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INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS ABUSE

WITHIN SYSTEMIC COERCIVE CONTROL

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This research emerged from two decades of frontline family violence practice and from the practitioner's ethical anguish in witnessing and enacting harmful system responses that compounded violence and systemically entrapped those seeking safety and protection. The research centres on the lack of recognition or definition of Institutional Systems Abuse and its tactics, which obscures the full pattern of Systemic Coercive Control. Examining how Institutional Systems Abuse materialises reveals the profoundly *systemic* nature of coercive control and the ways responders and institutions may act as either disruptors or agents of complicity. Existing scholarship has established coercive control as a gendered system of interpersonal domination, while Social Entrapment Theory and Response-Based Practice provide critical foundations for understanding how violence is socially produced and resisted. This study extends these frameworks by tracing how institutional systems and actors can be co-opted into the abuse strategy, demonstrating that coercive control operates through interpersonal, social, and systemic assemblages. Guided by posthuman nomadic feminist theory, the research employed memory work with embodied practitioner memories as relational and ethical material drawn from practice. Memories were (re)imagined as figurations and assemblages, and reflexive thematic analysis traced entangled patterns across them to construct a sociopolitical cartography of harmful system responses. Two interconnected pathways were identified that offer insight into how systems abuse occurs: Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM), showing how perpetrators co-opt systems and responders, and Harmful System Responses (4Ps), revealing how

institutional policies, procedures, processes, and practices enable compounding harm and systemic entrapment. Posthuman feminist analysis exposes how gendered power is reproduced through systems claiming neutrality and how neoliberal and Eurocentric logics sustain systemic complicity. By naming Institutional Systems Abuse as a discrete and under-recognised tactic of Systemic Coercive Control, the research establishes a shared language to describe and disrupt it. A central contribution lies in articulating ethical anguish as embodied practitioner knowledge and a signpost for resistance, recognising forced positions of complicity that responders may be co-opted into when systems reproduce harm. The study offers an original methodological contribution through a sociopolitical cartography constructed from affective practitioner memories. It advances theoretical, methodological, and practice-based understanding of institutional complicity, positioning ethical, safety-oriented, and dignity-driven responses as essential sites of resistance and systemic reform.

Practitioner resources developed from this research are available at www.jacki.co.nz or www.coercive-control.co.nz

Dedication

Mumma

The final words we shared run through my mind…often

You said, "Jac, I am so tired"

I said, "I know, why don't you lie on your bed and float off on a puffy white cloud"

(The same words you used to say to me when I was little)

Then you said, "I think I will, Jac"

……

Words are never just words.

They matter

I wanted you to be free from your pain-filled body of suffering

I knew what my words were saying

I never thought about what each day would feel like for me after that …

I don't regret not saying "I love you" in that last moment, you knew I did

As after you left, you returned my letters of love for you that I had written,

You kept them, all of my life

The paper brittle from time, but still stronger than your lungs

Words really do matter.

They carry so much

Acknowledgements

To The Women – An Apology

Acknowledgements often begin with a thank you; this one begins with an apology. To all the people I let down through my not-knowing, for the times I may have had a glazed and panicked look in my eyes, for the times I never had language fitting for your lived experience, and mostly, for all the times I did not speak up and out – I hope I have done so now. I owe you an apology for taking so long to stand up for you and with you against systemic harms and in standing up against my own practice.

To my supervisors, Mandy, Leigh and Ann – With Gratitude

From my practice location, sitting on the outside of academia, I imagined a sterile place full of institutional demands of clinical precision and statistical significance where affective hearts were nothing more than inconvenient variables. Where knowing was shaped by proof not through feeling, reflection, and encounter. My first learnings began with you three where theory became both embodied and relational.

Mandy, Leigh, and Ann, I am so grateful for your guidance and support, always there for me, reliable, honest, responsive, and wise. Thank you all for introducing me to Braidotti, for valuing lived experience and being supportive of other ways of doing things. And for giving me the space to figure out this research journey and what

kind of researcher I want to be. Thank you for challenging me to think more critically and deeply with theory. It has been a privilege to learn from you all.

Simon, James & Matt – With Love

Four life-changing events unfolded over the past three years: this research, the death of my Mum, moving home, and the long miles of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela.

Simon, James and Matt - As I saw each of you on the Camino, I see you in life.

Matt, you were my strength in the snow-covered Pyrenees, steady in the storm, guiding me forward when grief and sickness made the path a treacherous challenge. I watched you navigate The Way with strength, a sense of adventure, humour and connection.

James, you were my companion of reflection, reminding me of the importance of showing up as you are, with authentic courage and humility. Despite the weight you carried, both physically and metaphorically I watched as each step along The Way made you stronger - I saw your resilient, kind and steadfast self.

Simon, you brought, as you always do, the spark that keeps the journey light and the presence that makes me feel safe in the world. As you walked beside me on the Camino, you have walked beside me through every day of this research. No one has held me more closely through the long hours, tired nights, doubt, and fatigue of this work - just as you have for the last three decades of our life together.

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Context Terms

A Response-Based Practice approach to violence and oppression allows for an analysis that focuses on actions in context rather than fixed identities. It honours the complexity of human behaviour while still maintaining clarity about accountability in violent interactions. Response-Based Practice focuses more specifically on close consideration of who did what to whom (Richardson Kinewesquao & Wade, 2008). Contextual terms are not intended to define the totality of a person, nor are they used to imply permanence or fixed identity-based labels; instead, they convey specific actions or conduct within a context. This approach additionally draws on Rosi Braidotti's (2006, 2019b) critique of binary thinking, which challenges the assumption that violence and victimhood can be cleanly divided or represented through simplistic categories. Binary terms such as victim/perpetrator can flatten complexity and risk reinforcing harmful practices. For example, without contextual understanding, the use of binary labels (victim/perpetrator/aggressor) can misidentify violence and overlook the strategies of resistance used by those experiencing violence (Hydén, Gadd, et al., 2016; Todd et al., 2004; Wade, 1997b).

Ethical Anguish: A phrase I use to explain the deep-felt moral distress in recognising my complicity in a system response while bearing witness to systemic injustices in institutional violations. Unlike mere "pain", which suggests a passive experience to be endured, anguish captures the active wrestling with ongoing ethical dilemmas

that practitioners face in family violence work, often evidenced in unhelpful or harmful responses. The visceral, affective discomfort that arises when one is positioned within systems designed to protect but that instead cause harm or when one's professional role demands complicity in practices that violate values of justice and care - which constitutes a form of moral suffering and resistance. This anguish functions as an internal compass, pointing toward the injustices that demand redress and as a signpost for resistant responses that uphold practitioner dignity and wellbeing.

Harmful Responses (human and non-human): Actions, words, or policies from individuals, institutions, or systems that exacerbate harm, compromise safety, or further entrap those experiencing violence.

Institutional Systems Abuse: A deliberate third-party non-physical violence tactic in which institutional systems and system actors are utilised as instruments of abuse against victim-survivors to further strategies of ongoing harm and entrapment. Institutional Systems Abuse is a critical factor in Social Entrapment Theory as it provides an understanding of how this experience occurs.

Intimate Partner Violence: A pattern of coercive and controlling harm within an intimate relationship, including physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, and systemic forms of abuse.

Legal Systems Abuse: The exploitation of legal systems, processes, and remedies by a perpetrator to continue harassment, intimidation, and control of a victim-survivor (The Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration, 2024).

Predominant Aggressor (PA): The person in an intimate relationship whose primary intent is to exert and maintain coercive control through an ongoing pattern of harm and abusive behaviours, which may include physical and sexual violence, threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, stalking, and isolation, regardless of who may have initiated a particular incident or used force first (Nancarrow et al., 2020; Reeves, 2021).

Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM): A deliberate tactic of strategic manipulation used to exploit and leverage social systems and systemic gaps to extend coercive control from relational abuse to social and systemic abuse.

Primary Victim (PV): A person who experiences ongoing coercive control, fear, and harm, who may resist abuse through various means, including defensive and resistant force, but whose actions occur within a context of systematic power imbalance and patterns of abuse perpetrated against them (Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008; Wade, 1997; Wilson et al., 2019).

Resistance: An overt or covert response to violence and oppression "through which a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any disrespect), or the conditions that make such acts possible" (Wade, 1997, p. 25).

Social Responses: The ways others respond to a person's disclosure of violence or to the violence itself, whether these responses come from individuals, institutions, or systems.

Systems Abuse: This occurs when a predominant aggressor of intimate partner violence exploits support systems to harm and entrap the primary victim. The perpetrator manipulates legal, institutional, and other systems to control, threaten, and harass a current or former partner (National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children, 2022–2032).

Systemic Coercive Control: A broader conceptualisation of coercive control that includes the strategic use of systems – legal and institutional – to extend harm and entrapment beyond the interpersonal realm. This conceptual frame highlights how perpetrators use social systems, formal systems, and system actors as instruments of harm to reinforce their control.

Victim-Survivor: Identifies the person who was subjected to violence in a specific context, with "victim" specifically chosen to denote a wrongful act that was committed against that person and survivor to convey active resistance.

Gender as a Social Construct: In this research, gender is understood as not a fixed biological attribute but as a social construct that is produced through cultural, historical, and institutional discourses that shape expectations, behaviours, and identities. Gender is performed and reproduced through language, social practices, and power relations, creating asymmetries that privilege men and subordinate women. Within the context of family violence, these asymmetries are critical: patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions underpin both the perpetration of violence and the systemic responses that often misrecognise or dismiss women's experiences (Connell, 2005; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dobash & Dobash, 2017; Radtke et al., 2023).

Gender terms and pronouns: The composite cases in this research use the pronoun she/her for the victim-survivor and he/him pronouns are typically used for predominant aggressors, reflecting both the lived reality of my practice and the statistical evidence that men are the primary perpetrators of intimate partner violence (Family Violence Clearing House, 2017). However, I also acknowledge that men can be victims of family violence and violence occurs in all relationship types, including same-sex and rainbow communities. These experiences are valid and important, but they are not the focus of this research, which arises from and speaks to the dynamics most consistently encountered in my practice.

By explicitly naming gender as a social construction, this research highlights the ways in which violence is entangled with broader systems of power. It resists gender-neutral framings that obscure these dynamics and instead focuses the gendered realities of coercive control and systemic responses, while also recognising diversity and complexity beyond heteronormative discourses.

Family Violence Support Services

Elder Abuse Helpline - 0800 32 668 65

Family violence information line - 0800 456 450

Gandhi Nivas - supporting men to be free from violence - 0800 426 344

Hey Bro helpline - supporting men to be free from violence - 0800 HeyBro (439 276)

Hohou te rongo kahukura - outing violence - building rainbow communities free from violence - 0800 688 5463

The National Network of Stopping Violence - 03 391 0048

Sensitive Claims ACC - 0800 735 566

Shakti - for migrant and refugee women - 0800 742 584

Shine National Helpline - 0508 744 633

Victim Support - support for men and women victims - 0800 842 846

Women's Refuge Crisis - 0800 733 843

Chapter 1: A SITUATED INTRODUCTION

Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.

A person is a person through other people.

I begin this research with a powerful philosophical and ethical principle rooted in Ubuntu, an African worldview that is most prominently found in Southern African cultures, including languages such as Zulu and Xhosa. I bring with me the spirit that Van Breda argues connects us with each other, as individuals within our social worlds; it centres dignity between people within the community (2019).

How we respond in family violence work impacts lives.

The way we show up in the lives of others can affirm their dignity.

It says: you matter.

When someone reaches out – bruised, silenced, unsure – and we respond,

it's not about tick-box assessments.

We are shaping what this world feels like for someone who is already carrying too much.

Our response is not just a professional act. It is a human one.

It tells someone whether they are believed, whether their resistance is recognised, whether their story matters.

Responsibility lies between us.

We do not get to choose whether we are part of someone's story – we already are.

But we can choose how we show up in it.

Family violence doesn't happen behind closed doors. It happens within social systems, communities, formal systems, in offices, in conversations, in case notes and custody decisions.

Our responses have power, but they can echo the very tactics of control we claim to stand against.

So yes – I feel the weight of my response to another.

And if that's true, then my response is never just about policy or protocol.

It is about humanity.

This research journey is not about blame. It is about responsibility.

It is about remembering that we belong to each other.

Because that's what Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu asks of us

To live in a way that recognises our interconnectedness.

Because a person is a person through other people.

The Research Aims – A Cartographic Journey

This research began not with a question but with practitioner ethical anguish: a felt and embodied refusal to remain silent from bearing witness to and being complicit in systemic harm. As a family violence practitioner, I sat with women whose lives were shaped not only by intimate partner violence but also by the crushing impact of system responses that compounded that violence. These systems – community, organisational, and legal – did not just fail to support and protect; they also harmed and entrapped. They legitimised and authorised the perpetrator's coercive control.

Like a cartographer setting out to map unknown terrain, I began this research journey with my own ethical anguish as my guiding compass. I knew there was territory to discover and travel through, that being the mechanisms of harm within family violence response systems. I did not know what specific pathways I would trace or what precise landscapes of harm I would uncover.

From my frontline position as a practitioner, the territory I aimed to chart was to understand how harmful responses occur in the context of family violence, particularly through institutional systems that are designed to support and protect. I was distressed about how little was known about how these harmful responses are produced, operationalised, and legitimised. I began this journey seeking to trace the mechanics of these harms, not simply as failures but as patterned and systemic forms of violence that often go unseen, unheard, and unnamed – despite deafening cries for help from those who are living this harm.

My initial aim was to map pathways of systemic harm and contribute to a knowledge base that could help practitioners, institutions, and communities recognise, disrupt,

and resist systems abuse. The purpose of this was driven by a yearning to restore dignity and justice to those who have been silenced or harmed by the very systems meant to protect them and to attend to the ethical anguish of responders made complicit in these harms. The precise routes this mapping would follow through to the pathways that would be identified were uncharted and unknown, yet their emergence was enabled by the theoretical assumptions underpinning my research.

Systemic harms and institutional "indifference" by powerful institutions were first identified in James Ptacek's (1999) theory of social entrapment, which describes the institutional and systemic harms experienced by victims of intimate partner violence. While Social Entrapment Theory has become a recognised and established understanding of compounding family violence harm (Douglas et al., 2021; Tolmie et al., 2018, 2023, 2024), I noticed a persistent gap: the limited understanding of "how" this institutional indifference is enacted and sustained, or how specific responses and structures cause further harm. This gap became my starting point, and I began by examining the mechanisms through which responders become complicit, to understand more about how these harms are legitimised and normalised within social and institutional systems.

Drawing on my own re-remembered experiences from clinical family violence practice, I moved with posthuman feminist nomadic theory as both a philosophical and methodological foundation. I engaged with nomadic theory as it allowed me to negotiate pathways of affect, memory, imagination, and meaning. Doing so enabled access to uncharted terrain, allowing my journey to wander from the

imposing and predetermined routes that had been predominantly trodden in past research.

I worked with memory fragments from my many years in practice, reimagined and curated into composite memory figurations and assemblages. Through the iterative process of reflexive thematic analysis, I traced how strategies of harm were performed, sanctioned, and responded to by responders.

As I moved through the terrain of memory and analysis, I was able to map two distinct pathways: Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) and Harmful Systems Responses (HSR).

The figurations captured how perpetrators curated performances of manipulation to gain social power, and how system responses can be embedded with violence. This then led to the assemblages that showed how formal institutional responses, operating through both human and non-human mechanisms, legitimised that harm. Both pathways were constructed from the same cartographic process: an analysis of composite memory fragments through posthuman, feminist, and Response-Based Practice theory.

