THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Making Sense of Psychological Abuse in Romantic Relationships: A Thematic Analysis

Dori Lansbach

Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

School of Philosophy, Psychology, and Languages

The University of Edinburgh

2022

Declaration

I confirm that this thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, has

     i) been composed entirely by myself

     ii) been solely the result of my own work

     iii) not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification

Signed

Abstract

Studies indicate that psychological abuse is more pervasive and insidious than physical or sexual abuse (Semple, 2001). It has serious physical and psychological consequences, and yet is an under-researched area of intimate partner violence (Lammers et al., 2005). Moreover, there is little consensus among researchers (e.g. Chang, 1996; Follingstad et al., 1990; Kelly, 2004; Lammers et al., 2005; Marshall, 1996; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; Tolman, 1989) as to what constitutes psychological abuse, how it is experienced over time, and how victims make sense of it. This research therefore aims to address the questions: (1) How do victims describe their experiences of being in psychologically abusive romantic relationships? (2) How do victims make sense of, and address issues of accountability in their psychologically abusive relationships?

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted on two data sets. Seven blog entries of victims' experiences of psychological abuse and 20 semi-structured interviews with victims of psychologically abusive relationships were analyzed. One overarching theme and five key themes were identified across the blogs. The overarching theme of (*Retrospective Accountability)* encapsulated the way that individuals tended to account for their own thoughts or actions upon the reflection of their relationships. In the first key theme, the bloggers described the beginning stages of their relationship as 'blissful' and overwhelmingly happy (*Blissful Beginnings),* but tended to question upon reflection whether the beginning stages were in fact ever truly happy. Second, the invisibility of psychological abuse pervaded accounts and its presence was described as building imperceptibly over time (*The Invisible Nature of Abuse)*. Third, many of the bloggers

described a *Loss of Self* or identity. Fourth, they portrayed abuse as a 'cycle' of brief periods of warmth, abusive and manipulating tactics, withdrawal, and intermittent warmth again (*The Continuous Cycle of Abuse)*. Finally, victims described the ending process of their relationship as a series of stages which led to leaving (*The Leaving Process)*.

Similar themes were identified in the analysis of the interview data with some differences. One overarching theme and four key themes were identified across the semi-structured interviews. The overarching theme, (*Retrospective Sense-Making),* referred to the idea that through several retrospective descriptions, victims tended to make sense of the abuse, changes within themselves, and their experience as a whole. The first key theme, *How This Was Abuse*, encapsulated the ways in which victims constructed how they experienced psychological abuse showing that psychological abuse was an all-consuming, confusing experience that left significant impact on its victims and was difficult to describe in retrospect.

A second theme, *I am Less Than I Was Before,* related to the way the victims noted a change in interests and loss of identity over the course of the relationship, but with difficulty in recognizing and understanding it at the time. Third, *Managing Blame and Accountability*, focused on the ways in which victims addressed issues of accountability and blame within themselves and others. Several victims attributed aspects of getting involved in the relationship and their partners' abusive behaviors to violence or neglect in families of origin. Fourth, *It's Good That it Ended?* consisted of the ways in which victims reflected upon the dissolution of their relationships while concurrently seeking confirmation that it was the right thing to do during the process of

describing these endings. Here in contrast to the stages above, victims described a series of turning points which they claimed were key in recognizing the abuse and moving them toward the end of their relationships.

Together the findings of the two studies provided insight into how victims made sense of their psychologically abusive relationships over time revealing a difficulty in identifying abuse as well as changes within themselves at the time of the relationship. A continuous cycle of abuse became apparent in the descriptions indicating the utility of Loring's (1994) Connection-Deprivation Cycle, although this is rarely referred to by other researchers when attempting to understand how psychological abuse functions in a relationship. The findings also served to address/reject common assumptions or potential criticisms of victims (e.g. why didn't they just leave?) and furthermore extended previous work (Chang, 1996) on how individuals accounted for getting involved in a psychologically abusive relationship. New research was added on how victims reflected upon their beliefs as to why their partners may have been more prone to implementing psychological abuse in romantic relationships.

Lay Summary

Psychological abuse in romantic relationships is more widespread and harder to detect than physical or sexual abuse; it has serious physical and psychological consequences, and yet is an under-researched area of intimate partner violence. Victims often have difficulty in defining and describing what happened during their relationships. This research therefore aims to discover how victims reflect back upon their experiences of being in psychologically abusive romantic relationships and how they speak about their perceptions of why they may have gotten involved in this relationship as well as why their partners may have been an individual who perpetrated abuse. Seven blogs written by individuals who had been victims of psychological abuse in romantic relationships were analyzed to gain a greater understanding of what may happen in a psychologically abusive relationship. In addition, 20 victims of psychological abuse were interviewed in an attempt to learn how victims reflected back upon and made sense of their relationship.

Psychological abuse in romantic relationships is a gradual, all-consuming process that is difficult to recognize by its victims during the relationships. When reflecting back upon relationships, victims often describe abuse occurring in a cycle where they notice periods of warmth and connection from their partner, abusive and manipulating behaviors, the sense that their partner is withdrawing from them emotionally, and again brief periods of warmth and connection. When reflecting upon their involvement in the relationship as well as their partner's tendency to abuse them, victims often attributed a degree of blame toward experiencing abuse and/or neglect in their families of origin. The findings of this work can add to the idea that with the nature

of psychological abuse being harder to identify, building imperceptibly over time, and leaving lasting impacts on its victims, this research can be used to make this form of abuse less hidden, and since it is an under-researched area of intimate partner violence in comparison to physical abuse, it continues to add to the work in this field and highlight the importance of researching this form of abuse.

Acknowledgments

As I finish writing my doctoral thesis, I can't help but be overwhelmed with emotion. I started this degree out of a passion for relationships and helping others, yet it also birthed out a place of pain having gone through a psychologically abusive relationship myself. I have always been a big believer in the saying, "you get speared in the places where God gives you the most dominion." It has always been my calling to help educate and motivate others to follow their dreams and understand relationship dynamics. With all of that said, I am truly grateful to have had the opportunity to do my PhD on Psychological Abuse in Romantic Relationships through The University of Edinburgh. There are many people I would like to thank for supporting me in this process. First and foremost, I would like to give the glory to God for carrying me through this period of my life, never stopping loving me, and blessing me with this opportunity. Mom and Dad, I owe everything to you for supporting me emotionally and financially throughout this process and for all of my life. You have both taught me to believe in my dreams and go after them. I've always taken on the biggest challenges and this one is no small feat, so thank you for your love and support. Todd and Grandma, thank you for your continued support and love throughout my life. To Coach Mo, thank you for introducing me to Jesus and encouraging me to help mentor others with their relationships. To my wonderful supervisors Dr. Sue Widdicombe and Dr. Sarah Stanton, thank you for guiding me in this journey and for countless hours spent leading meetings and giving me wisdom throughout this process. You are both inspirations to me. I would like to thank Katie Keltie in the postgraduate office at the University of Edinburgh for her support, and the rest of my former faculty members and basketball coaches and

teammates at the University of Edinburgh. Thank you to Pepperdine University where I now am a professor, for supporting me in my endeavors to finish my PhD. Finally, to my sweetheart, golden retriever, Bailey Dian, and my cat, Mr. Poof, I love you both, you have always been by my side cheering me on, until we meet again.

A Note on the Terminology Used: Rationale for the Term of Psychological Abuse

In the current field of research, the phenomenon of non-physical abuse has several terms and definitions, which will be described in detail in the literature review chapter that follows. However, for the purpose of this research the term "psychological abuse" will be used predominantly versus "emotional abuse," although they are frequently used interchangeably in research. The reasoning behind using psychological abuse to refer to this phenomenon is due to the nature of this form of intimate partner violence having the potential to affect more than the emotions of its victims; it has the potential to destructively influence the thought processes and cognitions of the individuals experiencing the abuse. When certain studies in this thesis use the term "emotional abuse," then the term used to discuss the study will be kept consistent with the term that matches the study being referenced.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The occurrence of intimate partner violence in romantic relationships has long been prevalent in societies all over the world, however it only began gaining more significant attention in the 1970's through the rise of the feminist movement and Leonore Walker's (1979) cycle of violence she named the battered women syndrome. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is "abuse or aggression that occurs in a romantic relationship. IPV can vary in how often it happens and how severe it is. It can range from one episode of violence that could have lasting impact to chronic and severe episodes over multiple years" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, What is Intimate Partner Violence Section, para. 1). Many are familiar with physical and sexual abuse within romantic relationships, however there is a form of intimate partner violence called psychological abuse (PSYAB) that is not as widely known, but has been gaining attention over the past thirty years as a serious concern within intimate relationships. Psychological abuse, also often called emotional abuse can be defined as:

> The patterned non-physical degradation of one person by their partner through the conscious or unconscious gaining, regaining, or maintaining of power through repetitive overt or subtle acts and messages that control or attempt to control, which negatively affects the abused partner's emotions or self-value in the long term (Lammers et al., 2005, p. 31).

Psychological abuse in intimate relationships is more pervasive and insidious than physical or sexual abuse (Semple, 2001; Hamel et al., 2023) and has serious physical and psychological consequences such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, headaches, stomachaches, and upper respiratory illnesses (Hamel et al., 2015; Lawrence et al., 2012; Loring, 1994) that may affect an individual's psychological well-being to the same extent as physical abuse or battering (Follingstad et al., 1990; Katz & Ariaz, 2000). Despite more attention being drawn to this form of intimate partner violence in recent years, psychological abuse is still largely under-researched. Moreover, research into psychological abuse being a form of abuse that stands alone, independent of physical or sexual abuse, is much more limited. The majority of the research up until recent years has viewed psychological abuse as something that serves as a precursor to physical violence (Hyden, 1995; Kaisan & Painter, 1992; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; O'Leary et al., 1994) or can only exist concurrently with physical and/or sexual violence (Anderson et al., 1991; Bass & Davis, 1988; Herman, 1994; Kirkwood, 1993; NiCarthy, 1986; Pence & Paymar, 1993). Furthermore, there is little consensus among researchers as to what constitutes psychological abuse despite the varying definitions in the field, how a relationship is experienced and progresses over time, as well as how victims reflect back upon and make sense of their relationships. This research therefore aims to address these gaps through two studies with victims of psychological abuse in romantic relationships.

Overview of Thesis

This thesis will contain nine chapters. The current chapter outlines the historical problems in this area of research such as the lack of consensus on what constitutes psychological abuse, a lack of research on psychological abuse existing independently of physical and/or sexual abuse, as well as a lack of qualitative research previously conducted on victims making sense of their experiences in psychologically abusive relationships. This chapter shows how the current research will address these problems as well as adding insight into the area of psychological abuse. Chapter two provides a thorough overview of the literature in the field of psychological abuse as well as introducing the research rationale, aims, and research questions. Chapter three describes the methodological decisions and procedures used in the studies, specifically why a qualitative design was used, why the blogs were analyzed before conducting the interviews and why thematic analysis was used to analyze both sets of data. Chapter four presents the analysis of the blogs in which one overarching theme and five key themes were identified from analyzing seven online blogs of individuals who have written about their experience in psychologically abusive relationships. Chapter five, six, seven, and eight are the analysis chapters of the semi-structured interviews with victims of psychological abuse in which one overarching theme and four key themes are identified. Chapter nine is the discussion and conclusion chapter where the summary of the findings are discussed as well as how they relate to, and extend certain areas of the field of research, discuss implications for the field of psychological abuse, and suggest future research in the area of psychological abuse.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Intimate partner violence is a major issue within intimate relationships, however, it only began gaining recognition in the 1970's with the rise of the feminist movement. From a historical perspective, Leonore Walker was the first to define a cycle of violence that later became known as the battered women syndrome. Walker identified a three-stage cycle that became key in providing a foundation for future research in the field of intimate partner violence. The phases reported were tension building, explosion of acute battering incidents, and calm, loving respite (Walker, 1979). In 1983, Leonore Walker conducted a follow-up study that supported her hypothesis that a psychological phenomenon does occur within an identifiable cycle. Walker's research discouraged the pattern of victim blaming, and paved the way for conducting future research in this field that would look at identifying and validating additional forms of abuse (Kelly, 2004).

Intimate partner violence includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner (i.e., spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, dating partner, or ongoing sexual partner) (Breiding et al., 2015). Intimate partner violence is a serious problem with "approximately 41% of women and 26% of men experiencing physical, sexual, and/or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, How Big is the Problem section, para. 2). Many researchers in the field of intimate partner violence make the distinction between minor and severe physical violence: minor physical violence includes behaviors such as shoving or slapping, while severe physical violence includes behaviors that have higher potential to

cause physical injury, such as choking, punching, or assault with a deadly weapon (Lynch, 2016).

Another serious form of intimate partner violence, sexual abuse or violence is defined as:

a sexual act that is committed or attempted by another person without freely given consent of the victim or against someone who is unable to consent or refuse. It includes: forced or alcohol/drug facilitated penetration of a victim; forced or alcohol/drug facilitated incidents in which the victim was made to penetrate a perpetrator or someone else; non physically pressured unwanted penetration; intentional sexual touching; or non-contact acts of a sexual nature. Sexual violence can also occur when a perpetrator forces or coerces a victim to engage in sexual acts with a third party (Brieding et al., 2015, p. 11).

Stalking refers to "a pattern of repeated, unwanted, attention and contact that causes fear or concern for one's own safety or the safety of someone else (e.g., family member, close friend)" (Brieding et al., 2015, p. 14). The most prevalent type of intimate partner violence is not physical abuse as many would suspect, but instead psychological abuse (Hamel et al., 2023). Psychological abuse as noted in the introduction can be defined as, "the patterned non-physical degradation of one person by their partner through the conscious or unconscious gaining, regaining, or maintaining of power through repetitive overt or subtle acts and messages that control or attempt to control, which negatively affects the abused partner's emotions or self-value in the long

term" (Lammers et al., 2005, pg. 31). Similar to purely psychological abuse, it is reported that women who experience intimate partner violence, tend to exhibit low personal self-esteem, family and social isolation, dependency, insecurity, inferiority, submissiveness, and pacification (Pereira et al., 2020). Psychological abuse will also often be referred to as psychological aggression, violence, harm, or maltreatment, emotional abuse, aggression, violence, harm, or maltreatment, or mental abuse. Psychological abuse is widespread with over "61 million women and 51 million men" having experienced psychological abuse by an intimate partner in their lifetime (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, para. 2), and is especially prevalent in Western cultures (Antônio & Hokoda, 2009; Falconier, 2010; Menesini & Nocentini, 2008) with percentages ranging from 70% to 90% (Kar & Garcia-Moreno, 2009). In comparison, psychological abuse is reported to range from 5% to 59% in Eastern cultures (Hou et al., 2011; Tiwari et al., 2009). Contrary to popular belief, psychological abuse is similarly distributed among men and women (Hamel & Nicholls, 2006; Pimlott-Kubiak & Cortina, 2003), and is especially frequent in college dating romantic relationships and during the transition to adulthood (Jose & O'Leary, 2009; Milletich et al., 2010; Schnurr et al.,, 2010).

Traditionally, physical forms of abuse have received more awareness in the past in society, the world of academia, and in the legal system. However, more recently there has been recognition within research and policy to the significant impact non-physical forms of abuse may have in relationships (Laskey et al., 2019). In 2015, a new law concerning coercive control called The Serious Crime Act 2015 was introduced in the United Kingdom that criminalizes this behavior in the absence of physical violence. This

new law defines coercive behavior as "…an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim" and controlling behavior as "…a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behavior" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). With the addition of The Serious Crime Act 2015, it has helped to give non-physical or psychological abuse more attention and validity, and will likely continue to pave the way for further education, policy and interventions for non-physical abuse. The combination of further research and policy implementations will aid in better understanding all components of intimate partner violence.

Theoretical Frameworks

There are several theoretical frameworks that exist to help explain why intimate partner violence occurs. The majority of research on intimate partner violence is centered around female victims in heterosexual relationships (Morin, 2014), which can largely be attributed to the traditional feminist or gendered perspectives that support the idea that men are the perpetrators and women are the victims. Feminist theories of violence suggest that intimate partner violence occurs in relationships largely due to a "societally ingrained hostility toward women" (Love et al., 2020, p. 923) and violence is used as a means to obtain power and control over them (Bograd, 1988; Dobash &

Dobash, 1979; Marin & Russo, 1999). Feminist theorists would suggest that this hostility toward women derives from patriarchal notions of gender traditionalism and control.

Family violence theories in contrast to feminist theories, suggest that violence in relationships is not predominantly perpetrated by one gender over the other; instead it is initiated through mutually escalating conflict (Straus, 2011). As Love et al., state in their 2020 work, "Often this type of conflict begins as arguing or shouting and then leads to some form of physical involvement such as pushing, slapping, or hitting. Retaliation is likely to occur in these situations, but not always through physical violence" (p, 923).

One of the most influential frameworks for intimate partner violence research is that of Johnson's typology of IPV (Johnson, 1995, 2007, 2008; Johnson et al., 2014). Johnson purports that there are two types of intimate partner violence: intimate terrorism (IV) and situational couple violence (SCV). Intimate terrorism is different from situational couple violence predominantly in terms of the motive for control; IT is often marked by the need for one partner to exert control over the other partner through dominance and potentially physical violence (Johnson & Leone, 2005). Intimate terrorism being rooted in dominance is also considered to fall under feminist theories of violence. Situational couple violence is described as violence that is "situationally provoked" (Johnson, 2008, p. 11) escalating from mutual conflict that leads to physical violence in partners (Johnson, 2006b). SCV is therefore most closely associated with family violence theories.

Another theory of IPV, the social learning theory, suggests abusive or violent ways of handling conflict are often observed and learned in childhood (Bandura, 1973; Mihalic & Elliot, 2005; Wareham et al., 2009) and thus propose that victims and

perpetrators have either witnessed abuse in their families of origin, thereby resulting in their tolerance of violence in the family (Jin et al., 2007; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Vung & Krantz, 2009). Several studies have supported the idea that either witnessing or experiencing abuse during childhood might be associated with becoming a victim or a perpetrator of intimate partner violence in the future (Berzenski & Yates, 2010; Parks et al., 2011; Shook et al., 2000; Whitfield et al., 2003).

Riggs and O'Leary (1996) expanded on the social learning theory when they developed the Model of Courtship Aggression to explain IPV. Essentially, they claim that there are two components that contribute to the occurrence of aggression within intimate relationships: background and situational factors. The background factors potentially contributing to aggression include individual, societal, and historical characteristics. As cited in (Burelomova et al., 2018,) these characteristics may include childhood abuse; exposure to violence in childhood; personality characteristics, a history of aggression; psychopathology; social norms; and attitudes toward aggression. The other component of the model of courtship aggression is the situational component which includes circumstantial factors that, if present, might increase the likelihood of aggression occurring. Examples of these factors include interpersonal conflict; expectations of the outcomes of violence; lack of problem-solving skills; substance abuse; or intimacy levels. Studies have shown that factors such as parental aggression, witnessing violence, and attitudes toward aggression were predictive of intimate partner violence occurrence, whereas substance abuse, one's partner's aggression, and the degree of interpersonal conflict appeared to impact courtship aggression

(Gwartney-Gibbs et al., 1987; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; White & Koss, 1991; White et al., 2001).

The Vulnerability Concept Model created by Few and Rosen (2005) looks at the interplay of risk factors and resiliencies to help explain women's decisions to remain in abusive relationships. The model contains two dimensions of vulnerability: relational vulnerability and situational vulnerability. Relational vulnerability refers to one's beliefs about self in relationship to others and what is normal within an intimate relationship. There are five subcategories of relational vulnerability: (1) external orientation, (2) socialization to violence, (3) socialization to abuse of power, (4) caretaker identity, and (5) cultural factors. Situational vulnerability refers to the degree to which a woman experiences life-circumstance or life-stage stress when she begins her relationship with her abusive boyfriend. Life-circumstance stress is the stress individuals experience as a consequence of transitions or events that seem to destabilize them. Life-stage stress is the stress individuals experience as a result of feeling that they are out of sync with traditional age-related transitions such as marriage or parenthood (Few & Rosen, 2005). The Vulnerability Conceptual Model locates relational and situational vulnerabilities on two interdependent continuums. An accumulation of risk factors (i.e., any combination of relational and situational vulnerabilities) without possession of significant protective factors (e.g., high self-esteem or self-worth, positive social support, healthy coping skills, high sense of perceived control) appeared to intensify vulnerability to remaining in an abusive relationship (Few & Rosen, 2005). Although this model only looks at women being the victims of abuse, it has the potential to be applicable to male victims of intimate partner violence as well.

Gender and IPV Victimization

While the majority of intimate partner violence literature focuses on male-perpetrated violence in heterosexual relationships, there is a strong need for further research focusing on male victims due to the findings that do exist in this area. According to the existing research on male victims of IPV, it shows that men and women have similar experiences of abuse in many ways, but also have differences in others (Laskey et al., 2019). Men are just as likely to experience IPV as women (Ferguson, 2011; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2008), and in some instances can experience it more often (Penpid & Peltzer, 2008). Contrary to popular belief, the abuse (both physical and psychological) that male victims endure can be equally severe to the abuse that female victims endure, however, since men are less likely to receive serious injuries it is often not perceived as serious (Dennison & Thompson, 2011; Nowinski & Bowen, 2012). Female perpetrators are actually significantly more likely to use physical aggression toward their partners compared to men (Archer, 2000).

Male victims largely experience the same types of abuse as female victims; it is how the abuse is perpetrated that differs. In physically violent relationships, female perpetrators may be more likely to use weapons against their partners compared to men (Cho & Wilke, 2010) thus resulting in a higher likelihood of male victims incurring different injuries than women (Swan et al., 2008). Female perpetrators will at times, take advantage of systems in place that help them to appear as the victims (Hines et al., 2007; Hines et al., 2015). Both male and female victims however, have been reported to experience serious effects of the abuse, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, self-blame, and alcoholism (Dim, 2021; Hines & Malley-Morrison,

2001). The ways in which both genders cope with the abuse is where a clear difference can be seen (Tamres et al., 2002), with men tending to externalize the distress, and women internalizing it (Afifi et al., 2009). The findings surrounding mens' and womens' experiences of perpetrating abuse and being victims of abuse further demonstrates the need for research to continue being done on both genders separately, and the movement away from the traditional feminist model of intimate partner violence.

Challenges in Researching Psychological Abuse

Due to psychological abuse being widespread and insidious in nature, having serious physical and psychological consequences that have the potential to be more harmful than the impacts of other types of abuse, and it being significantly less researched in comparison to physical or sexual abuse, being able to conceptualise psychological abuse in intimate relationships as an independent form of abuse is important. It is necessary for researchers to continue to study psychological abuse as a form of intimate partner violence in its own right in order to better understand the types of behaviors experienced by victims, the impacts, and the contextual experiences, which are lacking in particular, of individuals in these types of relationships due to the majority of the research being quantitative in nature. However, several factors have limited this research in the past.

There are many challenges that present themselves in the field of psychological abuse research. One issue researchers face is that psychological abuse is an under-researched area of intimate partner violence. In fact, psychological abuse is the form of abuse within intimate partner violence that has the least amount of research

undertaken (Follingstad, 2007; Lammers et al., 2005; Queen et al., 2009; Schumacher et al., 2001). While intimate partner violence itself is newer to the field having started to become conceptualized and researched in the late 1970's, psychological abuse only began to gain recognition as a component of physical and/or sexual abuse in the late 1980's (Geffner & Rossman,1998; Marshall, 1996; Tolman, 1989).

An additional challenge into researching psychological abuse is that it has long been associated with physical and sexual abuse; it often studied and understood to occur concurrently with these forms of abuse instead of being recognized as an independent form of abuse. Researchers such as (Hyden, 1995; Kaisan & Painter, 1992; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; O'Leary et al., 1994) believe that psychological abuse typically serves as a precursor to physical or sexual abuse and other researchers agree that psychological abuse occurs as part of both physical and sexual abuse (Anderson et al., 1991; Bass & Davis, 1988; Herman, 1994; Kirkwood, 1993; NiCarthy, 1986; Pence & Paymar, 1993).

As the research in the field of psychological abuse has progressed over time, there are several researchers who now recognize it as an independent form of abuse (Chang, 1995; Chang, 1996; Loring, 1994; Marshall, 1996; Marshall, 1999; Panagiari, 2020). As Lammers et al., note in their (2005) research, "Such researchers posit that while physical abuse is almost always accompanied by emotional abuse, the presence of emotional abuse does not always indicate or predict the presence of concurrent physical or sexual abuse" (p. 31). The need for additional research into "pure" psychological abuse is continually needed on this pervasive form of intimate partner

violence, if more clarity is desired to be gained on what constitutes psychological abuse in romantic relationships independent of physical or sexual abuse.

Other significant reasons as to why research on psychological abuse is limited is due to it being more difficult to recognize and under-reported by victims (Semple, 2001). Psychological abuse differs greatly from physical abuse in that it is often insidious in nature (Follingstad et al., 1990; Kaisan & Painter, 1992; Kirkwood, 1993). Due to the fact that psychological abuse does not leave physical marks on its victims, it is often harder to detect by those who experience the abuse, as well as by any individuals outside of the relationship. The lack of awareness of the abuse and the tendency of victims to not be believed consistently when sharing their experience with others, can also lead to underreporting therefore limiting the research even further in this field.

Differing Definitions of Psychological Abuse

Another challenge that has been a continual issue in the field of psychological abuse is the use of differing definitions of what constitutes this form of abuse in particular. O'Leary (1999) defines psychological abuse as acts of recurring criticism and/or verbal aggression toward a partner, and/or acts of isolation and domination of a partner. Generally, such actions cause the partner to be fearful of the other or lead the partner to have very low self-esteem. Tolman (1992) defines it as a set of behaviors intended to harm the other person's welfare by undermining their self-esteem, their sense of control and security. Shepard and Campbell (1992) conceptualized psychological abuse as a set of violent behaviors designed to terrorize the victim. Marshall (1992) defined this form of abuse as the effect of an act and not the act in

itself, as well as being the result of everyday intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that can take on many guises, ranging from those that are more serious and threatening to others in the form of games, jokes or tokens of love. In addition, it is based on everyday communication and interaction between partners, which gradually undermines the psychological, emotional and behavioral competence of the victim.

Psychological abuse has also been defined as coercive or aversive behaviors, not including physical force or threat of harm, which are "intended to produce emotional harm and which are directed at the target's sense of self" (Murphy & Cascardi,1999, p.40). Hoffman (1984) says that psychological abuse is "behavior sufficiently threatening to the woman so that she believes her capacity to work, interact in the family or society, or to enjoy good physical or mental health, has or might be threatened" (p.37). O'Neal (1992) defines psychological abuse as including verbal and behavioral means to undermine someone's sense of self, resorting to such tactics as ridiculing, shaming, blaming, criticizing, threatening and neglecting the partner's emotional needs. In more recent research on the role of narcissism in psychological perpetrated abuse, Ponti et al., (2020) posit that psychological abuse is a form of interpersonal violence that is implemented through a wide variety of acts and behaviors ranging from dominance, control, isolation, physical threats, and criticism, which entail significant and negative consequences for psychological, physical, and relational well being of abused subjects (Bonechi & Tani, 2011a, 2011b; Follingstad & DeHard, 2000; Ro & Lawrence, 2007).

Hamel et al., (2023) say that psychological abuse can be separated into various subtypes which include expressive abuse and instrumental abuse. Expressive abuse may consist of verbal put downs, and other attempts to diminish the self-esteem of

one's partner. Instrumental abuse may consist of attempts to control one's partner

through jealousy-driven monitoring and surveillance behaviors, threats, and other

coercive behaviors such as manipulation, economic abuse, using children, and

manipulation of the legal system (Hamel et al., 2023).

Differing Definitions of Emotional Abuse

There are several differing definitions of emotional abuse in the literature as well.

Loring (1994) defines emotional abuse as an on-going process in which one individual

systematically diminishes and destroys the inner self of another. The essential ideas,

feelings, perceptions, and personality characteristics of the victim are constantly

belittled. Lammers et al., (1995) define emotional abuse as the patterned non-physical

degradation of person by their partner through the conscious or unconscious gaining,

regaining or maintaining of power through repetitive overt or subtle acts and messages

that control or attempt to control, which negatively affects the abused partner's emotions

or self-value in the long term. In Queen et al., (2009) emotional abuse was defined as

an ongoing systematic psychological and symbolic violence process during which an

intimate partner makes deliberate and repeated threats to harm a woman's family,

friends, pets, and property for the purpose of controlling the woman's personal freedom

and autonomy. Geffner and Rossman (1997) use both of the terms 'psychological

abuse' and 'emotional abuse' when providing a definition in their research on emotional

abuse. Geffner and Rossman (1997) state that psychological abuse or emotional abuse

involves attacks on the self or spirit that create distress and may interfere with an

individual's ability to develop and mature in healthy ways. Thus, emotional abuse and

psychological maltreatment can be thought of as the nonphysical degradation of the self which lowers with and interferes with human development and productivity. It can be carried out with words, gestures, or policies. Lachkar (2001) defines emotional abuse as an ongoing process, differing from physical abuse in that one person psychologically, either consciously or unconsciously, attempts to destroy the will, needs, desires or perceptions of another. In more recent research, emotional abuse has been defined as a "repetitive, targeted, and destructive form of communication" (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003, p. 472) that attempts to make a romantic partner feel bad about themselves (Pence & Paymar, 1993). It is clear that there are several definitions that exist in the field of research to describe this form of non-physical abuse in romantic relationships, and the difficulty in pinning down a universal definition has left researchers with an additional labeling problem.

The Labeling Dilemma

The lack of consensus of what constitutes psychological abuse and how to define it has led to a labeling dilemma as well. The rationale for using the term 'psychological abuse' instead of any other terms to describe this form of abuse was described in the introduction, and several researchers (Aizpura, 2017; Chang, 1995; Chang, 1996; Kelly, 2004, Marshall, 1994; Marshall, 1996; McKibbin, 1997; Rodriguez-Carballeira et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2016) have also used this term to describe non-physical abuse. The other most common term is that of 'emotional abuse' used by (Alvarez & Miller-Ott, 2021; Black et al., 2011, Douglas, 1994; Follingstad et al., 1990; Francis & Pearson, 2011; Geffner & Rossman 1997; Kirkwood, 1993; Lammers et al., 2005; Loring, 1994;

Sims, 2008). Various other terms such as 'psychological maltreatment' (Tolman, 1989);

'psychological aggression' (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; O'Leary et al., 1994; O'Leary

1999; Stets, 1991); and coercion (Tedeschi & Felson 1994). According to Lammers et

al., in their (1995) research, these various terms are sometimes used interchangeably

(Hoffman, 1984; Garbarino et al., 1986) while others state that the term "psychological

abuse" is used as an umbrella term for the different types of non-physical abuse

(Marshall, 1996). These disparities in how this form of non-physical abuse is defined as

well as labeled are some of the challenges to researching, synthesizing, and advancing

the research of psychological abuse in romantic relationships.

Relevant Quantitative Studies

With a better understanding of the current challenges to researching

psychological abuse, it is more apparent as to why there has been such difficulty in

providing a universally accepted definition of psychological abuse. Many researchers

have attempted to define psychological abuse through the use of data collected from

the development of measures primarily to identify and quantify the existence of various

behaviors and components of psychological abuse (Kelly, 2004).

One of the first researchers to define psychological 'maltreatment' was that of

Tolman (1992) who described several categories of abuse such as psychological

destabilization, rigid sex role expectations, emotional or interpersonal withholdings of

love, contingent expressions of love, monopolization, fear, degradation, and economic

abuse. Tolman continued to assess research in this area and developed the

Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI) in 1999 which represented the

first comprehensive measure of psychological abuse to include a continuous measure of the construct (Kelly, 2004). Tolman ultimately identified two types of psychological abuse: dominance/isolation and emotional/verbal with various behaviors falling under each type of abuse, which helped to organize and classify elements of the abuse, and strengthen the case for psychological abuse being measurable and legitimate. Overall, Tolman's (1992) and (1999) research served to validate and expand the notion of psychological abuse being something that individuals experienced in intimate relationships. Through his research and creation of the PMWI, Tolman was able to help pave a way for others to identify and measure psychological abuse through specific constructs.

Murphy and Hoover (1999) hypothesized that psychological abuse is a complex, multidimensional construct (Kelly, 2004). Using a sample of 157 unmarried and currently non-dating, female undergraduate students, Murphy and Hoover looked at the level of emotional abuse, physical aggression, social responsibility response bias, interpersonal problems, and attachment. The results led to four factors that corresponded to the previously derived scales of Restrictive Engulfment, Hostile Withdrawal, Denigration, and Domination/Intimidation. Murphy and Hoover (1999) suggested that there are four identifiable types of emotional abuse and that relationships exist between emotional abuse and other variables. Specifically, they suggested a relationship between both Dominance/Intimidation and Denigration and physical aggression. "Their results further indicate a relationship between Hostile Withdrawal and Restrictive Engulfment and specific interpersonal problems. It was also suggested that Restrictive Engulfment was related to self-reported attachment insecurities" (Kelly, 2004, p. 385). Murphy and

Hoover's work was important to the advancement of research on psychological abuse because it helped to further and more specifically categorize variables of the abuse, and relate them to different intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects such as attachment and social responsibility bias. It is helpful to have further categories of behaviors of psychological abuse so that the abuse can be logged and measured more clearly and frequently; also the suggested relationships between the categories of abuse are potentially helpful in predicting the types of future abusive behavior a perpetrator may enact.

Relevant Qualitative Studies

In Loring's (1994) book called *Emotional Abuse,* it focused on the research conducted by Loring and Myers (1991) where in an attempt to differentiate emotional abuse from that of physical abuse, two forms of abuse were compared across several dimensions. Loring (1994) posits that emotional abuse occurs on two levels - overt and covert - and utilizes several mechanisms. Overt abuse has a pattern of isolation, jealousy, and/or control of finances, activities, and everyday choices of the woman; it is openly demeaning in nature. Covert behaviors are more subtle and difficult to identify, but no less devastating to the victims (Loring, 1994). The covert behaviors were things such as, discounting, negation, projection/accusations, denial of abuse by the abuser, negative labeling, and subtle threats of abandonment (physically and/or emotionally). In regards to the awareness of the abuse, more than half of the physically abused women considered themselves as being abused in comparison to less than one third of the women who were only emotionally abused considering themselves as abused.

Loring (1994) highlights several prominent aspects of an emotionally abusive relationship in addition to differentiating between emotional and physical abuse, and the patterned nature of covert and overt abuse prevalent in these types of relationships. Loring also talks about the impact of early attachment, the consequences of the abusive behaviors in regards to trauma, and suggests a new model of therapy to help practitioners treat individuals who have been emotionally abused. The main findings of the research in addition to the distinguishing forms of covert and overt abuse are that emotionally abused individuals tend to deal with high attachment anxiety levels and endure repeated trauma throughout the course of their relationships. An emotional abuse victim usually has a history of anxious attachment in the family of origin or in previous significant relationships that makes them vulnerable to this type of threat (Loring, 1994). Oftentimes, the perpetrators will either threaten to leave their partner physically or emotionally at several points during the relationship which causes further anxious clinging from the victim. As Loring (1994) notes:

> *Hoping to receive crumbs of warmth and connection, victims cling desperately (physically and emotionally) to non-nurturing partners. Overt and covert emotional abuse often generate a spiral of desperate clinging, subsequent betrayals, and more trauma. The tragedy for emotional abuse victims is that the partner from whom they seek attachment is himself the source of betrayal and trauma. He is likely to respond with additional abuse and threats of abandonment. (p. 7)*

In regards to other impacts of emotional abuse felt by victims, Loring identified that victims also dealt with intense feelings of loneliness, sadness, and confusion leading to a feeling that their sense of self had been eroded or changed in a significant way:

> *Over time these covert mechanisms of labeling, discounting, and negation lead to a diminution and destruction of the self. Victims describe feeling that the constituent parts of the self -- the individual characteristics, abilities and skills, preferences and wishes, dreams and aspirations -- no longer cohere. This fragmentation affects the victim's thinking and judgment. She may have uncontrollable intrusive thoughts and mental images that reinforce over and over the abuser's denigrating and negating labeling. (Loring, 1994, p. 6)*

This loss or diminution of sense of self is a defining element of emotional abuse and will be discussed in more depth throughout this thesis.

The other significant impacts of emotional abuse discussed in Loring's (1994) book, are that the women tended to experience impairment in their cognitive functioning and decision-making abilities, as well as somatic symptoms or physical manifestations of emotional pain due to the repeated abuse such as, headaches, stomachaches, and upper respiratory illnesses (Loring, 1994). The women also showed difficulty in the ability to recognize and understand the abuse while in the relationship. The lack of awareness of this form of abuse is something that is prevalent in other research (Chang, 1996; Kirkwood, 1993; Lammers et al., 2005; Marshall, 1996).

Loring's research was influential in bringing awareness to emotional abuse without physical or sexual abuse as something that could cause trauma to its victims. Many of the traumatic symptoms experienced by victims of emotional abuse, such as, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, difficulty sleeping and concentrating, and psychogenic amnesia (APA, 1987) are characteristic of PTSD and were considered to be as pervasive and intense as those of other trauma victims (Loring, 1994). Loring posited that emotionally abused individuals with no physical or sexual abuse suffer a long-term pattern of behavior marked by inconsistent warmth and abrupt disconnection (Loring, 1994). Previous work done on complex PTSD by Herman (1992) suggested that there may be a different type of trauma that presents itself after experiencing repeated emotional stresses versus shorter traumatic incidents. Panagiari (2020) stated that:

> Vandervoort (2004) proposed a new diagnostic category, known as Post Traumatic Relationship Syndrome (PTRS), with the aim of highlighting the qualitative differences between trauma by human design and any other trauma deriving from events such as natural disasters, severe illnesses or accidents that have no aim to harm. (Panagiari, 2020, p. 11)

Loring's 1994 work of studying "pure" emotional abuse independent of physical or sexual abuse from a qualitative perspective provided great insight into women's experiences of emotional abuse by differentiating it from physical abuse; it helped to validate emotional abuse as a stand alone form of abuse. The research also affirmed that emotional abuse can be equally destructive and insidious as physical abuse, if not

more (Loring & Myers, 1991) through demonstrating the significant feelings of loneliness, confusion, sadness, loss or diminution of self, and symptoms of trauma.

