How Do Couples Assess Relationship Satisfaction After There Have Been Abusive Behaviours?

By

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Abstract

The negative impact of intimate partner violence (IPV) on individuals' relationship satisfaction along with psychological and physical well-being has been well documented. The present study examined how individuals experience and assess their relationship satisfaction when there has been a history of abusive behaviours by qualitatively exploring three questions: 1) how do women assess their relationship satisfaction when there has previously been violence in the relationship; 2) how do men assess their relationship satisfaction when there has previously been violence in the relationship; and 3) do women and men differ in the way they assess their relationship satisfaction. The study sample included five heterosexual couples. Based on the CTS-2, which was used as a descriptive measure of abusive behaviours, women and men reported differing types and frequency of abusive behaviours. Individual interviews with the women and men from these couples were completed using an interpretive phenomenological analysis framework (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Key emerging themes for the women were the importance of framing the beginning of the relationship as idyllic and the roles that agency and powerlessness played in their experience of their relationships in the face of abusive behaviours. For the men, their self-definitions along with minimization and lack of responsibility taking for their own abusive behaviours emerged as important in understanding their experience of relationship satisfaction. At the level of the couple, shared perceptions in factors precipitating and maintaining the conflict, and shared perceptions about growth and hope emerged as important to understanding relationship satisfaction. Differences in the impact of abusive behaviours were also found; themes relating to the negative impact of abusive behaviours were more salient in the narratives of the women compared to the men. The implications of the findings for clinical work with individuals and couples who have experienced abuse in their relationships are discussed.

Keywords: intimate partner violence, relationship satisfaction, qualitative research

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Disclaimer: The content of this thesis addresses difficult dynamics in heterosexual relationships and may be distressing to the reader.

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Relationship Satisfaction in Couples After Abusive Behaviours

Chapter 1: Literature Review

It is important to note that there is a growing recognition that gender is a non-binary construct (Hyde et al., 2019). Though the focus of this study largely considers relationship satisfaction and abusive behaviours in the context of women and men, I acknowledge that this comprises only a portion of the gender-spectrum which includes those who identify as transgender, two-spirit, genderqueer, and other non-binary identities.

Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction has been defined as "the global evaluation of the state of one's marriage and a reflection of marital happiness and functioning" (Zainah, Nasir, Hashim, & Md Yusof, 2012, p. 46). Though early days of relationship satisfaction research centered around samples composed of married, heterosexual couples, there has been a shift in recent years to include more diverse couples including couples who are co-habitating or are dating. Accordingly, the term relationship satisfaction will be used synonymously with marital satisfaction to refer to the degree of satisfaction that individuals feel in their romantic relationships regardless of marital status.

Gender Differences in Relationship Satisfaction

It is generally accepted that there are differences in level of relationship satisfaction as a function of gender; research generally shows that men and women experience their relationships differently (Carstensen et al., 1995) and consequent to this difference, women experience lower levels of relationship satisfaction than men (Boerner et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2014; Umberson et al., 2005; Windsor & Butterworth, 2010).

Researchers have theorized that one possible reason why these gender differences in relationship satisfaction exist is owed to the way in which gender has been constructed within society. Ferree (2010) argued that gender should be conceptualized less as an individual trait, but rather a social construct shaped by the processes in culture that leads to the differential socialization of the two sexes which in turn, leads to differences in the way that men and women access, experience, and make meaning of power in their relationships. Ferree argued that because all relationships encompass power dynamics, be it platonic or romantic, and the construct of gender shapes how individuals access, experience, and make meaning of power, gender differentially impacts the way women and men experience themselves, the other, and the

relationship. There has been a growing body of literature in support of this view. For example, Bulanda (2011) examined the responses of over 12,000 older adults from the 1992 Health and Retirement Study and found that women reported lower levels of marital quality, satisfaction, and power compared to men.

Some have suggested that the cultural ideals relating to gender have shifted in recent years in favour of women as more women enter the workforce (Scanzoni, 1978). Proponents of this view argue that this has resulted in challenges to the traditional gender-norms (e.g., men being ascribed the role of 'bread winner' and women taking on the role of 'caregiver') and that these changes should result in more equitable distribution of power within modern-day relationships with corresponding increases in relationship satisfaction for women (Coltrane, 1996). Despite the cultural shifts that have seen an increase in non-traditional gender roles within romantic relationships, studies that have compared women's and men's reports of relationship satisfaction have continued to show that women are less satisfied in their relationships compared to men (e.g., Rogers & Amato, 2000).

Impact of Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction has been shown to have consequences for both the psychological and physical well-being of individuals (Cohen, Schulz, Liu, Halassa, & Waldinger, 2015; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Schuster, Kessler, & Aseltine, 1990; Umberson et al., 2005; Wisman, 1999). Lower relationship satisfaction has been linked with thickening coronary arteries in cardiac patients (Wang et al., 2007), depression and depressive symptoms (Beach, Sandeen, & O'Leary, 1990; Fincham & Beach, 2002), substance use (Frankenstein et al., 2015), anxiety disorders such as panic attacks and agoraphobia (Goldstein & Chambless, 1987; Kleiner & Marshall, 1987), and psychosis (Goldstein & Chambless, 1987; Halford & Bouma, 1997). O'Leary and colleagues (1994) conducted a study with 328 couples and reported a 10-fold increase in risk for depressive symptomatology for individuals reporting relationship dissatisfaction compared to those who were not dissatisfied. Though it is possible that relationship satisfaction decreases as a function of poor mental health, studies have reported a causal, or at the very least, a bi-directional relationship between relationship satisfaction and psychological disorders (Beach, Fincham, & Katz, 1998; Beach et al., 1990; Fincham & Beach, 2002).

Low levels of relationship satisfaction have also been shown to contribute to the onset of psychological sequelae as well as the maintenance of, and likelihood of relapse of, psychological disorders (Durham et al., 1997; Hooley & Teasdale, 1989; Maisto & O'Farrell, 1988). Furthermore, relationship dissatisfaction has been shown to be related to poorer prognosis for treatment of psychological disorders (Durham et al., 1997; Rounsaville et al., 1979). These are alarming findings because they suggest that individuals who report low relationship satisfaction are not only at risk of developing psychological symptomatology, but they are also less likely to benefit from treatment which can in turn, further decrease their relationship satisfaction. Additionally, the impact that relationship dissatisfaction has on the relational and psychological functioning of the dyad also has deleterious implications for children (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Papp et al., 2004; Robert, 1982; Waldron et al., 1995). Papp and colleagues (2004) investigated the impact on children of parents who report relationship dissatisfaction as well as psychological symptoms and found that both mothers' and fathers' marital functioning and symptomatology negatively impact children's adjustment characterized by both internalizing and externalizing problems.

Taken together, these findings on psychological and familial consequences of relationship satisfaction highlight the importance of considering relationship satisfaction in couples, especially if the couples are at greater risk of experiencing relational distress and dissatisfaction, as is the case with IPV. Additionally, when these negative consequences of decreased relationship satisfaction are considered in light of the gender differences that exist between women and men (discussed above), the collective findings of literature suggest that women may disproportionately bear the negative consequences of poor relationship satisfaction.

How is Relationship Satisfaction Assessed?

A national study surveying over 50,000 married couples listed five factors that are important contributors to relationship satisfaction: 1) communication, referring to how satisfied couples feel about the way they speak to each other; 2) conflict resolution, how much individuals feel understood in disagreements and feel they can share their feelings with each other; 3) role relationships, the degree to which the couple equitably share responsibilities and household chores; 4) managing finances, how much couples agree on how to manage their money; and 5) spiritual beliefs, the degree to which couples express and share their spiritual values and beliefs (Olson et al., 2008).

Another study surveying 57 couples who had been married for 25 to 46 years identified several "essential ingredients" (Kaslow & Robison, 1996, p. 165) for high relationship satisfaction: 1) commitment to the relationship and the growth of the relationship; 2) respect for the partner; 3) responsibility to the partner; 4) intrapersonal fidelity and integrity; 5) mutual support; 6) accountability to one another that stems from love and devotion; 7) trust and cooperation; 8) expressions of love that communicate appreciation and a sense of being valued; 9) possibility for continued personal development; 10) good communication characterized by openness, honesty, and transparency; 11) flexibility and willingness to forego personal gain for the benefit of the partner; 12) good problem-solving skills characterized by a spirit of cooperation; 13) ability to compromise and engage in creative thinking to handle differences; 14) a sense of equality with regards to power dynamics within the relationship; 15) joint decision making; 16) shared beliefs/values; and 17) fun and friendship (Kaslow & Robison, 1996).

Bachand and Carson (2001) conducted a qualitative study of 15 heterosexual couples who had been in stable, happy marriages for a minimum of 35 years. These authors reported that while there were factors that were commonly cited by the couples as being important contributors to their relationship satisfaction (e.g., friendship, love, similar background/interest, commitment, and the freedom to pursue goals), there were numerous factors that were unique to each couple. One thing of note is that, although there was a wide range of responses across the couples, within each couple, the partners tended to list similar factors as being responsible for their high relationship satisfaction.

In sum, the wide range of factors that have been identified by both quantitative and qualitative studies suggests that while there may be larger themes among the factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction such as communication and the freedom to further one's own development, there is also an idiosyncratic nature to the factors that contribute to individuals' relationship satisfaction. This notion is supported by Harvey and Wenzel's (2006) contention that there is no singular perspective on relationship satisfaction that provides a full explanation of why some couples enjoy high levels of relationship satisfaction while others do not.

In addition to the presence (or absence) of these factors that impact individuals' level of relationship satisfaction, attribution theory provides a theoretical framework that speaks to the experience of relationships that give rise to appraisals of relationship satisfaction. Attribution

theory takes its roots from cognitive behavioural theories that purport that the way in which individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences impact their emotions as well as their behaviours (Beck, 1988). Attributional style refers to a pattern in the way an individual ascribes the cause of events or behaviours. A positive attributional style in relationships involves attributing the cause of negative interactions with a partner to transient, external, situational factors while positive interactions are attributed to stable internal characteristics of the partner; this attributional style is most commonly observed in individuals in healthy and satisfying relationships (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham et al., 1987). Individuals with negative attributional styles tend to view negative aspects of their partners' behaviours or relationship as being a result of stable, global internal characteristics of their partner, while positive aspects of the relationships are attributed to transient, external factors of the situation; this attributional style is more closely associated with blaming behaviours and decreased relationship satisfaction (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham et al., 1987; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987).

The literature suggests that there is a snowball effect in the way that individuals appraise their relationships. Those involved in healthy relationships and reporting high levels of relationship satisfaction are motivated to view their partners in a positive light, regardless of the veracity of their evaluation, biasing their interpretation of their partners' behaviours, further driving their elevated relationship satisfaction evaluations (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2011; Luo et al., 2010; Luo & Snider, 2009). Conversely, couples experiencing low levels of relationship satisfaction may be primed to attribute partners' behaviours negatively, leading to negative attributional styles (Fincham et al., 1997).

Methodology in Relationship Satisfaction Research

Most of the studies in the relationship satisfaction literature employ quantitative methods and use a variety of measures that have been developed over the past several decades including the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976), a 32-item measure which is also one of the most commonly used measures to assess dyadic relationship satisfaction; Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS; Schumm et al., 1986), a brief, 3-item measure of marital satisfaction; Marital Satisfaction Inventory Revised (MSI-R; Snyder, 1997), a longer, 150-item measure of marital satisfaction; Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959), a 15-item measure that assesses satisfaction and areas of agreement and disagreement within a couple; and Marital Satisfaction Scale (MSS; Roach et al., 1981) a 48-item measure of satisfaction that

examines attitudes toward the relationship as well as effort put into the relationship. While there are certainly numerous contributions made by studies employing these measures to conduct purely quantitative research (see Jackson et al., 2014), they fail to capture the nuances of individuals' experiences that inform individuals' experiences and assessment of relationship satisfaction. These studies are also limited in their conceptualization of constructs such as relationship satisfaction by the measures that are used operationalize them. The importance of capturing the detailed nuances of the individual's narrative and experience was demonstrated well in a mixed methods study conducted by Kienas (2018). She investigated relationship satisfaction in a group of women involved in heterosexual relationships with a history of violence but where the violence had desisted. Her study, while echoing what has been found in literature regarding important factors contributing to relationship satisfaction, found that how women perceived and interpreted their experiences of past violence was also important in the determination of their assessment of relationship satisfaction. Past experiences of violence impacted the women's perceptions of how their relationships had evolved since the desistance of violence, which in turn, shaped their perceptions of relationship satisfaction. This finding is important, not only for a conceptual understanding of relationship satisfaction in this population, but also in the implementation of intervention for couples who have experienced violence.

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been labelled as a serious societal issue with detrimental implications for the physical and psychological health of those impacted (Nicolaidis & Paranjape, 2009; WHO, 2013). It has been defined in many different ways over the last several decades, but a clear consensus on a definition has eluded researchers (Nicolaidis & Paranjape, 2009). Notwithstanding, a theme amongst these definitions is behaviour "within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm" (WHO, 2012). These behaviours can encompass acts of physical aggression (i.e., pushing, slapping, kicking), psychological abuse (i.e., humiliation, intimidation), sexual abuse (i.e., rape), and coercive controlling behaviours (i.e., isolation from supports, restricting financial access; Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). IPV can vary in frequency and severity, from a one-time occurrence of verbal, physical, or sexual aggression, to chronic, severe abuse (CDC, 2018).

IPV in Canada

Recent research in Canada found that three in ten (28%) victims of police-reported violence over the age of 15 were victimized as a result of IPV, and the highest rates of these acts of aggression were perpetrated by a current dating partner (35%) or a spouse (32%; Burczycka & Conroy, 2018). The most commonly reported violent crime in relation to IPV in Canada was common assaults (62%; Burczycka & Conroy, 2018) which includes pushing, slapping, punching, and face-to-face verbal threats (Statistics Canada, 2009). It is likely that the true prevalence rate of IPV is much higher than what is known; it is estimated that as high as seven in ten Canadians will not make a police report in relation to their experiences with IPV and individuals are less likely to report incidents of IPV to the police when there is no physical injury (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018).

Additionally, the cost of IPV on Canadian society in 2009 was estimated to be $7.4 billion (Zhang et al., 2012). The greatest portion of this cost was borne by the victims ($6.0 billion) for costs relating to lost wages and education, stolen and/or damaged property, pain and suffering, and medical attention. The remainder of the burden was borne by third parties (i.e., children who were exposed to violence at home and losses to employers) and the criminal and civil justice system. Despite these staggering numbers, the authors considered $7.4 billion to be a conservative estimate (Zhang et al., 2012).

Impact of IPV

In light of these statistics that demonstrate the considerable economic burden IPV places on Canadian society, it is without question that IPV is an issue that warrants attention on a national level. Globally, IPV has been identified by the WHO as a serious public health issue (WHO, 2013), and has been linked to a host of mental and physical health issues.

Individuals who report a history of IPV report higher prevalence rates of adverse mental and physical health challenges including depression, bipolar disorder, problematic substance use and abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm and suicide, chronic pain, somatic disorders, sexually transmitted infections, and stroke (Campbell, 2002; Chang et al., 2011; Coker et al., 2002; Devries et al., 2011; Dillon et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Sansone et al., 2007; Sugg, 2015; Woods, 2005). Dienemann and colleagues found that women reporting a history of IPV had a 61% lifetime prevalence rate of depression (Dienemann et al., 2002). A meta-analysis of 37 studies suggests that women who were exposed to IPV are two to three times more likely

to develop a major depressive disorder and 1.5 to 2 times more likely to develop depressive symptoms compared to women who had never been exposed to IPV (Beydoun et al., 2012).

Beyond the impact that IPV has on the individual, the presence of IPV in the home can have deleterious consequences for children (Campbell, 2002; Dillon et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2008). Often, when IPV is present, at least some of the aggression and/or abuse takes place in the presence of children, and sometimes may even be displaced onto the children. The onset of psychopathology such as alcohol abuse and related problems (Holden, 1998; Ireland & Widom, 1994; Miller et al., 1993; Sternberg et al., 1993) and increases in aggressive behaviours as well as social problems are more likely in children who are exposed to IPV at home compared to non-exposed children (Holden, 1998; Kashani, 1998). Evans and colleagues (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 60 studies and found that children exposed to IPV are at increased risk of internalizing and externalizing behaviours, and report higher rates of depressive and anxiety-related symptoms, including symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder such as emotional withdrawal and hyperarousal. Furthermore, the exposure to IPV in childhood has been linked with an increased likelihood of experiencing IPV as an adult, either as a perpetrator of violence or as a victim of abuse, further perpetuating the cycle of violence and leading to an intergenerational transmission of trauma (Stith et al., 2000).

IPV is Not a "One Size Fits All" Phenomenon

There has been a growing consensus among researchers that IPV is not a unitary phenomenon. Historically, research in IPV was primarily carried out by researchers who examined IPV in either 'clinical' samples or community samples (Nicolaidis & Paranjape, 2009). Researchers examining IPV using 'clinical' samples collected data from women who had sought shelter services as a result of their experiences with IPV and from men who had entered the criminal or civil justice system as a result of their perpetration of violence (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 2007; Wermuth, Dobash, & Dobash, 2006; Yllo, 2005). These studies found that a disproportionate number of women were victimized by their male counterparts (Pagelow, 1981). Conversely, those using community samples reported a symmetry in the frequency of female-to-male and male-to-female violence (Archer, 2000).

These conflicting findings have been collectively referred to in the literature as the 'gender symmetry debate' (Dobash et al., 2007; Wermuth et al., 1981; Yllo, 2005). In light of these mixed findings, a number of typologies of IPV have been suggested (e.g., Gottman et al.,

1995; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000; Johnson, 2008). For example, Johnson (2008; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000) suggested that IPV may be a more complicated phenomenon than once thought. In order to capture this complexity, Johnson subsequently described four patterns of IPV, each characterized by differing interactional patterns between couples and outcome (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). The four types of IPV that he proposed were: 1) situational couple violence, 2) intimate terrorism, 3) violent resistance, and 4) mutual violent control.

The main point of difference between these four types lies in the presence of motivations to control one's partner. Situational couple violence describes IPV where men and women may both be perpetrators of aggression, but the violence is not motivated by a desire to exert coercive control over the other partner. Intimate terrorism on the other hand, describes IPV where one partner attempts to exert coercive control over his or her partner, and is usually perpetrated by a male partner. Johnson and Leone (2005) purported that those victimized in intimate terrorism were more likely to be injured, abused more frequently and severely, and more likely to experience mental health problems. Violent resistance describes IPV wherein a partner engages in abusive/violent behaviour without coercive controlling motives towards a partner who is coercively controlling, usually resulting from a victim responding to violence with violence (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Stith et al., 2012). Mutual violent control occurs when there are two partners who are violent/abusive, are motivated by coercive control, and are attempting to exert control over the other (Johnson, 2008; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000).

Johnson purported that the pattern of IPV observed in studies using clinical samples was consistent with intimate terrorism, while situational couple violence was more representative of IPV found in community/population samples (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). This typology provides a useful framework through which IPV can be conceptualized as it provides a way to frame a researcher's approach in his or her questions examining IPV. However, it is important to keep in mind that an overemphasis on typology can risk oversimplifying the complex nature of IPV. For example, although Archer (2000) found some support for the idea that different types of IPV may be captured in different samples, his meta-analysis also found support for the suggestion that the way that research operationalizes and measures violence can impact the distribution of the perpetration of violence between the genders (i.e., using self-report injury versus injury requiring medical attention; see Archer, 2000).

It is also important to not conflate the presence or absence of severe violence as the criteria by which couples are categorized into one of the four types of IPV Johnson identified. It would be erroneous to conclude that couples' patterns of IPV are more consistent with situational couple violence because they do not report severe and frequent abuse/violence. Conversely, it is also possible that the patterns of violence fit more closely with intimate terrorism despite relatively lower frequency and severity of physical violence. The danger associated with strictly subscribing to a typology to classify patterns of IPV among couples is that it can also lead to erroneously making premature conclusions about the potential severity of mental health outcomes for the victims (i.e., assuming that mental health problems must be less severe because the pattern of violence is more consistent with situational couple violence).

Relationship Satisfaction in IPV

The majority of research pertaining to relationship satisfaction and IPV suggests that that IPV is associated with relationship instability, decreased relationship satisfaction, and increased divorce ideation (Heyman, O'Leary, & Jouriles, 1995; Katz, Arias, Beach, Brody, & Roman, 1995; Stith, Green, Smith, & Ward, 2008; Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004). However, some studies found that victims of IPV indicated average or above average ratings of relationship satisfaction despite the presence of violence (O'Leary et al., 1989; Williams & Frieze, 2005). Katz and colleagues (1995) examined relationship satisfaction among 66 couples and found that the presence of violence was not a strong predictor of marital satisfaction (Katz et al., 1995). These findings suggest that there may be other factors that couples use to evaluate their level of relationship satisfaction that are weighed more heavily than the presence of violence. Findings reported by Panuzio and DiLillo (2010) further suggest that not all violence has the same impact on relationship satisfaction. These authors investigated the impact of physical, psychological, and sexual aggression on relationship satisfaction and found that psychological aggression was predictive of relationship satisfaction whereas physical and sexual aggression were not.

Some researchers have highlighted the importance of the way individuals experience and make meaning of the abusive behaviours in their relationships (e.g., Boerner et al., 2014; Gordon et al., 2004). These researchers emphasize the importance of individuals' perceptions of their relationship by suggesting that it is not the absolute level and severity of violence that predicts decisions to stay or leave, but rather other factors such as how the experience of the relationship in the face of abusive behaviours compares to their expectations of their relationship (McDonald,

1981) or perceived changes in level and severity of violence that may be important in the way individuals assess their relationship satisfaction (Pape & Arias, 2000). Kienas (2017) also found that understanding how women perceived and made meaning of changes in their relationships following a history of abusive behaviours was important in understanding how they assessed their relationship satisfaction.

These findings shed light on the important role that subjective experience and meaning making of that experience play in determining the level of satisfaction an individual feels in their relationship. It follows then, that exploring how individuals experience their relationship is an area deserving of consideration in order to promote the well-being of individuals, especially when one considers interventions for couples who report a history of violence.

