

Exploring the Impacts of Intimate Partner Violence on Emerging Adult Women's Sense of Self:
A Qualitative Case Study

by

Kathryn Laura Butler
B.A., Whitman College, 2007

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Emerging adulthood, the period between 18 and 30 years of age, is particularly relevant for identity development. During this time, relational disconnections such as intimate partner violence (IPV) can inhibit the growth that occurs within interpersonal relationships. There has been little in-depth exploration of how emerging adult women describe the impacts of IPV on their sense of self. Using qualitative case study methodology, six young women shared their stories of IPV during open-ended narrative interviews and completed an exploration of their *Possible Selves*. Thematic analysis identified impacts of IPV relating to participants' sense of self, future possible selves, and subsequent intimate relationships. The findings highlight participants' self-descriptions of strength and resilience, as well as accounts of challenges and growth since the relationships ended. The findings have meaningful implications for theory and research on IPV for young women, and for counselling practice.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by thanking the six women who volunteered to participate in this study. I am honoured to have heard your stories and I am appreciative of all that I have learned from you. You showed great strength and courage to become involved. I want to acknowledge your desire to better the lives of others by sharing your experiences. Thank you.

I also want to thank my sister, Maria, for trusting and confiding in me. You are a strong, resilient, intelligent, and inspirational woman. Many positive outcomes of my research and counselling work connect back to you.

I would like to convey my deepest gratitude to Anne Marshall for showing me such positive mentorship over the past several years. Thank you for believing in me, and always encouraging me to step outside my comfort zone. I have learned immensely from you, and I am grateful for your unwavering support.

I also want to thank Natalee Popadiuk – I appreciate your support during this research endeavour and throughout the counselling program. I thank you for your kindness, encouragement, and guidance, and I feel fortunate to have your mentorship.

To my parents and sisters, thank you for your interest, and encouragement over the years. Your belief in me has helped me get to this point.

To my husband, Luke – thank you for your patience as I dedicated so much of my time, energy, and attention to my studies since we have known one another. I appreciate your excitement to learn about and discuss new ideas, and how you have shown great respect for how meaningful this work is to me.

Nola, my sweet baby girl – thank you for bringing a fresh perspective, renewed motivation, and balance to my work. I am so grateful you joined us in this journey.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Background to the Study

Intimate relationships often bring a sense of joy, respect, and love to many people, but a different story prevails for those who experience intimate partner violence (IPV)¹. IPV refers to any physical or psychological abuse within a romantic relationship, including physical and sexual assault, emotional abuse, and financial abuse (McHugh & Frieze, 2006). Findings from the 2009 General Social Survey (GSS) in Canada reports that between 2004 and 2009, over 20% of women older than 15 years reported being victims of physical violence from a current or past partner (Brennan, 2011). Findings from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (Black, et al., 2011) in the United States indicate that more than 1 in 3 women (35.6%) have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime, and almost half (48.4%) of all women over 18 have experienced psychological aggression by their partners. About half (51%) of female victims of rape report being raped by an intimate partner (Black, et al.). Young women under the age of 35 are particularly vulnerable; the GSS reports that they are about three times more likely than older adults to report abuse in their intimate relationships (Brennan). Thus, IPV is a significant issue affecting young women.

Relationships marked by violence and other forms of abuse can have a major negative impact. Numerous studies point to the physical and mental health consequences of IPV, such as depression (Brennan, 2011), suicidal ideation (Ackard, Eisenberg, & Neimark-Sztainer, 2007; Banyard & Cross, 2008), and physical injury (Swahn, Alemdar, & Whitaker, 2010). Impacts

¹ I acknowledge that there are several different terminologies used within the literature to refer to relationship violence, typically correlating to researchers' theoretical orientation. According to Lawson (2012), terms like "wife abuse" and "violence against women" imply a fundamental assumption that gender is the central factor to the problem of violence in relationships. Alternatively, terms like "domestic violence" and "spouse abuse" imply an assumption that other factors (like substance use or mental health issues) are also of importance when studying violence in relationships, and more specifically, that gender is not central to the phenomenon. Using the term "intimate partner violence" avoids implicit agreement with a particular perspective, and acknowledges a multi-factored etiological model of relationship violence that includes gender (Heise, 1998; Lawson, 2012; White, 2009).

relating to education and career have also been noted, such as decreased motivation to continue education (Banyard & Cross, 2008), and lower educational and vocational goals (Collin-Vezina, Hebert, Manseau, Blais, & Fernet, 2006). Studies highlight how IPV can impact how women perceive themselves, such as negative self-worth, low self-esteem self-blame, and self-doubt (Amar & Alexy, 2005; Lynch, 2013). Importantly, research also shows that women who are no longer in abusive relationships often have positive self descriptions, such as being strong, resilient, assertive, and self-reliant (Lynch).

Focus and Contribution of Present Study

Interpersonal connection plays a significant role in human functioning and development across the lifespan (Blustein, 2011; Jordan, 2009). Developing a sense of self, in particular, is a process that is influenced by social factors like interpersonal relationships and culture (Josselson, 1998). Josselson suggests that the sense of self comprises of “all the aspects of ourselves and our various locations of ourselves with others and with the larger society” (p. 28). Therefore, how we see ourselves is situated within our particular contexts. Moreover, Markus and Nurius (1986) posit that what we see as possible for ourselves in the future is contextually bound, that is, constructed from our experiences.

From a relational perspective, the experience of IPV disrupts the growth fostering relationships that are necessary for positive development (Jordan, 2009). Experiencing IPV at a young age can be particularly problematic because this is when individuals are keenly focused on developing their sense of self (Jordan, 2009). Arnett (2004) suggests that young people between the ages of 18 and 29, which he termed emerging adulthood, are especially focused on their personal identity, including how they see themselves today and in the future. Difficult intimate relationships during this time could impact how young women develop their sense of self. While

some research has explored the identity related impacts of IPV for women, there are few qualitative studies that directly explore the impact of IPV on women in the emerging adult age group in particular. Also, though a large proportion of emerging adult women attend post secondary institutions, there is little research investigating the impact of IPV within this population. The intent of the current study was to address this gap in research.

Overview of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how abusive relationships impact the way that young women view themselves today and in the future. The main research question was: How do experiences of IPV impact emerging adult women's sense of self? Specifically, I wanted to learn whether and how effects of IPV appear in women's current and future perceptions of themselves, and further, what other impacts women describe after having left the abusive relationship. As part of this qualitative study, six young women from a western Canadian university participated in semi-structured individual research interviews. Through these discussions, participants described their experiences during the relationship, the perceived impacts, and their perceptions of themselves today and in the future.

Researcher's Self-Location

As a qualitative researcher, I acknowledge the inherent subjectivity in this research study. I believe it is important to be explicit about myself as a researcher, and what assumptions and experiences I hold so that readers can understand the perspectives I bring to each element of this study.

I begin by sharing my primary experience of intimate relationships, as I believe this forms the foundation for what I hope for in a relationship. I was raised in what I believe to be a loving home, with a mother and father who treated one another respectfully, practiced honesty,

and who were “always on the same team”, as they say. To this day, I continue to observe my parents commit to a life of love and happiness together, and model to my sisters and me how a positive relationship might look. Witnessing their relationship has allowed me to hope for, or even expect, that I will also be able to create similar happiness with my partner.

I believe it is also important to touch on my personal relationships as they partly construct my assumptions around intimate relationships. I have been in several heterosexual monogamous relationships, most of which I considered to have been healthy, safe, and enjoyable. One significant relationship was tenuous, with verbal and psychological aggression. I have never experienced physical abuse from an intimate partner. I am now married to my husband, Luke, and I am proud to be a new mother to our baby girl, Nola. I feel fortunate to describe our marriage as supportive, trusting, and respectful.

I acknowledge that my academic path in recent years has been largely influenced by my oldest sister, Maria. I wrote about Maria’s story of IPV when I applied to UVic four years ago, and I write about her again as my degree comes to a close with my thesis research. Her story of enduring violence, leaving and reuniting, self-blame, and her journey of rebuilding a positive sense of self has touched me in a profound way. Maria’s openness about her experiences and her courage to make very difficult changes in her life are inspiring. I am sensitive to the challenges that she had endured in past relationships, and I was aware of this sensitivity when I spoke with the participants during the interviews, as well as when I thought about their experiences thereafter. I reflected on these thoughts and experiences in my research journal.

Some of my previous work and practicum experiences have connected me with women who have experienced IPV. Before beginning the Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology program at UVic, I worked in a women’s transition house where I supported women of all ages

who had experienced some form of relationship violence. Most women came to the house to seek reprieve from a violent male partner. My role was to provide emotional support, as well as to connect the women with other community resources such as employment services and professional counselling. I completed my first practicum at Pacific Centre Family Services in the Alcohol and Other Drug program, and provided counselling to several women who experienced IPV. Further, my second practicum at UVic Counselling services also included several counselling sessions with young women who talked about very difficult relationships, oftentimes involving violence or psychological abuse. My personal and professional experiences have helped me to realize that IPV is a reality that many women face, independent of socioeconomic status, education level, or age.

The experiences I have described shape the values and assumptions I have brought to this study, and thus, impacted the way I interacted with participants and how I interpreted the data.

Summary of Chapter 1

This chapter introduced my research study and situated it within the greater context of IPV towards women as well as within my own experiences. The chapters that follow include: a selected review of literature, a description of the methodology, the participants' individual stories, across participant thematic findings and discussion, and a conclusion.

Chapter 2 – Review of Selected Literature

This chapter provides a review of literature that is relevant to the study of how IPV impacts young women. I begin with my foundational theoretical and conceptual frameworks that I draw from throughout this research, including social constructionism, relational theories, and possible selves. I then orient the reader to the notion of *self* and *sense of self* and, in particular, I describe how a woman's sense of self develops within relationships. I follow with a discussion of pertinent research studies that have specifically explored abusive relationship with young adults. I acknowledge the prevalence, nature, and etiology of abuse in young relationships, and I focus more specifically on studies that explore the impact of such relationships. I also discuss the concept of *emerging adulthood* and address why difficult intimate relationships during this time can be especially problematic. I conclude this chapter by briefly outlining the present research study including my guiding research questions.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

In this section, I discuss the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that provided a foundation to the study. Specifically, social constructionism, relational theories, and the possible selves framework shape my perspective and understanding of issues surrounding IPV, and also guided the way I have chosen to go about researching and discussing these issues.

Social Constructionism. Social constructionism holds a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge, that is, it challenges the belief that we can simply access knowledge through objective and unbiased observations (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2008; 2011). From this perspective, knowledge or “truth” do not exist independently in the world, able to be discovered or acquired, but rather, knowledge is created by human interactions and dependent on social and historical contexts. Gergen (2008) articulates that social constructionists do not agree that “there is

nothing” or “there is no reality,” but instead, he suggests that the way we describe, notice, and make meaning of the world relies on social interactions (p. 4). The use of language, then, is one way that groups of people engage with one another to create meaning of the world around them (Gergen, 2008). Rather than viewing language as a picture or reflection of the world, social constructionism holds that language provides the organizational structure for how meaning is attributed to different experiences (Burr, 2003). According to Gergen (2008), “words themselves do not describe the world; but because of their successful functioning within the relational ritual, they became truth-telling” (p. 11). In this way, the language we use communicates meaning among others within our specific contextually bound experience.

Considering the use of language within the current study helps illustrate the above points. Researchers have chosen to use several different terms to discuss the physical and emotional abuse of young women in intimate relationships. Terms like *domestic violence*, *intimate partner violence*, *dating violence*, *wife battering*, and *spousal abuse*, among others, may each account for the same event such as a man hitting his female partner. However, the meaning or understanding of the event varies by context such as time, theoretical perspectives, past experiences, awareness of and openness to other perspectives, and so on. My choice to use “intimate partner violence” is influenced by multiple factors such as the possible terms offered to me by our society, my perspective about how IPV develops, my personal relationship history, and my observations about those who have been in abusive relationships. Furthermore, because I use this term throughout my thesis, my understanding of the phenomena will continue to be shaped by language. I approached the research interviews with curiosity about the language that participants used to describe their experiences of abuse, and during the interviews, I aimed to use the same terminology that the participants did.

Of particular relevance for the current study is the notion that what we know about the world, including morality, reason, self-knowledge, and emotions, are created within human relationships, not within the individual mind (Gergen, 2011). According to Gergen, we have a “communal view of knowledge” created among the people we engage with (p.109); how, then, does an abusive relationship influence what a young women learns about herself and about the world around her? What knowledge, emotions, and reason develop from the interactions between an emerging adult women and her abusive partner? A social constructionist lens points me to these questions, and further, it offers important theoretical underpinnings pertaining to the importance of our social relationships.

Relational Cultural Theory. Relational cultural theory (RCT) offers a framework that extends my understanding of how social context and personal relationships play a role in self-development and personal growth (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 2009; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Jossleson, 1998). In particular, RCT illuminates the influence of interpersonal relationships on positive development for women. Stemming from ideas in Jean Baker Miller’s (1976) publication, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, RCT offers a well-developed explanation of the importance of positive human connection, as well as the impact of negative encounters such as IPV, on personal growth (Jordan, 2009). Thus, perspectives from RCT raise questions about the impact of abuse on women’s developing sense of self.

RCT is a model of human development where human connection is placed at the centre of all growth (Jordan, 2009). Where traditional theories of development, such as Erik Erikson’s (1980), suggest that humans mature from dependence to independence, where autonomy, self-reliance, and individuation are encouraged, RCT contends that human beings rely on their connections with others in order to flourish in this world. Judith Jordan, a seminal RCT theorist,

resists the individually-focused Western view of maturity, stating, “the myth of independence comes to obscure the inevitable dependence and interconnectedness of human beings” (pp. 2-3). We are social beings and thus, unavoidably dependent on one another. Furthermore, the interconnected and interdependent nature of humans is celebrated from this perspective, rather than problematized as it has been in more traditional points of view.

RCT rests on seven core concepts that explain the process of psychological growth (Jordan, 2009):

1. People grow through and towards relationship throughout the life span.
2. Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature functioning.
3. Relationship differentiation and elaboration characterize growth.
4. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships.
5. Authenticity is necessary for real engagement and full participation in growth-fostering relationships.
6. In growth-fostering relationships, all people contribute and grow or benefit. Development is not a one-way street.
7. A goal of development is to increase relational competence and capacities over the life span

Positive relationships and connections with others, or what RCT labels *growth-fostering relationships*, are necessary to promote development and maturity. In the context of the current study, positive intimate relationships would be one type of relationship that could support this growth. From a relational perspective, participating in such relationships leads the *five good*

things: 1) increased energy and zest for life; 2) increased knowledge and clarity about one's experience, the other person, and the relationship; 3) increased creativity and productivity; 4) greater sense of self-worth; and 5) increased desire for more connections (Miller, 1986; Jordan, 2009). While connection is a main goal of relationships, RCT holds that acute challenges, or *disconnections*, normally occur in all relationships as well and growth can still occur during these circumstances.

In contrast, more severe challenges, or *chronic disconnections*, within relationships “result from humiliations, violations, abuse, and emotional neglect,” and on top of the immediate consequences, individuals are less likely to grow during these relationships (Jordan, 2009, p. 5). With chronic disconnection, be it through marginalization, IPV, or other forms of oppression, individuals often feel disempowered, immobilized, and isolated, and they may move away from genuine authenticity within relationships – something that RCT sees as crucial for growth (Jordan).

From a relational perspective, experiencing IPV could interfere with the conditions necessary to freely grow and develop. Women who experience IPV are a marginalized group, and, according to Jordan (2013), those at the margins can perpetuate their own disconnection by self-blame processes. It is possible that the myth of meritocracy in our society can lead young women to draw conclusions about being somehow deserving of violence, or as if they have done something to cause a violent relationship. These notions of marginalization and disconnection led me to question how having experiences of IPV impacts the beliefs, hopes, and expectations that emerging adult women have about themselves.

Possible Selves. One framework that facilitates the exploration of sense of self is what Markus and Nurius (1986) call *Possible Selves*. Possible selves are concrete representations of

the self, including what we hope to become, what we expect to become, and what we fear we may become; in other words, they maintain the “role of possibility within the self-concept” (Markus & Nurius, p. 958). All individuals have possible selves and can easily reflect upon them; some appear as symbols of hope or reminders of past challenges to avoid in the future, while others represent exciting dreams and possibilities. Markus and Nurius explain how possible selves are created from “the categories made salient by the individual’s particular socio-cultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual’s immediate social experiences” (p. 954). In other words, possible selves are influenced by the individual, relational, social, historical, and cultural contexts within which individuals live.

Since Markus and Nurius’ (1986) seminal work on possible selves, many researchers have continued to expand the discussion and have been curious about this element of the self-concept. Researchers have explored the construction process of possible selves (e.g., Kerpelman & Pittman, 2001), the motivational and self-regulatory effect of possible selves on behaviour and decision-making (e.g., Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2006; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Van Dellen & Hoyle, 2008), and the content of possible selves for different groups of individuals in different life situations (e.g., Marshall, et al., 2011; Kao, 2000) among many other research areas. While there might only be a few, if any, studies that explore possible selves of emerging adult women who have experienced IPV, several research areas offer findings that are relevant to the current study. Moreover, I believe these studies support the use of the possible selves framework as a vehicle to research this population.

The possible selves that we hold for our futures seem are influenced by those around us (Marshall, Young, Domene, & Zaidman-Zait, 2008). That is, the process of creating our hopes,

fears, and expectations for the future is not a solitary event, but rather, includes other individuals. One study by Marshall et al. (2008) found that adolescents and their parents participate in discussions that create a sense of what is possible for the future. In this study, parent and adolescent dyads were videotaped while they engaged in a discussion about the adolescent's future. Transcriptions and analysis of these discussions suggested that parents and adolescents worked together to generate ideas of what was possible for the future. The conversations also included processes of rejecting ideas that seemed unlikely or undesired by one or both participants. Parents also seemed to offer ideas to their children with hope that they could "catch" their child's attention, and furthermore, debating and resisting different ideas was another common process.

Overall, this study suggests that parents might influence what young people see as being possible for their futures. More broadly speaking, this study supports the notion that interpersonal context is one factor that shapes how we see out futures. Although no studies have explored how intimate relationships shape possible selves, I believe it is reasonable to wonder how intimate relationships play a role in constructing the possible selves of emerging adult women. It is possible that emerging adults also participate in joint-projects with others to create their possible selves.

Some research has also suggested that stereotypes or social stigmas can influence how individuals perceive themselves (Kao, 2000; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013). Kao has proposed a link between social expectations and individuals' perceived areas of competence. In her study, she noticed that stereotypes about racial groups, such as "Asians are smart", correlated with those individuals' hoped-for selves. Negative stereotypes operated in a similar way; for example, several Hispanic students in her study expressed feared possible selves such as

becoming “unskilled outdoor manual labourers” (p.427). Overall, Kao noticed that racial stereotypes seemed to shape individuals’ beliefs about their current identity, as well as what is possible for their futures. In the context of this study, perhaps the self-image of being a “battered woman” or a “victim” might influence how emerging adult women perceive themselves presently and in the future. Overstreet and Quinn (2013) are among many scholars who argue that those who have experienced IPV have a stigmatized identity within society, and the stereotypes associated with this group can often interfere with the help-seeking process. Moreover, stereotypes such as being helpless, unassertive, defenceless, and weak, in addition to the victim-blaming component of IPV (Overstreet & Quinn) might influence the ideas that a woman develop about herself in the present and in the future.

Another area of possible selves literature that is relevant for the current study is how challenging life events or negative experiences influence the way that individuals see themselves in the future (Barreto & Frazier, 2012; Kloep, Hendry, Gardner, & Seage, 2010). Barreto and Frazier (2012) recently conducted a study to explore whether certain life circumstances were more likely than others to be integrated into the self-concept in the form of possible selves. They hypothesized that participants’ stressful life events, such as a death of a family member, health issues, and career concerns, would somehow be integrated into participants’ possible selves repertoire. The study comprised 198 male and female participants between 18 and 85 years of age. The findings suggest that the life events that were integrated into possible selves were generally rated as being more stressful for the participants. Conversely, the life events that were rated as less stressful were less likely to be integrated into participants’ possible selves. Overall, Barreto and Frazier state that over two-thirds of the participants generated possible selves that were connected to stressful past events.

These findings suggest that possible selves are “dynamic and sensitive to developmental context, [...] life transitions, events, and highly salient life experience” (Barreto & Frazier, 2012, p. 1802). In other words, individuals’ significant life experiences can shape what they hope and fear for the future. In the context of the current study, I believe it is reasonable to consider relationship violence as a stressor that might also become integrated into a person’s view of the future.

Self/Sense of Self. A central focus of this research is the concept of *self*. The idea of self, commonly referred to as *identity*, is prominent in many different disciplines with their own traditions, including psychology, sociology, linguistics, political science, and education, among others (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). Thus, it is necessary to describe the meaning and use of “self” within the current study. Using the term “self” rather than “identity” reflects my relational theoretical perspective as outlined above.

Gergen (2008) maintains that what we believe to be true about ourselves, our *sense of self*, is created within social relationships and is culturally and historically bound. In this way, developing a sense of self is not an individual or private exercise, but rather, it includes social factors like interpersonal relationships, and culture: Josselson (1998) describes this process as “a complex negotiation between the person and a society” (p. 31). For women in particular, sense of self is constructed in relational terms of connections rather than separation – that is, sense of self is largely a matter of relational rather than individual qualities (Josselson; Surrey, 1991). The development of a relational self begins at a young age where women are encouraged to be perceptive of others’ feelings and needs, and to build a capacity for empathy. Women often learn to value their ability to connect and relate to others, and in turn, “the self develops in the context of relationships, rather than as an isolated or separated autonomous individual” (Surrey,

p. 59). Important relationships within women's lives, therefore, play a major role in how a woman comes to know herself (Surrey). It follows, then, that when inquiring about women's construction of self, it is imperative to recognize her relational experiences.

Questions like what matters, what goals you have, how you want others to see you, what beliefs and values you hold, what plans you have, and so forth, are all self-related questions (Josselson, 1998). Thus, self involves more than ideas about the present, but also includes notions about the past and future. As indicated above, sense of self includes ideas about who you are in relation to others (e.g., who am I as a wife? A mother?) (Chen, Boucher, & Kraus, 2011). Self, then, is fluid and malleable as relationships develop and change over time.

This idea of self is central to this research, and thus, I continue to return to this notion of self throughout the manuscript. I pay particular attention to how a woman's sense of self may be impacted by experiences of IPV particularly within her early intimate relationships.

Intimate Partner Violence in Emerging Adulthood

Intimate partner violence often begins in young relationships. The Canadian General Social Survey (GSS) reports that younger adults (between 25 and 34 years) are about three times more likely than older adults (over 45 years) to report IPV victimization, and that homicides from IPV are highest between ages of 15 and 24 as compared to older ages (Brennan, 2011). Moreover, Mulford and Giordano (2008) suggest that as many as 50% of college students in the United States have experienced abuse within a dating relationship. According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, among women in the United States who experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner, almost half (47.1%) were between the ages of 18 and 24 when they first experienced violence by a partner (Black, et al., 2011). It is clear that many young women in our society do not have healthy, supportive, or

safe relationships. Although IPV has negative consequences at any age, younger women in their late teens to late twenties experience unique developmental challenges and opportunities that, when paired with violent relationships, can be even more challenging and can have an enduring negative impact.

The time between adolescence and young adulthood, roughly 18 to 30 years old is particularly salient for development. Jeffrey Arnett (2004) terms this age period *emerging adulthood*, and a promising body of literature has been developed. Recent discussions of emerging adulthood offer insight to, and raise questions about, the way IPV impacts young women today. I have chosen to use the term *emerging adults* to describe the group of young women with whom I refer to in this study; I believe this line of research, although relatively new, enriches my understanding of this period of life, and introduces a unique way to explore the impact on IPV on young women's self development.

Arnett (2004) suggests that emerging adulthood is a unique developmental period for young people where critical opportunities for exploring identity, career, and intimate relationships are available. Because emerging adults often have independence from adult responsibilities, like work and parenting, but do not yet perceive themselves as adults, they often experience greater opportunity to explore a variety of life possibilities. In particular, individuals are intently focused on their personal identity, including how they define themselves, what values and beliefs they hold, what qualities they seek in a life partner, and how they see themselves in the future (Arnett). Based on her research of intimacy development, Montgomery (2005) suggests that as young people transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood, they become increasingly oriented toward developing closeness with others. This, she argues, is "a necessary precondition for the capacity to embrace the intense emotions and reciprocal

involvements entailed in mutual relational intimacy” (p. 367). In other words, young people increasingly develop the capacity to engage in intimate relationship as they approach and move through emerging adulthood.

Emerging adulthood is also marked by periods of transition and uncertainty, such as changes in living arrangements, work, intimate relationships, and with family, among other transitions (Arnett, 2004). During these years, individuals tend to be flexible with their life plans, and over the years, they continue to clarify the kinds of futures they want to create. Emerging adulthood, then, is a time of transition, of gaining self-knowledge and revising ideas about how the future can be shaped. Moreover, the decisions that are made during emerging adulthood begin to carry more weight than many decisions during younger years. For instance, decisions about career choices or starting a family have enduring impacts on the rest of a person’s life (Arnett). It seems then, that emerging adulthood is a time of growth, but also of finding direction.

Within this discussion, it is important to note that emerging adulthood is a cultural construct that is not universal to all young people around the world (Arnett, 2004). Emerging adulthood is seen in cultures where many young people’s entry into adulthood is postponed past the late teens. Generally speaking, these cultures are often within highly industrialized countries or those that require or encourage a high level of education or skills training to enter professions. In Canada, about 60% of 20 to 34 year olds have obtained a certificate, diploma, or degree beyond high school, indicating that the majority pursue studies past their teenage years (Statistics Canada, 2006). The emerging adulthood framework, therefore, is appropriate for this study of young women in a university setting, as most will not see themselves as adults until later on in their twenties.

Although IPV has been a common topic in scholarly literature for the past several decades and remains so today, few studies have focused specifically on IPV for the emerging adult age group, and even fewer IPV studies call this age group “emerging adulthood.” One possible reason for this is that emerging adulthood is a relatively new construct. Another possibility is that researchers have focused on other age categories, or other constructs, that overlap somewhat with emerging adulthood. For example, some studies have explored abuse in young relationships using the term *adolescent dating violence* (ADV) to refer to participants ages 18 to 21 years (e.g., Martsolf, Draucker, Stephenson, Cook, & Hackman, 2012). Some studies consider adult women over the age of 18 years in one large category (e.g., Coker et al., 2002). Because some women in these studies are within the emerging adult years, the findings are relevant for this discussion; thus, I draw from literature that includes participants of the emerging adulthood ages, even though researchers may talk about their participants using different terminology.

Past research on IPV in emerging adulthood ages, or including emerging adult participants, has mainly focused on three areas of inquiry: the nature of violence in young relationships, the causes or risk factors, and the impact or consequences. A review of the findings from some of these studies highlights key issues that young women face, and it also points to important research directions by highlighting areas that have not yet been explored.

Nature of IPV in emerging adult relationships. Although IPV often looks different across couples, some researchers have noticed patterns of abuse and have suggested using typologies when thinking about these relationships (Johnson, 2008; Martsolf et al., 2012). Johnson is one scholar in particular who suggests that there are different typologies of IPV. A discussion of Martsolf, et al, and Johnson’s typologies offers an understanding of the multiple

ways that young women might experience IPV, and draws attention toward relationship factors that might contribute to these challenges. Although these typologies are not specifically focused on emerging adult relationships, the ideas are based on research that includes emerging adult age participants.

