

“Is It Me? Am I Losing My Mind?”

Living with Intimate Male Partners Presenting With Subjective  
Narcissistic Behaviours and Attitudes

by

Sherry Lynn Saunders Lane

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

**MASTER OF EDUCATION**

Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

Copyright © 2020 Sherry Lynn Saunders Lane

## **Abstract**

Mainstream culture and the media are increasingly using the terminology 'narcissism' as socio-cultural parlance to describe selfish and self-centered behaviors and attitudes in social relationships. The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to describe the lived experience of women who are in intimate relationships with male partners whom they characterize as having narcissistic behaviors and attitudes. The research focus is motivated by client-centered therapeutic orientations that encourage counselors to 'be present with' clients, even when the experiences lack objective validation. Unstructured interviews were used to collect data from three adult females. The data was analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach. The participants' stories indicated that their relationships have identifiable phases and characteristics. The participants experienced diminished well-being, compromised self-differentiation, and pervasive loss. Pervasive loss served as a wake-up call and motivated the activation of participants' residual sense of self to leave the relationships. In conclusion, while the terminology used to describe the intimate male partners may lack validation, the women perceive that their experiences negatively affected their lives. The women also recognized and regretted their lack of capability to negotiate dignified positioning in their intimate relationships.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to the participants who courageously shared their stories with me and the world.

Thank you to my thesis advisor, Dr. Grace Ukasoanya, your interest, expertise, and knowledge were invaluable to this project. The countless hours we spent discussing and sorting through ideas, topics, and understandings were both extremely valuable and enjoyable. I am truly appreciative of the time, energy and support you devoted to this work.

A sincere thanks is extended to my gracious committee members, Dr. Nadine Bartlett and Dr. Jennifer Watt for your valued time, input, patience, and suggestions.

Thank you to my friends and family, for your ears, time, and support.

Thank you to my two amazing daughters, Marie and Teeah, for listening to the concepts and understandings as I was unravelling them. Your awareness, wisdom, and input are highly valued. I love both of you to hills and back.

To my favorite son, thank you for being a great person, father, and partner. You are setting an amazing example for my grandson. I love you to the hills and back, too.

Thank you to my incredible daughter-in-law, Natalie, for your compassionate understanding. HUGS and love forever.

My grandsons, Kory and L, thank you for becoming the wonderful young men the world so greatly needs. Nana is very proud of you.

We are lovingly waiting for you baby, Cassius Duane. Thank you for choosing our family.

Finally, a heartfelt thank you to my mom, Marie Saunders, who gave me the foundation and love I needed to push myself past my comfort zones. Although not here with us now, you continually live in our hearts. You were only here for a very short time, but your positive influences will live on forever. We all greatly love and miss you along with your infinite support, wisdom, and affections. XOXO

## Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Study Purpose .....	3
Research Question .....	3
Rationale .....	3
Delimitations of the Study.....	6
Significance of the Study .....	7
Positionality of the Research .....	9
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	10
Narcissism in Intimate Partner Relationships.....	11
Benefits and Pitfalls .....	13
Developmental Issues that Shape Women’s Responses to Abusive Intimate Relationships.....	14
Sociocultural background contexts.....	14
Background experiences of power imbalances.....	18
Dominance .....	18
Admiration and rivalry.....	20
Surviving Experiences Using Learned or Adaptive Responses.....	21
Attachment and Connection Issues.....	21
Dependency.....	23
Boundary and Relational Shifts .....	25
Family Dynamics .....	27
Stockholm Syndrome.....	29
Interrelated Processes by which Mental Health and Well-Being are Experienced by Women Within the Context of Intimate Partner Abusive Relationships.....	30
Preservation of the ‘Self’ .....	30
Living Through Love Bombing.....	32
Trauma and Trauma Bonding.....	33

Conditional Regard and Self-Determination Theory .....	35
Responses and Approaches to Supporting Women Who Live in Intimate Partner	
Narcissistic Relationships .....	38
Starting Where the Client ‘Is’: Using Humanistic Counselling Orientation .....	38
Use of Conceptual Metaphors in Counselling .....	40
Supports .....	41
Summary .....	42
Chapter Three: Methodology .....	45
Participants .....	45
Design of the Study .....	46
Data Collection .....	46
Data Management .....	47
Data Analysis .....	48
Trustworthiness .....	50
Reliability .....	50
Internal Validity .....	51
Bracketing: Ensuring Validity When the Researcher has a Stake in Participants’	
Narratives .....	52
Limitations of the Study .....	56
Summary .....	57
Chapter Four: Findings .....	58
Participants Demographics .....	58
The Development Phases of the Women's Intimate Relational Journey .....	59
Entry Phase: Negotiations of Desire .....	59
Sweet Beginnings .....	62
Yearnings for Love and Craving for Significance .....	62
Exploration Phase: Heightening Male Dominance and Control Tolerance-Rejection	
Dialectics .....	62
Heightening Male Dominance and Control .....	63
Control Tolerance-Rejection Dialectics .....	65

Emotional Dialecticism .....	68
Establishment Phase: Authoritarianism and Relational Burdens.....	68
Financial Burdens .....	69
Burdens Related to Activities of Daily Routines .....	70
Subjective Well-Being in the Relationships .....	71
Autonomy .....	71
Competence.....	74
Connectedness.....	75
Restriction.....	76
Character Blackmail.....	77
Patches of Awakening and Coping.....	78
Awakening as a Result of Authoritarianism .....	78
Awakening Evoked by the Sense of Compromised Safets .....	81
Compromised Safety of Material Possessions.....	81
Physical Safety.....	82
Emotional Safety.....	84
Emotional Hostage.....	85
Awakening Evoked by the Sense of Loss.....	86
Loss in Specific Domains .....	86
Loss of Trust in Self.....	86
Loss of Enjoyment of Life .....	87
Loss of Physiological Health .....	87
Freeing the 'Self' from the Relationship.....	88
It was Time to Leave.....	88
Impementations of Problem-Focused Coping Strategies.....	89
Use of Anger .....	89

Access of Social Support .....	89
Reframing of the Cost of Leaving as the Process of Growth .....	90
Conclusion .....	90
Chapter Five Discussion .....	92
Introduction .....	92
Romantic Relationship as Journey with Phases .....	92
Beginning Phase .....	93
Power and Control by Male Partners .....	93
Authoritarian Phase .....	95
Dissonances Experienced in the Journey .....	97
Intimacy .....	98
Belonging .....	99
Mattering .....	100
Impacts of Narcissistic-like Romantic Relational Behaviors and Attitudes on	
Subjective Well-Being .....	102
Loss of Self in the Relationships .....	104
Journey to Self Discovery .....	107
Implications for Research .....	108
Implications for Counselling Practice .....	110
Suggestions for Further Resources .....	111
Conclusion .....	112
References .....	114

## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

This study explores and documents how women experience life with intimate male partners whom they characterize as having narcissistic behaviors and attitudes. The focus is not on women whose male partners present with clinical narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). The study's focus is motivated by a client-centered counseling recognition that individuals are the experts of their life experiences and therefore, counselors should be “present with” clients, even when their presenting concerns lack objective validation (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). The goal of the study was to understand better, how women make meaning of themselves, their intimate male partners, and their relationships through this sociocultural lens termed “narcissism” (I would refer to this phenomenon as ‘narcissism’ throughout the study). Narcissism is used as parlance to describe selfish, self-centered presentation in social relationships across life domains including work and friendship in mainstream culture (Gleig, 2010; Markova, 2016; Miller & Campbell, 2010; Morales, 1995; Sokolova, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2008). Individuals who are "excessively self-absorbed, selfish and egotistical, self-enhancing, arrogant and shameless," especially in interpersonal relationships, are characterized as narcissistic in popular culture (Jonasson et al., 2012). Narcissism in this study does not represent the clinical specifications of NPD in any way. Nevertheless, it still culturally communicates challenging peculiarities experienced by people in relationships with individuals whose behaviors and attitudes fit cultural descriptors of narcissism (Jonasson et al., 2012).



Humanistic psychology agrees that both subjective and objective client concerns causing emotional distress could equally be detrimental to the well-being of individuals (Bland & DeRobertis, 2017; Määttä et al., 2012). Client-centered approaches to counseling (Carson & Butcher, 1992) recommend that counselors accept all clients' subjective narratives as their objective reality because individuals exist in a private world of experience in which they are the center. The reason for this view of client reality is that individuals tend to react to situations in terms of how they perceive it, in ways consistent with the self-concept and worldview (Carson & Butcher, 1992). Like individuals who experience emotional abuse from partners with diagnosed narcissistic disorders, it may be the case that women involved with partners whom they subjectively describe as narcissistic may have the same or similar experiences (Määttä et al., 2012). However, counseling research and practice have little information about this phenomenon. This lack of research and practice may minimize the emotional burdens or personal gains associated with women's experience of perceived narcissism in intimate relationships.

This study is timely because discussions about intimate partner narcissism, in various social contexts, are on the rise in the worldwide web and psychology research (Freeman, 1993; Määttä et al., 2012). Related to this, there are also calls for empirical evidence about how people negotiate the underlying mechanisms involved in emotionally abusive relationships (Lamkin et al., 2015; Miller & Campbell, 2010). For example, research, on how women describe their life experiences with NPD intimate male partners, found that the women described the men as appearing "unstable and immoral exercisers of power and manipulation, who lack the sense of reality and that narcissism destroys intimate relationships in many ways" (Maata et al. 2012, p. 6). They recommend further studies to understand better how women experience themselves and cope with the effects of narcissistic relational dynamics. A better understanding of how women

describe themselves, their partners, and coping strategies within any narcissistic relationships could help map women's subjective experiences and help to determine ways for counselor's to effectively support them (Määttä et al., 2012).

### **Study Purpose**

This study aimed to better understand the personal accounts of women who have lived experiences with intimate male partners they subjectively perceive as possessing narcissistic characteristics. It involved investigating how women made meaning of their unique processes of living in intimate male partner relationships that they subjectively construed as narcissistic. This study operationalized narcissism as the women's subjective opinions about how their partners presented behaviorally and attitudinally. No clinical or research interpretation was given to the participants subjectively described narcissistic partners. The reason is that this study's focus was neither to issue objective clinical DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) diagnoses nor to understand it. The sample comprised three women from rural and urban communities in Manitoba who have experienced relationships with intimate male partners they viewed as presenting with narcissistic behaviors and attitudes.

### **Research Question for the Study**

The guiding research question for this study was: “What is the lived experience of woman who subjectively characterize their intimate male partner as presenting with narcissistic behaviours and attitudes?”

### **Rationale for Study**

There is limited empirical data to inform counseling practitioners, whether women interpret narcissism as positive or negative experiences, within the context of intimate male partner relationships. Existing research focuses on NPD in intimate relationship. According to

the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V, 2013), an individual with diagnosable clinical NPD exhibits characteristics of exaggerated self-appraisal, goals based on approval of others, lacks empathy, superficial relationships existing to serve personal gain, grandiosity (entitlement, self-centered), and attention-seeking for the admiration of others. There are mixed empirical opinions about the experiences of individuals who are in a relationship with NPD intimate partners (Määttä et al., 2012). Some of these studies note that there are women in intimate relationships with NPD male partners who report enhanced well-being (Sellers et al., 2005). These studies describe women's experiences to include subjective positive life with a desire to stay in the relationships despite the various social and emotional losses they suffer (Sellers et al., 2005). Other studies report these kinds of intimate relationships impede the well-being of women (Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Wright, 2011). Individuals with NPD often seek out many positive outcomes for themselves and in those circumstances cause much distress for people with whom they relate (Stirling et al., 2012; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Wright, 2011). Majority of the research literature on intimate partner narcissism states NPD comes with a substantial emotional burden and need for self and relational adjustment (Määttä et al., 2012; Campbell & Foster, 2002; Lamkin et al., 2015). Counseling practice needs research that will contribute to a better understanding of women's intimate relationship experiences where they subjectively describe their male partners as narcissistic (Freeman, 1993, Määttä et al., 2012).

This is important because individuals are increasingly using narcissism to describe everyday intimate relational transactions. These individuals need counseling support to understand both themselves and their partners in the relationship, even when there is no objective NPD diagnosis (Lin-Roark et al., 2015; Määttä et al., 2012; McLeod et al., 2010). People, who

perceive themselves as victims of abuse in interpersonal relationships, describe the alleged wrongdoers as self-centered, self-promoting, power-hungry, domineering, lacking in personal responsibilities, and making or acting a claim for total freedom while disregarding their partner's needs (Markova, 2016; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). In abusive intimate partner relational contexts, women often describe their relationships as unusual, weird, and different, believing that they or their intimate male partners may need clinical or social support (Määttä et al., 2012). It would be good for women and counselors, who support them, to understand whether the experiences that the participants describe as narcissistic could be peculiar forms of intimate partner abuse.

Another rationale for this study is to contribute to research that seeks to create a sense of universality for women who go through relational experiences that could be described socioculturally as narcissistic. Yalom (2002) describes universality as the sense of assurance and healing when an individual draws empowerment from knowing that they are not alone in their experiences because other people experience similar phenomena. Information from women with the lived experiences would validate the experiences of other women and alleviate self-doubt and confusion. Individuals with narcissistic personality types often do not admit their imperfection causing more confusion. Objective clinical diagnoses may be difficult with these individuals as they master ways to cover up their attitudinal and behavioral deficits (Sokolova, 2010). Male partners with and without diagnosed narcissism often appear to have an appealing public persona covering up their shortcomings. Without better understanding of this phenomenon, women may continue to take the blame for the confusing psychologically dysfunctional relationships (Sokolova, 2010). Consistent with sociocultural beliefs (Kearney, 2001; Rivas et al., 2013) some of the women, who live with partners they describe as having narcissistic behaviours and

attitudes, have challenging experiences that impact their self-worth and well-being in the relationship. According to social learning theory (Sellers et al., 2005), they may also experience and live with dissonance—a sense of knowing but not being sure that they are living in unhealthy relational circumstances. The dissonance becomes more complicated when there are no formal diagnoses to validate unusual partner behaviours and attitudes (Markova, 2016; Wright, 2016). The women's experiences are more likely to be discounted by themselves and their contexts, especially when these narcissistic behaviours and attitudes are very subtle (Rivas, 2012; Rivas et al., 2013). This is worrisome from a counselling perspective. Humanistic psychology agrees that both subjective and objective perspectives causing negative emotional discord can be detrimental to women's well-being and mental health, especially when little or no attention is correctly given to the women's circumstances (Bland & DeRobertis, 2017; Määttä et al., 2012). The minds of the women who are in relationships with perceived narcissists are better helped when their subjective experiences are validated and respected as appropriate starting points to fostering emotional growth (Brown et al., 2018; Rivas et al., 2013).

### **Delimitations of the Study**

In conducting this study, I set several delimitations as a way to frame the boundaries of the research and keep the study focussed. I operationalized narcissism not as a clinical diagnosis but as a cultural phenomenon consistent with sociocultural beliefs that viewed the behaviours as unhealthy narcissism rather than healthy standards of narcissism.

1. The subjects for the study included three women who self-described as having intimate partner relationships with males whose behaviours and attitudes they experience as narcissistic. Therefore, there is no expectations for data that would be generalized across all female populations or inform inference to male populations.

2. The method for collecting qualitative data from the sample was unstructured face-to-face interviews. An audio recorder was used to capture the interviews and then transcribed by the researcher. As the researcher, I kept a journal recording observations, reflections, and insights during the study as a means of recognizing any personal and potential bias, preconceived opinions, or ideas.
3. Given that this was an exploratory study, my research did not consider experiences that influenced the demographic or background factors of the participants.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research is important in order to understand how women make meaning of their lives within a perceived narcissistic intimate relationship. Existing research has highlighted some of the challenges and opportunities that women experience when they are in intimate relationships with NPD males. However, to the knowledge of this primary investigator, no studies in counseling has addressed the unique needs and experiences of women who have experienced intimate relationships with undiagnosed narcissistic male partners who still present with behaviors and attitudes that come across as NPD. Having this understanding, may shed light on appropriate interventions that may be implemented in support of their psychosocial adjustment needs. Although the sample size is small, the data amplified the voices of these women and provided a platform for initiating therapeutic discussions about life and experiences within intimate male partner relationships in which they may lack both words and frames of reference to describe opportunities and vulnerabilities inherent in the relationships.

Findings from this study would inform the therapist working with women presenting subjective experiences that cause them distress in their intimate relationships. To therapeutically support women, who experience their intimate partners as narcissistic, their beliefs and truths

must be respected and accepted to build a strong client–counselor therapeutic alliance (Freeman, 1993; Meyers, 2014). An authentic and accepting therapeutic alliance encourages trust. It fosters open client–therapist dialogue to the deepest, darkest experiences, permitting increased insight, wisdom, knowledge, and satisfying therapeutic work (Meyers, 2014; Solomon, 1994; Stirling et al., 2012). Uncovering how these women experience their relationships and allowing them to name their insights about the personal processes inherent in these relationships could highlight unique underlying mechanisms related to intimate partner emotional abuse. The sooner the therapist helps guide the women’s insight and wisdom toward her narcissistic relationship, the less time her partner will have to carry forward the narcissistic epidemic. This therapeutic support will help the women to stop the detrimental emotional and physical damage aimed at impairing her (Karakurt & Silver, 2013).

Research findings about women’s subjective experiences with intimate male partners, whom they experience as narcissistic, would inform counselors against stereotypical and cultural bias. Sociocultural influences can significantly impair the therapist’s or counsellor’s beliefs and stereotypical attitudes toward women’s subjective experiences with intimate partners whom they experience as narcissistic (Wright, 2011). These sociocultural influenced beliefs are often deeply rooted and go unnoticed to the therapist holding them (Wright, 2011). Negative emotional responses or cognitive biases cannot be completely free from the conditioning influences of culture (Wright, 2011). Empathic listening and unconditional regard for the women and their stories are required if the therapist is to understand the experiences and burdens these narcissistic behavioural and attitudinal patterns place on the core well-being of the women seeking therapeutic support (Mosquera & Knipe, 2015). Wright (2011) further states that it is critical to be familiarized and become knowledgeable about clients’ (such as women’s subjective

experiences with narcissistic intimate male partners) in order to build the essential positive relational bonds required for successful treatment outcomes.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

I approach this study as a student in counseling psychology, counselor, and female with both direct and vicarious experience of the phenomenon. I have counseled women who report the experience of partners' personalities that are often subtle, confusing, or difficult to describe to themselves or others. Through my learning, practice, and experience, I am a witness to the stories of women in this area and the toll of confusing intimate relationship on women's well-being. I conducted an informal pilot study on narcissism in intimate relationship as part of a requirement in a qualitative research course, which I completed in 2016 . These positionalities motivated me to invest time, effort, and rigour in bracketing throughout data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I paid close attention to ensure trustworthiness of the research. Yet, I acknowledge that this is my first formal qualitative research. I acknowledge that I may unintentionally present with bias in some of my research process. I keep an open mind to learn from my research committee.



## CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore and document individual women's perceptions, meanings, and experiences of living with intimate male partners who they subjectively characterize as having unhealthy narcissistic behaviours and attitudes. Consistent with the phenomenological research approach, one key question provided a framework for the research: What is the life experience of women with an intimate male partner who presents with behaviours and attitudes which you perceive as narcissistic?

This study is relevant and important because existing global research uses clinical and subclinical lenses to explore the expression of narcissism and its relational consequences and excludes the experiences culturally described as 'narcissism' in which partners have not been diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) (Määttä et al., 2012). Both subjective and objective perspectives causing negative emotional discord can be detrimental to women's well-being and mental health, especially when little or no attention is correctly given to the women's circumstances (Derobertis & Bland, 2017; Määttä et al., 2012).

The outcomes of this phenomenological study are important, as they will offer more information and provide a better understanding to the unexplored concept of women living with intimate male partners whom they subjectively describe as having narcissistic behaviours and attitudes. In my past lived experience, the word narcissism was rarely used, and people did not understand the depths of the narcissistic personality type. Today, the awareness and related topics about narcissism are increasing at a steady pace because this personality type is endemic in our culture (Cowan-Jenssen & Goodison, 2009; Määttä et al., 2012). Since I took an interest in learning the metaphorical understanding of narcissism 10 years ago, the websites, blogs, books,

articles, and general conversations have increased dramatically. As a result, the general population is getting better at acknowledging and understanding the deeper concept of narcissism, leaving less room for denial. An increasing openness to acknowledge the effects narcissism has on society and home life is also increasing. We seem to be living in a time of awakening with a surge of interest in the metaphorical understanding of narcissism and no longer waiting for somebody else to take charge and deal with the narcissist (Cowan-Jenssen & Goodison, 2009; Sokolova, 2010). For this reason, I believe the time is ripe to explore more deeply the missing pieces and blind spots in the research on women living with intimate male partners whom they subjectively and metaphorically describe as having unhealthy narcissistic behaviours and attitudes.

I begin the literature review by outlining literature related to the surrounding women's experiences with intimate male partners whom they characterize as having narcissistic behaviours and attitudes. I also explored broader literature on psychological abuse in intimate partner relationships or what is known about narcissism in intimate partner relationships. I then discuss more deeply three conceptual frameworks: Narcissism in Intimate Partner Relationships, Benefits and Pitfalls, and Developmental Issues that Shape Women's Responses to Abusive Intimate Relationships.

### **Narcissism in Intimate Partner Relationships**

Much research has been done on narcissistic personality types and psychological discord. However, there appears to be little or no research specifically on women living with intimate male partners whom they subjectively describe as having unhealthy narcissistic behaviours and attitudes. Past research has exposed the idea that male narcissists appear strong, bold, and confident, which are very appealing characteristics to a prospective female partner (Grosz et al.,

2015). The strong, bold, and confident male narcissist is viewed as charming, expressive, and self-assured during the initial courting process (Grosz et al., 2015). The preference for a self-assured, confident partner result from a woman wanting to feel safe and believing the narcissist has the protective ability to tend to her needs and desires (Grosz et al., 2015). However, this type of narcissistic admiration is short lived and becomes extinguished after the initial phase of courting or once the narcissist is no longer in public view (Grosz et al., 2015). Bowlby (as cited in Øverup et al., 2017) argued humans are born with the innate desire to be loved by their caregivers, and this mechanism that helps ensure the survival of the human species. The problem is that this form of attention from the narcissistic partner is not love; it is conditional, and it disrupts the functional working model of the self (Berenson & Andersen, 2006). Narcissists tend to focus on the needs, wants, and desires of themselves and little, if any, concern is placed on the needs of their intimate partners (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Grosz et al., 2015; Øverup et al., 2017). While narcissists ensure their own selfish needs get met, crushing, or destroying the well-being of an intimate partner is of no concern to them (Popper, 2002).

Popper (2002) and Campbell and Foster (2002) contended that narcissistic male partners use their influence for personal benefit and find it easy to manipulate their intimate female partners. The intimate male narcissistic partner is not driven by the well-being of his partner or relationship, but rather by his need to satisfy only himself (Grosz et al., 2015; Lammers et al., 2005; Øverup et al., 2017). According to Kanat-Maymon et al., (2017) three basic needs required for a satisfying or close relationship are not met in this type of relationship: relatedness (belonging), competence (capability), and autonomy (self-direction). To maintain control in the relationship, the narcissist puts conditions on affections and the fulfillment of their intimate partner's basic needs causing her to believe that her needs will be compromised if she does not

continue to comply with his demands (Coker et al., 2000; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Øverup et al., 2013; Reid et al., 2013).

### **Benefits and Pitfalls**

As noted in Chapter 1, some researchers noted women in narcissistic relationships report well-being enhancing (Sellers et al., 2005), while others assert these relationships are well-being-impeding (Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Wright, 2011). The earlier stages of the narcissistic relationship can be quite exciting and satisfying. Narcissists generally present as extroverts; they are the life of the party and fun to be around (Lam, 2012). Lam (2012) discovered narcissists being viewed as funny, entertaining, not boring, energetic, and socially confident, especially in the courting phase of the relationship. People also considered narcissists to be more attractive and pleasing to the eye. This is no surprise given that narcissists are concerned with how others view them (Lam, 2012). These narcissistic qualities could have some strong effects on romantic relationships. Narcissists are capable of being strongly committed to their relationships, especially during the impressionable early days of the relationship when their partners tend to view the narcissistic behaviours in a positive light (Lam, 2012). Narcissists who chose to be married are often highly committed to the marriage (Campbell & Foster, 2002) and often idealize their partner (Foster & Twenge, 2009). New relationships involving narcissists may exhibit many of the hallmarks of a healthy relationship such as a high the commitment (Foster & Twenge, 2009). Women reported the relationship with the narcissist as the closest relationship they had ever experienced and were pleased with having a confident, bold, and protective father and male figure for their children (McLeod et al., 2010).

When compared with non narcissist partners, women reported less romantic relationship conflict and found narcissists easy to be with, at least in the beginning stages (Lam, 2012).

Narcissists appear confident and entertaining at first, but these characteristics fade over time as their grandiosity becomes a dominant characteristic (Lam, 2012). Narcissists begin the romantic relationships with an inflated appraisal of their partner (Lam, 2012). As the relationship develops, the high commitment to the marriage and partner appraisal becomes an obsession with large positive and negative inconsistencies noted (Lam, 2012). As a result, the female partner is unable to create sustained and consistent happiness with her narcissistic intimate male partner no matter how well she serves him, leaving her to feel very confused (Lam, 2012).

### **Developmental Issues that Shape Women’s Responses to Abusive Intimate Relationships**

The psychological components involving relationships with intimate narcissistic male partners are not as simple as one might initially believe. The literature review explores; (a) how women are shaped into believing the demands of the narcissistic relationships are acceptable or beneficial; (b) why women feel so comfortable with narcissistic male partners; (c) why it is important for women to have personal power; [and] (d) why women become so attached to intimate male partners whom they characterize as having narcissistic characteristics.

### ***Sociocultural Background Contexts***

Women define normal and acceptable emotionality through experiences in context to social and cultural understandings (Rivas et al., 2013). To prevent “falling into the trap of ‘cultural relativism’” (Thiara & Gill, as cited in Rivas et al., 2013, p. 1136), Rivas et al. (2013) have shown there are more similarities than differences in narcissistic emotional experiences and reactions in the different ethnic groups. Universal, sociocultural perspectives suggest that mistreated women’s roles, identities, and boundaries may be drawn, shifted, and redrawn to help live with and manage the oppressive narcissistic ill-treatment (Rivas et al., 2013).

Sociocultural perspectives have generally accepted changes in the stance of ill-treatment and the exploitative narcissistic relationships (Rivas, 2012). Across sociocultural contexts, narcissistic abuse against women is mostly invisible and accepted by families of origin, communities, the couple, even women themselves, and this creates fluid norms (Kearney, 2001). According to Kearney (2001) and Purgason et al., (2014), women hold a deep desire for commitment, romantic love, economic security, and a two-parent family for their children. These motivations also cause the women to be more likely stay in a relationship with their intimate narcissistic male partner (Rivas, 2012). For the woman to achieve her desires, she accepts the social and cultural inequalities and expectations of being the caregiver, caretaker, and self-sacrificing, even when the love and affection for her partner is undesirable, irreparable and robs of her agency (Kearney, 2000).

Women are affected by many interesting factors regarding gender power inequalities created by patriarchy (Lammers et al., 2005; Sellers et al., 2005). A number of these inequalities can be traced back to social norms within their families, communities, and sociocultural perspectives (Rivas, 2012). Patriarchy once meant the father had power and ruled over his family members but now it means social systems allow men to rule and dominate over women and children in every aspect of life and culture (Lammers et al., 2005). Multiple levels of social and cultural contexts normalize inequalities, which enable power and ill-treatment against women to take shape (Sokolova, 2010). Rivas et al. (2013) reported many mistreated women normalize their experiences by viewing them as typical but can sometimes admit the behaviours were unacceptable or undesirable and causing strife. Even though women do not desire the unacceptable behaviours of their intimate partners, they attempt to deal with the relational

tensions through accepting and normalizing the exploitative sociocultural gender roles (Rivas et al., 2013).

Gender role socialization promotes stifling of women by encouraging people to accept character traits in one gender while discouraging the same traits from developing in the other gender (Lammers et al., 2005). When emotional torment against women is viewed as gendered and accepted as natural and normal, the treatment toward women becomes very difficult to change (Sellers et al., 2005). However, social systems that produce gender beliefs of emotionally abusive attitudes and behaviours can also change and create healthier emotional attitudes and behaviours (Lammers et al., 2005). Gender roles in patriarchal societies that create oppressive female gender roles and characteristics are viewed as natural and normal, further constructing the action of *gender doing* (Lammers et al., 2005; Sellers et al., 2005). Gender doing is the action or doing of the gender role socialization characteristics. For example, mistreated women often try to keep their man in a good mood through gender doing. They use a submissive coaxing style such as gesturing a kiss with kissing sounds and calling him darling, even when inside they have feelings of hatred (Lammers et al., 2005). Women who do not conform to their subordinate gender doing roles are punished by the patriarchal, socialized, controlling partners who view the women's subordinate roles as normal and natural (Lammers et al., 2005). Women who are punished through the silent control of neglect or other emotional mistreatments suffer from acute extreme distress, emotional pain, and worry about their sanity (Fields, 2012; Karakurt & Silver, 2013; Lammers et al., 2005).

Knowing all of this, it is understandable how people's identities are shaped by their different social interactions and performed identities. People's performed identities shift with the roles they play, their audience, and the expectations deemed as acceptable (Lammers et al.,

2005). Part of the woman's identity in the relationship is to socially perform as if she is not being mistreated, a silently made agreement between her and her partner (Rivas et al., 2013).

[The] "disintegration of self" ... [is] a sort of "socio-cultural pathology" of self-identity.

The forms of narcissistic destructiveness are manifold; like a cancerous growth, they penetrate all spheres of life activities manifested in perfectionism, and in negative and hostile attitudes toward oneself and others. (Sokolova, 2010, p. 688)

Lammers et al. (2005) found that after a destroyed self-esteem, the undermined woman's identity was negatively affected, and part of her identity is to function as a *self object* performing like she is not being mistreated.

