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EXPLORING NARRATIVES OF AGENCY IN SURVIVORS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

By

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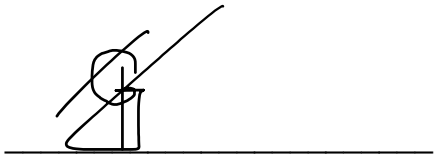
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Declaration of originality

I, Teneil Govindsammy, hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for my Master's degree. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at the University of the Witwatersrand or any other university. I further declare that Figure 4.1 in this document is my own work and has been created based on the findings of this study.



Teneil Govindsammy

Date: 05 March 2024

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to contribute to the knowledge on South African women's experiences of leaving relationships that consisted of intimate partner violence (IPV), as well as to give them a platform to share their narratives and subjective experiences. Guided by the principles of intersectionality, various factors were considered in understanding how these women experienced the process of leaving their abusive relationships – thus looking at the influence of race, class, employment status, marital status and religion. The study involved eight women between the ages of 25 years old and 54 years old, who were all out of their abusive relationships for over a year. This was a qualitative study in which narrative analysis was used to analyse the data collected, all of which were based on Mishler's adopted components of analysis (1995 as cited in Kim, 2016). Three themes emerged in understanding the psychological and emotional processes when leaving. These include the shattering of the idea of an ideal relationship, the beginning of the end as well as repositioning oneself. The objectives of the study were translated into the discussion section under these themes and the relevant sub-themes that emerged. The findings highlighted key differences in how this process was experienced between white women and women of colour, mothers, working women and those who were not working but it also pointed out some similarities. Overall, these were the nuances of the psychological and emotional experiences that are not often discussed which in essence play a significant part in the agency of women leaving these types of relationships. Future research recommendations are discussed based on the findings, which include focusing on the effectiveness of preventive measures both on a microlevel and macrolevel. In this regard, looking at the effectiveness of safehouses and looking at measures to increase access to these resources, as well as the effectiveness of conscientizing young men on the discourses of oppression and how these infiltrate intimate spaces. There is further discussion on how this research can be used in the field of psychology through informing interventions that correlate with the findings.

Key words: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), Agency, Narrative, Intersectionality.

1 Chapter 1: Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a serious global issue, as the World Health Organization (2024) reports that one in three women globally are subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner violence. However, it is highlighted that most of the violence reported is found in intimate partner relationships (World Health Organization, 2024). It has been noted that several disruptions in global functioning resulted in an increase in GBV, these included events of natural disaster, to microsystemic issues such as rises in unemployment or even during the course of severe epidemics (Ostadtaghizadeh et al., 2023). Thus, in relation to the most recent pandemic, Covid-19, it is highlighted that GBV, which was already a global issue, increased significantly throughout the world due to the lockdown restrictions (Ostadtaghizadeh et al., 2023). In an article by Akudolu et al. (2023), the authors highlight how the issue of GBV was experienced in Africa during the pandemic. They discuss how global media did not exempt African countries from reports of gruesome GBV cases during the pandemic. The crux of the increase came down to patriarchal ideologies which are very embedded in African societies, thus the economic and social challenges present at the time, seemed to have exacerbated the issue significantly (Akudolu et al., 2023).

It is significant to note that in 2020, GBV in South Africa was regarded as the second pandemic to Covid – 19 (Ellis, 2020). Despite this descriptions attempt to create a level of seriousness around the issue of GBV in the country, it also highlights the inability to address the issue while it stands on its own (Carr, 2020). Furthermore, many authors have depicted this as the “shadow pandemic” suggesting that this issue is something being refracted and reflected off something of more seriousness – the pandemic (Parry & Gordon, 2020; Felten, 2023; Roy et al., 2022). Moreover, the use of this type of language speaks to how the issue of violence against women is only surfaced when there is light being shed on other challenges (Boonzaier, 2017). Boonzaier (2017) highlights how in the act of GBV, women’s bodies are used as a premise to bring to light social challenges such as poverty, substance abuse and unemployment in communities that are most often marginalised. With the abovementioned factors in mind, there is a need to shift the narrative towards the actual subjective experience of

these women who found themselves in these violent experiences and how they found themselves out of it. Thus, a common place for this kind of violence happens behind closed doors, in intimate partner relationships but it is evident that this problem escalates to a point that it moves beyond closed doors and exposes itself to the world in some way. However, oftentimes, when women have the platform to communicate their experience, they are often shamed and this leads to various questions around the issue, one being why did these women not leave? And while this is a plausible question it lacks understanding of the various factors that are at play. The question in and of itself speaks to the underlying challenges that are faced when having to get up and walk out of these relationships. It speaks to the act of victim blaming and the idea that women are not afforded sympathy for these experiences, particularly women of colour (Carr, 2020). Hence this research study intends on looking at women of various contextual backgrounds who have taken a number of factors into consideration and used these factors to enable them to leave their abusive relationships. Thus, focusing on how their experiences of becoming agentive was shaped differently based on culture, race, economic status and various other points of intersection.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this research study was to explore the process of change and agency in women who had left their abusive intimate partner relationships. For this study, abuse in these intimate relationships included; physical, emotional, psychological and financial abuse. The participants interviewed were either traditionally or legally married or in romantic relationships with their abusive partners at the time. Thus, the study aimed to understand the following objectives:

- The circumstantial events that occur and serve as precipitating factors for women's decisions to leave these types of relationships
- The psychological and emotional processes that occur before women make a decision to leave.
- The processes that occur after leaving these relationships.

1.2 Research Questions

In understanding the abovementioned points, the following questions were answered in this study:

- What factors have an influence in facilitating a process of agency in women who decide to leave their abusive relationships?
- How do women experience the process of leaving their abusive relationships?

1.3 Rationale

When looking at the issue of GBV in South Africa, according to the results based on the Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey (2018/2019, as cited in Statistics South Africa, 2020), it was found that 50% of assaults against women were committed by people whom they were familiar with. Of this 50%, the following was recorded in terms of assaults being committed by the following people: close friends or acquaintances - 22%; intimate partners - 15% and relatives or household members - 13%. Considering this, it is worth noting that the percentage indicated for intimate partners does not account for the various women who may have not reported their experiences of abuse in their relationships. This suggests that IPV is very prevalent and that further research in this area would be beneficial in our country. Willan et al (2019) highlights that research on IPV and the agency of women leaving these relationships, often do not take into account contextual factors or the personalised experiences in the process. Thus, a study incorporating these aspects, whilst honing into subjective experiences of this type of transition would be beneficial to add to the body of research in this field.

With that being said, in understanding the root and underlying causes of violence in these relationships and considering the South African historical context and its impact, there are various socio-economic, and psychological factors at play with regards to GBV. Moreover, socially accepted ideologies around gender roles are also significant contributing factors to this silent pandemic. These ideologies include patriarchy (Mshweshwe, 2020; Russell et al., 2014) and masculinity (Graaff & Heinecken, 2017) which reflect the culture of dominance and violence against women as a means of exerting power and control. Thus, considering this, various studies have shown a

theme of intergenerational transmission of violence when understanding intimate partner violence (Jewkes, 2002). In this regard, various researchers highlight how witnessing violence in childhood creates a perception of it being acceptable and thus creates a perpetual cycle of violence (Gass et al., 2011; Griffing et al., 2002 ; Jewkes, 2002; Jewkes et al., 2002; Pingley, 2017; Russell et al., 2014).

Furthermore, socioeconomic factors are also considered to be a risk factor in these relationships, as women may subordinate themselves to the control and power of their abusers because of their financial dependence on them (Cervantes & Sherman, 2021; Gibbs et al., 2018; Ondicho, 2013; Halket et al., 2014). However, it was beneficial to investigate the processes of change for women who were employed during the course of their relationships to understand what factors influenced them to stay and then to leave. In this regard, in terms of psychological factors, there is a range of aspects that influence the reasons for women accepting violence in their relationships. Research on victims of IPV provide insight on psychological impacts such as emotional attachment (Griffing et al., 2002), ideas of love (Willan et al., 2019), learnt helplessness (Halket, et al., 2014; Ondicho, 2013), self- blame (Ondicho, 2013) and issues around perceived stigma (Ondicho, 2013), as well as a lack of support (Willan et al., 2019; Wuest & Merritt- Gray, 2001).

Considering the above, it is noted that these studies may provide insight on factors that cause women to stay. However, the purpose of this study was to explore how South African women in violent relationships, considered internal factors and experiences as reasons to facilitate a process of agency, which at some level enabled them to leave their abusive relationships. It has been noted that it takes women about seven attempts to leave their abusive relationships (Cervantes & Sherman, 2021). Although this is not a definite number nor is it plausible to say that it is applicable all round, the finding eludes to the difficulty in leaving due to a number of contextual and personal factors that women face when having to leave these relationships. In addition, in understanding agency, there is often only focus placed on women leaving their relationships and escaping domination (Kim et al., 2018), however this focus does not take into consideration the intersectionality of race, class and gender in this process. Thus, the study intended to take into consideration these factors and their

influences in the process of women leaving their abusive relationships by looking at a sample of multiracial participants.

Considering this, a research study done in Singapore (Khng & Ow, 2009) explored the reasons that influenced women to leave their abusive relationships, and in saying this, it was beneficial to gain a South African perspective in this regard. This was important to shed light on the multi-layered aspects of this process being influenced by various intersecting points given our historical background of violence. It is significant to note that gaining insight on different experiences of the process of leaving abusive relationships creates the premise and understanding that there are various factors that come into play. It also highlights that it is not an easy, 'straight forward' process, which is important for organisations that provide services to women seeking help for IPV to be cognisant of. Thus, if people are aware of the factors that keep women in their abusive relationships or cause them to leave and then return, appropriate interventions (e.g., psychoeducation) can be put in place according to this understanding. Most importantly, research on this matter normalises experiences in which women are often shamed for, whilst also providing insight into internal resources that facilitate agency and the reclamation of power. In saying this, the idea was to bring awareness on macro and micro systemic influences on the processes of having to leave abusive relationships and how this process is experienced differently based on this.

In 2020, South Africa attempted to further address the issue of GBV in the country. It was noted that the extreme cases of GBV were acts of violence that led to death. Hence the inclusion of femicide being noted as a social issue. Femicide is regarded as intimate and non-intimate female homicides, which is in essence the extreme act of GBV (Variava & Dekel, 2024). Given the high rates of femicide in South Africa, all relevant South African stakeholders contributed towards putting together a National Strategic Plan on Gender - Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF) in 2020. This document serves as a tool to understanding GBVF and highlights the interventions and intentions put in place to address these social ills. Some of the key pillars found in the plan centred around holding society and perpetrators accountable; honing in on preventive strategies; looking at means of obtaining justice and safety; adequate responsive actions and support structures; delving into initiatives to eliminate

economic disparities amongst women and men and lastly tapping into the importance of research in this area (Interim Steering Committee, 2020).

Thus, this research was significant within this context, as many studies provide insight on the cause and underlying factors for victimization, but there seemed to be a need to obtain more narratives on how these factors and negative experiences, actually provided alternative outcomes through a process of changing the narrative. There was and is a gap in the subjective experiences of women being relayed and too much focus is placed on the act of violence rather than the underlying experiences that shape these processes. Understanding these subjective processes speak to the National Strategic Plan implemented and is useful because it allows one to identify where the gaps are and to possibly look at things from a different perspective. This is useful because not only does it highlight the ability that people have to redefine themselves and redirect the trajectory of their lives, but it also highlights the challenges in that process due to deep rooted cultural ideologies and internal experiences that should be given more attention to in order to be of more assistance.

1.4 Chapter Structure

This research report has been organised into 5 chapters. The first chapter evidently provides an introduction to the study in which one is able to gain understanding of what the study aimed to achieve through answering the following questions: What factors have an influence in facilitating a process of agency in women decide to leave their abusive relationships? How do women experience the process of leaving their abusive relationships? The intention of the study is introduced in this chapter as well through providing a rationale. In addition, this chapter provides an outline of the report.

The second chapter of this report provides an extensive review of the literature pertaining to gender based violence and more specifically intimate partner violence. There is brief discussions around the risk factors of IPV inclusive of a brief overview of the historical background of violence in South Africa. Furthermore, the literature reviewed includes various studies that look at the factors that keep women in abusive relationships; looking at societal influences, financial dependency, childhood experiences of violence in the home, as well as emotional and psychological factors.

In contrast to this, is the review of literature that highlights factors that cause women to leave. These include looking at studies that have found fear, support and breaking intergenerational cycles of violence as motivating factors to leave. The literature that is reviewed in this section are based on studies done in South Africa as well as studies done abroad. Focus is placed on understanding how the process of leaving abusive relationships has been conceptualised which in turn informed the study. Additionally, in this chapter is a section that focuses on discussing the theoretical framework of intersectionality; whereby it is explored holistically as well as in terms of its relevance in conceptualising this study.

In the third chapter, a greater focus is placed on the research methods that were used in this study. A discussion on qualitative research introduces this chapter, followed by a discussion of narrative inquiry which informed the process of collecting the data and analysing the data. Following this the participants who chose to share their narratives are introduced in a way that protects their identity but allows for insight into their lives. A brief discussion on how the data was analysed and the ethical issues that were considered conclude this chapter.

In the fourth chapter, due this being a narrative study, it was important to locate the participants and bring their stories to the surface, hence they are introduced in the beginning of this chapter. Following this, the data obtained from the participants is presented after being analysed according to Mishler's (in Kim, 2016, p.17) components: Abstract, Orientation, Complicating action, evaluation, results and coda. Thus, key aspects are presented in accordance to the aims of the study under themes and a discussion thereof.

The fifth chapter concludes the study by providing an overview of the purpose of this whole study. In addition, the limitations of this study are discussed in this chapter together with future recommendations for studies in this area of interest and in the field of psychology.

2 Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following chapter aims to provide a clear understanding of what IPV is, by highlighting how it is located in the broader theme of GBV and domestic violence. Considering the overlap between these terms, this chapter focuses on narrowing down the understanding of intimate partner violence. The risk factors of IPV are discussed in this chapter, as well as a brief discussion on the historical background of violence in South Africa in relation to this social challenge. Second to this, emphasis will be placed on understanding the dynamics of being in an abusive relationship. In this regard, various sources of literature have been reviewed in order to highlight factors that have an influence on women's decisions to stay in their abusive relationships. Considering the purpose of this study, it was important to also look at what factors have a significant impact on women's decision to leave. This was important to understand as the purpose of this research was to explore the processes of change and agency; hence looking at how women move between and through these factors that kept them in these relationships into a process of considering factors that motivate them to leave. Thus, the incorporation of literature that highlights the process of leaving was also reviewed. Lastly, it is important to provide some understanding of the theoretical framework that informed this study; thus, the discussion of the theory of intersectionality concludes this chapter.

2.1 Gender- based violence and intimate partner violence

Graaff and Heinecken (2017), indicate that "gender is the socially-constructed role that a person is expected to perform in a specific context, and much of this role is learned through gender role socialisation – the concept that individuals receive social cues (positive or negative) on their expected gender roles, which shape how they present their gender" (p.622). Further, they indicate that through this socialised role, there are certain gender identities that are preferred over others in different contexts (Graaff & Heinecken, 2017). In this regard, they point to the idea of masculinity and how this ideology shapes what being a man is. One striking conceptualisation that has been highlighted is that men often show physical dominance and violence in order to show manliness (Anderson & Umberson, 2001). On this basis, we can understand the implications of this social acceptance of violence as a means of control. Noting this,

GBV refers to any act of violence that stems from the intention of subordinating the other based on the perceptions of what is regarded as normative gender roles and gender inequalities within a specific context (Bloom et al., 2008). There is a constant interplay between the terms GBV and violence against women because it has been found that victimization of this type of violence is more prevalent in women (Gass et al., 2011). In a study conducted in South Africa, on gender differences in the risk of IPV (Gass et al., 2011), it was found that women may also be perpetrators of IPV against their male partners. The study highlighted how there are risk factors for men as well, one being that men who were not earning well were more vulnerable in this regard (Gass et al., 2011). This speaks to the conceptualized ideals of gender norms and how the deviation from this disrupts how systems operate. There is a considerable gap in literature involving males as victims because of societal expectations and prejudices. Hence, men are not usually open to expressing their experiences in this regard. In saying this, the same ideals that prohibit men from speaking out are the same ideals that maintain the oppression against women. Focusing on GBV against women speaks to these structural elements which maintain inequality and oppression (Strid & Verloo, 2019).

Considering the above, the most common form of GBV is domestic violence (Justice and Constitutional Development, Republic of South Africa, 2014). According to the Domestic Violence Act (1998), in South Africa, it stipulates that violence is regarded as domestic when it occurs within relationships that involve people that are or were married; people of the same or opposite sex that live together or have lived together in the nature of a marriage but were not married; parents or people who have a shared relationship due to being responsible for a common child. It can also occur in family relationships which encompass family members who are related by blood or through marriage or even adoption. It also stipulates that domestic violence occurs in relationships that are constituted through engagement or a relationship whereby individuals are considered to be dating and there are intimate or sexual interactions involved. Lastly, it refers to common dwelling being shared or having been shared as a domestic relationship in which violence occurs in. Considering the definition of domestic violence occurring in intimate relationships, the World Health Organisation (2012) notes that although the term domestic violence is used interchangeably with IPV, the broader definition of domestic violence can include child or elderly abuse by

anyone in the household, as seen in the definitions provided by the Domestic Violence Act.

Considering the above and noting the focus of this study, the World Health Organisation (2012) defines IPV as acts that occur in relationships that cause physical, psychological and/or sexual harm to respective parties involved in these relationships. “Feminist theories treat the problem of partner violence as an issue fundamentally related to gender and specifically to the patriarchal domination of men over women” (Lawson, 2012, p. 573). Various researchers highlight what IPV means and what it consists of; thus some indicate that this involves acts such as being slapped, punched, pushed, shoved, kicked, bit, choked and injured with objects etc. (Jewkes et al., 2002; Patra et al., 2018; Stewart et al., 2020). They further mention how this can extend to the use of weapons. Abrahams et al. (2010), in their study on guns and GBV, indicated that men use guns as a means of intimidating women but it was also noted that South Africa has a very high rate of femicide due to the use of a firearm - it was noted that 82,7% of victims were killed by the use of a firearm.

Furthermore, researchers point out that violence in this regard is not only limited to physical violence but includes sexual, emotional, psychological and financial harm (Walby et al., 2017, as cited in Strid & Verloo, 2019). Thus, the emotional abuse that usually accompanies the physical abuse involves controlling interactions, holding back on financial support, infidelity, threats and belittling the victim (Stewart et al., 2020). In terms of sexual harm this refers to coercion and violence during sexual contact (Almeida et al., 2023). Moreover, Jewkes et al. (2011) notes that there is often a risk of HIV infection due to the prevalence of unsafe sexual activities occurring outside of the relationship, which is very common in violent men.

Furthermore, the World Health Organisation (2012), provides a summary of risk factors for IPV that have been found in various studies. These various factors are pointed out in reference to an eco-systemic perspective, which focuses on how different systems influence each other and in turn influence the individual. Thus, from a community perspective, it is highlighted that some of the risk factors include socially accepted ideologies around gender roles such as patriarchy that promote dominance and violence against women as a means of exerting power (Mshweshwe., 2020). In this regard, Jewkes (2002) highlighted how gender inequality and societal norms

around violence are risk factors for IPV. On this basis, it is understandable as to why this would be regarded as a risk factor in the perpetuation of violence against women, as it is noted that traditionally South Africa is very patriarchal, and that this ideology still governs society's thinking in that it speaks to the idea that men should be superior to women and that women should submit to that system of life (Russell et al., 2014).

In conjunction with this, it is highlighted that broader societal acceptance of violence is also seen as a risk factor, due to high levels of violence being used as a means of resolution. In the context of South Africa, the Apartheid era brought forth experiences of severe oppression and violence in marginalised and disadvantaged population groups (Hoosen et al., 2022). During this period, the South African Defence Force (SADF) was centralised in the country, as the defence force played an active role in not just political decisions but the upholding of those decisions (Cock, 2005). Thus, noting how the SADF played a role in creating a state that relied on extreme fear to maintain power (Cock, 2005). Hence, this system, through militarisation (Graaf & Heinecken, 2017; Gqola, 2007) has in essence condoned the idea of violence as a means of maintaining power or as a means of resolution. Based on this contextual background of violence that people were exposed to during the Apartheid era, it has led to a societal adoption of such behaviour (Graaff & Heinecken, 2017; Mshweshwe, 2020). Hoosen et al. (2022) further reiterates this by highlighting that frequent exposure to violence contributes to more violence. In this regard, it is significant to note how the historical experiences and understanding of violence perpetuates this behaviour presently and in intimate spaces as well.

