

**A Narrative Exploration of Love and Abuse in  
Women's Intimate Partner Relationships**

by

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## ABSTRACT

### **A Narrative Exploration of Love and Abuse in Women's Intimate Partner Relationships**

Women's narratives of their lived experience when love and abuse co-exist in intimate partner relationships provide insight into the ways that their action for safety is impacted by their beliefs about love, the micro-politics of these relationships, and the macro-politics of the structural inequalities that constrain these relationships. Women's vulnerability to abuse is increased and their access to safety limited by a belief in love as a promise, the dominant romance narratives including the fairy tale and dark romance narratives, by the practice of love with the two core conditions that support abuse, and by the social structures and institutions of society that constrain these relationships.

Understanding the impact of how love is practiced, the dominant narratives of love and abuse, and the ways that social structures and institutions constrain women when love and abuse co-exist will enhance women's access to safety and social work services.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Reason for the Research**

There is recognition in Canada that violence against women in their intimate partner relationships continues to be an issue with serious social and health consequences for women, and serious social and financial costs for society (Statistics Canada, 2008). Women continue to experience abuse in their intimate partner relationships and to look to social services to understand and cope with these experiences (Fraser, 2008; Stark, 2007; Ursel, Tutty & leMaistre, 2008).

Since the 1970's, three waves of feminism and countless other disciplines have explored, discussed, and theorized abuse in intimate partner relationships; what it is, why it happens, and how best to interact with the individuals involved in this experience. And still there is much need and much confusion. Women continue to experience abuse and have needs regarding safety in their intimate partner relationships. As a society we continue to struggle to understand this experience and to provide meaningful support and services to the individuals involved. Our confusion and the situation is further complicated when we begin to talk of love and its place in the experience of abuse as there is very little research and theorizing of the co-existence of love and abuse. In that literature there are those that believe that love and abuse cannot co-exist (hook, 2000) and those that believe that love and abuse do co-exist (Donovan, Hester, Holmes & McCarry, 2006; Donovan & Hester, 2010, 2011; Fraser, 2003, 2008; McHugh, 2005; Ristock, 2002). Each of these beliefs will influence how we understand the experience of abuse and how we interact with those involved in the experience of abuse. If we believe that

love and abuse cannot co-exist we might not be able to address the issues of love when we are dealing with abuse nor be able to address issues of abuse, including safety, when love is declared. This increases women's vulnerability to abuse and decreases their access to safety. Fraser (2003, 2008) suggests that if social work is to be part of a supportive and appropriate social justice response to abuse in intimate partner relationships, we need to continue to explore and gain understanding of love and abuse as co-existing.

### **Research Question**

It is for this reason that I undertook a narrative inquiry that explores women's understanding of their lived experience of love and abuse in their intimate partner relationships. The primary question of this research to women was, "What is the story of love and abuse in your relationship"? Additional conversational probes that were used in this exploration include: What beliefs did you have about love as the relationship began? What understanding did you have of abuse as the relationship began? Was there a time in the relationship where you experienced abuse that your beliefs about love changed? Was there a time in the relationship when your understanding of abuse changed? Was there a time in your relationship when you knew that you had to take action for your safety?

The exploration of this research question requires a discussion of love, abuse, and their co-existence in intimate partner relationships. Also the theoretical perspective and methodology of the research project. I discuss the importance of understanding love and abuse as co-existing in the relationship, the issues regarding safety that such an understanding brings to our attention, and the importance of understanding the

intersection of the meaning of love and women's action for safety in intimate partner relationships that contain the experience of abuse. I discuss the methodology of this research and situate myself as inquirer. As I am a woman who lives and works with women in Canada, I explore and undertake this discussion in a North American cultural context. My understanding of the topic is informed by a review of the literature, my work in Canada with women who have experienced abuse in their intimate partner relationships, my worldview, and my social location.

### **Thesis Overview**

In Chapter two, I provide a review of the literature regarding love, abuse in intimate partner relationships, the co-existence of love and abuse, and the meaning women make of love and abuse and its importance in the actions regarding safety. In concluding this chapter I situate the question of this research in the literature.

In Chapter three, I provide a discussion of the methodology and the process of the research project. I discuss the use of narrative inquiry and my reasons for this choice. I identify the feminist poststructural perspective from which the research was undertaken and the importance of social justice and an anti-oppressive process to this research. I provide operational definitions and explore questions of ethics. Here, I also discuss the research process including procedures for making and handling the data, as well as the process for quality assessment.

In Chapter four, I provide my analysis of the narratives of the women who took part in this research project. I situate my analysis and myself as researcher. I provide my



understanding of the women's narratives through a discussion of the themes in the women's narratives of their relationship experience.

In Chapter five, I provide a discussion of the findings of this research project. I situate this research project in the literature and provide an overview of my findings including a discussion of the way love and commitment interact in the decision to act for safety, the micro-politics of relationships where love and abuse co-exist, and the macro-politics of structural inequalities that constrain relationships when love and abuse co-exist. I explore how this knowledge can be important in understanding women's experience of love and abuse in their intimate partner relationships and the implications for social work practice. Finally, I provide an evaluation of this research project that includes limitations, future inquiry and quality of this research.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Love**

Love is a complicated and important concept for study as it is meaningful in the lives of many people (Fraser, 2008) and very much a part of western popular culture (Jackson, 1999). In Western, Anglo-American culture love is considered to be a fundamental part of what it means to be human (Fraser 2005, 2008; Fromm, 2006; Jankowiak, 1995; Sternberg, 1998). In addition, love is seen as a goal shared in a culture across class, gender, and other distinctions and as a goal that is internalized and worked towards (deMunck, 1998).

The literature discusses love as both a feeling and an action, received or given to another (Fraser, 2008). There have been many works across disciplines that have endeavoured to describe and define love. Love has been discussed as an action based on will (Peck, 1978), an art (Fromm, 2006), an emotion (Jackson, 1999), an ethics (hook, 2000), an ideology (Lee, 1998), a promise (Smart, 2007), a practice (Smart, 2007), a story or series of stories (Sternberg, 1998), and also as a complex system of attitudes, beliefs, feelings and behaviours (Snyder, 1992). Love has been described, theorized, and narrated in terms of falling in love, passionate love, jouissance, love styles, attachment, the love dichotomy (passionate/ companionate), love as a story, types of love (platonic/Christian/courtly/romantic), and love in modern and postmodern time (Fraser, 2008). Love has also been described, theorized, and narrated from psychological, sociological, anthropological, feminist, gay, lesbian, men's, neo-conservative, postmodern, popular culture, and queer perspectives (Fraser, 2008).

There is diversity in the narratives of love and there is no one consistent definition or understanding of love (deMunck, 1998; Fraser, 2008; Jankowiak, 1995). If we are trying to come to the one truth about love, this could be a point where the discussion of love becomes an argument about who is right. However, in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, the plurality of the experience of love has been acknowledged (Fraser, 2008; Fuery, 1995; Jankowiak, 1995) and rather than being problematic, it can be seen as an important part of understanding love (deMunck, 1998; Fraser, 2008; Jankowiak, 1995; Lee, 1998; Sternberg, 1998). We can experience, see and understand love in different contexts.

When the plurality of love is embraced, love is present in most cultures of the world (Donovan & Hester, 2010; Jankowiak, 1995). When the context of love is acknowledged, we see love is socially constructed (Fraser, 2008; Fuery, 1995; Jackson, 1999; Lee, 1998), gendered (Jackson, 1999; Sternberg, 1998) or feminized and masculinized (Donovan & Hester, 2011), guided by culture (Fraser, 2008; Jackson, 1999; Sternberg, 1998), with cultural context and expression (Jankowiak, 1995). Love can take place in any relationship in life. Romantic love is no longer tied to heterosexuality and the institution of marriage (Donovan & Hester, 2010; Fraser, 2008). In intimate unions love is seen in relationships that are same sex, heterosexual, short term, long term, open, or exclusive (Lee, 1998). Understanding love in this way reflects a postmodern view of love as having “many realities and truths; that even when love is a constant preoccupation, it is never fully captured by one human being, academic discipline, or site of production.” (Fraser, 2008, p. 45). It reflects an understanding of love that privileges the individual who is living the experience rather than the expert (Fraser, 2003, 2008). It is an understanding of love that also recognizes the impact of the dominant popular

culture's discourse of love on an individual's narrative of love (Donovan & Hester, 2011; Fraser, 2005, 2008; Jackson, 1999; Lee, 1998; Sternberg, 1998). As Fraser (2008) states, "love involves a complex web of emotions, motivations, actions, and explanations." (p. 18). We can increase our understanding of love by understanding narratives of love and their context from the perspective of those who live the experience (Fraser, 2008).

In 20th Century, Western, Anglo-American cultures, although more discourse is taking place in academia (Fraser, 2003, 2008; Jackson, 1999) the predominant discourse of love, in intimate partner relationships, that most individuals experience is the romantic narrative of popular culture (Davies, 1989; Donovan & Hester, 2011; Fraser, 2003, 2005, 2008; Jackson, 1999; Power, Koch, Kralik & Jackson, 2006; Wood, 2001). Although individuals may hear many stories of love's diversity (Fraser, 2005, 2008), popular culture has a strong influence on women's understanding of love (Davis, 1989; Donovan & Hester, 2011; Fraser, 2003, 2008; Jackson, 1999) and influences women's desire to be in a romantic relationship (Donovan & Hester, 2011; Power, Koch, Kralik & Jackson, 2006). An exploration of what is said and written about love in popular culture will enhance understanding of the meaning of love for women (Jackson, 1999).

The literature identifies a predominant and pervasive narrative of romantic love in Western Anglo-American popular culture. This dominant narrative of romantic love is based on the idea that there is one ideal other for each person, regardless of sexuality, and that coming together in love based on monogamy, fidelity, privacy, and loyalty completes the couple and lasts forever (Donovan & Hester, 2011; Fraser, 2008; Jackson, 1999; Wood, 2001).

Jackson (1999, 2001) and Wood (2001) describe two narratives that support the dominant romance narrative, the fairy tale romance narrative and the dark romance narrative. The fairy tale romance narrative says that the perfect love will come and rescue the woman who is in need and they will live happily ever after (Jackson, 1999; Jackson, 2001; Wood, 2001). Should the fairy tale romance not work out in this way, the dark romance narrative is available (Jackson, 2001; Wood, 2001). The violent or abusive “beast” shows his softer side when he declares his love (Jackson, 2001; Towns & Adams, 2000), which he has come to know through the love of a good woman (Jackson, 1999; Jackson, 2001; Towns & Adams, 2000).

Fairy tales provide these romance narratives to children and through out their lives they are reinforced (Wood, 2001). Cultural institutions, including the media, continue to produce the romance narratives through books (fiction and non-fiction), dance, magazines, movies, newspapers (stories and advice columns), television (news, programs, and reality), songs, and theatre (Fraser, 2008; Woods, 2001). There is widespread encouragement to love (Fraser, 2008). Women are seen as accommodating, and seeking to please men (Wood, 2001). Men are seen as dominating and regarding women as inferior (Wood, 2001). Women are portrayed as needing to be rescued, completed, and fulfilled (Wood, 2001). It is in this way the roles, rules, and options of love are prescribed and taught (Fraser, 2008; Wood, 2001). As Fraser (2008) states “the cultural imperative for women to love is alive and well.” (p.171). Donovan and Hester (2011) point out that this is also true in same sex relationships, that this cultural imperative to love “is neither inherently heteronormative nor gendered” (p. 86).

### **Abuse in Intimate Partner Relationships**

Abuse is also a complex concept (Fraser, 2008; Johnson, 2006, Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; McHugh, 2005; Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007) and can be understood, and discussed, in a number of ways. In Western, Anglo-American culture there has been significant change since the 1970's in the acknowledgement and understanding of abuse against women in their intimate partner relationships (Fraser, 2008; Stark, 2007). As a culture we have moved from not acknowledging violence against women in their intimate partner relationships to a time when we acknowledge and discuss the experience of abuse in intimate partner relationships and provide service to those who experience abuse, those who witness abuse, and those who behave abusively (Fraser, 2008; Stark, 2007).

Abuse has been described, theorized, and narrated from psychological, sociological, anthropological, feminist, gay, lesbian, men's, neo-conservative, medical, modern, postmodern, popular culture, queer, and religious perspectives. Across disciplines, there have been many works (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Stark, 2007) that have endeavoured to define, describe and explain abuse in intimate partner relationships. Discussions have taken place regarding: what abuse is, what to call abuse, what to call those who experience abuse, what to call those who behave abusively, how to talk about abuse, what causes abuse, what supports abuse, the process and purpose of abuse, who behaves abusively, who experiences abuse, who is responsible for abuse, why abuse happens, why women who experience abuse stay, why individuals who behave abusively stay, how we can identify those who behave abusively, and how to identify those who experience abuse, what is helpful to those who experience abuse, what is helpful to those who behave abusively, and who has the right and true answer. Donovan & Hester (2010,

2011), Dutton (2008), Fraser (2008), Johnson & Ferraro (2000), McHugh (2005), Ristock (2002), and Stark (2007) provide overviews of these discussions from different perspectives.

As is the case with love, there is no one definition or understanding of abuse (Donovan & Hester, 2010; Fraser, 2008, Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007). Discussion of who is right and what is true keeps us stuck and takes away from the goal of understanding and ending abuse in intimate partner relationships (Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007). In order that we do not remain stuck and to continue to move in the direction of ending abuse in intimate partner relationships we must accept that there is not one large, unchanging understanding of abuse that will explain all experiences (Ristock, 2002).

