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The Affective Flows of Shame: Hearing Women's Stories of Coercive Control

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Abstract

Understanding the shameful statistics of IPV and the ongoing normalisation of coercive control in Aotearoa, I became curious about the invisibility of coercive control in our everyday lives. How do women in Aotearoa recognise patterns of coercive control where colonial patriarchy produces heteronormativity as a condition of our everyday lives. Where does ‘normal’ end and ‘abuse’ begin? This research is located within the cultural conditions of Pākehā millennial politics through the voices of five women in a process of relational meaning making, as we make sense of our missing affective histories. It is through collective stories of our missing affective histories that we can gain a deeper understanding of the intensities and entanglements of affect that linger as shame in our bodies. Storytelling as methodology enables us to reflect on our past experiences as we make sense of how they affect our present and our futures and as we make sense of the affective memories that linger in our bodies, the process of narrative responds to our silence evoking empathy in our connections in relation with others as we move together in our capacity to affect and be affected, to move us into action. As a relational process of meaning making, the process of meaning making moves delicately and responsibly with telling, listening, hearing, writing and re-imagining our futures. The analysis is a process of remembering, together, as I follow Mouat et al. (2025) to hear the little stories, the mundane ordinary stories in the normalisation of gendered power relations, to bring to life the patterns of coercive control in the conditions of our everyday lives. Beginning with stories of love, we recognise the slow creep of entrapment through the normalisation of gendered responsibilities as we care for our partners, until we live our lives through the unreality of our partners, and our deeply embodied feelings of shame. Through the process of storytelling, I heard little stories that connected in the process of collective storytelling, into stories of love juxtaposed with abuse. And as I listened to the affective flows of meaning making, I heard stories of movement embedded and embodied in painful memories of entrapment and resistance through the long process of leaving and movement towards freedom. It matters what stories tell stories, and it matters how stories are told. The analysis is a story of fragments of embodied memories, so that through our missing affective histories we can come to a deeper understanding of the intensities and entanglements of affect that linger in our bodies long after the relationship

ends. These are stories of courage that recognise the affective violence of coercive control, so that other women may be able to hear, relate to, and be moved by them. The intimate process of meaning making became possible through affirmative ethics and the potential of listening to stories of pain for real through our collective affective histories of embodied knowing. I recognise too, that hearing these stories provoke a wide awakeness (Fine, 2014) to the experience of coercive control, as we tell our bodily intensities through stories of rage, of pain, of shame, which like violence, are affective processes embedded in the gendered conditions of heteronormativity that are enacted and embodied, to re-tell our stories with strength and purpose toward living more safely.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My story

This research is a personal journey for me, as I remember being just 23 years old when the relationship began, and he was 39. It lasted 6 years, and it was complicated as he was also my boss. As a victim-survivor of IPV, I recognise the process of the slow and painful realisation of the patterning of coercive control, and how harmfully it creeps into the conditions of everyday life until we live our lives through the reality of our abuser. As I began my postgraduate journey, I began to make sense of the ‘unreality’ of my experience (Black, 2018, Hancock, 2017). I began to hear the voices of women represented in research and the uncomfortable recognition that ‘something really happened’ (Kelly & Radford, 1990). And I began to think with the work of my peers, hearing their stories of the normalisation of abuse and the misrecognition of the “warning signs” – the patterns of abuse juxtaposed against expressions of love (Black, 2018, Hancock, 2017, Mouat et al., 2025). And as I began to connect with other women in social spaces, I recognised too a shared experience of unreality – and the long and painful process of meaning making that endures long after the relationship ends.

I remember too, a conversation with community advocate Jackie Clark as we made sense of my relationship, together. She recognised in my story the representation of the ‘cunt in a cardigan’ and I remember feeling recognised. Through the process of affirmation, I became increasingly aware that my intense feelings of hate *mattered*. I also recognised that Jackie was not talking about my ex-partner in particular, but men who exploit gendered power relations to dominate not only victim-survivors, but also those who are complicit in colonial patriarchy. She talks, for example, how respectable men, the middle-class professional Pākehā male, a ‘cunt in a cardigan’, can manipulate Family Court professionals to advance their own interests (Fabricated Reality, 2021, 47:12, cited in McGehan, 2023) because those systems of power are complicit in the normalisation of gendered violence. I felt affirmed in the recognition of my experience; the patterns of coercive control - the put downs, the control over my movements, the surveillance of my workspaces and places, control over my finances, control of my relationships with family, friends, colleagues as I became increasingly isolated.

I remember too the embedded narrative of individual responsibility that led to an understanding of my own pathologisation – seeking medical support for *my* anxiety, *my* body's response to feelings of 'too much', and the untellability of the connection between 'relationship stresses' and 'work stresses' through feelings of intense shame. As Probyn (2005, p.14) has written, "shame alerts us to things". Having begun to process the affects of my experience that linger in my memories, I became increasingly aware that the affirmation of affective intensity also *mattered* to making sense of our/my embodied memories of blame and shame.

And I remember clearly, the moment of reckoning, that until writing this thesis remained unspoken, my bodily response - the intensity of hate that erupted from my body in that last moment in which he hit me (the moment of recognisable violence), and I screamed my resistance.

And I remember too my complicity, as a painful recognition in the process of meaning making that continued throughout the journey of this thesis.

And I remember the love bombing. The expensive gifts, the flattery and the weekends away together. Above all, I remember the naughtiness of 'dating your boss' that initially excited me. I was young and I had little relationship experience and worked in an industry that was dominated by men, in a company where young women traded sex for job security in a haze of free alcohol. The older men ran the show and felt entitled to the bodies of their employees.

Locating my research through my cultural recognition as a millennial became important to my journey, and understanding post-feminist sensibilities (Gill, 2017) embodied through the forceful demands of neoliberal femininity enabled me to reflect on the gendered power relations that enable coercive control to become normalised. And yet, in the fragments of my memories, there is recognition too, that the threat of violence was also enacted and I began to remember the entangled affective flows - the fear and the shame – that became another site of control.

The first time I remember being afraid of him, he chased me to my car and tried to get in. He punched my windscreen so hard over and over again that I thought it would break. I was shaking, embarrassed but petrified. After I left, he rang me repeatedly and I had to turn off my phone. It was a pretty memorable evening. The next day he pretended nothing had happened. I was so scared that if I brought it up, he'd become angry again. Shortly after on

my dad's 50th birthday, he sulked until I invited him. But he didn't want to come, or for me to go without him. When I went to leave, he started yelling at me and threw a bottle at my car. And then he decided to come too. I felt I had no choice and didn't want to cause a scene.

I was not allowed. I was not allowed to choose how I spent my money, to choose what to eat, to choose his birthday present, choose where to live. I was not allowed to choose when I had sex or what sex to have. I was not allowed to sing... .

It matters what stories tell stories (Haraway, 2019), and as I remembered the account of myself as too emotional and the maker of the drama that unfolded (the unreality), I sought help for my 'pathological' response to my distress. And while I recognise myself now as responding to being made to feel crazy, to live through the unreality of another, I had no way to articulate, even to myself, that my 'disorder' was an embodied response to the enduring affect of IPV.

This research began with my curiosity about the invisibility of coercive control in our everyday lives. How do women in Aotearoa recognise patterns of coercive control if, as Tolmie (2018, p.56) asks: "behaviour exploits existing gender norms when does 'normal' end and 'abuse' begin?" Over the process of this research, I have become much more attuned to the deeply textured experiences of coercive control and the affective intensities of meaning making that are embodied and remembered. It is a project of moving fragments as I made sense of the coercion of heteronormativity that shapes women's experiences of coercive control. It is through collective stories of our missing affective histories that we can gain a deeper understanding of the intensities and entanglements of affect that linger as shame in our bodies. It tells us something.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Wicked Problem of Gendered Violence in Aotearoa New Zealand

Despite 50 years of research into the problem of violence against women in Aotearoa, IPV has become so normalised in the conditions of our everyday lives that it can be understood as a wicked problem (Black et al., 2020; Denne, 2019; Herbert & MacKenzie, 2014; Wilson et al., 2015). Fanslow et al. (2023) found in their population-based study that the lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence against women was 55.8%, meaning more than half the women in Aotearoa have experienced gender-based violence in their lifetime. Māori women's lifetime experiences of physical and/or sexual violence have reached a disproportionate rate of 57.6%.

A wicked problem requires an understanding of the complex and interconnected relationships that are deeply embedded in structural and social inequities, making it difficult to understand as a singular or isolated issue, with no singular solution, particularly when our focus within the legal system (including psychological expertise) remains focussed on individual behaviour at a specific moment in time. Tolmie (2018) has argued that criminalising coercive control requires an understanding of gendered power dynamics, and that without it, any legal response risks reinforcing the same power relations that produce coercive control. The ongoing process of colonisation, extended through neoliberalism, is authorised through western patriarchal knowledge claims that pathologises difference and ignores social and cultural contexts (Coombes et al., 2016) and it is this process of coloniality that entraps Māori (Mikaere, 1999; Wilson, 2016). To account for the disproportionate rate of IPV among Māori women, Mikaere (1999) argues that it is the imposition of patriarchy through colonisation that must be recognised in response to IPV. Tolmie et al. (2018) therefore mobilise social entrapment theory to render visible the structural (colonial patriarchy) and social (the lived experience of the inequitable gendered conditions of everyday life) power relations that continue to reproduce harm. Tolmie et al. (2018) have argued that to make sense of the relationships between experiences of colonisation, patriarchy and other forms of structural violence it is necessary for us to make sense of the lived experiences of women's lives. The affective flows of meaning making that connect aroha and manaakitanga through relationships that sustain whakapapa is often misunderstood through the authority of legal systems, including psychology (Tolmie et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2021). As a result, the gendered systemic and structural violences that entrap women, Māori

and Pākehā, in Aotearoa are ignored (Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2014). Tolmie et al. (2018) argue that we need to make sense of the intersecting inequities beyond the colonial patriarchal gaze to understand the enduring and gendered effects of colonisation.

Current knowledge of violence is disciplined through neoliberal individualism and the responsibilisation of women for the violence perpetrated against them. I recognise that it is through western knowledge systems, where the objectification of the ‘other’, women in particular, is so endemic to misogyny, racism, heterosexism, and other forms of systemic oppression, that our history of violence has become normalised (Gavey, 2005; Tolmie et al, 2018). Understanding the processes of the gendered systemic and structural violence that entraps women, this research aims to contribute to decolonising colonial patriarchal knowledge systems that produce the conditions for the normalisation of coercively controlling relationships. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, much of the research provides evidence of coercive control operating within the legal institutions that respond to IPV, and not the everyday lived experience that is difficult to recognise.

I wondered about the statistical figure of IPV and remembered that, despite the high rate of IPV that includes patterns of coercive control in its definition in Aotearoa, only approximately 20% of IPV is reported (Fanslow et al., 2021). This is particularly the case regarding coercive control, due to a disconnection between our experiences and singular narratives that normalise the everydayness of the actions making abuse invisible (Fanslow & Robinson, 2011). This literature review traces my understanding of Tolmie’s question in relation to IPV in Aotearoa – where does heteronormativity end and abuse begin? This research is interested in coercive control for those of us who do not necessarily recognise the patterns of abuse as we try to make sense of our experiences.

Heteronormativity

Coercive control cannot be understood without recognising the colonial patriarchal power relations that produce heteronormativity as a relationship of domination and subordination that enables the conditions that entrap women in coercively controlling relationships. Rich (1980) mobilised an understanding of compulsory heterosexuality as an institution that is deeply connected to neoliberalism and governs the sexual division of labour that requires women to contribute inequitable work in the domestic realm. Rich began to make sense of the ways gendered cultural norms both establish and maintain the enactment

and embodiment of the social, cultural and political power relations that condition women's everyday lives. Western knowledge produces a gendered hierarchy of dominant masculinity and subordinate femininity (Bartky, 1998) through which women are coerced into heteronormativity, and feminine productivity. Bartky (1998) makes sense of how we embody forms of feminine subordination through disciplinary power. She argues that "in contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment" (p. 34). Through the enforcement of ideal femininity, the female body becomes confined, unable to move freely in the world due to the "enclosure in which she feels herself positioned" (Bartky, 1998, p.29), women instead acting as "docile and compliant companions of men" (p.37). Disciplinary power inscribes our bodies with meaning, controlling our movements and bodily expressions, and our gendered entrapment is the embodiment of "an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination" (Bartky, 1998, p.37). Social and institutional rewards or sanctions for compliance to, or transgressions against the norms of femininity discipline our bodily conduct holding us responsible for any deviation from the dominant heteronormative narrative and our status as racialised, sexed and gendered bodies become blameworthy (Morgan et al., 2019).

In Aotearoa, Gavey (1992, 2005) also drew on disciplinary power to show the often-imperceptible operation of sexual coercion within heteronormative relationships. Gender based violence is upheld by deeply gendered power relations of domination and subordination, reproduced in and through Western knowledge systems that normalise women's oppression (Westmarland & Kelly, 2016). Understandings of IPV that respond to individual women 'victims' reproduce a dominant narrative of a docile subject (Bartky, 1988) rather than understanding the complexities of women's engagement in carefully managed resistances within gendered and racialised power relations. In Aotearoa, both Black (2018) and Hancock (2017) negotiated the term victim-survivor to recognise women's experiences of both the violence and their integrity (agency) within their relationships as they heard the women's stories of strength and resistance. Much like the focus on physical violence, most research does not adequately account for the multiple and diverse experiences of IPV that almost always is deeply embodied and affective (Boonzaier, 2008).

The pervasiveness of heteronormativity in western knowledge systems emerges with the technologies of power that travel in and through popular culture. Remembering fairy tales, the stories of our childhoods, the narrative encourages the performance of submissive

femininity as we wait for our prince to arrive and becomes something of a map for our dreams toward secure futures (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Mouat et al., 2025; Rowe, 2014). Romantic love discourse connects women to the existing gendered social order, drawing on an idealised version of the socially sanctioned partner and, therefore, creates difficulty for women to recognise or make sense of their relationship experiences. Through the insidiousness of westernised notions of romantic love connecting masculine and feminine social norms, the conditions for women's entrapment in relations of power that are "painful, all-encompassing, controlling, and obsessive" (Hayes & Jeffries, 2013, p. 69) are produced, making it difficult for women to recognise or make sense of their experiences (Towns & Adams, 2000).