Self object is an infant's initial sociocultural experience not separating self or object but instead combines with another (Gleig, 2010). As the infant matures their psychic structure will later transmute into internal structures (Gleig, 2010; Solomon, 1994). During this restructuring, if caretakers fail to show empathy towards the child's experiences, or the child undergoes a traumatic experience, the child develops states of emptiness, despair, feelings of unreality, excessive self-consciousness, flips back and forth between inferiority and grandiosity, reverts backwards to an intense desire to merge with another, develops uncontrollable rage, and creates a lack of empathy (Gleig, 2010). This object relation coping mechanism models how emotional relationships and social cognition determines success or failure in the ability to generate and sustain balanced personal and social relationships (Sokolova, 2010). The current sociocultural mindset brings about the "me generation" (Wolfe, as cited in Gleig, 2010, p. 84), a crisis in personal and social relationships, resulting from the changes that have become a part of the predominant culture in present-day life combined with relationally futile behaviours and attitudes



such as power imbalances, unequal attachments, and connections (Cowan-Jenssen & Goodison, 2009; Gleig, 2010).

### ***Background Experiences of Power Imbalances***

In this section I review two power imbalances. First, I discuss literature relating to dominance. I then examine admiration and rivalry.

**Dominance.** Dominance and fear are created through force, intimidation, hostility, aggression, and manipulation, usually by threatening to take away supports and resources (Tracy et al., 2011). Campbell and Foster (2002) defined power as occurring when one person has the ability and skill to influence another person's behaviour, feelings, way of thinking, or attitude. Bonds between people of unequal power often occur when there is also an unequal balance in resources. When women lack housing, education, emotionally and socially healthy support systems, finances, transportation, childcare or other necessary resources, they experience a loss of personal security (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). The loss of personal security could include loss of personal power, positive sense of self, or a feeling of living in domestic captivity (McLeod et al., 2010).

Opposite to this, narcissists have a grandiose sense of self-importance, want to be recognized as superior, believe they are special or unique, require excessive admiration, take advantage of others to meet their own needs, lack empathy, and are often jealous or envious (King, 2011; Popper, 2002; Tracy et al., 2011). Dominance is sustained by subjective feelings of superiority, and arrogance (Campbell, 1999). Narcissists report having inflated self-beliefs and believe they are more intelligent, attractive, and have higher achievements than others (Campbell, 1999; Campbell & Foster, 2002; Popper, 2002). However, diagnosed narcissism is considered an emotional disorder created in early development by experiencing a loss of

grandiosity, inflicted sense of shame, and abuse, which leaves a fragile self-esteem and creates a “narcissistic wound” (Tracy, et al., 2011, p. 330) leaving a person with a deflated sense of self (Tracy et al., 2011; Wright, 2016). In some cases, narcissists grow up in environments where they were overly praised, treated as the centre of the universe, reared to believe they are superior, entitled, or more special than others (Campbell, 1999; Popper, 2002; Tracy et al., 2011). Not fulfilling these deeply rooted values in adulthood creates a sense of disequilibrium, sense of failure, low self-worth, and insecurity forming the need for dominance, power, and control to gain back the comforts of the learned childhood status or expectancy (Berenson, & Andersen, 2006; Tracy et al., 2011). Experiencing both ends of the narcissism spectrum effects decisions, attitudes, and behaviours, resulting in a wake of emotional destruction along the narcissist’s path (Popper, 2002; Wright, 2016; Tracy et al., 2011).

For narcissists to overcome the perceived imperfections and live up to their inflated sense of self, they create a strategy of dominance through coercing others and situations (Tracy et al., 2011; Wright, 2016). To coerce others into viewing them as perfect, the narcissist takes credit for successful situations and blames others or situations when outcomes are not favourable. To compensate and improve perceived perfectionism, they continually try to impress, even at the expense of another’s well-being, and this is a constant game of dominance, power, and control that they forever play (Berenson & Andersen, 2006; Campbell & Foster, 2002; Popper, 2002). Intimate narcissistic male partners are not interested in intimacy, commitment, or investment in a relationship because they are always looking for something better to improve their perfect self-image. The narcissist only stays in the current relationship until a perceived better partner is presented to enhance his self image, giving him a sense of being powerfully dominant, secure, and successful (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Due to their insecurities and uncertain sense of self,

narcissists seek out perceived easy targets who they believe are unsuspecting, unaware, or vulnerable, allowing the narcissist to have the upper hand (Berenson & Andersen, 2006; Campbell & Foster, 2002; Popper, 2002).

Many narcissists gravitate toward positions of power, which include dominant relational roles where they have an advantage over others (Miller & Campbell, 2010; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). To secure their enhanced sense of self, intimate narcissistic male partners use dominance as a form of self-preservation and an emotional self-defence (Popper, 2002; Veronese et al., 2015). Men are more likely to secure a position of dominance in a relationship because women tend to admire partners who appear to be powerful. Power and control characteristics suggest men able to take care of their partner and their children (Grosz et al., 2015). What needs to be explored further are outcomes after women (young girls) and men (young boys) are educated in the effects of dominant interpersonal peer relationships and other dominant interpersonal relationships.

**Admiration and Rivalry.** Grosz et al. (2015) described narcissistic admiration as a “self-enhancing interpersonal strategy aimed at acquiring social adoration through charm and assertiveness (Dufner et al., 2015, p. 84). Narcissists have a high need for attention and admiration and are very skilled at entertaining others for highly sought-after approval and acceptance (Campbell, 1999; Campbell & Foster, 1999; Grosz et al., 2015). As a result, narcissists behave in a charming and self-assured manner, giving them a social boldness to create a positive first impression. They come across as very likeable, confident, and interested in their audience (Campbell, 1999; Dimaggio, 2011; Grosz et al., 2015). Women low in dominance sometimes seek out partners high in self-admiration who appear to be competent and confident for what the women feel they are lacking in themselves (Grosz et al., 2015).

In contrast, Grosz et al. (2015) defined narcissistic rivalry “as an antagonistic, other-derogative interpersonal orientation that is aimed towards preventing damage to the self-image by aggressiveness and devaluation of others” (pp. 84–85). Grosz et al. found that people with anxiety were more attracted to partners high in narcissistic rivalry for long-term relationships. Narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry have different effects on long- and short-term relationships. In short-term relationships, people do not mind the company of a narcissist with narcissistic admiration, finding them comfortable and easy to be around. Partners of narcissists experience lot of entertainment and excitement with very little boredom (Grosz et al., 2015). Narcissistic rivalry is an attractive characteristic for the long-term relationship because the sarcasm that the narcissist uses toward the female partner is also used to stand up to the world and protect her (Grosz et al., 2015). However, overtime, as the true admiration and rivalry narcissistic characteristics are revealed, people become repelled by the behaviours, actions, and attitudes of the dominant narcissist (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Grosz et al., 2015). Citing Freud (1957) in his essay “On Narcissism,” Grosz et al. (2015) stated, “People either choose targets that satisfy their needs or targets who are like their past, current, or future/desired self” (p. 85).

### ***Surviving Experiences Using Learned or Adaptive Responses***

In this section, I discuss common adaptive responses to being subjected to narcissistic behaviours. First, I review literature on attachment and connections issues. I then discuss dependency, boundary and relationship, and family dynamics. I close this section with an examination of the Stockholm syndrome.

**Attachment and connection issues.** Bowlby’s attachment theory (as cited in Reid et al., 2013) has three main attachment styles: insecure attachment, ambivalent/avoidant attachment, and secure attachment. Although children generally do not view parental ill-treatment as

negative, it conflicts with innate positive inner dialogue, creating an insecure attachment (Berenson & Andersen, 2006; Øverup et al., 2017; Popper, 2002). Furthermore, Mumford et al. (as cited in Popper, 2002) noted destructive intimate narcissistic male partners who made destructive and harsh decisions were groomed by negative life experiences and parental ill-treatment. These insecurely attached individuals often feel unworthy of love, may develop anxiety and depression, and generally have emotional problems, including low self-worth, poor sense of self, emotional distance, anxious sensitivity to rejection, poorer interpersonal problem-solving skills, and increased neuroticism (Berenson & Andersen, 2006; Øverup et al., 2017; Popper, 2002). Popper (2002) stated, “There is a striking resemblance between narcissism and insecure/avoidant attachment styles” (p. 803).

Ambivalent attachment is a form of insecure, avoidant attachment created by inconsistent responses of the caregiver and the child’s confusion about the caregiver’s ability to care for them (Øverup et al., 2017; Popper, 2002). This creates an insecurity with a strong desire for love coupled with a fear of rejection (Berenson & Andersen, 2006; Popper, 2002). On the opposite end of the spectrum, the securely attached individual possesses a healthy confidence and trust in others (Øverup et al., 2017; Popper, 2002). A person who has grown up with caregivers who are reliable and can be depended on in stressful situations or times of need feel protected by their caregivers and develop a secure attachment (Popper, 2002). The child tends to see him or herself with positive self-views and later in life creates and maintains peaceful interpersonal relationships (Øverup et al., 2017). It would follow suit that those who are securely attached create relationships that foster growth and well-being in their partners more easily than the insecurely attached intimate narcissistic male partners (Øverup et al., 2017; Popper, 2002). The securely attached individuals do not need any forms of self-defence nor do they possess a need to

dominate others. Instead, they empower their partners and have positive emotional investments because no personal security is required (Popper, 2002). This type of attachment maybe more in line with creating an ebb-and-flow type of relationship by living side by side yet magically still connecting with nobody needing to empower anybody.

**Dependency.** Social psychological theory suggests that the power in a relationship is affected by the amount of dependency each person has on that relationship (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). The more dependent a person, including emotional dependency, the less power that individual will have in the relationship. The more power a person has, the less investment that person feels they need to put forth. The individual with greater dependence invests more into the relationship because he or she believes the relationship is needed to function or survive (McLeod et al., 2010; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Females tend to be more emotional beings than males, leaving them more susceptible to emotional dependency on the relationship (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). As a result of males being less emotionally dependant on relationships, they are less invested and less dependent on the relationship, enabling them to have more power and to dominate the relationship (McLeod et al., 2010; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). According to Campbell and Foster (2002), “investments refer to the amount that the individual has staked in the relationship. Examples of investments in a relationship are shared friendships, shared networks, shared resources, children, and even memories or time. Greater investments lead to greater commitment” (p. 486). Intimate narcissistic male partners lack commitment and investments in the home, leaving little satisfaction, because the greater the investment, the greater the satisfaction (Campbell & Foster, 2002).

Campbell and Foster (2002) suggested that highly committed people take ownership to create and maintain satisfying, successful, and peaceful relationships. These authors further

noted coping with the relationship requires discussing conflict, finding satisfactory solutions to conflict, and maintaining loyalty to the relationship (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Opposite to this, narcissists have a low level of commitment to any relationship and display behaviours and attitudes that express a lack of commitment and emotional distance (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). This lack of emotional investment is often to the extent that the behaviours and attitudes are viewed as antisocial and lacking in commitment, which creates unstable relationships (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Popper, 2002). Stable, satisfying, and rewarding relationships occur when there is balanced dependency and independency with both partners. Unfortunately, only a third of the couples report having equal and satisfying relationships in which both shared in decision making and power (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Sprecher and Felmlee (1997) recorded a sizeable group of women self-reporting as having more power in the relationship (19–30%). These authors also reported men being the ones to have the power and the decision-making position most likely in the relationship (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). The men in this study self-reported being satisfied with equal power but were most satisfied in a relationship with final decision-making authority (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Individuals who have final decision-making authority appear to hold the power in the relationship, but apparently this is not always the case (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Making a final decision that is motivated by keeping the person in power feeling settled is not the same as having power. For example, if a woman wants to go out but decides to stay home because she does not want to upset her intimate narcissistic partner, she has made a forced decision not a decision of choice.

Although, women generally prefer the male to have more power, over time unequal relationships tend to dissolve (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Sprecher and Felmlee (1997) found that women who feel they have equal power will stay in the relationship. However, these authors

failed to look at relationships or connections that survive in an ebb-and-flow state, in which each participant is free to live in a manner that fulfills her or his life's purpose and nobody controls, lives with conditional regard, or has power except over her or himself. This left me questioning if it is detrimental to give up personal power or independence and become dependent in exchange for not having the headaches that control or responsibility brings. Do some women find it easier to choose to ride the waves rather than steer the boat? Assuming there must be some level of power in a relationship, Popper (2002) made the case clear that personal security, power, and domination determines the attachment styles created through conditional regard in childhood experiences.

**Boundary and Relational Shifts.** As a result of sociocultural influences, people develop nonphysical boundaries to their roles and identities, which they draw, shift, and redraw in constant negotiations and renegotiations with others, consciously or unconsciously, to create, maintain, or find their missing peace (Brown et al., 2018; Kress et al., 2018). When individuals act in these fluent boundaries, they are said to perform in character to their roles in life. People draw on understandings that are normatively shared with their circle of friends, family, and sociocultural community (Brown et al., 2018; Rivas et al., 2013). Boundaries shift from outer to inner boundary after acknowledging the exploitative and stifling ill-treatment in the relationship (Rivas, 2012). The boundary shifts are determined by social and cultural contexts, including changes in the stance of others, support, and explicit comments made by others about the self and the relationship (Néray, 2016; Rivas et al., 2013). As in object relation, the early stages of childhood development with the primary boundaries between self and others are inseparable (Gleig, 2010). When these meshed boundaries continue into adulthood, the internal self does not



end but rather merges with another external to the self, making it extremely difficult to reach a turning point and leave the restrictive relationship (Gleig, 2010; Rivas et al., 2013).

According to Rivas (2012), most researchers assert the women's primary goal in relational shifts is to leave the hurtful relationship. Rivas (2012) further stated, before leaving, the woman needs to reach a turning point that is generally created by life events or recognition of an unacceptable situation, shifting the woman from passive to active and from avoidant coping to emotionally focussed coping (Lammers et al., 2005). The connection between turning point events and moments of change are often vague and frequently only recognized in hindsight. The turning point could be a single event, subtle or sudden (Kearney, 2001; Rivas, 2012). The process for leaving or repairing the relationship generally starts at the turning point at which the woman becomes aware that she has changed overtime and is no longer willing to tolerate her intimate partner's emotional mistreatment (Lammers et al., 2005). The awareness of mistreatment usually manifests in her anger or her destructive rage as a means of expressing her pent-up negative emotions. These actions generally allow for the beginning of the change process (Kearney, 2001; Rivas, 2012; Lammers et al., 2005). The change process cannot start until the woman has disconnected emotionally and becomes unattached with a complete separation from her intimate narcissistic male partner (Kearney, 2001; Lammers et al., 2005). According to Rivas (2012) and Kearney (2001), the more independent a woman becomes, the less self-sacrificing she becomes, and the more likely to leave a narcissistic situation. Often, when the woman seeks out support from sociocultural influenced others, such as clergy, family, or friends, they continue to encourage her to stay in the emotionally challenging relationship, chaining the woman's commitment and obligation to her partner and elevating the difficulty in breaking free (Rivas et al., 2013).

Even with new understandings and attitudes, women still must muster up enough strength and courage to leave the narcissistic relationship. However, many times, even after leaving, the torture and turmoil manifested by her narcissistically intimate partner does not end (Lammers et al., 2005). Kearney (2001) stated that the abuse often becomes worse once the woman has physically left her narcissistic partnership. If she has not emotionally detached from her partner, he is able to control her by retaining an emotional hold on her (Lammers et al., 2005). Women must begin to let go emotionally, create more personal power, become less dependant, and give up the unaware sociocultural support system; only then can restructuring of a more satisfying life finally start to begin (Kearney, 2001; Lammers et al., 2005). In the process of restructuring their well-being, women seek out a wide range of supports for stresses such as childcare, home responsibilities, or other problems with the relationship (Rivas et al., 2013). Through gaining trust in the support being sought out, women begin to actively work at reducing the narcissistic influence by correcting power imbalances, increasing personal power, and learning healthy ways to deal with their intimate narcissistic male partners, or start preparing to leave and begin an independent and satisfying lifestyle.

**Family Dynamics.** Given the previous information, it is obvious that attachment styles effect relationships and family dynamics. Insecurely attached individuals have a fear of abandonment; therefore, they can only commit on a superficial level (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Øverup et al., 2017). The lack of commitment by the insecure intimate narcissistic male partner is fuelled by the need to continue looking for something better to attach themselves and belong (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Øverup et al., 2017). The insecurely attached individuals seem to always be chasing their tails, trying to find the missing piece instead of working to build a strong relational foundation to satisfy the need for belonging while establishing a healthy sense

of self and a foundational sense of peace (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Øverup et al., 2017).

Humans have a strong need to belong and benefit from affectionate relations; as a result, a sense of belonging within the family dynamics come into play (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Øverup et al., 2017). Feelings of rejection, on the other hand, create distance in relationships and family dynamics while depleting the self-esteem and self-worth (Kearney, 2001; Määttä et al., 2012; Tracy et al., 2011). Nevertheless, women influenced by intimate narcissistic male partners continue to attempt to find different ways to connect in these relationships (Berenson & Andersen, 2006; McLeod et al., 2010). Many women who experienced life with intimate narcissistic male partner were exposed to similar harsh and destructive households in childhood or family of origins where they learned to connect through the psychological turmoil (McLeod et al., 2010).

Calvete et al., (2007) contended that the psychological turmoil in family situations is created through isolation, belittling, and humiliation. With this, psychological abuse effects cognitions, creating maladaptive thought processes including disconnection-rejection. Disconnection-rejection is the belief that one's needs for security, respect, and belonging will not be met while expecting to be hurt, taken advantage of, humiliated, or abused (Calvete et al., 2007; Lin-Roark et al., 2015). This disrupts the relational needs and leaves feelings of uncertainty (Calvete et al., 2007; Lin-Roark et al., 2015). These types cognitions are commonly found amongst women whose past beliefs involved thinking they were the cause of the disruptions or to blame (Calvete et al., 2007; Lammers et al., 2005). These women believe the poor treatment they experience in their family dynamics are unavoidable. At the same time, they believe there are a lack resources and support (Bernardo & Estrellado, 2017; Lin-Roark et al.,

2015). With this learned helplessness, these women do not seek out help or attempt to solve problems related to the perceived inescapable ill-treatment (Calvete et al., 2007). Therefore, change and finding the missing peace is unlikely to occur until the woman transforms her negative schema into a workable positive one (Bernardo & Estrellado, 2017; Foster et al., 2015).

**Stockholm Syndrome.** Stockholm syndrome is another form of superficial bonding for the sake of survival and attempt for well-being. Cantor and Price (2007) described Stockholm syndrome as the paradoxical development of reciprocal positive feelings between hostages and their captors during traumatic experiences. To explain more, it is when a bond is developed between the aggressor and the survivor in some form of isolation. There are four conditions that are apparent in the development of Stockholm syndrome. There is a perceived threat to the victim's physical or psychological well-being at the hands of the aggressor, perceived kindness in the aggressor, isolated ideas of the aggressor with no outside influence, and the belief that escape from the situation is not likely (Cantor & Price, 2007). The survivor may ironically consider the abuser as the only source from which she can obtain her needed nurturance and protection. If this need is coupled with some small kindness, it brings her hope and leads her to emotionally bond with the positive side and deny her anger at the abuse and terrorizing side the captor (Jameson, 2010; Lin-Roark et al., 2015). The woman may believe that the intimate narcissistic male partner or captor is her only source of protection and nurturance. When this is added with even a slight amount of caring or kindness, it brings hope, and she bonds to this side of her aggressor while denying her negative emotions (Jameson, 2010; Lin-Roark et al., 2015). Women bond with abusers or narcissists in this way to ensure the survival and well-being in traumatic situations, environments, or experiences (Jameson, 2010).

The outcomes for staying in relationships with intimate narcissistic partners comes at a steep price-the self (Cantor & Price, 2007; Coker et al., 2000; Foster et al., 2015; Reid et al., 2013). It takes a significant amount of courage to face the effects of posttraumatic stress disorder, trauma bonding, and Stockholm Syndrome created through repeated criticism and the constant destruction of human spirit or self through repetitive teachings of unworthiness and “proven” weaknesses (Lin-Roark et al., 2015; McLeod et al., 2010). These unsupportive actions and criticisms that are lacking in stable boundaries leave the female’s emotional well-being shattered, making it difficult for her to find her missing peace (Coker et al., 2000; Lin-Roark et al., 2015).

### **Interrelated Processes by which Mental Health and Well-Being are Experienced by Women Within the Context of Intimate Partner Abusive Relationships**

#### ***Preservation of the ‘Self’***

Bowlby (as cited in Reid et al., 2013) suggested that experiences with attachments and relationships in childhood lay the groundwork for adult psychosocial well-being. Fromm (as cited in Øverup et al., 2017) explained that when parents are inattentive or unavailable to love their children it creates an unworthy-of-love schema, resulting in a lifetime foundation that influences feelings, behaviours, attention, memory, and cognitions with intimate partners (Øverup et al., 2017). The working model of the self is greatly affected through the interactions with intimate partners who appear to know the exact tactics needed to gain and maintain control with power in the relationship (Grosz et al., 2015; Tracy et al., 2011). Narcissists will use any tactic necessary to ensure their own personal needs are met, even at the expense of their partners’ self-esteem, self-concepts, and spirit (Grosz et al., 2015; Tracy et al., 2011). However, women in these types

of relationships still do their best to maintain their own needs and self-care. In McLeod et al.'s (2010) study, all the women identified spirituality as a means of self-care:

One participant described creating sanctuaries for herself: it could be taking a walk in a special place; it could be spiritual, like for my soul to connect with a higher power; and knowing God believes I am a good person and I deserve good things creates an inner sanctuary. (p. 306)

Genuine self-esteem, which is defined as “an adequate person of worth but not superior to others” Tracy et al., 2011, p. 334), gives human beings the courage to acknowledge failures, faults, and limitations without feeling shame, guilt, unworthiness or becoming defensive, allowing further development of a healthy, positive self (Tracy et al., 2011). Low self-esteem or low feelings of value in a woman can potentially affect the outcomes in her life; if a woman believes she cannot, she simply will not (Erol & Orth, 2011; Lin-Roark et al., 2015). Being able to create a healthy sense of being and the ability to develop mastery encourages the healthy growth of self (Erol & Orth, 2011; Tracy et al., 2011). Erol and Orth (2011) defined a sense of mastery as “the extent to which people see themselves as having control over the forces that affect their lives” (Pearlin et al., 1981, p. 608), giving a sense of well-being.

When self-esteem is increased, or the woman's self is permitted to become her true self, adaptability increases and the risk taking required to create mastery is also bolstered (Erol & Orth, 2011). All these components result in better physical and emotional health and well-being. In addition, the woman is then comfortable taking part in social activities, increasing her higher self-esteem even more (Erol & Orth, 2011). In other words, the higher her self-esteem and self-mastery, the more likely she will part take in social activities. With social activities, she tends to find more supports. With more supports, she experiences less stress. With less stress, there is

increased, health, income, and opportunities (Erol & Orth, 2011). Opportunity and becoming give women the potential to climb to insurmountable levels even when facing her fears (Reid et al., 2013). Any movement toward changing grim circumstance is to be commended.

The intimate narcissistic male partner continually attacks and attempts to destroy his partner's self-esteem and well-being, safeguarding against her having opportunities that will give her any type of personal power and control (Cantor & Price, 2007; Reid et al., 2013; Lin-Roark et al., 2015). He condemns her sense of worthiness and lovability to prevent her from gaining independence in life and eventually having a satisfying and successful existence of her own in or out of the relationship (Tracy et al., 2011). Women hunger for approval from their male partners and continually try to prove they are good people, worthy person and loveable, all without accomplishment (Määttä et al., 2012). Unfortunately, much of people's affirmations come from relations with others (Calvete et al., 2007). According to Calvete et al. (2007), individuals can love themselves, but it is not adequate. People need to feel belonging and love from outside of themselves. Humans are born from love with love, and the spirit or self is constructed of pure unconditional love. Intimate narcissistic male partners use this need as a leverage and give acceptance, love, belonging in exchange for whatever they decide they need or want (Lin-Roark et al., 2015; Määttä et al., 2012).

### ***Living Through Love Bombing***

Intimate narcissistic male partners seem to have a clear understanding of the secular concepts of love, belonging, self-worth, and importance (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Määttä et al., 2012). In the initial stages of a romantic relationship, narcissists concentrate on these delicately programmed human needs when designing and practising a tactic called "love bombing" (Strutzenberg, 2017, p.82. Campbell and Foster (2002) stated, "Narcissists often begin romantic

relationships with an inflated appraisal of their partner (idealization)” (p. 485). When love bombing, narcissists will allow others to do all the talking, while they listen intently to the wishes, dreams, and desires. Once this information is gathered, the narcissist applies it to his actions, behaviours, ideas, thoughts, and discussions, creating a belief the target is extremely important and loveable to him (Määttä et al., 2012). To explain further, if the narcissist knows his target loves to go to the beach and suntan, he takes her to the beach so she can suntan and enjoy herself. At the same time, he pretends to love the beach even if he detests it. Not only does the target feel important, but a belief is also being created that the narcissist is the perfect person to be admired (Grosz et al., 2015). Love bombing is a powerful tactic to use because once a person falls in it is difficult to leave, especially for the anxious, vulnerable, or insecure woman (Grosz et al., 2015). These women view the world as a dangerous place, and this creates a strong need to be protected. The stronger the need for protection, the more likely she is to be dependent on her intimate narcissistic male partner for her survival (Lin-Roark et al., 2015). To safeguard survival, humans were designed to be social creatures and depend on one another emotionally, physically, psychologically, and sometimes, financially (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Researchers have formulated the idea that the more emotionally involved a person is in a relationship, the more she or he feels comprised her or his personal power (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). In general, men reported being less emotionally involved than women, giving them more power and control over the woman’s well-being (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997).

### ***Trauma and Trauma Bonding***

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is one of the many ways a woman’s well-being is compromised; PTSD develops when a woman experiences a traumatic event, prolonged trauma, and/or extreme stresses (Iverson et al., 2011; Iverson et al., 2013; Kress et al., 2018). Women



who remain in homes dominated by their narcissistic male partner may experience PTSD, which manifests in her feelings of being unable to escape the mental, physical, or emotional ill-treatment through constant threats such as having her children taken away or being left all alone to fend for herself (McLeod et al, 2010). The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2000) defined PTSD as reexperiencing or remembering the trauma, numbing, emotional avoidance, difficulty sleeping, sleeping to avoid, chronic guilt, shame, anger, difficulty with trust, increased physiological arousal, disassociation, personality changes, dysfunctional attachment patterns, learned helplessness, self-inflicted harm and harming others (see also Reid et al., 2013). Often PTSD is comorbid with trauma bonding and Stockholm Syndrome (Cantor & Price, 2007; Foster et al., 2015; Reid et al., 2013).

Traumatic bonding is a form of brainwashing developed through isolation, alienation, and intimidation by weakening any personal strengths. It is a breaking down personal strengths and sense of self, followed by rebuilding one's sense of self through the perceived salvation produced by the narcissist creates a traumatic bond (Jameson, 2010; Reid et al., 2013). Unfortunately, traumatic bonding creates a barrier to leaving home or staying away from the narcissist as a result the strong emotional bond, connection, and belonging that was created out of necessity (Cantor & Price, 2007; McLeod et al., 2010). With traumatic bonding, women feel sorry for the narcissist, develop empathy and forgiveness towards the aggressor replacing, and dissolving previous feelings of anger and entrapment (Jameson, 2010, ). To further this argument, Jameson (2010) asserted, through the establishment of the traumatic bond, the survivor identifies with the narcissist for physical self-created well-being and preservation. In trauma bonding, submission, pacification, and conciliation tend to be much more favourable in deescalating unfavourable and harmful outcomes to help salvage any type of well-being (Cantor

& Price, 2007; Coker et al., 2000). Appeasement, submission, and other avoidant strategies appear to be actions of the weak. Realistically, the opposite is true. It takes great strength and courage to put on a smile and carry on for the sake of survival (Jameson, 2010; Reid et al., 2013).

### ***Conditional Regard and Self-Determination Theory***

Family dynamics vary widely depending on cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, family history, family expectations, and family conditions, but the need for love, connectedness, and belonging are universal (Irvani, 2007; Øverup et al., 2017). The feeling of belonging, connectedness, and love comes at a high price for some women, because their family dynamics use control strategies with conditions to get her primal and basic needs met (Brown et al., 2018; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Kress et al., 2018; Roth, & Assor, 2012). The control strategies used to create conditional love are labelled as conditional positive and negative regard. Conditional regard is when affection or regard is given for complying with the needs, desires, and wants of another (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Roth, & Assor, 2012).

Conditional negative regard (CNR) occurs when one does not meet the standards of the other. They are punished, in one form or another, sometimes in the form of rejection or love withdrawal (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Roth, & Assor, 2012). Conditional positive regard (CPR), on the other hand, is the opposite control strategy, giving more love, attention, and acceptance when the partner's or parent's expectations have been met (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Roth & Assor, 2012). Both these conditions create suppressed, repressed, and stifled emotions, limiting attachment and connection because these conditional regard control tactics do not allow individuals to practice and exercise the expression of personal emotions that help aide in the development of emotional intelligence and build strong, healthy relationships (Roth &

Assor, 2012). According to self-determination theory (SDT), CNR and CPR influence more than the emotional stability, they also affect attachment and connection (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017).

The SDT adds to the explanation of CNR and CPR suggesting that people have three innate needs for psychological well-being and growth: relatedness (need to belong), autonomy (need for self-direction), and competence (need to feel capable and valuable; Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017). Individuals expressing CNR do not support any of the three innate needs of others. It does not satisfy relatedness because affection is being withheld, leaving intimates (i.e., partners and children) feeling unattached, unloved, unworthy, unimportant, and lacking in connection (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017). Kanat-Maymon et al. (2017) noted,

[CNR] is likely to undermine the need for autonomy because it involves pressure to behave in ways that the individual may not fully accept. It may also thwart the need for relatedness because it involves withholding affection if conditions are not met. It is also not likely to support competence because it may not involve a high degree of structure or bolster confidence in one's abilities. (p. 29)

Kanat-Maymon et al. (2017) further contended that competence affected in negative ways limits attachment and connection through undermining abilities and leaving individuals feeling they are incapable, unable, lacking in confidence, fearful of risk-taking, and, ultimately, creates insecurity. Research concludes that when people are prevented from becoming and behaving in ways that are meaningful to their own self-direction or personal growth and instead pressured to focus on the personal direction of another, autonomy is compromised because these individuals are forced to behave in ways they may not favour or do not enhance the spiritual being also known as the self (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Øverup et al., 2017; Roth & Assor, 2012).