What we know about abuse is constructed through culture, language, and social processes (Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007). Discussing, theorizing, and narrating abuse in this manner reflects a postmodern view of abuse as having many experiences, realities and truths. As Fraser discusses (2008, p. 23), “abuse may be defined as acts of domination by one individual or group over another”. Abuse in the context of intimate partner relationships may be emotional, financial, intellectual, psychological, physical, sexual, and/or spiritual in nature (Herman, 1992; Stark, 2007). Abuse may include experiences of control, coercion, deprivation, exploitation, manipulation, and surveillance (Fraser, 2008; Herman, 1992; Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007; Ursel, Tutty & leMaistre, 2008). Abuse in intimate partner relationships also occurs across age, ability, culture, ethnic background, geographic location, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (Power, Koch, Kralik & Jackson, 2006; Ristock, 2002). However we

must recognize that some individuals are at increased risk of experiencing abuse as a result of structural inequality (Fraser, 2008; Hughes, 2005) and socially sanctioned forms of domination, control, and manipulations (Fraser, 2008; Hughes, 2005; Mullaly, 2007). Social identity and location through ability, age, class, education, gender, immigration, parenting, race, sexuality and their intersection impact the experience of abuse and vulnerability to abuse (Davis & Glass, 2011; Donovan & Hester, 2011; Hiebert-Murphy, Ristock & Brownridge, 2011; Hughes, 2005; Ristock, 2002).

Abuse is often discussed in terms of the individual interpersonal experiences of critical incidences, which has left the more systematic and structural forms of abuse hidden from view (Fraser, 2008). Johnson & Ferraro (2000) and Stark (2007) discuss the individual, systematic, and structural forms of abuse and encourage us to understand the importance of recognizing all aspects of the experience of abuse.

Abuse continues to be an issue of concern in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008; Ursel, Tutty & leMaistre, 2008). The 2004 General Social Survey on Victimization (Statistics Canada, 2005a) and the Statistics Canada 2008 profile of family violence in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008) report that abuse toward women from males occurs most often with the most serious consequences including physical harm and death. Abuse in intimate partner relationships is seen in many forms (Fraser, 2008; Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007; Ursel, Tutty & leMaistre, 2008) and has the potential to have significant and long-lasting impacts on all aspects of the life of the person experiencing the abuse (Stark, 2007; Ursel, Tutty & leMaistre, 2008). The potential for physical and emotional harm are issues of safety for the individual who experiences abuse.



There is diversity in the impact of the experience of abuse (Fraser, 2008) and there is diversity in the possibility of change for those who behave abusively (Jenkins, 1990). Individuals who experience abuse may understand and feel the impact of their experience in many ways (Fraser & Craik, 2009). There is diversity in the way that individuals who experience abuse will act in response to the experience and act to resist the experience (Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003; Dziegielewski, Campbell & Turnage, 2005; Eisikovits, Buchbinder, & Mor, 1998; Fraser, 2003, 2008; Lammers, Ritchie & Robertson, 2005; Power, Koch, Kralik & Jackson, 2006; Towns & Adams, 2000; Wood, 2001). This is diversity in the action for emotional, physical, and sexual safety.

There is also diversity in the experience of those who behave abusively (Fraser & Craik, 2009). There are those who behave abusively who will accept responsibility for their behaviour and sustain change in their behaviour towards others and those who will not (Jenkins, 1990). Finally, there is diversity in the outcome of relationships that contain the experience of abuse with some ending and some continuing (Lesperance, 2002).

Although women are acknowledged to experience abuse by males most often (Fraser, 2008; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007; Ursel, Tutty & leMaistre, 2008), it is also important to recognize that men can experience abuse, and women can behave abusively (Donovan & Hester, 2010, 2011; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007; Ursel, Tutty & leMaistre, 2008). It is also important to recognize that abuse takes place in same sex relationships (Donovan & Hester, 2010, 2011; Donovan, Hester, Holmes & McCarry, 2006; Fraser, 2008; Hester & Donovan,

2009; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007 Ursel, Tutty & leMaistre, 2008).

In the theoretical literature abuse can be understood to involve a complex web of emotions, motivations, actions, impacts and explanations. However, it is also important to recognize that the dominant narrative of intimate partner abuse that most people experience in 20th Century, Western, Anglo-American popular culture continues to be that abuse is primarily physical, done by men and experienced by women in heterosexual relationships (Donovan & Hester, 2011). This is the abuse narrative most consistently seen in books, movies, songs, magazine articles, and news items.

We increase our understanding of abuse by privileging the voice of those who live the experience rather than the expert (Fraser, 2008; Ristock, 2002). We increase our understanding of abuse by recognizing the context in which the lived experience of abuse takes place (Fraser, 2008; Hester & Donovan, 2009; Hughes, 2005; Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007). We increase our understanding of abuse by seeing the differing theories and narratives of abuse as parts of the whole of our understanding (McHugh, 2005). We further increase our understanding of abuse through understanding the perspective and context in which the theory and narratives are developed (Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007). What becomes increasingly important in the discussion of abuse is the context of the lived experience, identification of one's definition of abuse, and the perspective that is informing the discussion and theorizing of abuse (Fraser, 2008; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Ristock, 2002; Stark, 2007).

A feminist poststructural framework endeavours to be open to the contradictions, diversity, and multiplicity of the experience of abuse (Fraser, 2008, Ristock, 2002,

Strega, 2005). How particularly abuse is experienced and the meaning made of that experience is best known through the narrative and perspective of those who live the experience (Fraser, 2008; Ristock, 2002). The language used to discuss abuse is also important (Fraser, 2008; Ristock, 2002) as it shapes how we understand and describe our and others experience. We must understand why we choose the way we name and discuss the experience of abuse, what we give voice to, and what we remain silent about (Ristock, 2002). Fraser (2008) and Stark (2007) further caution that a discussion of abuse must include not only the interpersonal but also the systemic and structural aspects that are often unnamed and left out of the discussion.

### **The Co-existence of Love and Abuse**

Jackson (1999) encourages the understanding of the place of love in women's lives. Since abuse is, also a part of many women's lived experience it is important to understand the relationship and interplay between love and abuse for women. There are those like hooks (2000) that believe love and abuse cannot co-exist because domination cannot be part of love. However, women's narratives of their intimate partner relationships provide the bases for understanding that it is possible to experience love and abuse in the same relationship (Donovan & Hester, 2010, 2011; Fraser, 2003, 2008; McHugh, 2005; Ristock, 2002). In fact, Wood (2001) identifies that it is not uncommon to experience abuse in the context of a love relationship.

Since it is not uncommon for love and abuse to co-exist, we limit our understanding of the experience of women in such a situation when we dichotomize love and abuse and understand them as mutually exclusive. The experience and needs of

women are disregarded if we cannot talk about love when there is abuse present or we cannot talk of abuse if love is present. As researchers, we cannot hear women's experience if we cannot talk of both love and abuse in one relationship. For service providers, this dichotomizing of love and abuse will get in the way of women who experience abuse in their intimate partner relationship going through their process of understanding their experience and moving forward in their lives. Women may need to talk of their feelings of love even if they have to act for their safety or leave their relationship or they may need to acknowledge and deal with safety concerns even if they feel love and continue in the relationship. We must find our way to understand and discuss both love and abuse in order that we can facilitate these conversations (Fraser, 2008).

However, as a result of the dichotomizing of love and abuse we know little about the ways in which women make sense of their experience when abuse occurs in the context of a love relationship (Donovan & Hester, 2011; Fraser, 2003, 2008; Jackson, 2001). We know little about how they understand their options and decide how they will move forward in their relationships and lives when love and abuse co-exist (Wood, 2001). The relationship between love and abuse has remained little studied and under-theorized (Donovan & Hester, 2011; Fraser, 2008; Power, Koch, Kralik & Jackson, 2006; Towns & Adams, 2000).

Wood (2001) quotes Del Mar (1996, p. 174) who states "violence against wives will remain commonplace until we muster the will to examine how closely it is bound up with our most cherished values and most powerful cultural traits". Love is such a cherished value. It is important to understand the co-existence of love and abuse as it can

provide insight into how the women living the experience of abuse in their partner relationships make sense of their experience, how they decide to act for their safety in response and resistance to the abuse experience, and decide how they will move forward. “Constructed and mystified into the taken-for-granted; you can demystify and deconstruct.” (Lee, 1998, p. 42).

As humans, we narrate our lives with culturally influenced narratives (Fraser, 2008; Wood, 2001) and in times of stress we search for the narrative that will help us make sense of what is happening (Czarniawska, 2004; Wood, 2001). As is true of love, cultural context informs the meaning and acceptability of violence and abuse (Wood, 2001). The dominant public story of love and abuse influences the practice of love and the identification of abuse (Donovan & Hester, 2010). The conventional and dominant romance narrative supports the co-existence of love and violence (Jackson, 2001; Woods, 2001). It also supports the dominance by males and submission by females (Woods, 2001) or as Donovan & Hester (2011) discuss dominance by the individual who would set the terms of the relationship by the means they would use and the submission of those who do the emotional work of the relationship. The “Conventional romance narratives (and their corresponding gender scripts) can operate as powerful mediators of future outcomes” (Fraser, 1999, p. 17) when love and abuse co-exist. Individuals need to understand that on which they base their lives (Lee, 1998). This is true of all people including women who experience love and abuse in their intimate partner relationships, the service providers who work with them, and the academics and researchers who theorize their experience.

### **The Meaning Women Make of Love and Abuse and its Importance in their Action for Safety**

How do women know and understand their experience when love and abuse co-exist, how do they decide how they will act for their safety in response and resistance to the abuse experience, and how do they decide how to move forward in relationships where they experience both love and abuse? The literature provides some insight into the interplay between ideas of love and ideas of abuse for women through a discussion of the importance of love for a partner in women's experience in an intimate partner relationship where they experience abuse. This limited discussion includes how they understand their experience, how they identify abuse, how they decide what action if any to take.

Jackson (2001) discusses women's use of the romance narrative to make sense of their experience of abuse. Wood (2001) identified that women in heterosexual relationships deem abuse in their intimate partner relationship to be understandable through their use of the romance narratives, both the fairy tale and the dark romance narratives. The fairy tale romance narrative says that a perfect partner will come and the couple completed will live happily ever after. Four beliefs were particularly important in developing and sustaining this understanding through the fairy tale romance narrative; "not as bad as" (was, could be, others experience), "the good outweighs the bad", "I can control it/stop it", and "not the real him" (Wood, 2001, p.250-252). The dark romance narrative says that the violent or badly behaving partner will behave better and declare their love, which they will come to know through the love of their partner, a good woman. Two beliefs were important in developing and sustaining this understanding

through the dark romance narrative; “I deserve it” and “being stuck” (no way out, being out not an option) (Woods, 2001, p. 254-255).

Expectations of romantic love and a belief in the power of romantic love are identified as two aspects of love that can result in women not identifying cues that identify their experience as abuse (Fraser, 2003, 2008; Power, Koch, Kralik & Jackson, 2006). Dominant culture stories of love and abuse may result in a relationship dynamic where abuse can occur and not be identified (Donovan & Hester, 2010). This is particularly salient since as Campbell (2004) discusses women who do not perceive the risk of their situation cannot make plans or take action for safety.

Boonzaier & de la Rey (2003) identified that love script narratives identify roles for women in relationships were they experience abuse and that women will draw on different aspects of these narratives at different points in their experience. This is important because the love scripts available may not include actions that support safety and may include actions that increase risk.

Perfect love discourse encourages women to remain in, be silent about abuse, and to endeavour to change the behaviour of the other person in relationships were they experience abuse (Towns & Adams, 2000). The perfect love discourse must be resisted prior to women leaving relationships in which they experience abuse (Towns & Adams, 2000). Further, love for the person who behaves abusively is identified as a challenge that prevents or delays leaving in heterosexual and same sex relationships (Donovan & Hester, 2010, 2011; Dziegielewski, Campbell & Turnage, 2005). Schiff, Gilbert, & El-Bassel (2006) discuss the importance of understanding a woman’s positive feelings toward her partner in their decision to leave or proceed in a relationship in which they

experience abuse. Donovan & Hester (2010) discuss how the practice of love makes identifying abuse more difficult. The belief that love can conquer all and produce change in others and in circumstances also makes it hard for women to sever ties in intimate partner relationships (Fraser, 2008).

Lammers, Ritchie & Robertson (2005) identify that decreased emotional attachment is necessary in order for women to consider leaving a relationship where abuse is experienced. Eisikovits, Buchbinder, & Mor (1998) identified that there is a turning point at which women who experience abuse understand the abuse as something they can not tolerate that must cease to be part of their relationship. Coming to the turning point is a process associated with both personal and inter-personal aspects of love. Such a turning point was possible and an outcome only when the meaning system that had kept them in their relationship collapsed. Finally, once the turning point was reached, the relationship could only continue if the abuse stopped (Eisikovits, Buchbinder, & Mor, 1998).

The interplay of ideas about love and abuse affect not only a woman identifying her experience as abuse but also influence her understanding of her options, actions, and decisions regarding how she will move forward. Narratives of love are seen to have an influence on the women's identification of the experience she is having as a problem and something that needed her attention and action (Donovan & Hester, 2010, Fraser, 2003, 2008; Power, Koch, Kralik & Jackson, 2006; Wood, 2001). Narratives of love impact a woman's understanding of her options for actions (Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003; Dziegielewski, Campbell & Turnage, 2005; Eisikovits, Buchbinder, & Mor, 1998; Lammers, Ritchie & Robertson, 2005; Towns & Adams, 2000). In addition, narratives of



love affect a woman's preparedness to leave the relationship (Dziegielewski, Campbell & Turnage, 2005; Eisikovits, Buchbinder, & Mor, 1998; Lammers, Ritchie & Robertson, 2005; Schiff, Gilbert, & El-Bassel, 2006; Towns & Adams, 2000).

### **Summary**

To date the focus of the literature has been on love or abuse with limited literature focusing on their co-existence in intimate partner relationships. This limited literature clearly suggests that our understanding of love and abuse are important when they co-exist. However, abuse threatens our understanding of love and love threatens our understanding of abuse and this makes it difficult to know how to proceed. As Fraser (2008) states "it was precisely because love and abuse could co-exist that women found it hard to know what to do when abuse began" (p. 229).

This is the reason that Fraser (2003, 2008) encourages social work to study, understand, and theorize love and its co-existence with abuse. We need to have knowledge of and critically reflect on the discourse and theorizing about love, abuse, and their co-existence (Fraser, 2008). We need to understand the way in which our narratives of love and abuse influence what we believe to be the options and appropriate action for safety that are available to women who experience the co-existence of love and abuse in their intimate partner relationships.

