suited.

The model may also not adequately account for competitive relationships, such as those between sportspeople, politicians or business rivals. It seems likely that it is possible to be competitive without being psychoemotionally abusive, provided that the competitors can respect each other's rights and the behaviours ensure that their broad needs are attended to (e.g., that the rules are upheld to maintain the integrity of the sport and ensure that people have a fair chance to compete). A deeper investigation into psychoemotional abuse in competitive relationships would prove a very valuable addition to the body of literature.

A series of terms used in the participants' conceptual understandings will need to be clarified in subsequent studies, such as “manipulative communication patterns”, “parties' freedom to express themselves”, the use of “force” and the resolution of conflicts to the satisfaction of “at least one party's standards”. The conceptual understanding developed through this study aimed to gather non-academic insights, not to manufacture a precise definition that could become the new benchmark for diagnoses or legal proceedings.

There was great value asking the participants for their understandings as they were able to illuminate abusive behaviours that may not be apparent in formal definitions, such as a wink, a pause, or a grin. Information on these subtle forms of transmitting psychoemotional abuse are particularly important when the behaviour is coded. These perspectives grounded the model in the participants' reality and

potentially open new lines of study in the social politics of relationships, such as explorations of the intersections between people’s needs in a relationship and the impact of various forms of psychoemotional abuse, or whether different forms of “force” are considered as legitimate means of resolving conflicts. It would also be interesting to explore the moral tensions surrounding the concepts of freedom of expression and other people’s rights to psychoemotional safety. People enter relationships with differing degrees of security and expectation; different interpretations of cues; different anticipations, thresholds of tolerance and sensitivities. They also enter with different views on normality and the types of psychoemotional strategies that can reasonably be applied to achieve individual and relationship goals.

Experiences of Receiving and Perpetrating Psychoemotional Abuse

The findings that were obtained from an investigation into the first aim of this research - exploring the dynamic processes of psychoemotional abuse from the perspectives of people who have received and perpetrated the abuse - may have several uses for practitioners and researchers. The following sections discuss how professionals could utilise insights from the five patterns of psychoemotional abuse described in the WORDS model and the experiences of the participants’ dual identity as receivers and perpetrators of psychoemotional abuse to predict, prevent and reduce future abuse. Various challenges faced by the professionals themselves are also examined.

The WORDS Model

The WORDS model described five movement patterns of psychoemotional abuse that the participants received and perpetrated, which essentially involved actions that rejected, dominated, restrained, attacked and ganged up on another person. The patterns characterised a wide variety of actions that have been identified as psychoemotional abuse and loosely correlate with categories on the psychometric scales developed by other researchers, such as Garbarino et al. (1996), Tolman (1992), Moran et al. (2002), Murphy and Hoover (1999) and Follingstad and Edmundson (2010). The exception was the pattern of abuse through a secondary source, which was identified in the WORDS model as a distinct movement pattern as it sought to conscript other people into the act of psychoemotional abuse.

The categorisation of withdrawal used in this study captured behaviours that may not be as overtly deliberate or aggressive as those captured in the categories of “hostile withdrawal” (Murphy & Hoover, 1999), “denying emotional responsiveness” (Garbarino et al., 1996), “emotional withholding” (Tolman, 1992) “rejection/abandonment” (Smullens, 2010), “extreme rejection” or “deprivation of basic needs” (Moran et al., 2002). Even the “withhold emotionally and physically” category on the scale Follingstad and Edmundson (2010) used, depended upon the strategy being used as a means of punishing the victim. The psychoemotional withdrawal that was accepted in this thesis does not assume that the perpetrator intended to harm the other person. Rather, it assumed that the behaviour can be abusive regardless of the perpetrator’s intent.

While there was quite a lot of synergy among the category of psychoemotional withdrawal and other researchers' categories of withdrawing or rejecting patterns of behaviour, the same could not be said for the other patterns of psychoemotional abuse. Possibly the most amorphous category was the one described in this thesis as psychoemotional oppression. Some categories used by Follingstad and Edmundson (2010), such as “manipulation”, “treatment as an inferior” and “hostile environment” would qualify in this thesis as elements of psychoemotionally oppressive behaviour. Perhaps the closest categories used by other researchers were Murphy and Hoover's (1999) “domination and intimidation”, although it could be argued that some intimidating behaviours would be categorised as “psychoemotional disintegration” in this thesis. Smullens' (2010) “enmeshment” category is also close, but it involves elements that would be classed as “psychoemotionally restrictive” behaviours as they limit the other person's freedom. The same is true for Tolman's (1992) “contingent love” category and Moran et al.'s (2002) “emotional blackmail”.

Other researchers' categories, such as Tolman's (1999) “creation of fear”, Follingstad and Edmundson's (2010) “threats to humiliate”, Garbarino et al's (1996) “terrorising” and “exploiting/corrupting” and Moran et al's (2002) “terrorising” and “corruption/exploitation” have certain aspects that would qualify as psychoemotional oppression in this thesis, but others that would be more suited to psychoemotional disintegration as the actions would have directly attacked their target, rather than ground them down over time.

There were several categories that closely aligned with “psychoemotional restriction”, with Murphy and Hoover's (1999) “restrictive engulfment” standing out

as the best overall match, followed by categories that clearly constituted psychoemotionally restrictive behaviours, such as “monitoring”, “controlling personal decisions”, “isolation” (Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010; Tolman, 1992), “extreme overprotection and overindulgence” (Smullens, 2010), “economic abuse” (Garbarino et al., 1996) and “rigid sex roles” (Tolman, 1992). Other categories such as “monopolisation” (Tolman, 1999), “deprivation of valued objects” (Moran et al., 2002), “stalking” (Logan et al., 2000) and “jealousy” (Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010) are strongly related, but also exhibit movement patterns that are likely to overlap with other categories, such as psychoemotional disintegration or psychoemotional oppression.

Psychoemotional disintegration also exhibited strong synergies with other researchers’ categories. Quite a few of Follingstad and Edmundson’s (2010) categories aligned directly with psychoemotional disintegration, such as “verbal abuse”, “wound regarding sexuality”, “wound regarding fidelity”, and possibly also “sadistic behaviour” and “public humiliation”, although these could also be applied using the patterns of withdrawal, oppression and secondary abuse. Smullens’ (2010) “rage” and Tolman’s (1992) “degradation” and “psychological destabilisation” would also feature as components of psychoemotional disintegration, although they would not account for all of the tactics used in this category. Nor would Garbarino et al.’s (1996) “spurning”, Murphy and Hoover’s (1999) “denigration”, Moran et al.’s (2002) “humiliation/degradation” or “inflicting marked distress or discomfort”, as other patterns of behaviour such as psychoemotional withdrawal or oppression could also forge these outcomes.

The main difference in the method of categorisation, was that this thesis used movement patterns to delineate the types of psychoemotional abuse; whereas other researchers used a mixture of descriptions of behaviour and outcomes. More quantitatively oriented future research could use techniques such as factor analysis to test the alignment between the WORDS method of categorisation and other methods used in psychometric instruments.

Aside from providing a memorable acronym that could be useful for community education and awareness raising campaigns, there appeared to be some signs that the five patterns identified in the WORDS model are generated by different motives, concealed by different disguises and exert different influences on the target.

The motives outlined in Table 10 are tentative and will require more rigorous testing in subsequent studies. However, two interesting points emerged through this data. The first confirms the conclusions in other studies that suggested that not all styles of psychoemotional abuse seem to be driven by the same motive. As different patterns of motives are behind different acts, different methods will be required to influence the reduction of the five styles of psychoemotional abuse. The second point is that not all of the motives that initiate the various forms of psychoemotional abuse appear to have ill intent. Some of the motives that underpin psychoemotional withdrawal, disintegration or abuse through a secondary source may intend to create space or time for a more sophisticated response, gently signal disapproval, avoid conflict, test another's character, play, gain support or protect oneself from abuse.

A sharper understanding of these motives, strategies of deception and impacts could help professionals who work with survivors of psychoemotional abuse, such as therapists and child protection workers, better predict the extent of psychoemotional abuse in the lives of the people they work with, the trajectory of effects and improve their ability to intervene effectively as early as possible.

This information would also be valuable to therapists who work with people who have been psychoemotionally abusive, as it could help them cut through their clients' defensive barriers more efficiently and unveil a more realistic repertoire of abuse. The information on the likely impact of different forms of abuse could help them enlighten their client about the risks and early warning signs of the impacts of their behaviour. The following sections detail the potential developments under each of the five patterns from the perspectives of people who used and who received this type of abuse.

Psychoemotional Withdrawal

The range of behaviours that participants experienced that were regarded as forms of psychoemotional withdrawal included moodiness in the house to make visitors uncomfortable and unlikely to return; refusing to attend social events; deliberately not talking to the other person for prolonged periods of time (often stonewalling until the other person apologises or breaks the silence first); refusing to participate in activities that benefited the relationship (e.g., counselling); using affection as a bargaining tool or a weapon; ignoring; cold interactions; and speaking another language to ostracise someone.

The findings suggested that it was often men who psychoemotionally withdrew, and the women in the sample reported more severe experiences of being psychoemotionally withdrawn from – particularly the women from the family violence sub-group. A conclusion on the gendered patterns of this form of abuse cannot be confidently made beyond this sample, as it was biased with a group of men with a history of being psychoemotionally abusive and women with a history of receiving extensive levels of psychoemotional abuse. Other studies on ostracism (Williams, 2002) suggested that this behaviour is common across genders and there are many anecdotal stories of teenage girls punishing others in their social group by socially excluding them (Bosacki, 2005).

From the information provided by the participants in this study, it seemed that the strategy of psychoemotional withdrawal aimed to psychoemotionally unsettle the other person, infect them with self-doubt, heighten their anxiety about the relationship and increase their dependence upon the strategy’s executioner to resolve this anxiety. Some people seemed to deliberately engage in psychoemotional withdrawal in an aggressive manner to punish another person or build pressure upon them until they psychoemotionally broke.

This is consistent with my experience of working with men who have committed family violence. Some men in these groups have confessed to using methods of psychoemotional withdrawal as weapons designed to punish or increase the pressure on their targets by burdening them with a behaviour that they expect will invoke uncomfortable feelings, such as guilt, frustration or shame. Once the verbal

communication ceased, then the prospects for a quick resolution to the argument ceased as well. Some saw psychoemotional withdrawal as a form of non-violent protest or “strike” in the relationship.

Other men I have worked with have stated that they intended to subtly signal to the other party or parties that they were not happy or supportive of a position the others took at the time. The act of psychoemotional withdrawal was meant as a non-offensive method of alerting the other party to their sense of dissatisfaction and was often carried out when other people were present, so that a hostile argument did not erupt in front of an audience. In this context, it was intended as a signal to the other that “I am not happy with you and we need to talk about this later.”

Methods of psychoemotional withdrawal have been applied by other men I have counselled as they perceived that their partners had much sharper communication skills than they did. Thus, they retrospectively understood that episodes of prolonged silence and stone-walling were methods of disarming their partners’ strategic advantage. Under the circumstances, psychoemotional withdrawal was one of the most powerful positions they could have taken, as they chose not to go into battle in an environment where they thought the odds of winning were stacked against them.

Other men in these counselling groups have claimed that they have stayed silent in an attempt to “keep the peace” and avoid a more costly mistake of saying something offensive. Some have stated that their silence is an attempt to maintain their composure and break their habit of an impulsive, violent response to an

argument. It may be possible that some believe psychoemotional withdrawal is a means of preventing psychoemotional disintegration or physical abuse, which they see as more harmful.

Another explanation that I have heard is the suggestion that they were emotionally dumbfounded by the situation before them and felt that they did not have the communication skills required to successfully deal with the situation at the time. They decided to retreat from the interaction and think of another way of working through their respective dilemmas. It is also quite plausible that this style of abuse may be favoured by people who want to maintain psychological control over another, but want to leave no trace of evidence.

Some participants on the receiving end of psychoemotional withdrawal in this study stated that they undeservedly took responsibility for the conflict merely to end the tension. Essentially, recipients of psychoemotional withdrawal felt diminished, devalued, disempowered and disrespected by their treatment, which was exacerbated if they were also isolated from other mechanisms of support. Some became angry and frustrated at what they perceived to be an immature response from the other person. Indeed, some reported being set up to be accused of being abusive themselves, if they reacted to the frustration of chronically being ignored in an overtly aggressive manner. Thus, they were punished with silence and punished again with the entrapment.

Punishment was one of the motives noted by Williams (2002) in her study on ostracism. While the shunning process of ostracism is a slightly narrower concept than the actions listed above that constitute psychoemotional withdrawal, some of the other motives Williams (2002) described are useful here. For example, it is very likely that defensiveness also explains why psychoemotional withdrawal is applied by some people. It can be used as a tactic to defend against another's attack, perhaps as a method of not providing the other person with more fuel for their argument, or to claim more time to gather one's thoughts and implement a strategy that prevents additional harm. It is feasible that a defensive use of psychoemotional withdrawal may not be abusive if it is conducted in a respectful manner. Additional testing of the four dimensional model could examine whether it can discern assertive psychoemotional strategies from abusive ones.

Williams (2002) also proposed that some people were oblivious that their behaviour ostracised others. Again, it is quite plausible that some psychoemotional withdrawers could be oblivious too, although it is probably less likely in intimate relationships, as participants in this study who received this form of abuse reported that they tried to communicate directly with their abuser many times. In any case, an oblivious style should offer no legitimate excuse for acts of psychoemotional withdrawal as it would provide a loophole that would be used by many to avoid responsibility.

It also seems logical that behaviour that fitted the characteristics of psychoemotional withdrawal may be more frequently used by people with poor communication skills or by people who did not trust their ability to verbally

communicate without being abusive. Some justified this approach by stating that they were “keeping the peace”. While the rhetoric, and possibly the intent may be noble, this method of peace-keeping could constitute an abusive style of behaviour. In my experience of counselling men who had been abusive, it was often the men who were not very articulate who defended their behaviour with the rationale of keeping the peace. They often reasoned that it was better to say nothing than to be abusive or to disengage from a verbal conflict that they thought they would lose. Silence was used as a method of retreating from a conflict or protesting against an outcome that they did not like. Some saw silence as a less harmful means of expressing their disdain than verbal or physical abuse. It also seems possible that it may be used by people whose aim is to psychoemotionally detach from or abandon another person that they want to spend less time near. While this research did not examine these propositions in detail, future research may, as they could prove to be powerful predictors of psychoemotional withdrawal.

Psychoemotional Oppression

Methods of psychological oppression seemed to be the most cunning, deceitful forms of psychoemotional abuse. The scope of behaviours performed by psychoemotional oppressors discussed by this sample included various forms of deception, such as mind games, lying, shifting the yardstick, double standards, broken promises, coded messages, manipulation, and the adoption of Jekyll and Hyde personas, where the abuser would change their behaviour in front of different audiences to maximise the impact of the abuse and minimise its detection.

The topic of the facades used by psychoemotional abusers is worthy of a study in its own right, as it is a vital issue that is rarely discussed in the literature. From the pieces of information gleaned from the interviews, these facades seem to be constructed differently for different audiences, although they have a positive image in common, such as the “good family man” or the “good citizen”. In a sense, the psychoemotional oppressors also use facades to trap the witness into an illusion, and screen the abusive, controlling behaviour from scrutiny. Information from additional research that can help expose these façades will be extremely valuable to professionals and people suffering from psychoemotional oppression.

Some of the most insidious forms of psychoemotional oppression mentioned by the participants were subtly designed to plant seeds of doubt in the target’s mind - seeds that gained nutrition from the target’s imagination and gradually eroded their confidence and esteem over time. A few drops of psychoemotional poison over a long period tended to create deep-seated, corrosive damage to some participants’ self-image; more than the acute methods of destruction typically associated with psychoemotional disintegration. Indeed, some participants noted that this form of psychoemotional abuse had transformed their identities completely. While it would be premature to attempt to attribute linear relationships between certain conditions and types of psychoemotional abuse, it was the women who developed side-effects such as eating disorders or chronic anxiety, who were psychoemotionally oppressed over long periods of time. Further research could examine whether some psychoemotional abuse styles are more likely than others to inflict long-term harm (Follingstad, 2009).