The following four typologies reflect the main patterns of IPV that Johnson (2008) has seen through his research: 1) *Intimate terrorism* describes a pattern of unilateral abuse that is usually embedded in long-term patterns of power and coercive control; 2) *Violent resistance* describes a pattern of abuse where a person responds with violence to their abusive partner with the purpose of defending themselves; 3) *Situational couple violence* describes a pattern of abuse where one or both partners use violence as a result of escalation of specific conflicts or situations, but unlike intimate terrorism, there is no attempt to exert general control within the relationship; and 4) *Mutual violent control* describes a pattern of abuse where each member is abusive, and also attempts to gain control over their partner and the relationship. I believe Johnson's line of research is helpful in expanding our understanding of how IPV operates in different relationships.

Martsof et al. (2012) have also attempted to understand the different patterns of IPV and have focused their recent research on young people between 18 and 21 years old, which they call *Adolescent Dating Violence (ADV)*. Martsof and her colleagues employed qualitative grounded theory methodology, using participants' retrospective accounts of ADV to explore patterns of duration, severity, and number of abusive relationships. Martsof et al also found four main patterns of ADV including: 1) *One relationship contained ADV*, referring to a single abusive relationship lasting for less than one year; 2) *One relationship prolonged ADV*, referring to a single abusive relationship lasting between one and four years; 3) *Multiple relationships*

repetitive ADV, referring to a pattern of multiple abusive relationships where the severity of abuse remained constant across multiple relationships; and 4) *Multiple relationships escalating ADV*, referring to multiple abusive relationships where the abuse significantly escalated between each relationship. The research findings suggest that for some young people who experience ADV, they might be more likely to experience subsequent abusive relationships. Alternatively, there were many participants who, although having experienced ADV in a past relationship, had no further experiences of abuse in subsequent relationships at the time of the study.

Taken together, the typologies of Johnson (2008) and Martsolf et al. (2012) offer insight into the heterogeneity of experiences of abusive relationships that young people may have. Furthermore, their findings serve as a reminder to avoid making broad assumptions or generalizations about the nature of abuse in relationships, including impacts.

Causes of IPV in emerging adulthood. For decades, researchers have attempted to understand the causes of abusive relationships, and have looked at family of origin, psychological, cognitive, and social factors, among others. Today, it is commonly understood that there is a wide range of possible developmental antecedents, along with other contextual and situational factors, that play a role in perpetration and victimization of abuse (Olsen, Parra, & Bennett, 2010). In their review of literature that has explored predictive factors of IPV, Olsen, et al. offer this statement:

No single ecological context or mechanism determines the development of risk for involvement in violent romantic relationships. Rather it may be a constellation of violence related influences across ecologies that collectively heighten the propensity for perpetration or victimization in romantic relationships (p. 119).

We cannot, therefore, draw conclusions about single factors that *cause* IPV, but rather, we can learn about a network of experiences that might increase the risk of experiencing abusive relationships.

Discussing the etiology of IPV necessitates the acknowledgment that violence against women is a deeply embedded social problem, rather than a problem confined solely to the individual or couple. Bograd (1988) states that IPV towards women is partly a product of the patriarchal society that places women in a submissive position below men, and maintains this position through physical, psychological, sexual, and economic oppression. Notions of masculinity that are defined in terms of strength, dominance, and violence are problematic, as are rigid gender roles that place women below men (Heise, 1998). Feminist theories maintain that gendered social forces, namely, men's oppression of women, largely contribute to IPV towards women (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011). In their review of Statistics Canada's 2000 report on violence, Dragiewicz and DeKeseredy (2012) share findings that highlight the asymmetry of IPV: compared to men, women are more likely to be victims of IPV, to report fear that their lives were in danger, to have negative emotional consequences, and to experience severe injury and death as a result of the violence.

With the acknowledgement that IPV is a gendered issue, research has demonstrated that situational and individual factors are also at play for those who experience IPV. One factor that some researchers believe plays a role in IPV victimization for emerging adult women is violence in the family of origin. Gover, Kaukinen, and Fox (2008) comprise one research team who attempted to understand how past experiences of violence in the home impact the likelihood of experiencing violence in subsequent intimate relationships. Based on survey data from 2,451 university students, Gover et al. found that for female students, childhood abuse (physical abuse

from a parent, guardian, or other caretaker) was associated with IPV victimization later in life. In the same study, young women who had witnessed their fathers physically abuse their mothers when they were children were also significantly more likely to experience IPV victimization in university. In a similar vein, Lohman, Neppi, Senia, and Schofield (2013) found that exposure to parent-child psychological violence during adolescence (e.g., criticism, shouting/yelling, getting angry) was a key predictor of psychological IPV in subsequent emerging adult relationships. It seems, therefore, that maltreatment of children is associated with the types of relationships young people experience when they are older.

Not only do experiencing and witnessing violence as a child impact the likelihood of entering a violent relationship later on, it also seems that emerging adults are negatively impacted by the parents' current dysfunctional and violent behaviour (Black, Sussman, & Ungar, 2010). Black and colleagues report that the majority of emerging adults in their study (58.3%) witnessed psychological violence and 17.5% witnessed physical violence between their parents within the previous 12 months. When looking at the participants' reports of physical and psychological violence within their own dating relationships in the previous years, they found significant correlations. Specifically, participants who witnessed psychological aggression between their parents were more likely to also experience psychological aggression in their own relationships. Furthermore, a significant correlation was found between witnessing physical violence between parents, and physical violence during the emerging adult relationship.

The literature also points to a correlation between experiences of violence in adolescent dating relationships and IPV in emerging adulthood (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003; Chase, Treboux, & O'Leary, 2002). In their study on what they call *dating violence* among adolescent and college-aged women, Smith et al. found that women who were physically victimized by a

romantic partner in high school were significantly more likely to experience physical victimization during college than those without adolescent victimization. Furthermore, those who experienced sexual victimization during adolescence were also more likely to experience sexual victimization by an intimate partner in college.

Looking beyond family of origin factors and history of violence, many researchers have turned their focus toward situational and individual factors that might be related to IPV in emerging adult relationships. Substance use, for example, is one factor that is widely accepted as being associated with IPV. Specifically, alcohol use is found to correlate with both IPV perpetration (Baker & Stith, 2008; Hines & Strauss, 2007; Hove, Parkhill, Neighbors, McConchie, & Fossos, 2010; Rapoza & Baker, 2008) and victimization (Shorey, Rhatigan, Fite, & Stuart, 2011; Roudsari, Leahy, & Walters, 2009) within young relationships. Furthermore, drug use has also been found to correlate with increased IPV for college students (Durant et al., 2007; Nabors, 2010). Not surprisingly, individual factors, such as attitudes about violence, have also been found to correlate with relationship violence: Jouriles, Grych, Rosenfield, McDonald, and Dodson (2011) found that teenager self-reported attitudes about dating violence correlated with perpetrating dating violence. Similarly, Prather, Dahlen, Nicholson, and Bullock-Yowell (2012) found that among college students between 18 and 25 years old, acceptance of violence was found to predict the perpetration of aggression between couples. In addition, some argue that personality disorders are an etiological factor in IPV. According to Ross and Babcock (2009), antisocial and borderline personalities are among the most common personality disorders associated with men's perpetration of IPV. Dutton's (2006) research, for example, suggests that men who perpetrate IPV have up to six times higher rates of personality disorders than the general population.

Relationship factors, as opposed to individual factors, may also be related to IPV in emerging adult relationships. Recent studies suggest that instability and uncertainty in some emerging adulthood relationships, along with poor conflict management skills, are associated with violence between partners (Draucker, Martsof, & Stephenson, 2012; Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013). Although most emerging adults will experience multiple breakups, and some reconciliations, before they settle with a longer term partner (Arnett, 2000), relationship *churning* (the on-again-off-again relationship pattern) might indicate an unhealthy and potentially dangerous pairing (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). Halpern-Meekin et al. explored the relationship between participants, ages 17-24 years who reported a churning relationship pattern (defined as having broken up twice, or having previously broken up with a current partner) with relationship violence. They found that, of 792 participants, churning was the most common relationship pattern (44.16%) compared to those stably broken up and those stably together. Furthermore, they found that both physical and verbal violence was significantly more likely to occur for “churners.” The researchers do not suggest that churning leads to violence, but rather, that “both dynamics arise because of an inability to properly prevent and manage conflict escalation” (p.10). This perspective of IPV supports the notion that a lack of conflict management skills can increase the likelihood of IPV. According to Johnson (2008), violence arising out of poor conflict management skills, what he calls *situational couple violence*, represents one kind of IPV that women experience but fails to account for violence that is rooted in efforts to gain power and control over one’s partner.

Similarly, Draucker, et al. (2012) discuss how the ambiguous or unclear aspects of dating relationships in university can be associated with abuse. They suggest that many couples are unclear about their relationship status as well as their expectations of one another, and that issues

arise from this ambiguity. Through their analysis of 88 young adults who had experienced ADV in college, they noticed three particular relational issues that correlated with relationship violence: 1) *struggling over degree of closeness*, where one partner wanted more closeness and intimacy than the other; 2) *struggling over expectations of fidelity*, where ideas about the level of loyalty and sexual faithfulness between partners were unclear; and 3) *struggling over relationship obligation*, where roles and expectations in the relationship were unclear. Taken together, the researchers findings presented by Halpern-Meekin et al. (2013) and Draucker et al. suggest that particular relational dynamics between a couple can play a role in whether IPV occurs in young relationships.

Through this discussion, it becomes apparent that no single factor can explain why some young women are victimized by IPV and others are not. As I have pointed to above, there seems to be a wide network of factors that interact to influence later experiences of IPV, rather than clear predictors of these experiences. Olsen et al. (2010) suggest that we reconsider using deterministic explanations of IPV such as the “cycle of violence” or “violence begets violence”, and rather, consider how the term *culture of violence* better reflects how IPV develops (p. 420). In their words, a culture of violence “may be a constellation of violence related influences across ecologies that collectively heighten the propensity for perpetration or victimization in romantic relationships” (Olsen et al., p. 419). Fittingly, this term points to the substantial role that our different cultures (i.e., society, family, friends) play in our attitudes toward, and experience of, violence within and outside of intimate relationships.

Impact of intimate partner violence for emerging adult women. Intimate partner violence can have a major effect on women, and, according to Riger, Raja, and Camacho (2002), it can have a “radiating effect” by also impacting the lives of those who are connected to these

women (p. 184). IPV can impact a person's physical and mental well-being, their ability to function in their environment, and can impact on those who are not directly victimized by the violence, such as other family members.

It is widely accepted that IPV can result in negative physical and mental health consequences for those victimized. Studies focusing on young female victims have found health consequences of IPV including increased depression, anger, and fear (Brennan, 2011), as well as post-traumatic stress disorder (Black et al., 2011) and suicidal ideation (Ackard et al., 2007; Banyard & Cross, 2008). Physical injury commonly results from IPV (Riger et al., 2002; Statistics Canada, 2011; Swahn, Alemdar, & Whitaker, 2010), and at worst, intimate partner homicide is a reality for some women (Statistics Canada; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003). Estimates from the 2003 National Violence Against Women Survey indicate that in the United States, nearly 1,300 women are victims of spousal homicide each year as a result from IPV (National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control).

Intimate partner violence also impacts the relationships that women have with their friends, family, and intimate partners. Family members, in particular, seem to play an important role in women's experiences of leaving abusive relationships, where they might offer tangible resources or emotional support (Riger et al., 2002). It is reasonable, then, that these relationships are also impacted by IPV. Riger, et al. also found that for some women in their study, attitudes toward future intimate relationships seemed to have been impacted by their experiences of IPV in the past; some women felt that violence is inevitable in all relationships. Literature also documents how children who witness their mothers being abused at home are at increased risk of also experiencing IPV in their own relationships later on in life (Gover, et al., 2008).

Furthermore, there are more immediate negative consequences for these children, such as behavioural and psychological challenges during childhood (Riger, et al.).

Some studies have explored the impact of IPV on education, career, and employment and related domains. Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) in the United States suggest that IPV impacts the degree to which female victims are able to maintain work commitments; estimates show that women in the US lose nearly 8 million days of paid work each year due to violence perpetrated against them by current or former intimate partners (National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003). Research suggests that adolescent girls who experienced abusive relationships are more likely to have negative educational and career concerns, such as increased thoughts about dropping out of school (Banyard & Cross, 2008) and lower educational and vocational goals (Collin-Vezina, et al., 2006). In one study, Albaugh and Nauta (2005) explored the relationship between college women's experiences of IPV and their career decision self-efficacy. They found that IPV (sexual coercion in particular) was significantly associated with lower career decision self-efficacy, that is, the women's perceived ability to engage in accurate self-appraisal, to select goals, and to problem solve were impacted by experiences of relationship violence.

Intimate partner violence and the self. Research has demonstrated that IPV can impact how women perceive themselves. Some women who experience IPV describe identity-related challenges. Lynch (2013) found that women who experience violent relationships had more negative perceptions of their self as compared to women who had non-violent relationships. For example, some women in her study shared negative self-perceptions related to body image, feeling incompetent, and feeling unattractive. Overall, those in abusive relationships described negative self-worth, low self-esteem, poor self-image, or decreased self-confidence more often

than women without abusive partners (Lynch). Amar and Alexy (2005) had similar findings when they asked college women to describe how experiencing physical, sexual, or emotional victimization from a dating partner affected their lives. The participants' written narratives commonly included statements of self-blame, self-doubt, and low self-esteem.

In one study, Drauker, Cook, Martsof, and Stephenson (2012) explored how young women (ages 18-21 years) who have experienced IPV describe themselves during open-ended interviews about dating violence. Using content analysis, Drauker, Cook, et al. extracted self-statements (i.e., statements reflecting beliefs about oneself) from the participants' narratives in order to understand how these women speak of their identity during conversation. Several self-appraisals found in the transcripts related to the personal characteristic of strength; many participants described themselves as being competent, resilient, independent, self-confident, or strong-willed, and others described themselves as in the process of developing these characteristics. Drauker, Cook, et al. suggest that for some young women in their study, viewing themselves as strong is crucial to moving out of an abusive relationship. In another study, Riger et al. (2002) conducted interviews with 57 women who had been in domestic violence shelters, and found that some women indicated an increase in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-respect after overcoming an abusive relationship. Lynch (2013) conducted a study exploring the impact of IPV on work and sense of self for women. Interviews were conducted with women who between the ages of 18 and 51, who had a child, and who identified themselves as having experienced physical or psychological abuse in their relationship within the past year. Interview questions focused on how the participants describe themselves, and how their relationship (among other factors) influences how they see themselves. Within their narratives, the participants often included positive descriptions of the self during interviews, including being

self-reliant, assertive, and strong. These findings point to the notion that although IPV can have a negative impact on women and those connected to them, many women also show tremendous strength and are able to restore, or even enhance, their sense of independence and confidence after leaving their abusive partners.

Summary of Chapter 2

This chapter has outlined the content areas, theories, and conceptual frameworks that form the foundation of the present study. There have been numerous research studies that have contributed to our understanding of how IPV develops, prevalence rates, and consequences for women and for those connected to them. However, there has been little direct focus on how IPV impacts a woman's sense of self. As evident from the discussion above, there are some studies that include a focus on the way that women's sense of self is impacted by IPV; however, there is a paucity of research that focuses specifically on emerging adult women who are no longer in an abusive relationship. Furthermore, there do not seem to be any studies that explore how experiences of IPV impact the way that women see their futures unfolding, or on their future identities. The emerging adulthood years are formative for how individuals construct their sense of self, and so it is reasonable to expect that experiences of IPV might influence this process. After an in-depth review of the literature about IPV and young women, it is apparent that further studies are needed to better understand how IPV impacts women's sense of self. Furthermore, I believe that an effort to understand this process for emerging adult women in particular is warranted due to the developmental challenges and opportunities that emerging adulthood brings.

The Present Study

The present study involved individual interviews with emerging adult women attending a western Canadian university who have experienced IPV within a past heterosexual relationship. In exploring these women's experiences of the difficult relationship along with the specific impacts of the relationship after it had ended, my study focused on the following research questions: How do experiences of IPV impact emerging adult women's sense of self? How do experiences of IPV show up in women's current and future perceptions of the self? How do experiences of IPV impact emerging adult women's lives after having left their abusive partner?

Chapter 3 - Research Design and Methodology

In this chapter, I outline my research design and methodology, including my philosophical assumptions and theoretical underpinnings that guided my methodological decisions. I describe case study methodology and discuss the ethical considerations relevant to this study. I then outline how I recruited participants, how I generated data, and how I made sense of that data through my analysis. Lastly, I close the chapter by describing how I established credibility and trustworthiness.

Philosophy of Science

Havercamp and Young (2007) discuss the direct connection between a philosophy of science paradigm and the overall design of a research study, highlighting how the design must logically fit with the assumptions within a paradigm. Therefore, making explicit my guiding research paradigm is necessary in order to communicate a coherent and sound research study, and also to make transparent my processes of conceptualizing and decision making through the study.

Interpretivism as described by Williamson (2006) provides the overarching paradigm for the proposed study, where the central tenet is that people are constantly involved in interpreting and making meaning of their surrounding worlds. Interpretivism is subjective in epistemology, meaning that knowledge develops within social interactions and meaning is generated through interpretation (Havercamp & Young, 2007). Grounded within this paradigm, my ontological position is that multiple social realities and perspectives exist, and they are equally valid. Thus, knowledge is viewed as the result of subjective and transactional processes within specific contexts, rather than as discoverable and objective facts (Ponterotto, 2005). A goal of science from this perspective is to learn about how we create and interpret our realities (Campbell &

Wasco, 2000). In the present study, the use of qualitative methodology with open-ended interviews honoured the subjective nature of participants' experiences by presenting the opportunity to share their stories in their own way. The co-constructive nature of knowledge was reflected in my data collection and analysis processes.

Social Constructionism and Relational Perspectives

Consistent with an interpretivist paradigm, assumptions within social constructionism and relational perspectives informed my methodological choices throughout my thesis. Social constructionists contend that there is no single or objective "truth" or "reality," but rather, there are "truth claims" or "truth-telling" based on individuals' situated and contextual realities (Gergen, 2008). In social constructionism theory, knowledge is constructed through relationships rooted in a cultural, historical, socioeconomic, and socio-political context rather than by individual processes (Burr, 2003; Gergen).

From this, research processes can be used to engage with participants in order to understand how they see and understand the world. In the context of this study, data collection and analysis processes were chosen in order to develop an understanding of participants' realities related to IPV, and the multiple realities that emerged across participants are respected. I also recognize that the research setting is its own social context, and as such, the knowledge and meaning developed within this study will have grown within the specific contextual arrangement that existed.

Both social constructionist and relational perspectives help explain how context is inextricably linked to meaning that individuals create (Gergen, 2008; 2011; Burr, 2003; Jordan, 2009). Thus, the relationship between me (as the researcher) and the participants is one element of the research context that plays a role in the meaning that is created from this study. As

Gergen (2008) puts forward, “It is within these relationships that we construct the world in this way or that. In relationships the world comes to be what it is for us” (p.3).

I approached my data collection procedure from this relational theoretical perspective, and, thereby, acknowledge the significance of the relationship between myself and participants during the construction of knowledge (Josselson, 2013). Within this study, individual interviews were conducted in order to learn about my research questions; from a relational perspective, the interview process has a major role in the knowledge that is generated. According to Josselson, “[a]n interview is a shared product of *what* two people – one the interviewer, the other the interviewee – talk about and *how* they talk together” (p. 1). The meaning generated from the interview is co-constructed, that is, the material shared is not “the” story, but rather, it is “a” story that was developed for the purpose of the interview (Josselson, p. 8). This is not to say that the material lacks meaning, but rather, that iterations of any story are ultimately linked to the context within which they are shared.

Case Study Design

My research questions required in-depth data and, therefore, a qualitative research design. Specifically, I used a collective case study methodology (Yin, 2009) in order to engage in a detailed, in-depth data collection approach where multiple sources of data were used to explore my research questions. Although case study methodology can be employed in other research paradigms (e.g. postpositivist, critical theory), “case study can be congruent with an interpretivist paradigm that assumes that reality is a social construct that emerges from the way in which individuals and groups interact and experience the world” (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007, p.8). Case study methodology, implemented within an interpretivist paradigm, acknowledges multiple

perspectives and is built upon a collaborative process between the researcher and participants (Yin).

Yin (2009) states that case study research design is appropriate when the research is focused on *how* questions, and when contextual conditions are relevant to understand the phenomenon of interest. Creswell (2007) describes collective case study methodology, in particular, to be appropriate when there is one specific issue or concern, where several different individuals or cases are used to explore that concern. Engaging in case study research requires that I identify the specific *case* or bounded unit of analysis that will be the focus of inquiry for the duration of the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Yin). In the context of this study, the participants were each considered to be cases that contribute to our understanding of the concern, that is, how IPV impacts the way emerging adult women perceive themselves today and in the future.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles and considerations were extremely important in this study. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Victoria before I began participant recruitment. Voluntary informed consent was addressed by requiring both verbal and written consent for participation in this study. At the beginning of interview #1, I discussed informed consent with participants, and asked them to sign the consent form (see Appendix A). At the beginning of interview #2, I revisited informed consent, and asked participants to indicate their continued consent by signing the second line on the consent form. I informed participants during the recruitment interview and at the beginning of both research interviews that they can withdraw from the study at any point without explanation or consequence.

Confidentiality was established by asking participants to select a pseudonym to be used throughout data analysis and the writing stages of study in order to maintain anonymity. Some participants did not specify a pseudonym, and in those cases, I created a pseudonym to be used. All audio recordings were deleted after the analysis process was complete. Confidentiality is maintained in this manuscript as well; no identifying information about participants or third parties was included. Furthermore, details about participants' stories that could potentially reveal their identity were omitted.

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, some participants became emotional when describing their experience in the past relationship, and how that impacts them today. As a trained counsellor, I am sensitive to these issues. If I noticed that a participant became upset, I stopped the interview and ask the participant how she wanted to proceed, whether that was to continue, to end the interview, to reschedule for a later time, or to terminate participation in the study. I believe my training in counselling facilitated open and respectful dialogue during the interviews, and further, I believe that specific skills such as active listening, communicating a non-judgmental attitude, and probing for clarification and elaboration enhanced the interview. I gave all participants contact information to for university counselling services, along with a local crisis line phone number in case they required support.

Participants

Recruitment. Participants were recruited from a western Canadian university. I created a recruitment poster (see Appendix B), including my contact information, and displayed them across campus in academic buildings. I also created an electronic version of my recruitment poster and emailed this to a student list-serve. Individuals were invited to contact me via email if they were interested in participation. I then responded by email to request a screening telephone

call in order to discuss the details of the study, and to assess their appropriateness for participation based on the inclusion criteria. See Appendix C for the screening interview script.

Pilot participant. Before conducting interviews with participants, I previewed my interview questions and other data collection procedures with an acquaintance who described herself as having experienced IPV; this person was not a participant in the study. After going through the interview questions with her as if she were a participant, we discussed the questions and process. I then used her feedback to make changes to the interview questions and to refine the interview processes.

Final sample. Participants were 6 women between the ages of 23 and 29 years of age who had experienced IPV victimization in a past heterosexual relationship. I limited the study to women who were in heterosexual relationships because of my interest in the gender dynamic between men and women. I acknowledge that IPV victimization is not a phenomenon specific to heterosexual women, but rather, violence occurs in relationships across cultures, ages, socio-economic statuses, genders, and sexual orientations. Including women who have experienced non-heterosexual partner violence would connect to an additional body of literature and thus, extend beyond the scope of this particular study.

In order to meet the criteria for “abusive relationship”, participants needed to describe a relationship that was significant in duration (rather than a single date). I did not ascribe a specific length of time to this criterion because I believe that people vary in terms of what length of a relationship is meaningful to them. The present participants’ relationships lasted for at least one year, indicating significant and multiple experiences over time. Participants were also required to have been out of the relationships for at least one year prior to participation in this study; I believe that this time away from the relationship allowed participants sufficient time and

space to reflect on how they were impacted, and also helped ensure that participants were not as emotionally involved in the relationship as they may have been if less time had passed. I had intended to exclude participants who were currently involved in a violent relationship, and provide them with information about support services available in the community, including the crisis line, women's shelters, and counselling services; however, no one was excluded based on this criterion.

All participants were enrolled in full-time university studies. As Arnett (2004) observes, university students are typically within the age range of emerging adults, and are often engaged in identity and relationship exploration. Furthermore, there is a plethora of IPV research that has recruited participants from community shelters and transition houses –fewer studies have involved post-secondary students. By focusing on women at UVic, I was able to explore how IPV impacts women with higher education levels and socioeconomic status. I had intended to exclude participants with children because this raises particular issues of family interactions and child protection beyond the scope of this study; however, no women with children volunteered to participate. Table 1 outlines a summary of inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation.

Table 1 - Inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Identifies sex and gender as female and woman, respectively. ❖ Between 18-29 years old ❖ Enrolled in university ❖ Has experienced IPV victimization in at least one past heterosexual intimate relationship ❖ Does not currently experience IPV in an intimate relationship. ❖ Has been out of the abusive relationship for at least 1 year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Identifies sex and gender other than female and woman, respectively. ❖ Younger than 18 years of age ❖ Older than 29 years of age ❖ Not enrolled in university ❖ Has experienced IPV in a past non-heterosexual relationship ❖ Experiencing IPV in current intimate relationship ❖ Has been out of the abusive relationship for less than 1 year. ❖ Has children

Data Collection

Data collection involved two interviews: the first used a narrative approach (Josselson, 2013), with open-ended questions to elicit the participant's story, and the second focused on a "possible selves" mapping exercise (Marshall & Guenette, 2011). These interviews facilitated rich and personalized accounts of the participants' experiences, and encouraged a collaborative and co-constructive process. These procedures allowed for a degree of fluidity and openness that helped to keep participants' voices an integral part of this study.

Interview #1. The purposes of interview #1 were: to communicate the purpose of the study, to obtain informed consent, to build rapport, and to begin to explore the research questions using an open ended interview format. The interview began with introductions, as well as an overall description of the study, and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study. Informed consent was also discussed in detail, along with confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent was revisited again at the beginning of the second interview in order to ensure that the participants wanted to continue their participation, and so that they were aware that consent was an ongoing process. Each participant either chose or was given a pseudonym (Brie, Callie, Laura, Erica, Alice, Cornelia).

During this first interview, I used the following nine questions as a guide, beginning with an invitation for participants to tell their story about what it was like to be in their relationship (See Appendix D). These questions gave direction to areas that I wanted to discuss, however, participants had the flexibility to share what they wished. I used probes and clarifying questions (such as "can you tell me more about that?") to continue in the direction chosen by the participants. The questions were:

1. We've discussed the focus of this study being around very challenging intimate relationships. In your words, could you tell me about your experience of being in this difficult relationship?
2. What language do you use to describe what this was like? I have used 'very difficult' and "abusive" but this might not be what you use.
3. Could you tell me about how you came to leave this relationship?
4. What has it been like for you since?
5. How do you see yourself now as compared to when you were in the relationship? In other words, how would you describe yourself then and how would you describe yourself now?
6. How do you think this has affected your subsequent relationships?
7. Is there anything you haven't done, or hesitated to do, because of your experiences in this relationship? If so, do you have any examples?
8. Do you think this relationship has had an effect on how you see your future? If so, can you give me some examples?
9. Is there anything you would like to share that I haven't asked about?