Poverty and the disparities between educational levels seem to also play a role in IPV (World Health Organisation, 2012). In correlation to this, it was found that the prevalence of IPV was found to be higher in women that had lower levels of education (Statistics South Africa, 2020). This is supported by the study on gender differences and IPV, which indicated that women who had reported experiences of IPV had also reported having lower levels of education (Gass et al., 2011). Considering these societal factors and its impacts, one is able to see how these would influence micro-systematic interactions, such as the dynamics within these abusive relationships.

In terms of victimization of violence, the World Health Organisation (2012) listed the following as risk factors for individuals; low educational levels, exposure to parental

violence, abuse in childhood and a sense of personal acceptance of violence. Considering these factors, one has to be aware that these factors are not definitive links between the individual and IPV, as there are multiple factors that need to be taken into consideration, such as individual factors in perpetrators, as well as the broader contextual factors as those mentioned above. In saying this, it is also important to note that not all females exposed to these risk factors find themselves in abusive relationships and similarly, that not all victims of IPV have been exposed to these risk factors. In considering all of these risk factors, whilst looking at the public exposure of IPV, the question around why do women stay is quite important. Thus, the section below explores the factors that may play a part in why women stay in abusive relationships.

2.2 Understanding why women stay in abusive relationships

2.2.1 Macro-level influences (Tradition, masculinity, patriarchy, religion & culture)

Macro-level influences have an impact on women's perceptions of their abusive relationships which may influence the reasoning for why they stay. This is because ideologies and beliefs play a part in how women make sense of their experiences and what they can do about it. In this regard, it is important to note that traditional beliefs tend to shape the way women view violence and its function within their own systems. Research done in Kenya (Ondicho, 2013), on women who were at the time in abusive relationships or reported having been in one, explored the reasons for why these women never left their relationships and it was found that traditional beliefs of the sacredness of marriage influenced their decision to stay. This can be tied to their reluctance to leave in order to preserve their image of being a 'good wife' (Ondicho, 2013). In the study it was noted that "a sample of women explained that they held a strong belief that marriage is a sacrosanct social institution that should be preserved at all costs and these forces women to remain in violent relationships" (Ondicho, 2013, p.109). Furthermore, traditionally it has been indicated that after these women have left their family homes due to marriage, they cannot return, hence there is an expectation for them to resolve relational issues as there would be no place for them to go (Ondicho, 2013).

In addition to this, another factor that influences the dynamics of violence being normalised in relationships is the ideologies of masculinity being shaped by Apartheid and its roots in violence and violation (Gqola, 2007). In their study on former Self-Defence Unit (SDU) members, Langa and Eagle (2008), highlighted how the socialised identity of what it meant to be masculine to these combatants, filtered into society's perception of masculinity. These men embodied what it meant to display a sense of masculinity through control and subordination and this narrative as the researchers highlighted, is still prevalent today (Langa & Eagle, 2008). Considering this, it highlights how systemically and historically there has been a social acceptance of this behaviour from men being socialised in this manner and society being accepting of it. It is significant to take cognisance of this in conjunction with the traditional beliefs around marriage which can keep women in these abusive relationships.

In addition to the above traditional views of marriage, another aspect to consider under the macrolevel influences is religion. It is highlighted that women turn towards religious spaces when leaving their abusive relationships, however, a perpetuating aspect that leaves women torn between leaving and staying is that religious ideologies dictate what it means to be a submissive wife (Wang et al., 2009). It is also noted that religious women often see their abuse as trials which they are to overcome (Wang et al., 2009). Thus, this indicates how male dominance and violence are perpetuated in spaces that coerce women into inferior positions and leave them feeling powerless in relation to men (Dlamini, 2023). In considering these ideologies, it is worth noting that separation is often seen as the last option based on religious teachings- for example this is seen in both Islam (Ahmad, 2003) and Christianity (Wang et al., 2009) thus making it difficult for women to easily make a decision to leave.

From a cultural perspective, in many parts of Africa, there is a customary practice of having to make a payment to the bride's family before marriage (Moono et al., 2020). Dlamini (2023) highlights how this practice of "ukulobola" sets the premise for women to be submissive in unequal relations, which are fuelled by the ideologies of patriarchy. The author further encapsulates the underlying process that cultivates vulnerability in women and dominance in men and how this translates into inequality but also to the submission to acts of violence as a form of obedience (Dlamini, 2023). Thus suggesting that although the practice places value on the bride, it also initiates a form

of male dominance as women are often reduced to and treated as acquired property (Moono et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Financial reasons

Secondly, another factor that is found in keeping women in these relationships is their financial dependence on their abusers (Cervantes & Sherman, 2021; Gibbs et al., 2018; Halket et al, 2014; Ondicho, 2013). There is an element of unequal power dynamics in this aspect as women who are financially dependent may not have access to finances or resources that would equip them to leave (Halket, et al., 2014). This is an evident barrier that should be considered when looking at why women choose not to move out, and also considering the abovementioned interplay of traditional beliefs whereby women cannot go back to their families homes. In the study by Gibbs et al. (2018), it was noted that socioeconomic factors in the home was a significant factor for why women would not leave, as food insecurity was a marker of women's economic dependence in these relationships because it was connected to other challenges that these women had to face, such as not being able to get an education or employment. However, in this regard, it is also important to note that not all women who have or are experiencing IPV are financially dependent on their partners, as there are some cases in which the abusers are on substances, without jobs and unable to make financial contributions (Griffing, et al., 2002). Thus, this alludes to the sense of power that exists in male dominance even when there is a lack of resource contribution. This speaks to the idea of patriarchal violence being any form of violence which ensures that men's power and dominance are maintained within a system – tapping into male internalized superiority and the subordination of women (Kaufman, 2023).

2.2.3 Childhood experiences

Whilst considering the notion of patriarchal ideologies and violence being passed down through generations, a theme that seems to be very common in literature on IPV, is women's childhood experiences of violence and how this poses as a risk factor for influencing their understanding of violent behaviour being accepted within relationships (Gass et al, 2011; Jewkes, 2002; Pingley, 2017). According to the Center

for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), witnessing violence in the home during ones childhood is regarded as an adverse childhood experience. In this regard, it has been noted that adverse childhood experiences refer to traumatic events that occur during one's childhood which disrupts development (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Studies have shown that exposure to these experiences and events in childhood have a significant negative impact on long term development (Herzog & Schmahl, 2018; Ross et al., 2020; Webster, 2022).

Megan Hesterman (2021) highlights that adverse childhood experiences have detrimental effects that extend into adulthood because of the implications it has on brain development, behaviour and overall health. It is noted that healthy development of children's brains are dependent on healthy experiences, whereby there is significant stimulation and care (Tierney & Nelson, 2009). Children who are exposed to severely stressful environments in childhood result in the over activation of the stress response system which negatively impacts the development of high- level areas in the brain that are responsible for executive functioning (Hesterman, 2021). Furthermore, Weiten (2014) notes that, "people's intimate relationships in adulthood follow the same form as their attachment in infancy" (p. 518). Thus eluding to the idea that the attachments formed in childhood, based on interactions with caregivers and the environment, have an influence on adult attachments. This would seem to be very controversial when looking at individuals who had experienced violence in their childhood and later in their adult relationships, however, in a study done by Erozkan (2016), it was found that there was a correlation between people with an insecure attachment in adulthood and a history of adverse childhood experiences. Hesterman (2021) also indicated that from this neurological premise, people conceptualise what is normal from what they witness and what they experience; these findings may be used to understand the correlation between adverse childhood experiences of violence and later victimization in adulthood.

To further support this from a more social perspective, it has been highlighted that people who have experienced violence or have been exposed to it in childhood, are more likely to experience a replication of this in their adult relationships (Wahab et al., 2022). In this regard, Jewkes (2002) best describes this phenomena as she noted that when looking at the South African context, "experiences of violence in the home in

childhood teach children that violence is normal in certain settings. In this way, men learn to use violence and women learn to tolerate it or at least tolerate aggressive behaviour" (p. 1426). However, this needs to be considered with a variety of other factors mentioned and should not be taken as obsolete reasons for why women stay in abusive relationships.

Thus, on the other side of this spectrum, are women who choose to stay in these relationships for the sake of the children as it has been often rationalised that it would be best if children lived together with both their parents (Halket, et al., 2014). Many other women also had to make these decisions based on fear of their children being left with their fathers and not being taken care of or even out of fear of the children being harmed in the process (Meyer, 2012; Ondicho, 2013).

2.2.4 Emotional factors

In addition, it is important to consider emotional and psychological factors that also influence women's decisions to stay. Noting this, an important factor that keeps women in these relationships is emotional attachment (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). In a study done on women who had left and returned back to their abusive relationships, it was reported that the emotional attachment that they had to their abusers is what played a part in their return (Griffing et al., 2002). Furthermore, it is interesting to see the emotional processes involved in the plan of leaving these relationships and how this is somewhat debilitating. Women who left several times before, reported that they were cognisant of the impact of the emotional attachment resurfacing in their future actions (Griffing et al., 2002).

This aspect of emotional attachment is substantiated by Dutton (1995, as cited in Griffing et al., 2002) who notes that women who leave abusive relationships may feel less fearful because they are away from the abuse, however an underlying feeling of attachment increases which then results in victims returning. In this regard, it is significant to note a study done on women in a rural setting in South Africa, based on the conceptualisation of love and violence (Willian et al., 2019). The researchers noted that in a love- relationship, there are two types of love, one being a love that involves being provided for, hence the financial dependency, and one that is more romantic

and involves affection (Willian et al., 2019). Literature within this area cannot negate this aspect of romance and affection, and should therefore consider the impact of this in condoning violence. To support this, in the study, it was found that women saw violence as an act of love, they perceived acts of jealousy as being desired (Willian et al., 2019). This coincides with the idea of men being seen as men through their toughness (Graaff & Heinecken, 2017; Langa & Eagle, 2008), and this in itself can provide some understanding of the perceptions and acceptance of violence from an emotional point of view.

In addition to the above, is an element of fear. Anderson (2003) highlights that women often fear leaving these relationships because they think that the abuser will respond with more violence. It is worth noting that it has been highlighted that 70% of violence occurs post leaving the relationship (Clark County Prosecuting Attorney, 2010 as cited in Halket et al., 2014), and while this may not be precise in its representation of the South African population, the high percentage speaks to an underlying challenge- the challenge faced when leaving. Griffing et al. (2002) even indicates how this fear of further violence prompts women to return back to their abusers as a means of minimizing the abuse and essentially protecting themselves.

In addition to this, it has been noted that the South African Police Service (SAPS) also plays a role in the combatting of this social issue but also in the failure to bring case numbers down (Simelane et al., 2023). Thus, women often fear having to report cases as SAPS is considerably male dominated and it has been highlighted that male police officers often hold onto dominant gender stereotypes found in patriarchal systems (Simelane et al., 2023). Thus, the response to some cases, is no response at all. In considering this, when these systems fail, it is noted that women who do leave, are often then faced with placing themselves in positions of further harm through unsafe income generative methods, criminality or having to be in unsafe areas (Bhana & Lopes, 2019). Thus, the fear of having to go through those circumstances can also keep women in these relationships.

2.2.5 Psychological factors

Another aspect to look at is how the dynamics in these relationships impact women psychologically. One of the ways in which this happens is through women internalising their abusers' violence and blaming themselves (Ondicho, 2013). The negative consequences of this must be considered, as it has been highlighted that "self-blame often leads to low-esteem, depression and feelings of helplessness, which in turn traps those battered women in abusive relationships. Some women even suggested that the longer they experienced the abuse, the more helpless they felt" (Ondicho, 2013, p. 4). Seligman (1975, as cited in Halket, et al., 2014) reiterates that the idea of learned helplessness can be applied in this regard, whereby women become so accustomed to their abuse that they do not try to escape but rather in these relationships develop coping strategies to minimize the pain caused.

The abovementioned factors provide insight into why women stay in their abusive relationships. However, considering that this research study is focused on the process of leaving, it would be important to understand the factors that play a part in women actively leaving their abusive relationships.

2.3 Factors that motivate women to leave their abusive relationships

2.3.1 Reclaiming of the self

With regards to leaving abusive relationships, the process has been deemed as challenging due to both personal and contextual factors that come into play, such as those mentioned in the section above. Wuest and Merrit- Gray (2001), defined the process of leaving as reclaiming one's self. The authors highlight various phases that accompany this, but in essence they highlight that the resistance of previously accepted abuse forms a part of reinstating oneself within larger social contexts and even personal contexts (Wuest & Merrit- Gray, 2001). It has been noted that violence has a direct impact on women's identities and their sense of self, and it is through the reclamation of this that they begin to construct new identities (Crawford et al., 2009) Given that the purpose of this study is to allow survivors of IPV to narrate their stories

of their processes of leaving their past abusive relationships, it is important to keep in mind that this does not occur in a single event but that it occurs gradually, as highlighted in the research (Wuest & Merrit- Gray, 2001).

2.3.2 Motivated by fear

A study conducted on women in Singapore, who had left their abusive relationships, found that women had left these relationships when the abuse had escalated to a point of them fearing for their lives (Khng & Ow, 2009). Murray and Crowe (2015) refer to this as a 'turning point' – one of many, however in this instance, it includes focus on more drastically violent events which prompt women to make a change by leaving or changing their thinking of the violence in the relationship. Therefore, one is able to see how even in the acceptance of violence due to the factors mentioned in the section above, this perception can be changed in the event of women experiencing a significant amount of fear for their lives and others. In conjunction with this, in South Africa it was found that women who had condoned violence would eventually leave these relationships if the violence became public and too extreme (Willian et al., 2019).

2.3.3 Children: Breaking intergeneration cycles of violence/ protecting children

In addition to this, another factor that has been found to motivate women to leave is their concerns for their children (Halket, et al., 2014; Murray & Crowe, 2015). In this regard there are two aspects that can be considered; women worrying about their children's physical safety and secondly women wanting to break a cycle of intergenerational violence. With regards to the former, when women feel that their children are being harmed or run the risk of being harmed in these relationships, it has been found that it serves as a motivator to leave (Murray & Crowe, 2015). With regards to the latter, this was a very prominent theme in the study of women who had experienced violence in their childhood and experienced IPV in adulthood (Cervantes & Sherman, 2021). The idea of breaking intergenerational cycles of violence stemmed from these women's experiences of being in violent homes and thus, not wanting their children to grow up in the same environments as they had seen the impacts it had on them (Cervantes & Sherman, 2021). In the report, it was noted that women who left

their abusive relationships felt that they wanted to be better parents than their own and did not want to normalise abuse in the sight of their children (Cervantes & Sherman, 2021).

2.3.4 Motivated by support

Another factor that has shown to have an influence in the process of leaving is support and intervention (Murray & Crowe, 2015). Considering that there is a significant amount of stigma and shame associated with being a victim of intimate partner violence, there is also additional stigma and shame associated with being a divorced women (Ondicho, 2013). One is able to conceptualise how this may hinder a process of agency in women wanting to leave. In a study done in Singapore, it was highlighted that participants were better equipped to leave their abusive relationships when they had guidance and counsel from their family support systems (Khng & Ow, 2009). In this regard Jewkes (2002, p. 1425) noted that "social support is another source of power for women. In studies from several countries, good social support was shown possibly to be protective against intimate partner violence".

In addition, considering the process of leaving and returning, it is significant to note that not many women access help (Wuest & Merritt- Gray, 2001). Additionally, societal ideologies around violence and gender inequality, filter into places of intervention, such as spaces of law and justice and protection, which is most notable in South Africa (Graaf & Heinecken, 2017; Jewkes, 2002). However, it is important to note that when there is consistent help as women go through their process of wanting to leave, it is quite beneficial.

2.3.5 Impact of awareness raising

In addition to being motivated by support, is the idea of being motivated by one's own awareness and knowledge on the issue of IPV. Burke et al. (2004) refers to this as "consciousness raising" (p. 127), as this speaks to the process of attaining more information around the abuse. The authors highlight how becoming more aware and informed about abusive relationships actually facilitate women's transition into stages of pre-contemplation and further into action as they look at ways of sustaining their

separation based on the knowledge they have attained (Burke et al., 2004). In this regard, knowledge may be attained from various resources, one being awareness campaigns. It has been highlighted that campaigns promote awareness around unhealthy behaviours and the misconceptions of violence against women (Mataba, 2016). This has been noted to be useful in that these processes challenge people's ideas of what is condoned and what should not be condoned within intimate relationships; all of which encourages women to change their perspectives of what they want to experience and how they can move away from their relationships (Mataba, 2016).

2.3.6 The role of shelters

Lempert (2003) highlights that shelters are often a place where women go when they have exhausted their options for safety. The author goes on to discuss that environments in a shelter is designed to foster critical thinking whereby women are guided to think holistically about the situations they are in and aids in developing their autonomy which "sometimes becomes synonymous with exiting the relationship" (Lempert, 2003, p.96). Despite shelters providing a short-term response for women, the policy brief on shelters in South Africa, highlighted some of the findings of these places of refuge (Bhana & Lopes, 2019). In terms of the benefits, it was found that shelters provide women and children with a space to break away from a cycle of abuse; there is often access to counselling services which assist in the process of dealing with the consequences of the abuse as well as coping methods upon leaving and there is access to networks for employment opportunities (Bhana & Lopes, 2019).

During the covid-19 pandemic, it was noted that South African shelters were fully operational and due to the increase in cases of abuse, shelters had even partnered up with Uber drivers to ensure that women were able to get to places of safety (John et al., 2023). This was necessary for when options of safety had depleted as stated by Lempert (2003), which was seen in the case of South Africa, whereby SAPS had further de-prioritised IPV cases and focused on monitoring Covid-19 protocol. Thus, despite this being a short-term response and a detour from addressing the actual issue of violence (Lempert, 2003), the importance of these spaces and the benefits are clearly noted.

2.4 What is agency?

Sociologists refer to agency as one's ability to think and act on their own will (Liwane & Rossouw, 2019) Therefore, in context of the various factors affecting women in IPV and GBV, the process of attaining agency in these restrictive relationships would imply a condition of being agentive. The tension within the sociology of agency lies in the understanding that structural systems and ideologies around us govern the way in which we navigate our way in life (Liwane & Rossouw, 2019). This can be understood by looking at the examples mentioned above of how systems of patriarchy and masculinity together with various cultural norms influence how women and men conduct themselves within their personal spaces. However, there are critiques in focusing on structural and systemic aspects only, as these negate the role of individual thought processes and actions (Shiffman, 2018).

Thus, in the context of the study, sociological understanding of agency locates the experiences of these women within the structural spaces that they occupy- which is necessary. However, in alignment with this, it is beneficial to look at the psychology of agency which refers to one's ability to contribute to and influence their life circumstances (Bandura, 2006). Thus, this speaks to "the idea that we can initiate actions in relation to our hopes for our lives within the context of an open (not predetermined) future" (Martin et al., 2003, p.1).

Merging the two perspectives whereby there is agency within the social context in which women exist, assists in seeing that women's transition from victim to survivor is not linear but that being proactive and intentional can occur within a process. Van Schalkwyk et al. (2014) highlights how women make changes in their relationships and act from a place of power even within the confines of their relationship. This is important to take cognisance of as it highlights that agency may exist even in victims, and thus powerlessness should not be subjected to women who may struggle with leaving. In this regard, Rajah (2007) encapsulates this point by highlighting that women in abusive relationships may often engage in covert acts of resistance as opposed to overt acts to avoid violent retaliations. In considering this, one would then see leaving as an act of agency towards transitioning from victim to survivor and maintaining this identity, through the process of moving away from the abuser (Van Schalkwyk et al, 2014). There are various models that have been formulated in order

to depict the process of leaving. One of these models is the stages of change model by Burke et al. (2004) and Chang et al. (2006) which highlights the five stages which women go through in their process of leaving, which are: “precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance” (Bermea et al., 2020, p.990). It is beneficial to further unpack these stages to provide some understanding.

Burke et al. (2004) suggests that in the stage of pre-contemplation women do not necessarily recognize the abuse they experience as being problematic. In this regard, there is no desire for change or there is a lack of understanding that change is necessary and achievable (Chang et al., 2006). This stage speaks to the accepted ideologies around violence, masculinity, love and marriage as noted in the sections above. In this stage there is no awareness around the experience of violence being regarded as abuse.

However, transitioning to contemplating leaving the relationship, speaks to the idea of ‘turning points’ that Murray et al. (2015) discusses. An initial disruption in the relationship comes from a realization of the abuse being experienced in terms of its nature and severity (Murray et al., 2015). It is from this place of realisation whereby women move from pre-contemplation, whereby they question the relationship to actually contemplating leaving on the basis of their experiences being regarded as unacceptable. In addition, it is highlighted that this shift is also facilitated by women understanding that perhaps their experiences were not of love and in reflecting on the lack of affection they consider what it would be like to leave (Di Basilio et al.,2022).