Having this qualitative research as a basis for other qualitative researchers to study and work off of is significant, and provides a look into how victims of emotional abuse respond to their experiences with context. Limitations of this research are that only married individuals were recruited and interviewed and only women were the victims of the abuse. The interview questions were designed to elicit responses to specific interests of certain behaviors such as, name calling, yelling, blame through questions like the following: "Does your husband call you names?" "Does your husband yell at you?" "Are you often blamed for things, labeled in some way, when this is a reflection of his hurt, anger, anxiety, etc,.?" These specific questions have been created to answer a very specific question, which has value in this study, however with the majority of the questions not being open-ended, it limits the type and length of response one can expect from an interviewee.

A qualitative study done by Valerie Nash Chang in (1993) for her doctoral dissertation resulted in her (1996) book called, *I Just Lost Myself: Psychological Abuse of Women in Marriage*. In this book, Chang talked about her experience of interviewing 16 women who had experienced psychological abuse in their marriages. Chang took an interpretative interactionsim method of study. An interpretative method is one that studies the processes used to make sense of and give meaning to reality (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974). Self-narratives were used to have the participants give an account of what the women considered the most important parts of their relationships. Chang was interested in answering several questions through the interviews: Did the

women have common interaction patterns and themes in their relationships? Did women stay in psychologically abusive relationships for the same reasons that kept women in physically abusive relationships? What impact did ongoing psychological abuse have on the lives of women? When in the relationship did personal shifts take place? Were there similar turning points for women in these relationships? In order to focus on answering these questions, Chang (1994) focused on descriptions of experience, perceptions, and the processes.

Chang (1993) and (1996) found that the women's experiences of psychological abuse could be grouped into five interaction patterns: (1) "adjust yourself" where the women had to change their behavior to appease their partner (2) "double bind" where the women could never do right; (3) "direct verbal attacks"; (4) "silence and withdrawal"; (5) "lack of emotional connection." Individual effects felt by the women were a sense of losing themselves along with depression, anxiety, and physical illnesses were also common. "Loss of self" is an element of psychological abuse that is significant and is described as, "In womens' attempts to please their partner and avoid criticism, they vigilantly censor their actions, adapting until all sense of unique self is lost" (Chang 1996, p. 109). The behaviors recalled furthered the idea that psychological abuse can be explained as an extension of the system of domination and submission which heightens gender duality and patriarchy (Chang, 1993). The remaining portion of Chang (1996) looked at the process of these relationships as a whole:

Moving from the beginning of the abuse and attempts to fix the relationship by changing herself, to a perceptual shift involving rejection of his view of reality,

seeing the seriousness of the problems, and often seeking counseling help; to exhaustion and despair and a return to self; to gaining support, setting limits, and in most cases, leaving the relationships, psychologically abusive relationships follow a predictable path. (p. 3)

The research done by Chang on psychologically abused women is one of the earliest significant qualitative studies on this area of research that begins to differentiate psychological abuse from physical and sexual abuse, describes different patterns of abusive tactics, discusses impacts such as loss of self, anxiety, and depression, and is able to provide a sense of what the process of a psychologically abusive relationship may look like over time. Chang also contributes significant information about the victims' upbringings in their family of origin, often revealing they had experienced psychological abuse, physical abuse or neglect as a child and young adult. Limitations of this study are that it looks at married couples only and analyzes psychological abuse through a feminist perspective; reducing this phenomenon to women as the only victims of abuse.

In one qualitative study, Lammers et al., (2005) used memory work to examine the experiences of seven heterosexual women who had experienced psychological abuse within their romantic relationships. The women were asked to write down their own memories in response to being given various triggers or cues such as "fairness," "caring," "expectation," "love," "support," and "responsibility" to elicit moments in their relationships that were significant to themselves as a way to help them make sense of the memories.

The researchers found that the women in the study were routinely subordinated by men and it had long-term and negative consequences for womens' emotional health. The study found that participants experienced three distinct forms of emotional abuse, which included dominant control, silent control, and manipulation. The form of abuse experienced was found to influence the ways in which participants were impacted, as well as to the degree. Eight consequences of affected abuse were identified and discussed in terms of the women most likely to experience them (Lammers et al., 2005). The consequences of the abuse that the participants reported impacting them were the following: (1) emotional loneliness; (2) despair; (3) guilt; (4) confusion; (5) fear; (6) diminished self-esteem; (7) diminished identity; and (8) anger (Lammers et al., 2005).

A feminist and social constructionist perspective was taken when conducting and analyzing the data, which was said to contribute to the participants' acceptance of what they went through to be considered more normal. Lammers et al., (2005) noted that the women perceived their partners to be in positions of authority and to set the rules and standards in the relationship. Due to these beliefs, they became more susceptible to the manipulative behavior of their partners and reported long-term and negative consequences for the women's emotional health (Lammers, 2005). The social constructionist framework came into play during the second phase of analysis when the group members discussed and analyzed one another's written memories: "The aim of the group analysis was to uncover the social, instead of the individual meanings "embodied by the actions described in the written accounts and to uncover the process whereby the meanings -- both then and now -- are arrived at." (Crawford, 1992, p. 49 in Lammers et al., 2005, p. 38)

The research of Lammers et al., (2005) contributed to the amount of research done on psychological abuse and an independent form of abuse, added information on the leaving process for victims, and also added further distinct categories of psychologically abusive behaviors experienced by the participants. Not only does this research extend findings on types of behaviors experienced, it extends them by classifying the perpetrators' behaviors into categories that label by type of control -- this classification could be seen as labeling the perpetrators' intent in some way. Through beginning or continuing to examine the behavior of perpetrators we learn valuable information about them. Learning about the consequences of this form of abuse from the victims' perspective, qualitatively, is incredibly valuable as many issues surrounding the research on psychological abuse are the lack of knowledge on what is experienced by victims as well as how it is experienced. Behaviors and effects/impacts without context misses the opportunity to gain a more full understanding of the experience of psychological abuse.

Limitations of this research are that while memory work is a valuable and interesting methodology to use, one drawback from this particular study is that through only giving the participants a trigger or cue word to have them provide memories for, it possibly limits the amount of information they may recall and share. There is the potential to miss out on a great deal of the context, or the story of individual experiences of abuse as a whole with only providing trigger words for victims to use as inspiration for memories. While this research gives merit to a case for using memory work and an analytic framework of social constructionism, it makes further the case for qualitative research to be done with semi-structured interviews to guide participants through the

narratives of their relationships. With limited research on how a psychologically abusive relationship begins, progresses over time, and ends (Chang, 1993; Chang, 1996) having probes or specific open-ended interview questions can help to add to an understanding of a psychologically abusive relationship as a whole experience from start to finish.

Another important qualitative study done by Queen et al., (2009) sought to examine the lived experiences of emotionally abused women in intimate relationships through looking at their individual perceptions, meanings, and definitions of emotional abuse (Queen et al., 2009). A descriptive, phenomenological framework was used to interview fifteen emotionally abused women through unstructured interviews. The experience of emotional abuse was found to be an all encompassing one that impacts the mental and physical health of its victims and pervades other areas of individuals lives. Seven themes were identified in Queen's (2009) research: captivity, defining moments, dissociation from self, fixing, mindful manipulation, relentless terror, and taking a stand.

The women described their experience of emotional abuse as having "no clear beginning or end." (Queen et al., 2009, p. 242) It was difficult to pinpoint where the abuse began and where it ended for the women and they expressed that they were still struggling with the aftermath of the emotional abuse. The participants noted that they experienced many impacts and symptoms of trauma during and after their relationships such as, flashbacks, physical illnesses, inadequate coping mechanisms, and relationship difficulties (Queen et al., 2009). The lived experience of emotional abuse is defined by a large number of behaviors, which when taken out of a specific context and

isolated in and of themselves, wouldn't be defined as abuse (Queen et al., 2009). Overall, emotional abuse must be examined contextually, behaviorally, environmentally, and through the lens of the individual who experienced it, in order to understand it most authentically.

Some limitations of this study are that aside from seeing the beginning question of the interview of "What is it like to live the life of a woman who is emotionally abused by her intimate partner?" The follow up questions from the interviews are not visible in the research in order to get a better sense of how the interviews progressed, although the open-endedness of the interviews also serve as a great strength in that the participants are not heavily influenced by the researcher. Another limitation is that there is no information on how the participants' relationships began and progressed over time, or how they ended. This study, much like Lammers et al., (2005), provides a very open-ended platform for women to discuss their experiences of emotional abuse. However, there is little information accessible surrounding the progression of the emotional abuse in the relationship, the families of origin for both victim and perpetrator, and/or how victims attribute blame or take accountability for aspects of their relationships such as, why they got entered, stayed, and/or left the relationship.

Finally, a more recent study done by Panagiari in (2020) used a social constructionist approach to conduct an inductive thematic analysis of the experiences of seven women who had left their emotionally abusive relationships. The aim of the study was to "explore the journeys of these women towards leaving, in order to provide a holistic picture of their relationships from beginning to end, including the post separation period, while also paying attention to the social context, amongst other factors,"

(Panagiari, 2020, p. iii). Five themes were identified in the study: 'A Disconnection from Self,' 'A Burst of Standing Up,' 'The Importance of Support,' 'Multiple Endings' and 'Making Sense of the Past.' Together these findings revealed that the leaving process is a layered journey which often involves multiple attempts to leave the relationship.

An interesting aspect of this particular study is that Panagiari found that "the leaving processes did not always reflect a conscious decision-making process. Instead, none of the participants were aware of the abuse while they were in the relationship" (2020, p. iii). Many of the participants appeared to take action to leave their relationships out of strong emotional responses instead of spending a great deal of time thinking about the pros and cons. Panagiari concluded that the victims were "entrapped individuals who had to break free and still needed further support to make sense of their experiences and rebuild their lives" (p. iii). This study contributed information on the leaving processes of psychologically abusive relationships from a social constructionist perspective, which has not been done often.

Research Aims and Rationale

In the field of psychological abuse literature, there are many quantitative studies that examine various aspects of psychological abuse (Anderson et al., 1991; Bass & Davis, 1988; Follingstad et al., 1990; Herman, 1994; Hyden, 1995; Kirkwood, 1993; Kaisan & Painter, 1992; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; NiCarthy, 1986; O'Leary et al., 1994; Pence & Paymar, 1993) such as behaviors reported and effects experienced, but fewer qualitative studies have been done to research how victims describe their experiences in psychologically abusive relationships (Lammers et al., 1995; Loring, 1994, Chang

1996, Queen, 2009). With there being an existing debate on what exactly constitutes psychological abuse as well as questions surrounding whether it can stand alone as an independent form of abuse, the aim of this research was to expand the qualitative research in the field of psychological abuse providing more insight into what constitutes psychological abuse from a victim's perspective, and increase the understanding of how victims of psychological abuse reflect back upon and describe their experiences in their relationships. Specifically, I was interested in how individuals construct their experience and account for, or attribute blame to themselves, their partner, or any other circumstances in their lives. Through looking at the ways in which the victims describe their experiences through a social constructionist framework via online blogs and semi-structured interviews, the research will aim to provide valuable insight into what is significant to the victims of psychological abuse and how they make sense of their relationships through their descriptions.

With a smaller area of qualitative research conducted on psychological abuse and a lack of a concise definition as well as an understanding of what happens in a psychologically abusive romantic relationship from a qualitative perspective, it was decided that more data should first be collected on what individuals describe happening in their relationships unprompted by a researcher before conducting semi-structured interviews. Online blogs of individuals who had chosen to write their experiences of being a victim of psychological or emotional abuse were viewed and selected in order to gain a better understanding of how victims of psychological abuse reflected back upon and described their experiences.

A main reason for selecting online blogs was that they were not researcher-generated; these individuals chose to write about their experiences in a public forum with no guidance from a researcher. The goal was to use the results of the analysis of the blogs to help guide and construct interview questions for the next study of semi-structured interviews with victims of psychological abuse.

Research Questions

There were two main research questions for the online blogs study and the semi-structured interviews: (1) How do victims describe their experiences of being in psychologically abusive romantic relationships? (2) How do victims make sense of, and address issues of accountability in their psychologically abusive relationships? Two different studies aim to address these research questions: (1) an inductive thematic analysis of seven blog entries of victims' experiences of psychologically abusive relationships (2) an inductive thematic analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews with victims of psychologically abusive relationships.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Methodological Decisions: Introduction to Research Design

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted on two data sets in this research. Seven blog entries of victims' experiences of psychological abuse and 20 semi-structured interviews with victims of psychologically abusive relationships were analyzed in order to answer the research questions of (1) How do victims describe their experiences of being in psychologically abusive romantic relationships? (2) How do victims make sense of, and address issues of accountability in their psychologically abusive relationships? The research consisted of two studies in order to address the research questions thoroughly, and the blogs in particular were analyzed first in order to help guide the construction of the semi-structured interview questions. The first study consisted of looking at online blogs written by individuals who endured psychological abuse in a romantic relationship who had chosen to write about their experiences via a public platform, unprompted by a researcher. The second study consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals who endured psychological abuse recruited via Facebook forums by the researcher. The rationale for choosing the blogs and the semi-structured interviews will be described in detail in the "Rationale for Blogs" and "Rationale for Semi-Structured Interviews" sections.

Qualitative Approach

A qualitative research design was used for both the blogs and semi-structured interview analysis due to the nature of the research questions looking at how individuals

describe their experiences of being in a relationship. With the particular research questions chosen, it made sense to use a qualitative approach in order to ensure that a method would be selected that would best allow the participants to speak about their experiences in psychologically abusive relationships via interviews and through the public forum of the blogs in a way that would serve as a platform for language, context, experience, and meaning to be assessed most thoroughly. Both of these methods (blogs and interviews) also allowed participants to share and construct their experiences in a way that was most meaningful to them and allowed them the freedom to respond to questions without constraints. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for this research for the purpose of having a guideline to follow. However, the interview questions were designed in such a way as to allow the participants the freedom to speak about other topics that they deemed relevant and meaningful to them when considering their experiences. Inductive thematic analyses were undertaken to analyze the data.

Thematic Analysis

The methodology that was chosen for this research was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method (Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001) within and beyond psychology. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998 in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis

was selected because it allows theoretical freedom in that it does not require the researcher to be tied to a specific theoretical framework, specifically reflexive thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), reflexive thematic analysis is an approach that values qualitative research principals, the subjective skills of the researcher, and an open coding style, with no coding framework. Analysis can be inductive or more theoretical/deductive, but it must be "...situated in an interpretative reflexive process. Themes should be the final 'outcome' of data coding and iterative theme development" (p. 333-334).

Due to the exploratory approach of the research questions, an inductive thematic analysis best fit the nature of this study because the researcher was looking to code all the data and find new information. The use of an inductive thematic analysis also allowed the coding of the answers to look at both the ways in which the participants reflected back upon their experiences and the ways in which they constructed their descriptions. Although thematic analysis does not need to align with a particular set of theoretical beliefs, it is necessary to be clear on which epistemological stance the researcher is aligned with for the research.

Since the start of this research, Braun and Clarke published an article in (2021) where they discuss the quality in thematic analysis research, particularly reflexive thematic analysis, with reference to ten common problems they identified in published research. One of their key takeaways from their paper was that what's most important about doing thematic analysis well is not so much the emphasis on following procedure, but having a firm understanding of what the procedure allows the researcher to do with the data; it provides a framework for moving through the data and analyzing it in an

organized way, but it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the data is coded and analyzed thoroughly and intentionally. Procedures are guidelines to help a researcher organize their analytical process, but it is not the most important element of the data analyzation process entirely.

A social constructionist epistemological stance was chosen for this research which will be described in detail in the following section of "Social Constructionist Epistemology," but it was primarily selected due to the idea that it prescribes to, that in order to best understand people, we must understand the complex context they operate in and the meanings attached to things (Forrester, 2019). Thematic analysis allows for a great deal of flexibility in regards to what material is coded as well as the epistemological stance that coincides with the method, which will be discussed further in the "Analytic Process" sections. While there is great flexibility within this particular analytic strategy, as noted by Braun and Clarke (2006), what makes a strong thematic analysis is the rigor and thorough procedure in which the data is analyzed. Braun and Clarke have a 6-step method of analysis that ensures rigor in the process of analyzing data which will be described in detail in the "Analytic Process" sections.

Social Constructionist Epistemology

A social constructionist epistemological stance was used in this research design due to the desire to gain insight into how victims of psychological abuse reflected back upon and described their experience of being in a psychologically abusive relationship as well as how they attributed blame to themselves or others when describing their experiences. Through the adoption of a social constructionist framework for this

research, it will allow the researcher to place emphasis on the way social reality is constructed through language. People may use a plethora of techniques such as 'blaming' or 'justifying' in their narratives to create versions of their worlds that serve a purpose unique to their story (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Language is seen, therefore, as not merely descriptive medium for representing reality, but rather as playing an active and fundamental role in constituting events, objects and 'truths' as people draw on available ideas or meanings, referred to as 'discourses' to perform particular functions (Burr, 1995, p. 50).

The social constructionist epistemological stance taken throughout the analytic process of the blogs and the semi-structured interviews functions to help interpret the results of what the participants said to be viewed as what they found meaningful and how they experienced the relationship to occur. With a social constructionist lens, it posits that we cannot know that what is being said by individuals to have necessarily been true, but we can look at how the descriptions are put together and what is talked about to be meaningful to the participants and a way that they construct their reality. There is a strong emphasis on the type of knowledge that is desired to be looked at through a social constructionist framework (Willig, 2013). Willig (2013) posits that the emphasis is not so much on finding out what is true in the world or in an individual's experience, but rather the process by which the knowledge is constructed. Willig (2013) talks about how social constructionist researchers are concerned with the social construction of 'knowledge' itself, and how individuals construct these versions of their reality through their use of language.

Critical Realist Ontological Position

A critical realist ontological position was taken in addition to a social

constructionist epistemological stance throughout this research. According to Willig

(1999) a critical realist ontological position would recognize the existence of a material

reality while also accepting the idea that there are different ways this may be

understood. One can see how a phenomenon like that of interpersonal violence may

gain part of its meaning through the ways in which it is discussed via language instead

of solely attributing the cause of interpersonal violence to an individual's biology or

cognitions (Potter & Wetherwell, 1987). Gergen proposes that what is important to focus

on when taking a critical realist approach is the purpose of constructions in

relationships, recognizing that the function of words and how they are communicated

'depends so very much on the way they are embodied' (1999, p. 85). The amount to

which one can have direct access and knowledge of reality is what is questioned versus

the existence of a material reality itself, and therefore places the emphasis on the role of

language.

Study One: Online Blogs

Overview and Rationale for Blogs

Online blogs in the public forum were used for the first study in order to gain

more insight into how victims of psychological abuse described their experiences of

abuse. As noted in previous chapters, there is a lack of consensus of what constitutes

psychological abuse, so one of the aims of looking at blogs was to understand more

about how individuals who had gone through one of these relationships may reflect

back upon their experiences, hopefully providing more rich descriptions of elements of

the relationships such as the abusive behaviors they noticed, the progression of the

relationship, and how they reflected back upon and addressed issues of accountability.

With the blogs being non-researcher generated and in the public forum, they were not

influenced by the researcher in any way and provided information that was already

written for the purpose of sharing individuals' experiences in psychologically abusive

romantic relationships. The eventual aim of the research was to conduct

semi-structured interviews with victims of psychological abuse in romantic relationships.

In order to construct an interview schedule that would best help answer the research

questions laid out prior, the blogs were looked at to provide more of an understanding of

what may happen in a psychologically abusive relationship from victims' perspectives.

Thus, the data from the blogs were used to help inform the interview questions for the

next study.

Methodological Procedures: Data Collection

When beginning the search for online blogs of individuals who had undergone a

psychologically abusive relationship, there was a great deal of flexibility that went into

this process. Several search terms or phrases were used to look for online blogs such

as, "individuals' accounts of psychological abuse," "individuals' accounts of emotional

abuse," "blogs of psychological abuse," "blogs of emotional abuse," "stories of

psychological abuse," "blogs of emotional abuse," "stories or accounts of psychological

abuse," "stories or accounts of emotional abuse." Several blogs were written for

magazines, personal web pages, online newspapers, or mental health websites, and

the minimum length of a blog that was accepted for a potential account to be analyzed

in this research was one page single-spaced. When considering the content, blogs

tended to be selected that had more narrative-like style writing with a considerable

amount of context and descriptions of the abuse experienced as well as the victims'

feelings and reactions to the abuse. Ultimately, seven blogs were chosen to be

analyzed and deemed a sufficient amount for this study.

Analytic Process

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the seven blogs and Braun and Clarke's

(2006) six phases of thematic analysis were used to ensure rigor and clarity through the

analytic process. The six stages of analysis are as follows: (1) familiarizing yourself with

your data (2) generating initial codes (3) searching for themes (4) reviewing themes (5)

defining and naming themes (6) producing the report. The first stage "familiarizing

yourself with your data" required the thorough reading and re-reading of the blog

transcripts. When analyzing the blogs individually, each blog was read one time through

without taking any notes to ensure that the complete essence of the account was taken

in and captured before adding any comments/notes by the researcher or potential

codes. The second time the blogs were read through, any thoughts, questions, or

comments were highlighted, circled, and noted in the margins of the transcripts. The

second step of the analytic procedure was to "generate initial codes." As suggested by

Clarke and Braun (2013), the blogs were coded using "complete coding" meaning that

the data was coded line by line looking for data with the potential to answer any part of

the research questions. Words or brief phrases were written in the margins of the blogs

that may be significant building blocks to a potential code and eventual theme. After codes began to appear more often throughout the blogs, they were sorted in NVivo with data that coincided with the codes; this process was called "collating the data." As codes began to solidify and data began to fit clearly into different categories of codes, the researcher began to search for themes. Searching for themes involved gathering codes into potential themes through looking at what codes were similar or encapsulated similar concepts.

The fourth step was to review the themes. During this phase the potential themes are reviewed by checking against the coded data and the full data set (Forrester & Sullivan, 2018) and a thematic map was created (Appendix A). Step five involved defining and naming the themes. Theme names were created that encapsulated the concept of the data within that theme; the names were predominantly representative of what appeared to be core elements of the relationship such as, *Blissful Beginnings, The Continuous Cycle of Abuse, The Invisible Nature of Abuse, Loss of Self,* and *The Leaving Process*. Finally, step six involved writing the analysis where a "narrative was created to bring the data to life" (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from The University of Edinburgh School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences Ethics Committee before data collection commenced (Appendix C). When evaluating the ethical considerations of the blog data collection and research, it was important to consider the consent, anonymity, and privacy of the data. The blogs were non-researcher generated and

found in the public forum, so the issue of privacy became less crucial to protect versus more ethically sensitive data such as interviews collected for a specific research project. Since the blogs were primarily written for journals or magazines and were already in a public forum, consent was not necessary to obtain from the authors of the blog posts to use in the current research. However, the researcher did change the names of the blog post writers and any names mentioned in the blogs in an attempt to create more anonymity, although identifying details were not altered. An aspect that was considered in regards to using this data was the potential of the data being used or analyzed in a way that would change how the author intended for it to be viewed originally. Ultimately, however, the publicly available data meant that ethical consideration was not required in this instance.

Study Two: Semi-Structured Interviews

Methodological Decisions: Overview and Rationale for Interviews

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which individuals reflected upon and made sense of their experiences in psychologically abusive relationships as victims, and address issues of accountability in their psychologically abusive relationships after obtaining more of an understanding of psychologically abusive relationships from the blog analysis. A qualitative research design was used in order to ensure flexibility for the participants to speak about their experiences in psychologically abusive relationships in a way that was most meaningful to them, and allowed them the freedom to respond to questions without constraints.

Interviews were selected as the method of data collection for the second study in the research. With the lack of qualitative research on psychological abuse in romantic relationships as well as research into "pure" psychological abuse independent of physical abuse, it made sense to select the method of an interview to provide an open platform for individuals to share their experiences in detail. Interviews can be viewed as a "professional conversation with the goal of getting a participant to talk about their experiences and perspectives" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2007, p. 96) and to capture their language and concepts, in relation to a topic that you have determined (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Semi-structured interviews were selected in particular because they allowed for flexibility during the interview process as well as ensuring a well-crafted interview schedule. In Clarke and Braun (2013) they define semi-structured interviews as having a list of predetermined questions generated by the researcher, but having bandwidth built into the interview for participants to talk about other ideas or issues that were not expected. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for this research for the purpose of having a guideline to follow. However, the interview questions were designed in such a way as to allow the participants the freedom to speak about other topics that they deemed relevant and meaningful to them when considering their experiences. A thematic analysis was undertaken to analyze the data and help guide the writing of the analysis.

Methodological Decisions: Rationale for Combined Use of Blogs and Interviews

The decision to use both blogs and interviews in this research was made in an effort to provide a more robust understanding of individuals' experiences through the journey of psychologically abusive relationships. Due to the lack of qualitative research on psychological abuse in romantic relationships, looking at blogs that were available in the public forum and non-researcher generated provided an opportunity to gain more insight into the contextual experiences of individuals. The blogs allowed a window into the victims' journeys providing rich detail of emotions, behaviors, effects, and most importantly demonstrated what individuals deemed as most salient to share from their experiences.

With the end-goal of conducting interviews with victims of psychological abuse, the blogs were used to gain more of an understanding of what happened during these types of relationships in order to design semi-structured interview questions that would help guide the discussion. The questions were designed in such a way as to provide first and foremost an open platform for the victims to share their experiences, but also crafted in a way to take them through their journey from beginning to end. Having gained insight into key elements of a psychologically abusive relationship via the blogs, some interview questions were directed toward certain topics that were touched upon in the blogs such as, abusive behaviors experienced, emotions, and changes within themselves or their partner. After reading and analyzing the blogs, there were some areas that were not touched upon, but were of interest such as the contextual circumstances of meeting the partner, previous romantic relationships, the initial stages of dating, the process of breaking up, and family of origin dynamics for both the victim and the perpetrator. The interviews afforded the opportunity to look for commonalities

across the blogs and interviews, and furthermore, extend the understanding of how individuals describe experiencing psychological abuse in their relationships. Together, the use of the blogs and the interviews provided an opportunity to gain a more robust level of insight into the contextual circumstances and progression of psychologically abusive relationships as well as how individuals processed and reflected back upon their experiences thereby illuminating the parts they felt were most significant to share.

Methodological Procedures: Development of The Interview Schedule

The interview schedule (Appendix E) for the semi-structured interviews was created with much intention and several drafts and revisions of the initial flow chart. During the process of designing the semi-structured interview questions the interview schedule that was created served to be there to guide the interview, but would also allow the participant and researcher to deviate in terms of wording and the order of which questions were asked; it also allowed for additional follow up or probe questions to be asked if it went with the flow of the conversation during the interview. When beginning to think about the interview schedule, it was important to also consider the nature of the interviews themselves and certain aspects. It was hoped, initially, that the interviews would all be in-person face-to-face interviews to potentially provide an opportunity for there to be the most authentic connection and comfortable environment for the participants to share their experiences. Due to logistical issues, the interviews were planned to be conducted virtually instead which did provide additional anonymity and potential ease for participants to prepare for the interview and feel more comfortable talking. However, the drawbacks were that even with some video interviews

via Skype, it was more difficult to read body language than it would be in an in-person interview.

When it came to considering elements of a well-designed interview schedule, four elements valued by Clarke and Braun (2013) were implemented: the opening and closing questions, the sequencing of questions, the prompts and probes, and the constructing and wording of questions. First, the opening and closing questions were given great thought in regards to asking a series of short and easy demographic questions as well as assuring that the participants did not have to answer any questions they weren't comfortable with, everything would remain anonymous, and they could end the interview at any time. The first main question was, "Can you tell me about how you and your partner (or ex-partner) met?" This question was designed to help set up the context of the participants' lives as they met their partner, and also serve as a question to ease them into recalling their relationship. The ending question of, "Is there anything that you would like to talk about or add in the conversation that you feel hasn't been addressed, something that you were expecting to be asked?" is designed to be a question where they can have more agency in directing the interview by adding anything they deemed relevant.

The sequencing of questions was important as well. The schedule was designed to flow logically and start with less probing questions such as the demographics and initial meeting of their partner. The questions progress the participant through the early stages of abuse and their awareness of it through questions such as, "What was the relationship was like in the early stages? What happened next?" Next, "Did you notice some changes during this time or not?" "How did you respond to his/her behavior?"

"How did the relationship end?" "Did you notice any effects after the relationship ended on yourself, other relationships, or other areas of your life?" These questions take the participants through their journey of abuse gently, allowing a lot of flexibility in how the accounts can be given. The ending questions of the interview prompt some reflection: "How are you doing now?" "Looking back, why do you think this happened?" "Have you made sense of the relationship?" If interview participants were currently still in the relationship, they were asked "What would you like to have happen in your relationship?"

The prompts and probes were created to encourage the participants to open up, expand on their answers, and provide more detail (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The probes were suggestions for areas of potential clarification or phrases that may spark a memory in relation to the question being asked. Finally, the wording was important to take into consideration for the construction of the questions. Special care was taken to ensure that the questions were for the majority, open-ended, non-leading, and did not assume any blame toward the victim. The questions were designed to be more broad, but also encourage the participants to talk about specific areas of their relationship with flexibility.

Recruitment Strategy: Semi-Structured Interviews

Purposive sampling was undertaken to recruit individuals for the interviews who had been in psychologically abusive intimate relationships independent of physical abuse. The individuals were recruited via Facebook support groups designed for people who had or were still in the process of experiencing psychological abuse. Key terms

such as 'Survivors of Psychological Abuse,' 'Emotional Abuse,' or 'Domestic Violence'

were used to help start the search for groups. Oftentimes upon opening one group's

website, there would be a suggestion for a similar Facebook group on the sidebar of the

page, leading to several groups that were possible to select from.

In order to initiate contact with the group, a message would be sent to the

administrator(s) of the group introducing the researcher, aims of the study, and what

would be asked of any willing group members. The researcher provided the

administrators with an example of the write up that would be on the proposed post

within the group. Once permission was granted by an administrator of the group, the

post (Appendix F) would go onto the discussion board of the page and people would

either comment on the post saying they were willing to help or send a direct message to

the researcher as requested on the original post.

After receiving a group member's request to help with research, the researcher

sent a message to the individual thanking them for responding to the inquiry and telling

them a brief amount of information about what would happen during the interview as

well as ensuring anonymity. If the individuals were still interested in discussing with the

researcher, they would then be sent the formal participant information (Appendix G)

sheet as well as a consent form (Appendix H) for them to sign and return. A date and

time would then be arranged between the researcher and the participant and a means

of communication: either Skype, Whatsapp (video or voice call), Facebook messenger,

or a regular telephone call. The participants chose the form of communication that they

felt most comfortable with, and at times, it also depended on the participants'

geographical location.

Participant Characteristics: Semi-Structured Interviews

 After advertising the Facebook posts in various psychological and/or domestic abuse forums on Facebook for approximately one month, 20 individuals were selected for participating in the research. Many additional individuals sent messages of interest in partaking in the interviews, but ultimately decided that they did not want to participate. A few participants began interviews via Facebook messenger through writing, but stopped participating over the course of their interviews, which resulted in their data not being used for the research. The sample consisted of 16 female and 4 male participants from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Mexico. Specific regions of the world were not intentionally targeted for recruitment, the sample was based on who responded to the Facebook advertisement. Of the 20 interviews, fourteen were conducted over a regular phone call, two were held via Skype video calls, and four were done through Facebook Messenger. The phone calls and Skype calls ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, and the Facebook Messenger participants could respond at their own pace.

 The initial aim was to have a similar ratio of female and male victims of psychological abuse as the researcher was interested in both male and female experiences of psychologically abusive relationships, however the people that expressed interest and followed through with setting up emails were predominantly females. The participants had to have been over 18 to participate in the research and they ended up ranging from 20 years old to 76 years old. There was one homosexual relationship and 19 heterosexual relationships and all names were removed for anonymity. The majority of the participants were out of their psychologically abusive

relationships (either formerly dating or married) and two participants were currently still in their relationships (dating), but expressed the desire to leave the relationship.

Methodological Procedures: Semi-Structured Interview Procedure

After scheduling a date for the interview and a platform of the interviewee's choice, the researcher prepared for each interview by going over the interview schedule, reviewing notes from the previous interview and allowing the flexibility to tweak or potentially add an additional question that seemed as if it could provide valuable insight based off of other interviews already conducted. The researcher used a transcription service called "Otter Transcription" to record the audio of the interviews which was set up prior to the start of the interview.

When starting the call, the researcher took special care to connect with the participant and make them feel comfortable through asking them questions about their day, where they're from and having a reciprocal conversation about these "small talk" topics. As a prelude to the interview questions, participants were asked for some demographic information, including their age, confirmation of whether or not they have been involved in a psychologically abusive relationship or are still involved in one, how many psychologically abusive relationships, length of most prominent psychologically abusive relationship in their life, and how long ago the relationship ended if they are not currently in that relationship. If the participants confirmed that they were in a psychologically abusive relationship and still wanted to participate, the interviewer then proceeded with the interview schedule ensuring that while following the guide that the researcher kept the questions open-ended and non-leading as to allow the interviewees

to speak about anything they deemed meaningful in their relationships. The length of the interviews lasted anywhere approximately between 45 minutes to as long as two and a half hours.

  After the interviews concluded the researcher sent a Debriefing Form (Appendix I) to the participant with information regarding the importance of their contribution to the area of research, feelings they may experience as a result of participating in the interview, and a list of available resources for support such as counseling services and domestic violence services.

Analytic Process

  Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis were used for analysis of the interviews. The analysis began with transcribing the interviews through the use of Otter Translation. All interviews were played as Otter Transcription translated the transcripts. Several changes had to be made throughout the transcription due to the software not picking up all of the words at times. After the transcription process was complete, each interview was read one time through without taking any notes to ensure that the complete essence of the account was taken in and captured before adding any comments/notes by the researcher or potential codes. The second time the interviews were read through, any thoughts, questions, or comments were highlighted, circled, and noted in the margins of the transcripts via Google Docs.

  The second step of the analytic procedure was to "generate initial codes." The interviews were coded using "complete coding" meaning that the data was coded line by line looking for data with the potential to answer any part of the research questions.

Words or brief phrases were written in the margins of the interviews that may be significant building blocks to a potential code and eventual theme. After codes began to appear more often throughout the interviews, they were sorted in Google Docs with data that coincided with the codes; this process was called "collating the data." As codes began to solidify and data began to fit clearly into different categories of codes, the researcher began to search for themes. Searching for themes involved gathering codes into potential themes through looking at what codes were similar or encapsulated similar concepts. As potential themes were beginning to be identified, selective coding was used instead of complete coding, as data that would align with the particular themes were only truly necessary to find at that point.

The fourth step was to review the themes by checking them against the coded data and the full data set. Next, a thematic map was created (Appendix B). Step five involved defining and naming the themes. Theme names were created that encapsulated the concept of the data within that theme; the names were predominantly representative of the feelings that the victims appeared to be portraying within that data linked to the theme such as, *It's Good That it Ended, How This Was Abuse,* and *I am Less Than I Was Before*. Finally, step six involved writing the analysis.

Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from The University of Edinburgh School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences Ethics Committee before data collection commenced. (Appendix D). When considering the ethical sensitivities of this type of data collection it was important to take into account several aspects such as

consent, anonymity, and privacy. Participants were fully informed of the nature, purpose,

potential benefits, risks of emotional discomfort, and potential uses of the study upon

expressing interest in participating via a participant information form (Appendix G). The

information form also addressed how their data would be kept anonymous and

protected through changing names, locations, and other identifying details, and would

be stored in a password protected file. A debriefing form (Appendix I) was provided to

participants after taking part in the interview to provide individuals with further

information on the importance of their contribution to the study, resources for domestic

violence services and support hotlines should they wish to speak to someone after

participating in the interview, and the researcher's contact information. After viewing the

information form, the participants were required to sign a consent form (Appendix H),

which outlined their acknowledgment of receiving and reading the information sheet, as

well as the voluntary nature of participating and the ability to withdraw themselves or

any part of their information at any given point, as well as their consent to be audio

recorded.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an important aspect of research to take into consideration. In Clarke

and Braun (2013) they discuss the importance of "consistently placing an emphasis on

the active role of the researcher in the research process and in constructing knowledge,

and the fact that all of us have values, interests, and standpoints that shape our

research" (p. 303). Clarke and Braun (2013) further advocate for the importance of

considering reflexivity through asking researchers to consider if any aspects of their

identities are relevant to the research topic. It is not only necessary to 'situate the sample' of participants, but also to 'situate' or consider the context of the researcher as well (p. 303).

As I consider my own personal reflexivity, there are several aspects of my career and life history that have had the potential to shape this research process. I am currently a university professor and teach a class on the Psychology of Close Relationships where I talk about romantic relationships and focus on psychological abuse as well as other forms of intimate partner violence. There are several students who have shared their relationship concerns with me, and other students on campus who I mentor that have shared experiences of abuse as well. This exposure to examples of psychological abuse and relational conflict in my professional role, could potentially increase the likelihood of my own preconceived notions of what I expect the bloggers or the interview participants to talk about or mean in their descriptions.

The most potentially influential aspect, as I consider my personal reflexivity in this research, is that I have experienced a psychologically abusive romantic relationship in my personal life. This relationship was deeply damaging and impactful and left me in a state of numbness, confusion, and isolation. Having always been passionate about helping others with relationships, it caused me to doubt at first, my ability to be in a role where I could help teach and mentor others one day, in the areas of healthy and unhealthy relationships. I was an individual who never considered the possibility of becoming a victim of abuse; I was a straight-A student, college and professional athlete, hard worker, and a typically 'good judge of character.' If a person like myself could get involved in an abusive relationship and not realize it at first, then in my mind, this form of

abuse was something I felt compelled to study and be able to help educate others about in life. Due to this psychologically abusive relationship that I experienced, I have formed ideas about why I was vulnerable to entering into that relationship, what happened in the relationship that I was in, and what may be potential causes of perpetrators' abusive behavior in general.