Similarly, CPR fails to support the need for autonomy, as it puts one in a position that compromises personal beliefs and preferred actions by forcing the person to focus on the beliefs of their partner instead of their own beliefs (Øverup et al., 2017). CPR is more likely to support the needs of relatedness and competence, as it promises future love and acceptance, future sense of belonging, future importance, and a future feeling of capability (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017). However, the love and acceptance are conditional and viewed as lasting only if the needs of the other are being met. In the long run, CPR creates conditions that foster unhappy and unsatisfying relationships that lack attachment and connection because needs are only temporarily met, making emotional regulation very difficult (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017).

Childhood family conditions, and environments set the stage for future family conditions and environments (Øverup et al., 2017). Mothers who experience lives with intimate narcissistic partners are inconsistent with the expectations they impose on their children. The women are more stressed and emotionally drained, which leads to more punitive actions on their children (Reid et al., 2013). Punitive actions send messages to the children that they are not worthy or loveable. With this, the mother is also modelling for the children ineffective problem-solving behaviours and coping mechanisms (Reid et al., 2013). Based on SDT, living in negative childhood conditions creates stress and internal conflict, leading to anxiety and confusion in children diminishing their psychological ability (Reid et al., 2013). On the other hand, mothers who displayed unconditional affection, love, and acceptance created household conditions that lead to children having the ability to make good choices, allowed the children to feel emotionally close, and created more optimal outcomes such as being able to express negative emotions in a constructive manner (Jameson, 2010; Øverup et al., 2017; Roth & Assor, 2012).

Researchers found that women involved with narcissistic male partners reported their parents' regard was conditional and psychological needs had only been met depending on the outcomes such as being obedient to the parents, respecting, supporting, and participating in family expectations (Øverup et al., 2017; Roth & Assor, 2012). According to SDT, three psychological needs must be met for psychological growth to take place: need for relatedness, autonomy, and competence (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2017; Roth & Assor, 2012; Øverup et al., 2017). Researchers have shown that attachment styles are rooted in childhood experiences, expectations, conditions, and environments (Popper, 2002). Knowing this helps to explicate why intimate narcissistic male partners and women respond to one another like a well-rehearsed two-step dance of love and hate, pushing and pulling away from one another as if addicted to the relationship's emotional ups and downs (Cantor & Price, 2007; Iverson et al., 2011). This cycle of emotional confusion leads to psychological distress and depression, creating a greater likelihood of intimate partner exploitation (Iverson et al., 2011). To survive the narcissistic experiences, cognitive dissonance, or believing the distortions, is created through a contradictory thought process, which serve to reduce the emotional pain and confusion (Iverson et al., 2011). Cognitive dissonance, chaos, and confusion are some tactics narcissists use to upset the psychosocial well-being and gain control, as it is very difficult to separate truth from reality in these situations (Cantor & Price, 2007; Jameson, 2010; Iverson et al., 2011).

### ***Responses and Approaches to Supporting Women Who Live in Intimate Partner Narcissistic Relationships***

**Starting Where the Client 'Is': Using Humanistic Counselling Orientation.** Client-centred theory or a humanistic approach requires the therapist's role to be nondirective. Client-centred approaches view people as authentically motivated toward growth, the experts on their

lived experiences, and as possessing an innate capacity to move toward self-enhancement and fulfillment (Freeman, 1993; Hill & Nakayama, 2000; Moon, 2007). The client-centred therapist recognizes the client's world as being her or his experience, perceptions, intentions, wishes, and worries (Moon, 2007). The therapist recognizes this all without judgment and lays aside personal values in order to enter the client's world without prejudice (Hill & Nakayama, 2000). The counsellor stays in context with the client as much as humanly possible, striving to understand as much of the client's world as is possible while still existing as a separate person (Freeman, 1993). This is known as conceptual identification.

To enter the client's world, the therapist listens to client with empathy and accepts the individual for who she or he is, where the person is, and takes the views as the client's truth and reality (Freeman, 1993; Hill & Nakayama, 2000; Meyers, 2014). To therapeutically support women who experience their intimate partners as narcissistic, their beliefs and truths must be respected and accepted if there is to be a strong client–therapist therapeutic alliance (Freeman, 1993; Meyers, 2014). The therapist is to stay present and empathically receptive of the client's communications and experience (Freeman, 1993), setting aside personal preoccupations while fostering an authentic therapeutic alliance (Freeman, 1993; Meyers, 2014; Moon, 2007).

Empathic understanding refers to the counsellor's commitment to follow and grasp the client's communications, intentions, and meanings as the client's reality with unconditional positive regard (Freeman, 1993; Moon, 2007). Empathic listening and unconditional positive regard for the women and her stories are required if the therapist is to understand the experiences and burdens these narcissistic behavioural and attitudinal patterns place on the core well-being of the women seeking support (Mosquera & Knipe, 2015).

The use of unconditional positive regard requires the therapist to accept, care, and respect the client as a separate person while also maintaining her or his own feelings and experiences. Caring through unconditional positive regard is closely related to the nondirective attitude of a therapist (Freeman, 1993; Mosquera & Knipe, 2015). Unconditional positive regard is communicated through attunement, genuine interest, wanting to empathetically understand the client's internal frame of reference, listening without judgement or evaluation, and a willingness to walk with the client on his or her journey without questioning the client's expert view of his or her personal world (Hill & Nakayama, 2000; Moon, 2007; Meyers, 2014). Questioning can occur if the counsellor does not understand or needs clarification (Freeman, 1993; Wright, 2011). Sociocultural influences can significantly impair the therapist's or counsellor's beliefs and stereotypical attitudes toward women's subjective experiences with intimate partners whom they experience as narcissistic (Wright, 2011). When therapists are in an unfamiliar cross-cultural or sociocultural experience with a client, the therapist must be honest about the lack of knowledge and ask questions to understand, clarify, and learn from the expert (Freeman, 1993; Wright, 2011).

**Use of Conceptual Metaphors in Counselling.** Qualitative researchers use conceptual metaphors as an interpretive tool or an indirect form of expression accepting the client's metaphors as authentic narratives (Schmitt, 2005; Strong, 1989). An emerging shift in the expression and perspective of narcissism has begun to increase. Individuals are increasingly using the term narcissism to describe everyday intimate relational transactions for which they need support to understand both themselves and their partners in the relationship (Lin-Roark et al., 2015; Määttä et al., 2012; McLeod et al., 2010). Women increasingly use the term narcissistic or narcissism to characterize partners who present with some or all the following

qualities: self-centeredness, self-promotion, power, dominance, lacking personal responsibilities, and making or acting a claim for total freedom while disregarding their partner's needs (Markova, 2016; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). This shift is influencing and creating a metaphorical concept of narcissism which, for better or worse, is what the word narcissism has come to mean in everyday situations and contexts (Bromberg, 1983). Conceptual metaphors can help identify assumptions about a subject or situation and make relevant the sociocultural contexts in which conceptual metaphors occur (Kochis & Gillespie, 2006). Metaphors can include information that is predetermined by a particular assumption as it helps to establish an understanding of a commonplace experience by shaping how people conceptualize those experiences (Kochis & Gillespie, 2006; Wagner, 2017).

Metaphors allow language users to understand and communicate about complex or abstract ideas in terms of ordinary events and experiences (Kochis & Gillespie, 2006). For counsellors, conceptual metaphors can be important in understanding the meanings of clients' lived experiences and their connection to those experiences by interpreting the notions of commonplace (Kochis & Gillespie, 2006; Schmitt, 2005; Strong, 1989). Conceptual metaphors play an important part in learning and cognitively organizing an understanding of the world in which the clients live (Wagner, 2017). Conceptual metaphors conditioned by social norms can bring forth assumptions that are culturally shared to make sense of lived experiences (Kochis & Gillespie, 2006; Schmitt, 2005).

**Supports.** Supports are needed in the attempt to develop a satisfying, healthy, and stable well-being (Lin-Roark et al., 2015; McLeod et al., 2010). More importantly, supports are essential to changing life's path after being detoured and grossly misdirected (Purgason et al., 2016). To leave or survive living with an intimate narcissistic male partner, validation and



acknowledgement in an unconditional relationship or environment is paramount (Foster et al., 2015; McLeod et al., 2010). The woman needs to feel heard, understood, and validated (Purgason et al., 2016). The woman often feels her experiences and situations are unbelievable because her intimate narcissistic male partner created a belief in others that he is the perfect partner, making her look like the liar. With this, she doubts her own judgement and understandings. The woman needs to have somebody who will listen without judgement, who cares, and authentically has concerns for her well-being. She needs to express her anger, fears, and frustrations with other women who have had witness to such bizarre cruelty (Coker et al., 2000; Foster et al., 2015; McLeod et al., 2010). It may take years for her to undo the damage that was inflicted on her psyche, soul, and well-being (Jameson, 2010). Her supports may need to listen to her tell the same stories repeatedly until she has processed her ordeal (Coker et al., 2000; Foster et al., 2015; McLeod et al., 2010). To continue to heal and better understand the effects of living with an intimate narcissistic male partner, the woman benefits and becomes further empowered by supporting other women who are or have experienced a similar relationship (McLeod et al., 2010). Empowerment is gained not only through receiving support but also in the giving and teaching others how to heal. When individuals teach, they learn; when people give, they get (McLeod et al., 2010).

### **Summary**

In conducting this literature review, I uncovered some gaps in the research that require further exploration. For example, do women's attitudes, behaviours, and choices change after they have received training and education in narcissism? Would their ideas of healthy or "normal" relationship change? Would the way they view themselves and their roles in the relationship change? Would they remain in the narcissistic relationship? What type of support

would they need if they chose to stay in the relationship or leave? What happens when women understand themselves better in the context of a narcissistic relationship?

We already know women seek out a confident and bold partner who appears to be able to care for her needs and her children's needs (McLeod, et al., 2010; Grosz, et al., 2015). We also know how narcissists manipulate situations and relationships (Grosz, et al., 2015; Lam, 2012; Campbell & Foster, 2002; Popper, 2002). What requires further exploration is how these women describe themselves and their partners within these narcissistic relationships. This is important because it has been found that women continue to stay in relationships with male partners who abuse them through devaluation and exercise of behavioural and emotional dominance (Karakurt & Silver, 2013; Rivas, 2012). While there are numerous studies that explore coping in overtly abusive intimate male partner relationships (Iverson et al., 2011; Calvete et al., 2007), only few studies (Määttä et al., 2012) have attempted to better understand how women experience and cope with the effects of narcissistic relational dynamics, such as negotiating life with a male partner whose life patterns share features dialogically described as narcissistic in the current mainstream culture (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). As such, my goal in conducting this study was to understand and increase the awareness of narcissistically driven behaviours, attitudes, and its effects on women in who subjectively described their intimate male partner as narcissistic and to use this critical information to support women in these types of relationships.

The review of literature offered two very important concluding thoughts. First, women of intimate narcissistic male partners find ways to push through the lies that were imposed on them in childhood and in their intimate narcissistic relationships, preventing the precious development of becoming beautifully balanced beings (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2008). Inside, the resilient female is an ember that somehow remains protected from the wrath of cruelty. From this ember

great fires can be started. Try putting out a wildfire—it is unstoppable once started! The second but more disturbing thought, which is difficult to admit, is that narcissists are the other side of the same coin. Those with unhealthy narcissistic characteristics have a false confidence and false sense of superiority. These are coping mechanisms used as protective bearers to a fragile and very frightened inner child (Irvani, 2007; Mosquera & Knipe, 2015). Underneath the facade, this inner child feels inadequate and lives in a constant debilitating fear of not being loveable or good enough (Irvani, 2007; Mosquera & Knipe, 2015). The stifled infant self functions with an unstable well-being, thinking or feeling that the only supports he will have been the ones he captures and holds hostage (Irvani, 2007). These people are often in so much emotional distress, weighted down by unimaginable fear of not being good enough or the fear of not being able to live up to the standards set by their childhood caregivers (Dimaggio, 2011; Irvani, 2007). Instead of looking inside and healing the agony, they compensate painful feelings of inadequacy by convincing themselves and others of their superiority and entitlement (Dimaggio, 2011; Irvani, 2007; Wright, 2016). It would be very interesting and most challenging to research the makings of a narcissist, discovering the loss of the original identity and then find ways to correct the injustice. This research would hopefully prevent or stop narcissistic harm to the individual's children and intimate partners. The story of the narcissistic relationship has two sides, because love for self and love for others cannot be separated. People who cannot love themselves, cannot love others; those who cannot love others, cannot love themselves (Irvani, 2007).

## **CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY**

This current research is a qualitative phenomenological study that seeks to explore and better understand the personal accounts of women who have experienced living with intimate male partners whom they subjectively characterize as having narcissistic behaviors and attitudes. The purpose of this study was to investigate and document individual perceptions, meanings, and experiences expressed by the women living with intimate male partners whom they subjectively characterized as having narcissist behaviors and attitudes. The following question guided this research: “What is it like to live life as a woman with an intimate male partner subjectively perceived as narcissistic?” This primary investigator presents the methodology for this study in this chapter. The methodology is organized under the following sub-themes: Participants, Design of the Study, Data Collection, Data Management, Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, Bracketing, Limitations, and Summary.

### **Participants**

After human ethics approval from the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board and with signed consent from the participants, three adult females who met the criteria of having lived experiences with an intimate male partner subjectively presenting with narcissistic behaviors and attitudes were recruited for the study. To participate in this study, these women were at least 18 years of age, fluent in English, interested in volunteering in the study, and able to be interviewed alone. Smith and Osborn (2007) state that a sample size of three to five participants is ideal for a master's thesis Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Participants were recruited utilizing flyers via snowballing through participants of a previous pilot study, who agreed to

hand out a letter of information to people they thought would fit the inclusion criteria. Interested parties then contacted me directly by email.

### **Design of the Study**

This study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research design. The focus of phenomenological research is to describe and interpret participants' experiences to understand the essence of their experiences as perceived by them (McMillian, 2004). Specifically, I used the IPA method to assign meaning to the multiple realities of the participants' lived experiences (Smith, et al, 1999). For data collection, I adopted unstructured interview approach. Focused questions were used as prompts, while allowing the participants to guide the direction of the conversations that were of interest or concern to them. The data was analyzed using a double hermeneutics approach. This is described as a process where "the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" ( Smith & Osborn, 2007, p.4). In other words, the primary researcher interpreted the participants' interpretations of their experiences ( Osborn & Smith, 2005). For the interpretation of data, the primary researcher identified four super-ordinate themes that captured the main meanings of various subordinate themes that emerged from the data (Bradley and Simpson, 2014).

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected from a few women rather than a large group of women allowing the information to be concentrated and rich rather than fluid and erratic (Creswell, 2004). Before the interviews, each participant was provided with a script identifying the nature and purpose of this research study. Then, they were asked to provide written informed consent before the interview process began. After consent, and one week before the interview session, the participants

received the interview question. The participants chose the time and location outside of their home for the interview.

Consistent with phenomenological approaches, this study relied on first-person accounts obtained through participant face-to-face interviews. One unstructured interview averaging 60 to 90 minutes was conducted at a venue convenient for the participants. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Interviews opened with the question, "Could you tell me your life experience living with an intimate male partner whose behaviors and attitudes come across to you as 'narcissistic'?" Based on the participants' responses, subsequent questions were asked as prompts to probe for further insight (Osborn & Smith, 2005). Examples of the questions included: (a) Could you tell me more about how you experienced yourself during this event/episode/interaction?; (b) Could you tell me more about how you experienced your intimate partner during this event/episode/interaction?; [and] (c) How would you describe your process of awareness about what you were experiencing?

Each participant provided general demographic data at the end of their interview. The primary investigator offered the participants the opportunity for member checking. All participants validated transcribed information and chose not to make changes to their transcripts. Preliminary report would be sent to the participants as soon as the defense is concluded successfully. All ethical guidelines for protecting the confidentiality and rights of the participants, as indicated in the ENREB application, were duly followed.

### **Data Management**

Brief notes were taken on an interview protocol form during the interview to safeguard against the audio recording device's possible malfunction. These notes were brief and complete but not recorded verbatim. During the interview, it was difficult to probe, write answers, and

manually record everything that was disclosed, all at the same time. Bevan (2014) states in phenomenological research when taking notes, the researcher is required to refrain from using personal knowledge, theories, or beliefs and instead become an explorer of new concepts. The primary researcher was guided by Bevan (2014), given that it was impossible to abstain from personal values and knowledge completely. The researcher tried to stay aware of her natural attitudes and opinions, remaining faithful to the participants' descriptions and experiences.

In this research study, detailed field notes were kept, and journal reflections were written after each interview. Descriptive (i.e., to record what happened) and reflective (to record how I made sense of the site, people, and situation) field notes were also taken during and after the interviews (Creswell, 2004). In line with McMillian (2004), I used a journal to record emerging thoughts (i.e., insights, judgments, ethical issues, and personal meaning-making reflections). Throughout the study, the journal kept me focussed as I confronted biases intertwined with any of my preconceived ideas. The descriptive and reflective field notes brought to life the spoken words of the participants. Overall, the field notes brought extra value to interpreting the data.

### **Data Analysis**

During the interviews, I sought to uncover patterns, ideas, understandings, and themes (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007) by using three steps: organization of data, summarizing the data, and interpreting the data (McMillian, 2004). First, the interview data was transcribed. Following that, the researcher coded the collected data. While looking for categories and central concepts, topics, and themes, the coding process was organized by separating the data into workable units (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; McMillian, 2004;). The codes were processed through reading and thinking about the transcribed text material, and then it was narrowed down to a manageable

number of categories in preparation for the summarization (Lichtman, 2013). The specific data analysis steps are discussed below.

First, I looked for themes one participant interview at a time. This process involved reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain familiarity with the cases. Consistent with Smith and Osborn (2007), I used the left-hand margin to document her observations about the participants' language, the meanings that they communicated, similarities and contradictions in their stories, and my observations about the interview process. I then reviewed the notations on the left-hand margin looking for emerging theme titles. Secondly, I sought to connect the themes one transcript at a time. The themes were listed on a piece of paper while trying to make sense of their connections. I noted the themes that clustered together and checked them against the original narratives of the participants. The clusters were ordered methodically, central themes were developed, and the appropriate clustered themes were placed under each central theme. I then placed the notes from the three transcripts side by side and looked for how the central themes were connected across the interview cases. Notes were transformed into concise phrases that capture the voices of the women's narratives. Expressions that allow for connections within and across the cases were identified. I made sure no data was omitted or selected for indiscriminate special attention prematurely. Themes that did not fit were dropped. Themes that were not backed by enough thick evidence were dropped. Finally, for interpretations of the summarized findings, looked for relationships amongst the categories. The goal was to explain what had been found and begin interpreting the believed meanings. Consistent with Lincoln and Guba (1985) as cited in Creswell (2012), interpretation involves making sense of the data. To ensure credibility and reliability, there was a constant comparison of information while watching for developing themes and patterns. (McMillian, 2004).



## **Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure trustworthiness in this study, credibility, reliability, the validity of the research, and validation procedures such as member checking, triangulation, external validation, and internal validation were put in place (Groenewald, 2004). Credibility is "the extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions are believable and trustworthy" (McMillian, 2004, p. 277). The researcher consciously connects herself to understand the perspectives of the participants better. With the audio recordings of each interview, the researcher again separated herself while transcribing the interviews verbatim to ensure the truth was revealed (Groenewald, 2004). This was followed by giving the women a copy of their interview transcripts to validate their perspectives, experiences, and ideas.

**Reliability.** Reliability was another way to ensure the credibility of the qualitative research study. According to McMillian (2004), "Reliability is the extent to which what is recorded as data is what has occurred in the setting that was studied" (p. 278). Member checking was conducted. In this study, all participants were given copies of their transcriptions to clarify the accuracy of the information.

In this research study, triangulation was realized by verifying and comparing different data collected from the participants, the researcher's journal, brief notes, and field notes, which all consisted of observations, reflections, and comments. McMillian (2004) states that triangulation is "the use of different methods of gathering data or collecting data with different samples, at different times, or in different places to compare different approaches to the same thing" (p. 278). Existing research agrees that triangulation is one of the most effective ways to develop accurate and credible analysis (Creswell, 2012; McMillian, 2004). As themes and

patterns were exposed, data analysis was triangulated to maintain accuracy and credibility, allowing the information to be accurately transferable (Creswell, 2012; McMillian, 2004).

For the works done in phenomenological research to be transferable, accurate details, accurate interpretations, and accurate perspectives must be at the forefront of the study (Creswell, 2012; McMillian, 2004). To achieve external validity, data collection and analysis was detailed with all measures taken to ensure accuracy. For transferability, the methods, information, and interpretations were simply and precisely written, making it easy to be used in similar situations, which was the intent of this study. McMillian (2004) explains external validity as the extent to which findings and perspectives can be used in other environments, situations, or populations.

**Internal Validity.** Internal validity is a general concept explaining the meanings, categories, and interpretations with the researcher reflecting reality by having actual patterns or limitations in the data gathering without distorting the findings of the situation, experience, or event (McMillian, 2004). Considering that all research is interpretive, the researcher needed to be self-reflective about her research (Creswell, 2012). For this research study, an open-ended question with probing questions was used to allow the participants to provide their unconstrained answers. In the interview, they were allowed to explore all possible options which could have included cultural and social experiences different from the researcher.

All researchers realize they have opinions, biases, and outcome expectations that can alter the conclusions and interpretations threatening the credibility and validity. It was essential to take steps to avoid researcher subjectivity and potential bias, which could threaten the credibility of the study (McMillian, 2004). In this study, a journal was kept. The researcher recorded field notes in the form of observations, reflections, and comments to help separate the researcher's

subjective understanding and focus on the participants' perspectives and understandings, giving strength to internal validity.

### **Bracketing: Ensuring Validity When the Researcher has a Stake in Participants'**

#### **Narratives**

By the middle of my first interview, I realized that bracketing would be one of the keys to the validity of my data. Some of the participants' narratives resonated with me. I realized that I approached the interviews with preconceived judgments, biases, and assumptions from my theoretical learning and previous experiences. All of a sudden, I was at risk of filtering the data by superimposing my emotions and cognitions over the emerging narratives (Chan et al., 2013). I needed to suspend preconceived judgment throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Bracketing enabled me to engage with the participants and manage the narratives they provided in an ethical manner (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Bracketing was essential for my research, as some of the women's stories resonated closely with my experiences. When some of their stories contrasted with my experiences, they appeared confusing; it became expedient to rely on my life world to make meaning of their meaning. Also, most of the underlying emotions associated with their stories evoked strong emotional reactions in me and made me vulnerable to bias.

I practiced bracketing throughout all my interviews, data analyses, and even discussion of findings. I agree with Wertz (2005), who recommended that bracketing must be applied in qualitative research because researchers and participants have live worlds, and "each life-world incident is realized uniquely and each person experiences the world in their way from their unique experiences and understandings all starting at birth and ending with death" (p.176). My interviewing approach created a perfect space to practice bracketing. I chose un-structured interviewing as a data collection approach. I had a central question on my interview schedule

(i.e., “What is it like to live life as a woman with an intimate male partner who you perceive as narcissistic?”). Nevertheless, I strictly took cues from the participants and only probed issues of interest or concern to my participants (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

I did not interview like a counselor because my goal was to capture my participants’ narratives and not to help them work towards change. I struggled with processing the stories shared with me when they appeared too similar to experiences I know directly or vicariously. I found that I switched from researcher, judge, to advocate during the first ten minutes of the first interview. I used mindfulness approach to mentally bring into view Chan et.al’s (2013) questions for self grounding during qualitative interviewing (see below). I struggled to disentangle myself from the participants' experiences when their stories centered on some male partners' oppressive attitudes and behaviors. I found it unsettling that male partners stripped my research participants of their sense of self, and the women accepted it for the most part. I internally processed my amazement about how the participants' brilliance, strength, and gutsy maneuvers to escape the invisible prison walls challenged popular cultural conceptions about the victimized woman. Consistent with Chan et al., (2013), I applied reflexivity as a major tool for bracketing throughout data collection and analysis processes.

As Chan et al. (2013) recommended, I frequently asked myself: "Are you humble enough to learn about the experiences of women who share experiences similar to those you have lived or heard about?" When I felt that I could complete the participants' thoughts, I took a deep breath and exhaled while meditating on "Are you showing an attitude of conscious ignorance about this story right now?" I maintained curiosity to learn how their stories would present experiences I do not know. In moments when I asked leading questions based on my

hedonic need to know, I apologized and rephrased with more focusing questions. This allowed them to express their stories and emotions freely.

Sometimes, the stories challenged my preconceptions. I bracketed by maintaining awareness that the goal of the interviews was to uncover the women's unique experiences without swaying or leading them. These moments taught me the power of reflexive journal writing (Wall et al., 2004). Wertz (2005) validated keeping a reflective research journal as a core practice in phenomenology. Research journaling keeps the data collection genuine, and the researcher genuinely sensitive to the voices of the participants. My reflexive journals kept me focused. I reflected on thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about the participants, their narratives, things that were said, how they were said, and things that were not said. With a stake in their stories, I would only ensure the validity of the findings by intentionally keeping my thoughts, opinions, and ideas separate from the participants. The journal showed me how my inner emotional processes related to the emerging data during and after data collection. My preconceptions were in check throughout. These personal experiences validated Tufford and Newman's (2010) recommendation that researchers use bracketing "to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project" (p. 81).

I also maintained a not-knowing curious attitude (Chan et al., 2013). When I was emotionally *joined with* my participants, I determined to stay present with the participants while remaining conscious of my ethical research obligations. I maintained a listen-to-hear-to-understand attitude rather than a judgmental one. I was ready to feel, know, and be a part of their stories without comparing to stories known from the past. My goal was to understand their narratives fully and accurately convey their voices. Overall, I tried to keep my

communication with the participants flexible, open, unconditional, free from tension and judgment (Finlay, 2009), and focused on uncovering their voices without swaying or leading them.

Finally, during the data analysis and interpretation phases, I engaged my faculty advisor in bracketing. I had several debriefing interviews and data analysis dialogues with her. These conversations were put in place to ensure that I did not impose my life world on the participants' meaning-making processes. I submitted several drafts of my data analysis and interpretation manuscripts for her review. Finlay (2009) expressed the importance of supervision for the researcher to focus on the analytical process and findings in keeping with ethical research. In agreement, Tufford and Newman (2010) noted that it is essential that phenomenological researchers remain genuinely sensitive to the co-researcher's voice.

Bracketing to allow the valid stories of my participants to stand resonated with my counseling practice. While I use reflexivity in counseling, I have never thought of how bracketing exemplifies simple ways of maintaining grounding. Bracketing in counseling would help me examine my interviewing approaches as the sessions proceed. I would easily modify my questions and authentically communicate to my client why I think that I was previously wrong (Yalom, 2002). In counseling, communicating my mistake to my client would be considered self-disclosure to help connect with the client and to model to the client that the counselor is not perfect. I would keep journals for my growth, but this time, it would be a reflective journal about my processes and not my clients' data.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The primary researcher encountered several limitations while conducting this study. First, the study was limited by small sample size. I was therefore, cautious about how to interpret the

findings. A larger sample would allow for more comprehensive and in-depth analysis. Two considerations helped to augment this limitation. The unstructured interview approach enabled the me to ask in-depth questions and receive authentic responses in a relational atmosphere. However, I experienced a limitation as a novice researcher. I started with the clear goal to understand the experiences of the three participants rather than to garner information for generalization. I was overly cautious not to ask leading or hedonic questions. I realized that the participants' narratives did not address complex underlying mechanisms that explain how male partners' dominating attitudes and behaviours subjugated them to submission. Reflecting on the feedbacks from my research committee members, I realized that what I considered hedonic or self-serving questions could have provided the opportunity to ask questions that would elicit deeper responses. Therefore, counselors should exercise caution when applying the findings of the present study to the counseling of women with similar relational experiences.

Information about underlying issues that account for the patterns reported by the women is essential for several reasons. First, case conceptualization models in counseling recommend that helps explore various aspects of clients presenting issues to understand the issues that bring them to therapy (Sperry & Sperry, 2012). Counselors ask questions about the biological, psychological, and social contexts of clients to understand the issues that bring them to counseling and support them to work towards change. Secondly, the participants perceived the male partners as oppression perpetrators and the females as victims of oppression. However, current research about intimate partner violence acknowledges that these events may be more complex than linear. I should have asked further questions to uncover the participants' perspectives about some underlying background factors that would explain the male partners' narcissistic-like behaviours and attitudes.

The positionality of the primary researcher and unstructured interviewing approach added to the risk for bias. I may have inadvertently asked some follow-up questions out of curiosity. I acknowledge that it may not be impossible to eliminate researcher bias while studying a phenomenon like this. Nevertheless, I am confident that the bracketing strategies used helped to mitigate bias. I acknowledge that there is still room for further interpretation of the data collected because, McMillian (2004) observed that "there are multiple ways of interpreting the same experiences, and that the meaning of the experience to each participant is what constitutes reality" (p. 274). During the interviews, I sought to uncover patterns, ideas, understandings, and themes (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007) by using three steps: organization of data, summarizing the data, and interpreting the data (McMillian, 2004).

### **Summary**

This chapter examined the characteristics of qualitative research, and outlined the participant criteria, design of the study, data collection, data management, data analysis, trustworthiness, limitations of the study, bracketing, and limitations of the study. The focus of phenomenological research is uncover the experiences of the participants is to understand their perceptions. Three adult females, who met the criteria of having lived experiences with an intimate male partner subjectively presenting with narcissistic behaviors and attitudes, were recruited for the study. During the interviews, I sought to uncover patterns, ideas, understandings, and themes by using three steps: organization of data, summarizing the data, and interpreting the data. Chapter four highlights the findings, participant demographics, and the development phases of the women's relational journeys.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

This chapter will draw upon the main themes and present the findings that arose from the interviews and subsequent data analysis. Consistent with phenomenological methodology, my starting point for this data analysis was my training and role as a school counselor and a female with a history of personal and vicarious challenging, intimate partner experience. First, I present a brief profile of each of the participants. Next, I present as findings, the key themes that emerged following data analysis of the interviews. The themes include: (a) developmental phases of the intimate relationships, (b) subjective well-being in the relationships, (c) patches of awakening and coping, and (d) freeing of the ‘self’ from the relationships. The participants’ depiction of how they experienced themselves and their partners in the relationships was not linear, and I tried to present the experiences in no particular hierarchical order. The participants’ stories depicted “a cycle, a coming, and a returning” (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 152). The chapter closes with a brief conclusion.