It is from this phase of contemplation, whereby women move into a period of preparation. In terms of mental preparation, the authors highlight that this refers to the idealisation of life without the abuser. In this stage, women envision what life will be like outside of the abuse, oftentimes as a means of coping (Bermea et al., 2020). They reflect on the process of fantasizing and how this in itself creates a way of minimizing abuse but also creates a shift in perception. Interestingly, it was also highlighted how this phase can be regarded as a self-preservation phase which can include thoughts of murder or suicide (Lempert, 1996). Thus all indicative of the extremities of trying to halt the abuse but also trying to get away from it through mentalizing alternative possibilities. Active preparation speaks to the overt plans involved in creating an escape (Bermea et al., 2020). This could be through setting up safe spaces, looking

at ways of saving finances and essentially creating a plan of action. It was highlighted that people who skipped this phase did so out of fear of death and in extreme cases of needing to leave (Bermea et al., 2020).

Burke et al. (2004) highlights that in these initial stages women use more cognitive processes, whereby they focus on becoming conscious of their perceptions regarding their experiences, focusing on how they are perceiving themselves and their environments and re-evaluating these aspects. In the stage of taking action, which refers to the actualization of the desired behaviours and change (Chang et al., 2006), it is highlighted that women focus on behavioural processes (Burke et al., 2004). The authors indicate that initially these behavioural processes involve actions that are thought through in order to control the responses of their partners – such as avoiding conflict to avoid physical abuse (Burke et al., 2004). This conscientious decision-making evokes a sense of autonomy which is seen in the action stage as women use similar behavioural tactics to move away too. Disengaging involves finding safe spaces to be alone, having time to think, immersing oneself in external support systems, shifting away from the routine and individuating at some level (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). It is significant to note the constant reframing of one's experience, the relationship and themselves in each stage. Thus, in this stage of action and breaking free, women find themselves in positions whereby they are able to recognise their self-confidence and self-efficacy (Burke et al., 2004) – and in this, they are able to recognize their abilities to take care of themselves which prompts them to leave (Di Basilio et al.,2022).

Research highlights that it is from this place of self-efficacy that women regain a sense of control of their lives and in turn maintain separation from their abusers (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Di Basilio et al (2022) indicate that the support that women receive during these phases also play a part in the maintenance of separation. The authors highlight that supportive systems trigger the realisation of the repercussions of staying, but also assists in maintaining a life that is free of abuse (Di Basilio et al., 2022). It is through connecting with people who have been through similar experiences or being able to share information with others that helps women find and build confidence in their decision to step away from their abusive relationships (Burke et al., 2004).

Given the diversity in South Africa, it is useful to understand how this process has been conceptualised based on various contextual factors. Thus, honing in on adding to the research knowledge through the lens of intersectionality. The discussion below focuses on the theory of intersectionality and how it has informed this study.

2.5 Theoretical Framework: Theory of intersectionality

Intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as she critiqued feminist and critical race studies which focused on gender and race exclusively (Keuchenius & Mugge, 2021). Crenshaw argued that by looking at these factors exclusively, one was unable to identify the experiences of black women whose oppression was informed by both their race and gender (Al- Faham et al., 2019) . In this regard, it is significant to note that it has been highlighted that “race is particularly salient, because race, when combined with other marginalized identities—gender, sexuality, immigration status, almost always becomes a primary determinant of disparity” (Gill, 2018, p. 560).

Hence, this shift resulted in the inclusion of black women in research studies as this provided a platform for them to share their own acclaimed experiences, of which were not informed by studies on white women or black men (Carastathis, 2014). Intersectionality thus emphasises how the different axes of one’s identity intersect and reinforce oppression (Al- Faham et al., 2019). In this regard, this theoretical framework informs how information on the experiences of violence and agency should be seen through the understanding of racial, ethnic and class complexities. Cole (2009) defined intersectionality as ‘‘analytic approaches that simultaneously consider the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage’’ (p. 170), which are important to consider when looking into what a process of becoming agentive in abusive relationships looks like for various women within these multi-layered categories.

A key question around the theoretical underpinning for this study was, how would the narratives of the female survivors of intimate partner violence be conceptualised and located within larger systems that speak to the various factors that seemed to have an influence in the process of leaving? In sitting with this question, given the inclination

to answer it from an intersectional standpoint which would allow various points of context to be taken into consideration, it was important to be cognizant of the following;

> Intersectionality is not simply a matter of theory or analysis. Instead, it should be thought of as a series of ethical principles in relation to research conduct in the field, such as commitment to social justice goals, and granting epistemic and authoritative privilege to the stories, definitions and perspectives of marginalised persons and careful attention to the politics of positionality as they play out in the field. (Chadwich. 2017, p.13)

Thus, being guided by the principles of intersectionality to grant marginalised voices the platform to be heard and understood in every part of the research process to then understand how these points of intersection play out in their realities. With that being said, beyond the methodology and analysis process being informed by intersectional thinking, the reason why this theoretical framework underpins this study, is because of its principles of simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility and inclusivity (Carastathis, 2014).

In terms of the simultaneity aspect, from an intersectional lens, one is able to understand how multiple co-constituting categories make up a lived experience. Intersectional narrative studies allows for this to be taken into account because there is no fragmentation of texts but rather a respect for the full account (Chadwich, 2017). Buitelaar (2006) explains that in looking at full accounts from this perspective, it enables one to see that individuals do not have a singular self but that the self is dialogical. This is best described through the understanding of the multiplicity of various positions that individuals take – which reflects the 'autonomous I- positions' (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992, as cited Hermans, 2001). The extract below provides a description of this.

> In this conception, the *I* has the possibility to move from one spatial position to another in accordance with changes in situation and time…The voices function like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of question and answer, agreement and disagreement. Each of them has a story to tell about his or her own experiences from his or her own stance. As different voices,

> these characters exchange information about their respective *Me's*, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self. (Hermans, 2001, p. 248).

Thus simply put, oppression can be experienced simultaneously and needs to be understood in conjunction with one another - for example a black women experiencing challenges at work, such as racism due to her race and sexism due to the fact that she is a woman. Hence, tapping into each of these positionalities are necessary.

With regards to complexity, Carasthathis (2014) highlights how intersectionality focuses on social groups that are neglected in order to gain richer understanding of their experiences. This is further explained by McCall (2005) who highlights that at these neglected points of intersection, we are able to gain understanding of the difference across various categories (race, gender, sexuality etc.) and not just within these categories. McCall (2005) highlights how this level of intra-categorical analysis can provide rich insight into how different identity positions are experienced.

Carasthathis (2014) points out that another benefit of this framework is that it is not reductive in that it does not over simplify experiences from both individuals or collective groups. In this regard, it is highlighted that a narrative approach to intersectional thinking allows for both insight into systemic ideas such as the impact of structural inequalities as well as insight into constructionist ideas such as the relational aspects of power and oppression (Chadwich, 2017). Thus allowing women to not just vocalise their positions of oppression from a place of systems that are rigid and oppressive but rather also allowing women to position themselves from a point of agency and resistance to power (Chadwich, 2017). This in essence does not just solely take into consideration the idea of groups or individuals being passive and influenced by systems but also extends into considering their experiences of agency and constructionism. The last principle of inclusivity speaks to the idea that intersectionality addresses the challenges of exclusion of certain experiences by locating interest in once neglected spaces, in order to bring about visibility to wholesome experiences (Carastathis, 2014).

On this basis, the theoretical framework of intersectionality has informed and underpinned this study because it was important to consider race, gender and class in understanding how these factors all played a part in how and why women made

decisions to leave their once accepted abusive relationships. In addition, the inspiration of having this study be informed by the theoretical framework of intersectionality, was through reading Segalo's (2015) article on gender and social cohesion in South Africa. In the article it was noted that in order for there to be sustainable growth, women's silenced experiences and knowledge would need to be heard and acknowledged (Segalo, 2015), hence it was significant to capture the experiences from various perspectives, all of which had different factors which influenced them and which needed to be considered. Beyond the tangible intention of having narratives exposed, the framework of intersectionality informed the overall experience in how the research was conducted (Falcon, 2016). Thus, challenging power relations in the research process all of which were informed by the narrative methodology which will be discussed in the next chapter.

In conclusion, this chapter highlighted the various literature that was reviewed in order to gain clarity on what intimate partner is and what it meant for women to stay in these relationships and what it took for them to leave. These studies reviewed were either done in South Africa or abroad, which is significant as there seems to be a commonality which exists when it comes to intimate partner violence. It was important to highlight the conceptualised process of leaving abusive relationships from previous studies, as this informed the discussions in this study. Lastly, it was important to introduce the theoretical framework which underpinned this study; intersectionality, which basically highlights how it is important to understand that the various parts of one's identity, i.e. race, gender, class etc. , intersect and influence their experiences in the process of leaving. It was also useful to understand how this framework informed how this research was conducted.

3 Chapter 3: Research Methodology

In this chapter, considering that this is a qualitative study, this be discussed first by highlighting what a qualitative research design is, its strengths and its suitability. Thereafter, interpretivism - constructivism will be discussed as the theoretical paradigm that informed the methodology of this study. Following this, there will be a brief discussion regarding the sampling approach and a concise depiction of the participants demographics and relevant information obtained for the study. In addition to this, the method of data collection will be discussed by highlighting the process and purpose of narrative inquiry. Thereafter, there will be a discussion of the procedures that were followed in the data collection process. This will be followed by discussing the use of narrative analysis as a method of analysing the collected data. Ethical considerations will also be discussed as an important aspect of the process of the study. The chapter will be concluded by discussions of how rigor was ensured, followed by self-reflexivity as the researcher.

3.1 Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is used to gain insight on experiences, perspectives and meaning from the participants point of view (Hammarberg & De Lacey, 2016). The data obtained from qualitative research is not quantifiable as the aim is not to quantify the data but rather to obtain more understanding around certain concepts or experiences (Hammarberg & De Lacey, 2016). In this type of research, the researcher's role is very important in that they need to be reflective of their role in the process as they engage quite curiously with the data (Choy, 2014). One of the strengths of qualitative research is that the data analyzed can be simplified without destroying the context (Atieno, 2009). Thus, aspects can be examined and understood in detail and there is room for nuances and complexities to be explored (Anderson, 2010).

This was a suitable design as the aim was to engage with experiences to gain insight on the process of leaving abusive relationships, hence through the interviews and the analysis, I as the researcher was able to gain and relay this insight through my own curiosity and reflections in the process. In addition, given that the idea was to give survivors of IPV a voice - a platform to story their own experiences - this research design was suitable for that, as the focus was not on quantifying the data, nor was it

about disregarding the context, but it was about understanding the data and engaging with it holistically.

3.2 Theoretical paradigm: Interpretivism- constructivism

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), a theoretical paradigm refers to a set of beliefs that infer the way in which people understand and make sense of the world around them. They highlight that "it represents a worldview that defines, the nature of the "world", the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and it's parts" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p 107). The theoretical paradigm that had informed this study's methodology was interpretivism, which infers that people subjectively interpret and make sense of their lives and that there is meaning behind their actions (Chowdhury, 2014). This paradigm posits that accounts of phenomenon and experiences cannot be generalised but rather the aim is explore the various interpretations of a particular phenomenon within its diverse contexts (Pham, 2018). Therefore, data analysed from this paradigm takes into account the idea that individuals will have different narratives and that how they make sense of their experiences, their processes followed and facilitating factors will differ for various reasons.

It was important to initiate the collection of the data and the analysis thereof from delving into the understanding of constructivism within interpretivism. Thus, the constructivism philosophy highlights that individuals construct and make sense of their realities through their own experiences (Adom et al, 2016). Hence, this suggests that knowledge is only attained through experience and that this experience and understanding consists of mental constructions which are shared within social groups and within the individual (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Thus, in exchanging this knowledge, there is a co-construction between the individual and the investigator, because both parties have their own set of mental constructions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Van Der Walt (202) highlights how these mental constructions are informed not only by our biases, assumptions and prejudices but also by our theoretical frameworks – asking ourselves, how are we are seeing the world? And in this case, how is the data being seen? Hence, as discussed in the previous chapter, viewing the data from a theoretical

lens of intersectionality shapes the understanding of the findings in a way that there is sight of all relevant information, all of which come from various processes of constructing, co-constructing, interpreting and re-interpreting (Van Der Walt, 2020). This is important as it is noted that “interpretivism-constructivism is aimed at a ‘holistic complementarity’ rather than the acquisition of ‘proven facts’ ” (Van Der Walt, 2020, p. 65).

In this regard, my role as the researcher played a part in the process of gaining an understanding of these women’s experiences and together we co-constructed a narration of that experience. Considering that this was the paradigm that informed the methodology of this study, it spoke to the way in which the research was conducted, from the sampling approach and criteria, to the collection of the data and the analysis thereof. The reflections and reflexivity from my positionality will be discussed briefly at the end of the chapter as it was important to pay attention to my own mental constructions and my thought processes which were in some way informing the interpretations.

3.3 Sampling Approach

The study was conducted with 8 females all of which met the following inclusion criteria: They were above the age of 18 years old and had been in an abusive relationship which comprised of physical, emotional and/or financial abuse. These women were out of their abusive relationships for more than a year, and they were residing in Johannesburg at the time that they were in their abusive relationships and some are still residing in Johannesburg currently. The sample of participants were gathered through purposive sampling. Participants were obtained through circulating an advertisement (refer to Appendix A) on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp. The use of a snowballing method was also used, as people had communicated with women whom they knew would be interested.

3.4 Participants

The table below (Table 3.1) provides summarized information of the participants in the study. In the next chapter, the noted participants' background information and parts of the narratives will be discussed briefly in order to provide some context within the study.

Table 3.1 *Table highlighting participants' biographical information*

Participant	Age	Race	Employment Status currently	Employment status during the course of the relationship	Period of abusive relationship	Period out of abusive relationship	Children from the abusive relationship	
A	36	Indian	Employed	Employed	2-3 yrs	+8 yrs	No	
B	34	Black	Employed	Employed	11 yrs	2 yrs	Yes	2
C	32	White	Employed	In school	2 yrs	+ 10 yrs	No	
D	47	White	Unemployed	Employed	8 yrs	16 yrs	Yes	1
E	25	Black	Employed	Employed	4 yrs	1 yr	No	
F	46	White	Employed	Employed	14 yrs	12 yrs	Yes	2
G	39	Indian	Employed	Employed	1 yr	+ 10 yrs	No	
H	54	Indian	Employed	Unemployed	3 yrs	31 yrs	Yes	2

3.5 Data collection

This was an exploratory inductive study as it aimed to look at new ideas in relation to the topic by using existing literature to expand the understanding of agency in women in abusive relationships (Stebbins, 2001). Considering that the purpose of the study was to explore narratives of survivors of intimate partner violence, the research method used for collecting data was narrative inquiry through interviews. This research methodology explores participants lived experiences through the telling of their stories (Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Scholars infer that narrative inquiry is useful in that through telling our life stories it enables us to make meaning of our experiences and in turn help others (Clandinin, 2006). Furthermore, this method of study encompasses the understanding that individuals' experiences are made up of individual and social interactions (Clandinin, 2006). Thus, this allows for understanding participants' experiences within the contexts in which they exist. On this basis, the data was

collected by using semi-structured interviews. Refer to Appendix B for the interview schedule that was used as a guide.

It was beneficial to use semi-structured interviews as the research tool, as Willig (2013) highlights that these interviews allow participants to share their experiences through a form of dialogue that is not too rigid. Thus, according to Kim (2016), it is noted that narrative researchers are involved in the research process together with the participants, as they try to interpret the meanings conveyed by analysing parts of the story being told. Riessman (in Kim, 2016, p.7), notes that "narrative inquirers do not stand outside in a neutral, objective position, merely presenting or analysing "what was said"…", thus highlighting the researchers role in using subjective interpretations of what is analysed to convey further understanding and meaning. Hence, in this regard my positionality as a female in this country and my interpretations and subjectivities were also important in the collecting of the data phase as this influenced the questions that were asked, as well as the overall interaction. Hence, some of the questions that were posed spontaneously based on the content and the comments made must be understood from the premise of my positionality in the process. Thus, the flexibility of the semi-structured interviews allowed for me to be engaged in the process to ensure that rapport was built and that there was open flowing conversation which aligned with providing the participants with the platform to freely share their stories.

3.6 Research procedure

The process for recruiting participants was initiated a month after approval and ethical clearance was obtained for the final research proposal on 23rd May 2022 from School of Human and Community Development Ethics Committee (HREC Non-medical) and the Registrar of the Faculty of Humanity. An advert was created (refer to Appendix A), approved by my supervisor and circulated on social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. Participants made contact via WhatsApp initially, and they were then emailed a copy of the information letter which explained the purpose of the study and what it entailed (refer to Appendix C), as well as the consent form (refer to Appendix D). Once consent was given, interviews were arranged and conducted virtually via Teams, due to the transcription option available on this virtual platform. Participants were informed of the preferred virtual platform prior

to the interview. Each interview was audio recorded as per the consent provided. The interviews began with a brief introduction which allowed for a sense of comfortability and easing into the process. Each interview was adapted according to the participant. The interviews ended with a short debriefing and a space for reflections regarding the process.

The data collection process took place over a period of two months; whereby the first interview was conducted on 15th July 2022 and the last one on 20th September 2022**.** The transcription period was done over two months – from October to November 2022. Thereafter, following the transcription, the data was analysed which allowed for the results and discussion to follow.

3.7 Data analysis

The data was analysed by using principles of narrative data analysis. Narrative analysis involves the process of interpreting and analysing narratives in order to provide insight on how participants make sense of their experiences through the use of storytelling (Kim, 2016). As mentioned above, the researcher is involved in the process through interpreting the data, and this subjective interpretation is facilitated by the use of narrative smoothing, whereby the researcher fills in the gaps of the narrative to ensure that it is coherent. This is critiqued by Spence (1986 as cited in Kim, 2016), as this is seen as an attempt to present a good story rather than a faithful account of the persons narrative, as the researcher decides what is presented and what is not in the analysis through re- presenting the story. This issue was taken into consideration and addressed by being cognisant of Spence's (1986 as cited in Kim, 2016, p.9) proposal:

> (a) by being more nuanced and sensitive, (b) by recognizing the fact that the stories are not fixed and the referents can be ambiguous, (c) by guaranteeing confidentiality at the expense of some of the data's richness, and (d) by taking the participant and the reader into consideration .

Therefore, whilst noting the above, the narratives were analysed by using Labov's model of analysis as per Mishler (1995, as cited in Kim, 2016). The reason for using this model is because it focuses on temporal ordering in which events occur and considering that the research aimed to understand the process of agency in survivors

of intimate partner violence, it was beneficial to have a structure of order and key events. Thus the analysis consisted of Mishler's (1995 as cited in Kim, 2016, p.17) adopted components of the model:

1. ***Abstract:*** a summary of the story and its points.
2. ***Orientation:*** providing a context such as place, time, and character to orient the reader.
3. ***Complicating Action:*** skeleton plot or an event that causes a problem as in, 'And then what happened?'
4. ***Result or Resolution:*** resolution of the story or the conflict.
5. ***Evaluation:*** evaluative comments on events, justification of its telling, or the meaning that the teller gives to an event.
6. ***Coda:*** bringing the narrator and listener back to the present.

Taking cognisance of the abovementioned framework, whilst considering the aim of the research, it was important that emphasis be placed on the events following the *Complicating Action* as the interest was on the process of leaving and not on the experience of the abuse. However, it was important to allow these women to share their experience as fully as they wished as that provided the premise to locate them contextually and to have insight on what influenced them to remove themselves from the dynamic that they were a part of. Thus, analysing data according to these components, meant looking at orientation as data that located the participants in their context at the time of the abuse experienced. The *CAction* involved analysing parts of the data that highlighted when the abuse begun and the various challenges that arose as a result thereof. An important component is the result or resolution in which the tension of the narrative is released through the resolving action (Khalil, 2017).

Another important component was the *evaluation analysis*, whereby the participant's interpretations of their experiences were highlighted. Labov (1972, as cited in Patterson, 2011), highlights that in the analysis of narratives, there are different types of evaluations to look for, one of which includes the "embedded evaluation" which highlights how the narrator felt at the time. He goes on to identify "external evaluations" whereby narrators step out their experience and describes what it meant for them and inevitability what it means for them now. Thus, it was important to take note of embedded evaluations wherein there was extra detail provided and the actions were suspended through paraphrases of repetition (Khalil, 2017). In this regard, emphasis was placed on analysing reflections that occurred during the experience which linked to the evaluations followed after. Thus, in this instance, embedded evaluations

highlight both the reflecting on what was felt at the time and also the stepping out of the experience to allow for an more external reflection of the meaning in relation to that embedded feeling and experience. This allowed for a richer understanding of the evaluation or sense made of the events after the resolution.