As I began to figure out that heteronormativity as Gavey argues, coerces us into gendered power relations, popular culture (technologies of power) reemerges "discourse of love" as the happy ever after feelings of heteronormative security that conceals coercive control (Mouat et al., 2025; Fraser, 2003). As a technology of power, heteronormativity provides the conditions for abusive men to undermine women's expressions of love.

Boonzaier's (2008) research draws our attention to the movement of stories within women's accounts of IPV, where women engage in processes of making sense of their (ongoing) relationships with abusive partners in ways that resonate with Wilson and colleagues (2019) research with Māori women, challenging the dominant story of western romantic love, and opening the potential for understanding the compassionate forms of love that connect us to each other. Wilson et al. (2021, p. 98) identify two critical Māori cultural concepts that strongly influence wāhine Māori in partnerships, "aroha (compassion, empathy, and respect) and manaakitanga (hospitality, sharing, and caring for others)." These cultural concepts go beyond Western understandings of what love may mean in romantic partnerships – they are strongly connected with whakapapa (genealogy) and whanaungatanga (connections). Drawing on the women's narratives, the complexity of compassionate love that values care and reciprocity, Māori women understood their partners' trauma histories and their relational obligations as deeply embedded in the complexities of histories and connections that are enduring relations of whanaungatanga, where the flows of care are deeply relational to healing, recognising too, their partner's potential to become non-violent.

Following the narrative of heteronormativity, I recognise the entanglement of love and our gendered social responsibilities to care. And it is this relationship that Evan Stark's

advancement of coercive control brings into view, explicitly linking coercive control with gender normativity. And yet, making sense of my experience through western normativity where the dominant narrative of IPV is structured through individual deficit along the social relations of power that continue an institutional hegemonic direction where physical violence is measured through categories of race, sex, socioeconomic status and where singular stories of ‘victims’ of IPV are produced, was troubling. It seemed counter-intuitive to privilege my experience as a Pākehā woman as an act of resistance to colonial patriarchy and I began to remember the potentials of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) to disrupt singular stories that prioritise physical violence perpetrated by heterosexual men, or women victims located in refuges, institutions, and other formal supports (Black, 2018; Boonzaier, 2008; Enander, 2010). Resisting the dominant narrative requires recognising the multifaceted and situated social narratives that imbue our stories with meaning.

My location as a millennial in a Eurocentric neoliberal context produced tensions for my understanding of heteronormativity, especially as I recognised the burden of responsibility evoked as I remembered my active resistance to sexism (feminine subordination).

And so I remember...

Growing up, I believed that feminism had been and gone and that equality had been achieved. Feminism was a pejorative term used to describe man-hating women who are responsible for men’s loss of masculine privilege (Busch et al., 2014).

And I remember the ‘horror’ of the accusation as a serious social sanction that I now understand as the operation of power - a forceful demand for the reinstatement of colonial patriarchal social power relations in the name of equality. As a daughter, I understood my mother as generationally different, most especially through our differences in recognising gendered power relations. And, even when I remind her of the stories where men in her industry pathologised her questions as feminine emotional excess, or positioned her as hysterical, her success in a male dominated industry was a marker of gender equality. And again, I hear the traces of the normality, of sexism – moving with the embedded and embodied experience of gendered social power.

Post-Feminism

The negotiation of gendered power relationships in a culture shaped by neoliberal capitalism according to Gill (2007) brings our attention to the politics of our location where women's bodies are commodified within a marketplace that values competition and an understanding of individual freedoms that are contingent on the increasing entanglement with heteronormativity that is seductively entwined with empowerment in the desires of a masculine gaze.

Fully immersed in makeover and self-improvement paradigms, self improvement, the commodification of difference, consumerism, and the sexualisation of culture emerge throughout the 2000s through the intensification of social media, I became interested in how Gill (2007) spoke of how a shift in gendered power relations emerged that require women to desire their own sexualisation, and to be constantly scrutinised and judged on their performance of femininity. Thinking about the ways sexual empowerment is produced as an individual achievement within a postfeminist, neoliberal landscape wherein attaining ideal heterosexual desirability is a measure of a woman's success (Gill, 2007), I remembered too, how increasingly, media representations of desirous femininity produced the conditions for what Gill calls the production of a postfeminist sensibility, an ideal figure of femininity who is sassy, independent and sexually liberated and willing to engage with demands of heteronormativity. I remember recording episodes of "Sex and the City" that played late at night to watch the next day. The women of course, had it all - careers, independence and plenty of casual sex, the epitome of equality and empowerment that reinforced the social narrative that feminism was no longer necessary. Despite great careers, casual sex and hot flings, the empowering articulations of sexual freedom, heterosexual desirability and monogamy and not singledom was the measure of their success (Nash & Grant, 2015; Pickens & Braun, 2018).

Given that heterosexual desirability is a measure of success, casual sex appears on our cultural landscape as a freedom from the constraints of heteronormativity and began to appear on our screens and in our lives, including online spaces, as empowering. I remember sealed sections in magazines helped (coerced) us to learn 42 different ways to pleasure a man and educated us about the unique sex positions we should all try. Being 'up for sex' whenever and wherever was important if you wanted to be cool, commodified through the empowering narrative that made it feel like it was a woman's choice. And we also knew there were rules

when celebrity sex tapes went viral, and the woman vilified for their choices, because after all, there were still ‘right’ ways of doing sex.

Farvid and Braun (2013) draw attention to the landscape of casual sex as an encounter that exceeds the boundaries of a relationship in as much as “they (ostensibly) occur outside the context of a committed, romantic, and longer-term sexual relationship” so that it becomes a relation where it is “just about the sex” (p.360). As understood by Farvid and Braun, casual sex excludes the discourses of romantic love and sets up a paradox for women, as through its casual encounter, it does not replace the desirability of heteronormativity. The rules of casual sex, however, produce a tension for women between sexual freedoms and the double standards women experience if they do not meet the standards of femininity that are inscribed through masculine desire (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2013; Farvid et al., 2016). I began to make sense of the intense scrutiny of women’s bodies as they become regulated through sexual reputation and began to feel the entanglement between post-feminism and heteronormativity that Gill (2016) recognised as the seduction of empowerment – the embodied painful memories of the desires of the masculine gaze.

I remember that he would ‘joke’ about how my male co-workers laughed at my veiny boobs and called me butterface – referencing that I had a hot body, but-her-face! I remember co-workers asking me questions at social events about our sex-life referring to stories he had discussed with them. And when he was fired, he began to tell me what they really thought of me – useless, stupid, stropky, ugly, and of course he was the only person who recognised how good I really was... .

Moments and memories become present to the embodiment of the scrutiny of our performances of heteronormativity, where our empowerment required us to be fun, sexy and resilient, no matter our feelings (Gill, 2017). Gill and Orgad (2018) describe the resistance to our emotional distress as being “bounce-backable” through a focus on fixing issues and maintaining optimism in the face of any challenge. Individual responsibility to constantly improve our chances of success in the commodification of our sexual freedom, we must also overcome our painful emotions and adapt to difficult situations, including in our intimate relationships, carrying the burden of responsibility for our own victimisation (Gill & Orgad, 2018). And yet, this is not a location of passivity, but rather, according to Calder-Dawe (2017) the relationship between the normalisation of the qualities of our empowerment and the cultural conditions that produce our resistance to being dismissed as exceeding the norms

of femininity has meant that we are entrapped in a careful negotiation that binds us to “the choreography of sexism and polite response” that hold us responsible for the violence against us (Rasmussen, 2025, p.13). And I began to make sense of the invisibility of the forceful demands of heteronormativity that entrap women in relationships, where the affective flows of meaning making are silenced through fear of social sanctions where our failure must be overcome. And I remember the feelings of shame, deeply in my body.

Coercive control

Coercive control recognises IPV as a pattern of behaviour that exploits heteronormative gendered power relations to gain and maintain the dominance of men over women in an intimate relationship (Stark, 2012). Through his research, Stark conceptualises coercive control as a liberty crime where a woman’s freedoms of movement are controlled by her abusive partner, closing down her abilities to act. In this way coercive control has the potential to shift the focus of our response, not from the physical action of a man, but listening for what his intimate partner has been prevented from doing (Tolmie, 2018). Coercive control brings into view distinct forms of the operation of heteronormative entrapment that include multiple and dynamic strategies of intimidation, isolation, and control of the minutiae in women’s lives (Stark, 2007; 2012) limiting our freedoms.

And as I remember too, it is through the experiences of entitlement that our partners have over our bodies enacted through surveillance, not only who we are talking to, who we are socialising with, the places we go, but also the clothes we wear, our careers, our sexualities, our finances, our emotions that we begin to live our lives through the eyes of our abuser (Hancock, 2017; Mouat et al., 2025; Towns & Adams, 2016). Stark (2007) argues that the harm that is inflicted on women, is political, endorsed as it is through gendered power relations through a process of entrapment through multiple strategies that affirm gender normativity and culminate in the conditions that Stark (2012) argues resemble living under siege. And I remember the feelings of going crazy, where my experience was so intense as I tried to negotiate his unreality, questioning my own memories and the glimpse of recognition that reminded me too, that the threat of violence was not far away. Gaslighting has emerged as a way of making sense of the crazy-making tactics of intimidation, with the purpose of reinforcing women’s dependence on her partner’s version of reality, enacted through the

manipulation of her memories until she begins to question her own experience and increasing her feelings of fear (Stark, 2007).

The concept of living under siege is brought into view through Hayes and Jeffries (2016) work to mobilise coercive control as the threat of everyday romantic terrorism in the experience of women whose bodily integrity is restricted, through conditions performed through the insidious and ever-present political enactment of gender normative conditions of fear (Morgan et al., 2008; Stark, 2007, 2012).

And yet, how do we recognise our experiences of coercive control as millennial women whose experiences do not match dominant narratives of IPV that evidence discrete acts of violence and reproduce representations of victimhood as young, Māori and of lower-socioeconomic status, mostly representing the inequities in our everyday conditions in Aotearoa produced through statistics collected when services are involved (Elizabeth, 2015). In her argument, Elizabeth argued that Pākehā women who are engaged in heteronormativity often experience tactics of psychological and emotional control that become imperceptible within the coercion of heteronormativity that entraps us.

So I return to the voices, like my own, making sense of coercive control through patterns that were imperceptible in their slow creep over time. Thinking with the idea of an invisible cage built on actions of our intimate partners that are often invisible in our compliance with heteronormativity in as much that they may seem normal or insignificant, Mouat et al. (2025) recognise the many stories of the endurance of emotional abuse that women experience, the recognition of surrender to gendered responsibilities, until 'she' becomes unrecognisable. The experience of coercive control therefore is difficult to define through western knowledge systems (Black et al., 2020; Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006). While these stories are being told, their legitimacy as knowledge has been dismissed within our institutional responses (Fanslow et al., 2021). And while I had my experience of coercive control affirmed in and through conversations with community advocate Jackie Clark, and as I slowly began to take the opportunities to talk about my research with friends and family, I became aware that it remains difficult to retell the multiple and contesting memories of coercive control in a coherent way. And yet as I began to try to articulate my experience of coercive control, there was recognition in the affective intensities of memories connected to the feelings of my entrapment.

I remember too, the long process of making sense of coercive control. When Young-Hauser et al. (2014) listened to women's stories of their experiences of IPV, they found that there was a long process of making sense of not only the IPV but also the intense feelings of responsibility for their own victimisation that Fields' (2008) research suggests is embedded in discourses of blame and shame. Following my interest in how shame and blame contribute to the untellability of IPV through the normalisation of individual responsibility, it is difficult to shift within the contemporary conditions that pathologise our resistances. As I began to make sense of the enactment of coercive control and the intensities of my entanglements with my own pathologisation, the slow creep of shame lingered deeply in my body. Probyn (2005, p.86) suggests that it is "shame [that] makes us feel small, and somehow undone...it carries the uncertainty about oneself...and the skin feels raw".

Understanding the shameful statistics of IPV and the ongoing normalisation of coercive control in Aotearoa, I became curious too about the patterns of normalisation that shape women's experiences of coercive control as it becomes experienced as shame. Probyn (2005) understands shame as an affective process, and like violence, it is embedded in the gendered conditions of heteronormativity that are enacted and embodied, creating the conditions for untellability. She argues that it is through collective stories that women can find ways to understand their "bodies movements, how the body expresses feeling, its affects, and how the body changes in proximity to other bodies or in different places" (Probyn, 2005, p.40).

And as I started to comprehend the complexities of the untellability of coercive control and long and painful process of meaning making that endures long after the relationship ends, I am reminded of Wilson and colleagues critique of neoliberal feminism that brings into view an understanding of western notions of individual empowerment that excludes the multiple oppressions of Māori women. Understanding IPV through colonial patriarchal structural power relations, I become responsible to resisting the forces of heteronormativity that dominate institutional responses to IPV.

Having worked through the literature, I became attuned to the conditions of heterosexual coercion that become entangled in the experience of IPV and the embodied memories in the long and painful process of meaning making that endures.

The research seeks to understand how Pākehā women make sense of their experiences of coercive control and the process of meaning making that can contribute to the collective

stories that have the potential for other women to recognise themselves within them and be moved by them, and to disrupt the gendered power relations that normalise heteronormative violence.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Narrative inquiry

This research emerged from my experience as a Pākehā millennial woman who was unable to recognise herself in the research or institutional responses to coercive control, and often I could not hear the women in the stories that were circulating. What was missing from the research were the stories of the embodied intensities of our entrapment. Storying bodies and violence, Lucia Osborne-Crowley (2021) borrows from Wittgenstein's philosophical analogy of a fly in the bottle to re-tell her experience of abuse. For Osborne-Crowley, the fly cannot see that it is imprisoned as the glass is transparent and so everything seems ordinary. It is so normalised that the fly cannot see it until it has escaped. Much like Stark's (2007) invisible cage, this is what coercive control felt like to me. I did not know I was trapped even when I hit boundaries that I could not see. My glass bottle was made of the gender norms and social power relations that supported my ex-partner's enactment of coercive control. It was so normalised that like the fly, I had to escape it to see it.

