“No blood, no foul”?

How invalidating responses to non-physical intimate partner abuse imperils victims

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DECLARATION

This dissertation contains no material which has been accepted for any award of any other degree of diploma in any University, and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the dissertation.

Jenni Nathan

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Mo taku tamariki. Te aroha me te rangimarie.

ABSTRACT

In Australian legislation and policy, definitions of intimate partner abuse acknowledge that it is an ongoing pattern employed by a perpetrator in order to gain or maintain control, foster dependency, and erode the self-worth of the victim and can include behaviours that are physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological in nature. However, societal responses – from service providers, and friends and family – to help seeker's disclosures of non-physical abuse are indicative of much narrower understandings.

This thesis draws on qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews with nine survivors of non-physical abuse to examine how responses to help seeking efforts influence stay/leave decision-making. Constructivist grounded theory was used in the analysis of responses from which two categories emerged – invalidating and validating. Invalidating responses inhibited further help seeking and prolonged exposure to abuse. Validating responses prompted efforts to alleviate or leave abuse. Drawing on the thesis findings, the discussion and analysis centre on better understanding the social foundations of decision-making and responses. These include: the reasons responses are so influential in the decision-making process, why responses are often incongruent with current policy and practice guidelines, conceptions of abuse in popular discourse, and the impact of social norms and popular discourse on non-help seeking behaviours. Following from this, some of the measures that might be employed to change societal responses to intimate partner abuse are discussed.

The current study found that responses to participant's help seeking efforts were influential in their decisions to stay in, or leave the relationship. The findings indicate that responses to help-seeking efforts are derived from public perceptions of, and attitudes to, intimate partner abuse. Poor understandings can result in poor responses, which can ultimately put the victim at risk. The current societal focus on physical manifestations of abuse belies the complexity of the problem and is detrimental to efforts to address intimate partner abuse. Improved awareness and acknowledgment of the impact of non-physical intimate partner abuse is therefore critical to domestic violence reduction and intervention.

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CHAPTER 1. INVISIBLE ABUSE: AN INTRODUCTION

After five years of living in fear of an abusive partner, Sarah¹ attended her local police station to ask for their assistance in escaping the abuse. Sarah had no bruises, no broken bones, and she had not been in a hospital emergency department since she was a child with an ear infection. You see, Sarah's abuse was non-physical. Her partner denigrated her on an almost daily basis. He monitored her every move, and controlled her access to money, transport, employment, friends, and family. A verbal tirade followed any perceived wrongdoing. In the few weeks before attending the station, Sarah's partner had added a new tactic to his arsenal. He had begun whispering threats to her, telling her in increasing detail how he intended to maim her. Sarah's escalating fear of her partner is what brought her to the police station. Moreover, she felt that if something could incite that much fear, it surely warranted assistance.

However, Sarah left the police station with little more than doubt in her perceptions of her experience. The officers she spoke to were dismissive of her and questioned the validity of her claims. They suggested that Sarah's fear was excessive to the situation she had described. The interaction left Sarah questioning whether her partner's behaviour was as bad as she had made it out to be. As it turned out, her initial fears were warranted. Unbeknown to Sarah, her partner was aware of her visit to the police station and was waiting for her when she returned home. In the altercation that followed, Sarah sustained multiple injuries including irreversible damage to her eye. For this incident, her partner was charged and removed from the house by police. Additionally, as part of their response, police referred Sarah to domestic violence support services. The irony of the situation is not lost on Sarah who, regardless, feels grateful that she is alive and finally getting the help she had earlier sought.

¹ All names used in this thesis are pseudonyms.

Sarah's story is not unique. Her experience demonstrates a general lack of understanding by many responders, both service providers and family and friends, regarding the nature of intimate partner abuse, the forms it can take, and the propensity for it to escalate into physical abuse (Carnovale 2016; Hannem, Langan & Stewart 2015; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. I). In examining the help-seeking experiences of intimate partner abuse victims, this thesis argues that invalidating responses to non-physical intimate partner abuse can have negative ramifications for abuse sufferers, including prolonged exposure to abuse and a potential escalation of controlling tactics. Moreover, because societal efforts to address the issue of domestic violence tend to focus on bruised and battered victims, help-seekers suffering non-physical abuse face additional barriers.

The invisibility of some of the most pervasive forms of abuse is due in part to the historical trajectory of efforts to address spousal abuse. The domestic violence movement developed from the feminist movements of the late 1960s in Great Britain and the United States, and by the mid-1970s the issue was propelled onto the international stage. These movements have contributed significantly to the shifts in community awareness, public attitudes, government policy and practice, and legal reforms. However, because they predominantly focused on physical manifestations of abuse, public perceptions of what constitutes abuse and what a 'real' victim looks like have narrowed to the exclusion of non-physical forms (Laing 2001; O'Leary 1999; Rees 2010). Today, media reports concerning domestic incidents tend to focus on the physical damage inflicted, and public campaigns to address the issue show images of bruised and battered women, or imposing figures with clenched fists standing over their cowering victims.² These images, redeployed in efforts to maintain awareness of the issue, only reinforce limiting conceptions of abuse that are already widespread in society.

² For example: <http://coastcommunitynews.com.au/2016/09/anti-domestic-violence-community-service-announcement-campaign-underway/>; <http://www.crescentsofbrisbane.org/00%20Files%20%20Images/CCN499/DV/P1.jpg>; and <http://i.huffpost.com/gen/4235920/thumbs/o-DV-570.jpg?7> – a still from the 2016 Australian Government *Stop it from the Start* campaign

1.1 Key terms

Intimate partner abuse refers to ‘acts of violence that occur between people who have, or have had, an intimate relationship’ (Council of Australian Governments 2011, p. 2), whereas family and domestic violence is a broader term that encompasses other forms of relational abuse such as child abuse (State of Victoria 2016, Vol. I). In Australia, the national legislation concerning intimate partner abuse is the *Family Law Act 1975* (Office of Parliamentary Counsel 2016). The Act uses the term *family violence* and defines it as ‘...violent, threatening or other behaviour by a person that coerces or controls a member of the person’s family (the *family member*), or causes the family member to be fearful’ (p. 33). Definitions vary between states and across service sectors (judicial, social services, non-governmental organisations); nevertheless, there is general agreement that intimate partner abuse includes behaviours that can be physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological in nature (Carnovale 2016; Laing 2001). Moreover, most definitions acknowledge that such behaviours are part of an ongoing pattern employed by a perpetrator in order to gain or maintain control, foster dependency, and erode the self-worth of the victim (Hearn 2013; Hunter 2006; Johnson 2008; Myhill 2015; Stark 2007). Physical abuse is only one of the many tactics in an abuser’s repertoire. Control is exercised and maintained in a number of ways including, but not limited to, isolating the victim from support networks, controlling access to money, and using intimate knowledge to degrade, ridicule, or blackmail the victim (Hunter 2006; Karakurt & Silver 2013; Stark 2007). Perpetrators also routinely deny, minimise, justify, and blame others for the abuse they use (Hunter 2006). This pattern of control in intimate relationships has been referred to by many terms in the literature. Two of the most common are ‘coercive control’ (Stark 2007), and ‘intimate terrorism’ (Johnson 2008). However, both of these terms are inclusive of physical abuse, therefore, the term non-physical abuse is used throughout this thesis to delineate the visible, from the invisible. It is a term that is not commonly used in popular discourse and is not well understood.

Help seeking is defined as actions undertaken by individuals to assist them in alleviating something they perceive as an issue (Meyer 2009; Pescosolido 2007). In relation to intimate partner abuse, the experience may not necessarily be perceived as abuse, at least initially. Nevertheless, individuals seek help for problems in their intimate relationships and disclosing to another is usually the first step (Lempert 1997; Meyer 2009). It is important to note that help seeking is broader than service utilisation - which generally entails engaging with formal services - as it encompasses actions such as talking to a friend, or searching for information on the internet (Pescosolido 2007; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. I). Decision-making forms a part of the help seeking process and decisions can be seen as *shaping* the experience and being *shaped by* the experience. (Curry et al. 2011; Pescosolido 2007). For example, the decision of who to approach first - specialist domestic violence services, or the police - shapes subsequent experience and behaviours because the responses from each will vary in their perceived helpfulness. Furthermore, that initial decision is itself shaped by the resources available to a help seeker in the first place, who may not have access to specialist services.