To honour the women's own preferences for sharing their experiences, I allowed the interview to unfold naturally, in a narrative fashion, rather than asking my questions one by one. All participants told their stories in a chronological manner, beginning with their experience in the relationship, followed by how the relationship ended, and how they were impacted. Toward the end of the interview, I checked my list of questions to see if there was any topic area that we did not discuss, at which point I asked more specific questions to address that area.

Interview #2. The intent of interview #2 was for participants to generate more specific ideas about themselves in the future. This interview took place at least one week after interview #1. We began by reviewing informed consent, and participants were asked to indicate their continued consent by signing a separate line on the consent form. I then asked them if there was anything about interview #1 that they wanted to discuss, or if there was anything new they wanted to add to what they shared. Most participants wanted to either add something new or clarify what they had previously said. After that, the focus in Interview #2 was completing an adapted version of the *Possible Selves Mapping Process* (PSMP; Marshall & Guenette, 2011).

The PSMP is an exploration tool that has been developed to help participants describe their ideas about themselves in the future. This tool is based on Markus and Nurius' (1986) concept of possible selves, which is comprised of ideas about the future self-concept, including hopes, dreams, and fears. Several iterations of the PSMP have been created by Dr. Marshall's research team at the University of Victoria, and have been used in several research contexts such as studies of cultural identity and school-to-work transitions (Coverdale, 2012; Spowart, 2013). I have had multiple experiences facilitating the PSMP in workshops and with research team members, and I have also completed a series of possible selves maps for myself.

In the present study, my adaptation of the PSMP included the following steps (see Appendix E for the detailed PSMP process):

1. *Create a brainstorm map for hoped for and feared possible selves.* Participants were asked to think about their hopes for themselves in the future, and to write each idea on a green Post-it note. After they were finished, they were asked to write their feared selves on yellow sticky notes. Participants placed all possible selves on a large piece of paper that we called the Brainstorm Map.

2. *Group and name possible selves.* Participants were asked to organize their possible selves (hopes and fears together) into categories, and then give each category a name. See Appendix F for an example.
3. *Debrief the brainstorm map.* Participants were asked to discuss some of the ideas they wrote down, as well as the way they chose to organize their possible selves.
4. *Identify the most hoped for self, and most likely hoped for self. Identify most feared self, and most likely feared self.* Participants were asked to draw a star beside the hoped for self that they really wanted to have happen, as well as the feared self that they feared the most. Then, they were asked to draw a square around the hoped for and feared selves that they thought were most likely to actualize.
5. *Transfer the brainstorm map onto the possible selves map.* Participants placed their four selections (from step 4) onto the possible selves map. See Appendix G and Appendix H to view a blank and completed possible selves map, respectively.
6. *Review the overall impressions and experiences of completing the PSMP.* Participants were asked to share their impression, and to consider how their past experiences of IPV related to any of the possible selves that were generated.

There was some variability in the way that participants engaged in the PSMP. For example, one participant generated only 6 hoped for selves and 7 feared selves, whereas another participant came up with 20 hopes and 28 fears. Furthermore, one participant took close to two hours to complete the process and engaged in discussion throughout, whereas another participant finished the process in about 30 minutes with only minimal dialogue. Despite these differences, the PSMP facilitated a deeper look into the ways in which IPV impacts women's ideas of themselves in the future that might otherwise be missed with interviews alone.

The PSMP is not only a research tool used for data collection, it is also a change-tool; thinking about possible selves can be motivating and help individuals focus on their goals for the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). The PSMP has several benefits as a research tool for exploring young women's sense of self; it has creative and visual interest, it is easy to use, it offers the opportunity to notice possible connections between different hopes and fears, it can motivate participants to work towards their goals (Marshall & Guenette, 2011; Shepard & Marshall, 1999). Following the interview, participants had the option to take their completed possible selves map with them, and thus, the opportunity to build on what they generated during the interview. Because participants were able to take their maps away, I took a photograph of each map in order to have access to the data for analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative researchers have an opportunity to engage in the meaning-making processes within their studies, and are intimately linked to the knowledge that is thereby created (Krauss, 2005). Krauss reflects on the way that individuals (the researcher, in this context) play an important role in how meaning develops:

A person draws meaning from, or gives meaning to, events and experiences. That is, experiencing starts to make sense as the person performs his or her psychological functioning of translating it into how he or she thinks and feels. It is individuals' subjectivity, or phenomenological world, that forms the very core for meaning origination and evolvment (pp.762-763).

In this way, meaning does not exist on its own, but rather, is created by individuals. Similarly, data generated in qualitative research studies does not possess inherent meaning, but rather, necessitates a method of data analysis in order develop meaningful results (Braun &

Clarke, 2006). Importantly, methods of analysis are inextricably linked to researchers' ontology and epistemology. Braun and Clarke remind us that "researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum" (p. 84). Coming from an interpretivist paradigm and social constructionist theoretical framework, my epistemological assumptions are that knowledge is created through social processes, rather than existing in the external world, and that meaning is generated through interpretation. Therefore, my data analysis processes reflected my *interpretive* and *active* role in meaning making processes, rather than a *passive* role where meaning is *discovered* or *emerges* (Braun & Clarke). My role was to engage with data – to analyze, interpret, and make sense of it.

My analysis began when I first engaged with participants and continued until the time when I completed my manuscript. As Braun and Clarke (2006) maintain, because analysis involves my own interpretation of what participants shared with me, it began during the initial discussions with the women in the study. I noted thoughts and questions in my research journal that I revisited during later analysis.

When conducting data analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that researchers are cognizant of the specific approach there are using, that is, whether their ideas are informed by past knowledge or theory, or by the data generated. In the present study, I used an inductive, bottom-up approach where the data informed the codes and themes chosen. This is in contrast to a deductive approach that uses pre-existing ideas or codes gathered from prior knowledge (Braun & Clarke). My research focus was to develop an understanding of an area that has received little focus, and thus, an inductive approach was appropriate.

I had initially planned to analyze the data from interview #1 and interview #2 separately because I believed they would generate different kinds of data; I expected interview #1 to

generate conversational data and interview #2 to generate lists of possible selves. Because most participants began interview #2 by either clarifying what they discussed during the first interview, or by adding something new that they thought about between interviews, it was important that I included this additional data in the thematic analysis. Furthermore, all participants engaged in in-depth discussions about their possible selves, and how they might be related to their past experiences. These discussions were also related to the questions that I asked during interview #1, and helped me develop a clearer sense of how their past relationships impacted them today. Thus, it was not possible or desirable to separate data from the two interviews. Therefore, I chose to consider all data from both interviews together and use thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006) to make sense of the data. I included only the specific possible selves that participants indicated were related to their past IPV relationships; I omitted from analysis those possible selves that had no connection. For example, one participant stated that she wanted to have a fulfilling career, but because she did not see a link between this possible self and the impact of her past relationship, I omitted it from analysis. All the hoped for and feared selves that participants describe as being related to the relationship were included in the overall analysis.

For my specific analysis method I chose Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis that is intended for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). I engaged in analysis in an iterative and circular fashion, rather than in a strictly linear manner. In other words, the "steps" used in analysis did not necessarily occur only once and in sequence, and prior steps were revisited throughout analysis.

The steps I used for analysis were adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006) and Lawrence (2010) as follows:

1. Record impressions after each interview
2. Listen to audiotapes and record holistic impressions
3. Transcribe audio-recorded interviews
4. Within-participant analysis – identify core information for each participant
5. Create a written story based on the core information for each participant
6. Across-participant analysis – re-read all transcripts and generate initial codes from data labeling interesting segments
7. Develop across-participant themes and subthemes by collating codes into broader groups
8. Review themes and subthemes for overlap and redundancy, and combine, omit, or break apart themes if necessary
9. Select direct participant quotes to illustrate themes and subthemes
10. Organize themes and subthemes into a table
11. Integrate and link the findings to the literature

The first step involved recording my impressions, wonderings, or other notes-to-self within my research journal after each interview. These reflections were useful in terms of subsequent interview preparation, and also with future analysis of participants' transcripts. Writing reminders about details or subtleties from the interview such as off-the-record comments or participant mood offered additional insight as I analyzed the data. Furthermore, recording impressions throughout the research process was an important part of developing a clear trail that outlines the reasons behind my decisions throughout this study, such as why I coded a certain segment of a transcript in particular way.

Transcription was another process that was an early part of analysis. Creating the transcript, like other aspects of this study, involved decisions based on my research design and intentions. Different transcript formats are created based on the assumptions and goals of various research traditions, and so, they vary in the detail of what is recorded (Hammersley, 2010; Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). Oliver et al. remind us of the importance of carefully reflecting upon transcription decisions by the following statement:

Transcription is a powerful act of representation. This representation can affect how data are conceptualized. Instead of being viewed as a behind-the-scenes task, we argue that the transcription process be incorporated more intimately into qualitative research designs and methodologies (p.1287).

Thus, it is important to be intentional and explicit about how I have chosen to transcribe the research interviews.

I listened to the entire interview in order to become familiar with the data and to generate holistic impressions (Step 2). I then used what Oliver et al. (2005) call a *denaturalized transcription process*, where the focus is on the “substance of the interview, that is, the meanings and perceptions created and shared during a conversation” (p.1277). With this approach, I focused on the verbal conversation and omitted non-verbal material such as head nodding, fidgeting, or other hand gestures, as well as “um”, “like” and other repetitive words that were not deemed essential. I was primarily interested in the content of what the participants shared, and therefore, mainly focused on the spoken words. There were some instances where I recorded laughter because I believed this added meaning to what the participants had said. There were also some moments of silence that I found to be particularly meaningful and these were included in the transcripts, however, most pauses and shorter silences were omitted.

It becomes apparent, then, that the transcriptions I created were not exact records of everything in the interviews, nor was this my goal. The process of transcribing involved my interaction with the audio-taped interviews that necessarily changed the data into a new version that was tailored to my research goals. Performing my own transcriptions was valuable, because it positioned me more closely to the data than if I were to simply read a transcript that someone else had completed for me. Moreover, transcribing the interviews during the interview phase was valuable in offering insight into additional questions, or different ways of asking questions, that could have been more effective in subsequent interviews.

As part of my within-case analysis, I used the ghostwriting method (Rhodes, 2000), where I wrote a brief description of each participant's story using the information they provided during the interviews. Rhodes suggests that ghostwriting is an effective way to introduce participants to readers and to provide context and personalization to the text. To develop these stories, which was an iterative process, I reviewed the transcripts and my written reflections in order to select the parts of the story that I thought were most salient and would give the reader a sense of the participant and what was discussed during the interview. Because I focused on what I believed was most illustrative of the interviews, interpretation and analysis were taking place during the story creation process. At times, I went back to the original recordings in order to check impressions. After I created an initial draft, I emailed each participant and asked them to read their story and to indicate whether it was complete and represented them in a way with which they were comfortable. Participants were invited to suggest any changes they would like to make to their stories, which I revised as requested. Only two participants requested that some changes were made.

After rereading the transcripts, I generated codes by labeling meaningful segments of text with a word or a phrase, such as *supportive friends* or *cautious in relationships*. I then reviewed my codes and generated broader themes and subthemes that comprised of multiple codes that could be grouped together. For example, the subthemes *Receiving support*, *Lack of support*, and *Challenges with justice system* became part of the theme *Response from others*. This process involved re-visiting the transcripts, reviewing the themes and subthemes for overlap, and clearly defining each theme and subtheme (Creswell, 2008). After several rounds of this thematic refining process, I grouped the themes into three major categories (Experiences During and After the Relationship; Impact on Sense of Self; and Other Impacts) that broadly described the dataset. See Table 2 - Categories, themes, and subthemes in Chapter 5 for the final thematic organization. Within my discussion of each theme and subtheme, I included direct participant quotes, as well as connections to current literature.

With thematic analysis, researchers decide what meaning to create from the data, what themes to identify, and what explanations they attribute to these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a social constructionist researcher, I acknowledge the significant role I played in the interpretation of participants' stories (Gergen, 2008). Moreover, I accept that the knowledge I generated through this study is not *the* story, but a *version* of the story created in this particular research context (Josselson, 2013).

Establishing Trustworthiness

As a qualitative researcher, I understand the inherent subjectivity in the data I gathered and the analytic processes I chose to use (Morrow, 2005). Developing rigor in qualitative research, therefore, is necessary in order to “establish trust or confidence in the findings or results of a research study” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 151). In other words, there are steps in

which researchers engage to demonstrate that their findings are believable or trustworthy, methodologically sound, and represent the group of participants being studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

To establish rigor in this study, I addressed Guba and Lincoln's (1982) four components of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to the degree to which the findings are representative of how the participants described their experiences (Thomas & Magilvy), and further, how "believable" these accounts are (Guba & Lincoln). In this study, I established credibility by asking participants to review the ghost stories that I created and to make any changes that would help the story become more representative of their experiences. As Morrow (2005) posits, researchers have the "responsibility to learn from the interviewee how well the researcher's interpretations reflect the interviewee's meanings" (p. 254). Because the stories were intended to represent the participants' experiences and to introduce participants to readers, it was important that they were comfortable with how their story was told. Providing thick descriptions and details about the study, as well as about what each participant shared, also improves credibility because readers can more easily establish trust in the findings (Tracy, 2010). Furthermore, using multiple types of data and drawing from theoretical perspectives "increases scope and deepens understanding", thereby improving credibility (Tracy, p. 843).

Findings in qualitative research are not meant to be widely generalized, however, by providing detailed descriptions about the context of the study, readers can use judgment about the degree of transferability that is possible (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Social constructionist research is grounded in the belief that research findings are always situated within the context surrounding the study, and that providing sufficient detail about the research design can improve

transparency of the research process (Meyrick, 2006). I believe the details that I have provided about the participants, data collection, and analysis help establish transferability.

Establishing rigor in qualitative research also involves connecting with the audience so that learning can occur and the potential for impact is available (Tracy, 2010). According to Tracy, *resonance* refers to the “research’s ability to meaningfully reverberate and effect an audience” (p. 844). Bochner (2000) values qualitative reports that are vivid and engaging, that can be felt in the “heart and the belly” as well as the “head” (p. 271). I believe the detail and emotion captured in the participant stories infuse this manuscript with a sense of realness that resonates with readers. Resonance also develops from research’s ability to be valuable to others (Tracy), or in other words, to be transferable (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Dependability is achieved when another researcher could follow the decisions made throughout the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). To establish dependability, I have included detailed descriptions about my research design, beginning with my underlying philosophy of science as well as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guide this study. I have also written explicitly about my methodological and analytical choices so that readers can understand my decisions throughout the study.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which other researchers could corroborate the findings in a study, that is, the likelihood that others might glean similar meanings if they were to follow the same procedures (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Researchers in qualitative inquiry are inherently involved in the meanings that are created from their research; thus, Guba and Lincoln (1982) suggest that rather than aiming to be objective researchers, we to aim for “confirmability of the data” (p. 247). In other words, while two different researchers would likely generate different versions of a participant’s story, it is reasonable to expect there would be overlap in the

findings. Practicing reflexivity is one way to improve confirmability because researchers' decisions, experiences, and assumptions are made explicit (Guba & Lincoln). I practiced reflexivity during this research study by maintaining a research journal for the duration of the project within which I recorded my experiences, reactions, and new awarenesses that I gained along the way. I also recorded my observations after each interview, and after transcription. Maintaining this record helped to remind me about why I made certain decisions, for example, why I coded a segment of a transcript one way rather than another. In addition, linking my findings to other research findings also helps establish confirmability.

Summary of Chapter 3

This chapter focused on the research design for the present study, including my philosophy of science and theoretical perspectives, as well as my approach to data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations and efforts to establish trustworthiness were also discussed. The following chapter presents each participant's story.

Chapter 4 – Participant Stories

This chapter comprises short stories created from what each participant shared during the research conversations. Based on Rhodes' (2000) ghostwriting method, I have written these descriptions from the perspective of the participants in order to tell a story that brings meaningful context and personalization to the reader. In doing so, I aimed to construct a representation of the research conversations by focusing on aspects of the interview that seemed to be most relevant to the whole story and to the goals of the study. According to Rhodes, these written stories are “not intended to be a replica of the interview but [are] designed to create a written narrative congruent in feel and content to the discussion that transpired in the interview” (p. 518). In each story, I have included a description of what it was like for each participant to be in the relationship with her partner, how she experienced IPV, how the relationship ended, and the impact on various areas of their lives. I have constructed the majority of each story with direct interview quotes in order to bring the participants' voices forward as much as possible. The stories are numbered, rather than named, in order to protect confidentiality. In Chapter 5, participant pseudonyms (Brie, Callie, Laura, Erica, Alice, and Cornelia) are used for specific quotes.

Participant #1

I had a hard time understanding what happened in my relationship when I was in it, and I still do now, which makes it hard to explain it. I feel like it's so difficult to describe what happened so that other people can understand it. I met my ex just before I turned 22. He was my first boyfriend, my only boyfriend actually, and it was special because that was the first time I was able to convince myself that I was loveable. He was the first person willing to accept all of me when he didn't have to; he wasn't a parent or a counsellor. He still loved me despite

knowing some of the things that I bring to a relationship that most people don't want to deal with.

After I had finished my undergraduate degree, I wanted to move to a bigger city so I could find a job, so I moved away and he was devastated. We still loved each other and so we did the long-distance thing for about three months. He decided to move in with me but things were not very good. He would never ever leave the apartment without me, and it was distressing because I had no space to myself and I am the kind of person who needs alone time. He wouldn't do anything for himself, he just spent months playing video games. He ran out of money, and he wasn't doing anything to make that situation better, so I felt completely obligated to pay for everything. It was a major source of tension. I felt so trapped, I even started taking classes just to get out of the house. I wanted to leave him at this point, I was there, I just didn't know how to and I felt guilty because he was so dependent on me.

The situation got even worse when I became pregnant. When I told him about it, he got really angry and was yelling and screaming, and ended up putting his fist through the wall a few times. I knew I couldn't keep the baby because there was no way I was going to bring a child into that situation with someone who would react like that, and be attached to him for the rest of my life. I just couldn't do it. The night I got back from having the abortion, we got into a horrible fight, almost worse than the time I told him I was pregnant, and it seemed like he was purposely trying to be vicious in his choice of words.

Things were really hard after the abortion. He started threatening to leave me when we would fight, and I wanted him to, I just couldn't be the one to send him away, I didn't have that power. He even started threatening to hurt himself when we would fight. One time he locked himself in the bathroom with a knife and told me he was going to kill himself. He never did hit

me, no matter how our fights escalated; he usually took it out on the walls or the cats, or just threw things and yelled and screamed. It feels weird to say but I wish he would have hit me because then I think I would have been able to leave him sooner. I was too close to the relationship to be able to see clearly what was happening, and I thought that if he hit me I would be able to use that as an excuse to leave. It would have been a clear line that he crossed and I wouldn't have felt so obligated to stay.

Once he finally got a job, I felt like I could start to pull back and focus on myself a little bit more. For a long time I just couldn't deal with myself so I had ignored things that were important to me. Once he had some money coming in, I felt less obligation to him, and I actually found another place to live. I eventually went over to our apartment and officially broke it off. I saw him a couple of times after that to sort out things like the internet, and we had dinner together once, but that was it, I never saw him again.

When I think back to when I was in that relationship, I definitely see myself differently than I do today, but it's hard to know what has caused the changes. I don't know if it's from the experiences or because I am older. I don't like a lot of things about myself; it's been that way for my whole adult life. So if I were to try to describe who I think I am, I end up just articulating purely negative self-talk, which I know isn't necessarily how others see me, but it's how I see myself. I have a hard time with some of the decisions I have made in the past, the abortion for one, and I worry about how others judge me. It just makes me doubt my worth in the eyes of other people, people I might want to be close to.

I can say that that relationship influences a lot of things in my life. I am really weird about money now; it's important that I pay for myself and that anyone I am with pays for themselves, and I get a little bit preoccupied with it. I really don't want to be responsible for or

obliged to anyone else again like I was in that relationships. When we were together, he compared me to a load-bearing wall in a house, and he was right. I never want to feel that again. I want to be half of a duplex. I haven't had any other boyfriends since him, I don't think I know how to. I have had sex with other people, but no one that I would want to see again, let alone sleep with again. For a long time I just didn't want to get close to anyone, but now I find myself interested in being in a relationship, but I just don't trust my own judgment. I'd like to think I would recognize a negative relationship faster than I did before, but I don't have any faith in myself.

Participant #2

I met this person what I was about 16. I couldn't say when the abuse actually started, but I know that it got worse once I tried to end the relationship. During the relationship there was sexual abuse, maybe not necessarily forced, but I never wanted it to happen. I was a virgin when I met him and I wanted to wait until I was in love to have sex. He just kind of took it from me, that's the best way to describe it. That's when things started to feel really wrong. I remember being really angry when it happened, and we didn't speak for days. I really didn't know what to do. I had just moved to a new town and didn't have a strong social network, so I felt really isolated and stuck. Then by the time I tried to get out, it seemed like I couldn't, there was no way for me to. Sometimes when we would fight and I would try to leave, he would literally pick my up and lock me in his truck or a room so I couldn't get away. I have no chance against him, especially physically, so I was kind of helpless. If I ignored his calls it would just get worse and he would harass me all day long, show up at my house, and my work, so I was better off just answering the phone. We were technically broken up when things got really bad, although he

still acted as if we were together and I guess there still was some sort of relationship between us. We lived in a really small town and that seemed to make everything so much harder. I felt like I was constantly being watched even when he wasn't around, like he has spies or something. There was a lot of phone calls when I was out places and he would ask me why I was talking to this person or that person because he seemed to always know what I had been doing. If any other guy ever hit on me they would end up with a broken nose, so I became really fearful of how I was affecting others. He had this kind of social power that made it impossible for me to talk to anyone about it. He even had friends who were cops and fire fighters so I was scared to go to the police. It seemed like it was better to just sit down and take it.

My entire identity was wrapped up in him, my social circle, everyone in town knew me as so-and-so's ex-girlfriend. And I felt like I lost a lot of my true identity during that relationship, and lost a lot of things that I thought were my strengths. I came to hate many things about myself. I used to be a really open, fun, flirty personality, and I lost a good chunk of that. And I think a lot of that had to do with the fact that other people ended up getting hurt which was harder for me to deal with than me getting hurt. I didn't like the fact that people thought I was attractive because that got other people hurt. I didn't like the fact that I was caring because that was getting me hurt. So I became numb in a lot of ways and just shut down. I eventually hit a point where I knew that I needed to get out of that town, and this was a big turning point. I found a job abroad and moved away, and just knowing that he couldn't get to me physically had a huge impact. I moved away with the goal of finding myself again because it was obvious to me that I didn't know who I was anymore. He tried to contact me for months when I was gone, and for a couple of years after I came back home but I felt strong enough, and safe enough, to ignore him, and that was the end of it.

I would say one of the biggest impacts of that relationship was on my relationships with future boyfriends. It was almost like it changed my attachment style, where I now have a lot of trust issues and insecurities. I feel like damaged goods. When I started dating again I realized that a lot of issues were coming up and I felt like I had to warn people or explain my behaviour, and at the same time I felt like people were going to judge me for it. Another major impact was on how I viewed sex, mainly because he was my first sexual partner and so I formed a lot of ideas about it in that relationship. For a long time I associated sex with power because that's how it was used. It was something I hated, and it felt more like a punishment than something that was enjoyable. So it has been challenging to develop a different sexual identity after that. I'm so careful and cautious about getting intimate with people in any shape or form, and it takes a long time for me to get comfortable with someone. Although I still have a hard time asserting myself, even in a trusting relationship, I actually feel like a sexual being now, whereas before I felt like somebody else's sexual property. So there has been a big shift, a really good one.

Getting in my first relationship after the break up was hard, but I felt like I had the chance to learn about what a relationship is actually supposed to be like, what love actually meant, and what mutual respect felt like. He allowed me to be myself and I had freedom. We worked through a lot of things and I thought I had come so far, but now with my current partner I realize that a lot of the same issues are still there. I have been trying to unlearn a lot of my behaviour but I am hoping to get to the point where I can feel secure and independent in a relationship as opposed to anxious and dependent. I'd like to be able to get rid of the self-blame.

I would describe myself as very strong, and I know that I have been strengthened by my past experiences. I look at the fact that I was able to actually walk away from that situation and continue living a functional life. I would say a lot of strength came from that. I know that I have

more wisdom given my experience, but I still have this fear that I am going to end up back where I was before and maybe not being able to get out of it. I'm also afraid of feeling alone and isolated again, even if I have a partner. What I really want is to become fearless, and to live a little bit more at peace. I can see a lot of really positive changes that I have made in my life and I think I have come a long way.

Participant #3

The most violent relationship that I had was when I was about 19 or 20. I saw all the standard red danger flags that anyone would know about but for some reason I just kind of went along with it. We went through pretty typical honeymoon periods, and then periods of violence where he would push me around and beat me up. I've had a few other relationships where I would get slapped or punched, but nothing like this. This one seemed to happen on more of a routine. I remember one time he tried to strangle me, and his mother was in the other room and didn't even respond to me screaming. I guess I got pretty apathetic through a lot of the violence, and it didn't seem like anyone could help me either. I went to the police at one point, but I should have known there was nothing they could do about it; they just seemed to wonder why I didn't look that battered at the time. It's really hard when you tell people and reach out for help and they shame and blame you instead. Logically I know that it's important to tell people about stuff like this, but truthfully it's easier to pretend like it never happened. It takes so much courage to say that this stuff happened, and you're vulnerable, and it's just such a slap in the face when people put all the blame on you.

Our relationship ended when I got really sick. I was bedridden for a few months and was living with my parents. They wouldn't let him into the house, so that basically split things off.

If I hadn't gotten sick, it probably would have gone on for much longer. It was still really scary to leave him even after I was healthy again. I didn't want to make him look bad because if he was capable of what he already did, what else could he do?

I realized one day in class that I hadn't really dealt with the emotions of what happened for a long time. One of my professors was talking about her experience working with people who had been abused and she basically said that all women who are abused are pretty much broken goods and will carry this with them for their entire lives. At first I was really defensive and was like, "I'm fine!" but then I started questioning if that might be true. It was triggering to be really honest, and that showed me that obviously there is still something there from my past experience. I am trying to deal with it by talking to people and trying to work through it, but obviously it would be a lot easier if you could just repress everything, but it doesn't really work that way.

I have been on my own for a little over a year and I actually enjoy being single. I feel happy and I am good on my own. But at the same time, I definitely shun any potential future relationship because I just don't want to go there. I usually just make up excuses like "I'm not ready" or "I'm too busy", but I think I am just worried about how bad things could be. I'm just chicken shit. My ability to actually engage in a trusting relationship is completely gone, and staying emotionally disconnected from people makes me feel less likely to get hurt. I totally freak out if I can tell that a guy wants to be intimate, it's really challenging for me. Sex without emotions, that's more of a recreational activity, is one thing, but anything that is an expression of love or intimacy is very hard for me. I guess because that involves some aspect of trust and vulnerability and it's just hard to take that leap.

I think everyone else sees me as though I am conquering the world. I know that I'm smart and that I give my heart and soul to my community. But in my own opinion, I feel like I am a failure and that I wanted to be a lot further ahead than where I am today. I would say I have really low self-worth. I'd say part of that is from my experiences in bad relationships, part is from growing up with my parents. It's easy for me to think that I deserved to get hit or cheated on. I can be the biggest advocate for other people, but when people want to treat me like crap, I just don't seem to care.