IPV and Intervention

There are conflicting opinions regarding the appropriateness of conjoint therapy for couples who have a history of IPV (Stith & McCollum, 2011). Those opposed to conjoint therapy express concerns around the ability of the therapist to maintain a neutral stance (Shamai, 1996) and the belief that power imbalances in IPV prevent victims from voicing their opinions freely in therapy (Jory et al., 1997). Those advocating for conjoint therapy argue that offering individual therapy, most often for the perpetrator, can have deleterious consequences for the couple because tools learned in sessions can be misused for further perpetration of abuse (Rosen et al., 2003). Advocates also argue that not all IPV is the same and for some patterns of IPV, couple therapy can increase safety and relationship satisfaction (see Stith & McCollum, 2011 for a more detailed discussion).

There is a body of literature, albeit small, that speaks to the effectiveness of conjoint therapy in reducing violence in some couples who have experienced IPV (Stith, Rosen, & McCollum, 2003; Stith et al., 2012). The literature emphasizes that in order for conjoint therapy to be successful, it is important that the perpetrator(s) of violence takes responsibility for the abusive behaviours and that the couples commit to the desistance of violence (Stith et al., 2003). The desistance of violence is often a major point of focus for interventions, and understandably so, because therapists have a moral and ethical obligation to minimize harm to their clients by ensuring clients' safety. Desistance of violence is also the primary way of evaluating interventions (Stith et al., 2012), which again, is understandable given that it provides a concrete measure of treatment success. While important, this focus on decreasing level of violence has led

to a neglect of another important factor that contributes to couples' well-being: relationship satisfaction. Specifically, if as research suggests, couples' evaluations of their relationship satisfaction includes areas that are outside the domain of physical violence (Katz et al., 1995; O'Leary et al., 1989; Williams & Frieze, 2005), and positive evaluations of relationships are most predictive of relationship satisfaction (Boerner et al., 2014), it stands to reason that a focus on promoting factors that help couples evaluate their relationships positively and working on increasing couples' relationship satisfaction should also be a goal of therapy for couples who have a history of violence.

In order for clinicians to effectively work with couples to increase their relationship satisfaction in the context of IPV, clinicians must not only be informed on what factors help individuals assess their relationships but also on processes involved in the assessment of relationship satisfaction. For example, Kienas (2017) demonstrated that the 'what' of relationship satisfaction (e.g., aspects of the relationship used to evaluate relationship satisfaction) is impacted by the 'how' of relationship satisfaction appraisals (e.g., process of appraisals) that are influenced by individual experience. While studies using quantitative methodologies are useful for identifying the 'what' at population levels, qualitative studies are necessary to identify the 'how' at the individual level. Accordingly, it is important to understand the processes that give rise to individuals' valuation of their relationship because such knowledge sheds light on the processes that could be addressed by clinical and community programs designed to both decrease violence and promote relationship satisfaction for couples who have experienced violence.

Current Study

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine men's and women's experiences and assessment of relationship satisfaction when abusive behaviours have occurred in their relationship. In light of the paucity of studies that examine how couples who have experienced abuse assess their relationship satisfaction, three broad questions were explored:

(1) How do women assess their relationship satisfaction when there has previously been abuse/violence in their relationships?

(2) How do men assess their relationship satisfaction when there has previously been abuse/violence in their relationships?

(3) Do women and men within a couple relationship in which there has been abuse/violence assess their relationships in the same way?

Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods

Methodology

Phenomenology

Phenomenology has its roots in philosophical inquiry that was initially articulated by Edmund Husserl (1983) whose goal was to describe a phenomena in order to ascertain characteristics of that phenomena that give rise to its presence and existence (Giorgi, 1997; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2011). Thus, Husserlian phenomenology maintains a focus on describing the 'essence' of a phenomenon, defined as the most "invariant meaning for a construct" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 242) – the part of a construct that remains constant regardless of the context of the experience. This is done through a process of phenomenological reduction wherein observers of the phenomenon bracket their experiences (reduce subjectivity by setting aside their worldviews and biases) and immerse themselves in the rich description of the phenomenon as provided by the experiencer of the phenomenon (Allan & Eatough, 2016; Giorgi, 1997). Since its original inception, phenomenology has been adopted by various philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and most notably, Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger (Spiegelberg, 1982). Heidegger placed emphasis on the phenomenon as it was experienced by individuals, in context; in other words, the experience of the phenomenon as it occurred in relationship with others. Heidegger thus shifted Husserl's original focus on description of a phenomena to its interpretation, arguing that describing the phenomenon was also a form of interpretation (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2011).

From its development as a vessel of philosophical inquiry, phenomenology has been adopted as a method for qualitative inquiry for psychology and has been used in literature to explore various topics such as the lived experience of bulimia (Day, 2004), of transsexual individuals (Scarpella, 2011), and of therapy (Giorgi & Gallegos, 2005).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) is a phenomenological method of approaching experiences, and was initially introduced by Jonathan Smith with specific application to health psychology. Though it largely finds its roots in the philosophy of phenomenology, IPA contains elements of symbolic interactionism (Cronk, 2012; Denzin, 1974),

hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969), and ideography (Allport, 1940); the three form the key philosophical pillars to the epistemological approach that IPA takes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Symbolic interactionism posits that the experience and the meaning made of those experiences take place within the individual's private world as well as the social context in which the individual operates. An investigator who examines these meanings must, to the best of his or her ability, take the position – personally and socially – of the experiencer in order to accurately ascertain the true experience of the phenomenon (Cronk, 2012; Denzin, 1974). To this end, Smith (1996, 2004) describes IPA's theoretical position as exploring the way in which a participant experiences and makes meaning of the phenomenon under study, by adopting an 'insider's perspective' (Conrad, 1987) in relation to the participant's individual and social context.

Hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969) is a method of interpretation that was originally applied to the study of biblical texts through an in-depth analysis of the text itself, such as semantics, syntax, frequency of particular words, etc., but has since been applied more generally as a method of qualitative enquiry (Eatough & Smith, 2011; Palmer, 1969; Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA in particular, includes 'double hermeneutics' (Smith, 2004), referring to the two stages of interpretation that take place in IPA; first, the participant interprets and make sense of his or her experiences, and second, the investigator attempts to make sense of the participant's efforts to make sense of his or her experiences by a close examination of interviews (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Finally, staying true to the nature of qualitative inquiry, IPA emphasizes the importance of an ideographic approach in its in-depth dive into the personal experiences and meaning making process of participants. Ideography (Allport, 1940), which concerns itself with the study of the individual, manifests itself in IPA in its emphasis of focusing on the data collected from a single individual, engaging with it immersively until "some degree of understanding or gestalt has been achieved." (Allan & Eatough, 2016, p. 409). Only after this process does the investigator move on to the data from the next participant, only to repeat the process (described in more detail below). Consequently, upon completion of the analysis of all interviews, the investigator looks for idiosyncratic themes from individual participants, consequently resulting

in the identification of patterns of convergence and divergence of themes between and within participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Taken together, IPA was an appropriate methodology through which I was able to investigate the experiences of couples who have experienced abusive behaviours and address the goals of the research. More specifically, IPA allowed for a rich exploration of relationship satisfaction in couples who have experienced abusive behaviours in their relationship by going beyond a description of the phenomenon as traditional phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1997) would allow. Instead, IPA gave the opportunity to examine how individuals in these relationships make meaning of their relationships in light of their experiences of IPV and to assess relationship satisfaction. Additionally, the idiographic emphasis allowed me to examine points of convergence, giving rise to emerging themes, and divergence, that highlighted the nuanced experiences of the women and men who participated in this study.

Methods

Consistent with recommendations in the literature (Allan & Eatough, 2016), I employed a purposive sampling technique (Cresswell & Poth, 2016). Purposive sampling is used frequently in qualitative studies due to the participants' ability to speak to, and give rich descriptions of, the phenomenon in question (Allan & Eatough, 2016; Cresswell & Poth, 2016). The aim of purposive sampling diverges from randomized sampling in that its goal is not to enable the investigator to make general inferences about the population from the sample. Rather, the goal of purposive sampling is to specifically recruit those individuals who can best answer the research question under consideration (Cresswell & Poth, 2016).

In contrast to nomothetic approaches consistent with quantitative studies, IPA's idiographic underpinnings encourage a small and generally homogenous sample that enable the researcher to derive the richest possible description and analysis of the phenomenon in question (Allan & Eatough, 2016; Smith, 1996, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2003). As such, I recruited five heterosexual couples from the Couples Counselling Project (CCP) to participate in this study.

The CCP is a clinical/research/training program funded by the Family Violence Prevention Program of the Manitoba Status of Women within the Government of Manitoba. All participants were accepted into the project prior to their participation, meaning that they met the following criteria: a) the violence had ceased, b) the perpetrators of abuse/violence accepted responsibility and were committed to continued cessation of their abusive/violent behaviours, c)

the abused individuals agreed to formulating a safety plan, and d) both partners were committed to pursuing a violence-free relationship.

Intake appointments at the CCP take place on Monday and Tuesday evenings at which time the couple meets with a co-therapy team to determine the couple's suitability for the CCP. I was on site on these evenings to facilitate recruitment. Those who met CCP's criteria were introduced to the present study by the co-therapy team and given an information sheet about the study which also included a section for them to provide consent to be contacted (Appendix A). Couples who expressed interest in the study provided consent to be contacted by me either immediately following their intake appointment or by phone at a later date.

Eight couples were approached by co-therapy team and six couples provided consent to be contacted. One of the six couples asked to be contacted by phone at a later date. When I contacted them by phone, they decided not to participate in the study due to scheduling difficulties. Five of the six couples chose to meet with me immediately following their intake appointment. During this meeting, I provided them with more information about the purpose of the study and what their participation would entail (see Appendix B for script). I confirmed that both partners were interested in participating in the study at this time and scheduled appointments for their participation. All interviews were scheduled within two weeks of this initial meeting.

I, along with a research assistant, met with the couples for the study during the CCP's hours of operation. Each partner was taken separately (one partner with me and the other with the research assistant) to separate private rooms to review the consent form (see Appendix C for script; Appendix D for informed consent form), answer any questions the participants had, and obtain informed consent. Each participant was assured that their receipt of services from the CCP was not contingent upon their participation. Upon receiving informed consent, each participant was given a $25 cash honorarium as a token of appreciation for their time.

Because the appointment for participation for both members of the couple were at the same time, it was important to minimize the amount of waiting time for each participant. To facilitate this, the research assistant had one member of the couple complete the demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) and the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus et al., 1996) while the I interviewed the other member of the couple in a separate room. All items for the

CTS-2 and demographic questionnaire were read out loud to the participants and filled out by the research assistant according to the participants' answers.

Phenomenological Interview

Consistent with Smith and Osborn's (2003) suggestion to use an interview guide while taking care to not be bound by it, I conducted all the interviews using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix F) to ask questions about the participants' relationships. The interview began by inviting participants to tell me about their relationships. They were asked to describe the evolution of their relationship including any change that occurred following the onset of abusive behaviours. I also asked questions about how the participants' experiences of the relationship changed, including if any change occurred as a result of the abuse. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a transcriptionist subsequent to the interview.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously in order to assess whether additional probes were required and whether existing probes needed to be adjusted. After the data from the first two couples was collected, I conferred with my advisor, Dr. Diane Hiebert-Murphy to assess whether additional probes were required and to ensure sufficient richness of data. We determined that there was sufficient richness of the data based on the existing interview guide and no changes were made. Analyzing the data concurrent to data collection also allowed me to continue recruiting until saturation (Saunders et al., 2018) had been reached.

Debriefing

Upon completion of the interview, I checked in with the participants to ask how the interview was for them and provided them with a list of resources should they wish to access additional services (see Appendix D). All participants completed their participation in one appointment without incident and there were no participants who requested to pause or stop their participation. There were also no participants who requested to withdraw from the study after the completion of their participation.

In order to ensure anonymity of the participants, each participant was asked to select a pseudonym for themselves. All content with identifying information including consent forms, interviews, transcriptions and recordings, and self-report questionnaires are stored in a locked cabinet in a locked room, and/or a password-protected computer at the University of Manitoba. Additionally, all identifying information (including names and locations) were either changed (e.g., names of participants changed to their chosen pseudonyms) or taken out (e.g., addresses)

Level of Violence

All participants were asked to fill out the CTS2 (Straus et al., 1996) to assess the level of violence present in the relationship. The CTS2 is one of the most widely used measure of violence that evaluates both the frequency and severity of violence present in a relationship (Aldarondo & Straus, 1994; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010).

The CTS-2 is a 78-item measure that asks participants to endorse a series of statements regarding the presence of abusive behaviours in the relationship in the past 12 months on a scale ranging from 1 (once in the past year) to 6 (more than 20 times in the past year), 7 (has not happened in the past year but has happened previously), or 0 (has never happened; Straus et al., 1996). Behaviours that occur one or two times within the past 12 months are considered as infrequent behaviours while those that occur more than three times in a 12 month period are considered frequent behaviours (Feld & Straus, 1989).

The questionnaire is composed of five scales: a) negotiation scale, which examines how well an individual is able to settle disagreements with his or her partner through discussion, contains six items with an internal consistency of 0.86; b) psychological aggression scale, which examines the degree of psychological aggression against his or her partner, contains eight items with an internal consistency of 0.79; c) physical assault scale, which examines the degree of physical violence perpetrated against his or her partner, contains 12 items with an internal consistency of 0.86; d) sexual coercion scale, which examines the behaviours that are intended to force a partner to engage in unwanted sexual activities, contains seven items with an internal consistency of 0.87; and e) injury scale, which examines physical injury sustained as a result of his or her partner's perpetration of violence, contains six items with an internal consistency of 0.92 (Straus et al., 1996).

The use of this scale has received criticism in IPV research, particularly from researchers examining IPV from a feminist perspective who state that the CTS-2 fails to address the context in which violent behaviours take place, and therefore results in misleading conclusions about the nature of the violence (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 2012). However, Straus and colleagues (1996) argue that though context is an integral part of investigating the presence of violence in relationships, it must be addressed through the use of other measures that explore the explanatory or contextual factors around the presence of violence. In addition, these criticisms have been mostly in reference to studies that employ quantitative methodologies that fail to capture detailed

information about the context of the violence. The present study addressed these concerns by using this measure as a supplemental descriptive measure to a qualitative interview that explored the context of the presence of violence.

Participants

The demographics of the 10 participants based on their responses to the demographic questionnaire can be found on Table 1. The individuals within the five couples in this study ranged in age from 23 to 56 and had been in their relationships ranging from 1.5 to 30 years. The participants' level of education ranged from grade 7 to completion of undergraduate degrees.

All couples reported a history of abusive behaviours in their current relationships on the demographic questionnaire; The majority of participants indicated the presence of emotionally and verbally abusive behaviours and half of the participants reported experiencing controlling behaviours and physically abusive behaviours in their current relationships. Four participants (three women and one man) reported that they had been in other abusive relationships in the past. All three women expressed having experienced a range of abusive behaviours in their previous relationships including controlling behaviours, emotionally, verbally, and physically abusive behaviours. The male participant reported having experienced verbally and physically abusive behaviours in his previous relationship. Five participants reported having children, though only one participant had her child living with her full time. Two participants (belonging in one relationship) had children from their current relationship who had been apprehended by child welfare authorities as a direct consequence of the abusive behaviours in their relationship. While four of the five couples agreed on their relationship status, one couple disagreed, with one partner reporting that they were common-law partners and the other reporting that they were "living together and trying to work things out."

Only three of the 10 participants were employed full time at the time of their participation; two participants were employed doing seasonal work, and four indicated that they were unemployed. A small number of participants (two) indicated that they were receiving social assistance. The majority of participants (seven of 10) had either graduated from high school or had attained post-secondary education. The remaining three participants did not complete high school (highest education range: grade seven to nine).

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Characteristics	*n*
Age	36.7
Women	34.2
Men	39.2
Ethnicity	
White	7
Metis	3
Employment Status	
Employed FT	3
Seasonal	2
Unemployed	4
Retired	1
Education	
Elementary	2
High School	4
Post-Secondary	4
Social Assistance	2
Children	5
Relationship Status	
Married	4
Common-Law	2
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	3
Other	1
Length of Relationship	9.6
Type of Abuse (current)	
Emotional Abuse	9
Women	5
Men	4
Verbal Abuse	10
Women	5
Men	5
Physical Abuse	5
Women	3
Men	2
Controlling Behaviours	5
Women	2
Men	3
Financial Abuse	2
Women	1

Men	1
History of high conflict relationship	4
Type of Abuse (previous relationship)	
Controlling Behaviours	3
Women	3
Men	0
Emotional Abuse	3
Women	3
Men	0
Verbal Abuse	4
Women	3
Men	1
Physical Abuse	4
Women	3
Men	1
Financial Abuse	1
Women	1
Men	0
Sexual Abuse	2
Women	2
Men	0
History of Couples Counselling	4
History of help due to mental health issues	6
Disabilities and/or LT disability	4

Data Analysis Procedures and Interpretation

Analysis

Each transcript was analyzed in its entirety before moving on to the next transcript, and data collection occurred concurrently with data analysis. I analyzed transcripts for each individual partner within one couple prior to moving onto the within-couple analysis. One couple was analyzed in full before moving onto the next couple.

In line with recommendations outlined by Smith and colleagues (2009), I read each transcript in full three times before starting analysis. During the fourth read, I noted interesting and significant content on the right margin of each interview. Once this process was complete, I returned to the beginning of the interview for a fifth time, noting emerging themes (in a separate margin) that captured the notes from my fourth read. These emerging themes were put into an

Excel spread sheet and organized into six general domains: relationship factors; emotional factors; patterns of relating and/or behaving; values; and tensions. I wrote summaries for each interview to outline emerging themes for each participant, including statements about the essence of each participant's experience. After each summary, I returned to the original transcript, reading it in full, to ensure that the prepared summary accurately represented the experiences of each participant.

This process was repeated for each participant. Once individual summaries of both members of a couple were complete, a separate summary for the couple was written. The couple summary highlighted areas of convergence and divergence of emerging themes within each couple. I then returned to the individual transcripts for each partner, reading both in their entirety to ensure that the summary written for the couple was reflective of the contents in their individual interviews. At each step of the data analysis and for each research decision, Dr. Hiebert-Murphy was consulted. As such, Dr. Hiebert-Murphy reviewed all coding, summaries, and emerging themes for each participant and each couple.

Analysis continued into the writeup of the results. Prior to commencing write up, I met with Dr. Hiebert-Murphy on multiple occasions to discuss the main emerging themes from the previous analytic steps. Separate meetings were held to discuss emerging themes for the women, men, and the couples. Research questions 1 and 2 were answered by examining the interviews and summaries at a gender-specific level. In other words, I examined women's interviews and summaries separately from the men's interviews and summaries. These summaries were used to create outlines for the emerging themes. I answered research question 3 by examining the interviews and summaries at a couple-level analysis; the interviews and summaries belonging to each members of a couple were compared against each other (i.e., the female partner versus the male partner) to assess whether men and women in individual relationships were similar or different in the way they assessed their relationship satisfaction. Areas of convergence and divergence were compared against the summaries for each couple that I had written in previous steps to ensure that emerging themes for each couple remained consistent. Subsequently, I made comparisons between couples by using summaries of each couple to examine whether there were any similarities or differences between the couples in their assessment of relationship satisfaction. I organized the refined emerging themes for the women, men, and couples into an outline with quotes from each participant as evidence for the corresponding themes. I reviewed

the summaries written for each participant and each couple, along with each individual interview transcript at each step to ensure the themes and their corresponding quotes accurately represented the experiences of the participants.

Verification

In order to ensure a high quality of qualitative research, I paid special attention to the "Big Tent Criteria" (Tracy, 2010) of high-quality research which outlines five areas of focus: rich rigour, sincerity, resonance, credibility, and meaningful coherence.

Rich rigour refers to the abundance of data collected that will allow for meaningful interpretation, the attention paid to the "care and practice of data collection and analysis procedure" (p. 841), and the appropriateness of the length and breadth of the interview in light of the research question. I kept a log of all the decision-making processes that I engaged in, including a log of meetings held with Dr. Hiebert-Murphy that discussed the process of data collection, emerging themes, and outlines for the final write up. In addition, upon completion of the first two interviews, I met with Dr. Hiebert-Murphy to discuss the appropriateness of the interview probes, paying specific attention to the richness of data as well as content to reflect the research questions.

Sincerity is the practice of remaining open, honest, authentic, and transparent with oneself through the process of data collection, analysis, and write-up. Self-awareness when engaging in IPA is of particular importance as it requires the investigator to make interpretations of a participant's experience that has been communicated. My own biases, worldviews, and conceptions played an integral role in my ability to access the worldviews of my participants that give meaning to their experiences. To this end, I recognize that I am an educated, married woman with no previous personal or familial history of IPV. I enjoy financial security and a relatively high socioeconomic status (SES). All of these factors play a significant role in the privilege that I enjoy in society. Many of these factors diverged from the experiences of the participants I interviewed. I also recognize that my female sex and gender-identity may have impacted the interviewer-interviewee dynamic (e.g., openness to disclose and share experiences) as I asked them sensitive questions about the participants' deeply personal experiences of abusive relationships. I kept a reflexive journal throughout the data collection and analysis process that included field notes after each interview, my thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of each interview, and potential biases that I may have been bringing into my analysis. This

reflexive journal served several purposes: 1) it helped me to stay vigilant and conscientious of my personal biases and opinions throughout the interview, analyses, and write-up of the final report; 2) it allowed me to remain transparent and honest with myself about my biases and opinions; and 3) it helped me to authentically communicate my interpretations without confounding my personal views with the actual experiences of the participants.

Resonance is the "ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience" (p. 844) in the final write up. This is a criterion that is consistent with the underlying ideology of IPA, which aims to understand and explore the lived experiences of individuals and communicate this to a more general audience. Specifically, IPA has the goal of taking the reader through two narrative experiences. First, as readers journey through the identified themes, they are able to logically and coherently understand the narrative within those themes. In other words, irrespective of the reader's own background, the narrative should make sense. Second, as they do so, they should be able to understand, and resonate with the life story of the participants (Smith, 2004). In addition, as the data analysis process for IPA suggests, IPA is meant to yield a rich description and analysis of the experiences and meaning-making of the participants. In effort to meet this criterion, I have worked hard to write a final report that is clear while simultaneously delineating the nuanced experiences of each participant within a larger theme. I paid close attention to language used in the final writeup in hopes that the reader would be able to both relate to the experiences of the participants while also recognizing the nuances of each person's experiences.