As with any journey through unknown landscapes, unexpected findings were inevitable. It was through this movement of mapping that I came to recognise that my lived experience of ethical anguish was both my compass and my travel companion. By centring ethical anguish, this research re-anchored ethics in practice, not as abstract principles but as embodied responses to systemic harm. I came to frame ethical anguish as a signpost, not to be ignored as I had done for all

these years, but as an opportunity to consider our resistance and re-centre what matters to us (the practitioner) as ethically just.

Ultimately, this journey led me to advocate for naming Institutional Systems Abuse as a specific tactic of Systemic Coercive Control. New territory emerged from the mapping process, and it was a shift in understanding that pushes back against the "othering" of third-party non-physical violence harm that is too often treated as secondary and remains invisible. The purpose of conceptualising Institutional Systems Abuse became locating and mapping the sociopolitical and structural power-based coordinates of systemic harm in family violence work so that those pathways may be recognised, resisted, and disrupted, offering a trajectory of hope.

This retrospective framing of the research aims acknowledges that in qualitative embodied research, the journey of discovery is integral to the methodology, as one informs the other. The aims presented here reflect both my initial intentions and the pathways that emerged through the research process itself.

What follows opens my research project by locating myself within it, as both practitioner and researcher, and by situating my practice experiences as the material of inquiry. Through a reflexive process of researching my own practice, I position myself as the nomadic subject and narrator of these experiences. I begin with a story that demonstrates the multiple harms enacted in a practice moment and, in doing so, foreground my relational ethics and duty of care. Most of this first chapter is presented through reflexive nomadic traces, which are built from my personal positioning in this work and from (re)remembered and then (re)imagined

composite stories that convey the essence, and rather than specific details of any one situation they are a multitude of gathered memories.

The Practitioner-Researcher

The pursuit of practices of hope, rooted in the ordinary micro-practices of everyday life, is a simple strategy to hold, sustain and map out sustainable transformations.

(Braidotti, 2010, p. 417)

This thesis began from the intersection of lived experience, professional practice, and scholarly inquiry. As a feminist qualitative researcher, I understand that knowledge is always situated, always emerging from particular bodies in particular places at particular times (Braidotti, 2019b, 2019a; Haraway, 1988). Rather than claiming objectivity, I begin by locating myself within the research as a practitioner who has borne witness and enacted systemic harm, as a researcher seeking to understand these patterns, and as an ethical activist refusing to remain silent.

The research that follows is personal, academic, social, and political and as such, requires that I navigate my hyphenated identity of being the practitioner-researcher. The hyphen embodies my ethical activist location and binds my practice and academic position together. It is born from what I call ethical anguish: the visceral, embodied responses that arise when practitioners are forced to work in ways that betray their ethics of relational care, and that render them complicit in harmful responses.

Based on insider research, this project moves from listening, remembering, and reconfiguring to theorising, aligning with what Drake and Heath (2010) describe as the doctoral shift from real-world experience to theoretical framing. Rather than separating the roles of practitioner and researcher, I hold them as inseparable: a hyphenated embodied identity that shapes the methodology, process, and the message. This positioning reflects a commitment to theory and praxis-based knowledge that honours those who have shared with me. I have listened with my body as much as with my ears. Ethical anguish sits inside the body, through breath, blood, and affect, and it has arisen for me in the folds between knowing and doing as relational forces.

As a Family Violence counsellor-practitioner, I am bound by a Duty of Care and To Care (FVDRC, 2022; NZAC, 2020), acknowledging the importance of genuine relationships of care and my position of responsibility. This orientation within my work led me to question where my duty starts and stops with clients. What has come to matter is an entanglement of complex relations of responsibility. This project was motivated by what felt like my responsibility for all I have heard and my ethical responsibility in working against violence. My ethical responsibilities and the pain I carried led me to understand and activate my ethics of resistance, which begins with stories told of these harms and re-remembered for the purpose of looking through theory to find ways of understanding and resistance.

Taking up my hyphenated position as practitioner-activist-researcher means that I cannot separate my scholarly inquiry from my embodied experience of witnessing harm. The questions that drive this research emerged not only from academic

literature but also from the daily reality of sitting with women whose lives have been shaped by both intimate partner violence and the compounding harm of institutional responses. I share my personal reflections throughout my research as reflexive traces, as reminders of my location, my humanness, and my felt and lived embodied responses.

Reflexive Traces: The Storytellers

She is the storyteller, and I am the listener.

In my work as a family violence counsellor, she is the storyteller, and I am the listener (it's never that simple). I listen to understand what harms her, what has hurt her, and what she needs.

We are in a relationship, it sits between us, the listener and the storyteller. I hear the injustice as I feel her pain. She tells me about his violence. And then just when I think, "How much pain can one person bear?" She tells me about the harmful institutional responses she received.

Again and again in my life, I am in the position of witnessing injustice and harm.

I am more than the listener. I feel the entanglement of complex relations of responsibility: to who? I feel like a puppet of the system but I am not.

What she tells me stays with me. Sometimes I replay her story of lived experience in my head. I use it to get more support for her, to assess risk and plan for safety, and I take her to supervision.

Her story travels with me wherever I go, she becomes they/we as their stories are embodied, embedded and embrained within me as ethical anguish. I, too, am an

active participant in her story, and I carry my burden of responsibility for doing and not doing.

The burden of this responsibility feels heavy and lonely. Sitting with all that I have heard, and all that I know: I feel the burden of responsibility deeply. "Remembering the wound, the pain, the injustice: bearing witness to the missing people" (Braidotti, 2010, p. 215). My response has the power to impact her too as I recognise I am complicit in the harms. I wrestle with my ethics, my silence and hers.

For me, I feel as if some pain-felt stories that I have been told compound because they refuse to be forgotten; they need to enable their every presence through memory. Sometimes, at supervision, they are retold, they circulate, and merge with other stories, becoming a river together. Just as a river continuously flows, stories have a timeless quality that allows them to be told and retold. The retelling is their energetic re-making as the essence of the story remains with me, inside of me, stored in my flesh, my bones, my mind, and my heart cluster-like lumps of pain-felt and pain-lived narratives.

Richardson Kinewesquao (2012) describes how we not only carry the memory of what was shared with us but also our own responses to it – witnessing and responding become the stories for telling. It is the told and retold experiences of support service responses to those impacted by family violence that must matter because it matters what stories tell stories (Haraway, 1988). The retelling of stories is not neutral; they shape how harm is understood, remembered, and responded to. They reveal the patterns of institutional betrayal woven through legal, health, and social systems – systems shaped by colonial, patriarchal, and sexist logics that are

still inscribing our bodies with meaning enacted and embodied, embedded and embrained so the stories that tell stories and the mattering matter (Braidotti, 2010; Jackson, 2021; Radtke et al., 2023; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Stories matter because they expose how structural responses often reproduce the very harms they claim to interrupt, and in doing so they remind us of our responsibility to notice what thoughts think thoughts, and what stories tell stories, in these harmful repetitions. In naming these power patterns, this research moves toward a different story: one that shifts us closer to justice.

My fractured and embodied memories harbour many composite stories of harmful responses. Sarah's story is important because it communicates multiple harms: direct intimate partner violence, harmful system response from systems supposed to offer safety and protections, harmful practitioner response, and an example of how system actors (myself) are made complicit in harmful responses. It is because of this that I am retelling this story – which represents many stories.

Reflexive Traces: Beginning With Sarah

A few years ago, something shifted inside of me. As a family violence counsellor bound by a duty of care to do no harm (FVDRC Seventh Report, 2022; Fifth Report Data, 2015; New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2020).

I began questioning my practice, especially my ethical responsibilities as my duty of care to do no harm.

I remember sitting with Sarah, a client referred to as a perpetrator of family violence, mandated to attend a non-violence assessment as a respondent on a protection order.

It was an "assessment" that was supposed to be focused on her use of violence. However, when Sarah began talking, she shared the devastating details of her ex-partner's abuse: extreme coercive control, micromanaging her daily life, and sexual and physical abuse, including strangulation to the point of unconsciousness.

As I sat there with Sarah, listening to the cruel details of abuse she had survived, I thought, how much can one person bear? It matters what thoughts think thoughts as this is the requirement of reflexivity. However, her story was not over. Her body was slightly shaking as if she was cold, but the room was warm, and her voice small and shallow while looking downwards with tears in her eyes.

She said in a soft, broken voice, "I never thought leaving him would make my life worse. I am not the abuser; I shouldn't be here. I should be protected from him".

She explained how her ex-partner "set her up". He did not return their son by 5 PM on Sunday as promised, knowing she would be overwhelmed with worry. When she was still with him, he would threaten that she would lose her son if she left him, knowing her son meant the world to her. That Sunday, she repeatedly called and texted her 7-year-old son, but there was no response. Worried, she went to her ex-partner's house, heard her son crying from inside the house, and, feeling desperately concerned, she started shouting and frantically banging and kicking at his door.

He called the police, saying that his ex-partner was mentally unstable, that she was trying to break into his home and that he was afraid of her. When the police arrived, Sarah tried to explain the situation. However, they arrested Sarah and removed her from the property. Unbeknownst to Sarah, he had set up a camera at his front door that recorded her. The next day, he used the video to apply for a protection order, saying that she had previous mental health issues and that he was afraid of her violent and unpredictable outbursts. Furthermore, he had trespassed her from his property, but as she continued to enter his property, he felt unsafe and requested a legal protection order.

At this point in the conversation, she looked at me and said:

"How did he manipulate the system into treating me as the mentally unstable perpetrator of violence? How is it that now he has the power of the system to continue to control me."

After Sarah left, I sat alone in the room we had shared – feeling confused about how I was supposed to continue with the "non-violence programme".

I went to my manager and said, "Sarah is not a perpetrator of violence, she responded to his control, he set her up. How can I now be expected to provide psychological education to her as a perpetrator?" My manager said, "Just work the programme." I remember feeling confused. It didn't feel right, but I doubted my own intuition, I was new to the role and trusted those more experienced than I was. My response was silenced alongside Sarah's cry for help. As a new practitioner, with no formal family violence education or specific qualifications, I was told to follow the Ministry of Justice Code of Practice by using the suggested workbook and

assessment for people who use violence and to provide psychological information about non-violent behaviour change.

Ethical transgressions that cut through our values stay with us – moments where we cross ethical boundaries of inner knowing. Caught between what felt wrong, unjust, and what is expected and required by the power of people who wrote these policies and those who uphold them. The power of those I reported to. The power of those they report to – I step toward my ethical compass, and I repositioned what was *just* to what was *required*.

I was faced with Sarah in front of me and the manager over me directing me toward harmful policies – that what would become the requirement for my standard of practice for almost two decades. I became aware that the client was not the person sitting in front of me. The client was the Ministry of (in)Justice, the system – that allowed me to sit in front of Sarah and mandated her to be there and for me to provide psychological education to her about her anger instead of support for resistance to violence.

When we cross ethical boundaries and redress is not possible, it clings to the inside of our bones. I know this.

Sarah is one of many Sarahs. She is a composite figuration that embodies the essence of multiple memories and the complexities of frontline work maintained by system codes of practice and mandated ways of responding. My duty of care and ethics of care - to do no harm is tightly woven with a deep sense of ethical anguish. The codes of practice that guide my work can, at times, constrain my responses in

ways that risk causing harm. I find myself continually negotiating the tensions among relationships, responsibilities, and the relational ethics of care.

After Sarah left, I sat in the room we had shared, and I asked myself some questions. These were questions that were connected to my ethics of responsibility as a family violence registered counsellor who is not only witness to these systemic harms; I am also enacting them, mandated by a Code of Practice. What is my ethical responsibility to Sarah, and to myself? When I talk about "inadvertent" harmful responses, am I saying this to avoid my responsibilities? Knowing what I know about systemic harms, what is my duty of care? Am I doing enough? What do I know about how institutional harmful responses take place in family violence situations? Furthermore, if I can understand more about how harmful institutional responses take place, could I improve my response?

Reflexive Traces: Ethics of Resistance

Understanding the lived experience of harmful responses requires beginning with a person's experience, their told story, which means that to really hear, we must really listen not passive listening, but a deep, felt listening that moves us to contemplate. Physical and sexual violence carry an undisputed weight of shared knowing harm. From memory I write reflexive traces, such as Sarah's story, as figurations, as composite narratives and assemblages of non-physical third-party forms of violence that include social violence and structural violence, which stems from patriarchal origins. Violence is violence, its impact is always devastating; yet when non-physical forms are normalised or made invisible through colonial

patriarchy and the individualisation of responsibility, we must work harder to name them, because the knowledge that erases them also governs our responses and demands our complicity. As Evan Stark (2009) says, understanding a person's experience of coercive control requires working in reverse from their lived reality to understand what took place before as a complex sequence of experiences.

This work is an embroidery of memory and practice. Each story I recall is a fragment of cloth, uneven at the edges, carrying marks of use and pain. I take up the needle, not to mend or conceal but to stitch these fragments together, to hold them in relation. The thread is responsibility, pulling through me, piercing, binding - reminding me that I am not outside these stories but woven into them.

Stitching is slow work. I am and remain a novice in this craft. It requires attention to detail, patience with knots and tangles, and a willingness to let the fabric guide the hand. So too does this research: a threading of ethical activism, lived experience, and the conditions of gendered everyday life. Each stitch is both personal and political, a small act of resistance against the normalisation of violence and the erasure of women's voices.

To embroider is to embody. The needle moves because my hand moves. In this way, activism is not an external stance but a practice carried in me, stitched into the fabric of my skin, as practitioner, researcher, and woman.

This is my ethics of resistance. Personal activism acknowledges my responsibility and my location outside of the counselling room, as it travels with(in) my body.

Assuming a social position of resistance is not a singular stance, but a weaving together of the injustices carried across bodies and histories. To name family violence, racism, colonisation, and the harmful responses victims receive is already to name the extensions of colonial patriarchy and neoliberalism that individualise responsibility and reproduce inequities. This resistance is not only mine; as *it is* stitched through the everyday conditions of gendered life. The stories I carry – Sarah's, my own, and all the Sarahs – thread me into this collective fabric. Activism here is the work of listening and hearing, refusing to stand outside, and recognising that our connections are what matter in moving us toward change.

And importantly, to remain silent in my work is still a position.

The listening needs to be shared to honour *her* lived experience and my lived experience; this is my ethics of resistance and responsibility. This research is my ethics of resistance.

As a family violence professional, most of my life's work has been in working against violence.

I entered the family violence sector in 2007 as a volunteer.

Naive and inexperienced. At that time, I did not realise that I had entered a relationship with power, co-located. I did not realise that I should have been a harm – to be managed, as my practice, like so many others who begin in this sector I was under-informed.

I was raised in a violent colonised country (South Africa) and a patriarchal, sexist, racist home. I grew up feeling powerless and voiceless in the face of violence. At

home, I watched my father assert himself as the king of the castle and positioned all men as the preferred species, being told from a young age that girls don't need an education but rather a husband.

While growing up in South Africa I bore witness to people of colour that I loved and who loved me being treated in ways that my mind can't name. Or won't name, my resistance protects me from within. I witnessed, in all my bodily senses how race, power and gender can be used to feed greed and maintain white privilege, myself included.

Embedded in histories of violence, working every day against violence, power, and injustice, has led me here, to the (un)silencing of my ethical anguish.

This personal history shapes how I understand both intimate partner violence and institutional violence. It has taught me that silence in the face of harm is still a position, a position that doesn't align ethically.