Coda was also important to analyse as this highlighted the end of the narrative and it also informed how these women maintained their distance from these relationships and what assisted in that. These components were analysed and highlighted on each of the participant's transcripts – thus every line in each transcript was analysed accordingly. Sections within the transcripts were then analysed further to evaluate which of the abovementioned components fit each of those sections. For example, looking at a section in a transcript that read: *"Umm and then as the months went on, it must have been about seven months down the line. Then I started noticing the changes in his attitude, like the way he would speak to me*" was labelled as "Complicating action". Following the analysis on each transcript electronically, the components discussed were placed onto an Excel spreadsheet and various themes were derived under each component for each participant. Thus, the data allowed for the themes to emerge and from this, I was able to identify which quotations to select based on each of these themes.

The table below (Table 3.2) provides an example of how themes were derived for each participant under the components mentioned above. This was useful in being able to have insight on themes across for each participant within each stage and also provided the platform to concisely find broader themes (which are highlighted in the next chapter) that spoke to each theme that was found in the analysis.

Table 3.2: *Table showing an example of how the data was coded into themes within each component*

Narrative Component	Participant A
Orientation	Promising beginnings
Complicating action	Emotional manipulation
Embedded evaluation	Entitlement
Resolution	Mentally leaving the relationship
Evaluation	Mourning the loss before the loss
Coda	Creating safe spaces

3.8 Ethical considerations

It was imperative that the research had taken into account various ethical considerations. The following aspects were taken into consideration: informed consent, voluntary participation, privacy and confidentiality as well non-maleficence.

3.8.1 Informed consent

Participants being provided with the information sheet ensured that they were informed of the purpose and the process of the study and that their written consent was provided based on being well-informed thereof. This also ensured that participants were aware of the fact that the interviews were going to be audio recorded and used for analysis in which they provided permission and consent to do so. On this basis, obtaining written consent from the participants was important.

3.8.2 Voluntary participation

In the information sheet, participants were also informed of their freedom to decline participation, as well as their freedom to withdraw at any point (Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2015).

3.8.3 Privacy and confidentiality

Participants understood that their privacy was considered and ensured, as they were informed that the information they shared would be strictly confidential as no one except those involved in the study had access to their data. In addition, they were informed that they would maintain anonymity, which was adhered to as participants were referred to as “Participant A, Participant B”. This essentially meant that no information was connected to them in the write up and that they remained unknown to the readers (Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2015). Furthermore, measures were taken to ensure privacy as all recorded and transcribed interviews were stored on a password secured laptop.

3.8.4 Non-maleficence

Non- maleficence refers the active process of avoiding harm to participants (Tangwa, 2009). In this regard, it was necessary to ensure that there was no harm caused to the participants. Thus, considering that the data was collected through semi-structured interviews, it allowed the participants to communicate their stories freely and allowed for them to share details that they felt comfortable to. Considering the nature of the study and the sensitivity around the topic, the interviews had ended with a short debriefing and discussion whereby participants reflected on how they felt after having shared their experiences. Considering my role in this instance, being both a researcher and a student counselling psychologist, my training in the field during my Masters year had assisted me to provide space for reflection and containment as we ended interviews. Should there have been any instance of severe distress, there were alternative psychological services to be directed to. None of the participants expressed a great deal of unease, hence there was no discussion of the psychological services available, however this was provided in the information sheet should they have felt that they needed any support at a later stage (refer to Appendix C).

3.9 Enhancing the quality of the research

To ensure that the analysis of the findings were valid, consideration was given to the concept of bracketing, which refers to the process whereby prior beliefs or perceptions and experiences held by the researcher do not have any influence on the interpretation of the findings (Fischer, 2008). It was important to be cognisant of this because through the research process, as noted, narrative inquirers and participants co-construct experiences (Clandinin, 2006). The reason for this is because narrative inquiry works from the premise of 3 dimensions; time, place and social interaction (Clandinin, 2006). Therefore, all these dimensions interplay with each other and the researcher falls into these dimensions through engaging and bringing in their own assumptions and own experiences. This is also the case because of the influence of the relationship between the participant and the researcher as this facilitates the process of what is shared and how it is shared. Thus, Fischer (2008), highlights that being aware of the influence of our perspectives, is helpful in creating a shift which enables the data to be interpreted for what it is. All in all, this ensures the quality of the research.

In this regard, it has been noted that it is important that the researcher engages in constant reflection or reflexivity (Stedmon & Dallos, 2009), whereby any subjective ideals or thoughts are highlighted in order to not thwart the process during the interview nor the analysis of the narratives. This is done as the researcher becomes aware of their thought processes and the influence thereof. It is important to note that the researcher's presuppositions should not create a biased account of the analysis but rather facilitate understanding (Willig, 2013). Hence, reflexivity is an important aspect to ensure validity as the researcher should highlight any personal values or experiences that may influence the research and the analysis (Willig, 2013). This process of being reflexive is a constant "looking back and inward in a self-aware manner" (Fischer, 2008, p 584). Hence, this was necessary as it ensured transparency in the way in which the narratives were analysed which speaks to the idea of co-construction. On that note, the section below will highlight my reflexivity and reflections as the researcher.

Furthermore, in qualitative research, authenticity is more of a concern than reliability (Seale & Silverman, 1997). Thus, to ensure authenticity, the sample size was small enough to pay attention to individual details but big enough to get a broad sense of understanding on the topic. Secondly, the use of audio recordings allowed for precise recall of what was said during the interviews which was supported by transcripts, hence there was no distortion of participant's interviews and this allowed for a process of analysis on accurate and verbatim narratives. Thirdly, narrative inquiry research involves a constant discussion between participant and researcher, ensuring that the participant is fully involved in the process. Thus, through reflecting their stories back to them, the aim was to allow participants to have control over how their stories were being framed and understood (Wang & Geale, 2015) – thus highlighting a process of collaboration.

3.10 Reflexivity

In my understanding of the process, intention for me is very important and can inform how you conduct research and how you understand and convey the findings. Being an Indian female in a country whereby violence against women is so rife, coming from a community and a family whereby I had witnessed it for myself, the intention of the study for me was to reframe victimhood. I understood the factors that bound women to men in relationships of this nature, as do many of us, but I wanted to sit with the process of agency because there was something powerful about becoming agentive in restricting situations. I needed to sit with this intention throughout the process because I needed to understand where I was limiting the study and where I was enforcing a narrative of process, power and agency to a process that encompassed a lot more than that.

In my first interview, I had seen how my intention dictated the way in which I carried out the interview – very intentional in finding the answers to the process. I realised that I needed to be more flexible in this and allow these women to share their stories in the ways that they wanted. This for me meant sitting with the discomfort, the painful realities and tough experiences first before trying to tap into a narrative of agency or rather allowing it to unfold as it did. I had to ensure that I did not push positivity and resilience into the conversation which was difficult because I felt that sitting in the "mess" of their narratives, took away from the purpose of the study. However, I had to be cognisant of reflecting back on what they were sharing, and sitting with where they were at in their relation of the story, because it was a part of the process.

As a researcher, I had to be cognisant of how the participants related to me. I was mindful of how my age seemed to play a part in how some of the participants related to me, whereby the youngest participant seemed to have engaged better with me in comparison to the older participants. It would seem that relatability from an age perspective played a part in that. This was also significant, particularly for one of the participants who expressed frustration with a young psychologist she engaged with and that made me feel as though I too could not understand the complexities of what she was sharing. This was also noted in her tone, and her constant repetition of things such as, *"as I've said".* It was important for me to be aware of this as it spoke to the

disconnect she felt between those who have not experienced what she did as well as my positionality as a student psychologist. This assisted me in being able to hold these discussions with great sensitivity and relay these emotions in the analysis. There did not seem to be any noteworthy reflections on the aspect of my race, however, being a female played a significant part in these women feeling comfortable to share openly and almost relate with some of the aspects that come along with being a woman. I needed to be very careful with this aspect, because I needed to draw the line between being a voice of empowerment during the process and being the voice of a researcher as it was my role to engage curiously.

In analysing the data, it was important for to be mindful of my own assumptions, experiences and biases because this would have influenced the themes I gathered from the data, in terms of how they were languaged and how they were phrased. Hence it was important for me to re- read the data and identify if the same meanings were emerging each time and what was different because I needed the data to speak for itself. In doing so, I was able to tap into more of the factors that were at play here, such as internal processes and contextual aspects, and this created the balance needed to giving voice to the experiences of violence and what leaving those spaces actually looked and felt like.

4 Chapter 4 – Findings and Discussion

Based on the analysis mentioned in the previous chapter, the results from the data are discussed in this chapter. In this chapter, various themes that have been extracted from the data will be unpacked and explored through further understanding of the process in which the participants had undergone. The following themes will be discussed: The shattering of the idea of an ideal relationship; the beginning of the end and repositioning oneself- all of which consist of a number of subthemes. It is important to locate the participants and provide some narration of their lived experiences, hence prior to exploring the themes, each participant will be introduced and a brief summary of their journey will be documented to ensure that there is some insight into their shared narratives. This will set the platform for understanding the diverse experiences as well as the commonalities found within the intersecting parts of the participants identities.

4.1 Participants

Participant A is a 36 year old Indian female. She currently resides in Johannesburg but was originally form Durban. The relationship she discussed began when she was in Durban, but when she relocated to Johannesburg she was still in the relationship as her ex-partner moved with her. At the time, she was employed and financially independent. She was in the abusive relationship for two to three years and has been out of the relationship for more than 8 years. She reported that she experienced verbal and physical abuse while in the relationship. She further expressed that her feelings of love had changed to fear for her life as she was unable to leave because her ex-partner would threaten her. However, her experience of nearly being thrown over a balcony in front of her younger nephews, was a changing point for her, in which she decided to leave with the help of her cousin. Participant A reported that she is currently married and is employed.

Participant B is a 34 year old black female. She is a single mother to her daughter who is 12 years old and her son who is 10 years old. She currently resides in Soweto with her parents. She expressed having witnessed her father being abusive towards her mother as she was growing up. She has a teaching degree and is looking for a job in this field. She currently works as an administrator and she sells clothing as a part time

means of attaining income. Participant B reported being traditionally married to the children's father until they had separated due to the emotional, financial and physical abuse that she had endured. She reported that during her first year of tertiary studies, she had her first child when she was dating her ex-partner, whom she eventually got married to and thereafter moved in with him. At that time, she was studying and working part time in which her ex-husband became financially dependent on her. She reported feeling restrained in her progression as there were elements of control and emotional manipulation. Following a big adjustment in her ex-husband's health, she reported feeling as though she could not leave. However, seeing that he had not changed in his behaviour, she underwent a therapy process and she had left, and has had to avoid contact with him due to an incident of violence when she took the children to visit.

Participant C is a 32 year old white female. She had described her childhood as functional however, she expressed that she lacked affection from father. She reported that she was still in school when she was in this abusive relationship, however her partner at the time was five years older than her. She expressed that she experienced him cheating on her, emotionally abusing her by belittling her and making her feel insecure and she also experienced physical abuse. Participant C expressed that she was threatened and humiliated when she tried to leave. She was a dancer and having had her dancing attire thrown out the car and having been burnt with cigarettes, she reported that she knew she had to leave. Once she matriculated, she ended the relationship and went for therapy. Thereafter, she became an international flight attendant for 14 years in which she then returned to South Africa. She is currently a trauma counsellor, Pilates instructor and baker. Participant C reported that she is currently in a relationship.

Participant D is a 47 year old white female who, at the time of the study was unemployed. She is a mother to an 18 year old daughter. When her daughter was 2 years old, Participant D had left her husband due to the emotional, physical and financial abuse she had endured. She reported that her marriage was not what she had aspired to have when she looked at what her parents had modelled for her as she was growing up. She expressed being an independent woman, however in her marriage she felt that this was stripped away from her. Her husband at the time was

financially dependent on her and she was restrained in that she would need to ask for his permission to spend her money. A turning point for her was when her ex-husband had been physically and verbally abusive while their daughter was in his arms. Participant D had decided to leave the relationship following this incident as she reported that she did not want her daughter to grow up in that environment. Currently, she and her daughter are in the process of immigrating to Bulgaria and she is not in a relationship.

Participant E is a 25 year old black female who currently works in the Aviation industry. During the course of her relationship, she transitioned from being financially dependent on her parents to finding employment, which was when she had noticed that her ex-partner began relying on her for financial favours. She expressed that initially her ex- partner was emotionally available and supportive and it was this that kept her in the relationship. However, she reported consistent periods of neglect and emotional abuse. Participant E expressed that a turning point for her was when he threatened her with suicide in order to get financial aid and thereafter she left the relationship.

Participant F is a 46 year old white female. She is a trauma counsellor and a search and rescue founder. She reported being married twice. She had left her last marriage 12 years ago as she reported experiencing emotional and physical abuse. Participant F expressed that she was employed but her husband at the time had full control of the finances, hence she felt as though she was financially dependent on him. She reported that she was isolated from her family and there was great control over how she presented herself and where she went. Participant F expressed that she had left four times before but felt as though she had nowhere to go because she isolated herself from her family and often wondered what people would think if she had left. In addition, she reported that her ex-husband would threaten to commit suicide when she tried to leave. She reported that after speaking to her mother- in-law, she was encouraged to save money whenever she could and to place significant focus on her religion which assisted in her finding the strength to leave. She reported that she started the search and rescue with another single mother who was a survivor of IPV as a platform to help other women who struggle in similar situations.

Participant G is a 39 year old, Indian female and she reported that she is a teacher by profession but currently works in the finance industry with her husband. Participant G reported that she was originally from Johannesburg and relocated to Durban. She expressed that she had grown up in a poverty stricken community. She reported that while she was in the abusive relationship with her ex-partner, she felt a sense of protection, as he was someone that was feared in the community. However, she reported that she then began to feel a sense of fear for him when he became physically violent towards her. She contemplated leaving but felt that she had nowhere to go because she had left her family. A significant moment for her was when her ex-partner was abusive in public. She expressed that after trying to leave and opening up a case against him, this was not successful and that he threatened to end her life. Participant G expressed that she had found her way out of this relationship by moving out of the community. She highlighted that she had focused on other things in her life, such as work and her religion. She expressed that she is currently married and has two children.

Participant H is a 54 year old Indian female residing in Benoni. She currently works as a Life Coach at a non- governmental organisation. She is a mother to two children, a daughter and son - 33 years old and 32 years old respectively. She is currently single and had expressed that she is not prioritizing a relationship. Participant H expressed that she was socialised into a home environment of violence in which her mother experienced domestic violence and she then was subjected to physical punishment by her mother. She too found herself in an abusive marriage in which she experienced exposure to her ex-husband using substances as well as physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Conflicted by the reality of having her husband subject her to childhood experiences, she expressed that she found small ways to assist her in leaving the relationship. She did this by being sterilized at a young age to ensure that she would not be able to bear more children with him and through the internal conversations she had with herself following significant experiences of abuse. Thus, a key factor in her decision to leave was to give her children a safer environment and to protect them from harm. She then found herself in positions whereby she empowers young people through education, coaching and counsel.

4.2 Themes

Considering that the stages of leaving an abusive relationship seem to follow a process of pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance (Burke et al, 2004, as cited in Bermea et al., 2020) as discussed in Chapter 2, it is beneficial to understand the covert processes that unfold within these stages. The authors highlight that there are cognitive processes in the beginning stages followed by more behavioural processes (Burke et al, 2004). However, there are emotional and psychological processes as well that are embedded within each of these stages. Perhaps in order to fully understand the process of leaving, one needs to understand the hidden and unspoken processes that underlie this transition. **Figure 4.1** below provides an outline of the findings from the research study. Each of these stages will be discussed in detail in this section. However, it is important to note that the process of leaving does not follow a sequential process in the order represented below and that women often find themselves at various points at different times. Thus, it is important to be cognisant that this just provides a conceptualisation of the unspoken aspects in each stage and how each stage in some way aids in progressing to the act of actually leaving.

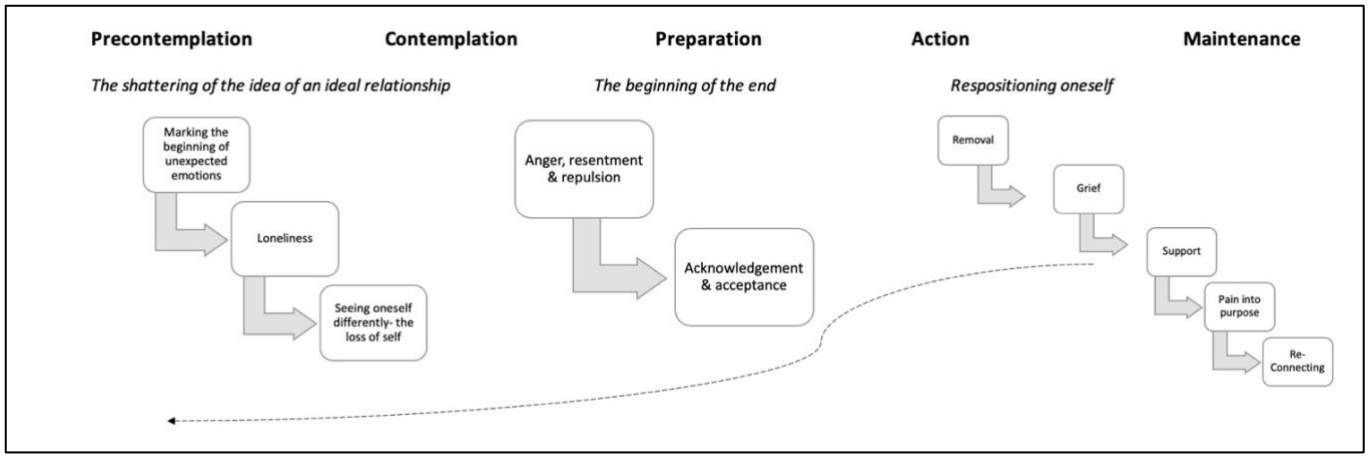


Figure 4.1: *Diagram showing the conceptualised process of leaving an abusive relationship based on the findings in the study*

4.2.1 **Theme 1: The shattering of the idea of an ideal relationship**

Three subthemes were identified as part of the participants process of transitioning from pre-contemplation to contemplation around leaving their relationships. The themes below highlight how the process of mentally shattering the idea of an ideal relationship comes from beginning to feel unexpected emotions within the relationship and becoming aware of the loss of oneself. This often leads to a process of contemplating taking action in order to leave.

4.2.1.1 Subtheme 1: "And that would mark the beginning"…

Based on the interviews, it was significant to understand that the experience of abuse did not just mark the beginning of acts of violence or control and isolation, but that it marked the beginning of a change; a shift in the way the relationship was once perceived. Beyond this, it caused a shift in how these women felt within the relationship.

> *"I was lying on the couch and he kicked me with his leg on my head. And I got up and I said, what are you doing? And he said, where were you? I want to know where you went and where you were? And I just cried and I said I was with nobody, you know. I just went to a party. I think that was the first trace of violence that I perceived and I no longer felt safe. I just thought, something's not right here. And I got a little bit frozen, and that would mark the beginning of no longer feeling safe."* (Participant G)

> *"Another incident happened where [he] uhh he dragged me by my hair ,uhm, across the kitchen. Umm and so then I [I was] then I told him I [I] want out. And he… he held me by my throat and he said that uh uhm…He said that if I ever leave him, or if I ever try leaving him, he will disfigure my face. And then that's when I knew like there's no way that I could stay here in this relationship. But even after that, I still didn't leave…Cause I was afraid. Cause when that happened, fear set in." (Participant A)*

The quotes above speak to the shift in no longer feeling what was once felt in the relationship- essentially in this case, no longer feeling safe and feeling a sense of fear instead. It is noted that the transition into a stage of contemplation is marked by a realization that certain events and experiences are harmful, hence suggesting a cognitive appraisal of the situation (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). However, it would seem that it is also a realization of an emotional experience which is contrary to previous

experiences that sparks ideas of reconsidering the relationship. In essence, this seems to result in becoming more aware that things are changing within the relationship and that something is essentially wrong. Thus, this speaks to, not just a cognitive shift but an experiential one. The quotes above allude to this feeling as something very common within these relationships – fear. Saunders (2003) highlights that it is when women realize the negative impact of the violence they have experienced, that feelings of fear and anger commonly surface.