It matters what stories tell stories

Locating myself through a millennial politics of my personal connection to the conditions of the present, what I know is embodied and situated, and how we 'see', like the fly, affects what we can know (Haraway, 1988). In this way, this research is a process of knowledge that emerges from the body in a particular location, from the "joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position...of views from somewhere" (Haraway, 1988, p.590). Understanding my responsibilities of my location within feminist psychological knowledge to disrupt western knowledge claims of sameness and difference legitimated through scientific objectivity grounded in colonial, patriarchal knowledge, engaging situated knowledge I began to hear stories of difference, differently. As Haraway says, "it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with..." (p. 12), because how stories are told, and by whom is produced through power relations (Harding, 1992). "Who speaks? For what and to whom? Who listens?" (Fine, 2014, p. 26). The danger of the singular story told through western knowledge systems is through its circulation and normalisation making one story the only story, and excludes our affective histories (Wetherell, 2015) that, like Probyn's (2005) understanding of shame, creates the conditions of untellability. And yet, those memories, those moments linger in our bodies.

Fine (2017) asks us to question what it is we wish to accomplish in the circulation of narratives, drawing our attention to the mobilising potential of narrative. In this way narrative research is interested in how stories are told as they hold within them, the power to move us into action in multiple resistances to structural power relations that limit what can be told (Fine, 2017; Tamboukou, 2021). Storytelling as a process of relational meaning making has the potential to hear women's experiences coercive control enacted on our bodies to open new possibilities for making sense of the untellability of our entrapment within our affective histories. Narrative research is not centered on gaining knowledge but the power of stories as a means of social transformation (Fine, 1994; Gergen, 2011; Tamboukou, 2008). Tamboukou (2021) argues that narratives are stories in becoming and that meaning is in the flow, rather than in their sequences. It is what the stories do, rather than the order in which they are told that provides insight and meaning.

Storytelling enables us to reflect on our past experiences as we make sense of how they affect our present and our futures (Tamboukou, 2021), and as we make sense of the affective memories that linger in our bodies, the process of narrative responds to our silence evoking empathy in our connections in relation with others as we move together in our capacity to affect and be affected (Fine, 2017). In this way, what narratives can do is hold within them the power to move us, culturally, socially, politically and materially (Fine, 2017). The process of narrative inquiry, the listening/hearing of stories, is a process of empathy, reflexivity and interpretation that informs affirmative meaning making within relational spaces (Hydén, 2014). Within these relational spaces, as we engage with empathy and compassion in the process of listening and hearing, we move with other possibilities, celebrate other stories, and recognise potential for social transformation.

The notion of "passing on stories" (Fine, 2017, p. 108) is an ethically relational process of meaning making, delicately and responsibly telling, listening, hearing, writing and re-imagining our futures. But it also matters who listens (Fine, 2014), and on a willingness to hear (Waitere & Johnston, 2009). Smith et al. (2024) critique western knowledge claims, including the legitimacy of psy-disciplines, in response to understandings of IPV that reproduce colonial violence through institutional racism and the marginalisation of Māori women operating in our court systems. And I hear their challenge to this project, hearing is not about Pākehā women's privilege but rather has as its focus, "disrupting structures of white dominance" (p.87). And yet, as Smith and colleagues remind us, coercive control understood only through gendered power relations in the absence of violence, ignores the

very real lived experiences for the most socially entrapped women, who are subject to multiple forms of oppression within our shameful statistics.

As this research seeks to be responsive to relational meaning making, I am reminded that telling stories is not new to Māori women, and as Waitere and Johnston (2009) have argued, telling stories does not guarantee a hearing within the acoustics of our institutions. Here the challenge becomes how to decolonise our knowledge claims and ourselves, through a willingness to hear. I recognise then, my responsibilities as tangata tiriti to disrupt the “hegemony of rational, masculine and empirical discourses that continue to marginalise and silence Māori women’s knowledges” (Simmonds, 2011, p.16) through a story that pays “heed to the dignity of women” (Waitere & Johnston, 2009, p.14) and decolonises patriarchal knowledge claims, creating new opportunities for collective opportunities for movement and change.

Chapter 4: Method

Relational ethics

Fine (2017) asks, what do we seek to accomplish as narratives circulate and we as researchers leave our mark on the text? Reflecting on the potential of narrative inquiry, I remembered that it was through the process of affirmation, that moment of being heard in my encounter with Jacki Clark that affective flows of meaning making become relational. As a researcher who wanted to enter a relational encounter with research participants that involved painful memories, I was deeply aware of my responsibility to recognise those moments of affect, reflecting on my own experiences as we made sense together of the flows of meaning making that linger in our bodies.

Oakley (2015) understands that stories are gifts, a reminder of the relationship between research and participants that includes my ethical responsibility for the care for the affective histories that connect us. How I tell the story of this research is relational, my story of their stories, and the gift is in the relationship that is the process of telling, listening, hearing, writing, but also extends beyond the research itself. Relational ethics attends to the complexities and partialities and difficult to tell experiences, and in the process of being afforded an affective hearing, a process where empathy, reflexivity and care inform the knowledge we make through a process of becoming-with (Haraway, 2016; Hydén, 2014).

Reflecting on Hydén's (2014) understanding of relational ethics as a process that unfolds through affirmation, I began conversations with colleagues and friends about the purposefulness of the research. Hearing the voice of Smith et al (2024), I also consulted with our kaumatua about the tensions I felt with limiting the research to Pākehā women. For our Kaupapa Māori services, understanding our people requires many ways of understanding IPV and its effects, to respond in ways that respect their dignity. Through our conversations, I became responsible for decolonising the hegemony of western knowledge claims that produce the singular story of IPV through colonialist structural and institutional power relations that produce cultural dominance, and to disrupt the objectivity of western scientific methods that produce it (Smith, 1999). With encouragement, I began the task of creating relationally safe spaces through which women could engage in the process of storytelling, through a method that supported the process.

Participants

I felt deeply the responsibility to my participants to create such a space, and to affirm the stories of coercive control embedded in the conditions of our location as millennials and after gaining ethical approval (MUHEC NOR 22/47), I invited women between the ages of 25-40 who thought they might have a story to tell about their experience and contribute to research that aimed to understand women's experiences of coercive control. One of the safety requirements for the ethics committee was that participants were no longer in the relationship in which they experienced coercive control.

I circulated the information sheet (Appendix A) among my close social network, those with whom I had shared something of my story and those with whom I had shared my ideas about this research to pass among their social networks, and anyone who was interested in participating were given the information sheet so that they could contact me. This process of inviting participants through a network of connections opens an ethical space of care. Seven women contacted me expressing an interest in participating and engaged with me in conversations about the research process. Five women agreed to participate who met the criteria for inclusion.

I wondered how to story the many normalised differences among a group of 5 millennial Pākehā women professionals who were willing to share their experiences of coercive control. All of the women had left their abusive heterosexual relationship more than 3 years before taking part, with one having ended her relationship 10 years earlier. Four of the participants were living away from their families in urban centers when they experienced coercive control. For one woman it was the movement away from her hometown that enabled her relationship to end. Two of the women were mothers and one was about to become a first-time mother. One woman was single; the others were married or dating. Jamie, Laura, Sarah, Jess and Lily located themselves within the very mundane and ordinary conditions where the little stories become patterns as yet unknown as they experienced the tension between where normal ends and abuse begins.

Our conversations

In opening up a research space to participants, I was aware of the importance of an ethical space of care. Understanding that women might be uncomfortable sharing stories that

might involve painful memories, and responsive to the conditions of the untellability of coercive control, the women were invited to meet in person at a location that felt comfortable for them, including homes and public spaces. I was also flexible in negotiating the number of meetings to enable a relationship to trust to form as we negotiated consent.

Affirmative relational ethics means that the process of consent is a relationship of care and reciprocity. Participants were encouraged to ask questions about the research and through the responsibilities of reciprocity (Hydén, 2014), this opening included being open and honest about sharing aspects of my own experience of coercive control that led me to the research, as a process of *whanaungatanga* (relationship building). It is through these relationships that the potentials for co-creating new ways of knowing is possible. The participants then were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix B) before our conversations began, with an understanding that they could take a break, pause, or stop the recording at any time. And while this process met the formalities, consent through relational ethics extends beyond the recorded conversation in an ongoing negotiation throughout the research process, including my responsibility to care for how the story of their stories is told (Oakley, 2015).

Despite narrative inquiry engaging in a process of storytelling, I felt uncomfortable not having questions and did prepare some prompts, such as “tell me about what it was that made you feel like contributing to this research?” and yet I reminded myself that narrative inquiry was a process of disrupting ways of knowing that turn the relational into data collection, to imagine the gift of storytelling as a process of affect and although this can feel uncomfortable, it is necessary to the relational process of listening, hearing, writing (Hydén, 2008).

When the recorded conversations began, stories were still a little tentative and, as we began to connect with each other through a process of affirmation, the stories flowed thick and fast as we made sense of our experiences, together. The recorded conversations were between one to three hours, coming to a natural end. We took time together, and through a process of *manaakitanga*, continued to reflect on the conversation with each other to bring the space to a close.

Once I had a transcription that I felt was carefully anonymised, and where pauses and moments of sensitivity were added, I contacted the women so that they could make any changes along the way. This was another opportunity to connect with each other and check in with how they were feeling about their participation. Some expressed trepidation about

reading their transcripts, worried that their stories were insignificant, or that they might be heard as being to blame, and I recognised the trepidation as that deeply embodied knot of complicity and shame. What they reported on returning their (unaltered) transcripts, was that they felt affirmed in their telling. One participant asked for a change to a detail that might be recognisable (see Appendix C).

Transcribing is also a process of engaging with stories. At first, my notes reflected the dominant stories that pattern coercive control, evidence of tactics of isolation, intimidation and control that contribute to our painful stories of entrapment, but after completing the transcriptions, I became overwhelmed with the burden of responsibility for what I was being told. Moved deeply through a process of meaning making through affirmative ethics, there were so many painful moments that felt intimidatingly big, and important. *It was the moment while I was listening to the patterning of coercive control, that through the process of hearing I could feel the affective flow of meaning in my body, and I remembered too bodily resistance, the shaking and the vibrating, the 'hysterical' laughter and the tears as we began to remember together.*

The stories that were told were raw, painful and full of shame and at times I felt paralysed as I tried to make sense of my own feelings of stuckness. I remembered feeling so confident that I had come to 'know' my experiences of coercive control when I began this research. Wrestling with the intensity of remembering in close proximity to others (Probyn, 2005) I sought support for PTSD to affirm the added intensities of being a researcher hearing stories of gendered violence. Bringing my struggles to supervision, we organised peer supervision alongside another student working on a similar project. Creating this space has enabled the process of this research to move through an affirmative process of unknowing, and a collaborative process of sense-making not only of coercive control, but through an understanding of affect and our overarching desire to tell our stories away from the stickiness of shame and blame.

Storytelling evokes movement, the ways through which a feeling, the recognition of a bodily memory, becomes recognised through our encounters with others. I also felt deeply the responsibility to my participants in ensuring I had a method in place that supported us through this process. I began to remember the stories that moved me, and reflected on the emotional intensities of storytelling. I also heard the complex gendered power relations that inscribe our bodies with meaning, and how they interconnected with our experiences, feeling

the connections with the women and the emotional flows in our bodies within our conversation, I moved too.

Following a long process of working with the transcripts, I returned to my contemporaneous notes that shifted my process from listening to the stories of coercive control to hearing the stories of pain for real, and through repeated passes over the recordings, the transcripts, I began to tell a story of our story of collective embodied knowledge.

Process of Analysis

Remembering with moments in the women's stories that had moved me in my sensemaking I continued to actively and deliberately participate in producing knowledge that is affirmative. I listened for the loud silences in the untellability of coercive control. Through ongoing processes of hearing and connecting with the participant's stories, and many conversations within supervision, I began to attend to the affective intensity of our embodied memories. By understanding that shame is always relational, the affective flows between ourselves and our social conditions came to life in the participant's stories. As I heard a collective narrative emerge across the women's stories, I became acutely aware of the responsibility to care for the women's stories in ways that at times felt like a heavy burden.

Understanding my analysis as a process of remembering, together, I follow Mouat et al. (2025) to hear the little stories, the mundane ordinary stories in the normalisation of gendered power relations, to bring to life the patterns of coercive control in the conditions of our everyday lives. Beginning with stories of love, we recognise the slow creep of entrapment through the normalisation of gendered responsibilities as we care for our partners, until we live our lives through the unreality of our partners, and our deeply embodied feelings of shame. Through the process of storytelling, I heard little stories that connected in the process of collective storytelling, into stories of love juxtaposed with abuse. And as I listened to the affective flows of meaning making, I heard stories of movement embedded and embodied in painful memories of entrapment and resistance through the long process of leaving and movement towards freedom. It matters what stories tell stories, and it matters how stories are told. The analysis is a story of fragments of embodied memories, so that through our missing affective histories we can come to a deeper understanding of the intensities and entanglements of affect that linger in our bodies long after the relationship ends. These are

stories of courage that recognise the affective violence of coercive control, so that other women may be able to hear, relate to, and be moved by them.

Chapter 5: Analysis

Listening, hearing, and moving

In this chapter I listened to stories of coercive control situated within the sociocultural conditions of our shared millennial subjectivities. Understanding my responsibilities to bring cohesion to our often fragmented embodied memories, it is through our collective stories of our missing affective histories, making sense of the intensities and entanglements of affect that linger in our bodies are told in the story that follows so that other women may be able to hear, relate to, and be moved by them. There were many little stories (Mouat et al., 2025), that through the conversations became connected in process of collective storytelling, *into stories of love juxtaposed with abuse, stories of movement embedded and embodied in painful memories of entrapment, and resistances through the long process of leaving and movement towards freedom. These stories are stories of courage.*

Remembering that the women were invited to participate in research about missing stories of coercive control, I did not exclude experiences of physical and sexual violence and as research tells us, they are often not so easily separated (Elizabeth, 2015; Hancock, 2017; Wilson et al., 2015). None of the participants shared stories of physical or sexual abuse in their relationships, and even though they told little stories through the process, they did not characterise these experiences as abuse. And I remember when my resistance to his anger ended in physical violence, and the deeply embodied shame that has endured, until I experienced the movement of this research process. Through affirmative ethics, I hear these stories and respect how they are told by the participants in the analysis. So I trace the gendered social power relations as I heard their stories of the normalisation of abuse and a misrecognition of the ‘warning signs’ (sometimes understood as red flags) – the patterns of abuse juxtaposed against expressions of love (Black, 2018, Hancock, 2017, Mouat et al., 2025).