As a result of the continuing importance of emotional, physical, and sexual safety concerns in the experience of abuse and the confusion regarding how to act regarding these safety issues, there is more to understand about the co-existence of love and abuse. It will be helpful to those who are impacted by the experience of abuse if we have a

greater understanding of the way in which love for the individual behaving abusively and commitment to the relationship interact in the decision to act for one's safety, in response and resistance, within or outside the relationship (Dziegielewski, Campbell, & Turnage, 2005; Power, Koch, Kralik, & Jackson, 2006). It will also be helpful if we gain understanding of the micro-politics of relationships where love and abuse co-exist and the macro-politics of the structural inequalities that constrain these relationships (Fraser, 2003; 2005, 2008). Finally, it will be helpful to gain understanding into the implications of this increased understanding for social work practice with women who experience love and abuse co-existing in their intimate partner relationships. This inquiry was undertaken to further this understanding.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative research including narrative inquiry has been acknowledged as a source of knowledge production (Creswell, 2007; Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 1993; Skeggs, 2002). The value of hearing, representing, interpreting, and presenting experience that might otherwise not be heard has been discussed and established (Riessman, 1993; Strega, 2005; Strier, 2007) with narrative methods identified as an appropriate means of inquiry when we are interested in what an individual has to say about their lived experience (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007; Czarniawska, 2004; Fraser, 2008; Strega, 2005). Narrative inquiry begins with a respect for lived experience and includes an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional context of this lived experience (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Understanding the impact of women's beliefs about love on their action for their safety in intimate partner relationships in which they experience abuse will be more possible and complete when we listen to the narratives of those who have lived the experience. This research project undertook such a narrative inquiry into women's lived experience of love, abuse, and their actions for their safety. The focus of this narrative inquiry is the participating women's lived experience of how love and their understanding of love impacts their action for safety in an intimate partner relationship where they experience abuse.

It has also been established that once a method of inquiry is determined that it is important to identify the perspective from which the research project is undertaken (Creswell, 2007; Fraser, 2004; Kirby & McKennagh, 1989; Riessman, 1993; Ristock, 2002; Skeggs, 2002). To situate the inquiry within a worldview and interpretive

paradigm that determines the perspective from which the research decisions are undertaken; for whom the research is undertaken and how it will be undertaken (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007; Potts & Brown, 2005; Strega, 2005). This narrative inquiry was guided by a desire to produce anti-oppressive research. It is a research project situated in a feminist, poststructural worldview and interpretive paradigm and commitment to social justice.

I chose this type of narrative inquiry because of its attention to social justice. I conceptualize social justice as described by Young (1990) and Mullaly (1997, 2002). This is an understanding of social justice that includes not only distributive justice of goods and services, but also brings attention to the structures, processes, and practices of society that hold social justice and injustice in place. It is an understanding of social justice based on a belief that all people should have access to the same rights and privileges and a belief that equity and fairness are not possible when the structures, processes, and practices of society restrict this access. I believe that safety is a basic human right and therefore, access to safety is a social justice issue. It is my belief that the knowledge gained through this inquiry will help to understand the structures, processes and practices of society that restrict some women's access to safety and that it will assist women, who experience abuse, to access their right to emotional, mental, physical, sexual, and spiritual safety.

### **Feminist Poststructural Theory and Research**

A feminist poststructural worldview (see Strega, 2005 for an overview of this philosophical coming together and its challenges) encourages openness to the

contradictions, diversity, and multiplicity of lived experience (Fraser, 2008, Ristock, 2002, Strega, 2005). Feminist poststructural ideas allow researchers to raise questions of what constitutes knowledge, power, truth, difference, and self while acknowledging the sexual, racial, and class inequalities that structure the world (Strega, 2005). It encourages feminism to include differences, beyond gender, broadening its understanding of women's experience and encourages poststructuralism to recognize the impact of structural inequalities. Feminist poststructuralism encourages analysis that can incorporate all of these concepts as well as the way in which they relate to and influence each other (Strega, 2005). A feminist poststructural worldview encourages a researcher to engage in inquiry that supports social justice and action toward social justice (Strega, 2005).

### **Anti-oppressive Research**

Anti-oppressive research is based in the belief that knowledge is socially constructed, that research can support social justice through its process and there are ways of engaging in research that do not support relationships of domination and oppression (Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Potts & Brown, 2005). Research of this type requires that we question the taken for granted, the "normal", and the dominant discourse. That we listen carefully to the individual's lived experience, think critically from socio-cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal perspectives, and recognize and understand the implications of power dynamics in relationships, including the research relationship (Potts & Brown, 2005). It requires that the research be anti-oppressive in both purpose and process (Potts & Brown, 2005).

### **Operational Definition of Terms**

My understanding of love and abuse in intimate partner relationships is informed by feminist and poststructural thought. Understanding that there is no one truth or understanding of our language it is important to describe clearly the terms used to discuss a topic. For the purpose of this narrative inquiry, I choose deliberately to discuss women's experience and understanding of love, abuse and safety in intimate partner relationships. I choose to discuss "love", "abuse", and "safety" without further definition to allow for each woman's experience and understanding to be privileged in the their narrative; to allow room for the emotional, mental, physical, sexual and spiritual aspects of women's understanding and experience. I choose "experience of abuse" to be clear that I am discussing an experience that women are having not something that is intrinsic to them. I choose "abuse" to include more than physically violent incidences, which has become a focus in much of the literature and work in the area of abuse (Stark, 2007). I recognize that there is concern about establishing a hierarchy of experience when violence is not used and the violent nature of all abusive behaviour are not highlighted (Donovan & Hester, 2010; Fraser, 2008). However, I also choose "abuse" to include the individual, interpersonal, systematic, and structural aspects of the abuse experience. I choose to discuss "action for safety" to recognize the potential for impact and harm in the experience of abuse and the potential for action in response and resistance by those having the experience. To resist the idea of an individual who experiences abuse as passive victim as discussed by Donovan & Hester (2010) and Hughes (2005). I use "intimate partner relationships" in an effort to be inclusive of intimate relationships that

are same sex, heterosexual, short term, long term, dating, marriage (civil, common-law, and religious), open, exclusive, living separately and living together.

### **Ethics**

This research meets the requirements of the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba and ethical questions of anti-oppressive and feminist poststructural research. Ethics approval was required for this research to be undertaken through the University, as this research is part of the requirements for a Master degree in Social Work. The ethics submission was made and the ethics certificate and the extension required as a result of the time frame of this research project were received.

In addition anti-oppressive and feminist poststructural research requires that research be anti-oppressive in both purpose and process (Potts & Brown, 2005; Ristock & Pennell, 1996; Strega, 2005). The research must be purposeful regarding goals and intentional in its process (Potts & Brown, 2005) with each research decision guided by the anti-oppressive, feminist, post-structural beliefs (Potts & Brown, 2005; Ristock & Pennell, 1996; Strega, 2005). Attention is given to the way various interests and power relations (including the inquirer and participants) construct and undertake the process, how participants are engaged, and the process of informed consent (herising, 2005; Potts & Brown, 2005; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). My reflective process and the use of a journal throughout the research process assisted in maintaining such an “ethical attitude toward narrative research” (Josselson, 2007, p.538).

Particularly issues of confidentiality, impact of participation, informed consent and ethics of the report were identified as important in this research. Issues of anonymity and confidentiality were of concern in this research project. The process for ensuring confidentiality was clearly set out in the informed consent form (Appendix A) and adhered to. In addition, in the interest of anonymity pseudonyms were used and identifying information, in the narratives and other identifying information, including where the research took place and the communities to which the women belonged, were not included in writing the thesis. Reflections in this regard are discussed in the narrative context section of Chapter four.

There is also a potential for impact as a result of participation in a research project. This research was designed to be clear and transparent regarding the purpose of the research and no deception was involved. As is often the case when someone is reflecting on their lived experience a participant may decide that further conversations would be of value for them, the resource list was available to them for such situations. Issues of safety are always a potential concern in conversations about the experience of abuse in intimate partnering relationships. Should issues of current safety in relationships be identified the list of accessible and available community resources was available to be reviewed with participants. The resources given are not identified in support of confidentiality and anonymity as they would identify the city in which the research project took place.

As the focus of these encounters is the making of data and not counselling, no counselling was undertaken. Josselson (2007) identifies the inquirer's ability to deal with the issues that may arise as a potential ethical concern. As the principal inquirer is a



counsellor with experience working with women, regarding issues of abuse and safety, conversations in this regard did not result in undue stress for the inquirer. The researcher is experienced regarding the issue and resources regarding abuse in intimate partner relationships and resources were readily available to participants should they wish to access them.

Informed consent is also important in this research project. The process of informed consent is understood as a contract that the researcher has with the participating women. Recognizing the signing of the informed consent form as a declaration of the researcher's obligation to the participant, the participant's ownership of the data produced and their right to the involvement and control they choose (Potts & Brown, 2005). Although this meant that participants could withdraw at anytime prior to completion of the project (Ristock & Pennel, 1996), it is the contract of research from an anti-oppressive and feminist poststructural perspective.

Finally, the ethics of the report was of concern in this research project. Josselson (2007) identifies attention to the interpretive process and anonymity particularly in small communities as important. Both of these areas are discussed in the analysis and discussion of chapter four and five.

### **Participants and Recruitment**

The participants for this research project were women in a Canadian city who respond to an invitation to discuss their experience of love and abuse in their intimate partner relationship. The women self identified their interest in this topic and themselves

as having experienced abuse in an intimate partner relationship by responding to the invitation, setting up the interviews, and attending the interviews.

The invitations (Appendix B) to take part in the research project were distributed by posting them in community organizations that provide services to women who have experienced abuse in intimate partner relationships. In an effort to increase the potential diversity of women responding a variety of community resources were used as distribution points. Community resources in the north, central, and south of the city were included as distribution points. As well, resources that provide services for heterosexual and lesbian individuals, couples, and families were included.

The participants for this research project were the three women who took part in the interview and reviewed their narratives. This is a very small number of participants, however over a period of six months only five women contacted to set up interviews. It appears that talking of their experience of love and abuse in an intimate partner relationship was something few women were interested in doing. Perhaps this is an indication of the influence of the dichotomizing of love and abuse in our society. Five women initially contacted to set up meetings. One woman did not attend the scheduled meeting. One woman cancelled the second meeting due to a family emergency and then did not reconnect to review her narrative. Narratives that were not reviewed were not included because of the importance of ensuring that what was in the women's narratives was what the women wanted others to hear and know about their lived experience of love and abuse.

### **Interview Setting**

The interviews with the women took place at a Community Health Centre. The health centre was established as the location for this research because the organization's values support the values of the research and the centre is easily accessible from all areas of the city by bus or private vehicle. Women were also given the option of meeting at an alternate location if they desired and on one occasion a woman requested this and the meeting took place at another location.

### **Procedures for Making and Handling the Data**

Most importantly, this research process was guided by respect of and accountability to the participating women as discussed by Josselson (2007). The data was made over two meetings. The interview questions and guide are provided in Appendix C. The first meeting began with the gathering of some demographic information. The remainder of the data was made during two meetings, a narrative interview and a follow up meeting that focused on the production of a detailed narrative of experience through an evolving and collaborative conversation (Riessman, 2004a). Narrative interviewing was used to allow the women to bring forward that which they experienced as important (Riessman, 2004a). This process, as discussed by Fraser (2004) and Riessman (1993), involves open-ended questions and conversational probes as might be appropriate to bring forward detail.

The first interview was based on the question, what is the story of love and abuse in your relationship. Additional conversational probes used in this exploration included the following: What beliefs did you have about love as the relationship began? What

understanding did you have of abuse as the relationship began? Was there a time in the relationship where you experienced abuse that your beliefs about love changed? Was there a time in the relationship when your understanding of abuse changed? Was there a time in your relationship when you knew that you had to take action for your safety?

The second meeting provided an opportunity for the participants to review the typed transcript of the first interview. This provided an opportunity to ensure that the women felt the transcript reflected their voice and their lived experience. Also, that the content of the first interview was what the women want others to hear and know about their experience. The inquirer had an opportunity to ask any clarifying questions at this time and the women also had an opportunity to clarify, add, or delete information. The individual interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and the interviews were approximately one hour in length. At the end of the second meeting informed consent was reviewed and confirmed.

An analysis of the data made through the narrative interview was undertaken in a line-by-line manner as described by Fraser (2004). It is an analysis that attends to the thematic content, the structure of the narrative and the language used, the interactional context of the telling of the narrative, and the narrative as performative telling and positioning of the self and lived experience. This is the thematic, structural, interactional, and performative analyses of narratives as discussed by Riessman (2004b). Such an analytic process is useful and appropriate when theorizing across a small number of narratives (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 2004b). It is also appropriate for research based in a feminist poststructural analysis as it attends to the intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural, and, structural aspects of experience.

Phase one of the analysis process includes the hearing of the stories and experiencing the emotions of the participants and the interviewer (Fraser, 2004). Audio recordings were made of each interview. A journal was used to note the time, place and emotional climate of each interview. Fraser (2004) suggests that we consider the sense we get from each interview; emotions experienced during and after the interview; how the interviews begin, end and unfold; and how curious we felt during and after the interviews. This provides insight into the archetypal plot or genre of the story. A journal was also used through out the analysis process to support my reflective process including the recognizing and interrogating the privilege of my social location as discussed by Hughes (2005).

The second phase of a line-by-line analysis is the process of transcribing the audio recordings (Fraser, 2004). The transcription is an integral part of the analysis because of the many decisions that are made regarding how the utterances will be represented (Fraser, 2004). For this reason I transcribed the recordings myself. This allowed me to maintain the confidentiality of the participant while I become more familiar with the narratives and the voice of the women. These are benefits of transcribing the data oneself described by Fraser (2004) and Riessman (1993). The data produced in this inquiry were transcripts of the actual content of the interviews including pauses and interviewer comments.