My research emerges from this intersection of personal lived experience, ethical anguish, professional experience, and scholarly inquiry. It is grounded in the understanding that helpful responses provide safety and support wellness, while harmful social responses can exacerbate harm, compromise safety, and further entrap victims (Backbone Collective, 2020; Coates & Wade, 2016; Ptacek, 1999; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Fast, 2019; Tolmie et al., 2023). The research that follows is my attempt to map the terrain of these harmful responses, to understand their mechanisms, and to contribute to their disruption.

Journey Through the Thesis

This thesis unfolds as a cartographic journey through practice, theory and memory, tracing how Systemic Coercive Control is enacted and sustained across human and non-human assemblages. Each chapter builds on the last, moving between reflexive traces, conceptual mapping and thematic analysis, and circling back to practice implications.

In Chapter One, A Situated Introduction, I locate myself within family violence work, and my ethical position alongside all the Sarahs. I introduce the research aims as a cartographic journey and the practitioner-researcher – myself – who holds them. This chapter establishes that the research is grounded in my own experience as a frontline practitioner and that I write myself reflexively into every aspect of the study to demonstrate that we are not separate from the work we do. Reflexivity here is not incidental; it is central to upholding worker wellness, to sustaining ethical awareness of systemic harms and to disrupting those harms as they are encountered. Through reflexive creative writing (reflexive traces) – I begin with Sarah and the ethics of resistance. By naming what I carry and what I can no longer leave unsaid. These creative-reflexive traces are an exposition of embodiment, written from the standpoint of a non-neutral practitioner and I signal their purpose here so they read as evidence rather than as interruption. I begin with Sarah, a composite figuration that illustrates the harm done to primary victims by predominant aggressors, by systems and by my own complicity as a practitioner. This moment of ethical anguish is not just a memory; it is the ground from which the research unfolds and is maintained in my current frontline position. I then chart the journey through the

thesis and lay the methodological and theoretical ground that permissions the whole inquiry: I resist methodological nationalism and becoming-unfitting, situate the work within posthuman critical theory and nomadic philosophy, and introduce cartography – figurations and assemblages – not as metaphor but as methodological and epistemological approach, before connecting these threads to methodology and method.

In Chapter Two, Posthuman Knowledges, I explore how posthumanities, affect and embodied knowledge shape this work – from situated knowledges in the belly of the monster, through the roar of visceral memory within nomadism, to namelessness and facelessness as respect and safety. I introduce ethical anguish as an embodied force and set out the non-formal and affirmative relational ethics that guide how I write, remember and respond. The posthuman subject I write from is not disembodied – it is located in practice, memory and accountability.

In Chapter Three, Mapping the Literature, I turn to the literature not as a separate container of knowledge but as a woven terrain of ideas, tensions and frameworks. Beginning with family violence in Aotearoa and the operation of power, gender and patriarchal systems, I engage with Social Entrapment Theory and Coercive Control, Harmful System Responses and Systems Abuse – tracing the shift from "other" framings toward Institutional Systems Abuse – before turning to Response-Based Practice and its key principles. I examine how violence is misrecognised, how institutions participate in harm and how dominant discourses shape who is believed, who is blamed and who is erased, closing with a reflexive trace on ethical anguish and resistance and connecting the threads for what follows.

In Chapter Four, Rhizomatic Memory Recollections, I move into memory. Beginning as a cartographer with embroidery in hand, I describe the role of memory in nomadic subjectivity, the subjective coordinates of memory and the process of traversing and zigzagging to harvest material that is shapeless, disconnected and messy. These are not "data" in the traditional sense; they are affective, remembered and reimagined figurations drawn from years of practice. I describe how I ethically gathered, composed and held these fragments, forming the material for the analytic chapters that follow.

In Chapter Five, The Reflexive Thematic Analysis, I outline the method process, describing how I reimagined reflexive thematic analysis through a cartographic lens – familiarisation as mapping the territory, generating initial codes as tracing the fault lines, generating initial themes as plotting cartographic points and developing cartographic themes through to analysis, findings and discussion. I trace feeling lost, stitching and drifting alongside each phase, making the iterative and affective labour of mapping harm visible.

In Chapter Six, Analysis – Pathway One: Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM), I introduce the first pathway, mapping how coercive controllers manipulate social communities, organisations, professionals and institutions to harm and entrap primary victims. Across four sub-pathways – figurations of social manipulation, organisational manipulation, professional manipulation and institutional manipulation – I trace curated performances and responder complicity, and bring the four sub-pathways together.

In Chapter Seven, Analysis – Pathway Two: Harmful System Responses (the 4Ps), I introduce the second pathway, examining how institutional harm is produced through assemblages of policies, procedures, practices and processes. Across two sub-pathways – harmful policies, procedures and processes, and harmful practices – I map how these assemblages embed violence within institutional responses and co-produce Systemic Coercive Control.

In Chapter Eight, Mapping the Figuration of Sarah, I bring the two pathways together, circling back to Sarah to trace how Predominant Aggressor Manipulation and Harmful Systems Responses intersect – including policy and procedural compliance that harms and intersectional system discrimination – to produce harm. I illustrate the mechanisms of institutional complicity, and centre ethical anguish, through the lens of one composite figuration.

In Chapter Nine, Reimaginings of Affirmative Ethics, I bring together the affirmative ethics that have guided this research journey. I reflect on the milestones in the journey and the theoretical implications, policy and praxis recommendations that emerge – including naming and legislating Institutional Systems Abuse, and advancing Social Entrapment language toward Systemic Coercive Control – alongside my reflections on methodology and method, and my personal and professional reflections. I close the chapter with a reflexive trace of hope as a gesture toward ongoing connection, collaboration and becoming with others.

Appendices

In the appendices, I draw the analysis back into conversation with practice and theory, emphasising the visual and practice-based outcomes of the research. I

present the Map of Harmful Response Pathways and related frameworks – the shift to Systemic Coercive Control, differentiating systems abuse, the (un)othering of Institutional Systems Abuse and centring ethical anguish – offering a view of how Systemic Coercive Control operates across social, organisational and institutional contexts. Together, these appendices consolidate the findings from my two pathways, PAM and HSR, and their sub-pathways, forming the cartographic and practical culmination of the research.

> *The multiple hybrid connections of the "minor sciences" that sustain these new epistemological openings are the result of the hard work of communities of thinkers and activists – alternative collective assemblages – that reconstitute not only the missing links in academic practices, but also and especially the missing people.*
>
> (Braidotti, 2019, p. 21)

Against Methodological Nationalism: Becoming-Unfitting

Every research project has a beginning. Mine was not in the literature but in the moments where listening and silence carried equally painful weight. These affective experiences are not a weakness to overcome but a valuable methodological place to begin, because they reveal the entanglement of practice, responsibility, and structural harm in ways that theory alone cannot. To have started with a literature review would have aligned me with methodological nationalism, positioning knowledge as abstracted and disembodied. Instead, I chose to begin with methodology – with affect, with the fractures of practice, and with the lived conditions of ethical resistance. It is from this place that my questions emerged, where I enacted harm.

Assessments I conducted.

Processes I followed.

When I did what was expected rather than what was just.

The times I listened, but I didn't understand.

The harms I bore witness to.

The silence I maintained.

The felt experience that arrived every time I watched another woman disappear into a system, that could not or would not see her – it moved and unsettled me until I could no longer look away. My questions were not born from a gap found in scholarship; they came from that lived place – where ethics, practice, and complicity meet as harmful responses. To begin with theory alone would have betrayed that origin.

This chapter outlines the epistemological foundations and methodological assumptions that guide this research and makes known how this is related to the research aims and my position, which is stitched together by the hyphen as a participant-practitioner-activist-researcher within this project. I provide reasoning for my research assumptions and their influence on methodological decisions, aligning these aspects with my subjective position.

Fundamentally, it felt unfitting to conduct research into family violence in a colonised country through the very systemic structures that are associated and connected to the ongoing causes of violence. As a tauiwi woman living as a visitor on the colonised lands of Aotearoa, New Zealand, my presence here is entangled in the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism. In my practice as a clinical family violence practitioner, I remain attuned to the enduring harms enacted through

Western Eurocentric-gendered reproduction of heteronormative violence (Braidotti, 2013b, 2019b; Connell, 2005; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gavey, 2011; Radtke et al., 2023; Stark, 2009; Ussher, 2023). This harm is not historical but continuously reproduced in our colonial institutions established on patriarchal footings (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). I locate myself within this complexity, acknowledging that my work and personal location are both threaded with violence and oppression that stem from the past yet persist in the present (Jackson, 2021; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

My location remains a constant situated ethical responsibility to remain responsive to the lived realities of those most affected. Family violence, as a gendered crime (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Radtke et al., 2023; Stark, 2009), follows lines of connection to Western concepts such as patriarchy and colonisation. This connection supports and necessitates my chosen (non)methodological alignment, as current-day dominant social powers are considered complicit in perpetuating social hierarchies and norms that can sustain these power imbalances (Braidotti, 2010, 2013b; Braidotti et al., 2018; Braidotti, 2019b; Connell, 2005; Gavey, 2011; Pihama et al., 2014; Radtke et al., 2023; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

To do this, I aligned myself with other feminist thinkers and took my lead from Rosi Braidotti, (2010, 2019a, 2019b) refusing the constraints of methodological nationalism, the tendency to separate knowledge from embodiment, the researcher from the researched, and to pretend that neutral objectivity can account for the relational violence that constitutes family violence. Methodological nationalism relies on the same humanist frames that uphold the very systems I am critiquing,

which are systems built on coloniality, patriarchy, power imbalances, and individualism. In the context of family violence, these systems do not just fail to respond – they actively produce harm. To do this, I start where I stand – in my own entanglement. My methodological chapter comes first because it holds the ethical, political, theoretical, and epistemological commitments that give shape to everything that follows.

Posthuman Critical Theory

Braidotti (2013, 2019) challenges the concept of human exceptionalism, a movement prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries and beyond that promotes specific moral, intellectual, and value systems intrinsic to European political practices, attributing morality to flawless rationality and logic, and associating these qualities with biologically attributed male gender (Braidotti, 2010, 2019a). She encourages thinking that extends beyond traditional humanities that have historically established a hierarchy where humans, particularly males, were regarded as the ideal species (2010).

One of the key limitations of Eurocentric research traditions is the idea of equating biological sex with gender, which leads to the erroneous attribution of socially constructed norms and behaviours to presumed biological differences. This conflation underpins a long history of essentialist thinking in which women are positioned as emotionally unstable, overly dependent, or passive – not because of social conditioning or structural inequality, but due to an assumed biological deficiency. Such approaches pathologise women's experiences and responses,

framing resistance as individual pathology rather than as rational, strategic acts within oppressive contexts (Braidotti, 2020; Radtke et al., 2023; Ussher, 2023, Hydén et al., 2016; Wade, 1997).

In doing so, Eurocentric research can obscure the social, political, and institutional forces that shape gendered violence and inequality. It reinforces patriarchal narratives that naturalise women's subordination and reframe structural power imbalances as personal or biological traits (Stark, 2009). In this thesis, I reject such essentialist framings and instead adopt a critical feminist and posthuman lens that understands gender as socially produced, relational, and embedded within systems of power (Braidotti, 2013b, 2019b; Gavey, 2011; Radtke et al., 2023).

Posthuman feminist theory grew in response to historical occurrences such as colonialism, fascism, the Holocaust, patriarchy, racism, and communist dictatorship, which are illustrative examples of wrongdoings committed in the name of Europe's claimed global civilising mission (Braidotti, 2013b, 2019b). These historical occurrences were aligned with the man-made narratives of that time, which upheld humanity (mankind) as the presumed ideal and superior species. Braidotti (2013, 2019) argues that traditional humanism has been used to marginalise and exclude those who do not fit within this constrained notion of the preferred man-made human subject, justifying the use of power over others. Braidotti emphasises that "Eurocentrism is more than simply a matter of attitude: it is a structural element of our cultural practice, ingrained in both theory and institutional and pedagogical practices" (2019, p. 15).

As social power relations within the context of family violence are an integral part of our understandings of the reproduction of family violence, it would be ill-considered to position the methodological foundation of this research from theories of knowledge that have supported patriarchal constructs and colonisation, which are considered conditions for gendered violence. Therefore, the research methodology chosen for this study is based on posthuman critical theory, which aligns with bringing forward the voices of the "othered" while challenging the use of nationalistic methods.

By grounding my project in Braidotti's posthuman critical feminist theory, I align with nomadic, relational, and embodied forms of knowing (Braidotti, 2010, 2013b; Haraway, 1988) that challenge the notion that Western European discourse has claimed universality while obscuring the power relations it upholds. This theoretical shift represents more than an academic choice – it becomes a pathway toward justice. Braidotti's (2019) critique allowed me to locate myself and those that I served within the ongoing legacy of marginalisation. From here, I could begin to move through and account for my affective listener-practitioner position. Moving beyond the static categories and hierarchical thinking of Eurocentrism, nomadic subjectivity provides a dynamic framework for understanding identity, power, and resistance in more fluid and relational terms.

Nomadic Philosophy – Creativity and Imagination

> *Rhizomatic thinking, promotes creativity and criticality through circular - type thinking of retelling, reconfiguring, and revisiting concepts and phenomena, events, or locations. Nomadic thought*

draws a web of connections from zigzagging paths of shared subjectivity.

(Braidotti, 2010, p. 412)

In the landscape of posthuman nomadic ethics, I embarked on a methodological journey that transformed personal experience into scholarly inquiry through what I call heartfelt memory recall. This process became my entry point into establishing memory fragments with raw material built from lived experience, which I then reconfigured through imagination into unidentifiable figurations that could speak to the essence of the harmful response.

Braidotti's writing on "Deleuze's sustainable nomadic ethics (transcendental empiricism) can be mutually illuminating in so far as both practise philosophy as a conceptual art that involves both retrieval (memory) and creation (imagination)" (2006, p. 182) became the philosophical bedrock of this approach. Here, memory is not simply retrieval of past events; it is an active, creative force that works in partnership with imagination to birth new understandings. This partnership dissolves the traditional binary between what was and what could be, creating a space where past experience becomes generative material for future possibilities, i.e. affirmative ethics (Braidotti, 2019a). Working in alignment with Braidotti, I positioned creativity and imagination as methodological, ethical, and political imperatives at the very heart of nomadic philosophy (Braidotti, 2013a). These forces emerge as transformative powers that enable subjects to invent new ways of being and thinking, particularly in response to oppressive systems and the violence of fixed identities that seek to contain and categorise human experience.

Philosophical nomadism, as Braidotti conceptualises it, is a posthuman philosophical challenge to traditional Western concepts of subjectivity and knowledge production that is more rhizomatic (Braidotti, 2006b, 2010, 2013a). Rather than referring to physical movement, nomadism represents a way of thinking and being that operates through process-oriented subjectivity and between different discursive fields. In this way, "theory happens in transit" (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018, p. 234). It views the subject as multiplicity, process, and becoming rather than a fixed, unified identity, and it is moving beyond static identity categories to embrace a process ontology that recognises constant transformation (Braidotti, 2010; Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018). This framework is fundamentally relational and interconnected, emphasising the interdependence of all beings, human and non-human, while creating webs of connection through what Braidotti (2019) presents them as threads of shared subjectivity woven together, rather than organised in hierarchical tiers. This resonates with the African saying that I began with, in that people are people through people, which names our becoming as always relational, never solitary. Both perspectives affirm that subjectivity is shaped in and through connection, and not by separation or hierarchy but by the interwoven relations that make us who we are. Nomadism explicitly challenges methodological nationalism, rejecting the restrictive frameworks of European-centred, universalist thinking that have historically legitimised power and exclusion (Braidotti, 2010, 2019a; Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018).