In addition to this, the research findings from the interviews suggest that it is not only fear that is newly experienced in this shift, but there are also experiences of unhappiness and desires to feel a sense of escape. The excerpt below paints a picture of what it looked like to no longer feel comfortable or happy in that relationship.

> *"So I tell you, I was starting to…I don't know. I had this, bad feeling that you know. Like I was no longer happy. I was no longer comfortable. So uhm, if I could just give you an idea of my character. I'm quite an artistic person. So in my spare time I paint, I draw, or I style. I play around with clothes you know. So...I…I would just make…like when I'm unhappy, I find…I find ways to…to escape, you know. So I would escape and fortunately for me. I'd also get, like, occupations that would help me escape, you know, without really showing that, hey, I'm running away from this responsibility of being someone's wife.***"** (Participant B)

Additionally, the excerpt suggests that when romantic feelings change in an abusive relationship, it initiates the idea of leaving (Basilio et al., 2022) – even in the sense of escaping temporarily. In further scrutinizing this excerpt, *"without really showing that, hey, I'm running away from this responsibility of being someone's wife"* (Participant B), it relays a message of shame and guilt. The experience of these emotions in relation to the idea of leaving these relationships were very common in these women's narratives. It was particularly evident for married women and women of colour. In respect of the former, it was noted that shame and guilt was a result of not being able to leave the relationship due to the possibilities of being ostracized by communities and families (Shaheen et al., 2020), as seen in Participant B's reluctance to be seen as an uninvolved wife. It was also noted that much of the guilt was around being shamed by family members, as indicated particularly in women of colour. The two

quotations below are from two Indian participants, one married at the time and the other dating at the time. These quotations highlight the shame that they were avoiding from how others would react, all of which resulted in them not speaking to their family members.

> *"I gathered myself and I said to myself because at this stage I wasn't even telling my family what was happening. I was so humiliated, that they told me don't marry him and people would see me, my friends would see me and say, what have you done."* (Participant H)

> *"All I had to do was…[starts crying]. I didn't think this was going to happen. [Laughs] All I had to do was pray that…talking now on part of the experience…all I had to do was just go home. That's all I had to do. But I just couldn't do it."* (Participant G)

The above quotations highlight the difference in the narratives of white women, married or unmarried at the time, whereby the experience of shame in this regard, seemed to be more internally based rather than externally based. Shame is described as a feeling that some of the women experienced in relation to the idea that they had failed (Lindergren & Renck, 2008) – failed themselves and failed in their decisions. Thus, in the case of the white participants, not necessarily looking at external pressure but an internal one. One of the participants highlighted this, through indicating the following:

> *"It was humiliating, because then I had to admit that my marriage is a failure. I'm a failure as a wife, I'm a failure as a mother because I couldn't keep the family together. I was a failure because I couldn't keep a household running. It was very humiliating."* (Participant F)

In addition to this, the following quotations below speaks to how this shame and guilt experienced by white participants were somewhat buffered by the support of the family system. The following quotations are from white women, married and unmarried respectively at the time:

> *"Uhm his dad passed away about two years ago, he was very supportive as well. And his mom said to me, just you need to leave him. And I said, I don't know how to I have nowhere to go."* (Participant F)

> *"Uhm after, [I] like literally the very next few days after I had told my parents my mom shipped me off to counselling- I'd go once or twice a week and just having a good support system from my family and the counsellor being my guidance and my voice of reason."* (Participant C)

This experience of guilt and shame, in and of itself spoke to the beginning of feeling something that would facilitate a process of change, whether it was through being supported or unsupported. Albeit, it is significant to note that the processing of guilt and shame which facilitated the process of leaving, seemed helpful with the support of others, as it has been noted that a "lack of support from others results in depression, increased isolation, and a decrease in self-esteem" (Ladenburger, 1998, p.702).

4.2.1.2 Subtheme 2: Loneliness

Most research highlights that within abusive relationships, isolation is a very common experience. Researchers indicate how isolation works in the favour of gaining control over women (Senter & Caldwell, 2002). In the findings, it was significant to note that it was more common for the white participants to experience the extremes of isolation in an overt way- such as being told not to engage with certain people; speaking to direct isolation. The quote below highlights the experience of one of the white participants:

> *"And slowly but surely you get alienated from everybody that believes you. He will make sure that they are alienated from you and that you're on your own and that you don't have a support structure. Uhm, and at one stage I was given the ultimatum it was either him or my relationship with my mother and I never spoke to her for three months because of it…"* (Participant D)

Participant F, a white participant shared a similar experience, as she expressed that she too was not allowed to see her mother who lived five kilometres away from her. She was also cut off from her friends and the rest of her family. She experienced the extremes of this isolation to the point that she was not allowed to have a cell-phone. She highlighted that she *"was shut out from the world"* and at this point of being physically isolated from the rest of the world, she "*realized that genuine loneliness is a real thing. People do go through it*." (Participant F)

In comparison to the above experiences, it was found that in relation to the black and Indian participants, they began to feel the need to isolate themselves from people. Participant B, a black female expressed how her unhappiness caused her to shift away from people. She highlighted the following;

> *"And then I think I slipped into a state of loneliness or isolation. I then isolated myself you know? Because I mean, what's the point? I'm out there. I'm looking all pretty and fancy in clothes. People think I'm living the life and I'm feeling miserable. I'm feeling very, very miserable, you know?"* (Participant B)

With regards to this, what was common in these narratives, was not solely the aspect of isolation and how it occurred, but rather the sense of loneliness that surfaced as a result of these experiences in these relationships. Loneliness is described as quite a painful experience that results from situational constraints and personal challenges, all of which are exacerbated by changing circumstances (Rokach, 2006). Thus, it is not just the constraints in these relationships that should be of focus, but the feeling of no longer belonging and no longer feeling valued that is significant in the process (Arokach, 2006). Participant B above highlights how she herself began to isolate because of how she was feeling, and this in and of itself speaks to the deeper feeling around these constraints that the research speaks of – the pain beneath the isolation and the loneliness thereof.

It is significant to note that this experience of loneliness was similar for each participant. The expression of this loneliness was different due to familial support and lack of external pressure as mentioned above, however the internal experience was similar. Essentially it was a sense of loneliness in the relationship. The excerpt below from Participant E, highlights this loneliness and the sense of devaluation that coincided with the Arokach's (2006) description.

> *"I was like so sick and uhm, I told him that I was going to the hospital and that I'm getting admitted at hospital, and he didn't check in. Didn't care to you know, how are you feeling? Have you been discharged…nothing. Like he literally didn't say anything, until I was the one who was like, Yebo. How can you be quiet when I told you that, you know?"* (Participant E)

Significantly, it was the questioning of this feeling that would spark a sense of unease. Feeling as though they were living two separate realities, one which other people saw as glorified and one that they had to keep away due to their own fears, shame and insecurities. However this reality was a lonely one as Participant B explains further below.

> *"I realized that you know what? I looked around me and I had to be really…because most of my friends are not married. So some see this life I'm living as ideal. Some want a ring on their finger, you know? I mean, I have a ring on my finger,[but it would], it would make me feel a bit shy seeing another woman looking at me with that, you know, like [I don't know how to put it], I don't want to use the word envy. But like, you know, like this young person wants to be in my situation. And I feel like this is not the situation to be in as a young person, you know."* (Participant B)

In reflecting on their experiences in the relationship and their decisions to move away, it is useful to understand why. Thorsen et al. (2018) explains this as violence- related shame. The authors highlight that shame around violent and abusive experiences, often results in social withdrawal and the loss of trust in others which inevitably leads to this sense of loneliness that has been highlighted.

4.2.1.3 Subtheme 3: Seeing oneself differently – loss of self

In "Feminism – Corporeality, Materialism, and beyond", Grabowska (2023), suggests that over years the female body has not only been an instrument for political agendas, but also an instrument of oppression. However, it is important to understand how these two aspects coincide. The author makes reference to political decisions that occur in public spaces which then influence how people engage in private spaces (Grabowska, 2023). These political decisions, influenced by the ideology of patriarchy has influenced how women position themselves privately as well. This discourse speaks to women's understanding of their own bodies not belonging to them – thus an internalization of patriarchal standards that condition women into being submissive and accepting of discipline and control (Grabowska, 2023). Thus, highlighting how discipline and in this case, abuse and domination is condoned because of women's separation from their very own bodies due to deep rooted ideological standards.

On a macro-level this speaks to how women have been conditioned to be so disconnected from themselves and how this infiltrates how men and women relate to each other, as the author highlighted. On a micro-level this disconnect seems to surface over time in abusive relationships. The act of oppressing the body of woman, also speaks to the oppression of her identity. IPV has been said to leave women's self-esteem, self- worth and their sense of self completely fragmented (Crawford, et al., 2009). The participants in the study highlighted that in the process of conforming and silencing themselves, they were essentially losing themselves. Participant D relayed a conversation that she had with her mother who was able to see the shift. She indicated that her mother made the following comment: *"She said to me, you've changed [you] you're doing things to make him happy and content but, in the process, you losing yourself."* (Participant D)

Burke et al (2004) highlights how "women moving into preparation discussed changes in how they thought of themselves and their intimate relationships" (p. 127). Thus relating to this idea of the shattering of the ideal relationship which encompasses awareness around the shattering of oneself too. This is further suggested through the idea that the battering of a woman's body is not just physical, in that it's consequences are seen in the battering of one's ability to engage in self- care, in their functioning and their well-being (Rakovec- Felser, 2014). A common experience which highlights this loss of self, was seen as these women had to question themselves on the basis of the abuse they were experiencing, thus suggesting that they struggled to hold their own perspective and opinions.

> *"…but he kept on threatening with the 'if you don't have the proof. You know, you can't say that anything is happening, it's in your mind and you're jealous'. And again, with the manipulation and all of that you start to question things that aren't there - Is it maybe because I'm jealous?"* (Participant D)

The excerpt above from participant D not only highlights the common experience of manipulation but rather the process of seeing how one begins to question themselves and how this essentially takes away from their reality and themselves. In considering this, Crawford et al. (2009) highlights how the negative impact on their self-esteem

and self-worth leaves them doubting their own abilities and decisions, thus resulting in women becoming emotionally dependant on their abusive partners.

> *"…it's the complete destruction of your person, then you feel you're not going to be able to do it on your own, you won't be capable. I mean, it got to the stage when I eventually believed his words to me… 'you're not going to survive, and you're not going to be able to talk to your daughter because she's going to die because you're just not a capable mother' and all of that. And it resonates in your mind."* (Participant D)

Participant D's words coincides with the findings by Crawford et al. (2009) regarding the impact of abuse on women's self-esteem and their capabilities. It would seem that it is at this low point, that women often feel stuck as it was reported that *"…when you have low self-esteem, you can never reach for anything higher than what you feel about yourself"* (Participant H). This translated in financial areas as well. It was interesting to note that research highlights that financial independence is often an outlet to freeing oneself from abusive relationships (Showalter, 2016), however, six out the eight participants in this study were financially independent whilst they were in their respective relationships. Yet for some, through the control they experienced, that independence was stripped away. This coincided with the research by Hayes (2013), whereby it is noted that coercion is not just achieved through physical acts of violence, but also through implicit ways of manipulation. Thus, these women, despite having financial access and resources, did not have financial independence as this was controlled.

Participant E, one of the unmarried participants, explained how her ex-boyfriend would ask her for money. She highlighted that he would give her "*sob stories*" about how he was not earning enough money from his learnership, and that she would give in to his requests to pay for his expenses. She highlighted that this was only seen as an issue when his requests were denied and he threatened her with suicide. It was at this point that she was able to see how she was altering her role and herself and in essence denying herself of what she needed in the relationship to accommodate him. She indicated that in the beginning, she did not see it in that way. She questioned the relationship as she wondered about him feeling "*entitled to her hard-earned money*" despite his reluctance to emotionally support her.

It was quite significant to note that even in being unmarried one could be coerced into giving up a role as being financially stable for themselves in order to be that for someone else too. This was similar for two of the married participants, Participant D and Participant F. They expressed that they were the breadwinners in the home yet they did not have the "*luxury*" (Participant F) of spending the money they worked for. Participant D expressed how she was expected to have a spreadsheet of her spending and how this became frustrating for her once her daughter was born. Identifying the challenges, she had with fulfilling the role as a providing mother, she was able to see how this was negative for her daughter. Participant F reported that her money went into her ex-husband's account and this actually prevented her from leaving because she, like many others was concerned about the welfare of her children (Moe, 2009). She highlighted that she was able to see how she had changed through processing the fact that she was just a *"shadow of the person she used to be*" (Participant F). She explained that she ran companies and did HR jobs and was a fully capable single mother prior to being in that marriage. It is thus, through the realization of this change in oneself that aids in the process of contemplating what to do about this relationship and the experience. Participant B highlighted her process of contemplation through the feeling of unhappiness, and later through her realization that, *"he was trying to remove me from this person that I wanted to become. My communion with him caused me to let go of some parts of myself, you know"* (Participant B).

These three subthemes highlight what the first part of the process entailed through a very personal experience of taking note of the relationship being far from ideal. In this regard, it is through the recognition of feeling emotions that were strange in the relationship, such as fear and unhappiness that marks a sense of unease. Additionally, looking at the experiences of being isolated or isolating themselves. But beyond the isolation, the loneliness within the relationship, the feeling of being devalued and no longer belonging. Then lastly looking at a very personal experience of noticing that there is a change in oneself – paying attention to the small changes being made which are out of character, the internalization of inferiorities and the dependence on ones partner for emotional support that all play a role is moving from pre-contemplation to contemplating possibilities of leaving.

4.2.2 Theme 2: The beginning of the end

In this theme, focus will be placed on what surfaced for the participants which led them to the phase of preparation. This theme is labelled as the beginning of the end because it is in the preparation phase that women often then move into action. There were two subthemes identified under this theme – the subtheme of anger, resentment and repulsion and the subtheme of acknowledgment and acceptance. These aspects highlighted a process of transitioning from contemplation to preparation. Within this phase of preparation there is also focus on the importance of reflection in the process of acknowledgment and acceptance.

4.2.2.1 Subtheme 1: Anger, resentment & repulsion

Anger is described as an emotion which is supported by outcome-directed behaviour when situations prevent a desired goal, which leads to frustration (Williams, 2017). Carlsson (2018), who looked into understanding the tragedies of unrequited love and resentment, describes resentment as suppressed or subdued anger. The author indicates that in this instance, anger cannot be expressed due to certain restraints and the lack of grounds to hold the other person accountable (Carlsson, 2018). This coincides with the participants who had experienced abuse in their relationship.

> "*So over time it just became very apparent to me that that wasn't normal and I umm just wanted to get away. I became repulsed by him."* (Participant C)

It seemed quite fitting to draw in on Participant C's statement noted above because it quite expressively and descriptively highlights this feeling of anger which was so suppressed that she became repulsed by her partner. This was a common experience for most of the participants and this speaks to the shift in once loving someone, to also feeling a sense of repulsion and resentment- in essence a great deal of anger (Sere et al., 2021). Participant A's excerpt below encapsulates this further;

> *"Whatever feelings that I had for him started to fade. So, it wasn't love. Umm. I started to resent him, hate him. I started having those types of feelings towards him like umm…Sort of like don't care… Umm, kind of attitude but even though*

> *I started feeling that way like I was still, I felt like I was still trapped."* (Participant A)

Taking into consideration the last statement by Participant A which highlights this sense of entrapment, it is interesting to see the two internal experiences merge. The feeling of resentment and feeling trapped, all of which indicates a loss of hope for change. Sukeri & Man (2017) suggest that women ponder over the idea of leaving their relationships once they come to terms with the fact that there is no longer room for improvement. This seemed to result in feelings of anger that somewhat pushed these participants away from their partners. Sere et al. (2021) highlights how anger and resentment were means of coping in these relationships, but the study highlighted that this experience in and of itself marked a great shift.

> *"And in that moment, I picked up the iron and I was gonna burn him. I just thought today I'm gonna try and hurt you and he punched me across the couch, and I saw that, that was the moment I was absolutely defeated."* (Participant H)

The excerpt above from Participant H highlights the anger and the loss of hope which the authors speak of (Sukeri & Man, 2017; Sere et al., 2021). However, this quote also highlighted the difference between the expression of this anger between the participants. The findings suggested that the participants with children were more overt in their expressions. They, unlike the others, were not restrained at a certain point in their relationship due to the existence of children. Participant D explained that when her husband threatened to commit suicide, whilst their daughter was around, she had an outburst which was something she had not done in a while. She reported the following:

> *"I snapped but I seriously did. 'Do me a favor, do it. Just do it if you want to stop but take them off and get out and do it somewhere else because I'm not going to clean up the mess.' …And it was the first time in a very long time that I've actually raised my voice and been so authoritative and I told him take off and get out just go and do what you have to do but not in my house just leave."* (Participant D)

Considering the above, it is significant to correlate this with Sani and Pereira's (2020) article on mothers as victims of intimate partner violence, whereby they highlight how motherhood can actually be seen as a source of empowerment in these relationships. This experience of anger seems to be more profound in women with children because they needed to protect the children too, thus providing grounds to express their anger. Participant D explains this further as she reported, *"And once I fell pregnant, I realized that I couldn't be the mousy person I had become uhm because I now had another life to look after."* (Participant D)

This was significant to consider as Moe (2009) highlighted that when women realise that their abuse is impacting others, such as children, that they then change their perspective on tolerating the abuse. It was interesting to identify that this was also the case for Participant A, who highlighted that she thought of her younger sister and that she did not want her to continue witnessing this type of violence and internalize this as what a relationship should be.

Furthermore, considering the discussions on anger towards their partners, it is also important to be cognisant of anger directed to the self. Silva (2022) perfectly describes that anger towards the self "involves a strongly divided self where one part is antagonistically opposed to the other" (p.238). This was seen in Participant C's reflections as she highlighted the following; *"I was so put off and ashamed really of myself for even putting up, I mean my own parents don't beat me up. Why would why would I accept that from someone else?"*. She further explains that she was "*vulnerable and in love*" and this speaks to the findings of Silva (2022) as these two opposing sides being in conflict seemed to have resulted in the anger that Participant C described in terms of how she felt towards herself. This was similar in Participant B's experience when she noticed that her partner was not making any positive changes, she expressed the following; *"You know, it would be like a combination of anger and sadness. And I think a bit of regret somehow, because you know, I'd like blame myself like, you know. If I didn't come back to this guy, none of this would be happening, you know, to me, you know."* Considering Participant B's reporting, Cassiello- Robbins, et al. (2018) highlighted that this type of self-directed anger is usually an expression of suppressed shame. The authors further indicate that from this place of anger, people oftentimes engage in impulsive behaviours (Cassiello-

Robbins, et al.,2018). Thus, honing in on Participants B's experience of regret, self-blame and anger, she expressed that at one point she ran away from home. She did not consider the implications, she just decided to get up and leave. "*I didn't know where I was going… I was calling random people… I went to Palm Springs. Imagine*" (Participant B). This reporting, explains the anger towards the people around her but also the anger towards herself that resulted in her taking action which led to the consequence of her family reporting her as missing at the police station. Thus suggestive of what the authors highlight as impulsive behaviours as a means of avoiding certain emotional experiences (Cassiello- Robbins, et al. 2018) , in this case, the anger, shame, regret and self-blame.

In summing up this subtheme, Manfredi & Taglietti (2022, p.189) highlights that "anger can be motivated by both a need for security and a need for domination" which contrary to the fear and helplessness, suggests a transition towards empowerment and agency. This is supported by Silva (2022) who highlighted that anger is a "motivational emotion" (p.237), in that it causes one to make changes to avoid further offenses. This is similar in relation to self-anger, in that despite being punitive towards oneself, that at some point, the intention is to change something in oneself to avoid further offenses (Silva, 2022), which in this case was seen as part of the process that the participants engaged in in order to leave.