There also was some interplay between the categories of psychoemotional oppression and psychoemotional disintegration in the stories heard through the interviews. For example, a comment such as “You’ll never be any good...” which was directed to Sarah by her husband by itself would typically be regarded as an example of psychoemotional disintegration. However, when it was coupled with a comment such as “Gee, you’re trying really hard” delivered in a patronising manner, the combination became a pattern of psychoemotional oppression, as it attacked Sarah’s confidence and set the perpetrator up in a superior position. Without combining these statements, their context is lost and a comment such as “Gee, you’re trying really hard” would seem nebulous or innocuous to most people. It has a different meaning when juxtaposed against the other statement. It seemed as though the motive behind strategies such as these, contained elements of fear or insecurity that translated into a need to dominate others, coupled with a sense of enjoyment that was gained from the challenge of manipulating another person.

Other participants were subjected to psychoemotional time bombs, where the social environment in the house they lived in became so tense and insecure that people were chronically operating as though they were tip-toeing on eggshells. The psychoemotional oppressor controlled others’ behaviour in the space by heightening their anxiety with the psychoemotional pressure of real and implied threats. In some of the participants’ reports, objects were used to provide a physical form to the threats and introduce physical abuse to the mind of the victim. For example, doors were slammed, walls were smashed and loaded lethal weapons were kept in the house. The time bomb seemed to be presented to signal a reminder that further violence was not far away. The use of threats also signalled that psychoemotional abuse could occur

across time dimensions as the distress resulted from threats of future harm or past regrets as Doyle (2001) has suggested. Threats also could prevent the targets from reporting the incidents or seeking help from others, as they increased the danger of these activities.

It is possible that psychoemotional time bombs could be initiated defensively, to warn others that they were simmering with anger or otherwise emotionally unstable and keep them away. They may have also been used to send out a threatening alarm that aimed to prevent a conflict or argument.

Psychoemotional landmines, on the other hand, appeared to be more provocative as the psychoemotional oppressor would set up the abusive incident like a trap and wait for others to detonate the trigger. This tactic is akin to somebody setting a delicate plate precariously on the edge of a table so that the next person who passes is set up to knock it off the table and smash it on the floor. The landmine was set up to create the illusion that the victim had caused their own harm. Psychoemotional landmines seemed to serve multiple purposes. Not only did they invoke feelings of stupidity, guilt, confusion or embarrassment in their targets and increase their insecurity over a prolonged period; they also transferred the blame, responsibility and accountability for the act onto the victim and gradually chipped away at their status and confidence.

This pattern often overlaps with psychoemotional abuse through a secondary source as it was frequently performed in front of others to heighten the embarrassment and validate the contrived innocence of the perpetrator, as the victim is seen as the

emotive, irrational or abusive party. In this act, the witnesses were subtly co-opted into colluding with the abuse or degrading the target's reputation. It would seem to be extraordinarily difficult to find a solid ground of truthfulness, attach securely to the abuser or to interpret reality in a psychoemotionally landmined environment.

In the interviews, Helen described the notion of “blowing up” as the method she used to release to the pressure she felt. It would be interesting for future research to investigate the phenomenon of “blowing up” and interview people who have courageously taken a stand against tactics of psychoemotional oppression and risked their safety, their jobs or their reputations and who become further victimised.

Other actions mentioned through the interviews that involved sabotaging, undermining and gas-lighting were particularly disturbing as they appeared to be calculated to harm others. The behaviour of gas-lighting - the deliberate hiding and moving of objects to invoke the sense in the victim that they are mentally unstable - was particularly insidious and could be incredibly elaborate. These pre-meditated, elaborate campaigns designed to inflict psychoemotional harm on others require more attention by researchers, as they appear to be cruel, but rare. The majority of psychoemotional abuse in this study involved incidents that happened opportunistically, such as during times of conflict or in the midst of a conversation. This is not to say that these opportunistic acts are accidental or random. It is likely that somebody with a disrespectful attitude, who is in a superior position to another and is not concerned about attending to the other party's goals, has a higher probability than somebody without these pre-conditions of committing an opportunistic psychoemotionally abusive act towards the other party. It also seems

likely that pre-meditated abusers would be more likely to apply psychoemotionally oppressive and restrictive methods than other patterns. Future research could compare the pre-meditated and opportunistic acts of psychoemotional abuse to see if certain conditions or philosophical frameworks could predict each type of act.

It was also noteworthy that the women from the family violence group reported fewer examples of experiencing healthy relationships than other groups. Exposure to psychoemotionally oppressive behaviour may have conditioned them to become more guarded, more cautious about forming new intimate relationships and reluctant to extend the circle of people they become close to. Some research has found that psychoemotional abuse negatively impacts the victim's current relationships and may lead to them restricting their future relationship prospects (e.g., Follingstad, 2009; Garbarino et al., 1996; Loring, 1994); however, additional research is required to determine the link between psychoemotional oppression and the scope of close relationships that survivors are willing to engage with.

The material from the interviews suggested that the motive for psychoemotional oppressors may be the intellectual stimulation or challenge of constructing or engaging with a psychoemotional contest; a need to feel superior to others; or the thrill of successfully tricking or fooling someone. This implied a need for power and control over the other, which in turn could have been motivated by insecurity, fear and a sense of being uncomfortable with one's vulnerability in some situations. There appeared to be a strong theme running through the examples of the interview material of people acting to exert their power, while simultaneously covering up fears, such as the fear of the relationship failing, losing one's current or

former partner, or losing authority, freedom or respect. It is difficult to know how conscious people are of their motives when they apply psychoemotional oppression.

It is quite probable that this pattern of psychoemotional abuse may be used more frequently by people who are less inclined to physically strike, as physical abuse would risk “blowing their cover” and highlighting their strategy of domination. This pattern of abuse may also be used more by people, including couples, who enjoy the intellectual stimulation of conflict or “playing” as some put it; or who feel as though they need to defend against the psychoemotional games initiated by others.

This study’s insights into psychoemotional oppression may be very useful for professionals working in family violence, as this type of abuse may create the most harm over time and seems to be the most difficult to detect and treat as the perpetrator often makes an effort to disguise the acts and leave no trace. There were hints that this behaviour also operated in other settings such as workplaces and schools through comments about tense cultures, which is quite feasible, as political oppression can operate across a large scale (Mullaly, 2002). Future research can explore the extent of these tactics in different settings.

Psychoemotional oppression is the form of psychoemotional abuse most closely aligned with the subordinating concept at the heart of coercive control (Stark, 2007). Although, the entrapping aspects of coercive control resemble elements of psychological restriction, as well. While Stark’s (2007; 2009) conceptualisation of coercive control undoubtedly provides an important contribution to the literature on psychoemotional abuse, it does not stretch across the entire breadth

of the construct. The broader concept of psychoemotional abuse also captures interactions that are potentially milder, shorter and more naïve among all people, such as psychoemotionally abusive behaviours at schools between teenagers of the same gender.

Psychoemotional Restriction

Patterns of psychoemotional restriction were typified by acts that were demanding, regulating and restraining. None of the participants confessed to perpetrating psychoemotional restriction in this study, possibly because it may be the most shameful of the five patterns. While attempts could be made to justify other patterns on more socially desirable grounds (e.g., jokes, misunderstandings, avoiding conflicts) or shift responsibility onto the other party (e.g., psychoemotional landmines), acts of psychoemotional restriction, particularly against intimate partners, simply appear nasty and controlling. It is also possible that none of the participants behaved in this way.

In the absence of direct insights into the motives behind psychoemotional restriction, it seemed logical that the perpetrators of this form of abuse behaved this way to guard or protect something that they were worried about losing, such as their power-base, their authority or their relationship. They may have also been worried about their domineering ways being challenged or exposed by outsiders, as much of the behaviour attempted to isolate intimate partners from contact with other people. The motive behind psychoemotional restriction seemed to be more grounded in fear, jealousy, insecurity, possessiveness and possibly a compulsive nurturance than the

other patterns of psychoemotional abuse. As it was one of the more subtle and isolating forms of psychoemotional abuse, there was also a relatively lower risk of the abuser being held to account.

There were no incidents of classical stalking behaviour identified in the interviews, where the participants either physically followed or were followed by another person. If classical stalking behaviour did occur, it would have been categorised as a type of psychoemotional restriction in the WORDS model as it functioned to limit the victims’ freedom of movement, even though some researchers, such as Basile et al. (2004) distinguished it from psychological or emotional abuse. Some women in this study reported that their behaviour was closely monitored by their husbands in an intimidating manner (e.g., telephone calls checked, random visits during the day to check that they were home); which would qualify as a form of stalking, as it was scoped by researchers such as Brewster (2003).

Financial abuse was included as a method of psychoemotional restriction in this study as it limited the targets’ financial opportunities. It has also been included as a method of psychoemotional abuse by some researchers, such as Garbarino et al. (1996), although it has been highlighted as a distinct form of abuse by others (e.g., Harris & Benson, 2006; Tueth, 2000). There may be practical advantages in noting it separately from psychoemotional and physical abuse, as specific attention can be drawn to it.

Strategies of psychoemotional disintegration and oppression seemed to help achieve the aims of psychoemotional restriction as well, as comments that were

chronically demeaning could create mental prisons that tightly regulated the target's behaviour. As Foucault (1994) noted with the model of the Panopticon, the victim can become so conditioned to their behaviour being under surveillance from others, that they expect this to be the norm. Over time, they gradually set up unconscious mechanisms of self-surveillance and effectively self-regulate their behaviour so that it meets the needs of their psychoemotional captor. The victim can cease attempts to assert him or herself or advance their needs because they expect that these actions will lead to more trouble or punishment. Thus, the victims are ultimately conditioned to remain “on guard” in a position that suits the perpetrator's needs, even though they appear as though they are adopting this position without external pressure.

People who were psychoemotionally restricted also recounted that they had few opportunities to exercise any power over their life's decisions, were insecure, anxious, depressed and lonely. Indeed, two described behaviour that could be described as hyper-vigilant. It took the women who experienced the most severe cases of this form of abuse a lot of courage to escape or challenge this condition and they needed a great deal of support from professionals, friends and family during and directly after this time.

This form of abuse clearly fits the four dimensional model as the perpetrator demonstrates disrespectful attitudes, behaviours that are selfish, adopts a dominant position in the balance of power and establishes an insecure social environment.

Psychoemotional Disintegration

Psychoemotional disintegration was the most common form of psychoemotional abuse across the broadest range of settings and roles, described during the interviews. It is possible that the participants may have over-represented this form of psychoemotional abuse more than the others, as they recalled a clear sense of attack that often exerted an immediate, powerful impact. This direct impression may have made the incident more memorable than the subtler and less conclusive forms of abuse, such as acts that create tense environments, silence, restrict someone’s choices or attempt to collude with others. Psychoemotional disintegrative acts were also the most commonly cited as the types of psychoemotional abuse that signalled problems in the relationship and prompted broader reflection on the other patterns of psychoemotional abuse.

There also were gendered differences in the manner in which psychoemotional disintegration was described. The males in the sample tended to use general comments that suggested it was a reasonably typical communication style in a culture of psychoemotional “sparring”; while the women provided specific, detailed accounts of their experiences that contained verbatim comments. It would be fruitful for future research to investigate how acts of psychoemotional disintegration are tolerated across gender and other demographic differences such as race, sexual orientation and physical ability. It is likely that those in the minority positions of some demographic status groups may be less tolerant of accepting this form of abuse than others who experience its wrath less often.

Some participants acknowledged that their comments were deliberately designed to hurt others, with one man specifically targeting his wife’s weight, as he knew certain comments would humiliate her. Other men recognised the pain they inflicted upon their targets, but added that they had lost control over their behaviour at the time – a perspective that only changed after several sessions of group therapy. All of the men from the family violence sub-groups expressed deep regret about the damage they had inflicted upon their families. The issue of the perpetrators’ regret has not featured in the literature on psychoemotional abuse, possibly because this topic might be seen to soften the view of the perpetrator and excuse their behaviour. I believe that the field is mature enough to research these issues in a manner that compassionately seeks to understand the multiple dimensions of the behaviour, without either excusing it or diminishing efforts to protect and care for people who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing psychoemotional abuse.

While acts of psychoemotional disintegration were typically more overt and colourful than other forms of psychoemotional abuse, some of the reports exposed various tactical disguises that were employed by the perpetrator to cover or excuse their behaviour, other than a lack of impulse control. One example involved attempts to excuse the abuse as an act of friendship or love that was in the best interests of the other person.

Indeed, some people held the belief that their psychoemotionally abusive behaviour was motivated by a need to save their target from harm. For example, a couple of respondents mentioned telling “white lies” to avoid hurting somebody else’s feelings with the truth, and others passed comments that were intended to be

constructive, such as one mother telling her son that he was smelly. Members of the professional group mentioned that they heard psychoemotional disintegration justified by their clients by the rationale “At least he never hit them”, which I have also heard many times in the men’s groups I have worked with. This statement implied that the perpetrator of psychoemotional abuse was effectively performing a favour for their partner, as they believed that this treatment was less harmful than physical assault. This perception presents a startling contrast to the responses from other participants. Indeed, when talking about it from a recipients’ perspective, none of the participants noted that physical abuse was easier to deal with than psychoemotional abuse, even those who disclosed that they had experienced both forms of abuse. Comments, such as “I wish that he hit me” were more typical and largely fuelled by the participant’s frustration that society does not treat incidents of psychoemotional abuse as seriously as incidents of physical abuse. This insight supports the conclusions drawn by other researchers such as Arias and Pape (1999) and O’Leary (1999) that psychoemotional abuse may be at least, if not more, damaging than other forms of interpersonal abuse; although, as Follingstad (2009) recommended, more studies are required to adequately disentangle psychoemotional abuse from the effects of physical and sexual abuse before such a claim can be declared with more confidence..

It may be argued that the roller-coaster of emotions that some recipients experienced in relationships that involved psychoemotional disintegration may have diluted their acknowledgement of the extent of the abuse. These people described relationships where they loved the person who abused them and the relationship was sprinkled with positive and negative experiences. I suspect that it may have been a genuine reflection of the highs and lows of the relationship, rather than a deliberate

ploy to deceive in many cases, as my experience in counselling men and women involved in family violence has often exposed me to people struggling with a wide range of conflicting feelings. A deeper analysis into the elements of this struggle and an exploration around the decisive points that helped resolve difficult issues would make for some fine future research. It would also be intriguing to assess whether components of the “Stockholm Syndrome” were present in some domestic psychoemotionally abusive relationships (Graham et al., 2001; Loring, 1994) or whether different aspects could more accurately predict those who stayed in psychoemotionally abusive relationships from those who were more likely to leave.

Some respondents raised the point that they used the strategy of psychoemotional disintegration with others to test their character. This may be motivated by the entertainment that comes from the challenge of manipulating, connecting with or influencing other people; or it could be motivated by fear or a need of self-protection, such as Joanne’s strategy of making striking statements early in her relationship with others and test whether their views are compatible with hers. In any case, this notion of testing has not appeared in other literature on this topic before and deserves to be investigated further. It is possible that a large volume of the low-grade, teasing behaviour that could be categorised as psychoemotional abuse in some contexts could be motivated by the desire to test others. Indeed, this research could explore whether playful interactions often leads to patterns of behaviour that escalates into very harmful forms of psychoemotional abuse. There is a role for practitioners to help people refrain from testing people by using destructive means such as psychoemotional disintegration.

Another disguise was the cloak of couching psychoemotional disintegration as a necessary tactic in a competitive relationship, or as some put it, as part of “the game.” “The game” was sometimes described as a culture where people were constantly teasing each other. At other times, there were more serious prospects at stake, such as marriages or business deals. This is a particularly interesting disguise as the framing of a relationship as a form of competition encourages people to display otherwise admirable qualities or values, such as honour and integrity, while they psychoemotionally disintegrate others. This framing also compels people to use these tactics to beat or at least defend against others, or risk being hurt themselves. The motive of protection and defence was offered by men and women in this sample, which carried an assumption that if they were caught up in the culture of the game, it also became too dangerous not to play. Some of the men justified using tactics of psychoemotional disintegration as revenge for being hurt. The construction of relationships in competitive terms may be another potentially early warning sign of psychoemotional abusers. Those with a highly competitive sense of the world may be more likely to behave in a way that aims to “beat”, take revenge on and punish other people. Counsellors and researchers could test this proposition in the future.

It does beg the question about where competitive relationships fit into this topic. Are they inherently abusive? Or can they be competitive, but still respectful if they are guarded by rules or a code of ethics that are honoured so that all parties have a relatively equal opportunity to participate and win? There are other questions raised through this discussion about how this topic should be handled when psychoemotional abusive practices are regarded as a normal part of a culture. While I believe that we should err on the side of protecting potential victims from harm, there

are also risks of becoming over-cautious and having these attempts mocked, disregarded and of losing popular and political support, as occurred with the “politically correct” movement. Future debates could consider whether an over-emphasis on the ills of this topic create people who are hyper-sensitive to criticism or light-hearted jokes, and ultimately more miserable than those who have learned to be more resilient? How does one build resilience if the slightest affront is considered abusive? Some more work is required by researchers, theorists and practitioners to disentangle these dilemmas and develop politically robust positions.