Central to nomadic methodology is the practice of creative repetition, which involves "retelling, reconfiguring, and revisiting" (Braidotti, 2010, p. 412) concepts

and events from different angles, producing qualitative leaps rather than mere quantitative iterations. This process enables rhizomatic thinking, a circular, non-linear approach that creates unexpected connections. Rather than relying on traditional representational categories, nomadism employs the idea of figuration over representation, using creative figurations such as feminist/womanist positions to capture the complexity of situated, embodied experiences. Braidotti explains that "Figurations are forms of literal expression that bring into representation that which the system had declared off-limits" (2010, p. 409). This approach recognises that subjectivity is not a bias to be eliminated but a critical resource in knowledge production. As she notes, "It also enlists affectivity, memory and the imagination to the crucial task of inventing new figurations and new ways of representing the complex subjects we have become "(2010, p. 417).

Nomadism positions itself as a radical alternative to traditional ways of knowing, operating as a process of ontology that transcends rigid identity categories. Instead of seeking to fix and categorise, nomadic thought recognises relational bonds, emphasising the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings alongside the rich diversity and complexity of social, political, and cultural phenomena (Braidotti, 2010, 2019a).

What draws me to this line of thought is its understanding that relationships are what connect us, an understanding that rests at the centre of both ethics and epistemic nomadic relational structures. Nomadic thought creates what Braidotti describes as "a web of links from the zigzagging tracks of shared subjectivity" (2010, p. 412), generating connection through movement rather than stillness. Nomadism carries

with it an ethics of affirmation, a turning toward transformation, where even in the face of harm the work is to imagine and move toward what might yet be otherwise. It is less about cataloguing the weight of negative conditions than about opening sustainable horizons of hope (Braidotti, 2006a).

It is through this lens of nomadic thought that I was able to draw a zigzagging web of connections, creating networks of meaning that resist the straight lines of traditional academic discourse. These paths wind and weave, creating unexpected connections and opening spaces for new forms of knowledge to emerge – knowledge that honours both the complexity of lived experience and the transformative potential of philosophical inquiry. Essentially, nomadism operates as both a critique of fixed, exclusionary thinking and a creative methodology for generating more inclusive, dynamic, and ethically accountable ways of socio-political understanding. Building on this nomadic lens, the next step I took in my journey led me to the building of the cartography, which I traced through figurations and assemblages that offered a way to map these winding, interconnected paths, giving form to the complexities of lived experience while resisting the closures of fixed categories.

Cartographies – Figurations and Assemblages

I began writing from the fault lines between memory and hope, between the weight of bearing witness to harm and the possibility of transformative practice. As a family violence practitioner, I have inhabited the spaces where institutional responses can either extend harm and entrapment or open pathways to healing. The memories carried from these encounters – fragments of harmful responses witnessed, lived,

and enacted of systems that failed those seeking safety – demanded a methodology capable of holding, positioning, critiquing, and of creative possibility.

I draw on Braidotti's posthuman cartographic methodology (2019) as I employ three interconnected concepts – cartographies, figurations, and assemblages – to map the complex terrain of harmful institutional responses to family violence. This methodological framework allows me to work with pain, memory, and imagination as sites of knowledge production, transforming lived experiences of systemic harm into figurations that can reveal new ethical possibilities. The approach moves beyond static analysis toward dynamic mappings that trace what we are ceasing to be while advocating for what we might become. Braidotti conceptualises cartographies as "materially embedded, theoretically driven, and politically informed reading[s] of the present" (2019, p. 33). Unlike static geographical maps, cartographies are dynamic processes that trace transformations in subjectivity, power relations, and social formations. They map not only what we are ceasing to be but also what we are in the process of becoming, comprised of "embodied and embedded partial, subjective nomadic relational subjects" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 408).

Cartographies function as transversal assemblages that cross and interconnect diverse elements, including humans and non-humans, documents, memories, networks, and relations. This framework moves beyond fixed representations of social spaces to seek interconnectedness across multiple scales and temporalities. As Braidotti states, "A cartographic style of thinking is the methodological tool that I have developed to account for the situated and embedded nature of knowledge and the effects of power relations in the production of truth" (2011, p. 4).

In the research journey that I embody, central to this methodology is the application of cartographies of memory in mapping how personal experiences, collective histories, and institutional practices intersect to shape understandings. These cartographic memories are not fixed or static but constantly evolving, shaped by cultural and political contexts, historical legacies, and lived experiences. Importantly, cartographies of memory have the potential to challenge dominant narratives and power structures, offering alternative visions that disrupt normative categories and hierarchies. Specifically in the cartography of this research, I travel the zigzagging fault lines of frontline practice memories. Here, I connect with the memory-work method of Frigga Haug (2008), which is applied "explicitly to bridge the gap between theory and experience" (Onyx & Small, 2001, p. 773). This method encompasses intentionally dispersing ourselves through rhizomatic networks, wherein we only partially and temporarily trace the outline of nomadic subjects. The cartographies go beyond genealogical self-narratives to work dynamically with memory and imagination, creating maps that are simultaneously records of harm and seeds of transformation.

To do this, I build various figurations, which in Braidotti's work are politically informed accounts of situated knowledges that materialise alternative ways of being (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018). They are not metaphors but materialist mappings that embody specific power relations and possibilities for becoming-otherwise. Figurations serve as cartographic apparatus that help navigate transformations in contemporary subjectivity, offering concrete ways to think through posthuman becomings.

In addition to the figurations I construct, I also draw on assemblages that are connections between bodies, objects, expressions, and qualities that generate particular capacities and affects (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018). For example, Braidotti illustrates how Western human exceptionalism has produced destructive assemblages in our current ecological moment, evident in phenomena such as super-storms, pollution, toxicity, and mass extinctions. Within Braidotti's posthuman framework (2013, 2019), assemblages are understood as material configurations in which human and non-human actors, technologies, institutions, and environments converge to create new forms of agency and subjectivity.

This methodological framework guides a research process that moves from memory through imagination to analysis. Beginning with practice memories of harmful responses, I employ creative reimagining to construct figurations that maintain the core of the lived experiences while opening possibilities for transformation. From there, I use Reflexive Thematic Analysis to build themes that reveal patterns within and across figurations and assemblages. These figurations then undergo analysis and discussion through critical feminist principles.

Connecting Themes – Methodology and Method

Nomadic theory enabled me to locate and plot the geopolitical cartography and to flesh out the various figurations emerging from the affective experiences and ethical anguish of practice. It was from here that I added threads of alignment from reflexive thematic analysis and critical feminism to build the analysis and discussion.

I identified key themes that ran between the method of reflexive thematic analysis and the methodology of posthuman nomadic philosophy. The first theme

addresses the researcher's positionality, emphasising their reflexivity and situatedness. Both Braidotti (2019) and Braun and Clarke (2022) underscore the importance of reflexivity as a critical research process and the situated nature of knowledge. In reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher is understood not as a neutral observer but as an active meaning-maker whose values, assumptions, agenda, and lived experience shape the analysis. Braidotti's nomadic philosophy echoes this process by foregrounding the "politics of location", where the researcher's subjectivity is not a problem to be overcome but a necessary, embodied part of knowledge production (Braidotti, 2010). Secondly, creativity in meaning-making plays a central role, as Braun and Clarke encourage researchers to treat theme development as an interpretative and imaginative process, resisting formulaic coding practices. Braidotti (2021) similarly situates creativity as methodologically vital, arguing that meaning is constructed through non-linear, affective acts of composition she terms "nomadic transpositions" (p. 415). Rather than aiming for neat categorisation, both approaches promote dynamic processes of re-telling, reconfiguring, and re-framing experiences and research material. Creativity is not only permitted but also essential to the process, for it enables the formation of insights that honour complexity, multiplicity, and the partial nature of truth claims. Thirdly, both frameworks resist linear, hierarchical, or overly structured approaches to knowledge production. Reflexive thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2022), reflects a recursive and emergent approach, inviting researchers to move back and forth between data, codes, and themes in an iterative manner. Braidotti's methodological position is similarly anti-linear, embracing what she calls "zigzagging" patterns of thought and methodological rhizomes (p. 412).

Affective and ethical engagement is a property of both research approaches. Emotion, ethics, and relationality are treated as central rather than secondary in both Braidotti's (2013b) and Braun and Clarke's (2022) approaches to research. Reflexive thematic analysis recognises that researchers bring their whole selves to work and that emotions, values, and personal history will shape what stands out and how meaning is made. Braidotti extends this by framing memory and interpretation as inherently affective processes. She writes of "accounting backwards for the affective impact" of encounters with texts, people, or concepts (2013b, p. 415). An overlapping theme is that of knowledge as situated, partial, and political. At the core of both approaches is a commitment to knowledge that is partial, situated, and politically accountable. Braun and Clarke advocate for reflexive thematic analysis to tell contextually grounded, theoretically informed stories about stories. Such material is not generalisable in a positivist sense, but it is rich in insight and relevance. Braidotti similarly argues for producing knowledge that emerges from embodied and historically situated perspectives, rejecting universalist claims to truth. In working with memory, ethical anguish, and fragments of experience, I find both Braidotti's nomadic methodology and Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis offer me a framework with boundaries that enable a meaningful research process.

At the heart of both approaches is a refusal to separate the knower from the known, encouragement of creativity and imagination to think differently, and a political orientation to ethical stances of justice doing. Therefore, ethics is not contained in

a chapter or within an external board review and approval but through 2 decades of clinical practice and positioned throughout this entire research project.

These are not two parallel approaches but a relationship of influence, where nomadic theory informs the use of thematic analysis. The compatibility matters, but it does not mean that methodology, theory, and method are working side by side as equals; rather, one provides the philosophical grounding that shapes how the other is taken up. It is from Braidotti that I am able to work through and with reflective thematic process.

Chapter 2: POSTHUMAN KNOWLEDGES

> *Posthuman critical theory can thus be described as vital-materialist, embodied and embedded, and immanent. Elsewhere, I have described this way of thinking as "nomadic".*
>
> (Braidotti, 2018, p. 340)

Situated Knowledges: In the Belly of the Monster

Accuracy in cartography requires scholarly awareness of one's position within systems of authority. Rather than claiming objective, universal knowledge, this approach explicitly acknowledges situatedness within power structures through feminist politics of location, posthumanism, and situated knowledges (Braidotti, 2019a; Haraway, 1988). This embodied and embedded empiricism contrasts with traditional humanist epistemology, where a context-free knower produces voiceless, bodyless research from a detached, elevated vantage point. This is what Haraway terms the "God Trick" of positivist epistemology (Haraway, 1988).

The posthumanist approach positions the researcher as a transparent participant connected with research subjects, similar to multi-sited autoethnography that shifts the "I" and body in academic reflection (Berger, 2001; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 1999; Ellis et al., 2011; Ferrando, 2012). Haraway argues we are always "in the belly of the monster" (1988, p. 581) rather than perched safely outside with a neutral eye. Knowledge production is inherently subjective, with science functioning as a storytelling practice for active participant-researchers. This aligns with Braidotti's

posthuman methodology, which overcomes theory-practice dualism by treating posthumanism as praxis.

Rejecting the faceless, bodiless, decontextualised God's eye view, Braidotti proposes a knowing position that is embodied, embedded, and embrained (Braidotti, 2010, 2013b, 2020). This requires reflection on both our sitting location (site) and seeing location (sight), which enables us to speak with authority about our partial reality while maintaining ethical responsibility.

Within this research process, the memory fragments of the women's stories that I collate are collectively and relationally enabled rather than positioned as objective, singular, and universal knowledge. This approach treats reflexivity as essential for producing more responsible and accountable knowledge that acknowledges its inherent limitations and situatedness (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

I begin reflexively by threading myself into the tapestry as the active participant and making my specific subjective location as visible as possible. I actively participate in this research, holding overlapping roles as researcher, practitioner, and participant. I envision the hyphen between these positions as a thread that connects the relationship between them, with "reflexivity" representing this thread. Reflexivity guides and integrates these locations, serves as a crucial practice of navigation throughout the research process, and is inherent in all the fibres used and woven into this project. Throughout this project, in addition to the memories used to create the imagined figuration, I also offer personal reflections, which I have named reflexive traces, and they are reflexive interludes of my affective experiences. Combining responsibility and transparency, as a family violence counselling

practitioner, the memory narrative fragments that I share in this research project do not belong to me, as this is not my story or one story, but many versions of stories retold and combined into composites. I am a teller of stories, and with this position comes responsibility. Responsibility includes acting against harmful responses while protecting the client's identity. To this effect, I have ensured that the memory fragments I curated are protected and anonymised. Transparency in part refers to my social and political agenda, positionality, subjective influences, privileges, personal identity and worldview, epistemological roots, power dynamics, and multiple other possible sites of theoretical situatedness.

The Roar of Visceral Memory Within Nomadism

> *If our ears were sensitive enough, we would hear the roar of the blades of grass growing, the sap rising in the plants, the molecular becoming of matter itself.*
>
> (Braidotti, 2002, p. 148)

While I have not heard grass grow, I have heard the roar of the voiceless othered. The stories entrusted to me and my response to them reverberated through my memory until the roar became transformed from a metaphor, appearing as a memory, an affect, and a socio-political urgency. Braidotti describes this as an "…enfleshed kind of memory" (2006, p. 156). Working with affective residue became an intervention against traditional research norms, a way of researching that I never knew was possible. Braidotti critiques standard scholarly practice as "the repetition of 'his master's voice'" (2010, p. 414). Her cartographies disrupt linearity and disembodied knowledge and instead, embrace creative forces and lived

embodiment. Research, for Braidotti, is not about capturing the truth of a text but about tracing the visceral narrative for its ethical relevance in justice-doing. In her articulation of nomadic subjectivity, Braidotti (2011) emphasises memory and narrative as central practices for ethical and political accountability. Remembering becomes a relational act of accounting for power and mapping one's location in space and time. "The coherence of this system is the result of the affinity and empathy that allowed for the preliminary selection to be made in the first place, resulting in the storage of the data in or as memory" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 172). Memory and narrative, in this frame, "activate the process of bringing into discursive representation that which by definition escapes self-representation and can only be disclosed by the active intervention of others" (Braidotti, 2010, p. 410). Rather than replicating sameness through traditional methods of data collection and dominant discourse citation, Braidotti advocates for deep submersion and vulnerability, which she calls writing "by heart", where the truth of a text lies not in its repetition but in "the affects… it enables, provokes, engenders and sustains" (p. 414).

It is from here that I engaged in nomadic transpositions, "creative and highly generative interconnections" that draw lines between bodies, histories, and affects (Braidotti, 2011, p. 415). For Braidotti (2011), memory is not just about what is remembered but also about how it is endured. In this way, memory becomes ethical: a commitment to sustaining transformation across time, through affect, and into the future. As she puts it, "It is about engendering and sustaining processes of 'becoming'- a concept that is central to philosophical nomadism. This specific

sensibility combines a strong historical memory with consciousness and the desire for resistance" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 27).

Reflexive Traces Visceral Hopeless Rage

I arrived at the academic door of my supervisors, Leigh, Mandy, and Ann, wearing visceral rage.

My affective position mirrored the resistant responses I had seen often in my practice with others who were resisting the harms of others.

Yet, my own resistance was still not obvious to me. I was too consumed with self-blame and self-imposed practitioner incompetence.