#### **Participant Demographics**

Participant 1 is Lynn. She is a single mother with one child in her early 30’s. She dated her intimate male partner for a month before moving in with him. They lived together for just over one year before she was able to separate from him. Her parents divorced when she was a child, but she still had a good relationship with both of them.

Participant 2 is Darcy. She is in her mid-40s. She has married twice. She has no children. She reported that her first husband was narcissistic. She married him when she was in her late teens. The marriage lasted for 11 years.

Participant 3 is Dakota. She is a single parent in her late 50s. She has an adult son who is in his early 30s. She met her intimate male partner in her late teens, dated for approximately six months, lived common-law for eight years, and then married. They remained married for 15 years. Her parents divorced when she was a young girl. Her older siblings raised her. Her mother left to live with a boyfriend, and her dad moved away, with neither taking the children. She had minimal contact with her mother and currently has no interest in having a relationship with her.

### **The Developmental Phases of the Women's Intimate Relational Journey**

All of the participants reported that their relationships progressed in phases with identifiable characteristics. The three women's narratives described distinct experiences that fit into three relational phases. The phases are

1. Entry and negotiation of desire characterized by sweet beginnings and yearnings for love and care;
2. Exploration characterized by heightening dominance/control by the male partners, control tolerance-rejection dialectics; and
3. Establishment phase when the male partners became emboldened to place most of the financial, activity of daily routines, and emotional burdens of the relationships on the women.

#### ***Entry Phase: Negotiations of Desire***

All participants acknowledged that their relationships had 'certain' beginning points. All women used the phrase "in the beginning" almost as a metaphor to communicate a relational benchmark. They would compare their later relational outcomes throughout the interviews against this beginning benchmark. They described how "the entry phases revolved around needs

and desires, which their partners and they mutually aspired to meet and maintain in the relationships” (Liu, 2012, p. 63).

One participant described how she time marked the entry into her relationship.

In the beginning, he appeared to want to understand me, and he became what I wanted and needed. (Lynn)

Another participant described her “certain time” experience as:

In the beginning, when he first took me out, I was a little bit nervous, but it wasn’t too bad. It was like anybody else. His dad was more scary towards me. (Dakota)

The third participant described her own sweet entry experience through the lens of emotional connection:

In the beginning, he was pleasant and polite. It was easy for me to talk with him. (Darcy).

**Sweet Beginnings.** The male partners showed peculiar behaviours and attitudes that identified the sweet beginnings phase. Firstly, the male partners presented with overly serious engagement in the relationship. Secondly, the male partners quickly identified the women’s needs, and the women overtly offered assurance and admiration as the male partners met their needs. Thirdly, the male partners validated the women and gave them a sense of power and control in the relationships. One participant described emotional satisfaction early in the relationship:

We got along so well in the beginning. We were two peas in a pod. He was me in boy form. The humor and everything. He appeared to want to understand me, and he became what I wanted and needed. He was too good to be real. (Lynn)

She spoke about her joy in finding a fulfillment to her dream man. She struggled financially and feared not being able to pay the rent:

About a month into the relationship, he complained about having nowhere to stay. So, I told him you can come stay with me. It will help me with rent, so he moved in. This was my dream relationship. (Lynn)

One participant described her “sweet luck” in finding “that relationship” that would allow her to fulfill her nurturing instincts and “that man” who would appreciate her nurturing qualities’ impact on him:

Yeah, it felt sweet that I could find a man with all the qualities I wanted. He would ask me to do things for hm. He would ask me to take care of his needs. It felt just right. He appreciated everything I did for him. He let people around us know that I was appreciated for the things I did for him. I was beginning to feel alive, my self-belief in myself was reaffirmed. I was happy. I felt lucky. (Darcy)

Another participant described how her male partner came across as very likable, confident, and interested in meeting all her needs:

I needed a man that would take care of my needs. In the beginning, he told me what I wanted to hear, and after he got what he wanted, he changed the rules. He had ways of making me believe he was doing things for my benefit. (Dakota)

Another behavioural interpretation of “the sweet beginning” was that the women reported a sense of personal control in the relationships. There was an appreciation for the validation of self-worth that their partners offered to them. One participant relished the unusual sense of power that her partner offered to her in the relationship:

I had never had that kind of power before. He made me believe that I was making the decisions and controlling situations in our relationship. I loved this “sweet” importance. It convinced me that he was a keeper. He even made me to believe that he fell helplessly for my idea to date him. (Lynn)

Another participant described how she gained a sense of self-importance and social validation because he was willing to spend his breaks talking to her:

He came up to me, and he was nice. Then he started coming to work a little earlier so he could spend time having small talk with me. It progressed from there. Then, we start having lunches together, and he asked me if he could call me, and he called me on one of his breaks. (Darcy)

Dakota did not mention any experiences of a sense of power during this phase.

In summary, consistent with the “Social Exchange in Intimate Relationship” theory (Cook & Rice, 2006, p. #), the participants found this phase to be “sweet and normal” (Liu, 2012, p. 63) and involved “a series exchanges between the partners of both materialistic and symbolic” (p. 63) love resources.

**Yearnings for Love and Craving for Significance.** The data highlight what the participants considered criteria for sealing the relationships. The data indicated that the yearning for intimate partners who would play the love role was the critical factor influencing what the women referred to as “sealing” the relationships. An essential condition for the emotional contracts was that the male partners were willing to “assure” them that they would be in an intimate and caring bond. All the participants responded to this assurance with readiness to move the relationship to a “deeper” level.

One participant described how she appraised the potential for “*loving*” quality in her relationship:

When I first noticed Bob, I watched him for about six months in the school. I figured because he worked in the elementary school, he would be a giver, a caretaker. He seemed very good with the kids. He seemed happy and confident, and I did not think there would be anything wrong with him. This was a sign that he would be a tender loving man.  
(Lynn)

As a reward, she stated,

I finally asked him to hang out. We hung out on my birthday. We had some drinks, and we got along really, really, well. Then, we hung out every day for two weeks. I couldn't find anything wrong with him. I even told him there must be something wrong with you. You are too perfect, and then nothing, nothing. (Lynn)

Another participant's appraisal highlighted the potentials for the “*love and affection*” she desired:

Moving in with him made me feel loved and appreciated, and I felt I thought that that's what that would be. It would be a loving relationship. After about half a year of dating, we lived together. [She appraised that] living with him and with his expectations and authority was an affirmation of our union. (Darcy)

Dakota did not mention how she appraised her partner and the factors that accounted for “sealing their relationship.” She described the process as “nothing special. It was just normal.” This might mean that it was important for her to enter into intimate relationship that felt like “what a relationship should be.”

In summary, the women screened for relationship potentials based on immediate emotional needs. Their criteria for confirming the relationships focused on behavioural demonstration of intimacy and tender relational exchange in the relationships (Cordova & Scott, 2001). These criteria are in contrast with counseling research that recommends shared values, mutual mattering, and shared future purpose as important yardsticks to determine potentials for dignified intimate relationships (DeMarian et al., 2003).

#### ***Exploration Phase: Heightening Male Dominance and Control Tolerance-Rejection Dialectics***

All three women reported a distinct phase in their relationships that felt like their partners were seeking to “grasp more” in their relationships. Recurring phrases that described the phase included “searching for,” “trying to,” “craving more,” “seizing more,” and “progressing.” Some of the stories came across as both clear and opaque at the same time. In some instances, the women were able to separate and describe precisely how they felt as they underwent some experiences that were unusual to them. For example, they shared stories about how they experienced negative and positive emotions within the same relational events (i.e., emotional dialecticism). Participants expressed a general awareness that something was shifting or becoming elusive in the relationships.

**Heightening Male Dominance and Control.** The data indicated the women noted that “the way things were controlled was shifting” (Darcy). As the women began to develop deep

affections for their intimate male partners, the men began to “try out” for more control in everyday little processes and interactions. Darcy now noticed,

When we started living together, he progressed from asking me to bring him water to drink to asking me to buy him cigarettes. I missed the signs of things progressing from getting something for him to drink to supporting his bad habits. Then, he started asking to borrow my car and my truck and or whatever vehicle I had. I also began to realize that there would be some type of negative consequence when I ever said no. (Darcy)

One participant used a philosophical analogy to depict how the “shift in control” felt gradual, cumulative, and indeterminate. She narrated her experience of the gradual erosion of the deeper intimacy she craved and the personal sense of control she had come to value:

Things felt like an erosion of a rock that is washed over daily by the waves of water on the shore until there is nothing left of the rock. (Lynn).

A second participant acknowledged that her partner was taking more of the “father” role in the relationship. She normalized the “shift,” by conceptualizing it as “what the typical man does in a family.” She, however, reported that the controlling behaviours sometimes “made him look narcissistic. His attitudes were unacceptable or undesirable and caused discord.” She summarized her experience using a popular culture statement:

It is what it is. I guess this would happen to anybody. (Dakota)

As the relationships developed, the women reported loss of a sense of personal control and power. At the same time, the men asserted more control and power over their partners’ lives. The participants all noted that they felt an absolute pressure to comply with the men’s demands to avoid loss of affection and the perceived care that they had previously received from their partners. The narratives presented awareness of heightening control over the women, their properties, and offspring.

One participant described how she interpreted her experience of “power shift” like “handing over control” to her male partner. She presented examples:

It felt like I was gradually handing over control of my life to him. He didn't have a license and he would still take my car. If he asked me to go somewhere and I said no, he would take my car keys and my car and still go without me. (Lynn)

Another participant non-verbally expressed the extent of erosion of personal power by rubbing her hands together. Erosion of personal power to her implied the inability to set personal boundaries around herself and her properties. She remembered:

He never even had a license. He would say: You are at work you don't need your car. He would take my car. It started becoming like I wasn't even able to drive my own car. (Darcy).

**Control Tolerance-Rejection Dialectics.** The data amplified how the women dialectically processed “heightened control” as a coping strategy. For example, a participant experienced herself as “being looked after as well as being robbed of everything that made me a person at the same time” (Lynn). The women found it difficult to determine where “taking care” stopped and “taking advantage” started. Is is common in relational dialecticism, they constantly struggled to “sift” through the mix of love and hate inherent in their relational dynamics (Eginli & Ozsenler, 2016). The participants viewed the heightened control to be within tolerable limits when processed through the lens of patriarchal value system (Linos et al., 2013; Speizer, 2010). On the other hand, they found it to be beyond tolerable limits from a well-being perspective (Karakurt & Silver, 2013).

From a patriarchal perspective, the heightening control was within a tolerable limit. The participants shared stories that endorsed “taking charge” (Lynn, Dakota, & Darcy) as the male role in the relationships. One participant narrated how she processed the dual experience of care and control in her relationship using a patriarchal lens:



I did not even get to see my own paycheck. When Dakota got paid, she did not even get a chance to see her own paycheque. I would ask, “Where is my cheque?” He said, “I needed things; I needed tools.” There was no money left for me. I had to ask him for things first before I got them, but this was reassuring because it was the traditional male role of “taking care of business.” (Dakota)

She went on to discuss how she experienced the impact of this dualism on her psychological well-being:

I slowly lost my sovereignty through my partner’s continual public displays of supremacy. He demeaned me in front of his family and in front of his friends. He would just call me names. He did this just to show his friends and his family that he wears the pants in the family, just like his father did. I liked that that he took charge and got things done, but I detested him for using me as a work horse to complete his projects. (Dakota)

Another participant described how she experienced the dialectics of control tolerance and control rejection in her relationship:

I liked what he was doing. He was taking charge of our affairs. I initially felt comfortable just to play the “female.” Later, I realized that this role robbed me of my autonomy. It felt like he was guarding me. It was starting to feel like I wasn’t even allowed to drive my own car or sit in the front seat. He didn’t even have a driver’s license. It felt like he was stripping me of my independent thinking. If I didn’t do something to the way that he liked it to be... It was horrible. It was just a horrible experience. I did not have the courage to challenge these uncomfortable things. I was relieved when his parents addressed these things on my behalf. His parents’ attention and affection paid for his horrible behaviours. (Darcy)

Another participant described a similar experience:

He was your typical male gatekeeper. My phone had to be on so he would know where I was at all times. You know ... that paternal caregiver thing. He was making sure I am safe and okay, but the control was smothering me and taking away all my freedom. I was not myself. (Lynn)

To add to the sense of lost autonomy, Lynn was not allowed to look at anyone but her partner.

She had to be completely and utterly focused on him. Shaking her head as if in disbelief with her experience of autonomy erosion, she said,

He would say, “Ooo, you’re looking at this person that way, and looking at this person this way, and you weren’t even looking at me and this and that.”

For Lynn, this extreme possessiveness represented both male protective affection that she desired and limiting control that she detested.

All the women often used similar expressions to describe experiences that came across as “*forced*” father-child treatment. The women felt that they were cast into “child roles” by their partners. They experienced their male partners as superiors who expected them to capitulate to a “parental kind of control.” Two participants described how their partners acted like authoritarian fathers to gain whatever they wanted from the women. One participant described how her partner used fear as a “weapon” to keep her in check:

He punched holes in the walls to scare me into obedience. He was punching holes in the wall right beside my head. I didn’t know if he was going to kill us or hurt my son and I.  
(Lynn)

Another participant described how her male partner used fear and coercion to “cow” her “into compliance like an obedient child”:

He demeaned me in front of others. He wanted me to fear him so that I would begin to act like an obedient child. Sometimes, when he did this, I would just sit quiet like a good child because I did not like feeling stupid and devalued in front of others. I began to feel more inadequate. He would escalate abuse from scolding to spanking when I talked back. A couple of times, he put me up against the wall. One time, he put me against the wall with his hands around my throat because he was trying to convince me to get back together with him, and I refused. Before going on any outings, he would say, “Is this done? Is this done? If things aren’t done, we can’t go.” (Dakota)

A third participant described how the heightening male partner control felt like she was placed in a child world all over again:

He said, “I will tell your mom you spent the money. I will tell your mom and dad you did this and that.” So, then I would give in because I didn’t want him telling. Then he would say, “I am on the phone with your dad, now.” So, then I would give in because I am scared. I didn’t want my parents to know what I was putting up with and how badly I was being treated. It feels like a hellish nightmare, but it is real.

In summary, the data indicated constant reflection about cost and benefit from the dualism of care and control inherent in their relationships. The participants experienced confusion and self-doubt as they processed the cost of tolerating or rejecting any aspect of the new control behaviors and attitudes. They found it challenging to make meaning of the male partner's progressive controlling attitudes.

**Emotional Dialecticism.** The women coped by trying to find the “good” in the “bad” emotional experiences. For Darcy, her capability to defend her “own territory broke down” as soon as she received affection from her male partner. In her perspective, acts of affection and open validation from her partner worked like “anesthesia” on her self-will to defend herself. Despite Dakota's resentment of paternalistic abuse, she felt rewarded when her partner presented as both a lover and a caring parent figure. Although she did not articulate this using many words, her face lit up each time she narrated how her partner treated her with special affection as a reward for doing something “right”.

Lynn traded her autonomy for fun, laughter, and friendship. Lynn loved him for his fun qualities. At the same time, she hated him for his controlling attitude. She said,

I was telling him daily how much I hated him and wanted him to go away. Telling him to get out. He wouldn't go. He wouldn't go away. I don't know why he wouldn't go. If somebody was to say that to me, I wouldn't want to stay. He was obsessed with me and the good times we had, the only good part of it.

***Establishment Phase: Authoritarianism and Relational Burden***

The women's stories indicated an awareness of another transition in the relationships. Darcy described this stage as “when things had gone too deep.” The women experienced themselves as relational burden bearers. The burdens were financial, physical (i.e., the activity of daily routines), and emotional.

**Financial Burden.** Role expectation shifted from women as nurturers to “income earners.” The men increasingly became “income managers” (Lynn, Dakota, & Darcy). This reason was that the male partners all lost their jobs soon after their relationships began to ‘go deep.’” One participant shared,

He lost his job as soon as we began to live together. He wouldn’t help pay for anything, but he continued with his gambling. I would ask him about the bills. He would say, “We will pay them later,” and then he would go gambling. He wanted my paycheque for gambling. (Dakota)

To explain how she experienced herself and her partner within this changed family financial dynamic, she stated,

I gave what I could, and he didn’t like that. He would get upset, yell, and started talking violent to me. I had to tell him that I needed to pay the bills. I had to argue with my partner before he would sometimes agree to direct my earnings towards bills. (Dakota)

A second participant described how she experienced herself and her partner in this new economic arrangement:

He lost his job, and I had to bear the burden of paying the family bills. I could not pay bills, and he was not working outside of the home. He got fired from his work. (Darcy)

The third participant had a similar experience and reported that:

After a couple of months into our relationship, his work term finished. Therefore, he wasn’t working at all. I was supporting him and my child. I couldn’t keep up. He would sleep pretty much all day until I got home. I couldn’t keep up. (Lynn)

This participant described how she experienced a shift in her male partner’s role as he became more like the family “income administrator” than a romantic partner:

He would come home and say, “Okay, you got paid today, so give me some money so I can go, so we can go and do some stuff. Stuff we need to do.” And I’m like, “Well, we need to pay this bill or otherwise our hydro will be cut off.” We got into arguments about me wanting to pay the bills. (Dakota)

The male partners’ role shifts to income administrators evoked existential questioning and marked the first resistance to the male partner’s sole authority. It also marked the beginning

of conscious individuation (Marshall, 1994) because the women began to seek to honour their unique life values. “Bills had to be paid as a matter of priority” (Lynn). Interpersonally, the women began to question their male partners’ decisions overtly to minimize the urgency of household bill payments. They began to re-orient themselves to speak up for their fiscal values. The women were faced with the choice to continue to yield to their partners’ financial bad habits to maintain peace or to stand their grounds and adapt to the stressors to maintain their families.

**Burdens Related to Activities of Daily Routines.** The three participants acknowledged that the ever-increasing daily life routine burdens did not fit into the “lives they desired” when they got into their relationships. While they got into the relationship for “mutual support” (Codova & Scott, 2001; Liu, 2012), they all began to bear the burdens alone.

One of the participants acknowledged that while she put up with his demands, she resented the expectation that she serve her partner and his friends:

I did everything while he sat on the couch and smoked joints. Meanwhile, on top of doing everything and all the housework, cooking, cleaning, I even had three jobs. That was my life working inside the house or working outside the house... He would have his friends come over, and I would have to make them dinner, too. I felt betrayed by the attitude of this f---cking narcissist. (Darcy)

Another participant shared how she experienced herself and her partner within the context of role ambivalence, where she was the family carer without power:

He just wanted me to work and care for the family. I was only home for six months after my son was born. I had to go back to work right away. He did not give any consideration to the needs of my newborn child. My focus was to be on him and him alone. He has set all these expectations, and I have learned not to question his decisions or authority. When I tried to challenge him, he would respond with, “You just do your work and that’s it.” (Dakota)

In summary, the women in the study experienced pervasive burdens from the relationships. It felt like they compulsively “gave” to maintain the relationships. They sometimes

questioned themselves on why they felt conditioned to give to maintain the relationships, even when they did not feel comfortable with giving. The stories were nuanced with interpretations about underlying subtle resistance, including the “felt need to name” their burdens (Marshall, 1994) and desire to stand up for the shared burden they desired (Fordham, 1985). Their stories depicted psychological struggles to identify and name for themselves what they would gain or lose if they chose to modify, alter, or drop the relationships’ burdens.

### **Subjective Well-Being in the Relationships**

The data highlighted the impacts of relational experiences on participants’ subjective well-being. They experienced depleted well-being. All participants reported consciousness of the erosion of specific aspects of their well-being. Although they reported neither self-emancipation strategies nor the sense of efficacy for implementing any strategies, the data highlighted a common desire to take back whatever personal strength (i.e., autonomy, competence, and connectedness) was bargained away in the relationships. Participants’ stories were characterized by gradual erosion of self and epiphany moments when they awakened to the desire to take back various pieces of their subjective well-being. These moments represent “encounters with the self,” a process noted in counseling as an essential part of posttraumatic or post-adversity growth (Valdez & Lilly, 2014, p. #). The narratives converged around three common subjective well-being themes: autonomy, competence, and connectedness.

#### ***Autonomy***

Themes about sacrifice, shame, self-blame, and keeping the peace formed the meta-story about how the participants experienced themselves, their partners, and relationships in relation to autonomy. The three participants indicated surprise, anger, and shame that it took them so long to “free themselves” from their relationships. The participants used a mix of suppressed emotion-

focused (i.e., passivity) and cognitive-focused (i.e., reframing of resignation as “keeping the peace”) coping approaches to “buy” an immediate daily “sense of” autonomy.

One participant described how she experienced the loss of her autonomy and how she coped using resignation as a coping mechanism:

He wanted me to be in “earshot range” of him.

When he was playing video games, I would have to sit there for five or six hours watching him go around in circles on the screen.... I felt like a caged animal who did not belong to myself. I went back with him after I “escaped.” I didn’t feel comfortable doing that at all. I felt, I felt like I was feeling trapped even more. Cuz now he’s going to hold onto me tighter. He’s not going to let me out of his sight now because I tried to get away from him. I didn’t know how to get out of the relationship, successfully. (Darcy)

Another participant described how she experienced lost autonomy and described resignation as her psychological process of coping with the experience:

I felt emotionally trapped and didn’t know how to leave. I didn’t share anything with anyone because it was embarrassing for one. I just couldn’t keep up. I could care less about cleaning after a while. I couldn’t keep up. I couldn’t handle what he was putting me through. I just felt defeated. I was tired, and I would just go to bed. (Lynn)

A third participant described the experience of loss of autonomy and coping with it as “going through the motions.”

I did not have any autonomy to follow my passion or live the life I desired in the relationship. We didn’t do much of what I wanted to do. I would work, work, work. [Then, in a slightly escalated voice, she said,] I went out to work, and then I had to come home and do more work cuz that is what he wanted. I had no time to just be myself. The experiences were very intense and difficult to handle.... I would just say, “Okay. I don’t care anymore.” (Dakota)

Lynn shared how she traded-off her autonomy “to purchase” immediate well-being for herself and her child. When she did not want her child to experience the toxicity from her relationship, she would trade-off her capability to defend her boundary. This trade-off would

keep her intimate male partner from escalating in front of her child. With tears in her eyes, Lynn voiced her story:

My child would hear Bob calling me names—whore, slut, or whatever over and over, again. Yelling at me. My child would mostly stay up in their room. Bob came in there yelling.... I did not know how to remove my child from the toxic family life without involving Child and Family Services and risk losing my child. I had to keep the peace and allow my child to feel safe. I completely lost myself.

Dakota chose to forgo her right to legal justice in exchange for her son's happiness. She said:

I just wanted my son to be happy, so I didn't fight for my share or custody. I didn't want my son caught in the middle.

As is typical when individuals in distress begin to actively “name” their own experiences (Shields, 2011, p. #), there was a recurrence of shame and regret about why it took them so long to realize that they had lost their autonomy. One participant's narrative captured this way of thinking:

I feel like such an ass for allowing this to happen. I ask myself regularly, “Why didn't I stop it sooner? Why did I let this happen? What is wrong with me for being so ... weak?” I was ashamed and embarrassed of myself.... I didn't share anything with anyone because it was embarrassing for one. I had to wait to develop a “backbone” before I could make the move to leave. (Lynn)

Another participant shared a similar thought:

I stayed too long in that relationship. I wanted my son to have both parents. I thought my partner would change. I think I did more damage to my son by staying. (Dakota)

In summary, all three participants experienced loss of autonomy in the relationships.

They consciously employed passivity and resignation as coping devices (Lazarus & Faulkman, 1984) when they felt exhausted, defeated, overwhelmed, and needed to retake autonomy in the moment. None of the women acknowledged the coping strategies they implemented as agentic endeavours. Regrets and shame nuanced their narratives.



## *Competence*

To thrive, all participants were “forced” to prioritize “infantile obedience” (Metz et al., 2018, p. #) over assertion of competence. All three participants lived with the experience of being cast into a child’s role and devaluation of worth from their male partners. All three participants described these treatments as “narcissistic attempts” to diminish their sense of competence. One participant grieved the loss of her sense of competence in the relationship:

I was a nothing in my relationship with him. I had no value except for my paycheques.  
(Lynn)

Another participant shared the systematic process that her partner used to “strip” her of her sense of competence:

When we were out at a social event, he would look at other women and comment how they were better than me. When he would be drinking, he would say, “I would fuck that one in a New York minute.” If I questioned him or challenged his beliefs, he would let me know that my point of view had no value, just like me. He frequently told me I was fucked in the head. (Dakota)

A third participant narrated how she experienced herself in an intimate relationship where the male partner was no longer “romantically coupled” with her. Physiological reactions (i.e., trembling hands) accompanied her narrative:

If I didn’t do something to the way that he liked it to be, it was horrible. He would downgrade me to make me feel like there was always something wrong with me. He made me appear and feel so incompetent that I was locked outside of my home on a snowy day. I was not responsible enough to be able to keep my own key to my marital home. (Darcy)

One participant described how she experienced a subtle but significant damaging cognitive re-structuring about her competence to drive a car, leading to a surrender of her access to the family car key:

We did consent together to buy me a \$45,000 vehicle/truck that was supposed to be for both of us. After we got the truck, I was not allowed to drive it. I feel stupid for having a new vehicle and not even being allowed to drive it. Maybe, I couldn't. (Dakota)

Another participant explained how she was coerced by her partner's "weird .... controlling" behaviours and attitudes to "unlearn" previously mastered functional capabilities:

I felt, I felt small all the time. I was made to feel stupid. I was made to feel weak. It made me feel stupid because I was believing parts on a car don't last longer than a month. It's ridiculous. It was weird. It was super controlling. (Darcy)

A third participant described, with resignation, how she experienced herself and the loss of her sense of competence in her relationship: "I felt like an idiot" (Lynn).

In summary, the participants' stories highlighted themes about the internalization of negative self-attributions (Deacon et al., 2011) and damaging cognitive re-structuring (Corey, 2009; Kaur & Kaur, 2015) related to competence. The participants vocalized acceptance of incompetence and self-doubt even in areas they had demonstrated mastery before entering the relationships. They all narrated what they called "narcissistic" behaviour that their male partners used to "jinx" (Lynn) their sense of capability. They described the behaviours with phrases such as "did not have words" (Dakota), "not able to describe fully" (Lynn), and "something that felt like love and cruelty at the same time" (Darcy).

### ***Connectedness***

A recurring phenomenon was that the males used social alienation to consolidate their power over the women. All three women shared a sense of being contained in specific environments and not being "allowed" to "connect with" the outside world. The data highlighted that social alienation happened through three processes. Firstly, the male partners "removed" the women from people through "restriction." Secondly, the male partners "removed" people from

the women through “character blackmail.” Thirdly, the women “activated” social alienation as a coping mechanism to protect themselves from embarrassment.

**Restriction.** The participants used the word “prison” to describe how they experienced physical restriction. One participant shared an experience of extreme restriction that could have cost her life:

I went into affiliate shock. I couldn't get help myself because I didn't have a cell phone. I couldn't go anywhere. I can't call anybody to come get me. I couldn't get help from a neighbour or anything like that. If I left the yard, I didn't have keys to lock up the house, so I wouldn't be able to get back in. I can't leave. I can't leave, so I went to an episode of having cold showers and throwing up. I was giving myself antihistamines. It was something that somebody should have gotten medical attention for, but I dealt with it on my own because I knew if I disappeared, I would get yelled at for leaving the house.... I was in his jail. He was growing weed and somebody had to stay home and basically defend the house. I was not allowed to open the door. I wasn't allowed to talk to anybody. I was not even allowed to go grocery shopping. (Darcy)

She narrated how she experienced her male partner as narcissistic and their relational dynamics as systematic “narcissistic control”:

He must have to be narcissistic. Period. There was a list of people that I was allowed to hang out with. I was allowed to hang out with his mom and dad, his cousin, and I could talk to a couple of his friends. The list of contacts did not include any of my friends or family. I didn't have any friends. I didn't have any way of going anywhere or doing anything. I had a hard time going to see my parents. (Darcy)

Another participant highlighted how she felt disconnected from life that “*mattered*” to her:

My sister was like a distant relative. I only related with his friends and family. We went camping once in a while, but mostly we never went anywhere. I wasn't able to see people that mattered to me, my friends or family very often. (Dakota)

The third participant narrated how social restriction translated to a feeling of emotional restriction and sense of “captivity”:

I noticed that he tracked me at work. He would sometimes walk past the field when I was outside. I would always have the walkie-talkie with me in case he came around. He used electronic devices for surveillance to ensure I kept disconnected from going places or visiting with people he did not approve of. I was like a captive. (Lynn)

She further equated her captivity with modern-day stalking:

He watched my every move through the phone, or he would be calling me constantly. He was constantly needing to know what, who, and my whereabouts. He stalked me literally. I had to keep the location tracker on, on my phone so he could see where I was going every day. He always thought I was cheating on him. (Lynn)

**Character Blackmail.** Character blackmail was a prominent phenomenon across all the stories. With character blackmail, the men tried to get as many people as possible on their side.

The intimate male partners “pulled” as many people as they could away from the women to create a sense of emotional and social isolation for them.

One participant described how she experienced her male partner as a “robber” who restricted her access to essential resources (i.e., dignity) for social connectedness in the community:

He told the police and my son that I couldn't keep a job, I am unstable, and an unfit mother. He was telling everyone that I was a slut to pull them away from me. They believed him. The whole town thought I was the “bad” person in the relationship. Many years later, I still carry that reputation, for the most part. He always accused me of cheating and spread rumours that I was cheating on him. Everyone believed him. People still talk about me. (Dakota)

She highlighted how the blackmail targeted her dignity, where it mattered most to her:

My son was my world. He not only wanted to take my son away from me, but also wanted to turn my son against me. He would tell my son I was nothing but a bitch, and I am not going to let her talk to you. This was his way of controlling me. He not only threatened but attempted to follow through with his threat. He tried to stop me from seeing my son. He wanted my son to think badly of me. This was to kill a piece of me and torture my heart one piece at a time. He made my life a living hell. (Dakota)

A second participant described how her partner used character blackmail as a tool for social alienation against her:

All my friends thought I had a “loose screw” because my partner was telling everyone she was the one doing what he was actually doing. They believed him because I felt too ashamed and embarrassed to tell anyone what was taking place. I walked around with embarrassment. (Lynn)

A third participant spoke about how she experienced a loss of self-esteem because of character blackmail. She recalls that it remains a struggle to interact without shame in her community.