The third phase of the analysis focused on the interpretation of the narratives (Fraser, 2004). This was facilitated through listening to the audio recordings of the interviews on a number of occasions throughout the analysis process. The transcribed narratives were also read and explored on a number of occasions throughout the process,

including a review without the researcher's voice. The interpretation includes identifying the themes, types, structure, direction, and contradictions of the narratives (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 1993). The narratives were also disaggregated into "stories or segments of narratives." (Fraser, 2004 p.189) which assisted in identifying themes. Attention was paid to the language used and not used to produce the narrative including inflection and emphasis (Fraser, 2004, Riessman, 2004b, 2008; Ristock, 2002). Throughout this process the stories of the women's narratives were identified that spoke about love, abuse and safety. From this process themes of beliefs about love, the experience of abuse in the context of a love relationship, how love is practiced, identification of experience as abuse, need to act for safety, the romance narratives, social location and structures of society, as well as, coming to a turning point were identified.

The fourth phase of the analysis focused on scanning across different domains of experience (Fraser, 2004). This process includes the intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural, and structural domains (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 1993). This process is important in order to avoid reading the narratives for proof of my personal beliefs (Riessman, 1993) and encouraged an exploration of the social roles and structures in narratives (Fraser, 2004). This phase of the analysis process provided insight into the individual woman's decisions about action for safety, the micro-politics of their relationships and the macro-politics of the structural inequalities that constrain relationships where love and abuse co-exist.

The fifth phase of the analysis focused on linking the personal and the political (Fraser, 2004; Strega, 2005)). Attention was given to the place and purpose of social conventions, social roles, and popular discourse in the narratives (Fraser, 2004;

Riessman, 1993). Fraser (2004) suggests attention be given to the relationship of the narratives to theoretical discourse, what others might say about interpretations made, and what the narratives say about the lived experience of ability, age, class, gender, geographical location, race, religion, and/or sexual orientation. This phase focused on the place and impact of the dominant narratives and social identity and location in the narratives of the women.

The sixth phase of the analysis focused on an exploration of the similarities and differences between participants (Fraser, 2004). Comparing and contrasting the narratives of participating women, attention is given to content, style, and tone (Fraser, 2004).

Finally, the seventh phase focused on writing the academic narrative about the personal stories shared by the participants (Fraser, 2004). This process was undertaken recognizing the multiple possibilities for how narratives are told, heard, understood and represented (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 1993) with particular attention to the ethics of the report as discussed by Josselson (2007). In this phase there was much reflection on my position as research report writer and the ethical consideration of this privileged position. Finally, although a member check had been undertaken in the second meeting, I endeavoured to make the analysis and discussion available to the women who participated in this research project. This was to allow the women to comment on my analysis if they wished and it also provided them with an opportunity to know what would be in my thesis. Unfortunately none of the contact information for the women was current. This made my reflective process regarding the ethics of the report as discussed by Josselson (2007) particularly salient.

### **Criteria for Quality Assessment**

The quality of a research project is important. It is important to be clear about the criteria used to judge the quality of a research project and that these criteria are appropriate for the type of research (Potts & Brown, 2005; Strega, 2005). Further it is the clarity of this discussion that will make the research “credible, publishable, actionable, and worth listening to.” (Strega, 2005 pp.271). In the literature discussing measurement of the quality of research with the goal of social justice with a feminist poststructural worldview this assessment is discussed in a number of ways. Strega (2005) suggests political implications and usefulness, who the research is made for, and reflexivity including complicity as areas for quality assessment. Ristock & Pennell (1996) discuss standards of integrity, value and accountability. While Potts & Brown (2005) discuss standards of credibility, action ability, and trustworthiness. Each of these reflects an assessment of the degree to which the research holds to the values of anti-oppressive, feminist, poststructural beliefs and values, reflects the lived experience and the voice of the participants, and provides information that is useful in action towards social justice. Using Strega’s (2005) guidelines, these are the standards by which this research project was assessed.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

My exploration and understanding of the women's narratives focused on the content of the women's narratives, the context of the narrative production and analysis, the themes of the women's narratives, the similarities in the narratives of the relationship experience, the differences in narratives of relationship experiences, and the importance of the narratives to the questions of the research. My exploration and understanding of the women's narrative is but one exploration of the narratives, situated in my location as a feminist woman of the dominant culture who works with and is interested in the experience of women when love and abuse co-exist in their relationships. I do not intend to state the truth of the women's experience, the truth of the women's narratives nor the truth about the topic of love and abuse in women's intimate partner relationships. Rather it is my intention to add to our understanding of women's experience of love and abuse in intimate partner relationships and their access to safety through an exploration of the place and meaning of love in the narratives the women who took part in this research project shared.

It is my intention to discuss my exploration and understanding of the narratives in this research project based in my experience of the meetings with the women; my understanding of the context of the meeting in which the narratives were produced and analysed; my understanding of the content of the women's narratives; my understanding of the theory and research regarding love and abuse in women's intimate partner relationships; my understanding of the context of the women's lived experience; my

respect for and responsibility to the women who shared their lived experience of love and abuse in an intimate partnering relationship; and my commitment to social justice through anti-oppressive research.

#### Demographic Information for the Women who shared their Narratives

Three women participated in this research project. The women who participated in this study were between 25 and 55 years of age. One woman identified as lesbian and two as heterosexual. The education they had completed ranged from high school to graduate school. The women were either Canadian born or had immigrated to Canada. All identified as other than the dominant Caucasian culture of the area. I have decided not to identify the specific cultural communities in order to preserve anonymity and confidentiality because of the small number of women who took part in the study, the detail provided in the narratives, and the small size of many of the cultural communities in this Canadian community. Two of the women identified parenting children identified as biological and step and one woman had no children. The women described being involved in the intimate relationship of their narrative between five and fifteen years. All described the relationships as ended at the time of the interviews.

#### The Women's Narratives

Each of the women produced a narrative of their experience of love and abuse in an intimate partner relationship. The narratives included how the relationship began, their experience in the relationship, and the impact of the experience in the relationship. The narratives were not always a straightforward chronological reflection on their lived

experience. However, with a clear beginning and ending each of the women's narratives spoke of their experiences of love and abuse in an intimate partner relationship and their understanding of that experience. They spoke of their beliefs about love going into the relationship, their experience of abuse in the relationship, their understanding of the abusive behaviour they had experienced in the context of a love relationship, the need to act for their safety, the ways in which they acted for their safety, the impact of their experience of abuse in the relationship on their understanding of love, and their current understanding of love and its importance as they move forward in their lives. The narratives also provided information regarding the context of the women's lived experience. The narratives were given in response to my initial open ended question about the story of love and abuse in the intimate partner relationship they had chosen to speak about and my conversational probes regarding beliefs about love, beliefs about abuse and action for safety.

### The Narrative Production and Analysis Context

The narratives were produced in narrative interviews of approximately one hour in response to my open-ended question about love and abuse in the intimate partner relationship that the women had decided to talk about. The women reviewed the narrative transcripts at a second meeting in order to ensure that the narrative contained what they wanted others to hear and know about their experience of love and abuse and that it reflected their experience of the meeting.

Throughout this research process I endeavoured to be respectful and responsible to the women participating through my interactions with them and my commitment to

engage in anti-oppressive research. This means not only acknowledging my social location but also reflecting on the potential implications of this for the women who took part in the research project and for the research project. I recognize the impact on the narrative production and analysis process of my position as a mature, heterosexual, woman of the dominant Caucasian culture, pursuing a graduate degree, and working as a service provider in the area of violence against women. My social location influenced what I was told, what I asked, what I heard and understood in the narratives, and what I discussed in my analysis.

Being aware of the multiple sites of oppression and the intersectionality that are important in the context of the narrative production through ableism, ageism, classism, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and colonialism (Ristock, 2002), I recognize that the narratives produced were produced in this context and at another time and place with another interviewer different information may have been part of the narratives. As Moosa-Mitha (2005) discussed the narratives that are shared with me is what the women felt was right to share with me and some of what is known to the women is not knowable by me. There may be information that they would not share with me because I am a mature, heterosexual, Caucasian woman of the dominant culture, pursuing a graduate degree, and working as a service provider in the area of violence against women.

The importance of my social location and its impact on the interviews is highlighted in the women's asking if I was getting the answers that I wanted or needed. As the woman in control of presenting the questions and the process of the interview and analysis of the research project they knew that what I was interested in would guide my understanding of their answers. Even while meeting their personal goals for taking part

in the research process they were concerned with ensuring that my needs were being met. I assured them that for this research project their understanding of their experience of love and abuse was the answer that I was hoping for. That I was not looking for support of my answer but rather information from them and their experience, to guide my understanding of this topic in order to provide information that could be of value to women having the experience of love and abuse in their intimate partner relationship and those who provide services to them.

I recognize that my social location influenced the development of the questions of the research, the way in which they were presented in the meetings with the women. My interest in women's understanding of the meaning of love and its place in the experience of abuse was the reason I undertook this exploration of love and abuse co-existing in women's life, presented questions about love and abuse in the narrative interview, and highlighted love and abuse in my analysis of the narratives produced. I also understand that the multiple sites of oppression and their intersection have an influence on the questions I did not ask and the things I did not pursue. Ableism, ageism, classism, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and colonialism (Ristock, 2002) have their impact in this process even as I endeavoured to be an ally and to be reflective in this regard. There were questions not asked and aspects of experience not pursued in the interviews as a result of my interest and social location.

I recognize that my social location impacted my understanding and analysis of the narratives. In the analysis process I recognize the power in my position of researcher and am concerned with not privileging my understanding or interests. In my analysis process I did not want to assume that I knew more about their experience than the women directly

discussed with me. I have challenged myself to look at the narratives, particularly in terms of structural influences, recognizing the privilege I experience in my life being mindful not to assume my understanding was theirs or to assume that it was not. I was cautious not to over generalize based on social location and obscure the specificity of the women's experience (Taylor & Ristock, 2011). I was cautious not to infer too much as Mishler (1986) discussed but also not too strip the narratives of their context when it was not directly and explicitly stated. I wished to be respectful of the women's identity even as I maintained the focus of the analysis and discussion on the meaning of love and abuse in the women's experience. This is a balance and it results in some aspects of the narratives and social context not being explored in the way they might have been from a different social location.

My social location and experience as service provider influences my academic narrative of the research. In my desire to produce anti-oppressive research I have struggled with the detail present in the analysis. Although informed consent had been given, the participants had reviewed a transcript of their narrative to ensure they were comfortable with what they were sharing, I had removed or changed any identifying information and had not identified the cultural community the women come from, I had questions and concerns about the degree of detail of women's experience shared in my analysis. Upon reflection and consultation I came to realize that my concerns resulted from the intersection and differences in my role as therapist and researcher. In my role as service provider I do not discuss details of women's experience except for the purpose of peer or clinical supervision because it is possible that some one hearing would be able to identify the woman and this might not only breach her confidentiality but be a risk to

her safety. I take confidentiality very seriously and this is well established after twenty years of providing service. In my role as researcher I needed to provide detail of what women had shared with me in service of accuracy, authenticity and interpretation (Josselson, 2007). Through my reflective process I came to a place of comfort that recognized both my responsibility to the privacy, well being and dignity (Josselson, 2007) of the women who participated in this research project and their desire to be part of the research project that provided their experience of love and abuse to increase our understanding of the experience. This tension between roles influenced the amount of detail and the content of my analysis, informing the focus and restricting the depth of analysis.

### My Experience Of The Interview Process

I experienced the women speaking about the complicated experiences in their intimate partner relationship with care, attention, and a respectful tone for all involved. The narratives were similar in many ways although they varied in the timing, detail and context. Each of the women shared a narrative of an intimate partner relationship that did not turn out in the way that they expected. A relationship in which, they experienced behaviours of control and domination from their intimate partner that they did not expect nor understand in the context of a love relationship. The women described responding to these behaviours in ways that they describe reflecting on. Each of the women shared a narrative of perseverance, resistance and survival that reflect having had an experience of abuse, taking action for their safety, and going through a process of understanding and

healing as they move forward in their lives. They are narratives of courage, strength, and resilience.

### Analysis Presentation

My analysis of the women's narratives will be presented through a discussion of the content of the women's narratives of their relationships including the themes in the narratives and how they impact vulnerability to abuse and access to safety.

#### **Themes in the Women's Narratives of their Relationship Experience**

Each of the women spoke of an intimate partner relationship that, although diverse, began in love and included an experience of abuse. In my exploration and understanding of the women's narratives, guided by my interest in love in their narratives, I identified the following themes; beliefs about love, experience of abuse, how love was practiced, identification of partner's behaviour as abuse, the need to act for safety, the romance narratives, social location and coming to a turning point.

#### Beliefs about Love

Although diverse, based on different ideas of relationship, with different partners, in different types of relationships each of the women's narrative described an intimate partner relationship began in love and consent that reflected a belief in the dominant romance narrative discussed by Donovan & Hester (2011), Jackson (1999), Jackson (2001), Wood (2001) where the expectation is two people come together, regardless of sexuality, and live happily ever after. Love as a promise (Smart, 2007).



The women were in diverse relationships. Each of the women also entered into their relationship with a different belief about love. They reflect beliefs about love that are based on different ideas of relationship. Jean described her relationship as living together in a heterosexual relationship. Her belief reflects love as something that happens to you, that has a promise of perfection (Smart, 2007), *“I believed I would have a perfect relationship like every other woman would”, “the guy was sweet”, “I believed I was a princess and I would be loved”*. Grace described her relationship as a heterosexual marriage. Her belief reflects love that is focussed on the joint project of the mutual goals of the marriage and family (Donovan & Hester, 2011), *“I thought love was to be supportive and to help one another and to build plans together, to have mutual goals, to have united values when it came to raising our children, uhm, and to work together towards the future”*. Linda described her relationship as a lesbian marriage. Her belief reflects love that is based on the egalitarian ideal (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001), *“she was really nice, and sweet, and charming”, “this is going to work for me and I think it will work for everyone else too”, “I guess I made the assumption that everything that’s good everyone has”, “and so I came up with the assumption that this is going to be a partnership”*. In diverse relationships with different beliefs about the dynamics of love relationships, these intimate partner relationships were begun in love with belief in their happy future. None of the women spoke of the potential for things to be otherwise. These are beliefs in love as a promise. None of the beliefs about love as the relationships began included the potential for difficulties or the experience of abuse.