1.2 Help seeking outcomes and non-physical abuse: a review of the literature

While research into the processes of, and factors impacting help seeking behaviours have grown significantly in recently decades, many important gaps remain. Specifically, studies into help seeking outcomes are rare (Meyer 2009; Rhatigan, Street, & Axsom 2006) and deserve more attention because it cannot be assumed that all those who seek help remedy their situation. Many victims return to, or remain in, an abusive relationship after reaching out for help. Of the studies that examine stay/leave decision-making, a handful consider the influence of responses. Several studies (George & Harris 2014; Gover et al. 2013; Guggisberg & Fisher 2010; Meyer 2009) document how negative responses from police deter reutilisation of the service, and psychologists Srinivas and DePrince (2015) who conducted a quantitative study of female abuse survivor outcomes following police contact, linked poor police responses, specifically unmet expectations, to

greater post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms in the victim. Public health researchers in Spain (Ruiz-Pérez et al. 2013) also considered the impact of institutional responses, although not limited to the police, in their study that analysed the interview transcripts of 34 abuse victims to discern factors that inhibit and facilitate leaving abuse. The researchers found that poor responses compounded existing feelings of guilt and shame and deterred further help seeking efforts, prolonging abusive experiences. In regards to responses from informal sources, Sociologist Moe (2007) interviewed 19 refuge residents in her study investigating the help-seeking experiences of abuse victims and found that many victims felt ‘abandoned’ by the friends and family they had disclosed their abuse to, resulting in feelings of guilt and self-blame. Meyer’s (2009) extensive mixed method social research with abuse victims in Queensland produced similar results with participants who experienced negative responses from informal sources having prolonged exposure to abuse. Similarly, Lempert’s (1997) sociological research with 32 abuse victims looked at the negative effects of well-meaning help when victims disclosed abuse to friends and families. Although stay/leave decision-making was not specifically investigated, the study found that informal helpers tended to takeover and steer the help seeking process and this emulated the control dynamics the victim was looking to escape.

Just as there are very few studies on help-seeking for intimate partner abuse, there is a relative dearth of studies on non-physical abuse compared to physical. This gap is even more pronounced in regards to experiences of help seeking for non-physical abuses. The help seeking literature, if it does include sufferers of non-physical abuse, tends not to differentiate them from victims of physical abuse (Hannem, Langan & Stewart 2015). That is, the existing research rarely considers that help seeking experiences might differ in the absence of visual markers of abuse. Notable exceptions are Carnovale (2016), whose social research work with women in the Australian Capital Territory found that the dominant normative bias towards recognition of abuse as only physical negatively impacted help seeking efforts. Additionally, *The Royal Commission into Family*

Violence report (State of Victoria 2016, Vol. I), received many submissions that testified to the additional barriers to help seeking posed by the invisibility of non-physical abuse.

This thesis contributes to bridging this important gap by bringing the two themes of help seeking and non-physical abuse together and argues that the current societal focus on physical manifestations of abuse belies the complexity of the problem and is detrimental to efforts to address intimate partner abuse. The analysis of the literature suggests that responses to help-seeking efforts are informed by public perceptions of, and attitudes to, intimate partner abuse; a finding corroborated by the current research. The current limited awareness of the impact of non-physical abuse gives rise to poor understandings that can result in poor responses, which can ultimately prolong exposure and put the victim at increased risk.

1.3 Methodology

Using snowball sampling recruitment techniques, and following receipt of research ethics clearance, nine participants were interviewed, eight females, and one male aged between 24 and 52.

Individuals were eligible to participate if they had sought help for non-physical abuse suffered in an intimate partner relationship within the last five years (mid-2012 onwards) and were no longer in an abusive relationship. The timeframe helps ensure data is relevant to the current context as significant changes relating to domestic violence occurred in political and legal spheres prior to this time. For example, for the first time, via the *Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Act 2011* (Office of Parliamentary Counsel 2011), the Act's definition included controlling or coercive behaviour as forms of abuse. Additionally, the Council of Australian Governments (2011) tabled *The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children*, drawing attention to the topic and prompting changes in service delivery policies and practices.

Participants were given an information sheet describing types of non-physical abuse immediately prior to interview and were asked how they would categorise the abuse they had experienced in their former relationships. The information sheet broadly delineated abuse behaviours into five categories: financial/economic, psychological/emotional, stalking and digital, social, and spiritual/cultural. These responses were used as an indicative overview of the common experience of the participants. Another purpose of the information sheet was to give interviewees a way of referring to the abuse they had suffered without having to go into detail. The discussions generated by the information sheet also provided a transition to the interview questions. Interviews lasted between 20 and 70 minutes and were audio recorded for later transcription. They followed a semi-structured format with the questions relating to four key areas: help-seeking efforts (who was approached for help, what type of help was sought); the responses received; the impact of responses on shaping perceptions and behaviour; and the impact of other factors on decisions to remain in, or leave the abusive relationships. Whilst all data was used in the development of this thesis, five cases are featured because these participants spoke extensively about their help seeking experiences. Follow-up interviews were conducted with four of these participants.

Analysis of interview data employed a constructivist grounded theory approach using the work of Charmaz (2014) as a methodological guide, and draws on Pescosolido's (1992) social organisation strategy framework in developing codes and categories. The constructivist grounded theory approach was chosen to address the lack of research on the topic, as it is well suited to small-scale, exploratory studies using qualitative forms of inquiry (Charmaz 2014; Denscombe 2014). Additionally, with its roots in symbolic interactionism, grounded theory is a useful tool for exploring experience from the participant's perspective (Denscombe 2014). Data was continuously coded with open and axial coding conducted after each interview so that emergent themes and categories could be built upon and clarified in subsequent interviews.

The social organisation strategy framework is concerned with how people make decisions and was primarily developed to understand health service utilisation decisions (Pescosolido 1992). It is related to rational choice and social exchange theories (Agnew & Lehmiller 2007), but differs from both in important ways. Rational choice theory hails from economics and presupposes that individuals make rational choices based on a cost-benefit analysis (Hedström & Stern 2008). Similarly, social exchange theory posits that cost-benefit analysis, and the consideration and comparison of alternatives, are used in the formation of relationships. Both approaches leave little room for the consideration of the influence of social responses on an individual's decision-making. In the social organisation strategy framework, in contrast, social interaction and the influence of social forces are central, rather than peripheral, or absent. Social interaction is the mechanism through which individuals inform themselves and comprehend their situation. 'Choice' is seen as socially embedded as opposed to 'rational', where rational is understood as relatively devoid of social forces. As Pescosolido (1992, p110), a sociologist known for her work in developing health decision-making models including the SOS framework points out: 'Interaction with others forms an essential element in the dynamics of decision-making processes'. This approach recognises the influence of overarching social structures, and social norms that permeate every social interaction. Social norms constrain 'choice', shape narratives, and affect the scope of available resources and responses (Langan, Hannem & Stewart 2016; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. V). This framework acknowledges the social foundations of responses, both formal and informal, and recognises the limitations imposed on the help seeking experience.

1.4 Focus and scope

There are several reasons this research focused solely on help seeking for non-physical abuse, to the exclusion of physical. Firstly, as with public discourse, studies of intimate partner violence tend to concentrate on physical manifestations of abuse as measures of severity, or they do not specifically delineate the physical from the non-physical (Copp et al. 2015; Hannem, Langan & Stewart 2015;

Karakurt & Silver 2013). The current study seeks to address this knowledge gap and contribute to the literature that draws attention to the complexity of intimate partner abuse. Secondly, as the opening story demonstrates, non-physical forms of abuse tend to precede physically violent incidents (Domestic Violence Death Review Team [DVDRT] 2015; Myhill 2015; O’Leary 1999; Wheller & Wire 2014). Therefore, an understanding of the risks of poor responses to non-physical abuse is imperative to improve service delivery. Third, although non-physical abuse frequently occurs in isolation from physical abuse, the reverse does not hold, certainly not in the context of coercive controlling relationships (O’Leary 1999; Seff, Beaulaurier & Newman 2008). This suggests that non-physical abuses are far more pervasive than their physical counterparts are (Karakurt & Silver 2013; Hannem, Langan & Stewart 2015). Fourth, it is common for victims of abuse to perceive the non-physical controlling behaviours as more damaging psychologically, and certainly more difficult to ‘heal’ from, than the physical incidents (Doherty & Berglund 2008; Douglas & Stark 2010; MacDonald 2012; Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick 2008; O’Leary 1999; Rees 2010; Seff, Beaulaurier & Newman 2008). Finally, non-physical abuses are deleterious to health even in the absence of physical abuse (Crossman, Hardesty, & Raffeilli 2016). Emotional abuse in particular is found to erode a victim’s resilience and is linked to chronic stress and increased rates of depression (Graham-Kevan 2007; Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick 2008).

In summary, this research examines the help seeking experience of sufferers of non-physical abuse to understand how responses to their disclosures of abuse shaped their subsequent decisions to stay in, or leave, the relationship. It is argued that invalidating responses cause victims to forego, or delay, decisions to leave, which can prove detrimental to their safety and wellbeing.

Chapter two presents five case studies drawn from the interview data that explore help seeking for non-physical abuse as experienced by the interviewees. In chapter three, findings from the analysis of the interview data conducted for this thesis are discussed. The analysis focused on the impact of

responses and two broad categories emerged; invalidating and validating. Each are discussed with reference to their impact on help seeking trajectories and stay/leave decision-making. The chapter concludes by discussing other influential factors that emerged both from thesis data and relevant literature, including: mental illness, financial/economic concerns, children, severity of abuse, and social support.

Drawing on the thesis findings, chapter four discusses the social foundations of decision-making and responses to highlight how help seeking, and the responses to them, are embedded in social and relational contexts. Firstly, the reasons responses are so influential in the decision-making process are examined. This discussion leads to an analysis of why responses are often incongruent with current policy and practice guidelines, which leads to considerations of conceptions of abuse in popular discourse, and issues of measuring and defining abuse. An exploration of how social norms and popular discourse on abuse might impact non-help seeking behaviours follows. The final section discusses some of the measures that might be employed to change societal responses to intimate partner abuse.