Also, she described feelings of depression because she cannot clean her record for herself:

His friends all thought that I was a “doormat” and “stupid” because they all knew he was cheating, using my car whenever he wanted, and spending my money. He only let them hear and see what he wanted them to hear and see. He blackmailed me all the time. I never had the opportunity to be alone with them and tell them my truth. (Darcy)

### **Patches of Awakening and Coping**

The data highlighted words and emotions that reflected deep contemplations and ponderings about “what happened to me?” The women shared stories about “passing through” emotion-sensing spaces (Davidson & Milligan, 2004) that felt like the labyrinth: a complicated place constructed of or full of intricate passageways and blind alleys (Webster-Merridium.com, 2011) that evoked a desire to fight back. Findings highlight experiences of (a) awakening specific to the authoritarian phases of their relationships; (b) awakening evoked by the erosion of safety (i.e., physical, emotional, material, and social); and (c) awakening evoked by the sense of loss. The narratives uncovered underlying coping mechanisms they utilized in their relationships.

### ***Awakening as a Result of Authoritarianism***

All the women described awakening experiences in three distinct but interrelated ways during the authoritarian phase. These awakening included gaining insight for personal growth, activating intentional coping using dialectics, and acknowledging adverse experiences as wake-up alerts. Firstly, the burdens evoked the insight to name their experiences for themselves. Consistent with humanistic counseling perspectives (Ivey et al., 2010), naming their experiences

spurred them to unequivocally accept that the burdens influenced their health and well-being negatively, which is a sign of growth. For example, Lynn stated,

When I could not take responsibility, due to exhaustion, anxiety, and depression, nobody took responsibility. I denied how these influenced my life before then. I often had difficult times thinking I could not “handle” life and went to bed.

Secondly, their narratives about male authoritarianism were nuanced with love-hate dialectics. They tried to find both positive and negative meanings in the same events to accept themselves while working towards change. They used these dialectics as coping mechanisms in adversity (Shields, 2011). Darcy stated that while she detested how the relational burdens compromised her well-being, the demands satisfied her need to be “a caregiver and a mommy.” Similarly, Dakota reported that although she hated that her partner “made” her do endless chores, the burden would have been more tolerable if it did not seem “like all work, no love, no play.”

Thirdly, at some point during the authoritarian phase, all the three women depicted adverse experiences as wake-up alerts. A recurring theme was wake-up alarm. The women acknowledged that they were awoken by their male partners’ extreme desires to control all the power and material resources, including money and other belongings, in the ploy to maintain absolute authority in the relationships.

One participant described how she recognized that it was time to reject her partner’s “narcissistic control”:

He needs control. The longer we were together, the more he became the boss. The more he gets, the more he wants. I was to be controlled, and it was not my business to know why. He was not to be questioned. He would just tell me, “Do what I tell you.” I would say, “What for?” Just do what I tell you to do, constant bitching. He decided when, where, or if I could go out. We would go out, at times, but again he would say, “We will go out when I say we go out.” He did things his way and couldn’t accept doing things different ways. I needed my freedom from this narcissist. (Dakota)

Another participant described the “mental alert” evoked by her partner’s extreme hedonistic control tendencies alerted her to take back control:

My partner would often tell me things like: “You are going to be my slave.” In his narcissistic way, he will say, “You’re going to be my bitch,” is basically what he wanted me to be. So ... so that living with him, I didn’t have any control.... Yeah. He was taking away all my autonomy subtly. When he went out, he would say I had to stay home to look after the place. I needed to guard his home territory, and at the same time, he held me as his prisoner, keeping everything, he owned safe, including me. He gave me the illusion of sharing power with him, while he maintained all the power and control in the relationship. I had to stop trying to untwist the twist in the twist of everything. (Darcy)

She reported how the identity of impoverishment served as the alert that motivated her to transition from control tolerance to control rejection:

I became troubled that my money went to my partner and nothing was left for me. I was no longer able to meet my basic needs of clothing. I wore hand-me-downs from his mother. His mother gave me her used clothes to wear. The amount of stuff and money he took, he basically took advantage of me. It had to stop. (Darcy)

Another participant described how she came to her psychological resistance:

I was compelled to hand over my bank card whenever he demanded. I became “alarmed” when I could no longer buy food for my son. I would no longer tolerate it. (Lynn)

In summary, all three women reported that they rejected extreme male “control and dominance” when they became alerted that they were “paying too much” (Darcy) for relational stability. They came to accept that they sacrificed their essential psychological assets such as freedom, values, and preferences for an elusive strength, security, and ecstasy from the intimate relationships (Whitaker, 1989). They came to accept that something was wrong. They rallied their energy to reject the treatments mentally and emotionally. They began to re-take the power to reconstruct their boundaries. These were early signs of individuation and self-growth in the relationships.

### *Awakening Evoked by the Sense of Compromised Safety*

All three participants reported a significant compromise of their sense of safety in the relationships. Pervasive compromise of their safety contributed to a feeling of living life to survive and not to thrive. Pervasive insecurity engendered a determination to leave the relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2010). They described experiences of living life and coping with compromised safety.

**Compromised Safety of Material Possessions:** The participants presented their narratives about compromised material safety with tones of helplessness. They all utilized some form of emotion suppression consisting of passivity and fatalism as coping tools (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The participants reflected on these events with regrets, self-blame, and guilt. Nevertheless, each participant described how the experiences motivated their struggle to strive to “get past” the labyrinth.

One participant described how she utilized passive emotion coping to survive and in readiness to “push herself to leave”:

He threatened to take everything away from me. He threatened to take my pension, all and any money or belongings. This time, he held true to his word. He keyed my car and put a flat tire on my car. He burned all my pictures and destroyed my memorabilia.... Once when he was pulling on me, I tried to tell him he was damaging my clothing. He replied, “I don’t fucking care if I am ripping your clothes.” I did not stop him. I could not. These cruel treatments helped me to keep nursing the plan to leave. (Dakota)

Another woman described how she experienced inner anger about how her partner destroyed her “stuff.” She described how she knew the actions she was supposed to take, but could not articulate what “stopped her” from taking the actions. His continued lousy behaviour and attitude helped to awaken the determination to leave:

He blew the transmission in my car, and I would go through three sets of brakes in a month. I knew that I needed to take over my car. I seemed to be silenced by my need to



be appreciated and loved. I would not have been awakened if his narcissism did not get worse. (Darcy)

The third participant recounted how she was aware that her material possessions were in danger. Nevertheless, she suppressed her emotions for a long time to preserve her life.

I still wonder how I was able to take the treatments that clearly showed he had no respect for me or my belongings. I needed to feel safe in my relationship with him. My whole life was dismantled by him. He basically destroyed me and everything I worked for. I became alarmed when I realized that he has crossed a line. (Lynn)

**Physical Safety.** All three participants reported that physical safety was one of the most challenging issues in their relationships. Two of the participants shared that physical and emotional insecurity were inseparable. Insecurity had a substantial negative impact on their well-being. They could no longer experience themselves or their partners positively in their relationships. The narratives highlighted the use of avoidant problem-solving coping methods as a response to physically threatening events (Baker & Berenbaum, 2000). They were all awakened in various ways by physical safety issues.

One participant described how she experienced physical insecurity within herself and in every aspect of her relationship:

He would threaten me with stuff. I never knew if he would follow through or not. He just said things that scared me to show me that he could be violent. However, she never knew if he would follow through or not. He never physically harmed me though. But I lived in fear of physical harm.... He would back me up to the wall yelling at me and punching holes in the walls right next to my face. I was so intimidated and scared. I didn't know if the next punch was going to be my face or the wall. (Lynn)

She highlighted how fear for physical safety spread across all her environments took over her life, cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally:

He kept me preoccupied with thoughts about physical safety, even in places where I should feel safe. At work, I am surrounded by adults and children. I should feel safe. Yet, I still hid from him when I was at work. I was afraid of his unpredictability.... When at

home with my child, I didn't know if we would be safe or not. I didn't know if he would kill us or hurt us. I didn't know how far he would go. (Lynn)

She described how she employed an emotionally intensive but behaviourally passive coping method to ensure that her son and she would eventually leave alive:

I alienated myself from my friends and family because I was embarrassed and ashamed of how my partner was treating me and what I was tolerating. They don't even know the story, just the harassing phone calls and showing up at work and all that stuff and how I react when he phones. I couldn't tell my parents or family cuz I was embarrassed and ashamed of my choices. I didn't share anything with anyone because it was embarrassing for one. I didn't want to face my parents and tell them how foolish I was for continuing. An unwritten agreement between us is that I would perform in front of others as if I am not being mistreated. I knew that this was not the life I signed for. Something would change somehow. (Lynn)

Another participant described how she experienced physical insecurity as a barrier to her sense of freedom:

He put me against the wall with his hands around my throat. Another time, he pushed me down, and I couldn't get up. He held me down. The physical abuse degenerated to more threats. He was a narcissist got pleasure from "hurting me," but he acted good outside. After, I met him on the road three times, and if he could hurt me and get away with it, he would. He pushed my car over as far as he could to put me in the ditch. He tried to drive me off the road. He wanted me dead. I was at my friend's house. When he knocked on the door, I hid under the bed to protect myself from him. (Dakota)

She went further to describe how extreme stress from safety threat became her wake-up call:

I was so stressed. I stayed away from friends and family and remained quiet to avoid embarrassment. I had to face reality. It is either I escape alive or dead. (Dakota)

The third participant shared how the fear of the unknown "pushed" her to appraise her relationship objectively:

He never physically hurt me, but I was never sure if he would because the things he did kept getting worse. I once sought shelter in our doghouse. That told me that things will only get worse. (Darcy)

She further narrated how she coped:

I was embarrassed and ashamed that I went back after my parents helped me. He went back to his old ways. I was ashamed to tell my parents, so I just stayed away. (Darcy)

**Emotional Safety.** The three participants reported that the men induced fear in them to gain control. In an exchange format, when the male partners used threats to induce fear, the women rewarded them with resignation and submission. Consistent with patterns noted in intimate partner male emotional abuse on women, the male partners were emotionally distressed when they could not have their way (Liu, 2012). Besides, the participants' stories amplified how their relational experiences depleted their agency and "made" them live like emotional "hostages" without any walls or bars preventing them from leaving. They processed their coping styles more as trying to "deal with it" rather than seeking to "beat it." Both fear and sense of emotional hostage felt like torture and served as wake-up calls to all the three participants.

One participant described real fear as events that induced scare and inability to defend self:

I would be scared and give him my keys, bank card, or give him whatever he wanted. Then, he would do whatever he wanted. Sometimes he would be gone for a day or two with my car. I would be worried about what he was doing with my car and what he was doing. (Lynn)

She explained how she experienced "imagined fear" in her relationship and how she became alarmed by its impact on her mind:

I didn't know what he was capable of. There were times when I left my friends' house with my ex, and then I would jump out of the car, leave it running. I would jump out of there. I would run back to my friend's place because I was scared. I knew at this point that I had to go because I was losing my mind. (Lynn)

Another participant experienced fear as motivation to leave:

Fear of what he would do and what he could do kept me emotionally trapped in the relationship. He would take her phone and her car just because he could. He would leave me standing outside alone in dangerous environments to intimidate me into "giving in" to his desire. To add to this, I was unaware of how far he would push his destructive behaviours, and I was afraid to find out.... I was terrified to get in the car with him. I didn't know how destructive he would become or what he would do.... I had to face my life. This was no longer safe. (Darcy)

A third participant highlighted how she experienced emotional threat and how it forced her to do an objective assessment of her relationship:

I was sometimes afraid of my ex. He would threaten me. He would say nasty things. I walked on eggshells lots. I did not feel right anymore in that relationship. (Dakota)

**Emotional Hostage.** A recurring word used to describe the pervasive nature of these unsafe emotional experiences was hostage. The women used the word hostage to describe incidents in which they felt that the men still emotionally “hovered” in pervading ways, even when the women were physically far away from them. All participants acknowledged that emotional hostage experience got them preoccupied with thinking and wishing about how to break off emotionally and physically. All participants experience emotional hostage as “the longest lingering enemy” and “maybe a prize to pay throughout a lifetime.”

One participant shared her emotional hostage experience:

When I get out of my car, I look down the back lane. I check the yard before I go in. I’m still in that mindset that he is going to show up. I don’t know what he is capable of. I am always prepared for him to show up. I am never relaxed even after I got “away.”... No. I am still his hostage maybe for life. (Lynn)

She described the emotional hostage-taking experience as a wake-up call:

It helped me to think and think and think. It helped me to tell myself that nobody could survive this. [How had I] allowed this man to take me hostage through my own sense of insecurity? (Lynn)

Another participant described her emotional hostage experience as something that “kept her on her feet”:

I had to check around my new apartment before going inside because my partner would sporadically show up and down my street. I was always wondering if or when he would show up. (Dakota)

A third participant highlighted the debilitating spread of her emotional hostage feeling:

The experience of emotional hostage existence continued in my life, even after I separated from the partner and re-married 13 years later. At times, in my new marriage, I

still expect to be treated the same as my previous intimate partner. Like a hostage, I am waiting for my current husband to respond like my narcissistic husband. I am too self-conscious about my own behaviours. I am comparing my current behaviours to the behaviours I had with my narcissistic husband. (Darcy)

### ***Awakening Evoked by the Sense of Loss***

From their narratives, each loss evoked awakening. The participants described loss in two ways: (a) global and (b) specific domain loss. One participant described global domain loss as everything that is “taken away” or any deficit induced by conditions in the intimate relationship.

So, I gained nothing and lost everything. I lost everything except my child. But I am sure a part of my child was lost, too. My child was maltreated.... I can't believe how much damage was done in such a short period of time. It will take me many years to rebuild my life, and it was taken away in only one year.... Financially, I have nothing. Emotionally and mentally, I will never be the same. (Lynn)

**Loss in Specific Domains.** Loss was conceptualized in a broad way to include loss of self, supports, trust, security, time, family, friends, enjoyment, child's well-being, well-being, job, resources, home, time, and health. You need a short paragraph to introduce the subtopics to be covered in this section. More specifically these domains included loss of trust in self, loss of enjoyment of life, and loss of physiological health.

***Loss of Trust in Self.*** One participant described how the loss of trust in her reasoning capacity served as her wake-up call:

I lost trust in my own reasoning as well the reasoning of people who are important to me. Suddenly, it became clear to me that I was like a dog chasing after its tail because the rules kept changing. I could not ever meet his standards. Lots of times, I don't trust myself. I don't trust myself because I don't know who I am. So how can I trust myself? I basically have no confidence. I don't even just trust myself. I just pulled a blank now cuz my train of thoughts disappeared. I knew something was off when this kind of experience began to happen more often. I was awakened to how the toxic stuff had ruined my mind. (Darcy)

Another participant described how the loss of her trust in herself alerted her to the need to begin a “search for her Self”:

Yeah. I had lost my trust in my Self. It dawned on me that I could no longer do things I enjoyed or follow my desires. My life began to revolve around the needs, wants, and desires of my intimate partner. No. I want to make my own choices and decisions. I want to learn to be me. I want to get to know who I really am. Who I really am! (Dakota)

A third participant knew that she needed help when she realized how her relationship had influenced her trust in herself:

I could no longer trust myself. I began to connect to my friends and family to keep me from going back with my partner. I needed people to tell me, “Don’t, don’t, don’t,” and remind me to stay away from him. I had to quit my job and leave my apartment to get away from him. This feels like a hellish nightmare, but it is real. (Darcy)

***Loss of Enjoyment of Life.*** All three participants reported a loss of enjoyment of life as a wake-up call. This loss was accompanied by feelings of emptiness, lack of freedom, hopelessness, anxiety, depression, and worthlessness, often culminating in thoughts of suicide.

One participant explained her experience in this way:

I felt horrible, but then I was so depressed that I really did not even care enough to do anything about it. I was getting sick from stress. I was losing my mental health. I felt better dead. I had suicidal thoughts all the time. I felt hopeless, anxious, depressed, and trapped. I wouldn’t act on it because I wouldn’t do that to my child. (Lynn)

Another participant described how her dwindling sense of life awakened her to the overwhelming emotional burden from her intimate relationship:

I suddenly acknowledged, “If I didn’t get out of the relationship, I would be dead, or I would have committed suicide.” I had no worth in life. I began to feel depressed because of not feeling free to leave. I did lose my will to live, at times. I thought of suicide many times because I didn’t know any other way to get out of my relationship. (Darcy)

***Loss of Physiological Health.*** All participants revealed that physiological reactions to the toxicity in their intimate relationships “forced” them to reflect on their lives and think actively about the steps they need to take. The women reported that the “crash in their health and daily functioning” motivated them to reappraise their situation and accept that life in the relationships

was intolerable. For example, all the participants reported the experience of extreme levels of stress and sleep disturbances.

One participant described the physiological impact that her relationship had on her and how it left her desiring strongly to leave.

When my body was fatigued and stressed, I felt that my immune system was compromised. I was so stressed out I was getting sick. I was getting a stress cough, which I still have, and it's been about four months. I began to feel frequently exhausted at work. I began to get anxiety attacks and all that stuff when he phoned or showed up at work. I am constantly afraid he is around someplace. I was a zombie at work. I just wanted to sleep. My body was giving me signal that the relationship needed to end. (Lynn)

Another participant described how her bodily reactions served as her alert to be free:

Whenever I need to drive somewhere, I almost needed Valium or something before I, I my stomach gets sore, I run to the bathroom. I became "alerted" to the need to "become free" when I noticed that my attempts at preventing anxiety and panic attacks from flaring up were not effective. I began to over-do things to make sure that I did not forget anything. (Darcy)

### **Freeing of the 'Self' from the Relationship**

All the women's stories of "breaking free" of the relationship highlighted two significant phenomena: (a) a clear awareness that it was time to leave and (b) implementation of problem-focused coping strategies (i.e., reframing, acceptance/anger about it, seeking support, emotional expression and practical problem solving).

#### ***It was Time to Leave***

It took multiple attempts for the participants to leave their relationships finally. Darcy made three unsuccessful attempts before she could finally leave. Dakota contemplated leaving for several years. Lynn "kicked" out her intimate partner several times, but he always came back to win her over.

### ***Implementation of Problem-Focused Coping Strategies***

The steps to “take back their lives” was expressed in the form of anger, seeking social support, and accepting the cost of removing oneself from the relationship.

**Use of Anger.** While there was no definite strategy to breaking free, one participant described how she utilized anger systematically to free her Self:

When I got mad and said I wanted to leave ... what he would do was get me so mad and frustrated that I would hit him first. I had to get to that level of madness before he stops or does anything. I would get so frustrated and mad. I just got up and punched him in the face, and I split his lip open because I was so mad.... I began to tell him openly how I felt about him. I was telling him daily how much I hated him and wanted him to go away. Telling him to get out. (Lynn)

Another participant utilized anger to affirm to herself that she could stand up to him:

I was angry. It was my sign that it was time to leave. Anger allowed me to defy him. I'm gonna fucken take the truck already. I told him, “If you want to do that, I will do the same damn thing.” I told him, “You can either come with me or I am fucking going on my own.” The more I talked back to him, the more he didn't like it. I was feeling stronger. (Dakota)

**Access of Social Support.** The women began to access social support as coping mechanism. One participant described social support as a coping tool:

I knew he would continually come back and try to manipulate me. For this reason, I leaned on my friends to help me get past this stage. I told another one of my girlfriends what was going on and moved into her place so he can't just show up anytime. (Lynn)

Another participant harnessed parental support as a psychological crutch to leave after she had developed her inner strength:

He went out for a drug run. Usually that means he'll go drive across the city and sit there and smoke a joint, joint after joint with his buddies, and I figured, “Okay, well, he's gone. I have an hour and a half basically.” I had my mom and dad lined up with their truck around the block. So as soon as my narcissistic partner left, I called them. I said, “K, he's gone.” Okay, we're ready to go. I packed up everything I owned in the half ton. I packed up everything I possibly could, and I left. (Dakota)



**Reframing of the Cost of Leaving as the Process of Growth.** All three women reframed “leaving the relationships” as personal growth. Motivation to leave came out of the awareness that they “had enough.” They were aware that they had to terminate their relationships. Lynn described her final determination to leave as “a process that involved many failed last chances” and how she finally “got a backbone.”

Dakota had finally realized that her life was of no value to him, and her only value was the money and labour she brought to the relationship. She reached a turning point when the threat to her staying alive became real, and it was “time to leave.” Darcy’s narratives reflected quiet heroism, personal initiative, and determination. She pulled herself up from feelings of despair and ingeniously plotted out a plan that would “fool” her intimate partner. She enacted a period of total submission to her intimate partner to “disarm” him. She planned that her parents would help her pack and leave when he was away.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to highlight the findings, which emerged from the phenomenological interviews. Firstly, the findings of this research study highlight how intimate relationships of the participants progress in identifiable developmental phases. Secondly, as the narratives have shown, dynamics between intimate partners may appear transactional with cost-benefit dividends. Thirdly, patterns and processes that characterize intimate partners’ relational behaviours and attitudes that come across as narcissistic are identifiable. There may not always be formal diagnoses to validate these narcissistic-toned behaviours and attitudes. Nevertheless, they have damaging impacts on the mental health and well-being of women who find themselves on the receiving end of these behaviours and attitudes. Narcissistic-like behaviours and attitudes from intimate male partners can leave some women with feelings of worthlessness, a lack of

dignity, a sense of loss, insecurity, loss of identity, and compromised physical, emotional, and subjective well-being. Fourthly, it may take an awakening to free oneself from a narcissistic-toned intimate partner relationship. Fifthly, retaking lives oppressed by intimate partner narcissistic-toned behaviours and attitudes may require the mobilization of both inner and external resistance coping resources. Based on the four major themes that emerged from this analysis, I will make meaning of the participants' meaning making within the context of relevant existing literature. From a counseling perspective, I will organize my discussions in the next chapter under the following themes:

- (1) Romantic Relationship as a Journey with Phases;
- (2) Dissonances Experienced in the Journey;
- (3) Impacts of Narcissistic-Like Romantic Relationship Behaviours and Attitudes on Subjective-Well-Being;
- (4) Journey to Self-Discovery;
- (5) Implications for Research;
- (6) Implications for Counseling Practice;
- (7) Suggestions for Further Resources; and
- (8) Conclusion.

## **Chapter 5 Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This research study's primary objectives were to examine the lived experiences of women who self-describe their intimate partners and their relationships as narcissistic. This study's findings are based on the interpretation and analysis of data obtained through the process of phenomenological interviews with three female participants. The participants used the "narcissistic" descriptor mainly as a cultural word to describe intimate relational experiences that felt and looked more challenging than what they "expected" while entering into the relationships. I will provide an interpretation of the findings presented in chapter four in this chapter. I will continuously illustrate how the findings are relevant to counseling and relate the findings to existing broader research in psychology. The participants in this study described their experiences of self, partners, and relationships as interconnected phenomena, which I will explore through the themes that emerged during my interpretive process before moving onto issues of methodology,

### **Romantic Relationship as Journey with Phases**

The findings from this study highlight how the participants perceive a romantic relationship as a form of a journey with phases marked by distinctive relational patterns. The participants placed their stories on the axis of chronological time and interpreted key relational issues as phased experiences (Hagestad, 1986; Halbrook, 1994, p. 152). The phases discussed in this section include (a) the beginning, (b) power and control by male partners, and (c) relationship as authoritarian.

### ***Beginning Phase***

Events that happen during entry into romantic relationships are important. In this study, feelings of excitement, positive interactions, yearning for love, exclusive bonding, and desire characterized the *beginning* phases of the participants' relationships with their partners. The participants' descriptions of the beginning phases of their relationships is consistent with intimate relationship research that recognizes intimate relationships typically begin with the honeymoon phase (Reese-Weber & Johnson, 2012; Rokach & Sha'Ked, 2013). All the participants in my study hastily judged the suitability of their partners for a relationship based on immediate emotional needs. Their criteria for choosing intimate male partners emphasized a simplistic demonstration of affection and verbal promises to take care of the women. The participants' stories about the criteria for choosing their partners did not indicate mutual conversations or agreements about values, standards and boundaries, themes that counseling research consider essential when determining whether to go into a relationship with someone or not (Cordova & Scott, 2001; DeMarian et al., 2003).

### ***Power and Control by Male Partners***

Consistent with Reese-Weber and Johnson (2012), a second phase quickly emerged as power and control continuously tilted towards the male partners. The participants experienced intimidating communication characterized by verbal aggression by the male partners. They experienced the affection offered to them as *twisted*. Rokach and Weber (2013) used the expression a "twisted way of loving . . . [to describe] abusive relationships with a repeated cycle of tenderness and abuse that leaves the loved and loving partner confused, wounded, and lonely" (p. 65). While the second phase emerged in the same order as indicated by extant research (i.e., after the honeymoon), the patterns that characterized the participants' experiences were in

contrast. For example, according to Reese-Weber and Johnsons' (2012) three-phase model of a romantic relationship, the *defining* phase is supposed to emerge after the honeymoon. This is the phase when partners negotiate the expected depth of bonding in the relationship, label the relationship, and determine the relationship's seriousness and longevity. Mutual agreements about standards for relating, including boundaries, problem-solving, communication, and the balance of power are typical (Rokach & Sha'Ked, 2013). However, in this study, all the male intimate partners, starting from this phase, rebuffed negotiations for balanced power sharing with the participants.

Interestingly, participant perceived that they worked hard to be loved by their male partners. During this second phase, the women described a continual willingness to renew their expectations of receiving love after repeated disappointments from their male partners. Meanwhile, the women continue to serve their male partners as a way of gaining the love that they desire. The participants described relational dynamics consistent with the psychological abusive romantic relationship phenomenon termed "waiting for love" (Papp & Witt, 2010, p. 553). Papp and Witt (2020) used this phrase to describe when male partners' expectations of abused women become indecipherable: the men seem not to be ever satisfied with anything that their partners do, and they remain reproachful of their partner. The participants and experienced their male partners as controlling and reported difficulties dealing with unsatisfactory emotional relationship with their male partners. Consistent with current research, these experiences evoked imaginations of separation of themselves from their relationships (Metz et al., 2018; Papp & Witt, 2020).

Within a counseling context, Korff-Sausse (as cited in Metz et al., 2018) described controlling relationships as events where one partner's behaviours and attitudes reflect

“appropriation through the dispossession of the other (p. 927). Individuals who report psychological abuse in their intimate relationship often feel dispossessed of their personhood. The narratives highlighted how the women experienced their male partners as bullies who subjugated them to an infantile existence. The participants perceived that they lost the personal agency required to stand up for themselves. As a result, the participants experienced themselves as subservient. They described themselves as victims who were acted against rather than individuals who are agents of their relational outcomes. The participants perceived their relationships as existing within loveless contexts filled with psychic distress, where they were *required* to submit to domination by male partners.

### ***Authoritarian Phase***

The participants described the third phase when they experienced their relationships as authoritarian. They perceived their intimate male partners as authoritative and patriarchal. The participants experienced this phase of the relationships as “when things have gone deep.” On the one hand, the participants’ experiences corresponded with Knapp’s (1978) description of the intensifying phase when romantic relationships go deep and are no longer superficial. On the other hand, the events that characterized the participants’ experiences during this phase still fit more into Reese-Weber and Johnson’s (2012) second phase when intimacy is negotiated, leading to increased intimacy or aggression. If so, I wonder if the growth of the relationships stalled during the second phase. While the participants continued to seek emotional fusion with their male partners (Ferreira et al., 2015), the male partners were persistently avoidant and often blatantly maintained a separate identity from the women. Either way, Lewis (1973) noted that this pattern indicates a relationship that will be hurtful and short-lived. The participants’

narratives indicated that the events during this phase as precursors for themselves to eventually leaving the relationships.

The study participants' experiences stood in contrast with existing literature about intimate relationships that are in the third phase. For example, the women experienced themselves as *alone* within their relationships (Rokach & Sha'Ked, 2013). They experienced themselves as relational burden bearers. The burdens the participants had to bear were financial, physical (i.e., the activity of daily routines), and emotional. They paid for all household bills with their incomes. They gradually began to negotiate to prioritize the family bills over the male partners' leisure costs. Physically, they did all the household chores while their male partners focused on their leisure habits. In contrast with existing literature that view intimate relationships as *organisms* that grow in mutual support and fusion over time (Codova & Scott, 2001; Knapp, 1978; Liu, 2012), the participants perceived themselves as the partners who were responsible for maintaining and enhancing whatever positive emotions remained in the relationships. The participants experienced their partners as domineering and hostile individuals in the relationships who were only interested in dispossessing them of their physical, material, and emotional safety.

Data from this study indicates that the women traded off self-differentiation as they sought to 'purchase' relational stability. They often experienced themselves as *paralyzed* and unable to draw from internal or external psychosocial coping resources when needed. For example, none of the participants made overt effort to defend themselves physically or emotionally from their intimate male partners' aggression especially during the first two phases of their relationships. Their stories highlighted an unhealthy sacrificial process. These are in contrast with what existing literature suggests for the maintenance of healthy relationships during

the third phase. For example, developmental models of romantic relationships propose that intimate relationships are entities that institute new systems (e.g., father-child, husband-wife, and the relational unit itself). The interplays among the *systems* introduce new ways of doing and being in the relationships. To maintain stability, partners would invest their unique strength. Women who maintain their self-differentiation tend to have more resources to invest towards the adaptation of their selves and their relationships (Parke 1998; Rokach & Sha'Ked, 2013).

### **Dissonances Experienced in the Journey**

These findings about romantic relationships as journeys highlight the need to understand narcissistic-like abuse in an intimate relationship through the lens of women who have lived through it. This is important because many people, including helpers view their experiences as *tall tales*. Such a view is understandable when one considers the multi-layered dissonance that shapes the women's daily life experiences. Dissonance occurs when individuals present with two conflicting information, thoughts, or feelings that do not fit together psychologically about an event. Data from this research indicate that the men presented continuously with dissonance and the participants struggled to find compatibility between the opinions or actions of their intimate male partners (Cherry, 2014). These data showed an unusual level of lack of harmony in the way the women experienced and interpreted life in their relationships. Counselors who support the women must acknowledge how a continuous widening of dissonance influences the lives the women live. For example, the more they *chase after* their desired standards for relational success, the further away those standards appear and the more they try to make meaning of the unfolding process. Managing dissonance was their way of maintaining sanity.