Following the experience of abuse in their intimate partner relationship each of the women changed their belief about love in some way that reflected that there was more

to love than they had thought at the beginning of the relationship. One woman added the idea that mutuality is important, another talked of expectations and being able to say yes or no, another simply spoke of not knowing right now. However after their experience of abuse and love co-existing each spoke of how love is acted as important to moving forward in a love relationship safely.

*Grace: "I am entering a new partnership relationship right now. And I know my past experiences about love and partnerships have affected that and this is actually the first time I have been in a relationship since my husband. So that has forced me to examine what I believe love is and how to express it. Uhm, what is a love action versus an abusive action. You know, there is a difference."*

*Jean: "And I am just scared to fall in love again because if I do then that may happen again. So I am not in any relationship right now."  
"I am scared to get hurt again."*

*Linda: "what I expect in the future if I ever do this again, is that it's a partnership"*

*"(a new potential partner) saying I love you, I went oh (intake of breath), I'm scared to death, because I'm thinking exactly what are you asking, what does that mean. So now it's like, ok what are the expectations because I might not be willing or able to meet those expectations. And now I love what it is right now, and the possibility that it can be something"*

*else ” “do you love me and have this list of things you expect of me and can I do those things and do I want to do those things.”*

The changes in what the women believe about love and the importance of this as they move forward in a love relationship reflect a move away from the idea of love as an ideology with a promise to the idea of love as practice as Smart (2007) and Donovan and Hester (2010, 2011) discuss. An understanding of love that includes the possibility of behaviours that they do not expect, that may be hurtful and have a negative impact on them, and that they will have to decide about and protect themselves from.

#### Experience of Abuse in the Context of a Love Relationship

Abuse was a part of the women’s experience in their intimate partner relationships. Each of the women spoke of their experience of abuse in their relationship, describing a wide and varied range of emotional, physical and sexual behaviours as part of their experience *“throwing things” “verbally abusing me” “always controlling me” “keeping me inside” “emotional blackmail” “threats” “little safety in regards to anything” “lots of anger” “dismissive” “making love was very painful” “derogatory” “there would be ramifications” “didn’t leave us any money (when away)” “having an affair” “cruel” “get mad because I wasn’t accessible” “wasn’t safe in saying” “refused any access to the children” “insulting me, degrading me” “didn’t find my sadness reasonable” “I revealed my confidences...ended up using them against me” “threw me on the ground”*. All were experienced through out the relationship and in one instance beyond. Despite differences in the type of behaviours experienced each of the woman’s narratives clearly described an experience of behaviours that were ongoing, from early in

the relationship throughout the relationship as discussed by Donovan, Hester, Holmes & McCarry (2006), Johnson, (2006), Johnson & Ferraro (2000), and Stark (2007).

Experiences that reflect coercion, control and/or domination where they described feeling that their response was dictated by a need to protect them self from the harmful impact of the behaviours they were experiencing.

#### How Love was Practiced

Donovan & Hester (2010, 2011) and Hester & Donovan (2009) discuss the core actions of relationships where there is a vulnerability to abuse and where abuse is seen. Relationships based on the idea that the relationship is determined by the individual behaving abusively based on what they want and established by whatever means they will use, with the individual who experiences the abuse feeling commitment to and responsible for the emotion care of their partner and the relationship. The women's narratives describe such relationships. Each spoke of a partner who expected the relationship to proceed on their terms.

*Grace: "Uhm, I know during that time as well he had taken a trip, that is what proceeded my really falling apart, he had taken a trip even though he told us we had no money and what not, he had taken a trip to (sniff). When I expressed my dissatisfaction, he threw me on the ground and told me I had no choice and he went off and left the children and I for another month."*

Jean: *“he threw hot coffee at me and a coffee pot at my head, just because I wouldn’t make him coffee.”*

Linda: *“that hurt stop. No it doesn’t hurt. And that was night after night after night.”* And later *“no did not only not mean no but it was minimized and discounted and we proceeded anyway.”*

The women also discussed their acceptance of the responsibility for the emotional work of the relationships, care of and commitment to their partner and the relationship.

Grace: *“I thought love was to be supportive and to help one another and to build plans together,”* *“the troubles he had I thought could be surmounted by me supporting him and helping.”*

Linda *“if I am in a relationship with you I am committed to you totally, and whatever it takes I am willing to do.”*

Jean: *“love is kind, love is sweet, and love is uhm gentle.”*

It is also of interest that the women were responsible for the day-to-day care of the home and the children if present. Jean was expected to do the domestic duties and a coffee pot was thrown at her when she didn’t. Grace was responsible for the home and the family, so much so that her husband left for extended periods of time. They took care to provide the home and the environment for the relationship. As Linda states *“I became the*

*housekeeper, the cook, the babysitter*” and *“I spent a lot of time being support to the kids as well as her”*. They undertook the work of the relationship that has been gendered as feminine, the emotional work (Donovan & Hester, 2011). Undertaking the emotional work of the relationship encouraged the women to endeavour to make the relationship work even if that was to be on their partner’s terms and was hurtful to them. This increased their vulnerability to the experience of abuse and limited their access to safety.

#### Identification of Experience as Abuse

The women’s narratives identified differences in the process of identifying the behaviours that they were experiencing as abuse. Two women spoke of their confusion about the behaviour they were experiencing while in the relationship, if it was ok and if it was abuse. Linda spoke of her confusion *“and I wondered as this stuff was going on, if, is this abuse?”* She recognized that she did not feel good and what she was experiencing was not right however she had no words for the experience *“There was a shift in the relationship but I don’t know that I would have defined it then as abusive, I, I don’t know that I would have been able to put a label on it. I could have said this doesn’t feel right, this is not right or I’m not comfortable but if you said give me a word or phase that you would categorize that. My answer probably would be I don’t know”*. Grace described trying to figure out what was going on in her relationship *“I tried to talk to family and friends and get some advise on what was going on and whether this was normal, whether I was a fool, uh to believe that he wanted forgiveness,”* and later coming to a new understanding of abuse that included her experience *“I guess I realized how tricky and insidious it can be. I realized uhm, when I finally had a wake up call that uh, abuse isn’t*

*always about loudest voices and striking a person. Uh, abuse can be done in tricking someone or hiding their favourite thing or ripping up their writing or you know, sleeping with their best friend.”* Jean who experienced primarily physical violence discussed no confusion about describing the behaviours as abuse *“And he threw things at me. I didn’t think it was love anymore. I thought it was turning into abuse.”* It appears that it may be easier to identify an experience as abuse the more closely the experience resembles the dominant story of abuse discussed by Donovan & Hester (2011) as primarily physical, in a heterosexual relationship, and done by a man to a woman.

It was not necessary for the women to identify the experience as abuse to identify the behaviour as a problem. Although each of the women was in the relationship of their narrative for between five and fifteen years, whether she identified it as abuse or not each woman spoke of understanding the behaviour as problematic and that this occurred early in the relationship;

Jean: *“started off great and then things started up, say maybe five months after that.”*

Linda: *“it was ok for the first few months, maybe four to six months and then things started to turn sour.”*

Grace: *“even when I was pregnant with my first child he was uh, abusive and furious, because I actually left him at that time.”*

Although there were differences in identifying the behaviour as abuse the women discussed the behaviour as problematic and they discussed knowing that they needed to act for their safety.

### Need to Act for Safety

The women spoke of the need to act for their safety. The women all described a time of knowing that they needed to take action for their safety. Linda described thinking about safety daily from early in the relationship *“That thought occurred to me almost everyday.”* She thought about keeping herself safe from the experience she was having in the relationship but also about keeping herself safely in the relationship, as she did not see any options for herself outside the relationship, *“It was just a thought I had about again not being kicked out, not having anywhere to go”*. Jean described how the worsening experience identified to her that she would have to act for her experience to stop *“but then after a while things started to get worse and (pause)” “I thought I want to get out of this relationship and I don’t want to do this anymore to myself. I can’t, I can’t do this anymore, I don’t deserve it.”* And Grace described knowing that safety relied on her action when her husband became physical and she saw the impact for the children *“I know uhm, when it became obvious to me that he, when he threw me to the ground that was one. Uh, when he started the physical, uh, abuse was kicking up a notch. You know, it is one thing to throw plates against the wall, it is another to have a child cowering in the bathroom because you’re frightened. So I looked around me at the chaos that it was and said this has to stop.”* She further described that she knew she needed to act for safety even though she felt that there would be no support for this action *“I knew that*



*even in the face of everybody's opposition and disbelief that if I don't get out of this I am not going to survive.*". For all of the women their discussion of knowing the need to act was focussed on physical harm.

Although the women continued in the relationship, this did not mean that they passively accepted the experience they were having. All of the women also spoke of thoughts and actions that reflect their use of their agency in acts of resistance to the abuse experience in the relationship *"I thought I want to get out of this relationship"* *"I don't deserve it"* *"I thought I deserve so much better than this"* *"it was all about keeping her happy"* *"I tried to talk to family and friends and get some advice on what was going on and whether this was normal, whether I was a fool, uh to believe that he wanted forgiveness"* *"you put it into two separate, this is my day, this is my night"* *"when I started noticing some of the things he said were less than kind, they were kind of derivative or denigrating and I started to say hey that wasn't or you"* *"And I would say, no that hurts"* *"that hurt stop"* *"I began to see a counsellor"* *"I actually left him at that time"* *"filing for divorce and protection"*. Each of the women acted in resistance to the experience they were having, while trying to understand their experience and the need to act for their safety in the context of their love relationships.

### The Romance Narratives

Wood (2001) discussed women's use of the fairy tale and dark romance narratives to make sense of abuse in their intimate partner relationship. Although Wood (2001) initially identified how these narratives were used in research with heterosexual women, Hester and Donovan (2011) point out the importance of the love narratives regardless of

sexuality. The women's narratives reflect the use of the beliefs that Wood (2001) identified as important in supporting the fairy tale and dark romance narratives. The fairy tale romance narrative is supported by beliefs that "not as bad as, the good outweighs the bad, I can control it/stop it, and not the real him" (p. 251-252). These were seen in the women's narratives regardless of sexuality.

Not as bad as: *"I feel a little bit of, I hadn't got it so bad."*

*"this is not the most traumatic case you'll ever encounter"*

*"And it wasn't outrageous"*

*"That thought (to act for safety) occurred to me almost every day but as far as life and death I got to make a decision now, it wasn't like that"*

The good outweighs the bad: *"knowing that if I did it that way I have somewhere to sleep that night"*

I can control it/stop it: *"But I thought I could make it work anyway. You know, I talked myself into it."*

*"I mean if I am in a relationship with you I am committed to you totally, and whatever it takes I am willing to do."*

*"he was so soft and gentle, so I thought, and the troubles he had I thought could be surmounted by me supporting him and helping."*

Not the real him/her: *"for some reason I talked myself out of it and believed that he was a good guy and went forwards"*

*“I don’t think she was being intentionally abusive,”*

*“She’s not an evil, evil person, she’s not.”*

The dark romance narrative is supported by the belief that “I deserve it and being stuck” (p. 254-255). These were also seen in the narratives of the women.

I deserve it: *“I thought it was just me.” “maybe it’s me”*

*“this is my mental stuff and I kept making excuses and this is just me, maybe I’m doing something.”*

*“in the middle of it, I’m thinking maybe your right, maybe something, maybe it’s me, I’ve messed up, you know, somewhere and maybe but (pause)”*

*“So for a long time I’ve put all of it back on me.”*

*“Because I have a history of abuse”*

Being stuck:

*“I don’t know what I was doing, I guess I was, partly the kids, you know, I guess you’ve invested family in this person.”*

*“That’s the mindset and so yes I came to a very foreign country and if she got mad and said get out, (pause).” “I don’t know anybody, where was I going to go, what was I going to do”*

*“he was always controlling me, he was telling me I couldn’t see my workers, he was always keeping me inside”*

The women's narratives, across sexuality, show the use of the fairy tale and dark romance narratives in the women's attempts to understand and respond to what they were experiencing in their relationship. These narratives of love maintained the women's belief in the promise of a happy and forever intimate partner relationship. The narratives available maintained the women's focus on what was good in the relationship, on maintaining the relationship and trying to figure out a way to make things better in the relationship. Although some action in resistance to the abuse and for their safety was possible, the use of the romance narratives to understand their experience and guide their actions kept them focused on and in the relationship and got in the way of some potential actions for their safety.

#### Social Location and Structures of Society

The women's narratives and their demographic information provided information on the social location of their lived experience and the narratives of that experience. Although all of the narratives were of women's experience that took place in the same geographical area in North America there were differences in the structural context of the experience and the narratives. The women were different in terms of ability, age, class, education, immigration, parenting, race, and sexuality. The structural aspects of abilism, ageism, classism, colonialism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, and dislocation of recent immigration (Ristock, 2002) as well as the intersection of these aspects (Davis & Glass, 2011; Hiebert-Murphy, Ristock & Brownridge, 2011) influence the woman's experience. Understanding of the women's experience of abuse is enhanced with an exploration of

the intersection of the multiple sources of oppression in which their lived experience takes place (Hiebert-Murphy, Ristock & Brownridge, 2011).

The women discussed these structural aspects in their narrative directly and indirectly, identifying social structures and practices as important in their experience of abuse in their intimate partner relationship. The narrative of Linda the woman who immigrated identifies the importance of dislocation in her experience in her intimate partner relationship. She describes her confusion about the differences in culture with her being on the outside, "*knowing hers is so far removed from my world and I didn't get it.*". At times not knowing what was meant by something that was said, "*And it's like no I've never heard that. I don't know what that is.*". Not being comfortable in her understanding of what was being said or the cultural context, the focus of the experience is on understanding rather than simply acknowledging the impact as hurtful. The time and energy taken in understanding increased her vulnerability to abuse and decreased her access to safety, as it is time and energy taken from recognizing the harm of the experience and taking action for safety.

She also discussed the impact of coming to a place she knew little about that was different from the place from which she came, "*Canada has always been this obscure place.*", "*a very foreign country*". How stressful that was, the fear she felt and how it limited her experience of her options, "*But so there were, I had actual fears as to what would happen to me.*". Structural aspects that constrain her actions for her safety are identified as she describes her lack of resources outside the relationship, "*I am in a foreign country*" "*I didn't know anybody, where was I going to go, what was I going to do.*". With no knowledge of resources, personal or professional she had no option but to

stay in the relationship and ensure that her partner would let her stay. This increased her vulnerability to abuse and decreased her access to safety as her emotional attachment to the relationship and partner was maintained.