4.2.2.2 Subtheme 2: Acknowledgment & Acceptance

Based on the interviews, it was conceptualised that one of the internal processes that facilitated a transition from preparation to action was acceptance – the acknowledgement and acceptance of the abuse experienced. It was highlighted that in acknowledging and accepting that one has been abused, that it allowed these women to think about what they wanted to do next. This coincides with research as it has been noted that women who have left their abusive relationships, had to acknowledge the abusers tendencies towards being loving and abusive towards them, as well as acknowledge that they have been victims of abuse (Basilio et al, 2022). The excerpt below speaks to this;

> *So, I think part of that whole process was grow up time where I just had to say to myself, look, there's nothing romantic about what happens here. This is when*

> *I could define that this is domestic violence, when I could define that I'm an abused woman, when I could define that I am now putting my children at risk. Uhm and then I could say to myself, okay, so what are you going to do?* (Participant H)

Similarly, Participant F expressed that her process of acknowledgment occurred when she thought about her daughter. She highlighted; *"the main push for me was I had to get out of that situation because I didn't want it to happen where during an altercation, she* [her daughter] *would end up in the middle and get hurt by accident. I never wanted that to be"* (Participant F). The acceptance of her circumstances and her reality led to her making decisions that would foster change. She expressed that in thinking about her daughter, she was faced with the reality of her fears coming to pass as her husband came home intoxicated one night and there was commotion in the home as he wanted to be intimate but their daughter was in the room. She expressed that he grabbed their daughter and she began screaming hysterically. In her attempt of trying to take her daughter away from him, he grabbed her by her throat and pushed her against the wall with their daughter in his arms. *"And I never wanted that to happen. I never wanted to believe it, or feel it or be involved in it,"* expressed Participant F quite emotionally. However, it happened, and it was her moment of impact where she too had to sit with the idea of putting her child at risk. It was from this moment that she made a decision to tell her husband to leave.

It is important to highlight that irrespective of their race, age, class or marital status, each of these women had to go through a process of acknowledging what they had been experiencing and what they wanted to do about it, just as the excerpt noted above by Participant H and the experience of Participant F noted above. Basilio et al. (2022) highlights how in the process of survival, women often sit in denial as a way of distorting their reality, thus speaking to hopes of keeping the abuse hidden from others but also themselves. The authors go on to highlight that in the process of denial there is often rationalization around the abusive behaviour (Basilio et al., 2022). In looking at the aspect of rationalization, it is noted that oftentimes, abusers apologise for their actions which lead to victims justifying their actions because there is some sense of acknowledgement and regret for the abuse (Leunissen et al., 2013), - Participant B described this as "*typical abuser style*". However, she recalled an incident whereby

this apology tactic did not work and she failed to rationalize her partner's behaviour or deny her own experience. She expressed that after a long period of accepting her partner's absence at home, he complained to her one of the days that he was at home because she paid no attention to him. She expressed that in attempts of explaining herself, he slapped her across her mouth and blamed her inclination towards speaking back to him on her tertiary education; as this was often associated with her thinking that she was better than him. At that particular moment, she expressed that despite him apologising, something seemed different.

> *"I guess I crumbled. I cried like a little girl. I was…I was mad. You know, I was so heart broken. But I think at that very moment, something just shifted, you know. Like I feel like there I was…I was forced to accept my reality, you know that, uh-uh, this is not what I want."* (Participant B).

This moment for Participant B suggests that in the stage of acknowledgement and acceptance, a desire for change and a commitment to moving forward is sparked (Clements et al., 2021). It has been further researched and found that those who had acknowledged their abuse were more likely to move forward in the stages of this process rather than backwards (Clements et al., 2021).

Burke et al. (2004), suggest that this shift is a cognitive process of re-evaluating the self in relation to other. The authors indicate how in this shift, women begin to recognize what they can and cannot change (Burke et al., 2004). Thus, highlighting an aspect of acknowledging what they were experiencing and the acceptance of it in order to identify that which cannot be changed. In relation to this, Participant G expressed that she had to change to suit her partner and to avoid any reactions that could be of harm to her. She expressed that *"…you now alter yourself to try and fit into this new mould… And I started to just make myself available."* She further reported that she soon realised that even in her changing her ways to suit to him, it was not changing the abuse she was experiencing. She expressed that this indicated that something was wrong, because despite her apologizing and explaining her whereabouts, he would still beat her.

In addition, she expressed that things escalated to a point of her abuse taking place in public. She recalled an incident when she had gone out to the club with her friends and had fully reported on where she was and who she was with. Despite that, he arrived at the club and started shouting at her. In an attempt to avoid things getting worse, she walked out of the club but he followed her and started shouting at her outside. She expressed that he had a way of hitting her in places that people could not see, such as tramping on her foot, tussling her around, punching her on her shoulder or even kicking her. However, this public moment was quite an impactful one for her because she noticed everyone watching, but not doing anything out of fear. In reflecting on her experience that night, she reported how she felt below.

> *"And he took me back to this lonely feeling again, and I thought to myself, if I don't get out of here, …this is going to be my life. I think that was the next moment where I was like able to get out of the shock of the fear. And I said, okay, I've got to do something. I've got to get out..."* (Participant G)

Thus, considering the above quote and Participant G's experience , it is also worth noting the importance of self- reflection in the process of acknowledgement and acceptance. The above public experience allowed Participant G to reflect on how she felt and make meaning of that experience. Self-reflection in this regard refers to one's ability to conceptualise and draw on experiences and behaviour in order to understand themselves better and make meaningful decisions (Dishon et al., 2017). The researchers explain this in relation to being self-aware (Dishon et al., 2017). With this being said, Participant C explained how her acceptance in conjunction with her reflections, allowed her to make meaning of why she was in the relationship and why she needed to leave - A dancer, being stripped away of her experience to dance freely due to her relationship; she recalled an incident whereby her boyfriend stormed into the restaurant where she worked and chased her into the bathroom causing a *"massive scene".* In an attempt to end the relationship in the car on the way home, he threw out her dancing clothes onto the highway. She highlighted that she thought that if she did not get out of this relationship, he was going to kill her because it was *"edging closer and closer to like, worse than before".* This moment, similar to Participant G , allowed her to reflect on her experience which in essence accompanied her

acknowledgment of the abuse she was experiencing. Her reflections of this was the following;

> *"I didn't feel depressed. I actually, you know, he would beat me up and then the very next day, he would be so loving and kind. And that's what I just craved. Like, I craved that acceptance and maybe the affection that I possibly never got as a kid from my dad. I mean, it's [it's] not my dad's fault at all, but that link was missing for sure."* (Participant C)

In this excerpt reflecting her inner thoughts and the meaning she made of her experience, Participant C was able to identify why she allowed herself to experience what she did but also sat with the idea and the importance of getting out as mentioned prior to this. This was important for many of the participants as it were these moments of impact that allowed them prepare themselves for change. It was a moment, in the case of Participant C, where the thing she loved was taken away and devalued.

Thus, it is significant to note that the participants in this study, had to engage in some level of self-reflection and become more self-aware in order to identify and understand the abuse they experienced. This allowed them to accept it and work towards the reconstruction of themselves thereafter. For some of these women, the self-reflections entailed reflections of themselves as mothers and what they wanted and did not want for their children, for others it was reflections around what being a wife meant and for others it was around safety. The except below summatively speaks to this reflection, through the questions being posed to herself, and essentially the acknowledgement of the severity of the situation.

> *But like, I think for me, I had seen kind of the gradual escalation. So, I'm like if…if this is where you are now, where are you going to be in the next two months or the next…like what are you going to be telling me? What are you going to be saying to me?... Like this person knew what I wanted, like I…I was very open and honest about my expectations of the person I'm in a relationship with. And he actually didn't do anything about that. So…how do you build a life with someone who doesn't care about what you want?* (Participant E)

In conclusion to this theme, it was significant to identify in the stage of contemplation that there were cognitive and emotional shifts that facilitated a process of acknowledgement and acceptance. Significantly these women had many moments of

acknowledging what they were experiencing, but the difficulty to take action in those moments were often due to the shame they experienced from going back home as mentioned in Theme 1 or the guilt they felt in relation to moving their children away. Participant B highlighted the following; *"I've got children and I'm going to raise children without a dad, whereas I was brought up by a mom and a dad even though they had a very bad relationship…So, this means that I am now going into a life that I don't know of."* Despite this, each of these women had significant moments that spoke to not only the acknowledgment but the acceptance of the fact that they were abused and this sparked ideas of what to do next. These ideas and these actions will be discussed in the next theme.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Repositioning oneself

Under this theme, emphasis is placed on transitioning towards action and maintenance in the leaving phase. Following on from the processes mentioned above, this theme highlights how tapping into anger and resentment, reflecting, acknowledging and accepting the abuse they experienced, allowed these women to reposition themselves and step into action. The first subtheme in this section has been identified as intentionally removing oneself or the other. This coincides with research which highlights that in the action and maintenance phase there seems to be more behavioural shifts and changes (Burke et al., 2004). However, from the interviews, there were emotional and psychological aspects that were identified too. These included looking at grieving aspects related to the relationship, support from others, the intentionality behind turning one's pain into purpose and lastly the point of re-connecting.

4.2.3.1 Subtheme 1: Removing oneself or the other

It has been noted that some research highlights how women in abusive relationships engage in an actively involved preparation process, such as seeking jobs elsewhere, staying at temporary shelters etc. (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). However, they also highlight how for some women, the decision to leave happens abruptly (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). From the study, it was found that three out of the eight participants engaged in a process of deliberate preparation which assisted them to remove

themselves from their partners. Participant F highlighted that she was advised to save money (as the money she worked for went into her husband's account) in order to assist her when she eventually left. Participant G reported that she obtained a restraining order against her partner, which despite being ineffective spoke to her intentions of wanting to leave and protect herself. In addition, Participant H highlighted how she actively engaged in processes to ensure that she was no longer bound further to her husband – one of her decisions was to get sterilized to avoid having more children with him which assisted her in feeling less overwhelmed about being a single mother. The quotes below serve as evidence of these reported experiences but also suggests the intentionality in these women's decisions which spoke to their desires to leave.

> *"I can't do this anymore. Why did you even introduce me to this guy?' I kind of think he felt personally responsible for this drama that I was going through. And he said, you know what? You need to get a restraining order. So, I'll take you and let's go and do this, not knowing how these processes work I said, 'okay, let's go.' I wanted him out of my life." (Participant G)*

> *"And she said to me, she gave me the advice to say, every time you go and buy something, and you leave two rand, hide the two rand away and build up a kitty until you can actually leave. And that's what I did, I started building up in the skirting of the lounge I loosened it and every two rand or one round, I used to fill it in there."* (Participant F)

> *"I will not be a statistic. So, I stood there, and I made the decision and the first decision I made was to go and have myself sterilized. I was 23 at the time and my gynae, he said, there's no way I'm gonna sterilize you, you will get married again… I picked up my dress, and I had blue marks and I said to him, if you don't help me, I will never be able to leave. So, you have to help me, because I cannot have another baby. I'll be stuck."* (Participant H)

Despite the difference in their choices, what was common for each of these participants was the active removal of themselves or their partners when having made the decision to end the relationship. In this regard, this often meant going to family or friends in order to gain some level of support (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Hence, for these women, it meant opening up to their families about their experiences and the reason for their distance. The excerpts below describes experiences of a black participant (Participant B) and white participant (Participant F), having to go back home

and admit to this abuse and also the reality of sitting with so much of emotion that came with removing oneself.

> *"That was me moving out and ever since I never looked back. I remember…now, I'm like forced to tell members of my family what I have been going through and people were now shocked you know. Like why haven't you been saying anything? Why…you know? And now I'm like a broken record. I'm going on and on and on, without stopping."* (Participant B)

> *"Just basically, that I had to go and admit to them what's going on. That I've been abused, that it wasn't my choice to cut off relations with them, that I do love them. That they didn't raise me wrong. It was that humiliation that came with it. To admit to the public that I was wrong, I made a huge mistake"* (Participant F)

Considering the quotations above, there seems to be less discussions around the subtle nuances of shame experienced within families when leaving abusive relationships. The way in which the story is narrated from a black female's point of view almost has hints of regret of having to engage with her family; this is seen in her use of words such as *"forced to tell".* However, in comparison to the narration from a white participant which suggests a more open and vulnerable experience. This seems to correlate with the aspects of shame that were discussed in the abovementioned themes. Additionally, considering that the white participants reported to have expressed what they were experiencing with other family members easily whilst in the relationship, whereas women of colour struggled to do so, based on a "culture of silence" (Duhaney, 2023, p.7). In this regard, it has been noted that for black women there are gendered stereotypes that they need to compete with, such as the idea that they themselves are capable of sustaining greater acts of violence than white women (Fenton, 2003). This is evidenced in how black women's experiences of violence is storied in the media as well (Carr, 2020), such that they are blamed or portrayed as being promiscuous, helpless and essentially being portrayed as the cause of the violence they have experienced (Boonzaier, 2017).In addition, the culture of silence is perpetuated by black women's lack of confidence in the system's ability to respond to their issues (Fenton, 2003). Thus, all these factors may allude to the difficulty, for women of colour, in having to admit to their abuse once they eventually leave. The excerpt below highlights the perception and response from an Indian participant's

family, which speaks to how the family thought she would go back as per a cycle. The constant looking back to her without the emotional support is what differed from white participants who received encouragement and even access to other support services.

> *"…that was the point where I moved home and I remember my eldest brother taking me for a drive and he was saying, what do you mean your marriage is over? I just said to him, it's time. I'm never going back, and I think my family thought, I was uhm, I was undecided. They had no idea how sure I was because that month after month, they kept looking at me and said, are you going back? And I said, no and then it became year after year, are you going back? And I said, I will never go back." (Participant H)*

The lack of seriousness given to the matter is noted in the quote above, in addition to the portrayal of the participant lacking agency and independence. This ties into the narrative of women of colour internalising blame because there is a culture of condoning such violence and treating it with a lack of seriousness – almost suggesting that it was okay for her to go back, thus noting the lack of conversations around the idea that she should not be experiencing that. In contrast to this, one of the white participants, explained how it was also her father's encouragement that stopped the cycle of returning back to her abusive relationship. She indicated;

> *"I've been there, I got out of there eventually, although it took me ages, but I got out. And it was just that encouragement from my dad mostly and just my faith that's pulled me through."* (Participant F)

However, in noting all of the above, despite the shame and humiliation and whether there was support around that, it is worth noting that five out of the eight participants had gone back to their families when they had left these relationships. Basilio et al. (2022) highlights how informal sources of support facilitate the leaving process for women as they offer places to stay and provide support. Participant G highlights this as she reported the following: *"And what I gather from that is that you need a private place where you can be found. You need to have connections"* (Participant G). For these women, that private place was at home with their families. Additionally, what was provided from being in these spaces was protective measures (Basilio et al., 2022). Participant A highlighted how whilst staying with her cousin, she ensured her safety.

> *"And the next day, she put me in the car. She took me home and like she made him pack all of his things. Every single thing, took the set of keys that he had, umm and she was with me like every day. [I] She would… There was a point where she would like, drive me to work, drive me back home."* (Participant A)

Another difference that was identified, was in those who were not staying with their partners as they had their own space away already. Participant D reported that she had told her partner to leave because he lived with her and Participant C and E lived with their parents, in which they had terminated the relationship whilst being at home. For participant C, this was important for safety reasons, as she feared what her partner would have done to her, so she ensured that she ended things at her house. In terms of the participants who were in their own homes, the removal of themselves came from a more emotional perspective. This came in the form of immersing oneself in different areas as highlighted by Participant E;

> *"Toward the end, like I'm trying to distract myself and like fill my life with other things, because he took up a lot of my time, a lot of my life. So, I tried to kind of like change that for myself. So, I started like reading more. I started going out like with other people, and I realised how much of my time I kind of spent with him and not really anybody else so.* " (Participant E)

Looking conclusively at this subtheme, there was a common dialogue for those women who stayed with their partners – conversations around the need for safe spaces in the country. Participant G highlighted how the restraining order was futile and that if she had a place that she could go to and pay to stay there, she would have done that. Thus, looking at how it would have sped up a process because many of these women avoided going home to their families out of embarrassment of how they would be perceived. Participant D and F both emphasised the importance of these spaces which led to them opening a Search and Rescue (which will be discussed in subtheme 4). This subtheme highlighted the importance of weaning off from their partners as they removed themselves from the relationship both physically and emotionally.

4.2.3.2 Subtheme 2: Grief

In the process of repositioning oneself, it is significant to understand that this seemed to have been coupled with an element of grief (Senter & Caldwell, 2002). Grief has been highlighted to be a process of moving back and forth between the pain and beauty of loss experienced (Zisook & Shear, 2013). Mourning in this regard, is referred to the manifestation of this grief (Zisook & Shear, 2013). In relation to the study, it would seem that in taking up a new position and letting go of their partners, these women had to mourn the loss of their partners, the relationship and parts of themselves (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). It was made evident from this study, that for some, the grieving process occurred in the relationship. This was noted for Participant E, who experienced emotional abuse and neglect. She highlighted the following;

> *"I had been dealing with, kind of like dealing with the fact that the relationship was going to end. Like mentally I was already…you know, I already packed my bags. So, I cried a lot, whilst I was still in the relationship. Like I mourned the relationship a lot, whilst I was still in it. So, by the time I was out of it, I didn't even cry when I told him like, I am done with you."* (Participant E)

However, for those participants whereby there was physical, emotional and psychological trauma, it would seem that the grieving process became more prominent once the relationship ended. It has been noted that despite the abuse, due to their attachments to their abusers, women would often feel a sense of longing for them (Anderson et al., 2003). However, what was significant to note from the findings was that none of these women spoke about this sense of longing or missing their partners currently. This may have been due to the process of engaging with very uncomfortable emotions and experiences as noted above in the previous themes and possibly due to the fact that they had been out of these relationships for a significant amount of time. Zisook & Shear (2013) highlight that the experience of grief is dependent of multiple factors, some of it includes the nature of the relationship and the type of loss. Thus, considering that these relationships consisted of periods of comfort and love in addition to the abuse (Basilio et al.,2022) , it is often noted that women grieve the loss of the positive aspects. This was highlighted as Participant G indicated that she made contact a few times with her partner. She reported the following;

> *"Cause there were many times, even in silence, where yes, I was happy not to be with him anymore and out of the fear, but I still loved him. I still wanted to make connection with him and once or twice I phoned him. And thankfully it didn't go any further than that with him. I didn't try to be with him, but I just wanted to hear his voice."* (Participant G)

However, for some there was grief around the loss of the old role that they themselves had taken (Ladenburger, 1998). Anderson and Saunders (2003) speaks to this point as they indicate how women often do not focus on the attachment to their partners based on their feelings, but rather the association and role they obtained from being in that relationship, for example a wife. Participant F below explained this as she described her leaving process which occurred several times due to her not wanting to give up her role and responsibilities of being a wife.

> *"Honestly, I've actually left, I've actually left four times. Uhm, I left four times, to the point where I had to find the police to come get me out. Uhm I was locked in the house, stuff like that. But then this morning, I would be straight back, thinking, what are people going to think about me? I'm running away from our responsibilities. I'm running away from our marriage; I need to work on this."* (Participant F)

The above excerpt speaks not only to the shame in leaving which has been discussed, but the difficulty with letting go of the role taken. In this regard, it has been noted that in understanding that one's identity is made up of the various roles they play, when importance is placed on a specific role which is threatened it often is associated with identity disruption (Papa & Lancaster, 2015). This disruption often results in a sense of confusion and meaninglessness (Bellet et al., 2020). Moreover, this is often the case especially for people who have aspects of their lives intertwined, in which this is described as a "merged identity" (Bellet et al., 2020, p.2) Thus, looking at intimate relationships and marriages, the closeness of these relationships speak to merging identities and in the breaking away the disruption in that identity is noted. Thus it is the acceptance of this identity loss that is quite difficult, which translates to the grieving of it. Participant F further highlights how emotionally she needed to be strong in order to work through that process. She indicated the following:

> *“I can’t just leave, and it was quite hard every single time, and you think that it isn’t worth it once you back and then you think to yourself, why? Why did I go back? And then I realized one of my bath sessions, that you need that emotional part to be strong enough to say enough is enough. I cannot take this anymore” (Participant F)*

Another aspect that was seen in this process amongst mothers, was grieving the idea of themselves being seen in a certain light by their children. Research highlights how mothers are often blamed for the loss that the children also suffer or for the conflicting dynamics that children are often in between the two parents (Shorey & Baldram, 2023). Thus, it is in the intention behind taking on this blame that translates in mourning the idea of what an ideal mother was supposed to be. The excerpt below from Participant H highlights the difficulty in having to make this decision and sitting with the loss that she had to experience as well as the loss that her children had to experience.

> *“I had no idea, you know, I just didn’t know how I was going to heal my babies because they'd broken hearts. My daughter had said to me, you took me away from my father, I hate you and, in that moment, I asked myself do I go back? How can I go back? I don't have an ounce of self-respect [crying]. …I just thought, I’m the adult and I'll make the decisions. I wasn't going to allow it, as for the three of us, I couldn't allow emotion to speak because my emotions had failed me.”* (Participant H)

The grieving process highlighted in this subtheme suggests that there were various losses that came with the decision to leave and that these women had to mourn those losses. These losses of identity and roles were shaped differently based on the social experiences and social influences of these women as stated in previous themes. What was significant to note, drawing on the emotional strength that Participant F spoke to, was the fact that some of these women returned to their relationships during this stage which is displayed in Diagram 1 above. Participant B, a black woman, highlighted how upon leaving her partner, much later found herself in the relationship again due to the influence of the family shaming her for stepping away from her role. Participant F, a white women highlighted how she returned because she herself could not sit with the idea of transitioning away from her role of a wife and mother and being identified as a failure. This was interesting to note because it shed light on the difference in the

broader influence and the psychological process of returning within this stage. However, what was significant in this process was the support that aided in this despite the number of times some of these women returned. This will be discussed in the next subtheme.