## *Intimacy*

As is evidenced in the findings of this present study, participants conceptualized intimacy as key to the inseparable and exclusive bond that defined the union between their intimate male partners and them. All relationships were initially contracted based on the need for and willingness to give intimacy to the other. Psychology research describes the critical features of intimacy in intimate relationships to include love, tenderness, trust, and opening up to a romantic partner (Czyżowska, et al., 2019). The responses of participants indicate that the women craved intense caring, mutual support, continuous affection, and emotional fusion with the intimate male partners, qualities that are close to the description above.

The data illustrated that the participants conceptualized intimacy as a resource that could be *bought back* when it depreciated. Intimacy continuously depreciated as relationships progressed from one phase to the other. The more intimacy depreciated, the more the study participants experienced the loss of power, diminished sense of self, and willingness to invest more energy to buy back love. The women's buying back love as synonymous with giving up their needs to meet their partners' and relationships' needs. While intimacy should add warmth, zest, and colour to the lives of women in love (Parkes, 1982), the women in this study experienced an emotional void due to the elusiveness of intimacy in the relationships.

The perspectives of the participants highlight how the women valued intimacy in their intimate relationships. Their conceptualization of how the lack of intimacy influenced their lives was clear. To help these women effectively, counselors who work with them should exercise open-mindedness when they co-construct the women's perspectives about how to resolve intimacy needs in their relationships. Non-judgemental attitude would be required when supporting them to develop their agency so they can leave, if the relationships become unhealthy

for them. Open-minded counseling support may entail working with the women to co-construct what intimacy may look like for them at a particular phase in their relationships and brainstorm about how to negotiate for it. This is important because researchers have observed that intimacy changes over time in romantic relationships (Rokach & Sha'Ked, 2013). Intimacy declines as the relationship moves towards the development and consolidation of its own *we-identity*. Some research described this as a transition from the “sweet to the working stage” of the relationship (Rokach & Sha'Ked, 2013, p. 65). Management of intimacy in romantic relationships may be related to the psychological capabilities partners bring to relationships.

Depreciation of intimacy over time could become a normal phenomenon in the life of a relationship when both partners understand what is happening. Intimacy is typically at its peak during the *sweet beginnings* phase. Management of intimacy is one of the developmental tasks of young adulthood (Erikson et al., 1994). Therefore, there is the assumption that capabilities for the self-management of intimacy should be in the repertoire of most adults (Erikson et al., 1994). Relationship education in counseling typically invest time to help young women build capacity for self-management of intimacy by encouraging discussions about how to develop, use, and repair intimacy in their romantic relationship (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin & Fawcett, 2008).. Perhaps the women in this study may benefit from this kind of counseling resource.

### ***Belonging***

The perspectives of the participants indicate that the participants worked hard to *belong* to their partners and belong in the relationships. The data showed pervasive sense of failure and frustration, especially when the intimate male partners' ‘narcissistic’ behaviours and attitudes seemed to *push* the women away. There was cognitive dissonance when their relational transitions placed them in unclear situations between belonging and marginality. The women

believed that the male partners pushed them away from the center and towards marginality in the relationships. The women struggled to adapt to the *strange* changes and often grieved when they could not feel *part of* their intimate male partners.

This study's findings demonstrated how the impact of a lack of a sense of belonging in an intimate relationship should not be underestimated. Belonging is a human need met in intimate relationships (Bauminster & Leary, 1995). A sense of belonging in a romantic relationship acts as a buffer against adverse issues experienced outside of the relationship (Pillow et al., 2015). As is evidenced in this study, the women may felt like double victims when they feared that their support systems might judge them or trivialize the negative impacts of lack belonging that they experience in their romantic relationships. These feelings are expected, because belonging gap in a romantic relationship could lead to emotional void with the potential for debilitating impacts across other life functions such as the women's place of employment (Malone et al., 2013). Counselors who support women may need to listen to understand how they conceptualize belonging and how this determines how they thrive in other areas of life. In addition, authentic support for the women in this study would entail validation of their experiences and collaborating with them to explore inner resistance resources to engage in the resolution of psychic distress engendered by belonging void (Antovonosky, 1987). The participants showed inner strengths later in their relationships. As observed by Chopra (2001), these strengths could have been be leveraged to connect to their true selves, and challenge the diminished sense of belonging inflicted by twisted relational patterns, if they had appropriate support

### ***Mattering***

Mattering emerged as transitional marker and relational compass in the findings. Mattering refers to the belief that individuals count in others' lives and are valued for their

potential to make a difference to those significant others (Kawamura & Brown, 2010). As a transitional marker, the women experienced satisfaction at the beginning because the intimate male partners appreciated, noticed, and acknowledged their *usefulness*. The participants in this study perceived mattering as a crucial need in their intimate relationships. Placed on a chronological axis, all the participants perceived a high sense of mattering at the beginning of the relationships. Mattering began to erode during the second phase of the relationships. As a relational compass (Nash et al., 2015), the participants' sense of self diminished when they could no longer feel the sense of mattering. When the participants spoke out their inner reflections without any prompting during the interviews, the themes reflected typical inner ponderings about mattering (Anderson et al., 2012). Example of inner ponderings about mattering include "Do I know who I am? Do I appreciate myself? Do I feel competent? Are my inner expectations and external reality congruent? Do others appreciate me? Does people who relate with me make me feel needed?" These questions target real issues that individuals face during challenging transitions in inter-personal relationships (Anderson et al., 2012).

The current study's findings about mattering in intimate relationships are consistent with counseling research (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) that identified mattering as central to thriving in social relationships. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) proposed that individuals can identify when mattering depletes in a relationship. Logically, individuals know when they matter because mattering is a resource that is demonstrable by the attention, importance, dependence, ego-extension, and appreciation placed on an individual by his or her partner (Rosenberg & McCullough 1981). No wonder that the participants' sense of self continued to diminish as their male partners' behaviours and attitudes continued to rob them of this human organizing personal

resource. The male partners denied the women of attention, importance, and appreciation despite their roles as the “burden bearers” of the households.

Narratives from the interviews indicated that the participants believed that mattering is a reward resource to be offered to them by their partners. In contrast, research view self-mattering as a personal capital needed for psychological autonomy (Keller, 2016). Individuals play roles in how mattering is ascribed to them in a romantic relationship (Child, 2020). Women are encouraged first to establish how they matter to their self. Individuals’ mattering to self is a personalized resource that helps them position for mattering in social relationships. Individuals could lose a sense of mattering to self by the way significant people in their lives treat them (Dixon, 2007). Loss of mattering in relationships is associated with mental illness and suicide (Elliot et al., 2005). These existing researches imply that counseling practice and research should give more attention to mattering support in romantic relationships. The women in this study could benefit from mental health support that help them to develop capabilities for managing mattering as a personalized resource in intimate relationships.

### **Impacts of Narcissistic-Like Romantic Relational Behaviours and Attitudes on Subject-Well-Being**

The impact that the behaviours and attitudes of the intimate male partners had on the participants’ quality of life and their subjective well-being was a consistent theme that emerged throughout the interviews. The findings indicated that intimate male partner attitudes and narcissistic-like behaviours influenced women’s sense of fulfillment and well-being (Bradway et al., 2000; McClure & Lydon, 2018). The women in this study characterized themselves and intimate male partners in terms of dispossession of autonomy, competence, and connectedness. These are three essential components of life fulfillment and subjective well-being (Kluwer et al.,

2020). Individuals thrive in their intimate relationships (Geef & Malherbe, 2001) and life (Sutton, 2020) to the extent that they have a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Knee et al., 2002; Knee et al., 2005; Knee et al., 2013). These findings are important because well-being is central to living the good life (Sutton, 2020). Women who have a higher sense of autonomy, competence, and connectedness are more likely to thrive in adversity (Park 2012; Reis et al., 2000) and live satisfying lives (McClure & Lydon, 2018).

The participants acceptance of incompetence and self-doubt even in areas they had demonstrated mastery before entering the relationships demonstrates the destructive effects of abusive intimate relationships. The participants perceived themselves as individuals who had no competence because they had undergone prolonged cognitive re-structuring (Corey, 2009; Kaur & Kaur, 2015) through male partner verbal and emotional abuse. The data showed how living processes such as diminished sense of connectedness to others could be damaging to one's well-being. When the partners restricted the participants from connecting with others and used character blackmail to cut them off from family and friends, the women interpreted these as dispossession of necessary relatedness capital needed to flourish as healthy individuals (Costa et al., 2015).

Loss of autonomy affected their functioning even in areas that did not relate to home or love life. For example, cognitively, they doubted their capabilities to make decisions at work as independent individuals. They believed that they had lost all senses of autonomy because of prolonged devaluation and cruel comparisons to others that their intimate male partners had perpetrated. The women's interpretation of loss of autonomy as a violation of their sense of self, is consistent with existing research that views the autonomy of partners is a crucial determinant of the quality of life in intimate relationships (Hadden et al., 2015; Hui et al., 2013). Individuals

who maintain a sense of control and power over self in their intimate relationships flourish better in other life domains (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Gan et al., 2015).

### ***Loss of Self in the Relationships***

It is clear from the findings of this study that the story of living life with a male partner whose behaviours and attitudes come across as narcissistic is about the loss of self and its recovery. Severe adversity in the relationships evoked the desire to reclaim the self the participants believed that they had before the relationships. Douglas (1997), using a Jungian psychology lens, described the process of loss of self in a relationship as the peeling of the onion bulb that happens one layer at a time. The findings from this study illustrated how the loss of Self happens gradually over time. The recovery of self also happened gradually over time. However, I did not explore the women's process of recovery after they left the relationship nor issues related to post traumatic growth.

From the analysis of the data collected and consistent with relational counseling literature (Ferreira et al., 2015; Ferreira et al., 2016), the participants worked hard to maintain stability in the relationship at the cost of their self-differentiation. They demonstrated this trade-off by avoiding conflicts and disagreements with the male partners throughout the first two phases of the relationships. The male partners used intermittent emotional detachment and unpredictable emotional engagement to condition the relationships as transactional spaces where they had stronger bargaining powers. The intimate male partners were emotionally engaged when they needed. The participants experienced intimate male partners as frustrated whenever they could not get their way. The women were overly willing to buy-back the lost affection when the male partners were *rejecting* them. They were afraid of activating their capability for maintaining their self-differentiation, especially the I-position component (Ferreira et al., 2015), which enables

individuals to negotiate for a dignified position in any relationship. The participants might have been able to set limits based on personal values and wishes, if they could implement the I-position (Skowron, 2000), even in situations where their intimate male partners disagreed. (Skowron, 2000). Individuals in intimate relationships use their I-positions to address emotional gaps that occur in relationships, while affirming themselves in those contexts. This position helps individuals know how to dial down compensatory behaviour and emotions during challenging emotional transition phases (Ferreira et al. 2014; Pereira, 2016).

The findings indicate how the women struggled with maintaining self-identity while consciously establishing a positive couple identity (Child, 2020). The participants neglected their needs and prioritized their male partners' preferences and wishes. They purchased peace and affection by giving away their boundaries and allowed the male partners to dominate the psychological space in the relationships. These are indications of loss of self-identity (Child, 2020). The experiences are unfortunate, because self-identity is a critical determinant for happiness and fulfillment in intimate relationships (Ferreira et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2013; Parke, 1998). Child's (2020) suggestion that a proactive empowerment of women for dignified positioning in romantic relationships could cushion their readiness to engage in relationships with a conscious sense of self, could be relevant for families, educators and mental health practitioners who support the women in this study. This is especially because society pays serious attention to preparing young people for life and careers, while minimal proactive attention is given to capabilities for negotiating dignified relationships. This is unfortunate, as the romantic relationship is a critical determinant for happiness and fulfillment in careers (Ferreira et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2013; Parke, 1998).



The data illustrated what could happen when women seek to cope in a negative romantic relationship without self-differentiation. The participants relied on denial, passivity, resignation, and reframing of adverse situations for coping. Lazarus and Folkman (2004) described these as problem-focused coping. While these coping strategies provide immediate relief to abusive events, they do not signify the implementation of an I-position. Besides, the participants in this study experienced heightened stress because they could only access negative dyadic coping. Counseling research describe negative dyadic coping as “hostile, with one partner disparaging, distancing themselves, mocking, using sarcasm, or minimizing partner stress” (Papp & Witt 2010, p. 552). The women could only cope independently throughout the first two phases of the relationships. They sought support from friends and relatives only when their stress became overwhelming. The male partners were emotionally disengaged and hostile. This is worrisome because counseling research has proposed that intimate partner relationships flourish during turbulence only when they practice positive dyadic coping (Bodenmann, 1995). Positive dyadic coping describes situations where both couples work together behaviourally, emotionally, and cognitively to reduce stress during turbulence (Bodenmann, 2005; Bodenmann & Cina, 2005). It is not clear from the data whether the intimate male partners were conditioned to aloofness because the women rewarded the behavior by always denying themselves of their needs to please the men.

Consistent with existing studies (Bodenmann & Cina, 2005; Papp & Witt, 2010), problem-focused and negative dyadic coping created unbearable stress, continuing pervasive loss (i.e., self-trust, material, enjoyment of life, and physiological health) and deteriorating safety (i.e., material, physical, and emotional) issues for the participants. The narratives from the women indicate that the conditions described above awakened the women to two realities: (a) the

relationships would get more unsafe with increased consequential losses, and (b) it was time to reclaim the self and remove themselves from the relationships.

### **Journey to Self-Discovery**

All the participants seemed sure about the moments of epiphanies that marked their awakening from adverse intimate relationships with their male partners. The women started to initiate steps to self-differentiate during the third phase. Their awakening patterns fit into typical Jungian descriptions of reconstruction of desired self or self-differentiation (Douglas, 1997; Ferreira et al., 2015). Related counseling research recommend that self-differentiation in a romantic relationship requires: “1) Understanding of Self; 2) Understanding of problem; 3) Capability to activate self-inquiry with a question such as: If I am not whom I thought I was, then who am I?; [and] 4) Selection of appropriate strategies to begin to respond in do-able steps” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 17). The findings illustrated two remarkable patterns. First, while all the participants’ experiences fit into these psychological requirements for self-differentiation, they did not happen in any particular order. Secondly, the threat to their lives, well-being, safety, and pervasive loss *pushed the women* to rally their residual personal resources to re-establish their self-differentiation.

Each of the participants uniquely acknowledged that something was wrong in her relationship. They realized that they had willfully repressed the personal strength and emotions needed to confront the unwanted issues they had denied in the relationships. Whitaker (1989) noted that individuals are ready to step into self-differentiation when they acknowledge the issues that had held them back from being the person they desire. Severe adversity experienced during the third phase awakened the participants to boldly name the issues, name the different elements of the self that they had previously bargained away, and gradually rally their agentic

self to address these, one piece at a time. Counseling refers to these actions as authentic encounters with the self (Valdez & Lilly, 2014). The participants gradually began to defend their autonomy by implementing responsible fiscal values over their partners' leisure spending habits. They asserted their sense of competence subtly by refusing the incompetence ascribed on them by their male partners. They gradually reconnected with valued social connections.

### **Implications for Research**

This research shows a need for awareness regarding how well women understand the developmental tasks required during various phases of an intimate relationship. All the intimate relationships described in this study seemed to skip developmental tasks necessary to attain relational success during various phases of an intimate relationship (Rokach & Sha'Ked, 2013). For example, Knapp (1978) recommends that intense and frequent communication about expectations for the relationships should happen during the initial phases of an intimate relationship. This did not happen in the relationships of the three participants. Through purposeful communications, romantic partners accept that an intimate relationship is a living unit that has both nurturing needs and rewards. Partners also come to embrace the fact that dynamic changes occur in the life of relationship. These communications produce solid foundations that accommodate the changes that would likely happen later in the relationship. "Romantic relationships evolve to compassionate love or may even be replaced by other feelings that are not as intimate and binding as love is" (Rokach & Sha'Ked, 2013, p. 65). The overarching goal of these intense communications is to establish mutual foundations and standards that would guide the romantic relationships. The women in this study might have thought that they did their best to try to build solid foundations and negotiate the relationship at the beginning. Relational counseling research needs to build a theory about how well women understand that an intimate

relationship has its own related but separate needs during various phases. This research would give counseling psychologist evidence-based understanding in teaching or supporting the women on what to expect and not expect in a healthy relationship. This research would give counselors researched evidence to build a best practices approach in supporting women.

Counseling research would benefit from understanding how women in challenging intimate relationships describe the ways of developing, losing, and recovering autonomy, connectedness and competence (McClure & Lydon, 2018; Neff & Harter, 2003). The data from this study indicated that the women suffered compromised wellbeing when these self-determination qualities (i.e. autonomy, connectedness and competence) eroded. A better understanding about management of well-being in abusive intimate relationships would be beneficial to counseling research. This understanding would be important because well-being is central to living the good life (Sutton, 2020). Women who have a higher sense of autonomy, competence, and connectedness tend to thrive better when faced with adversity (Park 2012; Reis et al., 2000) and live satisfying lives (McClure & Lydon, 2018).

There is need for further information about how women experience self-differentiation in abusive intimate relationships. Existing research attribute loss of self-differentiation in a relationship to developmental deficits transferred from lives lived before the relationships (Child, 2020). For example, individuals who had insecure attachments with parental figures tended to overcompensate for love and affection, even to the extent of disconnecting from their realities (Whishman, 2006). Other studies suggested that these individuals might present with avoidant love, where they initiate relationships and, after that, pull away to preserve self (Godbout et al., 2006; Rokach & Sha'Ked, 2013). While none of these underlying reasons for loss of self-differentiation emerged from this current study, research recommendations that self-identity

could be recovered through mental health education is relevant for the rehabilitation of women in this study. A better understanding of self-differentiation in intimate relationships would be beneficial to young girls, women and the counselors that work with these populations.

### **Implications for Counseling Practice**

Counseling practice should continue to appreciate the importance of interventions that support women to develop capabilities for managing challenging relational transitions (Rhoades & Stanley, 2011; Stanley et al., 2010). An example of such intervention would be psychoeducation that could teach women about how to respond to expected transitions in relationships. The goal of designing this kind of support is to enable women to identify what is *unhealthy* early enough. It would equip them with capabilities needed to access resources for corrective actions (which can include ending the relationship for their partners, themselves, and their relationships proactively).

The findings from this study shed light on the importance of providing compassionate counseling support for women, focussing specifically on self-discovery. Counselors should target support approaches that proactively equip the women and perhaps, young girls with capabilities to address narcissistic relational patterns (Rhoades & Stanley, 2011). This support could be provided in an individual or group format. Women who have experienced intimate male partner relationships, as described by the participants in this study, need counselor support to validate their often hard-to-believe experiences, explore, identify suppressed capabilities needed for self-reconstruction (Child, 2020), and gradually work towards developing capabilities to manage their resistance resources (Rokach & Shaked, 2013).

These findings also provide insights that could be useful to counseling practice. One of the critical counseling insights illustrated by the findings about self-differentiation is that the women could implement the I-Position by looking inwards for strength. For the women in this study, this capacity was suppressed by two factors: (a) the male partners' dehumanizing narcissistic relational patterns and (b) the women's tendency to operate without self-differentiation. Another insight is that the participants seemed to end the relationships with more self-awareness and a sense of self than they brought into the relationships. All the participants acknowledged on their own that they needed to leave. These are stories of victory. Within the counseling context, the celebration of small victories is a way of strengthening the potentials for further victories (Lyon, 2015).

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Future research should investigate what women who experience narcissistic-like relationships recommend as supports for living life during specific phases of relationships. Data from a cross-sectional investigation of entry, living, and exiting narcissistic-like relationships with women of various ages or at different phases of intimate relationships would provide valuable insight. Further research should also explore perceptions regarding the links between past and present life experiences (Garry & Gentry, 1991) and the influence the capabilities that women bring to narcissistic-like intimate relationships. Also, the findings from this thesis research shine light on further valid questions that need to be asked to gain clarity about the life experiences of women in intimate relationships with male partners who present with narcissistic-like behaviours and attitudes. The socio-cultural phenomenon termed "narcissism" represents an issue that deserves attention from relationship counseling research and practice.

Women in this study reported distress about how their intimate male partners ‘denied’ them of mattering and belonging. While these findings are insightful, it seems that the women still have more to say about these phenomena. The findings suggest a gap in knowledge that would be filled by research that better explains how women interpret how they conceptualize belonging in romantic relationships, and the capacities they bring along to help them proactively identify and counter the kind of narcissistic intimate male partner patterns uncovered in this study.

### **Conclusion**

The present study investigated how women, who subjectively described their male partners’ behaviours and attitudes as narcissistic, experienced themselves and their intimate male partners in their relationships. To summarise the findings, the participants interpreted their intimate relational experiences as transitions through marked developmental phases. They described their co-existence with their intimate male partners as continuous, lop-sided negotiations for well-being with a significant toll on the women’s sense of self. They interpreted heightened adversity in the relationships as *gifts* that led to a change in their coping strategies and awakening to free their self from the relationships. They grieved the lack of capabilities to negotiate for what they wanted in their relationships and believed that the extent of the losses they experienced was directly proportional to the length of time it took for them to become awakened.

To summarize my major take-away from the findings, all the study participants had similar negative experiences and losses in terms of going through intimate relational life events with male partners, whose behaviours and attitudes they described as narcissistic. They differed in terms of timing of the activation of various hardship-inspired coping strategies and

experiences of awakening epiphanies to leave. A common experience was that they all entered their relationships with agentic desire to meet their needs and left by implementing agentic steps to reclaim their self. These insights can have implications for the content of interventions to support women and girls to develop capabilities for negotiating dignified experiences in intimate relationships, especially when male partners who present with narcissistic-like behaviours and attitudes are involved.



## References

- Adamczyk, K., & Segrin, C. (2015). The Mediating Role of Romantic Desolation and Dating Anxiety in the Association Between Interpersonal Competence and Life Satisfaction Among Polish Young Adults. *Journal of Adult Development, 23*(1), 1–10.  
[doi.org/10.1007/s10804-015-9216-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-015-9216-3)
- American Psychiatric Association. (1980). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (3rd ed.). Arlington, VA: Author.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., Text rev.). Washington, DC: Author.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: Author.
- Anderson, M. L., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K. (2012). *Counseling adults in transition: linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world*. Springer Pub.
- Anderson, H., & Goolishian, H. (1992). The client is the expert: A not-knowing approach to therapy. In S. McNamee & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Inquiries in social construction. Therapy as social construction* (p. 25–39). Sage Publications, Inc.

- Antonovsky, A. (1987). *The Jossey-Bass social and behavioral science series and the Jossey-Bass health series. Unraveling the mystery of health: How people manage stress and stay well*. Jossey-Bass.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480. [doi:10.1037/0003-066x.55.5.469](https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.5.469)
- Balbernie, R. (2015). Security and Attachment. *A Critical Companion to Early Childhood*, 130-141. [doi:10.4135/9781473910188.n12](https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473910188.n12)
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529. [doi:10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497)
- Baxter, L. A., & Erbert, L. A. (1999). Perceptions of Dialectical Contradictions in Turning Points of Development in Heterosexual Romantic Relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 16(5), 547–569. [doi.org/10.1177/0265407599165001](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407599165001)
- Baxter, L. A., & Scharp, K. M. (2016). Dialectical Tensions in Relationships. *The International Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Communication*, 1–6. [doi.org/10.1002/9781118540190.wbeic017](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118540190.wbeic017)
- Bell, K. J. (2008). *Intimate partner violence on campus: A tests of social learning theory* (Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania). Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/730b/49e22394259ac4a1c96692f9ec8c280ccff4.pdf>
- Berebaum, H. & Baker, J.P. (2008). The Efficacy of Problem-Focused and Emotional Approach Interventions Varies as a Function of Emotional Processing Style. *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 32(1):66-82 DOI: [10.1007/s10608-007-9129-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-007-9129-y)

- Berenson, K. R., & Andersen, S. M. (2006). Childhood physical and emotional abuse by a parent: Transference Effects in adult interpersonal relations. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(11), 1509–1522. [doi.org/10.1177/0146167206291671](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167206291671)
- Bernardo, A. B. I., & Estrellado, A. F. (2017). Subjective well-being of Filipino women who experienced intimate partner violence: A person-centered analysis. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 39(4), 360–376. [doi.org/10.1007/s10447-017-9303-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-017-9303-1)
- Bevan, M. T. (2014). A method of phenomenological interviewing. *Qualitative Health Research*, 24(1), 136–144. [doi.org/10.1177/1049732313519710](https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732313519710)
- Bhui, K., & Bhugra, D. (2002). Explanatory models for mental distress: Implications for clinical practice and research. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 181(1), 6–7. [doi.org/10.1192/bjp.181.1.6](https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.181.1.6)
- Bland, A. M., & DeRobertis, E. M. (2017). Humanistic perspective. *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, 1–19. [doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8\\_1484-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8_1484-1)
- Bodenmann, G. (2005). Dyadic Coping and Its Significance for Marital Functioning. *Couples Coping with Stress: Emerging Perspectives on Dyadic Coping.*, 33–49. [doi.org/10.1037/11031-002](https://doi.org/10.1037/11031-002)
- Bodenmann, G., & Cina, A. (2006). Stress and Coping Among Stable-Satisfied, Stable-Distressed and Separated/Divorced Swiss Couples. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 44(1-2), 71–89. [doi.org/10.1300/j087v44n01\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/j087v44n01_04)
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4th ed.). Toronto, Canada: Pearson Education Group .

- Bloomquist, K. R., Wood, L., Friedmeyer-Trainor, K., & Kim, H. (2016). Self-care and Professional Quality of Life: Predictive Factors among MSW Practitioners. *Advances in Social Work, 16*(2), 292-311. [doi:10.18060/18760](https://doi.org/10.18060/18760)
- Bradway, C., Trotta, R., Bixby, M. B., McPartland, E., Wollman, M. C., Kapustka, H., ... Naylor, M. D. (2012). A qualitative analysis of an advanced practice nurse-directed transitional care model intervention. *Gerontologist, 52*(3), 394-407. doi:10.1093/geront/gnr078
- Bromberg, P. (1983). The Mirror and the Mask-On Narcissism and Psychoanalytic Growth1. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis, 19*:359-387.
- Briere, J., & Scott, C. (2015). Complex Trauma in Adolescents and Adults. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 38*(3), 515-527. [doi:10.1016/j.psc.2015.05.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psc.2015.05.004)
- Brown, S. L. (2010). *Women who love psychopaths: Inside the relationships of inevitable harm with psychopaths, sociopaths & narcissists* (2nd ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Institute for Relational Harm Reduction.
- Brown, S., McGriff, K., & Speedlin, S. (2018). Using relational-cultural theory to negotiate relational rebuilding in survivors of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 13*(2), 136–147. [doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2017.1355289](https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2017.1355289)
- Calvete, E., Corral, S., & Estévez, A. (2007). Cognitive and coping mechanisms in the interplay between intimate partner violence and depression. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping, 20*(4), 369–382. [doi.org/10.1080/10615800701628850](https://doi.org/10.1080/10615800701628850)
- Campbell, J., & Moyers, B. D. (1988). *The power of myth*. New York: Doubleday.
- Campbell, W. K. (1999). Narcissism and romantic attraction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*(6), 1254–1270. [doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.77.6.1254](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.77.6.1254)

- Campbell, W. K., & Foster, C. A. (2002). Narcissism and commitment in romantic relationships: An investment model analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(4), 484–495. [doi.org/10.1177/0146167202287006](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167202287006)
- Cantor, C., & Price, J. (2007). Traumatic entrapment, appeasement and complex post-traumatic stress disorder: Evolutionary perspectives of hostage reactions, domestic abuse and the Stockholm syndrome. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 41, 377–384. [doi.org/10.1080/00048670701261178](https://doi.org/10.1080/00048670701261178)
- Carson, R. C., & Butcher, J. N. (1992). *Abnormal psychology & modern life* (9th ed.). New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Catalano, S. (2007). Intimate partner violence in the United States. *Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics*. Washington, D.C.: U.S.
- Chan, Z. C., Fung, Y., & Chien, W. (2013). Bracketing in Phenomenology: Only Undertaken in the Data Collection and Analysis Process. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(30), 1-9. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol18/iss30/1>
- Childs, J. E. (2020). *I hate the man I love: a conscious relationship is your key to success*. Frederick Fell Publishers, Inc.
- Chopra, D. (2001). *Perfect Health--Revised and Updated : The Complete Mind*
- Cicognani, E. (2014). *Psychological home and well being* [Electronic version]. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269930525\\_Psychological\\_home\\_and\\_well\\_Being](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269930525_Psychological_home_and_well_Being)
- Coeling, H. V., & Harman, G. (1997). Learning to ask about domestic violence. *Women's Health Issues*, 7(4), 263–268. [doi.org/10.1016/s1049-3867\(97\)00008-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1049-3867(97)00008-x)

- Coker, A. L., Smith, P. H., McKeown, R. E., & King, M. J. (2000). Frequency and correlates of intimate partner violence by type: Physical, sexual, and psychological battering. *American Journal of Public Health, 90*(4), 553–559. [doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.90.4.553](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.90.4.553)
- Coleman, A. M., Chouliara, Z., & Currie, K. (2018). Working in the Field of Complex Psychological Trauma: A Framework for Personal and Professional Growth, Training, and Supervision. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 088626051875906*.  
[doi:10.1177/0886260518759062](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518759062)
- Cook & Rice (2006). Social Exchange Theory. *Social Forces* 68(2):53-76  
DOI: 10.1007/0-387-36921-X\_3..
- Cordova, J.V. & Scott, R.L. (2001). Intimacy: A behavioral interpretation  
Behavior Analysis, ; 24(1): 75–86. doi: [10.1007/BF03392020](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03392020)
- Corey, G. (2009). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy*. Belmont, CA, Thomas: Brooks/Cole.
- Costa, S., Ntoumanis, N., & Bartholomew, K. J. (2015). Predicting the brighter and darker sides of interpersonal relationships: Does psychological need thwarting matter? *Motivation and Emotion, 39*(1), 11-24. [doi:10.1007/s11031-014-9427-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-014-9427-0)
- Cowan-Jenssen, S., & Goodison, L. (2009). Narcissism: Fragile bodies in a fragile world. *Psychotherapy and Politics International, 7*(2), 81–94. [doi.org/10.1002/ppi.187](https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.187)
- Crabtree, H. (2008). ‘Love turned angry’: A critical exploration of domestic abuse from an object relations perspective. *UCLan Journal of Undergraduate Research, 1*(2), 1–16.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th. ed.). Toronto, Canada: Pearson Education.