Stories of love

All of the women, and me, located ourselves as young and inexperienced when we entered our relationships. And it wasn’t that we couldn’t see that there were traces of coercive control in our parent’s generation. Both Laura and Sarah, for example, were able to recognise

financial abuse in their parents' relationships. And yet, the coercion of heteronormativity for young independent millennials did not shift the narrative that our success was achieved through a monogamous relationship with 'the one'.

He was one of those people that just seemed too good to be true

The women's stories told of feelings of infatuation and feeling flattered 'being chosen' by their partners. They expressed feeling 'special' through a relationship of generosity, affection, and a desire to spend all their time together. And as I reflected on their stories I connected to that other feeling, the process of being swept up and into a relationship of someone else's making becomes the condition of women's entrapment, precisely because they undermine women's expressions of love (Hayes & Jeffries, 2013).

Sarah: Yeah, yeah. And that was the other thing that he started doing as well, was like, "oh, you know, you don't need to work as much if you don't want to, like, I've got plenty of money", "oh I can buy us this house". And it's like, now that I think about it. I'm like, "Dude, I barely even know you!" but like, at the time, it was, it felt really nice, you know, for someone to want to be that serious with you. Um especially when other people were apparently talking shit about you, you know. Um... I felt kind of lucky that he wanted to spoil me. And I remember he bought me... I think we must have got together in like August. And I was going on, I used to go on an - before I had a child [laughs] an annual girl's trip to Australia. He bought me like these two really expensive pair of sneakers, and then put like, \$500 cash in the shoes. ...And I was like, on this quite shitty wage starting out as a [professional] and so it was like, "oh my god, this is amazing". And all of my friends, all my girlfriends, like, they were like, "he's the best guy that you've ever dated," like "the best looking", "he's so nice to you". You know, "this is the one"... da da da... Even my parents, my parents thought that he was going to be the one that gave them grandkids, like.

The reinforcement of the ideal heterosexual relationship is affirmed in and through her sociocultural relationships with her friends and family, so that when a glimmer of recognition that something was not quite right was felt, Sarah and the other women too, began to take responsibility for not knowing what a good relationship was like and were

therefore, due to their inexperience in relationships, unable to recognise that the relationship was ‘unhealthy’.

Staying with Sarah’s narrative to follow the affirmation of the ‘one’, *in the small story of the beginnings of love, I heard the slow creep of entrapment*. And it is here that discourses of romantic love are entwined within socially sanctioned gendered power relations (Hayes & Jeffries, 2013; Towns & Adams, 2000) making it difficult for women to make sense of their experiences. And through our location in popular culture, heteronormative discourse of love emerges as the happy ever after feelings of heteronormative security (the one) that produces the conditions for coercive control (Gavey, 2005; Mouat et al., 2025).

Sarah: And he was one of those people that just seemed too good to be true. He was like, you know, in his mid 30s, had it all together, didn't have, appear to have any baggage from previous relationships, was super caring super, like, I would say, he seemed like he had really high EQ in the beginning, you know, like really in-tune, because I'm quite an anxious person and I suffered from depression, and he seemed really in-tune with all of that. Um, and then things just kind of started to-to shift a little bit. So we, he-he wanted to sort of define the relationship really early on. Um, and I was a little bit uncomfortable with it. But I was like, "Oh my gosh, you know, this, this could be the one". So okay, well, you know, he's got a bit more experience than me, I was like in my early 20s. So I thought, "hey, this, this could be the guy, you know, this the settling down period that I need"...And it got to a point where... like, he would introduce me to certain people, as his friend. And then I'd be like, "what did you-What did you do that for?" And he's like, "Oh, no, sorry, sorry, you're my girlfriend, you're my girlfriend". And it was almost like he was playing this weird, like little game with me, if that makes sense... to kind of make sure that I was proving to him that I wanted to be with him...But I think at the time, you know, I was in my, like I say, I was in my early 20s. And um while I'm mean that's what you see in the fairytales right...? ...You get, you know, you get treated like a princess. And I'd never had that before...

And I hear in this story of happy ever after, the pervasiveness of the coercion of heteronormativity where ideal femininity as told through the cultural imperative of fairytales; waiting for a charming prince to fall in love with us with the ultimate reward of marriage

(Farvid & Braun, 2006) that normalises feminine subjugation in the roadmap of our dreams (Rowe, 2014). And I recognised too, in that story, the social sanctions if we fail.

This is how relationships are, I just need to make this relationship work

Across all of the women's stories was a consistent pattern of taking responsibility for unknowing, their lack of experience normalised against their partners worldliness also emerged as a little story that set the conditions for the slow creep of entrapment. Sarah, for example, found out near the end of her relationship, that the life experiences that made him seemingly more worldly, were fictional. And I remembered too, that the stories that my ex-partner had created in the 'game' of sweeping me into his reality, were also fictional. The stories that chose us, were produced through the enactment of control over the narrative, and our responsibility to improve our performance of gendered subjugation (Bartky, 1998).

Jamie's partner explicitly told her that because she had not been in a relationship before, she needed to learn from him how one worked. Across the stories, the women became responsible for their self-improvement in a process of overcoming their inadequacies when the 'cracks' started to appear.

Jamie: Like I know him saying like, "you've never been in a long-term relationship", which I hadn't, so "you don't understand how this kind of works" or and he'd do it in like a caring way like, "Oh no, you don't understand blah, blah, blah". And I'd be like "yeah, okay". And it's not something you can research and be knowledgeable about unless you've actually gone through it. Yeah So then I'd go "oh". But yeah, just slowly, very quietly, it just slowly chipped and chipped and chipped and chipped away.

Control carefully organised through her 'lack' was not recognised as putting her down, and while she had 'felt' something was not quite right, she became increasingly doubtful of her own experience and acquiesced to the demands of heteronormative responsibility. It was through the little stories of inexperience and the normalisation of how relationships should be that formed an early pattern that was imperceptible in its slow creep over time.

Jess: And like he was my first long term boyfriend... I was like, had no idea how it was supposed to be, with people

Sarah: This is how relationships are, I just need to make this relationship work

Laura: This is what I'm meant to do because it's my role as a girlfriend... We're in a relationship, this is what comes with relationships and relationship feelings, this is what I'm meant to do

Lily: I was like, "Well, what are we doing like for the future, are we're going to have kids, ah like, whatever?", and that's crazy to think that now like why would I want to do that with that person?! But at the time that was to me, I was like, how do we make it better, like more cohesive. And like togetherness...

Sarah:...And I think this is really pervasive kind of thought that, well someone's only doing these things because they care so much about me, because they love me, that's why they're, you know, doing these things.

And I remember too, that those not quite right feelings were out of place in the context of love. And while the women had talked about the affirmation of their relationship among their friends and family, I wondered about the missing story of the silences that might have been understood as tacit affirmation too.

You don't advertise that! Because then it makes you look as bad as well

As I began to talk about my relationship over the course of this project, some of my family and friends expressed that they did have concerns about the safety of my relationship, while I was still trapped in my unknowing. And I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. A question that emerged in response to the little stories, that might connect us to how the unknown effects of coercive control might purchase silence in close proximity with others (Probyn, 2005). In their little stories, I heard that all of the participants actively concealed elements of their relationships from family, friends and doctors. And I began to hear traces of shame.

What they did tell were the socially sanctioned 'niggles' that were normal to their understandings of intimate relationships, and not the more concerning behaviours that their partners were exhibiting. Remembering the flow of love in the stories, I began to hear fragments of the ways that love and relationships are not perfect, require work, not all bad. Indeed, they told stories of getting on most of the time, good and bad times, as the narrative of heteronormativity held them in place.

Laura: [That's] one little part, you don't have to like 100% of people to still want to be with them.

Jess: We just, there were a few issues there. And everybody, every couple, no couple's perfect, you know.

Jamie: And because there was good and bad. Like, if it was all bad, you'd just leave.

Sarah: And I think this is really pervasive kind of thought that, well someone's only doing these things because they care so much about me, because they love me, that's why they're, you know, doing these things. That's why they're saying that they- who they want me to be friends with and don't want me to be friends with or how they want me to dress because they are just protecting me, you know? Yeah... And tha- that's loving, as that's loving, isn't it... But it's not [laughs].

As I listened to the stories, I became attuned to how the silences, the unsaid in our relationships with others were entangled with the conditions of heteronormativity that are enacted and embodied through the affective flows of shame. Jamie told a story about going to her ex-partners sister's house, feeling fearful after an argument with him. She returned home the following morning, responsible for the family narrative to not bring shame on the family; "his family is very much you know, 'keep it in house' kind of thing".

Jess had taken the silence of her parents as affirmation of her relationship. And it wasn't until she left and they began to talk that she learned "my mum did, my dad did, everyone knew, but I didn't... Yeah... Until I got out". It was then that she found out that her parents had kept an incident between her father a secret from her. On reflection, Jess understood that as she was living overseas, her parents' silence was a form of knowing that she was at risk of isolation. And yet other people did alert her to something.

Jess: And then we were staying with a couple at this farm, and they could see it, and the guy sat me down one day. And he was like, "You shouldn't let him like treat you like that...And I was like, "What do you mean? Like, I don't see it?"

...Some of my friends would tell me like, you know, little bits, like "why do you let him speak to you like that?" And then, other friends would be like, "oh my God, but you two are so good together. Like I'm so jealous of your life!"

And I could hear the confusion, the silences, the responsibility to stop him, the affirmation in the responses to attempts to tell, or make sense of the ‘something’. With an understanding that no couple is perfect, and that relationships need work, Lily, like the others, could not hear the warnings in the context of love.

Lily: “Because like, he was real, like, sullen towards me and people around me, especially my family were like, “what? He just treats you like shit? Like, he's not even nice to you”.

And I recognised through these stories of telling and response, the movement of shame, so that when Jamie’s best friend asked questions about her relationship, she had withheld information or even lied, *“because I thought she was just being judgmental, and she didn't understand the relationship because she wasn't in it”.*

And as the stories unfolded, Jamie and Sarah both experienced being ‘warned’ about their partners from women who claimed they were or had been in a relationship with them during the time they were in an exclusive relationship, with the ‘one’. It was when they challenged the ‘truthfulness’ of these claims that the stories intensified into other forms of coercion. Jamie recalled that her partner’s response to her questions contributed to the first time she broke up, as we remember returning was her responsibility to the family narrative of keeping it secret. But for Sarah, it set off a set of responses that reminded her, in the process of storytelling, that the little story of control over how she had to monitor how she talked about her relationships with other men, began a set of other reactions.

Sarah: And so I had to be really careful like, not to talk about past relationships or from you know, my past relationships or males that I was friends with, or any of my past experiences, because that set him off.

And in the moment of telling, as she was explaining that she could not predict what might set off a reaction, she was overcome with emotion, and the little story became a site of affective intensity as she told that his reaction was inevitably to punish her by withdrawing his attention until she proved her love through the performance of a particular sex act *“to make it up to him”*. Through a process of affirmation, I hear the painful memory as she makes sense of this part of the relationship, a story she had not been able to tell before.

Maybe my friends are saying this about me

As the women shared their stories, and as they began to notice that the relationship had ‘cracks’ they also realised how isolated they had become, and they felt alone. While Sarah and Jess’s partners were explicit in their isolation strategies, Jamie recognised that she had been complicit in her isolation through lying.

Sarah: I don't think I want you spending time with her, you know, she's a bad influence.

Jess: Like I stopped doing things with my friends, because he just, he didn't like my friends that I had at the time. So then he would always complain, whenever I like would go out or hang out with them... And then how would I cope without him, without a support system, like on my own in this country like, ah, and I was relying on him for my visa as well.

Jamie: But again, like how I said about how I treated my friends, you know, lying to them, but then just like beating myself up so much, like, "how do I get on this position?"

Following the stories of isolation, I began to hear the intensity of how isolation controls women’s movement, closing down her ability to act, through listening to what the women have been prevented from doing (Stark, 2007, 2012, Tolmie, 2018).

Remembering that Jess had moved overseas, isolation became a much larger story. When they came home to visit, he refused to attend family events, and on their return would continue a barrage of derogatory comments about them when he was angry with her. He would tell her that the people she did make friends with didn’t like her and that she “*needed to stop talking*”. Again, he made it clear he did not like them and used derogatory terms, refused entry to their house, and made threats to them.

Jess: And she, we walked in, and he was like, um [he] told her that he was going to slit her throat.

Jess felt stuck. And I heard the painful feeling of shame, as the patterns of coercive control emerged in their stories of isolation. Sarah remembered that not only did her ex-partner not like her friends he began to tell her the things they were saying to him behind her back, including that she was “*sleeping around*” so that she could not trust them. He

assured her that he didn't believe what they were saying and was only telling her because he loved her. And she became more and more isolated.

Sarah: "Oh well [name of friend] said that, you know, that you've usually got someone here every weekend" and those kinds of things and it just really started to go, oh, shit, maybe my friends are saying this about me!"

As I heard the women's stories, the patterns of abuse juxtaposed against expressions of love (Black, 2018; Hancock, 2017; Mouat et al., 2025), I recognised too a shared experience of unreality, as we became increasingly entrapped in the actions of our intimate partners that are invisible in our compliance with heteronormativity.

I was oblivious to... everything

And as I moved with the patterns of abuse juxtaposed against expression of love, I began to recognise the many stories of the endurance of emotional abuse that women experience until we become unrecognisable (Mouat et al, 2025). Given their locations as inexperienced in relationships, all the women talked about how 'they' had misrecognised control as love and caring. Their stories illustrated just how complex the journey to knowing can be and the painful process of coming to terms with their responsibility for their not-knowing. Often this was not framed as a result of their abuse, but rather as a shameful and painful failing on their part.