CHAPTER 2. HELP SEEKING FOR NON-PHYSICAL INTIMATE PARTNER ABUSE

This chapter is concerned with illustrating the experiences of seeking help for non-physical intimate partner abuse as recounted by the participants of the current study. Although limited, the data helps to address the existing literature gaps outlined in the previous chapter and contributes important evidence to support the assertion that the invisibility of non-physical abuse complicates the help seeking process. Pseudonyms are used and some identifying details are intentionally vague, to protect participant identities.

2.1 Alison

Alison's experience of intimate partner abuse lasted for ten years, during which time she made several attempts to leave. Alison was well-educated on the topic of non-physical abuse and did not reference the information sheet given out at the beginning of interviews when defining her experience. She uses the term psychological abuse, which she understands as encapsulating emotional abuse, to describe her experience. Alison also alludes to financial abuse, but believes its impact was not as damaging. Throughout the interview, Alison repeatedly referred to the violence she experienced in her family of origin and expressed a belief that her childhood experiences established her understanding of abuse as only physical. Further, Alison felt that it was this limited understanding that contributed to her delay in leaving.

...back then, it wasn't a big deal, parents smacked their kids. But as I got older... [pause] I remember copping a hiding once, like, welts on my arse, that kind of hiding, for getting home five minutes late. So yeah, as I got older, I started to think that that was probably a bit extreme. And I wondered if this was happening to other kids. So I started to see that that, what I went through, that was unacceptable, you know, not normal. *That's abuse.* [emphasis added]

When asked about how her understanding of abuse came to change, Alison described a back-and-forth process that began with an internet search about two years into the relationship. She was seeking information on how to deal with what she felt were ‘everyday relationship problems’. What she found was information on psychological abuse, and it succinctly described her situation. Still reluctant to label her partner abusive, Alison turned to a close friend.

I guess I wanted some sort of, um, confirmation. I wanted to know if those sites were right.

And I guess I wanted to, [pause] I wanted backup? Support! I wanted emotional support...

It didn’t really work out that way. (Friend’s name) brushed off any suggestions of abuse. She was supportive though, I guess. Like, she gave me ideas of how to make him happy. You know - cook him a nice meal, make sure the house is always spotless [laughs].

So I did.

In light of her friend’s reaction, Alison reverted to defining her relationship as problematic, rather than abusive. She also consulted several doctors about the normalcy of her relationship strain and was told she was depressed. Further, it was her ‘condition’ that was the root of her problems and medication would alleviate them. Only one doctor questioned the relationship itself. However...

She was really concerned. She said I looked a mess, and, the medication didn’t seem to be helping. So she said, “Does he hit you? You can tell me. I can get you some help”. Stuff like that. But, as soon as I said that he didn’t, her whole demeanour changed. She was like, “Ah, okay. Let’s look at upping your dosage then”.

The doctor’s response reiterated to Alison that being hit was legitimate cause for concern. However, not being hit meant that the problem lay with her, not the relationship, and certainly not her partner. This view remained largely unchallenged for the remainder of the relationship. Alison recalls her ‘turning-point’, which occurred during a routine antenatal visit:

They were asking me all the usual questions and stuff, and they asked me about what sort of support I had at home. I kind of laughed and then burst into tears. So of course, they asked what was going on. I remember saying, “he doesn’t hit me, I’m just tired”, or something like that. I was just expecting it to go like all the others. But they still looked concerned.

It was so different, it was... [pause] they didn’t ask what he was doing. Like, um, they didn’t ask me to describe his behaviours or whatever. They asked how *I* felt. How comfortable did I feel going home to him. How did I feel leaving the kids with him. How afraid was I. It was just so different. I mattered.

Alison’s responses to the questions triggered access to a number of services including domestic violence outreach, individual counselling, and charity services that could help with obtaining items for her baby. Alison moved out before the birth and maintained contact with her ex-partner. However, post-separation raised new challenges as her ex-partner’s behaviours worsened. She pursued various avenues of help in an attempt to keep her ex-partner from harassing her, whilst still allowing him access to the children.

I didn’t want to involve family and friends, because, quite frankly, I was sick of trying to justify my leaving. I tried to get a VRO (violent restraining order), but even the DV (domestic violence) advocate who outreach organised to come with me... she said it would fail. She said the (local courthouse) judge never granted them.

So I went to speak to someone at the child contact centre and explained why I wanted a middle ground for handover and stuff. She basically dismissed me. I mean, she said I could use the services, but she thought it was unnecessary because I wasn’t, what I was describing wasn’t abuse. She reckoned he was just old-fashioned [laughs]. So yeah, I didn’t go back there either.

Alison had a similar interaction with a pro bono lawyer who flatly dismissed her claims of abuse and then, as if to correct Alison’s definition, proceeded to describe the violent beating of one of her

clients. Alison described the interaction as ‘uncomfortable’, and did not return to the legal centre for matters pertaining to the children.

She did however continue to utilise domestic violence outreach services as a means of ongoing support and education about abuse. She spoke of the service as ‘a continuous reaffirming force’ that validated her experience and understanding of abuse and helped her move forward.

2.2 Beth

Beth indicated on the sheet provided at the beginning of her interview that she suffered psychological, social, and financial abuse over a period of twelve years. She feels that abuse socially isolated her and she believed for many years that her situation was normal. This is interesting as she also indicates that she does not recall any abuse in her family of origin. Several times throughout the interview, Beth raises the point of having few to no reference points for ‘normal’. ‘He told me how things were supposed to go. He told me what was normal. And why wouldn’t I believe him? He loved me.’

Beth’s situation began to change when she fell pregnant. Pregnancy necessitated the involvement of other people in her life. However, she also experienced an increase in abuse.

He would do and say stuff as if I, my being pregnant, was a hassle. He always had to come with me, I was never alone. Then on one of my [antenatal] visits, one of the nurses was waiting for me in the toilets and she was asking me how I was feeling and how things were at home, and it was... not what they usually did.

I told her I was okay.

Beth believes that, in doing something unusual, the nurse was conveying concern. Beth considers this event ‘the beginning of the end’. ‘I replayed that moment over and over in my head. It became my glimmer of hope. I wondered if my normal wasn’t other people’s normal.’

The birth of her baby afforded Beth more opportunities for social interaction. It was during a visit to a child health nurse that Beth discovered pamphlets on domestic violence.

I remember reading them and thinking oh yeah he does that, but then it was all, oh nah, that doesn't happen. Maybe they're different now? It was all about, it was just different ways of being hit, slapping, kicking, shoving. The only one he did was threaten.

[...]

So I didn't take it (the pamphlet) or anything because it didn't seem, it wasn't for my situation.

Beth said that although she had long come to understand her relationship as 'not normal', she felt using the term abusive was 'too harsh'. However, her health began to suffer as she struggled to raise a baby and placate her partner. After failing to talk her partner into attending counselling with her, she attended alone.

He said I was the one with the problem, so why should he go. So I went alone. He didn't like that at all, but I had started to learn that I could do things on my own, and that I could ignore the attitude I got when I did.

Through counselling, Beth built up her confidence and began to stand-up to her partner. The abuse escalated again and one day, after returning from a counselling session, her partner refused to let her into the house. She attended the police station to determine her options.

I had (child's name), and I wasn't hurt, so they basically said 'go somewhere else for the night'. My other option was they could escort me home and get me some clothes. I didn't want to go home, because, I mean, he didn't want me there so how would things go if I turned up with the police. It was the most extreme thing he'd done.

When asked what difference it made that she was not visibly hurt, Beth responded that the police informed her they could remove him from the home and detain him. ‘I guess because, you know, it’s a crime then’. In the end, the police assisted Beth with finding accommodation for the night.

Beth stayed in temporary accommodation for a few weeks before moving into short-term accommodation in a women’s shelter. The staff there helped her to rebuild her life and navigate legal issues pertaining to child contact. Beth is critical of how the legal system handles cases of domestic violence.

They say that child safety is the most important thing, and they even say mental abuse, or emotional, or something like that. But then they tell me I’m being, I’m alienating the other parent. It’s a lose-lose situation.

2.3 Helena

Helena’s experience of abuse spanned two decades, and, she believes, it was profoundly shaped by her religious ties. Using the sheet provided, she considered her experience indicative of emotional, social, and financial abuse. Helena recalls turning to her parents for help and telling them she wanted to end her relationship before the impending marriage.

They had a wonderful relationship. Still do. I went to them with all the confidence in the world that they would support and encourage me to leave. I thought they would be quite defensive of their daughter being mistreated. But, they loved him. They, he was incredibly charming, and they loved him. They convinced me that it was the stress of the upcoming wedding that had made him [pause] misbehave, and I was just being sensitive. They assured me that everything would work out once we were married.

Helena felt strongly that had she experienced physical abuse, her father would have been outraged. She felt the interaction changed her relationship with her parents and she did not return to them again for help. Once married, Helena continued to experience abuse at home and began immersing

herself in church activities. As the abuse had worked to isolate Helena from former ties, involvement in the church became her only means of social interaction. She used the opportunities to ‘test the waters’.