This research and debate could inform the development of a grading system that can capture a large variety of psychoemotionally abusive acts using broad definitions or conceptual understandings, and then refining the acts according to criteria such as the severity of the outcome. A punch is a punch whether it bruises or not. It is the severity of the injury that determines the severity of the crime (e.g., serious assault, grievous bodily harm, manslaughter, murder). Thus, it is possible that the accumulation of “glancing blows” may develop certain long- or short-term conditions, such as a “flinching response” to early cues and heighten the recipients’ sensitivity to abuse. The multi-layered definition and the models introduced through this research may assist this development as it seems that the underlying condition of respect could be a crucial component of these gradings. It also enables the field to err on the side of over-protecting, without necessarily over-reacting. It was not so long ago that corporal punishment at home and school was regarded by many as an essential component of successfully raising well-adjusted children.

It is likely that people may be more resilient to psychoemotional disintegration if they are surrounded by others who take this issue seriously; and are emboldened with more confidence if there are formal and informal protections around them. They may be able to recover from psychoemotional abuse more quickly if they are not victimised twice – once by their perpetrator and again by the weight of an apathetic society that either does not care or fumbles awkwardly in its response. There is no doubt that this is a difficult topic upon which to develop clear policies and procedures, but this does not mean that our society should shirk away from its responsibilities to protect people from harm, as other researchers such as Dutton et al. (1999), Keashly (2001) and Raphael (1998) have also advocated. The evidence that was collected from the 20 people in this study and the hundreds of other pieces of research from around the world, should demonstrate that the impact of psychoemotional abuse can be severe and more protection is needed.

More research is required on the role of philosophical frameworks that rationalise or cloak psychoemotional abuse generally, and psychoemotional disintegration specifically, that builds on the work of authors such as Garbarino et al. (1996) and Hyman and Snook (1999). These strategies are integral components that protect people from being accountable for their abusive actions and make it easier to sustain the damaging behaviour. There is a crucial role for researchers and practitioners to expose and challenge these strategies so that the targets of psychoemotional abuse can receive the protection rather than the perpetrators.

It also seems reasonable to conclude that some acts of psychoemotional disintegration are genuinely caused by misinterpretations, such as the incident of the

wedding invitation. More research could analyse whether the four dimensional model is able to distinguish events where the intent is genuinely directed towards advancing the other parties’ needs from other acts that carry ulterior motives.

Some of the participants mentioned that they initiated instances of psychoemotional disintegration to protect themselves, as they were worried that if they did not engage in this behaviour at school or at work, they would be targeted by others. In other words, fear drove them to collude with the norms of culture and commit abusive behaviour. This position aligns with the findings of many other researchers who have studied how people conform to the expectations of authorities and peer groups (e.g., Godrej, 2000; Jory & Anderson, 1999; Keashly, 2001; Marshall, 1999).

While linear pathways from psychoemotional abuse to the certain conditions are difficult to establish, recipients of psychoemotional disintegration in this study typically felt embarrassed, insulted, humiliated, devalued and angry as a result of the abusive acts. However, the longer-term impact of this form of abuse seemed to vary across the many examples, depending on who said the abusive statement, how it was said, where it was said and the length, regularity and frequency of the attack. For example, it seemed that most people found obviously abusive, low frequency incidents in public places, easier to handle than obscure, high frequency incidents that occurred in private, as they had the extra resources of witnesses, clarity and time to help locate the problem with the attacker, rather than with oneself. Thus, in spite of the many disguises of psychoemotional disintegration, it may be the easiest to prove.

The participants of this study cited examples of children who had been psychoemotionally abused experiencing long-term mental health impacts, including suicidal ideation and eating disorders, which supported the findings of Doyle (1997), Kelly (2004), Mullen et al. (1996) and Stevenson (1999). However, it must be noted that this finding was based on interview data and not corroborated with official records.

An impact of psychoemotional abuse that is rarely discussed in the literature is the impact of the incidents on the perpetrators' lives. It seems that psychoemotional abuse does not just shape the identity of the victims. The men from the family violence groups mentioned that they may have won the fights, but lost or severely damaged valuable relationships with friends and family members, their pride and sense of self. Some were left them stricken with the pain of chronic guilt and shame. The men's stories could be used educationally to raise awareness that the abusers can have a long-term impact imposed on them as well.

Psychoemotional Abuse Through a Secondary Source

It seems that people who attempted to psychoemotionally abuse their target through the recruitment of others either sought to muster allies to help with their attack on the target or disarm the target's defences and support networks by undermining the status of their position. It was rare that participants would admit to perpetrating this form of psychoemotional abuse, with only one case reported. However, more participants reported being on the receiving end of this treatment.

The level of distress and effects of the abusive act varied depending on the context of the experience, the nature of what was said and the response from the secondary source. It is possible that all of the other four patterns of the WORDS model could be enacted through a secondary source, so the effects mentioned above under each of the sections above could be elicited. For example, the perpetrator may make disparaging comments about the target, set them up with a deceitful rumour, or request that the secondary source ignores or cuts off communications with the target. At the very least, most of the participants felt a lack of trust towards the person committing the abuse and the secondary source if they colluded.

Indeed, this form of abuse applies pressure on at least two targets. The primary target is the person who is the subject of the abusive comments or actions, and the secondary target is the person or people with whom the abuse is directly communicated to. Sometimes secondary targets were used to intensify the abuse, such as when they were encouraged to support the abuse by laughing or joining in. At other times, the information that was fed to the secondary target shielded them from the abuse to the first target (ie. comments that held particular meanings for the primary target were ambiguous and disguised the abuse to others) or aimed to diminish their support of the first target (e.g., comments that sought to frame the primary target as a liar).

The impact of the psychoemotional abuse on the primary target seemed to depend on the response of the secondary target. In examples where the secondary target colluded, the primary target was more likely to suffer. However, the degree of suffering depended on a range of factors, such as their respect for the secondary

target's opinions, the secondary target's role in the life of the primary target and the primary target's level of alternative support. Thus, it is possible that the impact may be very low if the secondary target is regarded as a fairly inconsequential influence on the primary target's life.

The exasperation of not being believed or listened to or taken seriously by broader society caused immense pain for some participants. Some felt that society in general had let them down by not addressing psychoemotional abuse seriously enough. Others felt particularly aggrieved in instances when the secondary target did not challenge the attacker, even when they had authority over the attacker (e.g., teacher) or allegiances to the victim (e.g., family members).

The role of and support required for the secondary targets and bystanders who witness psychoemotional abuse is also desperately in need of further research that builds on studies already undertaken, such as those conducted by Allen et al. (2003). These studies can explore factors that determine whether the secondary target is likely to take a courageous stand and directly challenge the abusive comments or take a neutral stance that provides no support to the abuser. This information can be used by practitioners to develop systems that support more people to stand up against psychoemotional abuse conducted through a secondary source, and potentially prevent a significant amount of harm. Indeed, this will empower the primary target, without them even knowing.

These situations can also cause the secondary target a great deal of distress, particularly if they are children caught in the abuse between their parents, as Diamond

and Muller (2004) and Milletich et al. (2010) have reported. More research needs to follow their lead, as children’s dependence on their parents leaves them particularly vulnerable. Indeed, in this study, most of the psychoemotional abuse occurred at home, so it is likely that one of the most common types of witnesses to the abuse were children.

Indeed, bystanders were central characters in many of the stories disclosed through the interviews. They were often described as people who helped the victim through moral or practical support. In other circumstances they supported the abuse by dismissing its seriousness, offered unhelpful advice or ignored the abuse completely. It is quite possible that many bystanders do not appreciate the potential damage of psychoemotional abuse, know how to deal with situations when they arise, or feel helpless as they do not trust current processes of managing complaints.

In the light of Keashly’s (2001) findings that the distress of people who suffered psychoemotional abuse in her study was compounded by an ineffective official response, it is important to recognise that any attempts to educate the community about the benefits of standing up to psychoemotional abuse directed at others will need to acknowledge that many bystanders fear they may be harmed in some way as well, such as being targeted directly, tied up in hearings, or placed in a compromising position between two friends. Campaigns directed at bystanders should provide clear information about psychoemotional abuse, its forms and impacts and support them to develop an educated decision on how they should respond to it. More education is required that states that a bystander’s ignorance or attempts to “stay out of it” may actually harm the victim, and in some cases will become a significant secondary form of abuse. To be effective, these educational campaigns will need to

be bolstered by formal processes that give the bystanders confidence that complaints of psychoemotional abuse will be handled competently and minimise the risk of harm to them.

One of the most fundamental difficulties in addressing this topic for counsellors, courts and tribunals is that psychoemotional abuse is largely delivered in a verbal manner, and unless witnesses are present or the incident is recorded to triangulate the other parties' accounts, the evidence is lost as soon as the words are spoken. The records of bystanders' and other participant's memories tend to become increasingly unreliable as time passes and are vulnerable to being coloured by varying perceptions and interests. In addition, if the victim has been traumatised by the psychoemotional abuse, their confidence in their version of events may be compromised. Professionals can provide valuable advice to people about collecting reliable evidence that can provide them with therapeutic and legal assistance.

Summary

It was clear from the interviews that psychoemotional abuse was performed through a wide spectrum of behaviour across people from different cultural and demographic backgrounds. Indeed, the types of abuse canvassed through this research ranged from threats to kill to attempts at constructive criticism. The reports collected supported the notions that psychoemotional abuse did not have to occur during a conflict with another person. Nor did it need to be deemed as offensive at the time of delivery, which is consistent with the conclusions of Loring (1994) and Marshall (1999). It occurred in relationships where the power dynamics were

extremely lop-sided and the traditional victim-perpetrator model was obvious; and also in relationships where the patterns of domination, attack and counter-attack fluctuated.

There was a gendered pattern of psychoemotional abuse in this sample, which saw more men abusing women and women from the family violence group experiencing the most severe impacts compared to any other group. Behaviours that restricted, controlled or manipulated another person were received twice as much by women than they were by men. This may change in a less biased sample, as there are many reports, for example, of teenage girls blocking and socially isolating or excommunicating their peers out of a social group, although this gendered trend is consistent with other patterns of abuse between men and women. This trend is worth exploring further through research that investigates the capacity for people to both receive and deliver psychoemotional abuse. There is much to learn from a bigger sample about the types, frequency and severity of abuse among people from different genders and other demographic differences.

This research provided some insights into the links between some forms of abuse and the impacts, although more research is required to assess these associations more thoroughly. It is difficult to disentangle the effects into discrete patterns, as in many cases more than one pattern was applied to the same person and some patterns could fit the characteristics of more than one pattern. It was also not possible to achieve Follingstad's (2009) standard of disentangling the effects of psychoemotional abuse from physical and sexual abuse in this style of study.

However, it seemed that psychoemotional withdrawal generally had the impact of annoying, frustrating or pressuring the recipient, but was unlikely to make a lasting impact unless it was maintained for long periods of time. One woman stated in her interview that the experience of not being spoken to for months was debilitating and negatively affected her sense of self-worth. In these extreme cases, recipients are likely to experience a sense of psychoemotional abandonment, which would be exacerbated if they lacked other support networks.

Psychoemotional withdrawal seemed to be more commonly used as a short-term strategy to avoiding difficult issues, signal disapproval or avoid a verbal or physical conflict. On the surface, the withdrawer may be rewarded with a series of small wins; but eventually this tactic seemed to decouple the trust and satisfaction between the parties and rot the relationship over time. Over the long-term, the tactic may backfire on the abuser as they look increasingly unreasonable and immature.

Psychoemotional oppression and disintegration appeared to have short term effects such as upsetting the recipient or invoking unpleasant emotional states, such as discomfort, worry, guilt, humiliation or fear. Over time many participants reported that the behaviours involved in these patterns sapped their confidence and affected their mental health through symptoms such as anxiety, depression, lower self esteem, PTSD and eating disorders. Some women stated that the impact of this abuse terrorised them and transformed them into people whom they did not respect. They also were changed in ways that remained long after the abuse stopped (e.g., regrets or hyper-sensitivity of being attacked by others). It is possible that abuse through a secondary source also has the capacity to elicit these impacts if the secondary source

colludes with the abuser and supports the attack. They could easily lose friendships or trust through these attacks and reduce their capacity for protection and support.

Psychoemotional restriction was more likely to occur over a longer period as it exemplified a pattern of controlling another person and seemed motivated by issues that were deeper seated. Psychoemotional restriction, oppression and some forms of secondary abuse were the patterns most likely to be executed without the recipients' full awareness of that they were being abused at the time.

The sample was not large enough to state categorically that any pattern was more or less damaging as multiple factors seem to determine the impact, such as the resources that people had access to, the culture and context that the abuse took place in and the duration and intensity of the assault. On the other hand, the suggestive findings of the research provide numerous leads for other researchers to pursue.

It is important to gain a detailed understanding of the motives behind different patterns of psychoemotional abuse, so that counsellors can implement the most appropriate strategies to create change. For example, different strategies will be applied depending on whether the behaviour of the abusers was influenced by their individual needs (e.g., irrational thoughts, fear); relationship based needs (e.g., power sharing, entertainment); or cultural pressures (e.g., structuring relationships as competitive; patriarchal attitudes).

The Locations Where the Psychoemotional Abuse Occurred

The range of locations outside of the home that were mentioned by participants of this study indicates that there is considerable potential for future research to explore the situational elements associated with psychoemotional abuse in much greater detail. Future research may find that some environments make it easier or more difficult for psychoemotional abuse to flourish. For example, it seems that psychoemotional abuse can be more easily screened from witnesses in private places than public places, as two-thirds of the psychoemotionally abusive events disclosed by the participants occurred in their homes. This high proportion of incidents in the home may represent the emotional intensity of relationships among family members or the intensity of the issues raised there.

The fact that these events are often hidden from witnesses would make it very difficult to lodge a successful protest, particularly if the protest is exclusively assessed by the abuser themselves. In these cases, protection is largely dependent on the abuser voluntarily changing their behaviour, which may be against their own interests.

The relatively high proportion of incidents at home may also reflect the sheer volume of time that the participants spent at home compared to other places. It is also quite probable that these results reflect the fact that half of this sample was selected on the basis of their involvement in family violence programs. A broader mainstream sample may find a different proportion of psychoemotional abuse in the home.

Of the incidents that were disclosed outside of the home, eleven occurred at work, ten in public spaces and five at school. I expected more incidents to be reported at school, as many people I have spoken to about this research have strong memories of at least one psychoemotionally abusive incident that they can remember from their school days. The body of research also carries many examples of children being psychoemotionally abused or bullied by their peers (e.g., Casarjian, 2000; Hyman & Snook, 1999; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006; McKenzie, 2009; Schuchert, 1998; Shumba, 2004), as many young people are still learning to moderate their behaviour and become more sensitive about comments or actions that might offend others. It is possible that more incidents of psychoemotional abuse would have been reported in schools if the participants in this study were younger. Indeed, less than one-third of reported incidents in this study occurred when the participant was a child at school or at home.

There were a few occasions during the interviews when the participants were prompted to discuss their childhood and some could not recall much detail. All the participants were interviewed as adults and at least five years had elapsed since they were a secondary school student. It is reasonable to assume that many other memories had been formed in the participants' minds over this time, and they may have drawn from the recent and possibly most vivid memories, when providing examples. As half of the sample had powerful experiences with psychoemotional abuse and family violence, it is likely that these would be the incidents they prioritised during this research.

Another line of research that could be explored further is the gendered trends of psychoemotional abuse in different settings to test the speculation circulated by some “men’s rights” groups that men receive as much abuse in the home as they cast onto others. In this study, half of the male participants in both sub-groups reported being psychoemotionally abused at home, which would indicate that it is an issue that needs to be addressed. However, there was no support for the position that men were abused as much or more than women in the home, as the women in both the family violence and general population groups experienced a much higher proportion of psychoemotional abuse (i.e., 40% to 80% higher) in the home than the men. This suggests that the women in this study were much more vulnerable to abuse of all forms in the home than men, as they were also more likely to disclose physical and sexual assault. While this finding supports the trends seen in the body of literature on physical and sexual abuse, the trends for psychoemotional abuse need to be tested on larger samples before this conclusion can be generalised. There was also a gendered difference in the range of people the participants were abused by, with women being abused by a broader range of people than men. This suggests that women’s increased vulnerability to being victims of psychoemotional abuse does not stop at their front door. Further research could also investigate women’s vulnerability to psychoemotional abuse in domains outside of the family.