In the process of storytelling, the women moved from stories that rendered abuse as 'just how relationships were' to understanding that their partners' behaviours were not normal. Jamie remembered thinking it was "lovely" for her ex-partner to encourage her to wear more outgoing clothing.

Jamie: And I really appreciate it and that's what I need... So then I'd focus on like that, and not, actually have any idea that he was slowly chipping away at my self esteem. Yeah, so that's what I mean like the positive and the negative. Yeah like they actually you work together, but you don't know that, that's what's happening. Yeah.

In the movement of the stories, "now that [they] thought about it", the women began to tell little stories of their struggles to make sense of their partners behaviour as coercive control, and questioned whether these experiences had genuinely happened, were intentional, or that they warranted the distress they were experiencing.

Jamie struggled to make sense of her experience because he had not physically abused her, like he had his previous partner, and who took him back despite having broken bones. This story does not recognise previous violence as a warning sign, but rather when questioned about his history, would reproduce his story of blame.

Jamie: Um I was probably oblivious too. I'd, like I'd try and sort of tell people the positives and be like, "oh [his] [ex-partner] done this, and this and this", and try and hide the other shit. But not know that I was intentionally doing-like, not knowing I was doing that.

And I heard the affective intensities of the not knowing in the slow process of chipping away, as the momentum of the little stories mattered to making sense of our embodied memories that something really happened.

Jamie: I remember talking to my sister about it afterwards because I was like, "how did I get in that position?" Like "how did I get there?" And believing that sort of thing where I know I'm capable? I think just slowly over time, he just slowly chipped away... And so to anyone out like to anyone in this situation it wouldn't be like a red flag because he's not standing there going "you're a piece of shit", "you're useless," "you..". You know if he'd done- you just, but just slowly chipped away and I to this day, I don't know what those little things were that did it.

Sarah: No, no towards the end, I knew something was off. You know, I knew that something wasn't right. I couldn't verbal- I, I could not verbalise it. I could not make sense of it in my own head. Um... Because I could say, "you are these things. You have done these things. This is why we're breaking up"... But that didn't matter. Because he's like, "Oh, I haven't done that. That's not true". This, you know, so... I couldn't make sense of it at the time, because I was trying so hard to make sense of everything but I, I just couldn't, because there was an external voice telling me that whatever I thought made sense, or whatever I thought was the truth of that relationship was wrong.

Was it actually a coercive relationship? Or was he just an asshole?

Remembering that the women were invited to participate in research that was interested in women's experiences of coercive control, the dominant narrative that circulates

through our institutional responses where IPV is understood as discrete incidents of physical/sexual violence interrupted the women's sense making. Where discrete incidents of physical violence are emphasised, women question their experiences of abuse (Westmarland & Kelly, 2016). I heard the flow of doubt in all the women's stories, as they questioned the legitimacy of their participation in the research; were their experiences serious enough to be understood as abuse? As Jamie put it, "*I don't have any injuries from him*". All of the women expressed concern that perhaps their stories were not significant enough, as they knew that other women had experiences that were 'much worse'. All of the women, except for Laura, asked at various times for me to either define coercive control or confirm that what they had experienced was serious enough. As they shared some of their little stories, they often paused waiting for affirmation of their process of meaning making that something had happened, before they continued. Even Laura, who had already recognised the behaviours of her ex-partner as coercive control was unsure if her abuse was 'serious enough'.

Laura: And thankfully, it didn't get to the point where I- my life was in danger or something like that. Um I've heard horror stories, and thankfully, yeah it's never gotten that bad for me. ...I'm always like "well at least always mine wasn't that bad". Or "at least it didn't go there", at least- and it sort of downplays your own experience. That's something that I'm trying to not do anymore.

I was reminded of Kelly and Radford's (1990) early work on the normalisation of violence, and how women do not recognise themselves in the dominant narrative of abuse through a process of minimising our experiences. And I am reminded of the uncomfortable realisation that something really happened and the affective intensities of meaning making that are deeply textured experiences of coercive control that are embodied and remembered.

Sarah: Yeah, I suppose my only concern is that I'm like, I don't feel as though, like there's other people that have experienced it worse than me. So I'm like, worrying that I'm not, you know, like damaged enough for you. Or it's not like a serious enough experience...It's fine, I just don't feel like, like I say, I just feel like there's- its just not, wasn't that bad, you know, like, it was only a short period of time. We didn't have any kids, weren't married, didn't buy a house... [laughs] Yeah. Other people have had like, really awful, awful... I'm just not sure....[my experience] doesn't have much shock value. I guess what I've

said...But it's funny because even after this conversation, I'm still like, was I in a coercive relationship? ...You know... Sitting here like going, "Oh, was it? Or was he just a dick?" "Was it actually a coercive relationship? Or was he just an asshole?"

Making sense of coercive control through patterns that were often imperceptible in their slow creep into our embodied memories, I heard the ongoing questioning of our experiences through the entanglements of affect that linger in our bodies.

Who the hell am I?

As I followed the women's narratives of minimisation, self doubt and the insidious chipping away at how they understood themselves, I remembered too the intensity of feeling like I was going crazy, questioning my own memories. All of the women connected fragments of stories in the entangled affective flows, the feelings of going crazy as they tried to make sense of the ongoing harmful effects on how they understand themselves. Sarah, Jamie and Lily made sense of their not knowing because their partners exploited their uncertainties about themselves, those aspects that they had shared in the intimacy of their relationships. Jamie was mystified as to why her partner had belittled her contribution to a bereavement in his family as insincere because she was only 'throwing money at the situation'.

Jamie: ...and saying that, you know, I'd just thrown money at the situation, or whatever. And I get quite defensive about that sort of thing, because I hate people thinking that it's just ye- me.

And I remember that it is shame that makes us feel small, and somehow undone (Probyn, 2005). Gaslighting has emerged as a way of making sense of the crazy-making tactics of intimidation, with the purpose of reinforcing women's dependence on her partner's version of reality. In 2022, Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Cabral, 2022) dubbed gaslighting as word of the year to mean, in our current political conditions, "the act or practice of grossly misleading someone, especially for a personal advantage." What is missing from this understanding are the long and enduring patterns of manipulation sustained over a period of time, that mean that our own thoughts, memories, and confidence become so uncertain that we think we are emotionally or mentally unstable (Hayes & Jeffries, 2016). Interestingly, all the participants were familiar with the term, and told stories that could be understood as gaslighting, although they were uncomfortable with its meaningfulness for them. And I heard

stories of ordinary everyday manipulations that might appear well-meaning as little stories through to more explicitly sinister stories of disturbing abuse. The common thread that held these stories together was the consistency of manipulation over a period of time that became experienced as a loss in their own abilities, personhood and embodied knowing.

Sarah: So kind of all of those internal things that I felt about myself, he seemed to be able to, like, kind of pick up on and, drive them home... it really started, I suppose, eating away at, things that I thought I knew about myself.

Lily: And I was too emotional, and too sensitive. And um yeah, too intense. Like all this, like too much of, too much of all the things. I've just, I just need[ed] to, like, stop being so, so much like, so extra.

Jess: He would say, like when I would have a drink, I would start waffling shit. And it's something that lots of people do when they've had a drink. But he would say to me... "You need to shut up. I just saw them roll their eyes at you. You're waffling" ... "I can see them rolling their eyes!". So then I became really, really nervous around other people. And I hated- I didn't want to be social, I would get really bad anxiety. Because I didn't want to go out and drink in front of new people because of the way he was like, you know... And he made me then... Like, and even in work like it would affect everything. Because then I would be quite like subdued and quite quiet. And like really just not myself, because I was so scared that the person I was as myself was embarrassing.

And I could hear the affective flow of meaning making, where a woman's freedoms of movement are controlled by her abusive partner, closing down her abilities to act in relation to others (Stark, 2007), through intense feelings of shame. And through these little stories I recognised the entangled affective flows, the fear and the shame, for women whose bodily integrity is restricted, through conditions performed through the insidious and ever-present political enactment of gender normative conditions of fear (Morgan et al., 2008; Stark, 2007, 2012).

Both Jamie and Jess told stories of how their partners dismissed or refused to accept their medical conditions. Jamie was gluten intolerant, and her partner would not accept that it was a problem because it clashed with his food preferences. Jess's partner did not accept that she had a diagnosis of depression, and that *"it was all in her head"*. She was also threatened

physically when they were intoxicated, but when she raised it, he manipulated what was *in her head* to tell her it had not happened, or that he was defending himself from her attacks. And Jess no longer trusted her memory of what had happened, or that felt knowing that something had happened.

Sarah: And, and maybe I'm not walking that talk, maybe I'm not as you know, as great a feminist as I think I am...But now that I think about it, it's so funny, because, like, kind of the flow on effect from that was...I stopped trusting myself...Because everything I thought that I knew, he was kind of telling me was opposite, even when it was like, clearly logically there in front of me. Having someone that like denying that so intensely, and telling you that you're not that smart, and telling you that your friends are talking about you... Um or that your friends are a bad influence and trying to influence how you dress and that kind of thing... um and knowing that they've got a history of I suppose... ruining other people's lives... Yeah, it just made me, I came out of that like very short relationship in the scheme of things, just feeling like "who the hell am I?!" like everything I thought I knew about myself. I thought I was this really strong person. I thought that I would pick up on someone's bullshit and not put up with it. Um yeah, I didn't realise that. It was so kind of easy to fall into that... trap. Yeah...

And as I heard these fragments of memory through the little stories, I could remember my own entrapment through what I was not allowed to choose. And it seems that how we dressed was a common thread that held together the forceful demands of masculine entitlement that sexualised our bodies through their imagination. Gill (2007) argues that women are 'free' to choose to become a particular version of sexual subject, so long as they transform themselves into the object of masculine desire commonly found in pornography. Sarah, Jess and Jamie's partners all bought clothes for them that were not in styles that they would have chosen themselves and told them that what they were currently wearing was not acceptable. Jess' partner went so far as to throw away clothes he did not like without telling her, even when she searched for them. Sarah and Jess, told how they had felt distressed about being dressed in this way, feeling put down, unattractive and overly sexualised. Jamie however, embraced the experience as her partner made her feel amazing. And in these little stories there was an overwhelming affective intensity that in our close proximity through

storytelling we recognised the shame “that carries the uncertainty about oneself...and the skin feels raw” (Probyn, 2005, p.40). And I breathed.

Stories of Movement

As the women remembered, like the process of (not)- knowing, the process moving with stories of pain in the ebbs and flows of storytelling emerged a particular narrative of pain; their struggle to reconcile their victimisation with who they thought they were. And I heard an ongoing process of grief, of loss, of anger and shame, and at times it felt like an unsurmountable burden. And yet, it is through the stories that we find resistances and movement as they begin to understand themselves through the research process. The women did not make sense of themselves through an understanding of coercive control until they became storytellers in the research. But they moved with a desire to understand their experiences.

That's when I was like, this is not healthy.

Following Sarah's process of sense making, it was not until a friend had sent her the information sheet for this research that she made any connection to her experience as coercive control. She was surprised at the connection because through her own education she had only ever heard of “*like coercive control kind of discussed as part of domestic violence rather than kind of like its own thing*”.

Sarah: Um.... To be honest... probably I hadn't really thought about it until [friend] sent me this email...It was, I'd always just thought of it as... you know what this guy's- this guy was just weird. He was manipulative. But I didn't- I don't think I really put it into the category of him trying to control me, but then when I've... reflected on it, and as soon as that- I suppose that opportunity to label it that way was given to me it was like Oh, okay. Yeah, that sounds kind of like what it was...I hadn't really heard -yeah, I'd heard of gaslighting...No, and that was probably what I used to say was, like, you know, "he gas lit me real hard". But in terms of coercive control... like I was aware about it... Not to the extent, like and it surprises me, it really surprises me that I wasn't more aware of that... Um given like my background study was in like criminology and psychology and law. And so I kind of feel a bit stupid that I didn't really

go... "Ah, that is, yeah, that's not normal. That's- that's him trying to control my life and control me". But yeah, I don't even really hear like coercive control kind of discussed as part of domestic violence rather than kind of like its own thing, if that makes sense... .

Through this story, Sarah had isolated her experience through an understanding that what her ex-partner had done was individualised to his behaviour. As she tells this story, another story emerges too, that she had dated a man who had been identified in the media as using serious and lethal violence against women. Through intense media representation of the story, she had made sense that his behaviour toward her had also been controlling, but at such an intensity that it was recognisable.

Sarah: ...But there was like really coercive behavior, like in that very, very short period of time in terms of like gaslighting, like being verbally abusive, just completely lying about things, um, trying like to sexually pressure me into doing things as well. Um... and it got to the point literally after like four dates, where I was like, "Okay, there's something wrong with this person. The way that they're treating me is horrific".

And as research by Bows and Herring (2020) tells us, the defense of rough sex draws our attention to the horrors of violence deeply embedded in the gendered cultural narrative that normalises violence.

As discussed earlier, coercive control was not known about at the time of the women's experiences, and Jess had researched what it meant before the interview and found that it aligned with her experience. But this was not the beginning of their sense making. It was through the process of leaving their relationships that all of the women began to develop an increasing understanding of how painful it really had been.

Sarah, Lily and Laura shared that engaging in therapy had helped to make sense of themselves after the end of the relationship. Sarah and Laura described this as a process of 'unpacking' and 'strengthening' the way that they felt about themselves. For Lily, this process was vital to her well-being, as she sought help for *her* 'neediness' that she had come to understand was the problem in the relationship. And I remember too, that moment of seeking support for *my* anxiety. Jess painfully recalled witnessing her friend go through a "*horribly abusive relationship*" that had triggered her to begin to interrogate why she was putting up with similarly abusive behaviours.

Emma: So did you work out that it was coercive control? Or?

Jess: I didn't, I didn't. I didn't until...

Emma: So just from...

Jess: I recognised it as control... When I- after I'd left... And then I would like tell people why I left and I would tell them the things they didn't know... And they were like, "oh, my God!" And then people would say, "oh, he was so controlling. I can't believe it took you that long!" Um and then I realized how bad it was... And then I didn't see it as abuse until... [clears throat] I don't think I've ever actually seen it as abuse... Until... Now

And we breathed in affirmation. Storytelling as a process of relational meaning making, helps us make sense of the memories that linger in our bodies, as in our connection with each other we move our capacity to understand our bodies differently through the affective moments of understanding in our proximity to others.