- Davidson, J., & Milligan, C. (2004). Embodying emotion sensing space: Introducing emotional geographies. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 5(4), 523-532.
- Deacon, B. J., Fawzy, T. I., Lickel, J. J., & Wolitzky-Taylor, K. B. (2011). Cognitive Defusion Versus Cognitive Restructuring in the Treatment of Negative Self-Referential Thoughts: An Investigation of Process and Outcome. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 25(3), 218-232. [doi:10.1891/0889-8391.25.3.218](https://doi.org/10.1891/0889-8391.25.3.218)
- Derobertis, E.M. & Bland, A.M. (2017). Humanistic Perspectives. *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*. Springer, Cham [doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8)
- Devilly, G. J., Wright, R., & Varker, T. (2009). Vicarious Trauma, Secondary Traumatic Stress or Simply Burnout? Effect of Trauma Therapy on Mental Health Professionals. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 43(4), 373-385. [doi:10.1080/00048670902721079](https://doi.org/10.1080/00048670902721079)
- Dimaggio, G. (2011). Commentary assessment of dysfunctional interpersonal schemas, avoidance of intimacy and lack of agency as key issues for treating narcissism: A commentary on Ronningstam's narcissistic personality disorder. *Personality and Mental Health*, 5(3), 228–234. [doi.org/10.1002/pmh.173](https://doi.org/10.1002/pmh.173)
- Dixon, A. L. (2007). Mattering in the Later Years: Older Adults' Experiences of Mattering to Others, Purpose in Life, Depression, and Wellness. *Adultspana Journal*, 6(2), 83-95. [doi:10.1002/j.2161-0029.2007.tb00034.x](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0029.2007.tb00034.x)
- Douglas, J. & Olshaker, M. (1997). *Journey Into Darkness*. New York: Pocket Books.

- Dufner, M., Reitz, A. K., & Zander, L. (2015). Antecedents, consequences, and mechanisms: On the longitudinal interplay between academic self-enhancement and psychological adjustment. *Journal of Personality*, *83*, 511-522.
- Eginli, A. T., & Ozsenler, S. D. (2016). Interpretations of Differences and Similarities In Intimate Partners According To Dialectic Approach. *Proceedings of the 24th International Academic Conference, Barcelona*. [doi.org/10.20472/iac.2016.024.086](https://doi.org/10.20472/iac.2016.024.086)
- Eller-Boyko, D., & Grace, F. (2017). Longing for the Feminine: Reflections on Love, Sexual Orientation, Individuation, and the Soul. *Psychological Perspectives*, *60*(3), 289–316. [doi.org/10.1080/00332925.2017.1350800](https://doi.org/10.1080/00332925.2017.1350800)
- Elliott, G. C., Colangelo, M. F., & Gelles, R. J. (2005). Mattering and Suicide Ideation: Establishing and Elaborating a Relationship. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *68*(3), 223-238. [doi:10.1177/019027250506800303](https://doi.org/10.1177/019027250506800303)
- Elliott, R., Fischer, C. T., & Rennie, D. L. (1999). Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *38*(3), 215–229. [doi.org/10.1348/014466599162782](https://doi.org/10.1348/014466599162782)
- Englander, M. (2012). The interview: Data collection in descriptive phenomenological human scientific research. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, *43*(1), 13–35. [doi.org/10.1163/156916212X632943](https://doi.org/10.1163/156916212X632943)
- Erol, R. Y., & Orth, U. (2011). Self-esteem development from age 14-30 years: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *101*(3), 607–619. [doi.org/10.1037/a0024299](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024299)
- Feeney, B. C., & Collins, N. L. (2015). Thriving through relationships. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *1*, 22-28. [doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2014.11.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2014.11.001)



- Fernandez, O. M., Krause, M., & Pérez, J. C. (2016). Therapeutic alliance in the initial phase of psychotherapy with adolescents: Different perspectives and their association with therapeutic outcomes. *Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process and Outcome*, 19(1), 1-9. [doi:10.4081/ripppo.2016.180](https://doi.org/10.4081/ripppo.2016.180)
- Ferreira, L. C., Fraenkel, P., Narciso, I., & Novo, R. (2015). Is committed desire intentional? A qualitative exploration of sexual desire and differentiation of self in couples. *Family Process*, 54, 308 –326. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/famp.12108>
- Ferreira, L. C., Narciso, I., Novo, R. F., & Pereira, C. R. (2016). Predicting couple satisfaction: The role of differentiation of self, sexual desire and intimacy in heterosexual individuals. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 29, 390 – 404. [doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2014.957498](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2014.957498)
- Fields, S. K. (2012). *Narcissism and intimate partner violence: An establishment of the link and investigation of multiple potential mediators* (Master's thesis, East Tennessee State University). Retrieved from [dc.etsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2408&context=etd](http://dc.etsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2408&context=etd)
- Finkel, E. J., & Campbell, W. K. (2001). Self-control and accommodation in close relationships: An interdependence analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 263-277.
- Finlay, L. (2009). Ambiguous Encounters: A Relational Approach to Phenomenological Research. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 9(1), 1-17. [doi:10.1080/20797222.2009.11433983](https://doi.org/10.1080/20797222.2009.11433983)
- Foster, J. D., Shrira, I., & Campbell, W. K. (2006). Theoretical models of narcissism, sexuality, and relationship commitment. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 23(3), 367-386. [doi:10.1177/0265407506064204](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407506064204)
- Foster, E. L., Becho, J., Burge, S. K., Talamantes, M. A., Ferrer, R. L., Wood, R. C., & Katerndahl, D. A. (2015). Coping with intimate partner violence: Qualitative findings

- from the study of dynamics of husband to wife abuse. *Families, Systems, & Health*, 33(3), 285–294. [doi.org/10.1037/fsh0000130](https://doi.org/10.1037/fsh0000130)
- Fox, J., Warber, K. M., & Makstaller, D. C. (2013). The role of Facebook in romantic relationship development. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 30(6), 771–794. [doi.org/10.1177/0265407512468370](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407512468370)
- Fraley, R. C., & Roisman, G. I. (2015). Do early caregiving experiences leave an enduring or transient mark on developmental adaptation? *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 1, 101–106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2014.11.007>
- Freeman, S. C. (1993). Client-centered therapy with diverse populations: The universal within the specific. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 21(4), 248–254. [doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.1993.tb00235.x](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.1993.tb00235.x)
- Freud, S. (1957). On narcissism: An introduction. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14, pp. 67–104). London, United Kingdom: Hogarth Press.
- Gan, M., Heller, D., & Chen, S. (2018). The power in being yourself: Feeling authentic enhances the sense of power. *Personality and Social Psychology*, 44, 1460-1472
- Geller, S. M., & Greenberg, L. S. (2012). Therapeutic presence: A mindful approach to effective therapy. [doi:10.1037/13485-000](https://doi.org/10.1037/13485-000)
- Gerstein, L. H. (2006). Counseling Psychology's Commitment to Strengths: Rhetoric or Reality? *The Counseling Psychologist*, 34(2), 276-292. [doi:10.1177/0011000005283518](https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000005283518)
- Gerson, R. (1995). The family life cycle: Phases, stages, and crises. *Integrating Family Therapy: Handbook of Family Psychology and Systems Theory.*, 91–111.

[doi.org/10.1037/10172-005](https://doi.org/10.1037/10172-005)

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development*.

Harvard University Press.

Godbout, N., Lussier, Y., & Sabourin, S. (2006). Early Abuse Experiences and Subsequent

Gender Differences in Couple Adjustment. *Violence and Victims, 21*(6), 744-760.

[doi:10.1891/0886-6708.21.6.744](https://doi.org/10.1891/0886-6708.21.6.744)

Goldner, V. (2004). When Love Hurts: Treating Abusive Relationships. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry,*

24(3), 346–372. [doi.org/10.1080/07351692409349088](https://doi.org/10.1080/07351692409349088)

Gordon, L. H., & Frandsen, J. (1993). *Passage to intimacy*. Simon & Schuster

Gleig, A. (2010). The culture of narcissism revisited: Transformations of narcissism in contemporary psychospirituality. *Pastoral Psychology, 59*, 79–91.

[doi.org/10.1007/s11089-009-0207-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-009-0207-9)

Grazino, A. M., & Raulin, M. L. (2012). *Research methods: A process of inquiry* (8th ed.).

Toronto, Canada: Pearson Education.

Greeff, A., & Malherbe, H. (2001). Intimacy and Marital Satisfaction in Spouses. *Journal of Sex*

*& Marital Therapy, 27*(3), 247-257. [doi:10.1080/009262301750257100](https://doi.org/10.1080/009262301750257100)

Grihom, M.-J. (2015). Pourquoi le silence des femmes ? Violence sexuelle et lien de couple.

*Dialogue, 208*(2), 71–84. [doi.org/10.3917/dia.208.0071](https://doi.org/10.3917/dia.208.0071)

Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of*

*Qualitative Methods, 3*(1), 42–54. [doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104](https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104)

Grosz, M. P., Dufner M., Back, M. D., & Denissen, J. J. A. (2015). Who is open to a narcissistic

romantic partner? The roles of sensation seeking, trait anxiety, and similarity. *Journal of*

*Research in Personality, 58*, 84–95. [doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2015.05.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2015.05.007)

- Haaken, J. (2010). *Hard Knocks: Domestic Violence and the Psychology of Storytelling*. Taylor & Francis.
- Hadden, B. W., Rodriguez, L. M., Knee, C. R., & Porter, B. (2015). Relationship autonomy and support provision in romantic relationships. *Motivation and Emotion, 39*(3), 359-373.  
[doi:10.1007/s11031-014-9455-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-014-9455-9)
- Hagestad, G. O. (1986). Dimensions of time and the family. *American Behavioral Scientist, 29*, 679-694
- Hall, J., & Powell, J. (2011, May 04). Understanding the Person through Narrative. Retrieved July 01, 2020, from [www.hindawi.com/journals/nrp/2011/293837/](http://www.hindawi.com/journals/nrp/2011/293837/)
- Hart, C. M., Bush-Evans, R. D., Hepper, E. G., & Hickman, H. M. (2017). Individual differences, the children of narcissus: Insights into narcissists' parenting styles personality. *Personality and Individual Differences, 117*, 249–254.  
[doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.06.019](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.06.019)
- Harvey, J., & Wenzel, A. (2001). Close Romantic Relationships.  
[doi.org/10.4324/9781410600462](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410600462)
- Hill, C. E., & Nakayama, E. Y. (2000). Client-centered therapy: Where has it been and where is it going? A comment on Hathaway (1948). *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 56*(7), 861–875. [doi.org/10.1002/1097-4679\(200007\)56:7<861::AID-JCLP5>3.0.CO;2-J](https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-4679(200007)56:7<861::AID-JCLP5>3.0.CO;2-J)
- Hoffman, K. L., & Edwards, J. N. (2004). An integrated theoretical model of sibling violence and abuse. *Journal of Family Violence, 19*(3), 185–200.  
[doi.org/10.1023/B:JOFV.0000028078.71745.a2](https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOFV.0000028078.71745.a2)

- Holmes, J. (2013). Countertransference in qualitative research: A critical appraisal. *Qualitative Research, 14*(2), 166-183. [doi:10.1177/1468794112468473](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468473)
- Horvath, A., & Luborsky, L. (1993). The role of the therapeutic alliance in Psychotherapy. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 61*(4), 561-573. [doi:10.1037//0022-006X.61.4.561](https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-006X.61.4.561)
- Hui, C. M., Molden, D. C., & Finkel, E. J. (2013). Loving freedom: Concerns with promotion or prevention and the role of autonomy in relationship well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 105*(1), 61-85. [doi:10.1037/a0032503](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032503)
- Hutchinson, D. (2012). *The essential counselor: Process, skills, and techniques* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Iverson, K. M., Gradus, J. L., Resick, P. A., Suvak, M. K., Smith, K. F., & Monson, C. M. (2011). Cognitive-behavioral therapy for PTSD and depression symptoms reduces risk for future intimate partner violence among interpersonal trauma survivors. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 79*(2), 193–202. [doi.org/10.1037/a0022512](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022512)
- Iverson, K. M., Litwack, S. D., Pineles, S. L., Suvak, M. K., Vaughn, R. A., & Resick, P. A. (2013). Predictors of intimate partner violence revictimization: The relative impact of distinct PTSD symptoms, dissociation, and coping strategies. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 26*(1), 102–110. [doi.org/10.1002/jts.21781](https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21781)
- (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett e 2010),
- Irvani, S. (2007). *Authentic self-love as a healing phenomenon in systemic, relational psychotherapy* (Master's thesis). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3316805)

- Jameson, C. (2010). The “short step” from love to hypnosis: A reconsiderations of the Stockholm syndrome. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 14(4), 337–355.  
[doi.org/10.1080/14797581003765309](https://doi.org/10.1080/14797581003765309)
- Jonason, P. K., Webster, G. D., Schmitt, D. P., Li, N. P., & Crysel, L. (2012). The Antihero in Popular Culture: Life History Theory and the Dark Triad Personality Traits. *Review of General Psychology*, 16(2), 192-199. [doi:10.1037/a0027914](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027914)
- Kanat-Maymon, Y., Argaman, Y., & Roth, G. (2017). The association between conditional regard and relationship quality: A daily diary study. *Personal Relationships*, 24(1), 27–35. [doi.org/10.1111/per.12164](https://doi.org/10.1111/per.12164)
- Karakurt, G., & Silver, K. E. (2013). Emotional abuse in intimate relationships: The role of gender and age. *Violence & Victims*, 28(5), 804–821.
- Kaur, M., & Kaur, I. (n.d.). Dysfunctional attitude and self-blame: Effect on self-esteem and self-conscious emotions among adolescents. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 3(12015).
- Kawamura, S., & Brown, S. L. (2010). Mattering and wives’ perceived fairness of the division of household labor. *Social Science Research*, 39(6), 976-986.  
[doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2010.04.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2010.04.004)
- Kearney, M. H. (2001). Enduring love: A grounded formal theory of women’s experience of domestic violence. *Research in Nursing and Health*, 24(4), 270–282.  
[doi.org/10.1002/nur.1029](https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.1029) [in text says 2000 page 24](#)
- Ko, G.T., & Gentry, J.W. (1991). The Development of Time Orientation Measures for Use in Cross-Cultural Research.", *NA - Advances in Consumer Research*, 18, 135-142.

- King, J. W. (2011). Narcissism in romantic relationships: An analysis of couples' behavior during disagreements. *Kaleidoscope*, 10(11). Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/0a8c/05ec1cced970b8d98eba98463543e43ec7f2.pdf>
- Kirk, J., & Miller, M. L. (1986). *Qualitative research methods: Reliability and validity in qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Kluwer, E. S., Karremans, J. C., Riedijk, L., & Knee, C. R. (2020). Autonomy in Relatedness: How Need Fulfillment Interacts in Close Relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 46(4), 603-616. [doi:10.1177/0146167219867964](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167219867964)
- Knapp, M. L. (1978). *Social intercourse: from greeting to goodbye*. Allyn and Bacon.
- Knee, C. R., Hadden, B. W., Porter, B., & Rodriguez, L. M. (2013). Self-Determination Theory and Romantic Relationship Processes. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 17(4), 307-324. [doi:10.1177/1088868313498000](https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868313498000)
- Knee, C. R., Lonsbary, C., Canevello, A., & Patrick, H. (2005). Self-determination and conflict in romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89(6), 997-1009. [doi:10.1037/0022-3514.89.6.997](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.6.997)
- Knee, C. R., Patrick, H., Vietor, N. A., Nanayakkara, A., & Neighbors, C. (2002). Self-determination as growth motivation in romantic relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology*, 28, 609-619.
- Kochis, B., & Gillespie, D. (2006). *Conceptual Metaphors as Interpretive Tools in Qualitative Research: A Re-Examination of College Students' Diversity Discussions*. The Qualitative Report, 11(3), 566-585. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol11/iss3/8>
- Korff-Sausse, S. (2003). La femme du pervers narcissique. *Revue Française De Psychanalyse*, 67(3), 925. [doi.org/10.3917/rfp.673.0925](https://doi.org/10.3917/rfp.673.0925)

Kress, V. E., Haiyasoso, M., Zoldan, C. A., Headley, J. A., & Trepal, H. (2018). The use of relational-cultural theory in counseling clients who have traumatic stress disorders.

*Journal of Counseling & Development*, 96(1), 106–114. [doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12182](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12182)

Kress et al., 2017-in text says 2017 page 13

Kurz, D. (1989). Social science perspectives on wife abuse: Current debates and future

directions. *Gender & Society*, 3(4), 489–505. [doi.org/10.1177/089124389003004007](https://doi.org/10.1177/089124389003004007)

Lam, Z. K. W. (2012). Narcissism and romantic relationship: The mediating role of perception discrepancy. *Discovery – SS Student E-Journal*, 1, 1–20.

Lambert, M. J. (2015). The therapeutic alliance: An evidence-based guide to practice.

*Psychotherapy Research*, 26(2), 259-261. doi:10.1080/10503307.2015.1031200

Lamkin, J., Campbell, W. K., vanDellen, M. R., & Miller, J. D. (2015). An exploration of the correlates of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in romantic relationships: Homophily, partner characteristics, and dyadic adjustments. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 79, 166–171. [doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.01.029](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.01.029)

Lamkin, J., Lavner, J. A., & Shaffer, A. (2017). Narcissism and observed communication in couples. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 105, 224–228.

[doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.09.046](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.09.046)

Lammers, M., Ritchie, J., & Robertson, N. (2005). Women's experience of emotional abuse in intimate relationships. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 5(1), 29–64.

[doi.org/10.1300/J135v05n01\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/J135v05n01_02)



Lavner, J. A., Lamkin, J., Miller, J. D., Campbell, W. K., & Karney, B. R. (2016). Narcissism and newlywed marriage: Partner characteristics and marital trajectories. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 7(2), 169-179. [doi:10.1037/per0000137](https://doi.org/10.1037/per0000137)

Lazarus & Folkman 1984

Lewis, R. A. (1973). Social Reaction and the Formation of Dyads: An Interactionist Approach to Mate Selection. *Sociometry*, 36(3), 409. [doi.org/10.2307/2786342](https://doi.org/10.2307/2786342)

Linos, N., Slopen, N., Subramanian, S. V., Berkman, L., & Kawachi, I. (2013). Influence of Community Social Norms on Spousal Violence: A Population-Based Multilevel Study of Nigerian Women. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(1), 148-155. [doi:10.2105/ajph.2012.300829](https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2012.300829)

Lin-Roark, I. H., Church, A. T., & McCubbin, L. D. (2015). Battered women's evaluations of their intimate partners as a possible mediator between abuse and self-esteem. *Journal of Family Violence*, 30(2), 201–214. [doi.org/10.1007/s10896-014-9661-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-014-9661-y)

Liu, 2012

Lyons, N. (2015). Celebrate the Small Victories [web log]. [blogs.psychcentral.com/embracing-balance/2015/09/celebrate-the-small-victories/](http://blogs.psychcentral.com/embracing-balance/2015/09/celebrate-the-small-victories/).

Määttä, K., & Uusiautti, S. (2013). *Many faces of love*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.

Määttä, 2013, p. 155 page 54-55 chapter 3

Määttä, M., Uusiautti, S., & Määttä, K. (2012). An intimate relationship in the shadow of narcissism: What is it like to live with a narcissistic spouse? *International Journal of Research Studies in Psychology*, 1(1), 37–50. [doi.org/10.5861/ijrsp.2012.v1i1.28](https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrsp.2012.v1i1.28)

Malone, G., Pillow, D., & Fuhrman. (2013) The direct test of the belongingness hypothesis: An investigation of fully satisfying relationships. [Unpublished manuscript]. University of Texas.

Marková, I. (2016). The Dialogical Mind. [doi:10.1017/cbo9780511753602](https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511753602)

(Marshall, 1994)

McClure, M. J., & Lydon, J. E. (2018). Exploring the regulation of need-satisfying goals: A baseline model. *Motivation and Emotion*, 42, 871-884.

McGoldrick, M., Carter, B., & Garcia-Preto, N. (2013). *The expanded family life cycle: individual, family, and social perspectives* (3rd ed.). Pearson Allyn & Bacon.

McLeod, A. L., Hays, D. G., & Chang, C. Y. (2010). Female intimate partner violence survivors' experiences with accessing resources. *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 88(3), 303–310. [doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2010.tb00026.x](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2010.tb00026.x)

McMillian, J. H. (2004). *Educational research: Fundamentals for the consumer* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

*Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. (2011). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

Metz, C., Calmet, J., & Thevenot, A. (2019). Women subjected to domestic violence: The impossibility of separation. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 36(1), 36–43. [doi.org/10.1037/pap0000186](https://doi.org/10.1037/pap0000186) Chapter 4 page 16 states 2018

Meyers, L. (2014). Connecting with clients. *Counselling Today*, 1–12. Received from <https://ct.counseling.org/2014/08/connecting-with-clients/>

- Miller, J. D., & Campbell, W. K. (2008). Comparing clinical and social-personality conceptualizations of narcissism. *Journal of Personality*, 76(3), 449–76.  
[doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00492](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00492)
- Miller, J. D., & Campbell, W. K. (2010). The case for using research on trait narcissism as a building block for understanding narcissistic personality disorder. *Personality Disorders*, 1(3), 180–191. [doi.org/10.1037/a0018229](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018229)
- Moon, K. A. (2007). A client-centered review of Rogers with Gloria. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 85, 277–285. [doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2007.tb00475.x](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2007.tb00475.x)
- Moustakas, C. (2011). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morales, D. P. (1995). The relationship between culture and narcissism. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering*, 56(4-B), 2335.
- Mosquera, D., & Knipe, J. (2015). Understanding and treating narcissism with EMDR therapy. *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research*, 9(1), 46–63.
- Myllärniemi, J. (2005). Is narcissism a disease? Retrieved from  
<http://www.jotte.info/narsismi/index.html>
- Nash, S., Longmore, M., Manning, W., & Giordano, P. (2015). Strained Dating Relationships: A Sense of Mattering and Emerging Adults? Depressive Symptoms. *Journal of Depression and Anxiety*, 51. [doi:10.4172/2167-1044.s1-013](https://doi.org/10.4172/2167-1044.s1-013)
- Neff, K. D., & Harter, S. (2003). Relationship styles of self-focused autonomy, other-focused connectedness, and mutuality across multiple relationship contexts. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 20, 81-99.

- Néray, B. (2016). The relational approach in sociology: A study of dependence. *Review of Sociology*, 26(4), 5–28.
- Novick, K. K., & Novick, J. (2014). Psychoanalysis and child rearing. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 34(5), 440–451. [doi.org/10.1080/07351690.2014.916984](https://doi.org/10.1080/07351690.2014.916984)
- Olariu Iliuş- Anale, A. (2017). ATTACHMENT, SELF DEVELOPMENT AND TRAUMA RECOVERY IN STRATEGIC INTEGRATIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY. *Psychology Series, 15th Tome* (1st Fasc).
- Ottoboni G. (2013). Grounding clinical and cognitive scientists in an interdisciplinary discussion. *Frontiers in psychology*, 4, 630. [doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00630](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00630)
- Oved, O. (2017). Rethinking the place of love needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. *Society*, 54(6), 537–538. [doi.org/10.1007/s12115-017-0186-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-017-0186-x)
- Øverup, C. S., Brunson, J. A., Steers, M.-L. N., & Acitelli, L. K. (2017). I know I have to earn your love: How the family environment shapes feelings of worthiness of love. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 22(1), 16–35. [doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2013.868362](https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2013.868362)
- Padilla-Díaz, M. (2015). Phenomenology in educational qualitative research: Philosophy as science or philosophical science? *International Journal of Educational Excellence*, 1(2), 101–110. [doi.org/10.18562/IJEE.2015.0009](https://doi.org/10.18562/IJEE.2015.0009)
- Papp, L. M., & Witt, N. L. (2010). Romantic partners' individual coping strategies and dyadic coping: Implications for relationship functioning. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 24(5), 551–559. [doi.org/10.1037/a0020836](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020836)

- Park, N. (2012). Adversity, resilience, and thriving: A positive psychology perspective on research and practices. *Trauma Therapy in Context: The Science and Craft of Evidence-Based Practice.*, 121–140. [doi.org/10.1037/13746-006](https://doi.org/10.1037/13746-006)
- Parke, R. D. (1998). A Developmentalist's Perspective on Marital Change. *The Developmental Course of Marital Dysfunction*, 393–409. [doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511527814.015](https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511527814.015)
- Peterson, J. L. (2010). “I love you” (but I can’t look you in the eyes): Explicit and implicit self-esteem predict verbal and nonverbal response to relationship threat (dissertation). ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, Retrieved from [search.proquest.com/openview/3c4bf6eae6efb6138a5885ce9f963971/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y](https://search.proquest.com/openview/3c4bf6eae6efb6138a5885ce9f963971/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y)
- Pico-Alfonso, M. A. (2005). Psychological intimate partner violence: The major predictor of posttraumatic stress disorder in abused women. *Neuroscience and Biochemical Reviews*, 29(1), 181–193. [doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2004.08.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2004.08.010)
- Pillow, D. R., Malone, G. P., & Hale, W. J. (2015). The need to belong and its association with fully satisfying relationships: A tale of two measures. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 74, 259-264. [doi:10.1016/j.paid.2014.10.031](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.10.031)
- Pistrang, N., & Barker, C. (1992). Client beliefs about psychological problems. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 5(4), 325–335. [doi.org/10.1080/09515079208254478](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515079208254478)
- Popper, M. (2002). Narcissism and attachment patterns of personalized and socialized charismatic leaders. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 19(6), 797–809. [doi.org/10.1177/0265407502196004](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407502196004)
- Pulla, Venkat. (2017). Strength-Based Approach in Social Work: A distinct ethical advantage. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, , *Creativity and Change*(3), 2017th ser. Retrieved July 1, 2020.

- Purgason, L. L., Avent, J. R., Cashwell, C. S., Jordan, M. E., & Reese, R. F. (2016). Culturally relevant advising: Applying relational-cultural theory in counsellor education. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 94*(4), 429–436. [doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12101](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12101)
- Raby, K. L., Roisman, G. I., Fraley, R. C., & Simpson, J. A. (2014). The Enduring Predictive Significance of Early Maternal Sensitivity: Social and Academic Competence Through Age 32 Years. *Child Development, 86*(3), 695–708. [doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12325](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12325)
- Rakovec-Felser, F. (2014). Domestic violence and abuse in intimate relationship from public health perspective. *Health Psychology Research, 2*(3), 1821. [doi.org/10.4081/hpr.2014.1821](https://doi.org/10.4081/hpr.2014.1821)
- Randall, A. K., & Bodenmann, G. (2009). The role of stress on close relationships and marital satisfaction. *Clinical Psychology Review, 29*(2), 105–115. [doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2008.10.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2008.10.004)
- Raskin, R., & Terry, H. (1988). A principal-components analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and further evidence of its construct validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*(5), 890–902. [doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.5.890](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.5.890)
- Reese-Weber, M. (2015). Intimacy, communication, and aggressive behaviors: Variations by phases of romantic relationship development. *Personal Relationships, 22*(2), 204–215. [doi.org/10.1111/pere.12074](https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12074)
- Reid, J. A., Haskell, R. A., Dillahunt-Aspillaga, C., & Thor, J. A. (2013). Trauma bonding and interpersonal violence. *Psychology of Trauma, 2*, 35–55.
- Reis, H. T., & Patrick, B. C. (1996). *Attachment and intimacy: Component processes*. In E. T. Higgins & A. W. Kruglanski (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (p. 523–563). The Guilford Press.

- Reis, H. T., Sheldon, K. M., Gable, S. L., Roscoe, J., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). Daily well-being: The role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Personality and Social Psychology*, 26, 419-435.
- Rhoades, G. K., & Stanley, S. M. (2011). Using Individual-Oriented Relationship Education to Prevent Family Violence. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 10(2), 185-200. [doi:10.1080/15332691.2011.562844](https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2011.562844)
- Rivas, C. A. (2012). *Negotiating psychological abuse: A qualitative study of white British, Caribbean and African women in inner London* (Doctoral dissertation, Mary Queen, University of London). Retrieved from <https://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/8373/C%20A%20Rivas%20PhD.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Rivas, C. A., Kelly, M., & Feder, G. (2013). Drawing the line: How African, Caribbean and white British women live out psychological abusive experiences. *Violence Against Women*, 19(9), 1104–1132. [doi.org/10.1177/1077801213501842](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801213501842)
- Rokach, A., & Sha'ked, A. (2013). *Together and lonely: loneliness in intimate relationships: causes and coping*. Nova Publishers.
- Roth, G., & Assor, A. (2012). The costs of parental pressure to express emotions: Conditional regard and autonomy support as predictors of emotion regulation and intimacy. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35(4), 799–808. [doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.11.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.11.005)
- Schmitt, R. (2005). Systematic Metaphor Analysis as a Method of Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 10(2), 358-394. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol10/iss2/10>

- Sedikides, C., Rudich, E. A., Gregg, A. P., Kumashiro, M., & Rusbult, C. (2004). Are normal narcissists psychologically healthy?: Self-esteem matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87(3), 400–416. [doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.3.400](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.3.400)
- Sellers, C. S., Cochran, J. K., & Branch, K. A. (2005). Social learning theory and partner violence: A research note. *Deviant Behaviour*, 26(4), 379–395. [doi.org/10.1080/016396290931669](https://doi.org/10.1080/016396290931669)
- Sexton, T. L. (1999). ED0-CG-99-9 1999-00-00 Evidence-Based Counseling ... Retrieved July 1, 2020, from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED435948.pdf>
- Simon, R. W., & Barrett, A. E. (2010). Nonmarital Romantic Relationships and Mental Health in Early Adulthood. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 51(2), 168-182. [doi:10.1177/0022146510372343](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146510372343)
- Simpson, J. A., & Rholes, W. S. (2017). Adult attachment, stress, and romantic relationships. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 13, 19-24. [doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.04.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.04.006)
- Skowron, E. A. (2000). The role of differentiation of self in marital adjustment. *Journal of Counseling psychology*, 47, 229-237
- Sokolova, E. (2010). Narcissism as clinical and socio-cultural phenomenon. *Psychology in Russia*, 3, 684–702. [doi.org/10.11621/pir.2010.0034](https://doi.org/10.11621/pir.2010.0034)
- Solomon, M. F. (1994). Narcissism and intimacy: Treating the wounded couple. *The Family Journal*, 2(2), 104–113. [doi.org/10.1177/1066480794022003](https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480794022003)
- Shannon, P. J., Simmelink-McCleary, J., Im, H., Becher, E., & Crook-Lyon, R. E. (2014). Developing Self-Care Practices in a Trauma Treatment Course. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 50(3), 440-453. [doi:10.1080/10437797.2014.917932](https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2014.917932)
- Shields, C. (2011). The dialectic of life. *Synthese*, 185(1), 103-124.