All of these experiences and thoughts surrounding my particular relationship as well as other psychologically abusive relationships, have the potential to impact the way I look at participants' responses as well as how I may be prone to interpreting them. During the interviews, the knowledge that I had gone through a psychologically abusive relationship prior to conducting research on this form of abuse, had the potential to bring comfort to the interview participants and help put them at ease when answering questions, allowing them to have less fear of being judged knowing that I had been through a similar situation. Throughout this research, I paid careful attention to how my personal beliefs about relationships of this nature may impact my lens through which I view the participants and the data, but also acknowledge that these experiences that have shaped my lens through which I view psychologically abusive relationships may still have an effect on various elements of this research such as, the construction of the interview questions and the analytic process.

CHAPTER FOUR: BLOG ANALYSIS

Overview of Chapter

In this chapter, an inductive thematic analysis was done on seven blogs of individuals accounts of their experiences in psychologically abusive relationships. One overarching theme of *Retrospective Accountability* was identified and five key themes were also identified in the analysis: *Blissful Beginnings, The Continuous Cycle of Abuse, The Invisible Nature of Abuse, Loss of Self,* and *The Leaving Process.* Together these themes helped to provide information on what victims said were the most prominent features of their experiences in their psychologically abusive relationships.

These blogs were found in the public forum (magazines, personal web pages, online newspapers, or mental health websites) and were used to gain a greater insight into understanding how victims of psychological abuse describe and make sense of their experiences in psychologically abusive relationships. Several search terms or phrases were used to look for online blogs such as, "individuals' accounts of psychological abuse," "individuals' accounts of emotional abuse," "blogs of psychological abuse," "blogs of emotional abuse," "stories of psychological abuse," "blogs of emotional abuse," "stories or accounts of psychological abuse," "stories or accounts of emotional abuse." The blogs selected were ones that had very detailed and more narrative-like descriptions of their experiences of abuse, and provided a significant amount of context as well as descriptive feelings of the victims surrounding the abuse.

Overview of Literature on Blogs

Using blogs as a platform for sharing writing is a common way for individuals to express their experiences in life. Blogs can have the benefit of serving as an outlet for the process of self-affirmation (self-presentation, self-disclosure, and others) while providing a knowledge hub and a social support network. (Watanabe et al., 2022). Blogs also "provide a safe environment in which victims could deal with the ongoing challenge of coping with, and recovering from the abuse" and "enable victims to use their negative experience to educate and support others going through a similar experience" (Watanabe et al., 2022, p. 2283). In looking at why individuals blog, Zareie (2013) found that blog writing has a dualistic function for women in a vulnerable situation: (1) as a venue to express their views and; (2) as a medium to represent their self-awareness and identity (Watanabe et al., 2022, p. 2289). Although psychological abuse is not only experienced by females, the blogs used in this particular research were written by females, which provides an opportunity to view these particular blogs in light of the findings listed above by Zareie (2013).

Overarching Theme: *Retrospective Accountability*

Retrospective Accountability can be defined as the notion of individuals' tendency to take accountability for their own thoughts or actions when speaking about their relationship as well as the pattern of not noticing concerning aspects of their relationships after they have ended. This overarching theme is present throughout all of the five key themes in the analysis and is something that is done through different phrases and positioning of descriptions. The bloggers describe their reflections of their

experiences in ways that potentially serve to provide accountability for why they did not notice the abuse initially or the changes within themselves.

Theme One: *Blissful Beginnings*

One of the prevalent themes found throughout the blogs is one surrounding the idea of the psychologically abusive relationships having *Blissful Beginnings.* The name of this theme refers to the nature of the beginning stages of the relationships seeming to be happy and blissful. The beginning stages were characterized as extremely happy, filled with grand gestures, instant connections, and little conflict. However, upon reflection several bloggers tended to question whether they were so blissful in the beginning or was it an act. There are several components that comprise the beginning stages which the writers speak about in different ways. Many of the bloggers give what appears to be an account for why they got involved in the relationship, doing so by speaking about what kind of love they were searching for at that particular time in their life. Other bloggers talk about their awareness of common assumptions of what a beginning of a relationship should be like and how that played a role in their perceptions surrounding the beginning stages of their relationship.

One blogger shares about the early stages of her relationship:

My relationship began like so many do. I was almost 21 and had just met a guy who looked after me, bought me nice gifts, made me laugh and introduced me to his family. In those early days there were little things, that in looking back, I can see were warning signs of what was to come, but I was the girl who wanted to

get married. I had dreams of a big wedding, having my own home, and kids, and so those things that should have let me know I wasn't being treated right got pushed aside (Halle, Blog #1).

Halle begins her description of the beginning time of her relationship by stating that her relationship "began like so many do." She may have chosen to set up her description with this statement to set the scene for relationships as one that seemed not out of the ordinary and quite common. If there were no obvious red flags, conflicts, or other negative behaviors, then it may seem more justifiable as to why Halle did not notice any signs of what was to come. One can infer that Halle considered relationships to be more normal when a man takes care of a woman, introduces them to their family, buys them nice gifts, and makes them laugh. These elements experienced by Halle early on, may be normal for some individuals, but it also depends on the context including the speed and intensity of which these "normal" behaviors are introduced into the relationship. Unfortunately, the rate and intensity of the behaviors are not described by Halle in the blog.

Next, she speaks of how upon reflection she saw things that were potential warning signs of negative changes to come, and then provides reasons as to why she overlooked them including, "I was the girl who wanted to get married. I had dreams of a big wedding, having my own home, and kids, and so those things that should have let me know I wasn't being treated right got pushed aside." Although Halle does not explicitly state the behaviors that were concerning and why, it may be possible to deduce that the seemingly normal behaviors she did talk about in the description were

presented to her in a way that upon looking back, may have been red flags due to the context in which they occurred. This quote is also interesting because she provides accountability for not noticing red flags due to her seemingly normal desires to have a happy relationship. Wanting to be married, having a family, and owning a home are not desires that would lend themselves into getting into an abusive relationship all on their own, but it is possible that these types of goals and desires if fixated upon frequently enough may increase the possibility in some circumstances for individuals to put their goals of seeking a lifelong partner over everything else. The desire to have a relationship may supersede one's ability to evaluate multiple aspects of a partner and their compatibility together.

Another aspect of the *Blissful Beginnings* theme that the bloggers emphasize is the idea that there is this notion that for the early part of any relationship, things should be a certain way. Ideally, the bloggers express that the relationships should be largely happy and filled with kind words, gestures, extreme attentiveness, and perhaps even several gifts. Some of the writers use phrases that illustrate the belief that their relationships were normal, such as, "things were as they should be in the beginning," or "my relationship began like so many do." One blogger noted when referring back to happier times in her relationship, "Things weren't always bad, in fact, they started off great. He was sweet and romantic and my family loved him" (Judy, Blog #4).

Another woman described the initial stages of her relationship in more detail saying:

The beginning of your relationship is typically always blissful. You have butterflies when you see them and can hardly concentrate when you know you will be seeing them later. The whole nine yards, things are as they should be in the beginning. For me, that is how it started. He was charming, very chivalrous and polite. He was attentive and giving. He poured all his attention into me and the relationship. He would always compliment me and tell me how amazing I was, and how lucky he was to finally find me. He was always accessible and appeared to me to be emotionally available and totally into me. That lasted for the first couple months (Martha, Blog #2).

In this passage, Martha describes her relationship in comparison to what she believes the majority of other relationships should be like, saying "the beginning of your relationship is typically always blissful," and "things are as they should be." Both of these statements are assumptions. While yes, the early stages of an ideal relationship tend to be more surface level, happier, and with little conflict, the idea that relationships should be a certain way and should be happy all of the time, reinforces a standard that isn't necessarily accurate. These assumptions likely show the ideals that the individuals were entering the relationships with at the time, which may have contributed to them not noticing red flags. Furthermore, the statements may reinforce stereotypes that relationships should be characterized by certain elements in the beginning leaving little room to view behaviors from a different lens and/or may not allow for healthy conflict and discussion of more deep issues.

Martha goes on to talk about her partner's qualities and behaviors during these beginning stages. Similar to Halle, Martha sets up her description by saying that things were "as they should be in the beginning," he went "the whole nine yards." Again, there is an assumption that the following words Martha uses to describe her partner in the beginning are what is expected and normal. Her partner was said to be 'charming,' 'very chivalrous,' 'polite,' 'attentive,' 'giving,' 'emotionally available' and frequently complementary. The end of the description ominously foreshadows a change that is to come when Martha said, "that lasted for the first couple of months." Retrospectively, Martha shows a level of awareness that the positive behaviors and happy feelings she experienced during the early parts of her relationship, were perhaps not as genuine as she hoped they would be.

During the beginning stages of their relationships, the women noted that at the time, they were very happy, nothing seemed out of order; they seemed to have a relationship that most people would dream of having. Additionally, the behavior of the bloggers' partners didn't seem grand or excessive in nature, it wasn't until the relationship progressed further, or for some women, until they were finished with the relationship, did they realize that the seemingly blissful beginning was not what they thought it was. When reflecting back upon a relationship, one of the bloggers chose to describe the initial stages with terminology that demonstrated their current perceptions of what their partner was actually doing to them at the time, instead of how they viewed the nature of their relationship whilst experiencing it:

In hindsight, I can see the red flags. He was extremely romantic when I first met him — trips and fancy dinners, very attentive and endearing. When we met, he was too good to be true. Now I know that too good to be true on the first date is what a narcissist looks like. Very early on, he had to convince me that I was so in love with him. He would lie and say that I told him I wanted to marry him in my sleep or when I was drunk. I would laugh it off, knowing I didn't feel like that yet. (Sally, Blog #3)

In this blog, Sally, describes how she can look back and see the red flags in her relationship since its dissolution. Sally recognizes how her partner being "extremely romantic," "very attentive and charming," and showering her with "fancy dinners" were red flags because they were "too good to be true." She then takes on the tone of an expert or at least someone who has chosen to educate themselves on psychological abuse and the types of people who typically perpetrate the abuse by saying, "Now I know that too good to be true on the first date is what a narcissist looks like. Very early on, he had to convince me that I was so in love with him." This description may serve to show that with research and observation of behaviors it could be possible to spot concerning behaviors from a partner earlier on in the future. With expressing her awareness of the red flags retrospectively, plus through applying her own personal research, Sally could be choosing to present herself in a way that shows she has taken steps to process the relationship, and also to educate herself to ensure she would recognize any abuse preemptively in the future.

Another woman also reflects back upon her relationship by comparing it to a

Hollywood movie love story:

> *I was always a secret romantic. I wanted the love we saw in movies: the passionate kind, the heart rumbling, fire sparking, all-consuming love that is glorified in Hollywood movies. But what I didn't realize in my early teens was how similar this "all-consuming" love was to emotional abuse. How behind the romantic gestures made by the male actors was a deep objectification of female bodies.* (Jessica, Blog #6)

The qualities that once seemed normal, flattering, and intriguing, were actually not what they appeared to be in these relationships, and that is the crucial element to the early moments of these relationships. According to the bloggers, the beginning stages of their psychologically abusive relationships were overwhelmingly happy; their partners appearing devoted to them, often showering them with love, compliments, and gifts. However, upon reflection some bloggers admit to now knowing that this too good to be true behavior may have just been a set up for what was to come.

In writing about the beginning stages of the relationship as overwhelmingly happy and also taking the time to explain their own ideals for a romantic relationship, it may serve to help the readers understand why the victims were attracted to their partners in the first place. It takes vulnerability to share about an experience of abuse, no matter the degree, and there are oftentimes preconceived notions about the types of people who get involved in abusive relationships. By describing the nature of the beginning of the relationship, including how well their partner treated them, and how happy they were

initially, it may help others reading the blogs to identify with similar feelings in a relationship, and to not only understand why the victim was caught off guard when their perpetrator changed, but to also give credibility to the writer as someone who may not have normally been in a relationship of this nature.

Theme Two: *The Continuous Cycle of Abuse*

When writing about their experiences, the bloggers discussed different elements of the abuse they believed to have experienced such as the severity of abuse, the specific ways in which the manipulative and abusive tactics were implemented, and the frequency. Although the contextual circumstances and the specifics of the abuse reported varied, the bloggers tended to note a similar continuous pattern of abuse in the relationships. *The Continuous Cycle of Abuse*' refers to the continuous and patterned cycle of behaviors and feelings that the women experienced in their psychologically abusive relationships seemingly including 6 components: (1) intermittent warmth, (2) silent withdrawal, (3) abuse, (4) reconciliation, (5) intermittent warmth, (6) abuse.

One account, Halle, gives a clear and concise description of the cycle's pattern that she experienced frequently in her relationship:

The ups and downs became a regular gig in the days and months of my marriage. It never stopped or slowed down. It was and is a toxic cycle in any abusive relationship. We would have great normal days, but then someone or something would cause a trigger reaction where there would be arguing, threats, and intimidation, then denial, blaming, and saying I caused him to act that way.

There was never an apology, but there was always a guaranteed silent treatment that followed and lasted for days. The communication would just stop. I became invisible, as well as my feelings (Halle, Blog #1)

Halle's description of the nature of her relationship demonstrated a pattern of abuse, in showing that there could be periods of normalcy, although brief, a trigger reaction, the implementation of abuse, denial, blame reversal, and then a silent treatment before the stage of connection again. Halle talks about how 'the ups and downs became a regular gig in her marriage." This description shows that this relationship was one in which Halle experienced to be predominantly made up of highs and lows; there were very rarely moments of peace and happiness between the couple. The regularity of the highs and lows it would seem would lend itself to creating an atmosphere within the relationship of confusion and instability with not knowing what would happen next or what type of person Halle would be getting every day. Another blogger conveyed a similar awareness of an abusive cycle:

Our arguments differed from night to night, weekend to weekend, but the premise of the emotional abuse was still the same. Putting me down, name calling, belittling, and mind games all made up the emotional abuse I endured my freshman and sophomore year of college. He made me believe that I was the one causing the problems in the relationship. He would threaten to leave me and call me in the middle of the night screaming for no reason, telling me how ugly and dumb I was. (Judy, Blog #4)

In this description, Judy began with talking about how the contextual differences of the arguments were different, but the elements of the abuse were always similar. "Putting me down, name calling, belittling, and mind games" were some of the typical behaviors she experienced. She then talks about how her partner made her feel that she was the one causing the problems. By listing the different tactics employed by her abuser, and emphasizing Judy's partner implying that she was the one who was creating issues within the relationship, it may serve to show how unimaginable elements of a psychologically abusive relationship can be for people. Next, Judy talks about how he would threaten to leave her frequently, and also belittle her in the middle of the night via phone calls. Judy's descriptions show the clear consistent nature of psychological abuse and conveys the unpredictable nature that the bloggers appear to be describing as well. The consistent put downs and underlying sense of unpredictability helps illuminate the instability in these types of relationships as seen by Halle's account. This instability and sense of not knowing what may happen next brings with it the possibility of confusion and a level of susceptibility to staying involved for a longer period of time due to not witnessing a healthy partner in their current relationships, or simply trying to appease the partner.

One blogger described in great detail what would consistently happen in her relationship and gives a long description of all of the elements that the women claimed to have experienced over the course of their psychologically abusive relationships:

During a fight (that he would usually pick), he would become unhinged and launch into all the things that were wrong with me. I was too clingy, too assertive, too talkative, too this, too that. He would accuse me of overthinking everything and over reacting to a situation, which would give him more cause to become an animal. He would go after my character and tell me I was too selfish (or any number of other things) and that everyone sees it and the only reason why our friends hung out with us is because of him. This is usually how the fights would start and he would then launch into verbal abuse and degradation of epic proportions. After the meltdown, whether it be the next morning, or in my case, it was several days to a week later, he would apologize for acting that way and say he loved me and didn't mean to act that way and it wouldn't happen again. All the while, since I had days to brew in the shit stew he boiled me in, manipulating me into thinking that what had happened was my fault, I started to beat myself up and began to believe all the untruths he was giving me. I started to convince myself that I would try harder, be a better person so that I could make him happy. Half the time I didn't even know what he was mad about but I convinced myself it had to be something I did. This started to happen over and over again. Things would be going good and then he would turn distant, cold and detached. I would always fall for the bait to ask him if he was okay. He would wait until I would ask him several times and start to get aggravated and ask him why he wasn't communicating with me. That is when he would start to shift the blame

and another blow up would occur over something that made absolutely no sense to me. Even when he was the one that did something wrong or disrespectful, he would play this game so that he could manipulate it and turn it around on me. And when he was satisfied with punishing me, I was left to pick up the pieces again. I was his verbal punching bag, always being assaulted with words. (Halle, Blog #1)

What is clear in Halle's extract and the other extracts as a whole is that psychological abuse is continuous. There are very few breaks in the cycle, where the couple relaxes and enjoys each other's company per se; it appears to be a very fragile and unnerving experience for the women to be in one of these relationships. As the abusive cycle continued day after day, the women began to describe experiencing living with a new normal, one that was drastically different to the beginning stages of bliss.

In summary, the cycle of abuse described in the blogs typically occurred as follows: the 'intermittent warmth' stage referring to a period of happiness with few problems, followed by the 'silent withdrawal' stage which is a brief period of time where the perpetrator begins to withdrawal emotionally, verbally, and physically from their partner, to the start of the 'abuse stage' which is a period of hostility between the couple where the perpetrator begins implementing a range of tactics including but not limited to: degradation, criticizing, name calling, threats, intimidation, manipulation, verbally devaluing the victim's qualities, victim-blaming, and then into a brief 'blow up' stage between the couple where the argument comes to a climax, leading to a period again of 'silent withdrawal' where the perpetrator retreats emotionally and physically from their

partner, the 'reconciliation phase' will occur next as either the victim begins to internalize the blame that is placed upon them regardless of whether or not it is their fault, and will apologize to their partner, or the perpetrator will excessively apologize and shower the victim with love and grand gestures depending on the severity of the argument. After the 'reconciliation phase,' the cycle will return to the stage of 'intermittent warmth,' and it will only be a matter of time before the cycle begins again. The continuous cycle of abuse seen repeatedly in these blogs mirrors the cycle of abuse found in the work of Loring (1994).

Theme Three: *Loss of Self*

A theme that was identified in the blogs is called *Loss of Self* which refers to the notion of how over the course of the psychologically abusive relationships the victims described the feeling that they lost the 'essence' of who they were as a person. Many of the things the women formerly believed comprised the person they were such as their interests, passions, personality, and core values, seemingly slowly diminished, and what replaced those aspects of themselves they claimed were a loss of joy, sadness, the feeling of being numb to any sort of emotions, and confusion surrounding this change in themselves.

One blogger, Halle, described the general sense that she began to have of "losing herself" so to speak:

After a while, I stopped feeling like a person. That part of me, that soul part of me, felt like a little girl locked in a cage screaming for someone to let her out.

Only, I stopped listening to that little girl and then that part of my soul slipped into a coma. I became numb, my internal emotions shut down, and I convinced myself that this is what my life was to be like (Halle, Blog #1)

In this extract, Halle starts with a very bleak and bold statement, "I stopped feeling like a person." This statement is something that could cause a reader to pause and question how this strong of a sentiment could be possible, and also may achieve the effect of helping others to realize this form of abuse can profoundly impact an individual. Halle proceeds to use the strong imagery of comparing her soul to a little girl locked in a cage. She creates this vivid image of a person trapped, screaming for help, but no one can hear her. Next a form of accountability appears to be taken in noting that she "stopped listening to the little girl in the cage," and because of that her soul "slipped into a coma." Here she acknowledges retrospectively that she may have played a part in almost falling into this "loss of self' through ignoring her own intuition and pain. Halle concludes this statement by talking about herself "becoming numb," her internal emotions "shutting down," illustrating the power of being entrenched in a psychologically abusive relationship.

The last part of her statement demonstrates that this process of losing oneself is a gradual process over time where one may become emotionally numb. Halle's admittance that she felt as if she'd convinced herself that this was how her life was supposed to be from then on, shows that getting to this state of acceptance may take a certain level of effort to accept this new state of being experienced by victims of psychological abuse. Halle's description of losing oneself in a way, demonstrates

acknowledgement of her role in denying her own initial feelings, and minimizing or choosing to ignore her pain after a while. This notion of denying one's true self and experience could very well be a precursor toward individuals becoming detached from their emotions making them more vulnerable to accepting the abuse as normal.

Another blogger, Martha, describes her recollection of how she experienced herself changing over the course of the relationship:

> *I felt trapped and unable to see how diminished my self-respect had become. I lost my ability to be combative in arguments, because I'd have rather kept the peace than trigger an emotional outburst. The joy and happiness in my own life was trapped underneath the misery. I worried more about my kid's and my husband's lives than my own well being. It was pathetic, but it became my normal* (Martha, Blog #2).

Martha's description of noticing a change within herself begins with the same word as Halle's description in the previous extract of "trapped." Martha speaks of feeling trapped in the relationship and "unable to see how diminished her self-respect had become;" this retrospective awareness of the state she was in is potentially powerful because it can serve to set up this description with an understanding that already, she was not mentally free to make choices that would potentially contribute to her noticing a change within herself during the relationship, and she wasn't able to see the degree to which her sense of self had become affected by the abuse.

Martha then goes into descriptions of different areas of loss starting with losing her ability to "fight and be combative in arguments" due to not wanting to "trigger emotional outbursts." Essentially, Martha's ability to advocate for herself appears to have become diminished. Next, she speaks about her loss of joy being "trapped under her own misery." Martha includes that she was more concerned about her kids and husband's lives than her own well-being, which could serve to help show that since she was so incredibly engulfed in the relationship and attempting to lessen the abuse, she neglected herself in the process.

The final part of Martha's reflections of noticing a change within herself ends with her acknowledging that she may have gotten to a point of acceptance of the abuse being an unavoidable and normal part of her life by saying, "It was pathetic, but it became my normal." Here Martha takes accountability for her retrospective awareness of what she felt to be an embarrassing reality of her life at the time, which may suggest that she felt it was necessary to acknowledge the situation that she was in was damaging, and perhaps it also serves as a way to attempt to preserve her image as others could potentially judge her lack of awareness or decision making during the relationship.

Another blogger, Sally, spoke of how this loss of self builds almost imperceptibly until all of a sudden, the drastic change becomes apparent:

> *How had I been living a life as a victim of abuse and not even known? You may look at these same checklists and think "of course that is wrong!". But*

the thing about emotional abuse is - it is silent, sneaking up on you,

digging its claws in - so slowly that at first the pain is easy to manage,

easy to brush off, easy to make excuses for until all of a sudden you begin

to see that you are a shell of yourself, a person without joy, a person in so

*much pain that numbness has started to take over (*Sally, Blog #3)*.*

Sally begins her description of loss with asking a rhetorical question, "How had I been living a life as a victim and not even known?" This question may serve to function as a way of showing that she has learned from her experience or potentially to give the impression that she was above this and should have known better. Sally goes on to engage with the reader and identify with them by saying, "You may look at these same checklists and think "of course that is wrong!"" By beginning her description this way, it helps to set up the remainder of the extract with a sense that this change must be really drastic or have been difficult to identify.

The next part of her explanation involves Sally describing how emotional abuse is sneaky, "digging its claws in so slowly at first that it's easy to manage," but then "all of a sudden you begin to see that you are a shell of yourself, a person without joy, a person in so much pain that numbness has started to take over." This realization appears to be sudden for Sally and difficult to grasp the seriousness of initially when being abused, but eventually it is hard to deny the realization that there is loss of joy and loss of the overall essence of who the person was before the relationship began. The hidden nature of the abuse and the realization that there has been such a drastic

change is something that may contribute to the great deal of pain that Sally describes having felt, contributing to her feelings of numbness.

One blogger, Krista, describes her experience of recognizing how much she had changed and been affected by this relationship retrospectively:

> *I didn't consciously realize it was bad until about a year into the relationship. I'd moved to a new state with him, lost touch with four of my best friends, and was feeling suicidal when I brought myself to therapy behind his back. I'd been in a constant state of confusion. Almost crippling confusion. We'd been fighting so frequently and extremely during the move, I wasn't able to keep a job for months. I would wake up and not know what to do with myself — clean up after him? Job hunt? I'd never woken up so flustered every day. I felt like I didn't look or act like myself* (Krista, Blog #7).

Krista begins her description by admitting that at the time of her relationship, she didn't realize how bad things had gotten for herself, which may serve as an element of justification for not noticing the abuse and may help her feel as if she's preserving her self-image when writing. This act of accounting speaks to the notion that victims of abuse may feel that they should provide an account for not noticing the abuse or changes within themselves. Krista then goes onto list some contextual

elements that set up some recent changes in her life at that time such as, moving to a new state and losing touch with her best friends, all of which could have played a role in feeling more isolated during this relationship. Between the combination of the location change, isolation, suicide ideation, struggles with keeping a job, finding her purpose, and feelings of continual confusion as a result of her tumultuous relationship, Krista provides a clear picture of the challenges during her life at that time.

The combination of all of these different changes in her life and obstacles help to show the difficulties of recognizing the abuse when one is entangled in the layered dynamics and challenges of being in a psychologically abusive relationship. The final portion of this extract involves Krista sharing that she'd noticed significant changes within herself when she said, "I'd never woken up so flustered every day. I felt like I didn't look or act like myself." Her phrasing choices further demonstrate that these feelings of being flustered and not acting or feeling like herself weren't something that she typically struggled with in her day-to-day life. Krista's retrospective awareness of the abuse, the confusion, the changes within herself and her lifestyle, all help to support the disorienting nature of being in a psychologically abusive relationship.

Halle provides a more lengthy description of an additional element to this losing of oneself in the relationship which appears to be an impact of the confusion, loss of self-esteem, and self-confidence:

I didn't know what was being done to me, that was part of the mental confusion and manipulation of reality. He had demolished my sense of self and self-confidence that I started to feel like I deserved the abuse. I would jump through hoops and walk on eggshells to keep him from getting upset. I blamed myself for being so stupid for upsetting him and convinced myself I didn't deserve him. I found myself thinking he was better than me. That if only I could become a better person, he wouldn't get upset. I didn't understand what I was doing to myself, but I knew I had to keep it to myself. Being abused was something I was supposed to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. So, I kept it to myself, for a long time. And somewhere between sleepless nights and self-loathing I decided that all I wanted to be was something he wanted. And the only way to do that was to change who I was. I turned into someone I didn't recognize. If he would tell me I was too talkative around people, I became shy and timid around groups of people. I would change my behavior, my look, anything if it would make him happy and keep him from degrading me or insulting me (Halle, Blog #1).

Halle begins this description in a similar way to several other extracts in the blog analysis thus far, putting forth that she didn't realize or understand at the time what was being done to her, which she attributes to the "mental confusion" and "manipulation of reality." Starting her statement with acknowledging this retrospective awareness of abuse may serve to provide some immediate accountability as to why Halle didn't see the changes or leave the relationship. She also speaks with almost an expert tone or as someone who has done their research on terminology

commonly found in psychologically abusive relationships when she uses "mental confusion" and "manipulation of reality." Both the accountability and expert tone could potentially help to situate Halle in a position where people reading her story may think she is not your "typical victim," and therefore give her more grace and understanding. Anyone who has experienced psychological abuse or any type of abuse does not need to justify their reasons for staying or not noticing the abuse, but the continued accounting work done by victims may suggest that they feel it is necessary to do so up front.

The next line provides a new element in *Loss of Self* which is a clear shift in this process of losing oneself. Halle states, "He had demolished my sense of self and self-confidence that I started to feel like I deserved the abuse." Here, Halle admits that she began to internalize the blame, but that was due to her partner's actions and abuse. There is an aspect to this phrasing that suggests that this feeling of being deserving of abuse is one that develops primarily due to the perpetrator's influence, which of course is large part of how "losing oneself" occurs in these types of relationships, however, the emphasis in Halle's narrative is stronger than others.

With Halle now internalizing the blame in the relationship, she admits that this put her in a mindset and pattern of working to change her behaviors to appease her partner and keep him from getting upset. Halle went on to say, "I decided that all I wanted to be was something he wanted. And the only way to do that was to change who I was. I turned into someone I didn't recognize." Here Halle talks about having come to the feeling that she was deserving of the abuse and would work to change herself in an attempt to change her partner's behavior toward her, even if it involved

doing things that didn't represent who she normally felt that she was such as, "her looks" or the amount that she talked. This statement helps to show how quickly and severely victims' thinking in these relationships can be impacted due to the continual abuse and feelings of confusion. The acknowledgement that her sense of self and confidence had become so heavily diminished in this relationship to the point where she now just wanted to be something her partner "wanted," illuminates the seriousness of the impacts of psychological abuse.

One additional aspect to this extract that proves interesting is where Halle reflects upon her lack awareness of why she was changing her behavior for her partner, and some assumptions she had previously acquired about abusive relationships. Halle shows that she was aware that something was wrong with her relationship, but she could not put her finger on the exact problems when she said, "I didn't understand what I was doing to myself, but I knew I had to keep it to myself." Next, Halle adds an assumption or preconceived notion she had about being in an abusive relationship when saying that she knew, "Being abused was something I was supposed to be ashamed of or embarrassed about." Halle demonstrates that to her, there was a common feeling that individuals who are abused should be ashamed of it, and they should keep it to themselves. This of course, is not something that is true, victims of abuse should not feel ashamed of being a victim. Unfortunately, it is common that those who have not been abused may judge those who have been abused due to not understanding or experiencing it themselves, or as a result of what they have been taught in their lifetime. With Halle and other victims, It appears that this confusion and lack of ability to come to grips with why

these changes are happening may potentially contribute to the notion of losing oneself and staying in a psychologically abusive relationship.

The theme of *Loss of Self* is described by the bloggers in various ways, but there are some common elements to this theme. Several of the accounts talk about the feeling of being trapped and unable to see their sense of self or self-esteem diminishing. Overall, they tend to feel a loss of joy, interests, the ability to feel a range of emotions, as well as the ability to advocate for themselves in the relationship. These feelings of loss or change, typically lead to a feeling of numbness. The bloggers also described getting to a point where they began to internalize the blame, and work to change their own behavior to limit the abuse they received from their partner. The notion of *Loss of Self* appears to be a gradual process of loss that is difficult to recognize at the time, but often comes to a point where the victims have a realization of just how much they have changed resulting in further feelings of confusion and sadness.

Theme Four: *The Invisible Nature of Abuse*

One theme that was pervasive throughout the accounts was that of the *Invisible Nature of Psychological Abuse*. Since psychological abuse does not leave physical marks, it can be harder to detect from the outside looking in, but has the potential to have very significant psychological and emotional impacts. Many of the individuals described being unaware of what was occurring at the time; it often 'crept up' on them. The bloggers tended to speak about how the abuse appeared to build

imperceptibly over time; they weren't aware what was happening until they were already in the thick of the abuse.

One blogger, Molly, speaks of the invisible nature of abuse:

> *And that is the thing with emotional abuse. It invades you and you don't know you are being invaded. It infects you and you don't know you are being infected. It takes you over and you happily surrender, mistaking it for love. And that is the most frightening thing of all about emotional abuse, that it parades around under a guise of love* (Molly, Blog #5).

Molly's description of the invisible nature of emotional abuse leaves a very strong impact through using personification. In several sentences, Molly ascribes traits to the nature of emotional abuse giving it almost parasitic-like qualities when she talks about emotional abuse "invading" and "infecting" people. Similar to a parasite or a disease, we don't see those things enter our body, but over time we are aware that something is wrong. This is a description that may point to the stark contrast between psychological and physical abuse; one can detect physical abuse more easily, whereas psychological abuse one may have a hard time detecting at first.

Another statement which demonstrates the invisible nature of the abuse is when Molly says, "It takes you over and you happily surrender, mistaking it for love. And that is the thing with emotional abuse, that it parades around under a guise of love." Here Molly, personifies the element of abuse giving it human-like qualities with

being able to "parade," or "show itself off." By using personification, these descriptions may resonate with, and help others to more clearly understand the hidden, insidious nature of psychological abuse. The nature of this form of abuse appears to be experienced here as something that looks loving at first, but in reality, is not what it seems. Molly's description of the invisible nature of abuse helps demonstrate how it could be more feasible for such a powerful experience to happen to an individual without the awareness or full understanding of it at the time.

Another blogger, Martha, shares her feelings of coming to terms with not recognizing the abuse at the time of her marriage:

> *For most of my marriage, I never felt my relationship with my husband of 22 years was abusive. One would certainly think it would be so easily detected, so easily felt. I would have never believed it could have been part of my life. The abuse had crept in effortlessly, and I subconsciously learned to survive through the horrific dysfunction. I despised it, yet I couldn't give it up.* (Martha, Blog #2)

In this description, like many other extracts from bloggers in this analysis, Martha begins her statement by providing some retrospective accountability in saying that she never felt her relationship with her husband was abusive, which points to the difficulty in recognizing psychological abuse. Next, she provides perhaps a common assumption in saying, "One would certainly think it would be so easily detected, so easily felt." Martha is reinforcing a stereotypical view of all forms of abuse, that it should be easily identifiable. She then goes on to say, "I would have

never believed it could have been part of my life." Martha's statement may serve to remove some accountability in showing that she wasn't your "stereotypical" victim of abuse, and it may further show that if others thought she wasn't your traditional victim, then psychological abuse must be extremely serious and difficult to detect.

Furthermore, Martha continues to show the invisible nature of psychological abuse through talking about its "effortless" movement into her life, and how it operated at a subconscious level, although with an awareness of the unhealthy nature of the relationship, "...I subconsciously learned to survive through the horrific dysfunction." Lastly, Martha speaks to the feeling of being stuck during the course of her relationship when saying, "I despised it, yet I couldn't give it up." There is both a retrospective awareness of the feelings of unhappiness in the relationship, as well as her feelings during the relationship here, which further reveal how the invisible nature of this type of abuse and the experience of being a victim of it, can make recognizing and leaving a psychologically abusive relationship very challenging.

Judy, speaks about her reflections of the nature of psychological abuse being invisible as well as her former perceptions of people who were abused:

> *Emotional abuse gets pushed under the rug because no one really*
> *sees the effects. And it's easier to justify words than bruises, but they*
> *both hurt equally, and they're both unhealthy. No one deserves to be*
> *degraded or to have someone put them down. As far as being a victim*
> *goes, it can happen to anyone. I used to be the girl that pitied abused*
> *women because I thought I was better than that. But abuse isn't always*

obvious. Because my boyfriend wasn't always abusive, I was already

in love with him when the abuse began. You can be the strongest

person, but sometimes you love someone too much to notice that

they're hurting you – or admit it. (Judy, Blog #4)

Judy begins her extract with talking about the difficulty in identifying and talking about psychological abuse. With the potential tendency of society to "push emotional abuse under the rug," due to not being able to physically see the effects of psychological abuse, she highlights the dangers of being in one of these types of relationships as it's more difficult to recognize from both the victim's perspective and from an outsider's perspective. Even though as she says, "it's easier to justify words than bruises," it doesn't make one form of abuse less impactful than the other.

Next, Judy makes a clear shift in tone to one of an advocate or experienced individual in this type of abuse when she says that "no one deserves it" and "it can happen to anyone." This shift in tone actually serves to set up her remaining extract nicely when she demonstrates further vulnerability when talking about her former misconceptions about women who were abused: "I used to be the girl that pitied abused women because I thought I was better than that." The purpose of stating that she used to pity women involved in abusive relationships, it may go to show that she believed that she was an individual who should have never been involved in a psychologically abusive relationship. By setting up her prior feelings and perceptions of women who get involved, it may serve to help further show the seriousness of this form of abuse.

Judy says that people often think that this is something that can't happen to them or they are above certain situations, but she follows up with a reason for her unawareness of the abuse when talking about it not being obvious. Judy describes a key factor that blinded her to the abuse when saying, "Because my boyfriend wasn't always abusive, I was already in love with him when the abuse began. Sometimes you love someone too much to notice that they're hurting you – or admit it." Here Judy reveals that in her relationship, the abuse wasn't always seemingly present which likely contributed toward not seeing the seriousness of the abuse. Also, she talks about the fact that she was already in love with her boyfriend before the abuse began; this could prevent her from recognizing or internalizing any behavior as negative or abuse. This feeling of being in love with one's partner early on and before the awareness of the abuse may be a common trend for the beginnings of psychologically abusive relationships.

One further blogger provided a description of her feelings toward psychological abuse being invisible:

> *Unlike physical abuse, emotional abuse creates invisible wounds, making recovery more difficult, as the scars can be more self-destructive. There are no marks to see, and friends and family are frequently unaware of your pain. The turmoil was relentless. The few people I shared this with were oblivious to any abuse. Their empathy quickly turned to excuses for my husband's irrational behavior. They'd never witnessed any of it, so I am wondering if they ever really*

believed me or maybe thought I exaggerated the truth (Martha, Blog

#2).

In this final extract, Martha again talks about the invisible nature of this abuse

and the fact that one cannot see the scars, potentially contributing toward

psychological abuse being more destructive and difficult to heal from in the long run.

There is an additional element to this description that includes people outside of the

relationship and their lack of awareness of the abuse. If a victim's inner circle is

"oblivious to any abuse," as Martha noted in her case, it can make it more difficult to

validate and move toward eventual healing. Martha shares about her experience of

telling people close to her about the abuse. In her experience, the individuals almost

tended to defend her husband: "Their empathy quickly turned to excuses for my

husband's irrational behavior." While she noted that her friends and family never

witnessed any of the abuse, the mere mention of those close to her seemingly taking

her husband's side right away, further shows how the difficulty in recognizing this

form of abuse can lead to further isolation and confusion. It is possible to suggest

that in the situations where those close to the victims either refuse to acknowledge

or don't recognize the abuse, it may increase the likelihood of a victim feeling

increased confusion around the seriousness of the abuse they are experiencing, and

also extending the length of time they remain in the relationship. Again, this claim is

not something one can say with certainty, but a possibility to consider.