I carried memories and words I couldn't forget. I didn't have the language for what I held, only a deep, disorienting sense of not-doing. Later, I would come to understand these as affective traces that refused to be quiet.

I wanted these memories of lived lives to matter. Not just mine, but all the stories entrusted to me.

I wanted justice for the women, the children, the families that I and the systems I worked within had let down.

I began with memories that curled in on themselves and an introduction to Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theory (Braidotti, 2006b, 2010, 2013b, 2013a, 2019a, 2019b; Braidotti et al., 2018; Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018), an academic orientation that did not require me to hide my visceral rage for fear of being labelled unprofessional, not coping, or burnt-out (Richardson Kineweskwêw, 2023; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Reynolds, 2012). Slowly, I began to unravel the pain I carried, not

as a symptom to manage but as a methodological position. Braidotti (2013, 2019) showed me that the pain helping professionals witness does not simply "belong" to others. It becomes entangled in the relational and institutional assemblages we move through – that being both the human and non-human aspects of practice, as I practiced within formal established systems. She speaks of sustainability, not through detachment but through affirmation. Braidotti suggests that pain, as affective emotion, can serve as sites of transformation, and they act as places and reasons to take notice of, and to search and research (2013,2019). Sara Ahmed (2004) deepened this understanding, as she speaks of "sticky pain", i.e. the kind of pain that clings to both the inside and outside of bodies, as it is etched into bodies as traces and moments of unease demanding us to consider the narratives we carry. This pain, she argues, is performative. It propels us. It generates movement from discomfort towards justice.

Cathy Richardson Kinewesquao also spoke to me, naming how we not only carry the memory of what was shared with us but also our own responses to it – our witnessing of injustice. Alongside Vikki Reynolds (2012, 2020), they invite us to shift from the language of vicarious trauma to that of vicarious resistance. To see ourselves as inspired by the courage and resistance of those we support. Drawing on the relational and justice orientated community work of Richardson Kinewesquao and Reynolds, I recognise the depth of spiritual pain that they name that emerges through witnessing injustice and the ongoing impacts of patriarchal and colonial forces (2012, 2014, 2023). Their articulation of spiritual pain acknowledges how harm is carried through ancestry, creation, and the embodied

acts of resistance that protect and enliven dignity (Richardson & Reynolds, 2014). Thinking with their concept offers a vital entry point into speaking about the depth of moral pain in this work, that I have felt. Yet it also becomes a springboard for distinguishing my own experience of ethical anguish, which arises not only from witnessing injustice but from being positioned within institutional structures that create ethical harm and complicity. The kind-of pain that grows from being caught in a system of ethical harm, a pain that stems from being made complicit through unjust practices enforced through institutional requirements for practice.

My use of ethical anguish makes it clear that the pain I feel is from social and political tensions arising when practitioners are caught between ethical responsibilities and institutional constraints that compromise moral values. It includes bearing witness to injustice but it is centred on the enactment practitioner complicity of being forced into wrong doings. This grounds distress, not in metaphysical pain but in embodied, situated ethical conflict that is relentlessly struggled with – anguish produced by complicity in practices that violate commitments to justice, dignity, or relational care. Ethical anguish signals relational and structural failing, positioning this profound ethical disturbance as a site of refusal, resistance, and critical insight that signals ethical responsibilities of care. I then took this further, to support supervisees in practice when they too found themselves in a place of ethical anguish, and I shifted this to an active position as centring ethical anguish. This reflexive practice approach considers who or what is being centred, how this position is causing ethical anguish, and what shifts can be made to restore or soften this felt anguish.

The process of centering my lived experience of practitioner ethical anguish serves as an invitation to stay with the trouble and to act from within it.

How stories are told matters, retaining both the essence of the story and ensuring safety and dignity through anonymity for the many voices reverberating within my fractured memories and processes of assembling figurations through recollection and imagination. These embodied memories of ethical anguish, combined with posthuman theory, emerged as the foundations from which this project unfolded.

Namelessness and Facelessness as Respect and Safety

Braidotti's words give guidance when researching from memory and heart:

> *It means that one starts working from what is left over, what remains, what has somehow caught and stuck around, the drags and the sediments of the reading and cognitive process*. (2006, p. 171)

Within the realm of family violence work, respect and safety for clients are maintained through practitioner conversations that avoid mentioning names when clients are not present. Specific case details are not shared unless an immediate safety response is required. Instead, practitioners focus on situational details to seek consultation and provide support.

To achieve this, I drew on Braidotti's nomadic theory (2010) and her invitation to engage with memory as affective enquiry. For me, memory is a living practice, a process that moves, bends, and shifts, much like a thread pulled through fabric. Each act of remembering catches hold of different fibres: some smooth, some frayed, some knotted.

I gathered what I call (re)imagined composite narratives. These are not single case accounts, but threads drawn from multiple encounters, woven together into fabric strong enough to carry meaning yet loose enough to show its seams. Some fragments return with clarity, taut and unbroken, others arrive tangled or incomplete, and I honour them as they are. The composites are therefore always partial, affectively charged, and restlessly situated in my body, heart, and mind.

I attended to the threads of memory that surfaced with force, those carrying the weight of ethical pain or the sharpness of resistance. I gathered and knotted them into composite narratives, folding them so that no one person is exposed, yet the heart remains to carry the pain. I hold these composites as affective memory work: they are threads stitched from lived encounters, mapped into a cartography that charts not only what was endured but also what was resisted, what was carried, and what continues to move through me. They are not whole stories but partial, situated traces imagined and remembered from the live intensities of practice, threaded into research as an ethical act of mapping.

The responsibility to protect the privacy and safety of individuals requires thoughtful alteration of identifying characteristics. This includes changes to names, specific details of events, demographic features such as race and gender, and, where necessary, elements of personal or contextual circumstances. These changes are carefully considered to avoid obscuring the systemic conditions that are the focus of critique. Rather than excluding the topics discussed, this research preserves them through creative composite construction, allowing key aspects of systemic harm to remain visible. The intent is not to erase the content of experience; it is to ethically

reposition it in a way that protects individuals and maintains the affective intensities. This approach balances individual responsibility with a commitment to social justice. It draws on the ethical principles of care, confidentiality, and justice, and reflects a practice-based understanding of how privacy can coexist with ethical resistance and truth-telling in research.

Memory, heart, and responsibility are vital to my research story's meaningfulness and are more important than precisely recounting each detail or citation. Rather, they reflect what remains, ensuring ethical practice through representational figurations that honour the heartfelt-ness of the person, yet presented with namelessness and facelessness of everyday protective dignity-driven praxis in respect, privacy, and safety. I am reminded of Michelle Fine's (2017) work on the delicate process of circulating narratives, the responsibility of passing on stories, the part we play in retelling narratives, and the ways in which they are infused with all the others and co-produced as composite pain narratives because the relationality of the process of re-telling matters.

Reflexive Traces: Personal Standpoint

I have been positioned through violence and oppression most of my life, both personally and professionally. My privileged experiences as a family violence practitioner provided me with the knowledge, skills, and first-hand insights to create this research. I acknowledge my social placement as a practitioner and that research material from my experiential account is contingent, provisional, personal, and influenced by this social location and reflects my political agenda, which is to make known the perceived power imbalances, inequality, and injustice in family violence

institutions and how these can be leveraged as forms of compounding systemic abuse. The project is affirmative in that this qualitative inquiry aims to improve these responses by centring on women's voices, uncovering opportunities for social change, activism, and policy reform, and highlighting areas for meaningful interventions to address systemic inequities and promote justice.

My situated knowledges as a researcher include reflections on my personal cultural position as a privileged White, able-bodied woman. As an immigrant from a colonised country, I have been privileged by this position and continue to be in New Zealand. I descend from Irish ancestors on my father's side and, on my mother's side, from Scottish lineages. They sought a better life, like many European migrants of that era. My cultural upbringing as an ex-South African originates from English-speaking colonial influences raised within Western, patriarchal ways. I actively rejected this culture as a young adult, participating in anti-apartheid rallies and challenging the dominant rhetoric within my parents' home. My current position is shaped by my childhood culture and adult values, embracing active stances against violence, oppression, racism, and sexism. Living in Aotearoa, New Zealand, I identify as tauiwi, acknowledging my non-Indigenous, European descent. Understanding white privilege in Aotearoa involves acknowledging enduring systemic advantages favouring people of European descent while disadvantaging Māori, beginning with the European settlers' arrival in the 19th century. This historical legacy laid the groundwork for enduring systemic inequalities in education, employment, housing, healthcare, and the criminal justice system.

White privilege is evident in the dominance of European culture in mainstream society, marginalising Māori language, customs, and traditions. Recognising white privilege entails challenging and dismantling systems of oppression. Categorisation amplifying marginalised voices and engaging in anti-racist work. Within praxis, I adopt a view of cultural humility, a position of open ongoing learning, a view that seeks to understand cultural differences by positioning oneself as open and aware (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). This understanding informs me methodologically, recognising that colonisation persists. Working from these assumptions and the fact that Western patriarchal ideology underpins family violence, this project is in the margins, outside of neoliberal knowledge production theories. My personal values of cultural awareness, respect for Indigenous Peoples, inclusion, and opposition to racism and sexism guide both my personal and professional life. In summary, my standpoint is shaped by the interplay of my social, political, gender, cultural, professional, ethical, and personal situations that makes known my commitment to social justice in responding to family violence.

Non-formal Ethics Application

Massey University's Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants (2017) states that research based on personal reflection or professional practice may not require formal ethics approval when it does not involve identifiable participants or new data. In consultation with my supervisors, I did not seek formal ethics approval, as I was the only participant in this research and the material for the research was made up from my memories. The material of the memory fragments that I studied was (re)remembered and

reimagined into composite narratives. I did not have access to closed client files, nor could I recall surnames or personal identifiers. The recall spanned almost 20 years of practice, beginning in my first week in family violence when I began to suppress my ethical anguish in response to harmful practice responses. These fragments were combined into unidentifiable composites, recreated as disidentified narratives held together at their essence. They were not isolated incidents but evolved into patterns of harm, which created an ethical imperative to speak out, as silence felt like complicity. This aligns with both my role as a posthuman nomadic ethics researcher and as a practising member of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC), where the Code of Ethics informs my practice.

The University operates under a "high-trust" model, which entrusts researchers with interpreting and applying ethical principles thoughtfully to their context. This model emphasises mutual accountability, requiring deep ethical consideration rather than rigid procedural rules (MUHEC Code, p. 4). The Code of Responsible Research Conduct similarly requires honesty, respect, duty of care, and cultural responsiveness, which I have engaged with rigorously.

As a Pākehā tauiwi researcher, I acknowledge the limits of my perspective and approach this project with cultural humility (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015), informed by cultural supervision that maintains a position of not knowing with a deep desire to know more. In this way, I do not claim Indigenous insights, but I recognise the authority of tangata whenua as the Indigenous People of Aotearoa and remain open to learning.

While I am tauiwi, I am also a person who feels the devastation of colonisation and Western thinking in this way, I exercise my resistance as I situate this research outside approaches aligned with neoliberal thought and instead draw on process ontology grounded in posthuman feminist critique of traditional humanism and its anthropocentric, hierarchical, and patriarchal assumptions. This stance maintains respect for the lived experiences of colonisation and its consequences for tangata whenua, and reflects my commitment to upholding partnership, protection, and participation under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (1840).

I am able to work from a braided woven positioning as posthuman theory and Braidotti's framing of affective memory. I draw on embodied recollections to construct fictionalised, composite accounts referred to as memory fragments. As Braidotti notes, "The body is also a living recording device actualised by a highly personalised and enfleshed memory system" (2006, p. 97). No living individual is explicitly represented, and the fragments contain no identifiable material. While others may identify with the themes, this is due to the recurrence of these dynamics in family violence contexts, not from a traceable origin.

My methodological stance maintains respect for the lived experiences of colonisation and its consequences for tangata whenua. I ground this work in the four pillars of kaupapa Māori ethical practice – whanaungatanga, rangatiratanga, manaakitanga, and kotahitanga – which provide a relational, accountable, and justice-oriented framework for research. These pillars align with, and extend, Te Tiriti principles of partnership, protection, and participation.

Braidotti's nomadic theory (2010) offered a way of working methodologically, that enabled a process to build a sociopolitical cartography, that is a situated map of relations and affects within in the context of social political power structures. The four pillars serve as anchor points within this cartography, not as abstract principles but coordinates of ethical orientation, ensuring accountability to tangata whenua and responsiveness to the legacies of colonisation. Whanaungatanga resonates with nomadic relationality, foregrounding connection, reciprocity, and accountability. Rangatiratanga affirms self-determination and aligns with the nomadic subject's capacity for agency and becoming, resisting fixed identities imposed by colonial or institutional systems. Manaakitanga holds the care, dignity, and respect central to both Response-Based Practice and affective memory work. Kotahitanga reflects collective responsibility and solidarity, echoing the posthuman call to think beyond the individual towards assemblages of human and non-human actors.

By holding mindful awareness of the four pillars, I position my research as both methodologically situated and ethically relational. This weaving honours Te Tiriti while expanding the methodological horizon through posthuman feminist theory, allowing me to work with affective memory fragments in a way that is critically rigorous and culturally appropriate.

The methodological framing of this project is a (re)remembered approach grounded in feminist and posthuman scholarship. Ethics is not a procedural hurdle but a relational, situated process. Scholars such as Barad (2007), Braidotti (2011), and Ellis (2004) frame ethics as intra-active, emergent, and materially embedded.

Barad's (2007) concept of ethico-onto-epistemology shows that ethics, being, and knowing are co-constitutive, embedding ethical responsibility in every research act.

As a full member of the NZAC, my clinical practice is inseparable from the ethical foundations underpinning this research. Three NZAC principles directly guided the study: Respect and integrity (Principle 1) – shaped by honesty, care, and reflective integrity. Fictionalised composites ensure no harm to clients, colleagues, or agencies. Confidentiality (Principle 5) – fictionalisation above minimum standards of anonymity. Justice and Addressing Harm (Principle 6) – speaking out against systemic injustice is both a professional responsibility and an ethical imperative.

This approach is consistent with the NZAC Code of Ethics and extends these principles within a living research practice grounded in integrity. The Code of Practice was continually revisited throughout, consistent with qualitative standards of ethical responsiveness and situated judgement. Ethical rigour was embedded as a living, relational practice.

Posthuman ethics is generated through intra-active entanglements between memory, theory, and practice. Barad (2007) describes being part of the world's ongoing intra-activity. This research arises not from an externalised ethical position but through lived entanglement, where the material emerges from my becoming-with the research. The ethics here is not a procedural checkpoint but a continuous practice of relational accountability.

I ethically reimagine remembered experiences to speak out against harm that might otherwise remain unspoken. This work aligns with the NZAC Code of Ethics as lived values, embeds ethics as an ongoing relational process, and was developed in

consultation with supervisors. It is also consistent with Massey University's high-trust framework and responsible research principles. In the context of family violence, where silence can perpetuate harm, this research honours the ethical responsibility to name and resist systemic injustice, not by exposing individuals but by bearing witness in ways that protect the marginalised and silenced, and refusing complicity while upholding dignity and care. The decision not to seek formal ethics approval is both professionally and theoretically justified, reflecting a situated and principled enactment of ethical research practice.