When reviewing the roles that the participants were in when the abuse took place, it was clear that the most common targets of psychoemotional abuse in this study were female intimate partners. However, as has been mentioned previously, this was an obvious bias in this sample. Additional research with a broader sample would be required before any confident generalisation could be drawn. It is also

possible that this finding may be explained by women remembering the incidents that had powerful impacts on their lives. Psychoemotional abuse in the home environment was often accompanied by enormous efforts to stop the abuse, protect themselves and their children and recover. Their stories often contained details of severe damage, including the loss of their confidence, their marriage and the fulfilment of their life's dreams. It is highly likely that these experiences would have etched deeply into people's memories. A study on how psychoemotional abuse is remembered, forgotten or dismissed would also enrich the field, as it could contribute to the collection of more reliable testimonies.

The patterns of psychoemotional abuse found in different relationship structures also warrant a more detailed examination from subsequent research. Some of the roles appear to carry structural advantages, such as the parent-child relationship. While these findings cannot be generalised for reasons listed above, they provide some emerging support for the importance of the connection between traditional power structures and the receipt of psychoemotional abuse that would need more research to examine in greater detail.

The findings of this study showed that the ratio of psychoemotional abuse received and delivered was very similar in relationships with relatively equal power structures, such as in relationships involving siblings, student colleagues/friends and spouses/intimate partners. This compared to roles where there was a more obvious structural imbalance, such as parents and children. While the power exchange is dynamic – and often turbulent - within many social relationships, patterns of exchange over time can heavily weigh the odds in favour of some parties. For

example, the heavy artillery (e.g., legal rights, physical strength, experience and resources such as shelter and food) is almost exclusively in the hands of the parent until the child is a teenager. However, the structural advantages and disadvantages of other roles are not so clear due to a much more even distribution of resources and a more fluid exchange of the power dynamics. The influence of these resources on the power dynamics in relationships need to be taken into account when practitioners design interventions and community education that helps people participate in these roles without harming others.

The evidence collected in this study confirms that this topic needs to be studied in contexts beyond the home. While there were no reports of cyber-bullying and cyber-stalking in this study, there have been reports elsewhere (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). This phenomenon essentially describes some of the techniques of psychoemotional abuse using modern technology as the instrument of distribution. Many recent studies have found that this form of abuse is particularly powerful as the victim can be humiliated in front of a world-wide audience and the messages can reach the target 24 hours a day. Some suicides have been attributed to the antics of cyber-bullies (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). New research could explore how this technology is used as methods of psychoemotional disintegration (e.g., offensive posts), psychoemotional oppression (e.g., spying on-line, tracking movements, hacking into accounts), psychoemotional withdrawal (e.g., cyber-sulking; refusing to reply to a message or invitation), psychoemotional abuse via a secondary source (e.g., ganging up on a person through supporting or distributing abusive material), and possibly even psychoemotional restriction (e.g., limiting access to on-line friends; tracking contacts). The other interesting aspect of this style of psychoemotional

abuse is that the abuse is in written or visual form and leaves a more tangible trace than psychoemotional abuse that is committed face to face or behind someone’s back.

The participants in this study were willing to discuss occasions when they were both victims of psychoemotional abuse and also perpetrators of it. This multi-perspective line of enquiry may also add new dimensions to subsequent research and practice. If people can draw from their own experience of being psychoemotionally abused, this information can be used to increase people’s awareness of their own behaviour and empathy towards others. For example, participants in group therapy for male perpetrators are often challenged to recount experiences from their childhood when they were overpowered by a parent – most often their father- to gain an experiential understanding of the impact of domineering behaviour from the victim’s perspective. This aims to help them become more sensitive about comments or actions that they had previously thought of as frivolous.

On reflection it was very useful to ask people about their experiences of being abusive and being abused as it provided a rounder picture of the phenomenon. I was able to use elements from two aspects of psychoemotional abuse to build a model, where the perspectives merged. From a researcher’s perspective, obtaining data from at least two perspectives from the same participant can provide richer material to work with, and help participants draw out conclusions that exhibit the complexities of human behaviour. Although I found that while the participants were willing to discuss this material from both perspectives, they generally did not provide as much detail in their stories when talking from the perspective of a psychoemotional abuser. Researchers could examine this finding in subsequent studies to explore whether this

pattern repeats with other samples. Within this investigation, elements such as social desirability and influences on one’s memory could be examined in greater detail. I suspect that the richness of the stories would be affected by people dismissing, downgrading or blocking out memories of abusive incidents that they are not proud of and filtering their stories to cast a better image of themselves to others.

Resistance and Resilience Against Psychoemotional Abuse

The participants in this sample demonstrated a mix of learned and innovated strategies to protect themselves from psychoemotional abuse and withstand its effects. There was no particular strategy that emerged as more successful than any other, as this aspect was not evaluated any further than the details provided in the participants’ report. Some noted that even their most successful strategies did not work on every occasion, which is useful information for professionals working with people who are particularly vulnerable to psychoemotional abuse, as their clients need not be disheartened if they do not achieve their desired results after initially trialling new methods.

A wide range of strategies were employed, with different methods selected depending on the context, the skills and resources that were available. Indeed, resistance and resilience against psychoemotional abuse did not just depend on people’s internal resources, as it is often framed by researchers such as Sneddon (2003) who primarily focussed on an individual’s skills, characteristics, close relationships and the nature of the abuse. While it is important to understand

individual variations to psychoemotional abuse, the impact of the broader sociocultural factors also needs to be appreciated. In this research, the self-reported success of individuals' strategies of resilience and resistance was also heavily dependent on the availability and quality of external resources such as support networks, counsellors and formal policies.

Some of the participants who experienced the most intensive episodes of abuse used strategies in the short-term, such as distracting, avoiding or placating, to help them manage extremely stressful times. These strategies may not be effective over the long-term, but they helped the survivor break their coping tasks into small, manageable chunks. While it is relatively easy to objectively prescribe the ideal coping strategies, it is crucial to understand that it can be intensely frightening to confront people who are overwhelmingly abusive, particularly if there is no other support available. It is quite feasible that weathering the storm until it passes is the most appropriate method available at times. Many of the participants who used these methods were concerned that more assertive strategies in these critical moments may have put them at risk of greater harm, as Lewis, Griffing and Chu (2006) found in their study.

One woman created a series of disguises, such as “the perfectionist” or the “good wife” to reduce this risk of greater harm. These disguises created a façade of superficial compliance with her husband which shielded her from the prospect of another barrage of abuse - a coping strategy that Iwaniec et al (2006) reported was employed by her sample of emotionally abused children. Thus, it seems that disguises are strategically used by both perpetrators and victims of psychoemotional

abuse. Further research is required to explore these strategies and their implications for detecting psychoemotional abuse and counselling practices.

The participant who wore protective disguises also implemented a series of mental escape routes by using dissociation techniques and developing imaginary characters, such as Wise Woman. She found these characters particularly useful methods of minimising the power of her attacker, in the absence of any other support. Other women also developed alternative personas to help them muster enough courage to end the abusive relationship. For example, one woman drew inspiration from her ancestors who survived the Holocaust, while another recalibrated her central identity as the “protector of the children” which helped her supersede her own doubts and fears, and chart a clear course of action for their sakes.

Others who were involved in psychoemotionally abusive relationships over long periods of time found other mental escape routes to build in short breaks from their situation. These strategies seemed to have been particularly relevant for people suffering from psychoemotional oppression or restriction. The techniques included becoming involved in writing, art, music, walking, playing with children or connecting with animals or nature. Not only did these breaks enable them to reclaim some enjoyment, gain a broader perspective or express some pain; they were also an important means of salvaging small elements of control for people whose lives were dominated by others. Others sought mental breaks through the use of medications or illicit drugs, as members of Doyle’s (2001) sample did.

Doyle's (1997,2001) conclusion that support from others seemed to be one of the most crucial factors for survivors of psychoemotional abuse, also resonated with most participants in this study. Indeed, it was probably the most essential antidote for those who were psychoemotionally restricted. It would have also been very important for those who were subjected to psychoemotional withdrawal, as they could talk through the issue that brought the silence in a respectful manner. This support could help them tailor an appropriate response to the withdrawer. These pragmatic mechanisms of weathering severe bouts of psychoemotional abuse could become very important tools for therapists and their clients. Further research into the disguises and escape routes could quickly expand the repertoire of strategies and determine their potential for successful countering of different patterns of psychoemotional abuse.

The support the participants in this study received included professional support, friends, family, religion or even people they met casually. These contacts were particularly helpful to those who had lost confidence in their own judgement as they helped challenge their distorted views of their “deservedness of a better life”; shared their own experiences or helped them reconnect with people who were not abusive to reinstate their confidence that things did not have to be this way. Often these people validated their experiences and taught them skills such as assertiveness, boundary setting, changing their thinking, or self-talk which helped them block out the impact of negative words or changed their perspective about themselves. This retrospective validation and skill development was discussed as a crucial component of their healing. The assertiveness developed via the help of counselling and extra reading enabled some people to radically change their identities over time. One

woman initiated her own support group and developed various resources to challenge the cultural norms of psychoemotional abuse in her community.

However, not all contact with other people was necessarily constructive. Some participants received unhelpful advice from others, such as those who were blamed for the abuse they received or were told that their role was to remain in the relationship regardless of how abusive the situation became, as they had committed to stay “for better or worse”. Some people cut off friendships or reduced their circle of friends and only socialised with those they could trust. There is a vital role for community educators and practitioners to help provide the general community with good quality information about appropriate and sensitive ways of supporting people who are enduring psychoemotional abuse, as the victims of the abuse often sought help from their friends, colleagues or family members first.

Some participants took the assertive step of collecting evidence by diary or keeping telephone recordings to validate their experiences; while others adopted a more aggressive response and fought back by seeking revenge or building a tough reputation as a form of pre-emptive strike. This is an element that could be explored deeper by additional research, as aggressive responses may be tactics that are frequently used in practice, but they appear to be rarely advised by professionals, possibly due to the risk that this approach may inflame tense situations and increase the risk of harm. It would be interesting to revisit this taboo and determine if there were situations where the application of aggressive tactics may be suitable.

Some stated that, on reflection, they realised that their body's and mind's response to the stress of the psychoemotional abuse was an involuntary method of coping. Some described conditions, such as illness or developing an eating disorder, as means of breaking the patterns of abuse and reclaiming some control of some fragments of their life. Others may argue that these conditions were signs that they were not coping with the abuse. The point that both sides may agree on is that it was certainly not the most effective manner of coping or dealing with psychoemotional abuse, but may have been all that they were capable of at the time.

Other methods that were trialled, but proved not to be effective from the participants' perspective included ignoring, excusing or rationalising the behaviour, or having an affair as a form of revenge. Each of these methods either prolonged the abusive patterns or created new problems.

When the situation proved too difficult to change, some participants left the relationship, by moving out of the home or quitting their job. This provides a good example of how external factors play a role in coping, as this strategy would be easier to implement for those with external supports, such as enough money to rent a new place, another job to go to or a strong social network to support the transition. It would also be more difficult for people with dependent children to find an alternative, safe home than those who were only responsible for the welfare of themselves. Some of the women in the sample discussed how difficult it was to find a safe route out of their home when they had children to care for. Interestingly it was only the mothers in this sample who spoke about protecting their children from harm in

psychoemotionally abusive relationships. No men mentioned removing their children from the home due to psychoemotional or physical abuse.

Some participants acknowledged that they stayed in psychoemotionally abusive relationships longer than they should have as they believed that leaving would cause a violent backlash that would be worse than the abuse they were suffering – a belief that has support from Mouzos’ (1999) study on the cause of female homicides. Some of these made several attempts to leave before they were finally able to do so. Others mentioned that they wanted to hold on to their dreams or ideals for a happy life and thought they could overlook some psychoemotionally abusive behaviour, as it was not as bad as some abuse that they had seen or heard others experiencing. Thus, their emotions and perspectives shifted often throughout the relationship and they continued to believe that they could repair the relationship that they had invested so much in. As this happened they became further acclimatised to a psychoemotionally abusive environment. Some did not appreciate how abusive this environment was until after they had left it. These comments reinforced the invisibility of psychoemotional abuse, even to those who were intensely affected by it. They also endorsed earlier conclusions of Twaite and Rodriguez-Srednicki (2004), Kasian and Painter (1992) and Jory and Anderson (1999) and added weight to the growing body of research on this topic that described the multiple reasons why people remain in psychoemotionally abusive relationships.

The participants who stayed for a long time in a relationship where frequent psychoemotional abuse occurred often noted that there was no clear marker of when the behaviour had crossed their line of tolerance, compared to an incident of physical

abuse, which, incidentally was often the marker that ended the relationship. Those who were isolated from other views or did not trust their own judgement were even less likely to leave for reasons of psychoemotional abuse – a point that echoed the findings of Marshall (1999), Morse (2003) and Pipes and LeBov-Keeler (1997). More research on the markers that end relationships would be very useful, as it seemed from the information provided by this sample that psychoemotional abuse was more likely to be tolerated within a relationship than physical or sexual abuse, which would support Henning and Klesges’ (2003) research. It may also be likely that oppressive or restrictive types of abuse could keep damaged relationships intact for the longest periods of time.

There is a potential for practitioners to develop good quality community education campaigns that alert people about the harms of psychoemotional abuse and the avenues for professional help. The receipt of external validation from legitimate sources such as professionals, books, brochures, and articles was mentioned as a critical factor of recovery from many participants with extensive experience in psychoemotionally abusive relationships. This information could be coupled with the results of other relevant research, such as Doyle’s (1997, 2001) studies on supportive ‘lifelines’ and packaged with pragmatic advice from survivors and either distributed generally or merged with existing campaigns on issues such as family violence or bullying.

The role that the participants’ previous experience played in their coping response was unclear, as there were so many other confounding variables present. Follingstad (2009) rightly warned of the powerful impact that prior physical or sexual

abuse could have on interpreting the outcomes of psychoemotional abuse. These forms of abuse were disclosed by some of the participants and may have been experienced by others as well. The sample was also exposed to a wide spectrum of psychological abuse, ranging from death threats to teasing and had experienced varying degrees of professional counselling. Indeed, many had undertaken at least six months of therapy.

A more narrowly focussed study design would be required to determine the most important factors that would help an individual's ability to cope with the impacts of psychoemotional abuse. Such a study could explore how particular types of recovery techniques interact with the degree of exposure, the intensity of psychoemotional abuse and broader contextual factors. Different results are likely to be obtained if people were assessed at the height of an abusive period when their self-confidence was at its lowest, compared to five years after the most abusive period. In this study, those who had received extensive therapy certainly seemed well equipped to handle future abuse and identify subtle patterns of psychoemotional abuse much earlier than they once did. However, a study that was designed to control for this variable would be able to provide a firmer conclusion. Indeed, any additional research that attempted to determine the most critical factors that provide resilience against and recovery from psychoemotional abuse would provide tremendous benefit to therapists, other practitioners and their clients.

It would also be useful for future research to distinguish different methods of resistance and recovery among the sub-types of psychoemotional abuse, as the effects of each pattern can be quite different. For example, if they were to be described using

physical analogies, the impact of short-term striking style of attack could be seen as potentially bone-breaking; whereas the longer-term grinding forms of abuse were more cancerous. The recovery and healing process from each pattern is expected to also be quite different.

The participants from the general population were more inclined to offer strategies such as approaching the abuse with a positive mindset and sense of humour, and trusting one's instincts to interpret the meaning of the act (e.g., deciphering whether it was a careless or targeted comment). Some found that these micro-skills can serve as useful defences and substantially reduce the tension in the interaction. However, it is likely that those who faced more severe experiences of psychoemotional abuse may find these suggestions flippant. There are possibly variations in the effectiveness of certain responses according to different types of abuse and the features outlined in the four-dimensional model. For example, a positive, good-humoured mindset may be a useful defence against psychoemotional disintegration from someone in an otherwise respectful relationship with a relatively equal balance of power and secure social environment. However, a chipper attitude may not provide much help if one uses it in an insecure environment against an aggressive person in a powerful position who shows contempt for others' needs.