(He) was deeply involved with the church, even before we met. I was expected to be just as involved as him. I was really cautious though, because I felt like he had eyes everywhere. I started listening to the other women because I, I wasn’t sure. I wanted to see how they talked about their marriages. To try and [pause] find out where the boundaries were? It was discouraging.

Helena felt that those within her church network would react similarly to her parents. Her husband was a well-liked, long time member and it would be near impossible to persuade anyone otherwise. She felt, in particular, that it would be even less likely for people to believe her without physical evidence. On reflection, Helena surmises that the attitudes she encountered within her church network were likely widespread. However, she is resolute in her belief that religious doctrine works to veil abuse.

I couldn’t just leave. You just don’t do that. I mean, being beaten, that would be a reason. Although, I have heard that gets covered up too. But for me, that would have been a reason, a good reason, to go.

It was not until sometime later, when Helena’s children were older, that extracurricular activities provided the opportunity for new social connections. Helena forged a new friendship that had no associations to her husband. Helena emphasised this point, suggesting that the ‘fresh perspective’ was the impetus for change.

It’s funny you know. We never really spoke of abuse in a direct manner. I mean, I guess I mean, I didn’t call it that. But she knew it was that. She used to say to me before I left to go home, “Don’t be bold, be smart” - because, she said I had changed so much, her friendship

gave me strength and confidence. So, “Don’t be bold”, was shorthand for “don’t go home and say something that will get you hurt”.

Helena credits this friendship with allowing her the space and time to ‘work things out’ herself, and build up the confidence to act. She began to make plans to leave and sought legal advice to ascertain her rights and responsibilities in regards to financial matters and the children.

...the financial stuff was all pretty straight forward, but children’s matters are a whole different kettle of fish. She was talking at me so fast, but, it was confusing. I asked about what happens in cases, when there’s, where there’s abuse and she seemed to say two different things. She was saying that, ah, if it’s not so bad then you shouldn’t say anything because, it, because it makes things harder. But, if it’s bad and you don’t say anything, you get in trouble.

I asked her what ‘bad’ was. She started talking about getting hospital records together and taking photos and stuff. So I asked what you do if they don’t hit you. [long pause]. Yeah, that’s what she said.

Helena explained that the lawyer she consulted could not comprehend how the relationship was abusive if there were no physical incidents. When Helena persisted in describing her experience as such, the lawyer cautioned against claiming abuse without evidence. He continued, explaining that only the most severe cases of spousal abuse affect parenting arrangements and unsubstantiated claims can work against the victim.

Helena notes that the encounter left her rethinking her exit from the relationship: ‘If I left, and they [the children] couldn’t... he would’ve gotten worse’.

2.4 Mark

Mark's experience of abuse lasted for nine years and, using the information sheet, he characterised it as primarily psychological/emotional during the relationship, with stalking behaviours occurring after separation. Mark also cited financial abuse:

I've never seen it [financial abuse] defined like that. I always thought it meant controlling, um, restricting, um access, to money. I didn't experience that. But the debt thing [laughs]. Yeah, I know all about that.

It's um, it's probably the one I'm most ashamed of, to be honest, because, well. I think it was the most preventable. But I also think it had the least impact... in the long run.

Mark is referring to his experience of financial abuse where his partner accumulated a large amount of debt in his name. Mark was aware of financial abuse; however, he believed it only described instances where one person controls another person's access to goods, or money. Despite being unaware that his partner's financial actions could be considered abusive, he notes that 'money troubles' was the reason underlying his first attempt to seek help from a relationship counsellor.

Abusive? Nah. I was just trying to get a handle on things. She was flying through the money, taking out loans left, right, and centre, and, ah, on some level, I thought I was, ah, causing that. She sure told me I was [laughs]. I figured all the weird behaviours were because of, well, ah, not me maybe, but us. Fix the relationship, and, the rest will follow.

[...]

Counselling was my first real wake up call. It was [pause] It was mind-blowing, truly. She was completely different in there, a different person. I was gobsmacked. Didn't know what to say, forgot why I was there, and when I did speak, I sounded like a bumbling idiot.

Mark clarifies that during the session his partner was non-confrontational, acted ‘normal’, and seemed perplexed as to why they were there. ‘In front of others, she was sugar and spice’ - behaviour that was completely opposite to what Mark was experiencing at home.

Although the session did not achieve what Mark had hoped for, it did prompt him to seek out more information as he began to suspect he was dealing with more than ‘relationship troubles’. Mark first sought out information on the internet, which led him to an online domestic violence support group. His choice was motivated by the inclusivity of the forum (it was not, as many are, exclusive to women in heterosexual relationships), and the anonymity it afforded him.

I spent a lot of time on there [online support forum]. Read all I could, learnt all I could, didn’t contribute much, felt like a noob. But that didn’t matter. It was more about knowing there were others. I didn’t have to talk to them, it was just good to know I wasn’t crazy.

There comes a time though when you have to stop reading and start doing [laughs]. I put off leaving. I just. Denial. You know. In any case, I did leave.

Mark experienced an escalation of abuse after separation, a phenomena that is well documented in the literature. He reflects on this period as involving ‘the most frustrating experiences’ of his life. Mark’s frustration stemmed from the difficulties he had in obtaining help from the justice and legal systems. On several occasions, police insisted there was little they could do and advised Mark to apply for a violent restraining order (VRO).

The police didn’t seem too concerned with her turning up at my house, or work, every, single, day. The hundred plus unanswered texts, that were getting more and more vile mind you, they were nothing... apparently. They kept saying, get a VRO and then we can do something. So I go and apply and the judge says, “if you’re so concerned, why didn’t you call the police? Where’s the police report?”. Seriously?

Mark became exasperated with the process of seeking help. He felt as though nobody was taking his concerns seriously and he was continuously being passed along to another service. Mark did eventually obtain a VRO. However, he believes it was ineffective in eliminating the stalking. He changed jobs, contact details, and moved residence to escape the abuse. When asked to reflect on whether he feels the responses he received were influenced by his gender or the nature of the abuse he suffered:

I think my being male hasn't made things any easier, but, I know from the forums that what happened to me happens to women all the time. I do think we need to have some more services though, or inclusive services maybe? Maybe that wouldn't work. There just aren't any for guys. Well, there are, but they're really geared towards abusers, not abused.

But back to that question. I think I would've had an easier time getting help if she had stabbed me or something. I mean, that's hard to ignore. But if I were female, with the same story? I doubt the ending would have changed much.

Mark's statement demonstrates a belief that was expressed by all the interviewees - a lack of physical evidence of abuse complicates the help seeking experience. Mark had little doubt that police, or other responders, could so easily dismiss his claims of abuse if he were physically assaulted.

2.5 Rachel

Rachel's experience of psychological and financial abuse lasted four years. She feels that her help seeking attempts were complicated by the fact that her abuser suffered from a mental illness. Rachel indicates that she did not understand her situation as abusive until she began seeing a counsellor.

And that wasn't for DV so much as it was for getting help to deal with all the stress. I mean, looking back, yeah, it was DV. But at the time, I didn't think all the stress was related to that. I didn't even know to call it that.

[...]

I had somewhere to go and someone who listened to me, and it was cathartic. But then, the more I said, the more awkward... I don't know if that's the right word [...] The counsellor began to say more things that suggested I was in a very bad relationship. I was sitting there thinking, you've got this so wrong! It's me, not him, or us. So I pulled back a bit.

Rachel clarified that 'pulled back a bit', meant she began cancelling sessions and eventually stopped all together. Due to her partner's condition, Rachel had regular contact with mental health professionals and felt that abuse is something that would have already been mentioned. She therefore surmised that the counsellor had misread her situation.

...over the years I have seen probably 20 or more medical professionals with him. I just find it astounding that not one of them thought to tend to the dribbling mess that accompanied him. Not one ever asked "are you okay?". Because I very clearly wasn't. I mean, even in the context of ensuring the carer is well. And that's what I was.

One did ask to speak to me alone, but it was to tell me I needed to be more supportive. So what else would I think except that it was me?

Her understandings of abuse shifted again when her employer ran a workplace bullying awareness workshop. Rachel recalls the familiarity of the characteristics used to describe a workplace bully.

Everything on the list. Everything. Manipulative, self-righteous, blames others. But the clincher... they're selective. They don't act like that all the time. Of course they don't! Cos everyone else would know. And that's when it hit me. (He)'s a bully! It was a strange feeling... that moment. Relief? Excitement? Maybe? [laughs] I just thought... I'm leaving.

Determined to leave, but feeling guilty about what her absence might do to her partner, Rachel returned to the counsellor. From here she was referred to a domestic violence outreach service where she learnt about leaving a relationship safely.

It took a bit of planning, yeah. I found it all a bit frustrating cos I just wanted to go. But one of the first things they got me to do was a safety, no, a risk thing, measure. [...] they said that I was high risk, which I didn't really understand. There's no history of violence, like, physical violence. He has no history that I know of. But, they said that can change so fast.