The theme of *The Invisible Nature of Abuse* shows that victims of

psychological abuse tend to observe this form of abuse building slowly and

imperceptibly over time. The ways in which the abuse gradually intensifies, yet does

not leave physical scars increases the difficulty in both victims and others' ability to

recognize the abuse. The challenges of having psychological abuse validated by

others outside of the relationship may potentially dampen the confidence that victims

have in understanding the abuse, or may contribute to decreasing feelings of support

for leaving the relationship. The invisible nature of psychological abuse appears to

be one of the most frustrating and confusing aspects of the experience as a whole.

Theme Five: *Leaving Process*

The theme, *Leaving Process* refers to the process that the victims of the blogs

talked about going through during the dissolution of the psychologically abusive

relationships. The process of leaving a psychologically abusive relationship is different

for every person, and often takes several attempts, but there are certain elements and

emerging stages that were identified in the blog accounts. Bloggers tended to talk about

'turning points' which were pivotal moments in the relationship where the victim became

aware of the seriousness of the abuse and/or how uncared for and unloved they felt, or

this was a moment where they decided they would like to take steps to leave the

relationship. Another element that was present in the accounts was that of a stage of

'self-empowerment' where the individuals took steps to educate, empower, and connect

with other sources of support such as therapists, family and friends, or lawyers to help

understand and validate their experiences of abuse. One additional element that was

present was that of the 'reawakening of the soul.' This aspect of the leaving process is

something that may become combined with the self empowerment aspect, but generally

refers to the time when the victims felt the parts of them that had been diminished such

as self-esteem and joy begin to reemerge; this reawakening of the soul would begin for some before they left the relationship or upon leaving the relationship. In the blogs, there typically were turning points and a stage of self-empowerment and/or reawakening of the soul that encapsulated the leaving process.

In one blog, Halle, described her leaving process as a gradual process that required changes within herself and planning on her part in order to be able to leave:

> *Once you realize you are being abused, many of us just can't get up and leave straight away, unless it is physical. If it is physical abuse you must get help immediately. Emotional abuse is a different animal altogether. Sometimes it requires a bit of self-realization and planning to successfully remove yourself from the situation. At least, that is what my experience was. It took me 4 years to finally get myself, my strength and my gumption back to leave* (Halle, Blog #1).

In the first part of her description, Halle provides accountability for not leaving her relationship right away due to the nature of the type of abuse. It's interesting to note how Halle said "many of us just can't get up and leave" when talking about the difficulty in leaving these types of relationships. She asserts herself as a voice for many and at the same time removes a bit of accountability by showing that this is a difficult experience for many individuals, not just her. This start to her description could serve to help the readers view her story with more empathy if she is one of many who have struggled in detaching and leaving their relationships. Halle's voice also takes on an expert, educational tone when saying that if physical abuse is present in the relationship, the individual should leave "immediately." Here she almost gives a warning

to others of the seriousness of physical abuse, which could on one hand downplay the seriousness of psychological abuse, but on the other, may also help to show insidious and serious psychological abuse really is because it's more difficult to recognize and get out of for some. The difficulty in dealing with psychological abuse is evidenced when Halle says that it's a "different animal altogether."

Next, Halle speaks of the leaving process being gradual, and one that someone has to work toward in order to be strong enough to leave by talking about how for some it requires "self-realization" and "planning." This description may serve to help remove blame from Halle and other victims of abuse by potential readers that might wonder why they didn't leave right away. She also notes that it took her four years to get her "strength and gumption back to leave," which helps show that it is often not a quick decision to leave and requires a building back up of a sense of self that has been diminished over the course of the relationship. Lastly, by emphasizing that in her opinion, there is such a difference in the urgency and process of leaving between psychological abuse and physical abuse, it may help to reinforce the invisible nature and the impact of psychological abuse on the victim throughout the relationship if it impedes their ability to recognize the abuse and advocate for their needs in the relationship.

In another extract written by Halle, she talks about how she went through a period of self-empowerment that led to a reawakening of her soul before leaving her partner:

> *When the amount of time that he would ignore me after a round of verbal*
> *abuse started getting longer and longer, my soul started to awaken. In the*

beginning, he would go a few days or a week at most without contacting me. As we got further along in the relationship there would be times he would go sometimes 2 weeks or more without contacting me. And in the beginning, this would make me crazy but like I said I became numb to a lot of this and just started to accept that is how he was. Those breaks in contact from him were little gifts from heaven. So, after years of this cycle, during the "off" times we were apart, I started reading books again about abuse, spiritual enlightenment and the law of attraction. I seemed to have stopped doing this pastime I liked so much when I was with this person. I also went to a counselor to help navigate me through this web of destruction I was tangled in. That part of my soul that was in a coma slowly started to awaken and re-energize the parts of me that I lost. Over time, I started to get back to my own self and found myself not taking the bait he would throw out. Of course, we would still have the abusive outbursts but I was able to navigate them better and not let his manipulation get inside me as much. And after 4 years of abuse, the day finally came when I was able to set myself free (Halle, Blog #1).

In her description, Halle begins with referencing the emotional and verbal withdrawal done by her partner after rounds of verbal abuse, and how initially she thought being ignored by her partner was just something she'd have to accept as her normal. It's important to note that this acceptance of the treatment is something that was also part of "losing oneself" from the previous chapter and is potentially linked to the sense of self being so heavily diminished in psychologically abusive relationships.

As she continued to have periods of reprieve from communication with her partner, Halle described the breaks in contact as "little gifts from heaven," and she talked about her inclination to take advantage of these "off" periods with her partner to engage in practices that would help her to strengthen and empower herself. She talks of reading books about "abuse, spiritual enlightenment and the law of attraction" to educate and empower herself. As Halle began to get in touch with herself through reading as well as the addition of a counselor she described experiencing the following feeling, "that part of my soul that was in a coma slowly started to awaken and re-energize the parts of me that I lost." She talks about how through the strengthening and reawakening, she was able to slowly gain back her old self and begin to respond differently to, or not engage in the abuse as much as she did before this process, and eventually got to the point where she was able to leave her partner. Through Halle's description of her leaving process it seems that what was initially key in starting the leaving process was having breaks in contact from her partner, which may have helped to distance herself and clear her mind from the abuse, eventually clearing the way for her to empower herself again and leave the relationship.

By Halle taking the time to describe how retrospectively she was able to view the periods of silence or withdrawal from her partner as a positive, it helps show how quickly a victim's thinking and sense of self can become affected by the abuse, as well as how with time and distance from the abusive behavior and contact altogether, it is possible to start healing. Even if not out of the relationship, the healing has the potential to ignite an important part of the leaving process by allowing part of the victims' sense of self that has been suppressed to come back to life. Through Halle's description of

gaining the strength to empower, educate, and seek support, it may help bring inspiration and hope to other victims of psychological abuse that it is possible to regain that sense of self that was negatively impacted and take steps to leave the relationship.

Another blogger, Sally, described her leaving process, which had similar elements to Martha's leaving process, but she also acknowledged some barriers to leaving:

> *The times I wanted to leave were immeasurable. He was an expert at convincing me I would never make it on my own, and the kids would hate me forever. Self-doubt was inevitable. The abuse became such a profound part of my life, yet I stayed. Truthfully, I did not even know what emotional and financial abuse was or that it was considered domestic violence until I finally broke down and secretly went to a local women's abuse center for counseling. Knowledge became power for me. I began to research and read up on the issues. They all resonated. I learned the best way to handle an abuser and how to leave an unhealthy marriage* (Martha, Blog #2).

Martha begins her description with doing some accounting work for her role in staying in the relationship by saying, "the times I wanted to leave were immeasurable." Right away, Martha positions herself as someone who was aware that the relationship was not good for her, and wanted to get out of it, but that there were other factors which inhibited her from leaving. Some of the reasons she lists next were that her partner was very good at convincing her that she'd "never make it on her own" and that her kids would "hate her forever." These reasons Martha lists are things that are understandably

tough to deal with, and may also serve to justify why she didn't try to leave before, and in addition, help preserve an image of someone who would not have stayed if it were not for the other influences that increased her "self-doubt."

Martha then begins to talk about her unawareness of the abuse which can also serve to provide an account for not leaving right away. She notes that she did not know what emotional or financial abuse was and that she would not have considered it domestic violence before going to a women's abuse center for counseling. All of this accounting work and retrospective recognition of the abuse helps show the thought processes victims may have to go through during and after getting out of the relationship, which may help others to understand the complexities of experiencing psychological abuse. Finally, Martha notes that "knowledge became power" for her and took steps to empower herself such as research, reading, and counseling. Learning about psychological abuse at the counseling center appears to have been a potential turning point for her when beginning to think about leaving the relationship.

Once Martha was at the process of beginning to empower herself, she talked about how she knew leaving would be something that she had to plan with intention, because "the more I pulled away from his grip on me, the tighter he held on," she admitted. There was a great deal of planning that went into this moment of leaving which she said involved her "...acting like I would try to work on our relationship. I pretended to care, when deep down I hated him and myself for allowing this man to tear my soul apart." Martha demonstrated that the leaving process for some individuals takes a lot of time to work up the strength to leave and to plan out the logistics of leaving.

Throughout this process of planning and researching, she reflected upon the value of having a counselor to aid in this process:

> *I began regular therapy, which gave me instant perspective. Every time I left the sessions, I felt more powerful. Just having an outsider view my marriage, who acknowledged my disheveled marital unraveling, allowed my doubts and fears to slowly dissipate* (Martha, Blog #2).

For Martha, it seems that having an outside source and an expert counseling her helped her to continue to work up the strength to leave her partner. The counseling sessions seem to be a catalyst for her to leave, and serve as a reinforcer of the feelings she was having about her relationship. It appears that Martha's self-empowerment was strengthened with these sessions and it was important for her to be able to have an outside individual validate her feelings and the presence of the abuse in her marriage. Similar to Halle's experience, a key to self-empowerment seems to be the presence of a counselor or an individual who can support and validate the victims' feelings.

The last part of Martha's description talks about how she eventually left and her feelings surrounding leaving:

> *It took me an excruciating year of facing my fears to realize I had to leave or I would never make it. I was afraid I would become seriously ill from internalizing the abuse for all these years. The strong fist of domestic violence would end up costing me my life, my soul, and my being! I blindsided him and left while he was away one day. With the support of family, therapist, attorney and friends I am starting a new life. It was the*

scariest decision I had ever made, but I now consider it to be an exciting

new beginning for me. A new chapter has begun. I now write my own

future, and that is the true power of self (Martha, Blog #2).

Martha begins this extract by acknowledging that leaving was not a quick

process for her or an easy one; she had fears about leaving. Martha also shares

reasons for why she was confident that she needed to leave the relationship. Her health

was a strong reason for Martha to get out of the relationship. She admits that she was

scared that her health would become compromised by "internalizing the abuse" for so

many years, and that in her words, "The strong fist of domestic violence would end up

costing me my life, my soul, and my being!" These reasons for wanting to leave are

certainly justified and also go a layer farther in showing the potential toll psychological

abuse can take on an individual; it can not only affect their spirit, sense of self, and

mental or emotional health, but there is the potential for victims to become physically

impacted through internalizing the abuse.

The next part of Martha's description reinforces the importance of social support

during the leaving process when she talks about how, "With the support of family,

therapist, attorney and friends I am starting a new life." Martha, similar to other

bloggers, continues to note the importance of having individuals in place who can

support and help counsel them through the leaving process. She then acknowledges

again that although she initially had fear about leaving her relationship, she's chosen to

empower herself and change her perspective around being on her own: "it was the

scariest decision I had ever made, but I now consider it to be an exciting new beginning

for me." This shift in perspective may serve as a lesson or a seed of encouragement for

others in desiring to leave their relationships. Martha concludes her description of her process of leaving by saying, "A new chapter has begun. I now write my own future, and that is the true power of self." Martha demonstrates that through much intentionality, perseverance, and facing of fears, it is possible to leave, take back one's personal agency, and move forward with a new, hopeful, and empowered outlook on life.

In one additional extract, Georgia speaks about her leaving process not with stages, but more of with an emphasis on turning points:

> *What really made me snap out of it was when she came over really drunk one night and started ranting about how she knew she could manipulate people, make them feel important. This was the moment I saw that this was what she had been doing to me all along. She made me feel really important, to the point that I needed her as a source of confidence. I remember feeling so scared to break up with her, but in that moment, I knew I had to end it. I had to get as far away from her as possible. I had to break whatever fucked-up spell she had on me. I read an article online about gaslighting a couple weeks after I broke up with her, and it made me realize that this was something that happens to other people, and there was a name for it, and there was a way to get out of it. I had to cut ties with her completely. I lost friends, I felt like it really hurt my study-abroad experience, and the breakup was worse than anything I'd experienced before. But I feel so much better now. And I have a sense of clarity to see that yes, what she did to me was really fucked up* (Georgia, Blog #6).

For Georgia's description of her leaving process, there were turning points that helped illuminate her partner's behavior to her, as well ones that aided her in realizing she needed to leave the relationship. Georgia came to the realization about her partner's character when, "She came over really drunk one night and started ranting about how she knew she could manipulate people, make them feel important." Georgia speaks of that night being a critical moment of awareness for her as she said, "This was the moment I saw that this was what she had been doing to me all along." Her recognition of the behavior was enough to make Georgia break up with her partner. In addition to the turning point, Georgia shares that she was afraid to break up with her partner, but "in that moment, I knew I had to end it." Similar to other bloggers, there was fear present in the thought of ending the relationship, but the potential consequences of remaining in the relationship outweighed staying. Having perspective and clarity on the dangers of staying in a psychologically abusive relationship may serve as a strong catalyst to leaving the relationship.

Georgia goes on to talk about her awareness of the abuse coming post breakup. After her break up, she saw an article on "gaslighting" a tactic she felt was used on her during her relationship. Through reading this article she also found comfort in recognizing that she was not alone in her experience, this was something that others endured, "There was a name for it, and there was a way to get out of it." This realization appears to have been a turning point and a moment of self-empowerment for Georgia as she began to learn about manipulation tactics and psychological abuse as a whole.

The conclusion of Georgia's statement about her leaving process demonstrates that her experience of leaving the relationship brought with it some difficulty and loss.

She acknowledged that, "The breakup was worse than anything I'd experienced before," and she also talks about how in "cutting ties" with her ex, she lost friends and also witnessed it impacting her study-abroad experience." Georgia was very authentic in listing the difficulties and loss she experienced when breaking up with her partner, and then goes on to speak about her change in perspective, "I feel so much better now. And I have a sense of clarity to see that yes, what she did to me was really fucked up." In this part of the extract, Georgia demonstrates that after different turning points or moments of awareness, she was able to get to the point where she could see clearly what had been done to her during the course of the relationship, which appears to be a crucial step toward healing for victims of psychological abuse.

Conclusion

The theme of *The Leaving Process* is a multi-layered journey for victims and varies in details for each individual, but is one that appears to be a gradual process and often one with many attempts of the victim to leave the abuser. There are some general emerging stages or elements of the leaving process that include the presence of 'turning points,' or pivotal moments in which the victims talk of realizing the seriousness of the abuse and/or make decisions about leaving the relationship, 'self-empowerment' where the victims demonstrate taking ownership of educating themselves on abuse and seeking social support from others such as, counselors, family, friends, and lawyers. Finally, some bloggers, not all, spoke of the element of the 'reawakening of the soul' where the parts of themselves that were lost over the course of the relationship, begin to reemerge. In the blogs, the reawakening of the soul can occur at different times (either during or after the breakup) for the victims depending on the individual

circumstances of their relationships. While not every blog contained a portion dedicated

to the leaving process, several accounts provided rich descriptions of the stages or

elements to this process of leaving.

CHAPTERS FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, AND EIGHT: Thematic Chapters

Overview of Thematic Chapters

The results of the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews are discussed in four thematic chapters representing a theme with each chapter. It was decided that the themes for the interviews would be analyzed in the separate thematic chapters in order to ensure that the elements of each theme were given enough attention to detail, and also because the interviews were very long in comparison to the blogs, it made sense to split up the themes into chapters. One overarching theme and four key themes were identified across the semi-structured interviews. The overarching theme, (*Retrospective Sense-Making),* referred to the idea that through several retrospective descriptions, victims tended to make sense of the abuse, changes within themselves, and their experience as a whole. The first key theme, *How This Was Abuse*, encapsulated the ways in which victims constructed how they experienced psychological abuse. A second theme, *I am Less Than I Was Before,* related to the way the victims noted a change in interests and loss of identity over the course of the relationship, but with difficulty in recognizing and understanding it at the time. Third, *Managing Blame and Accountability*, focused on the ways in which victims addressed issues of accountability and blame within themselves and others. Fourth, *It's Good That it Ended?* consisted of the ways in which victims reflected upon the dissolution of their relationships.

Overarching Theme: *Retrospective Sense-Making*

The overarching theme, *Retrospective Sense-Making,* referred to the idea that through several retrospective descriptions, victims tended to make sense of the abuse,

changes within themselves, and their experience as a whole after their relationships had ended. The participants frequently spoke of not noticing the abuse especially in the beginning stages of the relationship as abuse. When reflecting upon changes within themselves, they noticed that something was different upon them. At the time of the relationship, it was difficult to pinpoint the changes, but they were aware that they were feeling as if they were "less than they were before." When considering their involvement in the relationships as well as their partner's involvement, they often reflected upon reasons for not noticing the abuse, staying, leaving, and for why they themselves or their partners may have been more susceptible to becoming victims or perpetrators of psychological abuse. When reflecting upon their leaving process, it was apparent that much consideration and emotional preparation as well as several attempts to leave went into this process, and it is something they appear to seek confirmation for when describing. Together these four thematic chapters display the victims' tendency to analyze aspects of, and make sense of their psychologically abusive relationships upon reflection.

CHAPTER FIVE: *How This Was Abuse*

The theme of *How This Was Abuse* looks at the ways in which the victims constructed their descriptions of the psychological abuse they encountered during their relationships. The seriousness of psychological abuse can be difficult to describe in comparison to physical abuse, thus the participants tended to emphasize this challenge. The unique approaches to describing the nature of what the victims endured, including the behaviors from their partner, feelings they experienced, reactions to the abuse, and the changes they witnessed in themselves over time, can be used to better illustrate

how their relationship evolved, as well as how it differentiates from a relationship without physical abuse.

There were several questions aimed at providing the opportunity to understand how the victims of psychological abuse made sense of their process of becoming aware of the abuse, as well as how they explained experiencing the abuse. After asking about how the participants met and began dating, the researcher asked the simple, open-ended question of, "What happened next?" This question served to keep the progression of their narrative moving forward and was intended to get the participants closer to describing when they first began to notice the abuse beginning. The next questions: "Did you notice some changes in this time or not?" "How did you respond to his/her behavior?" "How did you respond to his/her behavior?" "Were there further changes?" were all open-ended and non-leading questions that were created to provide an open platform with structure to help guide the participant through their relationship. Several interviews did not get to all of these questions or in the same order as the participants would often begin to talk about the stages of the relationship where they began to notice the abuse or feel that something was off, and would then continue on with sharing their stories in a way that was meaningful for them. These questions served to provide a starting point for the victims to share their stories with the researcher.

Participants reported becoming aware of behaviors and patterns in their relationships that were concerning early on, however, they did not consider to be experiencing 'abuse' until a later point in the relationship or after it was finished:

(5.1) Joe: The first red flags took awhile to actually be red flags. The big red flag was when we were away on a trip with 2 other couples. The guys all had a meeting and the women stayed at the hotel to go to the pool and be ready to go out when we returned. When we returned she was not around. Found her at a bar in the convention center that was furthest from where we were staying. Dressed very very differently than I've ever seen her before. I will say more risqué than I've ever seen. She was sitting almost on top of another guy. Having quite the flirtatious conversation with him. Her hand on his leg etc etc. Her voice, mannerisms, and even laugh were completely different than I've ever heard before. Like I didn't even know this person. Put a light sweater on as her, as her outfit should have had a bra but she didn't have one on. And she flipped the switch like nothing ever happened. During this time I just can't put my finger on any actual emotional abuse but wow did it cause me a ton of I guess, discomfort? Stress? Pissed off?

In his description of his awareness or lack of awareness of abuse, Joe began by saying, "The first red flags took awhile to actually be red flags." This statement may serve to provide accountability for not noticing right away. He then goes into a scenario that he witnessed of his ex when he was away at a convention with her. The way he describes her as if she were almost a stranger to him may be indicative of the drastic shift or change in character that he hadn't seen in her. He works up this description by describing her clothing, tone of voice, and interactions with another man and then says

he "put a light sweater on as her, as her outfit should have had a bra but she didn't have one on." By stating his actions this way it could serve to show that he was jealous, cared about her modesty, was trying to cover her up and protect her from the other men looking at her, or perhaps to demonstrate power that he wanted to have over her in that situation. Joe ends his conversation with a reflection on his awareness of the abuse, "During this time I just can't put my finger on any actual emotional abuse but wow did it cause me a ton of I guess, discomfort? Stress? Pissed off?" This sums up his feelings he experienced when looking back and likely a bit of frustration as he claimed not to notice her behavior as true red flags initially, but what he was aware of was a sense of discomfort or stress.

When asked about whether there were warning signs of the abuse one participant noted:

> *(5.2) Loretta: I don't think there were really signs that it was going to turn like that. Although I suppose a lot of people would say there were the red flags, because there was immense flattery and sweeping you off your feet, I didn't really think at the time that would, you know, be a way of like, hooking me in, you know? Because that's what they do, isn't it? They get you to fall for them, and they sweep you off your feet, and they put you up on a pedestal and everything? Because then they know that it's going to be harder to break up with them, isn't it?*

Loretta admits that it was hard to pinpoint warning signs in her relationship early on, which may serve to provide some reasoning as to why she did not notice any "signs," that the relationship was abusive or going to progress toward abuse in future. She mentions however that other people might say there were warning signs looking back because of the "immense flattery" and "sweeping you off your feet" which shows that either Loretta was aware of some of these tendencies at the time, or upon reflection, and upon potentially educating herself about abuse, she was able to then identify behaviors that are common indicators of potentially psychologically abusive relationships.

Loretta continues on with her description showing that upon reflection she realizes that perhaps she can see now what her partner's intent was with these behaviors, "They get you to fall for them, and they sweep you off your feet, and they put you up on a pedestal and everything? Because then they know that it's going to be harder to break up with them, isn't it?" This quote shows some awareness or a potential indication that Loretta has done some research on psychological abuse and could be using that to help her process what she went through and move forward with her personal healing.

There is an element in Loretta's descriptions where she continues to end her statements with questions showing that she is potentially seeking confirmation whether or not what she is saying about perpetrators' intent is true, which is understandable considering that her relationship had just ended the weekend prior to doing the interview. Overall, Loretta's description of her awareness of abuse was retrospective,

but looking back she can see warning signs of the behavior and is beginning to understand what she thinks are the underlying motives of the perpetrator.

For some participants there was a feeling of 'never being good enough' for their partner. The individuals had the continual sense of needing to make sure that their actions, appearances and behaviors lined up with what would make their partner happy. The difficult realization for many of the participants was that, despite their best efforts, nothing would satisfy their partner for long; it was only a matter of time before the perpetrator would find another way to criticize them. Harriet spoke of an incident where she felt she was 'not good enough' for he partner:

(5.3) Harriet: He always made me feel like I wasn't good enough. He would say things like, oh, if you ever get fat, I'm going to leave you. If we have babies, and afterwards, you don't like drop the weight, like it's going to be over. So I was very, like, worried about how I looked physically. Or we would be getting ready to go and he would say, "think about what you're going to wear." I always felt the need that I had to like, dress to impress everywhere we went and I'm not that kind of human being. He was very about appearances…it was like I never felt good enough.

In this particular incident, Harriet describes that not only did she feel as if she could not measure up to her partner's standards, she also expressed the feeling of this consistent sense of instability due to the expectations that she remembered being placed upon her to dress a certain way and keep her weight down. Harriet describes the

continual threat of abandonment that was brought up if her appearance didn't align with what he wanted. This element of frequent criticisms, pressure to be a certain way for a partner and if not, the threat of leaving, all can undoubtedly create an underlying sense of instability, fear, insecurity, and the feeling of being controlled by one's partner. It's important to note that this sense of never being able to do anything right or be good enough for a partner, has the potential to bleed over into the victims' sense of self making them more vulnerable to other tactics of abuse in the relationship. By listing all of these instances where she was made to feel like she wasn't enough, Harriet provides further justification for the horrible nature of the psychological abuse she experienced.

Darlene had a similar experience of "never measuring up" and feeling and also experiencing the reversal of blame onto her in the relationship:

> *(5.4) Darlene: If I disagreed with him he'd snap at me. Then he'd yell. That would be the reason he wouldn't finish what he started, he would say it was because I couldn't make up my mind. He would be careful however not to do this in front of people. I started to feel I could do nothing right. A big thing was I had put weight on...he stopped being intimate with me. When I'd say it's because of my weight he'd say he never said that, which he never did, but also never denied it. I'd ask why, but never got an answer. If we didn't do what he wanted, he would give me the silent treatment but would make little digs.*

Darlene begins her description of not feeling good enough by stating the abusive behaviors that her partner would implement such as snapping and yelling at her anytime she disagreed with him, or giving her "the silent treatment" when she did not do what he wanted. She then notes this element of blame reversal where with many things in their relationship, Darlene's partner would say it was because of something that she did to make him behave the way that he did. Darlene continues to talk about other aspects of their relationship that she was made to feel not good enough for, or insecure about, such as her weight, and then notes that again it was her fault for him not wanting to be intimate with her. This feeling of the blame being placed on Darlene was likely enhanced by when she spoke about how he would never give her a straight answer, but instead leave it up to her to decide whose fault something was in their partnership. She also brings up how her partner hid the abuse from others in that, "he would be careful however not to do this in front of people. There appears to be an element of noticing a secretive nature or a public persona of her partner that was different in public versus behind closed doors, which is also prevalent in other accounts. Darlene's feelings of never measuring up or doing anything right, as well as having the blame reversed onto her, will be visible in subsequent interviews.

In addition to never measuring up, further participants expressed a strong feeling that during the course of their relationship, their partner would consistently deny their own actions and attempt to place the blame on them. One individual talked about the most pertinent abusive trend she experienced was not that of any sort of physical threat, but the frequent feeling that everything was her fault:

(5.5) Lauren: There was physical intimidation, but it was more the mental gaslighting projection, that sort of thing that occurred most often. When he did behave badly, when he was drunk, he would be like, really angry the next day and he would say, 'I was drunk, I did that because of you,' and then he would find something to blame me with, put the blame on me, and he'd say, 'That's why I did it.' The other reasons he gave were absolutely ridiculous, and I'd say 'Why did you ruin last night? We had a lovely night together.' He'd say, 'Because you wanted to watch your show on tv,' when in fact I only got to watch about two minutes. He was mad because he had to make time for something I liked. You know, trivial things. His excuses for his bad behavior were that he'd say it was my fault. I made him do it. No, he never apologized for any of that. The only things he ever apologized for were the things that he couldn't really run away from, you know that there was solid proof, like the time when the police were called.

In Lauren's description she speaks of the fact that there was physical intimidation present at times, but more than that the "projection" occurred most often. She talks about how with anything that went wrong or made him upset, he told her that it was her fault or something that she did to make him feel a certain way. This notion of the blame consistently being put on the victim, is something that is becoming more prevalent in the victim accounts. Lauren's bridges into the next portion of her description by talking about the over-the-top nature of her partner's behaviors and accusations. Lauren proceeds to list seemingly trivial matters that she was blamed for such as being the

cause of her partner drinking, or being the cause of ruining his evening because they watched a show that she wanted to watch. By listing the types of things that her partner blamed her for as well as what she thinks about them may serve to help show how ridiculous the accusations were from her partner, and may also help to preserve her image as someone who knew how trivial things truly were at the time. Toward the end of the extract, Lauren talks about how "he never apologized for anything" or the only things that he did apologize for were when he was caught red-handed or there was "solid proof." Talking about her partner's lack of accountability can help further demonstrate the questionable character of perpetrator's of psychological abuse, and how frustrating it must be to be in a relationship with someone who reverses the blame and never apologizes for anything.

Participants noted that along with feeling the frustration and confusion of constantly having the blame placed upon themselves, it was difficult to have a discussion about this idea. The conversations turned into 'circular arguments' where no real progress was made, and the same ideas continued to be discussed without a solution:

> *(5.6) Geff: But what I found extremely toxic and extremely damaging was that I couldn't get a straight answer. I couldn't get the truth. I couldn't find out like, are you sure you're really over your first husband? "Absolutely..." "Well, your behavior doesn't indicate that your behavior indicates the other way so can you please just tell me what you know." So it felt like it was impossible for me to actually solve anything, and this is a very, very narcissistic trait, this whole idea of circular conversation, things that just*

never get anything solved and they deny everything. So that's when I

started to feel paranoid. I definitely noticed she was constantly gaslighting

me, and so naturally, I eventually started saying, you know, like, 'What am

I not getting something here?' Like, I'm trying to have conversations with

her, and she's taking them in circles, and then seeming to really delight in

sabotaging anything, so we can't get anything done. Like, 'Is there

something wrong with that? Or is this me?'

Geff began his description by stating, "But what I found extremely toxic and extremely damaging was that I couldn't get a straight answer. I couldn't get the truth." By saying this right away it helps to set up the tone of what is to come in the extract as something that was glaringly obvious as wrong; this beginning may also serve to show that Geff feels educated on this type of abuse or is taking accountability for now understanding the true nature of his partner. The pattern of perpetrators denying their wrongdoings and not giving straight answers, is now being seen more than once in the interviews.

Geff then proceeded to talk about how the conversations became circular and he spoke of growing frustrated with their arguments. Geff brought up in the beginning of his interview how since getting out of this relationship, he has dedicated his life to understanding psychological abuse and even wrote a book about his experience. Geff demonstrates his knowledge of psychological abuse further when he mentions how the tendency of his partner to deny everything and talk in circular conversations is a "very narcissistic trait." This may serve to help demonstrate that Geff is an individual who

made a conscious decision to use his experience to educate himself and others about this type of abuse, thereby declaring that he took accountability in terms of wanting to protect himself and others from this harm in the future.

Geff concludes his statement by admitting to feeling "paranoid" when he thinks about how his partner seemed to be "gaslighting" him and to "really delight in sabotaging" their conversations so nothing "could get done." He would ask himself, 'Is there something wrong with that? Or is this me?' What is interesting is he starts his description confident that something was toxic and then gets down to the end and admits that at one time he was feeling very paranoid and beginning to question his ability to judge his partner as well as the contexts of their arguments. This idea of questioning one's sanity, ability to make decisions, and memory of events or conversations is attributed to the phenomenon of "gaslighting." Gaslighting can be described as a "form of emotional abuse that causes a victim to question their own feelings, instincts, and sanity. Once an abusive partner has broken down the victim's ability to trust their own perceptions, the victim is more likely to stay in the abusive relationship" (*What is gaslighting?,* 2023, para. 2).

Many of the participants noted manipulation to be a key component of the abuse in particular, gaslighting. Loretta talked about her experience of feeling as if she was made to believe she was the 'crazy' one as they went through circular arguments:

> *(5.7) Loretta: He would just twist and turn things. They want you to engage*
> *with them. You can't even have a conversation because they will find*
> *something and twist it. I had trouble remembering things. He would say,*

'well you said such and such and you did such and such,' and I knew I hadn't and I'd be like 'are you crazy?' I'd say, 'Alright well look Don, you did this,' and he'd say, 'I didn't do that.' He would deny, despite all the evidence to the contrary. I think in that respect, I think he's a bit of a narcissist as well. Yeah he would often flat out lie, and he'd make up a conversation. He would say to me, 'but you said this to me last night,' and he'd say that I said something that had quite bad, foul language, which I was supposed to have said, and I know I don't talk like that, but I remember what happened last night...But it does, it can get you questioning yourself. I did at one point think I was going mad because you do start to doubt yourself, yeah. You go round and round in circles with these people, and the things they come out with is just madness.

Loretta started her description by saying, "He would just twist and turn things." This quote demonstrates her awareness that the truth was not going to be something she would get from her partner. She goes on to acknowledge her belief that perpetrators of this kind "want you to engage with them. You can't even have a conversation because they will find something and twist it." Loretta is expressing the difficulties of being in a relationship with a person such as her partner because it is as if they want to irritate their victim or draw them into a conversation that will not benefit them in any way; it appears from her description that she feels the perpetrators enjoy twisting the truth. The way that Loretta is speaking almost has a tone of someone who has educated

themselves on what they've experienced and how she talks about what she feels were her partner's intent may show that she is seeking to confirm the abusive behavior.

Next Loretta speaks about how she had "trouble remembering things." He would say, 'well you said such and such and you did such and such,' and I knew I hadn't. This feeling that one cannot separate the truth from the lies is apparent through several interviews. At one point Loretta speaks of a time when her partner was trying to tell her about something that she said or did and she responded, "I remember what happened last night…but it does, it can get you questioning yourself. I did at one point think I was going mad because you do start to doubt yourself." She notes this feeling the more she was told she said certain things or did certain things the less confident she was in her own memory. These "circular arguments" and elements of gaslighting are something that seem to be central to psychological abuse and a key to helping create instability, uncertainty, and doubt in the victims.

Zane continued to speak about the abusive tactics that he felt he experienced and stated that his partner attempted to make him feel insecure by speaking about another romantic interest around him:

> *(5.8) Zane: A lot of lies and manipulation tactics to try to gauge my reaction. Like a whole week or so he spent lying about the fact that he was stopping over at some guy's house and that this elusive guy had tried to come onto him. I think he just did that to see what my reaction would be and to make me jealous. He also said that he likes to know secrets about me to use them as blackmail against me. I think he made a point of telling*

me about this person to toy with me; it made me uncomfortable, uneasy,

and made me question my safety.

Similar to Loretta's description above, Zane spoke of feeling that his partner enjoyed making him "uncomfortable" and "uneasy." He begins his description by saying he experienced "a lot of lies and manipulation tactics," and Zane describes feeling that his partner would frequently lie to him to "gauge his reaction." He proceeds to share about how he used another guy to attempt to make him jealous and also talks about how his partner liked to know secrets about him to use as blackmail. It appears that in this particular relationship, the perpetrator is not only seeking to make his partner feel insecure, but also gain leverage through blackmail to potentially keep his partner under his control longer. Zane's description of his experience of questioning himself, and the reality of what was really going on with his partner may serve to highlight an area of psychological abuse that may continue to be prevalent in other accounts as well, which is seeking to make the victim feel insecure.

One participant encapsulates the experience of psychological abuse in a very multifaceted and detailed way:

(5.9) Amy: I don't think a lot of people know about emotional abuse, I can say, I

definitely didn't think much about it at all, I thought that, when I think of abuse, I

think much more of the physical side. But being someone that's gone through

both, to me, this is way worse. I mean, physical abuse can scar you emotionally,

of course….so there's that aspect of it. But the emotional abuse goes really deep,

and it makes you question, everything that you felt you knew about yourself. You know, 'I'm this strong person. I know I'm not ugly. I'm okay with myself,' but it makes you actually question every, single, thing. Whereas with the physical abuse, you can almost pinpoint that one thing, that set off point, right? And you can be like, oh, logically, you could say, 'okay, not that it's the abusee's fault by any means, but you could go back and say, like, I'll never do that again' try not to trigger it. But emotional abuse goes so much deeper to me.

Amy begins her description with talking about her initial unawareness of psychological/emotional abuse as a whole when saying, "I don't think a lot of people know about emotional abuse, I definitely didn't think much about it at all, when I think of abuse, I think much more of the physical side." This quote may help to remove accountability for not noticing the abuse and help to preserve Amy's self-image as someone who would not be able to recognize psychological abuse because of the misconception of physical abuse being the only type of intimate partner violence. Amy next moves on to talking about the seriousness of abuse by saying that "physical abuse can scare you physically, but the emotional abuse goes really deep. And It makes you question everything that you felt you knew about yourself." This description sets up very well the impact of psychological abuse and leaves room for enquiry for the reader as to why this form of abuse makes you question everything you knew about yourself. Amy describes psychological abuse as something that potentially impacts the core of who you are as an individual, and that is part of what can cause psychological abuse to be so damaging.

Next, Amy talks about how psychological abuse is so challenging to recognize when saying, "Whereas with physical abuse, you can almost pinpoint that one thing, that set off point, right?" She talks about how you can find that physically abusive incident or trigger that started the episode, but with psychological abuse it is difficult to identify what ignited the psychological abuse because it is not as obvious. This is an important notion to consider when thinking about how victims can potentially predict when their partner will begin to implement psychologically abusive tactics and what benefit that may have. Amy ends her description by saying, "But, emotional abuse goes so much deeper to me." This quote ends the extract quite nicely by showing that psychological abuse has the potential to leave a different and potentially greater depth of pain than physical abuse, which continues to convey the serious impact of psychological abuse on individuals.

Psychological abuse is conveyed in these descriptions as a serious form of abuse that can leave lasting impacts on its victims. This form of abuse as described by the victims often has elements of manipulation such as gaslighting, circular arguments, blame reversal and denial of responsibility, continual lies, feelings of the victim never measuring up, and difficulty in pinpointing the abuse at the time of the relationship. Upon reflection, victims still struggled to pinpoint when the abuse began and claimed to have challenges describing how this was abuse in their eyes. However difficult it may be to describe, the victims talked about being confident that what they experienced was abuse and it was awful. According to the victims, it can make one question everything about themselves and their ability to make decisions and to remember things.

CHAPTER SIX: *I am Less Than I Was Before*

   In this theme, the process of change within oneself or loss of self over the course of the relationship will be analyzed. During the interviews, the victims spoke of different ways they began to notice negative changes within themselves over time whether it be through interests, the ability to feel and express emotions, self-esteem, confidence, or activities and personal habits. The focal point of this theme is how the individuals constructed their perceptions of these changes; the ways in which they identified what was most prominent to them will be discussed.