Some of the men relied on setting up an aggressive reputation to protect themselves from future abuse; although one man from the general population preferred to foster a considerate reputation to insure himself with the benefit of the doubt if a conflict arose. The professional focus group participants added that some of their clients deliberately changed their appearance to intimidate others and protect

themselves. It was unclear whether these methods were successful or not. A new line of research could assess how successful various types of reputations are in deflecting psychoemotional abuse and consider other side effects. For example, an intimidating person may protect themselves from psychoemotional abuse, but also restrict the quality or quantity of their friendships.

Psychologists, community educators and other practitioners hold an important role in raising awareness of the subtleties of different forms of psychoemotional abuse through the general community and providing targeted assistance to those who have been impacted by this abuse. Broadening the popular psychoemotional abuse lexicon and attributing the behaviours to potential impacts can increase the chances of early detection, provide evidence that supports the recipients’ protest against the action and help them muster professional assistance.

The information provided from this study’s sample can be collated to form a model of protection that can be easily taught to the general population: the psychoemotional castle. The analogy of a castle highlighted the main security features that the participants used to protect themselves from psychoemotional abuse. These symbolic security features and their associations with the participants’ mechanisms of protection from psychoemotional abuse are discussed below:

- (a) High, solid walls – These symbolised the boundaries of safety that clarify the positions between the two people. The need for clear boundaries was often mentioned by the women in family violence sub-group, who learned to protect

their physical and psychoemotional space from others attempts to dominate and control it. The boundaries provided a reliable sanctuary.

- (b) Strong Gates - Gates symbolised the point of decision making that participants used to control what they accepted into their personal spaces and what they learned to block out (e.g., nasty comments, poor quality relationships).
- (c) Sensitive Alarm Systems and Guards – Some people noted that greater awareness of the subtleties of psychoemotional abuse or early warning signs of patterns that would typically lead to psychoemotional abuse were critical components of their protection. Sharper detection skills enabled them to act earlier and defend or avoid harmful interactions.
- (d) Speed humps – Some found that methods of slowing down either the pace of the attacks upon them or their responses to certain comments or actions helped them determine the most suitable response. Extra time to form more comprehensive judgements was a critical defensive resource against psychoemotional abuse.
- (e) Aggressive Reputation – Just as some castles aimed to prevent attacks by establishing a fearsome reputation, some participants felt that they could ward off potential abusers with their aggressive reputation. They figured they could avoid conflicts by scaring any potential attackers away.

- (f) Goodwill gestures – Some participants were not interested in the potential side-effects of an aggressive reputation and sought to form a caring reputation to pre-emptively influence the behaviour of others in their vicinity. They tried to minimise unnecessary conflict by defusing tension with humour or positive gestures.

- (g) Escape Tunnels – The most elaborate castles had underground passages built in so that the residents could seek alternative places of refuge when their initial boundaries were transgressed and they were under severe attack. The participants of this study used similar methods of finding sanctuary when they suffered the barrage of severe or prolonged psychoemotional attacks or had few other options of retreat. This involved physically moving into a safer place in some circumstances and psychoemotionally shifting out of the line of fire at other times.

- (h) Understanding of Risk and Vulnerability – Some participants acknowledged that they understood that they could never be completely protected from psychoemotional abuse, as vulnerability was part of the inherent risk of social interaction. They also noted that the risk of mixing with certain people increased their chances of being psychoemotionally abused. Others wondered whether they were too defensive and risked becoming socially isolated or sacrificing more enjoyment than they needed to. Different styles of castles can be designed and upgraded to represent the different levels of risk and vulnerability that people are willing to accept in their interaction with others.

While protection is important, not all will be comfortable with alligators in their moat.

The castle model could be used by practitioners to teach a simple method of protection for people who have been psychoemotionally abused. Its features could form part of a checklist that helps its students remember to apply skills such as establishing clear boundaries, evaluating the risks, attending to early warning signs and building in time to think of their best response. This skill set may be more memorable because of the imagery the castle metaphor invokes.

Stop Oneself from Being Psychoemotionally Abusive

Some of the psychoemotional castle’s features were also useful for participants when they attempted to refrain from being abusive themselves. The most prominent of these was the tactic of slowing down their response time to enable more time to think through their options. This extra time enabled them to analyse the situation more comprehensively, double check their assumptions and reframe their perspectives.

Some participants noted that it was important to learn the skill of staying calm, reserving judgement and not feeling compelled to instantly respond to other people’s comments or actions. They felt relieved that they did not have to be rushed into a hasty response every time they felt affronted. Some stated that they learned watch and listen more carefully to avoid misinterpretations. These slight shifts in their approach

gave people more control over choosing the issues that they would respond to and their style of response. Other women used this extra time to write about the concerns they faced and gain clarity on the internal and external dynamics involved. A couple of the men used the extra time to bring forth mental images of the potential costs of being abusive and anticipate the damage it would cause all of the parties. They declared that they had learned that any short-term gain from psychoemotionally abusive behaviour was not worth the long-term loss that it was often accompanied by.

The timing of the application of an intervention is worthy of additional research as several participants highlighted its importance. Indeed, they mentioned that it was vital for them to be able to employ strategies at critical moments to break old patterns. Some participants also mentioned the importance of strategies that they could implement before these critical moments arrived to stave off the prospect of an abusive response. For example, some became more skilled at identifying early warning signs, such as their own feelings of irritability and distress, and learned how to manage these feelings before they were expressed abusively towards others. The tactic mentioned in the previous section of creating a caring reputation to increase the chances of receiving the benefit of doubt from others was another example of a longer-term pre-emptive strategy.

The women from the family violence sub-groups emphasised that individuals need to seek professional help to stop psychoemotional abuse. This is not surprising given that they encountered powerful experiences of living with people who could not change or sustain the changes by themselves. The men from the family violence group validated this position, as they stated that they and their families had greatly

benefitted from learning how to substitute psychoemotional abuse with effective, non-abusive behaviours, such as assertive communication, careful listening, managing anxiety and withdrawal from petty conflicts.

Practitioners may be able to use the four-dimensional model as a framework to help people seeking therapy for psychoemotionally abusive behaviour they have committed or to demonstrate examples of psychoemotionally abusive behaviour to clients in more generic forms of individual or couples counselling. Many micro-skills are required to stop disrespectful attitudes, selfish behaviour, inequitable relationship power dynamics and an insecure social environment. Some of the men who had committed the most psychoemotional abuse in the sample concluded that they had been much less abusive since they adopted a more respectful, compassionate, empathetic approach towards others; and placed less value on their own importance and more humbly looked at issues via another person's point of view. They reported that this vantage point helped them learn to take fewer comments from others as a personal insult. Other participants advised that they had improved their behaviour when they shifted their focus from winning arguments to sustaining good relationships.

While the four-dimensional model will not provide a comprehensive program that stops psychoemotional abuse, it could serve as a useful outline that targets different layers of intervention. This could be particularly important for people presenting conflicts in couples counselling, for example. Working through these layers could help professionals align and secure the new patterns behaviour within the environmental context in which they operate. Additional research could evaluate the

use of the four-dimensional model as a therapeutic aid or test the predictive strength of the model, its layers and various combinations of its layers.

According to some participants, the professional intervention was particularly important at helping the participants “own” their emotions and take responsibility for their actions. This was otherwise very difficult to achieve as they were previously committed to blaming others for triggering their abusive actions or being too weak to “handle their comments” or interpret them correctly. There is an opportunity for practitioners and community educators to deal with the issue of the responsibility of stopping and preventing abuse in the public arena. It seems that as long as this remains ambiguous, people who use psychoemotional abuse as a means to achieve their goals will be able to gain enough public support to blame the victim and excuse their own behaviour. There have been demonstrable shifts in victim-blaming attitudes in other areas, such as sexual assault (VicHealth, 2010), in recent times after large scale publicity campaigns. Similar campaigns could be adapted to assigning more personal responsibility onto people who employ psychoemotional abuse against others.

Another campaign that has the potential to prevent a great deal of harm could focus on helping people in the general community recognise the early stages of psychoemotionally abusive pathways. This would be most effective if the awareness raising activities were coupled with professionally-designed pragmatic strategies of stopping or addressing the various patterns of psychoemotional abuse. It is also useful for professionals to promote the fact that each strategy will not necessarily be successful every time, so that people do not stop trying them after one or two setbacks.

The participants seemed to be focused primarily on the pattern of psychoemotional disintegration when they spoke about stopping psychoemotional abuse, as they highlighted refraining from abusive comments towards another person. It would be interesting for other researchers to follow this line of enquiry with the other patterns of psychoemotional abuse to see if different resources were required to stop this behaviour.

Preventing Psychoemotional Abuse

Many of the participants in this study believed that society’s best opportunity of preventing psychoemotional abuse required a focus on teaching a range of social skills to the latest generation of children – particularly to boys. The implications of this position assert that these skills are not currently taught well enough through traditional education or parenting. This view suggested that programs needed to be implemented that contain specific components that address the skills of building positive relationships with others. Some participants noted that these social skills may have diminished recently as people spend less time physically socialising together and seek more company through electronic devices such as computers and televisions.

Interventions of this nature would provide a wide variety of opportunities for community educators, therapists, teachers and researchers. For example, programs that aim to teach boys how to constructively express their feelings could be expanded and integrated into the education system’s curriculum. Topics could include how to

constructively deal with threats, assertiveness, managing and expressing a broader range of emotions (e.g., increasing the lexicon of emotions could enable students to differentiate anxiety from anger and respond more appropriately), taking personal responsibility for one’s own actions, self-esteem and gender politics (e.g., challenging macho stereotypes and introducing concepts such as male privilege). While boys were explicitly mentioned by the participants as those most in need of this type of skill development, it is likely that girls would also benefit.

There are also practical implications of tailoring educational programs that raise awareness of psychoemotional abuse. Strategies of reducing its impact could be taught in specific high-risk populations, such as early intervention programs for children who are involved with child protection cases or women in family violence shelters. There are many examples of similar early interventions that professionals could draw from to develop meaningful interventions for these target groups.

Professionals could also alert parents and teachers to the early warning signs of psychoemotional abuse and develop materials to increase their awareness of how particular comments and patterns of behaviour affects children. Just as the on-going practice of torture requires a complicit, silent community (Conroy, 2000), so does the proliferation of psychoemotional abuse. Again, there are many successful examples of large scale social marketing or community education campaigns that warn of the consequences of certain behaviours that could be used as models, such as those aimed at reducing smoking and traffic crashes; or the “My strength is not for hurting” anti-rape campaign in the USA. It is vital that the messages of the campaign are supported with other materials and resources to help people change their behaviour and maintain

the change. For example, the information could be bolstered with resources such as step-by-step guides, telephone help lines and counselling. The idea of specialised support groups for survivors of psychoemotional abuse may be worth trialling, particularly for those who do not identify with their stereotype of a traditional family violence victim.

As has been previously mentioned, other interventions could be developed to help raise the awareness of the role of the bystander in challenging, stopping and preventing psychoemotional abuse. Many participants mentioned how pivotal other people’s roles were in their stories of escaping psychoemotionally abusive situations, particularly those of other family members and friends. The position of not wanting to get involved needs to be challenged to avoid a second wave of pain for the victims, and bystanders need more support to develop the confidence to successfully and safely intervene.

The findings of this study could also inform literature that helps health professionals identify the patterns and impacts of psychoemotional abuse, so they can intervene earlier and advocate for broader political and cultural change. For example, health professionals have traditionally been very keen to challenge media practices or comments raised through the media that are offensive. Indeed, the role of professionals tackling mass media productions that celebrate cruel or psychoemotionally abusive behaviour is paramount, as some media agencies appear drawn to highlighting conflicts or creating controversy to stimulate the attention of their readers, listeners and viewers.

There is also an important role for professionals to assist with the establishment or improvement of formal complaint systems, where victims of psychoemotional abuse can have their grievances heard fairly and the people who lodge the complaints or appear as witnesses are protected from informal punishment. Some recent developments in the fields of discrimination and sexual harassment in the workforce and educational institutions could help provide the foundations for such a system. The French government's recent laws that outlawed “repeated psychological violence” between couples as an offence that is punishable with up to three years in prison and fines of up to 75,000 Euros, sets an interesting legal precedent that could be adopted in other jurisdictions (Davies, 2010; Samuel, 2010). Researchers could investigate whether this new law is able to help reduce the estimated 8% of French women who are psychologically abused (Davies, 2010).

The role of ‘pressure’ is certainly worthy of further explanation, as a few men in this sample made comments that associated the abuse they committed with feeling “on edge” constantly. There is a risk that the inability to cope constructively with pressure could be either used as a convenient excuse or a legitimate, under-researched contribution to psychoemotional abuse. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) described a phenomenon they referred to as the shame-rage spiral where people from marginalised backgrounds expressed their shame, low status and sense of incompetence through hostility and disrespectful communication towards others. This brought them into more conflict, then further misunderstanding and alienation. According to this model, people with low social status tended to become increasingly sensitive over time and defensive against being looked down on, disrespected or treated badly by others. This sense of shame and heightened sensitivity was used to

explain why people from marginalised groups use violence to reclaim some personal control.

Anecdotally, many of the men I have worked with therapeutically who have committed family violence have noted that they are more likely to become physically violent when they are in physical pain or feel psychologically niggled. Almost always, the violence they expressed could be traced back to feelings such as fear, shame, humiliation, anxiety or threat. This certainly does not excuse or legitimate their violence, but may help future researchers explore the role that these and other emotions have as precursors to psychoemotional abuse.

The men in this sample from the family violence group provided the broadest variety of ideas about prevention at the individual level, which may indicate that their training has increased their repertoire of techniques. There seems to be an ongoing central role for men’s behaviour change groups in the prevention of psychoemotional abuse, as they target men with a history of abusive behaviour. Even though men’s groups differ in style and content, they generally provide abusive men with opportunities to learn more constructive ways of behaving in response to ‘pressures’ or issues that they perceive as provocative. The group’s facilitators and other participants can directly challenge the abusive men’s excuses, minimisations, rationalisations and justifications and invite them to accept more personal responsibility for their actions in a way that a book or brochure cannot.

An ideal model of intervention would see groups eventually diminish as the psychoemotionally abusive aspects of male culture, such as intense competition, misogyny, victim-blaming and other norms that excuse abuse, are attended to more

generally in a preventive manner. This work should, at the very least, aim to make it clear to men that ignorance about the effects of their psychoemotional abuse on others is no excuse; it is the result of their abuse, rather than their intent that matters; and that abusive cultures generally make everybody more vulnerable and risk ruining some of their best relationships.

How the Models Developed in this Thesis Fit Together

This thesis generated several new models that could be used by practitioners who work with issues involving psychoemotional abuse. The four-layered conceptualisation developed from the participants' understandings of psychoemotional abuse could be used to detect the preconditions of psychoemotional abuse, such as disrespectful attitudes, an unequal balance of power in the relationship, behaviour that meets the needs of one party at the expense of the other and an insecure social environment.

This model could also be used to help design multi-layered prevention interventions. Each layer could be assessed in a workplace, for example, to predict which employees are more likely to be vulnerable to becoming victims of psychoemotional abuse. Prevention efforts could also be assisted by the table of potential motives of psychoemotional abuse (ie. Table 10). The table of potential motives will require more development by other researchers; however, it may be used to prompt or inform discussions with people at risk of being psychoemotionally abusive or those who have committed psychoemotional abuse and are seeking to break this pattern of behaviour.

The dual threshold model can be adapted by professionals and researchers to capture different ‘qualities’ of psychoemotional abuse, such as milder versions for early interventions and more harmful versions for criminal prosecution or child custody decisions. Additional thresholds can be added and assessment criteria can be refined after further research has been conducted.

The WORDS model can also be used to assist professionals with their assessment and help researchers examine how different patterns of psychoemotional abuse contribute to different types and degrees of harm. Therapists may use this information to tailor their treatment more effectively. The mnemonic WORDS also has an educative function, as it is designed to be memorable and raise awareness of the more subtle forms of psychoemotional abuse, such as psychoemotional oppression and restriction, for victims, bystanders, perpetrators, therapists, other professionals, such as teachers and general medical practitioners.

Therapists may also find the psychoemotional castle a useful metaphor that their clients can incorporate into a coordinated set of safety strategies. This model provides a sense of design control that responded to some survivors’ comments that they were worried that they had become over-cautious and were consequentially missing out on opportunities for new relationships. The design of the castles can suit each individual’s protective needs and various components can be renovated whenever these needs alter.