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness, and soundness of the research. Tracy (2010) suggests that the way in which this is achieved is through a detailed description that illustrates, as opposed to just telling, the complexity and nuances of the experiences and meanings that the participants communicated. My repeated return to the original transcripts at each stage of the analysis allowed me to be attentive to this criterion as I remained very close to the original data in an effort to accurately capture the nuances of the participants' experiences. Additionally, the close supervision of Dr. Hiebert-Murphy involved her independent examination of the data. We identified and corroborated points of convergence and divergence in our individual analyses of the original transcripts.

Finally, meaningful coherence refers to whether or not the research uses methodology that is appropriate for the identified research questions. It also refers to the ability of the research

to connect the findings to the research question and broader literature in a meaningful, comprehensive and logical manner. IPA was an appropriate methodological approach for the research questions in the present study due to IPA's focus on the experiences and corresponding meaning making of individuals. Because analysis of the data continued into the write-up phase in IPA, I continuously returned back to the original text to ensure coherence. This, combined with writing a discussion section that connected the findings to the existing literature, allowed me to adhere to this criterion.

Chapter 3: Findings

Prior to a discussion of the findings to follow, it is important to note that the language referring to the severity of abusive behaviours will be anchored in the description the CTS-2 provides (see Table 2). Accordingly, 'minor' abusive behaviours will refer to behaviours such as shouting, yelling, calling names, pushing, shoving, and slapping; 'severe' abusive behaviours will refer to behaviours such as calling/being called fat or ugly, threatening to hit or throw something that will hurt, slamming partner against the wall, choking, and intentionally scalding/burning the other. It is also important to note that in the discussion of the findings, pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants.

Table 2

Examples of Abusive Behaviours Endorsed by the Participants on the CTS-2

Subscale	Severity	Examples
Negotiation		
	Emotional	I showed my partner I cared even though we disagreed
		I showed respect for my partner's feelings about an issue
		I said I was sure we could work out a problem
	Cognitive	I explained my side of a disagreement to my partner
		I suggested a compromise to a disagreement
		I agreed to try a solution to a disagreement my partner suggested
Psychological Aggression		
	Minor	I insulted or swore at my partner
		I did something to spite my partner
	Severe	I called my partner fat or ugly
		I threatened to hit or throw something at my partner
Physical		

Assault		
	Minor	I grabbed my partner
		I slapped my partner
	Severe	I burned or scalded my partner on purpose
		I kicked my partner
Injury		
	Minor	I had a sprain, bruise, or small cut because of a fight with my partner
		I felt physical pain that still hurt the next day because of a fight with my partner
Sexual Coercion		
	Minor	I made my partner have sex without a condom
		I insisted on sex when my partner did not want to (but did not use physical force

Women and Men: CTS-2

All participants reported that they and their partners engaged in psychologically abusive behaviours in their relationship in the past year (Tables 3 through 6). Eight participants reported that they and their partners engaged in physically abusive behaviours in the past year. When examining the participants' responses on the CTS-2, it is important to keep in mind that the CTS-2 is designed in such a way that participants are asked to respond to the presence of abusive behaviours in the past 12 months *or* in the relationship prior to the past 12 months (lifetime) with the goal of determining whether abusive behaviours existed in the pat but not in the past 12 months. In other words, participants are not given the option of reporting the presence of abusive behaviours both in the past 12 months *and* prior to the last 12 months of the relationship. This means that the way respondents report abusive behaviours that occurred prior to the last 12 months of the relationship provides information on the diversity of abusive behaviours but not on the frequency with which these abusive behaviours occurred.

As can be seen on Tables 3 and 4, the women's reports of their abusive behaviours in the past year were consistently higher than the men's reports of their behaviour in the past year. The women endorsed a higher number of items for both psychologically and physically abusive behaviours, suggesting that women perceived a greater diversity in the types of their abusive behaviours compared to men's perceptions of their abusive behaviours. Likewise, comparison of women's and men's raw scores, which reflects frequency of abusive behaviours, suggest that

women perceived themselves as behaving in psychologically and physically abusive ways more frequently compared to men's perception of their own abusive behaviours. The responses were more variable for the injury subscale. All five women reported having sustained minor injuries as a result of the physically abusive behaviours in their relationships (Cheyanne, Amanda, and Tara in the past 12 months; Breanna and Patty prior to the last 12 months). Conversely, three men reported having sustained minor injuries owing to the physically abusive behaviours in their relationships (Eric and Jose in the past 12 months; Richard prior to the last 12 months). Responses for the past year were also more variable on the Sexual Coercion subscale; Breanna and Cheyanne reported behaving in sexually coercive ways while Ray was the only man who reported behaving this way in the past 12 months. Comparisons of Cheyanne's and Ray's reports of their own sexually coercive behaviours show that Ray reported he engaged in sexually coercive behaviour more frequently compared to Cheyanne. None of the participants reported that they behaved in sexually coercive ways prior to the last 12 months.

Table 3

Women's Self-Report on Their Own Abusive Behaviours on the CTS-2

	Couple 1 Breanna	Couple 2 Cheyanne	Couple 3 Amanda	Couple 4 Tara	Couple 5 Patty	Average
Negotiation						
Raw (in past year)	68	123	119	82	85	95.4
# items in past year	6	6	6	6	6	6
Psychological Aggression						
Raw (in past year)	74	116	91	61	20	72.4
# items in past year	8	7	6	6	3	6
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	0	0	0	0	0	0
Physical Assault						
Raw (in past year)	15	86	17	7	0	31.25
# items in past year	6	7	6	4	0	4.6
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	2	0	1	0	1	0.8
Injury						
Raw (in past year)	0	2	2	1	0	1.7
# items in past year	0	1	1	1	0	1

# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	2	0	0	0	2	0.8
Sexual Coercion						
Raw (in past year)	4	2	0	0	0	3
# items in past year	1	1	0	0	0	1
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 4

Men's Self-Report on Their Own Abusive Behaviours on the CTS-2

	Couple 1 Moe	Couple 2 Ray	Couple 3 Eric	Couple 4 Jose	Couple 5 Richard	Average
Negotiation						
Raw (in past year)	79	58	96	77	75	77
# items in past year	4	6	6	6	6	5.6
Psychological Aggression						
Raw (in past year)	50	53	79	45	4	46.2
# items in past year	2	5	5	4	2	3.6
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	1	0	0	0	2	0.6
Physical Assault						
Raw (in past year)	9	15	14	4	0	10.5
# items in past year	3	5	5	3	0	4
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	1	0	1	0	0	0.6
Injury						
Raw (in past year)	0	5	2	1	0	2.7
# items in past year		2	1	1	0	1.3
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	0	0	0	0	2	0.4
Sexual Coercion						
Raw (in past year)	0	4	0	0	0	4
# items in past year	0	1	0	0	0	0.2
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	0	0	0	0	0	0

When comparing men's reports of their own abusive behaviours (Table 4) with women's reports of their partners' abusive behaviours (Table 5), we can see that women reported that their partners engaged in more frequent and diverse types of abusive behaviours than the men reported in the past year. It is important to note that a number of couples reported no abuse in the past year but did report abuse earlier in the relationship. For example, Patty did not report that Richard behaved in physically or sexually abusive ways in the past year and Richard also did not report his own abusive behaviour in the past year. However, Patty reported that Richard behaved in physically and sexually abusive ways in previous years of their marriage while Richard's did not report behaving in abusive ways in previous years. Similarly, examining Breanna's responses for abusive behaviours that occurred prior to the last 12 months of their relationship shows that she reported Moe behaved in more physically abusive ways than Moe reported for himself. This suggests that at least for some couples, the scores on the CTS-2 may underrepresent the frequency and severity of physically abusive behaviour present in the relationship if these behaviours are only assessed in the past year.

Comparing women's reports of their own abusive behaviours (Table 3) to their reports of their partners' abusive behaviours (Table 5) shows that the women had variable perceptions of their own level of abusive behaviours compared to those of their partners. Three of the women (Breanna, Cheyanne, and Tara) perceived their psychologically and physically abusive behaviours as being relatively equal to or greater in frequency or in diversity of abusive behaviours compared to their partners in the year. Amanda reported that Eric behaved in more psychologically and physically abusive ways in frequency and diversity compared to her own abusive behaviours in the last year. Patty also reported that Richard had behaved in more psychologically abusive ways in frequency and diversity compared to her own abusive behaviours in the past year but she did not report that she or Richard had behaved in physically or sexually abusive ways in the past year. Examining Patty's responses for her and Richard's physically and sexually abusive behaviours prior to the past 12 months shows that she reported that Richard had behaved more abusively than her in previous years of their relationship.

Table 5

Women's Report on Their Partners' Abusive Behaviours on the CTS-2

	Couple 1 Breanna	Couple 2 Cheyanne	Couple 3 Amanda	Couple 4 Tara	Couple 5 Patty	Average

Negotiation						
Raw (in past year)	62	76	116	65	50	73.8
# items in past year	6	6	6	6	6	6
Psychological Aggression						
Raw (in past year)	74	93	103	60	42	74.4
# items in past year	8	6	7	5	3	5.8
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	0	0	0	0	0	0
Physical Assault						
Raw (in past year)	4	35	23	6	0	17
# items in past year	3	6	8	4	0	5.25
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	2	0	0	0	3	0.75
Injury						
Raw (in past year)	1	6	2	2	0	2.75
# items in past year	1	2	2	2	0	1.75
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
Sexual Coercion						
Raw (in past year)	1	2	0	0	0	1.5
# items in past year	1	1	0	0	0	1
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	0	0	0	0	1	0.2

Comparisons of women's self-reports of their own abusive behaviours (Table 3) with men's reports of their partners' abusive behaviours (Table 6) show that generally, women reported a greater frequency and diversity of different types of their own abusive behaviours (both psychological and physical) compared to men's reports of their partners' abusive behaviours in the past year. This pattern held true generally for the Injury and Sexual Coercion subscales as well. Interestingly, Breanna's response on the Sexual Coercion scale shows that she reported herself as being more sexually coercive than Moe reported her to be, suggesting that Moe may have not perceived some of Breanna's behaviours as being sexually coercive. The women's and men's reports of the women's abusive behaviours in the relationship prior to the last 12 months was more variable; Ray, Eric, and Richard reported that their partners behaved in more physically abusive ways than Cheyanne, Amanda, and Patty reported of their own abusive

behaviours and Moe reported Breanna behaved in more psychologically abusive ways than Breanna reported for herself.

Lastly, a comparison of men's reports of their own abusive behaviours (Table 4) to their reports of their partners' abusive behaviours (Table 6) shows that the men consistently reported their partners' psychologically and physically abusive behaviours to be greater than their own in terms of both frequency and number in the past year. This pattern also held true for the men's reports of abusive behaviours (their own and their partners') in the relationship prior to the last 12 months.

Table 6

Men's Report on Their Partners' Abusive Behaviours on the CTS-2

	Couple 1 Moe	Couple 2 Ray	Couple 3 Eric	Couple 4 Jose	Couple 5 Richard	Average
Negotiation						
Raw (in past year)	90	58	96	75	30	69.8
# items in past year	4	6	6	6	6	5.6
Psychological Aggression						
Raw (in past year)	52	63	86	50	56	61.4
# items in past year	4	6	8	4	5	5.4
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	2	0	0	0	0	0.4
Physical Assault						
Raw (in past year)	37	14	12	5	0	17
# items in past year	4	4	5	3	0	4
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	1	2	3	0	4	2
Injury						
Raw (in past year)	1	1	1	0	0	1
# items in past year	1	1	1	0	0	1
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	1	0	0	0	0	0.2
Sexual Coercion						

Raw (in past year)	0	2	0	0	0	2
# items in past year	0	1	0	0	0	1
# of items endorsed for lifetime but not in the past year	0	0	0	0	0	0

On the whole, comparisons of women's and men's reports of their own and their partner's abusive behaviours indicate that there is a general pattern of women reporting a greater number and a higher frequency of physically and psychologically abusive behaviours both for themselves and for their partners. While there was some evidence of this pattern holding true for the Injury and Sexual Coercion subscales, responses on these subscales were more variable. Variability notwithstanding, the differences between the women's and men's reports of their own and their partners' behaviours suggests two possibilities: 1) men and women may have different perceptions of their own and their partners' abusive behaviours in their relationships; and/or 2) compared to women, men may be less willing to report their own abusive behaviours.

Reporting of Abusive Behaviours in the Interview Versus on the CTS-2

Participants' responses of their own and their partners' abusive behaviours was compared with their reports of these behaviours in their interview. This was an important step in the analysis to gain a deeper understanding of how women and men perceived and experienced the abusive behaviours in their relationships.

Women.

Negotiation. All five women endorsed all the items covered by the negotiation scale on the CTS-2 (Table 2). This was consistent with the women's narratives, which spoke to their unsuccessful efforts to deescalate the conflict and prevent abusive behaviours. However, they reported that their partners also engaged in behaviours such as "My partner showed respect for my feelings about an issue" and " My partner agreed to try a solution to a disagreement I suggested" (Table 2; CTS-2; Straus et al., 1996) which was inconsistent with women's narratives that generally described their partners as emotionally volatile and/or uncompromising.

Psychologically Abusive Behaviours. For four of the women in this study (Tara, Amanda, Breanna, and Patty), there was consistency between the type and severity of their own and their partners' psychologically abusive behaviours reported on the CTS-2 and their

interviews. With the exception of Breanna, much of the psychological abuse was characterized by 'minor' abusive behaviours. Breanna reported behaving in 'severely' psychologically abusive ways, but this was unsurprising in light of her characterization of her relationship as unstable and emotionally volatile, and her reports of having thrown Moe out of the house on numerous occasions. Though Cheyanne's interview left the impression that the psychologically abusive behaviours she and Ray had enacted on each other were 'minor,' her responses on the CTS-2, like Breanna's, indicated that both she and Ray behaved in 'severely' psychologically abusive ways towards each other.

Physically Abusive Behaviours. The pattern of consistency between interview and CTS-2 responses for physically abusive behaviours was more variable than it was for the psychologically abusive behaviours. Two women for whom there was a good level of consistency between their interviews and CTS-2 responses (Tara and Patty) reported that both they and their partners engaged in 'minor' physically abusive behaviours.

For the remaining three women, there were inconsistencies between their interviews and their CTS-2 responses. Two women, Breanna and Amanda, reported that they engaged in 'severe' physically abusive behaviours on the CTS-2, although the behaviours they spoke about in their interviews were more consistent with 'minor' physically abusive behaviours. Additionally, Breanna reported Moe's physically abusive behaviour was not as severe on the CTS-2 as she had suggested in her interview. Amanda's reports of Eric's 'severely' abusive behaviours on the CTS-2 was consistent with her interview in which she shared feeling fearful of Eric and incidents relating to calling the police because she felt unsafe.

Cheyanne's reports on the CTS-2 indicated that both she and Ray had engaged in 'severely' abusive behaviours. This was inconsistent with her interview in which she emphasized psychologically abusive behaviours; discussions of physically abusive behaviours were largely absent from her interview.

Injury and Sexual Coercion. None of the women spoke to injury as a result of the physically abusive behaviours in their relationships in their interviews. However, four of the five women (Amanda, Cheyanne, Tara, and Patty) all reported having sustained 'minor' injuries and having inflicted 'minor' injuries on their partners as a result of physically abusive behaviours in their relationship.

Patty was the only woman to share her experiences of sexual coercion by her husband, Richard, during her interview, and this was consistent with her CTS-2 responses in which she reported that although Richard did not behave this way in the past year, he has behaved this way in previous years.

Two other women, Cheyanne and Breanna, reported that they and their partners engaged in sexually coercive behaviour, although they did not speak to this in their interviews. Lastly, Tara and Amanda neither spoke to sexually coercive behaviours in their interviews nor reported the presence of such behaviours in their relationships in their CTS-2 responses.

Men.

Negotiation. Like the women, the CTS-2 responses for men in this study indicated that they saw themselves as behaving in ways that promoted cooperation and negotiation within the relationship, which was consistent with their interviews. The men also reported that their partners behaved in ways that promoted cooperation and negotiation in their relationships, though this was inconsistent with men's narratives in which they attributed the responsibility of abusive behaviours to their partners.

Psychologically Abusive Behaviours. There was consistency between the interviews and their responses on the CTS-2 for four of the five men who participated in this study (Eric, Richard, Moe, and Jose). Although most of the psychologically abusive behaviours men reported (their partners' and their own) were 'minor' in nature, their reports of their partners' abusive behaviours were more 'severe' than their own.

The only person for whom their interview diverged from their CTS-2 responses was Ray. Specifically, Ray's interview indicated that he perceived Cheyanne as being the primary aggressor and he, the passive recipient of that aggression. Despite this narrative, on the CTS-2, Ray reported behaving in psychologically abusive ways.

Physically Abusive Behaviours. Two of the five men (Jose and Ray) did not directly acknowledge their own or their partners' physically abusive behaviours in their interviews but did report their own and their partners' physically abusive behaviours on the CTS-2. Three men (Richard, Moe and Eric) acknowledged behaving in physically abusive ways in their interviews and on the CTS-2.

Richard did not speak much to his own abusive behaviours in his interview, only noting that there had not been any physically abusive behaviours in his marriage in the past year. The

only physically abusive behaviour Richard reported for himself was that he had grabbed Patty at some point in their marriage but not within the past year, which was consistent with his remarks during the interview. He reported that Patty behaved more abusively (in terms of number of behaviours) than he had, which was also consistent with his interview in which he reported that Patty was the primary aggressor in their relationship.

Eric's interview was also generally consistent with his CTS-2 responses for his partner's (Amanda) physically abusive behaviours. Like Richard, Eric reported that Amanda behaved in more physically abusive ways than he did. Eric's reports of his own abusive behaviours were inconsistent with his interview - he reported engaging in more 'severely' physically abusive behaviours on the CTS-2 than he shared in his interview.

Moe acknowledged his own abusive behaviours in his interview, specifically highlighting an incident in which he had broken a beer bottle over Breanna's head. His CTS-2 responses were consistent with what he shared in his interview, acknowledging his engagement in both 'minor' and 'severe' physically abusive behaviours. His also reported that Breanna did not behave any more abusively physically than he did, which fit with his perception that the relationship was generally doing okay, with the exception of Breanna's inability to forgive him for his cheating.

For two of the five men (Ray and Jose), their interviews were less consistent with their CTS-2 responses. Similar to psychologically abusive behaviours, Ray's reports of his own 'minor' and 'severe' physically abusive behaviours were inconsistent with his narrative that situated him as a passive recipient of Cheyanne's abusive behaviours. Likewise, Jose's interview and CTS-2 responses were also inconsistent. During the interview, Jose noted, "…we're not physically violent," but his responses on the CTS-2 acknowledged his and Tara's 'minor' physically abusive behaviours.

Injury and Sexual Coercion. Like the women, none of the men in this study spoke to any injuries they suffered as a result of the physically abusive behaviours in their relationships For this reason, the responses on the CTS-2 were inconsistent with the interviews for three men (Ray, Eric and Jose), who reported that they had been injured as a result of the physically abusive behaviours in their relationships. Moe spoke about Breanna's injuries as a result of his abusive behaviour (breaking a beer bottle over her head) which was consistent with his reports of having injured her as a result of his behaviour in previous years.

None of the men spoke about behaving in sexually coercive ways in their relationships, and this was consistent with the interviews for four of the five men. One man (Ray) reported behaving in a sexually coercive manner, which was inconsistent with his interview. In terms of men's reports of their partners' sexually coercive behaviours, Ray again, was the only participant for whom his interview and response on the CTS-2 were inconsistent as he did not discuss Cheyanne behaving in sexually coercive ways.

Summary. Four of the five women (Tara, Amanda, Breanna, and Patty) had interviews that were consistent with their CTS-2 responses in terms of psychologically abusive behaviours. Cheyanne was the only woman for whom her responses on the CTS-2 and interview were inconsistent. There was less agreement between the interviews and CTS-2 responses for the physically abusive behaviours. Only two of the five women (Tara and Patty) had interviews and CTS-2 responses that were consistent with each other, and the remaining three (Breanna, Amanda, and Cheyanne) had interviews and CTS-2 responses that were inconsistent with each other.

There was good consistency between interview and CTS-2 responses for the psychologically abusive behaviours for four of the five men. Ray's CTS-2 responses were inconsistent with his interview, primarily because of the absence of reporting of his own abusive behaviours in his interview. Like with the women, there was less consistency for the physically abusive behaviours compared to the psychologically abusive behaviours. Two men (Ray and Jose) had inconsistent reports, again, due to the absence of discussions of their own abusive behaviours in their interviews.

The inconsistency between the interviews and reports of physically abusive behaviours in both men and women highlight the need for a multi-method approach in gathering information about the type (e.g., psychological, physical), frequency, and severity of abusive behaviours present in the relationship.

Interviews: Women

Idyllic Beginnings

The women appeared to define and assess their relationships based on how consistent their relationship at the present time was to the idyllic beginning of the relationship in their memories. Specifically, they compared the idyllic start of their relationships, characterized by qualities that they highly value, to their current experience of their relationships.

This was most poignantly shared by Cheyanne, who discussed feelings of loss and shock resulting from the difference between her current experience and the idealized past. Early in the relationship, she felt a strong sense of support from Ray which, in turn, helped her feel a sense of personal agency. This sense of connection was contrasted by how she felt about the relationship now, a change which she experienced as being sudden and marked by an episode of aggression:

> Cheyanne: It's all gone. All disappeared…. Like my side's like I went to sleep. He went to sleep and then we woke up and I woke up with a different person …it was just like as soon as he had one outburst, that was it. It just, it stuck, it didn't stop. And it just escalated and he stopped caring… I feel like I'm just so fixated on a person that he used to be and that person's gone… Like if I could go back and have that person, I would have married that person. I was ready to marry that person.