Affirmative Relational Ethics

> *The motivation for the social construction of hope is grounded in a profound sense of responsibility and accountability. A fundamental gratuitousness and a profound sense of hope is part of it. Hope is a way of dreaming up possible futures: an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them.*
>
> (Braidotti, 2010, p. 417)

Ethical considerations as a practitioner-researcher within feminist methodology involve navigating the hyphen between these two places of situatedness. As a researcher, theoretically based within posthuman cartographic research methodology, I am ethically orientated to relational affirmative ethics. While I am closely nestled alongside Braidotti, she reminds me, "thinking about the present is a process of affirmative becoming" (Braidotti, 2019b). I am reminded that my priority is to the unheard voices, to what I have come to understand as my ethics of

responsibility. Feminist researchers, alongside other qualitative, postmodern, and anticolonial scholars, have voiced long-standing concerns about codified institutional procedural ethical rules, racism, and their impact on social research (Mauthner, 2023; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). As Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues, research itself has historically been a tool of colonisation, embedding Western notions of knowledge and ethics in ways that marginalise and silence Indigenous epistemologies. Acknowledging this critique highlights the need for research practices that are not only procedurally sound but also responsive to the cultural, historical, and political contexts in which they are embedded. These concerns centre on the regulatory requirements that can be restrictive, often serving more as mechanisms to protect universities from liability than to support ethically sound research practices. Braidotti's (2006, 2011) concept of situated affirmative ethics offers a direct counter to such procedural rigidity. Her work challenges methodological nationalism and proposes a more responsive, context-attuned approach to ethics through cartographically infused mappings of the present. This approach invites accountability in the here and now, enabling intervention and transformation. The critique of the present, framed as a form of ethical and political resistance, is integral to the process of becoming. The intervention begins with the cartographic map, as a theoretical discursive production that is ongoing at a given historical moment (Braidotti, 2019b).

Feminist ethics repositions the ongoing neoliberal sciences conversation as theories containing "…partial and distorted knowledge of women's lives; by claiming to be objective, these theories have provided a means to legitimise gender

hierarchies and other forms of oppression" (Mauthner, 2023, p. 76). Feminist standpoint epistemologies (Haraway, 1988) play a crucial role in countering this purported objectivity by asserting that all knowledge is partial, situated, and shaped by the social position of the knower. Instead of taking up an objective, disembodied "view from nowhere," these frameworks make a deliberate move toward reflexivity, accountability, and an active awareness of the power dynamics that shape how knowledge is produced (Haraway, 1988). Donna Haraway's (1988) notion of situated knowledge further challenges the illusion of neutrality by emphasising that all knowledge emerges from embodied experience, relational positioning, and the specific social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it is formed.

This epistemological repositioning has paved the way for the development of feminist ethical approaches that reject abstract, decontextualised moral reasoning in favour of relational, responsive, and context-sensitive practices. One such development is Braidotti's affirmative ethics, which reimagines ethical engagement as a situated, posthuman and relational practice grounded in the politics of becoming (Braidotti, 2011, 2019). Affirmative ethics aligns with feminist epistemologies by emphasising embodied knowledge, affect, and the ethical potential of transformation, offering a hopeful, future-oriented stance that resists both essentialism and moral universalism. In this sense, feminist ethics does not simply critique neoliberal objectivity; it generates an alternative ethics that honours vulnerability, relationality, and the capacity to act differently in the world.

Braidotti's cartographies articulate this ethical position, noting that we account for the present while simultaneously creating a cartography of what we are ceasing to

be, projecting what we are in the process of becoming. In this way, cartographic accounts frame the present moment to produce a relational map of what is ceasing to be. In other words, the map accounts for one's situatedness and relational responsibility. In addition, it is affirmative in that it is created from negatives and sets the foundations for affirmative forces of becoming. It is essential to clarify the distinction between accountability and responsibility, terms that are often used interchangeably but carry distinct ethical implications. Accountability frequently refers to the act of accounting for oneself, often a retrospective and institutionalised process that can be tied to transparency, justification, or compliance. By contrast, responsibility, particularly in the posthuman feminist context, is better understood as a forward-facing, relational practice of becoming response-able (Haraway, 2008). While accountability asks, "What did you do, and can you explain it?", responsibility asks, "How are you ethically present in this relationship?"

These are necessarily intertwined, yet they differ in orientation, as while accountability is calculative, responsibility is affective and relational. Feminist theorists such as Braidotti (2011, 2019) and Haraway (2008) argue that ethical subjectivity does not emerge through individualism but through entangled, situated practices of response-ability. Thus, in the context of research ethics and social inquiry, becoming response-able means engaging in reflexive, situated, and ongoing practices of care, power awareness, and ethical transformation in relation to oneself and others. Staying with Braidotti, as she notes a foundation of ethics is to extract knowledge from pain, as the "mapping of pain cartographies allows for affirmative possibilities" (Braidotti, 2019b, p. 470).

This chapter makes known upfront that a key research decision was to work against methodological nationalism. I cannot use the very systems that created and sustain violence to study that very violence. Instead, I grounded this research in posthuman nomadic theory because it is a qualitative and subjective approach that honours pain as affective residue. This theory invites an ethical methodology that works from the personal to the political, using memory and lived experience to build social and political awareness for those whose voices have been silenced. I make clear that research involving the self, especially when drawing on experiences that involve others, must be carried out for ethical purposes – namely, to speak against the harms that are perpetuated through silence. The stories I share are prompted by memory but shaped through imagination; no one person is singularly represented. Rather, the fragments held in my memory have been woven together and pulled apart to form composite narratives that hold the vitality of what needs to be said. I have introduced cartography to map affective experience as an essential practice of affirmation in posthuman ethics. Throughout this chapter, I have located myself as a practitioner-researcher, using my lived experience as both conceptual grounding and ethical responsibility. With these theoretical and ethical foundations in place, the following chapter turns to the literature that informs and intersects with this study. Having established the ethical framework that guides this research, one grounded in Braidotti's affirmative ethics and the practice of mapping pain cartographies, I examine how these methodological commitments intersect with existing scholarship on family violence. In the literature review that follows, I map the theoretical territories that inform and challenge my understanding of how family violence operates as social problem.

The literature is organised around interconnected domains that reflect the cartographic nature of this inquiry: the construction of family violence as a social problem; critical feminist analyses of power, gender, and patriarchy in intimate partner violence; theories of social entrapment and coercive control that highlight systemic abuse alongside Response-Based Practice approaches that centre the importance of social context in which violences take place, resistance, agency, dignity, and discourse. Each domain reveals both the established coordinates of knowledge and the spaces where new mappings might emerge.

Chapter 3: MAPPING THE LITERATURE

I have been shaped by the very systems this literature reviews. I do not approach it as a detached reviewer but as someone deeply entangled in the ethical and political terrain it describes. What follows is not a neat synthesis but a gathering and stitching together of refusals, insights, and frameworks that help make visible the patterned character of intimate partner violence.

This literature maps the conceptual terrain that underpins this inquiry. It brings together feminist, structural, and practice-based work that exposes how violence is enacted, sustained, and misrecognised. These readings are not neutral. They are read through the same body that remembers, resists, and responds. The review forms a bridge between context, theory, and practice; it grounds the research conceptually, situates it within posthuman feminist scholarship, and informs the analytical lens I carry forward.

I begin by situating family violence in Aotearoa New Zealand, foregrounding the colonial, structural, and gendered conditions that shape both its occurrence and the responses to it. This includes attention to the scale and complexity of family violence as a social and political issue, and to the enduring impacts of colonisation on the lives of Māori and other marginalised groups.

Next, I examine how power, gender, and discourse operate in the framing of intimate partner violence. Feminist and post-structural theories offer vital insights for disrupting dominant framings that neutralise harm, obscure power, or deny

gendered dimensions. The way we speak about violence, in policy, law, and services, shapes who is believed, who is blamed, and who is held responsible. Here, discourse itself is traced as a form of violence, rendering those subjected to abuse as either complicit or invisible.

Building on these foundations, I turn to two key frameworks: Social Entrapment Theory and Coercive Control Theory. These offer a move beyond incident-based models, identifying patterns of isolation, deprivation, and structural abandonment that contextualise abuse. They also draw attention to the role of social and institutional responses in reinforcing harm. Yet, as this review shows, these frameworks remain limited in explaining how institutions themselves become active participants in coercive control. This research is positioned to extend that conversation.

To support that shift, I explore critical literature on harmful institutional responses to family violence. Drawing on both Aotearoa-based and international work, this section examines how legal, social, and procedural systems can compound harm through the silencing of resistance, the failure to recognise strategic violence, and the injustices produced by risk logics, custody disputes, and neoliberal service cultures.

Finally, I turn to Response-Based Practice, a framework grounded in practice, yet conceptually rich. It centres dignity, resistance, and the ethics of social response. It offers an alternative to models that pathologise those subjected to abuse or naturalise violence. It reveals how the language of response can conceal harm or disrupt it, and how resistance is always present, even when unrecognised.

Response-Based Practice offers a language for ethical resistance, not only for those who experience violence, but also for those who witness and respond within systems shaped by constraint. For practitioners, it becomes a way to act ethically, relationally, and with awareness of complicity.

Together, these literatures form the foundation for what follows. They unsettle dominant narratives, make visible the power of language and response, and call for a deeper understanding of Systemic Coercive Control. In the next chapter, I shift from the work of others to the work of memory – my own. There, I begin to gather and reimagine the memory fragments that form the material that is studied in this inquiry.

Family Violence Aotearoa

Family violence is a grievous social problem that takes lives, impedes daily living, fragments families, and causes harm that can endure across lifetimes and generations (Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2016, 2020, 2022). Aotearoa New Zealand has one of the highest rates of intimate partner violence in the developed world (OECD, 2019). This violence is largely gendered. The majority of serious harm, abuse, injury, and domestic homicide is perpetrated by men against women and children (Good Shepherd NZ, 2024). For example, NZ Police data (2007–2022) show that 34% of homicide victims were women, with 58% killed by a family member (Te Puna Aonui, 2024). The Femicide report (National Mortality Review Committee, 2025) highlights that 63% of maternal suicides involved a police-reported family violence history, underscoring how family violence leads to lethal, non-homicidal outcomes, primarily of women.

While gendered patterns dominate, men also experience family violence. Underreporting and reporting are an ongoing issue, particularly by women, LGBTQIA+ people, and men, which obscures the full picture. Barriers to disclosure include fear of not being believed, retaliation, child removal, or stigma (Family Violence Clearing House, 2017). These gaps in reporting reflect systemic failures and institutional conditions that determine whose experiences are seen or silenced. Such failures are not merely gaps in service delivery; they are shaped by broader political and discursive formations that depoliticise violence and obscure accountability. Family violence responses in Aotearoa are increasingly shaped by neoliberal logics that privilege risk management, individual responsibility, and institutional efficiency (Bumiller, 2008; Gavey, 2011). Hyslop (2016) calls out the intersection of child protection social work, poverty, and neoliberalism in Aotearoa New Zealand. His research examines how child protection policies and practices are influenced by neoliberal ideologies, which emphasise individual responsibility and market-driven solutions, often at the expense of addressing structural inequalities. These frameworks emerge not as neutral strategies but as ideological formations that depoliticise violence, obscure structural inequalities, and offload responsibility for safety onto the very individuals most at risk (Coombes & Morgan, 2013; Radtke et al., 2023). As Gavey (2023) and Gill and Scharff (2011) argue, neoliberalism restructures the social world by reframing structural violence as personal vulnerability and systemic failure as individual dysfunction. In this context, the person subjected to violence is often positioned as responsible for their own protection, expected to engage safety plans, leave relationships, secure housing, and manage harm perpetrated against them. When they cannot, they are framed as

high risk, uncooperative, or non-compliant (Coombes & Morgan, 2013; Morgan & Coombes, 2016). This aligns with Bumiller's (2008) critique of neoliberal victimhood, where help is only available to those who conform to a narrow ideal of the innocent, compliant, and self-managing victim.

These patterns of neoliberal discourse are reinforced through the language of risk and neutrality. Gender-neutral policy terms erase the gendered nature of violence, obscure patterns of power and control, and produce a flattened view of conflict as mutual, relational, or reciprocal (Radtke, et al., 2023). Such terminology allows systems to appear impartial while failing to name the patriarchal dynamics at the core of coercive control and highlights how psychological and legal discourses often adopt a gender-blind lens, treating coercion as a relational dysfunction or communication failure (Coates & Wade, 2007; Richardson-Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2012; Ussher, 2023). In doing so, these frameworks render male violence invisible and women's resistance pathological. Aotearoa's family violence sector is not immune to this trend. Efforts to create inclusive and non-discriminatory language often result in the erasure of power asymmetries and the systemic conditions that enable violence.

Braidotti (2018) critiques power, gender, and Eurocentrism within the framework of posthuman theory, emphasising their roles in shaping structural inequalities and dominant narratives. From this posthuman feminist perspective, language is not simply representational – it is material, structuring what forms of violence are seen, who is considered credible, and what responses are authorised (Braidotti, 2013). The gender neutrality of institutional discourse thus becomes a form of epistemic

and institutional violence, one that misrecognises the nature of harm and actively contributes to systems that harm. As Braidotti (2013) reminds us, the displacement of the universal subject must include a critical dismantling of the normative assumptions that underpin institutional language, including those that masquerade as neutral.

If coercive control is to be addressed meaningfully, it must be situated within the political, discursive, and institutional landscapes that produce vulnerability. This includes recognising how neoliberal governance and gender-neutral language together function as technologies of silencing, misidentification, and systemic complicity. Addressing family violence requires extensive social support infrastructure: law enforcement, healthcare, advocacy, counselling, legal and emergency services, and culturally grounded community care (Anrows, 2020; Carswell et al., 2020; Gear et al., 2024). However, these systems within Aotearoa often struggle with resourcing, fragmented responses, and institutional barriers (Carne et al., 2019; Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2022; Te Puna Aonui, 2021). Te Puna Aonui has identified critical system-level concerns: lack of coordinated service delivery, failure to acknowledge colonisation and gendered violence, and absence of best-practice, whānau-centred responses (Pihama et al., 2014, 2019; Te Puna Aonui, 2021). These concerns highlight the structural nature of family violence and the need for transformation that recognises deeper patterns of marginalisation and harm.

Power, Gender, and Patriarchal Systems

Family violence cannot be understood outside the context of colonisation. Colonialism in Aotearoa has entrenched structural inequalities that continue to shape institutional responses (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Western systems of power privilege white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied norms, rendering others – Māori, disabled, queer, and non-European people – less visible. Braidotti (2010, 2013b, 2019a, 2019b) critiques Eurocentric humanism, asserting that 'human' has been historically defined through exclusion. To be recognised as fully human and worthy of rights, protection, and care, one must conform to dominant ideals. Those who fall outside are marginalised and often denied protection, care, and credibility.

Violence against women research has long insisted that violence must be analysed through the lens of neoliberal gendered power, where men's violence is embedded in wider constellations of control, intimidation, and entitlement (Bumiller, 2008; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). These dynamics manifest in family violence systems. For example, Bumiller (2008) examines how women-run refuges and shelters established by early feminists to support victims have been co-opted by neoliberal ideologies. Against the interests of victim-survivors. Institutional frameworks often misidentify, disbelieve, or fail to protect Indigenous women, migrants, queer or disabled survivors, and others who do not fit dominant narratives of victimhood (Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Pihama et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2019). Colonialism imposed gender binaries and heteronormativity, eroding tangata whenua understandings of whakapapa, mana, tikanga, and collective wellbeing. Māori feminist and kaupapa Māori scholars remind us that gendered violence in Aotearoa

is inseparable from the violent logics of colonisation (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wilson, Moloney, et al., 2021; Ngata, 2022). Māori frameworks advocate for whānau-led, culturally grounded therapeutic models that restore dignity and relational accountability (Te Aorerekura, 2021).