Chapter 6: Final Reflections

Reflections on Research Design

The main difficulty I faced through the journey of this thesis was the challenge of attempting to adequately deal with the broad range of topics that intersected with psychoemotional abuse, such as bullying, torture, mental illness, trauma and cults, without following their tempting detours and losing direction. I aimed to recruit concepts from critical psychology to develop a research method that was grounded in the experiences of the participants, balanced the competing demands of breadth and depth and moved beyond an analysis that was family violence-centric, relied on a static model that was limited to the individual behaviours of the victim and the perpetrator and focused exclusively on deficit and damage.

I was excited that the methods of critical psychology promised me more licence than empirical methods to explore some of the nuances of the phenomenon of psychoemotional abuse more thoroughly; although at various times throughout the research, I felt drawn back to my empirical upbringing as a psychologist and craved for more certainty in the data.

Overall, though I managed to hold my methodological ground in unfamiliar territory as I believed that, on balance of a range of considerations, a more flexible position was more useful, particularly as I was conducting exploratory research, as it kept my mind open to a wider spectrum of possible outcomes and was less inclined than empirical methods to turn its back on uncertainty. On a topic as murky as

psychoemotional abuse, this seemed like the most appropriate epistemological path to take.

This method provided me with the capacity to integrate complex, multiple and interacting themes (Kirkman, 1999), and use subjectivity and bias as extra material in the thesis. I also found it useful to include deviant data in the analysis as sometimes a comment that only appeared once in the data could bridge loose threads that dangled from other interviews.

I initially found it difficult to declare my biases as I had been conditioned to think that they impeded good research and was worried that a deconstructive approach would ultimately grind the value of moral positions into nothingness. I was most persuaded to embrace this approach after reading Parker's (1999) point that the declaration of subjective political and moral positions are precisely what helps critical and community psychologists take stances that are most likely to invigorate social change. Indeed, it is arguable that many, if not all, researchers who implement various forms of discourse analysis are motivated by strong moral positions, such as those who use it to study the power dynamics of sexual assault or gender-based oppression (Hepburn, 2003). The deconstruction of a “social truth” does not mean that the researchers also need to dismantle or abandon their moral platform. I support Parker's (1999) view that some moral stands are more defensible to a broader audience than others are. I have chosen to use a critical psychology methodology to map out my means, my ends, and my moral positions so others can judge the merits of the analysis, the broader work and its valency as a tool of advancing social change and protecting those at most risk of psychoemotional abuse. In order to ensure that the

interpretation was drawn from, rather than imposed on the data in a predetermined manner, I declared my philosophical framework, considered alternative explanations of the phenomenon in question and constantly monitored how this interacted or interfered with the data. I elaborate on this later in my reflections.

This is not to say that the chords I struck in this research should be closed to further fine tuning, but I believe it is important to attempt to settle on an interpretive position that liberates the work from the paralysing poles of either accepting all data at face value or accepting nothing unless it can be proven according to limited, and some would argue, dubious, standards of reality. The position I settled on is offered to the reader, not as the way of understanding this topic, but as my way of understanding this topic, given the context of my experiences. My analysis is based on my reflections of previous research and theoretical perspectives; my professional and personal experience; as well as what I saw, heard and understood in the interviews. I do not intend to instruct the readers on what I declare to be the truth and close off alternative interpretations. Rather, I invite them to view the data through my lens and engage with the topic in their own way (Harper, 1999).

Thus, I did not seek to replace one form of reality with another, but investigate how various realities, including my own, were constructed and used for political ends (Hepburn, 2003). Indeed, as Hepburn (2003, p. 221) suggested, values, morals and political positions are not neutered by a relativist framework, but are “precisely the things that relativism insists on”, as these are central to the construction and positioning of the contested issues at stake. Richardson and Fowers, (1997) proposed that it is the identification and revelation of these moral and political positions that

help the postmodern researcher cope with uncertainty and doubt, tests particular commitments, energizes motivation and provides a tangible structure for remedial or preventive action.

The authoring of my interpretation may, at times, have been at odds with how the participants would have liked their comments to have been interpreted, which creates difficult personal conflicts for me. Ideally, I would have liked to adopt all of the data at face value and was concerned that an interpretation that went beyond the surface may have appeared as a betrayal of the trust that was established between the participants and me. I found it particularly difficult to challenge the meaning of the narratives from people who may not trust many on a topic as sensitive as this. However, on the other hand, I believe that the point of the researcher’s analysis is to engage with the transcript material and not leave the process of interpretation at the level of the participants’ own interpretations. As Charmaz (2006) elegantly described:

As we try to look at their world through their eyes, we offer our participants respect and, to the best of our ability, understanding, although we may not agree with them. We try to understand but do not necessarily reproduce their views as our own; rather we interpret them (p.19).

I have become aware through this research process that even if states of truthfulness or accuracy could be established, it is possible that several positions may be simultaneously and equally accurate or truthful. This perspective helped me understand that many researchers who applied postmodern methods were generally

less interested in spending energy discovering the truth or accuracy of an issue than they were on exploring the strategies that constructed and legitimated a particular position and the effect or function that position rendered when it was employed (Harper, 1999; Hepburn, 2003).

I aimed to use the material from the interviews to develop tools and models that would be useful for practitioners who work with their clients on psychoemotional abuse, as I found that these were rare in my 15 years working as a family violence counsellor. The common models such as the “cycle of violence” were typically framed around physical abuse and, at best, psychoemotional disintegration. While various types of psychoemotional abuse were mentioned, the material that was developed to specifically address it was rare, with the exception of some that was provided by authors such as Forward and Frazier (1997), Loring, (1994), Stosny (2006) and Smullens (2010). My desire to craft pragmatic functions from the data shaped my interpretation of the participants’ offerings. I wanted to consider how the material might be used by others who are encountering similar experiences and prevent them from accruing more harm. Wherever possible, I tried to shape these tools into formats that would be remembered easily, such as the WORDS mnemonic, the four-dimensional model or the psychoemotional castle, to assist with their application to a general audience.

The development of my interest in asking people to respond from the perspectives of a perpetrator and a victim emerged from three different sites. The first was my experience counselling men who had committed family violence and liaising

with their partners and children; and counselling men and women experiencing drug and alcohol dependencies. I heard stories in these settings about the same clients being psychoemotionally abused by others and abusive towards others. This dual identity also resonated with my own experience of interacting with people throughout my life. I wanted to explore these identities in more depth than the thin description typically portrayed by the perpetrator-victim stereotype commonly cited in research on interpersonal abuse. Secondly, I was also encouraged to investigate this aspect of psychoemotional abuse by reading about analytical methods of deconstructing phenomena that were often taken for granted. The idea of a mono-identity seemed inadequate to me, although I did not want to simply create another superficial conceptualisation of an alternative understanding (e.g., men and women are equally abusive). Nor did I want to develop models that were so complex that they would not be useful in practice. I was looking to explore this topic in a more sophisticated and more pragmatic manner.

Thirdly, I wanted to address some of the anecdotal claims raised by some “men’s rights groups” that women’s abuse was equally, if not more, prolific than men’s abuse. This was not my experience in my professional or private life, although I was certainly aware of examples when men had been psychoemotionally abused by women. This was quite a risk, as if I did find that this claim had some merit in my sample I would be obliged to report it which would be a politically dangerous finding to circulate without being able to guarantee that the attachment of sufficient explanatory context as a safeguard. Such a finding would also potentially politically discredit my research as I could be portrayed as a man who had set up research to serve male interests. The results of my research showed that while women in this

sample did commit psychoemotional abuse against others, it would be completely misleading to conclude that this abuse was any worse or equal to the men’s abuse. Indeed, the psychoemotional abuse committed by the men and received by the women in this sample generally resulted in a much more devastating impact for women.

Reflections on the TIP Method

The TIP framework was a very thorough method of analysing the data and certainly left no word or pause unexamined by the end of the process. As I was trialling it for the first time, I possibly over-analysed the data by re-reading each transcript several times, exploring each sentence from the three different angles of inquiry. I found that the information generated from the analysing the transcripts through “Text” and “Power” aspects accounted for the vast majority of the material that was used in the findings section.

The primary value of the “Interpretation” aspect of the analysis was that it monitored the influence of my biases and thinking processes; which prompted me to avoid quickly jumping to conclusions and consider alternative explanations. Thus, it served more as an analysis regulation tool than a data collection tool.

I was aware that postmodern methods of analysis, such as discourse and narrative analyses, also carry the risk that the material may be over-deconstructed to the point where it becomes either impossibly dense or the meaning disintegrates (Parker & Burman, 1993). My challenge was to find a balance between an analysis

that was thorough, yet fresh to read, without lapsing into assuming particular stereotypes or creating a universal voice that claims to speak on behalf of all the data (Kirkman, 1999).

When I interpreted the data, using the filters outlined in the methodology section, I found myself being more sceptical about the stories from the perspective of an abuser, and providing more benefit of the doubt when reading the stories from the perspective of a survivor. Awareness of this bias prompted me to re-check my interpretations when I read the comments during subsequent occasions to determine whether the meaning changed if I withheld this bias. Generally, the interpretations I arrived at through my original filter were reasonable, possibly because that after re-reading a few transcripts I was quickly sensitised to reading them from a perspective that was conscious of my biases. Although, there were some occasions when I reviewed my interpretations and a different meaning emerged, such as the time when I analysed comments from a man who could not remember anything about his childhood. I initially suspected that he was in denial, as in my experience it is quite rare that somebody who otherwise appears to be relatively young and functional had absolutely no memory of their childhood. My suspicion of his denial was heightened by the fact that he confessed to the most extreme abuse of any of the participants. When I thought about this again, I opened my mind to the prospect that his disclosure of the largest catalogue of abuse may mean that he had been very honest and was not wanting to blame his childhood or upbringing for his psychoemotionally abusive behaviour. It is possible that he may legitimately not remember anything about his childhood for various other reasons, such as the effects of trauma or brain injury. When reinterpretations such as this occurred I stripped back my original judgements

to a more neutral perspective when I reported the participants’ remarks in the findings section.

When I re-read the accounts through the “Interpretation” lens, I searched for leading statements, inconsistencies or missing parts of information in the stories. I also sifted through the material for insights that may be useful for practitioners or supported or refuted previous research findings. Generally it appeared that the participants presented their information honestly and consistently, although some appeared to blame other people or other factors for the psychoemotional abuse they perpetrated and diminished their personal responsibility. On some occasions, participations attributed responsibility for the abuse onto society at large or another entity such as mental illness. Many of the stories were constructed in a manner that explained the context or circumstance surrounding the event that placed the participant in a sympathetic position.

I extracted the values that were expressed in the participants’ accounts and found that their behaviours were often influenced by virtues such as individualism, responsibility and respect. I coupled this with an examination of the feelings that were expressed through the interviews, such as confusion, guilt, frustration, fear, hope and relief, to develop an insight into the motives behind their behaviours – particularly their psychoemotionally abusive behaviours. In hindsight, I would have included a direct question in the interview schedule about specific motivations that prompted psychoemotionally abusive behaviours, rather than attempting to chase this information through the interviews via follow-up questions. These insights were used to help form the attitudes component of the four-dimensional model of

psychoemotionally abusive relationships and the motives that I concluded would drive much of the behaviour exhibited through each pattern identified in the WORDS model.

All of the participants were eager to tell their stories, although some struggled to provide much more detail than a thin description. Some participants commented that the process of exposing their stories was quite cathartic and told me that they hoped their experiences could help other people avoid similar situations.

Others seemed a little worried that their stories were not compelling enough, such as the man from the general population group who told me that he offered everyone in the room a cup of tea except for his father when they were in the midst of an argument. This did not concern me though, as I believe that it is important to study a wide range of abusive or potentially abusive behaviours to deeply understand this phenomenon. Indeed, in some respects, the most compelling examples are the easiest for forming a judgement on and managing. Most progress in this field is likely to emerge from our work on identifying, contextualising and managing the grey areas, as these are the areas which are too readily either exaggerated or trivialised and dismissed.

Occasionally, some patterns of presentation stood out as being different from those presented by other interviewees. For example, one man started some of his answers to my questions with a bold assertion; then would gradually water down the strength of a comment with weaker supporting details. The volume of his voice

would soften correspondingly, which would reduce my confidence in the accuracy of his original statement.

Indeed, the theme of traditional male and female typecasts ran consistently through the stories and it was more often the men who often appeared to be struggling with the challenges of the relatively new egalitarian role that they were expected to fulfil. For most who mentioned their fathers, these role expectations were very different from the authoritarian positions adopted by their fathers, grandfathers and many generations before that. When one man spoke about dealing with stress, he was referring to the tension of blazing these new trails – still taking on many of the burdens of the old role expectations, such as being of the family breadwinner; while feeling clumsy about living up to the new role expectations such as expressing intimate feelings or managing sensitive relationships with their children. These stories also intersected with reflections on attempts to be successful at various endeavours; admissions of failure; and conflicts over shifts in standards of manners across different generations and how they interpreted or misinterpreted signals of respect (e.g., disobeying conditions of agreements, allowing traffic to exit a car park or parking in a disabled car park).

Typically, the gaps and silences in the stories signalled deep thought or difficulty remembering details; although there was one example that was cited in the findings section of a participant experiencing a panic attack that was triggered by a flashback during the interview. She paused to compose herself.

Reflections on the Impact of My Presence at the Interviews

I was very sensitive about the reactions participants would have to my presence as a male psychologist sitting opposite them as they revealed their opinions and accounts of psychoemotional abuse. My maleness did not seem to inhibit any of the men and may have helped some feel more comfortable about sharing sensitive information. While some of the men did not disclose much personal information and quickly completed answers to questions that probed into personal feelings, others were very comfortable and articulate around these issues. One man attempted to appeal to our common gender and gain support for his theories on modern man being generally over-worked, burnt out, shallow and unsatisfied with his life. It is possible that some of the men may have disclosed more information to a female researcher, although I do not have any reason to conclude that. I believe that my experience of being a counsellor in many men’s behaviour change groups provided me with important insights into narrative patterns used to minimise or cover up psychoemotional abuse.

I mentioned during the methodology section that I suspect that my gender was an obstacle to recruiting female participants who had graduated from a course for survivors of family violence, as many may have not been comfortable trusting men with sensitive, personal information so soon after being betrayed by men. I became more confident about this suspicion after the interviews as many of the women who had been recruited through a survivors group had not re-partnered and stated that they were still learning to trust men again. My professional standing as a psychologist would have also helped to alleviate some of the concerns some of the women may

have had about disclosing their experiences to a man. While interviewing, I felt a little anxious about asking the women from the family violence group about their experiences of hurting other people, particularly after hearing some of the graphic stories they told about the abuse they suffered. I was very careful not to appear as though I was trying to equate the severity of their experiences of being abusive with their experiences of receiving psychoemotional abuse, as I did not want to diminish these experiences. This was a very delicate point in the interviews that required sensitive explanation and was clearly understood in every case.

The interview with the professionals was easier as the participants were not disclosing information about their personal lives, but were discussing general statements that were based on the overall experience of their clients. I found the interview with the professionals to be a very useful method for me to test my working theories on issues that had emerged through the individual interviews such as conceptualisations of the breadth of behaviours that constituted psychoemotional abuse, a sense of the prevalence of psychoemotional abuse that is discussed in counselling settings that do not directly address family violence, methods of coping, methods of perpetration, and social factors that contribute to the facilitation of psychoemotional abuse.

Reflections on the Limitations of the Study

The most obvious limitation of this study was its inability to generalise its conclusions more broadly, due to the small sample size. This has been noted through the discussions. However, while this is a limitation overall, it is common that smaller sample sizes are used in qualitative research explore the issues in greater depth, contain the volume of data and keep the research manageable. Most qualitative PhD studies reviewed by Mason (2010) featured between 20 and 30 participants. The sample size of 20 in this study presented 196 strategies of psychoemotional abuse in 13 roles across a range of settings, which was a sufficient amount of data to analyse trends and develop practical models. It was easier to find saturation for some of the material, such as the participants’ views on the prevention of psychoemotional abuse, than for other, rarer types of behaviour, such as death threats and stalking. It was particularly difficult to find saturation points on material that depended on the participants’ disclosure of their abusive behaviour towards others. Future studies could adopt a narrower scope than the range of topics canvassed in this study and delve more deeply into specific areas,

The stories that were presented in the interviews were also not validated by independent accounts, so I cannot be sure if they were accurate accounts. I attempted to search for inconsistencies in the data, but could not be sure. However, even if I was able to obtain alternative accounts from other people mentioned in the participants’ stories, or witnesses or professional records in a manner that would not put the participants at risk of harm, doubt about the accuracy would remain, as each source contains its own interpretive filter and limitations. As the prospect of video-

recording historical events was also impossible, it is likely that this limitation will remain with this type of work.