Structural aspects of class, ability, social institutions, and family were identified in the narrative of Grace. Class was identified as important in a sense of judgement by others *“his family are some paragon of virtue, some fine upstanding citizens and you know, uh, they looked upon my family, and still do, as you know, a lower class.”*. Poverty was also important in terms of the funds available for the family’s needs *“we were always broke”*. The impact of this is seen in the constantly moving and re-establishing; the energy this takes and the sense of isolation *“I knew we were always moving, I knew we were always isolated.”*. Dealing with the day to day impact of feeding and housing the family takes time and energy, there is little left for decreasing vulnerability to abuse and increasing safety especially when the person who is providing the experience of abuse is also the person providing the limited resources of the family. This use of time and energy combined with the lack of interaction with others increases vulnerability to abuse and decreases access to safety.

Ability and abilism were seen as important in Grace’s narrative *“They thought because I was sick that was the problem.”*. When Grace was hospitalized the social service structures of the legal and family services systems were also described as important, *“his lawyer and child and family services came to the hospital when I was there, and I think I had been there a week or two, when they had me sign over my children, the rights to them.”*, further *“they (children) have been kept from me more often than I have had access. And that is as a result of what they called my mental instability*

*uhm, my uhm, uh they claimed I had alcoholism, they claimed I was all sorts of things”.*

The structures of society appear to have the same issues as women in identifying abuse and wonder as women do, “is it her?”. In Grace’s narrative the structures of society appear to identify the things that are an issue for her at the time as the reason for the problems in the relationship and family. They act to support her vulnerability to abuse and decrease her access to safety. The legal and social service systems supported her vulnerability to abuse and decreased her access to safety by supporting her husband’s action for custody while she was in the hospital with limited access to resources. This action regarding custody increased her vulnerability to abuse and decreased her access to safety through its support of her children’s father limiting her access through visitation or contact with the children.

Finally family was also discussed as a structural system that supports the experience of abuse and gets in the way of action for safety. Grace’s narrative described this. *“But at the beginning because he put on such a face for most people, everyone was angry at me that I had taken this step, furious at me. My family and his. You know, and I couldn’t talk about the abuse. They didn’t want to believe me.” They thought because I was sick that was the problem. You know, it is all your fault.”*. Also *“Even things that his own family did, uh, especially during the end when they were caught in the difficult place where loyalties and allegiances lie. And they become involved in the abuse, you know, out of support for him but really not with any facts or clarification.”*. Family members anger at her for identifying the abuse and taking action supported her vulnerability to abuse and punished accessing safety. In this we also see the intersection

of abilism and family loyalty in supporting both vulnerability to abuse and decreased access to safety in the relationship and even after the relationship had ended.

Although social aspects of age, gender, race, heterosexism, homophobia, colonialism, and their intersecting oppressive and constraining impacts were not directly discussed we know that these structural aspects and their intersections impact one's experience including a vulnerability to the experience of abuse, options available, and access to options (Hiebert-Murphy, Ristock & Brownridge, 2011). For the women who shared their narratives there were many social identities and intersections that were not discussed directly but are known sites of oppression through social structures and practices that are oppressive (Hughes, 2005). All participants are women, so sexism was part of their social location and all identified as other than the dominant culture so racism and the impact of colonialism were part of their social location. One woman identified as lesbian so heterosexism and homophobia were part of her social location. In addition, age and education attained were part of the women's social location. Each of these identities and their intersection is part of the context in which the women's experience of abuse must be understood. Social location through the oppressive social structures and practices of society complicate women's experience when love and abuse co-exist in their intimate partnering relationship. They increase vulnerability to abuse and limit access to safety through their support of domination and control of one person over another, based on social identity. As well as through, their belief in, perpetuation of, and support of the dominant narratives of love and abuse.



### Coming to a Turning Point

The women acted in response and resistance to their experience but they were not able to be in a place of safety, with partners who did not change their behaviour, until they were out of the relationship and the individual who was behaving abusively did not have access to them. It seems that recognizing that the abusive behaviour could not continue with out serious harm was important. And this needed to be understood before leaving a relationship begun in love was possible.

Jean whose experience most reflected the dominant story of abuse was clear that she was experiencing abuse and left the relationship in the shortest time. However, it was not until after a reconciliation when he threw hot coffee at her. And of this she said “*and I was in so much pain because, you know, I thought he loved me.*”. The behaviour could not continue without serious physical and emotional harm to her and despite love the relationship had to come to an end.

Grace who saw the fear of her children as the physical nature of the abuse she experienced increased realized that what was going on in their home had to stop “*You know, it is one thing to throw plates against the wall, it is another to have a child cowering in the bathroom because you’re frightened. So I looked around at the chaos that it was and said this has to stop.*”. The abusive behaviour could not continue without harm to the children. She described filing for a restraining order at this time, although her experience of abuse continued through the divorce process and beyond.

Eisikovits, Buckbinder & Mor (1998) discussed a turning point in relationships where abuse is experienced. A point where women understand that that the experience of abuse is something that they cannot tolerate and that it must cease to be part of their

experience for the relationship to continue. Two women's narratives reflected such a point.

Jean: *"I thought I want to get out of this relationship. And I don't want to do this anymore to myself. I can't, I can't do this anymore, I don't deserve it"*

Grace: *"I knew that even in the face of everybody's opposition and disbelief that if I don't get out of this I am not going to survive."*

At this point the women could not see the experience of abuse continuing and since the behaviour continued in the relationship could see being out of the relationship as an option, despite love, commitment to the relationship, and a lack of support for ending the relationship. The part of the meaning system that kept them emotionally attached to their partner and the relationship and kept them in the relationship was over ridden by the need for it to stop.

Linda's whose narrative did not identify a turning point was the woman who had the strongest emotional attachment to her partner and the relationship as a result of her experience of isolation as a lesbian who had immigrated to Canada and the lack of options for her outside the relationship, *"I came to a very foreign country and if she got mad and said get out, (pause). "I don't know anybody, where was I going to go, what was I going to do"*. This intersects with the known impact of heterosexism and homophobia. As Eisikovits, Buckbinder & Mor (1998) discussed, the meaning system that kept her emotionally attached to her partner and in the relationship did not collapse

and so no turning point regarding the abuse was identified. As Lammers, Ritchie & Robertson (2005) discussed the decreased emotional attachment necessary to consider leaving the relationship was not achieved until alternate options were available. This provides a clear example of the power of social location and how being lesbian and immigration intersects with beliefs about love in this women's experience of abuse. The meaning of being isolated without knowledge or access to resources as a woman who had immigrated to Canada maintained the emotional attachment to a relationship in which she was experiencing abuse.

#### How the Themes Influence Vulnerability to Abuse and Access to Safety

A review of the themes in the women's narratives reveals differences in their influence on vulnerability to abuse and access to safety. The women's vulnerability to abuse was supported and their access to safety limited by: a belief in love as a promise of happy ever after; the practice of love in the relationship reflecting the condition of one partner determining the terms of the relationship by the means they would use and the women undertaking the emotional work of the relationship; their experience of abuse not being identified by the dominant narrative of abuse; the use of the dominant narratives of love including the fairy tale and dark romance narratives to understand their experience; their social location restricting their options through oppression and marginalization, as well as, social structures that use the dominant narratives of love and abuse to understand their experience and respond to it.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

This research project was undertaken to further our understanding of women's lived experience of love and abuse in their intimate partner relationships and focuses on the meaning of love in women's experience when love and abuse co-exist. The meaning of love was explored in terms of the woman's decisions for safety, the micro-politics of the relationship and the macro-politics of the structural inequalities that constrain them. This focus on the meaning of love across the individual, relationship and structural levels identified the importance of the dominant romance and abuse narratives, how love is practiced, and social structures and practices in the lived experience of the women when love and abuse co-exist.

The literature reviewed provides a wealth of insight into the experience of abuse in women's intimate partner relationships and has highlighted the complexity and difference in this experience across individuals, experience and social location. In understanding women's experience of abuse in their intimate partner relationships, it is important to recognize these complexities in women's experiences and the impact on their experience, their understanding of their experience, their vulnerability to abuse and their access to safety. An understanding of how abuse is experienced differently across social location and experiences is important and provides valuable information for women who experience abuse and those who provide services for them. Women's experience of abuse cannot be explored nor understood without acknowledging and understanding social location, for to do so is to strip the women of their identity (Mishler,

1986). It is imperative that we take a context informed stance to research, understanding and service provision.

The literature reviewed also shows a limited amount of research on the co-existence of love and abuse. Unfortunately the dichotomizing of love and abuse (Fraser, 2003, 2008; Jackson, 2001) has meant that there is little research and theorizing regarding the importance of love in the experience of abuse in women's intimate partner relationships. See Donovan & Hester (2010, 2011), Fraser (2003, 2008), Hester & Donovan (2009), Jackson (1999, 2001) and Wood (2001) for some exceptions. And even less that speaks to the importance of context as well. The intention of this research project was to gain insight into the meaning of love in women's experience of abuse from a feminist poststructural worldview. A worldview that includes differences in women's experiences beyond gender and recognizes the importance of structural inequalities. This is the distinction of this research project. It is research that endeavours to understand love as a personal belief, a relationship experience, and as social context, within a context specific understanding. Across the considerable relational and social differences in the lived experience of the women who took part in this research project love and the belief in the possibility of the relationship co-exist with the experience of abuse. In my analysis and discussion I have endeavoured to acknowledge both the relational and possessive conceptualizations of power and the similarities, complexities and contradictions in women's lives in understanding the meaning of love in their actions for safety, the micro-politics of their relationships and the macro-politics of the social structures that constrain them when love and abuse co-exist.

The women's narrative show us that what she believes about love and abuse, how love is practiced in the relationship, what individuals and social structures she comes in contact with believe about love and abuse, as well as social location are all part of the women's experience and they have a powerful impact on her experience. A review of how love and commitment to the relationship interact in decisions about safety, the micro-politics of the relationships where love and abuse co-exist and the macro-politics of the macro politics of structural inequalities that constrain the relationships where love and abuse co-exists highlights the way in which the vulnerability to abuse was supported and access to safety limited.

### **The Way Love and Commitment to the Relationship Interact in the Decision to Act for Safety**

Each of the women identified their partner's behaviour as a problem early in the relationship and, whether they identified it as abuse or not, knew they needed to act for their safety. The women also remained in the relationship of their narrative between five and fifteen years. Love and commitment to the relationship interacted in their decisions regarding safety and the relationship. The dominant narrative of love, the fairy tale romance narrative and the dark romance narrative were important in these interactions.

The dominant narrative about love is seen as important in the women's decisions about safety. Despite differences in the social location, context and details of their lived experience as the relationship began their belief about love reflected a belief in the promise of a love relationship. Across differences in age, ability, culture, education, life experience, race and sexual orientation the women's narrative reflects a belief in the dominant romance narrative discussed by Donovan & Hester (2011), Jackson (1999),

Jackson (2001) and Wood (2001) where the expectation is two people come together and live happily ever after. Each of the women's narratives also reflect the use of both the fairy tale romance narrative and the dark romance narrative described by Jackson (2001) and Wood (2001) to understand and respond to their experience in their relationship. The dominant romance narrative and the fairy tale romance narrative encourage women to be in forever, intimate partner relationships, to stay in relationships and endeavour to find a way to improve the relationship, to live happily ever after. The dark romance narrative makes room for the experience of abusive behaviours in the context of a love relationship. Together they provided a context for understanding the experience of abuse as part of a love relationship and supported a response focused on doing what was necessary to take care of their partner in order to make the relationship work. Feeling that their experience was not outside what was acceptable in a love relationship, that it was possible for them to improve this situation and that this was their responsibility encouraged women to stay in the relationship and limited the women's potential responses to their experience, increasing their vulnerability to abuse and limiting their options and actions for safety.

This is important because the romance narratives is the meaning system that keeps the women focused on the care of the partner and the relationship, doing the emotional work of the relationship, emotionally attached to the partner and the relationship. The meaning system that supports practices of love that increases their vulnerability to abuse is maintained. They cannot come to a turning point where they know that the abuse cannot be tolerated and needs to stop for the relationship to continue. With partners who behave abusively and do not change their behaviour the dominant romance narrative, the

fairy tale romance narrative and the dark romance narrative limit the options for action and get in the way of women acting for their safety.

### **The Micro-politics of Relationships where Love and Abuse Co-exist**

Donovan and Hester (2011) have discussed the impact of how love is practiced and beliefs about love and abuse on vulnerability to abuse in an intimate partner relationship in both heterosexual and same sex relationships. These were important in the micro-politics of relationships where love and abuse co-existed for the women who took part in this project.

The two core actions that Hester & Donovan (2009) and Donovan & Hester (2010) describe as being seen in relationships where abuse occurs, the relationship on one persons terms by the means they will use with the other undertaking the emotional work of the relationship, were present in the micro-politics of the women's intimate partner relationships. The partner's willingness to use the means necessary to have the relationship as they wished and the women's undertaking of the emotional work of the relationship established a vulnerability to the experience of abuse. The dominant romance and abuse narratives support this vulnerability.

The dominant romance narrative, the fairy tale romance narrative and the dark romance narrative were part of the environment and micro politics of the women's intimate partner relationships. As discussed the desire for and belief in the possibility of a relationship based in love where one can join with and commit to another forever is seen in the women's narratives. It is in this belief that they began their relationships and it is in this environment that they endeavoured to understand their experience and respond to



their experience through the use of the fairy tale romance narrative and the dark romance narrative. The romance narratives support the women's focus on the emotional work of the relationship.