The other four women also echoed feelings of loss and confusion from the contrast between their idyllic start that embodied their hopes for themselves and their futures versus the current lived experiences of their relationships. For Patty, her history of childhood sexual abuse contributed to her prioritization of stability and safety in her life. This was what she felt she had with Richard, but as her relationship began to change and the emotional volatility and unpredictability in Richard's behaviours and her relationship became more salient, the safety and stability she valued disappeared. As a result, she became emotionally detached from the relationship. Amanda described a sense of togetherness she felt with Eric at the beginning of their relationship that resulted from excitement of exploring new things together along with the financial stability she found in their relationship. As their relationship progressed and they began to experience financial difficulties, the stability disappeared. With increasing arguments and corresponding decrease in shared activities, the togetherness she felt from making new discoveries also decreased. Tara also contrasted the idyllic start to her relationship, which was anchored in her desire for a strong family, to the current relationship characterized by conflict and a loss of connection. For Tara, having a unified family was tied to her sense of wholeness. Despite believing that they love each other, the conflict detracted from her satisfaction in the relationship:

> Tara: Like really good. Like a family. Like I was a whole person…So this has been difficult to deal with I guess. The fighting and everything, because it's hard because I mean I know I love him and I know he loves me but it's very. When we're arguing it's very difficult to deal with.

The confusion and the pain of the loss of the idealized relationship is poignantly demonstrated in these four women's accounts. For each of these women, the values that made the relationship ideal were different: for Patty, it was safety, security, and stability; for Amanda, it was the sense of partnership and shared experiences; for Tara, it was the realization of a unified, whole family and the feeling of being understood; and for Cheyanne, it was the feeling of empowerment that she derived from being with a partner with whom she felt validated. Despite these different factors that helped contribute to their relationship satisfaction at the beginning, the process of change that stemmed from the presence of abusive behaviours in the relationship led to the women experiencing a sense of loss of the ideal relationship which was present at the beginning. Their comparison of what was and what now is caused the women to feel the loss more acutely.

Unlike the four women who described an idyllic beginning of their relationships as being due to the presence of qualities they valued and found enriching, one woman, Breanna, described her 'idyllic' past as a relationship, although not ideal, that was free of conflict and violence. As she reflected back, she had difficulty recalling a time when things felt good and satisfying. When she was finally able to, she described a relationship that was free of the emotional turbulence that became more characteristic of her relationship in the recent years:

> Breanna: …in the beginning again, being back in the honeymoon stages and no worries, no stress, no tension, no drama, no fighting, no arguing, no nothing for the first little bit… he was always willing to help…he wasn't so distant [emotionally].

In light of this contrast between the past and current relationship, in order to create a more cohesive narrative of their relationship, two women minimized factors that contributed to their decreased relationship satisfaction. Amanda vacillated back and forth between sharing about the presence of conflict and abusive behaviours and downplaying the impact of these experiences. For example, though she acknowledged her and Eric's physically abusive behaviours, Amanda minimized their presence by curtailing reports of the frequency and

severity. Specifically, early in the interview, Amanda described an incident involving Eric's physically abusive behaviours which led her to call the police as she feared for her safety. This same incident was used later to downplay the presence of physically abusive behaviours currently present in their relationship:

> Amanda: it's become very like isolated incidents. Like, um, since then, like this year, we had maybe a really bad incidence in March. And then we had a bad incident in August. And then we haven't had anything since then. So I'd say like there's two times that things got really bad. Um. But it hasn't, um, other than that, I'd say things like we've argued but they don't get to the point where like the police have to be called.

Likewise, early in the interview Cheyanne emphasized Ray's loyalty and his prioritizing of her as qualities that helped her feel valued and supported. Later, she described his uncertainty about his commitment to the relationship early on. She did not revisit Ray's uncertainties at the beginning of their relationship for the rest of the interview, which helped bolster her narrative of an idyllic beginning, as perfect as she had remembered it to be.

An important process by which the women defined and assessed their relationship satisfaction involved comparing the way they experienced their relationships early on with their relationships in the face of increasing conflict and the presence of abusive behaviours. The disconnect between the two, which caused the women to experience feelings of sadness, loss, and longing, informed their evaluation of their current relationship satisfaction. In wrestling with the tension between what was and what is, some women minimized the presence of factors leading to their decreased level of satisfaction such as the presence of volatility and instability, as a way to create a cohesive narrative that was consistent with the idealized relationship beginnings.

Lack of Agency and Power

A sense of agency, or a lack thereof, emerged as important to understanding women's evaluation of relationship satisfaction. Specifically, a sense of lacking in agency appeared to result in women feeling powerless to impact change, which led to a decreased level of hopefulness for change in the future. In comparing their current experience of their relationship to the idealized past, an absence of agency amplified the women's experiences of decreased relationship satisfaction.

Patty described feeling as though "it [didn't] matter what [she] did"; despite her numerous attempts to prevent conflict in their relationship, it was always present and often escalated to Richard's "explosive anger." This was tied to her lack of a sense of safety and stability in her marriage – the element of controllability in the midst of volatility in her relationship was absent for Patty. Patty's sense of powerlessness extended to her perceived decision-making power whether it was related to retirement plans or sexual intimacy with her husband. The powerlessness ultimately resulted in her emotional withdrawal from the relationship:

> Patty: He wanted us to retire at the same time. I didn't want to retire at the same time… simply because I didn't want to be alone with this person that I no longer trusted. I no longer felt safe with…I would end up giving in and having intercourse with him simply because he guilted me, coaxed me, emotionally got me to a point where, yeah, I'm doing this for him. I'm not doing it for me

Patty felt as though she lacked the agency to voice her thoughts. Any aspiration of being in a relationship in which she felt safe, at peace, and hopeful for the future was gone. These processes eventually caused Patty to become ambivalent about hope for the future, her feelings about the relationship, and her relationship satisfaction.

Tara also echoed Patty's sense of losing her voice within the relationship over time. Like Patty, Tara felt that she was powerless to impact change in Jose's emotional volatility. Tara described feeling trapped in a lose-lose situation: if she spoke up, it would likely escalate the conflict and remaining silent in an attempt to avoid escalation meant the loss of her voice in the relationship. It was not necessarily a lack of options that led Tara to her assessment of decreased relationship satisfaction; the problem was that the 'options' available to her – speak up and risk escalation versus keep quiet and lose her voice – both resulted in negative outcomes.

Amanda's experience was slightly varied from that of Patty's and Tara's. While Patty's and Tara's sense of powerlessness came from the emotional volatility of their partners, Amanda felt that both she *and* her partner fell victim to their own anger. Specifically, Amanda situated both herself and Eric outside of the anger, describing it as an entity in and of itself that exerted its control over them. While the presence of conflict and abusive behaviours in her marriage certainly impacted her assessment of her relationship satisfaction, unlike the other women whose sense of hope for change in the relationship was impacted by their feelings of powerlessness

stemming from the emotional volatility of their partners, Amanda's perception of emotional volatility as being external to her and Eric (but a problem for both) led her to feel that there could be positive change if they could both regain control over their own anger.

Three women discussed feeling trapped in their relationships. Tara shared that although she did not feel happy or satisfied in her relationship, leaving was not an option due to her pregnancy and her desire to keep her family intact, which appeared to negatively impact her sense of agency and decision-making power. Patty also echoed the experience of feeling trapped in her marriage. Patty felt a lack of confidence in herself which was in part, due to having spent years feeling as though she did not have a voice or power in the relationship. It seemed that this negatively impacted her confidence to leave the relationship. She also experienced feelings of guilt from the thought of leaving Richard and a sense of duty to stay. Together, these experiences led her to feel as though there was no other option except to stay, which further stripped her of her sense of agency:

> Patty: …a lot of guilt…not feeling confident to stand on my own two feet…this annoying sense of, 'well, I'm his wife, it's my duty'

Cheyanne's lack of agency stemmed from her past experiences of abusive behaviours in relationships which caused her to experience confusion and uncertainty about why violence seemed to pervade her life. She also wondered about whether things would ever change for the better. Cheyanne turned inward for an explanation, concluding that there was "something" about her that was "bringing out the worst sides of people," illustrating her sense of powerlessness in the face of a recurring pattern of violence in her life and the resulting negative impact on her own self-perception. Cheyanne's feelings of powerlessness were also amplified by the sudden shift that she experienced in Ray's behaviours (discussed above). The bewilderment and confusion that she experienced from the abrupt shift led her to feel at a loss for how to move forward in her relationship with Ray. This sense of powerlessness that Cheyanne experienced prevented her from hoping for change within the couple dynamic and decreased her relationship satisfaction.

Another interesting point about Cheyanne's experience was that she demonstrated awareness of the possibility of making decisions in her relationship with Ray, although these options were with regards to whether to stay or leave, and unrelated to her ability to impact change in the relationship for the better. Additionally, her description of this "power of choice"

shifted from the first person to a second person point of view (i.e., from "I" to "you"). This created a distance between herself and the notion of choice and raised questions about her experience as an agent of choice:

> Cheyanne: …if I met this person now, I would never have dated him. I would never enter into a relationship with a person…and that sounds horrible to say...because like when you think about how it sounds when you say it out loud, it makes me think 'Why are you in it then?' It's like the power of choice. You're in it because you want to be in it.

Breanna's experiences diverged from the experiences of the other women. Breanna shared how she felt a sense of power and agency within the relationship by taking control of the expectations within the relationship as a way to minimize the hurt that she felt from Moe's infidelity. Despite living together, Breanna first changed her relationship status with Moe (e.g., no longer mutually exclusive) to address what was causing her pain (i.e., Moe's infidelity when there was an expectation of a mutually exclusive relationship). Second, she set boundaries (e.g., no alcohol at home) around what she perceived as being the cause of Moe's abusive behaviours (Moe's inebriation). Setting these boundaries and seeing a subsequent change in Moe's behaviours enabled her to feel a sense of agency within the relationship. There was also a shift in Breanna's language relating to agency. Her intentional switch from "we" to "I" in the decision-making process of taking the "status away" was reflective of her sense of ownership of this decision:

> Breanna: …when we took, or when I took that status away, it almost seems like things got better…he stopped talking to all these girls…I keep telling him, go meet some females…but this is your home and you don't bring her home.

It is important to note however, that Breanna's perception of her relationship also differed from the other women. While the other women identified themselves as being in a committed, mutually exclusive relationship, Breanna was non-committal about her relationship status with Moe, and this fluidity about the relationship was reflected in her ambivalence about her hope for the future and general sense of relationship satisfaction.

In summary, the pathways to feeling powerless and a lack of agency was varied for the woman. Three women (Patty, Tara, and Amanda) shared feelings of losing their voices in their relationships due to the emotional volatility of their partners, which also impacted their sense of

being able to impact change in their relationships. Three women (Patty, Tara, and Cheyanne) shared their feelings of being trapped within their relationships which translated to feelings of feeling trapped within a cycle of abusive behaviours. This was especially true for Cheyanne, who had been in previous relationships characterized by abusive behaviours. For four women, the theme of feeling powerless and lacking agency emerged as important in understanding their relationship satisfaction. Unlike the other women, Breanna, felt that she had agency and the power to impact change in the relationship, which she experienced by not only feeling like she was in a position to be able to set boundaries in her relationship, but by actually putting them in place and seeing changes in her partner's behaviours. Nevertheless, despite perceiving herself to be an agent of choice and change, Breanna remained non-committal about the relationship, likely due to the fact that the way in which she set this boundary was by choosing to emotionally disengage from the relationship.

Impact of Abusive Behaviour on Relationship Satisfaction

In their accounts of their relationship satisfaction, the women talked about the negative impact that the presence of abusive behaviours had on how they felt about their relationships. Although the women reported that their own and their partners' psychologically and physically abusive behaviours were 'minor' (e.g., name calling, pushing/shoving), the impact of these abusive behaviours was nonetheless powerful in its influence of the women's sense of satisfaction with their relationships. Specifically, their experiences of abusive behaviours in their relationships appeared to give rise to feelings of powerlessness, loss of agency, loss of trust, and the loss of an idealized relationship. For the women, these losses along with contextual elements (e.g., infidelity, stresses of high-risk pregnancy), appeared to form an intricate interconnected web of factors that gave rise to, and kept them stuck in a cycle of relational turbulence, high conflict, and abusive behaviours.

For Patty, the broader context of her life (e.g., her history of childhood sexual trauma) informed her experience of the abusive behaviours within her relationship. The presence of abusive behaviours directly challenged her sense of safety, decision-making abilities, and triggered traumas related to her childhood sexual abuse, which was a powerful contributor to her decreased relationship satisfaction.

Amanda also expressed that the unpredictability of Eric's emotional volatility and resulting abusive behaviours caused her to feel unsettled and unsafe within her relationship which decreased her relationship satisfaction:

> Amanda: So you're kinda wondering is this going to happen again? When is this going to happen? Um. So you're kind of a little um, unnerved but then you can, but we can go like weeks or months and nothing happens. You know what I mean? And then it can be like something huge happens, we're both in each other's faces and the police are called.

Interestingly, for Amanda, the financial stability she experienced in her relationship with Eric, which she attributed in part to the big age difference between them, was also an important factor that impacted her overall experience of relationship satisfaction. Namely, it served to counterbalance the impact of abusive behaviours in her relationship enough that it provided a reason for her to stay:

> Amanda: …Eric and I have a 19 year age gap…even though we have our ups and downs, does bring, um, stability um, especially financially…So I think sounds bad, but it's the truth, that a big part of it is the financial, the financial stability…the financial stability was a reason for staying.

Tara shared similar experiences of feeling powerless to alter the emotional volatility and ensuing abusive behaviours of her partner, Jose. The decreased relationship satisfaction for Tara appeared to be related to losing hope that she could have a unified family, a loss in which the presence of abusive behaviours played an important role – it destabilized the relationship. Tara had difficulty coping with the loss of a happy family unit and the pain that she perceived was being inflicted on her kids as a result of the instability in the relationship. An additional role that the abusive behaviours seemed to have in Tara's decreased relationship satisfaction was the development of her distrust in Jose's apologies; as the frequency of abusive behaviours increased, so did the apologies, which she began to experience as being empty and hollow.

Cheyanne echoed Tara's feelings of loss that stemmed from their ongoing abusive behaviours. She felt pain as she perceived the loss of Ray's respect that she valued, and his abusive behaviours served as evidence of his lack of respect for her. This loss was made more difficult as she attributed her increased sense of empowerment within and outside of the

relationship to the respect that he gave her. The loss of Ray's respect, as evidenced by his abusive behaviours, also challenged Cheyanne's sense of personhood and beliefs:

> Cheyanne: I felt like I was valued by somebody…[Now] I feel like he doesn't respect I anything I have to say at all…I just feel like the circumstances of our relationship, him being so dismissive towards me, it crossed the boundary where I feel like he doesn't respect my opinions and who I am as a person or my beliefs.

Cheyanne's relationship satisfaction was powerfully impacted by the betrayal that she felt when she discovered that Ray had feelings for her sister. This betrayal contributed to the escalation of conflict (and resulting abusive behaviours) in the relationship and was a significant contributor to the loss of the "healthy relationship" that she valued and was working on maintaining.

Feelings of betrayal being an important contributor to the presence of abusive behaviours was also echoed in Breanna's narrative. For Breanna however, the betrayal of Moe's infidelity was more important than the presence or impact of abusive behaviours in her evaluation of her relationship satisfaction. Breanna shared that while Moe's repeated indiscretions with women unknown to her negatively impacted her relationship satisfaction, it was his infidelity with her best friend that was most influential to her decreased satisfaction – it was a boundary violation that she was unwilling to tolerate. This betrayal also was a significant contributor to her abusive behaviours. Breanna shared Moe's infidelity was the tipping point:

> Breanna: …where it started going wrong would have been the physical fight…when I was hit with a beer bottle. That's where it started going wrong. When it completely fell apart would have been probably when he slept with my best friend…when it completely crashed and burned.

The women shared how the presence of violence and conflict in their relationships negatively impacted their experiences in their relationship, although the way in which abusive behaviours exerted their influence on relationship satisfaction varied for each woman. For Patty, the conflict and abuse caused her to feel a slow stripping of her sense of agency, voice, and sense of safety which was exacerbated by the triggering memories of her childhood sexual trauma. Amanda highlighted the unpredictability of abusive behaviours in the relationship which caused her to feel unsettled and unsafe. However, unlike the other women, Amanda was able to identify

a positive aspect about her relationship (i.e., financial stability) that counterbalanced the impact of abusive behaviours on her relationship satisfaction. For Tara, the abuse, conflict, and emotional volatility within the relationship led her to experience the loss of the ideal relationship in which she saw the potential for a unified family unit. Cheyanne's experience was also defined by losses – agency, voice, and friendship – but her experience was marked by feelings of betrayal by her partner. Breanna also echoed the impact of betrayal in her experience of decreased relationship satisfaction.

Interviews: Men

Disconnect Between Self-Definition and Behaviour

Unlike the women whose definition and assessment of relationship satisfaction hinged on the combination of personal values and relational dynamics, for men, their definition and assessment of relationship satisfaction was anchored in their experience and understanding of themselves (i.e., self-definition) in the context of the relationship. Specifically, understanding how their self-definition was affirmed or challenged in their relationship in the face of abusive behaviours emerged as key to understanding how the men assessed their relationship satisfaction.

In all of the men's narratives, the times that they identified the relationship being at its best were also the times that they saw themselves behaving in ways that were most consistent with how they generally defined themselves. For Moe, his self-definition as provider and protector of Breanna was most affirmed during their time living in the streets of an urban centre where he was originally from. His comfort and familiarity with the area combined with Breanna's unfamiliarity and subsequent increased reliance on him seemed to created a context in which he was in a position of control and power to be able to provide and protect Breanna. This was contrasted with his experience of himself when faced with the lived experience of his abusive behaviours. He remained focused on one particular incident when he was inebriated and broke a beer bottle over Breanna's head. This act of physical abuse against Breanna contradicted his view of himself as a protector and contrasted his self-definition as someone who is "not a violent person":

> Moe: I wanted to know where [the violence] came from. How the violent came from because I'm not a violent person.

Jose appeared to view himself as a sharp-witted and sarcastic individual. He felt affirmed in the value of these characteristics through his perception that he and Tara shared similar traits.

This helped him to feel seen, understood, and accepted for who he was. As the conflict increased and he and Tara behaved abusively toward each other, his view of these qualities as good was challenged, especially because it was the sharp-witted sarcasm that often led to behaviours that his partner experienced as abusive:

> Jose: …she says that I'm just trying to hurt her or um, being a dick on purpose or, you know, acting like an asshole. A lot of times I'm not.

Ray's self-definition as a supportive boyfriend was challenged as the conflict escalated. He shared that he and Cheyanne frequently argued due to Cheyanne's demand for his support in her arguments with others. He seemed to find himself conflicted over having to choose between remaining honest versus choosing to continue being a supportive boyfriend:

> Ray: she needs someone to always have her back no matter what … it's not like I don't want to support her and just, it feels like I can't because I don't like to…like if something's like obvious, you know, like two plus two is four. And she says it's seven. Then for me it's like hard to say like, 'yeah it is seven'

Eric shared his self-definition as a tenacious yet "easy going guy" who would not give up on his marriage and was doing his best to keep Amanda happy and to make his marriage a successful one. As he began to perceive Amanda as being disrespectful of his boundaries (e.g., calling him at work to question him about his Facebook activity) and the conflict in his relationship began to increase, he felt more agitated and tense – discordant to his self-declared easy-going and accommodating nature. The eventual escalation of conflict and his behaving in abusive ways also conflicted with his view of himself as doing all he could to keep Amanda happy.

Similarly, Richard saw himself as a supportive husband who was trying his best to support Patty as she dealt with mental health difficulties. His perception and experience of Patty as an individual who was in clear need of help supported his self-definition of being a committed husband. Unlike the other men, the increasing conflict and the resulting abusive behaviour (both his and Patty's) did not challenge Richard's self-definition. Instead, staying in the marriage despite the instability caused by the escalating conflict and abusive behaviours, solidified his self-definition as the devoted husband who was unwilling to give up on his wife. This was primarily due to his attribution of the conflict to Patty's mental health difficulties and his failure to take responsibility for his own abusive behaviours (discussed below).

Unlike the women's narratives that illustrated their contrasting experiences of the relationship before and after the onset of increased conflict and abusive behaviours, the men's narratives were predominantly illustrative of how their relationship satisfaction was based on how they experienced themselves in the context of their relationships before and after onset of increasing conflict and abusive behaviours. Four of the men experienced incongruence between their self-definitions and their experiences of themselves in the face of their own abusive behaviours which resulted in decreased satisfaction with the relationship. Moe saw himself as a protector and provider for Breanna which conflicted with his instigation of physically abusive behaviour in their relationship. Jose felt affirmed in his perception of himself as quick-witted and sarcastic, but this self-definition was challenged when it became a part of the reason for increased conflict in his relationship and was perceived as abusive by his partner. Ray's view of himself as a supportive boyfriend was challenged as his relationship deteriorated and he felt forced to choose between being honest and risk escalating the conflict versus staying consistent with his self-definition. Eric defined himself as being an easy going and accommodating partner, but the abusive behaviours and associated feelings of being agitated challenged this definition. Richard was an exception as he maintained his self-definition as a loyal, committed, and caring husband despite the abusive behaviours. This was also made possible by the fact that Richard did not perceive his behaviours in the relationship as being abusive.

With the exception of Richard, the men's abusive behaviours challenged their perceptions of themselves. Examining the congruence between who they wanted to be and how they were behaving was core to how they defined relationship satisfaction. In other words, the men defined relationship satisfaction by how affirming or validating their relationships were of their own self-definition.

Accounting for Conflict: Minimization and Lack of Responsibility Taking

In the face of conflict and their own abusive behaviours that challenged their self-definition, the men's accounts were suggestive of their attempts to create cohesive narratives about themselves by minimizing the role they played in the onset and maintenance of conflict. There also appeared to be a lack of responsibility-taking for their roles in their abusive behaviours. This lack of responsibility-taking seemed to lead the men to externalize the cause of the conflict and abusive behaviours in the relationship. This helped them to create a separation between themselves and the abusive behaviours in the relationship which contributed to their

assessment of relationship satisfaction. This pattern of minimizing was consistent with men's reports of their own and their partners' abusive behaviours on the CTS-2 which showed inconsistency between men's reporting of their own behaviours and women's reporting of their partners' behaviours (with the men's reports of their own abusive behaviours being lower than women's reports of their partners' abusive behaviours).