Rachel did manage to leave safely and without incident. She attributes this to the help, support, and education provided by the outreach centre. When asked to reflect on the reasons she remained in the relationship:

Not knowing. Just, not knowing. Thinking it was me. That's where, that's why it still bothers me today that so many people saw us together, saw me a mess, [...] and they didn't help. I know it's hindsight, and I try not to live in the past, but, think of all those who come after me. That seed could have been planted a long, long time ago. People can get out before they feel like driving off a bridge is the only cure.

I think shame too. Like, I'm a smart woman. I'm a strong, educated woman. DV doesn't happen to people like me. I'm too clever not to recognise and avoid it [laughs]. You know?

Throughout this chapter, excerpts taken from participant interviews demonstrate the difficulties encountered when seeking help for non-physical abuse. The stories here illustrate that the help seeking journey is rarely straightforward. The interviewees' perceptions and understanding of their situation changed with new information and altered their help seeking trajectories. The case studies presented in this chapter support the argument that seeking help for non-physical abuse is complicated by the lack of physical manifestations of abuse. To support the assertion that responses to help seeking are influential in stay/leave decision-making, the next chapter presents an analysis of the interview data with a focus on the responses interviewees received during their help seeking journeys.

CHAPTER 3. RESPONSES TO NON-PHYSICAL ABUSE AND THEIR IMPACT ON STAY/LEAVE DECISION-MAKING

The preceding chapter demonstrates that those seeking help for non-physical abuse encounter a myriad of conflicting information and various levels of support for their plights. This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the impact of responses to help seeking efforts on stay/leave decisions, and draws on relevant literature in discussing the results.

Interview data was broadly coded by response data – the responses interviewees received to their help seeking efforts; and effect data – the perceptual changes, and actions and inactions resulting from the responses. Two categories of responses emerged from the analysis – invalidating and validating. The analysis showed that effect data aligned strongly with response data, indicating very clearly that responses were powerful shapers of the help seeking experiences of the interviewees. That is, invalidating responses had similar effects across interviewee experiences, as did validating responses. It is important to remember that these categories have been constructed from the data at hand with an interviewee's perception of said response given primacy in how it was categorised. However, participants were rarely unclear about how a response affected them, and clarification was sought in instances where there was ambiguity.

The first two sections of the chapter outline the response categories described above, and the effect of those responses. The final section of the chapter considers how other factors identified in the data – for example, economic, severity of abuse, and the presence of children – influence the trajectories of help seeking experiences and decisions to stay or leave an abusive relationship. These factors are undoubtedly important in determining whether to stay in, or leave, an abusive relationship. Nevertheless, the data also clearly show that responses to help seeking efforts are powerful shapers of further help seeking and are highly influential in stay/leave decision-making.

3.1 Invalidating the help seeker

Invalidating responses took several forms, but all of them worked to undermine the experience of abuse recounted by the help seeker. Many of these responses emulated the abusive behaviours help seekers were struggling to understand, including denying, minimising, and blaming. For example, when Alison confided in her friend, the response was dismissive of her concerns. Her friend instead offered suggestions of how Alison might placate her partner. The friend, inadvertently or not, denied Alison's already shaky interpretation of her situation and then shifted the onus to Alison by suggesting the 'problems' she was having were due to her own failings:

She kept a beautiful house. It was always spotless. And she kept saying how, you know, her husband works so hard and she wants him to come home to a nice clean home and all. And just, just the way she was saying it, was, um. I deserved? [pause] I couldn't be surprised if he was grumpy coming home to a less than perfect house. He would be happy if I just took better care of the house, and him.

Similarly, Helena's parents acknowledged that her husband-to-be was acting irrationally, but attributed it to excessive stress. Her parents did not put forth ways to appease her partner, however, they minimised her initial perceptions of the abuse by suggesting that she might be overstating the severity of his behaviours:

Mum said a couple of times "is it really that bad?" She said it enough that I started to wonder if it really was that bad. The more she said it, the more I felt like I was being stupid for even suggesting it.

Mark too experienced minimising responses when he attempted to take out a VRO against his ex-partner. Mark's recollection of the magistrate's comment – 'if you're so concerned, why didn't you call the police? Where's the police report?' - demonstrate that Mark felt his concerns were 'played

down'. Seemingly, the magistrate considered that if Mark was not fearful enough to call the police, his situation must not be that bad.

Sometimes a minimising response was even more subtle. For example, Beth's discovery of domestic violence pamphlets worked to invalidate her understandings of abuse because she did not recognise her situation in the pamphlet. It characterised abuse as physical incidents such as slapping and kicking, thereby invalidating Beth's understanding of abuse.

Overt victim blaming responses were rarely experienced by interviewees with Beth's story providing the only examples. Beth's interactions with the legal system are replete with instances of blaming:

So what happens is, if you say your ex is abusive, at first they're like, well, your kids are exposed to that, you exposed your kids to domestic violence. So it doesn't matter if you're the victim, if you say, went back or something, they blame you for putting your kids at risk.

But, if you then turn around and say, well I don't want them (the abuser) to see the kids because DCP (Department of Child Protection) will say I'm at fault if I allow that, well then the lawyers say you're alienating the father. Either way, someone blames you for something.

Covert forms of blaming responses were more prevalent in the data. For example, in Alison's excerpt above, her friend shifts the blame for the 'problematic' behaviour from the abuser to Alison. Rachel too was told she was not supportive enough of her partner and his worsening behaviours were directly related to the insufficiency of her support. Helena spoke of how she monitored the 'church chatter' to ascertain whether it was a safe place to disclose her abuse and was discouraged by her findings:

Well, I mean once, they (the ladies at church) were all talking about why one of the other ladies hadn't turned up for the weekend stall and they were saying her husband had basically forbidden her to go out. And, they said it was because she had been too forward, too, ah,

immoral in her behaviours and he suspected she was cheating. The consensus was, she deserved it. She needed to be shut away, and she deserved it.

The effects of invalidating responses prior to leaving abuse

The key point to highlight about these responses is that they work to invalidate the help seeking behaviour. Despite the variability of invalidating responses, there was a commonality in how they shaped help seeking trajectories. Interviewees who experienced these responses whilst still in the relationship, remained in the relationship. The excerpt below from Rachel succinctly describes how invalidating responses work to shut down help seeking behaviour:

When you think it's you, when you believe you're to blame, you stay. Of course you stay. They haven't done anything wrong except put up with your insanity. So you don't just stay, you stay and try harder, to make things better. They're saints. You're the a*****e.

Helena too, despite being determined to end her relationship, remained after being convinced that she had exaggerated her partner's abuse and it was a temporary behavioural state. After encountering the domestic violence leaflet that focussed on physical abuse, Beth believed that to define her relationship as abusive was 'melodramatic'. She continued to define her relationship as problematic, but remained. Alison also remained, firmly believing that it was her depression that was the root cause of her partner's behaviour. This belief was fostered by the invalidating responses of a doctor who - as Alison's story suggests - defined abuse as physical violence.

The effects of invalidating responses after leaving abuse

Once interviewees had left the relationship, invalidating responses worked to complicate recovery. Mark encountered several barriers in his efforts to move on from abuse. Attempts to obtain a VRO were drawn out and 'humiliating'. Further, the delay in getting protection orders caused additional problems at Mark's workplace, and with family and friends. Mark believes that his ex-partner saw the delays and difficulties in obtaining a VRO as exonerating her behaviour.

Invalidating responses led Alison to abandon using services that might have otherwise been useful in helping her move forward. This was evident in her interactions with child contact services and some legal services, where she sought a way to have her ex-partner maintain contact with the children without her having to facilitate.

Yeah, sure it made things harder, but, I didn't need to be spoken down to like that. I left that.

I had worked so hard to convince myself that I deserved better and I wasn't crazy, and it was abuse, and all those things. I didn't want to be in contact with people who might unravel all that hard work. No. Didn't need that.

Beth encountered difficulties navigating the legal system that she was forced to engage with due to her ex-partner's pursuit of access to the children. She expressed frustration at the contradictions in the way children's matters are dealt with, and repeatedly noted how blame is shifted to the victim. Beth attributes her 'longer than it should've been road to recovery' on her interactions - most of which were invalidating - with the judicial system.

3.2 Validating the help seeker

As with invalidating responses, those perceived as validating varied considerably. Exposure to information that corresponded with their situation was considered validating and was noted by three of the interviewees. Alison found information on a website pertaining to abusive behaviours that she felt aptly described her ex-partner. Mark found familiarity in the stories from an online domestic violence victims support forum. For Rachel, it was information presented in a workplace bullying awareness course that struck a chord. These similar events had differing responses. Alison sought further confirmation of the veracity of the information. Mark utilised the forums he found on a regular basis as a form of ongoing support until he eventually left the relationship. Rachel notes that on encountering the validating information, her desire to leave was 'overwhelming' and she began to plan her exit almost immediately.

The effects of validating responses prior to leaving abuse

Being believed and listened to were other commonly cited features of validating responses.

Although Mark rarely commented in the online support forum he frequented, he said reading similar stories and the caring, affirming responses that accompanied them, was enough to convince him he would be welcomed and believed if he chose to share. Alison, Beth, and Rachel all credit domestic violence specific services with validating their experiences and providing ongoing support.