I think that violent relationships like this do cause damage, it will always be there, but figuring out how to move on is the important part. And do I think I will be broken forever? I don't know... I just haven't got to the healing part of it yet. I think it'll always be with me but the challenge is to move forward and to figure out where that piece of information fits in who I am today. Sometimes I feel like I am a weaker person now. I mean, one of my biggest fears is that if I got into another relationship that turned abusive, I don't know if I could get out. Sometimes I worry because I know that it's so much easier to just lie down and play dead than it is to fight because the consequences are so much lighter if you just go with the flow. In some ways, I also see myself as a better and stronger person now. I now have this lens that helps me be mindful about issues like violence against women and I am such an advocate for others.

Participant #4

I was in a relationship with my ex for a little over a year, and things had been kind of abusive the entire time. It was mostly physical, but there were so many other things like stealing money, emotional and sexual abuse, all of it seems to apply. I knew that it wasn't right, but I was so afraid to leave him. He is really strong and I was fearful of what he would do if I tried to

leave, and what if I wasn't actually able to leave? Then what? And the truth is, he could also be a really fun person at times, and he put me on a pedestal and treated me like the best thing ever, made me feel like I was really needed and loved, but then it would change so abruptly and he would just lose it. Toward the end of the relationship, I was physically and emotionally weak from the stress, and from pouring all my energy into it and trying to fix it. I always thought I could make it better, but I think that was very naïve. I ended up reaching a point where I had had enough and I told him I was leaving him, and that led to him assaulting me pretty badly. I had run to my car to try to get away, and he chased me and basically started beating the crap out of me in my car. Eventually I was able to get out and I just started screaming and screaming and the people who lived upstairs finally came out and helped me. I was able to get away from him that day, and that was the end of our relationship, although it seemed to continue because I chose to involve the police and that dragged things out for a long time.

The relationship impacted so much at the time, like my relationship with my family and all my friends. I had lost a lot of my close friends, not because they didn't care or were bad friends, but because they knew the relationship was bad for me and they didn't want to continue to witness horrible things happening. I also started struggling in school which was hard for me because I had always been such a strong student. But as time has passed, things have really shifted for me. I am now in a relationship with an amazing man who is so supportive. We have been together for about 2 and a half years now, and we are doing things that I never imagined I would, like traveling around the world together! I'd say that my past relationship impacts this relationship in some ways, although it doesn't come up very often. Sometimes sexual things can be hard, it's almost like my body remembers some negative experiences with my ex and it makes

it so hard to go on with things with my current partner. So I just have to listen to my body and honour those messages when they come up.

I think that it's important to accept all experiences as part of your life, rather than trying to make them fade away. I think I do a good job of accepting what happened as part of my past and part of my story, but not letting it be something that necessarily defines or consumes me. The hardest thing is when other people feel sorry for me or pity me, as if I am forever scarred by what happened. When I think about my identity, the first thing that comes to mind is that I am a strong and resilient person. I think I have always been this way, but my past has made this even more so today. I also see myself as very empathetic toward other people, I really care and I am a good listener. One thing that has changed since the past relationship is that I take care of myself so much better now, and this is really important to me. I need to care for myself before I can care for others, so I am getting better at checking in and staying in tune with myself. I guess this is part of being assertive too, where I pay attention to my needs and I am not afraid to put them first when I need to. I am learning to trust myself, and trust my intuition more as well.

As awful as that experience was, I would say that overall it was a huge catalyst for change in my life. I think at some point you need to just decide that you deserve to be treated well and that you are a worthwhile person, and that's exactly what I did. I mean, this was really difficult to do and it certainly wasn't immediate. It feels weird to say this, but after coming out of something like that, I have a new perspective on life, almost like I have a way of seeing the positives in all situations, like if I am having a bad day or am not doing well in school. I am so much better off now than I was before, and that helps me find the silver lining in almost anything. I would say that the past has helped me clarify what is important in my life. I am so hopeful for the future and where I want to go and I have so many goals, I don't know if there is

enough time in this life for me to complete them all! I think that as hard as the past is sometimes, I learned that you have to take what you can from it - chances are you will learn something about yourself that you like.

Participant #5

I wound up involved with a partner who I ended up staying with for about 2 years total. After the first year or so we had moved in together and then there started to be issues that weren't typical relationship issues, pretty terrible things actually. I didn't recognize how bad things were at the time, I just had no sense of how controlling and deceitful he was. On the outside, things seemed to be going really well; we had been talking about getting married, I got a big promotion at work, we moved into a really nice apartment. But I was getting more and more depressed, and he was getting more and more aggressive. He had become so violent with me; he'd slapped, punched, choked me, almost suffocated me to a point of unconsciousness, and was sexually violent too. I can't believe I stayed with him through all of that, but I remember feeling so hopeless, and as if I deserved it somehow. I know that it wasn't good to see it as my fault, but I guess it helped me feel like I had some control or that there was something I could do to change things. But it quickly became clear to me that there was nothing I could do, that I didn't deserve it, but I ultimately felt trapped.

As soon as it became evident that there was violence in our relationship, I really lost the support of my family and friends. It just felt like they weren't sure if I was ever going to get out of it and it was too hard for them to watch it happen. I felt like I had backed myself into this corner with him where I was making excuses for what was going on, but eventually those excuses could no longer hold. I ended up trying to take my own life as it seemed like that was

the only way out. I realized I was really alone when I was in the hospital partly because almost nobody came to visit me, including my family. People had given up on me, and I guess I had given up too. Honestly, this was a pretty big turning point. When I left the hospital, no one was there to pick me up, I was completely alone. Getting through that made it really clear to me that I could get through anything, and that I didn't really need anyone. It definitely gave me a new lease on life, a new perspective on my own strength. Even though I stayed with him for several months afterwards where we both continued to be violent, I knew that I could handle it after what I had went through. And after a particularly bad fight, I managed to leave.

Things got pretty messy as I involved the police, and the injustice of how I was treated was just horrifying. Although he was convicted of so many different offences over the years, and not just involving myself, the punishment was a complete joke, and the ordeal that I was put through was appalling. After years of writing statements, making court appearances, and having extremely private details of what happened including videos of abuse made public, he seemed to get off with a slap on the wrist, if that. It was so insane. How can you see the world the same way after something like that happens? Our society seems to act like we don't tolerate physical abuse and sexual violence, but the truth is, these are not punishable acts. I learned that I shouldn't even try to stand up for myself because there aren't any structures in place that allow me to do that.

I would say that the biggest impact from the relationship is in terms of the way that I relate to people. I don't feel like I can talk about any of it, like being in a violent relationship, the court experience, the sexual assault, the friendships that I lost, the wounds that have never healed with my family, none of it. It gives me the sense that I am not known at all, like people have no real idea of who I am. I am afraid to share with people because I don't want to be

identified as weak, vulnerable, or damaged in any way. It's also really awkward to talk about it, people don't know what to say, and there is this horrible dead space afterwards. It's just uncomfortable. I wish that I could heal and that I didn't need to or want to talk to anyone about it, as opposed to feeling like I want to but can't. Year after year I find it increasingly difficult to connect with people in spite of the fact that I seem to be getting further away from the relationships, at least in time and space. I feel very unmotivated to connect, as if I could just live on an island and never talk to anybody again. I feel like part of this came from like finding a very calm place where I just didn't need anything or anybody, where I felt like I could survive without anyone. And that has become a really comfortable place for me because I have total control over myself and my space.

This comfort in being disconnected really impacts other intimate relationships though. For instance, the moment that I see a slight problem with a partner, I completely lose attachment even if it's a very trivial problem, I just don't care anymore. I used to fall in love so hard and so easily, but I just feel compelled to avoid people now and I can't get emotionally engaged. I can certainly make sense of why I do this: the price that I paid for it in my past relationships was so huge, I literally almost lost my life over it. So it makes sense to me that I am not willing to take that risk anymore.

My sense of myself and my independence has probably changed the most. I feel like I am extremely independent now, and it's really difficult for me to hinge anything on anybody at all. What I really want is for people to feel like I am an OK person, I want people to feel like it's pleasant to be around me, and that it's a good experience. I would like to be a parent someday, and to find a partner that can be a nurturing parent to our children. But the partnership is just so hard for me to imagine. I want to be a good and attentive partner, but in the past that made me

very vulnerable so I am not sure if am going to be able to be that way. I also don't want to have any more violence in my life, but I'm not so sure that is possible. I think I incite violence in other people in a really profound way, so I am worried about how this will play out in the future.

In terms of my identity, I think that my experiences have made me a very multi-dimensional person because I can understand the position of people who are in a very different situation from my own. I feel like a more interesting human being to know that I have had such diverse experiences in my life, that I haven't lived just one life, that I have lived a whole bunch of different lives. And I believe that I have wisdom from that experience that maybe isn't evident to other people but at least it's clear to me. Before that relationship, I tended to feel like I didn't really fit in anywhere, that I didn't belong, and that certainly has not changed. I had grown up with violence in my family, and definitely had some of my own behavioural issues in school, so it wasn't like this past relationship strayed far from how I already saw myself. I used to feel really weak and depressed, especially during the relationship, but I now have a lot more faith in my own ability to get through things and to make good choices.

Participant #6

I was in a really difficult relationship when I was 16 and it lasted for about two years. He was five years older than me, and was actually my boss at work, so there was a lot of power that infused the relationship from the beginning. Everything was great in the first year of our relationship, and then it just slowly became really twisted and manipulative. He began telling me what I could and couldn't eat, what colour to dye my hair, what kinds of things to wear, even who I could or couldn't talk to. I remember him telling me about a dream that he had where he had killed me, and then he told me that he thought he might lose control one day and actually kill

me. Things became physically abusive after the first year or so. He never slapped or punched in the face, but he would hit me in places that were easier for me to cover up like my legs, my stomach, and my arms. One of the hardest things was when he would make me change my work schedule around all the time so that I didn't work with this other guy, and if I had to work with him, he would watch me all night to make sure I didn't talk to him. One time I couldn't get my shift covered so I had to quit my job of several years on the spot. I still feel so badly and embarrassed about that. I made so many excuses for him, especially with my family, and went along with so many lies. It's so hard to believe that I actually stayed with him; in hindsight, it's hard to understand why I did.

The turning point in the relationship was one time when I was at a pool party, obviously wearing a bathing suit, and he showed up and pulled me aside and started yelling at me for what I was wearing and then punched me in the thigh. I knew after that point that I had to get out. Shortly after, he actually ended up breaking up with me because I wouldn't sleep at his house one night, only to quickly apologize after and beg that I come back to him. But it was too late, and I was incredibly relieved! He kept calling me and calling me, I would have over 40 missed calls a day. He would show up at my work and just sit at the bar waiting for my shift to end, wrote me letters, all of it. And at one point, he used the code that he had memorized for my parents front door to come into the house to see what I was doing after he noticed another person's car in the driveway. I was so scared so I called the cops, and that was the last time that I had any contact with him.

That experience had a pretty big impact on me at the time, and I can see that now with almost 11 years of hindsight. I remember just feeling incredibly lost, like I was being pulled in different directions, trying to manage the situation, but giving up a lot of things that were really

important to me. I used to have such a great network of girlfriends before I had met him, and by the time I had graduated, I lost them and I was so alone. I look at the person I was when we first started dating and I see how much confidence I had, and it's sad to know that that has diminished so much. Even 10 years later, I would say that I have a ways to go in building that confidence back, but I am really proud of how far I have come. Although the situation was really negative, I can actually see a lot of really positive changes that have happened in my life since then and I think a lot of growth and learning came from that experience. For one, I know what a loving and healthy relationship is *not*, and I really value having respectful and healthy relationships now. I am engaged to a wonderful man that I love so much, and I really appreciate and cherish what we have. I think another positive result from that experience is that I have been able to talk to several other women about their experiences in abusive relationships, and I feel like I can empathize and understand them in a way that I wouldn't have been able to if I hadn't gone through it myself. Being able to speak to others, to relate to them, and to help them if I can, is so important to me.

I can definitely say that my past relationship shows up in how I see myself, and what I want for myself in the future. I value strong female connections so much now, and I work really hard to maintain my own network of friends, and I see myself as being a really good friend. I know what it feels like to be disconnected from friends and family, especially other women, and this is something that I won't let happen again. I see myself as being very caring of others, empathic, and easy for others to talk to. I also see myself as very dedicated and passionate about the things I care about. It's interesting because after that relationship, I spent a few years on my own, just casually dating here and there, and this time was invaluable in terms of my own self-discovery. I needed to learn about who I was, who I wanted to be, and what I wanted out of life.

I was completely lost and was not living true to myself when I was in that relationship, so making sure I do this today is important. I want to be someone who leads an authentic and honest life, where I am always true to myself.

Summary of Chapter 4

In this chapter, I presented a story summarizing what the participants shared during the interviews. I used many of their own words to describe their experiences of IPV, how the relationships ended, and how they believe they have been impacted. These stories capture the unique set of circumstances, the varying experiences, and multitude of consequences that the participants faced during and after their relationships. While it is apparent through the stories that many differences exist among the participants, the following chapter shifts focus to describe the common themes identified across all the interviews.

Chapter 5 – Across Participant Findings

In this chapter, I present a summary of the findings from the across-participant data analysis. It is important to acknowledge that although I generated themes and subthemes to represent common ideas that participants shared during their interviews, there are also differences among the participants. Generating themes and subthemes is helpful in synthesizing the complexities of what was shared during the research interviews, and facilitates the connection to an already established body of literature; however, it is important to see the themes as groupings of similar ideas rather than as categories with defined boundaries. Due to the variety of experiences that the women shared, the criterion for a theme was that at least four out of the six participants spoke about it. While most subthemes were also discussed by at least four participants, I have also decided to include some subthemes with fewer than four participants' input because they seem to hold significant meaning for the participants who did speak to them, and also hold meaning in terms of learning more about the impact of intimate partner violence. For example, fewer than four participants spoke about how the police and court system failed to respond adequately to their situation, however, this feeling of injustice was strongly emphasized in their stories and therefore, I believe it should be included in this discussion.

Across the participants, I identified 8 themes that are grouped into three major categories: (A) EXPERIENCES DURING AND AFTER THE RELATIONSHIP; (B) the IMPACT ON SENSE OF SELF; and (C) OTHER IMPACTS (see Table 2 below). The themes in the first category illustrate the kinds of experiences that the women had during the relationships, as well as some challenges and supports they encountered. The first theme called Descriptions of IPV illustrates the different ways that participants experienced IPV. The second theme, called Dilemmas of Leaving, was organized into four subthemes including: Developing awareness of

abuse; Positive elements of the relationship; Not knowing how to leave; and The turning point and breakup. The third theme, called Response from Others, is comprised of 3 subthemes: Receiving support; Lack of support; and Challenges with the justice system. Overall, this category is important because it provides further context about what happened for the participants that will deepen our understanding of the impact of the abuse.

Table 2 - Categories, themes, and subthemes

Category	Theme	Subtheme
EXPERIENCE DURING AND AFTER THE RELATIONSHIP	1. Descriptions of IPV	
	2. Dilemmas of Leaving	<i>Developing awareness of abuse Positive elements of the relationship Not knowing how to leave The turning point and breakup</i>
	3. Response from Others	<i>Receiving support Lack of support Challenges with justice system</i>
IMPACT ON SENSE OF SELF	4. Perception of Self	<i>Negative perception of self Strength and Resiliency Self-blame</i>
	5. Wavering Sense of Self	<i>Loss of self Rebuilding the self</i>
	6. Possible Selves	<i>Hoped for selves Feared selves</i>
OTHER IMPACTS	7. Subsequent Relationships	<i>Avoiding closeness or intimacy Sex and sexuality Learning about healthy relationships</i>
	8. “Silver Lining”	<i>Finding the silver lining Making a difference</i>

The majority of the following discussion will focus on the second and third major thematic categories. The second category, called Impact on Sense of Self, focuses on how the participants’ sense of self is impacted by being in an abusive relationship. Theme 4, called Perception of Self, includes the following subthemes: Negative perception of self; Strength and resiliency; and Self-blame. Theme 5, called Wavering Sense of Self, has two subthemes: Loss of

self; and Rebuilding the self. Theme 6, called Possible Selves, illustrates the findings from the PSMP and is grouped into two subthemes: Hoped for selves; and Feared selves.

The third category, called Other Impacts, describes the ways that participants talked about being affected by IPV that were not explicitly related to the sense of self. Theme 7, called Subsequent Relationships, illustrates how future intimate relationships have been influenced by past IPV, and includes three subthemes: Avoiding closeness or intimacy; Sex and sexuality and Learning about healthy relationships. Theme 8, called “Silver Lining”, addresses what participants believe to be positive changes in their lives since the relationship ended. Subthemes for theme 8 include: Finding the silver lining, and Making a difference.

In this chapter, I provide a discussion of each theme and subtheme and connect these ideas to existing literature. I have included direct quotations in *italics* from participants (using their pseudonyms) for each subtheme in order to illustrate the themes and subthemes. To improve readability, I have removed excessive “likes”, “ums”, or other repeated words.

The following results are presented in a way that reflects participants’ stories. I begin by discussing the theme *Description of IPV* and I end by discussing the theme “*Silver lining*” because this was often the way that participants described their experiences – that is, many participants tended to begin by providing context and background, and close their sharing by discussing the positive changes they now experience. The purpose of this chapter is to present common themes across participants; however, breaking up their stories in this way can interrupt the integrity of what was shared during the interviews. While the categories, themes, and subthemes, seem to break up the continuity of participants’ stories, my aim is that the written ghost stories presented in Chapter 4 will maintain the complexity and wholeness of what was shared.

EXPERIENCES DURING AND AFTER THE RELATIONSHIP (CATEGORY 1)

This category includes a discussion about the participants' experiences while they were in their past relationship. While the research questions were mainly focused on the impacts of IPV, each participant was invited to talk about what it was like to be in the relationship. Gaining context about the participants' experiences was necessary in order to situate the impacts of IPV within a more holistic understanding of their stories. This discussion begins with a summary of the kinds of abuse that the women described, followed by a discussion about the challenges that the participants' described in leaving their partners. This thematic category also includes participants' experiences of support, or lack thereof, during the intimate relationship as well as after it ended.

Descriptions of IPV (Theme 1)

Researchers have long acknowledged that IPV includes multiple forms of physical abuse, as well as non-physical forms (e.g., Johnson, 2008; McHugh & Frieze, 2006). Research also shows that physical and non-physical forms of abuse often co-occur (Mechanic, Uhlmansiefk, Weaver, & Resick, 2000). Consistent with this, the participants in the present study described experience multiple forms of abuse within their past relationship. Brie illustrated this by the following:

When you were talking about your definition of abuse for your study, it included taking or stealing money, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and when you asked me, you said, "Do any of these things apply to you?" And then, what I was really thinking was "yes, all of them apply to me".

The period in the relationship where the abuse began for each participant varied. For example, Brie stated that her partner *had been kind of abusive throughout the whole thing*. In contrast, Alice and Erica found that their relationship was not abusive until after about a year,

whereas Callie felt like her situation became the most abusive once the relationship technically ended.

Elements of participants' stories can be considered what Miller (1995) calls emotional, social, and psychological abuse. Emotional abuse involves behaviour like insults, accusations, or even public embarrassment that is intended to undermine a persons' self-worth (Miller).

Cornelia, for example, shared that during arguments, her partner seemed to be *purposely vicious in his choice of words* and would often *yell and scream* at her. Other participants described insults, name-calling, and other verbal attacks from their partners.

Social abuse, according to Miller, involves the isolation of a person where they are cut-off from friends and family. Consistent with past research, the participants in the present study spoke about how they felt isolated from friends and family (Kulkarni, 2009). Sometimes this isolation was explicitly enforced, such as when Alice's boyfriend told her she was not allowed to talk to a male friend who she worked with. Likewise, Laura described her partner as *super jealous* to the extent that she could not go out with any of her friends. Other times, participants found themselves isolated over time. For example, Callie mentioned that her friends stopped making an effort to connect with her because they did not want to support the abusive relationship.

Miller (1995) defines psychological abuse as efforts to undermine a person's reasoning, such as by causing her to doubt herself, or to feel obligated to stay in the relationship. In the present study, two participants described how their partners threatened to commit suicide or hurt themselves or others in order to gain control over them. When Alice ended the relationship with her partner, he attempted to have her change her mind by threatening to harm himself or others. She explained:

He was going to kill himself, he wanted to jump off his balcony... he said, "I'm gonna go downstairs and like stab someone, you have to come over!"

Cornelia's also described how her partner threatened to commit suicide during their arguments. Referring to attempting suicide, she said:

There were a few times when I thought that he was going to but he never did. Either he just took it out on the walls, or the cats, or yeah, I felt bad for the cats. Or he threw things or just yelled and screamed.

Five of the six participants described experiencing physical abuse, such as slapping, punching, and strangling. Alice explained how her partner was strategic with where he hit her, attempting to avoid causing a noticeable mark. She shared:

He never punched me in the face or slapped my face, but it was like my legs, my thighs, my stomach and like arms and that. So not giving me a black eye where people would notice but bruises in places that would be covered up.

Some of the participants' described experiences of abuse that were life threatening. For instance, Erica spoke about how she feared for her life with her partner because he became more and more aggressive and violent as the relationship progressed. Laura also described the severity of physical abuse in her relationship with the following comment:

We had one incident where he grabbed my computer cord and wrapped it around my neck and tried to hang me with it.

Sexual violence is a form of IPV that many women experience. In a recent large population-based study in the USA by Thompson, et al. (2006), 11% of women reported lifetime incidence of sexual violence from an intimate partner. It is not surprising, then, that three participants in the current study discussed that they were sexually abused during their relationship. Callie felt that her partner sexually coerced her; sex was not something she wanted but in her words, *it kinda just happened*. She talked about never wanting to have had sex with her partner when she lost her virginity, and that she continued to feel pressured to engage in

sexual acts throughout the relationship. Erica described more aggressive forms of sexual abuse. For example, she explained that she found video footage that her partner had taken of him sexually assaulting her while she was unconscious. She believed that she was drugged by her partner, as she said she has no recollection of the assault and was shocked to see the video footage.

The heterogeneity of the participants' stories illuminates the multiple ways that women might experience IPV, and further, how abuse can be hidden from those outside the relationship. Some participants described pervasive non-violent forms of abuse, along with severe physical and sexual abuse.

Dilemmas of Leaving (Theme 2)

As can be expected, all participants spoke about their challenges not only to arrive at their decision to leave their partner, but to also find a way to do so. While a common reaction to those in abusive relationships is often “why doesn't she just leave him?”, research shows that leaving an abusive relationship can actually be a very complex process and is not simply a matter of deciding to leave (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Baly, 2010; Edwards, Dardis, & Gidycz, 2012). Moreover, Bograd (1998) suggest that power inequalities between men and women not only make women more vulnerable to IPV victimization, but also make it more difficult for women be met with the positive support they need during and after abuse. The following discussion illustrates some of the processes and challenges that the participants described in their stories of leaving their relationship.

Developing awareness of abuse. All participants spoke about either lacking complete awareness that their relationship was abusive, or about not recognizing the severity of the abuse at the time. Some described how their lack of intimate relationship experience made it

challenging to know what was “normal.” For example, Alice mentioned that while she did not necessarily have a lot of experience to compare her situation to, she felt uncomfortable with how her boyfriend was treating her:

I was young and I guess I didn't know what a normal relationship was like.

Similarly, Cornelia mentioned how lack of past relationship experience made it difficult to gauge what she was willing to put up with in her relationship:

I had no, I had nothing to base it on because that was the first relationship I had been in so I really had nothing to base it on.

Erica discussed how she didn't recognize early indications of abuse, and that her desire to be with her partner may have obscured a clear picture of what was happening:

I really didn't recognize it as we were starting to get involved, some of the things he was being deceitful about, like I just had no sense about how much I was being lied to, and definitely no sense of how controlling he was... Sorta just like blind faith...and just like a desperate need to be with him.

Several participants spoke about instances that helped them to gain further awareness about the abuse, either while still in the relationship or afterwards. For example, Laura shared how she did not fully realize the extent of the abuse in her relationship at the time, and that talking to her friends about what they believed to be abusive in their own relationships provided her with some perspective. While reflecting about her friends' experience, she said:

I need to put my experiences on that continuum, like where, where did I fit? You know? Cause I think for the longest time I didn't, I was like “oh that happened, OK,” and I don't think I realized how, you know...

She paused, and I asked:

How severe it was?

And she replied:

Yeah.

Alice described gaining further awareness about how her relationship was abusive when watching a television program, by commenting:

Like I said, so I didn't know at the time, I knew something wasn't right and that, that reaction in my body and all that. But I was actually watching Oprah and she had a show on about intimate partner violence, and gave a list of signs and the one I remember was the dog one because I was like, I never, I didn't really connect it before, the being violent towards your animals and that.

It became apparent during the interviews that hindsight allowed participants the space to develop a clearer view of the experiences that they considered to be abusive. For example, Erica shared her disbelief that she stayed with her partner for as long as she did:

When looking back this is just so unbelievable to me. After that we continued to be together for a couple more months, which continued to be horrible and violent and miserable.

Similarly, Alice mentioned:

Again I am kinda, like again with hindsight I can't imagine staying or being with someone who would ever say that to me.

Brie also shared that she had a sense things were not going well during the relationship but is much more clear about this today. She shared:

Yeah at the time, I knew that it was not good, that's how I would describe it then. And now I know that's totally not acceptable.

In their meta-review of research studies that focused on women's leaving processes, Anderson and Saunders (2003) describe how women commonly experience a shift in perspective at some point during the relationship, such that they reframe the relationship as abusive. This process, they describe, involves recognizing and acknowledging the impacts of the abuse. With respect to the participants in this study, building awareness of the abuse also seemed to be an important shift, and seemed to be an instrumental part of the leaving process. These excerpts above illustrate how challenging it can be for women to recognize abusive behaviours, or the

severity of the abuse, while they are in the relationship. Even though these women now assert that their past relationships were abusive, they did not necessarily have this clear perspective when it first became problematic.

Positive elements of the relationship. Another factor that makes leaving an abusive partner challenging is that there is often strong feelings of love and commitment (Anderson, et al., 2003). Five of the six participants in the present study spoke about positive and enjoyable aspects of their relationship that made it more difficult to leave, and thus extended the length of time that was spent in the relationship. It became apparent that participants did not experience their relationships as completely negative, but rather, they often talked about how things were often very enjoyable. One participant said, *we were pretty good at spending quite a bit of time in the honeymoon stage*, and another mentioned, *when things were good, they were very very good...there was a lot of care and support*. Edwards and her colleagues (2012) found similar results in their study on college women, where participants who were currently in abusive relationships reported positive boyfriend and relationship qualities. For example, participants in their study shared positive statements like, “we enjoy being with each other and provide support”, “I really care about him,” and “he makes me very happy and satisfied” (p. 206). Similarly, participants in the current study also articulated positive comments about the relationship.

Some participants described how their relationship fulfilled a certain need that was not met elsewhere. For example, Callie talked about her belief that the difficulty in her relationship with her father contributed to her staying with her abusive partner for longer:

My Dad and I would go for like months without speaking to each other, so, again, kinda through hindsight I recognize that that was a big part of it that was keeping me in the relationship. Because I was essentially sort of getting something from him that I wasn't really getting anywhere else.