Moe's self-definition as a protector and provider for Breanna prevented him from taking ownership of the role that he played in the escalation of conflict and his own abusive behaviours. In discussing the incident with the beer bottle, Moe vacillated between expressing remorse for what he had done to blaming Breanna for triggering his abusive behaviour, "I hate myself for it every day… …but it's that name that she called." In other parts of the interview, despite acknowledging the detrimental impact of his cheating, he did not take responsibility for it, stating, "I couldn't really tell you why or how, led up to [the cheating]." Moe also minimized his role in the relationship breakdown by failing to acknowledge specifically the impact that his cheating had on Breanna and instead, highlighted his perception that Breanna was holding the infidelity over his head. Lastly, Moe pointed to the change he perceived in Breanna after her pregnancy as being the primary cause of the maintenance of conflict in the relationship. He emphasized that as she changed, "everything else" in the relationship changed, suggesting that he attributed the breakdown in the relationship largely to her inability to "suck it up."

This pattern of minimization and lack of responsibility taking was observed in two other men. Although Eric acknowledged that his behaviours (e.g., yelling) contributed to the conflict, he justified his psychologically abusive behaviours by stating that behaving this way prevented him from escalating to physically abusive behaviours. Like Moe, Eric also minimized his abusive behaviours by attributing blame to Amanda's "disrespectful" behaviours which triggered his abusive behaviours. For example, in one part of the interview, Eric felt he was owed respect as the bread winner for his family, and if Amanda was not going to give it to him, he would also not "hold back" his own abusive behaviours:

> Eric: I'm not getting the respect I need and deserve and, you know, every time she crosses that, that boundary or, you know, disrespects me, then I feel like I have no reason not to, uh, hold back or did I say that right? I have no reason to hold back

There was also a shift in Eric's language from talking about joint responsibility (i.e., "we") when describing ways that he would like to see the relationship change, to language that indicated that the responsibility for change rested with Amanda when describing the specifics of practical changes needed within the relationship. This was reflective of his lack of responsibility-taking for change in the relationship. From his perspective, if Amanda, whose behaviour was the trigger for his abusive behaviours, was to change, things would improve within the relationship:

> Eric: it's just during the conflict that we need to, you know, have the skills to say, Ok, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Right? Instead of, OK sweetheart, like I'm upset. But I need to talk about this. I know you're upset. You need to talk about this. Let's talk about it. Don't yell. Just, just talk. Or even if it's just to bring things down and just write it in the book instead of her calling me at work. You know, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Putting me in that state

Ray also attributed his abusive behaviours to changes he saw in Cheyanne's behaviours sharing that it was Cheyanne's irrational and aggressive behaviours that led to his emotional disengagement in the relationship as well as the conflict and escalation to abusive behaviours within the relationship.

Though Richard's self-definition appeared to remain unchallenged in the face of conflict and his abusive behaviours in his relationship, his narrative demonstrated a lack of acknowledgment of or responsibility for his abusive behaviour. Richard perceived Patty's mental health difficulties as the reason for the breakdown in the relationship while minimizing his role as evidenced by a general lack of discussion of his own behaviours throughout the interview. Early in the interview, Richard acknowledged that Patty's history of sexual trauma has had an impact on their relationship, but his narrative of the impact was anchored around his continued pursuit of having his needs met as opposed to his experiences or perceptions of the conflict in the relationship, or his own abusive behaviours. For example, even while considering the impact Patty's mental health challenges has had on her, Richard's narrative focused on the impact on himself and his capacity for love:

> Richard: I want her to like herself again, so that you know, she can accept my love and that, you know, I've got a lot of love to give…And it was, and this intimacy stuff that kept causing all this conflict and everything. I just said, I just, you're just never going to get me to accept that we just can't have that…I, I don't want half

> of you or three quarters of you because that's a big part of a relationship. And intimacy takes many forms for me. It just doesn't mean sex…but, you know, uh, and I just said, you know, if you think I'm just going to get tired and just stop bringing this up and it's just going to go away, I said, it's just never going to happen.

Jose's experience differed from those of the other men discussed. Jose, who found validation of his witty and sarcastic character through the similarity that he felt he shared with Tara, also identified with the emotional experience of Tara. It was precisely his perception of their shared characteristics that provided the pathway by which he felt he could also understand and empathize with her, which contributed to the recognition that both of them could stand to change in the relationship in order to make it better:

> Jose: Well, I feel, I feel like, well I feel like I know her, you know, I know her emotions very well and like, you know, just how deep they go…I'm definitely very well aware of how emotional she can be and how sensitive she can be…so I feel like I just maybe got to change a little bit to be more sensitive to that or, you know…I think we both got to be a little more understanding perhaps. Um. maybe she's got to see the world through my eyes a little bit and I [have to] see through hers

Jose seemed aware of his role in the conflict and abusive behaviours within the relationship and evidenced ownership of the need to change in order to impact positive growth in the relationship. However, his narrative also echoed the theme of placing heavier emphasis on the need for Tara to change in order for the relationship to improve. Specifically, Jose shared his perception of how he felt Tara should change without continued reference to how he might also do the same, noting that she should just "know" what was in his head and recognize that he is not behaving abusively to hurt her.

The men demonstrated a general lack of responsibility-taking for their own abusive behaviours and minimization of the impact their abusive behaviours had on their partners or on the relationship. Interestingly even those men who acknowledged their roles in the onset or maintenance of conflict and abusive behaviours in the relationship (e.g., Moe and Jose) were quick to shift to highlighting how their abusive behaviours were triggered by their partners or their perceptions of their partners as being more significant contributors to the conflict.

Impact of Abusive Behaviour on Relationship Satisfaction

Unlike the women whose relationship satisfaction generally decreased with the experience of abusive behaviours in their relationships, the presence of conflict and its escalation to abusive behaviours had varying influences on the experience of relationship satisfaction for the men. Three of the five men expressed ambivalence about their relationship satisfaction. For two men, the presence of conflict and abusive behaviours negatively impacted relationship satisfaction relative to how it was at the beginning of the relationship.

Eric expressed ambivalence about his relationship satisfaction. While his and Amanda's abusive behaviours negatively impacted his overall level of satisfaction, Eric shared that he felt that there were also positive aspects that came from the instability in his relationship:

> Eric: I do believe we are communit-, communicating better. Um. I think better than we ever have. Um. But I mean, certainly we're not there yet but, uh, we have spent, you know, nights where we just sit across the table and talk and hash things out.

The improvement in communication along with his minimization of his own role in the conflict in his relationship and his lack of responsibility-taking for his own abusive behaviours led him to feel more satisfied with his relationship now than a year ago, though it was still not back to how satisfied he felt prior to the onset of abusive behaviours.

Unlike Eric whose ambivalence was due to a combination of minimization, lack of responsibility taking, and growth he had seen in his relationship. Richard's feelings of ambivalence about his relationship satisfaction was anchored in his minimization of his abusive behaviours and attribution of conflict being due Patty's mental health difficulties. Even when asked directly how he felt about his relationship now, he failed to answer, instead, circling back to the impact of Patty's mental health difficulties and his wish that they had known more about mental health at the beginning of their relationship. So, while the negative impact of conflict was felt, his and Patty's abusive behaviours were not the primary factors that impacted Richard's relationship satisfaction.

Ray also minimized the negative impact of conflict and abusive behaviours on his relationship satisfaction. More specifically, the conflict in the relationship and Cheyanne's abusive behaviours contributed to Ray's general sense of emotional disengagement from the relationship which caused him to feel ambivalent about his relationship. Note, for Ray, it was not

his own abusive behaviours that impacted his relationship satisfaction – as noted above, Ray did not speak about his own abusive behaviours in his interview. Rather, his focus was on the impact of Cheyanne's abusive behaviours. The emotional disengagement and ambivalent attitude about his relationship led Ray to be non-committal about his level of satisfaction with his relationship:

> Ray: Sometimes I feel like I don't even care to care…things are pretty like kind of like neutral right now. Like actually, I would say like it's not, it's not great right now in our relationship but it's not bad.

Moe's relationship satisfaction did not appear to be impacted to a great extent by his or Breanna's abusive behaviours. His general lack of ownership of his role in the conflict or abusive behaviours notwithstanding, unlike the other three men whose relationship satisfaction was impacted by the consequences of abusive behaviours (e.g., emotional disengagement), Moe's narrative demonstrated little reflection on the impact of his or Breanna's abusive behaviours. There was a disconnect between parts of the interview where he spoke about his and Breanna's abusive behaviours and his general assessment of his relationship satisfaction; he completely ignored the abusive behaviours when reflecting on his current relationship satisfaction. He shared that his relationship satisfaction had remained unchanged, suggesting that for him, abusive behaviours had no impact on his assessment of relationship satisfaction:

> Moe: No, I'm happy. Every time I wake up and look at her, I always had, she brings a smile on my face. And every time I make her coffee and she smiles at me when I hand it to her, it just brightens me up. Just her laugh. I'd know her laugh anywhere

For Jose, his sense of satisfaction with the relationship seemed to remain unchanged in part due to the strength of emotional connection he felt with Tara; his sense of identification with Tara's emotional experience counterbalanced the impact of abusive behaviours on his relationship satisfaction.

Overall, the abusive behaviours appeared to have varying influences on the men's relationship satisfaction. For Eric, Richard, and Ray, the abusive behaviours led to a general sense of ambivalence regarding their relationship which translated into ambivalence regarding their assessments of their relationship satisfaction, while for Jose and Moe, their relationship satisfaction remained relatively unaffected by the presence of abusive behaviours in the relationship. The processes regarding the relationship between

abuse and satisfaction were also different for each of the men interviewed. Eric's ambivalence stemmed from the tension that arose between the experience of negative consequences of the conflict and the need to maintain his self-perception as a committed husband, which led him to minimize the severity of the conflict in his marriage. Richard's ambivalence also stemmed from efforts to maintain a cohesive narrative of himself as a committed husband, but unlike Eric who minimized the severity of violence, Richard did not acknowledge a role of abusive behaviours in his relationship satisfaction as evidenced by the absence of discussion of the abuse in his interview. The abusive behaviours in the relationship combined with the lack of ownership of his role in the conflict contributed to Ray's emotional disengagement from the relationship which in turn, led to his general ambivalence about the relationship. For Moe, it was his perceived lack of responsibility for the abusive behaviours or change in the relationship that contributed to his assessment that his satisfaction with the relationship was unchanged. Lastly, for Jose, his ability to identify with Tara and recognize his part in the conflict in the relationship contributed to his ability to overlook the negative consequences, instead choosing to focus on the connection he felt with her. This contributed to some sense of satisfaction.

Couples

In addition to analyzing the responses by gender (i.e., the women and men separately), the data was also analyzed at the level of couple (within-couple and across-couples). The following section provides a summary of the themes that emerged from this level of analysis.

There were several characteristics that all the couples in this study shared: First, in each couple that participated in the study, both members agreed on the presence of conflict in the relationship; second, in each couple, both members of the couple agreed on the presence of abusive behaviours in the relationship; third, both members of the couple reported that they engaged in abusive behaviours; and lastly, the majority of abusive behaviours in the relationships were 'minor' and occurred within the context of escalating conflict.

Agreement Within the Couple Regarding the Presence of Abusive Behaviours

For the most part, there was very little agreement between each partner within a couple on their reports of abusive behaviours. Within each couple, the female partner consistently reported a higher frequency and number of different kinds of psychologically and physically abusive behaviours for herself than her partner did for her. Conversely, the male partner

consistently reported a lower frequency and number of different kinds of psychologically and physically abusive behaviours for himself than his partner did for him. Though each partner in each couple reported 'minor' abusive behaviours, the female partner in each couple reported a greater number of 'severe' abusive behaviours than the male partner.

The general inconsistency between women's and men's reporting of abusive behaviours within each couple highlights that for many men and women, there are diverging experiences and perceptions of their relationships in terms of: a) the severity of their own abusive behaviours; b) the severity of their partner's abusive behaviours; and b) the frequency and kinds of abusive behaviours in their relationship (both their own and their partners). These differences suggest that women and men experience and interpret behaviours differently, with women being more likely to experience a behaviour as being abusive where a man may experience the same behaviour and interpret it as being benign. It also may suggest differences between women and men in terms of reporting, with women being more likely to report their own abusive behaviours and those of their partners more readily compared to men. As will be discussed later, these differences of experience and perception translated to differences in the impact that these abusive behaviours had on the female versus the male partner.

Context in Which Abusive Behaviours Occurred

The psychologically and physically abusive behaviours for the couples in this study were predominantly anchored in a situational context in which the abusive behaviours were mutual and were both impacted by and further fueled an inability to address unresolved issues that arose during the relationship. For all couples, the factors that precipitated the conflict remained unresolved within the relationship which contributed to the couples' inability to break out of the cycle of escalating conflict and abuse which contributed to their decreased relationship satisfaction.

Tara and Jose appeared to understand the conflict in their relationship as a manifestation of, and primarily driven by, stressors on their relationships (i.e., financial strain, high risk pregnancy). These stressors often triggered arguments between Tara and Jose which frequently escalated to psychologically and physically abusive behaviours; these abusive behaviours then became additional triggers for a continued cycle of conflict:

> Tara: But it was like, yea, it was like we would, um, argue and then it would turn into yelling and then it would turn into swearing. Now it's just, no, yea, now it's gotten a lot worse.
>
> Jose: You know like, if you're articulated with, uh, arguing and you can like actually go back and forth for hours and like it's escalating and escalating and not simmering down, it gets pretty crazy. Like it gets hectic.

One of the consequences of the conflict in Cheyanne and Ray's relationship which also maintained the conflict was Ray's emotional disengagement from the relationship and subsequent decrease in his support of Cheyanne. According to Cheyanne's account, this was an issue that was particularly important for her experience of the relationship and her relationship satisfaction. Ray shared that the continued conflict borne out of this contentious issue detracted from his satisfaction with the relationship. While both of them agreed that this was a main issue in their relationship, Cheyanne and Ray had come to an impasse on the issue, preventing them from being able to adaptively address and resolve the issue:

> Ray: like the whole not having her back thing that's a big one for her. She wants me to always have her back… I felt like I was really trying to be a reasonable, understanding and nice person. And then I felt like I was just being walked all over.
>
> Cheyanne: Like if I was in an altercation with somebody, like a family member, or even if I wasn't making the most sense, like he would still like stand by me… And now it's gone, now it's not there. So that was really important

For Breanna and Moe, a core unresolved issue was Moe's infidelity and the conflict that resulted from their differing perspectives of what needed to change. While Breanna did not feel that the impact of Moe's behaviour had been adequately acknowledged by Moe, Moe framed the problem as Breanna's inability to move past the issue. Similarly, Patty's and Richard's unresolved issues had to do with feeling unsafe in the relationship (Patty), and Patty's mental health difficulties (Richard). The inability to address unresolved issues in the relationship together with the abusive behaviours that emerged in the context of this conflict acted as barriers for the members of the couples in finding common ground from which to interrupt the cycle of conflict and built a more positive, satisfying relationship.

The importance of addressing these unresolved issues as a step towards interrupting the cycle of conflict and abuse and improve relationship satisfaction was highlighted by Amanda and Eric, who, unlike the other couples, reported resolution of some of the issues that they saw as being significant contributors to the conflict in their relationship. For example, Amanda, who saw the financial strain in their relationship as a result of Eric's failed business ventures as being one of the main contributors to the conflict in their relationship, shared that their financial situation had improved:

Amanda: There's no like businesses and he's almost done the bankruptcy... So I feel like there's less stress now than there's been in like years.

Eric, who experienced the imbalance in the division of responsibilities in their relationship as disrespectful, felt Amanda's increased contribution to domestic and household duties helped alleviate the stress he was feeling:

Eric: ..you know my wife started stepping up and is cooking the occasional meal and, um, you know, she does her best to clean… she's making an effort.

It is important to note that while Amanda and Eric noted a relative increase in their relationship satisfaction as the issues in their relationship that initially gave rise to the conflict in their relationship began to resolve, both partners indicated there was room to grow in terms of their relationship satisfaction. This highlights the possibility that resolving unaddressed issues that maintain the conflict in the relationship is an important first step towards a couple's recovery from conflict and abuse in their relationship, although is not the only change that is needed to improve the relationship and make it more satisfying.

Though abusive behaviours were mutual and primarily anchored within the context of escalating conflict that gave way to unresolved issues abusive behaviours, the differences in the way that women and men experienced and perceived abusive behaviours in the relationship suggested that the abusive behaviours had differing degrees of impact for the women than it did for the men. Reports of severity differed between the female and male partners, with female partners generally reporting more instances of 'severe' abusive behaviours. Additionally, elements of fear, lack of control, and/or lack of agency were not a part of any of the men's narratives, but they were present for four of the five female participants. This is an important consideration as these elements have been traditionally associated with more 'severe' forms of abusive behaviours, where abuse is seen as being anchored in an 'abuser's' attempts to exert his

or her power over the other and to control the partner. Despite the abuse occurring in the context of escalating conflict, three couples interviewed for this study described abusive behaviours embedded within a power imbalance in the relationship where the abuse served to further the power of the male partner and his control over his partner.

For example, in the case of Patty and Richard, an examination of Richard's interview alone would leave the impression that the conflict within their relationship was primarily borne out of Patty's mental health difficulties, and that the mutually abusive behaviours were a consequence of the escalating conflict in their relationship. In other words, Richard's interview suggested that the abusive behaviours in the relationship resulted from conflict related to other issues in the relationship with both partners being equally responsible for the abuse. Patty's interview, however, revealed a different perspective on the abuse. She spoke at length about the fear that she felt from Richard's emotional volatility, the lack of safety and agency that she felt within the relationship, and her experience of sexual coercion. This account portrayed a pattern of abuse embedded in a power imbalance in the relationship in which Patty perceived psychologically and physically abusive behaviours as being used by Richard to control her.

Similarly, though Amanda and Eric both acknowledged the presence of abuse within the context of conflict in the relationship, their narratives of their experiences of their relationship during the peak of relational instability and abuse also suggested that the abuse was an expression of power and control. Amanda spoke about feeling fearful for her physical safety due to Eric's emotional volatility which had driven her to call the police; she also spoke about being financially dependent on Eric, listing this financial dependence as one of the main reasons why she has decided to stay in the relationship. While these two elements alone may not constitute what might be traditionally considered abuse embedded in power and control, a fuller understanding of the relational dynamic could be gleaned when we consider Eric's narrative. A part of Eric's narrative on his own abusive behaviours was anchored in having no reasons to "hold back" his abusive behaviours if Amanda was going to continue being disrespectful towards him given his status of being the primary breadwinner. These elements combined provide a different perspective on the abuse: while a part of their mutually abusive behaviours could be attributed to a combination of external stressors and situational context (e.g., adjusting to life as a married couple), a part of the abuse in the relationship was also reflective of a power imbalance in which Eric, being the primary breadwinner, could use his financial position to control

Amanda, including behaving in physically abusive ways that caused her to feel unsafe in the relationship.

Lastly, the interviews with Breanna and Moe also reflected dynamics of power and control in the relationship. Moe described feeling good in the relationship when he and Breanna were living in the streets of his hometown, citing that it was because his familiarity combined with Breanna's unfamiliarity gave him a sense of control in their relationship. Breanna's interview echoed the presence of this dynamic of control, noting that Moe "does not allow [her] to go out alone," though for Breanna, this was experienced as Moe's care for her. These aspects of their interview combined with Moe's attitudes and beliefs of hypermasculinity were consistent with abuse anchored in power and control, but like the two other couples discussed above, there was also the presence of abusive behaviours that were borne out of escalation of conflict (i.e., Breanna kicking out Moe because of his infidelity).

Taken together, the reports of abuse in these three couples suggest that patterns of abusive behaviours in a relationship may be fluid. Even in situations where the abusive behaviours that a couple experiences are mostly anchored in a situational context in which mutual abusive behaviours emerge in the context of conflict, within the same relationship there can also be abusive behaviour that reflects a dynamic of power and control.

The remaining two couples (Cheyanne and Ray; Tara and Jose) did not talk about physically abusive behaviours in their interviews. It is possible that for those couples in which physically abusive behaviours are more pervasive, elements of power and control are more salient because of its direct impact on a sense of safety. However, this is not to suggest that the elements of power and control are limited only to those couples who experience physically abusive behaviours in their relationships. As discussed earlier, Tara and Cheyanne both spoke to feelings of powerlessness and lack of agency in their relationships – both of which are directly related to and an important aspect of abusive behaviours that are anchored in power imbalances and control.

The Role of Abusive Behaviours in Relationship Satisfaction

The role of abusive behaviours in the narratives of relationship satisfaction was varied for the couples. Two couples (Cheyanne and Ray; Tara and Jose) highlighted the importance of psychologically abusive behaviours and their impact as being important in their relationship satisfaction. Notably, these were the two couples for whom neither partners perceived a threat to

their physical safety due to the physically abusive behaviours of their partners. For two other couples (Amanda and Eric; Patty and Richard), both physically and psychologically abusive behaviours were important in relationship satisfaction. Lastly, for one couple (Breanna and Moe), the physically and psychologically abusive behaviours from both partners appeared to play a much less significant role in relationship satisfaction compared to the other couples.

For Cheyanne and Ray, it seemed that the relentless nature of the ongoing conflict accompanied by psychologically abusive behaviours caused them to view the other in a negative light. It caused Cheyanne to view Ray as being a dismissive person while Ray alluded to now viewing Cheyanne as being irrational and difficult to reason with. The frequency of their arguments and psychologically abusive behaviours wore them down mentally and emotionally, causing Cheyanne to feel a decrease in her relationship satisfaction while Ray detached himself from the relationship emotionally:

> Cheyanne: And we are really mean to each other. We are verbally abusive towards each other. We both are mentally abusive to each other. So that's like a 4, you know.
>
> Ray: But yea, if we could definitely reduce the arguments that we have all the time. Because sometimes we just, it makes us not even want to be around each other at all. That raises another question, why do we even want to be together?