The dominant narrative of abuse is also important in the micro-politics of the women's narratives. Much energy appears to be given to identifying if the behaviours were outside what is acceptable in an intimate partner relationship, bad enough to say they were unacceptable, to identify as abuse. The dominant abuse narrative that identifies abuse as primarily physical, in a heterosexual relationship, and done by a man to a woman (Donovan & Hester, 2011) keeps women involved in this question and from identifying many hurtful experiences as abuse, unacceptable, and outside that which they should continue to try and change through their focus on the emotional work of the relationship. This also supports the women's focus on the emotional work of the relationship. In addition the dominant narrative of abuse supports a partner using whatever means they will use. The means used to is often not identified by the dominant abuse narrative as outside of acceptable in an intimate partner relationship or abusive, as so little of behaviour that is abusive is physical and abusive behaviours can be done by women towards women.

The dominant romance narratives and the dominant abuse narratives support relationships with the core actions of relationships in which abuse can take place. Together they provide the relationship environment in which the abuse experienced by the women who shared their narrative took place.

### **The Macro-politics of Structural Inequalities that Constrain Relationships Where Love and Abuse Co-exist**

The larger societal context in which the women's experience took place is important to the women's lived experience of love and abuse. The women's narratives identify the structural realities of their lived experience, the macro politics of the structures and institutions that constrain them. They inform us that each woman's experience and understanding of her experience including her options is particular to her in her lived context. The narratives reflect the social structures and practices that support vulnerability to abuse and limit the women's action for safety.

Structural aspects are known to support vulnerability to abuse through the multiple sites of oppression such as ableism, ageism, classism, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and colonialism (Ristock, 2002) as well as their intersection (Davis & Glass, 2011; Hiebert-Murphy, Ristock & Brownridge, 2011). The intersection of these sites of oppression is the context in which the experience of abuse in the intimate partner relationships takes place. Social location, through oppressive social structures and practices, shape the woman's experience of abuse, her understanding of the experience and the options available to her in response to the experience.

Structural aspects also support vulnerability to abuse through the dominant narratives of love and abuse. Structures of society perpetuate, believe in and support the dominant narratives of abuse and love, including both the fairy tale and dark romance narratives. These narratives impact what society believes about love, identify as the experience of abuse and see as the options when love and abuse co-exist. As a result they impact how the society and its social structures respond to those who experience abuse and those who behave abusively. At times of crisis women look to the narratives most

known to them (Czarniawska, 2004; Wood, 2001) and at times of crisis other members of society do as well. The structures of society act in support of these narratives and limit women's action for and access to safety.

An example of the importance of the dominant narrative of abuse in the macro-politics of the women's narratives can be seen in the difference in the degree of detail of the women's narratives regarding their experiences in their relationships. The degree of detail varied in the description of the abuse experienced. Jean who experienced primarily physical abuse from a male toward a woman, the dominant narrative of abuse in discussed by Donovan and Hester (2011) provided a very factual account with little detail that she clearly identified as abuse. The women whose experiences were farther from the dominant narrative of abuse provided more detail regarding their experience and its impact. It is possible that the difference in the amount of detail used to describe the experiences in the narrative of abuse is potentially, to some degree, connected to an expected need to identify and establish experiences outside the dominant discourse of abuse as an experience of domination with impact.

### **Summary**

My analysis of the narratives of the women who took part in this research project was focused on and highlighted aspects of love, abuse and social context as important in vulnerability to abuse and access to safety. The women's vulnerability to abuse was increased and their access to safety limited by belief in love as a promise; by the dominant romance narrative including the fairy tale and dark romance narratives; by the dominant abuse narrative; by practices of love that supports one person determining the

relationship by the means they will use while the other feels responsible for and committed to the emotional work of the relationship; and by the oppressive social structures and practices of society. This was true across differences in social context across ability, age, class, education, gender, immigration, sexuality, race and their intersection.

In my analysis of the narratives of the women in consensual relationships when love and abuse co-existed the practices of love in the relationship showed the two core actions where abuse is seen (Donovan & Hester, 2009; Hester & Donovan 2010, 2011). The relationship on one person's terms by the means they will use with the other taking on the emotional work of the relationship. Understanding love as a practice allows for identifying vulnerability to abuse and the possibility of experiencing abuse.

In my analysis I identified the women's use of the dominant romance narrative including the fairy tale and dark romance narratives to understand their experience in their relationship. These romance narratives provided support for focusing on the emotional work of the relationship and a means of understanding the experience of abuse in the context of a love relationship. In this way love and commitment to the relationship comes together in their decisions for safety. Recognizing and understanding the impact of the romance narratives, including the fairy tale and dark romance narratives, in individual's decisions for safety allows for identifying vulnerability to abuse and decreased access to safety.

In my analysis I also identified the importance of the dominant romance and abuses narrative in the women's social context. These narratives are widely known and persistent in society. Across differences in identity and relationships a belief in love as a

promise of forever happiness was available and known. The dominant abuse narrative was also available and known. Experiences were identified as abuse most easily if they were consistent with this narrative; physical, done by men, experienced by women, in heterosexual relationships. Recognizing experience as abuse is important, as abuse is understood to be something that can be acted upon for safety even in a love relationship. Understanding the dominant romance narratives expectation of a forever, happy love and the dominant abuse narratives limited ability to identify abuse as part of the societal context, increases our understanding of how these narratives increase vulnerability to abuse and limit access to safety through society's support of the dominant narratives.

Recognizing the importance of the dominant love and abuse narratives in the individual, relationship and social context with beliefs, love practices and societal structures and practices that support and encourage them highlights the power of these dominant narratives in women's experience.

### **Implications for practice**

Love for a partner is often identified as a reason for staying in or returning to an intimate partner relationship where abuse is experienced (Donovan & Hester, 2010, 2011; Dziegielewski, Campbell & Turnage, 2005). The meaning of love to the experience of women in their intimate partner relationships when love and abuse co-exist provides important and valuable information for social work and other service providers and has implications for practice. First, as service providers we must recognize that an understanding of the meaning of love in a woman's experience must be held in an understanding of and respect for her social location. A woman's social identity and

location cannot be disregarded as it is the context in which her individual, relationship and structural experience of love and abuse takes place. It influences her vulnerability to abuse and her access to safety on its own through oppression and marginalization.

Service providers must also recognize that love and abuse co-exist in women's intimate partner relationships. Service providers need to be able to talk of both these experiences in one relationship. To talk of practices of love that support abuse and of taking action for safety even in a love relationship. In addition, service providers must recognize that the meaning of love is important to women on a personal, relationship, and structural level by means of personal beliefs, practices of love, and beliefs held by others including service providers. Finally, service providers must recognize that what they believe about love and abuse is important on the service relationship, agency, and structural level. In each of these areas women's vulnerability to abuse is supported and their access to safety limited by beliefs and practices that support the dominant narratives of love and abuse, and social inequality.

Providing service with this knowledge has implications for service provider's practice on the individual level, the service relationship level, and the structural level. This is true whether focused on healing or prevention from a clinical or administrative perspective.

On the individual level women's vulnerability to abuse is supported and their access to safety limited by belief in love as a promise of happy ever after; the practice of love in the relationship reflecting the condition of one partner determining the terms of the relationship by the means they would use and the women undertaking the emotional work of the relationship; their experience of abuse not being identified by the dominant

narrative of abuse; the use of the dominant narratives of love including the fairy tale and dark romance narratives to understand their experience and normalize the experience of abuse in the context of their love relationship; as well as, social structures and practices that support the dominant narratives of love and abuse. This is important in individual, couple and group work when love and abuse co-exist in women's intimate partner relationships. Service conversations focused on the meaning and practice of love can focus on identifying and decreasing vulnerability to harm and increasing access to safety within and outside of the relationship without love having to be denied and intention for abuse established. Such conversations focus on behaviour, experience, safety, and options rather than individual pathology of the women, their partners, their relationships or their social location. They focus on making decisions based in the reality of the current relationship situation.

On the service relationship level, service providers must understand how their beliefs about love and abuse impact the service they provide. Reflection on the impact of the dominant romance narrative, the fairy tale romance narrative, the dark romance narrative, and the dominant abuse narrative on service providers' understanding of love and abuse is imperative as it influences what is seen as the options for actions when love and abuse co-exist. As a structure of society, social work practice in support of the dominant romance or abuse narrative would increase women's vulnerability to abuse and decrease their access to safety. Social work service providers understanding love as a practice and support of an alternative narrative of love and abuse could decrease women's vulnerability to abuse and increase access to safety when love and abuse co-exist.

There are also implications for service on a political and structural level. The insights gained from the women's narratives point out the importance of the narratives available when love and abuse co-exist. Knowing that the narratives available are called upon in times of crisis and that the available dominant romance and abuse narratives do not help identify abuse and support action for safety, the importance of establishing and having other narratives of love and abuse in intimate partner relationships available is identified. As service providers, social work must give voice to and encourage conversations about love that support an understanding of love as a practice rather than a promise and abuse as a more inclusive experience. They must have conversations that challenge rather than support the dominant narratives, identify the need for alternative narratives, and give voice to alternative narratives of love and abuse.

On all levels of social work practice an alternative narrative of romantic love and an alternative narrative of abuse are needed. A narrative of romantic love that while it recognizes the potential of intimate partner relationships also recognizes the importance of how love is practiced to the dynamics of a relationship, the experience of love, and vulnerability to abuse in an intimate partner relationship. A narrative of romantic love that includes an understanding that the dynamics of an intimate partner relationship can result in vulnerability to abuse and necessitate choices about actions for safety within and outside the relationship regardless of differences of social location.

An alternate narrative of intimate partner abuse is also needed. A narrative of intimate partner abuse that is inclusive of all who might experience abuse, all who may behave abusively, and the varied ways that abuse can be experienced. A narrative of intimate partner abuse that recognizes that it can be part of a love relationship. A



narrative of intimate partner abuse that recognizes that there is vulnerability to the experience of abuse in a relationship where one person believes the relationship is on their terms established by whatever means they will use, and one person feels vulnerable, for whatever reason, and responsible for the emotional care of their partner and the relationship. A narrative of intimate partner abuse that recognizes that the experience is one of domination, coercion and control, that recognizes the issue of safety and the potential need of action for one's safety, and that recognizes that abuse can happen in a relationship begun in love.

Alternative narratives that recognize the importance of beliefs about love and what is expected in a love relationship to the experience of abuse in an intimate partner relationship, the importance of the practice of love to vulnerability to abuse in an intimate partner relationship, and the importance of context in vulnerability to the experience of abuse in an intimate partner relationship will facilitate expanded understanding of the options available when love and abuse co-exist in intimate partner relationships for women who experience abuse in their intimate partner relationships, service providers, and society in general. With these alternative narratives available we will be able to have conversations that allow the identification of the practices of love, dynamics in relationships, vulnerability in relationships, structures in society that increase vulnerability to abuse, and actions that can enhance safety, across differences while being respectful of social location.

These conversations will be of value to women who experience abuse in their intimate partner relationships. The ability to know abuse as an experience that can be part of a love relationship and to identify the abuse experience increases the ability to act

for safety when love and abuse co-exist in an intimate partner relationship. Having an alternative narrative of love and abuse can support women's access to their human right to safety when they experience abuse in their intimate partner relationships

These alternate narratives will assist service providers to provide respectful, relevant, responsible, and reflective services. Services that understands that love and abuse can co-exist, are respectful of an individual's love for their partner and commitment to the relationship, are aware of the vulnerability to abuse, and are aware of options for actions to enhance safety can provide an opportunity to explore the experience of abuse in a more inclusive way that provides more options for safety enhancing action.

A narrative of love that acknowledges the importance of how love is practiced on the potential of a love relationship would be of value for society generally as well as for those who might behave abusively. Understanding love as a practice could help all in society and the structures of society have a better understanding of the dynamics of relationships were love and abuse co-exist, the importance of how love is practiced to vulnerability in relationships and allow them to respond in a more respectful and relevant way to women who experience abuse in their intimate partner relationship. Were we as a society to have conversations about love as a practice we could explore the purpose and impact of love practices and avoid getting caught in an evaluation of whether it is love or not or abuse or not. As a society, understanding love as a practice could provide insight and direction when individuals experiencing abuse or those behaving abusively turn to us looking for a way to work through the inevitable issues in intimate partner relationships. We could be a society that supports relationships and honours love for a partner while

recognizing that some practices of love can result in vulnerability to abuse and a need to take action for safety. We could respond in a way that does not support vulnerability to abuse and supports accessing safety. Finally, a narrative of love that recognizes love as a practice and the purpose and impact of love practices might lead to conversations that provide alternatives to engaging in a relationship on one's own terms for those who might behave abusively to someone they love.

### **Evaluation of the Research Project**

Two areas of importance will be discussed in evaluation of this research, the limitations and the quality of the research.

#### **Limitations**

The limitations of this research include the small number of women who took part, that all of the women self identified as experiencing abuse and had left the relationship and researcher bias through social location and focus on the meaning of love. Although there was much diversity in the women's narratives in this research project, participation by a larger number of women might have provided more and perhaps different insights into the lived experience of women when love and abuse co-exist in their intimate partner relationships. A larger project may have identified additional issues of importance to the question of the research.

Another limitation of this research project is that all of the women self identified as having an experience of abuse and all had left the relationship. All were open to taking part in a project that focused on understanding the experience of love and abuse in

an intimate partner relationship. Narratives of women who did not identify as experiencing abuse or who identified as experiencing abuse but continued to live in the relationship may also have identified additional issues of importance to the questions of the research. Further inquiry could provide additional understanding of these lived experiences and add to our understanding of women's experience when love and abuse co-exist.

My social location and focus on love is a limitation to this study. Although it is my intention to act as an ally with attention to social justice issues, as discussed I impact the development of the research process and questions, the narrative context and the narratives provided. My interest in the meaning of love in women's narratives influenced how I heard and read the narratives, as well as, the meaning I made of the narratives. At a different time, with a different researcher, additional issues of importance to the question of the research might have been identified and pursued. In addition from a different social location different meaning may have been made of the narratives particularly the macro-politics of structural inequalities that constrain relationships where love and abuse co-exist. Further research is needed into the co-existence of love and abuse and to how it intersects with social location and the specificity of individual women's experience.

### Quality of the Research

Quality of the research is important to the evaluation of a research project. Strega (2005) suggests three areas for quality assessment of poststructural research projects. They include who the research is made for, reflexivity including complicity and

political implications and usefulness. Using Strega's (2005) guidelines, these are the standards by which this research project was assessed.