   The theme of *I am Less Than I Was Before,* was identified partly due to the result of the way in which the interview questions were created. After conducting the Blog Analysis in Chapter Four, a theme that was identified was one called *Loss of Self.* In the Blog Analysis, *Loss of Self* was a theme that reflected the bloggers' patterns in speaking about their feelings of losing their self-esteem, interests in things they once enjoyed, and overall identity over the course of their relationship. Knowing that this theme was prevalent in the blogs, this was taken into consideration during the semi-structured interview design planning.

   The aim was to create an interview question that would provide an opportunity for the victims in the interviews to talk about any changes they experienced within themselves. Similar to other points during the interviews, at times the participants would address certain topics that would have been asked in a question, but if they did not, they would be asked: 'What changes did you notice in yourself over the course of the relationship, if any? If the participant needed clarification of this question, either one of

the follow up prompts would be asked: "meaning did you find that this relationship was affecting you in any way, or did you notice changes in your way of thinking, behavior, interests?" The intent was to formulate this question as open-ended so that they would be more inclined to think about the changes or impact of the relationship, but by keeping "if any," at the end of the question it softened up any potential feelings that it was assumed they had to have noticed a change within themselves.

One participant, Zane talks about how he began to notice changes within himself over the course of his relationship:

> *(5.1) Zane: I noticed I didn't wear as many clothes. I used to wear a massive array of shirts with bow ties, all sorts. The more the relationship progressed, the more I started to only wear a couple of shirts and I eventually stopped wearing bow ties all together. Any confidence I had in myself was completely shattered over the time we were together, any femininity I had in me I became too ashamed to express and so I became I guess what you'd call hyper masculine. I had a very bleak outlook on life too…*

Zane speaks of experiencing a change in himself through the loss of the desire to express himself in the ways that were once unique and important to him. Revealing that he was once a person who took pride in embracing his femininity as a homosexual man through having a diversified wardrobe, but then due to the consistent degradation and criticizing from his partner, as mentioned in an earlier description of the abuse, he no

longer had the desire or confidence to embrace traits that were unique to himself. Zane also noted that his confidence was 'completely shattered' over the time he was in the relationship. What is particularly powerful in Zane's description is how he put together his description. After being asked about changes that he noticed within himself, what he deemed as most significant is something that could be mundane to others. By emphasizing that his wardrobe was so important to him and the variety of colors, shirts, and bow ties that he used to pride himself in wearing, it demonstrates that his outfits were so closely tied to what made him feel himself.

Furthermore, Zane begins his description by comparing what he used to be like, which was an individual who cared about how he presented himself, and then spoke about how after that aspect was affected, he felt his 'confidence shatter,' his femininity lessen, and his outlook on life become 'bleak.' This normative comparison of what he was like before his relationship versus during his abusive relationship provides great insight into what he chose to emphasize in his own story and what he deemed most significant. There are a variety of reasons why individuals lose their confidence in psychologically abusive relationships depending on the circumstances, but it is appearing to be a common pattern that through the repeated abuse, at some point, the victim's self-confidence begins to diminish and an element of hopelessness begins to creep in as they notice their partner doesn't change, and they begin to lose themselves in the process.

Another participant, Geff describes his experience of losing parts of himself during his relationship:

(5.2) Geff: I lost myself. I really felt like I had died, and I was so worried. I started looking at a lot of things: I began to have a hard time seeing positives, that was a really big thing, which is also a really huge change. Because I'm, I know you don't know me, but like, in my nature, I'm an optimist. I'm, I'm a lover and an optimist, and I'm not at all that kind of person. So if anything, I'm probably a little too far on the "seeing things on the bright side" type of person. So it was such a fundamental change in character for me to sort of put other people down in my mind and to think, 'you know, they're just trying to get the best of me' or whatever. Like it was just a negative universe of papers rolling in my head that were all just destructive and not healthy at all. I started consuming vast amounts of caffeine because honestly, I was getting so worn out, like physically actually just exhausted, trying to deal with the constant gaslighting and constant harassment.

Geff's description of how he experienced change within himself and loss of parts of himself was done in a very powerful way. He constructed his description a bit differently than Zane at the beginning by starting with a statement that cut right to the heart of how he felt by saying that he 'lost himself,' and then that he 'really felt like he had died.' These first two sentences grab the attention of others because they demonstrate that this individual felt that he went through something excruciating, and it sets the reader up to want to know why and how this happened. Geff speaks about his

process of realizing that he had changed dramatically over the course of his relationship through a 'fundamental change in character' as he puts it.

Upon reflection, he noticed that he was becoming a person that was struggling to see the positives in life, his mind and way of thinking was bombarded by negative thoughts and even thoughts that were critical and destructive toward others. As someone who described himself as "an eternal optimist," it was the complete opposite of his typical character and outlook on life. Here Geff choses to provide a comparative description of what he was like before the relationship, which was 'an eternal optimist.' He does some accounting work by emphasizing how big these changes were for him, which may be done for various reasons. One purpose for constructing his description in this way could be to show the seriousness and give more validity to psychological abuse, a second purpose could be to ensure that Geff portrays himself as a person that wouldn't normally have been affected so strongly by another person because of his typical personality and mindset that he talks about, and third, the description could be written in this way to remove accountability for himself and perhaps help him rationalize this experience further.

Geff mentions that due to the continual abuse through manipulation of reality aka 'gaslighting' and harassment, he began to get exhausted. This idea of the consistency of different abusive tactics causing mental exhaustion is one that is prevalent across several accounts, and is something that may accelerate the speed at which victims begin to lose parts of their identity, mindset, and self-confidence. There are very seldom amounts of time in which victims of psychologically abusive relationships are not under some sort of attack from their partners, leaving little room for the victim to observe and

analyze the changes that are taking place within their own minds. What is clear from Geff's extract is that he has put in a considerable amount of time and effort reflecting on his experience in this relationship, and he described experiencing significant changes within himself over time.

Another participant, Loretta describes her experience of noticing change within herself over the course of her relationship:

(5.3): Loretta: I'm quite a confident and outgoing person. I'm kind of the life and soul of the party, I suppose. I think I witnessed in those three years, I think I definitely became…I think it did affect my self esteem…I think I did become like for a short-term, I did become quite depressed. But yeah, I suffered. I suffered a lot with anxiety and OCD, I am getting better though… I've got anxiety; a lot of my anxiety is based around my job. I get quite anxious about that because I'm a perfectionist, but my anxiety was off the scale at the time and every day, I would wake up feeling like in the pit of my stomach, like those butterflies.

Loretta noticed that the changes, or loss of parts of herself were not only evident in her self-esteem, confidence, and personality changes, but also through the physical manifestations of the abuse or stress surrounding it, such as issues including anxiety, depression, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). It is not possible to say that the abuse caused Loretta's subsequent mental health issues, but it does certainly support the literature that suggests psychological abuse often leaves its victims with

health issues namely anxiety and depression (Lammers et al., 2005). What is

interesting is that upon being asked how she felt herself change over the course of the

relationship, she began with a comparison to what she was like before the relationship

by setting up that she typically is outgoing, confident, and the 'life and soul of the party.'

Accounting done in this way could serve the purpose to demonstrate how severe the

abuse was to Loretta if she was able to change so drastically to the point where she

was the complete opposite of herself. The way that Loretta accounted for her changes

in this extract may also serve to justify that it is understandable as to why she changed

over the course of the relationship, and also why she suffered with anxiety, depression,

and OCD during the relationship and after it ended.

In the next extract, Sarah provides an account for the changes she witnessed

within herself that also reference an element of confusion and a difficulty in

remembering things as well as a normative comparison:

> *(5.5)* <u>*Sarah:*</u> *You know what the bad part of what is really hard for me to, to*
>
> *think? I can't, I can't think of a time when I was happy before that. But now*
>
> *that I think about it and that's something I'm having trouble trying to figure*
>
> *out is, when did I start feeling depressed from my previous marriage, and*
>
> *then when did I start with, you know the depression that continued*
>
> *because of what I was going through, you see I can't, can't tell the*
>
> *difference. I always considered myself to be a very strong person. But*
>
> *when I was with him I felt like I couldn't do anything without him, you know,*
>
> *like I really needed him to do this stuff. When I have always been very*

very independent you know? I left home to go to college when I was 18. I lived by myself for a lot of years. You know I just, I fought hard for many many years. I had to go through surgeries and infertility treatments and things like that and I always fought hard, and then I fought hard to adopt my daughters, and I just, I, I wouldn't just stay put until I got them, you know I've always seen myself like as a very strong woman, and I have a lot of friends, or I attempt to make friends wherever I go, but yeah with him…I felt like I was in a cage. You know? In a cage, and he was isolating me and he didn't like my friends and I stopped taking care of myself. And then after a while, I stopped wanting to go out. You know? I didn't work, I couldn't work. I had to go shopping yesterday, actually because I'm going to start teaching English next week. All I wore were trainers, joggers, you know, and I started to gain weight, and he would say, 'yeah yeah you've gained weight you know you've gained weight because a change of diet,' but he will be bring me, chocolate, and stuff that, you know, instead of helping me, he was doing the opposite thing, you know so little things like, I just I don't understand. I don't know, maybe it's just my way of avoiding things. I don't know if I really lost my self- esteem, but I do feel very vulnerable, very weak…a lot. You know?

Interviewer: *Sure. Makes sense.*

Sarah: I think those are the effects, and there was a time when I felt I couldn't trust my own judgment. I couldn't trust, if I was being aggressive or if it was because I was depressed and I had these mood swings? I really believed his accusations that I kept having mood swings, I really believed him…and it was my daughter a week ago, who said, "No mom, the one who had mood swings was him, you know?" So I think that those would have been the effects and are still the effects of what happened. You know, like if you ask me right now, yeah I feel weak, I feel vulnerable, I don't feel like I'm ever going to be happy again. You know?

Interviewer: Mhmm

Sarah: I don't feel like I'm ever gonna find anybody. I don't even want to find anybody. Just like (sigh)...

Sarah provides an extremely rich description of how she rationalized this process of change and losing herself. She begins with stating that she cannot remember a time she was happy before her relationship and she can't remember when her depression started. There is this emphasis on the importance of the element of depression that she suffered from during her previous marriage and her most current relationship that she experienced the psychological abuse in. Like other participants, Sarah then goes on to describe how she used to feel, which was a strong, confident, and outgoing individual. She provides a list of significant events and things that she did in her life that

demonstrated her independence such as going to college early, suffering through multiple surgeries and infertility treatments, and fighting to adopt her daughters. Sarah goes through this process of struggling with putting a timeline on her depression and also reinforcing to herself and others that she is a strong woman who has overcome many things in her life; this may be done to help assure herself and/or assure the reader of her strength as an individual.

Sarah transitions to the statement of feeling as if she 'was in a cage,' and she felt that she was 'isolated,' which resulted in her not being able to see her friends or family and also losing the desire to take care of herself. Her clothing changed to very basic outfits and her outlook as there seemed to be little point in taking care of herself. Sarah admitted to gaining weight with her depression, but her partner enabled her at the same time by feeding her sweets and unhealthy foods. By the end of her statement, Sarah had begun to reflect back upon her ability to trust her own judgment and she admitted to internalizing the beliefs of her partner; it was only through her daughter reminding her that "no mom, it was her boyfriend who had those issues, not her," that she remembered more of who she was. Sarah demonstrated great vulnerability and a process of questioning and analyzing that she was still going through at the time, admitting that she was still feeling 'vulnerable,' and 'weak.'

Upon being asked "Did you notice any changes within yourself over the course of the relationship?" Kate provided interesting insight into the way the abuse affected her memories and thought processes as well as her self-confidence and interests:

(5.6) Kate: Yeah. Massively. It made me question my own mind. Made me question everything: my memories, my own emotions. It's when you're not able to find your own emotions, it's pretty weird, then trying to find them later. It's like trying to find yourself, isn't it? It's weird. I used to be quite confident, a lively thing that went on. I used to be quite a confident person, you know, walk into a room and talk to anybody and you know go out on my bike and just take off for the day..and I just feel like I lost everything. Like I lost me, and I stopped taking care of myself...because if I did it was, 'well who are you doing that for?' If It wasn't something that he liked, I wasn't really allowed to do it. I used to love painting but wasn't allowed to because it was "too expensive," yeah…silly isn't it?

Kate emphasized an additional element of change that she noticed within herself over the duration of her relationship, the tendency to question her own thoughts and emotions. What is noteworthy in Kate's example is that she doesn't speak about why she began to question her own ability to think and feel emotions, just that she got to the point where this change has occurred. She demonstrates her ability to be vulnerable in revealing that she wasn't confident in her own ability to remember, in her ability to feel emotions and trust her own judgment. When Kate said, 'It's when you're not able to find your own emotions, it's pretty weird, then trying to find them later. It's like trying to find yourself, isn't it? It's weird," it seems that there is an element of confusion that is felt when reflecting back upon this significant change in oneself; there is difficulty in locating how these changes have occurred. This is also consistent with other participants'

accounts where they were not aware of the abuse at the time, or able to pinpoint specific instances that they noticed changes within themselves or their partners; they simply noticed that a dramatic change occurred.

Similar to Geff's account where he began his answer with powerful statements saying 'he lost himself' and he felt as if 'he had died,' and then going on to give a comparison of what he typically was like as a person, Kate sets up her description in a similar way. After Kate says that she 'questioned her own mind' and 'questioned everything,' she goes on to say that she also used to be a confident person with the ability to talk to anyone or do things independently. Due to these changes within herself, Kate felt that she 'lost everything', and she 'lost herself.'

In the latter portion of Kates's description about changes she noticed within herself, she goes into describing a bit of what she believed contributed to this loss of herself, which was namely the fact that everything she did was eventually done to please her partner. If Kate did anything for herself such as 'taking care of herself' then her partner questioned, "well who are you doing that for?" Kate had to stop one of her interests, painting because her partner said it was "too expensive." Essentially, as Kate noted, "if it wasn't something he likes, I wasn't really allowed to do it." Here Kate in a way, removes accountability from herself noticing that she was losing herself due to her focus being on pleasing her partner by doing only the things that he liked her to do. Kate might also be focusing on explaining how her interests were stifled to help show that it was understandable as to why she felt she lost elements of herself in the relationship. This notion of victims attributing changes in themselves due a lack of awareness

caused by the time they spent focusing on pleasing their partner is interesting, and prevalent in other accounts in this chapter.

Another participant, Harriet describes her experience of change in a very unique way and attributes blame toward her partner in a way that is different compared to other participants:

(5.7) Harriet: I was really lucky with the fact that I found my passion very, very early in life and I fought very hard. I got my bachelor's degree in dance, which was a struggle in my family. I'm one of five kids, and I'm my dad's first kid to go to college. He was excited that I was going to go for anything. He didn't care if it was, you know, dance or to become a doctor. But my family, and my extended family, like my grandparents, questioned it like, 'what was I going to do with it?' And 'how was I going to succeed?' So that was something I've always fought really hard to keep in my life and never let anybody take from me because that's important. And then of course, I got my continuing education, like my grandpa told me a long time ago, his motto is "they can take everything from you, but they can't take your education." And so I always strongly valued that motto, so those were things that I always fought for, and I wouldn't let anyone take from me. Throughout the relationship, I felt like other things that I wanted and other goals that I had weren't as important as his, or weren't as valued…that whatever I wanted didn't matter…like I didn't matter, like my immediate wants and needs sometimes weren't taken into account for. I don't know. I

felt insignificant. You know, I hate to use the word 'worthless,' but I felt I wasn't worth anything.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Harriet: I was just there to please him and even though I was doing the best that I knew how to do… Yeah, it's pretty awful. I don't know why people make you feel that way, or why they want to make you feel like you're insignificant as a human being. Yeah, it's pretty much like I didn't mean anything.

Harriet's description of change within herself is one that is strikingly different compared to the other accounts. When asked what changes she noticed, the first thing she does is talk about what she did not give away. Harriet emphasizes what was always important to her in her life, which was her education and that she knew she would always focus on that, and that no one could take that away from her. She was not prompted in any way to talk about the things that she was proud of or the aspects of her life that she refused to give away, but it is incredibly interesting that Harriet chose to start off answering the question in this way. The description demonstrates that Harriet is a woman who worked hard to overcome many things in life, and perhaps it was because she was so proud of her accomplishments that she wanted to display all that she had overcome before letting down her walls, and speaking about aspects of her that regrettably changed.

Harriet next describes losing her sense of worth by talking about the realization that her desires, interests, and passions were never valued or deemed as important. Through not being validated, she felt insignificant and like she didn't matter in the relationship. This is an interesting difference compared to other accounts because here Harriet does not claim to witness changes in her own interests, character, or way of thinking as the other victims did. Instead, Harriet places the reason for her change in how she viewed her own worth, on the idea that her partner did not acknowledge, or place the same significance on what was important to her in life. This lack of support or acknowledgement of Harriet and her interests, caused Harriet to feel 'insignificant' and 'worthless.'

In some of the other victims' accounts, they expressed that looking back they were unaware of the changes taking place within themselves because they were so focused on making their partner happy. With Harriet, at the end of her extract, she eventually states that she too was very focused on her partner's needs by saying, "I was just there to please him and even though I was doing the best that I knew how to do." By stating that she was 'doing the best she could' and that she was focused on pleasing him, it can serve to remove accountability from herself while at the same time demonstrating that she realizes this change happened and she was perhaps just not aware of it at the time.

The chapter, *I am Less Than I Was Before* focused on how changes within the victims' selves were noticed, which resulted in the emphasis of the feeling of 'loss.' Loss was felt in several different ways: loss of activities and interests, loss of confidence and personality, and loss of emotions. Each participant's description of change within

themselves was different and how they experienced loss varied, but the majority of the participants expressed that they felt like they 'lost themselves' and that there was a confusion of how this happened. What appears to have occurred through their descriptions is that the combination of all of the different elements of themselves that changed over time caused such a fundamental change in the core of who they felt they were, that it contributed to a loss of identity.

The theme of *I am Less Than I Was Before* is about the process of the victims coming to realize that over a period of time in their relationships, they began to notice changes within themselves. The changes that they noticed differed for each individual, however it was the sense that the longer they stayed in the relationship the further they were pulled away from the core nature of who they were before they entered the relationship. There was also the element of lack of agency and lack of awareness present in these accounts. Some victims attributed the change and loss toward the efforts that they put into pleasing their abuser. They admitted, retrospectively, to being so focused on meeting their partner's needs and making them happy that they neglected their own; if it wasn't something their partner liked to do, they didn't want them to do it. Also many victims talk about loss in a way that portrays them as not being accountable at the time, but are taking accountability for their actions now because they are retrospectively looking back and seeing what was happening to them. This accounting is part others-focused and part focused on their own personal role.

Victims spoke of losing interests in the things they once enjoyed as well as a loss of joy and ability to feel a wide range of emotions overall. There was a tendency of the individuals to describe themselves as finding themselves 'morphing' into the person that

their partner wanted them to be over time; this included changing their interests and ways they thought and spoke, not voicing their opinions, and feeling a smaller variety of emotions or as some described it, 'feeling numb,' which often led to a frequent state of intense sadness. The feeling of 'losing oneself' is one that is expressed over many accounts, and appears to happen due to the victims realizing that they lost essential parts of themselves over the course of the relationship, resulting in a loss of identity.

CHAPTER SEVEN: *Managing Blame & Accountability*

The theme of *Managing Blame & Accountability* is focused on looking at the ways in which victims tend to account for their roles in their psychologically abusive relationships. Regardless of who is at fault within the relationship, the victims speak in ways that assume some degree of responsibility for the specific ways in which they responded and thought about the abuse. Some individuals provided reasons that justified their partner's abusive actions or justified their reasons for not noticing abusive behavior. Other individuals provided reflections of why they chose to remain in their relationships after it became abusive, as well as reasons why they left, if they did.

When considering the element of blame in abusive relationships, there are perceptions that victims are held accountable by society, and oftentimes themselves for their decisions surrounding their leaving process or their choice to stay in the relationship upon recognition of the abuse. Victim blaming and self-blame are common experiences for women who have been subjected to sexual violence and abuse (Eaton, 2019). Theorists suggest that victims are blamed in an attempt to establish control and to make sense of otherwise discomforting events (Lerner, 1980; Shaver, 1985), and it has been construed as involving judgements that the victims deserve what they get, which is motivated from a belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980). There are several assumptions within the victim blaming literature surrounding the notion that victims are to be somewhat held accountable for their decisions they make when in an abusive relationship.

Victims are not only blamed by others, but they tend to reflect upon their experiences and blame themselves in different ways as well. In the self-blame literature, Janoff Bulman (1979) acknowledges that self-blame may have a relationship with feelings of control and theorized that it serves as an adaptive coping mechanism. Bulman also posits that there are two forms of "self-blame" that victims identify with: behavioral self-blame and characterological self-blame. Behavioral self-blame involves attributing fault toward one's own actions; this type of blame would allow victims to believe that their behavior is modifiable as well as the outcome in the future. Characterological self-blame involves attributing fault to one's character.

As Bulman (1979) stated, "A person can believe that he/she *deserves* what happened and is therefore 'responsible' for it without believing that he/she is capable of altering the outcome in the past, present, or future" (p. 1801). This idea assumes that there is a flaw within people's ability to make decisions and/or a flaw within their character, and that their ability to make decisions is impacted somehow by their character traits, upbringing, or what they've experienced in life. The theme of 'Managing Blame & Accountability' seeks to address what specifically these victims are held accountable for, as well as how the victims of abuse manage this blame by attributing fault toward themselves or others, and how they talk about experiencing victim-blaming.

One of the reasons that the semi-structured interviews were chosen as discussed in the methodology chapter was to allow participants to speak freely about their relationships without too many specific questions that would guide them to answer a certain way. The questions proposed during the interviews were open-ended in nature and did not force participants to take responsibility for their own actions or their partner's

actions. However, if at the end of the interview the participant had not provided any reflections on their relationship as a whole such as, justifications for their decision-making, any thoughts surrounding their family upbringing as well as their partner's upbringing, due to the interest in how victims manage their accountability and blame in abusive relationships, the following questions were asked: "Have you given any thought as to why you think this relationship may have happened?" "What was your family like growing up?" "What do you know about your partner's upbringing?" These questions provided more direct access into the victim's perceptions surrounding issues of personal accountability for getting involved in the relationship as accountability for becoming involved in abusive relationships is more scarce than literature on why victims stay or why they leave. The questions asking about their family of origin as well as their partner's family of origin, provides the opportunity to learn about how victims may or may not attribute or remove blame from themselves and their partners due to experiences growing up. Although the majority of the interview was open-ended, these three questions were asked specifically to look into the ways in which victims may make sense of external factors that could have potentially played a role in individuals becoming involved in abusive relationships.

When participants were asked to reflect upon why they thought this relationship may have happened, in other words, why they may have felt that they were susceptible to entering into the relationship, various rationales were provided. This question was designed to encourage participants to reflect upon why they may have experienced this abuse, or been more susceptible to becoming involved in a psychologically abusive relationship. The intent was not to assume that there must be a reason for why people

"fall prey" to abuse, but to see whether the victims had given any previous thought to a rationale behind the relationship, or if upon reflection they provide accountability for their role or their partner's role in the relationship.

One participant, Zane, expressed both uncertainty and anger when reflecting back upon why this relationship may have happened:

> *(6.1) Zane: I'm not sure why it happened. I wish it didn't, but at the same time if I hadn't I wouldn't be with the partner I'm with now, if it didn't, I don't think. I've tried to explain why I fell for it but I'm not really sure. I wish there was more education on abusive relationships in school and then I think I would have stood a better chance of it not happening in the first place. After a bit I stopped trying to find a reason, I don't blame myself for it much as I know deep down it wasn't my fault. I shouldn't have to be checking if I'm being abused or not really, it just shouldn't be happening in the first place to anyone at all. I see people saying "everything happens for a reason" and it gets me really angry. There was no need for that to happen to me, I have a lot of issues as it is to be honest, and that just added to the pile. I thought perhaps it was the world's way of putting me on this path now with my current partner but it doesn't make sense even still, I shouldn't have had to suffer to be happy. I also wondered if perhaps he was like that because of how his life was and that probably is part of the cause. But I had an issue with that too as people are still responsible for*

their own actions. At the end of the day, yes he had issues but his issues

didn't make him an abuser. He made himself what he is.

The majority of Zane's explanation for why he may have been a person who experienced a psychologically abusive relationship was surrounding the idea that it was due to the lack of knowledge and education he had on what an abusive relationship was before going into the relationship. Zane had a great deal of frustration with feeling that this abuse didn't have to happen to him; he didn't deserve to go through all of this pain and perhaps if he had been aware of abusive signs before this point in his life, he might have been able to prevent it from happening. By talking about how things could have been different for him if he would have been exposed to more education on this type of abuse or had greater awareness of it existing, Zane removes some accountability from himself and is in essence, advocating that this could have been prevented. This notion of 'not knowing' or 'ignorance' will be prevalent in other accounts given by victims throughout this chapter. It is clear that Zane is still wrestling with the 'why' of this situation and demonstrates some frustration and anger toward people who believe nothing is a coincidence. He tries to rationalize different aspects of the relationship specifically, the idea of this having to happen for him to meet his current partner, or this occurring because of his perpetrator's difficult upbringing. This process of rationalizing could be something that is part of the natural healing process for victims of psychological abuse.

Darlene described her thought process behind why she may have found herself in this most recent psychologically abusive relationship as well as three other

'controlling' relationships and one other 'abusive' relationship in a way that attempts to link aspects of her childhood to her current choices:

> *(6.2) Darlene: I've been doing a lot of research on that. My sister said I need to do a pro and con list first and see if there is a common denominator. What I have found is that I tend to choose people who are broken in some way. It's like my subconscious is trying to take care of them.*

Darlene's statement proves to be interesting first in her statement saying "I've been doing a lot of research on that." The fact that her first statement is an acknowledgement that she has done research on why she got into this type of a relationship suggests that there may be a tendency to feel compelled to seek an answer in the first place and that there must be one. If one must do some searching to find a reason, then the reason may not always be obvious. Again, what is interesting is not there is a certain answer as to why abusive relationships happen, why people become a victim of one, or why they don't notice abuse right away, but there are many ways that people seek to answer that question, justify their role in the relationship, and account for their actions or in-action in a relationship. Darlene posits that there must be a 'common denominator' with her abusive partners, and why she began dating them.

Through her own research and self-reflection, Darlene came to the conclusion that she feels she is trying to fix earlier relationships from her life through her current abusive relationship that appear to have similarities. Upon hearing that Darlene felt

there were commonalities between partners, she was asked about what drew her to her partners initially and to provide some description of what was going on in her life around the time that she met her partners:

> *(6.3) Darlene: I think with my ex husband it was different in the sense that I didn't know who I was. I had run away from a very abusive home and he was someone to take care of me. As for the others I thought they had kind hearts as they were always kind and helpful to other people. I think with Mark it was that I was lonely. I was feeling good about myself as I had lost a bunch of weight but still looking for that companion.*

Darlene's descriptions of her different partners and what drew her to them shows that although the circumstances in her life varied, she put forth an explanation in which she blamed herself, not her partners as much. Going back to Janoff-Bulman's theory of blame, instead of leaning toward behavioral self-blame (finding fault in her own actions), Darlene tended to take on the perspective of characterological self-blame, meaning she believed that the faults could be found in her own character. This isn't to say that she doesn't blame her partner for his actions, but that when reflecting upon her own role, it was not as much to do with things that she did to cause the abuse behaviorally, but that she was more vulnerable to becoming a victim because she was "lonely" or didn't have a "strong sense of who she was" at the time.

When another participant, Joe, was asked whether or not he has ever looked back and thought about why he may have been susceptible to entering into one of these types of relationships, he replied:

> *(6.4) Joe: I think it depends on how people are wounded and the people they choose to be with. I think personally I am a very good person. Thoughtful, caring, loving, and one that can get their feelings hurt. At the same time I don't put up with any stupid stuff but am also a forgiving person. I don't think we're ever attracted to the toxic types, it's just easier for us to overlook their faults or not even see them. Kinda like putting up with someone else's garbage. I could go on and on.*

Joe takes a more removed stance when explaining his thoughts surrounding this question, and attributes some responsibility to the idea that we as individuals are wounded in some way, which may have the ability to shape how we view other people, as well as the degree to which we are able and willing to overlook their faults. He tends to generalize his feelings toward this question by suggesting that every person's situation is different depending on one's life circumstances and what they've endured along the way. Throughout the extract, Joe's remarks remove accountability from himself in the situation through listing good traits about himself, "I think personally I am a very good person. Thoughtful, caring, loving, and one that can get their feelings hurt." This example may serve to normalize him to others as well as build himself up by listing positive traits about himself so that when he begins to talk about his partner, it may

seem that she is the one mostly at fault and it could also serve to make it more understandable as to why he stayed in the relationship.

Joe also attributes blame to his partner by saying that although he is a good person, he will not put up with any "stupid stuff" but at the same time he is also "forgiving." He says it is "easier to overlook their faults or not even see them" when referring to individuals in general not being attracted to "toxic people," and that it is "kinda like putting up with someone else's garbage." These statements again take a more generalized stance and remove blame from Joe as he positions himself as a person that acted how any "good" person may act in the situation. It is difficult to pinpoint a reason as to why all of the individuals entered into these relationships, and it is not to say that there is a specific reason that makes people more likely to become a victim of psychological abuse, but it is valuable to hear their perceptions surrounding this idea and how they either ascribe blame to something or someone, or do not. How the individuals construct and share their relationship experiences, help to reveal the ways in which they make it most manageable and meaningful for themselves.

Participants reported various reasons for why they remained in their relationships. For many, the abuse was not recognizable at first, but even with the sense that something was wrong, it was difficult to identify the abuse, thus making it harder for the victims to desire to make a clean break from their partner. One reason that individuals provided for why they stayed in their relationships was hope their partner could change. Darlene spoke of her belief that her partner was a good person based on her earlier interactions with him, so she hoped that he would change and treat

her the same way he once treated her, and now she hoped for him to treat her the same way that he treated others:

> *(6.5) Darlene: I think it's because he could be a great person and I knew he had a good heart. I would watch him with other people and knew that is why I fell for him. I guess hope is a good way to put it. I hoped he'd treat me like he did others, I'd hope he'd treat me like he treated the dog.*

Darlene begins her description with providing accountability for wanting to see the best in her partner by saying, "I think it's because he could be a great person and I knew he had a good heart. I would watch him with other people and knew that is why I fell for him." This brief description of her feelings toward her partner demonstrated a potential desire for change in her partner or hope that he was the person she saw with other people. By expressing this wish, it may potentially serve to show that she was justified in not wanting to leave her partner. The next part of her description however, seemingly brings Darlene's expectations back down a little, "I guess hope is a good way to put it. I hoped he'd treat me like he did others, I'd hope he'd treat me like he treated the dog." Darlene may be saying this to show that she was not demanding, she did not ask for much in the relationship, and it could serve to help her process the unequal effort and poor treatment that she was beginning to realize that she experienced upon reflection.

Another participant, Jane, held a belief that there was hope for her partner to change if she could get him to understand her perspective of the relationship and the abuse that she felt she was experiencing:

> *(6.6) Jane: I remember one of the reasons I wanted so badly to get him to understand how I felt was because I, I thought he could. He had a conference in Indianapolis and he attended this conference and said he sat in on this seminar, and they talked about the power and control wheel. I saw myself in so many of these categories, the threats, the intimidation, the financial control, the isolation from your family. He said he saw himself on so many of those things, and I thought, 'Oh my God,' you know, 'he understands.' But since then, he has not talked about it. He is like 'that didn't happen.' He can't seem to say that 'yeah I once acknowledged that I was those things.' So that kind of gave me hope at the time, but now I realize I think he was just pandering and trying to tell me what I wanted to hear. So, you know, even if they do understand…they can't internalize it. They understand it, they understand it for other people, but they can't internalize it.*

For Jane, she had a brief period of hope that her partner could change due to his intellectual capabilities. "I remember one of the reasons I wanted so badly to get him to understand how I felt was because I, I thought he could." Jane demonstrates her belief in her partner's ability to observe his own behavior and then understand how his actions

were impacting her in their relationship. In the previous extract, she talks about her optimism being related to the hope that she could get her partner to recognize that he was abusing her, and that if maybe he realized what he was doing, he would stop. This feeling of hope that the perpetrator could change or at least change back into the person they seemed to be at one time continued to be a pattern throughout the accounts of abuse, but this realization that he would not understand left Jane feeling more hopeless. Jane ended her extract by saying, "So that kind of gave me hope at the time, but now I realize I think he was just pandering and trying to tell me what I wanted to hear. So, you know, even if they do understand…they can't internalize it. They understand it, they understand it for other people, but they can't internalize it." It is becoming more apparent that upon further reflection, Jane realized that her partner probably would not change and she appears to now intellectualize why he would not be able to change which may cause her to look like more of an expert in the situation or like someone who has learned from their experience of abuse.

Amy discusses others ways that she feels her partner influences her to remain in the relationship:

> *(6.7) Amy: The only reason I haven't left is because I'm scared of what he is going to do. He said he would get therapy and never did. We've had no less than 100 conversations about this. Typically, when I'm trying to leave, his ammo is usually guilt because he knows at heart, I'm super nurturing to everyone. I never want to hurt anyone's feelings or hurt them, and he knows that and he uses that against me. So it's one of my, what I would*

think is a good quality (not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings), and this is where I go back to questioning everything right? So what I think is a good quality in a person...maybe it's not so much because it's always at my detriment, right? Because when he does start saying the things he says, I get this horrible feeling of grief and shame, and guilt. I said, 'you know, maybe he's right, I said, I love him,' and love is supposed to be unconditional right? So that's the emotional part of it, where it gets in your head and then you start questioning everything that you think you know to be true.

Interviewer: What does he say to you when you say that you want to end the relationship?

Amy: He says that it's good that he knows this now, (that I'm giving up on him) instead of later because you know…and that I'm a liar because I said I loved him…um, and that, that I don't love him, because I'm giving up on him. Um…he uh, he's called me a coward um..he's literally physically stopped me from leaving…like, grabs my phone, grabs my keys, grabs my purse, my wallet so I can't, so I can't leave.

Amy speaks of having a good heart and not wanting to hurt her partner, but she also acknowledges that she knows he purposely taps into her fears in a way that will cause her to stay. An additional reason appeared to be hope for change with her partner

when he discussed the potential of therapy, but he never went. As Amy continues to talk about why she remained in her relationship, the list expands from "the only reason I haven't left" to multiple reasons. The expanding list suggests that having only one reason for staying wasn't considered by her, or perhaps by society, to be enough. This notion of searching for reasons to justify why a victim stays, further demonstrates that there appears to be a certain level of detail or credibility that must be presented by the victims of abuse in order to confirm that their decisions are understandable or valid. The belief that a victim must provide reasons for their decisions made in an abusive relationship, also further reinforces the victim-blaming phenomenon.

Another reason participants reported for remaining in their relationships was surrounding the level of investment that they had already put into the relationship:

> *(6.8) Darlene: I'd say after a year in, I'd notice things but would make excuses for the behavior. It was almost like I had that much time already invested so I would stick it out. I didn't want yet another failed relationship, and a huge part was I loved his family and had become attached to them; I knew I'd lose them, but I didn't want to.*

Darlene began her description with her early realizations of red flags or abusive behavior when saying, "I'd say after a year in, I'd notice things but would make excuses for the behavior." She expressed that she did not want to have to start over in another relationship after investing so much of herself into this one, and that she also did not want to lose the relationships that she had built with her partner's family. Darlene states

valid reasons that would be ones that would more than likely be more understood by others, so it may help to remove accountability from Darlene in this situation.

Joe spoke about his reasons for staying in the relationship which were partly due to the issue of investment level as well:

> *(6.9) Joe: What made me stay in it at first was the fact that she moved 600 miles to be with me. I felt ending it when she would have no place to go wouldn't be the proper thing to do. During visits, before the move in and after there were as I said, tons of red flags, and weird ones. Stuff that I knew better at the time…but after she had already moved 600 miles I felt I made my bed now I have to lie in it. A couple even still bother me till this day. After having kids it was all about the kids, and doing everything I could do to make sure they had a "normal" childhood with both parents and no stress from the whole "divorce thing."*

Both Darlene and Joe remove a degree of agency from themselves by stating that they did not want to have to start over after investing so much time and effort into the relationship already, and that they also did not want to impact others by breaking up. For Joe, he did not want his children to be negatively affected by divorce, and Darlene did not want to lose the support of her partner's family. It was almost as if they were accepting the idea that this was what life had to be like for them at that time in order to not "rock the boat."

In summary, the main reasons for remaining in the psychologically abusive relationships were hope for change, guilt, and prior investment level. What proves very interesting is that with each account given by the participants, what is held in common with all of the relationships is that the individuals are drawing on variability to manage their accountability. If every relationship and the circumstances surrounding them are different, then one can almost use that idea to take less accountability for their actions because everyone responds according to their own situations. By providing reasons for remaining in an abusive relationship, the victims tend to remove blame and personal decision making agency from themselves, therefore taking accountability in a way that shows they did the best that they could at the time. The victim's processes of explaining their decisions over the course of these psychologically abusive relationships reveal ways in which they learned to make sense of, and manage their experiences.

At different points during the interview, some participants brought up their family of origin relationship dynamics as a potential reason for "why they may have gotten involved in the relationship," and some were explicitly asked about their family of origin toward the end of the interview if they had not talked about it at all. The majority of participants claimed that they were either physically or emotionally abused by a member of their family growing up; only one person did not claim to have experienced any difficult dynamics. The ways in which the victims talked about their upbringing and attributed some blame to what they witnessed and endured growing up, proved to be insightful. When speaking about her thought process behind why she got into several abusive relationships, Darlene also went into her family dynamics:

(6.10) Darlene: Through research I have realized it does go back to my childhood and the fact I want someone to love me and stay. I am really working on myself so I don't do this again. Being raised in an abusive home and given up for adoption at the age of 5. I'm working on the abandonment issue. I left home at 17 fearing for my life. It was every type of abuse you can imagine. My mother never hit us, but never protected us. There were a lot of us, so I think she was trapped in her life. We also received physical and mental abuse from my aunt prior to being adopted. I do believe I've carried things into my adult life.