Another limitation arises when attempting to compare some of the conceptual understandings found in this study to other studies, as I asked participants for their conceptualisation of a psychoemotionally abusive relationship rather than an event. While this may not amount to a major setback for other researchers, it is a limitation that is worthy of note to ensure that these findings are accurately represented.

It should also be noted that the summarised conceptualisations presented in this study were not held by any one person, but represented a summarised position. Thus, it would be inaccurate to declare that this was a non-academic person's conceptualisation. Rather, it represented the views of a non-academic sample.

This research method also did not control for several confounding variables that could have mitigated the impact of the participants' receipt of psychoemotional abuse, such as access to support networks or formal mechanisms of complaint. There was also the enmeshment with other forms of abuse that could not be controlled for (Follingstad, 2010), and the impacts depended on self-report and often, self-diagnosis. Thus, while one cannot claim that the participants' accounts of the impacts directly resulted from psychoemotional abuse, it can be legitimately claimed that these were the impacts that the participants attributed to psychoemotional abuse. While Follingstad's (2010) call for disentanglement of the impacts of psychoemotional abuse from other forms of abuse should undoubtedly be heeded, there is also value for

deeper subsequent studies of the tangle itself, for it is likely that it will be the norm rather than the exception in many severe cases.

The fact that this is a Doctor of Philosophy thesis meant that only I could code the data, as I was required to claim that I conducted all of the work in this thesis by myself. In subsequent research, an exchange of data between coders should be conducted to further strengthen the trustworthiness of the interpretation.

It is also acknowledged that some researchers may perceive psychoemotional abuse as a multifactorial construct. While it was not possible to examine this angle of the topic in depth using the methodology designed in this thesis, multifactorial analyses in future studies could provide useful insights into how the various sub-components of psychoemotional abuse operate together and independently.

Reflections on the Impact of the Interviews on Me

Even though I have heard thousands of devastating stories of psychoemotional abuse over the years, I never fail to be inspired by the courage of the women who have endured intense experiences of psychoemotional abuse and sacrificed much to survive them. Some of the ordeals that I heard about during the interviews were as powerful as any I have heard in practice and will remain with me forever. It was easier to hear these often horrific accounts with the knowledge that the people who told them are now safely out of destructive relationships and are successfully rebuilding their lives. I expect that the impact of these stories on me would have been more intense if the participants were still in the midst of their psychoemotionally abusive relationships and I was worried about their or their children's immediate

safety, deeply concerned that they had a long, painful recovery ahead of them with largely unpredictable outcomes or felt helpless that I could not do much more to assist them – which is the real experience that many counsellors face daily. As a researcher there is less pressure to help compared to a counsellor, as the focus is largely on listening, learning and responsible reporting. My supervision sessions also helped put the dramatic aspects of these stories into perspective and debrief when necessary.

I was also impressed with the openness of the other participants who were not afraid to reveal some of their most shameful or humiliating times of their life to me. I felt very privileged to have the opportunity to meet the participants and gain an insight into highly sensitive aspects of their lives. It seems that various forms of psychoemotional abuse will remain as one of the most prevalent forms of interpersonal abuse as long as people jostle for power within their relationships. I hope the insights presented in this thesis can be used to help at least some of the countless numbers of other people who are suffering from psychoemotional abuse today and prevent others from suffering in the future.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Plain Language Statement for Participants Who Are Not Counsellors

Dear

My name is Peter Streker. I am a Master of Arts (Community Psychology) student², supervised by Professor Isaac Prilleltensky, Department of Psychology, Victoria University.

As part of my study, I will ask you about how you have dealt with unpleasant aspects of your interpersonal relationships and what you do to promote positive relationships. I would also like to learn about any other factors that you think might influence the quality of relationships. I hope the results of this project will help us improve the quality of relationships for large numbers of people.

I believe that you can make a valuable contribution and would like to hear your views and experiences with this topic. Your contribution may consist of two interviews:

- i) an individual interview
- ii) a group interview

The interview and the focus group will take approximately one hour each.

Ideally, I would like you to participate in both, as I value your input. However, the decision is completely yours.

Before you decide to participate or not, I need to clarify some important points:

- a) Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time.
- b) The interviews will be audiotaped with your consent. After the interview, I will send you a written transcript of what was said, so you have a chance to clarify or correct your comments.
- c) The information you provide will be confidential, except for disclosures of child abuse and instances where you may be at risk of hurting yourself or others. In the event that these issues are disclosed, I would have to discuss this with my supervisor and contact the appropriate authorities.
- d) If any direct quotes are used in the research paper, I will not include any identifying information and will make sure that no-one can find out who made the quote. Names will not be used on the interview transcripts. Identification numbers will be used as codes instead.

² I collected the data as a Master of Arts student. The work was upgraded to a PhD thesis and the Masters of Arts was not completed.

- e) At the end of the research a summary of the results will be available. If you wish to obtain a copy, please provide your address in the space below.
- f) If you experience some discomfort such as sadness or anxiety as a result of the issues that are raised during the interview, I will be able to refer you to a counsellor.

If you have any complaints regarding the way this research is performed, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher in person. Alternatively, you may prefer to contact Professor Isaac Prilleltensky at Victoria University on (03) 9365 2335 or the Chair of the Victoria University (Psychology Department) Ethics Committee on (03) 9365 2111.

Thank you for being involved in this study. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Peter Streker

Your Address:

Appendix B: An Excerpt from an Interview that Demonstrated how the TIP Method was Employed

| | Text | Interpretation | Power |
|------------|---|---|---|
| 6-1 | Interviewer: Could you please tell me about some of the experiences you have had during a psychologically abusive time in a relationship? | | |
| 6-2 | Interviewee: In real terms, I have played mind games with my wife. There is no question about that. | Confesses poor behaviour openly, but in a sheepish manner | Metaphor of a “game” – invokes playful image with even contestants |
| 6-3 | I probably still do. | Probably infers that he’s not sure - seems as he’s trying to be open about confessing current behaviour, but is very uncomfortable about it | |
| 6-4 | Which is not good for the environment | An very mild (minimised) admission of the detrimental impact of the abuse | |
| 6-5 | My wife and I have a really good relationship. It’s relatively good. | Attempt to show that there has been no real damage, but backtracks slightly | |
| 6-6 | My wife has a bit of friction with my father. | Another minimising phrase used | Takes attention off himself, without disclosing much. Introduces another family member who he has loyalties to. |
| 6-7 | My father is very hard on our son. | Strong view of father’s behaviour, but his own behaviour is now absent | Now has removed himself from centre stage completely |

| | Text | Interpretation | Power |
|------|--|---|--|
| 6-8 | But at the same time, she respects my parents and I respect her parents. | Backtracks again – has a pattern of opening with a bold headline, then watering it down. Appears that he wants to be honest but protect his and his family’s image. | Creates image of himself as respectful. |
| 6-9 | We socialize together, so there is no friction there in that sense. | I think he realizes that he has reached a dead-end in this story | Maybe he’s struggling for accurate language. Appears caught in business-speak. |
| 6-10 | But on the psychological side of things, I am just trying to... | Shifts attention back to himself. | |
| 6-11 | Look. I am the sort of person who likes things clean and neat. | A very telling comment – probably also a metaphor for black and white, or signaling that he has pure intent | |
| 6-12 | Our house is very clean and neat. | | Names it as “our house” – signals it is shared |
| 6-13 | And if I come home and the kids have got toys everywhere, I’ll come home after a stressful day and say hi and whatever. | Attempts to excuse/contextualise his behaviour as due to “stress” Mentions work pressures | Asserts dominance over wife and children together. |
| 6-14 | I’ll say hi to the kids and just walk straight through and just clean the house up. | Sets himself up as the hero in the story. If this was performed in a helpful manner, it would be different, but he is doing it to prove a point. | Ignores his wife, but is pleasant to his children – implicitly blames his wife, but not the children even though the mess consists of their toys |
| 6-15 | I suppose that is really a psychological approach towards her. It’s saying, “Hey. The house is not tidy.” | The admission contains the qualifier “I suppose”, but he understands what he is doing. | |

| | Text | Interpretation | Power |
|-------------|---|--|---|
| 6-16 | I’m not saying anything verbally. I’m just going through and doing things in a manner where she can pick up that I’m not happy with. | I suspect that this story is watered down – but he makes his point. A good everyday example. | He does not mention the response of other members of the household. It is exclusively told through his perspective. |

Appendix C: An Example of Some of the Themes Extracted from One Interview

| STRATEGIES | EFFECTS | COPING/RESISTANCE |
|---|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mind games 2. Tricks 3. Silent treatment for months 4. (I’m not sure what was psychological and what was emotional) – 5. Removed, silenced, devalued those who might help her (unaware of this at the time) - A critical condition that enhances the continuation of abuse – might want to write something on this blinding process 6. Abuse was coded “A lot of the things that were said and done were things that most people would think are quite innocent; but from past conditioning, to me they meant something else.” 7. Kept tension on “I would have liked a few things to blow up, because they didn’t.” | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Affects what you think. I was convinced it was my fault “On many occasions I knew that I wasn’t wrong, yet I would always feel as though I was wrong” 2. Other people didn’t believe me 3. Confusion “I wasn’t sure what I was seeing and what I wasn’t really seeing.” 4. Emotional roller-coaster – built up with promises then chronically let down 5. Became intricately absorbed by his family who also ostracised her – I’ve been in constant contact with them for 20 years but still don’t know many of them 6. Limited relationships – could not let good people get close to me, as if they did husband would attempt to block my relationship with them – so kept casual contact instead | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I had some casual contact with people while picking children up from school. Those people probably didn’t realise how important that was” 2. tried to leave 3 times – he threatened to kill himself 3. Went to couples counselling twice [again this was framed as a “relationships issue”]. Counsellor named his violence and he stopped going. 4. Told children to ignore his teasing. This worked for the older one, but the younger one suffered as he is a different personality. 5. “I became increasingly absorbed into his family” – but they also ostracized her 6. Casual contact with people (e.g., when picking kids up from school) became very important “...those people probably didn’t realize how important that was.” However I could not let those people get close [because my husband wouldn’t accept them]. 7. Found solidarity with another abused wife of my friend. 8. Several attempts to leave |

| STRATEGIES | EFFECTS | COPING/RESISTANCE |
|--|---|---|
| <p>8. He selected friends. “...he used to behave in a way that appeared normal and reasonable on the surface, but he would make people feel uncomfortable, so that they wouldn’t come back.”</p> <p>9. Sarcasm</p> <p>10. financial abuse</p> <p>11. His family & friends pressured me to stay in the relationship</p> <p>12. Teased the children until he got a reaction then would hit them.</p> | <p>7. Felt guilty when wanted to visit friends or see someone – internally trapped – panopticon/ self monitoring - Write a bit on this – people become conditioned into a state where they start to regulate their own behaviour, so that abuser does not need to do anything directly except exist as a threat looming in the background. People will behave in a way that prevents conflict by not giving them a chance to act (by keeping their noses clean)</p> | <p>9. Gave him a list of conditions to stay in the relationship</p> <p>10. After 3 attempts to leave, finally left home with the children</p> <p>11. Taught children to ignore the teasing from husband – worked for one child, but not the other as he couldn’t cope with the pressure</p> |

| Themes for Question 4 | FV WOMEN | | | | | GP WOMEN | | | | | FV MEN | | | | | GPMEN | | | | |
|---|----------|----|----|----|----|----------|----|----|----|-----|--------|----|----|----|----|-------|----|----|----|-----|
| | W1 | W6 | W3 | W4 | W5 | W2 | W7 | W8 | W9 | W10 | M1 | M2 | M3 | M4 | M5 | M6 | M7 | M8 | M9 | M10 |
| Pressures of modern family life unhealthy/financial pressures have negative affect on relationships | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | x | |
| Need new male role models – not just war and sports | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | | |
| Men often workaholics – burn out – destructive work ethic/need less emphasis on work more on family | | | | | | | | | | | | | x | | | | | | | |
| Checking in with partner or other people’s point of view | | | | | | | | | | | | | | x | | | | | | X |
| Society’s peer group pressure | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | |

Appendix E: An Example of a Raw Theme Sheet that combined the Responses from the Interviews

| Methods of Resistance and Coping |
|---|
| 1. “I’m not standing for it anymore” |
| 2. Avoid the abusive relationship |
| 3. Appropriating negative comments |
| 4. Process of checking/reflecting on abusive comments |
| 5. Daughter rejected abusive request by grandfather – sign of success for mother – prevented next generation of people who sit and take it |
| 6. Use other person’s abusive behaviour as fuel to keep fighting for rights to a respectful relationship |
| 7. Thoughtful reflection “How am I going to take this?” |
| 8. Think response through for a few days before executing |
| 9. Still invite abusive family members to be involved in life but only behave well. |
| 10. Determined to execute clear boundaries on what is acceptable and what is not: (I’m not going to take that”) |
| 11. Intervention Order to protect children |
| 12. Cut contact/changed phone numbers, address |
| 13. Saw counsellor |
| 14. Repositioned self in hierarchy from one of equal/less rights to that of equal/higher rights in order to protect [once was harmed, or threat of harm to children, recognised that abuser had forgone rights and need to protect prevailed] |
| 15. Rejected social pressure to keep family intact “Stuff what they say” |
| 16. Writing /journal (escape) |
| 17. Go for a drive (Escape) |
| 18. Creative artwork |
| 19. Hide art from husband to avoid judgement |
| 20. Bowl of jelly – move from one area to another |
| 21. Searching for an anchor to pin beliefs on |
| 22. Avoided him in the house by staying up late after he went to bed |

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| 23. Used sex to distract partner from hurting son – seen as a way of controlling his abusive behaviour - perceived this as a best of a series of bad options. Effectively used as a bargaining position akin to hostage situation as suspected he was sexually abusing kids. - sacrificed herself for them |
| 24. Had to kill maltreated cat |
| 25. Stayed out of his way/got children to stay out of his way (interesting term “his way”) and not say anything that could be used as a trigger (ie. give him no direct or indirect bait) |
| 26. “ Some people had it worse than me” - which counsellor’s views would conflict with – interesting debate as one the one hand this is a useful way of soothing pain, but on the other hand it maintains/prolongs abuse as it expands threshold for acting to change – lets him off the hook. So there’s conflict between short-term and long-term strategies in dealing with it. –during thesis I should conclude or give direction to promising areas of resistance and abuse – directions for further research – which could include a study on most successful strategies of coping and resistance. |
| 27. Started up Taskforce for other women who had suffered similar treatment. – largely due to frustration that no-one professionally would recognise it as serious – doctors and psychiatrists |
| 28. Deep down women who have survived/ experienced this are very strong |
| 29. Did not see any warning signs – only could pick them up with hindsight |
| 30. I couldn’t say anything as I did not want to step out of line and risk job |
| 31. Let it go (short term coping created long term problem) |
| 32. Suspected put downs were a response to jealousy |
| 33. Tried to talk about it to others at work but no-one wanted to listen/take it seriously – may have been intimidated by her |
| 34. “I retaliated a lot and probably made it a lot worse for myself” |
| 35. Now reflected on type of person father was and circumstances that shaped him – lived through the war, strict ethnic background |
| 36. “I’m a real fighter” |
| 37. Coped by keeping quiet |
| 38. Took overdose after was rejected |
| 39. Immediately wonder what is going on for them – ie. may not take it personally due to this |
| 40. “I give it back to them. I give them a bit of their own medicine” - aggressive revenge as an attempt of preventing future attacks. |
| 41. “I gave them a serve” |

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| 42. Severed relationship with them (In hindsight, wished I had spoken to them about how I felt) |
| 43. Used to train in preparation for a fight. Was always on guard and ready to fight. |
| 44. “I was always violent...if I thought that someone upset me enough, I would clout them...I’m not proud of that, but that’s where my thinking took me. I was very narrow minded.” |
| 45. “Today I don’t let things build up. I deal with problems as they arise. So I certainly don’t fire up.” |
| 46. Found cliché’s & stock phrases/questions from group very useful in changing thinking patterns (e.g., “how will this effect me in years to come?” “put yourself in the other person’s shoes” “How important is it really?” |
| 47. “ I don’t buy into stuff” [exercises restraint on issues that would have been seen as provocative previously |
| 48. 157. Spoke of how psychoemotional abusive behaviours grab hold of him: “Bang! It’s got me...I just can’t let go...I can’t stop myself.” As if they are an uncontrollable third party. He has OCD, but doesn’t blame that. Also reflects on learning deficiencies, genetics, work pressures |
| 49. Changes by reframing his thinking and thinking about the effect he is having on others. |
| 50. Took illegal drugs everyday to blot out/cope with pain – became dependent |
| 51. Counselling |
| 52. Women’s support groups |
| 53. Landmark (US self-development course) – left because they were too pushy (this decision helped her trust her own judgement again |
| 54. Re-learnt to trust her intuition |
| 55. Self-study |
| 56. Shopping at opp-shops |
| 57. Self help books which led to counselling (opened the door – tried to do it by herself first, then sought professional help) |
| 58. Belief in being guided by a higher power – which gave her a sense she was special and deserved to continue on her journey |
| 59. Inner Strength |
| 60. Re-framed experience as positive: Used analogy of boxing training - bad experiences being useful method of toughening her up for the real world |
| 61. Belief in becoming better in the future |
| 62. Idealization of love. – Dreams of true romance winning through in the end. |
| 63. He will turn into my hero. My prince will come. Happily ever afters will happen. That comes under romantic ethos drive. |
| 64. bloody mindedness |