Why did I let someone like that do that to me?

I remember my own process of meaning making and coming to terms with the deeply embedded normalisation of the gendered power relations that coerced my compliance and the slow creep of shame that became the burden of responsibility for my own victimisation. All of the women's stories connected through the shame they felt after they had left their relationships and told of experiences of guilt of self-blame for not having left sooner, that were tied to the dominant narrative that conditions who the ideal victim can be (Black, 2018; Boonzaier, 2008). What I heard was that deeply affective question, how did I let this happen? Jamie, Sarah, and Laura experienced a tension between their understanding of themselves as strong, independent women, with careers and futures and felt deep shame for their own entrapment.

Laura: How did I let this happen to me? Like, why did I let someone like that do that to me? ...You put yourself in a situation, you keep him around. So kinda there was a little bit of self-blame coming in there.

Jamie: Just like beating myself up so much, like, how did I get in this position?

Following Jamie's storying as she reflected on her painful memory of shame for 'going back', and in that process, she also reflected that her story gave her empathy for those stories that contradict what abuse looks like.

Jamie: I think back now and I'm like... "what...?!" like, did I value myself that little to think that that was okay. Or that he had changed or that- whatever like to go back there. I just... I just... when I came out of that relationship, I was such a shell of a human being, like I just, and through not just through, like how he treated me...Like I- And then I suppose it had also gave me though an empathy for other men and woman, predominantly women, like that anyone could get in that situation. Like not saying that I'm amazing, but I would like to think that I have a strong voice and usually will say when something's not right, or, you know, I was independent, I wasn't necessarily looking for a man to like, take care of me or you know, any of those sorts of things. And yet here I was, in this relationship, where things had gone bad. And I went back. It wasn't just like, and like yeah, and so I was like, "Who are you? Like, why..?" but also the way that he'd sort of just drilled me down.

As the women shared their stories of individual responsibility embodied as blame and shame, there were many pauses, breaths, moments where the affective flows of sense making were deeply felt. As we moved through these moments, I noticed that there was an energy that shifted to humour – self-depreciation jokes and laughter- that enabled the women to emerge deeply distressing experiences of 'beating themselves up' for being in, staying in, returning to their relationships. I noticed that feeling our painful memories was also a source of shame.

When sharing how they made sense of the relationship now, Jess, Jamie and Sarah all experienced shame and guilt for not leaving the relationship sooner. All three of the women shared their stories through a mix of embarrassment and disbelief. Often this was shared with wry humour and self-deprecation, like Jess admonishing her past self with "*What the fuck was wrong with me?! Grow some balls girl?!".* This self-deprecation was hard to hear as it resonated so strongly with how I had shared my own narrative for a long time and how I heard others minimising their experiences, within the conditions of heteronormativity. The joking way of telling our experiences of pain, do something to both make it palatable for others, and to test the response. The wry smile when we shared something to test out whether

we would truly be believed or whether, as we secretly suspected, the response would affirm that it had been our fault. The dismissive shrug when we said that it was not so bad because at least he had not hit us. It all felt very familiar.

Jamie: And it's almost like, I like I will have moments where I'm like, "I could have left and I didn't", or "I could have..." Like I don't know "why did I go back to him after he cheated?" Hundreds and hundreds of messages? ...Yeah. But yeah, so I just now it's, like you said before, you know, that's like a movie timing and stuff. Like, I look back at that entire relationship, and just my thinking and everything. And... I'm just like, I could talk about it so freely, but it's almost like a joke. Just like "how the fuck did that all happen?!" and when I tell people, like the cheating, the drugs, the certain situations...

Jess: Now, I'm like, now I just, I do kick myself... For not recognising it earlier. But then I also know like, well, what was meant to be, was meant to be...I can't believe it took me that fucking long. I'm like, why did I waste all that time?

Sarah: It's literally, I look at it now. And I'm like, "What the fuck were you [Sarah] on?!"

The differences in the ways the women's stories came together continued in some ways the silencing effects of shame as we negotiate our futures. For both Jess and Sarah, the shame they embody moves with silence. Sarah does not talk about it with her current partner, for fear that it would say something about her. And Jess has moved herself away from relationships through the fear of how her ex-partner was portraying her.

Sarah: And so I kind of feel a bit stupid that I didn't really go... "Ah, that is, yeah, that's not normal. That's- that's him trying to control my life and control me"

Jess: And then also worrying about what other people would say, because he, then I kind of stepped away from our friendship groups and apps, whereas he didn't. So then it was also the whole, being scared of how he was portraying me

And then, as the little stories began to connect in the process of storytelling, Jess began to tell her fear. Remembering how he controlled what she wore, she understood that he

wanted her to be physically attractive to others. She then tells another story, and that is that he was also extremely jealous at the thought of other men finding her attractive.

Jess: Yeah... I wasn't allowed to post selfies. He would always be like, "Why? Why do you need attention from other people, don't understand it"

And I heard a story of such affective intensity through the intimacy of our embodiment of shame; I felt her bodily response to a painful memory that lingers. She told me about the first time her partner had been jealous when, at the local fish and chip shop, she followed the male worker to the back of the shop to get vinegar for her chips. He became angry with her, and threw her shoes into a construction site. I felt her struggle now, over nine years later, to make sense of what was so ordinary to her into an act of abuse. And then dropping her voice into a whisper, she said, *"he lost it"*.

The long leaving process

As I followed the stories of making sense of the women's responsibility for being in, staying in, returning to their relationships, they began to talk about how the process of leaving endures beyond the end of the relationship. Jess for example, *"struggled to make decisions for a long time, because [she] always was like, 'Well, I'm going to make the wrong decision'"*. She was also *"so scared that the person [she] was as [herself] was embarrassing"*. When she became interested in participating in this research, she wanted to talk it through with her partner first, and in our conversation wondered whether her experience with coercive control had meant she was being *"submissive again"*. Sarah too, experienced the long leaving process, finding it difficult to make decisions, afraid of making the wrong one, and did not trust her friends. As a result, she became more and more reserved around new people. Even now, she said that she struggled to take things at face value or to trust people's intentions, something she said felt like *"analysis paralysis"*. She continues to experience the tension between her strong principles guiding her sexual relationships and her hesitancy with physical intimacy that endures.

I didn't understand why it was so hard to break up with him

As I followed the women's stories as they were making sense of their responsibility for staying in their relationships, I heard the little stories of the moments of resistance where they had raised the possibility of ending the relationship and their partners agreed to make

changes. Tracing these stories through the conditions of heteronormativity, I heard too, the declarations of love that the women heard as potential for their futures. Some of the women storied such expressions of love as being a process of love bombing, as the changes were short lived and often the promises didn't eventuate.

Lily: Like, everything will be okay. Things will be better now... Um Yeah, and almost like, in that heated space of like, "I can't do this anymore" And the reaction of from my partner at the time of like, "no, everything can change, like, everything will be better, I'll be better" and I would get, like, the emotional... The emotional and physical connection that I needed. In that little moment... And then nothing would change... And I - yeah, I kept getting pulled back around. Because I wanted to believe that things could get better. And then those like breadcrumbs like he knew, he knew that... like [he'd] just say some things and give me some hugs and be nice for a few days, he knew that that would get me back on track.

And I remembered the feeling of being 'reeled back in', the embodied memory of being a fish hooked on a line, sometimes cast out and at the moment I looked like I would cut myself loose, he would reel me back in by showing me the good parts of our relationship again. It never lasted for long, and then...the pattern repeated.

The process of leaving was a complicated process of fragmented sense making that did not focus on a singular moment, or event that prompted them to leave. What I heard were stories of affect, deeply embodied memories of coercive control that the women could no longer endure. Following Lily's story, we hear the "sense that he didn't like [her] that much" and an increasing awareness of the relational connections that affirmed her sense making that she "would be trapped" if she didn't leave.

Lily: I wanted to understand like, like, "where are we going?", "Are we gonna, like, do more together?" "Are we gonna find a way to like, have more time together, like, coordinate our work life so we spend more time or we can travel or have kids" or like, "what are we doing here?" and the conversation again, like it would boil up, and would feel like there'd be a resolution of sorts and be like, "cool, like, we finally got to talk about the thing that wasn't being talked about". And then it would go back. And, and I would assume for a while, like, "cool, like, we're going in this direction". And then I would be

feeling like, "why have we not talked about it again?", Bring it up a couple months later, he'd changed his mind, or "I didn't really mean...", like kind of like um, gaslighting a little bit. ...And I think, for me like he just wanted to exist in that space where I was like, over there. Um and I guess as it progressed, like, I got the sense that he didn't even like me that much. But I didn't understand why it was so hard to break up with him. ...Because like, he was real. Like, sullen towards me and people around me, especially my family were like, "what? He just treats you like shit?" ... "Like, he's not even nice to you."

And remembering at the time of their leaving, the women did not recognise coercive control, but all of them had instigated the end of their relationships. Neither Jess nor Laura could put into words what made them leave specifically, and I heard fragments of a story of where the line tethering them to their partner had finally snapped as they began to listen to their bodily memories that something indeed was 'wrong'.

Jamie, Lily and Sarah each told little stories of coming to the end of the line. Jamie had enough of the lying, as her partner continued taking drugs and cheating on her. Lily decided to break up with her partner after realising that while he had promised he would move to join her, he had no intention of doing so. When she decided to leave, her mother made it clear that she too was at the end of her tether. Confirmation that her partner had lied about everything, from his relationship status through to his education, prompted the end of Sarah's relationship.

Sarah: I've just remembered, like, even down to the day when he was supposed to move stuff out of my parents' house... I had netball that morning... And I said to him, specifically, I said, come between these hours, because my dad at this point, like after he'd made the [inappropriate] comment to my brother... Yeah... My dad was like, "Imma fucking kill him!". Like, no. And so I said to my parents, "look, I don't want to be here when he moves a shit". And my dad's like, "well, it's not coming into the house alone. Like, I don't fucking trust him". And so I said, "look, I'll be gone between these hours and these hours". And it was like quite early in the morning. It was good, like seven and nine or whatever. I said, "Do not turn up between those hours."

...Sure enough. 6:55[am]. And like he said, "Yep, yeah, I won't be there. I won't be there. Don't worry". 6:55[am] Knock on the door.

And the little stories of leaving became significant. And I heard stories of aggression, vitriol and threats as the women's partners realised that they had finally lost control. And I remembered that moment of leaving becoming very unsafe. Leaving an abuser is statistically one of the most dangerous things a woman can do (Black, 2018; FVDRC, 2017, Morgan & Coombes, 2016). Jamie showed me a video recording of her partner taking things from her house after their breakup, and even with my own experience, I found the level of abuse frightening. Sarah, Lily and Jess were also visibly shaken as they told stories of the ways their partners had responded when they realised the relationship was over. And we sat together with these painful memories that were beginning to intensify in our bodies as understandings of abuse.

Jess also spoke of her feelings of intense guilt that her partner was distraught when she left, and through remembering the gendered responsibility of love, I heard her guilt as care, questioning herself as to whether she had '*given him enough of a chance to change*' and then her voice dropped to a whisper:

Jess: Um so I left and he was [whispers] A. Fucking. Mess... Like, I feel like I probably should have done it in a better way.

Resistance

As the women storied their processes of leaving, I recognised the multiple resistances that enabled the women to leave, even when they had not understood their experience as abusive. And I remember the final moment of my relationship, when the intensity of rage erupted from my body as I screamed my resistance. I remember too, the processes of understanding my experience as coercive control with others. I heard in the women's stories another patterning, those little stories that connect us to taking control of "*the situation*".

In our social location as millennials, independence and responsibility for self improvement as ideal women, the women resisted an understanding of themselves as victims. Throughout the process of storytelling, I noticed the ways that women's resistances shifted as they began to have their experiences affirmed through relationships with others as a problem

with an individually dangerous or damaged ex-partner and understood that it was not their fault.

I've taken control of the situation

Understanding that their experiences were due to the behaviour of an individual man who had done them harm, the women began a process of affirming their experience, either through their increasing confidence in sharing their story with others, or through seeking therapy as they rebuilt their lives. Laura, perhaps because of her significant therapeutic journey, made the strongest claim, that “it was 100% his fault”. And in her story, we hear that it has been a long process (more than ten years) to begin to feel this way.

Laura: You can't blame yourself for something where the other person's shit...Kind of relieving, at the same time, kind of crappy. It was like "oh yay, I let myself get into that!?" But it was also, "but it's not you". It was him and now you've realised that it was 100% his fault, nothing wrong with you, nothing that you could have done to change that situation, or make it any better than what it was. And also, thankfully, it didn't go to the point where it could have eventuated in more serious physical harm to you, or serious harm to you in some way. And, so yeah, it was kind of relieving at the same time, after all of the- the anger and the guilt, and the self negative thoughts and stuff like had gone. And I don't know whether other people would have that same sort of turnaround... but for me with my experience and stuff like that and how I, I came through pretty quickly. Um, and now it's more of a "that guy's a bad person that I had a relationship with", and not "I was a bad person to that person" and all that sort of stuff. It's more all on him rather... [laughs] than on me, you know...I didn't feel like the actual specifics were my fault. But it was the whole thing of... "You put yourself in a situation, you keep him around". So kinda there was a little bit of self blame coming in there.

...I wouldn't necessarily say everything was my fault at that point. And now, I wouldn't say that at all. But yeah, it was definitely a thing, you- "You're a person with your own thoughts, you could've done something." Even though at a situation, at that time I didn't think I could. And it was like "if I create a negative situation, then that is going to be my fault". So I'm avoiding making this my fault sort of thing. Yeah... But it's kind of the same time because I've

taken control of that situation, taking the control back, and said I'm not going to let this define me and feel... I'm not gonna feel sad about the situation. And I'm going to use it to help other people, to help other people realise their different situations, or to allow me to grow from it and put what I've learned from my situation into another one or something like that. And it's kind of like a freeing thing at the same time.