Darlene begins her description by sharing that she has taken steps to educate and empower herself in this reflection process, "Through research I have realized it does go back to my childhood and the fact I want someone to love me and stay." She draws connections between her childhood and being abused and adopted. Darlene shows through the next part of her description that she is taking accountability for staying by saying, "I am really working on myself so I don't do this again." Through this wording, it almost shows that she assumes this relationship was her fault and by further attributing it toward her family of origin, when saying, "I'm working on the abandonment issue. I left home at 17 fearing for my life. It was every type of abuse you can imagine," it shows an awareness of potential factors of her upbringing that may have contributed toward influencing her relationship decisions. Toward the end of her description, Darlene says, "My mother never hit us, but never protected us. There were a lot of us, so I think she was trapped in her life." This quote shows that through her language she

was removing blame from her mom, but also attributing it when talking about how "she never protected us." There is further accountability removed from her mom when Darlene relays, "There were a lot of us, so I think she was trapped in her life." Darlene continues to remove accountability from her mom's role in her upbringing, but at the same time potentially attributing some degree of blame onto her by linking her childhood struggles with her current relationship struggles.

Another participant Geff, spoke of his family upbringing and how he felt that may have played a role in decisions he has made surrounding this particular relationship:

(6.11) Geff: I gotta say that the recovery process was astonishing, because what it ultimately led me to was the realization that my dad is the first narcissist in my life, and that was a very big, big realization that came with a lot of gravity and weight. Now, that's ironic, of course, because in the end, the realization is very liberating. But at the time that you realize 'holy shit, like he's been in my life, 50 years.' I realize now all the devaluation, the projection, and the putdowns, it was, it was a huge tectonic shift for me to realize that, yes, that's actually where it started.

Interviewer: Do you think that played a role with you staying in the relationship?

Geff: Yes. My desire to be loved is a healthy human design. My version of it is imbalanced because of the neglect that I had from him and the put

downs and all the stuff that went on for decades. So yeah, I didn't have a

healthy father. That's certainly a big part of this whole thing no doubt about

it, too, when in fact Carrie's 'love bombing,' which she did big time after

our first date…that's partly why it lured me in the way it did because it just

felt like 'this is the kind of attention that I've always hoped I would receive

or deserve at some point, but never had.' When you're starving and

longing for love and you have self-esteem issues and all that, then it feels

like…there's no question that connection is very strong, in my mind. I

started realizing, okay, so that explains this ridiculous mistake and

marriage.

Upon reflection, Geff spoke about similarities in qualities between his ex, Carrie, and his father both having what he perceived to be 'narcissistic tendencies.' He expressed that he experienced several similar behaviors such as being put down, devalued, and had blame shifted onto him multiple times in his relationship with his father and with Carrie. Due to the nature of the data collection, it cannot be verified that both of these individuals are narcissists or that because he experienced an abusive household growing up with a narcissistic parent he was more susceptible to entering into a psychologically abusive relationship, but the way that Geff has chosen to seek reasons as to why he endured this abuse, and has worked to make further connections between these significant relationships provides valuable insight into how he has been able to make sense of the abuse.

Both Darlene and Geff expressed a pattern of revealing some form of emotional abuse or neglect growing up, and the idea that it could have had the potential to affect them in their adult relationships provides interesting insight into how they account for being a victim of abuse. Again, here they are not blaming themselves for not being capable of noticing the abuse or not being able to leave the relationship, but the idea of being affected by the environments they grew up in, and the process of researching and seeking ways to synthesize this information is valuable.

Due to the limited literature on perpetrator's of psychological abuse as well as characteristics of their families of origin, participants were asked about what they knew about their partner's family of origin if they had not already mentioned it during the interview. The information that the victims mentioned about their partner's upbringing proved interesting not only in content, but in the connections they made between their abuser's behaviors and their family of origin. Many participants suggested that growing up in a family whose members exhibited certain patterns of abuse and/or neglect may have been a potential influence on their partner's behaviors; none of this can be proven in this particular study, but the accounting and attribution of blame is noteworthy. When participants were asked about what they knew about their partner's upbringing, a plethora of descriptions were given.

During Darlene's interview she opened up about family history when the interviewer was discussing past relationships and the presence of abuse:

> (6.12) <u>Interviewer:</u> *How many relationships would you say that you've had before this past one that you were unhappy with?*

Darlene: *I've had 4 unhappy ones in total. Dated some in between, but nothing major.*

Interviewer: Did you experience any form of abuse in any of them as well?

Darlene: Controlling from all but actual abuse from the first and last.

Interviewer: Could you tell me more about that?

Darlene: Looking back I repeated the first relationship which was also like living at home. Once I started defending myself things got bad. My dad, Phil, and Mark all had a jekyll and hyde personality. They'd blow up and I'd be trying to figure out why. I believe they all had serious anger issues. I know my dad and Phil grew up being abused. Mark I suspect is a lot like his dad. He passed so I never met him but his friends said he was controlling and ruled the house. One thing definitely with them all is they told their mothers how it is. I didn't notice until looking back. It was like they were the dad not the son.

Darlene reveals that she experienced controlling behavior and abuse from previous relationships including her father. Darlene was used to being in unpredictable environments that were explosive, and filled with anger. She also demonstrated a

degree of searching or seeking for an answer as to why there was abuse present when stating, "they'd blow up and I'd be trying to figure out why," and a retrospective accountability when saying that she "didn't notice until looking back" when making comparisons in the behaviors between men in her life. Although prompted by the interview questions, it appears that Darlene has given thought to these ideas before and this is likely not the first time she has had to account for aspects of this relationship.

Next, Geff describes how he has thought about his partner's upbringing and the potential connections between that and the abuse he experienced:

> *(6.13) <u>Geff:</u> So now, this takes us into a slightly different chapter, which is her own background. She came from a family where there was significant mental illness on her mom's side. And her dad beat his kids frequently. He had a major temper problem. He couldn't control his anger, and he was also very much a workaholic. And he was outside the home most of the time. So when he came home, now, what I'm telling you is, this is based on what she (Carrie) told me. So I don't know if it's really true. But I do think that she was telling the truth about being beaten. So you've got the presence of significant mental illness in the mother, the dad beating all three kids, one of them, developed a drug problem. He stole, he got into crime, and he ended up dead at 35 I believe it was…heroin overdose. So there's lots of trauma there. The other brother ended up living transiently and lived all over different parts of Canada. If you go into the nature and nurture part of it, I think she had both the trauma of being neglected and*

then being beaten for years on end, which did massive damage to her.

She didn't have any positive male influence in her life; the very first one

was her dad, and he was nasty. The second one was her former husband,

who turned out to be gay. Nevertheless, it makes sense when you add

that information, it now makes perfect sense that you know, to her,

reactions were ugly and abusive; she didn't know how to react positively to

a man. I do think that her behavior towards me, especially after her

marriage being so abusive, was really indicative of how she perceived

home and family.

Due to the amount of time and research he had put into this topic and making

sense of his relationship with Carrie, he was actively looking for something to attribute

blame toward and it seems that he is very confident that how Carrie was treated during

childhood had something to do with it. Geff is a participant who has actively worked to

find a reason for why his partner was the way that she was, and he does so with a tone

of expertise in this area. It is evident through the thorough description Geff provides and

statements such as "so now this takes us into a slightly different chapter" when

unprompted by the interviewer to answer a specific question, that he has done a great

deal of reflection on this area before. Geff has mentioned toward the beginning of his

interview that he's been educating himself on this form of abuse for a long time, so

much so that he wrote a book about his experience. With the amount of detail Geff

provides about his partner and her upbringing, he actively works to remove blame from

himself in the relationship. By showing that Carrie had a heavy amount of abuse and

instability in her home life, it tends to make it look more understandable as to why Carrie behaved abusively.

Joe talks about what he knows about his partner's upbringing as well:

> (6.14) <u>Interviewer:</u> *Is there anything you could tell me about her upbringing and relationship with her family?*

> <u>Joe:</u> *What's really weird is I don't know very much about that. It's just hit and miss information which is weird I think. I think she was pretty much spoiled. She was the youngest of 3. Her middle brother had pretty bad substance issues. All 3 siblings have been into drugs at one time. Her dad passed away right after we were married. Her mom is very goofy. Her mom, one uncle, and her middle brother are all very very different. I'm gonna say the nut didn't fall far from the tree.*

Joe begins his description by saying that he doesn't know much about his partner's family history, "What's really weird is I don't know very much about that. It's just hit and miss information which is weird I think." However, next he goes on to list some specific details about substance abuse and odd behavior within her family, and his beliefs that he thinks her behavior isn't that much different compared to her family's behavior. Although Joe did not provide any detail beyond the extract or make any blatant connections between upbringing and abusive behavior, he does reinforce the trend found within the

victims' accounts in this section that oftentimes the perpetrator's family of origin demonstrated abusive, neglectful, and atypical behavior.

All of these extracts continue to point to the question again of 'why does there need to be a reason?' The answer is, as with all of the blame and accountability questions that were asked, there does not, but it's interesting that the participants are searching for answers, they are searching for connections as to why people are the way that they are. It is also noteworthy that in many of the victims' and the perpetrators' family of origin, there was a history of violence. We cannot make a direct correlation with this information, but the idea of the victims processing and reflecting upon these similarities reveals how they tend to search for connections and may encourage future research on these dynamics. By ascribing blame or making connections between abuse in the families of origin, it may function to help victims remove blame from themselves for why they did not notice the abusive behavior or why they remained in the relationships, it could be to help themselves legitimize the validity of the abuse in showing the family history of the abusive behavior, or it could help to prepare themselves to recognize signs of abuse in future relationships.

The theme of *Managing Blame and Accountability* provided valuable insight into the ways in which the victims of psychological abuse provided accountability for their actions or in-action as well as their perpetrator's role in the abuse. The ways in which the individuals' constructed their stories of their experiences differed, but commonalities were found in regards to the function that providing accountability may have served in their accounts. The very notion that victims should provide accountability for any aspect of psychological abuse is not stated, but appears to be implicit which is consistent with the victim-blaming literature of Lerner (1980) and Shaver (1985). By providing an account for

their actions and decision-making processes throughout the course of their psychologically

abusive relationships, the victims' descriptions served to remove blame, guilt, and

accountability from themselves at times as well as from their abuser when providing

reasons as to why their perpetrator may have been abusive. The accounts also helped

contribute to an explanation as to why the victims overlooked warning signs of abuse, or

why they stayed in their relationships. Other victims' descriptions helped them to further

process retrospectively what happened to them during their relationship, and reinforce that

it was not until they were out of their relationship that they realized the severity of the

abuse and changes within themselves.

CHAPTER EIGHT: *It's Good That it Ended?*

The theme of *It's Good That it Ended?* reflects the victims' conclusions they came to surrounding the dissolution of their relationships. When reflecting back upon how their relationship ended and who ended the relationship, the participants frequently built up their descriptions of abusive incidents or 'turning points' leading up to incidents that ended the relationship once and for all or gave descriptions with substantially less detail depending on whether the participant or their abusive partner ended the relationship. Victims also frequently appeared to seek confirmation that it was good for their relationship to end the way that it did throughout these accounts. The ways in which the participants chose to describe the dissolution process of their psychologically abusive relationships and various ways they tended to seek confirmation for these processes will be explored.

The interview question that reflected the participants' answers in this chapter was, "How did the relationship end?" If participants struggled with a place to start answering the question, the interviewer had the possible probes of, "Was there something specific that ended the relationship or was it an accumulation of things?" This probe reflected Loring's (1994) work of looking at the leaving process of individuals in emotionally abusive relationships. Loring theorized that if the end of a relationship was due to a specific incident it could be referred to as "detachment." If the end of the relationship was due to a longer process of disconnection or in her words, "a twofold separation from the emotional abuse process and the individuals own traumatic reactions to it" (Loring, 1994, p. 95) then it could be considered disattachment. If

another probe was needed, the researcher could ask "Who ended it?" or "Could you tell me more about that process?" if the participant did not offer up the information.

Throughout Loretta's interview, her description of her relationship and the abuse she discussed experiencing was very detailed, and also tended to be less structured chronologically than other participants. Loretta spent a large portion of her interview describing the frustrating nature of the patterns of abuse she felt she experienced and went into great detail when speaking about specific incidents as she remembered them happening. Before the data extract that follows, Loretta had just finished describing a large "turning point" in her relationship where her partner had ruined her family's Christmas due to his drinking and explosive outburst so much so that she nearly ended the relationship, but the different abusive behaviors and patterns she described witnessing such as, 'projection,' 'gaslighting,' and 'mental abuse' continued for a long period of time until one more damaging incident:

> *(7.1) Loretta: Anyway, so we've been on and off, on and off, on and off since then and about March this year, I'd moved into my new place. I just about had enough. He came over here one day, and I was at work, and he was passed out drunk upstairs. He'd left something on top of the stove, which was in flames, and I thought, 'That's it, if I carry on seeing this person, he's going to burn my bloody house down.' I just snapped. That's it. I'm done. This man's gonna ruin my life, and I thought, 'I don't want to live like that anymore. I just want peace.' You know? If my daughter knew I was*

seeing him, she would have nothing to do with me, so I was like,

lying to her as well. So I gave him his marching orders the next day,

and needless to say he wasn't very happy about it. And since then,

I've had emails accusing me of all sorts of things. And they've been

abusive, like, you know, from telling me I'm the most beautiful

woman in the world, to actually being quite derogatory about my

looks, about wrinkles and getting old and getting fat, and no man

would ever fancy me, and I'm not going to do any better than him.

In her description, Loretta, unprompted by the question that was given to many other participants: "How did the relationship end?" comes to the point in her story where she feels it makes sense to transition into the dissolution of the relationship. She has been constructing a story that leaves the impression of one that was building in turmoil and intensity with arguments and manipulation. Loretta lists two turning points and builds up a description that helps to portray her partner as very unstable and someone who is spiraling and sending increasingly more serious threats to her and even threatening suicide. When she gets to the point in her account where she describes the breakup itself, she almost attributes the threat of losing her home in a fire or other bad things happening such as her daughter finding out she has been seeing him, to her ending the relationship. By attributing her cause for her decision to leave onto other people or potentially harmful events, she may be successful in achieving the impression that the breakup was out of a sense of duty to protect others from this negative person in her life. What this initial description of the trigger point incident and then the decision

to leave may portray for Loretta is a lack of agency, willpower, or ability to remove herself from the relationship without these external factors.

   After providing several examples of the harassment, blackmail, and suicide threats she was receiving from her partner since leaving him, she begins to provide a description of her reflections on recent months giving an impression that she is seeking to confirm her decision to leave her partner either to herself or to others:

> *(7.2) Loretta: Yeah, it's just been absolutely awful. And, you know, I would I mean, I'm better off on my own, really, I can't ever take him back now. There is no going back. I mean, that would just be you know, he's, he's not going to change, and he doesn't believe there's anything wrong with him. But I don't fall for it anymore because he's still around. I know he's still around. He hasn't killed himself yet. And I thought, 'you know, I hope he doesn't kill himself, no matter how awful he's been.' I hope no one ever does that, but I'm not responsible for his choices. That's his choice to do that, and I can't stay with someone because they can keep blackmailing me.*

For Loretta, she begins her reflection by stating "it's been absolutely awful" demonstrating that what she has endured has been very challenging. Loretta's tone shifts next to one that appears to be reaffirming that she made the right decision to leave by saying, "I'm better off on my own" which also gives off the appearance that Loretta is a strong individual who didn't need her partner to succeed or be happy in the

first place. However, her tone shifts to one that may give off the impression that she is

seeking confirmation now when she says "I can't ever take him back now. There is no

going back, I mean that would just be you know, he's not going to change, and he

doesn't believe there is anything wrong with him." These quotes also may function to

remove accountability from Loretta saying she has no choice but to leave her partner

because 'he won't change' and 'he doesn't think anything is wrong with him.'

Next in the description, Loretta is referring to the suicide threats from her partner

and that he hasn't killed himself yet. She says that she is happy he has not killed

himself and wouldn't want anyone to do that, but it's ultimately not her responsibility to

make sure he doesn't kill himself and it's also not her responsibility to stay with

someone because they keep blackmailing her. This is an interesting shift in tone in this

description because Loretta goes from portraying herself as a strong individual who is

'better off on their own,' to then someone who needed confirmation that she made the

right decision to leave, to finally a person who must worry about themselves and their

well-being first. The way that Loretta's thought process is depicted in this extract shows

how complex it can be for individuals to leave their partner and to also work through the

roller coaster of emotions that will likely come upon leaving someone they have been

with for a significant amount of time.

The buildup of descriptions of the significant incidents or "turning points" in the

relationships may have been necessary for the participants to attempt to portray in order

to show how bad the abuse was for them, and how much strength it took to leave the

relationship. Another reason that the victims who leave their partners provide such

detailed descriptions of their thought processes during and after the significant incidents

may be to validate and confirm to themselves their decision to leave. What is also interesting to note is the idea that for the individuals who ended the relationships themselves instead of being broken up with tend to build up their descriptions of the incidents that were powerful toward the end of the relationship as well as the actual description of the break up; this may again be done in order to demonstrate that they were justified in leaving the relationship and to show the strength it took to do so after enduring the abuse and struggling with feeling like they had already lost themselves.

During the closing part of the interview when the interviewer was thanking Loretta for her time, Loretta reflected upon her experience as something therapeutic and demonstrated further confirmation of her decision to end the relationship:

(7.3) Loretta: For a lot of people it's actually, it's quite therapeutic and cathartic as well to be able to talk to somebody you know that's not going to be judgmental or whatever and it probably helps them to to be able to talk about it. Even talking about it now you know, you shove a lot of things in the back of your mind, and even talking about it right now I think, 'Oh my god, what was I doing?' It just reinforces it, and I think, "oh I'm so glad I'm out of it. I'm really glad, the scales fell from my eyes. Thank God I had that wake up call. Thank God I never let him move in with me. My life would be hell now if I'd let him do that, I wouldn't have any money. He'd probably plow through my savings. It would have been awful you know, he would have been making scenes. I expect the police probably

would have been called, you know. Yeah…I'm so glad I'm out of it. I

don't really hate him, I pity him. I don't, I don't know what's gonna

happen to him, but it's really not my problem. I, I worry about…he

will find someone else and they're going to go through the same

thing, because he's very charming, or he can be, you know and I

worry for that person, but what can you do.

Here Loretta suggests that this process of speaking about the relationship experience with someone else who is 'not going to be judgmental' can be 'therapeutic' and 'cathartic.' It is noteworthy that she begins her statement with omitting herself from this claim; she takes somewhat of a removed stance at first and speaks in general terms, but it does demonstrate that the process of healing is something that takes time and should not be done without the support of others you can trust. Next, she introduces herself into this group of people who can benefit by talking about their experience with someone saying, "even talking about it right now I think, 'oh my God, what was I doing?' It just reinforces it, and I think, 'oh I'm so glad I'm out of it.'" By bringing up her thoughts surrounding her former involvement in the relationship, it shows that Loretta is aware of how terrible of a situation she was in and perhaps how out of character it was for her to be in an abusive relationship.

Loretta begins to speak about aspects of her relationship that could have gone wrong if she stayed with her partner, "Thank God I never let him move in with me. My life would be hell now, I wouldn't have any money. It would have been awful…yeah I'm so glad I'm out of it." By predicting what her life may have been like had she stayed with

her partner, it serves to provide further confirmation of her choice to leave the relationship and show that she has spent a significant amount of time reflecting upon her relationship and potential negative outcomes had she stayed. In her last part of her statement she begins to speak in a way that leaves the impression that she is demonstrating her personal maturity in how she views her former partner and the situation for what it actually is by saying, "I don't hate him, I pity him. I don't, I don't know what's gonna happen to him, but it's really not my problem." Loretta may have discussed this topic in order to demonstrate that she is trying to take the high road in the outcome of the relationship and move on emotionally by letting go of thinking about what will happen in the future to her partner.

Finally, she admits that she is worried about what will happen to the next person he finds. By ending her remarks by expressing concern for the individuals involved with her partner in the future, it shows an understanding of what behavior she feels will most likely continue on in the future; this could be done to show that she is moving on emotionally or it could also be done as a way to seek further confirmation or reaffirm to herself that her partner is abusive and it wouldn't have gotten better, so it was the right thing to do. Although Loretta expresses concern for any future victims of her partner's behavior, it could also be said to not so much express concern for others, but to help her move on from her relationship and to reinforce to herself that she is right in thinking that what she endured was truly awful and not a one time thing. At times, there can be a tendency to think 'was it just me, or would it have happened to anyone they were in a relationship with?'

Similar to the participants who initiated the break up in their psychologically abusive relationships, Joe also tended to describe specific incidents in great detail leading up to the actual incident that ended the relationship. Right before the interviewer asked the question about what led to the end of the relationship, Joe had just described in detail an instance where he realized that his wife had "some sort of evil in her that he couldn't comprehend." After having lower back surgery, he was in immense pain and had to run by the automotive shop at which he worked. When he arrived at the store, it was very busy and he volunteered to help with a project. Upon returning home, his wife said, "If you're good enough to be at work, you're good enough to finish our truck." He worked on their truck for six hours in excruciating pain, but as Joe puts it, "she didn't care" and upon reflection said, "it always amazed me how someone could be so sweet and nice but then turn into a monster so quick." Joe went on to confirm his negative feelings surrounding his wife by saying, "years later when I finally started studying narcissism this event here is what I think really proved it." Again Joe exhibits this tendency to confirm his thought processes and suspicions surrounding his wife's abusive behavior, and ultimately his decision to leave the relationship. He builds up detailed descriptions of incidents that were significant to him when reflecting upon the relationship which may serve as a way of demonstrating to others that his actions in leaving were justified, and it also contributes to strengthening the negative portrayal of his wife's behaviors toward him during the course of the relationship.

Following the description of the significant incident with his back pain, Joe answers the question about the actual breakup below in great detail as well:

(7.4) <u>Interviewer:</u> I know you're still going through the divorce process, but what eventually ended the relationship? Was there a specific trigger or incident that ended it for one of you, or was it an accumulation of events?

<u>Joe:</u> Yes there was a trigger. For years, basically since the big incident I told you about, she manipulated and worked hard to ruin EVERYTHING I cared about and loved to do. I snowmobiled for years. Quit that. I used to farm a large bit of farm ground. One of her "male friends" managed to get 700 acres of ground that I rent away from me. There are tons more instances but the big one was surrounding my son. My son has raced since 5 yrs old. At age 17 she really started working on him to be against me. MF'ing me. There is NO father on the planet that has done as much for his son as I have. We were buddies. Done everything together and were together every waking moment. I realized that it was gonna come to an end when I got from him, "when are you gonna finally be a father," and "you're an awful father." Then I knew it was too late. She already had him under her spell. My ex phoned me and called me everything but a white man. She finally had her Narcissistic enabler, flying monkey, whatever you call it. And that was it. I couldn't live that way any longer.

When Joe begins to talk about the breakup, he makes it very clear that there was a trigger incident, but begins with providing a summary of her 'manipulative' behavior and efforts to destroy 'everything that he cared about and loved to do.' He emphasized the word 'everything' by putting it in all caps, given that this was an interview done over Facebook messenger, it showed that he was very intent on communicating the amount of things in his life that she attempted to take over.

Joe then proceeds to provide a list of the things that she worked to 'ruin' including his snowmobiling, and having his farming land taken away from him. He says next that, "there are a ton more instances but the big one was surrounding my son." This statement demonstrates that Joe may feel what he has listed previously might not be enough to convey his feelings toward his wife and the degree of abusive or manipulative behavior that she was consistently exhibiting. Joe also likely sets up his description by listing things his wife had worked to ruin to show how deeply her abuse had infiltrated his life. By showing all of the areas she had negatively impacted, it could also help to internally confirm or gain support for his decision from an outsider's perspective, for leaving the relationship.

Next Joe takes time to build up a description of the closeness of his relationship with his son by first talking of his great racing ability and the amount of years that he had watched his talent develop, showing his support for him and something they likely bonded over. He interjects that she had been working on his son to be against him since age 17 or 'motherf-ing' him as he called it. Joe re-emphasizes his support for his son by saying, "NO father on the planet has done as much as I have. We were buddies. Done everything together and were together every waking moment." After working hard to

show how strong of a relationship he had with his son and how much time they had spent together all of those years, he then switches to the trigger that may have been his wake up call. It wasn't until his own son began to turn against him via what he describes as the influence of his wife by saying things such as, "when are you gonna finally be a father," and "you're an awful father," is when there was no hope to salvage a relationship with his wife. At the end of his description, Joe demonstrates that he had done some research on narcissistic abuse when likened his wife's behavior to that of a "flying monkey" or "narcissistic enabler," which is someone who traditionally carries out the work of a narcissist or does their "evil bidding" (Levin, 2021). This may be done to help show that Joe has learned since being in this relationship and to show how dishonorable his wife's intent and actions were during their time together.

Again, in Joe's situation it is noteworthy like some other participants that the actual final straw was the realization that they couldn't stay with their partner because of the effects it was having on someone else. For Joe, he had seen his relationship suffer with his son, and perhaps he had hopes for regaining that relationship, but nonetheless he attributed his decision at the end to the impact on a person whom he cared deeply about in his life, that being his son.

> (7.5) *Interviewer: How did you tell her you didn't want to be in the relationship anymore and how did she take it? If you don't mind me asking.*
>
> Joe: *After she blew up on me I had enough and blew up on her later in the day. I think she realized I finally figured her out. She left.*

Interviewer: Has she attempted to get back together with you since you initially separated?

Joe: No. And I made it perfectly clear there would be no contact after she left. I have listened to advice and kept no contact since then.

After being asked about how Joe told her he wanted to break up and how she received that news, Joe provides a very limited description of the events and also says, "I think she realized I finally figured her out. She left." This could show that Joe has potentially maybe never stood up to his wife during their marriage and that this decision to leave was extremely momentous for him. If his wife realized that she was 'found out' then that would be similar to the behavior of some participants' partners such as Loretta's partner, who left without much of a fight or reaction once they witnessed their partner was recognizing their abusive behavior and took concrete action to leave the relationship.

What's interesting about Joe's response to whether or not she had attempted to get back together with him is the tone that he takes that he was in charge of the relationship and how it would proceed from that point on, and also that he provides such little detail about her reaction to the breakup. The lack of detail surrounding her response again could be due to her not having much of a response to the breakup or it could be influenced by Joe working to strengthen his portrayal of his wife as someone

who truly didn't care about others; her lack of response could portray a lack of care for the outcome of the relationship with Joe.

Another participant, Kate shared her experience with the end of her relationship. In Kate's experience of her break up, she speaks of it being an accumulation of things, but an incident that she described previously in the interview surrounding an over-the-top reaction to her and her daughter taking the "wrong way" back from the grocery store thus taking too long for her partner's liking, and a tremendous amount of yelling in front of her daughter was "the straw that broke the camel's back." Kate admitted that she "couldn't do it to her daughter anymore" again contributing to the idea that sometimes the victims of abuse in these interviews speak of one of the final reasons they leave their partner being to protect their child.

(7.6) Interviewer: So what happened after that? What was that leaving process for you like?

Kate: Um, I've got a to-go bag ready at all times, a couple of 'nappies,' bed wipes, couple of changes of clothes, a couple days worth of meds. I told him it was just in case we ever ended up in the hospital again, and I was ready to leave, I didn't know where I'd go, but I was at a point where I'd go. I just started putting money away…he monitored my bank account quite a lot. I couldn't take out a lot, even my daughter's money was his. So I'd kind of start sneaking away bits and bobs of money. And this one day he started

shouting at me because I was on my PlayStation. I was gaming, apart from things. He started harassing me and shoutin' at me. He just started accusing me of sleeping with the lads that I was gaming with…all of them are married, all of them lived in America (laughter) At what point am I going to be sleeping with them? I literally, if I leave the house, my daughter is with me, and she was having frequent seizures at that time, so it was all the more a tense time. It was stupid, and he was just screaming and he was trying to get me to a point where I was crying.. and I just looked at him and I was like, 'I can't do this anymore, I can't. I won't do this anymore.' And he looked at me and his face dropped, and he started shouting at me again. I was like, 'Either you leave or I'm leavin', but Jane is coming with me…' He sat down, put on the waterworks, which he only ever did when he cheated really, he never really cried any other time. Em..fake cryin' it never seemed real. I turned my Playstation off and sat opposite the sofa from him, because I didn't want to be near him, and this was about three four months after the rapin' started and I just..I avoided him like the plague. I didn't like touching him, I didn't like him near me. He said he'd leave if I found him somewhere to live, so I literally begged anybody to take him, and he demanded quite a chunk of money for everything that was in the house, and he took a lot of the stuff that was in the house; it went a lot better than I thought it would. I was expecting to have to

pick my daughter up and run, but I think he was in a state of shock

when he'd agree to a lot of this…I think he realized he could still

use Jane.

Kate provides a very elaborate description of the day that she actually ended the relationship with her partner, which is again similar to other participants who broke up with their partners in providing lengthy, detailed descriptions of incidents leading up to the break up. First in her account, she begins to talk about her preparedness for leaving through listing several things she had ready for herself and her daughter if they ever needed to leave quickly such as, "nappies," "bed wipes," and "medication." By listing these elements it serves to show that she had been wanting and planning to leave for a significant amount of time, and adds further evidence supporting the idea that the leaving process of a psychologically abusive relationship is one that often has several attempts and is multifaceted. Admitting that she "didn't know where she'd go, but she knew she was ready to leave," was a big step for her, and she also began putting away some of her money because her partner frequently monitored her bank account; this also shows that she had put a great deal of consideration into leaving and that it wasn't a short process, but was serious about it nonetheless.

Next Kate speaks of how her daughter was having a particularly bad period of time in her health with her seizures and the fear surrounding this particular time for them. This description of the seriousness of her daughter's health strengthens her account of why she chose to leave her partner that particular day, and also may serve to portray additional examples of why she had to leave her partner for her daughter's

well-being. Kate then expresses an attitude of disbelief and acknowledges the hilarity of this particular accusation from her partner, "He just started accusing me of sleeping with the lads that I was gaming with…all of them are married, all of them lived in America" (Kate lives in the United Kingdom). "At what point am I going to be sleeping with them? I literally, if I leave the house, my daughter is with me." Kate's reaction to her partner's accusation demonstrates the absurd nature of her partner's personality by making far-fetched claims which were not feasible by any means as it was a virtual game she was playing with people in other countries. It is possible that Kate's partner was projecting his infidelity and behavior onto her at the end of the relationship.

Kate speaks of how he continued to scream and shout at her, making accusations and she came to the point where she said, "I can't do this anymore, I can't. I won't do this anymore. He sat down, put on the waterworks, which he only ever did when he cheated really, he never really cried any other time." Here Kate demonstrates awareness of the pattern of behaviors that her partner would exhibit when in conflict or when she threatened to leave him. It appears that she was at a state emotionally where she had prepared herself for these behaviors and decided that it was the last time she would put up with his antics and claims. Kate concludes her description of the breakup with talking about how she handled an ultimatum he put forth, and further shows vulnerability through admitting that she didn't think the breakup would go as smoothly as she thought it would.

Kate's description of her breakup continues to confirm that the participants who end the relationship tend to take a lot of time to show specific instances that were triggers or turning points for them in their stories, and also Kate does not speak of

whether or not there was contact from her ex after that point or if he said anything else in the moment when she agreed to find him a place to live. She does go on to talk about things she suffered from after the relationship such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and fear that she would see her partner again, which is in line with current literature supporting post-abuse effects (Laskey et al., 2019), but she does not mention anything further about her partner being involved in her life after that point. The omission of details regarding her partner's reaction could be done because she doesn't know what he felt, thought, or said, or it could also be a way of keeping the focus on her story and emphasizing the strength that it took for her to leave this particular relationship. Lastly, this incident also affirms the pattern of victims attributing a significant part of their decision to end the relationship to protecting the well-being of a family member.

Unlike the previous accounts of the participants having ended the relationships themselves, Darlene shares her experience of being broken up with:

(7.7) *Interviewer: How did the relationship eventually end then? Was there a specific trigger or was it an accumulation of things…*

Darlene: I believe it was an accumulation of things. He left me while I was visiting my dad. I had a motorcycle accident on my way back so I think he felt some guilt but not enough as it again was my fault. I'm not sure how long I would've put up with it, hard to say but I know this break up is right and I have to be strong.

Darlene's interview was done via Facebook messenger and her responses tended to be much more brief and less detailed in comparison to the majority of the phone call interviews as well as the other Facebook messenger interviews. Before she was asked about the end of the relationship Darlene had just described in general terms how the abuse was progressing over time and how she felt that she could do nothing right and that everything was her fault.

Here in this data extract talking about the dissolution of the relationship, she provided a very brief description of the actual breakup itself as well as the details leading up to the moment. Her first sentence in her description, "I believe it was an accumulation of things" demonstrates that there could still be an air of uncertainty and confusion in her mind surrounding the end of the relationship. Darlene proceeds by saying, "He left me while I was visiting my dad." There are no details mentioned surrounding the point leading up to him leaving her or why he left her, which may be because she does not know the reason why he left her, or simply because she does not want to describe anymore detail for whatever reason, perhaps it would invoke feelings of pain or shame surrounding the breakup.

Next in her description, Darlene says, "I had a motorcycle accident on my way back so I think he felt some guilt but not enough as it again was my fault." Darlene may be stating the motorcycle accident to show there was an opportunity for him to show some compassion about her when she got in an accident, and to potentially feel bad about considering leaving her before she was away from home, but he left her anyway. She shows a pattern that she realizes her partner blamed her for the majority of things

in their relationship; whether or not she believes everything was her fault is not clear, but Darlene acknowledges that she knows this was his way of thinking.

At the end of the description, Darlene states, "I'm not sure how long I would've put up with it, hard to say, but I know this break up is right and I have to be strong." She demonstrates that she was coming to the 'end of her ropes,' with the relationship at that time which may serve to give the impression that she was aware of the severity of the abuse and may have broken up with her partner soon anyway. When Darlene said, "I know that this break up is right and I have to be strong," it may function again as confirmation to herself that it was good that the relationship had finally ended; it was the right thing to have happen at the time and good to be able to move on from the situation. Despite Darlene not mentioning robust detail about the dissolution of her relationship, it does provide very interesting insight into what she deemed relevant or instead the lack of knowledge surrounding her partner's thoughts and actions.

Darlene next talks about how she has been doing since her breakup and speaks to the challenges emotionally, socially, and with her own thoughts about herself:

> (7.8) _Interviewer_: How has this month been for you since the break up, how are you coping?

> _Darlene:_ It's been extremely hard. My head knows it's the right thing but my heart hasn't gotten there. At first I felt so very sad. The loneliness has now set in so I'm trying to be strong and work

through it. My heart is finally catching up. His actions are helping

remind me why this is a good thing.

In these first couple of sentences, Darlene is very transparent with her current headspace that she is in post break up. By saying that her 'head knows it's the right thing,' she acknowledges that she realizes this relationship was unhealthy and it needed to come to an end, but at the same time by then saying, 'but my heart hasn't gotten there,' demonstrates vulnerability with describing that she feels she is still struggling with the relationship coming to an end.

Again Darlene demonstrates this idea of needing confirmation in her extract by saying things such as, "my head knows it's the right thing," and "my heart is finally catching up" demonstrating that she feels her emotions need to catch up with the truth of the reality of the break up. This may also show that she could feel as if she needs reminders, help, or confirmation that this relationship was not good for her through saying, "his actions are helping remind me why this is a good thing." Darlene achieves the impression that she is aware of the abusive nature of the relationship and the negative impact it had on her, but that at the same time, it is still a process to move on from the relationship when it ends so abruptly; the reality of the situation cannot heal the heart immediately. What is also evident is that like several other participants, Darlene appears to speak in a way that seeks confirmation either from herself or someone else that the relationship was damaging and it was good that it came to an end.

Overall, the leaving process for these victims of psychological abuse was a gradual process that often required several attempts to leave. It appeared to be a confusing process that required multiple turning points to help the victim realize the

seriousness of abuse, or the nature of their partner in order to initiate wanting to leave. There were moments of self-empowerment that occurred before leaving the victims' partners, and some individuals who reported a feeling of getting themselves back after the relationship ended. But, generally the individuals were candid about feeling that they were still struggling with the effects of the relationship, and tended to seek confirmation when reflecting upon their decisions to leave or feelings that they still held about the relationship as a whole.

CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There has been little research analyzing victims' accounts via blogs of their

experiences in psychologically abusive relationships until this current study, thus the

use of blogs to gain more insight into individuals' experiences in psychologically abusive

relationships proved to be valuable in adding more rich qualitative descriptions of

non-researcher generated data. The thematic analysis was conducted on the seven

blogs to answer the questions of how do victims describe their experiences of being in

psychologically abusive romantic relationships and how do victims account for or

attribute blame to themselves or others when describing their psychologically abusive

relationships? The data analysis led to one overarching theme: *Retrospective*

Accountability and five key themes: *Blissful Beginnings, The Continuous Cycle of*

Abuse, Invisible Nature, I Lost Myself, and the *Leaving Process*. The overarching

theme, *Retrospective Accountability* was defined as the notion of individuals' tendency

to take accountability for their own thoughts or actions when speaking about their

relationship as well as the pattern of not noticing concerning aspects of their

relationships until after they have ended. The components of the overarching theme of

Retrospective Accountability were prevalent throughout the five key themes identified in

the blog analysis.