Feminist theory has long asserted that intimate partner violence against women stems in part from patriarchy, a social system that legitimises male dominance and authorises violence to maintain it (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dobash & Dobash, 2017). Ussher (2023) critiques hetero-patriarchal power and the pathologisation of women, particularly in intimate relationships, as contributing to women's distress and depression. She argues that higher rates of reported depression and anxiety among women are often rooted in social, cultural, and political contexts rather than inherent biological or psychological deficiencies. Her research positions women's distress as historically medicalised, attributing it to biological factors like hormones or reproductive cycles, while often ignoring social and relational contexts instilled through hetero-patriarchal power (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Ussher, 2023). For example, in situations of oppression, control and violence, feelings of depression may be natural response to everyday lived social conditions (Wade, 1997a; Wade et al., 2007). According to Ussher (2023), when women's responses are pathologised, blame is shifted onto them, enabling the systems that created the harm to avoid accountability. Rich (1976) spoke of the maternal female body as a site of power and subjugation, a perspective maintained within current day understandings of coercive control as gendered power imbalances are maintained through gendered norms as a tactic of domination (Stark, 2009). Rich (1976)

deconstructs how the maternal has been appropriated and regulated within patriarchal structures, turning what could be a source of agency into a site of control. This highlights how motherhood, rather than being recognised in its complexity, is often reduced to a patriarchal script that serves wider systems of power.

In a similar vein, Braidotti (2013) reminds us that embodiment itself is political – that the lived body is never neutral but always situated within social, cultural, and political relations. Taken together, these insights highlight how both maternity and embodiment are entangled in power and how reclaiming them as sites of resistance disrupts the patriarchal order that seeks to define and contain them. In this way, social hierarchies are maintained, and Rich (1976) argues that maternal roles are policed and politicised, reproducing and reinforcing heteronormative, gendered power imbalances. Kelly (1988) extends this argument with her concept of the continuum of sexual violence, showing how entitlement and control operate across everyday interactions, not just through physical violence. Patriarchy has been conceptualised as an evolving social contract, sustained by hegemonic masculinity and requiring constant reinforcement through social institutions (Connell, 1987). Cultural narratives and psychological framings contribute to this reinforcement, recasting coercion as care and pathologising resistance as dysfunction (Gavey, 2005). Gender roles – people's perceptions of what it is to be a man or woman – are psychosocial constructions rather than biological givens (Connell, 2005, 2009). While sex relates to biology, gender is based on learned social and cultural norms. These roles shape the course of people's lives, influencing responsibilities within the home, workplace, and broader social life.

Within this context, gender-neutral and individualistic framings of violence depoliticise abuse and obscure structural power (Radtke et al., 2023). A feminist post-structural approach insists on analysing gender as relational and enacted, with power expressed through discourse. From a posthuman, critical feminist perspective, patriarchy itself can be understood as a dynamic assemblage of norms, language, policies, and technologies that maintain inequality (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018).

One theoretical perspective that remains dominant is Stark's (2009) theory of coercive control, which highlights the continuing relevance of violence as men's abuse of women embedded in everyday power imbalances. Power is not only institutional but enacted through language and professional responses. For this reason, resistance must address not only individuals but also systems that legitimise violence and obscure its roots. Feminist and post-structural scholars (Braidotti et al., 2018; Gavey, 1989; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Radtke et al., 2023) emphasise that power is not simply exercised but produced through discourse, interpretive frameworks, and professional and institutional practices.

How violence is named shapes how it is understood and responded to, and this can sustain and legitimise abuse. For instance, mislabelling coercive control as a communication breakdown or relationship dysfunction erases the perpetrator's intent and the gendered dynamics of abuse (Gavey, 2005; Wade & Coates, 2004). Therefore, professional discourses shape institutional outcomes; when frameworks pathologise victims and humanise abusers, they perpetuate epistemic violence, deny justice, and reinforce harm.

Posthuman feminist theorists extend this critique by showing how power circulates through assemblages interconnected by both human and non-human actors – bodies, tools, policies, and ideologies (Braidotti, 2010, 2013, 2019). This framework decentres the autonomous individual, illustrating how violence emerges through systemic patterns of inequality and institutional complicity. It also reveals how institutional systems can reproduce coercive control through policies, language, and practices. In this way, discourse is not abstract – it materialises power, determines credibility, and decides who receives protection (Bumiller, 2008; Douglas, 2018).

Posthuman feminist theories offer essential theoretical perspectives for understanding family violence not as isolated incidents but as systemic patterns sustained by colonial, gendered, and discursive structures (Braidotti et al., 2018, 2018; Bumiller, 2008; Gavey, 2011; Gill & Scharff, 2011). Gender is not merely identity but a social relation enacted, performed, and sustained through discourse, policy, and institutional scripts. Patriarchy is not a fixed system but a discursively reinforced social contract. Colonisation, heteronormativity, and racial hierarchies intersect with gendered power, shaping who is believed, who is harmed, and who is protected. Discourse does more than describe violence – it constructs what is seen, who is credible, and what responses are deemed appropriate. Coercive control must be understood not as a checklist of behaviours but as a patterned misuse of power shaped by these broader systems (Coates & Wade, 2007; Stark, 2009; Tolmie et al., 2023).

Theories of power, discourse, and posthumanism enable us to map these conditions and imagine more ethical, just, and responsive ways of responding. Social Entrapment Theory deepens this insight by situating the primary victim within not only interpersonal abuse but also the structural and institutional conditions that entrap them (Ptacek, 1999). What follows, then, is an exploration of coercive control and Social Entrapment Theory – two frameworks that make visible the structural, relational, and social nature of abuse. These perspectives align with feminist and posthuman concerns already outlined. They resist individualised or incident-based interpretations of harm and instead trace how violence unfolds through patterned control, constrained choice, and systemic complicity. Together, they offer insight into how family violence operates as a system of primarily gendered domination.

Social Entrapment Theory and Coercive Control

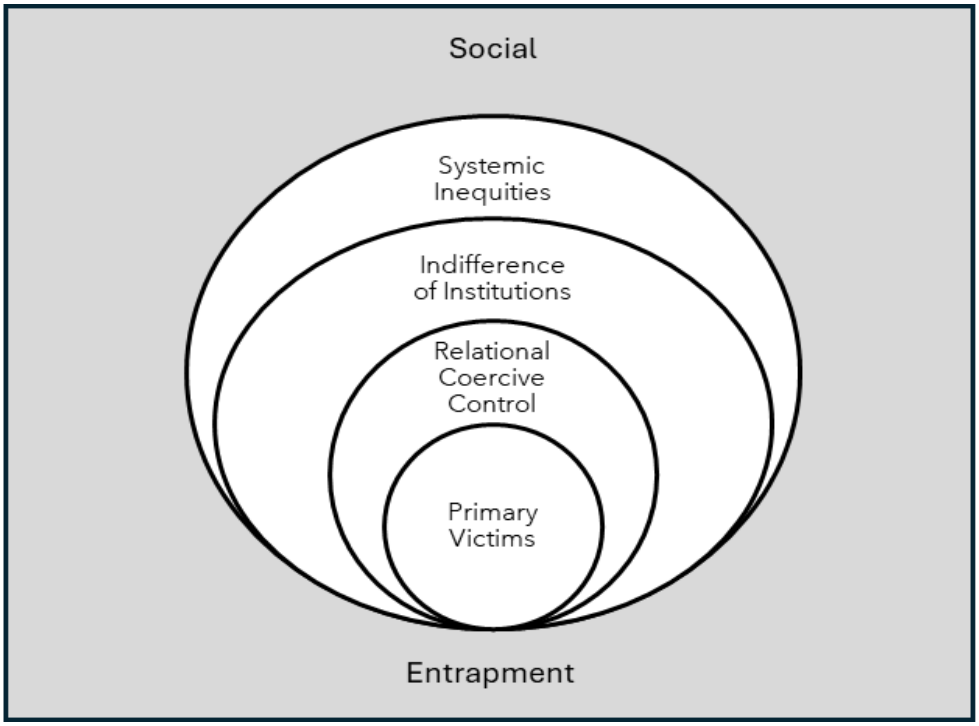
Neoliberal and gender-neutral frameworks do not simply misrepresent family violence – they actively participate in its continuation by erasing the social, structural, and gendered conditions that enable coercive control. When violence is reframed through the logics of risk, mutual conflict, or communication failure, the intentional, patterned misuse of power becomes unrecognisable within institutional responses (Coates & Wade, 2016; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dobash & Dobash, 2017; Hydén et al., 2015; Ptacek, 1999; Stark, 2009). This creates a dangerous disjuncture between lived experience and system intervention, one that often leaves those subjected to coercive control misidentified, unprotected, or even blamed (Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, 2021; No to Violence (NTV), 2019; Reeves, 2021). Coercive control theory and Social Entrapment Theory

are essential frameworks that render the social conditions of violence visible (Ptacek, 1999; Stark, 2009). These theories begin to centre the strategic, gendered, and systemic nature of abuse, offering ways to map not only the interpersonal dynamics of power but also the institutional and structural entrapments that reinforce harm. Their relevance lies in their ability to reveal how violence is both relational and social. However, their ability to offer insights into how the systemic and structural abuse takes place is less obvious – drawing attention to the lack of research in this area that my research sets about addressing.

Social Entrapment Theory

Social Entrapment Theory, initially developed by James Ptacek (1999), repositions individualistic and victim-blaming narratives by situating violence within a broader socio-political and institutional context, highlighting at its core that systemic and institutional responses can cause harm and entrapment. Social Entrapment Theory has been critical in shifting the focus from victim-blaming mentalities such as "Why doesn't she leave?" to examining the social conditions that enable abuse and prevent victim-survivors from escaping violent relationships.

Figure 1 *Social Entrapment Theory (Ptacek, 1999)*



This theory offers a lens through which to understand the impact of systemic responses as compounded harms and ongoing entrapment experienced in intimate partner violence. Although Ptacek's theory demonstrates this harmful real-world phenomenon, it does not provide details about how harm may take place. Understanding how these harmful responses occur has been a key intention of my research project, which aims to extend and deconstruct Ptacek's theory of social entrapment to gain a deeper understanding of how harmful responses may transpire, and to inform and enable the development of an approach that may mitigate against this lived phenomenon.

The social entrapment framework of intimate partner violence reflects three compounding dimensions of harm that entrap primary victims within the abusive relationship (Ptacek, 1999). The first level reflects the coercive and controlling

tactics used by the predominant aggressor, which restrict the primary victim's freedom to self-determine and act freely, maintained through ongoing fear, isolation, and subordination. The second level of social entrapment reflects the indifference from support services that results in harm or inadvertent responding (FVDRC, 2015; Tolmie et al., 2018). This second level of entrapment has become the primary focus of my research, as I have sought to understand and learn more about the types of harmful responses that occur within this dimension. The third level of Social Entrapment Theory reflects the compounding impact of structural inequalities, such as systemic racism, patriarchal systems, colonised systems, poverty, sexism, and ableism, that limit a person's options and exacerbate their vulnerability. Examples of structural inequities are reflected in mainstream responses to Indigenous people. Denise Wilson notes that "Inequities in the prevalence of violence within whānau is evident in the number of Māori mokopuna investigated for care and protection concerns (2016, p. 3). Building on the work of Pihama et al. (2019), it is clear that colonial ideologies and the imported structures of gender, race, and class have profoundly undermined Māori ways of living, and knowing. Wilson (2016) extends this critique by showing how many mainstream services, despite being positioned as supports for New Zealanders - continue to reproduce colonising practices. These services often reinforce systemic inequities and compound the effects of historical trauma, shaping and limiting access to resources, employment, and essential support in ways that disadvantage Māori.

Social Entrapment Theory provides a framework from which to consider the socio-political aspects of harmful responses and the consequences for those impacted by

this lived reality. Importantly, Social Entrapment Theory highlights that harmful responses do occur and that their consequences are enduring. Within this framework, harmful social responses are understood to compound the harm of intimate partner violence and to deepen the entrapment of individuals in oppressive situations. These responses intersect with multiple forms of marginalisation, including those shaped by gender inequities, stereotypes and social norms.

Over the past four decades, feminist scholarship on intimate partner violence has consistently argued that family violence is a social problem where violence against women is reproduced through gendered power relations and made more complex through the negotiation of everyday lived experiences, contexts and gendered social norm (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Langan et al., 2016; Radtke et al., 2023). Recognising and addressing these responses is vital in providing effective support and avoiding complicity with perpetrators, which necessitates an understanding of harmful systemic responses in practice.

While Social Entrapment Theory challenges individualised models of victimisation and resistance by placing structural, relational, and institutional forces at the centre of analysis, it is not without limitations. For example, while it foregrounds structural violence and institutional failure (Ptacek, 2007), it has been less attentive to the nuanced interpersonal dynamics of resistance (Coates & Wade, 2007) and the strategic manipulation of systems by perpetrators (Douglas, 2018). These omissions risk rendering women passive and obscuring how coercive control operates through institutions – a conceptual gap this thesis is aiming to address. Social

Entrapment Theory under-theorises the intention of the predominant aggressor strategy of systemic harm, particularly the ways in which those who use violence may actively manipulate not just primary victims but institutional systems and system actors. This can make invisible the analytical clarity needed to understand how legal and institutional systems become targets of coercive control. The absence of processes for understanding the tactical agency of those who use violence is a missed opportunity to bridge Social Entrapment Theory with emerging analyses of predominant aggressor manipulation and systems-based coercion is discussed in this research. However, as a frontline practitioner, I think that practically, Social Entrapment Theory lacks clinical practice-based insight and direction as it offers limited guidance on how practitioners and institutions might interrupt or mitigate those pathways of harm. This research highlights that without a developed understanding of Institutional Systems Abuse, professional practice, or decision-making risk frameworks, Social Entrapment Theory remains capable of highlighting systemic considerations but not of disrupting them. Tolmie et al. (2018) highlight the importance of taking into account the systemic factors that entrap a person. However, the specific strategies for this level of responsibility for disruption are lacking (Department of Social Services, 2022; Douglas, 2018; Family Violence; Reeves, 2021). Consequently, practitioners, who seek to apply Social Entrapment Theory within practice may find themselves without specific information to map social entrapment, to conduct a Systemic Coercive Control assessment and to have a means to gather evidence to advocate for systemic intervention. In this regard, I note that while Social Entrapment Theory shifts the analytic focus toward structures, it falls short of identifying specific and tangible “mechanics” of systems abuse, i.e.

how institutional responses become entangled in coercive control and significantly, how they can be disrupted. Without this operationalisation, Social Entrapment Theory may struggle to influence frontline decision-making in legal, social service, or clinical settings, thereby limiting its systemic impact.

The problem of systemic harm in family violence response systems remains a persistent issue. The Family Violence Death Review Committee Fifth Report (2014–2017) identifies this as a critical concern, calling for transformative change across the sector. While the report does not extensively map how these systemic failures occur, it documents the outcomes of inadequate institutional responses, particularly those that ignore context, misidentify risk, or reinforce societal norms that silence victims (FVDRC, 2020). The FVDRC report places emphasis on adopting a gendered lens and integrating Social Entrapment Theory into policy and practice, which marks an important shift in framing systemic responses as both sites of harm and potential sites of transformation (2020).

While the need for systemic responsibility is widely acknowledged, there is limited empirical research that unpacks how Institutional Systems Abuse is perpetrated although others have begun to trace these patterns through analyses of legal systems abuse (Douglas, 2018; Douglas et al., 2021; Reeves, 2020, 2021; Tolmie et al., 2018), demonstrating how perpetrators can misuse the justice system, especially family law, custody, and child protection services to maintain control over a victim. However, less is known about the patterns of systemic harm that take place across a multitude of institutional settings, those that typically come before legal systems abuse.