Similarly, Cornelia spoke about how her need to be loved and accepted was fulfilled in her relationship. Her boyfriend was someone who continued to choose to be with her when he had no obligation to do so, and this was important for Cornelia. She commented:

He was my first boyfriend so I kind of, that was important because that was the first time I sorta was able to convince myself that I was loveable... he was the first person who was willing to accept all of me when he didn't have to.

Erica was another participant who described a sense of fulfillment by being in the relationship with her partner. She stated:

I felt really fulfilled in supporting the things that he wanted.

Importantly, some participants also discussed genuine feelings of love and care for their partners which undoubtedly complicated the decision making process to leave the abusive relationship. One participant shared, *my instinct is to kind of be there for somebody, you know because I did care about him in some sense.* Brie spoke considerably about the love she developed for her partner and with hindsight, she maintains that this was a genuine love:

You can love someone and they may or may not love you...or they may like treat you like garbage, but that love that you have for them can still be real, whether that's returned or not. So that's kinda the way that I see it now. So I think I like really truly loved him.

When considering the difficult process of leaving an abusive partner, it is important to understand and acknowledge how the positive qualities that women see in their relationships and partners can complicate this process. In their study on women who have been in abusive relationships, Anderson, et al., (2003) suggest that factors like promises to change, and apologizing, are barriers that make leaving more challenging. Several women in the present study also talked about how their partner made promises to treat them better, and they were hopeful in those promises. By reading the above experts, we can see how feeling loved and accepted, for example, could hold significant weight and impact the decision to either maintain

the status quo or make a change. The positive elements of the relationship, and hope for positive changes, likely play a major part in women's decision to stay.

Not knowing how to leave. While all participants eventually arrived at a place where they knew they wanted to leave their partners, each described feelings of being trapped in the relationship or not knowing how to get out. These excerpts highlight the difference between making a decision to leave and taking action to leave; the findings suggest that women can have the desire to leave yet not feel able to implement a change. Laura articulated a common experience across participants when I asked her if she saw her relationship as abusive at the time, by responding, *yeah, like I had a feeling, but it was just more like, I don't really know how to get out.* Similarly, Cornelia said, *I didn't want to be with him anymore...I just didn't know how to not be with him anymore.*

Callie described how her partner physically restricted her from leaving him. She commented:

By the time I tried to get out, it was, like I couldn't, I couldn't get out. We would fight, and if I walked away he would just pick me up and lock me in his truck, like I couldn't, there was no way for me to...

Some participants shared a sense of apathy or resignation about the abuse, perceiving it as something that could not be avoided. This seemed to arise after participants made attempts to leave but were unsuccessful, and when they did not see a way out. Erica detailed this feeling of helplessness by the following comment:

And realizing that nothing I did was really going to change it, was like ultimate hopelessness of feeling like, if it has nothing to do with me then I am really just trapped in this situation and I can't, there's nothing that's going to change it... I had made myself dependent on him and I realized that it just wasn't going to get better.

Erica later shared that this extreme feeling of hopelessness ultimately led to her attempted suicide, as she felt like there was no other way out of the situation.

Callie also shared a similar tone of hopelessness after realizing that her attempts to change the situation or leave her partner were futile. She share that after she had “technically broken up” with her partner, he continued to treat her like his girlfriend and continued to be abusive. She said:

It was like it didn't really matter what I did, it was better to just sort of sit down and take it, be quiet, don't say anything. I remember feeling very very helpless, and stuck, I think that was the best word, that I felt stuck, my instinct was to kind of fight, and if I fought it got worse, so it was sorta like I had to go against what I believed in so I could make things better, like for myself.

Some participants spoke about a sense of responsibility for caring for their partners that kept them in the relationship for longer than they wanted. Wanting to be supportive to her boyfriend, Alice commented:

I have to get out of this but he had just lost his grandmother and, and so I didn't want to leave him, because of that.

Cornelia spoke extensively about her feelings of obligation and responsibility for her partner, including the following comment:

I wanted to leave, I just, I didn't know how to do it. Especially because he was completely dependent on me. I never asked him to stay, I didn't, I said, you know, if you want to go back, please, you know, feel free, if you feel like that's what you need to do. I wanted him to, I wanted him to make that decision, but I couldn't be the one to send him home, I just, I didn't have that power.

Cornelia described feeling like she did not have a clear reason to leave, that it would not have been justified because she was not being *physically* abused. She talked about how it would have been easier to leave if her partner had physically assaulted her, as that would have allowed her to feel less obligated to maintain the relationship:

I wanted to get out and, but I, I didn't feel like that was justified because he wasn't hitting me. And so, I wanted him to do it because I had the impression that I would have been able to use that as the final straw.

And later:

And if he had have hit me, I would have been able to say, ok, well, you know, there's the line, now I can leave, now I'll, I'll be, I wont feel the same sense of obligation to stay and continue to support him because that's a line you don't cross.

Fear about the consequences of attempting to leave an abusive relationship also seemed to keep some participants in the relationship longer than they wanted to. While young women might have awareness about the severity of their situation as well as the desire to leave, fearing what their partners will do can play a major role in whether they choose to leave.

Laura spoke about her concern that no one would believe her story, and also about putting herself at further risk:

You know, who do you say, who's gonna believe you, and you know what? You're scared because if you make him look bad, he is capable of doing this, what else could he do?

Brie also talked about how fear prolonged her decision to leave:

Like the way that I see it now is kind of like, you know, if I stayed, as hard as it was to leave, it took me a long time to leave even after I had decided to leave, cause I was so fearful. And by that point I was just like physically and emotionally weak from being in this stressful relationship, pouring all my energy into it, trying to fix it.

These findings are consistent with past research that suggests that women's fear of their partners' potential to harm them further prevents them from leaving (Anderson, et al., 2003).

The turning point or breakup. All participants described a specific turning point in their relationship where they became very clear about needing to leave their partners. For some, the relationship continued until they felt ready to leave, and for others, the relationship ended more abruptly. Brie's descriptions of "having enough" of the abuse and suddenly feeling reading to make a change echoes what Burke, Gielen, McDonnell, O'Campo, and Maman (2001) found in their qualitative study on women's leaving processes. One participant in their study spoke about reaching her limit and being tired of dealing with the abuse (Burke, et al.). Similarly, Brie shared:

I had basically had enough...I am not really sure why I decided that. I think I had decided that a while before but I hadn't really acted on it...And then I ended up being like, ok you know what, this is enough, I am leaving, like I'm gone.

Brie described leaving her boyfriend's basement suite after breaking up with him, only to be chased outside and physically assaulted in her car and on the front lawn. Fortunately, her neighbours came out to help her and she was able to get away. With relief, she stated: *I didn't go back to him thank God!*

Callie talked about ending her relationship by temporarily moving to another country:

I hit a point where I was like, I don't want to be in the town anymore, there's not a lot here for me, I need to physically get out of this situation.

And later she commented:

I think because I was able to kind of physically remove myself from the situation and I knew that he wouldn't be able to just drive up, to my house...which was the biggest thing because that's what I was afraid of...and I think that was probably the biggest impact is that physically could not get to me anymore.

In Callie's situation, the physical separation helped her to feel less fearful, and although her ex-partner continued to bombard her with emails during her trip, the distance prevented him from being able to contact her as easily as when they lived in the same town.

Laura described her breakup as something that was not necessarily in her control. She shared that she became very sick and was being cared for at her mother's house for over three months. Because her mother did not allow her partner to come to the house, their relationships ended. Laura stated:

Looking back on it, it was a good clean break. Whether I could have done that on my own? Probably not.

Broadly speaking, the women in the present study described a process of leaving that involved gaining awareness of the abuse, deciding to leave, and then taking action. These findings are consistent with past research that continues to suggest that leaving abusive

relationships is a complex and challenging process (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Burke, et al., 2001; Edwards, et al., 2012).

Response from Others (Theme 3)

All participants spoke about how others responded to them during and after the relationship. Consistent with the extant literature, some participants shared stories of support from multiple sources, such as family and the community, where others talked about lacking support (McLeod, Hays, & Chang, 2010).

Receiving support. Similar to Ansara and Hindin's (2010) findings, some participants felt supported by family members during their relationship, as well as after it ended. Alice spoke in detail about her strong connection to her family, including her siblings, father, and step-mother, and how *just knowing that they were there* was helpful. Although Alice never explicitly told her family what was going on in her relationship, she found that her step-mother in particular was able to offer helpful guidance. With appreciation, Alice stated:

I would just emphasize that again I think I was really fortunate to have a supportive family, and like a loving family that no matter what I did, they would be there for me... I had financial support of my, of my family, but just the emotional support and knowing that they wouldn't judge me. And knowing that when that relationship ended, that even though I didn't necessarily have my friends that were there before, I had my family. And I think that was really huge.

Brie also spoke about the support she received from her parents. She remembered a time where her mom came home and heard her and her partner fighting:

I didn't even realize she was home until she came in and was just like, she told him to get out, she's like "get out."

Similarly, Laura's parents offered tangible support by not allowing her partner to enter their home where Laura was also living. Because of this, she explained, it was easier to leave the

relationship. Brie shared that her father, in particular, has been a tremendous support for her, especially since the relationship has ended. Referring to her father, she commented:

I feel very fortunate to have such a positive male influence in my life because I imagine like a lot of people that go through that experience might not have that. And I would say that was a huge part of me going back to school, and just like having someone that cares about your future and cares about, like believes in you, that's huge. And I feel like it would be really difficult if you didn't have, didn't have that. Like it's not impossible but I think it would be so much harder.

Research suggests that college women who experience IPV often seek support from their friends (Dunhan & Senn, 2000; Edwards et al., 2012). Similarly, participants in the current study found that their friends, and sometimes subsequent intimate partners, were a positive source of support for them. Callie stated that she had a *couple of close friends* during the relationship that she trusted to continue supporting her despite her partner's attempts to isolate her. She commented:

I had enough faith in those friendships that I was like "you can't touch me, like, these people are going to stick with me and you can tell them what you want to tell them and I know that, you know, the rest of the town already thinks all of this stuff about me, and like, I don't care, go ahead and keep doing it."

Cornelia also mentioned having one close friend during her relationship that really *got* her. With reference to her relationship challenges, she stated:

He was the only one I really talked to about it... he was the only person that made sense to talk to about it.

Brie spoke about a mutual friend of her and her partner that was a great support for her during the relationship, while it ended, and afterwards. She shared:

He was just really supportive, and I was like, well, OK, it kinda just got me thinking about things differently. And then I ended up being like, ok you know what, this is enough, I am leaving, like I'm gone.

She shared that this friend, who is now her current partner, hid her in his house for days after she left the abusive relationship. Brie explained how this person continues to offer emotional

support for her, describing him as being *really good about it*, and *a really good listener*. Similar to Brie, Alice was another participant to describe her subsequent partner as a strong source of support with respect to the continued challenges of her past relationship. She shared:

I had talked to him about it and um I would say, I would tell him examples...his reaction, like "that's messed up, I can't believe that", was positive reinforcement of that in me getting out of that relationship and thinking that there was something bad about it.

His reactions to the examples of the abuse helped Alice feel validated in her experience and her decision to leave.

Women who experience IPV sometimes seek support outside of friends and family (Fortin, Guay, Lavoie, Boisvert, & Beaudry, 2012; McLeod, et al., 2010). In the present study, Callie and Erica mentioned seeing a counsellor, and Erica also sought help from her university's sexual assault centre. Brie and Erica spoke about how they felt supported at work. Brie appreciated her boss's position to not allow her partner to enter her place of work, and Erica felt like she *was useful or important to somebody* at work. Referring to her colleagues, Erica stated:

Where I felt like people didn't care about me on a personal level, they at least like cared about what I did, that I had a role there and so I think that's part of how I got to where I am now, where that's like really the most important thing in my life.

Erica also talked about feeling supported from community members through their responses to the court decision regarding the abuse. Erica described how her police statement was made available to the public, and that the article was published revealing the details of the case. She shared:

I did read a couple of news articles that came up at the time when he was sentenced, and I noticed that people had commented on them... and so I read the comments and like people had commented on how insane it was, how trivial the punishment was, that it was completely inadequate... and I think the fact that other people recognize that there was something wrong with it is the only thing that gives me hope because I feel like we intuitively know there is something wrong with this, and so maybe it can't be like that

forever, like maybe in 10 years from now there will be some improvement because people do have a problem with it.

Participants in the current study varied in their experiences of support felt from friends, family, and the community. Consistent with previous research, some, but not all, participants who had experienced IPV felt the presence of family and peer support (McLeod, et al., 2010).

Lack of support. Five of the participants in the present study spoke of lacking support in some way. Some women found themselves isolated from friends and family, a negative consequence that often results from IPV (James, Johnson, & Raghavan, 2004). In their mixed methods study, James et al. found that many women who experienced IPV felt physical and emotional aspects of isolation. Moreover, Amar and Alexy (2005) findings suggest that some women who experienced IPV often felt let down or otherwise unsupported by friends and family. Cornelia addressed how she felt alone in her challenges by the following:

I wasn't telling anyone what was happening, the only person I was talking to was my mother and she is my mother, so I, I kept things from her anyway.

Callie expressed similar hesitation to discuss her relationship with her parents:

I didn't know what to do, I mean, I was 17, going to your parents is a little bit weird... I remember my family had no idea what was going on. I think my parents knew that it was a bad relationship but they never knew to what extent, and I thought it was so obvious, because I was kind of in the middle of it, and I was so angry at them for years that they didn't intervene, I was so mad that I couldn't understand why they wouldn't intervene. And I remember last year having a discussion with my mom and kind of just briefly telling her some of the things he used to say to me and she was shocked, like my parents had no idea.

In contrast, Brie suspected her mother knew what had been happening in her relationship, but for some reason did not react. She commented:

I think she knew a lot of what was going on and didn't do anything. But at the same time, it's not really her responsibility.

Laura spoke even more explicitly about her partner's mother's inaction during an instance of physical violence by the following:

His mother was in the next room and didn't even come to the screams. She just sat on the couch or whatever, right.

As other studies have shown (e.g., Kulkarni, 2009), feelings of isolation were prominent in several of the participants' stories. Several stories described how family or friends withdrew because they did not know how to offer support and could not bear to watch what was taking place in the relationship. For instance, Brie described:

A lot of my close friends had kind of distanced themselves...not because they didn't care or were bad friends, but because they knew that it was bad for me and didn't want to be, didn't want to watch bad things happen to me.

Similarly, Erica spoke about how her family withdrew their support for her relationship, and thus, left her feeling isolated. She shared:

As soon as like it became evident that there was violence or even just like severe conflict in the relationship I really lost the support of my family and friends, and so by the time that I sort of realized how grievous the situation was, there really wasn't any of that support so it was especially hard to see how things were going to get better.

For Callie, it was the circumstance of moving to a new town that contributed to her feelings of isolation. She explained:

I didn't have strong social network or anything like that, so I was very isolated with him, and part of that was because of the relationship that I was in. So I didn't have a lot of people to turn to at that age either.

It seems that in some instances, circumstances such as living in a new town led some participants to feel isolated and thus, without support. However for others, the relationship itself seemed to have led to feelings of isolation. According to Sylaska and Edwards's (2014) meta review of research on IPV and social support, friends and female family members are the most commonly used sources of support and are considered to be the most helpful. When women become

disconnected from their friends and family, as several women in the present study described, an opportunity for support is lost.

Some of the participants commented on their disappointment after talking to others about their stories of IPV. Erica found that after initially talking to family and subsequent partners about her experiences, she *could never really speak of it again*. In her words:

Nobody wants to be exposed to it, nobody knows what to say, there is nothing left that anybody can do. It's just uncomfortable and afterwards you have to accept that they know that and yet they can't really offer any ongoing support... But that neglect, like that conscious neglect is painful.

It seems that for Erica, talking about her experiences came with the pain of not receiving the support she had anticipated. In her opinion, people were afraid to talk about the relationship.

Societal perceptions of IPV, and beliefs about those who experience abuse, often lead to devaluation of women's experiences, and discourage women from taking action to seek support (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013). Pervasive cultural beliefs about IPV, such as being unassertive or dependent, "delegitimize individuals who have experienced partner abuse, often blaming those who have experienced IPV for their own victimization" (Overstreet & Quinn, p. 110). Feminist theory suggests that society's acceptance of women's inferiority to men leads to the tolerance of violence against women in general; due to the power imbalance, women are often viewed as bringing about the violence, or somehow deserving of violence (Rozee & Koss, 2001). Past research has found that women who have experienced IPV report instances of victim-blaming or siding with the abuser (McLeod, et al, 2010). Several participants in the present study also spoke about not being believed, or worse, of being blamed when telling others about their experiences of IPV. Callie touched on the societal belief (and sometimes reality) that nothing positive would come of reporting IPV, by commenting:

I remember at the time I was learning a lot about kind of abuse and rape and they said a lot of the time if its just like his word against hers, half the time nothing really comes of it except now you've told a whole bunch of people what's happened and they tell you, you know, essentially they don't believe you. And I was like, I don't know if that would be better or worse, so I tend just to keep quiet.

For Laura, telling others about her experience came with negative consequences, similar to what Callie expected. Laura received questions like “what were you doing?” and “why were you with this guy?” when she shared her story. Victim blaming responses, like the ones Laura heard, contribute to what lead victims of IPV to remain in isolation and keep their stories secret (Overstreet & Quinn). Laura articulates this decision process by the following comment:

I have all this like wonderful theory and knowledge and background of stuff like that, being like, “You have to tell people, you should tell people,” but you know what? It's almost easier to pretend it never happened because you don't have everyone in your personal business, and they're not getting mad at you. You know what I mean? Like, it takes courage to say that this stuff happened, but yet, it's just like, you're shamed.

Overstreet & Quinn (2013) suggest that women who experience IPV internalize the overarching cultural stigma around IPV that is comprised of negative beliefs and stereotypes. The negative stigma surrounding IPV, they argue, is what deters women from seeking support.

Challenges with the justice system. Four participants spoke about the criminal justice system when sharing about their experience in an abusive relationship. They discussed a sense of apprehension and sometimes fear and guilt about going to the police to report the abuse. For example, Callie talked about how her partner was a friend of many of the police officers in their town and so she was *scared to go to the police because they all knew who he was*. She described a situation where she and her partner were fighting and she said:

He had me pinned down on the ground outside and a police car drove by and he was friends with them, so they're like “oh hey, everything's OK?” And then he kinda just drove away, so it was just like this, I couldn't go anywhere.

Brie also spoke about fear of reporting the abuse to the police, and a sense a guilt for doing so:

It was really hard...at the time I felt really guilty for going. I felt really bad.

A study by Amar and Alexy (2005) found that some women who report instances of IPV to the police described feeling let down or otherwise unsupported by law enforcement. One participant in their study spoke about being blamed by the police officer with whom she made the report to. Consistent with that study, all four of the six participants who discussed the criminal justice system spoke about their dissatisfaction with how their situation was managed or how they were treated during the reporting and/or legal proceedings. Laura spoke about her experience of being invalidated and disregarded by the police when she reported the abuse by commenting:

It's one of those things where, you know, you do it, but nothing comes of it...there's nothing they're going to do, and they're like, "well, you don't really look that battered."

Laura mentioned that she saw their response as accusing her of *crying wolf*, and that she felt blamed for her situation and unsupported.

Brie also spoke about similar feelings of being disregarded and not taken seriously.

Referring to the police, she said:

It was just so stressful, to be honest with you, like I could talk for a really long time about how ridiculous the way they handle things is in a lot of ways.

And later:

There was one officer that was really helpful...but other than that, I just felt like they didn't take it seriously at all.

Overall, Brie felt that her decision to go to the police was a good one, but found the overall experience to be very negative:

I am glad that I went. Like he was arrested for what he did, and he was arrested a few times, just for like the first thing and breaking, like breaching the no-contact order so many times. But I just felt like they, it could have been handled a lot better.

Erica also shared her sense of dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system, and her experience of being let-down and greatly unsupported. She openly shared that there were times in her relationship where she would also be violent towards her partner, sometimes punching or pushing him for example. She spoke about the *surreal* experience of being charged with assault and spending a night in prison after hitting her boyfriend; she was shocked at the injustice of this because she had endured years of extreme violence from him, including being choked almost to the point of suffocation, sexual assault, and other forms of severe physical abuse. She commented:

It was just like this surreal sort of like, I felt like I needed to take responsibility for what had happened, you know, I was violent in the relationship too. And there's no excuse for that. But on the other hand it was just this monumental loss of perspective.

While Erica kept the abuse in her relationship private from the police for several years, she ultimately decided to come forward. She assuredly states that her experience within the legal system *was definitely the worst experience of all of it*. She shared that over 20 charges were laid against her partner, however it took over a year to produce the necessary evidence. She spoke about needing to attend hearing after hearing that consumed most of two years. She also talked about how the judge requested that she consent to sharing the extremely graphic video images of her being assaulted by her partner to the public courts. Erica did not see this as a fair choice; she was advised that if she did not show the footage then the sentencing would have been impacted.

When speaking about this material being shared in court, she stated:

Oh, I mean it's horrifying... I could clearly say why that was harmful to me, and I was totally ignored... I didn't give that material over to the police thinking that it was going to be for anybody's viewing. I was told by the detective that people in the, the police force who were investigating would not view it. I was told that he would keep that material completely confidential, not just from the public but from people who work there because it, it affects me.

Erica spoke extensively about how she has lost faith in the legal system specially, and in society more broadly, after this experience. She shared that after the hearings closed and decisions were made, her ex-partner was sentenced with 50 hours of community service: a punishment that was appalling and saddening to Erica given that he was convicted of many violent crimes toward her, and also with respect to her punishment when she had previously hit him. Sounding disheartened and resigned, she commented:

The moral of the story was that like this is not punishable behaviour in our society, like in our extremely civilized, extreme modern, extremely privileged society, this is not punishable behaviour. And so yeah, I mean like it was shaking and appalling and it was like the ultimate loss of power that it was like even the rights that you have been promised don't apply...And it's a horrible world to live in, and it's a horrible world to think that if a friend came to me now and said that they had a similar experience, that I couldn't give them any solace in thinking that there is anything they can do besides find a place in themselves that they can live with it, because it's not going to help them any to address it.

Erica spoke in depth about the implications for women in our society, how she believes that women learn that they need to tolerate abusive situations, or overcome them on our own, because she finds there are no reliable supports or structures in place to help. When speaking about the impact of these experiences, she asked: *I mean, how can you see the world the same way after something like that happens?*

Other studies have generated similar results that suggest a level of dissatisfaction with how police have responded to their reports of IPV (Wolf, Ly, Hobart, & Kernic, 2003). Wolf and her colleagues interviewed 41 women who experienced IPV, and of those who turned to the police for support, many were disappointed. Participants in their study spoke about not feeling listened to, their situation being trivialized, and experiencing a lack of response from the authorities. Several women in their study who did not report to the police discussed fears about what would happen if they did, as well as previous negative experiences with police response

(Wolf, et al). The participants in the present study share some of these experiences and concerns, similarly left disappointed with the police response.

IMPACT ON SENSE OF SELF (CATEGORY 2)

The discussion within this category comprises the main focus of this thesis, and most directly responds to my primary research question: *How do experiences of intimate partner violence impact emerging adult women's sense of self?* I address three themes relating to how participants spoke about their sense of self, including: (1) Perception of self; (2) Wavering sense of self; and (3) Possible selves.

All participants in this study discussed how their experiences in an abusive relationship impacted their sense of self, that is, the way that they see themselves today and in the future. Many spoke about how their relationships negatively impacted the way they see themselves, which was often exacerbated by self-blame and shame. Participants also described processes of rebuilding a positive sense of self and integrating their experiences into their identities as part of moving forward with their lives. Importantly, while most spoke about negative impacts of the relationship on sense of self, the women were also able to describe themselves as possessing many positive qualities. All participants engaged in the Possible Selves Mapping Process (PSMP; see p.40) during the second interview, and thus, they all shared ideas about their sense of self in the future. This tool served as a vehicle for participants to expand their discussion about how experiences of IPV impact their identity by encouraging them to think about who they might want to become (or fear becoming) in the future. Through our conversations, participants discussed the possible selves that they believe are related to their experiences of abuse; I focus on these particular possible selves during this discussion.

Perception of Self (Theme 4)

From a relational theoretical perspective, a woman's sense of self develops out of her relationships with others (Josselson, 1998; Surrey, 1991). That is, developing a sense of self arises from social factors like culture and interpersonal relationships and consists of relational qualities (Josselson). Significant relationships, therefore, are expected to play a role in how a woman views herself. Research by Crawford, Leibling-Kalifani, and Hill (2009), supports these tenets. Their findings suggest that IPV impacts women's self esteem, self worth, and self agency, and thus they conclude that a women's sense of self was "fundamentally affected by domestic abuse," (p.72). Consistent with this research as well as the theoretical precepts described above, the women in the present study indicated that their sense of self has been influenced by IPV.

Negative perception of self. Four of the six participants made negative statements about themselves during the interviews; these included descriptions about how they felt during the relationship, as well as current self-perceptions. Importantly, some participants were not always able to connect their experiences in the abusive relationship to these negative self-perceptions; drawing a straight line between cause and effect was often not possible because of the multitude of other factors that influence how these women see themselves. Alternatively, some discuss distinct changes in self-perception as a result of the abusive relationship. For example, when discussing how her natural qualities, such as being caring, were causing problems in her relationship, Callie shared:

I came to hate a lot of myself.

For Callie, she believed that parts of her personality and in turn, parts of her identity, seemed to exacerbate the challenges in her relationship and so she learned to *shut down* these parts of self.

When speaking about her current sense of self she shared:

I feel like damaged goods...I still feel like I'm not quite right, or something, like I am coming into something a little bit broken.

Laura also spoke about this sense of being *broken*. During our interview, she discussed her reaction when someone referred to her as “broken” because she had experienced abuse.

While she initially rejected this notion, she questioned whether there was truth to it. I asked Laura about whether she believed there was some part of her that has changed because of her experience. Referring to being “broken” she responded:

Ya, I think so... this person says they love you they trust you, but then they try to kill you. You know, I think it, it does cause damage. And it will always be there.

Cornelia and Erica’s stories also included negative perceptions of the self, however their statements seemed to go beyond the direct impact of the relationship and represent a more general way that they view themselves, possibly even before the relationship began. When I asked Cornelia how she would describe herself, she responded:

I don't know, that's really hard because I don't like a lot of things about myself.

And later:

For my whole adult life I've just really not liked myself.

The decisions that Cornelia made during her relationship, namely her decision to have an abortion, perpetuate her negative perception of self and leave her wondering whether other people see her in a similarly negative light. She commented:

I have a hard time with how other people might see some of my past decisions, so that bothers me. And makes me doubt my worth in the eyes of other people, or people who I might potentially become close to in whatever form that takes.

Laura's narrative also contained many different statements illustrating her negative perception of self, and for her, feeling *worthless* makes her more likely to tolerate hurtful and abusive treatment from others. In her words:

I would say I have a really bad concept of self-worth. Like really bad. Part of that is kind of from that male influence, part of it's too is from like my parents, but ya just really like low self-worth and I definitely have that whole like text-book, "oh, I deserve to get hit." Or "I deserved to get cheated on" you know what I mean? ... People want to treat me like crap, I don't care.

Sounding resigned, Laura talked about feeling *disposable*, where other people seem to believe they can treat her in a way that she would never even consider treating another person

Similarly, Erica's self descriptions also had an undertone of low self-worth, or not being good enough. At one point she mentioned:

I kinda don't care that much about my own welfare because it will like, it's not that consequential.