Summary of Findings

The first key theme identified in the blogs, *Blissful Beginnings* refers to how the

individuals described the beginnings of their relationships as 'blissful' and

overwhelmingly happy; however, upon reflection tended to reconsider whether the beginning stages were happy after all. The second theme, *The Continuous Cycle of Abuse*, is centered around the pattern of abuse that the victims tended to notice in their relationships which included brief periods of warmth, abusive and manipulating tactics, withdrawal, and intermittent warmth again. The third key theme, *Invisible Nature*, refers to the sense of psychological abuse being 'invisible' in nature pervading the victims' accounts and its presence was described as building imperceptibly over time. Finally, the fourth theme, *I Lost Myself*, encapsulated the belief that the victims noticed a change in the core of who they were as a person over time, which contributed to feelings of sadness and confusion with this loss of personal identity. The fifth key theme, the *Leaving Process* is about the multi-staged process of leaving a psychologically abusive relationship; this process is not linear and is different for every person, however the bloggers described having significant turning points, moments of self-empowerment, and times where they experienced what they called "the reawakening of the soul" that helped them leave and/or heal from the aftermath of their abusive relationship. The blogs as a whole provided a powerful representation of how people reflected upon their experiences in psychologically abusive relationships, showing that the abuse was something that infiltrated seemingly almost every area of their life, and impacted their sense of identity so powerfully that it was difficult to gain the strength to leave.

In search of answering the questions of how do victims describe their experiences of being in psychologically abusive romantic relationships, and how do victims make sense of, and address issues of accountability in their psychologically abusive relationships, one overarching theme: *Retrospective Sense-Making* and four

key themes: *How this was Abuse, I am Less Than I was Before, Managing Blame and Accountability, and It's Good That it Ended* were identified in the semi-structured interviews. The overarching theme of *Retrospective Sense-Making* referred to the idea that victims tended to make sense of the abuse, changes within themselves, and their experience as a whole after their relationships had ended. In the first analytic chapter, *How this was Abuse*, it looked at the ways in which the victims constructed their descriptions of the psychological abuse they described encountering during their relationships. Several unique approaches to describing the nature of what the victims claimed to endure, including the behaviors from their partner and the feelings they experienced were reported. The key findings from this chapter are that much of the realization of the abuse was done in a retrospective nature; they couldn't pinpoint it as abuse at the time, and it was very difficult to explain how what they experienced was abuse due to the confusing nature of the experience as a whole.

The second thematic chapter, *I am Less Than I Was Before*, is centered around the idea that the victims knew the abuse impacted them greatly and resulted in a feeling of losing parts of themselves that were central to their identity before they were in the relationship. The key findings of this chapter are that the victims reported these changes within themselves through setting up their descriptions by using a normative comparison, meaning they compared themselves during their relationships to what they were like before the relationship, and the ways they talked about the changes or loss were very much more reflective-focused versus blame-focused. The blame is attributed in a very downplayed way -- even though they talk about this abuse and all of the harmful things the perpetrator did to them, the blame is not overtly put on them for this

loss of self or change. There is an element of confusion or lack of understanding when reflecting back upon this change in themselves; the victims struggle to identify when the changes happened or what caused them in the first place.

The third thematic chapter, *Managing Blame and Accountability*, was focused on looking at the ways in which victims tended to account for their roles in their psychologically abusive relationships and where they attributed blame for what happened during their relationships. The key findings are that the victims' descriptions served to remove blame, guilt, and accountability from themselves at times as well as from their abuser when providing reasons as to why they may have gotten involved or why the perpetrator may have been abusive. Many of the victims spoke of coming from families with a history of abuse or neglect and suggested that this is a reason they could have been vulnerable. Several perpetrators came from a similar upbringing and also one of entitlement where they were frequently given what they wanted growing up. The accounts also helped contribute to an explanation as to why they overlooked warning signs of abuse, or why they stayed in their relationships. Other victims' descriptions helped them to further process retrospectively what happened to them during their relationship, and reinforce that it wasn't until they were out of their relationship that they realized the severity of the abuse and changes within themselves.

The fourth thematic chapter, *It's Good That it Ended?* was centered around the reflection of the victims' thought processes surrounding the dissolution of their relationships. The key findings from this chapter are that the victims tended to seek confirmation through many of their descriptions when speaking about the process of leaving their partner or being broken up with. It was almost as if the individuals were

speaking in a way to affirm their decision to end the relationship, or that it was for the best that the relationship was finished even if they were the ones who initiated the break up. Another finding was that there was a strong emphasis on "turning points" in their relationship that helped them to realize how serious the abuse was and that they desired for the relationship to end. An additional finding was that many victims attributed the decision to breaking up with their partner due to the impact it was having on their children. Lastly, there was a pattern of the victims working to build up the descriptions of when they took the action to leave the relationship versus providing less details of the breakup when the perpetrator chose to end the relationship.

The semi-structured interviews reflected the experience of being in a psychologically abusive relationship as one that is a long-term process of recognizing and understanding what was actually occurring in the relationship. Self-doubt tended to creep in, and confirmation was often sought for whether what the individuals went through was actually abuse, and the questioning of if the changes in themselves were as drastic as they felt, is something that was given thought. Victims described the experience as one that consumes all aspects of an individuals' life, and it takes an extreme toll on them as they seek to understand and confirm what they are experiencing both during and after their relationship.

When looking across both the blogs and the interviews, there were several similarities and differences between how the themes functioned within the blogs and interviews as well as their presence in general. One key theme for the blogs and the interviews produced an emphasis on a change or loss of self over time. The victims spoke of this loss being one of confusion as they did not recognize it in the beginning,

which led to feelings of sadness as they realized they had completely changed from their former selves. One difference with the blogs is that the way that loss is talked about is one that is presented in a much more linear, concise fashion which could be due to the nature of the blogs being written for a public forum. There could also be a desire in the blogs, to preserve the self in this regard and there is also the opportunity for the bloggers to take more time and put more thought into how they wish to present their story. With the blogs, the description of how this loss happened over time tended to follow the pattern of the victims speaking about internalizing the blame of their partners, "walking on eggshells" so as not to upset their partners leading to the feeling that they began to change their behavior to appease their partners, which eventually was described as the realization that they lost elements of who they were over time. The blog findings fit with the literature on loss of self that talk about victims of psychological abuse experiencing a slow change in the loss of themselves over the course of the relationship, and one that leads to feelings of confusion and sadness (Chang, 1996; Lammers et al., 2005). The loss of self findings also fit with other previous research that has reported a diminished identity to be associated with psychological abuse and related to a loss of self-esteem (Chang, 1996; Douglas, 1994; Kirkwood, 1993; Loring, 1994).

The participants in the interviews tended to spend a much larger amount of time working up their descriptions of their experiences of this change within themselves. The victims described this experience through a normative comparison, placing emphasis on describing what they were like before the relationship whether it be through their mindset, ability to feel a range of emotions, interests, or how they dressed and then

describing the negative impacts they felt leading to the realization that they've changed dramatically. The ways in which they spoke about this change in comparison to the bloggers was much more consistently downplayed in their assurance of what happened to them; it was more a tone of they weren't as confident seeming of what happened to them, but they knew that they were different or even less than they before entering the relationship. When accounting for this change, the interviewees were more reflective-focused versus blame-focused, tending to downplay blame for this change or loss, whereas the bloggers portrayed this experience as something that was more clearly an effect of the abuse and actions of their partner.

Again, this difference between the descriptions of loss in the blogs versus loss in the interviews could be due to the nature of the platform for participants, and with that the tendency to preserve themselves in an online forum versus being more vulnerable in the interviews. Another note to make is that of course with the blogs, the individuals had much more time to construct the versions of the stories that were meaningful to them, where as the interviewees could not filter or edit how they shared their experiences to the researcher; however, it is not to say that the interviewees had not given great thought about their experiences and how they might describe their story.

There is one theme in the blogs that is not prevalent in that of the interviews and that is *Blissful Beginnings*. In the blogs, the individuals tended to spend time in the beginning of their accounts describing how overwhelmingly happy they felt when they first got together with their partner. The bloggers talked about their perceptions of their partners tending to shower them with gifts, compliments, and excessive affection. Many bloggers also set up these accounts with descriptions of themselves as individuals who

were like any other female with hopes for a fairytale-like love; they spent time showing

that they had hopes just like any other individual. This simple addition of the portrayal of

themselves like any other person and the overwhelmingly happy beginning stages could

have served to provide self-protection for not noticing any red flags from their partner or

the abuse that began to occur in their relationships.

During the interviews, the beginning stages, although asked about by the

researcher, were much more downplayed and matter-of-fact. The interviewees tended

to describe the beginnings of their relationships as one that was happy, but not

necessarily overwhelmingly blissful. A couple of interviewees spoke of experiencing an

extremely happy beginning with their partner, but it wasn't worked up in such a way that

the blogs were and there were even elements of red flags or unhealthy behaviors from

their partners early on. The differences between the beginning stages of the

relationships in the blogs and in the interviews could be due to the nature of the blogs

being written for the public eye and the interviews being given specifically out of a call to

help further research in this area. The nature of the interviews provide an opportunity for

the participants to be more vulnerable as they are not intended to be put directly onto a

public forum for several to read.

In both the blogs and interviews the victims spoke of how they had difficulty in

pinpointing the abuse or labeling the behavior as abuse at the time, which fits with the

nature of psychological abuse being hard to detect (Follingstad et al., 1990; Lammers et

al., 2005; Marshall, 1996; Semple, 2001). Also, both bloggers and interviewees

described their awareness of the abuse in a retrospective nature. The bloggers and

interview participants also shared similar descriptions of experiencing abuse through

various tactics of manipulation, emotional and physical withdrawal, and verbal abuse such as criticism, yelling, and degradation as well as how a pattern or continuous cycle of abuse was often experienced. In the blogs a more clear and concise pattern or cycle of abuse was described in the way they talked about the nature of the abuse, which may have been partly due to the platform of the blogs naturally providing longer amounts of time for writing their descriptions.

The bloggers spoke about how they witnessed experiencing a cycle as follows: brief periods of warmth, abusive and manipulating tactics, withdrawal, and intermittent warmth again. The description of this repeating pattern of abuse was similar to that of Loring's (1994) work where she maps out the Connection-Deprivation Cycle where there are six elements involved in the cycle: (1) connection, (2) disconnection in the form of emotional abuse, (3) trauma (which includes things such as nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts) (4) anxious clinging (5) continuous emotional abuse and (6) intermittent warmth. The bloggers do not place such an emphasis on anxious clinging behavior when experiencing the abuse. Instead, they talk about their process of at first attempting to change their behavior to appease their partner, then "walking on eggshells" with the fear of upsetting them or enduring another outburst. The bloggers also portrayed their experiences of abuse in a more linear and structured fashion compared to those who participated in the interviews.

The Connection-Deprivation Cycle has not been cited often or considered a foundation of the nature of psychological abuse in past research, to the researcher's knowledge, thus aids in providing information toward the aim of gaining further insight into what constitutes psychological abuse and how it functions in a romantic

relationship. This reinforcement of Loring's (1994) finding, can potentially strengthen our understanding of how psychological abuse can be an independent form of abuse and demonstrates how it can go undetected frequently due to its continuous nature.

The interviewees had many of the same components of abuse in their descriptions, such as, manipulation, circular arguments, criticizing, verbal abuse, emotional withdrawal, blame reversal, highs and lows, but the interviewees tended to describe the abusive behaviors and effects throughout their account even if it didn't correspond to the particular question, versus in one concise section like many of the bloggers. The interviewees appeared to remember more abusive incidents as the interview progressed and the frequency of their descriptions of different psychologically abusive incidents were more unpredictable in terms of order within the interview. A cycle of abuse wasn't as clearly defined in the interviews as it was in the blogs; this difference may also be due to the nature of the platform. Writing an for an online blog allows the individuals to think about how they remembered experiencing the abuse without time constraints or worrying about anyone listening to them process their experiences aloud, where as the interviewees had more of perceived pressure to respond in a timely manner through being in an interview, and also had to process and share their experiences as they themselves remembered it.

The blogs provide an interesting insight into how individuals chose to share and construct their narratives of psychological abuse; the lack of time constraints and presence of another individual with them asking questions potentially allows for a person to spend a great deal of time constructing their narrative in a way that reflects

how they remember experiencing it, or how they would like others to understand psychological abuse.

One other key element within the descriptions of abuse that differed was that although both bloggers and interviewees described the ability to recognize and classify what they were experiencing at the time to be abuse, the bloggers discussed this in a more retrospective manner. For example, the emphasis of the tone of the blogs was aimed more toward providing justification for not recognizing the abuse or for staying due to the difficulty of how psychological abuse builds imperceptibly over time. Whereas in the interviews while many participants discussed that in retrospect, they can now clearly see the early red flags and abusive behaviors as well as how it was impacting them, the interviewees seemed to be a bit more humble about some awareness of it early on as well as the seriousness of it as the relationship progressed with time. These differences in the descriptions of the victims' awareness of abuse could again be due to the nature of the platform and the purpose of writing, but overall, the findings from the themes on how victims construct their experiences of abuse help to show that the same ambiguities that exist within the attempt to define psychological abuse for researchers, are also present for the victims. Additionally, male and female victims' experiences of abuse did not differ greatly in terms of the types of abuse they experienced, which fits with some existing literature (Cho & Wilke, 2010). However, the men reported more instances of their partner manipulating others to affect the victims' relationship with that individual, which is supported by findings from Walker et al., (2020) which shows that females tend to perpetrate IPV through manipulation of others. The way in which men in the interviews spoke of how others reacted to them trying to explain their partner's

abusive behavior was oftentimes met with dismissal or minimization; this finding is also supported by Walker et al., (2020) which notes that male victims of IPV are met with shock and minimization.

The theme of *Managing Blame and Accountability* was a stand alone theme in the interviews, but was not a theme in the blogs. While although in the blogs, the participants took accountability for not noticing or overlooking abusive behavior as well as the impacts the abuse was having on themselves, it was done more retrospectively and tended to be more apparent as an overarching theme of *Retrospective Accountability*, which again supports the notion of individuals' tendency to take accountability for their own thoughts or actions when speaking about their relationship as well as the pattern of not noticing concerning aspects of their relationships until after they have ended.

Managing Blame and Accountability was identified in the interviews as a theme because there were several categories of accountability present in the participants' responses. Some of the key elements where participants can be seen taking accountability or placing blame on someone for aspects of their relationship were when talking about their perceptions of why they got involved in the relationship initially, why they stayed, and why they eventually left. Elements of blame were seen in the interviews when participants reflected upon their own family of origin as well as their perpetrator's family of origin. All but one of the participants in the interviews spoke of being raised in an environment where they experienced either physical and/or psychological abuse or emotional abandonment and neglect. This research fits with the findings of several researchers showing that there is often abuse and/or neglect in the

family of origin in victims of intimate partner violence (Berzenski & Yates, 2010; Chang, 2006; Parks et al., 2011). Participants tended to draw connections between their susceptibility to being in an abusive relationship with this attribution of blame, and some participants also attributed the actions of their perpetrator on their abusive or dysfunctional family dynamics growing up. These attributions of blame or the tendency to take accountability for certain behaviors, were often times brought up due to the interview questions that were asked which looked at understanding their family of origin background, their partners, and what their circumstances were like in their personal lives close to the time of meeting and beginning to date their partners.

In the blogs this element of blame or accountability goes more toward the direction of providing justification retrospectively and with providing more elaborate descriptions of the beginning stages of their relationships. Some participants talked about how since their partner was so overly charming and loving, and because they themselves wanted to be loved and have a happy relationship "like any girl would," they tended to dismiss or not notice anything wrong. Afterward, these *Blissful Beginnings* did not seem so blissful when they looked back at red flags that were missed, and after gaining a better understanding of the charming nature that was presented to them in the beginning that they later described to be more of a set up for the implementation of the abuse. Working up these overly happy beginnings in the blogs could be a way to provide accountability for not noticing or overlooking the abuse.

The ways in which the victims of psychological abuse described their process of leaving their abusive relationships was a multi-staged process that tended to be non-linear and looked different for every relationship. However, there were shared

components of the leaving process in which the bloggers described having significant turning points, moments of self-empowerment, and times where they experienced what they called "the reawakening of the soul" that helped them leave and/or heal from the aftermath of their abusive relationship. There were several similarities and differences in how this theme was apparent and developed by the participants through their descriptions in the blogs and the interviews.

In the blogs, the victims of abuse described their experiences of the ending stages of their relationships in ways that alluded to the presence of clear stages. The first stage was that of having significant turning points where they experienced pivotal moments either in their own mind, or due to an action of their partner that ignited a realization of the abuse they were experiencing and/or their desire to leave the relationship. The second stage was that of self-empowerment which was when the victims spoke of coming to a point where they desired to regain their self-esteem and strength that was so clearly diminished in their relationship that they began to take steps to empower and educate themselves on what they believed they were experiencing as abuse through things such as counseling, reading books on abuse, or connecting with supportive friends and family. The third stage was the reawakening of the soul where the parts of themselves that they once identified with such as their interests, ability to feel emotions, and ability to connect with themselves and others began to awaken. The second and third stages sometimes appeared to blend together as one where they began to regain their identity or former selves. The extent to which the reawakening of the soul was described depended on whether or not they broke up with their partners or if they were broken up with. If the victims initiated the break up, they talked about how

they educated themselves, empowered themselves, and surrounded themselves with strong social support during the aftermath of the breakup.

These stages or steps of a dissolution of a relationship can be seen to a certain extent in the interviews as well, but the ways in which the leaving process is described is not nearly as linear as in the blogs, which like with many of the differences between the themes in the blogs and in the interviews, could be impacted by the nature of the platform. In the blogs, the participants have the time to process their experience and edit their descriptions of their experiences, whereas in the interviews again, the participants answer directly after being asked about certain aspects of their relationships.

The interviews also fit with Loring's (1994) terms for periods of time when the victim is getting ready to leave their abuser. Loring (1994, as cited in Lammers et al., 2005) says that there are two ways to separate from the abuser: detachment vs. disattachment. Detachment refers to an "immediate and complete separation, while detachment designates an ongoing separation process in which a person, after reincorporating her or his formerly fragmented self, breaks away from the emotional abuse process" (p. 55). Loring (1994) also notes that disattachment is a two part process where the victim must separate from the emotional abuse and from their own traumatic reaction from it; essentially becoming aware of the abuse and then reconnecting to their former selves. The interview research from this study tends to emphasize turning points as being necessary to realize the seriousness of the abuse, and then they can begin to distance themselves emotionally through self-empowerment.

With the leaving processes in the interviews, it was evident that the participants put a great deal of effort into working up their descriptions of specific abusive incidents and turning points that helped them realize they were ready to leave the relationship. In the cases where the participants were broken up with, there was less description built up of the turning points and the description of the incident that actually ended the relationship was rather short and abrupt. This lack of detail in the incidents where the victims were broken up with could be seen in the blogs as well, which could be due to not having much explanation from the perpetrator as to why they left the relationship abruptly or it could function as a way of the victims protecting or preserving themselves in their descriptions because they were not the ones that chose to end the relationship at that particular point in time.

In the build up of the turning points, especially in the interviews, much more emphasis was placed upon describing specific impactful instances of abuse compared to that of the blogs; although turning points were referenced, there was just greater detail that went into the interviewees' descriptions more frequently throughout the accounts. The intensified build up of descriptions in the cases where the victim chose to end the relationship could serve to show the enormous amount of strength it took to overcome the horrendous abuse they experienced. If these incidents were not described with as much detail, it could be a concern of the interviewees that the seriousness of the abuse as well as the feat that it was to overcome in getting themselves out of the relationship would not be taken as seriously or understood as well. A study by Murray et al., (2015) looked at the importance of turning points in decisions to leave abusive relationships. When various individuals' leaving processes

were analyzed, six distinct themes of turning points were identified: (a) facing the threat of severe violence; (b) changing their perspective about the relationship, abuse, and/or their partner; (c) learning about the dynamics of abuse; (d) experiencing an intervention from external sources or consequences; (e) realizing the impact of the violence on children; and (f) the relationship being terminated by the abuser or some other cause (Murray et al., 2015). Many of these turning points were akin to the turning points described by victims in the current research.

The second stage of self-empowerment was described in the interviews as something that included various factors such as, citing former instances of abuse, having social supports that encouraged them or validated the abuse, or talking about the fear of what would happen to them if they stayed in the relationship. The stage of self-empowerment also appeared to merge a bit with the reasons for getting themselves out of the relationship. Several of the individuals in the interviews talked about how they ended up leaving so that their kids would not be impacted by the abuse anymore; it was almost as if leaving for themselves might not be considered to others as enough of a reason, or that they needed more reasoning or motivation to leave the relationship on their own. The reawakening of the self process was not always talked about as much, or in as great of detail in the interviews; some participants talked about how they were moving on well and leaning on others, but some talked more candidly that they were still hurting and were not healed yet. The interview participants also tended to speak with a tone of seeking confirmation from others or through their own vocalizing of their thoughts and actions. Throughout the leaving process descriptions, there were several

times when the participants tended to question their own decisions to leave and sought reassurance for the timing and the way in which they left.

Contributions to the Literature

There are findings from the blogs and interviews that extend the current literature in the field of psychological abuse in romantic relationships and help answer the aims of this research. During portions of the interviews when victims discussed the feelings of "being less than they were before" or "losing themselves," they did so in a way that tended to work up this description of change and loss through providing a normative comparison of how they were before the relationship began versus how they changed over time. Viewing the findings through a social constructionist lens provides the opportunity for researchers to not only look at the components of this loss, but to also gain greater insight into what the individuals deemed as relevant to them, and how they felt it was necessary to set up their descriptions in this manner. Choosing to state almost a disclaimer of what they were like before the relationship, may serve as a self-preservation method as well as a way to demonstrate that perhaps they weren't your typical victim of abuse as many bloggers did as well, and also again show how serious psychological abuse is if people who were typically one way, still were impacted so greatly by this abuse. The notion of victims describing changes in themselves and feelings of loss through a normative comparison, is something that has not been seen in the literature before.

An additional contribution of this research is how accountability is talked about through potential reasons for getting involved or being more susceptible to becoming a

victim of psychological abuse. In both the blogs and the interviews, the victims'

descriptions of their contextual circumstances surrounding the time of meeting their

partner provided new research, to the researcher's knowledge, regarding the ways in

which victims reflected upon how what was going in their life during the beginning of

their relationships may have impacted their decision to get involved in their

psychologically abusive relationship. Several participants had just been through a

difficult breakup, were dating another person, or were going through a new transition in

their life. This finding fits with Few and Rosen's (2005) Vulnerability Concept Model in

regards to attempting to link women's vulnerabilities toward staying in an abusive

relationship with various factors including situational vulnerabilities such as

'life-circumstance' or 'life-stage' stress, but extends this area of research because the

current research looked specifically at victims' perceptions of their contextual

circumstances, and their potential to make them more susceptible to entering a

psychologically abusive relationship.

A further contribution of this research is in regards to how the victims accounted

for why their partners may have been susceptible to becoming perpetrators of

psychological abuse. To the researcher's knowledge, no other studies have been

conducted on victims of purely psychological abuse providing an account for

perceptions of why their partners perpetrated the abuse. The victims tended to report

that their partners also experienced abuse either psychological or physical abuse or

neglect in their families of origin, tended to come from families of financial and social

privilege, or the perpetrator had a history of not having to take accountability for their

actions in their families of origin. There has been research supporting that witnessing or

experiencing abuse during childhood might be associated with future intimate partner violence victimization or perpetration in adulthood (Berzenski & Yates, 2010; Chang, 2006; Parks et al., 2011) but not for psychological abuse independent of physical or sexual abuse nor has there been research on perpetrators not having to take acccountability for their actions in their families or origin.

Lastly, the area of the leaving process proved to be interesting for different parts of the blogs and interviews. For the blogs, the self-empowerment and reawakening of the soul stage did not always follow in the same order and some individuals only spoke of experiencing one stage based on whether they were broken up with or they ended the relationship, but what was important in extending findings in the leaving process was having a set of stages emerge that individuals claim to go through when leaving a psychologically abusive relationship. In Chang's (1996) study, she too posited that turning points were evident, but that they were not always reflected in the actual leaving. Chang said that the leaving process for the individuals of psychological abuse included a time of "turning to self" where they began to prioritize their own self over the concern of others, gaining strong support, and working through a long process of actually, physically leaving the home which sometimes involved a "final straw."

For the interviews, the findings included the presence of turning points being important in the descriptions of realizing the seriousness of the abuse in the victims' lives. When the victims chose to break up with their partner, they tended to spend a great deal of time emphasizing these significant turning points versus when they were broken up with, there was much less detail surrounding the ending of the relationship. Although turning points have been discussed in Chang (1996) through significant points

over the course of their relationships, and Queen (2009) through the term 'taking a stand' referring to when the victims take actions to leave their abuser or in defiance of their abuser, special attention to how victims construct their descriptions when they left the relationship versus when their partner ended the relationship has not been emphasized in research.

Where the research from this study also extends findings is through the interviews. The victims in the interviews tended to seek confirmation for their decisions to leave, or whether or not it was for the best that their relationship ended through the descriptions of their leaving process. This may show that leaving a psychologically abusive relationship is one that is difficult and the confirmation seeking is interesting because it illuminates how damaging psychological abuse is to an individual's sense of self and ability to make decisions. Leaving an abusive relationship can best be understood as a complex process and not a one-time event (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007; Patzel, 2001) and is one that is difficult and different for every individual. Panagiari (2020) suggests that leaving is a "complex, arduous, multifaceted and developmental journey - generally echoing research on IPV" (p. 3); these two studies provide further confirmation of that statement.

Main Takeaways

There are two main takeaways from this research on both the blogs and the interviews: retrospective sense-making and self-preservation. Retrospective sense-making refers to the tendency of the individuals to reflect back upon their relationships in a way that potentially serves to help them to gain clarity of different

experiences during their time with their partner. The reflective nature is evident specifically in the individuals' portrayal of their awareness of the abuse, the changes within themselves, the ways in which they took accountability for their own actions, and how and where they tended to attribute blame for elements of the relationship such as, the abusive behaviors or reasons for leaving. Retrospective sense-making also is prevalent in how the individuals describe much of their experience and awareness of changes as something that wasn't noticed or identified clearly until after the relationship ended.

The other main takeaway is that of self-preservation which refers to the idea of the individuals' tendency to describe their experiences in a way that potentially serves to protect their self-image to whoever reads their accounts. This self-preservation is largely done through the previous overarching theme of retrospective sense-making. The element of self-protection may also be done in order to provide the individuals with a narrative that helps them make sense of, and come to peace with their participation in their psychologically abusive relationship. The idea of self-preservation can be seen in the ways in which the individuals describe their retrospective realization of abuse, take accountability or attribute blame, seek confirmation for their actions and thought processes as well as if the abuse would be considered abuse by other people. Sease et al., (2022) may call this *self-concealment*, the tendency to actively conceal distressing or negative information about oneself. Self-concealment, much like self-preservation may oftentimes be done in the context of psychological abuse as an attempt to cope with unwanted internal thoughts (Sease et al., 2022).

Implications

This research has various implications for the field of psychological abuse in romantic relationships. With psychological abuse having been historically an under-researched area of intimate partner violence in comparison to physical abuse (Lammers et al., 2005; Kelly, 2004), it continues to add to the work in this field and highlight the importance of researching this form of abuse. Psychological abuse has often been seen as a precursor of physical abuse (Hyden, 1995; Kaisan & Painter, 1992; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; O'Leary et al., 1994) or a form of abuse that coincides with physical and/or sexual abuse (Anderson et al., 1991; Bass & Davis, 1988; Herman, 1994; Kirkwood, 1993; NiCarthy, 1986; Pence & Paymar, 1993), having an additional study done looking at individuals experiencing "pure" psychological abuse, helps validate psychological abuse as form of intimate partner violence that can exist independently of any other form of abuse. Psychological abuse has serious consequences and is known to be more insidious than any other form of intimate partner violence (Semple, 2001). With the nature of psychological abuse being harder to identify, building imperceptibly over time, and leaving lasting impacts on its victims, this research can be used to make this form of abuse less hidden. Taking into consideration the recent addition of the Serious Crime Act 2015, the more research that is conducted that will help validate and bring awareness to psychological abuse being a damaging form of intimate partner violence with serious physical and psychological impacts, independent of physical and/or sexual abuse, is valuable for both the academic field and policy legislation.

Additionally, since psychological abuse has largely been studied in a quantitative format with the emphasis being on defining and quantifying behaviors of abusive relationships, this research continues to fill the lack of qualitative accounts of victims experiences of psychological abuse. There has been a difficulty in understanding what constitutes this form of abuse or how a relationship evolves, and this research therefore sheds light on this gap. Through conducting this research with a social constructionist epistemological stance, it provides the opportunity to better understand the way victims express their understanding of their experiences, and in essence make meaning of their relationship experiences. The social constructionist framework allows psychological abuse to be viewed through a lens where others can gain valuable insight into how the victims of psychological abuse felt that they experienced the abuse. How the victims put together their descriptions gives a degree of insight into the most salient parts of a psychologically abusive relationship from the victims' perspectives.

An additional area of the findings from this research that may have great implications for future research is that of Loring's (1994) Connection-Deprivation Cycle being found to be prevalent throughout victim accounts. With the great dilemma of there being a lack of consensus among researchers as to how psychological abuse may function on a day-to-day basis, having further validation of this cycle gives a strong model for health practitioners to screen with, policy makers to use in their legislation, law enforcement to help identify psychologically abusive instances that may constitute as coercive control, and for victims to help recognize a pattern of behavior when they are unsure of whether what they are experiencing is abuse.

A further finding that has the potential to impact the field of research is that of both how victims described themselves at times, and their perpetrators having come from a family of origin that exhibited abuse and/or neglect. As previously discussed, there is evidence of this with victims and perpetrators coming from homes with violence or neglect, but there appears to be no research on victims or perpetrators of psychological abuse independent of other forms of intimate partner violence having been raised in families of origin with abuse or neglect. This finding could serve to provide potent information to health practitioners and educators, and also serve as powerful knowledge for individuals to be aware of when considering their own vulnerabilities from their upbringings, and how it could impact their intimate relationships.

Educators, health practitioners, and researchers can use this research as an additional study or resource that provides further detailed accounts of individuals who have experienced psychological abuse in a romantic relationship. This research may prove beneficial for undergraduate or graduate university-level courses on relationship research and has the potential to help give health practitioners such doctors, nurses, counselors, and individuals working in domestic violence shelters or other forms of resource centers insight into the experience of psychological abuse or potential warning signs or impacts to look for when screening individuals for this type of abuse.

Evaluations

The main aims of these studies were to expand the area of qualitative research in the field of psychological abuse in romantic relationships by providing greater insight

into what constitutes psychological abuse from victims' perspectives, increase the understanding of how victims of psychological abuse reflect back upon and make sense of their experiences in their relationships, and also gain insight into how individuals of psychological abuse construct, account for, or attribute blame to themselves, their partner, or other circumstances in their lives. Although the study conducted thorough analyses of blogs and interviews, there were certain limitations while exploring the aims of the study.

There were a few limitations on the methodology of the interviews including the platform through which the data was collected. There was a mix of platforms through which the interviews could be conducted depending on their location in comparison to the researcher, technology set up availability, and preferences. The initial aim was to conduct in-person interviews, but with the decision to post a recruitment advertisement via Facebook only, the majority of the participants were from different areas of the world. The other hope was that participants would agree to do Skype interviews with their cameras on, but only two participants agreed to this, and the rest were a mix of phone calls and a couple who chose to conduct the interview via Facebook Messenger in real time. In the future, it would be ideal to conduct either in-person or video call interviews so that the researcher could witness the body language and reactions as well as provide a more personal environment for the interviewee. Since the majority of the interviews were verbal interviews via phone calls, there were advantages to this option as it allowed for the researcher to make a more personal connection with the participant, and also hear their initial reactions to the questions during the interview as well the tone of their voice. Disadvantages of the verbal interviews were that there may

have been a perceived pressure to answer quickly, or for individuals to not disclose elements of their story out of a fear of judgment.

Disadvantages of conducting interviews via Facebook Messenger were that the researcher could not hear the voice inflections of the interviewees and some answers were added via writing from the participants after the interview had been conducted. The ability to take one's time to think about and script answers to the questions as well as edit what someone might say, may have drawbacks in that it takes away from the element of the initial reaction or response to the questions; this could also help individuals give off the image that they want whether or not it is true of their experience. The strengths of these Facebook Messenger interviews were that the data was easier to analyze and it provided the participants a further layer of anonymity and perhaps allowed them to organize their thoughts more, which did have the potential to limit the more immediate responses that the other participants had due to the nature of their interview platforms.

Other limitations are connected to the participant size that dwindled after beginning research. One limitation is that two interviewees who claimed to have endured psychological abuse independent of physical abuse, turned out to give an interview that was predominantly physically abusive. The other limitation is due to the transcription method of the interviews. A few interviews were very difficult to hear due to malfunctions of the audio transcription software; they had to be amplified with additional speakers, but parts of those interviews were more challenging to hear. These issues left the researcher with 16 interviews instead of 20, which was the initial starting number.

One further area of the current research that potentially limited the scope of what can be said about how individuals of psychological abuse construct, account for, or attribute blame to themselves, their partner, or other circumstances in their lives is due to the design of the interview questions that corresponded with some of the accountability questions. With having asked interview participants questions such as the following: "Have you ever given any thought about why this relationship may have happened?" "What was your family like growing up?" and "What was your partner's upbringing like?" These questions could have influenced the participants to search for a place to attribute blame or provide a rationale for behavior either on their end or their partners, when perhaps they may not have offered up that information without those types of questions. However, these questions do provide the opportunity for valuable insight into the areas of the individuals' thinking and perception of how accountability or blame is placed or internalized being that they are areas of psychological abuse that have been historically under researched.

Suggestions for Future Research

There are some future suggestions for research that could continue to provide valuable research into the field of psychological abuse. We know that with victims and perpetrators of physical abuse, there tends to be violence or abuse in the families of origin, but less research has been done into the victims and perpetrators of psychological abuse. With the finding of victims tending to attribute some degree of accountability of their involvement to abuse in their family of origin, it would interesting to conduct more research with victims of purely psychological abuse both quantitatively

and qualitatively to continue to look at if this is prevalent in more individuals' accounts of psychologically abusive relationships. Similarly when asked about their perpetrator, victims also attributed some blame toward their partners unstable or abusive family upbringing and in some cases positions of influence; with the lack of research into perpetrators of psychological abuse, it would be interesting to see if perpetrators would also claim to have experienced, or attributed blame to any form of abuse in their families growing up. According to a study done by Ponti et al., (2020), both vulnerable and grandiose narcissism were linked to perpetration of psychological abuse in romantic relationships, so it would be interesting to conduct further research with family origin history, contextual elements of the abusive relationship being studied, and personality traits.

Another suggestion for future research would be to conduct more studies on how the notion of 'loss of self' is experienced overtime by victims, looking specifically at what elements of their lives, both intrinsically and extrinsically they felt changed and how they describe that experience of loss or change in their accounts; adding research both quantifying the elements of change and qualitatively examining the ways these descriptions are constructed would provide a blend of valuable research into how this process is understood by victims, as well as what elements are included in this process.

One additional suggestion for future research is to continue conducting studies on male victims of psychological abuse. Knowing that both males and females experience intimate partner violence as victims, and with similar patterns of abuse, (Laskey et al., 2019) it is important to continue to look at male experiences of being a victim of psychological abuse in order to strengthen the amount of research in this area.

If studies continue to validate the idea of men experiencing abuse at fairly similar rates as women and with similar patterns of abusive behavior, it will potentially support the move away from the traditional gendered model of intimate partner violence.

Conclusion

Psychological abuse in romantic relationships is an all-consuming and confusing experience. With there being a lack of consensus among researchers regarding what constitutes psychological abuse, and it also being the most pervasive and insidious form of abuse (Semple, 2001), it's important that psychological abuse continues to be researched as an independent form of abuse due to the more limited number of studies completed (Lammers et al., 2005; Kelly, 2004). Several main conclusions can be drawn about psychological abuse. First, psychological abuse is a gradual process that is different for everyone, and is oftentimes challenging to explain. Second, there is great difficulty in identifying psychological abuse during the course of a relationship, which is visible through the way the victims reflected upon and made sense of their experience; this ties into the issues of ambiguity that are already present in this field of research. However, the retrospective sense-making that is done through the blogs and interviews help to contribute to a better understanding of how victims may process their experiences retrospectively. Third, there is evidence of self-preservation work being done through the accounting during the blogs and the interviews. Together these conclusions that were drawn from the key findings of the studies, contribute to gaining further valuable insight into the experience of being a victim of psychological abuse in romantic relationships.

REFERENCES

Afifi, T. O., MacMillan, H., Cox, B. J., Asmundson, G. J., Stein, M. B., & Sareen, J. (2009). Mental health correlates of intimate partner violence in marital relationships in a nationally representative sample of males and females. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, *24*(8), 1398-1417.

Alhabib, S., Nur, U., & Jones, R. (2010). Domestic violence against women: Systematic review of prevalence studies. *Journal of family violence*, *25*(4), 369-382.

Archer, J. (2000). Sex differences in aggression between heterosexual partners: a meta-analytic review. *Psychological bulletin*, *126*(5), 651.

Lachkar, J. (2001). Emotional abuse of high-functioning professional women: A psychodynamic perspective. *Journal of emotional abuse*, *2*(1), 73-91.

Andersen, S. M., Boulette, T. R., & Schwartz, A. H. (1991). Psychological maltreatment of spouses. In *Case studies in family violence* (pp. 293-327). Springer, Boston, MA.

Andrews, T. (2012). What is social constructionism?. *Grounded theory review*, *11*(1).

Antônio, T., & Hokoda, A. (2009). Gender variations in dating violence and positive conflict resolution among Mexican adolescents. *Violence and victims*, *24*(4), 533-545.

Arias, I., & Pape, K. T. (1999). Psychological abuse: Implications for adjustment and commitment to leave violent partners. *Violence and victims*, *14*(1), 55-67.

Barlow, C., Johnson, K., Walklate, S., & Humphreys, L. (2020). Putting coercive control into practice: Problems and possibilities. *The British Journal of Criminology*, *60*(1), 160-179.