Validating responses triggered continued engagement with services. Despite initially feeling that her counsellor had misunderstood her, Rachel looked back on their interactions as being the first hint that she was suffering abuse. Subsequently, when additional information confirmed this, Rachel returned to the very same counsellor. Alison too enthusiastically engaged with the antenatal clinic that brought her abusive situation to light:

It was just such a wonderful place to be. Surrounded by people fussing over me and they knew what was going on at home, and there was always someone to talk to about it. No judgement, nobody telling me it's all in my head. Who wouldn't love that?

A common effect of all validating responses received prior to leaving the abuse was that they altered interviewees' perceptions of their situation, prompting them to consider that their partners' behaviours were neither normal, nor acceptable. Sometimes this perception shift was long lasting, spurring on plans to leave. Other times, it was fleeting, lasting only until it was convincingly invalidated. Nevertheless, it appears that even short-lived validation was clung to, even when the interviewee felt it could not be immediately acted on. Such was the case with Beth who vividly recalls the concerned actions of a midwife (waiting for her in the bathroom) and firmly believes that event altered her entire life:

I replayed that moment over and over in my head. It became my glimmer of hope. I wondered if my normal wasn't other people's normal. And I never forgot that. Once that thought was in my head, it didn't, it doesn't leave you. He looked different, life looked different, everything was different.

The effects of validating responses after leaving abuse

After leaving abuse, validating responses worked to build self-confidence and resilience. Interviewees spoke of such responses as providing much needed support, particularly in the early days of recovery journeys. Rachel describes how the domestic violence outreach service that helped her plan an exit strategy, continued to support her after she had left:

Once it was all over, once... [pause] it was strange. Euphoric and terrifying all at the same time. It's a major life change. And there were some days when I was just so lost, where I thought maybe I was better off if I went back [to the relationship]. Those days, I'd just call (outreach service) and they'd say, "there'll be days like this" and "it will get better". And you know, they always said the right thing.

Interviewees were asked about the purpose of their help seeking endeavours and whether they received the type of help they were seeking. More often than not, they were seeking acknowledgement that their situation was causing them harm, and that someone external to their relationship was aware of the abuse *and* considered it unacceptable. They were seeking *validation*.

In summary, participant stories show clearly that the information they encountered, including responses, were influential shapers of their help seeking experiences. Invalidating responses worked to undermine interviewees' perceptions of their situations. They denied, or minimised the seriousness of the abuse, and in the worst cases, blamed the sufferer for their suffering. Consequently, interviewees remained in abusive situations, prolonging their suffering. Moreover,

invalidating responses complicated recovery after interviewees had managed to leave abuse. These findings are similar to those in Moe's (2007) research, referred to in Chapter 1, which found that help seekers who received dismissive or minimising responses tended to blame themselves for the abuse and return to their abusers.

On the other hand, validating responses reinforced interviewees' perceptions and acknowledged the harmfulness of their situations. The impact of validating responses was not always immediate and was often times countered by invalidating responses. Nevertheless, all interviewees cited a validating incident as their 'turning point'. After leaving abuse, validating responses alleviated the difficulties that come with major life changes. Continued validation is seen as supportive and necessary to recovery. These findings are congruent with Lempert's (1997) research introduced in the literature review, which found that for victims of marital abuse, the most useful responses from family and friends were those that provided 'affirmation of their realities [and] their definitions of self as not deserving of the violence' (p. 299). These affirming responses were found to increase the help seeker's self-worth and offset the abuser's negative definitions of them (Lempert 1997). Moe (2007) made similar observations, noting that 'unconditional and empathetic institutional and/or social support [...] legitimated [a help seeker's] survivor status' (p. 13). Moreover, such responses were empowering and provided a measure of protection from returning to abuse (Moe 2007).

3.3 Situating other factors

Of course, responses to help seeking efforts interplay with a myriad of other factors to shape help seeking trajectories and outcomes. To establish the primacy of responses in influencing stay/leave decision-making, an examination of other possible factors is required. Time and space limitations precluded an in-depth examination of all influencing factors. However, thesis data was analysed for the influence of those factors frequently cited in the literature.

Mental illness

Mental illness has been cited as posing additional barriers to help seeking and manifests in several ways. Perpetrators may use the mental health issues of a victim as a means of dissuading them from seeking help (because nobody will believe them) and as evidence of inaccuracy in victims' claims of abuse if they did seek help (DVDRT 2015; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. IV). Additionally, the mental illness of a perpetrator was often used to negate their responsibility in using abuse and minimise a victims claims (DVDRT 2015). Certainly, there was corroborating evidence for the latter of these findings in Rachel's story. Rachel frequently alluded to how the mental illness of her partner was used to excuse or explain his abusive behaviours. However, when the mental health of a perpetrator is used to excuse claims of abuse, this is an invalidating response. In this case, as it was for Rachel, the response is the influential factor, not the mental illness of the perpetrator.

Financial/economic factors

Economic reasons are frequently cited as influencing help seeking trajectories. Lack of financial resources can prove a significant barrier to leaving, with accommodation, childcare, and transport needs all tied to finances (Ruiz-Pérez et al. 2013; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. IV). In situations where the perpetrator has incurred debts in both names, and tarnished rental records, the effects are even more pronounced (State of Victoria 2016, Vol. II).

Economic factors had variable influence amongst interviewees. Rachel and Mark both stated that they had access to adequate financial resources at the time, although, neither felt that money made the difference in their decision-making. Mark acknowledged that it was likely more difficult to leave if you also had financial concerns, however: 'I think not having to worry about money in that situation means not having to worry about money. The rest of the crap is still there.' On the other hand, Rachel's statement suggests that her role as the 'provider' may have fuelled her entrapment:

I had money, I have money, it does not help with changing that shackled mindset. I would stay because I believed that he needed me, that he would struggle without my financial support. I even convinced myself that this was empowering because I was essentially the breadwinner.

Alison, Beth, and Helena did not feel that their lack of finances influenced their decision-making. In fact, all three made reference to their improved financial situation *after* leaving abuse. However, Alison's comment below demonstrates how struggling financially in an abusive relationship might actually compel some to leave abuse:

Once you see how much control they have, once the control is visible, you can start to imagine life without that. I mean, I knew we should have had money, never heaps, but enough, but we never did. And I knew where it went. He spent it all on himself. So we were constantly getting disconnection notices and struggling for the most basic of things. Now, we don't. No more struggling. We still have very little, but we live within our means, you know, we're comfortable.

Children

The presence of children also proves to be a contradictory factor. Some studies show that people remain in relationships as they consider it the best option for protecting and caring for their children (Meyer 2010; State of Victoria 2016), particularly where 'pro-contact' arrangements are the norm (Laing 2017). Pro-contact refers to the trend of privileging the parent's right to have contact with their child over the child's right to be protected from family abuse (Laing 2017). Other findings show that decisions to leave are prompted by children witnessing abuse, or fears for their ongoing safety (Douglas & Stark 2010; Enander & Holmberg 2008; McCleary-Sills et al. 2016; Meyer 2010).

The contradictory results evident in the literature suggest that there are other more influential factors at play in stay/leave decision-making. Certainly, that was the finding of this thesis as none of the interviewees felt that the presence or absence of children was the primary influencer of their decision-making. Mark's comment shows how such contradictory results might arise:

Only having myself to worry about probably made it easier. But who knows? Maybe if we did have children I might have left sooner because someone else was being hurt. I can see that. But then, I can see how sometimes, staying is safer. Things were worse for me after leaving, way worse. I'm told that's common. So yeah. I guess it depends on the situation.

Severity of abuse

Severity of abuse is often cited as influential in the decision-making literature, albeit in conflicting ways. Some studies show that increased severity of abuse prompts victims to leave (Enander & Holmberg 2008; Lempert 1997; McCleary-Sills et al. 2016), while others demonstrate that victims of severe abuse are so controlled, they are less likely to leave because they lack access to information and resources (Karakurt & Silver 2013). The disparity in findings is complicated by the lack of a universal measure of severity. Coercive control cannot be properly understood as discrete abusive incidents and it is difficult to 'count' or 'see'. In the aforementioned studies, severe forms of abuse are always physical in nature and non-physical forms of abuse are considered less severe. Interestingly, Copp et al.'s (2015) sociological study of factors that influenced adolescents to terminate their intimate relationships, specifically demarcated physical and psychological forms of abuse and found that physical abuse was not statistically correlated with leaving the relationship, whereas psychological abuse was.

Severity of abuse was not measured in the current study. However, Alison, who had suffered physical abuse during childhood had this to say:

Getting beaten wasn't the worst part. It was all the other times, the in-between times. Like, it's the suspense [pause]. I cannot remember one time when I thought, "oh yeah, I saw that coming". You just never knew.

Social support

The level of social support one has is also a commonly included factor in intimate partner abuse studies. However, it is rarely operationalised in a comprehensive manner, and is usually only discussed as a positive influencer, which can lead to misinterpretations of the data (Lincoln 2007; Trotter & Allen 2009). This is particularly true of quantitative studies that use binary measures. For example, when social support is measured simply as 'having friends and family to talk to', many respondents will answer affirmatively, regardless of how 'supportive' their social network might be. As this study shows, having someone to talk to who provides invalidating responses is far from helpful.