That some women who have experienced IPV have a negative perception of self is supported in the current literature. Lynch (2013) also found that women who experienced violent relationships in the past, and those currently in abusive relationships, had negative perceptions of self. The women in her study expressed about twice as many negative self-statements as compared to women who had non-violent relationships. Examples of their negative self-perceptions include poor body image, feeling incompetent, and feeling unattractive. Amar and Alexy (2005) also found that college women who have experienced dating violence talk about what the authors call *self-discontent*, referring to a negative sense of self of low self-esteem. The authors state that "the experience of abuse can invade the core of one's being, causing self-doubt" (p. 167). Taken together, these studies suggest that women who have experienced abusive relationships described negative self-worth, low self-esteem, poor self-image, or decreased self-confidence.

Feeling confident in the ability to succeed in interpersonal relationships plays a role in developing a positive sense of self (Josselson, 1998). It is possible that women who have experienced IPV form negative ideas about themselves as a result of not succeeding in the relationship. Relational disconnections, according to RCT, disrupt positive development (Jordan, 2009); IPV is one type of disconnection that seems to have a negative impact for some women.

Strength and Resiliency. It is important to recognize that although experiencing IPV can lead to negative self-image, women who leave abusive relationships also describe themselves as having made positive changes despite the challenges, such as having greater strength and increased assertiveness (Lynch, 2013). Likewise, women in the present study also shared positive self-descriptions. Four participants described themselves as being strong and resilient, and attributed this to overcoming their relationship. For example, Callie spoke generally of the positive changes by the following comment:

I've come a really long way... ya. And I think that's what I have kind of realized is I sort of have to look at where I have come, not necessarily where I am going, cause that's a little bit more uncertain, but, I can see the positive changes that's happened, sort of in the last couple of years, and its been good.

Having endured IPV, and having separated from their partners, understandably bolstered participants' sense of personal strength. Erica's account of the strength she realized after recovering from her attempted suicide is particularly profound:

It was really evident to me when I got out of the hospital, there was no one to come pick me up, I was super alone. And getting through that, like I mean like it was excruciating physically and emotionally, and like my partner was angry with me, my family was angry with me, and there was no one to help take care of me you know, if I had to go to the hospital I had to find a way to get there myself. And so, getting through that made it really clear to me that like um, I could pretty much get through anything and that I didn't need anybody really. And I feel like it gave me a new lease on life, obviously feeling like that was it. And it certainly gave me perspective on like my own strength to get through that.

Resiliency can be understood as “an ability to go on with life after hardship and adversity” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 4). It seems that part of developing resiliency, for some, was to practice self-acceptance. When discussing her tendency to criticize herself for being in the relationship, Brie spoke about the need to *honour* her past experiences and only look forward. She articulated:

I think you have to really like accept that it's, it is a part of your experience, and you can't be like, "OK, these are the parts of me that I like and are good and move the rest away", it doesn't work that way. And I just think you have to embrace all of you and come to terms with things.

Callie also spoke about self-acceptance when describing how she continues to be affected by her past experiences of IPV, particularly with respect to subsequent intimate relationships. She said:

It's kinda something I've come to accept, that I think that's just how it's going to be for me, at least for now. And because I sort of accepted that I have been able to kind of look at people and be like if you can't deal with that then that's your problem, like I need to take my time and that's just how it's going to be for me, so you can deal with it or you can't, but I can't change that.

The findings in the present study are consistent with what has been observed in past research.

Anderson, Renner, and Danis (2012) found that although women report lingering effects of IPV such as anxiety and depression, they also exhibited tremendous personal strength and resiliency in leaving their relationship. For those women, spiritual and social support was central to their recovery by “giving them strength to prevail, uncovering the benefits of their suffering, and giving their lives purpose” (p.1289).

Self-blame. Women who experience IPV can be considered a marginalized group that is subject to stigmatization (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013). From a relational theoretical perspective, those at the margins can perpetuate their own disconnection by self-blame processes (Jordan, 2008). According to Jordan, “people at the margin are actively socialized to believe that they

have failed, that they *are* the problem and occupy a position of disadvantage because of inherent unworthiness” (p. 191). Overstreet and Quinn refer to this process as *stigma internalization*, where women project the negative societal beliefs about IPV toward themselves. All six participants in the present study spoke about blaming themselves, or taking some degree of responsibility, for being in an abusive relationship. For example, Alice expressed her surprise that she tolerated the kinds of things that happened with her partner, by stating:

I know that afterwards, like I, I would look back and think like, how, how could I?

Some participants discussed feeling some degree of responsibility for being abused or for continuing to stay in the relationship and subject themselves to abuse. While acknowledging that begin abused was not her fault, Brie commented on how her decision to stay with her partner perpetuated her own victimization:

If you are going to stand for that, or you don't have the strength to leave, it's going to keep happening, so. I feel like you're the only one that can really change that, or find ways to change that.

When I asked Brie if she ever blamed herself for being abused, she responded:

Oh totally...when you come out of something like that you do feel really awful and you feel like, “why did this happen to me?” Like, “I was so dumb,” “did I deserve that?”

Cornelia stated, *I didn't feel like I was without guilt*, when referring to the reason for the challenges in her relationship. Similarly, Erica shared that she felt like it was oftentimes her fault that her partner became violent. While acknowledging that she was also physically violent toward her partner at times, Erica spoke about her belief that she can somehow bring out violent behaviours in other people:

I learned that I could incite violence in other people, in a really profound way, to a really extreme degree.

Not only did she take responsibility for her own actions, she also blamed herself for her partner's use of violence. It seems that for some participants, self-blame served the purpose of instilling a sense of control over a situation that likely felt very out of control. When I asked Erica about the consequences of blaming herself for being abused, she shared:

I think although it was damaging to feel like it was my fault, it was also, like it made me feel like there was some control or some hope that it was gonna be possible to have a different relationship at some point.

Callie also described her tendency to blame herself for what happened in her relationship, and like Erica, she finds that self-blame actually serves a purpose of feeling more in control. She stated:

I have never been able to let go of the blame, like on myself, like even when I go to talk about it, I jump to statements like "I let him do that to me," and "I let myself be in that situation",

And later she said:

I've become very hard on myself, like everything becomes my fault, and I am quite critical of myself.

She later discusses her hope that the self-blame will dissipate *without feeling like everything is out of control.*

It seems that for some women in the present study, self-blame continues to be part of their narrative surrounding their experiences with IPV. It is possible that the victim-blaming paradigm of our culture that shifts the focus of violence towards women from perpetrators to the female victims (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) leads women to direct negative beliefs and stereotypes toward themselves. Moreover, Eckstein (2011) posits that the societal belief that victims can just leave their abusive partners may result in self-blame for women who do not end the abuse.

Wavering Sense of Self (Theme 5)

Arnett (2004) describes emerging adulthood as a period of identity exploration, increased self-knowledge, and personal growth. It is not surprising, then, that women in the present study described changes in their identity since their relationship has ended; however, they attribute these changes to their experiences of and recovery from IPV. For these women, experiencing IPV seemed to have disrupted their sense of self, and thus, a period of rebuilding their identity ensued after the relationships ended.

Loss of self. Five spoke about how they lost parts of themselves during the abusive relationship. In trying to find a way to make their relationship more manageable, some of the women described feeling like they needed to change who they were. For instance, Callie commented:

I had to go against what I believed in so I could make things better, like for myself... So I was literally like fighting against who I thought I was because of how it wasn't helping me in that situation.

And later:

I mean I lost, I used to be a really kind of like open, fun, flirty personality, and I lost a good chunk of that.

Similarly, Alice shared:

I felt really lost. And I think that I was feeling pulled in different directions and trying to find, find my way in managing... I can look at the person like, when we first, like first started dating and I was so confident. I was so confident and then like just diminished so much.

Some participants also discussed how they noticed that their identity seemed to be fused to either their partner, or their experiences in the abusive relationship. In other words, rather than being viewed (or viewing oneself) as an independent entity, some participants were seen in relation to their partners. When talking about the challenges of enduring an abusive relationship

in a small town, one participant discussed how no one knew her outside of her relationship; even after the relationship ended, she was still *so-and-so's ex-girlfriend*. She shared:

That was my identity in a sense, in most of that town, which he used against me, I mean, he was very much like "you're nothing without me", and that's, yeah, that's just kind of how it was... I think there was a part of me that believed that.

With almost 10 years of hindsight since her abusive relationship ended, Alice spoke about realizing how she found herself lost not only in the abuse relationship, but also in subsequent healthy relationships. She talked about *jumping* into another relationship after the initial abusive relationship ended, and noticed how she was not able to focus on herself and learn about who she was during these times. For Alice, being in an intimate relationship prevented her from having the space for self-discovery, which she later describes as being invaluable.

While some participants found that their identity was joined with their partner, Erica talked about being afraid of this happening and making efforts to avoid it. She described her fear that if she let people know about what had happened to her during and after her relationship, then they would identify her as *vulnerable or weak* or as *damaged in some way*. She commented:

I feel like once people see you in that light it's hard for them to see you in other ways that are complete.

As a result, Erica chooses to continue to keep this part of her life very private. She spoke about how her experiences of IPV and her involvement with the justice system would not be congruent with how she portrays herself in public. Due to her efforts to separate her past experiences from her identity, Erica shared that as a consequence, know one actually knows her. She stated:

I don't feel like its something that I can ever talk about, and like that goes for every aspect of it, like both being in a violent relationship, the court thing, the sexual assault, like, because I don't feel like I can speak about any piece of that...people have no real idea who I am.

It seems that for the women in the current study, enduring an abusive relationship has disrupted their sense of self, or at least parts of it; some question who they are, some modify themselves in order to manage the relationship, and others hide parts of themselves in order to avoid stigmatization and judgment. This sense of losing the self, or losing certain aspects of the self, has also been illuminated in other studies (Crawford, 2009; Lynch, 2013; Wuest & Merritt-Grey, 2001). Lynch (2013) found similar results in the qualitative part of her study on how women's sense of self is impacted by violent intimate relationships. She found that many women who had violent partners either currently or within the past 12 months described self-doubt or a loss of self as a part of their narratives. Some women talked about feeling like "no one", and having a sense of being unknown. Similar to the findings in the current study, Lynch described how some women in her study questioned who they were because of constant criticism from partners. Similarly, Crawford et al. (2009) suggest that women who experience abuse develop "fragile" identities because they are questioning who they are and adapting their identity to manage the negative situation.

Jordan (2008) maintains that chronic relational disconnections, like IPV, rob a person's ability to be authentic. Without the freedom, respect, and safety to explore and express our true selves, the potential for positive self-development that a healthy relationship offers appears to diminish.

Rebuilding the self. While most participants spoke about losing some parts of themselves during the abusive relationship, they also talked about rebuilding their sense of self after the relationship ended. For example, Callie moved abroad *with the goal of finding [her]self again*. She shared:

I totally lost myself and I needed to go away and reinvent myself in a place where nobody knows me. And that was the purpose kind of, of that trip. And it took, like I was there for

6 months, um, and it was, like it was good, like I met a lot of new people, and I backpacked, and I worked, like, and I think I just got back, like I wouldn't say I got myself back, but I got back a sense of strength I guess.

When reflecting on her process of reconstructing some parts of her identity that she lost during her past relationship, Alice commented:

It's been close to 10 years, and uh, my confidence like, I'd say I have a bit more to go, but no, I am proud of myself.

For Laura, rebuilding her sense of self involved integrating her past experiences into the person she is today. With reference to her past relationship, she shared:

I think it'll always be with me but just working forward and trying to figure out where that piece of information kind of fits in who I am today.

That participants spoke about rebuilding their identities after their relationships ended is consistent with extant literature. In one study by Crawford et al. (2009), some participants spoke about rebuilding themselves and reconstructing new identities after their relationships ended. For example, one woman talked about finding meaning in her role at work, and others spoke about prioritizing their roles as mothers. Similarly, Wuest and Merritt-Grey (2001) identified *taking on a new image* as a major theme in their qualitative study exploring women's experiences after leaving an abusive relationship. After having relinquished aspect of their identity during the relationship, the women in their study spoke about rediscovering a new image.

The wavering sense of self that participants in the present studied described, including the loss of self and the need to rebuild the self, is consistent with Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2009). Due the relational component of identity development, it is understandable that negative relational experiences like IPV unsettle a woman's sense of self. Questioning who they were,

along with redefining themselves seemed to be common processes for the women in the present study.

Possible Selves (Theme 6)

A number of studies have indicated that challenging life events or negative experiences influence the way people see themselves in the future (Barreto & Frazier, 2012; Kloep, et al., 2010), however, no research could be located that has explored whether past experiences of IPV influence young women's *possible selves* (as conceptualized by Markus & Nurius, 1986). The present study contributes to research by suggesting that IPV influences the way that women think about their futures, their possible selves, in a variety of ways.

Using the PSMP facilitated participants to generate specific possible selves for the future, such as “becoming a mother” or “having a loving relationship.” Through the process, participants described what they thought was possible for themselves in the future, as well as how they believed their past abusive relationship impacted their perception of what was possible. The following discussion draws from both the identification of specific possible selves, as well as the broader conversations about future goals during the PSMP. Table 3 outlines the possible selves described by the participants that were related to their past relationship. (Possible selves that were not identified as being connected to past relationships were omitted from analysis.)

The findings show that possible selves were influenced by participants' past experiences of IPV. Barreto and Frazier (2012) posit that significant life experiences can shape what individuals hope and fear for their futures. Further, Hoyle and Sherrill (2006) describe how people “conjure images of themselves from the past and imagine themselves in the future”, and thus, past selves can be motivating (p. 1674). Experiencing IPV seems to have been integrated into the present participants' sense of self, thus impacting their possible selves. When I asked

Table 3 - Possible selves relating to past experiences of IPV

	Hoped For Selves	Feared Selves
Callie	Wife Mother Close family Good, close friends Pursue hobbies Traveller/explorer Photographer Volunteer Write Runner* Fearless Open At peace	Bad relationship Alone Isolated Stuck Regrets Giving up Lost Unhealthy*
Laura	Connected to my community Good relationship with parents, friends, and family* Healthy relationship with partner	Disconnect from my community Losing identity
Erica	Visit family in the States regularly Work a lot, have an important role in my work environment Maintain my weight / stay fit Parenthood Maintain friendships with people who are important in my life Feel more connected to people/myself Be useful to my friends somehow	Be emotionally isolated from everyone, forever Never be close to anyone Violence (perpetrator, perpetuator) with partners or kids Being annoying, being useless Be an inattentive partner Infertility Alienate old and new friends
Alice	Life long friendships Connected to family and friends Living a healthy and balanced life Becoming a mother Loving relationship with current partner* Exploring and trying new things in life Live an honest (authentic) life	A single mom Having my partner leave me Having to always be in control*
Cornelia	Financial security and independence Relationship = ½ duplex To be wanted, not needed Love, happiness, children, choose 3 Biological mother Self-love In-person friends	Being financially dependent on someone else Feeling trapped / obligated in another relationship Finding out that it was his child, not mine Being needed Not being close to anyone* Never getting pregnant again Shame and disconnect*
Brie	Be a mother Having strong/close female friends and connections Get married Be better at keeping in touch with friends and family Practice more self-care Inspire others to live well Participate more in class Speak up more* Be more confident in my body/skin*	Being a bad mother Not have kids/be able to have kids Not being a good partner/losing partner Being lonely/not having strong connections Losing loved ones Not healthy/ illness/get sick*

Note. **Bold type possible selves** indicate the participants' selections for *What I really want*, and *What I really fear*, for hoped for selves and feared selves, respectively. Possible selves with an asterisk (*) indicate the *Most Likely* hoped for and feared self. Only possible selves that were linked to abusive relationships were included.

Brie whether she thought that the abusive relationship had influence on the possible selves that she generated, she responded:

The fact that it's just a part of who I am and my past so obviously it kinda goes with everything that I do in the future, if that makes sense.

In her opinion, her past relationship influenced every hope and fear that she brainstormed during the interview. Several of the participants mentioned difficulty in directly attributing a certain possible self with the past relationship because they believed there are other factors that have also played a role. Nonetheless, each participant discussed how they thought IPV influenced many of the possible selves they came up with.

Hoped for selves. The women shared many hoped for selves that they believed to be connected to their experiences of IPV. Often, they hoped for the opposite of what they had experienced, or that their hope for self was informed in some way by their past. On the surface, the connection between certain hoped for selves and participants' past relationships was not always clearly apparent, however, our conversations revealed the connections that were not obvious. For example, Callie included becoming a *runner* as a hoped for self. Without context, there seems to be no connection to her experiences of IPV, however, she shared that when she is running, she feels in complete control of herself – a *feeling [she] did not have during [her] relationship.*

Alice spoke about feeling isolated while in her past relationship, and so, she listed *staying connected to friends and family* as a hoped for self. Similarly, she included *lifelong friendships* as a hope because during her relationship, she explained, she felt like she had lost all of her friends. Brie also conveyed a hope to have *strong and close female friends and connections*, and explained this by commenting:

I've kinda always had more guy friends but after that experience it kind of made me realize that I really would like a lot more close female friends or just having strong connections with other women. I think that's really important and can be really powerful and central really in life, especially like when you get older and start to have children and stuff, I think that's really important. Just like women coming together, I think that's a really awesome thing.

Similar to what Alice and Brie mentioned, Erica's possible selves of *maintain friendships with people who are important in my life and feel more connected to people/myself* also refer to the desire for stronger relationships with others (in contrast to the disconnection she felt during the IPV experience).

Some participants came up with hoped for selves that represented an overall way of being that has been influenced by their experiences of IPV. Brie wrote that she wants to *inspire others to live well*, and explained:

I want to live in such a way that it will inspire others to, although that may sounds kind of cheezy, but just what I mean by that is just living well and setting a good example for other people. Like whether that's like friends and family, or like future children, that's really important to me.

Alice mentioned wanting to *live an honest (authentic) life*, where she hoped her actions would align with her values. Due to her sense of losing herself in her past relationship, her hope was that she becomes more connected to her true self.

Most participants shared hoped for selves that related directly to future intimate relationships. While you might expect that any person completing the PSMP would generate possible selves relating to intimate relationships, the women in this study explicitly linked these hoped for selves to their past experiences of IPV. For example, Alice wrote *loving relationship with my current partner* as her "most hoped for", and "most likely" hoped for self. When discussing this possible self, she shared that because of her past, she *know(s) what a loving relationship doesn't look like*, and therefore, has a clearer idea of what she hopes her current

relationship will become. Similarly, Cornelia wrote *love, happiness, children, choose 3* as her most hoped for self, referring to her belief that someday she might have all three.

Due to the age of the women in this study, it is not surprising that 5 participants included becoming mother as a hoped for self. However, the experience of IPV affected how some thought about motherhood. Alice, for instance, commented on her inclusion of *becoming a mother* as a hoped for self:

I have thought about before like what would I do if I had a daughter, or a son, and they are dating someone and I don't know what I would do if like I picked up on that they were like abusive to them. I think that would be really hard. So that's something I have thought about like before, how you as a parent help your child and all that.

Brie's comments about finding a partner who will be a supportive father also showed that IPV influenced how she thinks about future relationships and parenthood:

...just like making sure that the person I have a child with is a responsible person and isn't an abusive person, and is going to be there for their kids. I think that's, even if you can't stay together forever, like maybe that's not how it works, obviously that's the goal, that's the dream but just having someone that would still be there like for the kids even if it didn't work out.

Overall, the young women were able to generate many hoped for selves and showed excitement about their futures. There was a general sense of optimism when participants spoke about their futures, and many felt that most of their hoped for selves were achievable. One participant shared:

I am so hopeful for the future and where I want to go and I have so many goals, I don't know if there is enough time in this lifetime for me to complete them all.

Feared selves. Not surprisingly, all participants indicated that their experiences of IPV influenced several of their feared possible selves. As seen in Table 2, a number related to participants' concerns about family. Erica included a fear of using *violence with partners or kids*; Alice feared becoming a *single mom*; and Brie shared her fear of *being a bad mother*.

Feared selves also appeared to be connected to the particular feelings that the participants had while they were in the abusive relationship. For Cornelia, her fear of *feeling trapped / obligated in another relationship* and of *being needed* echo her experience with her previous partner. Likewise, Callie's fears of being *alone, isolated, stuck, and lost* match her description of herself during her abusive relationship. Erica discussed her feared selves in relation to her past:

“Not being a good partner” or “losing a partner”, I think that is a fear. I kinda always felt like I wasn't being a good partner, except for there was like odd moments where he would kinda put me on a pedestal.

For some participants, feared selves included images of themselves in the past that they hoped would not actualize again in the future – for example, Cornelia wrote *feeling trapped/obligated in another relationship*, and Alice listed *always having to be in control*. This is consistent with Markus and Nurius' (1986) original conceptualization of possible selves; they suggest that some possible selves can serve as reminders of past challenges to avoid in the future.

Somewhat surprisingly, Callie was the only participant who explicitly listed a fear of ending up in another abusive relationship, including *bad relationship* as a feared self. In our discussion, she shared:

Its funny cause I know that I have more wisdom, given my experience, and I know I can kind of pick up on like red flags as you would call them, but I still have this just huge fear that I am going to end up back where I was before. Even though I know that I am kinda smarter and I would probably be able to pick it up, it's one of those things that has happened before so it could happen again. So there's just like a very big fear about that happening, and maybe not getting out of it this time. So, that's probably one of the biggest ones.

Although Laura did not include “abusive relationship” as a specific feared self, she made several comments about fearing future IPV. She shared:

See like I think one of the biggest things that scares me is that if I got into a relationship and then it turned abusive I don't know if I could get out. And I think that's kinda of the scary, scary part.

And later:

I think one thing that kind of like rattles me is that if I was to get into an abusive relationship again, I don't know if I could leave. I know I should, and I have all like the warning signs and all that stuff...

When I asked Laura why, given our discussion, she hadn't included future IPV as a fear, she responded:

Well I was thinking that, like, if I just don't get into any more relationships it won't happen.

It seems unlikely that Laura, at her age, will not enter any subsequent intimate relationship. Perhaps her avoidance or disinterest in future intimate relationships is part of how she is coping with the challenges of past IPV. Participants in Wuest and Merrit-Grey's (2001) study also described resistance to entering new relationships. Those women described themselves as ambivalent about launching new relationships because of fear that "history would repeat itself" (p. 87). Avoiding future relationships, then, appears to instill a sense of safety for those who have experienced past IPV. For Laura, having experienced multiple abusive relationships seemed to have diminished her expectation of having a positive relationship in the future.

As one of her feared selves, Erica wrote *violence (perpetrator, perpetuator) with partners or kids*. As we debriefed her possible selves map, I mentioned to Erica my observation that she had chosen "perpetrator" and "perpetuator" but not "victim," to which she responded:

I mean, that's not something that really I worry about in the future too much. I feel like I am very sensitive now to signs that somebody is going to take a role like that. And it just doesn't take much for me to get a read on somebody that they have those you know like, very subtle things can cue me that somebody's not going to be able to be respectful of boundaries in that way. And I can jump on it like really quick and because I am not very attached to people anymore, it's a lot easier for me to extricate myself from those situations. And beyond that like I just, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. You know, I could tolerate... I don't think it's going to happen but if it does happen I could deal with it. I just couldn't deal with being a bad person.

Similar to Callie, Erica was confident that she would be able to notice signs that a person might become abusive, but unlike Callie, Erica seemed to be somewhat less concerned about the possibility actualizing. Participants implied that due to past experiences of IPV, they have learned to recognize warning signs and thus avoid subsequent IPV. It is also possible that participants' confidence in noticing future signs of abuse could be a response to the powerlessness they felt while in the abusive relationships; perhaps they feel a sense of control by thinking they are able to avoid a future situation that might become abusive.

The explanatory conversations that took place during the PSMP were fruitful in terms of understanding the meaning behind what selves were identified. Furthermore, some participants spoke about how failing to include certain possible selves held meaning as well. For example, Erica spoke about failing to include intimate relationships or sex in her hoped for selves because of how she has changed since the abusive relationship. She now sees herself as somewhat indifferent to relationships. Likewise, Brie spoke about how she didn't think she would end up in another abusive relationship, and therefore didn't write this as a feared self:

I actually didn't put "being in another abusive relationship" cause it's not a fear of mine... I don't think that would happen. And if it did I think I would be able to get out of it quickly because I know where that would take me.

Summary of possible selves. In their seminal writing, Markus and Nurius (1986) state that possible selves are influenced by relational contexts. The present findings are consistent with this, illustrating that experiences of IPV appear in how young women conceptualize their futures, and often in ways that are not necessarily expected. IPV was seen to impact multiple aspects of the participants' ideas about what is possible for themselves, including their interests and hobbies, sense of belonging, ideas about family and work, and future intimate relationships. Interestingly, all participants indicated that their "most hoped for" selves were connected to past

IPV; they often explained these connections in terms of learning about what they wanted that differed from what they previously experienced. This indicates how deeply the participants were affected, but also shows that negative experiences like IPV can influence not only what we wish to avoid but also what we wish to work toward in the future.

OTHER IMPACTS (CATEGORY 3)

This category includes impacts other than on sense of self that participants commonly discussed during the research interviews. Two themes were identified: the impacts of IPV on participants' subsequent relationships are presented first, followed by a discussion of what one participant referred to as the "silver lining" to her experiences of IPV.

Subsequent Relationships (Theme 7)

All participants spoke about how their past experiences of IPV have impacted subsequent intimate relationships, including issues surrounding intimacy and sexuality, and understanding what a healthy relationship might look like. Several of the participants have gone on to enjoy healthy and supportive relationships; for example, Alice shared that she *is engaged and in a healthy relationship*, and Brie described her current partner as *amazing* and a *really good listener*. While some describe positive changes with respect to intimate relationships since the abuse relationship ended, participants also shared some challenges that they still face.

Avoiding closeness or intimacy. Past research suggests that women's level of comfort engaging in subsequent intimate relationships after experiencing IPV is negatively impacted (Amar & Alexy, 2005; Crawford et al., 2009; Wuest & Merritt-Grey, 2001). In their qualitative study, Amar and Alexy found that women who had experienced IPV in college felt that subsequent dating relationships were unsafe and threatening. A major theme that arose from their study was that women often experienced *distrust* and thus used extra precautions when

considering dating someone new. Likewise, Crawford et al., (2009) found that women who have previously experienced IPV spoke about their fear of entering a new relationship, doubting their ability to find a good partner. Moreover, women in Wuest & Merrit-Grey's study spoke about their vigilance and caution when entering new relationships, such as watching for warning signs and being reluctant to trust other men. Findings in the present study were consistent with this previous research. Cornelia spoke about wanting to avoid getting close with another man:

For a long time, I just, I didn't want to... I didn't want to be close to anyone like that at all.

Callie acknowledged her caution about future intimate relationships resulting from her experiences of IPV by commenting:

I'm very careful about getting intimate with people in any shape or form. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing but I would say, if you kinda take a, I don't want to say regular, but if you take a regular person who is sort of guarded, you kinda add three layers to that and that's sorta where I'm at. So, I'm very very cautious, so it's still impacts me.

For Laura, finding what she called excuses such as *I'm not ready* or *it's not the right time* served to help her avoid becoming close with anyone. She referred to herself as *chicken shit* to become close with a man, and spoke about not knowing how to move past this feeling. It seems that for some participants, the desire to become close with a subsequent partner was there, but they could not (yet) allow themselves to be vulnerable. For instance, Erica described how before experiencing IPV, she *used to fall in love so hard and so easily*, but now she feels unable to do so in the same way. About her relationship with her current partner, she described:

Every time we get too close I just feel compelled to avoid him and like, yeah, I don't, I just can't get emotionally engaged and stay there.