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| 65. Passionate desire to create - used pain of being blocked as motivation to forge through |
| 66. Expressive outlet (metaphor of outlet/letting off steam – relieving pressure) |
| 67. Avenues of retreat – disguised like an escape tunnel from a guard. Disguises included being a good wife, cook, etc All these disguises had double meanings |
| 68. Perfectionist – kept home immaculate; controlled body – focused on things within control |
| 69. Hyper-surveillance of home |
| 70. Maintained façade to prevent/minimise any criticism from him or her family |
| 71. How was it that I managed to maintain a sense of self? |
| 72. Calculating what will pacify him |
| 73. Performing 'the minimum' and a minute fraction more. |
| 74. Withholding. |
| 75. Giving with a smile while secretly despising (him and me), |
| 76. Saying yes, looking like I'm doing it his and then doing it my way/or |
| 77. changing it back when he leaves.(passive resistance). |
| 78. 'Fait accompli'. (eg. installing lock on daughter's bedroom door.) |
| 79. Selective nagging. knowing exactly how much to nag so he won't want sex. |
| 80. Wearing tight clothes to bed. |
| 81. Not treating thrush. |
| 82. Pretend to be drunk/angry/hostile/ upset. whatever to get you 'out of it'. |
| 83. Urinate on his toothbrush. |
| 84. Imagining him as a midget when he's being condescending. |
| 85. Making sure he's 'out of his favourite things' on nights when the shop is closed early! |
| 86. And all sorts of really shitty, passive resistance, payback, revenge kind of stuff. (sometimes, for those who have no power they must first gain some, with revenge, in order to realise there are other more satisfying and lasting things that can be done. The important thing is that for someone to take revenge they must first have the belief that a wrong was done. From small niggles grows the power to act.) |
| 87. It is important to note that even in abusive relationship there is still power, and there is not a straight line of 'total control'. |
| 88. People can become so ugly in their attempts to control one another. |

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| 89. How was it that I managed to maintain a sense of self? |
| 90. Immersion in the role and selecting which parts are the most enjoyable for you. |
| 91. Enjoyment of little things. |
| 92. Letting myself play, just play - with my son - crawling around on the floor with him, imagining the world again as a child. tasting the couch leg and cushion and discovering a new understanding of the world through taste. (You really do see the world differently). |
| 93. Taking moments of freedom and savouring them (as a reservoir against the storm). |
| 94. Having a place and time (even just five minutes) where I can say . what do I want to do for me? |
| 95. Running into a bookstore - grabbing a book off the shelf and opening it for a moment of inspiration before 'facing him'. |
| 96. Assessing major problems and attempting to change just one aspect of it -concentrate on a realistic, achievable target goal. (When that fails, trying for a half compromise.) |
| 97. Anorexia as a source of strength. Me defying god, defying my body's need to eat, to sleep, to feel pain - literally defying god by pretending to be invincible. |
| 98. Later on that sense of invincible and inexhaustible is exactly what you have to have to put the physical hard work into rebuilding your life from the ground up. |
| 99. Out of body experience - separation as primary source of strength. I was not mentally in my body. This gave me the power to numb physical pain. |
| 100. Separation/Dissociation was a functioning state where the physicality of the body could be overcome by will. Thus, the more will I exert to 'accomplish' something despite any pain or limitations that have been put in place, then conversely, the greater is my capacity to 'persevere'. |
| 101. Establishing goals, and then 'just doing it' - you do without doing and everything gets done - is power in action that comes as a by product of dissociation. |
| 102. Developing psychological power - re-learning what 'gut instinct means' - listening to body tension in the stomach. listening to the quiet voice inside that KNOWS - there must be something worth living for - there must be more to marriage than this. |
| 103. Listening to your own grievances and hurts, what about me? This didn't have to be this way? |
| 104. (How else could this have been done in a way that didn't hurt?). |
| 105. Allowing yourself to need and want - what about me? |

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| 106. | Being in the centre - the kitchen. and 'looking' like your playing your part, 'doing the work' . but creating something internally. (Empowerment at the edges and while in the centre). |
| 107. | Grabbing each moment of freedom. Listen to the song on the radio when he's abusing you. Feel the sunlight through the car - remember going bush walking. Keep up the facade and lip service. You can have my body but you'll never have me. |
| 108. | Making - ten minutes of 'off load time'. I would jump in my car. Go and drive out to a paddock and sit locked in my car and write in my diary. |
| 109. | In a code. What was important was not what I wrote - but what I left out. |
| 110. | You can tell the worst times because of the 'blandness' of the writing. It was not the words - it was the writing itself that gave the power. and the act of defiance. |
| 111. | Learning to dream. |
| 112. | Developing a mental image for myself of a 'wise woman' - by recalling anyone who had ever said anything nice, compassionate or gentle to me and then seeing their face, then seeing another one and then transmuting this into the face of benevolent mother. This visualised face I would then ask |
| 113. | myself - what would my closest friend who cared about me - and knows me - what would she say? |
| 114. | How would she understand this situation. Excepting that she knows your true deep intentions - the gentle ones to desire peace, and harmony and joy . She does not say things the same way he does. That different language, that different perspective - of compassionate judgement and positive regard allows the space for unacknowledged feelings. From those unacknowledged feelings comes the one that is buried deep - the "that's not fair". This capacity to heard something other than what is currently around you is an unassailable source of strength for he cannot touch those memories, nor hear what she says, nor become like her. The wise woman sees him and knows him, and she is opposite to him. (the nastier he gets the more compassionate the wise woman - the more you can see Him. and feel another way of being). |
| 115. | Again, Wisewoman is a 'effect' of dissociation. The capacity to hear layers of self talk and then to decide to create one stable voice with which to follow. One stable voice which is reliable, trustworthy, dependable and most importantly - only ever has the deepest desire to honour your soul. |
| 116. | From this visualisation and the creative writing/creative anything I was able to develop a 'voice' (one) voice for me. A discerning parent that was not part of my experience but an amalgamation into a cohesive parental/counsellor/friend/ally. The voice of a friend. Talking to self as a friend. |

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| 117. | Starting to ask questions. think of alternatives by adding into self talk some questions - what else could have happened? He choose to do this but couldn't he have chosen to.? He says this but what do I want? What would it feel like if I got what I wanted? What would I think if I heard Tim say this to my best friend - what would I say and think about her? |
| 118. | Change self-talk - I say what hurts and what doesn't - not you. |
| 119. | - Do I have an opinion about this? |
| 120. | Watch the birds flies, a few beats of your wings, feel the direction you want to take and soar free. Choose your thermal. |
| 121. | (I used to sneak out of the house at dawn and watch the birds at the beach as a young girl. the memory of this stolen freedom was my salve, my nourishment during the hopeless nights and my hope. I knew, once, what it felt like to be free. Having known freedom. I know no freedom. I told myself - I would have that again.) |
| 122. | “I became increasingly absorbed into his family” – but they also ostracized her |
| 123. | Casual contact with people (e.g., when picking kids up from school) became very important “...those people probably didn’t realize how important that was.” However I could not let those people get close [because my husband wouldn’t accept them]. |
| 124. | Found solidarity with another abused wife of my friend. |
| 125. | Several attempts to leave |
| 126. | Gave him a list of conditions to stay in the relationship |
| 127. | After 3 attempts to leave, finally left home with the children |
| 128. | Taught children to ignore the teasing from husband – worked for one child, but not the other as he couldn’t cope with the pressure |
| 129. | Didn’t understand what was going on |
| 130. | ANOTHER LAYER OF COPING: mother could not cope with the prospect of her daughter having a broken home – THUS IT IS NOT JUST THOSE DIRECTLY AFFECTED WHO ARE REQUIRED TO COPE – coping occurs at multiple layers – perhaps even at societal level |
| 131. | Kept him quiet by “behaving” – CONTROLLED HIM BY BEING CONTROLLED “I bent over backwards to please him” |
| 132. | Attempted to buy his love, or his nice moods at least, by buying him presents |
| 133. | Tried to make life as comfortable and easy as possible [THIS IS A LURE THAT REWARDS ABUSIVE BEHAVIOUR] |
| 134. | Set up support group for women who have also been through this – as a response against not being believed |
| 135. | Speaking to other women who have been through it was very rewarding |

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| 136. | Books helped identify it was his fault/problem, not mine |
| 137. | Writing (as I was scared of forgetting- as assumed that blocking negative stuff out is body’s way of protecting it from trauma) |
| 138. | Mental control of thoughts – Told negative thoughts that they were not welcome here |
| 139. | Developed a strong commitment to remaining resilient [as part of new identity...I wonder whether being founder of a support group helped shift that identity and helped her resolve to keep up appearances for others – I mean this in a nice way – write this better] |
| 140. | Used images of the past to prevent going down that road again |
| 141. | I isolated myself - as much to cope with pressure of society not believing her – became a double edged sword – protective, but very limited as restricted potential for extra resources to be brought in to assist with the situation. |
| 142. | Stopped talking to him |
| 143. | Stopped going out with him |
| 144. | Ended up getting support from close family members |
| 145. | Slowed whole life down to get perspective |
| 146. | Dealt with one thing at a time (acknowledged this was wrong in hindsight as it never addressed the whole catalogue of abusive behaviour) - maybe this is a protective strategy – keep records of all the incidents |
| 147. | I let it build up – this wasn’t an effective coping strategy |
| 148. | I coped by making excuses to relieve the pressure of embarrassment |
| 149. | Used to pretend that I didn’t care & let it roll off my back (but it still affected me) |
| 150. | I was at a low place in my life – it may have been different today as I have more confidence. The abuser can pick up on that and choose targets [interesting notion – others have mentioned this too. I wonder if effect is more powerful on those with low self-esteem. Those committing physical and sexual abuse pick their targets, so it is not out of the question. However, I suspect that it is something else that they pick on such as big ears, dumb comments etc first - see how this emerges through the other topics. |
| 151. | I don’t think I work through things properly “don’t just sit here and whinge about it – go onto the next thing... I have a mechanism inside me that just makes me keep on going” |
| 152. | Friend sees her as a strong person |
| 153. | Kids help keep her focus “I’ve got kids. I can’t be crying every minute of the day...I don’t want to wreck their lives at this young age” |

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| 154. | Took Prozac for 11 years |
| 155. | Agreed with him to defuse the situation |
| 156. | Would walk away or hang up the phone [brought things to abrupt conclusion] |
| 157. | “when you are losing the whole fight the whole time you think: forget it. Why bother?” [framed relationship as a fight/competition] |
| 158. | Very upset at the time. Took it all personally [as it was probably directed personally] |
| 159. | Would trigger my insecurity, then I would rationalize my way through it and eventually put it back onto them |
| 160. | I avoid bringing up some issues with friends and tip-toe around them, which is quite exhausting [this is interesting. This brings into play the question of what is the relationship worth? Am I better off ignoring/copping some issues, as I don't want to injure or break the relationship? Or will this end up injuring the relationship anyway? Will it set up patterns that I'll regret later? This is more difficult when the relationship is interspersed with fun moments |
| 161. | I try to have empathy for all people |
| 162. | Counter abuse “I just went and told them where to go” |
| 163. | Withdrawal “and I switched off and didn't want to know about it. You sort it out then” |
| 164. | I won't help you in the future |
| 165. | I'm up front and straight down the line. I'll be direct to them and I'll confront them. Later concedes “Yet at the same time, we are playing mind games with each other.” |
| 166. | Tradition of revenge, pay back, asserting dominance, being powerful. No forgiveness. “ But the way I have been brought up is that if someone burns you, you never forget them.” |
| 167. | Great example of how deeply entrenched this is: I was out with one of my reps, going back 2 months ago...we were out at a venue with pre-planned call. We went in and he executed the call, which was cool. And on the way out I said, “That prick. I'll never forget him.” And he said “why?” And I said “he burnt me”. he said “when?” And I said, “1986.” We are talking 15 years ago, but I still won't forget that prick burning me in 1986. (over tickets to the Grand Prix) |
| 168. | Takes a stand on principle, even if it has costs. Forged on theme of dominance though. “This is probably not the best thing to say, but it might actually cost the company some volume, but it's about making a point. But it's important to be able to say “enough is enough” |
| 169. | Conflicted values from parents – sided with dad and reinforced by masculine culture at work: “But my father has never drummed it into me that “if he's done something wrong, get him back. My mum is always on my back telling me to forgive and forget. But I have been trained that way at work. |

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| 170. | At times I have taken it one step too far. Basically, if someone burns you make them pay for it. I’ve continued along that line, but I actually have lost control and taken it too far. Even to the point where I have taken it as a personal attack. And this can be a bit of a problem, because it takes a long time to get back on line. |
| 171. | INTEGRITY, STRENGTH POWER SHOULD NOT BE SACRIFICED, ALTHOUGH THERE ARE MARGINS (“you might lose a bit, but its worth it as you reclaim your reputation” “short-term pain for long-term gain) |
| 172. | “If you have people walking all over you, then you are a softcock” [hyper-masculine sexual metaphor used as a putdown in his business environment] |
| 173. | “I’m sure my wife has burnt me, but I just can’t remember when.” [IT’S FASCINATING THAT HE CAN REMEMBER OTHER INCIDNETS BACK 20 YEARS, BUT CAN’T REMEMBER DETAILS OF HIS HOME LIFE – maybe blocked by his own guilt or the enormous prescenece of hius own behaviour. Maybe it’s heroic to stand up at work, but cowardly at home. Maybe doesn’t want t hurt his wife by exposing her in this way or feels that answering this may diminish responsibility for his own behaviour. |
| 174. | “So I guess I just coped with it” [NO AWARENESS OF STRATEGIES BEYOND THIS BLANKET STATEMENT] |
| 175. | “I don’t surrender...I don’t give. I’m not lenient” |
| 176. | “I’ll just let water go under the bridge” (contrast to his statement about not being lenient) |
| 177. | “I just became a part of it [the abusive culture]. I didn’t say much either. It was almost like you had to leave the environment to change it” [this indicates the power of the environment on the behavior. It also suggests that people don’t necessarily fully embrace the abusive culture as they minimize their participation in it by not saying much. They tolerate it to help them achieve other goals, such as making money. Felt as though attempting to confront the culture was futile. This improved slightly when he joined up with others outside of work. |
| 178. | I just kept my mouth shut and my head down. Because if you replied to it you either get it worse Or if you come back with a better reply, they would either come and hit you, or come back with something worse still. Occasionally I would explode. [this indicates that a range of strategies were in the armory. First, kept a low profile to avoid abuse; then when this didn’t work he would explode to get them off his back. Important to note how neither strategy was universally perfect, but together they gave him options. It is the range of options that is important here. This may not be as viable for some people – exploding may be more possible or successful for some than others. |
| 179. | I tried to communicate it, but not very successfully. Skirted the issue...looked for excuses |
| 180. | I shut her out |
| 181. | I had an affair, then a series of one-night stands. I tried to capture in lust, what I lost in love. (response to his rejection by |

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| ex-girlfriend) – an emotional repair kit for a couple of days then I felt rather tacky. |
| 182. Children saw psychiatrist as he believed fathers abuse was his fault |
| 183. Daughter wrote letter to father |
| 184. Went to husband’s parents’ house. They told me he had a history of being physically and emotionally abusive with them. However, they treated him with respect and reinforced his behaviour. |
| 185. His mother advised me of some strategies of how to handle him (e.g., always apologise or he’ll get worse – placate him) |
| 186. “turn the other cheek” (biblical influence) Pretended that it had no impact on her – did not believe it was a good strategy, as it didn’t stop him and only made him try harder to hurt you next time |