4.2.3.3 Subtheme 3: Support

In looking at the various aspects of each part of this leaving process, considering that there is a huge impact on these women's sense of self and their self-esteem (Senter & Caldwell, 2002), it would seem that the one thing that aided in their grieving process and the reconstruction of their identities was support. This seemed to have looked different for some but the support they received was necessary in helping them find their strength again (Senter & Caldwell, 2002).

For participant G, the support came from her brother in the form of having a space to wean off from her relationship. She expressed the following;

> *You need that quiet place where you can just wean yourself off all the drama, all the fear. I think my brother's home became that.* (Participant G)

However, it was interesting to see that she felt as though she wanted a platform to speak about things and process things. She highlighted:

> *I needed a place where I wasn't judged. I just needed a place where I could be. I didn't have a place where I could…I could talk …I wish I could just like talk to somebody and say, you know I really love him and I feel like I want to pick up the phone and have someone say, no, don't do that. I was kind of having these conversations with myself. I was both victim and helper at the same time. You can't do that, because I was so scared of being judged. Looking back, I wish I had someone that I could've spoken to about it. (Participant G)*

This was different for another young white participant, who was provided with the opportunity to go for counselling. She had expressed that she came from a middle-class family and thus was afforded the opportunity and the relevant support to obtain emotional and psychological services. After she ended the relationship with her boyfriend, she reported; *"my mom shipped me off to counselling- I'd go once or twice*

a week and just having a good support system from my family and the counsellor being my guidance and my voice of reason." (Participant C)

It was significant to see the differences in the support between these young participants, whereby the Indian participant was provided with the practical resources to cope and the white participant was provided with the emotional resources. This in and of itself spoke to the class differences between these two participants. Participant G, in comparison to Participant C reported that she had come from a poverty stricken community. Thus, suggestive of her class positionality, which is supported by her going for free pastoral counselling at a later stage in her life (which will be discussed further).

With regards to emotional coping and intellectual resources, it was made apparent that this came through seeking support through counselling or therapy. It has been noted that this professional process, when sought whilst in the relationship facilitates the learning of skills, awareness and empowerment (Fleischack et al., 2020). From the study, there was only one participant who obtained professional help whilst in her relationship and this, as research suggests did assist in her process of leaving.

> *"…I'm understanding that…now I'm seeing all of these…these tendencies you know. These…how he would undermine me or manipulate me or you know. These…that was so…they were quite implicit but now that I know what these are. I'm identifying them first hand… And I was not aware of…I was…so, basically I was in this bad relationship because maybe I thought, bad relationships were normal, because I was raised by parents who were in a very bad relationship."* (Participant B)

What is significant to note from the above experience and reflection of Participant B, is her class positionality as well. She was able to obtain these services and in turn some insight and knowledge because of her access to this through ICAS (based on her employment). It is significant to note that this was not something that she had leaned towards on her own based on her own resources and the fact that she was the only one working for a long time, but that she was reminded of the services that she had access to by her sister. Thus speaking to how her employment status afforded her the access to such services. This is further reiterated as she highlighted that after

she left the relationship, she considered Childline counselling services for her children which are free, however having a second job allowed her to send her children for alternative counselling sessions.

Three other participants had obtained psychological and emotional support after leaving their relationship. There were aspects of the process that assisted in terms of working through the shame and guilt (Fleischack et al., 2020), as noted in the quote below.

> *So my counsellor, umm, you know, did a lot of work with me with that and that's…[It's probably] it's been a good thing all of that that happened to me because Umm, you know, when [when] I [I] deal with domestic abuse at the hospital, I can empathise."* (Participant C)

As indicated, Participant G had gone for counselling much later in her life, but it would seem as though it was more of a space for guidance considering that she was transitioning into a different phase of her life. This seemed to be the case, based on her words of "*by then I think I was a lot stronger"* as noted in the quote below:

> *"…so, the first time was prior to getting married and the second time was when I got married, and I went in there one more time after, with a pastor's wife and just sat under that counselling… By then I think I was a lot stronger."* (Participant G)

Thus, the above quote speaks to the lack of emotional support for some and how they themselves needed to work on a process of trying to learn skills and empower themselves. This may have also been the case due to certain beliefs held around psychotherapy and mental health, whereby Indian people have been previously noted to find verbal expression and display of emotions as weakness (Bhargava et al., 2016). This was similar for Participant B who highlighted that her family would suggest that she pray about her situation, however, she expressed great frustration regarding this. It has been highlighted that for some there are more inclinations towards superstitions and rituals (Bhargava et al., 2016), which speaks to the comfortability around finding support in more faith based ideologies. This was seen further in Participant G's reporting noted below:

> *"I focused…okay, so we are Christian and we are very spiritual and there was that spiritual base."* (Participant G)

For some, it was noted that they needed to be seen by a professional because their circumstances and the consequences of the abuse caught up with them. In this regard, it has been highlighted that mental health challenges persist even after the absence of abuse (Mechanic et al., 2008). Participant D reported that four years after leaving her marriage, she had a *"nervous breakdown"* and was hospitalised. She had seen a psychologist there and highlighted *"if you are lucky enough to be able to see a psychologist and talk to situations where it is constantly with you…it has enormously damaged me."* However, it seemed that the benefits of the therapeutic process was based on the age of the participant and the connection they had to the counsellors or psychologists they were seeing. Participant D highlighted the following;

> *"I had a psychologist that came through to speak to us as a group, the girl was 22/23. I was in my 30s at that stage. And she sat there with her textbook, talking to us about depression. And I kind of lost it. And I went to my psychiatrist, and I said to him, Look, you know, if you want to do therapy, that's fine. But give me somebody that has experienced life… because you can sit and sprout all the stuff from a textbook. But if you haven't been through it, and you haven't survived it, reading a textbook is not going to mean anything..."*(Participant D)

Quite a strong evocation of emotion from her experience in this regard, which seemed to tie into what was highlighted by Fleischack et al. (2020) around women who have experienced abuse being able to share their stories in a safe environment, one which they trust enough to be vulnerable and transparent in.

This subtheme highlighted how class and race influenced whether these women had access to psychological and emotional services both during and after being in these relationships, as well as a general understanding on the perspectives held on counselling. What was also significant to highlight was the impact of religion as a means of coping for those who could not go for counselling straight after leaving their relationships. In addition, it was important that those who were able to go for counselling, that they had safe spaces to be vulnerable and that they had relatable and experienced professionals in the field to facilitate healing.

4.2.3.4 Subtheme 4: Turning Pain into Purpose

Senter and Caldwell (2002) found that in the period after leaving a relationship of abuse, there is more time for self-discovery. The authors highlight how some of their research suggested that people are able to identify their strengths and make new meaning from their experiences once they have enough space away to do so (Senter & Caldwell, 2002). This often results in more positive views of themselves which is essentially important in the process of maintaining their distance away from these relationships. It is often through being able to correctly place responsibility on their abusers that allow for them to shift away from self-blame (Ladenburger, 1998) and also take on responsibility for their actions going forward – such as stepping further into their empowerment through introspection and through redefining themselves, their roles and purpose.

In addition, what was important during this phase was the focus on what they could control as this spoke to their own agency and their efficacy (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Many of the women interviewed had found themselves in spaces whereby they could be of service to others to further add to their sense of accomplishment considering the contextual issues and to, in essence, contribute to their own sense of self-worth (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Considering Participant D's negative experience with the psychologist; she highlighted how she found her place in being a supportive voice for people in distress in similar situations that she was once in. She highlighted the following;

> *And that's where I found almost my calling in the sense that. They used to call me to attempted suicide, they used to call me to domestic violence. Not because I was qualified in psychology or anything, but just being able to hold a person's hand and tell them, I've been there. And I say, and you couldn't do it. It's not easy. But you can do it.* (Participant D)

Similarly, Participant C, a trauma counsellor, highlighted how she finds that her experience enables her to be more understanding and not judge others based on their circumstances. She highlighted that working in the hospital field, she is exposed to domestic abuse cases and her own experience, allows her to empathise with others In this regard, it has been noted that following the experience of traumatic events there is evidence of negative outcomes, but there has also been evidence of growth in which

there is an increase in prosocial behaviour and compassion (Greenberg et al., 2018). Participant C expressed how she has become more prosocial in the quote below.

> *But, you know, all things work together for the good because the [the] environments that I'm in now in the hospital, I'm exposed to all forms of trauma and a lot of it is domestic abuse and what I've been through helps me to understand a lot more than just, you know, like listen to someone in, in my head, criticize them because I I can now fully understand.* (Participant C)

Participant F opened up a Search and Rescue organisation to assist women with safe spaces considering that she had no place to go to when she was in her relationship. Thus, sitting with her own experience, she created avenues for support for others. This speaks to Senter and Caldwell's (2002) findings, as they indicated how after leaving these relationships, women's compassion for others led to them undertaking various activities that helped people. Participant F, quite strongly reported why she decided to embark on this project of Search and Rescue.

> *There's no place to take them in, a place of safety, or somebody to help them. And that's why we started with South Africa Search Rescue was to help women in positions like this. To go and fetch them, take them out, place them in a safe house, with only woman and work through it and build them up. Like they're emotionally strong, get their spirituality back, getting back into faith. And just praying, and just working on them as a person, not as the wife of so and so.* (Participant F)

This was significant to see how she used her own experience of being confined and restricted in her movement due to her finances being controlled to create an avenue for others. Her reporting of the importance of *"building them up"* speaks to her own experiential knowledge of the importance of becoming emotionally strong.

Furthermore, Participant H reported that she joined Kids Haven and is a Life Coach. Her reflections around these decisions to work in these fields speaks so much to the liberation of herself (Burke et al., 2004) whilst being able to liberate others. Coming from an abusive home during her childhood, finding herself in an abusive marriage, Participant H highlighted that she wanted to parent her children differently. She wanted to have a different impact on them, hence her decision to join the Kid's Haven. This is important to consider based on how she reflected on her experiences of parenting her

children whilst in the relationship. She highlighted that from her own childhood experiences of violence and the violence she was exposed to in the relationship, she found herself reacting from a place of violence with her children. She recalled an incident that was similar to hers when she grew up, whereby she punched her son in his nose and he bled. Goldlatt et al. (2014) indicated that abused women often used inappropriate disciplinary measures of physical punishment in comparison to women who had not experienced abuse. Thus they make note of studies that look at ways that women attempt to prevent further exposure to violence (Goldlatt et al., 2014). Hence, looking at Participant H's intentionality in joining this organisation for the sake of her children which also allowed her to help other children. She reported the following which highlighted how she saw herself in relation to others and how she saw herself in relation to herself.

> *So, I joined Kid's haven in 1994 July when the ANC had come into power. And I thought if I get parenting skills then, just maybe I will parent them different to what I was parented, and maybe they'll have a chance in life, and I fought very hard because I didn't feel a sense of belonging to my mum...so Kid's Haven, uhm started with children who were working in the streets. Now it's 30 years this year, I, look, the only person I really needed to forgive was myself. I married a man I thought I loved. I don't think that you know what love is, you don't even know what commitment looks like…So, I think I've done well.* (Participant H)

It is worth being cognizant of how this experience of pain was also used as a guide in how these women parented their children and their intention to break an intergenerational cycle of violence. Jaffee et al. (2013) highlights how the relationship with parents and their children can prevent the transmission of maladaptive behaviours. Participant G's approach with her son and her daughter spoke to her attempts of breaking the socially accepted behavior of men and boys being domineering and women and girls being submissive. She recalled an incident whereby she reprimanded her son for yelling at his sister. She reported that she sent a text and it read *"don't you ever talk to your sister like that again. If you have a problem with her, you come to me. I'm still her parent. You don't talk to a woman like that."* She further reported that she spoke to her daughter later that day and said, *"you don't ever allow him to talk to you like that or any other boy".* She expressed the importance of instilling this in young children because this was missing for her.

Similarly, Participant F highlighted how she would read about cycles of abuse – intergenerational aspects of it and she feared that she would not break that for her daughters. However, she expressed that *"I know for a fact my daughters will not allow any kind of abuse. Because they've seen what I've been through, and they are just strong girls."* She highlighted how they stand up for themselves and others in moments of disrespect.

In summary of this theme, what was interesting to note was that the compassion and the intention to make a difference that the authors speak of, was also seen in those who were not in helping fields and those without children. Their intention and eagerness to participate in this research study highlighted this. Senter & Caldwell (2002) make an emphatic statement around women who have been through these experiences not only being limited to helping through sharing their stories, however, based on this research process, it was evident that doing so is quite profound. It is through the telling of these narratives that these women wanted to make a difference and help someone out there. It was through doing this that they provided insight into deep rooted issues and underlying processes that is not often spoken of. Thus turning pain into something purposeful by narrating their very own life stories.

4.2.3.5 Subtheme 5: Re-Connecting

Another form of maintenance identified in some participants was their decision to re-connect to the idea of romantic relationships with new people. Two of the participants who were not married at the time, are currently married and one is dating. It was significant to understand how they experienced being in their new relationships and what assisted them in the re-connecting process. Studies have shown that women often struggle to trust people when getting into new relationships as they try not to let a history of abuse repeat itself or because they feel the pain of their past too deeply (Ko & Park, 2018). Participant C expressed that she dated multiple people when the relationship ended and that after being in an abusive relationship she was able to recognise *"red flags",* hence when she identified issues of insecurities or jealousy she was able to easily leave as she attempted to avoid the possibility of repeating a cycle

of abuse. Ko and Park (2018), labelled this under a theme of “They might be all bad people” (p. 9) speaking to survivor’s tendency to look for resemblances of their ex partners characteristics in others and their tendency to flee when they notice any. This was even seen when she was courted by her current partner as she expressed that he was kind and gentle with her and she often questioned his agendas. However, she reported that in taking things slow, she realised that he did not have any hidden agendas. It was interesting to discover that he too is in the helping profession- a surgeon working in the hospital and that he was in an abusive marriage previously. Lillian Wilde (2022) noted that when people have experienced trauma they often struggle to feel a sense of belonging due to the lack of understanding from others or the challenge they have with integrating their experiences with those around them. The author further highlights that it is through common experiences and shared emotions that allows victims of trauma to feel a sense of togetherness (Wilde, 2022). Thus, looking at Participant C it may be that this common experience of abuse, desire to help others and the shared emotion fostered a sense of belonging for both her and her partner – a sense of belonging that created a sense of safety.

In addition, Participant A reflected on her decision to leave her abusive relationship and highlighted that she is “*happy that she made the decision to leave at the time, because now she has got something that is priceless*”. She expressed that her husband has showed her what love is and what it means. This coincided with Ko and Park (2018) who highlighted that people who have experienced IPV, often learn about healthy relationships through being in a new one – they note that it is through objectively viewing their previous relationships that assist them in accepting that what they are experiencing in their new relationships is healthy.

It is significant to note that this process of relearning and unlearning was facilitated through counselling for Participant G.

> *“Before I got married, we did marital counselling, I had these conversations with my husband because that was the first time that I had ever spoke about it. And I also spoke about it a few times under a spiritual covering, maybe twice. So, the first time was prior to getting married and the second time was when I got married, and I went in there one more time after, with a pastor’s wife and just sat under that counselling”.* (Participant G)

Thus, considering the quote above, it is significant to note that despite spiritual and religious aspects not being well integrated into psychological practices (Istratii & Ali, 2023), it would seem that the inclinations towards pastoral counselling may be due to the desire for people to have spiritual and religious experiences be centralised in their counselling sessions (Istratii & Ali, 2023). This would seem to be the case looking at Participant G and the importance that she placed on her religion. Thus, this suggests that she sought to make meaning from her experiences through the church and her pastoral leaders which assisted her before entering into a marriage, as noted above in the subtheme of support.

From the findings, it was interesting to see the influence of marital status and motherhood on the decisions these women made to either get into new relationships or remain single. The three participants mentioned above, were not married at the time that they were in their abusive relationships and they did not have any children from their abusive partners. However, the four women who had children with their abusive partners and who were previously married, highlighted that they were not in new relationships at the time of this study. Participant H who reported that she joined Kids Haven, expressed the following; *"I work at a place where I've raised 1000s of children and because that was [my] my thing, when I came back home, I said you know, I'm gonna give 10 years to my kids".* Thus, looking at her focus shifting towards re-connecting to her children and other children. Research done by Goldblatt et al. (2014) suggested how there is a significant shift in the experience of motherhood once leaving an abusive relationship in that mothers are able to move from "mechanical to authentic motherhood" (p. 568) The authors draw on the experiences of their participants and allude to the difficulty in being affectionate towards their children as they are often clouded by the pain and the fear (Goldblatt et al., 2014). Thus, this shift was noted in these women's narratives due to their decisions to focus on their children and position themselves differently in relation to their motherhood.

Additionally, it is noted that mothers take steps in wanting to protect their children which oftentimes is even the push they need to leave these abusive relationships (Reiter, 2022). Thus, it would seem that this desire to protect their children persists even after leaving the relationship, which suggests that this is a contributing factor in mothers' decisions to not get involved in new relationships and also what keeps them

from going back. Participant D reported that when she told her husband to leave, one of the days she figured out that he was in her home after being told that he was on his way to Bloemfontein. Furthermore, instinctually she knew to go to the nursery where her daughter was and she was told that her husband picked up their daughter. Anxiously she went to her husband's father's house and picked up her daughter, categorised this incident as "*kidnapping*" and left. Having been exposed to this incident of fear and her own trauma, Participant F reported:

> *"When I left, as I said, my daughter was two and I made the choice that her growing up is more important than me finding somebody. And I'd rather be on my own and not have her get introduced to somebody because they can be as charming as anything when you meet them. But always in the back your mind is this going to be another two or three years when we start having to change and change our attitudes and how we are to suit them. So, I just chose the path to be alone…Safe and maybe safe in putting us into a situation which could possibly go wrong."* (Participant F)

In a similar incident involving children, Participant B reported that after ending her relationship, her husband's parents asked to see the children and she had taken them to visit. When she saw her husband, she reported that she ran into her car. She expressed that he ran after her and hit her in the car, and this for her was an indication to keep her children away and safe guard herself in the future. Currently she and her children stay with her parents and she expressed the following; *"Uhm, [my parents]…my children get along very well with my parents. So you know, it's almost like they…[they] step in when I really…now I need to focus on my work and you know, they help."* Thus, for Participant B, she was protecting herself and her children and allowing herself to re-connect to her parents as she has the opportunity to look after them now. However, despite the benefits, she seemed hesitant to discuss the strain of staying with her parents as she highlighted that *"it can be straining sometimes, but I'm grateful for the experience, you know. At least I get to be with them in their old age because I'm [I'm]…I think I'm that child that never really stayed home for a long time."* Thus picking up on her inclination to hone into the positives aspects of being back at home and her reluctance to speak to the negative aspects of being in that space again.

Hence, it was important to further extrapolate factors that may have influenced the decisions for some of the married women who did not get into new relationships. It is

worth noting the impact of race on these decisions as it has been highlighted that despite divorce being quite common in this day and age, it is still something that is frowned upon (Kgadima & Leburu-Masigo, 2022). For Black women especially, the stigma around divorce is quite pervasive and this often makes the idea of remarrying difficult. This is due to the associations to *lobola* – the bride price; such that it has been noted that when a divorced woman remarries, the value for her and the family decreases significantly and these payments are made with scepticism (Kgadima & Leburu-Masigo, 2022). Thus it was important to consider how subconsciously these factors and ideologies may have played a part in these decisions, particularly for Participant B who had gone through a process of lobola payments in her first marriage.