...[talking about it is] a lot better than I did when first started talking about it and things like that. It's more of a "that happened in the past but I'm okay now" sort of thing. Whereas when I used to talk about it was quite like fresh and I hadn't had many healthy relationships afterwards.

Lily also resisted a position as victim, but through her story, I heard not blame, but rather the empathy that connected his behaviours to past childhood experiences, telling me that *"he is like the way he is because of the things that happened to him"*. While Jess recognised that *"it's not me it's [him]"*, she also felt sorry for her ex-partner stating that it is *"only just maybe in the past six months I started to get over the guilt"* for hurting him by leaving.

Jess too resisted a position of victim, and as she began to make sense of the patterns of his behaviour and have them affirmed in relation with others, coming to an understanding that it was not her that was the problem.

Jess: He would always say to me, "you need to ask for a pay rise". "You need to push, you've got no ambition". And it was the last in the last year. "You've got no ambition". "It's all in your head". "You're not depressed". "Why do you want to donate your eggs? That's a stupid thing to do". Calling my friend a faggot. Like it was all of those little things that like, finally started triggering. Like, "what the fuck is wrong with you?!"...Like, "it's not me it's you!" But then I felt really sorry for him as well, because I kind of towards the end, came back into my own, started finding myself again. Yeah... And then I felt sorry for him.

...Yeah. Um, [current partner] was like he had seen him. He knew him as a person at work. And he was, and he-and it's clear now that he wasn't just like that with me. He was like that with everyone he met, all his friends....So yeah, it did feel good. It's only felt normal until, like, last year, because I was so

guilty. And I would say though, he's not that bad. Like, I don't want people to hate him... Like, he's a good person... I would still defend him.

...So yeah, it did feel good... feel good now. I'm quite content with it all. I'm past it. I thought I was gonna cry during this... It feels good that I haven't... Yeah, I wouldn't have been embarrassed. It would have just been like bringing up a whole heap of like memories like I just thought and like feeling ashamed of myself and like...

And I heard through these stories the shift of blame for the problem; not me, but you. And I am reminded of the social and cultural conditions of the forceful demand to allocate blame at an individual level. And yet these resistances did not shift the deeply affective socially embedded and embodied affect that is shame.

Towards Freedom

Movement towards freedom is recognition of the ongoing affective flows of meaning making as we make sense of ourselves and our experiences of coercive control having had that experience affirmed. And I remember having read Jackie Clark's personal account of abuse, and followed her interviews and work over the years. But it was a moment that stopped me in my tracks was the affirmation that my ex-partner was a "cunt in a cardigan" (Fabricated Reality, 2021, 47:12, cited in McGehan, 2023). My body responded with relief and I felt seen. And her affirmation has travelled with me as a gift, and also a responsibility. And it didn't spare me from my painful memories. And as the women told of their movement toward freedom, I heard stories of relief that were embedded with painful memories. I heard stories of discomfort, fear, bodily responses to the possibility of interacting with their ex-partners and the deeply embodied affect that endures long after the relationship ends.

It was a crazy how it just sort of took me straight back there

As the women talked about their movements toward freedom, I heard a connection in the stories that rendered visible another affective intensity, the fear that they felt should they encounter their ex-partners again. As I traced these stories, I recognised a fear for the security of their futures, as if they could somehow become 'undone'. Jamie recalls a moment where she "unintentionally" watched a video on her phone – the unintentional was about scrolling and opening it, knowing that she had watched it many times before, and was not prepared.

Jamie: ...And so I watched it and it just immediate- that one... Just immediately transported me... back. So again, like I shake, I just, my hands like had started shaking, not even... thinking about what was happening. And I was just like, "Holy fuck!" Like, it was a crazy how it just sort of took me straight back there. And I was like, "oh, jeez okay" like, yeah. That was that one was pretty, like trauma...traumatising...Because I wasn't expecting it. And I've hadn't- like I can pretty much remember all the photos on my phone. Like "oh, yeah, that was this" or... Cos I'd seen that video god knows how many times. But yeah, that one took me by surprise. And I was like, it just took me straight back there. Like just everything, like the whole hiding in the toilet. And, like, all the feelings of how I felt in that moment. And around that time and feeling like shit and being scared and all of those things. It just took me straight back to all that and I was just like, "Whoa!"

...Whereas now I'm sort of, I can't- Like I couldn't talk about it, but I can't necessarily remember it all.

The first time Jess saw her ex-partner was as she drove past him, and she remembers that she “*kind of panicked*”. Having that bodily response meant that she was fearfully cautious as she navigated social spaces on social media through Covid-19 lockdown and felt extremely relieved that she was not spending that time with him.

Jess: When they did that, you know, during COVID they had the app, was that ‘The Roommate’? Oh, you kind of just had all your friends on it. And then you would go into like a room with like, people. I was very scared. When I was on the app where we had the same friends, that I would end up like, we'd be on FaceTime together...I was so scared. I didn't use it much because I was oh, it's just too I would just be too uncomfortable.

As the women continued to make sense of their experiences, they understood how undone they had become in the relationship and the ongoing process of, in Laura's story, liking ourselves again.

Laura: I've worked through a whole heap of things to come into who I am now. And I'm still learning and all that sort of stuff, but I'm now able to recognise that it's okay to be continuously learning

Lily reminds us too, that the process toward freedom doesn't mean that she doesn't sometimes still question whether she is "*too much*" and sometimes will say, "Oh, I hope that wasn't too intense".

Jamie too has a story where her movement toward freedom is a process of painful embodied memories and the relief of taking charge of her own life.

Jamie: So I know me being single is that I'm in charge of my happiness sort of thing like so I can feel- I can have shit days and feel like crap...And it's not that they remind you of you being in a bad relationship, they remind you of you being a quarter of the person that you, you know, are... So like, it's, it's frustrating that you think you've done all this work and you feel heaps better, and you'd definitely happily tell them to fuck off, and you're not gonna be in that position again, and blah blah blah, and yet you have these little things that just remind you.

And Sarah reflects on the deeply affective bodily memory that lingers as she moves toward freedom and has an ongoing flow of meaning in her new relationship. And I could hear the threat of going back there, the crazy, or dumb, or...

Sarah: But I mean, it's caused me like massive trust issues. Like with my husband, it's- I really struggle now to take anyone at face value, or I don't trust people's intentions, including his which like, that's really hard. Because um... I was thinking now that people have an ulterior motive. You know, if you're saying something to me, it's like, well, why are you saying that? Is it because you think I'm crazy? Is it because you think that, um you know, I'm not smart enough or? So it's caused like, for such a short period of time, it was caused like some quite, you know, serious hang ups. Yeah, but they were, they were things that were kind of already there but I just think that when you have someone else that- that puts that into question, you know, you've got your own self doubts, for sure everyone does... But when someone else adds into those and makes you doubt yourself as well, it kind of amplifies that.

And I would um, I dreamt about him, like every night for like two years

Following the stories that connected us to the deeply embodied affect that endures long after the relationship ends, there were little stories that meant their ex-partners presence

was still felt. For some women, it was those little things, moments that would remind them of something. For others, it was more constant. And through the process of storytelling, I noticed a pattern in the fragments, a collective story of the bodily intensities and entanglements of affective remembering.

Sarah: So yeah, um, no, no, I'm not uncomfortable or sort of triggered by anything at all. Just happy to have a free and open conversation... I remember him being like, "Oh, I know how you can make it up to me..." And then being like, "...well, you can do this sexually and then that that will make it up to me". ...Well, I haven't... [teary] I'd forgotten about that. That sucks. Oh... Oh, now that I think about that. I'm like, man, that is shit... Yeah... Yeah, um that's not normal. [laughs]. ...Yeah. And I look at him now. And I'm like, eww [laughs]... yeah, like, even... This is so gross. So this has probably nothing to do with your study. But um like, I even remember his smell like... it got to the point where like, I just could not be in the same space as him. Because of like, just his physical presence, and the smell of him in everything. It just made me soooo anxious. That I need to give like, I can't be in this space with you. I need to get away.

Jess: I'm not really I don't really think like, I think I went through... The two years where I'd still think about him every day. Not in like, "oh, I miss you!" But I would compare a lot... To... I would compare a lot of situations in my head and like, my relationship with him and my relationship now. And I would um I dreamt about him, like every night for like two years.

Emma: Like, like situations that have happened, or...

Jess: No, he would just be there. Like nothing. Like nothing like intimate like, nothing. Like, weird... Just he was just, he's just there. And like, sometimes it would blend between the two. Like, one minute it would be Sam in the situation and then it would change and it would be him. Like, it was weird. ...Yeah, it was hard. And then I think that's why the guilt always stayed with me because I just couldn't shake it. Even when I was asleep. Like I couldn't shake- I think it was guilt that caused it. Like I couldn't shake it. But I, like now I just, now he doesn't even cross my mind.

Oh, my God, I can be alone now

Understanding my responsibilities to bring meaning to experiences of coercive control, I also heard in the relief of moving toward freedom, the presence of other stories that connected us to our affective histories.

Following Jess's story of relief, I heard the deeply embedded and embodied memory of fear that limited her ability to move beyond a need for safety. Once her ex-partner had left, she put additional deadbolts on her front door that she still ensures are locked, even when she is in the house. She also told me that she hated using her sink in the kitchen, because she did not feel comfortable having her back to the door but that she could not afford to move it. She still keeps a baseball bat by her bed. And as she is remembering, and laughing tentatively, I affirmed her tangible bodily fear in the telling. The most gut-wrenching part of her narrative for me, was how fear had entrapped her for so long. She had barely left her home, eaten or even opened her curtains for nine months after the relationship ended. But it was seeing him that provided the 'shock' that moved her forward.

Jamie: And like he'd like, but he'd, and then I was, only in hindsight, I was like "he hid from me!" Like he walked out of this toilet and he just looked, I remember him looking like this fucking bravado sort of dickhead. Like trying to look flashy and just not. Putting a bag over his shoulder kind of thing and then seeing me and kind of went to the park bench thing and put his head down.

Lily too experienced relief, and as she ended her relationship, it was the affirmation of others who noticed how she had become more confident that kept her moving.

Lily: And like, as I've gone forward, and yeah, had other experiences and like, realized that [the relationship] I had was really, yeah, like really lacking... And it's been a real process for me to um, have the confidence like this. ...And then I remember being in MIQ and I was like, like, I left and I was like, "phew!" In a way, I was like, felt relieved. But I didn't feel fully relieved, because I was like, fuck I've still got this thing, and I guess I'll make a go of it. And in MIQ, I tried again, and he started getting shittier...[Mum] was just like, "you look lighter, and happier and freer." And yeah, and she just knew and I guess like a lot of other people have sort of said the same thing. Yeah, sort of like yeah, return to self... That's probably, my peace is like, people saw

the change. Yeah, like pretty quickly. And I, once I made the decision, and I finally cut the ties, I was just like, "sweet done!"

Finding the space, even if in the conditions of MIQ, to return to feeling more like herself that Lily experienced as relief, and Laura too recognised her own space was necessary in her moving toward freedom.

Laura: I didn't recognise that as something until later on as well, it was like, I never got my space. And because I'm an introvert, I like, that's how I get my energy all the time... I need time where it's just me to, like recharge my batteries and I just wasn't able to so I was constantly drained and then he disappeared and I was like "oh, my God, I can be alone now!" ... "Holy shit!" and yeah, everything just went up from there.

And as I heard Jess's story of movement towards freedom, I heard that through her participation in this research, she has shifted the blame for her submission, no longer scared, through a relationship of respect with her partner.

Jess: Yeah. And now I'm like, oh, it's, like, I still, I still feel like, there's a fine line between me being like submissive in certain things. Like when I like before I got back to you [about participating in the research] I wanted to talk to [partner] about this, because I wanted I just wanted to get his opinion, you know, if I'm gonna sit down and have a conversation about my ex with someone, I didn't want to do that without talking to him first... And then part of me was like, is that being, me being like, submissive, again, you know, I should be able to do whatever I want and him not worry. But then I thought, well, no, I think it's just a respectful thing to do. ... I think there's still, like that fine line that I always like, second guess.... And like [partner] was fine. And he was like, "Yeah, I don't care". He's like, "doesn't bother me!" ... Which I knew he would be. So I wasn't scared to have the conversation. It was just more so out of like, a respect thing that I wanted to.

I'm so much fucking happier now

As I followed stories of movement towards freedom, I traced an embodied affective flow that I heard as freedom; a feeling of being released from the invisible cage of their entrapment (Mouat et al., 2025; Stark, 2007)

And I remember Probyn's (2005) argument that through our collective stories, we can find ways to understand how our embedded and embodied affective memories express how we feel and through our relationships with others we can begin to tell ourselves differently. All of the women began to share their experiences with others, after they had left the relationship, and remembered how it "felt good". And as they shared more with family and friends, they found the response from others to be affirming, giving them a deeper understanding of their experiences. This does not mean that the coercive control was visible to everyone, and as Lily and Jess say, some people were "*clearly shocked*".

Lily: For some people, like, were like "but you're all such a like, chill, good couple". Like, actually! And like telling the actual details [to] the people who knew us as a couple together, they were like, "that's actually really fucked up".

Jess: Like I had people literally say to me, "Thank fuck you got out!", like "that was long time coming" because they felt like they could finally admit how they felt about us. But then I had other friends who were like, "I'm so shocked like you two were like a power couple" like, "you never would have known".

As the women began sharing their stories more confidently with others, there were traces in their interactions that even if others had not known, they had had an inkling that 'something wasn't quite right'. Laura's flat mates affirmed her story as they shared how they disliked him. Jamie's friends noticed how much she had changed in her relationship and affirmed her experience that he had treated her badly. Like Jess' family and friends ("*thank fuck for that*"), Jamie and Sarah's closest friends expressed joy and relief that they too, were out of their relationships.