Tara and Jose both acknowledged that the presence of abuse impacted their ways of engaging with each other that, in turn, affected their relationship satisfaction. While Tara's and Jose's individual interviews identified the presence of mutually psychologically abuse behaviours, they also highlighted the impact of the abusive behaviours on their relationship, namely, the instability that abuse introduced into their relational dynamic (i.e., poor communication skills, not feeling heard or understood), as being important in their experiences of their relationship satisfaction:

> Tara: Well, uh, he is, he swears, he yells, he calls me names….It's very hard to get him to calm down. You just kind of have to walk away and leave him completely be. Like have to just not even say a word… We just can't like listen to each other for more than 5 minutes without having to like interrupt. There's stuff like that I guess.

For Amanda and Eric, the role of physically and psychologically abusive behaviours appeared to play an important role in their relational dynamic and relationship satisfaction. Amanda shared that she had at times, felt unsafe due to Eric's physically abusive behaviours, leading her to call the police, which served as a "reality check" for Eric of how much the conflict in their relationship had escalated:

> Eric: When it got physical. And I was ready to, as I said, I don't want to go to jail for anyone, right? I said, for some reason, we are in a dynamic like this.

Eric also shared the impact the psychologically abusive behaviours had on his own sense of well-being which impacted his relationship satisfaction:

> Eric: I guess, when you have all those arrows coming at you and things that you hear the person that loves you say about you, after a while you believe it.

At the time of the interviews, the abuse in Amanda and Eric's relationship had decreased compared to previous years, a change that positively impacted their relationship satisfaction. However, in their interviews, both reflected on the important role that psychologically and physically abusive behaviours had on their decreased relationship satisfaction when the abusive behaviours were at their peak:

> Amanda: … it's gotten very explosive, almost dangerous. Um. So the police have been called a few times. Um. Once before we were married, a couple times while we've been married, um, just because I've, it's gotten to a point where I felt not safe anymore...I don't feel secure, it was a lot of negative feelings. The fear. Um. And then I guess what comes out is, is, um, like "Do I..", you know, thoughts of, "Do I want to stay in this marriage?"

The abusive behaviours also impacted Patty's and Richard's experiences of their relationship and relationship satisfaction. The abusive behaviours in their relationship seemed to emerge within the context of escalation of conflict in their relationship and served to confirm their individual perceptions of the other. For Patty, Richard's psychologically, physically, and sexually abusive behaviours caused her to perceive Richard as being unsafe, which directly impacted her dissatisfaction with Richard and the relationship. For Richard, Patty's psychologically and physically abusive behaviours served as evidence of her mental health difficulties and caused him to feel as though

Patty, the woman that he loved, was distant from him, “And I mean when things get bad, she’s lost to me.”

Breanna and Moe appeared to differ from the other couples in that for both of them, the presence of psychologically or physically abusive behaviours did not emerge as an important factor in their relationship satisfaction. Instead, much of the conflict and abusive behaviours in their relationship seemed to emerge in the context of a destabilized relationship that started with Moe’s infidelity which negatively impacted Breanna’s relationship satisfaction. Additionally, Moe remained largely in denial of the impact that his cheating has had on Breanna and was unphased by the conflict or abusive behaviours in his assessment of his relationship satisfaction. The disconnect between their two narratives of the impact of Moe’s infidelity and resulting conflict and abusive behaviour was also reflected in their disagreement of their relationship status and relationship satisfaction. Moe reported that he was happy and satisfied with the relationship with Breanna, while Breanna denied the mutual exclusivity of their relationship and remained ambivalent about her relationship satisfaction.

The role of abusive behaviours in relationship satisfaction was varied for the couples. The only couple for whom the presence of abusive behaviours did not appear to play a significant role in relationship satisfaction was Breanna and Moe. For the remaining four couples, understanding the role of abusive behaviours in relationship satisfaction involved understanding the impact that these behaviours had on the relational dynamic within the couple. For example, for one couple (Tara and Jose), the psychologically abusive behaviours had the impact of decreasing their sense of being understood and heard by the other, which was an important part of their relationship satisfaction. For Cheyanne and Ray, it was the presence of psychologically abusive behaviours combined with the unrelenting nature of the conflict between them that played a significant role in relationship satisfaction. For Patty and Richard, the presence of all the different kinds of abusive behaviours in their relationship (psychological, physical, and for Patty, also sexual) created emotional harm that prevented them from improving their relational functioning. In one couple (Amanda and Eric), the escalation of physically abusive behaviours served as a catalyst for change which resulted in both perceiving relationship growth.

Perceptions of the Causes of Relationship Problems

The narratives of all 10 participants were anchored in their perception that conflict in their relationship was problematic for them. Their perception being such, many of them identified external factors that precipitated the conflict in their relationships. The couples' identification of the conflict being borne out of external stressors as being problematic in their relationships was not to suggest that abusive behaviours were secondary or irrelevant to their assessment of the relationship. As discussed in the previous section, the impact of psychologically and physically abusive behaviours emerged as important to the participants' experiences of the relationship.

Three couples interviewed for this study disagreed on the precipitating cause of conflict in their relationship and they also disagreed on what was maintaining the conflict, which contributed to keeping them in the cycle of conflict. The differences between the perception of what caused and maintained the conflict in the relationship created a barrier for these couples in finding a common ground from which they could interrupt the cycle of conflict and abuse and begin to rebuild their relationships and improve their relationship satisfaction.

For example, while Patty and Richard both agreed on the presence of conflict in their relationship, Richard attributed the cause to Patty's mental health difficulties while Patty attributed the cause to Richard's emotional volatility and forcefulness that led her to feel unsafe within the relationship. For Patty, the feelings of unsafety and instability stemming from Richard's emotional volatility was a direct consequence of his abusive behaviours towards her. These feelings further perpetuated the ongoing conflict as Richard continued to view her behaviours as being a symptom of her mental health difficulties, failing to recognize his own abusive behaviours as being a part of the problem.

The disconnect between the two on what they perceived precipitated the conflict contributed to the escalation of conflict in their relationship; the more Richard pushed to get Patty to receive psychological help, the more Patty perceived Richard as being a "bully" and her sense of agency diminished further. A similar pattern of different understandings of the conflict was present for Eric and Amanda. While Eric attributed the cause of relationship conflict to Amanda's behaviours which he experienced as being disrespectful and distrusting, Amanda felt that external stressors such as financial strain and challenges associated with adjusting to living together as a married couple were responsible for the conflict in their relationship. Amanda's perception of external stressors as the cause of conflict was accompanied by limited awareness of

Eric's feelings of being slighted by what he considered to be her disrespectful behaviours. Amanda's lack of awareness of her own behaviours that were triggering for Eric meant that she continued to behave in ways that Eric perceived as being disrespectful, to which he responded with his abusive behaviours, causing Amanda to feel unsafe at times and at other times, to also respond abusively. This kept them stuck in a cycle of conflict and abuse.

Cheyanne's and Ray's narratives also echoed this pattern – Cheyanne perceived the loss of her pregnancy and Ray's feelings for her sister as the primary causes of conflict in their relationship while Ray attributed the cause of the conflict to Cheyanne's emotional volatility. Cheyanne's feelings of betrayal and hurt led her to become reactive to Ray's behaviours towards her, which continued to solidify Ray's perception that it was Cheyanne's emotional volatility that kept them in a cycle of escalating conflict.

Even when there was agreement between the men and women on the precipitants of conflict, differing perspectives on what was maintaining ongoing conflict and thus what needed to change in order to interrupt the cycle of conflict in the relationship negatively impacted the couple's general sense of relationship satisfaction. For example, although Breanna and Moe both identified Moe's infidelity as one of the turning points in their relationship, the differences between the meaning of the infidelity for Breanna and Moe led to diverging views on what was maintaining the conflict and needed to change to increase relationship satisfaction. For Breanna, Moe's infidelity was *the* point when "everything fell apart," while Moe treated it with less gravitas, viewing Breanna's inability to forgive as being more problematic. Tara and Jose also agreed on the precipitants of the conflict in their relationship (i.e., Tara's high-risk pregnancy and financial stress on the relationship) but had diverging perceptions on what was maintaining the conflict and needed to change in the relationship for their level of satisfaction to change. Tara felt that Jose's emotional volatility was what was maintaining the relationship and needed to change, while Jose attributed the maintenance of conflict to both of them lacking coping skills to deal with the external stressors in their relationship that was leading to unstable patterns of relating and communicating in the relationship (i.e., not listening to the other). For the two couples (Breanna and Moe; Tara and Jose), diverging perceptions on what was maintaining the conflict played a critical role in preventing them from making changes to interrupt the cycle of ongoing conflict in their relationship and improve their relationship satisfaction.

Taken together, the couples in this sample who had diverging perceptions on what precipitated and was maintaining the conflict, seemed unable to find common ground on which they could begin to connect and develop understanding about the perspective of the other. Even for couples who had a shared perception on what was precipitated conflict, if they had diverging perceptions on what was maintaining the conflict, they also appeared unable to resolve the pattern of conflict.

An important barrier to finding common ground and connecting to one another in each of these couples was the men's pattern of blaming their partners for the conflict in their relationships. This was evident in men's minimization of the impact of their own abusive behaviours along with the lack of responsibility-taking for their own abusive behaviours. It was also consistent with the pattern of the men reporting lower levels of their own abusive behaviours (in frequency and types of behaviours) compared to their partners. This suggests that when individuals fail to take responsibility for their part in the rise and maintenance of conflict within a relationship, the blaming behaviour not only creates a barrier to reconciliation and improved relationship satisfaction, but it also serves to further perpetuate the ongoing conflict and contributes to increased emotional distance between the two partners.

Shared Perceptions: Growth and Hope

Shared perceptions within the couple related to both growth and hope emerged as important in finding common ground to interrupt the cycle of violence and for a shared sense of satisfaction with the relationship. In discussing this finding, it is important to keep in in mind that the women and men interviewed for this study had diverging experiences of both abuse and conflict in their relationship which invariably impacted their diverging experiences of relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless, a shared perception of growth and improvement in the relationship combined with a sense of hopefulness for the future appeared to play an important role in bringing the partners together and creating a relational dynamic that lent itself to the possibility of change. For example, as mentioned in other sections, Amanda and Eric had diverging perceptions on what precipitated and maintained the conflict in their relationship, and also had differing reports of the physically abusive behaviours present in their relationship. However, they both agreed that the conflict within their relationship had contributed to the improvement of communication in the relationship. The growth that they identified within the relationship appeared to give them hope that continued growth could take place:

> Amanda: I'd say, from this year, that it's, it has gotten progressively better…I think then Eric has the same mentality too. Um, and I guess that's why we've always, we've always stuck it out… Yeah, I'm pretty hopeful [about relationship satisfaction increasing]

Eric also echoed Amanda's hopefulness about the future, "I'm, I'm very optimistic." Though their relationship satisfaction was lower at present compared to the start of their relationship, the combined impact of perceiving growth in the relationship and having a hopeful outlook helped them to feel more satisfied with the relationship relative to when the conflict was at its peak.

The importance of a couple having a shared perception of both growth as a couple and hopefulness was highlighted in reviewing the interviews for the other couples. In the relationship of Breanna and Moe, only Moe perceived that there had been growth as a result of the conflict in their relationship:

> Moe: I've, to me I feel stronger about [the relationship] because I've made her stronger…She's, when I first met her, she was so sweet. She still is but she's, she's a strong sweet now. She's thickened up. She's got a tougher hide...she made me a stronger person. It's got me to learn a whole bunch of new stuff about me. Um. Made her a harder person. She used to be soft. Not anymore.

Not only was this narrative of growth absent from Breanna's interview, throughout her interview, Breanna expressed that even if the trust was restored, she could not say with any certainty that she would feel hopeful about the relationship:

> Breanna: you know, once that trust starts to build back up, then yea, maybe I can let the walls down and start to love him again. I love him as a person. I love him as the father of my child. But to be in love with him like I was six, seven, eight years, not a hope in hell.

This stood in contrast to the hopefulness that Moe expressed about changes in the future, "I'm so hopeful that life will change. I'm hoping before 2021, you know, it'll be back to normal." Their diverging perceptions of growth and hopefulness for the future along with their diverging experiences of the conflict and abusive behaviours in the relationship impacted their relationship satisfaction as a couple – Breanna reported being dissatisfied with the relationship

while Moe's level of satisfaction had remained unchanged from the beginning of their relationship.

Although Cheyanne expressed feeling hopeful, her hopefulness was about individual growth. She expressed little hope for them as a couple and did not see relationship growth as likely. Like Breanna, Ray's interview did not reflect any perception that growth had occurred, and he remained ambivalent about hopefulness for the future. It was unsurprising that, given their differing perceptions of hopefulness about the future or for growth in the relationship, Cheyanne and Ray experienced differing levels of relationship satisfaction: Cheyanne was dissatisfied with the relationship while Ray remained ambivalent and non-committal about his level of satisfaction with the relationship.

Neither Patty nor Richard shared feeling hopeful. Patty was clear about her lack of hopefulness for changes in the future and expressed feeling dissatisfied. Richard, like Ray, expressed ambivalence about his hopefulness for the future and consequently, also remained ambivalent about his satisfaction.

Tara and Jose were different from the other couples. Their interviews provided evidence of understanding and empathy for the other; Jose expressed empathy for Tara's frustration of having to stay home due to her high-risk pregnancy while Tara shared that she understood the pressure on Jose to be the sole financial provider for their family while she was unable to work:

> Tara: I was extremely sick…So I had to stop working so that put a lot of stress on him because we didn't have that many financial problems before I stopped working
>
> Jose: For her, she's stuck at home, pregnant. If I tell her I'm at work eating a Big Mac, that sounds pretty good to someone stuck in bed sick you know…she's, you know, not in the best spot herself

Their mutual understanding and empathy provided a foundation on which they were able to connect and experience a sense of hope for change. However, in the absence of a shared perception of growth, this did not positively impact their reported relationship satisfaction. Tara reported feeling dissatisfied while Jose's assessment of his relationship satisfaction was that it remained negative and unchanged.

The different patterns evident across the couples indicate that shared perceptions of both growth and hope play an important role in improving relationship satisfaction. It appears that it is

not enough for only one partner to feel growth and hope (as was the case with Breanna and Moe), and even with shared perceptions of hope (e.g., Tara and Jose), without a sense of growth, no improvement in relationship satisfaction occurs.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The present study qualitatively explored the experiences of women and men who have experienced abuse in their relationships and had made the decision to stay together. These couples sought intervention to help them improve their relationships. The purpose of the study was to examine how women and men define and assess relationship satisfaction after experiencing high conflict and abusive behaviours in their relationships including how these experiences impact their relationship satisfaction. The study also explored the experiences of women and men within the same couple to increase understanding of the similarities and/or differences in how abuse impacts their relationship satisfaction.

Numerous studies have spoken to how different factors (e.g., SES, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability/disability, pre-existing mental health diagnoses) put individuals at increased vulnerability for experiencing IPV. This is especially true for those who belong to multiple groups that intersect, placing them in positions of lesser power which shape their experiences (Crenshaw, 1994; Eagly & Riger, 2014). For example, existing literature speaks to the increased likelihood that an individual will be victimized in their lifetime by virtue of being a woman (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), having lower levels of education, belonging to a lower SES group and/or class (Capaldi et al., 2012), living with physical or mental impairments or disabilities (Brownridge, 2006; Hahn et al., 2014), and/or identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ (Bates & Douglas, 2020). In her qualitative study examining the experiences of 49 Indigenous women who were impacted by IPV, Burnette (2015) found that the historical oppression of Indigenous groups which had resulted in a systemic devaluing of their cultural beliefs and identity, invariably shaped their experiences in a way that kept Indigenous women in a cycle of conflict and violence in their intimate relationships. Similarly, Campbell and colleagues (2001) argued that Black women are at increased risk of experiencing IPV in their lives due to the intersection of their sex, ethnicity, and SES which often leads them to be victimized by systemic oppression that stems from racism and broader cultural attitudes. These structural factors, the authors argue, that place Black women in positions of lesser power, both at the institutional and personal levels, leads them to experience and respond to IPV in a manner

that is distinct from those whose sex, ethnicity, and SES do not place them in positions of vulnerability. Studies such as these highlight the importance of keeping in mind that seemingly individual factors such as ethnicity and sex are invariably impacted by structural factors such as cultural attitudes and racism, and that these structural factors in turn, shape the way individuals interact with and experience the world. Thus, the findings of this study must also be interpreted with an awareness of the social locations of participants within the broader cultural context.

To this end, the participants in this study were heterosexual couples comprised of cis-gender individuals who were motivated to seek couple intervention to work toward a violence-free relationship. With the exception of one couple (Breanna and Moe) who did not agree on the status of their relationship, all participants reported being in mutually exclusive, heterosexual relationships of at least 1.5 years to a maximum of 30 years.

The Couple Counselling Project (CCP), from which all participants were recruited, provides free counselling services to couples who have experienced a history of abusive behaviours in their relationships. It is located in the inner city and is an important a resource for couples whose socioeconomic location limits other options for services (e.g., private counselling). Accordingly, the majority of participants in this study were of lower middle to middle SES as defined by their ethnicity (predominantly White), years of education (ranging from grade nine to bachelor's degree), and occupation (e.g., seasonal employment to working professionals). A small minority of participants were of lower SES and/or identified as Metis. In terms of previous psychological and medical history, three participants reported a history of mental health difficulties (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance dependence) and two participants reported disability owing to their medical histories (e.g., asthma and hip surgery).

For all of the participants, the abusive behaviours in their relationships had desisted at the time of their participation, including physically abusive behaviours; thus, there was no immediate cause for concern for the physical safety of any of the participants. As will be discussed below, while much of the abusive behaviours reported by participants fell into what is often classified as on the 'minor' spectrum of abusive behaviours (e.g., name calling, pushing/shoving), this did not preclude the presence of past 'severe' abusive behaviours in the participants' relationships.

Compared to a group of 82 men who were enrolled in court-mandated intervention programs (Vega & O'Leary, 2007), the men who participated in this study reported lower levels

of their own and their partners' physically abusive behaviours, sexually abusive behaviours, and reported injuries, but higher levels of psychologically abusive behaviours and more negotiation-related behaviours. Compared to 117 women accessing services for battered women (e.g., domestic violence shelters; Calvete et al., 2007), the women who participated in this study reported similar levels of negotiation behaviours by their partners, lower levels of psychologically, physically, and sexually abusive behaviours by their partners, and lower levels of injuries as a result of their partners' behaviour. Compared to a community sample of 917 women (Calvete et al., 2007), the women in the present study reported higher levels of their psychologically and physically abusive behaviours, lower levels of negotiation-related behaviours, reported injuries (their own as a result of their partners' behaviours), and sexually coercive behaviours. These comparisons suggest that the level of abusive behaviours as reported by the participant on the CTS-2 in the present study may be between what has been previously reported in 'clinical samples' (e.g., men enrolled in batterer interventions and women accessing domestic violence shelters) and community samples. Notwithstanding, there were certain areas (e.g., psychologically abusive behaviours reported by men) where the reported level of abusive behaviours for the participants in this study were higher than what has been observed in clinical samples.

Multi-Modal Assessment of Abusive Behaviours

This study utilized the CTS-2, a frequently used quantitative measure of abusive behaviours in relationships, to provide an additional source of data about the occurrence of abusive behaviours in the relationship. It should be noted that the CTS-2 has been widely criticized for its failure to take context of the abusive behaviours into consideration, which runs the risk of portraying patterns of abusive behaviours within a relationship as being symmetrical and mutual (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998). In order to address this criticism, the results from the CTS-2 were used as one source of information about the specific behaviours that were occurring in the relationship while the interview allowed those behaviours to be situated within the context of the relationship. Taken together, this helped provide a more detailed account of the nature of abusive behaviour in the relationship than would have been provided by either method alone.

The findings from this study supported the criticism that the CTS-2 can lead to conclusions about abuse in a relationship that do not fit with individuals' experiences because the

context of behaviours is not assessed. A review of the CTS-2 alone indicated that there was bilateral directionality of abusive behaviours for all couples in the study; despite this bilateral directionality, interviews with women and men within the same relationship highlighted that women and men were differentially impacted by the abusive behaviours in the relationships. Additionally, it was important to consider not only abusive behaviours that were endorsed as occurring within the past 12 months, but also to consider the presence of abusive behaviours that had occurred at any point in the relationship. A focus on only those behaviours that occurred in the past 12 months may underrepresent the severity of the abusive behaviours in the relationship. It is this history within a relationship that sets the context for understanding the meaning and impact of abusive behaviour.

The use of a quantitative measure such as the CTS-2 can assist in identifying behaviours that have occurred while an interview can assist in understanding the context in which those behaviours occurred and the impact of these behaviours. Information about the frequency and severity of abusive behaviours are certainly important to assess in determining level of safety for both partners in the relationship. In assessing safety and risk, it is essential to obtain as complete a picture as possible of the range of behaviours occurring in the relationship and the context in which these abusive behaviours occur. This suggests that a multi-modal assessment of abusive behaviours which includes a qualitative interview may be necessary to provide a more complete understanding of abusive behaviours in a relationship by placing the reported behaviours within the contexts within which those behaviours derive meaning. This may be especially true for clinical settings where an accurate assessment of present and past abusive behaviours is important in order to: 1) determine the appropriateness of a couples-based intervention; and 2) identify appropriate goals of treatment (Schacht et al., 2009; Stith & McCollum, 2011). This supports findings from other literature (e.g., Briere & Jordan, 2004; O'Leary et al., 1992) that suggests that a multi-modal assessment of abusive behaviours in intimate relationships is needed in order to clarify and gain additional information on the contexts in which abusive behaviours occur. Doing so may also shed light on additional occurrences of abusive behaviours that may not have been reported when using a single method of assessment (O'Leary et al., 1992).