Amongst participants of this thesis, there were various 'levels' of social support, defined here as a measure of the size of one's social network. Nevertheless, it was not the number of people one had access to that was influential in decision-making, as with Copp et al.'s (2015) research, it was the attitudes and responses of the network that mattered. For example, Helena's social network was relatively large via her involvement with the church group. However, whilst she considered the group a form of support and an important means of socialising, she did not believe it would be supportive in relation to the abuse she was suffering at the time. Certainly, the findings of this thesis support the findings of Trotter and Allen's (2009) social psychological research that broad uses of the term 'social support' might conceal negative and damaging responses from a victim's social network.

In summary, mental illness, the presence of children, financial concerns, severity of abuse and social support are undoubtedly influential factors for victims who are deciding to stay-in or leave an

abusive relationship. However, even putting aside the ambiguity in how some of these factors are measured, for participants of this thesis, none emerged as more influential than responses to help seeking. In fact, responses to help seeking was the only factor that had a consistent effect. Invalidating responses caused participants to delay, or forego leaving abuse, and validating responses prompted actions to alleviate or leave abuse.

Analysis of thesis data produced strong support for the primacy of responses as influential in stay/leave decision-making for abuse victims. This finding prompts several questions: Why are responses so influential? Why is society responding to non-physical abuse with invalidation? Moreover, how does this popular discourse fuel non-help seeking behaviours? What can be done to change societal responses? The central theme here is that decision-making processes and the responses that influence them are socially embedded. Understanding them requires an understanding of their social foundations. That is, the social norms, practices and interactions that inform these processes. The social foundations of these questions are the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4. THE SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF DECISION-MAKING AND RESPONSES

The previous chapter demonstrates that for thesis participants, responses were influential in their decision-making process. Moreover, responses that reflected poor understanding of non-physical abuse were not uncommon. This chapter is concerned with discussing the social embeddedness of responses, why their impact is so profound, how social norms are linked to non-help seeking behaviour, and what might be done to change responses. The first section discusses some of the theories and concepts that help explain why responses to help seeking are so influential, particularly those perceived as invalidating. The second section draws on literature relevant to the Australian context in examining why responses are often incongruent with current legislation and policy and practice guidelines. Further, it is argued that attempts to measure abuse are problematic and supportive of narrow conceptions. Following from this, the third section examines thesis participant data and the wider literature to consider how social norms and popular discourse might deter sufferers of non-physical abuse from seeking help. The final section discusses some of the measures that might be employed to change societal responses to intimate partner abuse.

4.1 Why are responses so influential?

As discussed in chapter three, responses influenced thesis participants' perceptions of their situations, which in turn, impacted their stay/leave decision-making. Interviewees acknowledged that concerns regarding money, children, and other factors were also influential, however, it was how they understood their situation that mattered the most. Moreover, this understanding was primarily constituted through the responses they received to their help seeking efforts. Cooley's (1902, p. 152) metaphor of the looking-glass self helps explain the importance of responses to help seeking. The concept of the looking-glass self describes how individuals define and redefine themselves through social interactions, and imagining the other person's evaluation of our selves is an essential element in altering 'self-feeling' (Cooley 1902, p. 152). How others perceived of the participants' situations fed into their own self-perceptions. If responses minimised or dismissed the

claims of abuse, interviewees' reformulated their perceptions to accommodate the new information. Moreover, through the micromanagement and social isolation of victims, perpetrators are usually the main definers of victims' self-perceptions (Lempert 1997; Smith, Smith, & Earp 1999). This meant that invalidating responses simply reinforced abusers' perceptions and interviewees reverted to questioning themselves, explaining away their initial concerns, feeling they were 'useless', 'overly dramatic', and deserving of their predicament. Conversely, validating responses helped interviewees foster an alternative perception of self (Lempert 1997), one that 'wasn't crazy', one that was worthy and deserving of help. These interactions helped victim's to offset the abuser's perceptions while they remained in the relationship, and contributed to a positive self-imagery after they had left the abuse.

Responses also appeared to be cumulative in their effects. That is, the more exposure one had to validating responses, the more protection they were afforded to offset invalidating responses. However, the more one encountered invalidating responses, the more hopeless and resigned to the abuse they became. This resignation to an adverse situation has been called 'learned hopelessness' (LaViolette & Barnett 2000). It is a term coined in response to Walker's (1984) use of Seligman's (1972) psychological theory of 'learned helplessness'. Walker is a psychologist renowned for producing some of the earliest research into domestic violence and she applied the learned helplessness concept to explain why people remain in abusive relationships. The concept refers to a learned response by someone who has suffered repeated trauma yet displays an unwillingness to leave his or her situation, even when able. Used in this way, learned helplessness focuses the attention on the individual, ignores active attempts of help seeking, and removes the onus for addressing the issue from society. On the other hand, learned hopelessness centres on the failures of societal responses to abuse.

In summary, responses are influential because they (re)constitute and (re)define a help seeker's perception of their situation. In the current study, responses were found to be more influential in

stay/leave decision-making than any other factor. This reaffirms Pescosolido's (1992) call to give due attention to the social foundations of decision-making processes.

4.2 Explaining current formal and informal responses to non-physical abuse

As discussed in the first chapter, definitions of abuse in legislation concerning family and domestic violence recognise that abuse is more than just physical behaviours. Moreover, definitions recognise that coercive control underpins abuse. Despite this, a focus on physical violence and poor understanding of other forms of abuse remains widespread and is evident in formal and informal responses. Certainly, this was the experience of all the participants of the research conducted for this thesis, and evidence from the literature shows that they are not isolated cases. This section is concerned with attempting to comprehend why the broader understanding of abuse adopted by Australian policy and legislation is not reflected in responses to sufferers of non-physical abuse.

Results from the VicHealth 2013 *National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women* survey of 17,517 Australians aged 16 and over (Webster et al. 2014, p. 1) indicate that, relative to physical abuse, non-physical abuse is poorly understood. For example, 26% of respondents said that trying to control a partner by denying them money was not a form of partner violence, and only 36% agreed that it was *always* partner violence (Webster et al. 2014, p. 69). Similarly, largely due to technology's increased use in relationships, technology-facilitated abuse – monitoring and repeated unwanted contact via technological means – has been normalised, and is poorly recognised (State of Victoria 2016, Vol I). Over a third of respondents to the VicHealth survey considered it acceptable³ to monitor a partner via technological means without their consent (Webster et al. 2014, p. 120).

³ Respondents answered either 'always acceptable' or 'rarely or sometimes acceptable'

In regards to formal sources of responses, understandings of abuse that acknowledge the underlying control dynamics and include non-physical forms are generally confined to specialist services such as domestic violence refuges, or outreach services (Carnovale 2016; Douglas 2010; Meyer 2009; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. II). Police are often the first formal services victims engage with, yet, they are ill equipped to recognise forms of abuse that do not produce visual signs that abuse has occurred, and their focus is usually restricted to physical and sexual forms of abuse (Douglas & Stark 2010; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. IV). Moreover, Douglas and Stark (2010) suggest that domestic violence incidents are not responded to as efficiently as other incidents. This is indicative of an underlying belief that such domestic matters are not as serious as other crimes. Similar observations have been made of magistrates and legal services that tend to focus on discrete incidents as opposed to patterns of behaviour (DVDRT 2015; Douglas & Stark 2010; George & Harris 2014; Hunter 2006; Laing 2017; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. III). Physical abuse is often prioritised and many magistrates demonstrate poor understanding of the dynamics of coercive control (DVDRT 2015; George & Harris 2014). Responses from police and magistrates are particularly important in terms of the power they hold for establishing societal tolerance levels (DVDRT 2015; Flood & Pease 2006; George & Harris 2014; Gracia, Garcia, & Lila 2008; Salazar et al. 2003; Srinivas & DePrince 2015). That is, police and magistrates are the points at which legislation is enforced; their dismissive or minimising responses to non-physical abuse symbolise that the law does not recognise the abuse as criminal, thereby reinforcing the narrow conceptions held in popular discourse.

Measuring abuse

Widespread misunderstandings of abuse are complicated by the dual meanings ascribed to some behaviours listed as abusive. For example, when does checking up on a partner out of genuine concern cross the line into harassment and stalking? It is not easily quantifiable. Although one could ‘count’ the number of times someone ‘checks-up’ on a partner, twice a day may seem excessive to

some people, whereas twice an hour is perfectly acceptable to others. Drawing on this example, the help seeker who tries to explain their experience of abuse by declaring ‘they’re always checking up on me!’ might well be met with confusion or indifference. As discussed in the introductory chapter, the element that separates the two behaviours and underpins the abusive one, is control. The categorisation of a behaviour as both ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ contributes to the ease with which it can be dismissed as abusive by perpetrators and responders alike.