#### *Who the research is made for*

I undertook this research project for women who experience love and abuse in their intimate partner relationships. It is my belief that the women who had lived this experience have valuable insight into this experience of love and abuse co-existing. I also believe that this insight would be of value to other women who experienced both love and abuse in their intimate partner relationship, to those who provide service to these women and to our community in general as we continue to struggle with how best to understand this experience and to provide support and service that is respectful and relevant to the experience of abuse in intimate partner relationships. In undertaking this research project I endeavoured to keep the focus on the usefulness of this project to women who experience love and abuse in their intimate partner relationship.

#### *Reflexivity*

Throughout the development and carrying out of this research project I have been guided by a deep respect for the women who shared their narratives and a sense of responsibility to them. It has been my intention to take a reflective attitude that challenges me to highlight my participation in this research project, understand the implications of my social location, my beliefs and values on all aspects of this research project. My interest in the topic of this research project resulted from my twenty-years of work with women who have experienced abuse in their intimate partner relationships.

My understanding of the experience of love and abuse co-existing in intimate partner relationships is based in my social location as a mature, heterosexual, woman of the dominant Caucasian culture, pursuing a graduate degree, and working as a service provider in the area of violence against women.

The development of this research project and its process came out of my lived experience and my social location. The development of the research questions, the interactions with the women who took part in the research, how I ask the questions, the probes use, and finally my analysis of the narratives were guided by my interest in the meaning of love in women's experience of abuse, my belief that women who lived this experience had valuable information for us in this regard, my social location and my desire to produce anti-oppressive research.

#### *Political implications and usefulness*

In addition to completing this thesis as part of my academic experience I hope to be able to share this information with women who experience abuse and love in their intimate partner relationships, service providers and the community generally. It has been my intention to write this thesis in clear and accessible language and it is my intention to discuss this work in workshops when possible. Personally, this research project has informed my interactions with women who experience abuse in their intimate partner relationships and I have undertaken conversations in this regard with service providers and with women generally. I believe the insights gained from this project can increase women's access to safety when love and abuse co-exist and that this access to safety is a social justice issue.

It is a useful and political activity to question and explore the part the dominant narratives of love and abuse play in supporting the experience of abuse in women's lives. This research project has focused on identifying the meaning of love in women's intimate partner relationships when love and abuse co-exist. My intention through out this process has been to provide access to the wisdom of women who have lived the experience of love and abuse co-existing in their intimate partner relationships. It is my hope that as a community we will reflect on how we can use this knowledge to more fully understand the experience when love and abuse co-exist. To understand how practice of love and narratives of love and abuse can increase vulnerability to abuse in intimate partner relationships and limit access to safety. To begin to give voice to the need for and to an alternative narratives of love as a practice and abuse as an experience that can be part of any love relationship when one person seeks to set the terms of the relationship by whatever means and the other feels responsible for the emotional work of the relationship.

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## APPENDIX A: Informed Consent Form

### Informed Consent Form

Research project Title: **A Narrative Exploration Of Love And Abuse In Women's Intimate Partnering Relationships**

Researcher: **Teresa Wilson**

**This research is undertaken for a Master's Thesis, with supervision from Dr. Maria Cheung, as part of the requirement for the Masters of Social Work degree at the University of Manitoba.**

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This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

I understand that this project is intended to explore women's experience of love and abuse in their intimate partnering relationships. Participating in this project will allow me an opportunity to share my experiences and express my views on the co-existence of love and abuse in relationships. Participation is also an opportunity to be part of a process of developing respectful and relevant services for other women who experience abuse in their intimate partnering relationship.

I understand that participation in this study will involve two meetings of approximately one hour each at [REDACTED] Community Health centre, or another location of my choice, at a time and date that is convenient to me. I understand that in the first meeting I will be asked to: answer some demographic questions about my life experience; reflect on and discuss my experience of love and abuse in an intimate partnering relationship; and answer some questions about my experience and understanding of love and abuse in an intimate partnering relationship. I understand that at the second meeting I will be asked to: review a typed transcript of the first meeting to ensure that it reflects that conversation; answer some clarifying questions about the first conversation; and decide if there is any information that I would like to add, clarify or delete from the transcript.

I understand that there are potential risks to participation in this study. I understand that my current or former partner may be angry about my participation in this study. To prevent this I must choose whether or not to tell my current or former partner of my participation. I understand that repeating my experience in the interview may cause me to experience distress. I am aware that at any time I can refuse to answer any question with which I am uncomfortable, stop the interview, have all or part of my information removed from the study, and receive a list of community resources which might be helpful. Finally, I understand that action will be taken to prevent harm to myself and/or

others. I am aware that if during this study I provide information about the abuse of children or threats of harm to myself or to others, the researcher is legally obliged to report this to the authorities.

I understand that I am agreeing to take part in two interviews of approximately one hour each and that these interviews will be recorded with a digital audio recorder and then typed to ensure accuracy. I understand that all information from this study will be kept on a password-protected computer or stored in a secure locked cabinet in the home of the researcher, Teresa Wilson and that this information will be confidentially destroyed, by shredding and erasure, when the study is completed by December 2010.

I understand that only the researcher, Teresa Wilson and if needed her advisor Dr. Maria Cheung, will have knowledge of my participation. No information about my participation will be released and no information about me will be obtained from nor given to any agency from which I may receive service.

I understand that when completed the research will be compiled in a thesis report and may be presented to professional audience or written about in professional journals. I was informed that the findings will be based on information grouped together from all who participate in the research, and that all names and identifying information will be omitted from the presentation of the findings. I understand that all efforts will be made to conceal the identities of all participants. I understand that a summary of the research will be made available to me and that there is a section at the end of this form to provide an email or postal address where the report can be sent.

I understand that if I have questions or concerns at any time during this study I can contact the researcher, Teresa Wilson [REDACTED] or her advisor, Dr. Maria Cheung [REDACTED]

This research has been approved by the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact the researcher or their advisor or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 204-474-7122, or e-mail [margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca).

My signature on this form indicates that I have understood to my satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate. It in no way waives my legal rights nor releases the researcher, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. I understand that my continued participation should be as informed as my initial consent and I should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation.

Please send the research summary report to the following email or postal address.

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Participants Signature

Date

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Researcher Signature

Date



**APPENDIX B: Poster Notice / Request for Participants**

**A narrative exploration of the intersection of love and abuse in women's intimate partnering relationships**

**My name is Teresa Wilson, and I am undertaking this research for my Master's Thesis, with the supervision of Dr. Maria Cheung, as part of the requirements for the completion of a Masters Degree in Social Work**

**I am interested in speaking with women  
(bisexual, heterosexual, lesbian, transgender and two-spirit)  
who have experienced love and abuse in an intimate partnering relationship and who  
are interested in talking about their experience.**

**As a voluntary participant in this study you will be asked to take part in two, audio  
taped, meetings lasting approximately one hour each.**

**The meetings will involve an in-depth interview about your experience of love and  
abuse in intimate partnering relationships.**

**(further information about participation on pages following)**

**The meetings will take place at [REDACTED] Community Health Centre,  
or an alternate location that is convenient for you, at a time and date that is convenient  
for you. Bus fare will be provided**

**It is my hope that the knowledge and insight of the women participating in these  
conversations will help to develop understanding of the experience of love and abuse in  
women's intimate partnering relationships and develop recommendations for improved  
services for women who experience abuse in their intimate partnering relationships.**

**If you are interested in being part of this research or would like more information  
about the research, please call and leave a confidential voicemail message at**

**[REDACTED].**

**This research has been approved by the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board  
(tear offs with number will be at the bottom of the sheets)**

### **Information regarding participation**

Research project Title: **A Narrative Exploration Of Love And Abuse In Women's Intimate Partnering Relationships**

Researcher: **Teresa Wilson**

This research is undertaken for a Master's Thesis, with supervision from Dr. Maria Cheung, as part of the requirement for the Masters of Social Work degree at the University of Manitoba.

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#### **What participation is asked?**

You will be asked to take part in two audio taped meetings at [REDACTED] Community Health Centre (or another location if you prefer), at time and date that is convenient to you. At the first meeting you will be asked to: answer some demographic questions about your life experience; reflect on and discuss your experience of love and abuse in an intimate partnering relationship; and answer some questions about your experience and understanding of love and abuse in an intimate partnering relationship. At the second meeting you will be asked to: review a typed transcript of our first meeting to ensure that it reflects that conversation; answer some clarifying questions about the first conversation; and decide if there is any information that you would like to add, clarify or delete from the transcript.

#### **What are the potential risks?**

Participation in this study may involve some potential risks for you. Your current or former partner may be angry about your participation in this study. To prevent this you must choose whether or not to tell your current or former partner of your participation. Repeating your experience in the interview may also cause you to experience distress. At any time during the study you can refuse to answer any question that you are uncomfortable with, stop the interview, have all or part of your information removed from the study, and receive a list of community resources that might be helpful. Finally, the researcher's responsibility to report both child abuse and threats of harm to yourself and/or others is a risk of participation in this study. If during this study you provide information about the abuse of children or threats of harm to yourself or to others, the researcher is legally obliged to report this to the authorities.

#### **Is the study confidential?**

With your permission the two meetings will be recorded with a digital audio recorder and then typed to ensure accuracy. All the information from this study will be kept on a password-protected computer or stored in a secure locked cabinet in the home of the researcher, Teresa Wilson. Shredding and erasure will confidentially destroy the information of this study,, when the study is completed by December 2010. Only the researcher, Teresa Wilson and, if needed, her advisor, Dr. Maria Cheung, will have knowledge of your participation. No information about your participation will be

released and no information about you will be obtained from nor given to any agency from which you may receive service.

When completed the findings from this study will be compiled in a thesis report and may be presented to professional audience or written about in professional journals. The findings will be based on information grouped together from all who participate in the research, and all names and identifying information will be omitted from the presentation of the findings. All efforts will be made to conceal the identities of all participants. A summary of the study findings will be made available to participants in the study and you will be asked to provide an email or postal address where the report can be sent.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider this information. Your participation would be valuable and appreciated. . Please contact the researcher, Teresa Wilson [REDACTED] or her advisor, Dr. Maria Cheung [REDACTED] if you have any questions or concerns.

Any concerns or complaints about this research can be directed to the Human Ethics Secretariat, University of Manitoba at 204-474-7122 or email [margaret.bowman at umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret.bowman@umanitoba.ca)

## APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

### A narrative exploration of the intersection of love and abuse in women's intimate partnering relationships

#### Demographic and history questionnaire

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Are you currently working? \_\_\_\_\_  
(e.g. yes, full-time; yes, part-time; yes, casual; no)
3. What is your current job/occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is your cultural background? \_\_\_\_\_  
(e.g. Aboriginal, Asian, African-Canadian, Polish, English, Metis, etc...)
6. What is your citizenship? \_\_\_\_\_  
(e.g. born in Canada; landed immigrant or refugee; Canadian born abroad, etc...)
7. Do you have children? \_\_\_\_\_  
(including biological, step, adopted and foster children)
8. If yes, how many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Do you have any long-term (more than 6 months) disabilities, differing abilities, and/or illnesses? \_\_\_\_\_  
(e.g. chronic fatigue, irritable bowel syndrome, depression, addiction issues, cardiovascular disease, post-traumatic stress, etc)
10. If yes, what are they? \_\_\_\_\_
11. Because of the different ability or illness, are you limited in the activity you can do?  
\_\_\_\_\_

**I would now like to ask you some questions about your sexual orientation and intimate partnering relationships.**

12. How would you describe your sexual orientation? \_\_\_\_\_  
(Bisexual, heterosexual, lesbian, transgender, two-spirited, other)
13. Have you been in more than one intimate partnering relationship where you experienced abuse? \_\_\_\_\_
14. If yes, how many relationships? \_\_\_\_\_
15. How long did the relationships last? \_\_\_\_\_

**The next two questions refer to the intimate partnering relationship(s) you will be talking about today**

16. How would you describe the status of this/these relationship(s)?  
( e.g. married, separated, divorced, common law, ex common law, boyfriend/girlfriend, ex boyfriend/girlfriend, etc) \_\_\_\_\_
17. How long were you/have you been involved in this/these relationship? \_\_\_\_\_

**Continue to interview Guide**

Interview guide for first and second narrative interviews.

## First interview

**This research project is interested in your understanding of your experience of love and abuse in an intimate partnering relationship.**

What is the story of love and abuse in your relationship?

Additional conversational probes that may be used in this exploration include:

What beliefs did you have about love as the relationship began?

What understanding did you have of abuse as the relationship began?

Was there a time in the relationship where you experienced abuse that your beliefs about love changed?

Was there a time in the relationship when your understanding of abuse changed?

Was there a time in your relationship when you knew that you had to take action for your safety?

**Recognizing that women may wish to keep their participation in the research confidential, the process for contacting them to set up the second interview should be confirmed/established (phone, email, mail, etc...).**

## **Second interview**

**The purpose of this second interview is to provide an opportunity for you to review the transcript of the first interview to ensure that the transcript reflects your voice and what you want others to know about your lived experience.**

**It is a time for you to clarify, add or remove information about your experience.**

**It is an opportunity for me to ask any clarifying questions I may have.**

**It is an opportunity for you to reflect on your continued desire to be part of this project.**

**It is a time to establish a process for receiving the research summary if you wish**

**This is a transcript of our conversation at our last meeting.  
Please read it over and then we will talk about it.**

Do you feel that the written transcript reflects the conversation we had at the last interview?

Do you hear your voice and your experience as you read it?

Do you feel that it contains the information that you would like others to hear and know about your lived experience of love and abuse in an intimate partnering relationship?

Is there anything that you feel is unclear that you would like to clarify?

Is there anything that you feel is missing that you would like to add?

Is there anything that you feel does not reflect your experience or that you feel uncomfortable with that you wish to be removed?

Any clarifying questions the inquirer might have will also be asked.

**A review of the informed consent will be undertaken.**

**Recognizing that women may wish to keep their participation in the research confidential, a process for receiving or being informed of the availability of the summary report should be established (e.g. phone, email, mail, etc...)**