[doi:10.1007/s11229-011-9878-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-011-9878-8)

Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (p. 51–80). Sage Publications, Inc

Smith et al., 2003

Sperry, L. & Sperry, J. (2012). *Case conceptualization: Mastering this competency with ease and confidence*. New York, NY: Routledge

Sprecher, S., & Felmlee, D. (1997). The balance of power in romantic heterosexual couples over time from “his” and “her” perspectives. *Sex Roles*, 37(5/6), 362–379.

[doi.org/10.1023/A:1025601423031](https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025601423031)

Stanley S., Rhoades G., & Whitton S. (2010). Commitment: Functions, formation, and the securing of romantic attachment. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*. 2(4), 243–257. [PubMed: 21339829]

Stirling, C., Lloyd, B., Scott, J., Abbey, J., Croft, T., & Robinson, A. (2012). A qualitative study of professional and client perspectives on information flows and decision aid use. *BMC Medical Informatics and Decision Making*, 12(26), 1–8.

[doi.org/10.1186/1472-6947-12-26](https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6947-12-26)

Strong, T. (1989). Metaphors and client change in counseling. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 12. 203-213. [doi:10.1007/BF00120585](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00120585).

Strutzenberg, C. C., Wiersma-Mosley, J. D., Jokowski, K. N., & Becnel, Jennifer N. (2017). "Love-bombing: A Narcissistic Approach to Relationship Formation," *Discovery, The Student Journal of Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences*.

University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture. 18:81-89.

<https://scholarworks.uark.edu/discoverymag/vol18/iss1/14>

Sutton, A. (2020). Living the good life: A meta-analysis of authenticity, well-being, and engagement. *Personality and Individual Differences, 153*, 109645.

[doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.109645](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.109645)

Tindall, L. (2009). J.A. Smith, P. Flower and M. Larkin (2009), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 6*(4), 346-347. [doi:10.1080/14780880903340091](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880903340091)

Tracy, J. L., Cheng, J. T., Martens, J. P., & Robins, R. W. (2011). The emotional dynamics of narcissism: Inflated by pride, deflated by shame. In W. K. Campbell & J. D. Miller (Eds.), *The handbook of narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder: Theoretical approaches, empirical findings, and treatments* (pp. 330–343). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.

Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2010). Bracketing in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice, 11*(1), 80-96. [doi:10.1177/1473325010368316](https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010368316)

Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2009). *The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Twenge, J. M., Konrath, S., Foster, J. D., Campbell, W. K., & Bushman, B. J. (2008b). Further evidence of an increase in narcissism among college students. *Journal of Personality, 76*(4), 919–928.

van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, NY: Viking.

- Valdez, C. E., & Lilly, M. M. (2014). Posttraumatic Growth in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 30*(2), 215-231.  
[doi:10.1177/0886260514533154](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260514533154)
- Veronese, G., Procaccia, R., Ruggiero, G. M., Sassaroli, S., & Castiglioni, M. (2015). Narcissism and defending self-esteem. An exploratory study based on self-characterizations. *The Open Psychology Journal, 8*(1), 38–43. [doi.org/10.2174/1874350101508010038](https://doi.org/10.2174/1874350101508010038)
- Vollhardt, J. R., Okuyan, M., & Ünal, H. (2020). Resistance to collective victimization and oppression. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 35*, 92-97. [doi:10.1016/j.copsy.2020.04.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsy.2020.04.001)
- Walker, P. (2013). *Complex-PTSD: From surviving to thriving*. Seattle, WA: CreateSpace Independent.
- Wall, C., Glenn, S., Mitchinson, S., & Poole, H. (2004). Using a reflective diary to develop bracketing skills during a investigation. *Nurse Researcher, 11*(4), 20-29.  
[doi:10.7748/nr2004.07.11.4.20.c6212](https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2004.07.11.4.20.c6212)
- Wertz, F. J. (2005). Phenomenological research methods for counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*(2), 167-177. [doi:10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.167](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.167)
- Whisman, M. A. (2006). Childhood trauma and marital outcomes in adulthood. *Personal Relationships, 13* , 375–386.
- Williams, B. (2015). How to evaluate qualitative research. *American Nurse Today, 10*(11), 31.
- Wright, A. G. (2011). Qualitative and Quantitative Distinctions in Personality Disorder. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 93*(4), 370-379. [doi:10.1080/00223891.2011.577477](https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2011.577477)
- Wright, A. G. (2016). On the Measure and Mismeasure of Narcissism. *Assessment, 23*(1), 10-17.  
[doi:10.1177/1073191115599054](https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191115599054)

- Wright, J. H., & Davis, D. (1994). The therapeutic relationship in cognitive-behavioral therapy: Patient perceptions and therapist responses. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 1*(1), 25–45. [doi.org/10.1016/S1077-7229\(05\)80085-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1077-7229(05)80085-9)
- Wuest, J., & Merritt-Gray, M. (2008). A theoretical understanding of abusive intimate partner relationships that became non-violent: Shifting the pattern of abusive control. *Journal of Family Violence, 23*, 281. [doi.org/10.1007/s10896-008-9155-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-008-9155-x)
- Wurst, S. N., Gerlach, T. M., Dufner, M., Rauthmann, J. F., Grosz, M. P., Küfner, A. C., . . . Back, M. D. (2017). Narcissism and romantic relationships: The differential impact of narcissistic admiration and rivalry. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 112*(2), 280-306. [doi:10.1037/pspp0000113](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000113)
- Xia, M., Fosco, G. M., Lippold, M. A., & Feinberg, M. E. (2018). A Developmental Perspective on Young Adult Romantic Relationships: Examining Family and Individual Factors in Adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 47*(7), 1499–1516. [doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0815-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0815-8)

ENREB Proposal: March 2019 Sherry Lane



## Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Administration,  
Foundations and Psychology

Appendix A

## Interview Guide

### **Main Question:**

What is it like to live life as a woman with an intimate male partner who presents with behaviours and attitudes which you perceive as narcissistic?

- These are tentative questions. Given that this is a phenomenological study, my interview will follow the narrative of the participant. Where it is necessary, I will use the following questions to assist the participants to contextualize, reflect deeper and provide structure to their narratives.
1. Can you describe to me your experience of entering, staying and being in that relationship
    - a. Tell me about your typical day in that relationship
    - b. Tell me what you did/do to ‘center’/’empower’/ ‘enjoy’ yourself daily in the relationship
  2. Please tell me what you did/do to prepare yourself to stay and be in the relationship
    - a. Please describe how you explain/ed your gains (emotional, social, relational or other) from the relationship
    - b. Please describe how you explain/ed your losses or challenges (emotional, social, relational or other) in the relationship
  3. Please share you process of gaining awareness about those attributes of your intimate partner and how you coped with those attributes in the relationship
    - a. How did you experience and describe your intimate male partner at key points in the relationship ( e.g. entering, staying, growing or exiting)
    - b. How did you experience and described your SELF at key points in the relationship ( e.g. entering, staying, growing or exiting)
  4. If you had all of [whatever participant identified as important to her emotional, social and relational well-being during the interview including support], how would it change the relationship?

### **Possible Probes:**

- Considering that this is a phenomenological study, major probes will be determined by the responses from the participants. For example.

You mentioned that you enjoyed... could you please describe what you mean by enjoy?

You mentioned that you were concerned about ....., can you describe what you did/do when you are concerned?

ENREB Proposal: March 2019 Sherry Lane



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

## Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Administration,  
Foundations and Psychology

Appendix B

Invitation to assist with recruitment Email Script

Thank you for your willingness to support me with recruitment for my study titled: *Is It Me? Am I Losing My Mind? Stories of Women Who Live with Intimate Male Partners Who They Characterize as Narcissistic*". I am contacting you because you indicated interest to assist me with future participant recruitment for this study during the pilot of this study three years ago.

Please note that you will not be included as a participant in the current study because you have already shared your story with me through previous interviews and member-checking clarification notes. Would you be willing to pass along the name and contact information of any friend/family/co-worker who may be interested in participating?

There is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide this information. I will let potential participants whom you refer know that you were the source of the referral. You also have the right to request that you are given time to notify the potential participants prior to us contacting them.

Please note that you must have the prior permission of potential participants before you may pass their contact information to me.

To participate in this recruitment, please contact the Principal Investigator at [umlanes@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:umlanes@myumanitoba.ca).

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sherry Lane,  
Masters' Candidate  
Counseling Psychology,  
Faculty of Education.  
University of Manitoba

ENREB Proposal: March 2019 Sherry Lane



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

## Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Administration,  
Foundations and Psychology

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Script



My name is Sherry Lane, and I am a masters' student in the Counseling Psychology program at the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba. I am conducting a research project called "Is It Me? Am I Losing My Mind? Stories of Women Who Live with Intimate Male Partners Who They Characterize as Narcissistic" for my master's degree under the supervision of Dr. Grace Ukasoanya. Your name/contact information was passed along to me by MaryAnn Silva. It was suggested that you may be interested in participating in my research study.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the experience of women who have experienced intimate relationship with a male partner currently or in the past, whose behaviors and attitudes they believe to be 'narcissistic' even when these partners do not have any clinical diagnosis of 'narcissism'. There is little research about how women describe this experience or how they explain the impact that it has on their lives. The goal of this study is to better understand how women make sense, or work through these experiences and how the experiences might influence their lives. Participation in this study will include possible two in-person interviews (about 60-90 minutes each) regarding your experiences with an intimate male partner who you characterize as narcissistic. You will be asked to share how you have experienced an intimate relationship with a male partner who you believe presents with narcissistic attitudes and behavior. You will be invited for the second interview ONLY if you indicate that you need to add more information, clarify some information or modify some of the information provided during the first interview. You will receive a transcript of each interview approximately two weeks after the interview. Interviews will be scheduled at any location, day and time which you consider most convenient and safe.

You are invited to participate because you are age 18 or above and freely able to participate in an interview by yourself and without any support, fluent in conversational English, have time to participate in two confidential conversations about the kind of relationships mentioned above lasting about 60 to 90 minutes each, do not have any current threat to personal safety related to your intimate relationship, not currently in treatment for emotional distress related to your intimate relationship, and your intimate male partner does not have any Narcissism diagnosis. Please note that you will be excluded from participation if you have any work-related, familial or community network relationship with the researcher.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me to arrange to email or post mail you an information package explaining the focus, objective and method of the study to enable you make an informed decision about whether to participate. If you are interested to participate in the study, you will be expected to email me about your continued interest in participating and willingness to be interviewed. At that point, I will email you to schedule a meeting time and venue for the one-on-one interview with me.

If you have any questions about me or my project, please contact me by email at [umlanes@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:umlanes@myumanitoba.ca), or by phone 204-330-3200.

If you know anyone who may be interested in participating in this study, please give them a copy of this information. For the purposes of keeping everyone's information safe, please note the following. 1) you must have the permission of individuals whom you may refer for this study before you forward their contact information to me; 2) there is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide this information; 3) I will be letting potential participants whom you refer know that you were the source of the referral; and 4) there will be no compensation for providing referrals, or any incentives to provide referrals for this study.

To participate in this study, please contact the Principal Investigator at [umlanes@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:umlanes@myumanitoba.ca).

Thank-you in advance for considering my request,

Sherry Lane,

Masters' Candidate

Counseling Psychology,

Faculty of Education.

University of Manitoba

**This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about this project, you may contact me at [umlanes@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:umlanes@myumanitoba.ca), my academic advisor at 204.474.9010 - [grace.ukasoanya@umanitoba.ca](mailto:grace.ukasoanya@umanitoba.ca), the Human Ethics Secretariat at 204.474.7122 – or e-mail the Human Ethics Director at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca).**

ENREB Proposal: March 2019 Sherry Lane



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Administration,  
Foundations and Psychology

Appendix D

## Invitation to Participate Script

Research Project Title: **“Is It Me? Am I Losing My Mind? Stories of Women Who Live with Intimate Male Partners Who They Characterize as Narcissistic”**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Sherry Lane. I am a master’s candidate in the University of Manitoba Counselling Psychology Program in the Faculty of Education who is doing a study on women and their experiences with partners who they subjectively view as having behaviors or attitudes that could be described as narcissistic, even though the partners do not have Narcissistic Personality Disorder diagnoses. I am currently contacting a variety of women about these kinds of experiences. I am inviting you to participate in this study because you reviewed the recruitment email and indicated that you meet the inclusion criteria and you are willing to participate in the interviews.

The following research question will guide this study: “What is it like to live life as a woman with an intimate male partner who presents with behaviours and attitudes which you perceive as narcissistic? To participate in this study, you will be asked to do a few things. You will be asked to read, understand and sign a consent form prior to participation in this study. You will also be asked to participate in two confidential conversations with me about the kind of relationships mentioned above lasting about 60 to 90 minutes each. These interviews will be audio recorded with your permission and then transcribed by me.

The method of this study requires that the direction of your narrative will determine the subsequent question that I will ask. However, where it is necessary, I will ask questions such as

the following to assist you to contextualize, reflect deeper and provide structure to your narratives.

1. Can you describe to me your experience of entering, staying and being in that relationship?
  - a. Tell me about your typical day in that relationship
  - b. Tell me what you did/do to ‘center’/‘empower’/ ‘enjoy’ yourself daily in the relationship
2. Please tell me what you did/do to prepare yourself to stay and be in the relationship
  - a. Please describe how you explain/ed your gains (emotional, social, relational or other) from the relationship
  - b. Please describe how you explain/ed your losses or challenges (emotional, social, relational or other) in the relationship
3. Please share you process of gaining awareness about those attributes of your intimate partner and how you coped with those attributes in the relationship
  - a. How did you experience and describe your intimate male partner at key points in relationship (e.g. entering, staying, growing or exiting)
  - b. How did you experience and described your SELF at key points in the relationship (e.g. entering, staying, growing or exiting)
4. If you had all of [whatever participant identified as important to her emotional, social and relational well-being during the interview including support], how would it change the relationship?

This study provides a platform for women to express and share their experiences about intimate male partners’ behaviors and attitudes which come across as ‘narcissistic’. This research will provide relatable data regarding the benefits or drawbacks of living with intimate male partners presenting with subjective narcissistic behaviors and attitudes. Data from this study may contribute to existing information from which insights to help promote a positive future for women in relationships could be drawn.

Please note that you are under no obligation to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw your participation and data without penalty. Consent may be withdrawn verbally or in writing and your data will be destroyed and not included in any reports generated by the study. Should you have any emotional distress during the interview, there will be a discussion around the distress. Interview can be re-continued when you feel comfortable.

The interview could also be discontinued at your request and the information gathered up to that point will be deleted without any consequences or penalty. After the interview is completed, you can send the PI (me) an email to withdraw and all information up and until the data has been transcribed will be deleted and destroyed. Please note that once you have provided your edits to the transcript of your interview, all your personally identifying information will be deleted and withdrawal will not be possible at this time. All your data will be anonymous.

I would like to inform you about how your data will be managed and used. All information (i.e. name, location, contact information or other) that will identify you will be removed in all the records of the study. I will store all the data from this study on USB memory sticks at my home in a locked cabinet. No other person will have access to the data. Your confidentiality will be ensured. All the email communications will be password protected, coded and encrypted. All the data will be destroyed according to the standards set by the University of Manitoba research ethics Committee. Once the written transcript is complete, the audio recording will be deleted. Only the principal investigator will have access to the audio recordings. Quotes from your interview will appear in the study reports but I will use codes when referring to your responses. I will disseminate the materials from this study in peer reviewed articles, book chapters, workshops and conference presentations.

You may experience some risks by participating in this study. These may include: emotional distress, triggers or reminders of past painful experiences, and possible threat from partners. Should there be emotional distress beyond what is tolerable in daily life during the interview, I will provide compassionate non-clinical support because I have training in counseling. Should heightened emotional reactions occur after the interview, I will encourage you to dial any 24 hour mental health hotline in your neighborhood or check into any emergency

room closest to you. We will verbally review the information about safety and mental health resources in your area prior to the interview.

If you decide to participate, I will give you a consent form to sign. I will provide you with a summary of the research findings at the end of the data collection phase if you indicate interest (by November 2019). All data from the study will be destroyed 5 years from thesis completion (July, 2024).

**This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board.**

**If you have any questions or concerns about this project, you may contact me at**

**[umlanes@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:umlanes@myumanitoba.ca), my academic advisor at 204.474.9010 -**

**[grace.ukasoanya@umanitoba.ca](mailto:grace.ukasoanya@umanitoba.ca), the Human Ethics Secretariat at 204.474.7122 – or e-**

**mail the Human Ethics Director at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca).**

Sincerely,

Sherry Lane, Principal Investigator, University of Manitoba

ENREB Proposal: March 2019 Sherry Lane



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Education

Department of Educational  
Administration, Foundations and Psychology

Appendix E  
**CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Study:** “Is It Me? Am I Losing My Mind? Stories of Women Who live with Intimate Male Partners Who They Characterize as Narcissistic”.

**Principal Investigator:** Sherry Lane, [umlanes@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:umlanes@myumanitoba.ca);  
[sherry-lane@outlook.com](mailto:sherry-lane@outlook.com)

**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 of Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore and document the perceptions, meanings, and experiences expressed by women living with intimate male partners whom they subjectively characterize as having narcissist behaviors and attitudes. This study will seek to explore and better understand the personal accounts of women who have lived experiences with intimate partners they believe as possessing narcissistic characteristics and investigate how these women understand this emerging socio-cultural relational metaphor commonly referred to as 'narcissism'. This study will also investigate how women experience themselves and their partners within these intimate relationships and investigate how these women make meaning of their unique processes toward gaining awareness about and living life in an intimate relationship which they believe to be 'narcissistic'. Narcissism will be used to describe a socio-cultural metaphor. Counseling research and practice use metaphors as a tool to help clients understand and organize complex emotional experiences. As such, no assumption of clinical or diagnostic criteria will be made in this study. Intimate partner narcissism will be the women's believed opinions about how their partners present behaviorally and attitudinally in the relationships.

We are aware that women are increasingly describing some of their intimate relationships as 'narcissistic'. Little or no data exist about women who describe their relational experience as narcissistic without their partners having a diagnosis. This study aims to address this blind spot by adding to our understanding of this lived experience and identify the possible needs and challenges of those going through this type experience. This way, individuals providing care, such as counsellors or doctors, may possess a better understanding about how to support women who go through these types of experiences. This study provides a platform for women to express and share their experiences about intimate male partners' behaviors and attitudes which come across as narcissistic. This research will provide relatable data regarding the benefits or drawbacks of living with intimate male partners presenting with believed narcissistic behaviors and attitudes. Data from this study may contribute to existing information and insights to help promote a positive future for women in believed narcissistic relationships.

A total of three to five participants will be selected to participate in this study.

### **Study procedures**

#### **Participants**

With human ethics approval from the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board and signed consent from the participants, three to five adult females who meet the criteria as having lived experiences with an intimate male partner who they believe presents with narcissistic behaviors and attitudes, will be recruited for the study. Women who report that their partners have a clinical narcissism diagnoses will not be included in this study. To participate in this study, the women will be at least 18 years of age, fluent in English, interested in volunteering in the study, have time to participate in two 60-90 minute interviews, do not have any current threat to safety, not currently in treatment for emotional distress related to their intimate relationship, and can be interviewed alone. No diagnostic information on any intimate male partners will be required and no assumption of clinical diagnoses will be made.

#### **Recruitment Method**

Participants for this study will be recruited by email, word of mouth and social network. The first three to five women who responded and meet the criteria will be given an invitation to participate and take part in the interview process. You will choose the preferred appointment time, day and place that you consider most convenient and safe.

You will participate in one major semi-structured interview averaging 60 to 90 minutes. A second interview will be scheduled and conducted if you wish to add to, modify or clarify the information from your first interview with me. Each interview will be audio recorded and transcribed word for word by the researcher.

#### **Design of the Study**

My study adopts a descriptive, phenomenological research design. The goal is to have in-depth conversations about your experiences, interpret the experiences, understand the essence of your perceptions in your own voice by focussing on how you make meaning of the events, episodes, or interactions. The interviews will capture the essence of your unique experiences in your intimate relationship with a narcissistic male partner.

#### **Participant Interviews**

**Data collection.** Data will be collected from three to five women. You are provided with this consent form identifying the nature and purpose of this research study one week ahead of the interview. You are expected to review it and fully determine if you would like to participate in this study. This consent letter will be reviewed orally again prior to the beginning of the interview. You will be expected to sign this consent form before participating in the interview.

One major semi-structured interview averaging 60 to 90 minutes will be take place at a time and location convenient for the participants. A second interview will be



conducted with participants who request a follow up interview. Each interview will be audio recorded and transcribed word for word by the researcher.

The central research question will be: What is it like to live life as a woman with an intimate male partner who presents with behaviors and attitudes which you perceive as narcissistic?

The method of this study requires that the direction of your story will determine the questions that I will ask. However, where it is necessary, I will ask questions such as the following to assist you to reflect deeper and provide structure to your descriptions and storylines.

1. Can you describe to me your experience of entering, staying and being in that relationship?
  - a. Tell me about your typical day in that relationship
  - b. Tell me what you did/do to 'center'/'empower'/'enjoy' yourself daily in the relationship
2. Please tell me what you did/do to prepare yourself to stay and be in the relationship
  - a. Please describe how you explain/ed your gains (emotional, social, relational or other) from the relationship
  - b. Please describe how you explain/ed your losses or challenges (emotional, social, relational or other) in the relationship
3. Please share you process of gaining awareness about those attributes of your intimate partner and how you coped with those attributes in the relationship
  - a. How did you experience and describe your intimate male partner at key points in the relationship (e.g. entering, staying, growing or exiting)
  - b. How did you experience and described your SELF at key points in the relationship (e.g. entering, staying, growing or exiting)
4. If you had all of [whatever participant identified as important to her emotional, social and relational well-being during the interview including support, how would it change the relationship?

Please note that you are under no obligation to participate in this research. Your decision to take part in this study is voluntary.

If you decide to participate, you may withdraw your participation and data without penalty. You may wish to withdraw your consent verbally or in writing and your data will be destroyed and not included in any reports generated by the study. Should you have any emotional distress during the interview, there will be a discussion around the distress. The interview can be continued when you feel comfortable. The interview could also be discontinued at your request and the information gathered up to that point will be deleted without any consequences or penalty. After the interview is completed, you can send the PI an email to withdraw and all information up and until the data has been

transcribed will be deleted and destroyed. Please note that once you have provided your edits to the transcript of your interview, all your personally identifying information will be deleted and withdrawal will not be possible at this time. All your data will be anonymous.

### **Data management**

I would like to inform you about how your data will be managed and used. In this study, confidentiality will be of highest importance and all efforts will be made to protect the participants' identities. All information (i.e. name, location, contact information or other) that will identify you will be removed in all the records of the study. Specifically, to help ensure confidentiality, fake names, altered personal details, and rewording or removal of words will be practiced when referring to the participants, or referring to any part of the transcript that might reveal an identity. During the research process, all audio recordings and transcripts will be locked in a cupboard in my home office. Only my academic advisor, Dr. Grace Ukasoanya, and I will have access to the data.

If you indicate interest in the space provided below, the interview transcript will be sent to you for review within two weeks of the interview. This will be approximately in October 2019. You will be asked to review the transcripts with opportunity to modify, delete or revise your information and/or request for a second interview if you wish to add newer information. The second interviews will be transcribed and sent to the participants again for review. You will be given two weeks to review the new information and return it back to the researcher. Should I not hear back from you within two weeks after the first interview, I will assume you are satisfied, and I will continue to categorize the information.

You may not be able to withdraw once I begin the data analysis phase. All the data will be anonymized at that point. Once again, you may be able to withdraw only up to the end of October 2019.

I will store all the data from this study on USB memory sticks at my home in a locked cabinet. No other person will have access to the data. Your confidentiality will be ensured. All the email communications will be password protected, coded and encrypted. All the data will be destroyed according to the standards set by the University of Manitoba research ethics Committee. Once the written transcript is complete, the audio recording will be deleted. Only the principal investigator will have access to the audio recordings. Quotes from your interview will appear in the study reports but I will use codes when referring to your responses. I will publicize the materials from this study in peer reviewed articles, book chapters, workshops and conference presentations.

### **Risks and Discomforts**

There are some potential nonphysical risks which may include emotional distress such as anxiety related to the sensitive nature of the questions and reliving past experiences. I will check with you about your familiarity with 24-hour free mental health hot lines or emergency rooms in your neighborhood prior to the interview. If safety is an issue, the PI is obligation to contact the proper authorities and

privacy and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Individuals who feel unsafe emotionally or physically in their intimate relationships should not participate.

**Benefits**

There may or may not be direct benefits to you from participating in this study. However, for the purpose of developing appropriate interventions to support women, your data may add to existing data which seeks to better understand the experiences of women in various intimate relationships.

**Costs**

Participation in this study will come at no cost to you.

**Payment for participation**

There will also be no compensation for participating in the interviews and/or recruitment of other participants. You will receive no payment or reimbursement for any expenses related to taking part in this study

\_\_\_\_\_ **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 as a subject. 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 this 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. Therefore, you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.**

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about this project, you may contact me at [umlanes@myumanitoba.ca](mailto:umlanes@myumanitoba.ca), my academic advisor at 204.474.9010 - [grace.ukasoanya@umanitoba.ca](mailto:grace.ukasoanya@umanitoba.ca), the Human Ethics Secretariat at 204.474.7122 or

E-mail the Human Ethics Director at [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this consent has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

---

**Participant's signature and date**

---

**Researcher and/or delegate's signature                      Date**

I will like to be contacted and receive a summary of findings (Please circle one)

Yes                      No

I may be contacted at:

---

**Mailing address or email address**

Sherry Lane  
Masters' Candidate  
Counseling Psychology  
Faculty of Education  
University of Manitoba



## Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Administration,  
Foundations and Psychology

### Appendix F

#### Script for interview participants

(Participants will be contacted by Email).

Remind participant of purpose of study. For example: My name is Sherry Lane and I am a graduate student in Counselling Psychology. I am completing a thesis as one of the Master's degree requirements. I am interested in better understanding the experience of women who currently living, or at some time in their past have lived with a male partner whose behaviors and attitudes they subjectively construe as 'narcissistic' even when these partners do not have any clinical diagnosis of 'narcissism'. There is little research into how individuals share this experience or how they explain the impact that it has on their lives. The goal of this study is to better understand how women make sense, or work through experiences with a 'narcissistic' male partner and how it might influence their lives. Participation in this portion of the study will include two in-person interviews (about 60-90 minutes each) regarding your experiences with an intimate male partner who you subjectively characterize as 'narcissistic'. This is the first of two possible semi-structured interviews which will each require 60-90 minute of your time. There will be an initial interview. You will receive a transcript of the interview two weeks later. Should you decide to make any changes a second interview will be scheduled at a venue of your choice.

The first interview will be semi structured with a prepared set of questions found in the information package. The interviews will be audio recorded. I will then transcribe the interview. Two weeks after the interview, you will have a chance to read your transcript. A second interview may be scheduled should you decide to make

changes to the transcript or interested in clarifying information, discussing deeper insights, or noticed themes. You will use a fake name of your choice and any identifying information will not be shared when results are presented. Direct quotes from the transcript may be used, but your name will not be published. Once we've completed the transcript, the audio recording will be deleted.

Should you experience a sense of emotional distress or a threat to our safety, the interview will have to stop. All written data collected will be shredded and audio recordings will be erased. All privacy and confidentiality will be guaranteed unless safety is a concern. Should safety be a concern you will have to contact the local women's shelter and law enforcement yourself as they will not take a statement or information from me. Information about local law enforcement and women's shelter resources is provided in the information package.

Would you like to go over the inclusion criteria once more to ensure that you could participate in this interview?

- You are of age 18 or above and freely able to participate in an interview by yourself and without any support.
- You are fluent in conversational English.
- You will have time to participate in two confidential conversations about the kind of relationships mentioned above lasting about 60 to 90 minutes each.
- You do not have any current threat to personal safety related to your intimate relationship.
- You are not currently in treatment for emotional distress related to your intimate relationship.

Do you have any questions? Indicating your interest now does not obligate you to participate in the study. You are free to decline participation at any time even once you've provided written consent and/or the study is in progress. This holds true up until the time you provide me with edits/confirmation of your transcript and the data has been anonymized. You may withdraw consent verbally or through writing.



## Faculty of Education

Department of Educational Administration,  
Foundations and Psychology

### Appendix G

#### LIST OF RESOURCES IN THE WINNIPEG AREA

**This is a list of counseling/therapy resources. Sometimes talking about difficult circumstances can cause some emotional discomfort. Here is a list of some of mental health support resources in the Winnipeg area. There is also information about a telephone crisis line that serves Winnipeg and surrounding cities. There are many other excellent counsellors and therapists listed on the internet who also provide services. Sherry Lane is not responsible for the cost of counseling or therapy.**

**Safety Plan** \*\*If you are in crisis, please call **Klinic Crisis Line: 204-786-8686**,  
**Winnipeg Police Services: 204-986-6222 or 911; Gimli RCMP: 204-642-5106 or 911**

**\*\*Women's shelter numbers to be aware of are:**

[Ikwe-Widdjiitiwin](#) Willow Place Phone: 204 987-2780 Phone: 204-615-0313

**If you are not in crisis and looking for professional counselling services, the following offer low-cost or free counselling:**

**Aulneau Renewal Centre: 204-987-7090**

**Family Dynamics: 204-947-2128 (formerly called Family Centre)**

**Fort Garry Women's Resource Centre: 204-477-1123**

**Jewish Child and Family Counselling Services: 204-477-7430 (open to all faiths and cultural groups)**

**Klinic Community Health Centre (non-crisis): 204-784-4059**

**North End Women's Centre: 204-589-7374**

**Interlake Women's Resource Centre: 204-642-8264**