Control too is difficult to measure. By the very nature of control, victims may not be able to recognise it. They are aware of ‘something’, but cannot necessarily name it. Even attempts at quantifying control by counting the number of behaviours used, and/or how often they are used, are problematic. This approach incidentalises the abuse and removes the behaviours from their context (Hearn 2013; Smith, Smith, & Earp 1999). That context is an underlying, omnipresent potential for further abuse that creates fear and uncertainty in the victim. Despite these issues, numerous measurement instruments have been developed in an effort to operationalise coercive control, or set rigid definitions of abuse, however, none emerge as universally accepted or capable of sufficiently capturing victim experience (Evans et al. 2016; Karakurt 2013; Smith, Smith, & Earp 1999).

Paediatric health researcher Rees (2010) states that ‘[a]ttempted definition has produced consensus largely about the difficulty of the task’ (p. 60), and argues that the focus of efforts to address non-physical abuse should not be about defining the concept, but understanding it. Promoting better conceptual understanding of abuse and the coercively controlling dynamics that underpin it, will likely result in more validating responses than are currently being given. Moreover, if societal responses are perceived to be more understanding of non-physical abuses, non-help seeking behaviours – which are discussed in the next section – might become less prevalent.

4.3 Non-help seeking behaviour

Although the current study did not specifically examine non-help seeking behaviours, evidence of them did emerge, usually as a reaction to invalidating responses. Victims of abuse, like those who respond to them, draw from the social messages around them. If societal conceptions of abuse are primarily physical, someone who has not suffered physical abuse is less likely to relate to those conceptions and understand themselves as a victim (Enander & Holmberg 2008; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. I). This was certainly evident in some of the participant narratives; for example, following the invalidating encounter with her friend, Alison did not actively seek help for over a year. Her friend had delegitimised her claim of abuse and Alison had reverted to defining the abuse as ‘normal relationship problems’. If a victim does not relate to the popular conceptions of abuse, they are not likely to engage with services that cater for abuse victims as they feel they are not for them (Gover et al. 2013; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. I).

A common finding in the literature is that victims of non-physical abuse lack the language to describe their experience (Carnovale 2016; State of Victoria 2016, Vol. I). This was less evident in the current study because all of the research participants were interviewed post-abuse, and all were well versed on the topic of non-physical abuse having educated themselves after the fact. Nevertheless, some spoke of interactions with responders where they struggled to get their point across because responders felt they were describing normal behaviours. For example, Beth tried to convey to a child contact service worker that her ex-partner berated the children for seemingly minor things. The service workers response was – ‘he sounds like he’s just old-fashioned, my husband’s like that too’, showing just how difficult it is to convey the experience of non-physical abuse to responders who have poor understandings of abuse dynamics in general, and non-physical abuse in particular.

Lack of opportunity to disclose abuse also emerged in the literature (State of Victoria 2016, Vol. III), and in Rachel’s interview for the current study. This too is partly a function of inadequate

understandings of abuse. Sometimes a victim might attend services for reasons other than abuse, yet, the opportunity to address the abuse is missed because the abuser is always present. Better understandings of coercive control can inform better management practices of this type of situation.

Social discourse on abuse holds narrow conceptions of what a real abuse victims is, and there is a concomitant lack of language to describe coercive control. Social discourse then, acts as an invalidating response by dissuading active help seeking. Social norms work to delegitimise non-physical abuse as *real* abuse, hindering the help seeking process before it has even begun.

4.4 Changing responses

I think changing the culture is about raising awareness in the public domain to such a level that what we learn can't be unlearned, and what we know can't be unknown. I think it is imperative to raise this issue to the point where everyone knows it's an issue, everyone knows the statistics and everyone understands the different forms of family violence. (Batty, cited in State of Victoria 2016, p 13)

Effectively addressing the issue of intimate partner abuse requires widespread education regarding what constitutes abuse, particularly non-physical abuse (Carnovale 2016; DVDRT 2015; George & Harris 2014; Meyer 2009). Given that many victims of non-physical abuse struggle to verbally convey their experience, terms such as 'coercive control', 'economic abuse', and 'emotional abuse' need to become part of the public vernacular. In research conducted in the United Kingdom, where coercive control has recently been criminalised, there is evidence suggesting that there are improved rates of recognising coercive control when the term is referenced on assessment forms (Robinson, Myhill, & Wire 2017). Encouraging the use of the term coercive control has the additional advantage of prompting a reconsideration of what constitutes abuse. Instead of describing the behaviour, as in 'verbal abuse', coercive control highlights the most significant and damaging element of abuse - control.

Of course, efforts to increase the popular use of terms must be accompanied by ways of understanding them. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, conceptual understanding should be the priority. Although including specific examples of behaviours in awareness campaigns is important, the motivation for their use needs to be included. That is, an awareness of the coercive control that underpins abuse must be the central focus of educational efforts. Without this understanding, there is a risk of the ‘abnormal’ behaviours being confused for ‘normal’ behaviours; consequently, the message of abuse is likely to be ignored (Stavrou, Poynton, & Weatherburn 2016). In depicting a range of abusive behaviours, not just physically abusive ones, there is potential for more victims of abuse – non-physical *and* physical – to identify themselves as needing, and being deserving of, help (Enander & Holmberg 2008).

Additionally, campaigns need to include messages of how to respond to disclosures of abuse and where to seek help if it is identified. Here, validation as a first response is key. Sometimes, well-meaning help can be invalidating because the responder has a poor understanding of the dynamics of abuse (Lievore 2003). As the findings from this research suggest, simply being acknowledged and heard characterised the responses that led to efforts to alleviate or end abuse, or at the very worst, they did not inflict further harm.

In summary, this chapter examined the social foundations of decision-making processes and the responses that inform them. Responses shape help seeker’s perceptions of their situation and they are socially embedded; informed by popular discourse and social norms. Consequently, the dominant normative conceptions of non-physical abuse in popular discourse are reiterated in responses. Popular discourse that invalidates non-physical abuse fuels non-help seeking behaviours and poses additional barriers for those who do seek help. As responses are socially embedded, changing responses requires changing the popular discourse that informs them.

CHAPTER 5. MOVING FORWARD

In Australia, family and domestic violence is widely acknowledged as being about more than just physical injuries. Australian law and the vast majority of service provision policies acknowledge the non-physical elements of intimate partner abuse. Nevertheless, popular discourse holds narrow conceptions of abuse and non-physical forms are readily overlooked and easily misunderstood. This thesis sought to address the dearth of literature concerning how responses to help seeking for non-physical intimate partner abuse influenced decisions to stay or leave the relationship.

The case studies presented in chapter two demonstrate the varying ways in which interviewees navigated the help seeking process. Their stories evidenced the difficulties of conveying abuse narratives when there is no corroborating physical evidence. There were also indications of how new information – in the form of social interactions, websites, etc. – shaped help seeking trajectories. This was further evidenced by the analysis findings presented in chapter three.

Responses participants received to their help seeking efforts fell into one of two categories; invalidating and validating. Invalidating responses worked to shut down help seeking efforts, and their impact was powerful. On the other hand, the influence of validating responses were subtler and often, not immediately apparent. Nevertheless, validation did not exacerbate interviewees' already fragile situations.

As discussed in chapter four, responses are socially embedded, created and reinforced. They are powerful influencers in stay/leave decision-making because they prompt a reconceptualisation of self; if the response is invalidating, this reinforces abuser perceptions of the victim. As was also demonstrated in chapter four, the experiences of the thesis participants are not unique. Invalidating responses have been documented from many service sectors, and public attitudes to abuse reflect understandings that often exclude non-physical forms. Invalidating responses from police and judicial staff are of particular concern given their symbolic role as setting the societal threshold of what behaviours will be tolerated. Issues of accurately defining and measuring abuse were

discussed, as they exacerbate poor public understandings. It was proposed that promoting conceptual understanding of abuse, as opposed to attempting to define it, might result in more appropriate societal responses to the issue. Moreover, a better understanding of abuse in popular discourse might decrease non-help seeking behaviours.

Overall, the current study found that responses to the participants' disclosures of non-physical abuse were influential in their stay/leave decision-making. Responses that minimised, dismissed, excused, or otherwise invalidated the help seeker resulted in prolonged exposure, and in some cases, immediate escalation of the abuse. Both outcomes are detrimental to the health and wellbeing of sufferers. Conversely, validating responses prompted action to alleviate or end the abuse. More importantly, validating responses did not further victimise the help seeker.

These findings suggest that validating the help seeker should be a first response. Victims will likely require responses that offer more practical help as their journeys progress. However, their journeys are unlikely to progress very quickly, if at all, if they are first met with invalidation. Additionally, validating responses bolstered self-conceptions and set participants on a path to recovery. Stories from participants of the current study demonstrated that once their sense-of-selves were sufficiently positive, their recoveries accelerated. Validating responses then provide the means for survivors to thrive.

Finally, this thesis echoes calls for the widespread dissemination of information that can help the public identify, and appropriately respond to, abuse. Future campaigns and information hubs should give specific examples of non-physical abuse and demonstrate how to appropriately respond to disclosures of abuse. Without the creation of these resources to inform better understandings of abuse, sufferers of non-physical abuse will likely continue to face invalidating responses, and subsequently endangering their health and wellbeing.

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