Sex and sexuality. It is common for women who have experienced sexual violence to have challenges in expressing their sexuality, particularly because intimate experiences can become associated with the pain and fear of being assaulted (Daglieri, 2013). Four participants in

the present study shared that experiencing IPV in the past has impacted their sexuality, that is, their feelings of attraction towards others and ability to engage in sexual activity. Several of the women shared stories of sexual abuse within their relationships, including rape. Not surprisingly, engaging in sexual activity with future partners has been challenging for them. Brie, for example, spoke in depth about how there are times when she is unable to proceed with sex. She shared:

Sexual things can be hard sometimes too...like it's not something that happens very often. But sometimes I have to just be like, "OK, I just need to cuddle tonight." Not that it's something you're thinking about or afraid of but it's almost just like your body remembers that, and it's hard to let that go...

For Brie, it seems that despite wanting to have sex, she finds that her body signals to her to hold back at times. Similarly, Laura described her difficulty in deciding to have sex by sharing:

I think one of the issues that still kinda comes up is that like being intimate is a lot more challenging for me. Like if it's like, OK if we are having fun, but once you get to that point in the relationship where you are like trying to achieve intimacy, I freak out.

Participants' tendency to avoid or withdraw from engaging in sex is consistent with past research. Berlo and Ensink (2000) discuss how sexual arousal, satisfaction, and desire can be inhibited from sexual assault, and that avoiding intimacy is common. Moreover, some participants in Amar and Alexy's (2005) qualitative study on the impact of IPV also spoke about the difficulty in engaging in sex; one participant talked about no longer being sexually active.

Discussing the negative impacts of sexual violence must be positioned alongside the reality that women are also able to heal their relationship with their bodies and reclaim their sexuality (Daglieri, 2013). Callie discussed her mending relationship with sex, describing how she has since had some positive sexual experiences. With a sense of relief, she spoke about realizing that sex isn't a *punishment* and that it could actually be enjoyable for her. While

acknowledging the impacts of her past, she spoke about an important shift in perspective about her own sexuality:

The first three years of my sexual life was not something I enjoyed, so I just assumed that I didn't have a sex drive because it was something that I hated and it wasn't something enjoyable or pleasurable you know, anything like that...I still have a hard time asserting myself, kind of as a, even in a trusting relationship, I still struggle with that. But I actually feel like a sexual being now, whereas before I didn't, I felt like somebody else's sexual property.

Learning about healthy relationships. Four of the participants in the present study discussed having a better idea of what a healthy relationship might look like after having experienced IPV. Not surprisingly, it seemed that for some women, experiencing challenges in their past relationship gave them a clearer idea of what they wanted (or wanted to avoid) with subsequent partners. Cornelia, for example, spoke about her sense of obligation to financially support her past partner. She explained

He compared me to a load-bearing wall in a house. And he was right, and I saw it too, I told him he was right, but that that, that wasn't what I wanted, I don't want to be a load-bearing wall in anyone's house ever. I want to be half of a duplex.

Having experienced the burden of being the *load-bearing wall*, Cornelia asserted that she has a better idea of the kind of balance she would like to achieve with a future partner with respect to financial responsibility.

Likewise, Callie spoke in depth of her expanded awareness about what a healthy relationship could be like. For her, dating a new partner was what she called a *corrective* experience, and by contrast, helped her to acknowledge how abusive her past relationship was.

She commented:

I just kind of learned sort of what love actually meant, like he was very respectful, and there was mutual respect, and there was kind of mutual caring, and there was no anger or lashing out, and he allowed me to kind of be myself, and I had freedom. Which took a lot of learning for me because I was very fearful in the relationship, so I was very restrained, and anytime I did something that I knew might ex would have gotten mad

about, I became really afraid with him, so we had a lot of kind of, communication I think was the big thing... once I started to learn that what you would typically behave in a relationship was not going to result in something bad, I slowly started to learn how bad that past relationship actually was, because I don't think I fully understood it even until then.

Arnett (2004) discusses how emerging adulthood is a period of exploration. During this time, young people are learning about relationships and developing an idea of what kind of intimate relationships they want for themselves in the future. The findings in the present study support these ideas in that the participants described learning about how they want to be treated by an intimate partner. After having left their partners, they seemed to have a clearer sense of what they hope for and wanted in future relationships.

“Silver Lining” (Theme 8)

The present findings have highlighted several of the challenges and negative impacts that arise from experiencing IPV. While IPV is undoubtedly a negative experience, each participant in this study discussed positive changes or growth that have resulted from overcoming IPV. This is similar to what Amar & Alexy (2005) and Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Cann (2006) found. On a cautionary note, though, Anderson et al. (2012) remind us that even if women talk about personal strength or positive changes after experiencing IPV, we “must be careful not to minimize victimization and its often devastating consequences as a person is *not* better off, for instance, because she experiences domestic abuse” (p. 1295). That stated, it is important to recognize stories of strength and resiliency, as well as of examples of personal growth that women have achieved through overcoming very difficult relationships.

Finding the silver lining. Cobb et al. (2006) suggests that women who have endured abusive relationships, and who have left their partners, are often able to find something positive out of a negative situation. Twenty-five out of 100 women in Amar and Alexy’s (2005)

qualitative study on the impact of IPV on young women believed that their experiences in the abusive relationship had actually provided them with a learning opportunity, and were a “catalyst for self-learning and growth” (p. 169). Consistent with those findings, participants in the present study also talked about positive changes. Callie spoke about *seeing positive changes* since leaving her partner and Erica believes she has *a new lease on life*. Brie broadly addressed this notion by stating:

Like as awful as it was, it's like, there are a lot of positive things that I see in my life now because of that, or because of being strong enough to leave that, if that makes sense.

And later:

Overall I would say like, as shitty, for lack of a better word, as that relationship was and debilitating in a lot of ways, ultimately it was like getting out of it was a huge catalyst for change in my life.

Importantly, in both comments Brie makes the distinction that *being strong enough to leave* and *getting out* of the relationship is what created positive changes in her life, not enduring the abuse.

She described making the conscious effort to redefine her experience of IPV by sharing:

You'll never be able to make that positive but you can kind of try and find the silver linings in it.

Participants also spoke about developing positive qualities after overcoming IPV, such as their ability to be empathic and caring for others. Callie mentioned:

I can see the experience sort of helping me in a lot of ways, to be able to sort of understand people better in situations like this...I want to help people...I consider myself to be empathetic.

Similarly, Alice spoke about her increased capacity to care for others:

I feel like I have a deeper empathy for other people now too... I have like always really cared about other people and wanting other people to be happy, but I'd say even more so now.

During the interviews, Alice described how since her relationship, she has been able to provide support to other women who have disclosed their experiences of IPV to her. Crawford et al. (2009) similarly found that women believed a positive effect of overcoming IPV was to be able to make connections and offer support to others with similar experiences.

Erica commented that after leaving her abusive relationship, she began to see herself as a *multi-dimensional* person because of the hardships she faced. Referring to her personal growth from the relationship, she shared:

I have wisdom from that that maybe isn't evident to other people but at least it's clear to me. It gives me an understanding of other people who live lives different from my own.

The positive growth that participants referred to throughout their narratives could be explained by what Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) refer to as *posttraumatic growth*. In their words, posttraumatic growth refers to:

the experience of individuals whose development, at least in some areas, has surpassed what was present before the struggle with crises occurred. The individual has not only survived, but has experienced changes that are viewed as important, and that go beyond what was the previous status quo (p.4).

Tedeschi and Calhoun highlight that growth arises from the aftermath of the trauma, rather than from the trauma itself. As the stories in the present study reflect, overcoming IPV was what facilitated several positive changes in participants' lives.

Cobb et al. (2006) conducted a quantitative study to explore whether it was possible for women who have experienced IPV to also experience posttraumatic growth. Participants completed a posttraumatic growth inventory that assessed 5 factors: new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. Overall, their findings

suggest that women who have experienced IPV often experienced posttraumatic growth, most commonly in terms of personal strength, new possibilities, and relating to others.

Importantly, acknowledging the presence of growth does not imply an end to the hardships that women may face during and after IPV (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The participants in this study exemplified the range of impacts and the different degrees of healing acknowledged in the literature. Those who have experienced IPV may notice continued challenges long after leaving their partners, and at the same time, they may appreciate the positive direction their lives are taking.

Making a difference. At the end of the second research interview, I asked participants to discuss why they decided to become involved in the study. Four participants mentioned that they wanted to help create positive change, and to hopefully make a difference for others. Brie discussed how since leaving the abusive relationship, she consciously makes an effort to better other people's lives. She shared:

Another thing that's different now is I am trying to find ways to like either volunteer, or like make a difference in other people's lives, whereas before I would say that I was lot more focused on myself. Um, or like myself and [EX-BOYFRIEND] kind of thing.

Reflecting on her participation in the study, Cornelia commented on the importance of raising awareness of different forms of IPV:

Studies like this are important...I think it's important for other people to acknowledge and be aware that relationships don't have to be physically violent for them to be difficult and for them to be...I'm seeing the word traumatic, it's not really what I want, but traumatic.

Similarly, Laura spoke about her desire to help others through her participation in this study by saying:

Well, just honestly, I think it is so important...it kinda starts with my values like reciprocity and stuff, if you go through a bad situation how can you make sure it doesn't happen again to someone else.

When I asked her why she became involved in the study, she replied:

I think it's just important to try to create change.

Participating in research is one way that women might feel like they are taking action about what they experienced in their past relationship. The participants' perceptions of their involvement in the present study echo findings in past research. For example, in Cambell's (2009) study on why sexual assault survivors chose to participate in face-to-face research interviews, participants shared that they became involved in the study because they wanted to help other survivors, help themselves, and support research on sexual assault. Due to the self-selecting nature of participation in the present study, it is understandable that the women spoke about wanting to help others who have similar experiences.

Summary of Chapter 5

In this chapter, I presented the findings from the across-participant thematic analysis. The themes and subthemes illustrate the commonalities among the participants' interviews. In addition to talking about experiences of IPV, participants spoke about a variety of impacts of IPV on their lives including their sense of self and subsequent intimate relationships. The findings suggest that past experiences of IPV influence many areas of a person's perception of their future beyond intimate relationships. Furthermore, participants spoke about the positive changes in their lives since leaving the relationship. The implications of these results, along with a discussion of future research and the limitations of the present study are presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 6 – Summary, Implications, and Final Reflections

In this final chapter, I first summarize the major findings from the present study. I then discuss the boundaries of the study along with the implications for theory, research, and methodology. I briefly present the implications of the findings for counselling practice, and I close the chapter, and this manuscript, with some final reflections.

Summary of Major Findings

Findings from this study contribute to the understanding of how experiences of IPV impact young women after they are no longer in the relationship. The main research question for the present study was: *How do experiences of IPV impact emerging adult women's sense of self?* Additional questions were: How do experiences of IPV show up in women's current and future perceptions of the self? How do experiences of IPV impact emerging adult women's lives after having left their abusive partner? In open-ended narrative interviews, six participants described their experiences, the impact of IPV, and engaged in the PSMP. As part of analysis, I utilized Rhodes' (2000) ghostwriting method to create stories that reflected what the participants shared during the interviews. Thematic data analysis supported three major categories: Experiences during and after the relationship; Impact on sense of self; and, Other impacts.

Participants' experiences of IPV varied greatly: Some described frequent and severe physical abuse, some spoke about verbal and financial abuse, and others described sexual violence and stalking. Nonetheless, their stories echoed similarities with respect to the challenges of leaving the relationship. While sources of relational support such as friends and family members were helpful at times, participants often found themselves isolated from these people when they needed them the most. Further disconnection occurred for those who sought support from the legal system but found the response to be inadequate.

The findings suggest that a woman's sense of self is profoundly impacted by IPV. These participants described feeling lost and inauthentic during their relationship, and that rebuilding the self afterwards was a challenging process. They described how IPV altered the way that they perceived themselves, sometimes diminishing positive ideas of the self, but also gave them a sense of strength and resiliency. Multiple dimensions of future self image (i.e., with respect to relationships, family, health, hobbies, personal characteristics), in the form of possible selves, also were influenced by past experiences of IPV.

Notably, participants spoke about the multiple ways that subsequent intimate relationships have been affected by past IPV, such as increased caution about entering new relationships and difficulty engage in sexual activity. Although participants' stories indicated various challenges related to subsequent intimate partners, some also described having a better understanding (and expectation) of what a healthy relationship might look like. Participants spoke about the "silver linings" or positive changes that have occurred since their relationship, such as developing positive personal qualities, and having a revived and optimistic outlook on life.

Overall, participants' experiences were similar to previous research in a number of ways. The findings also raise new information that goes beyond what past research has already shown. Specifically, the findings suggest that past experiences of IPV influence future possible selves – an area that has not been previously explored. That positive subsequent intimate relationships can facilitate healing from past IPV is also a finding that did not appear in past literature. In addition, this study contributes to the small body of research that directly explores the emerging adult population and the impact of IPV on sense of self.

Boundaries of the Study

As with all qualitative research, the findings are not meant to be generalized beyond the participants' context. Nevertheless, the findings could illuminate impacts that other women who share a similar environment and experiences might face. These findings may be representative of other emerging adult women who have experienced IPV from a male partner. That the women in the present study were recruited from a university should not be overlooked; there could be differences between the way that women who pursue post-secondary education are impacted by IPV compared to those who do not, possibly related to factors such as socioeconomic status, and opportunities to seek post secondary education. The women who participated in this study were well educated and spoke about having social support, as well as financial resources.

As a counsellor in training, I understand that trust is necessary for people to feel comfortable sharing their stories. Although I spoke with participants on the phone and corresponded via email for screening purposes and to arrange the interviews, we had only just met prior to the first interview. Because of this, we had little time to develop rapport before the interview began. I imagine that discussing sensitive matters such as IPV would be challenging with a stranger, and I appreciated participants' openness. One participant seemed somewhat apprehensive about sharing; she mentioned that she didn't know how much I wanted to hear about the details of what happened in her relationship. Another participant was unsure of whether her experiences of IPV "counted" or fit with what I was looking for, when what she shared clearly fit the criteria for participation. Although I believe that the young women shared their experiences openly, it is possible that more interviews over time might have yielded more in-depth data in some areas.

As a qualitative researcher, I acknowledge the subjective nature of the data, and that the person I am has an impact on the findings. There were some instances where this was clear, for example, when one participant hesitated to tell me about her abortion because I was pregnant at the time of the interviews. She expressed her concern that it would be upsetting to me to hear her describe what had happened. Other participants also commented or inquired about my pregnancy. There are likely other ways in which I had an impact on the research interview.

There was variation in the length of interviews, and in turn, variation in the degree of detail that participants shared. Although I referred to pre-planned questions during the research interviews, I was open to the conversations taking their own form and to follow the lead of the participants. While remaining focused on my research questions, I also respected the conversation paths that participants wanted to take. As a result, some participants shared more than others about different elements of their experiences.

Implications for Theory and Research

The present study has important implications for theory and research. The findings fit with, and extend, current literature in a number of areas. Interpretivism was an appropriate overarching philosophy of science for the study of IPV as it honours the subjective and individual nature of people's experiences. Although similarities existed, the impact of IPV for the women in the present study was subjective. Not only did the participants have varying experiences of IPV, they also differed in terms of their reactions to the relationship, as well as the meaning they constructed from it.

Relational cultural theory (RCT) offers a promising framework for the study of IPV and its impacts for women. The main tenet that positive development occurs in the context of positive interpersonal connections draws our attention to the way that IPV can constrict a

person's potential for growth. Defining positive development and healing in terms of connection, rather than separation, reflects the stories that the women in the present study shared. RCT presents a model of strength that is relational, not individual, thus emphasizing the importance of interpersonal connection (Jordan, 2008).

The women in this study narrated the difficulties in being their authentic selves, and of developing and maintaining a positive sense of self during the abusive relationship. Some denied parts of themselves in order to keep them safe and others felt lost and unclear about who they were. From a relational perspective, we need to understand IPV as a *chronic disconnection* that interferes with a woman's ability to grow within her relationship (Jordan, 2009; Miller, 1976). From their stories, we can notice how experiences of IPV constrained the participants' opportunities for self-discovery and self-expression. Moreover, RCT suggests that when people feel unsafe, their ability to live authentically drastically diminishes, often resulting in further isolation (Jordan, 2008). More research is needed to better understand the long term impacts of IPV on women's sense of self.

Positive relationships are central to a growth-fostering environment (Jordan, 2009), and thus, the need for positive personal connection outside of an abusive relationship is paramount. The women in this study shared stories about personal connection during and after the relationship that seemed to be important sources of support. Past research has explored sources of personal support for women who experienced IPV (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Fortin, et al., 2012; Riger et al., 2002), however, little is known about how these relationships impact a woman's sense of self. Future research is needed to better understand how other personal relationships during and after IPV play a role in women's identity development. Understanding the processes by which other people impact a woman's sense of self is valuable, given that

leaving an abusive relationship can take some time; if women are surrounded by other growth-fostering relationships while experiencing IPV, they may have more opportunities for positive development during challenging times. Perhaps outside relationships would give women an opportunity to be their “authentic” selves, potentially mitigating the negative impact of IPV on sense of self.

Through his conceptualization of emerging adulthood, Arnett (2004) maintains that identity is rarely achieved by 18 years of age, rather, identity exploration continues well into emerging adulthood and beyond. This is a time of transition toward adulthood, gaining self-knowledge, and revising ideas about self and how the future can be shaped. Although emerging adults begin to make more enduring decisions that they did not necessarily make during their adolescent years, the opportunity for learning, growth, possibilities, and change is ever present (Arnett, 2004). It became apparent through the young women’s stories that their identity, or sense of self, changed as a result of experiencing IPV; it was also apparent that change and growth continued to take place after the relationship ended. Ideas about self, therefore, seem to be fluid, malleable, and subject to change during emerging adulthood. More research is indicated in order to better understand sense of self in the age group.

To my knowledge, there has been no previous research that has explored the connection between past experiences of IPV and Markus and Nurius’ (1986) conception of *possible selves*. While some studies have found that major life events are represented in a person’s ideas of the future, past research has not explored how IPV influences a woman’s repertoire of possible selves. The present study contributes to the possible selves literature by suggesting that abusive relationship influence emerging adult women’s possible selves in a variety of ways. Not only do women indicate that IPV impacts their hoped for, feared, and expected selves in terms of future

relationships, they also identify possible selves in other realms (such as work, family, and health) to have been influenced by experiences of IPV. As possible selves “derive from representations of the self in the past” (Markus & Nurius, p. 954), it follows that future images would be related to past IPV. What is new, however, is the notion that past IPV influences other areas that are not obviously related to intimate relationships. Furthermore, participants commonly indicated that hopes and dreams for their futures (such as being healthy, becoming a mother, or being independent), rather than just fears, were connected to past IPV. This finding suggests that IPV plays a role in how women think about many aspects of what they hope, and fear, for their futures beyond intimate relationships. Future research that further explores the connection between IPV and possible selves is needed.

Participants’ descriptions of their experiences with the criminal justice system raise important issues that warrant further research. Several participants narrated how they felt let down, betrayed, and further victimized after reporting their experiences of IPV to the police. This is consistent with concerns raised by Wolf et al. (2003) and Amar and Alexy (2005) that women often feel a sense of dissatisfaction with how police have responded to their reports. Being invalidated or otherwise unsupported by a system that should provide protection could certainly impact a woman’s sense of self, and could also impact the conclusions she draws about how she expects to be treated by others. More research is needed to better understand how the reporting and court processes impact women who report IPV and how they can be better supported. When abusive behaviour is acknowledged, yet met with seemingly insignificant punishment for the perpetrators, what messages are received by those who experienced the abuse, and by others hearing these stories? What conclusions might they draw about how they are valued in society? These questions, while not explicitly addressed by participants, are

undoubtedly related to identity and the way young women understand themselves within the world.

Descriptions of ways that past experiences of IPV impacted subsequent intimate relationships were common in participants' stories, as other research has shown (Daglieri, 2013; Wuest & Merritt-Grey, 2001). IPV can impede a women's ability to engage in what might be considered "normal" activities relating to intimate relationships (dating, becoming close, and engaging in physical intimacy) without being overly cautious, sceptical, avoidant, or even triggered. Nonetheless, some participants described positive subsequent relationships, and spoke about how their new partner was a critical source of support in overcoming the impacts of IPV. Processes like being patient with physical intimacy and validating past experiences of abuse were described. Future research could explore the particular relational processes in subsequent intimate relationship that help women achieve the kind of connections they hope for. This knowledge could help inform couples of ways to help one another move through challenges that arose from past IPV and to construct healthy, supportive, and corrective relational experiences.

Implications for Methodology

Utilizing qualitative methodology was appropriate for the present study as it enabled participants to share their stories with depth and richness, and to the extent they wished. Little is known about how IPV impacts emerging adult women's sense of self, and thus, exploratory case study design was appropriate to investigate the research questions.

Conducting two individual interviews with each participant provided the length of time that facilitated detailed sharing of often-complex stories. Having a second interview gave participants the opportunity to add to what they had previously shared. Moreover, the flexible and open nature of the interviews seemed to establish a level of comfort that helped the

participants to feel safe when talking about sensitive matters. Being open to following the participants' path during the research conversations allowed topics to arise that may not have had I followed a prescribed interview script.

The open-ended narrative interviews were an effective research tool for gathering information; in addition, this approach was helpful for the participants. When reflecting on their experiences of taking part in the study, most of the women mentioned that it was helpful for them to tell their stories and to be heard. Moreover, sharing their stories in a non-counselling context also seemed to be beneficial. For example, Brie compared her experience describing her story to me during this research study with both a counselling context and a more formal context such as when reporting to police. She shared:

I was really apprehensive to talk to you. And I think part of that is just the stigma... I think you found a really good balance of interviewing without having it be cold. You were able to listen and empathize, but it's still different than a counselling role. So I think I was just nervous because I had only really had a counselling role or like a really really cold like "what are the details."

And later Brie mentioned:

I think even having done this with you it's really helped a lot...I think it really helps, it's really cathartic, and just having the space where it's OK to talk about it makes it more OK to talk about it the next time I guess.

Callie also discussed her appreciation for the opportunity to tell her story in a non-judgmental, yet non-counselling, setting. When I asked her how it was for her to share her experiences with me, she answered:

Good! It's good to share this story without being in a therapy setting, or you know, being in a setting where somebody knew me and feels surprised that that's something... it's good to share in such like a non-judgmental, like we're not trying to fix anything, we're just gonna have a conversation about it, because that doesn't happen in every day life.

These comments reflect the notion that simply talking about difficult experiences in an open and accepting environment can be a healing process in itself. Jordan (2008) discussed how feelings

of shame can often arise during periods of isolation and disconnection. The “antidote” to these feelings of shame, she says, is “to be respectfully and empathically ‘listened’ back into voice and ultimately back into connection” (Jordan, p. 195). Conveying empathy, warmth, and acceptance during the interviews could have contributed to the participants’ sense of positive connection.

When conducting research with young adults on sensitive matters like IPV, it is important to trust that participants will engage to the degree to which they are comfortable. While it is necessary to be mindful of sensitive areas, it is equally important to empower women to choose for themselves how they would like to share their stories. One participant spoke about a counselling experience where she was not allowed to talk about her trauma because her counsellor did not deem her *ready*. She shared her reaction to her counsellor with the following comment:

I came here to talk about trauma and you are telling that I am not ready to talk about trauma and for me, that was like, not only was it counter productive but it's almost like that impression that it gives you that, oh, this is so bad that we can't talk about it, it might be bad for you to even talk about it...

And later:

It's not like if I don't talk about it I won't think about it. And I want to feel like other people would have confidence that I could handle that even if I was dealing with it in a more emotional way than I normally do.

The participants in the present study seemed to appreciate the opportunity to tell their stories in a matter-of-fact way, without being treated with such fragility, and without any expectation to delve into emotions, as they might do in a counselling setting.

The PSMP was a helpful tool to facilitate participants’ exploration about how they wanted their futures to look (or not look) in a specific way. One participant shared that after completing the PSMP, she felt motivated to begin creating a vision board at home, and she planned to use ideas from the PSMP to get started. Another participant described how the PSMP

helped her to generate ideas about the future that she would not have necessarily thought about if she hadn't completed the process.

The conversations that took place during the PSMP added significant depth to the data that was generated from the interview questions. In particular, the discussions about which possible selves were related to IPV were especially meaningful. These conversations highlighted the many different layers of participants' lives that were impacted by past IPV that may not have been apparent by simply reading the lists of possible selves. Transcribing these conversations and including them within the overall thematic analysis added meaning to the findings. I believe it is important, therefore, to encourage participants to expand on their possible selves through discussion when conducting the PSMP for research purposes. Moreover, having more than one way for participants to share information had a positive effect on data quality; different interview methods might connect to personal preferences that could help participants discuss their experiences. In other words, some may find it easier to discuss their experiences open-endedly with little structure (open-ended narrative interviews), whereas others might prefer more direction (PSMP).

Implications for Practice

The present research findings have important implications for counselling practice by providing valuable information for those working with women who have experienced IPV, and also for women who are currently involved in an abusive relationship. Broadly speaking, the results highlight how a woman's sense of self is impacted by IPV. It is important for counsellors to create opportunities for women to explore different aspects of their personal identity, and how it has been affected by their relationship. Several women in the present study spoke about losing parts of their identity, or not living authentically while involved with their partners; counsellors

might help women who are currently in abusive relationships to consider what parts of themselves they are losing, or minimizing, and if safe to do so, how they might build these again. Counsellors could play a role in helping women who no longer experience IPV to rebuild a positive sense of self. Because women who experience IPV may define themselves in relation to their past partner, helping them to re-discover or re-create their sense of self independent of their past relationship is important. For some women in the present study, thinking about future hopes and dreams via the PSMP seemed to connect them with their authentic selves. The experience of IPV can impact a woman's sense of self long after the relationship has ended, and thus, counsellors need to inquire about these impacts even if a woman has been away from her past partner for a significant length of time.

The young women in the present study spoke about positive aspects of the self, both during their past relationship, and after it had ended. Although women who are currently involved with an abusive partner might describe losing parts of their identity as well as negative self-perceptions, they will also likely have positive personal qualities of which they are proud. Inviting discussions during counselling sessions about positive self perceptions and personal strengths is important; for women who experience abuse, bolstering the sense of self could help them either make changes within their relationship, or help them leave the relationship altogether. For those who have already left abusive relationships, self-descriptions of personal strength and resiliency are common (Anderson et al., 2012; Lynch, 2013). Presenting the opportunity for women to tell their stories of strength, as well as acknowledging and celebrating the positive qualities that become apparent in these stories could help facilitate a positive sense of self. A strengths-based approach to counselling women who have experienced IPV may

further reduce the internalized stigmatization, self blame, and negative self-perception that can linger long after the relationship has ended.

Like the women in the present study, others who have experienced IPV might also describe positive changes in their lives that have resulted from their experiences. Focusing on growth or meaning that has been created in spite of IPV is not intended to deny or diminish the consequences of their experiences, but rather, it can help women develop narratives that include stories of strength. Anderson et al. (2012) speak of the often-concurrent experiences of suffering and growth:

The pain individuals experience from domestic violence should not be minimized. Yet, it does not have to be the centerpiece of one's identity. Standing alongside the entire range of debilitating effects of trauma, most survivors display a stunning capacity for survival and perseverance (p. 1280).