Rethinking 'Patterns' of IPV

As discussed earlier, the gender symmetry debate (Dobash et al., 2007; Wermuth et al., 1981; Yllo, 2005) refers to differing perspectives on the nature of violence in intimate partner

relationships. Citing data that indicates that women are more likely to be victims of severe violence, are more likely to fear their partners, and are more likely to experience negative consequences of violence, some researchers argue that IPV is characterized by predominantly male perpetration of violence against their female partners (e.g., Pagelow, 1981). Other researchers, citing data that suggests that both men and women perpetrate abusive behaviours in relationships, argue there is an even distribution between male perpetration of violence and female perpetration of violence in relationships (e.g., Archer, 2000). The gender symmetry debate speaks to a fundamental difference in the understanding of intimate partner violence, and specifically, whether or not intimate partner violence is a gender-based issue evidenced predominantly by the uni-directional male-perpetration of abusive behaviours against female victims. In an attempt to provide a framework by which to view the seemingly conflicting research findings, numerous typologies have been proposed that speak to various patterns of violence in partner relationships. For example, Johnson (2008) proposed a typology to address this debate which distinguished four patterns of violence. These patterns of abusive behaviours in a relationship, include intimate terrorism (IT), violence with the presence of coercive control exerted by the perpetrator, and situational couple violence (SCV), violence in the context of conflicts (i.e., arguments) in intimate relationships. Others have suggested different typologies based on severity of abusive behaviours and personality traits (Gondolf, 1988; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000) and physiological markers (e.g., heart rate during marital interaction; Gottman et al., 1995).

Much of the current literature delves into the impact on victims (and on women in particular) of what Johnson (2008) would label as intimate terrorism. This focus in research is undoubtedly important in light of the disproportionate burden of social and economic disadvantage that women victims bear (Jordan et al., 2009). This literature has highlighted the deleterious consequences of severe forms of abusive behaviours for women (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) and has become the dominant lens through which intimate partner violence is understood by researchers, consumers of research such as clinicians, and the general public. Typologies such as Johnson's have tended to challenge the view of one pattern of violence, but have also led to thinking about violence as falling into discrete, mutually exclusive categories.

The findings of this study suggest that a relationship in which there is violence/abuse may not be easily categorized as having a particular type of violence. Rather, the data suggest that

while some abusive behaviours within a relationship may be more severe than others and seem to reflect the power and control dynamic characteristic of 'intimate terrorism,' at other points in the relationship other types of violence/abuse can exist in the relationship that is more consistent with what might be considered 'situational couple violence' in which the violence/abuse involves less severe behaviours, occurs in the context of escalating conflict, does not appear to involve fear for safety, and is more likely to involve abusive behaviour by both partners. In other words, the findings of this study suggest that it is possible to have abusive behaviours driven primarily by a desire for power and control while also containing abusive behaviours that occur in the context of escalating conflict. Further, violence/abuse that occurs within the context of escalating conflict does not necessarily mean that power and control are not relevant to understanding the violence. This was evidenced by Breanna and Moe, whose relationship evidenced the presence of abusive behaviours characterized by both power and control as well as escalating conflict. The dynamics of their interaction also evidenced the shifting of power (e.g., Moe's controlling behaviours regarding Breanna's outings vs. Breanna's control of the narrative relating to their relationship status), which highlight that for at least some couples, power is fluid and can shift between partners at different points in the relationship.

The patterns of violence/abuse in the relationships of participants in this study suggest that while typologies may provide a theoretical lens useful for understanding the complexity of violence that occurs in intimate partner relationships, caution must be exercised in applying this theory to couples whose relationships reflect complexity and in which violence and/or abuse occurs in numerous contexts with different motivations and functions. To this end, it may be prudent for clinicians to view violence and abusive behaviours in a relationship as falling along a spectrum that may be in flux through the course of a couple's relationship and to also exercise flexibility in their assessment and conceptualization of the patterns and characteristics of abusive behaviours in a relationship. Additionally, as clinicians assess, conceptualize, and provide treatment, it may be valuable for clinicians to keep in mind that that the movement of power within a relationship is informed by larger sociocultural context in which individual couples function, which in turn, impact the way individuals are able to access and exercise power.

Abusive Behaviours and Relationship Satisfaction

Impact of Abusive Behaviours

In order to understand the differing experiences and impact of abusive behaviours on women compared to men, we must first revisit an important aspect of the gender symmetry debate: distribution of power within a relationship. The feminist-view of IPV is grounded in the understanding that there is an inherent imbalance of power in societal structures that favour men and asserts that violence against women is anchored in a system of patriarchy in which women disproportionately experience and are impacted by IPV in their relationships (Dobash et al., 2007; Wermuth et al., 1981). In contrast, others have asserted that women and men are equally likely to perpetrate abusive behaviours to their partners (Archer, 2000), with some suggesting that women are more likely to behave abusively toward their male partners (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Proponents of the latter view generally assume an equal distribution of power and agency between the male and female partner within a relationship. These different views on the distribution of power between the two partners (and the underlying ideologies they represent) is a part of the reason this debate has been a topic of contention over the past several decades.

It is important to note that while it is not the purpose of this study to debate the merits of these opposing views, the data from this study is suggestive of an imbalance of power in the couples who participated in this study which is in line with feminist views of IPV. Specifically, though the abusive behaviours reported by the participants in this study were mutual (but not equal in patterns of reporting) and 'minor' as defined by the CTS-2, the *experience* of these acts of abusive behaviours had differing impacts on the women compared to the men. The women who participated in this study not only expressed significant decreases in relationship satisfaction, they also identified important emerging themes relating to lack of agency and power, loss of physical safety, and feelings of fear, which were all a direct consequence of the abusive behaviours in their relationships. This was in contrast to the men's interviews in which these elements that were highlighted by the women were notably absent. Instead, a review of men's interviews indicated the presence of elements relating to access to power and control, a lack of responsibility taking for their own abusive behaviours, and minimization of the impact of their own abusive behaviours. Additionally, the themes identified by the women (e.g., lack of agency) and men (e.g., lack of responsibility taking) have been traditionally been associated with 'severe' forms of abusive behaviours commonly referred to as 'intimate terrorism.' The presence of such elements for the participants in this study, where both the male and the female partner behaved in ways that were abusive, suggest that the differing impact of abusive behaviours

between the two genders can still occur when the abusive behaviours are not unilaterally perpetrated by a male partner to a female partner.

Currently, there is a sizable body of literature that suggests that women are disproportionately impacted by the negative consequence of IPV (e.g., Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). For example, a slap or a punch from a woman directed towards a man is likely to be less impactful (both physically and psychologically) than the same kind of behaviour from a man directed towards a woman. This is likely due the multiple factors including: 1) the physiological build of a man versus a woman being different such that the actual behaviour may cause more serious bodily harm to a woman being assaulted by a man than a man being assaulted by a woman; and 2) the social structures that have placed women in positions of less power, which impacts the lens through which a woman interprets and make meaning of abusive behaviours.

Regarding the first point, literature has shown that in the context of physically abusive behaviours, women are more likely than men to sustain more serious injuries requiring medical attention (Ehrensaft et al., 2004). Others have noted that the impact of abusive behaviours against women, including physical abuse, has far reaching consequences beyond the victimized woman, impacting the quality of life of those who depend on her (e.g., children) through secondary victimization (Briere & Jordan, 2004).

Relating to the second point, in their review of literature, Briere and Jordan (2004) highlighted the complex nature of IPV that leads to the victimization of women. These authors argued that violence against women is the culmination of multiple factors at the societal level (e.g., social disempowerment of women, lack of resources to support marginalized groups) that intersect to create vulnerabilities at the individual level (e.g., repeated exposure to IPV). The intersection of factors that place women in positions of lower social power, individual power, and increased vulnerability translates to women bearing a disproportionate degree of negative outcomes associated with IPV. Thus, while the 'objective' measure of the frequency and severity of abusive behaviours perpetrated by both genders may suggest a symmetrical distribution of violent acts (Archer, 2000), the context of these abusive behaviours at the level of the couple (e.g., abusive behaviours occurring in the context of escalating conflict) must be interpreted within a larger sociocultural context. From this perspective, it becomes clearer to see why the impact of abusive behaviours for the women in this study was more numerous and arguably, more severe (e.g., feelings of unsafety, lack of agency, and questions of self-worth) compared to

the impact on the men (e.g., challenges to their self-definitions). It also highlights that a sense of agency (or a lack thereof) in a relationship does not exist in isolation but is intricately tied to the historical and societal context that have systematically disempowered women.

In terms of the emerging themes relating to men's lack of responsibility taking for their own abusive behaviours and their tendency to minimize the impact of their abusive behaviours, the findings of the current study suggest that these behaviours were anchored in the men's attempts to create a cohesive narrative about themselves. Specifically, the men minimized their roles in the presence and escalation of conflict in their relationships and excused their abusive behaviours by shifting the responsibility to the behaviours and actions of their partners. The lack of responsibility taking and shifting blame to their partners by citing reasons such as the emotional volatility of their partners, their partners' disrespectful behaviours that trigger their own abusive behaviours, or unreasonable demands, was present in the narratives of all of the men to varying degrees.

A qualitative study exploring the perspective of male partners who had been enrolled in a batterer program reported similar findings (Whiting et al., 2014). Using a grounded theory approach to analyze qualitative interviews from 13 men, Whiting and colleagues (2014) reported the theme of justification which included minimization of their own abusive behaviours and shifting responsibility of their own abusive behaviours to their partners. Other researchers have also echoed this pattern of minimization and lack of responsibility taking in men who have behaved abusively in their relationships (Eckhardt & Dye, 2000; Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993). Other studies have also reported men's tendency to minimize and attribute blame for their own abusive behaviours to their partners. In their study comparing couples' reports of abusive behaviours using the CTS-2, Heckert and Goldolf (2000) used police incident reports to assess concurrent validity of the couples' individual reports of their own and their partners' abusive behaviours. These authors also found that men were more likely to underreport their own abusive behaviours, often minimizing or outright denying their own abusive behaviours.

The men's underreporting of their own abusive behaviours, minimization of the impact of their abusive behaviours, and attributing blame for their own abusive behaviours to their partners may be due to efforts to preserve a positive self-perception of themselves and their own self-definition. Previous studies have found that men evaluate themselves more positively than their

partners would (Perilloux et al., 2012; Press & Townsley, 1998). This is consistent with the findings from this study which showed that: 1) men attempted to create (positive) cohesive narratives about themselves by minimizing the impact of their own abusive behaviours and blaming their partners for eliciting the abusive behaviours; and 2) there is a disconnect between women's and men's reporting of men's abusive behaviours despite the consistency in reports of women's abusive behaviours. This was true for Richard, whose interview was notably absent of any discussion pertaining to his own abusive behaviours as well as Moe, who attributed his own abusive behaviours to some 'unknown' quality about Breanna that "brought out" the abusive side of him.

Literature suggests that men's tendency to engage in patterns of blaming may be attributable to cognitive distortions borne out of a negative attribution bias (Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993) wherein male partners attribute the responsibility for their behaviours outside themselves and onto their partners (Scott & Straus, 2007). Holtzworth-Munroe and Hutchinson (1993) compared men who had behaved abusively in their relationships to men who had not behaved abusively in their relationships. These researchers found that men who had behaved abusively in their relationships were much more likely to engage in negative attribution styles compared to their non-abusive counterparts. Men with negative attribution styles were more likely to engage in blaming, citing their partners' behaviours as being the reason for their own abusive behaviours (Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993). This was consistent with the findings in the current study, and was especially true for one participant, Eric, who clearly articulated that Amanda's disrespectful behaviours were the cause of his own abusive behaviours.

Assessment of Relationship Satisfaction

The data from this study indicated two ways in which women and men differed in their assessment of relationship satisfaction. First, while there was a clear pattern of decreased relationship satisfaction for women that was a direct result of abusive behaviours in the relationships, the pattern of change in relationship satisfaction was less clear for the men. Three men expressed ambivalence regarding changes in their relationship satisfaction while two men reported that their relationship satisfaction had remained unchanged. In light of the finding that themes relating to the negative impact of abusive behaviours on relationship satisfaction was a salient part of the women's accounts, it comes as no surprise that a clear pattern of decreased

relationship satisfaction emerged for the women. This difference between women and men is consistent with existing literature which has found that women report lower levels of satisfaction in their intimate partner relationships compared to their male partners. A meta-analysis revealed that even among couples without histories of abusive behaviours in their relationships, women experience lower levels of relationship satisfaction compared to men (Jackson et al., 2014), and this pattern has also been reported in studies involving couples with histories of abusive behaviours in their relationships (e.g. Ackerman, 2012).

In examining why this may be the case, we turn to Jessi Bernard (1972), a prolific and prominent researcher relating to family systems, who argued that the societal structure, which has historically favoured male privilege, has created a value system within the family that devalues and oppresses women, placing them in positions of subjugation to their partners. Thus, women enjoy considerably less agency, power, and freedom to exercise choices whether in the realm of family finances or sexual intimacy (Finlay & Clarke, 2003). This was echoed by the women in the current study who expressed financial dependence on their partners (e.g., Amanda and Tara) and feeling pressured to have intercourse with a partner (e.g., Patty). In light of the imbalance of power within intimate relationships (even in the absence of abusive behaviours) that translates to lower levels of relationship satisfaction for women compared to men (Gray-Little et al., 1996), it is not surprising that the data in this study showed that women experienced clearer patterns of relationship dissatisfaction in comparison to the men.

Second, women and men differed in how they assessed relationship satisfaction. Namely, women assessed their relationship satisfaction based on their experiences of the relationship, which was a departure from the way that men assessed their relationship satisfaction. All of the women shared that the beginnings to their relationships were idyllic which was congruent with their expectations of an ideal relationship (e.g., safety, family unity, personal empowerment, etc.). However, in the face of their current experiences marked by their own and their partners' abusive behaviours, the lived experience of their relationships drastically differed from their expectations of what constitutes an ideal relationship. The disconnect between their experiences at the beginning of the relationship versus the current state of the relationship may have led to feelings of loss and confusion which contributed to their decreased relationship satisfaction (McDonald, 1981; Nye, 1979; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Conversely, men's assessment of their relationship satisfaction was anchored in their experiences of themselves. Specifically, men compared their experiences of themselves in their relationships in the face of conflict and abusive behaviours to how they saw and defined themselves as a way of determining what it meant for them to be satisfied. Often, their own abusive behaviours in their relationships challenged their self-definition, creating a disconnect between their self-definition and their actual experiences of themselves in their relationships. The conflict between their abusive behaviours and their positive view of self may have led to a decrease in satisfaction with the relationship (McDonald, 1981).

This pattern of women's tendency to be more relationally oriented than men has been documented in literature examining relationship satisfaction (e.g., Acitelli et al., 1993; Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994). For example, in their study of identity within relationships, Acitelli and colleagues (1999) reported that women spent more time thinking about their relationships and had self-concepts that were more relationally oriented (e.g., anchoring their identity in their relationship to others and how caring they were of others) than their partners. Other areas of research that have examined gender differences in women's and men's selection of occupations (e.g., England et al., 1982; Rossi & Rossi, 1991) and in family roles (e.g., House et al., 1988; Rossi & Rossi, 1991) have also echoed similar patterns. In her classic essay on moral development, Carol Gilligan (1983) argued that women are more relationally oriented, emphasizing the importance of context and interdependence whereas men are oriented towards independence and autonomy. The findings of this study suggest that these gender differences may also hold true in the assessment of relationship satisfaction in the context of abusive behaviours.

Rethinking the Goals of Couple Treatments

Interventions addressing IPV have traditionally been divided into gender-specific treatments: one for the perpetrator of violence and another for the victim. Treatments have been predominantly shaped by the feminist movement that frames IPV as being borne out of patriarchy and the first formal interventions for IPV survivors began with the rise of domestic violence shelters in the 1970s (Buzawa et al., 2017). Interventions for perpetrators of IPV too, have been shaped by the feminist movement, and also began in the 1970s. Treatment is closely tied to intervention by the criminal justice system. For these interventions, the focus often remains on helping men take responsibility for their abusive behaviours and make a commitment

towards desisting violence in future relationships (Saunders, 2008). Since then, there have been countless forms of interventions that have been developed and investigated by researchers with the goal of desisting abusive behaviours, reducing recidivism, empowering abused women, and ensuring safety of those involved (Babcock et al., 2016; Sullivan, 2010). While these forms of treatments are indeed important and certainly needed, conceptualizing them strictly as a perpetrator versus victim runs the danger of oversimplifying the complicated and nuanced nature of IPV.

The joint treatment of both partners in the form of couples' therapy has been a more recent development, and as discussed in other parts of this manuscript, it has received both approval and criticisms within the IPV research community. The body of literature that examines its effectiveness (e.g., Stith et al., 2003; Stith et al., 2012) speaks to the possibility that couple interventions (that includes both individual and conjoint sessions) may be appropriate where there is a commitment to the desistance of abusive behaviours and there is responsibility-taking from those who are behaving abusively. As in gender-specific treatment, the continued desistance of abusive behaviours is used as an important measure of success (Stith et al., 2012). It is certainly of paramount importance that the safety of both partners in a couple dyad be ensured before further treatment can take place. While working towards the goal of stopping violence is critical to treatment, the desistance of abusive behaviour by itself may not increase the overall satisfaction with the relationship. To this end, the findings of this study suggest that change is also needed in other aspects of the relationship in order to for the relationship to be perceived as satisfying.

Agency, Powerlessness, Responsibility-Taking, Growth, and Hope

Despite the fact that abusive behaviours in the relationship had desisted prior to the participants' enrolment in the CCP and this study, their overall satisfaction with the relationship was still not where the participants wanted it to be. In fact, all the couples in this study, and by extension, all participants, identified factors including but not limited to the presence of abusive behaviours that were important in understanding their experiences of their relationship and evaluation of level of satisfaction. Specifically, for the women, the impact of the conflict (e.g., their sense of powerlessness), the impact of abusive behaviours (e.g., their loss of a sense of safety), and the lack of resolution of underlying issues that precipitated conflict (e.g., infidelity) were important in their assessment of relationship satisfaction.

Though studies have investigated the importance of agency in women's sense of well-being, these studies have mostly investigated agency in women who have decided to leave their abusive relationships (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Meyer et al., 2010) or are receiving shelter services (Sullivan & Virden, 2017). Focusing on improving women's sense of well-being by addressing their depleted sense of agency, hope for change, and their own personal growth is certainly important for women who have decided to leave their relationships, and many treatment programs for women with histories of IPV include this as a part of their mandate and use this as a measure of success of interventions for women (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015). The findings of this study suggest that these are also important issues for women who have decided to stay in their relationships. This suggests that an important goal of couple interventions should be to address women's sense of agency and power to impact change in their relationships. On this point, it is important to highlight that agency (or a lack thereof) does not develop in isolation. In their qualitative inquiry examining the construct of survival in 11 women with histories of abuse, Morrow and Smith (1995) emphasized the need to examine lack of agency and powerlessness through the lens of the social context in which abusive behaviours take place. Specifically, they emphasized the need to shift away from an individualistic understanding of agency and powerlessness, and instead, move toward understanding these elements through the "social forces" (p. 31) that situate women in positions of vulnerability. This was illustrated by Cheyanne, whose sense of lack of agency and powerlessness had evolved in the context of repeated exposures to abusive behaviours which had resulted in her turning inward, questioning whether she was to blame for Ray's abusive behaviours. This tendency for women to turn inward as a result of their experiences of abusive behaviour has been documented in other research (e.g., Barnett et al., 1996).

While addressing these "social forces" is complex and likely falls beyond the scope of any single clinician working with couples, it is possible for clinicians to name the ways in which structural factors impact the couple and to work collaboratively with couples to foster a relational dynamic in which women can begin to regain a sense of agency and power to impact change in their relationships. This need to work collaboratively with individuals to tailor interventions to the specific needs of those seeking help has been echoed in other literature (Briere & Jordan, 2004). In their article that introduces a model of couple intervention for IPV called the Cultural Context Model, Almeida and Durkin (1999) make specific recommendations that speak to the

need for clinicians to directly address structural factors that impact the relational dynamic within couples with a history of abusive behaviours. Notably, they argue that abusive behaviours in relationships are informed and shaped by structural factors that fall along a continuum such as "equitable economic power to misuses and abuses of economic power; shared childrearing and responsibility to underresponsibility, neglect, and abuse in parenting; and sexual intimacy to sexual abuse" (p. 313). In order to address these factors, Almeida and Durkin emphasize that clinicians should be informed by the way in which factors such as gender, class, and sexual orientation intersect to "shape the experiences" (p. 315) of women and men.

One way this can be done is by addressing the distribution of power within relationships. Literature examining the distribution of power and privilege within couple relationships have found that in relationships, even in those without histories of abusive behaviours, there is often an imbalance in the distribution of power and privilege such that one partner is systematically conferred more power than the other (e.g., McIntosh, 1990). This may be especially true in relationships where there is a history of abusive behaviours. In her review of literature addressing couples interventions, Parker (2009) argued that clinical practice involving couples only tangentially considers the distribution of power and agency, and instead, focuses more on "internal functioning of individuals, relationships, and family life" (p. 249). While these aspects of internal functioning are important in interventions with couples who have histories of abusive behaviours, it is also important that clinicians are acutely aware of the larger social contexts in which couples function. This awareness and specific education relating to distribution of power is critical to inform how the movement and distribution of power within couples (which are influenced by larger sociocultural factors that have placed women in positions of lesser power) impact the differential ways that abusive behaviours affect women compared to men (Almeida & Durkin, 1999). The benefits of a more equitable distribution of power and agency in relationships by increasing a woman's sense of agency and power in a relationship have been documented. For example Gray-Little and colleagues (Gray-Little et al., 1996) found that increasing a woman's sense of agency and power resulted in better marital adjustment for both women and men.

Related to the above, and consistent with recommendations made by Almeida and Durkin (1999), findings of this study suggest that addressing men's pattern of blaming and attributing responsibility for their abusive behaviours to their partners should also be made a goal within couple interventions. Cognitive distortions and negative attributional styles that have been

observed in men who have behaved abusively have been associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction in men (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). These findings were replicated in this study wherein men's lack of responsibility taking, minimization of the impact of their own abusive behaviours, and blaming behaviours contributed to their ambivalence about their relationship satisfaction. Recognizing the impact of their behaviours and acknowledging and taking responsibility for their abusive behaviours, which are often a focus of treatment for court-mandated interventions for male batterers (Saunders, 2008), may also be an important step towards increasing men's sense of satisfaction in their relationships. Such intervention may also foster a relational dynamic that encourages increasing agency and power for women in couples with a history of abuse. This may involve directly addressing in therapy how the distribution of power within a relationship may impact the different ways in which women and men experience abusive behaviours, increasing men's awareness of the importance of listening and validating the impact of their abusive behaviours, and/or building in individual, gender-specific work to target agency and power for women and responsibility taking and listening skills for men.