Being back in the space that she was in, it would seem that Participant B's focus was to also reconnect to herself, especially considering the various factors preventing her from connecting to someone else on that level. In reflecting on her experiences after she left the relationship, Participant B alluded to aspects of reconnecting to parts of herself as she reported the following;

> *"And…and yeah, it was more about finding myself and reminding myself of who I am. You know, remember the things that I love about myself, that I have neglected you know. You know, like revisiting my talents, just you know…just doing things that I like, things that brought me joy. Things that you know…made me feel like a kid again, if needed you know."* (Participant B)

This was also seen in Participant F who highlighted that she re-connected to the parts of herself that was independent which she mentioned was lost in the process of being in the relationship. She reported, *"I'm single still, so I'm not too interested in relationship because if somebody comes in, he's going to have to be absolutely wonderful. And he's going to have to have no reflex whatsoever because I'm so independent, and I'm just at peace with who I am*". It was interesting to note that she also highlighted that she will never go back to her ex-husband despite them having a friendship now. In noting this, she alluded to the importance that she placed on having her children's father involved in their lives. She highlighted a conversation that she had with him and reported that she said; *"We need to do this for your daughter. She needs her father in her life, even if you don't want to, then, that's on you. But I will try my utmost to have both parents in her life. And today, we're good friends are going to visit*

his mom quite often uhm so I see him as well". Thus, this coincides with research that speaks to some women who find significance in the role that fathers play in their children's lives, which then result in arrangements being made to maintain contact (Shorey & Baladram, 2023). In the case of Participant F, her ex- husband's acknowledgment of the abuse and honest conversations with his younger daughter aided in building the relationship that they have now. Their older daughter, who witnessed most of the abuse, is not fond of her father and did not seem to accept his apologies. However, Participant F indicated that she just wants her daughters to know that they have a father. Thus, looking at her process of re-connecting to her abuser on a different level and for different reasons all of which speaks to the interests of her children.

In conclusion to this subtheme, it was significant to note how the process of re-connecting to new partners, to their children, themselves or even with their abusers facilitated a larger process of maintaining their decisions to leave these relationships and also in securing themselves. It was worth noting how meaning was made from this process of re-connection and how this played out for these women based on the various factors such as children, race and marital status.

In conclusion to this chapter, it was significant to note the non-linear trajectory of leaving these types of relationships. It was important to be cognisant of the various factors of race, motherhood, class and cultural ideologies that shaped these women's experiences of leaving and how they differed amongst each other. It would seem that the process of leaving in considering the internal aspects were heavily influenced by macrolevel ideologies that were prominent for women of colour. A narrative of shame seemed to have played a part in how these women undertook their journeys of leaving. However, the process of leaving for white women seemed to have been more focused on how they saw themselves; thus speaking to the grieving process being quite different as well. These women were also helped and supported differently; whereby women of colour were not given the platform to voice their subjective experiences, almost tying into the idea of sympathy not being afforded to them (Carr, 2020), hence the strong internalisation of shame (Ondicho, 2013). Whereas, the white participants were given the opportunity to share their experiences with their families and they were given the platform to attend to the consequences of these experiences. This internal

process speaks to the larger issues of how people's experiences are storied differently (Boonzaier, 2017) and how women lean towards certain decisions and actions based on that. This in and of itself highlights how the influence of society plays a role in this very internal and subjective process. In addition, looking at access to services, white middle class women were afforded the opportunity to go for counselling after they had left, whereas women of colour even though they were of working class, were only able to access emotional and psychological services that were free- these came in the form of access due to employment (ICAS) or access to pastoral counselling much later.

However, the findings also suggested some overall similarities – some of these were seen in the transitional processes of feeling emotions that were different which sparked a thought for change and how in order to move from contemplation to action, it required these women to sit with negative emotions they had towards their partners and come to a place of acceptance (Clements et al., 2021). As noted in the discussion, at the point of grieving and support in the last phase, it was gathered that women often return when these aspects were not dealt with and received appropriately. Thus leading up to questions of how do we change the narrative for women to move quicker through the process and tap into resources that can assist them better emotionally and psychologically? Thus, looking into the importance of safe places which was very important for those women who were living with their partners or those who could not turn to their family in a hurry. A common conversation was around the fact that if they had access to these spaces, they would have felt more comfortable to leave because they prolonged the process of going back to their families. It was interesting to see similarities in how these women used their stories of pain to create change for others whether that was through being in helping professions or through trying to break intergenerational cycles of abuse in their children's lives. And lastly, there was a commonality in the process of re-connecting which was seen as a means of avoiding getting emotionally involved with their ex-partners again thus through focusing on connecting again to other people, to themselves and their children these women were able to make meaning of their experiences and create new ones.

5 Chapter 5 – Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter will focus on concluding this study by providing an overview of the key findings and tying these to the aims of the study and the research questions. Considering that all research has gaps, there will be a section that speaks to the limitations of this study as well as discussing recommendations for future studies.

5.1 Overview

This narrative study looked into understanding the process of agency in women who have experienced IPV by honing in on their subjective experience of leaving these relationships. Being informed by principles of intersectional theory the importance lied in giving this marginalized group a platform to share their experiences and highlight what the process of leaving looked like based on their own contextual backgrounds and psychological and emotional experiences. Thus, it was imperative to look at these narratives from a lens that looks into the multiple factors that come into play in this process of leaving. Hence looking into understanding the impact of race, culture, religion, class, marital status and employment status. The shift away from battered bodies was crucial in aligning this study with the principles of intersectionality in that it shed light on systemic and macrolevel issues that have been influencing how the narratives of survivors of IPV have been storied and in essence shed light on the importance of bringing the focus back onto them as people – people influenced by an array of factors.

The methodology of collecting and analyzing the data, was informed by interpretivism-constructivism, which focused on understanding that people make sense of their stories on their own and that there will be differences due to subjectivity- hence looking at the purpose of adding to research knowledge rather than being conclusive. It was crucial to keep in mind that people co-construct and this was useful in attaining the data and analyzing it, as I needed to be reflective on how my role as the researcher played a part in how these stories were being narrated and how I too narrated it back. This was key during the phase of analysis which was done as a narrative analysis using Mishler's method (1995 as cited in Kim, 2016). This was useful in understanding the process of leaving as it assisted in looking for key events and reflections and in

providing some chronological understanding which was discussed in the themes that were derived.

In noting the above, the study was guided by understanding the Stages of Change Model (Burke et al., 2004; Chang et al., 2006), hence the focus was on gaining insight on how these women experienced transitioning between the five stages of "precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance" (Bermea et al., 2020, p.990). Thus, two research questions were addressed in unpacking the themes which spoke to each of these stages. The following questions were answered: 1) what factors have an influence in facilitating a process of agency in women who decide to leave their abusive relationships? 2) How do women experience the process of leaving their abusive relationships? In further expanding on these, ultimately the aim was to understanding the following: 1) The circumstantial events that occur and serve as precipitating factors for women's decisions to leave these types of relationships 2) The psychological and emotional processes that occur before women make a decision to leave. 3) The processes that occur after leaving these relationships.

It was found that the psychological and emotional factors that initiate the process of leaving is often marked by feeling emotions of fear, unhappiness and shame due to events of violence or emotional abuse, as well as loneliness as a result of isolation. All of these marked changes, highlighted the transition towards feeling a loss of themselves through being stripped away from who they were. In connecting to how this was experienced, it was significant to note the differences as a result of race, whereby women of colour experienced shame as result of societal expectations whereas white women experienced shame due to their own internal expectations of the roles they took on in the relationship.

The experience of anger was another factor that had an influence on the process of becoming agentive, as it was highlighted that anger is a motivating emotion (Silva, 2022) and is often an emotion that leads to action. However, the difference in the experiences were found in those who were mothers and those who were not. Those who were not, described their anger through feelings of resentment and repulsion, whereas mothers were quite expressive of their anger because they had children to

protect. These key experiential moments together with certain moments of impact shifted these women to a process of acknowledging their abuse. Mothers had to acknowledge the impact on their children and those without children had to acknowledge that they were being devalued and that nothing was changing despite them trying to change. Thus, these circumstantial events included, incidents where children were involved, public incidents of violence and devaluation of things that these women enjoyed doing. In the process of acknowledging that this was what they were experiencing, they had to accept it in order to think about what they wanted to do going forward. This led them to taking action, whereby they removed themselves or their partners from their lives. Women of colour who went back home described this process as almost regretful in that it was shameful, whereas white participants were encouraged by their families. Speaking to the aspect of sympathy being afforded to some and not others (Carr, 2020), hence the perpetuation of a “culture of silence” (Duhaney, 2023, p.7) in women of colour. This was noted in the aspect of grief as well, whereby one of the participants, a woman of colour, found herself grieving the loss of her role as a wife and finding herself back in the relationship due to familial influence whereas a white participant had support when she left the first time. In considering support, those from middle class positions, were able to access psychological and emotional services once they left these relationships, whereas those from lower classes accessed these services from work benefits or religious spaces. The influence of race was also considered in that mental health is not necessarily a topic of discussion, as highlighted for Indian people which resulted in one of the participants seeking pastoral counselling at a much later stage in her life. A common discussion was around the need for safe spaces for women to go to as they avoided going back home, which in essence seemed to have prolonged the process.

Lastly, the aspects of maintaining their distance away from these relationships was seen in their decisions to be of service to people or even through changing the narratives for their children. This was done through having conversations that would break the commonly passed down ideologies of dominance in men and submission in women or through parenting differently. Another aspect was looking into their decisions to re-connect, thus in wanting to parent differently, the mothers focused on their children and connecting to them, they also focused on themselves and rebuilding themselves. Additionally, there were findings that highlighted the difficulty for mothers

to remarry due to the desire to protect their children and also cultural implications such as lobola for women of colour. Those who were unmarried during these relationships, re-connected to the idea of intimate relationships again and had highlighted that they were able to make meaning of their past relationships and learn about healthy relationships in their new ones.

Thus, conclusively, each stage highlighted a different factor that aided in this process of leaving and each stage brought to light the different experiences based on these women's contextual and personal backgrounds. Overall, this study was useful in that these experiences that were brought to the surface, added to a South African understanding of what the process of leaving an abusive relationship looks like from a more subjective point of view. Thus, not only giving survivors a voice but also providing insight on how to better equip those going through similar processes in the future.

5.2 Study Limitations & future recommendations

Despite this study contributing to knowledge in this area of focus, it also presented with some limitations. In saying this, considering that the sample size was quite small, it was difficult to obtain an analysis that could be easily generalized across racial, class and marital categories. Although generalization was not the primary focus of this study, it would be useful to obtain a slightly larger sample in order to obtain more insight based on the various points of intersection. The study included six participants who were working when they were in these relationships and two of them were not as one was in school and the other was unemployed. This was limiting in that it lacked a rich contrast in experience between those financial capable and those who were not. Thus, it would be useful in future, to consider having an equal number of participants who were unemployed and those who were employed whilst in their relationships to ascertain a greater understanding of the differences and similarities in the experiences from this perspective. Another possible research gap that could be considered may be including the experiences of leaving homosexual relationships that consisted of IPV, thus bringing in another intersecting category of sexuality.

In conclusion, the study presented findings that alluded to the lack of supportive structures in the country- looking at how protection orders fail to protect women and keep them bound in these relationships. Hence, possible future studies would benefit from looking into the effectiveness of preventive measures; first from a microlevel which could look at the benefits of safe houses in women's processes of leaving and preventing further abuse and what could be done to create more of these spaces. Lastly, looking at macrolevel interventions such as the importance of awareness raising in young men and women on these issues of violence and where it stems from – thus how do we prevent a process of needing to leave in the first place. Paulo Freire (1970) highlights how violence is a condition of the oppressor used in order to attain power. Thus, when there is a sense of lack or a sense of powerlessness, the oppressed is objectified to a level of inanimateness in order to achieve control and dominance (Freire, 1970) – this is seen in the case of IPV. Hence, looking at the benefits of conscientizing men on the effects of their own oppression infiltrating these intimate spaces could possibly be researched in this area as a way of adding to the research knowledge but also working towards breaking cycles of violence.

In the field of psychology, it would be useful for this research to be used as a guide in designing or revisiting interventions that speak to the internal processes experienced by women. Considering that women often return back to their abusers, it would be useful to psycho- educate service providers who assist women in abusive relationships, as it would be beneficial to look at the stages of leaving and work with the stages that women are currently in. This can be done through normalizing it, making it known to women in these situations, and assisting them accordingly through each stage of their process.

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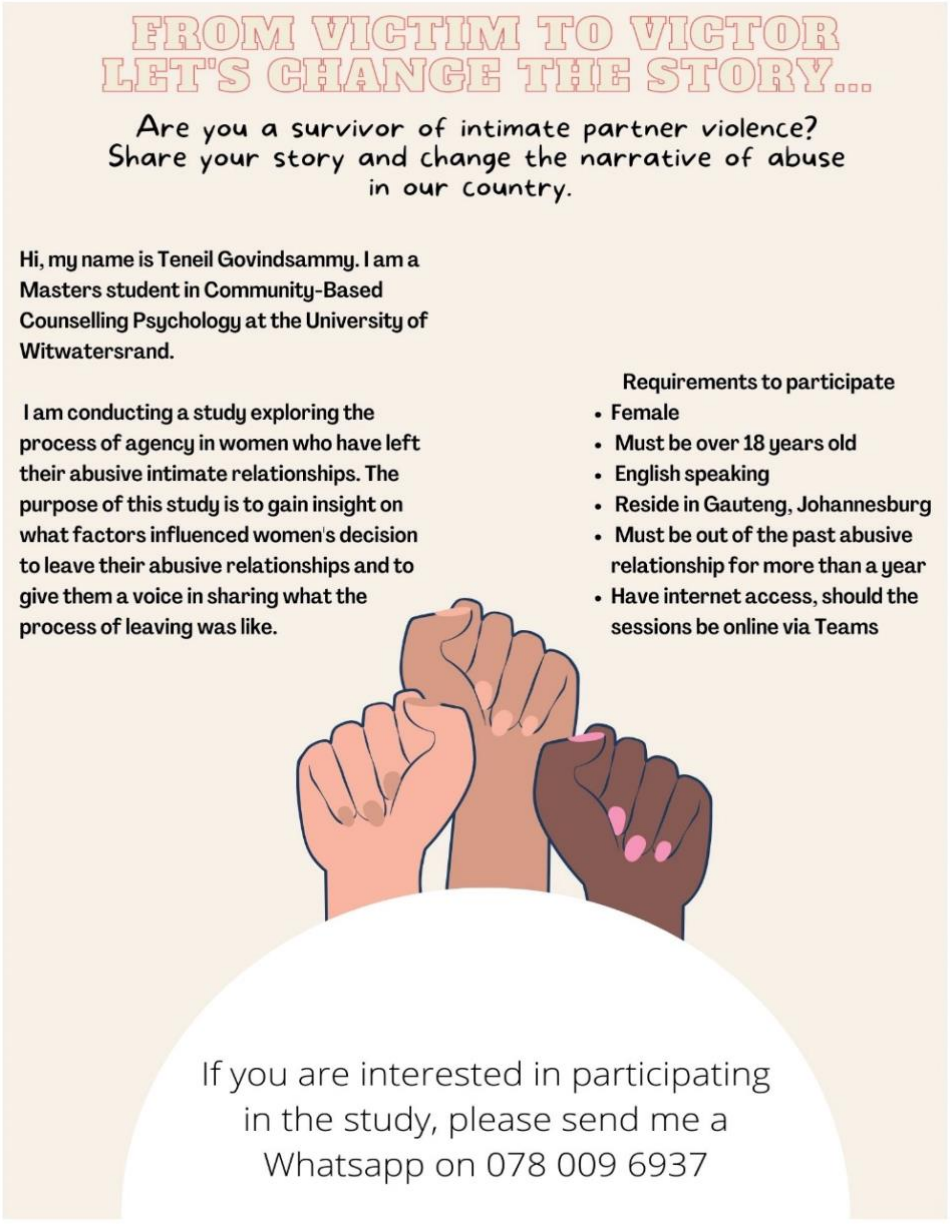
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5.4 Appendices

Appendix A: Copy of the Research Advert Circulated on Social Media



Appendix B: Interview Schedule for the semi-structured interviews

The following questions were used to lead and facilitate the semi-structured interviews. There was no sequential order followed as the questions were selected based on the direction and nature of the conversations. Essentially, these questions served as a guide in ascertaining key narrative points through the interviews.

Focus Area	Example of questions/ probes
Locating the participant in past and present context	Tell me about little bit about yourself. Where do you live? Where were you living when you were in your past relationship? What do you do for a living? When you were in your past relationship, were you employed? If not employed, who were you financially dependent on? Tell me about your childhood. What were your parents' relationships like? What was growing up like for you?
The abusive relationship	How did this particular relationship begin? When did you notice a change in the relationship? What were some of the triggers that caused the violence? How did you feel being in the relationship? How long were you in the relationship- What do you think were some of the reasons you stayed?
Process of change, inception of leaving	What changed your perceptions of this relationship? How did you start feeling when your perceptions changed about the individual or the circumstances? What pushed you to make a decision to leave? What did you have to do in order to fulfil your intention to leave? What was that process like for you? Did you ever go back? What kept you from going back? What helped you during the process of wanting to leave?
The aftermath	How did you manage to deal with things after you left? What has helped you in coping with the trauma and how you felt about the relationship? What reminders continue to keep you away from that relationship? Looking back, how do you feel about making that decision?

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

Good day

My name is Teneil Govindsammy. I am a Masters student in Community- Based Counselling Psychology at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor for this research project is Prof Malose Langa. I am conducting a research study on intimate partner violence and exploring how women have experienced the process of leaving these relationships and what factors influenced their decision in this regard. Through the aim of this this study, I also wish to give women a voice in telling their stories of agency and how they changed the narrative of their lives. In this regard, the title of the study is: *Exploring Narratives of Agency in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence.*

I am inviting you to take part in an interview for this research study. Should you decide to take part, please consider the following:

- Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw from the study, you will be able to do so at any point.
- The location for these sessions will be communicated and decided upon in terms of suitable places that can be within proximity for you. Should there be challenges, please allow for the flexibility of doing online sessions via Skype/ Zoom.
- With your permission, I would I like to audio record these sessions in which my supervisor and I will only have access to. These interviews will stored on a secured device and your interview will be confidential.
- In the interview I will ask personal information about you, such as where you stay and what you do for a living.
- Confidentiality will be ensured as your identity will not be revealed when sharing the results of the study in the report. In addition, I may use direct quotes from your interview but you will not be identified.

- With your permission, other researchers may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and personal details will not be used or passed down.

Considering the topic of the study, it is important that you are aware of the following risks:

- The questions may evoke feelings of discomfort whereby you may experience feeling sad or upset. If you feel it is too much for you to carry on with the interview, we will be able to resume on another day, or you may choose to withdraw from the study.
- After the interview is complete, you would have shared your story and it is normal to feel negative emotions again from having shared your story. In this regard, we will discuss how you may be feeling after the interviews and make sense of the whole process. However, should you feel you would need additional counselling services, you will be able to access free services, from the following organisations:
    - South African Depression & Anxiety Group: 0800 12 13 14
    - Lifeline: 0861 322 322
    - POWA: 076 694 5911

The results from this research study will be written up as a research report. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be able to send it to you.

If you have any questions during or after the process of this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours Sincerely,

Teneil Govindsammy

Researcher:
Teneil Govindsammy, 1056202@students.wits.ac.za, 078 009 6937

Supervisor:
Prof Malose Langa, Malose.Langa@wits.ac.za, 073 504 9890

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

MACC 2022
Consent Form for Research Participation

This form hereby confirms that I (full name & surname)…….agree to participate in this research project.

In agreeing to participate in the following research project, I confirm the following:

1. The researcher has fully discussed the purpose of the research with me how it will be done and my role in the research. I agree that I am comfortable with this and I fully understand the process.

2. I have been informed that my participation is voluntary and that I can choose to withdraw at any given point in time.

3. I agree to having my interview audio recorded.

4. I agree to being interviewed and sharing my story on the basis that I remain anonymous when the report is being written.

5. I agree to meeting in person or online depending on the circumstances.

6. I have been informed that direct quotes may be used by the researcher in their research report and I agree to this on the basis that I remain anonymous.

7. I have been informed that certain questions may make me feel uncomfortable, but that if I am uncomfortable and wish to not continue, the interview will be stopped and may resume the next day or I may withdraw.

8. I have been informed of various counselling services should I feel uneasy and wish to make use of counselling services during or after the interviews.

_____ _____

Participant signature Date

_____ _____

Researcher signature Date

Appendix E: Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE:	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: MACC/22/03**
PROJECT TITLE:	Exploring Narratives of Agency in Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence
INVESTIGATOR	Govindsammy Teneil (1056202)
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	SHCD/Psychology
DATE CONSIDERED	13 May 2022
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	Low Risk
EXPIRY DATE	31 December 2024

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 23 May 2022 **CHAIRPERSON** ____ ____
(Dr Vinitha Jithoo)

Cc: Prof. Malose Langa (Supervisor)

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

_____
Signature **Date: 06 June 2022**

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix F: Turnitin Report

Govindsammy, Teneil MA Thesis-1.docx

ORIGINALITY REPORT

8%	7%	5%	%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

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