It could be beneficial, therefore, for counsellors to talk to women who have left abusive partners about how they have made positive changes in their lives, and what meaning they now make of their past experiences. Without assuming that all women experience growth after IPV, being open to this possibility and presenting the opportunity to discuss this could be valuable.

It is consistently illustrated in IPV literature that leaving an abusive partner is often a challenging and complex process (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Baly, 2010; Edwards, et al., 2012). Helping professionals must honour the complexity of this process, and work with clients at their particular stage of readiness to leave. Although the Transtheoretical Model of intentional behaviour change (DiClemente & Prochaska, 1998) was initially intended for addiction work, the concepts and stages of change could help counsellors choose appropriate interventions depending on a client's particular situation. For example, with a client in *precontemplation* who

is not fully aware of or ready to acknowledge the extent that her partner is abusive (as several participants in the present study described), it might not be appropriate to talk about ways to leave her partner. Rather, awareness-raising interventions might be more helpful. Likewise, a client in *contemplation* who discusses wanting to leave her partner but feeling stuck could benefit from referrals to community resources, or from developing a safe plan to leave.

Counsellors need to adapt their approach to the particular context of the women they work with.

The findings in the present study suggest that women who experience IPV enjoy many positive aspects of being in an intimate relationship; they do not see their relationship as entirely negative (Anderson, et al., 2003; Edwards, et al., 2012). In fact, several women spoke about being treated well *most of the time*. When counselling women who experience, or who have experienced IPV, I believe that it is necessary to honour the positive aspects of the relationship and of the partner. Making the assumption that the partner is a “bad person” in general could lead to shame and embarrassment for the client. Demonstrating understanding about why a woman might have chosen to stay with her partner communicates compassion and acceptance. Importantly, honouring the positive elements of the relationship is not intended to accept the abuse, but rather, to demonstrate respect and acceptance for the client.

Final Reflections

This in-depth study on the impacts of IPV for emerging adult women underscores the relational perspective that chronic disconnections in relationships can inhibit self-development and can influence the way that women perceive their futures. Although IPV often leads to negative physical and mental health consequences, women show exceptional strength and potential to make positive changes in their lives despite the challenges. Positive relationships were instrumental in helping these women overcome IPV and restore a positive sense of self.

What became apparent during this study was the way that multiple relational influences play a role in how women are impacted by IPV. There are people beyond the perpetrators of IPV that seem to exacerbate the extent to which women are victimized. Women spoke about family members who were non-responsive to the violence, friends who disengaged when they were needed most, acquaintances who blamed them, and legal professionals who minimized their stories: these experiences illustrate a culture that seems to permit IPV (Heise, 1998). As a social construction, the sense of self is created through interpersonal relationships. Thus, we form ideas about ourselves from our social interactions and define ourselves in relation to others. What conclusions can we expect individuals to draw about themselves when they are blamed, shamed, denied, or ignored after being abused?

Continued effort to support women who find themselves in challenging relationships is needed. Further knowledge about how other relational processes can provide support for women in abusive relationships may help mitigate some of the negative outcomes of IPV. The more we understand about how IPV impacts women, the more aligned our efforts will be in successfully addressing the problem and in supporting women during their healing processes.

In closing, I want to acknowledge the participants' courage to share their experiences of IPV for this research endeavour. Their stories of strength, perseverance, and resilience shone through during this process. The participants shared a desire for others to know that their experiences of IPV are only *one* piece of their life story. While they can see how IPV has had an influence on the direction of their lives, the way they view themselves, and how they image their futures, it certainly does not define who they are today.

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Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Project title: Exploring the impact of intimate partner abuse on emerging adult women's identity

You are invited to participate in a study entitled *Exploring the impact of intimate partner violence on emerging adult women's identity: A multiple case study design* that is being conducted by Kate Butler.

I am a graduate student in the department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria. You may contact me if you have further questions by email (kborsato@uvic.ca). As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Counselling Psychology. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Anne Marshall and Dr. Natalee Popadiuk. You may contact them by email at amarshal@uvic.ca and popadiuk@uvic.ca.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research is to learn about how past experiences in very difficult or abusive intimate relationships influence the ways that young women view themselves currently and in the future. Very little is known about how very difficult intimate relationships that could be considered abusive impacts women's' identity development and what they see as possible for themselves in the future.

Importance of this Research

Research of this type is important because the results will help improve the supports for women who have experienced difficulties, such as abuse, in their intimate relationships. The results will also contribute to our knowledge about how these difficulties might influence identity development.

Participant Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as someone who has experienced what could be considered intimate partner abuse or violence in a past relationship, and because you have volunteered to become involved in the study.

What is involved?

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include two individual interviews lasting between 1 and 1.5 hours each. Both interviews will take place in MacLaurin A348, at the University of Victoria, or at a mutually agreed-upon private location. Both interviews will be audio-recorded.

The first interview will consist of several open-ended questions about your experiences of intimate partner abuse and how it has impacted you.

The second interview will include a mapping exercise where you will describe the possibilities you see for yourself in the future. With your permission, a photograph will be taken of your final map to be used for later analysis and in dissemination of results.

After the second interview I will write a short summary of the experiences that you shared with me. This summary will be included in my thesis report. I will email it to you for your suggestions or changes.

Time commitment

Participation in this study involves a time commitment of approximately 2 hours.

Potential Benefits

Participation in this research may be of benefit to you through being able to share your stories and think about your possibilities for the future. The results will also inform those who are in helping roles of ways to better support young women with similar experiences.

Potential Risks

There are some potential emotional risks to you by participating in this research. These include feeling upset or uncomfortable when describing past experiences that are negative or unpleasant. You may choose to end either interview at any time and/or stop the recorder, with no explanation or consequences. If I notice you becoming distressed, I will stop and ask you how you would like to proceed. If you choose to end the interview, I will provide you with referrals to counselling and supportive resource information.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you withdraw from the study part way through, you will be asked if you want the data you have contributed to be part of analysis. If you agree, your data will remain in the study. If not, your taped interview will be erased and the transcript and all field notes or data associated with you will be destroyed.

Ongoing Consent

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will ask you to sign the second signature line on this consent form at the beginning of the second interview.

Anonymity

In terms of protecting your anonymity, you will be invited to choose a pseudonym to be used instead of your name throughout the study. I will not use any identifying information in the summaries, and you will have the opportunity to remove or alter any information that you believe would reveal your identity.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be protected by storing written notes and any printed transcribed data in a locked filing cabinet at the Centre for Youth and Society. I will be the only person to have access to the data. I will complete all interview transcriptions using my password-protected computer. Audio files, interview transcriptions, and any identifying information will be stored in an encrypted electronic file on my computer to increase protection. In order to protect the confidentiality of third parties, please refrain from providing information about another person that could identify them. No information that could identify a third party will be included in public dissemination of results.

Dissemination of Results

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: final thesis manuscript, presentations at scholarly and community meetings, and in published articles. If you are interested, a summary of the results can be made available to you.

Disposal of Data

All audio recordings will be deleted after the transcription process is complete. All electronic data will be deleted and all paper copies of data will be shredded and disposed of after 5 years.

Contacts

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include myself (Kate Butler, kborsato@uvic.ca, (250) 589-2198) and my supervisors (Dr. Anne Marshall, amarshal@uvic.ca, 250.721.7815; and Dr. Natalee Popadiuk, popadiuk@uvic.ca, 250.721.7809). In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250.472.4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

PARTICIPATION

_____ (*initial only if you agree to this*) I agree that a photograph of my final map be shown in the thesis and reported results such as presentations at scholarly meetings, community settings and published articles.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project

<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
Signature for Ongoing Consent (Interview #2)	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>

I would like to receive a summary of the research findings via email: (circle) YES NO

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

Research Participation Opportunity

IMPACT OF VERY DIFFICULT OR ABUSIVE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

What is the purpose of the study?

- ❖ This study explores the impact of difficult or abusive relationships on young women's sense of self now and in the future

What are the participation criteria?

- ❖ Female
- ❖ Between 19 and 29 years old (inclusive)
- ❖ Have been in a very difficult or abusive relationship with a past intimate partner for at least two months
- ❖ Have been out of that relationship for at least one year
- ❖ Are willing to talk about how this past relationship has impacted your life

What is involved?

- ❖ 2 individual interviews of about 1 hour each

Who is conducting the research?

- ❖ This study is being conducted by Kate Butler, a graduate student in counselling psychology at the University of Victoria, for her thesis research

If you are interested in participating, contact Kate to arrange a screening interview.

EMAIL: kborsato@uvic.ca

PHONE: (250) 721-7852*

*This is a research office phone number, not a personal phone. Please leave a message and you will be contacted shortly.

Appendix C: Screening Interview Script

“Thank you for contacting me for possible participation in my thesis study. As you probably remember, my research is about how very difficult or abusive intimate relationships impact young women. The purpose of this phone call is to find out if you fit the criteria for my study.”

1. BECAUSE WE ARE BOTH UVIC STUDENTS, THERE IS A CHANCE THAT WE MIGHT KNOW EACH OTHER, AND I JUST WANTED TO CHECK WITH YOU BEFORE WE BEGIN.

IF THERE IS NO PREVIOUS RELATIONSHIP OR ACQUAINTANCE, MOVE TO #2

IF RESEARCHER KNOWS PARTICIPANT OR IF PARTICIPANT KNOWS RESEARCHER –

“FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS STUDY, IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU AND I DO NOT KNOW EACH OTHER BEFORE WE BEGIN THE RESEARCH. Thank you for your interest in the study. However, because WE KNOW EACH OTHER FROM OUTSIDE THIS STUDY, you are not eligible for participation. If at any time you feel like you might need some support in any way about the relationship that you had in mind, or for any other reason, you can access Uvic Counselling Services (250-721-8341), Citizens Counselling (250-384-9934), or the Vancouver Island Crisis Line (1-888-494-3888).”

2. “FOR THIS STUDY, I WILL BE INTERVIEWING FEMALE PARTICIPANTS WHO IDENTIFY AS WOMEN – IS THIS THE CASE FOR YOU?”

IF YES, MOVE ON TO #3

IF NO, TRANSGENERED, OR DESCRIBES THEMSELVES AS OTHER THAN FEMALE AND WOMAN –

“Thank you for your interest in the study. However, because you do not meet the criteria, you are not eligible for participation. If at any time you feel like you might need some support in any way about the relationship that you had in mind, or for any other reason, you can access Uvic Counselling Services (250-721-8341), Citizens Counselling (250-384-9934), or the Vancouver Island Crisis Line (1-888-494-3888).”

3. Participants are required to be between 19 and 29 years of age in order to participate – what is your age?”

If under 19 or over 29 –

“Thank you for your interest in the study. However, because you do not meet the age criteria, you are not eligible for participation. If at any time you feel like you might need some support in any way about the relationship that you had in mind, or for any other reason, you can access Uvic Counselling Services (250-721-8341), Citizens Counselling (250-384-9934), or the Vancouver Island Crisis Line (1-888-494-3888).”

If within age range, move on to #4

4. “Because it can be really difficult to talk about these things, I am looking to talk to young women who are not currently in a difficult relationship, and haven’t been for at least one year. The relationship that you have in mind will need to have gone on for at least 2 months (longer than a few dates). Does this fit with your experience?”

If no - “I appreciate your interest in my study, however, your situation doesn’t fit my criteria. If at any time you feel like you might need some support in any way about the relationship that you had in mind, or for any other reason, you can access Uvic Counselling Services (250-721-8341), Citizens Counselling (250-384-9934), or the Vancouver Island Crisis Line (1-888-494-3888).”

If yes, move on to #5

5. “Now I need to make sure your experience fits the criteria for very difficult relationship for my study. When I say *difficult* or *abusive* relationships, the kinds of things that I am referring to are:

- Physical abuse, like hitting, slapping, or pushing
- Forced sex or unwanted sexual behaviour
- Intimidation or manipulation
- Threats to commit suicide
- Withholding or stealing money
- Insults or name-calling
- Stalking
- Extreme jealousy
- Verbal threats.

“Have you experienced any of these behaviours in the relationship that you are thinking about?”

If no - “I appreciate your interest in my study, however, your situation doesn’t fit my criteria. If at any time you feel like you might need some support in any way about the relationship that you had in mind, or for any other reason, you can access UVic Counselling Services (250-721-8341), Citizens Counselling (250-384-9934), or the Vancouver Island Crisis Line (1-888-494-3888).”

If yes, move on to interview discussion and scheduling.

“Based on our conversation, it does seem like you fit the criteria for participation. Do you have any questions before we talk about what is involved in the study?”

“Your participation will include two individual interviews lasting 1 to 1.5 hours each. Both interviews will take place at the Centre for Youth and Society at UVic, or at a private location that you and I agree upon. Both interviews will be audio-recorded.”

“The first interview will include several questions about your experiences in your past relationship and how it has impacted you. The second interview will include a mapping exercise where you will describe the possibilities you see for yourself in the future. Do you have any questions about what is involved?”

“Is there a day that would work best for you to have the interviews?”

“I will send a reminder email to you before each interview. At the beginning of the first interview, I will review the inclusion criteria and introduce the consent form.”

“If at any time you feel like you might need some support in any way about the relationship that you had in mind, or for any other reason, you can access UVic Counselling Services (250-721-8341), Citizens Counselling (250-384-9934), or the Vancouver Island Crisis Line (1-888-494-3888).”

“Thank you for your interest, and I look forward to meeting you.”

Appendix D: Interview #1 Questions

Interview #1 will involve open-ended questions with the follow questions as an interview guide:

1. We've discussed the focus of this study being around very challenging intimate relationships. In your words, could you tell me about your experience of being in this difficult relationship?
2. Could you tell me about how you came to leave this relationship?
3. What has it been like for you since?
4. How do you see yourself now as compared to when you were in the relationship?
5. Do you think this relationship has had an effect on how you see your future? If so, can you give me some examples?
6. How do you think this has affected you subsequent relationships?
7. Do you think these experiences have had an impact on your work-life? If so, could you give some examples?
8. Is there anything you haven't done, or hesitated to do, because of your experiences in this relationship? If so, do you have any examples?
9. Is there anything you would like to share that I haven't asked about?

Appendix E: Possible Selves Mapping Process

Interview #2 will focus on the Possible Selves Mapping Process (PSMP). The PSMP involves six steps. Descriptions and instructions that will be read to participants are italicized.

I will begin by introducing participants to the idea of *possible selves* with the following description:

Everyone thinks about their goals and hopes, and even their fears, for their present and future lives – for example, what subjects you might like to study, what kind of work you would like to do when finished school or what you don't want to do, where and how you would like to live, and what things you don't want to have happen. The Possible Selves Mapping Process (PSMP) is a particular way of exploring and understanding your goals, hopes, fears, and expectations right now and in the future. The process uses brainstorming together with a tool called the "Possible Selves Map" and questions to help you identify your hopes and fears.

Step #1: Brainstorm hoped-for and feared selves

The first activity will help you focus on the possibilities for your future. By focusing on possibilities, we can look at the things you hope will happen for you, and the things you hope you will become. I am now going to ask you to think about your future and the things that are important to you.

Some possible selves seem very likely, for example – finished school, getting an education, or playing a favourite sport, and some seem less likely but still possible, for example – becoming a bestselling author, an Olympic athlete, or a movie star.

Take a few moments and think about all the dreams you have for yourself in the future – all the hoped for possible selves you have. As soon as you have an idea or get a picture in your mind, write that idea down on one of these green sticky notes. Put one idea on each note. Go ahead and fill in as many as you can. Just work until you run out of ideas. Don't worry if it seems far out or unrealistic. You can add more later if you think of other ideas.

Participants will be given about 7-10 minutes to generate hoped-for possible selves.

Besides having dreams that we hope for, we might also have pictures of ourselves in the future that we are afraid of or don't want to have happen. Again, some of the fears we have might be very likely, for example – not getting straight A's, not being able to travel and work at the same time. Others might be less likely but still possible, for example – not graduating, not getting a job.

I am going to ask you to spend just a few minutes to think about the future and the possible selves that you fear. As soon as an idea or picture presents itself to you, jot that idea down on a yellow sticky note. Put one idea on each sticky note and just continue to let your ideas flow until you have filled as many sticky notes as you can.

These represent your feared selves, the things that you are worried you may become in the future, or the things you are worried you may not become. Again, take your time and write as many as come to you.

Step #2: Grouping hoped for and feared selves

Participants are asked to arrange the hoped for and feared selves that they identified into groups or categories that make sense to them. These groups may be mixed or even be all hoped for or all feared selves. Sticky notes are arranged on a new sheet of paper, referred to as the "brainstorm map."

Many people find that some or even all of their selves go into groups, like "school" or "family". Now let's see which of your possible selves can be organized in different groups or categories. Take a look at your possible selves, and think about how some of them might fit into the same group. Go ahead and arrange your hoped for and feared selves into groups on this paper, arrange them however they seem to fit together for you.

Time is given for organizing.

Ok – now give each group a name.

Step #3: Debrief the brainstorm map

This step encourages participants to discuss the hopes and fears that they have identified and how they have chosen to group them. Participants will be asked to think about what led them to choosing that group or name. Participants may add or change names if they would like.

Could you just explain your map a bit for me in terms of what you wrote down? How did you organize it?

I will engage in conversation and ask for elaboration.

Step #4: Identifying most likely, most wanted hoped for and most feared selves

Participants are asked to reflect on the hoped for and feared selves that they think are most likely to happen, the hoped for self that they really want to have happen, and the feared self that they really don't want to have happen.

Sometimes a hoped for possible self can seem quite likely, for example, finishing school and graduating. Then we have hopes that we really, really want but may also seem like long shots, like becoming a world famous doctor, or an Olympic athlete. We are now going to identify your most likely and most wanted hoped for possible selves using shapes.

Looking at your hoped for selves first, which one is the most likely to happen, given everything you know about yourself, your abilities, and your past accomplishments? You are fairly confident this one has a good chance of coming to be. Put a box around this one – the most likely hoped for self.

Now, which is the one that you really, really want? Maybe it's a long shot but there is a part of you that really wants this and holds on to it. Put a star beside that one – the most wanted hoped for self.

Now we will do the same for fears. Sometimes our fears for ourselves in the future can be based on reality and other times they can be somewhat unrealistic – but the fear is still real. Which one is most likely to happen, out of all the fears, you feel this is the one you most realistically will have to face. Put a box around this one – the most likely feared self.

Now, which is the self you really, really fear? Put a star beside this one – the most feared self. It is OK if these overlap – the most likely hoped for or feared self might be the one you really want or don't want.

Step #5: Transferring the brainstorming information to the possible selves map

Participants are asked to take the two hoped for and two feared selves that they identified in the previous step and transfer them onto the Possible Selves Map. In this step, I will facilitate a conversation about the specific possible selves that were selected.

Now I am going to ask you to work just with the selves you have chosen as most likely and most wanted or feared, on a new possible selves map. Start with the most likely and really wanted hoped for selves and transfer them to this new map. Put the shapes associated with each self (box or star) into the cloud with the corresponding shape.

I will engage participants in conversation and ask them to elaborate on their selections.

Now transfer the most likely and really feared selves to the new map. Again, put the shapes associated with each self into the cloud with the corresponding shape.

I will engage participants in conversation and ask them to elaborate on their selections.

Step #6: Reviewing overall impressions

This final step is an opportunity for participants to discuss their overall impressions and thoughts about the mapping process.

Spend a few moments just observing the maps you have created today.

Does anything come up for you that you would like to talk about?

Do you notice anything you didn't mention before?

Given the focus of this research study, is there anything you would like to comment on about the relationship that you described last time?

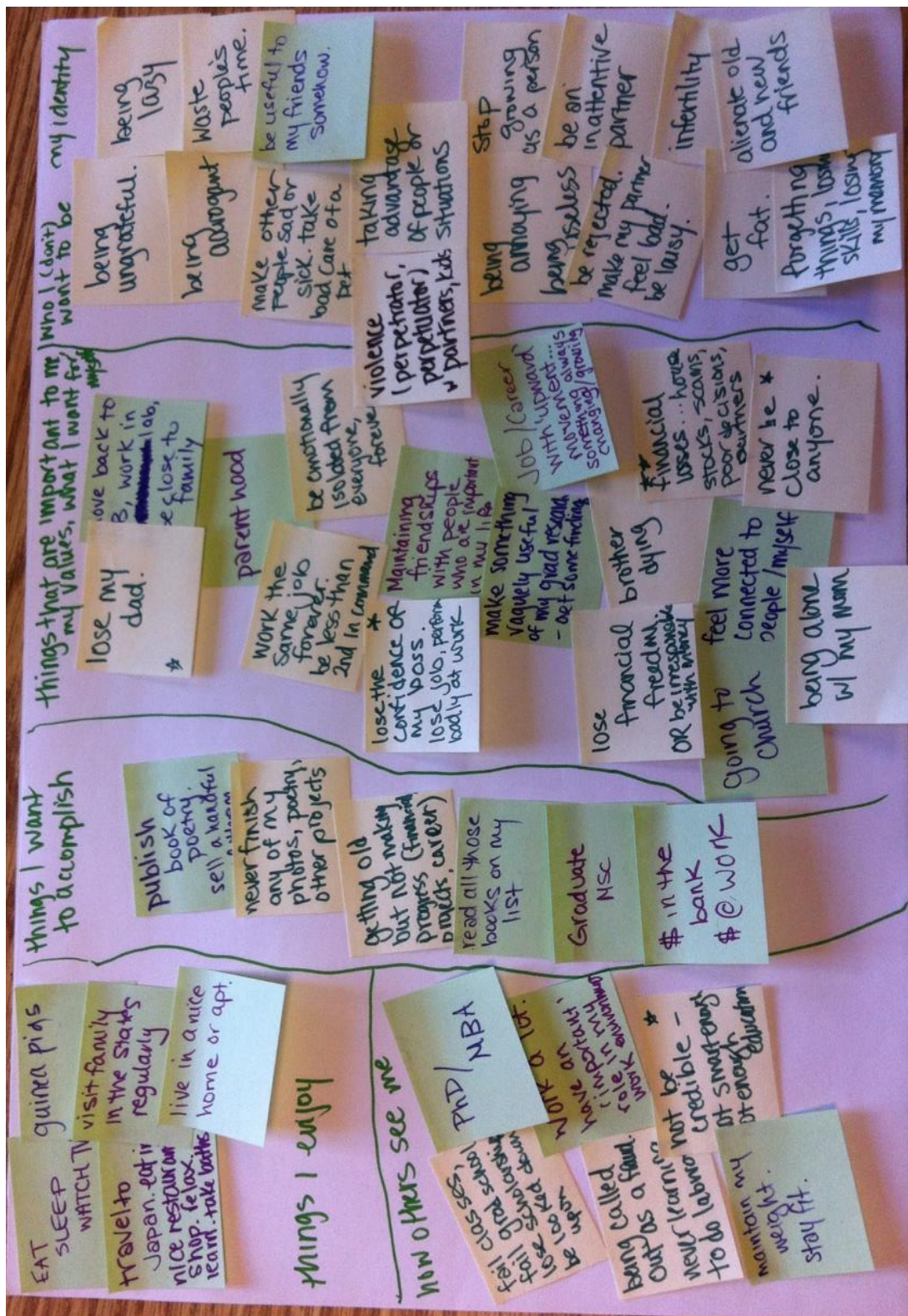
Any surprises?

Anything you would like to add?

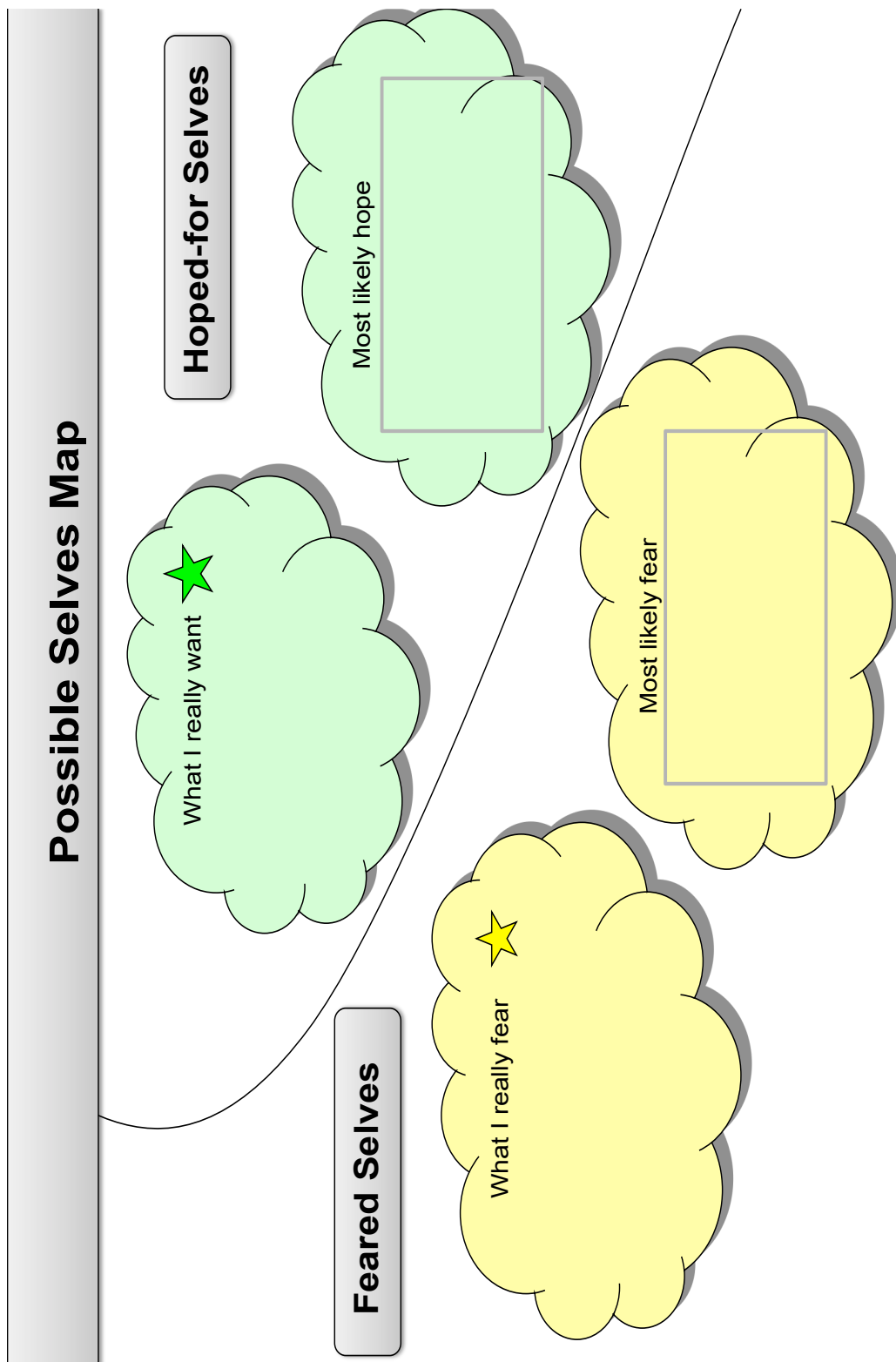
I will allow time here for discussion and debriefing.

Participants will have the option to take both maps home with them.

Appendix F: Completed Brainstorm Map



Appendix G: Blank Possible Selves Map



Appendix H: Completed Possible Selves Map