Kienas (2017) reported that women who have chosen to stay in their relationships after violence highlighted the importance of change and growth of the relationship in their evaluation of relationship satisfaction. The data from this study expand on this finding by suggesting that an important aspect of increasing the well-being and relationship satisfaction for couples who have decided to remain together is the joint perception (by both the female and male partner) of growth and hope for change in a relationship. This is consistent with the widely accepted view that hope and growth are important factors in understanding increased sense of satisfaction (e.g., Gilman et al., 2012; Kienas, 2017; Snyder, 2002). The findings from this study suggest that a couple's shared perception of growth and hope for the future in a relationship is important to how individual partners within a couple dyad experience increased relationship satisfaction and increased well-being. For couples in this study, increasing hope was accomplished by addressing some of the unresolved issues that the couple perceived as being problematic and the precipitant of the conflict in their relationships. For example, Amanda perceived financial strain as being a major stressor on their relationship which triggered many of their arguments that escalated to abusive behaviours. The improvement in their financial situation was perceived as releasing some of the pressure on their relationship which Amanda saw as being the reason for decreased arguments. Additionally, perceiving improvements in their relationship and in the behaviours of

the partner (e.g., Eric acknowledging Amanda's behaviour had changed for the better in reference to the division of labour in their home) led to a sense of hope that further change could take place.

Related, the last theme that emerged was the importance of unresolved issues. For the couples who participated in this study, their abusive behaviours occurred within a relationship in which there was escalating conflict that they saw as related to various unresolved issues in the relationship. The inability to resolve issues that maintained conflict served as a barrier to interrupting the cycle of conflict that eventually escalated to abusive behaviours. This is consistent with the plethora of literature that attest to the importance of effective conflict resolution in increasing marriage satisfaction, with unresolved issues being associated with increased conflict within couples (Billings, 1979; Birchler & Webb, 1977).

In summary, interventions involving couples who have decided to remain together may benefit from looking at ways to change the relationship so that women have more agency and men take more responsibility for their abusive behaviour. Strengthening conflict resolution skills, addressing unresolved issues (e.g., addressing blaming behaviours), and shifting and balancing power in the relationship may interrupt the cycle of conflict, help the couple work towards greater safety (emotional as well as physical), and begin to develop a sense of growth in the relationship which increases their collective hope for the future. Working towards these shifts in relationships must be grounded in an ongoing assessment of risk for abusive behaviour which underscores the need to accurately assess the nature and context of abusive behaviours in a relationship and the role of unresolved issues in increasing risk abusive behaviours.

Strengths

This study has several strengths in terms of its methodological design. First, the recruitment of couple dyads allowed for a comparison between men and women in their assessment and experiences of relationship satisfaction within the same relationship. This design sets this study apart from other studies that focus on the experiences of men or women but do not consider dynamics within the couple relationship. This design allowed for a couple-level analysis that enabled a comparison between men and women within the same relationship as well as a comparison across couple dyads.

Second, the use of both qualitative interviews and the CTS-2 enriched the information available for analysis. Specifically, the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather

data around the type, severity, and frequency of abusive behaviours allowed for the exploration of how the responses on the CTS-2 converged and diverged from the way that each participant and couple experienced their relationship. It also addressed a common critique of the CTS-2 regarding its inability to take context into consideration. Use of qualitative interviews with information from the CTS-2 enabled me to gain a richer and more in-depth understanding of the nature of abusive behaviours the women and men perceived and experienced in their relationship. This also strengthened my findings regarding the impact of, and the process by which, abusive behaviours influence relationship satisfaction.

Third, this study's use of IPA in its analysis of qualitative interviews allowed for a rich exploration of how each person's experience of conflict and abusive behaviours in a relationship converged and diverged from others with the same gender identity, as well as from his or her partner. IPA's emphasis on an immersive exploration of a participant's experience that required me to stay close to the data provided by the participants bolstered the rigour and richness of the analysis. Additionally, a particular advantage of IPA that lent itself to exploring the participants' experiences was the inherent flexibility built into this approach. Specifically, IPA highlights the importance of an investigator's flexibility as participants are interviewed, to ensure that the experiences of the participants are captured in the way that fits their narrative which helps guard against investigator bias. Such flexibility provided me with opportunity to ensure that all aspects of participants' experiences that they deemed important were fully explored. The central tenets of IPA (symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, and idiography) combined with its emphasis on immersion in the data and flexibility led to the in-depth, immersive exploration of each individual's experience. This allowed me to develop insight into the experiences of each individual prior to moving onto the next participant.

Contributions

The findings of this study have several important implications for clinical practice, especially for those clinicians whose work involves interventions with couples who have decided to work towards staying together after a history of abusive behaviours. First, this study challenges the notion of discrete patterns of abusive behaviours, encouraging clinicians to shift the lens through which they conceptualize the couples with whom they work. The findings of this study suggest that it may be prudent for clinicians to exercise caution in applying 'categories' of abusive behaviours as a way to understand the patterns of abusive behaviours that

characterize their clients. Instead, clinicians are recommended to maintain a flexible conceptualization of their clients that leaves room to individually tailor interventions to address the varied patterns of abusive behaviours at different points in time.

Second, relating to the first, clinicians are encouraged to adopt a multi-method assessment of the severity, frequency and context of abusive behaviours in a relationship. A single method of assessing abusive behaviour may result in an incomplete understanding of the complex nature of abusive behaviours within a relationship.

Third, the findings of this study suggest that in addition to working toward the desistance of abusive behaviours and reducing the risk of abuse, additional goals in couple interventions may be useful in interrupting the cycle of conflict and abusive behaviours as well as increasing well-being. Clinicians are encouraged to work collaboratively with couples to integrate goals traditionally associated with gender-specific therapy (e.g., increasing power and agency in women and encouraging responsibility taking for men) within couple intervention aimed at shifting relational patterns.

Lastly, the recruitment of both partners in a relationship allowed for direct comparison of how each partner in a relationship is impacted by and experiences the abusive behaviours in the relationship. To this end, this study adds to the growing literature that examines how gender impacts experiences of abusive behaviours and relationships.

Limitations of the Current Study and Directions for Future Research

The strengths of this study notwithstanding, there are limitations to this study that must be addressed in future research. First, this was a qualitative-dominant study that utilized the CTS-2 as a descriptive measure of abusive behaviours. While this was a strength of the study that revealed patterns in abusive behaviours of the couples who participated in the study that may have not otherwise been observed, this study recruited only five couples limiting the transferability of the findings. Future research that investigates these patterns in a larger, mixed-methods study would provide a stronger basis on which to make conclusions about the transferability to a more diverse group of couples.

Second, this study explored the experiences of cis-gender individuals in heterosexual couples who were motivated to access couple intervention, are predominantly White, and belong to lower-middle to middle SES. The growing body of literature highlights increased vulnerability of IPV based on factors such as ethnicity (Campbell et al., 2001), SES (Cunradi et al., 2002),

education (Capaldi et al., 2012), and sexual orientation and gender identity (Walker, 2015). For example, the prevalence of IPV in the 2SLGBTQ+ population has been shown to be higher when compared to the general population (Bates & Douglas, 2020; Walker, 2015). Couples with one or more partners who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ face additional challenges when trying to work through issues relating to IPV that may add to the active stressors in their relationships (Bates & Douglas, 2020). This population also face difficulty of accessing interventions with clinicians who are informed on their unique challenges (Walker, 2015). As such, the patterns and themes that emerged from the current study may not be applicable to couples wherein one or both members are ethnic minorities, identify as 2SLGBTQ+, and/or are low or high SES. Future research that qualitatively examines the experiences of couples belonging to one or more of the aforementioned groups would not only add to the growing body of literature on IPV in these populations, but would also have important implications for treatments (both individual and couples) designed to address IPV in populations where their social locations place them in positions of increased vulnerability.

Conclusions

There is a dearth of research that examines the experiences of couples who have experienced abusive behaviours in their relationship. Studies such as this are imperative in order to shed light on the experiences within intimate partner relationships that impact individuals' sense of well-being and relationship satisfaction. In particular, understanding the gendered ways in which abusive behaviours in relationships are experienced and understood, the ways in which men and women make meaning of violence that occurs, and the complex ways in which violence and abuse impacts relationship satisfaction is critical for clinicians working with couples to increase physical and emotional safety and improve relationship satisfaction. Without a nuanced understanding of the context of abusive behaviours, what drives the couple to stay together, and alternatively, what informs their evaluation of relationship satisfaction and sense of well-being, interrupting the cycle of abuse may be a challenging task.

Satisfaction with one's life, of which romantic relationships are a significant part, is an important aspect of one's subjective sense of well-being (Diener et al., 1999). For couples who desire to stay together after a history of abusive behaviours, this history can feel like an insurmountable barrier to rebuilding their relationships. Addressing important individual factors such as agency, powerlessness, and responsibility-taking for one's own role in abusive

behaviours will serve as important steppingstones to rebuilding relationships in couples who wish to stay together. Further, the impact of structural factors such as gender, race, class, and ability are critical to consider as the couple relationship exists within a broader context in which structural factors create environments that influence and constrain behaviour. To be effective, interventions must address the unique experiences and context of a couple to not only decrease the risk for violence and abuse, but to promote increased satisfaction. As this study suggests, therapy must help couples experience growth and develop a sense of hopefulness for a future relationship that is safe and satisfying.

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Appendix A

Consent to Contact

Department of Psychology
University of Manitoba
Duff Roblin Building
190 Dysart Rd
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R35 2N2
Email: chous@myumanitoba.ca

Relationship Satisfaction Study

For couples who have previously experienced high conflict in their current relationship

Are you interested in sharing your experiences?

Principal Investigator: Sharon Chou, University of Manitoba

The Research Project:

The goal is to learn how couples evaluate their relationship satisfaction when there has previously been violence. I would like to speak to you about your current relationship, how the violence has impacted you, and your experience of your relationship.

Participation:

If you participate in this study, you and your partner will each be scheduled for an interview (one interview per person) here, at the CCP. You will be asked questions about your experiences of your current relationship.

Eligibility?

You are eligible for participation in this study if you:

1) Are accepted for treatment at the CCP
2) Are in a heterosexual relationship with your partner
3) Are both willing to participate in the study

How long would this take?

It will take approximately 1 – 1.5 hours to complete the interview. Each partner will be compensated $25.00 for your time.

By signing below, you are agreeing to being contacted by the principal investigator for participation in this study. You are not obliged to participate by signing this form. Whether or not you participate in this study will not affect your treatment at the CCP.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Phone number: _____

Email: _____

Best time to be contacted (by phone): Morning Afternoon Evening

Appendix B

Script to Prospective Participants

Hello. My name is Sharon and I am the lead researcher for a project that is studying couples who have experienced high conflict in their current relationship and are seeking couples' therapy to work towards a violence-free relationship. My advisor Dr. Diane Hiebert-Murphy is working with me on this project and she is the director of the Couples Counselling Project, and a professor at the University of Manitoba.

The purpose of this research is to shed light on how couples evaluate their relationship satisfaction and how men and women might differ in how they evaluate their relationship satisfaction. We want to understand this so that it could inform future treatments for couples who experience high conflict in their relationships.

Participation will involve an interview with me to discuss your relationship. Specifically, I will be asking you questions about your current relationship, the violence and/or abuse that you and your partner have experienced. Each of you will be interviewed, and both interviews will ideally take place on the same day, back-to-back, at the CCP.

Both you and your partner must be interested in participating in this study for you to participate. Participation will take approximately 1 – 1.5 hours. Each partner will receive a $25 honorarium as a token of appreciation for your time.

You will be given an informed consent form to review prior to your participation. This form goes over what the research is about, your rights as a participant, and how the information you provide will and will not be used. You would be free to withdraw from the study at any time and to not answer any questions that you would prefer not to answer.

Your decision to participate will not affect the treatment that you receive at the CCP.

Do you have any questions?

If you are still interested, we can schedule a time for both you and your partner to come in for an interview.

Appendix C

Overview Script

Hi. My name is Sharon Chou. I am a Master's student in the Clinical Psychology program at the University of Manitoba.

This research project is about understanding relationship satisfaction in couples who have experienced high conflict in the past. More specifically, I am interested in how individuals assess their level of relationship satisfaction and how men and women might be similar or dissimilar in how they assess their satisfaction.

This project is being completed for the thesis that I am completing for my degree. Though my goal is to collect the information that you have shared with me and present the findings once the study is complete, any identifiable information will not be associated with the information that you provide me with.

This is a consent form for this study, and it outlines the study in greater detail. I would like to go over this from with you before you agree to participate.

(Informed Consent)

Again, please remember that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and your withdrawal from the study will not, in any way, impact the services that you receive at the CCP.

If you are ready and don't have any more questions, I will begin the audio-recording now.

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Department of Psychology
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Canada R35 2N2
Email: chous@myumanitoba.ca

Research Consent Form

Project Title: How Do Couples Appraise Relationship Satisfaction After Violence?

Principal Investigator: Sharon Chou, H.S.Bc., M.Div., University of Manitoba

Email: chous@myumanitoba.ca

Supervisor: Diane Hiebert-Murphy PhD C Psych, University of Manitoba, 204-474-9051

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.

Purpose. The purpose of this study is to better understand relationship satisfaction in couples who have experienced violence or abuse in their relationships in the past. The goal is to help identify how individuals experience their relationships after there has been violence and what affects their satisfaction with their relationship. This study will help clinicians better understand and support couples increase relationship satisfaction in their relationship.

Participating. If you decide to participate in this study, you and your partner will complete one interview session each lasting approximately 1 – 1.5 hours. You will be asked about your relationship, history of intimate partner violence, and about your satisfaction with your relationship. You will also be asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire as well as a brief questionnaire that describes the kind of conflict you have experienced in your romantic

relationships. You will receive a $25.00 honorarium for your participation in this study. You will receive this honorarium before the interview begins.

Your decision to take part in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision not to participate or to withdraw from the study will not affect the services you receive at the Couple Counselling Project. This means that you can stop participating in the study at any time. Please inform the researcher if you would like to end the interview. If, at the end of the interview, you decide that you would not like the data you've provided to be used in this study, please inform the researcher.

Legal rights. Participation does not affect your legal rights, and the researchers and the University must fulfill their legal and professional obligations.

Results. We would be happy to share the results of the study with you. The study is projected to be completed by April 2020 if you would like to be informed on the results of the study, a summary of the findings will be made available at the CCP. You can also request this information to be sent to you by email. If there are any comments, feedback or questions that you have about the findings, you can contact Sharon Chou at chous@myumanitoba.ca.

Confidentiality. When presenting the results, a summary of what we learn from all of the couples in the study will be grouped together. Some direct quotes from the interviews may be used to explain the findings. Information that describes you will be provided in general terms. These quotes along with general information about you and other participants will be presented to make sure that the research is based on the stories told by you and the other participants. Your name or directly identifying information will not be used, and you may choose a pseudonym that will be used to refer to your data. Every effort will be made to remove any additional identifying information. Information collected through any questionnaires in the study will either be reported through a summary or identified by the pseudonym that you have chosen. While every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and anonymity, it may be possible for you and your partner to identify a quote that comes from your interview.

The findings may be published or presented in public forums such as professional journals and academic conferences.

Your identity. Any information that you provide as part of your participation will be treated as confidential. Your name will not appear on any of the data. The information linking you to your data will be kept until the resulted are published. The deidentified data, along with the audio-recordings of your interview, will be stored in a secure location for a period of seven years. The audio recording will be transcribed by a transcriptionist and members of the research team will have access to your data; all individuals who have contact with the audio recordings, transcriptions, and paper questionnaires will sign oaths of confidentiality to protect your privacy and identity. Only members of the research team will have access to the data with one exception: the University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way. There are, however, several limits to confidentiality. Although no questions will be directly asked regarding issues of abuse of children or vulnerable persons (such as persons in care), if you report that a child or vulnerable person is at risk of harm, the law

requires that this information be reported to legal authorities. Also, if you share information that you or another person are in immediate danger, this information will also be shared with others. For example, if you disclose that you are planning to injure yourself, supports such as CCP staff or the crisis stabilization unit will be involved. If you disclose that another person is in imminent danger, the Winnipeg City Police will be called. In addition, please be aware of that it is possible for research data to be subpoenaed; if this were to occur we would be required by law to make our data available to the courts.

Benefits. Participating in this study may be of some benefit to you in terms of having the opportunity to share your personal experiences. You may also experience some benefit from knowing that you are contributing to research that advances therapy for couples who have experienced intimate partner violence.

Risks. There is the possibility that answering questions about your experiences could cause you emotional distress. If you are feeling overwhelmed during the interview, please let the researcher know. Remember, you are free to stop participating at any time. If you feel distressed, you may want to consider talking to a counselor either at the Couple Counselling Project or through a free service such as Klinic:

Klinic Drop in Counseling at: 204-784-4067
Klinic 24 Hour Crisis Line at: 204-786-8686

University approval. This research has been approved by the Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 474-7122, or e-mail humanethics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Security. The data will be kept for a period of seven years after the findings are published after which time it will be destroyed (approximately Dec, 2027).

Contact. You are free to ask any questions that you may have about your treatment and your rights as a research participant. If any questions come up during or after the study, you can contact the principal investigator, Sharon Chou at chous@myumanitoba.ca.

Do not sign this consent form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of your questions.

Statement of Consent

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any

time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Please indicate whether or not you agree to the following:

I have read or had read to me the details of this consent form. ( ) Yes ( ) No

My questions have been addressed. ( ) Yes ( ) No

I, _____ (print name), agree to participate in this study. ( ) Yes ( ) No

_____

Participant's Signature Date

_____

Researcher and/or Delegate's Signature Date

I would like to be kept informed of the findings of the study. ( ) Yes ( ) No

If yes, please provide your email address below:

If you would like to be mailed a summary of the findings, please provide your mailing address below:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix E

Demographic Information

This demographic form asks questions about who you are and why you are in seeking counselling services. There are no right or wrong answers. Please answer based on what is true for you right now. Your answers will not be shared with Couple Counselling Project staff and will not affect the services that you receive.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. How old are you? _____
2. Are you currently working?
   ____Yes (hrs/wk curr.: _____
   job(s): _____)
   ____Yes (seasonal – job: _____)
   ____No (last job:_____
   when:_____)

   Do you receive social assistance: ___ yes ___no
3. What is the highest level of education you have completed? _____
4. What is your ethnic background? (For example: First Nations, Metis, Indigenous, Asian, African-Canadian, Polish, Ukrainian, etc…)_____

   Do you come from a small town or a remote community? ____yes ____no

5. What is your citizenship?
   ____I was born in Canada
   ____I am a landed immigrant or refugee (list the country you came from:

   _____)
   ____I am a Canadian citizen, born in another country (which country?

   _____)
   ____Other (Please explain: _____)

6. Is English your first language? ____yes ____no (my first language is:_____)

7. How would you describe your gender? _____
8. How many children do you have? (Including biological, step, adopted, & foster children)
   _____
9. What are the ages of your children? _____

10. How many children are currently living with you? _____
11. Do you have any children who are not living with you? ___yes ___no
12. If yes, where are the children?
    _____on their own
    _____with their other parent
    _____with other family
    _____in foster care
    _____other (please specify:_____)

RELATIONSHIP HISTORY

1. What is your relationship with your current partner?
    ___Married ___Boyfriend/girlfriend
    ___Separated ___Divorced
    ___Common-law ___Other: (please explain:_____)
2. How long have you been together with your partner? _____
3. In what ways has that partner been violent/abusive to you? (check all that apply)

    _____controlling behavior

    _____emotional abuse

    _____verbal abuse

    _____financial abuse

    _____other (please specify: _____)

4. Have you previously been in an intimate relationship where there was violence/abuse?

    _____Yes _____ No

    If 'Yes':

    _____ One other intimate relationship was violent/abusive

    _____ More than one intimate relationship was violent/abusive

    _____ All significant intimate relationships

    In what ways was/were those partner(s) violent/abusive toward you?

    _____controlling behavior

    _____physical abuse

_____emotional abuse

_____verbal abuse

_____financial abuse

_____other (please specify: _____)

HISTORY OF SERVICES RECEIVED

1. Before you came to the Couple Counselling Project, have you ever received couples counselling services for a previous intimate relationship?

   ____ Yes ____No

2. If you answered 'Yes' to the above question, was it with regards to:

   _____ Because of violence/abuse in the current relationship

   _____ Because of violence/abuse in the current relationship

   _____other (please specify:_____)

3. Have you ever received help to deal with mental health issues?
   ___yes (please explain:_____)

   ___ no

4. Have you ever received help to deal with your use of drugs or alcohol?
   ___yes (please explain:_____)
   ___ no
5. Do you have any disabilities and/or long-term illnesses?
   ___yes (Please explain:_____
   _____)
   ___no

Appendix F

Interview Questions and Probes

1) Please tell me about your relationship.
    a. What about your partner drew you to him/her?
    b. What about the relationship makes you to stay?
2) What are some things that are important to you about this relationship?
    a. Can you please tell me about a time in your relationship when you felt things were good/bad?
    b. What about the relationship felt good/bad to you? (what was going on at that time, what allowed you to feel good/bad)
3) When did the violence start?
    a. How did you feel about the relationship when the violence started?
4) How have the conflict and violence in the relationship affected or changed how you feel about your relationship? (ensure participant addresses how they feel about the relationship / how satisfied they feel in the relationship both currently and previous to the violence)
    a. Do you feel differently about the relationship since there has been violence or abuse? How?
    b. Why do you think you feel differently?
    c. Are there things about your relationship that you feel have remained the same since the beginning?
    d. Are there things that you would like to see change? Why?
    e. Are there things about your relationship that you think have changed?
    f. How do you think your relationship has changed?
    g. Are there things that you wish didn't change? Why?
5) Has how happy or satisfied you are with the relationship changed over time?
    a. Why do you think that it has changed?
6) How do you hope that therapy will change your relationship?
    a. What do you think will need to change in order for you to be more happy or satisfied with the relationship?
    b. How hopeful do you feel that you will become happier or more satisfied with the relationship?

General Probe Format:

- You said ___. Could you tell me more about what you mean by that?