Remembering leaving her relationship as "*the most horrific experience of my life*" that was such a "*conflict of emotions*" Jess felt "*such relief that now it feels good. And like it just feels nice to be able to just be myself.*"

Jess: So [parents] were just like, and then when I met [current partner], mum was like, "I know you're happy because you don't complain". She said, "every time you called me you had something to complain about". She was like, "You never complain now"...So I left because I was like, kind of figuring out okay, he's changed me. I'm not the person I want to be. Now I'm like getting on

really well with this guy. Like it kind of made me realise that there's... There's a way out. Like there's other things out there that could be better... And then yeah... [Whispers] Everyone, so many people, my mum and dad were like, "Thank fuck for that!" [laughs]. ...and now I look back... And I'm so much fucking happier now... Like I'm actually back to myself. And it's so good. Yeah [laughs]...To know that you're gonna have fun [out with current partner]. Yeah, you're not [going to] have that in the back of your mind like, "oh, what's gonna happen tonight? How's he gonna react about things?" Oh it's sooo good [whispers]

And what I heard were stories of great courage as the women negotiated the conditions of gendered power relations that normalised their experiences of coercive control. And we whispered our bodily freedoms, always tentative within the shadows of fear lingering in our embodied memories.

Reflection

Rather than a summary of what the analysis found, I have reflected on the ethical relationships that enabled these stories to be told. Remembering that the women did not recognise their experiences as coercive control, the intimate process of meaning making became possible through affirmative ethics and the potentials of listening to stories of pain for real through our collective affective histories of knowing. I recognise too, that hearing these stories provoke a wide awakeness (Fine, 2014) to the experience of coercive control, as we tell our bodily intensities through stories of rage, of pain, of shame, which like violence, are affective processes embedded in the gendered conditions of heteronormativity that are enacted and embodied, to re-tell our stories with strength and purpose toward living more safely. And I invite you to be moved too, as we remember that it is shame that makes us feel undone, and the skin feel raw. And it is through our collective stories that we can together, find the potentials for safe futures.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Delicately and responsibly telling, listening, hearing, writing and re-imagining our futures.

As a researcher located within the marginal spaces of psychology, I am acutely aware of the colonial patriarchal structural violence that is produced through psychology's knowledge claims that authorise the texts of sameness and difference, and especially the embodied effects of the imposition of gendered power relations through the settler ethic of individualism (Mikaere, 1999, Morgan et al., 2019). Smith et al. (2024) call our attention to anti-colonial approaches to the generation of knowledge of IPV that renders visible the social and systemic power relations that entrap women, and wāhine Māori, in particular. And in this way, beginning from lived experience that turns away from stories of individual responsibility, I engaged in a process of meaning making that could become responsible too, for disrupting the single story of the "hegemony of rational, masculine and empirical discourses that continue to marginalise and silence Māori women's knowledges" (Simmonds, 2011, p.16) through a relational practice that attends to the dignity of women (Waitere & Johnston, 2009).

Resisting a focus on individual responsibility that ignores the complexities of contemporary gender normativity, I locate this research in the social and cultural conditions of the experiences of coercive control for millennial Pākehā women. Drawing on Fine's (2017) work with the movement of narrative, this discussion attends to the processes of storytelling and the political mobilisation of stories, so that we may hear "lives lived in quiet and loud resistance" (p.114) to open up opportunities for change.

Understanding the work of feminism as a collective movement necessarily involved in how we are moved into action, a process of understanding how the present is shaped through our colonial and patriarchal histories so that we may become wide awake (Fine, 2017) and increase our capacity to affect and be affected (Ahmed, 2014) requires new methodologies. Resisting the dominant narrative requires that we move with multiplicities and differences that shape who we are in the world and therefore it is a responsibility for researchers to affirm the transformative potentials for hearing how to rethink *with* difference.

The process of storytelling as a practice of relational ethics is a response to the missing affective histories (Wetherell, 2015) that are excluded from our knowledge

production, the missing gendered bodies of IPV. Bearing witness to women's painful memories is to respond to their silencing effects. But it also matters who listens (Fine, 2014) and on a willingness to hear (Waitere & Johnston, 2009). As the research moved with Tolmie's (2018) question in relation to IPV in Aotearoa – where does heteronormativity end and abuse begin? - I began to notice that it was no longer the question that enables a deeper understanding of our shameful history of violence. It was not until I had completed the analysis that hearing beyond institutional acoustics became profound and the burden of responsibility for the “passing on stories” (Fine, 2017, p.108) was at times overwhelming.

To locate a problem is to become the location of a problem

The discussion that follows is a reflexive process of movement through a research process that Keene (2021) draws our attention to, that is to reflect on the ways that we as researchers not only affect our projects but are deeply affected by them too. The process of hearing stories of intimate violent and coercive experiences affected me greatly.

When I began this research, I had been out of my relationship for seven years, and through this time, I had had my experience affirmed, and I had engaged with the literature that enabled me to understand Stark's theory of coercive control as a gendered power relationship. And of course, over time, and with a deeper understanding of coercive control, I had felt that I had reached that moment of having moved beyond its entrapment and ongoing effects. I did not fully understand how this research would also affect my embodied meaning making process, and I became increasingly aware that hearing as an embodied process in relation with others is affective. And I was deeply aware of my responsibility to recognise those moments of affect as I reflected on my own experiences as we made sense together of those memories that linger in our bodies.

And I remembered. As I heard the sometimes traumatic, violent and coercive experiences through the little stories, I felt the intensity of shame moving through my body. Listening to five women's stories in the process of remembering reflexively in relation with others was at times too much for me to bear.

Following the interviews and as I was moving with the process of how to move with the narrative being told, I was struggling to write, or even think, immobilised by the burden of responsibility of remembering in relation. I felt jittery, and anxious in ways I had not felt on a daily basis for years and yet here I was.

It took me months to become attuned to my embodied response, as I was remembering the many little stories through the sticky moments that lingered. Those moments of – and me too. Affirming the added intensities of hearing stories of gendered violence, we organised shared supervision with another student who was also researching IPV with an interest in emotional abuse. As we talked through understanding the affect of being affected, she shared some writing with me, a little story that without an understanding of coercive control would be heard as ordinary, mundane communication and as she read it out loud, I recognised again that familiar cold sweaty shaky bodily response and I was moved into action.

And I remembered. And through the process of remembering the little stories, writing over sixteen pages, I was able to tell the story that began this thesis. And while it took me a while to work through this writing memory process, I was able to move outward with the stories that we shared. It was an intensity of affect that moved me to a deeper understanding that it was not hate (the stickiness of individual ‘bad’ men) – but rather the stickiness of shame that was moving through our stories.

Through the ethics of affirmation, I began to move with the stories of unknowing that emerged in the process of storytelling that evoked movement in our encounters with others. Following the analysis and hearing the intensity of shame as it moved with the little stories, I became curious about the women’s experience of the affective process of having told their stories. I contacted the participants and asked if they had thought about how the process of the research might have impacted their lives. The women shared how having their experiences affirmed had moved them away from feeling responsible for their abuse, and they were encouraged through having now, a way of understanding their experiences. And I felt this too.

And I remember. I remember our location as Pākehā women entrapped within the forceful demands of heteronormative power relations where the normalisation violence is upheld by the authority of western disciplinary knowledges, and their expertise. And I remember too that our stories are embedded in relationships with partners within those same disciplines, lawyers, professors, and local doctors. Experts. Normalisation. Hegemony of knowledge. Violence. Disciplinary power everywhere and nowhere.

I could not have written a thesis that was both methodologically responsive to the little stories that are beyond the institutional acoustics of the normalisation of violence

through colonial patriarchal gendered power relations without the collective movement of shame that enabled the shape of the narrative of the thesis. Hearing the entangled affective flows, love, fear, and the embodied shame that lingers in our bodies long after the relationship ends, opens up the potential for new understandings of coercive control that are responsive to our struggles to live more safely.

As I reflect on the processes of hearing how past experiences affect our present and our futures, I recognise that the process of storytelling responds to our silence, evoking empathy in our connections with others as we move together in our capacity to affect change. Our stories hold within them, the power to move us, culturally, socially, and politically in multiple resistances to structural power relations that limit the conditions of gendered possibilities for safer futures.

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Appendix A



COLLEGE OF
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TE KURA PŪRENGA TANGATA

Information Sheet

‘How we make sense of coercive control’ - Hearing some of the missing voices in Intimate Partner Violence in Aotearoa.

Thank you for being interested in the research that I am undertaking into coercive control in Aotearoa as part of my Master of Arts (Psychology) thesis. I am inviting women like you to share your stories about your previous experience of coercive control and you have made sense of your experiences. This is because I believe that coercive control is something that we don't talk about nearly enough. What you have to say will be an invaluable contribution to my research and to the understanding of coercive control in Aotearoa.

This information sheet sets out some more details about how I am going to carry out my project and what will happen if you decide to participate. If you have any other questions or need clarification about any aspect of this project, I will of course be happy to answer these. My contact details and those of my supervisor Leigh are at the end of this document.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my invitation to participate in this project

Why I think that this research is important.

Aotearoa has a problem with intimate partner violence (IPV). More than half of the women in Aotearoa will experience some form during their lives but only an estimated 20% of this is reported. Unfortunately most research into coercive control reinforces this by gathering information from this 20%, through refuges, police reports and institutional bodies. As a result, IPV is commonly understood as something that only happens in low socioeconomic, non-Pākehā homes and coercive control is seen as something that only occurs in conjunction with physical abuse.

This means that there is a lot that we don't know, especially about coercive control which is the most common form of IPV. As a result, it can be hard for those experiencing coercive control to make sense of what is happening. In order to create change in Aotearoa's IPV statistics, it is important that these unheard stories are shared and the deficit-based stereotypes are disrupted. This research aims to support this by adding another voice to experiences of coercive control.

Your stories can create change.

Your narrative is a gift and is very important to both this research and to the wider understanding of coercive control in Aotearoa. By sharing your experiences with me, we may be able to make sense of this together and you may gain further knowledge about coercive control from your involvement in this research.

Your story can also enable understanding for others to recognise coercion in their relationships. Exposure to other women's stories may highlight that these behaviours are not 'normal', their own fault or less significant than other forms of abuse. These realisations can give courage to others to seek support and share their experiences in the knowledge that they are not alone.

By sharing your story you would also contribute to a better understanding of abuse in wider Aotearoa. Coercive control flourishes in silence, so bringing our voices to the knowledge about coercive control may contribute to changing wider attitudes to abuse in society, and prompt changes to interventions, policies and education around healthy relationships.

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Who I will be talking to:

I would like to speak with 5-10 people who identify as Pākehā women, aged between 25-40 who have experienced coercive control within a heterosexual relationship while living in Aotearoa.

Ideally all participants would be based in Ōtautahi Christchurch in order to easily share their stories in person, but I am happy to conduct this research with you over Zoom as well.

Please note that I will not be able to include you if you are currently experiencing an abusive (physically, sexually, psychologically or otherwise) relationship or were in one within the last six months. This is because I recognise that this could be an unsafe situation for you and your wellbeing is important to me.

What would your involvement in my research look like:

I estimate that your participation will take approximately two hours in total which will occur at times that is suitable to you, between July and August 2022 for the initial interview.

The first of these meetings will be a general meet and greet and a conversation about your participation. The second will be a conversation in more depth about your experiences of coercive control. Some of the things that we may talk about include your experiences of coercive control, how you felt about them then and how you have made sense of them since the relationship ended.

Both of these conversations will be recorded and then transcribed. When I transcribe the recordings, I will also remove any identifying information from them to protect your privacy. You will get to review the transcript and make any changes you feel necessary, after which the audio recording will be deleted.

Please note, our interactions will follow current Covid-19 Public Health guidelines.

Things to be aware of:

I am aware that discussing your experiences in a past coercively controlling relationship may bring uncomfortable or distressing feelings to the surface. In order to support you and ensure your well-being, we will take our conversations at your pace and conduct them in at a location that feels safe to you. I will check in with you throughout our conversations and during your review of the transcript. If you'd like to have a support person present during our conversations, please let me know.

If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to talk about something during our conversations
- ask any questions about the study at any time during your participation;
- take a break at any time or ask for the recorder to be turned off;
- receive a summary of my research when it is concluded

You can also withdraw from this research at any time up until the release of your final transcript. You can do this by contacting me, and we will discuss what you would like done with the information that you have provided at this point. This will be your choice.

If you would like to talk more about your experiences or any feelings that this research brings up, please reach out for further support.

Some of the free services available in Ōtautahi:

Battered Women's Trust

Phone: (03) 332 4122

Crisis line: (03) 364 8900 (24/7)

Website: <https://batteredwomenstrust.org.nz/>

Aviva

Freephone: 0800 AVIVA NOW (0800 28482 669)

Website: <https://www.avivafamilies.org.nz/>

Some of the free services available across Aotearoa:

Women's Refuge

Freephone: [0800 733 843](tel:0800733843) (24/7)

Website: <https://womensrefuge.org.nz/>

Shine

Freephone: [0508 744 633](tel:0508744633) (9am-11pm)

Website: <https://www.2shine.org.nz/>

It's Not OK

Freephone: [0800 456 450](tel:0800456450) (9am-11pm)

Website: <https://www.areyouok.org.nz/support-available/>

Your privacy:

Your consent forms will be kept separately and securely on file by my supervisor for five years, at which point she will destroy them. This is the only identifiable information that will be stored.

All other information will be de-identified and pseudonyms will be used, including place names, your previous partner's name and identifying characteristics. This is to make sure your personal information is kept private and to ensure that the results of this research is not published or presented in a form that would reasonably be expected to identify you. While these steps will be taken to ensure that your story is not identifiable, this may not be entirely possible particularly if read by those that already know your story.

Contact details:

If you would like to participate, please contact me on the details below:

Emma Brankin (Researcher)

Phone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Should you have any questions about this project, please do not hesitate to contact me, or my supervisor:

Dr Leigh Coombes

School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North

Phone: (06) 356 9099 ext. 85075

Email: L.Coombes@massey.ac.nz

Committee Approval Statement

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 22/47. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact A/Prof Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800, x 43347, email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix B



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Consent form

‘How we make sense of coercive control’ - Hearing some of the missing voices in Intimate Partner Violence in Aotearoa.

I have read, or have had read to me, and I understand the Information Sheet.

I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw any time prior to the release of my final transcript.

1. I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C



COLLEGE OF
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TE KURA PŪKENGĀ TĀNGATA

Authority For the Release of Transcripts

‘How we make sense of coercive control’ - Hearing some of the missing voices in Intimate Partner Violence in Aotearoa.

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature:

Date:

Full Name - printed