Bass, E., & Davis, L. (1988). *The courage to heal: A guide for women survivors of child sexual abuse.* Perennial Library/Harper & Row Publishers.

Bandura, A. (1973). Aggression: A social learning analysis: Prentice-Hall.

Bateson, G. (1972). The logical categories of learning and communication. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 279-308.

Basile, K. C., Black, M. C., Breiding, M. J., Chen, J., Merrick, M. T., Smith, S. G., ... & Walters, M. L. (2011). National intimate partner and sexual violence survey: 2010 summary report.

Berzenski, S. R., & Yates, T. M. (2019). A developmental process analysis of the contribution of childhood emotional abuse to relationship violence. In *The Effect of Childhood Emotional Maltreatment on Later Intimate Relationships* (pp. 180-203). Routledge.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *18*(3), 328-352..

Breiding, M., Basile, K. C., Smith, S. G., Black, M. C., & Mahendra, R. R. (2015). Intimate partner violence surveillance: Uniform definitions and recommended data elements. *Injury Prevention and Control*, Version 2.0.

Burelomova, A. S., Gulina, M. A., & Tikhomandritskaya, O. A. (2018). Intimate partner violence: An overview of the existing theories, conceptual frameworks, and definitions. *Psychology in Russia: State of the art*, *11*(3), 128-144.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). *Thematic analysis*. American Psychological Association.

Capezza, N. M., & Arriaga, X. B. (2008). Why do people blame victims of abuse? The role of stereotypes of women on perceptions of blame. *Sex Roles*, *59*(11), 839-850.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021). Intimate partner violence. Retrieved on 2nd of August 2023 from https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/index.html

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022). Fast Facts: Preventing Intimate Partner Violence. Retrieved on 10th of September 2023 from https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/fastfact.html.

Chang, V. N. (1993). *A study of psychological abuse of women in marriage*. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Chang, V. N. (1995). Interaction patterns that threaten the self. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, *25*(2), 133-140.

Chang, V. N. (1996). *I just lost myself: Psychological abuse of women in marriage*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Chen, G. M. (2012). Why do women write personal blogs? Satisfying needs for self-disclosure and affiliation tell part of the story. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *28*(1), 171-180.

Cho, H., & Wilke, D. J. (2010). Gender differences in the nature of the intimate partner violence and effects of perpetrator arrest on revictimization. *Journal of family violence*, *25*, 393-400.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners. *Successful Qualitative Research*, 1-400.

Crown Prosecution Service (2017). Domestic Abuse. Retrieved from: https://www.cps.gov.uk/domestic-abuse

DeKeseredy, W. S., & Schwartz, M. D. (1998). Measuring the extent of woman abuse in intimate heterosexual relationships: A critique of the Conflict Tactics Scales. *US Department of Justice Violence Against Women Grants Office Electronic Resources*.

Dennison, S. M., & Thompson, C. M. (2011). Intimate partner violence: The effect of gender and contextual factors on community perceptions of harm, and suggested victim and criminal justice responses. *Violence and Victims*, *26*(3), 347-363.

Dim, E. E. (2021). Experiences of physical and psychological violence against male victims in Canada: A qualitative study. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, *65*(9), 1029-1054.

Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. (1979). *Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy* (Vol. 15). New York: Free Press.

Douglas, K. (1994). *Invisible Wounds: A self-help guide for women in destructive relationships.* Auckland, N.Z.: Penguin Books.

Dye, M. L., & Davis, K. E. (2003). Stalking and psychological abuse: Common factors and relationship-specific characteristics. *Violence and Victims*, *18*(2), 163-180.

Eaton, J. (2019). *'Logically, I know I'm not to blame but I still feel to blame': exploring and measuring victim blaming and self-blame of women who have been subjected to sexual violence* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham).

Faik, I., Barrett, M., & Oborn, E. (2020). How information technology matters in societal change: An affordance-based institutional logics perspective. *MIS quarterly*, *44*(3), 1359-1390.

Falconier, M. K. (2010). Female anxiety and male depression: Links between economic strain and psychological aggression in Argentinean couples. *Family Relations*, *59*(4), 424-438.

Fawcett, H., & Shrestha, L. (2016). Blogging about sexual assault: A thematic analysis. *Journal of Forensic Practice*.

Ferguson, C. J. (2011). Love is a battlefield: Risk factors and gender disparities for domestic violence among Mexican Americans. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, *20*(2), 227-236.

Few, A. L., & Rosen, K. H. (2005). Victims of Chronic Dating Violence: How Women's Vulnerabilities Link to Their Decisions to Stay. *Family Relations*, *54*(2), 265–279. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40005254

Follingstad, D. R., & Dehart, D. D. (2000). Defining psychological abuse of husbands toward wives: Contexts, behaviors, and typologies. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, *15*(9), 891-920.

Follingstad, D. R., Rutledge, L. L., Berg, B. J., Hause, E. S., & Polek, D. S. (1990). The role of emotional abuse in physically abusive relationships. *Journal of family violence*, *5*(2), 107-120.

Forrester, M., & Sullivan, C. (2018). Doing qualitative research in psychology: A practical guide. *Doing Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1-376.

Garcia-Moreno, C., Jansen, H. A., Ellsberg, M., Heise, L., & Watts, C. H. (2006). Prevalence of intimate partner violence: findings from the WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence. *The lancet*, *368*(9543), 1260-1269.

Geffner, R., & Rossman, B. R. (1997). Emotional abuse: An emerging field of research and intervention. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, *1*(1), 1-5.

Gergen, K. J. (1999). Agency: Social construction and relational action. *Theory & Psychology*, *9*(1), 113-115.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.

Gwartney-Gibbs, P. A., Stockard, J., & Bohmer, S. (1987). Learning courtship aggression: The influence of parents, peers, and personal experiences. *Family Relations*, 276-282.

Hamel, J., Cannon, C. E., & Graham-Kevan, N. (2023). The consequences of psychological abuse and control in intimate partner relationships. *Traumatology*.

Hamel, J., Jones, D. N., Dutton, D. G., & Graham-Kevan, N. (2015). The CAT: A gender-inclusive measure of controlling and abusive tactics. *Violence and Victims*, *30*(4), 547-580.

Hamel, J., & Nicholls, T. (2006). Family approaches in domestic violence: A practitioner's guide to gender-inclusive research and treatment.

Harvey, M. D., & Rule, B. G. (1978). Moral evaluations and judgments of responsibility. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *4*(4), 583-588.

Hardesty, J. L., & Ogolsky, B. G. (2020). A socioecological perspective on intimate partner violence research: A decade in review. *Journal of marriage and family*, *82*(1), 454-477.

Hines, D. A., Brown, J., & Dunning, E. (2007). Characteristics of callers to the domestic abuse helpline for men. *Journal of Family Violence*, *22*, 63-72.

Hines, D. A., Douglas, E. M., & Berger, J. L. (2015). A self-report measure of legal and administrative aggression within intimate relationships. *Aggressive Behavior*, *41*(4), 295-309.

Hines, D. A., & Malley-Morrison, K. (2001). Psychological effects of partner abuse against men: A neglected research area. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, *2*(2), 75.

Hoffman, P. (1984). Psychological abuse of women by spouses and live-in lovers. *Women & Therapy*, *3*(1), 37-49.

Holloway, I., & Todres, L. (2003). The status of method: flexibility, consistency and coherence. *Qualitative research*, *3*(3), 345-357.

Home Office. (2023). Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship: Statutory guidance framework. *('Statutory Guidance Framework')*, *4*.
Hou, J., Yu, L., Ting, S. M. R., Sze, Y. T., & Fang, X. (2011). The status and characteristics of couple violence in China. *Journal of Family Violence*, *26*(2), 81-92.

Hydén, M. (1995). Verbal aggression as prehistory of woman battering. *Journal of Family Violence*, *10*(1), 55-71.

Janoff-Bulman, R. (1979). Characterological versus behavioral self-blame: inquiries into depression and rape. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *37*(10), 1798.

Jin, X., Eagle, M., & Yoshioka, M. (2007). Early exposure to violence in the family of origin and positive attitudes towards marital violence: Chinese immigrant male batterers vs. controls. *Journal of family violence*, *22*, 211-222.

Joffe, H. (2012). Thematic analysis. *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy*, *1*, 210-223.

Johnson, M. P. (2006). GENDERED COMMUNICATION AND INTIMATE PARTNER. *The SAGE handbook of gender and communication*, 71.

Johnson, M. P. (2007). Domestic violence: The intersection of gender and control. *Gender violence: Interdisciplinary perspectives*, 257-268.

Johnson, M. P. (2008). *A typology of domestic violence*. Upne.

Johnson, M. P., & Leone, J. M. (2005). The differential effects of intimate terrorism and situational couple violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey. *Journal of family issues*, *26*(3), 322-349.

Johnson, M. P., Leone, J. M., & Xu, Y. (2014). Intimate terrorism and situational couple violence in general surveys: Ex-spouses required. *Violence against women*, *20*(2), 186-207.

Jose, A., & O'Leary, K. D. (2009). Prevalence of partner aggression in representative and clinic samples.

Katz, J., Arias, I., & Beach, S. R. (2000). Psychological abuse, self-esteem, and women's dating relationship outcomes: A comparison of the self-verification and self-enhancement perspectives. *Psychology of women quarterly*, *24*(4), 349-357.

Kelly, V. A. (2004). Psychological abuse of women: A review of the literature. *The Family Journal*, *12*(4), 383-388.

Khaw, L., & Hardesty, J. L. (2007). Theorizing the process of leaving: Turning points and trajectories in the stages of change. *Family relations*, *56*(4), 413-425.

Kirkwood, C. (1993). *Leaving abusive partners: From the scars of survival to the wisdom for change*. Sage.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2007). Transcribing interviews. *Doing interviews*, 93-100.

Lachkar, J. (2001). Emotional abuse of high-functioning professional women: A psychodynamic perspective. *Journal of emotional abuse*, *2*(1), 73-91.

Lammers, M., Ritchie, J., & Robertson, N. (2005). Women's experience of emotional abuse in intimate relationships: A qualitative study. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, *5*(1), 29-64.

Laskey, P., Bates, E. A., & Taylor, J. C. (2019). A systematic literature review of intimate partner violence victimisation: An inclusive review across gender and sexuality. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *47*, 1-11.

Lawrence, J. (2012). *Deconstructing practitioners' understandings of intimate partner violence and abuse: implications for practice and supervision* (Doctoral dissertation, University of East London).

Lerner, M. J. (1980). The belief in a just world. In *The Belief in a just World* (pp. 9-30). Springer, Boston, MA.

Levin, L. (2021). Understanding narcissistic abuse. *Mental Health Matters*, *8*(3), 32-33.

Lewis, S. F., & Fremouw, W. (2001). Dating violence: A critical review of the literature. *Clinical psychology review*, *21*(1), 105-127.

Loring, M. T. (1994). *Emotional abuse*. Lexington Books/Macmillan.

Loring, M. T., Myers, D. L., & Loring, M. T. (1991). Differentiating emotionally abused women. *Emotional abuse*, 15-24.

Love, H. A., Spencer, C. M., May, S. A., Mendez, M., & Stith, S. M. (2020). Perpetrator risk markers for intimate terrorism and situational couple violence: A meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, *21*(5), 922-931.

Lynch, J. L. (2016). *Stuck in Transition: The Difficulties Young Women Face in Exiting Abusive Relationships* (Doctoral dissertation, Ohio University).

Mahoney, P., & Williams, L. M. (2001). Relationship Partners. *Sourcebook on violence against women*, 143.

Marin, A. J., & Russo, N. F. (1999). What causes men's violence against women. *Feminist perspectives on male violence*, 18-35.

Marshall, L. L. (1996). Psychological abuse of women: Six distinct clusters. *Journal of Family Violence*, *11*(4), 379-409.

Marshall, L. L. (1999). Effects of men's subtle and overt psychological abuse on low-income women. *Violence and Victims*, *14*(1), 69-88.

Mihalic, S. W. & Elliot, D. (2005). A social learning theory model of marital violence. Readings in Family Theory, 98.

Milletich, R. J., Kelley, M. L., Doane, A. N., & Pearson, M. R. (2010). Exposure to interparental violence and childhood physical and emotional abuse as related to physical aggression in undergraduate dating relationships. *Journal of family violence*, *25*, 627-637.

Morin, C. (2014). Re-traumatized: How gendered laws exacerbate the harm for same-sex victims of intimate partner violence. *New Eng. J. on Crim. & Civ. Confinement*, *40*, 477.

Murphy, C. M., & Hoover, S. A. (1999). Measuring emotional abuse in dating relationships as a multifactorial construct. *Violence and victims*, *14*(1), 39-53.

Murphy, C. M., & O'Leary, K. D. (1989). Psychological aggression predicts physical aggression in early marriage. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, *57*(5), 579.

Murray, C. E., Crowe, A., & Flasch, P. (2015). Turning points: Critical incidents prompting survivors to begin the process of terminating abusive relationships. *The Family Journal*, *23*(3), 228-238.

NiCarthy, G. (1986). *Getting free: A handbook for women in abusive relationships*. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.

Nowinski, S. N., & Bowen, E. (2012). Partner violence against heterosexual and gay men: Prevalence and correlates. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *17*(1), 36-52.

Pan, H. S., Neidig, P. H., & O'Leary, K. D. (1994). Predicting mild and severe husband-to-wife physical aggression. *Journal of consulting and clinical Psychology*, *62*(5), 975.

Panagiari, E. (2021). *'I still have the doubt': The unreal reality of emotional abuse Exploring women's experiences of leaving their intimate heterosexual relationship* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Surrey).

Parks, S. E., Kim, K. H., Day, N. L., Garza, M. A., & Larkby, C. A. (2011). Lifetime self-reported victimization among low-income, urban women: The relationship between childhood maltreatment and adult violent victimization. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, *26*(6), 1111-1128.

Patzel, B. (2001). Women's use of resources in leaving abusive relationships: A naturalistic inquiry. *Issues in mental health nursing*, *22*(8), 729-747.

Pence, E., Paymar, M., & Ritmeester, T. (1993). *Education groups for men who batter: The Duluth model*. Springer Publishing Company.

Pengpid, S., & Peltzer, K. (2016). Intimate partner violence victimization and associated factors among male and female university students in 22 countries in Africa, Asia and the Americas. *African journal of reproductive health*, *20*(1), 29-39.

Pereira, M. E., Azeredo, A., Moreira, D., Brandão, I., & Almeida, F. (2020). Personality characteristics of victims of intimate partner violence: A systematic review. *Aggression and violent behavior*, *52*, 101423.

Pimlott-Kubiak, S., & Cortina, L. M. (2003). Gender, victimization, and outcomes: reconceptualizing risk. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, *71*(3), 528.

Ponti, L., Ghinassi, S., & Tani, F. (2020). The role of vulnerable and grandiose narcissism in psychological perpetrated abuse within couple relationships: The mediating role of romantic jealousy. *The Journal of Psychology*, *154*(2), 144-158.

Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. Sage.

Próspero, M., & Vohra-Gupta, S. (2008). The use of mental health services among victims of partner violence on college campuses. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, *16*(4), 376-390.

Queen, J., Nurse, A., Brackley, M. H., & Williams, G. B. (2009). Being emotionally abused: a phenomenological study of adult women's experiences of emotionally abusive intimate partner relationships. *Issues in mental health nursing*, *30*(4), 237-245.

Riggs, D. S., & O'Leary, K. D. (1996). Aggression between heterosexual dating partners: An examination of a causal model of courtship aggression. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *11*(4), 519-540.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2011). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Sage.

Ro, E., & Lawrence, E. (2007). Comparing three measures of psychological aggression: Psychometric properties and differentiation from negative communication. *Journal of Family Violence*, *22*(7), 575-586.

Sackett, L. A., & Saunders, D. G. (1999). The impact of different forms of psychological abuse on battered women. *Violence and victims*, *14*(1), 105-117.

Sease, T. B., Perkins, D. R., & Yang, Y. (2022). The Influence of Emotion Dysregulation on the Relationship between Emotional Abuse and Self-concealment among Romantic Partners. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, *31*(5), 646-659.

Semple, R. J. (2001). Psychological abuse in intimate relationships: A New Zealand perspective. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, *30*(2), 60.

Schnurr, M. P., Lohman, B. J., & Kaura, S. A. (2010). Variation in late adolescents' reports of dating violence perpetration: A dyadic analysis. *Violence and Victims*, *25*(1), 84-100.

Schumacher, J. A., Feldbau-Kohn, S., Slep, A. M. S., & Heyman, R. E. (2001). Risk factors for male-to-female partner physical abuse. *Aggression and violent behavior*, *6*(2-3), 281-352.

Shepard, M. F., & Campbell, J. A. (1992). The Abusive Behavior Inventory: A measure of psychological and physical abuse. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 7(3), 291-305.

Shook, N. J., Gerrity, D. A., Jurich, J., & Segrist, A. E. (2000). Courtship violence among college students: A comparison of verbally and physically abusive couples. *Journal of Family Violence*, *15*, 1-22.

Stets, J. E. (1991). Psychological aggression in dating relationships: The role of interpersonal control. *Journal of Family Violence*, *6*(1), 97-114.

Straus, M. A. (2011). Gender symmetry and mutuality in perpetration of clinical-level partner violence: Empirical evidence and implications for prevention and treatment. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *16*(4), 279-288.

Sullivan, C., & Forrester, M. A. (Eds.). (2019). *Doing qualitative research in psychology: A practical guide. 2nd Edition*. Sage.

Swan, S. C., Gambone, L. J., Caldwell, J. E., Sullivan, T. P., & Snow, D. L. (2008). A review of research on women's use of violence with male intimate partners. *Violence and victims*, *23*(3), 301-314.

Sweet, P. L. (2019). The sociology of gaslighting. *American Sociological Review*, *84*(5), 851-875.

Tamres, L. K., Janicki, D., & Helgeson, V. S. (2002). Sex differences in coping behavior: A meta-analytic review and an examination of relative coping. *Personality and social psychology review*, *6*(1), 2-30.

Tedeschi, J. T., & Felson, R. B. (1994). *Violence, aggression, and coercive actions*. American Psychological Association.

Tolman, R. M. (1989). The development of a measure of psychological maltreatment of women by their male partners. *Violence and victims*, *4*(3), 159-177.

Tolman, R. M. (1999). The validation of the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory. *Violence and victims*, *14*(1), 25-37.

Vandervoort, D., & Rokach, A. (2004). Abusive relationships: Is a new category for traumatization needed?. *Current Psychology*, *23*(1), 68-76.

Vung, N. D., & Krantz, G. (2009). Childhood experiences of interparental violence as a risk factor for intimate partner violence: a population-based study from northern Vietnam. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, *63*(9), 708-714.

Walker, L. E. (1977). Who are the battered women?. *Frontiers: A journal of women studies*, 52-57.

Walker, L. (1979). *The battered woman*. New York: Harper and Row.

Walker, L. E. (1983). Syndrome Study. *The dark side of families: Current family violence research*, 31.

Walker, A., Lyall, K., Silva, D., Craigie, G., Mayshak, R., Costa, B., ... & Bentley, A. (2020). Male victims of female-perpetrated intimate partner violence, help-seeking, and reporting behaviors: A qualitative study. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, *21*(2), 213.

Wareham, J., Boots, D. P., & Chavez, J. M. (2009). A test of social learning and intergenerational transmission among batterers. *Journal of criminal justice*, *37*(2), 163-173.

Watanabe, C. Y. V., Diniz, E. H., & Scornavacca, E. (2022). The role of blogs in restoring the self-integrity of women victims of intimate partner sexual violence. *Information Technology & People*, (ahead-of-print).

What is gaslighting?. The Hotline. (2023, July 4). https://www.thehotline.org/resources/what-is-gaslighting/

White, J. W., & Koss, M. P. (1991). Courtship violence: Incidence in a national sample of higher education students. *Violence and victims*, *6*(4), 247-256.

White, J. W., Merrill, L. L., & Koss, M. P. (2001). Predictors of premilitary courtship violence in a Navy recruit sample. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *16*(9), 910-927.

Whitfield, C. L., Anda, R. F., Dube, S. R., & Felitti, V. J. (2003). Violent childhood experiences and the risk of intimate partner violence in adults: Assessment in a large health maintenance organization. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, *18*(2), 166-185.

Willig, C. (2013). *EBOOK: introducing qualitative research in psychology*. McGraw-hill education (UK).

Yllö, K. E., & Bograd, M. E. (1988). Feminist perspectives on wife abuse. In *National conference for family violence researchers, 2nd, 1984, U of New Hampshire, NH, US*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Zareie, A. (2013). From blog writing to self-consciousness: a study of Iranian female bloggers. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *91*, 66-71.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Thematic Map for Blog Analysis
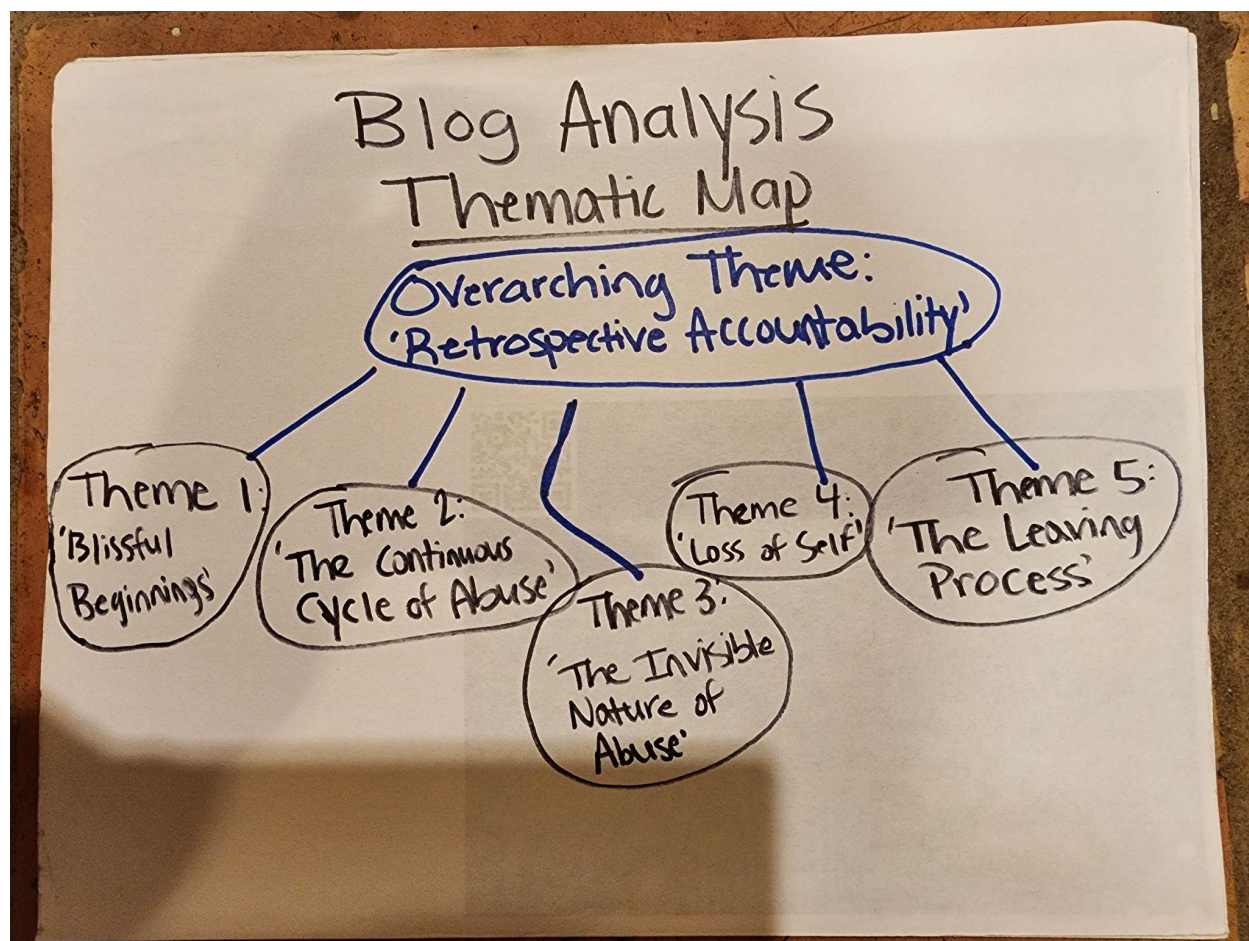
Appendix B: Thematic Map for Semi-Structured Interviews Analysis

Semi-Structured Interviews Analysis
Thematic Map

Overarching Theme: 'Retrospective Sense-Making'

Theme 1: 'How This was Abuse'

Theme 2: 'I am Less Than I was Before'

Theme 3: 'Managing Blame & Accountability'

Theme 4: 'It's Good That it Ended'
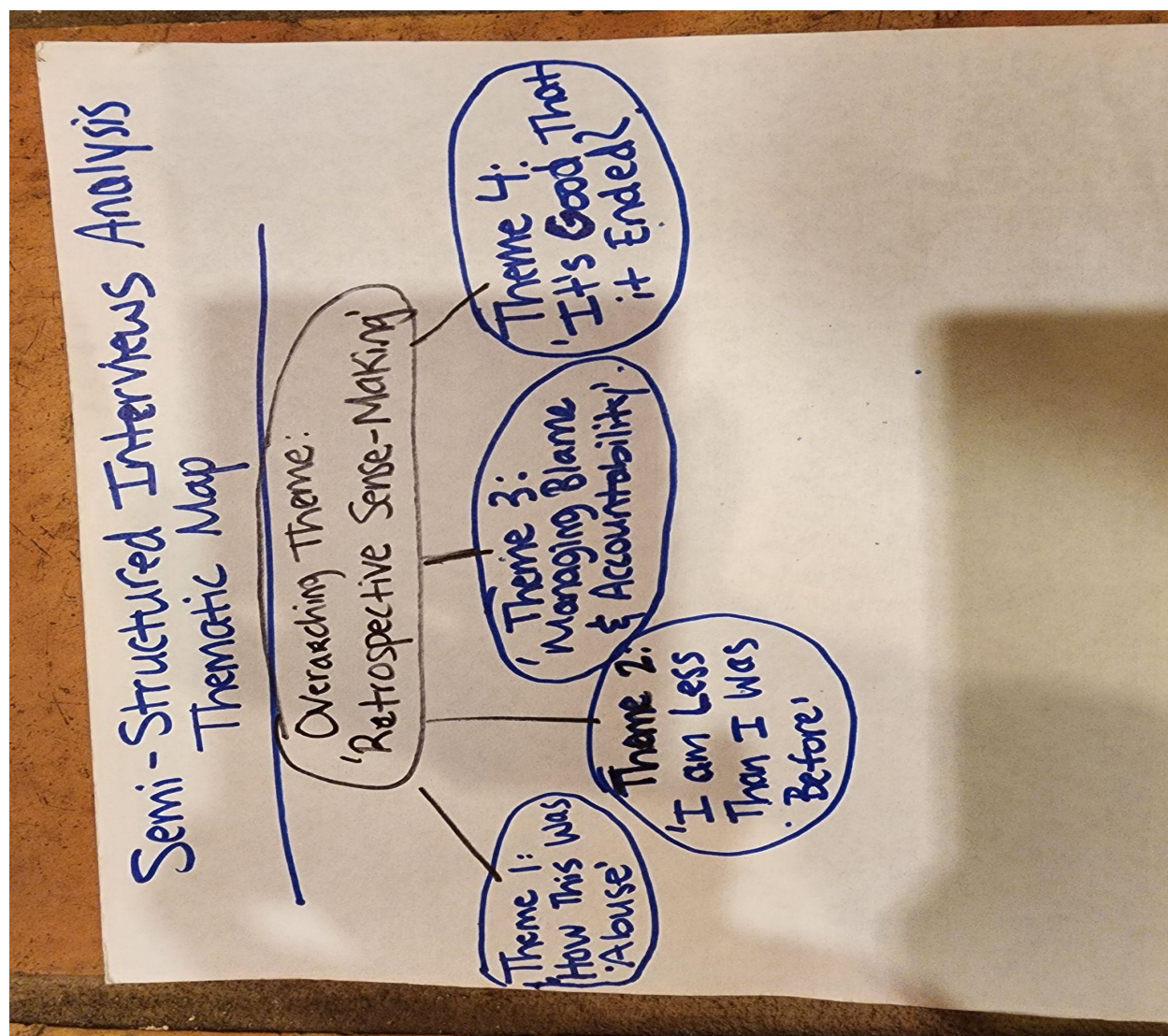
Appendix C: Ethical Approval for Blogs

Appendix D: Ethical Approval for Semi-Structured Interviews

Appendix E: Interview Schedule

Hello, my name is Dori Lansbach and I am a second-year PhD student at the University of Edinburgh studying psychology. Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. I would like to have a conversation with you about your experience in your relationship. Before we start, I just need to confirm a few details.

- Have you been in, or are you currently still in a psychologically abusive relationship?
- Would you consider yourself to have been in more than one of these types of relationships? If so, I want to focus on the relationship in which you've experienced the most amount of psychological abuse (be prepared with a definition and an example, just in case)
- How long did this relationship last?
- How long ago was the relationship?
- How old are you?

I want you to be comfortable, so you do not have to answer a question if you don't want to, everything will remain anonymous, and I will give you the opportunity to ask for the interview or part of it to be deleted afterwards.

Thank you.

Interview Schedule

1.) Can you tell me about how you and your partner (or ex-partner) started dating?

2.) Can you remember what the relationship was like in the early stages?
Probes:
Were you happy in the relationship?
Was it good?
3.) What happened next?
Probes:
-Meaning what happened in your relationship after the initial stages of meeting and getting to know one another? How did it progress? It could be routine or negative. I'm interested in "what" happened during this time...

-How did you feel about the relationship?
-How did you feel about your partner?
-How do you think your partner felt about you?

4.) Did you notice some changes in this time or not?
Probes: What changes did you notice?
What types of changes or different behaviours did you notice in your partner or in the relationship in general?
-Can you tell me more?
-Can you give me an example?

5.) How did you respond to their behavior?
-Did you notice changes in your behavior? (meaning what effects did their behavior have on you?
-Did you talk to friends, family, co-workers, etc., about the relationship? If so, what did you say and how did they feel about the relationship?
-Did the relationship affect other areas of your life? (work, responsibilities, interests/passions, etc.) If so, how did it affect them?
-Can you give me an example?

6.) Were there further changes?

7.) How did you respond to their behavior?
-Did you notice changes in your behavior? (meaning what effects did their behavior have on you?
-Were any of your relationships (friends, co-workers, family, etc.,) affected by the relationship?
-Did the relationship affect other areas of your life? (work, responsibilities, interests/passions, etc.)

8.) How did the relationship end?
Probes:
-Was there a specific trigger that ended the relationship or was it an accumulation of things?
-If they don't discuss on their own ask, can you tell me more?
-Ask who ended it, if not answered…

9.) Did you notice any changes after the relationship ended on yourself, other relationships, or other areas of your life?

Probe:

-How did the relationship impact you?

-What kinds of changes did you notice in yourself? These could be emotional, psychological, or even physical…

-Did you notice the relationship affecting you in the long-term in any way? If so, can you please give me some examples of what you noticed?

10.) How are you doing now?

Probe: Do you think you have moved on from your relationship?

11.) Do you ever look back and think about why this may have happened?

If they need clarification, "have you tried to explain this relationship to yourself?"

Possible areas they may reference:

-family relationships growing up

-traumas/abuse etc.,

-previous romantic relationships

-life circumstances at the time of entering into the relationship

-other reasons not accounted for

12.) Is there anything that you would like to talk about or add in the conversation that you thought you'd be asked and weren't?

Alternate ending for ongoing relationships

How would you describe your relationship currently?

-Are you happy?

-How are you feeling now?

-What parts of the relationship make you happy?

-Do you feel that your partner is happy?

Given what you've said, what would you like to happen with the relationship? What do you think will happen?

(likely directions)

- nothing/carry-on as is
- end
- make it better

Do you ever look back and think about why this may have happened?
Further clarification: Have you tried to explain this relationship to yourself?
-Why you entered the relationship? Why you've remained in it? How it progressed the way that it did?

Is there anything that you would like to talk about or add in the conversation that you thought you'd be asked and weren't?

Appendix F: Interview Recruitment Post for Facebook

Hello,

My name is Dori Lansbach, and I am a PhD student studying psychological abuse in heterosexual romantic relationships in the Department of Psychology at the University of Edinburgh. For my research, I am looking to have informal and confidential discussions (via Skype, telephone, Facebook messenger, etc.,) with individuals who have experienced being a victim of psychological abuse or even felt they played a role in perpetrating some of the abuse at times, in a romantic relationship. I have in the past experienced this form of maltreatment/abuse in a relationship of my own, so I have an understanding of how sensitive this topic can be to discuss, but this a large part of what inspired me to help increase the understanding of psychological/emotional abuse. I would love to speak to anyone who would be willing to share their story with me (confidentially and anonymously) to help bring to light this form of abuse that is so often overlooked. If you would like to speak to me, please send me a direct message on Facebook or email me at   and I can provide you with some more information.

Thank you,

Dori

Appendix G: Participant Information Sheet

Information Sheet

Project title: Experiences of Psychological Abuse in Romantic Relationships
You are being invited to take part in a study on individuals' experiences in psychologically abusive romantic relationships. The field of psychological abuse is under researched, but has been gaining widespread attention in recent years with more people sharing their experiences with this insidious form of abuse. Your willingness to share your experience will help to enhance our understanding of this field of research. To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be at least eighteen years of age, and have experienced psychological/emotional maltreatment or abuse in a current or former heterosexual romantic relationship of at least one month in duration.

What will happen?
You will be asked a few general questions by a researcher about yourself and your experience in your psychologically abusive relationship. The interviews will be audio recorded for the purposes of the research, and they will last around thirty to forty-five minutes.

Do I have to take part?
No, it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. Even if you do participate, you are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

Are there any potential benefits, harms, risks, or discomfort?
You may not gain any direct benefit from participating in this study, however your contribution will help enhance our understanding of psychological abuse in romantic relationships. The study poses no known risks to you, although there is a possibility of experiencing some distressing emotions when speaking about your experience in your relationship.

What happens when the study is finished?
At the end of the research results will be written up in academic publications and disseminated at academic conferences.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?
The interviews will be stored in an encrypted file in a password protected computer. The data collected may be shared with other researchers via public data repositories, and small sections of your interview may be cited at conferences and in academic publications. I will ensure that it is not possible to identify you from any of the information I publish and share.

For further information

I will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time, and can inform you about the results of the study once it is complete. You may contact me at

If you have questions about your rights in this research, or you have any other questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints that you do not feel can be addressed by the researcher, please contact the Convener of the PPLS Psychology Research Ethics committee (psych.ethics@ed.ac.uk).
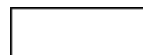
Appendix H: Interview Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project title: Experiences of Psychological Abuse in Romantic Relationships

You are being invited to take part in a research study on psychological abuse.

By signing below, you are agreeing that: (1) you have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, (2) questions about your participation in this study have been answered satisfactorily, (3) you are aware of the potential risks (if any), (4) you are taking part in this research study voluntarily (without coercion), and (5) anonymised data only may be shared in public research repositories.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask any questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

3. I understand that I will be asked to take part in an interview as described in the Participant Information Sheet.

4. I understand that my responses may be used in academic publications and dissemination and will be done so bearing in mind confidentiality and anonymity.

5. I agree to being audio recorded as part of this project. I understand that the recording will be stored confidentiality and that my voice will be altered if any part of the interview is presented at an academic conference.

6. I agree to take part in the above study.

_____

Participant's Name (Printed)*

_____   _____

Participant's signature*   Date

_____
Name of person obtaining consent (Printed)

_____
Signature of person obtaining consent

Appendix I: Interview Debrief Form

Debriefing Form

Project title: Experiences of Psychological Abuse in Romantic Relationships

Thank you for participating in this research. You have made a meaningful contribution to a developing body of knowledge in psychology, and we would like to acknowledge that contribution.

This study was conducted to further investigate and help bring validation to the severity of psychological abuse (PSYAB) in heterosexual romantic relationships. There is a lack of consensus among researchers as to how to define psychological abuse, thus stressing the need for further research, but generally can be defined as, "the patterned non-physical degradation of one person by their partner through the conscious or unconscious gaining, regaining, or maintaining of power through the repetitive overt or subtle acts and messages that control or attempt to control, which negatively affects the abused partner's emotions or self-value in the long-term" (Lammers et al., 2005). Psychological abuse within intimate partner violence (IPV) is often a precursor to physical or sexual abuse (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; Follingstad, Coyne, & Gambone, 2005; Jones et al., 2005) and is poorly researched (Carton & Egan, 2017). PSYAB is an insidious form of abuse and may not be recognized by its victims as constituting abuse initially, or at all (Follingstad, 2005). However, we know that the long-term effects of psychological abuse can be more devastating and harmful than physical and sexual abuse (Tolman, 1999). Due to the potential severity of psychological abuse and the lack of research in this field of intimate partner violence, it is our aim to help provide a platform for individuals to share their experiences with this form of abuse in order to investigate in a comprehensive manner, what happens during a psychologically abusive relationship and to see how one typically evolves over time.

Importantly, we ask that you please do not discuss this study with others. If you print a copy of this information, we similarly ask that you please take care to avoid leaving it where others may see it. We are interested in how thoughts, feelings, and behaviour occur naturally and prior knowledge of the study's goals may bias responses.

Resources

Although there are no known risks involved with participating in this study, we

understand that after completing the interview you may feel distressed and would like to speak confidentially to someone. If you would like additional support, you can call the 24-hour National Domestic Violence Freephone Helpline 0808 2000 247, the Mankind Initiative 01823 334244, or Samaritans 116 123.

For Further Information

Please contact Dori Lansbach (   ) or Dr. Sue Widdicombe (   ) if you have any questions regarding this research, or if you would like to know the outcomes of the study.

Thank you again for your time and cooperation; it is greatly appreciated.