Mitigating harmful institutional responses that can result in entrapment requires a broader understanding of how they may occur, including an understanding of wider aspects of coercive control and an acknowledgement of responder responsibility. This research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of coercive control, institutional complicity, and responder responsibility. Evan Stark (2009) has conducted extensive research into these dynamics through the concept of coercive control and the imperative of moving from an incident-based understanding of family violence to an understanding of intimate partner violence that considers the pattern of domination, subjugation, micro regulation and control that men use to entrap women in everyday life.

Social Entrapment Theory talks about harmful responses when police, courts, social services, and other formal supports respond with indifference to disclosures of abuse or requests for help, and they become active participants in the entrapment of victim-survivors. Ptacek's (1999) work was seminal in shifting the focus from viewing family violence as solely a private issue to recognising how social institutions and their responses (or non-responses) serve to reinforce and extend the power of abusers. His theory argues that institutional indifference does not merely fail to help victim-survivors – it actively contributes to their continued harm and entrapment. Later iterations of the theory introduced the concept of *inadvertent* harmful responses (Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2016; Tolmie et al., 2018, 2024). These responses are positioned more as unintentional or convey a lack of attention, but the result is still entrapment and the pathways to disruption are still vague. Indifference can be interpreted as an attitude, but inadvertence suggests an

unawareness that may not exist if systems have never been designed to notice certain forms of harm, such as coercive control in systems abuse. However, describing entrapment as "inadvertent" can obscure the mechanisms that produce harm and absolve the responder from responsibility, suggesting that we should move beyond current limitations of understanding entrapment as either inadvertent or as an attitude of indifference and focus on examining structural, operational, and interactional mechanisms that enable and perpetuate harmful responses.

Characterising institutional failures as merely accidental obscures the patterned, predictable, and often preventable production of state complicit harm within family violence contexts (Tolmie, 2018; FVDRC, 2016). Such framings can inadvertently sustain a culture of professional absolution, where responders remain unaccountable for the ways in which policies, procedures, and practices compound abuse. Unpacking harmful responses not only exposes the complicity of the system in cases of violence but also offers critical insights into the conditions that allow systems abuse to occur, including the foundations of the structures, heteronormativity, and gender norms that reproduce violence (Braidotti et al., 2018; Radtke et al., 2023). Extending the theoretical and practice-based learnings of Social Entrapment Theory to centre institutional agency is therefore essential if we are to respond ethically and refuse complicity in harm.

Drawing from Ptacek's (1999) Social Entrapment Theory, the framing of institutional harm as "inadvertent" or "indifferent" risks excusing professional and institutional complicity. Instead, we must examine how harmful responses are actively produced and maintained through norms, economics, patriarchy, and policies.

While Social Entrapment Theory draws attention to the ways harmful social responses deepen oppression, coercive control sharpens the focus on the perpetrators' desire to sustain that entrapment through patterned strategies of control.

Coercive Control

The concept of coercive control, developed by sociologist and forensic social worker Evan Stark (2009), represents a critical shift in understanding family violence beyond the physical incident's framework (Stark, 2012a). Rather than focusing on discrete acts of violence, coercive control refers to a pattern of domination, isolation, subjugation, intimidation, and entrapment that deprives victim-survivors of personal freedoms, autonomy, and personhood (Stark, 2009). Stark positioned these as a gendered crime most often directed toward women, a view reflected statistically. The Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) defines coercive control as "a course of conduct aimed at dominating and controlling another (usually an intimate partner)" (ANROWS, as cited in Beckwith et al., 2023, p. 10). Perpetrators use a combination of physical, emotional, psychological, financial, and technological tactics, often tailored to the vulnerabilities of the victim. These behaviours include social isolation, constant surveillance, gaslighting, controlling finances or reproductive choices, and exploiting social systems to maintain control over victim-survivors. This review primarily draws on Stark's foundational work while advancing a practice-based advocacy for a broader, systemic framing of coercive control, which I refer to throughout this research as Systemic Coercive Control.

Stark (2009) frames coercive control as a "liberty crime", one that subjugates, dominates, coerces, and controls victim-survivors, not only through overt physical force but through a cumulative regime of micro-regulations, fear, isolation, and control. It targets autonomy, rendering victims increasingly unable to make decisions free of fear or coercion. Within family violence frontline practice, coercive control is often presented as a restriction of freedoms. Research by Kelly et al. (2014) supports this view by focusing on an understanding of coercive control as relentless restrictions and the costs of personal freedom in making everyday choices. While national data on coercive control are limited, several Australian studies cited in the Beckwith et al. (2023) review on coercive control offer the following insights. In one survey, 64% of respondents reported being subjected to rules by their abuser in their daily lives, and more than half reported threats of harm if they disobeyed those rules. A considerable proportion of participants also experienced financial and emotional abuse, surveillance, and social isolation. Another study of intimate partner homicides in New South Wales (Domestic Violence Death Review Team, 2020) revealed that 9% of these fatal incidents were preceded by coercively controlling behaviours, highlighting its critical predictive value for serious harm. This form of abuse is often under-recognised in legal and service contexts precisely because it is chronic, patterned, and largely invisible (Stark, 2012a, 2020).

Coercive control is a primary lens through which this project understands intimate partner violence. It is also my foundational practice lens, in which I find that coercive control is always systemic and is very rarely maintained exclusively within the direct relationship but instead involves the use of social systems. I advocate that coercive

control should always maintain a systemic lens, recognising that it is structurally embedded social. Maintaining a focus on coercive control that is systemic aligns with the views of others who hold a social understanding of family violence, although more specifically through the lens of Social Entrapment Theory (Tolmie et al., 2024; Tolmie et al., 2018; Tolmie et al., 2023). By framing family violence through a Systemic Coercive Control perspective, services can better respond to systemic abuse and identify their complicity within this abuse form, in that it is always anticipated and as such, screened for in terms of risk and safety.

The Family Violence Act 2018, operational from July 2019 in Aotearoa, New Zealand, marks a legislative milestone by defining family violence in ways that incorporate patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour. Significantly, the Act recognises psychological abuse, including patterns of behaviour that may involve isolating victims from family, friends, well-being supports, or income – acknowledging how control is maintained by limiting access to community and autonomy. What is additionally critical in embedding this systemic perspective is the fact that family violence legislation does not account for systems abuse explicitly. At the same time, it does not classify it as an abuse form (Family Violence Act 2018). A recent release from the New Zealand Government indicates that legislation is considering the implications and the need for protection from legal systems abuse, however, Institutional Systems Abuse remains less acknowledged (New Zealand Government, 2025). This systems-based framing reiterates key service gaps highlighted by Te Puna Aonui in their National Strategy to Eliminate Family Violence and Sexual Violence (2021), including the lack of shared best

practices, insufficient understanding of family violence dynamics, uncoordinated inter-agency responses, and no cross-agency agreed risk framework. A wider coercive control lens enables practitioners to identify and respond more effectively to patterns of harm, including the use of systems and system actors who maintain control, requiring more cohesive interventions that resist social entrapment and acquiescence of such violence. Despite legislative inclusion, applying coercive control frameworks in practice remains challenging.

There is no standardised risk assessment tool for identifying patterns of coercive control where individual acts may appear trivial in isolation (Stark, 2009). Responders frequently lack training in identifying the pattern of coercive control (Backbone Collective, 2020; Stark, 2012a; Te Puna Aonui, 2025; Tolmie et al., 2024). A review of coercive control literature by Beckwith et al. (2023) concurs with this practice, highlighting gaps related to an incident-focused framework that can hinder the identification of the perpetrator. For example, police and justice responses can fail to recognise coercive control due to a focus on discrete incidents of physical violence rather than patterns of behaviour (Stark, 2012a), which can result in the misidentification of the victim-survivor as the aggressor and failure to contextualise self-defensive or retaliatory violence (Dobash & Dobash, 2017; Reeves, 2021; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008; Todd et al., 2004). This harmful frontline response highlights the gap between legislation and practice, as although "some practitioners have basic identification skills, more consistent and extensive support and training is required to ensure that forms of abuse other than physical violence can be successfully identified in risk and safety consideration"

(Beckwith et al., 2023, p. 34). A similar view is presented by the Backbone Collective, where victim-survivors note that responders lack understanding the tactics of perpetrators (Backbone Collective, 2020), leading to victim-survivors saying that physical injuries were often the threshold for institutional recognition and support. Within my experience, it is not uncommon to hear women say in practice, "I was relieved when I had a bruise to show the police officer; then I finally got some support."

Coercive control is both a mechanism and a condition of entrapment. Social entrapment begins before the relationship, as it is embedded in socially gendered expectations and neoliberal Western ways that require women to accommodate and care for men (Fanslow & Robinson, 2004; Pihama et al., 2019; Ptacek et al., 2022). Coercive control is ongoing and has enduring impacts on children, as children are direct victims of violence within their home if intimate partner violence takes place between their caregivers, and research confirms that children are persistently exposed to controlling behaviour even after separation, particularly through Family Court-mandated contact (Backbone Collective, 2018; Clements et al., 2022; Katz et al., 2020). Research shows coercive control may be perpetuated through parenting plans that, for example, allow ongoing contact between the victim and the abuser and by using the children to maintain control (Katz et al., 2020). The Coercive Control review (Beckwith et al., 2023) provides a comprehensive account of how coercive control significantly impacts children, identifying them not only as witnesses but also as victim-survivors. The report highlights that children can experience a range of long-term harms because of

coercive control exposure, including psychological distress, behavioural issues, and difficulties with education, relationships, and overall development. It underscores how perpetrators often deliberately target the mother–child relationship as a tactic of control, employing strategies such as undermining maternal authority, enforcing isolating routines, and manipulating children to adopt negative views of their mothers (Douglas & Fell, 2020; Katz, 2016; Katz et al., 2020; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2012; Stark, 2020). This relational sabotage may continue or escalate after separation. Furthermore, children are shown to be affected by systems abuse, particularly in family law contexts where legal processes are used by perpetrators, sometimes resulting in children being placed in the care of abusive fathers who continue to use tactics of coercion and control (Katz et al., 2020).

Parental alienation is discussed here only to name and critique its (mis)use as a tactic of abuse, not as a credible clinical or psychological construct. The World Health Organization considered and rejected proposals to include “parental alienation” as a term in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), concluding that it is a legal-context term rather than a health care one, that its inclusion would not contribute to health statistics, and that no evidence-based health care interventions exist specifically for it; an index term briefly added for search purposes was subsequently removed after concerns that it was being used to undermine the credibility of parents alleging abuse, and even to criminalise their behaviour (World Health Organization, n.d). It continues nonetheless to be invoked by court evaluators – including psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers – to

pathologise protective mothers' resistance to ongoing contact with an abusive former partner (Morgan & Coombes, 2016).

Stark's theory of coercive control continues to serve as a cornerstone for understanding intimate partner violence. A Systemic Coercive Control approach accounts not only for the pattern of harm within relationships but also for the institutional and social mechanisms that enable it. It positions responders not just as service providers but as actors embedded within institutional systems that can either reproduce or disrupt coercive conditions. This leads to the exploration and consideration of what harmful responses are, how they are enacted, and by whom and to what effect, as the main premise of situating coercive control as systemic is to call out the active role and responsibilities of responders.

In this section, I have brought together the contextual and conceptual scaffolding that supports a critical re-examination of systemic responses to family violence and through the literature and experiences in practice. I also critically considered how the present system is inadequate and harmful for the wellbeing of women and children who are embedded in a set of institutional and legal responses detached from the realities of women's and children's lived experiences of coercive control. Through engaging with lived realities of victim-survivors in Aotearoa, gendered and colonial power dynamics, discourse, Social Entrapment Theory, coercive control, and posthuman feminist theory, I argue for a shift in how violence is currently conceptualised, recognised, and responded to. Posthumanism theory critiques the traditional humanist constructions of the autonomous subject, calling for an understanding of relational and embedded agency. The power structures of

systemic and social assemblages (systems and system actors) are crucial when considering victims whose responses are entangled within social systems. A posthuman lens invites us to view family violence not as an individual problem or a relationship problem but as problems that are collectively, ethically, relationally, and socially configured. Braidotti, (2019a, p. 36) explains that "The figurations supported by cartographic accounts aim at dealing with the complexity of power relations" in that a figuration is an account of a particular situation, such as "the entrapped woman", which is not neutral; it is produced through intersecting discourses, policies, and affective economies. In affective economies, "sticky" emotions are treated as public and political, not just private (Ahmed, 2004). Recognising these "figurations" enables new imaginings of resistance, accountability, and care.

There is a limitation (and an opportunity) in the under-theorisation of institutional agency. Institutional responders are often positioned as bystanders or ineffective supports, but the literature has yet to fully engage with how perpetrators may co-opt systems and system actors to perpetuate violence through the strategy of coercive control. Although Social Entrapment Theory has gained traction in Aotearoa New Zealand, there remains a gap in the literature when it comes to theorising the mechanics of harmful institutional responses and their interaction with patterns of Systemic Coercive Control.

What emerges from this critique is a clear call for greater critical attention to how institutional harm is produced and sustained, not only through structural inequalities but also through the ways institutions think, speak, and act. The next

section turns toward a closer examination of harmful institutional responses as they appear in the literature. This includes critical discussion of child protection practices, misidentification, victim-blaming therapeutic models, and policy frameworks that obscure or reinforce coercive control. In doing so, I begin to assemble a clearer picture of how systemic responses themselves can become entangled in the reproduction of violence.

These frameworks converge around a central insight: that violence is not only enacted by individuals but also perpetuated and legitimised through institutional, relational, and discursive practices. Language shapes policy; systemic failure compounds harm; affective economies shape moral judgements; and posthuman figurations reveal how subjectivity, power, and responsibility are socially produced.

Harmful System Responses

Staying with Sarah, she said:

> *How did he manage to manipulate the system into treating me as the mentally unwell perpetrator, how is it that now he has the power of the system to control my every move?*

As I continue to reflect on other re-imagined memories of stories heard, such as when Sally finally found the courage to call the police after years of being controlled and isolated, the officer who responded looked around her tidy living room and said, "This is not a place to complain about your marriage." When Maria arrived at a refuge with her children after fleeing his violence, she was told, "There was no accommodation at that time." When Aroha contacted child services for help

protecting her children from their father's violence, she was told she was "isolating them from their father". She was returned home without options despite knowing this would escalate the danger. These are not isolated incidents of poor practice; these lived realities represent a disturbing pattern of harmful responses that I have encountered repeatedly in my research and practice, responses that reveal deep-seated structural flaws in systems meant to offer support and safety.

The journey from seeking help to finding safety is rarely straightforward for victim-survivors of family violence. While many do find formal support services helpful, a concerning number of responders experiences responses that not only fail to provide assistance but also actively compound their harm (Backbone Collective, 2018, 2020, 2024; Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2016, 2023; Nonomura et al., 2022). Through my critical reading practice of local and international research, I have come to understand that these harmful responses represent far more than individual practitioner failures; they are symptoms of systemic problems embedded in the very architecture of our response systems.

When examining these harmful responses, it is clear that many emerge from fundamentally fragmented systems operating with inconsistent approaches and conflicting philosophies. The Family Violence Death Review Committee (FVDRC, 2020, p. 14) highlights how this disjointed arrangement prevents coordinated intervention, with services often working in isolation rather than as part of a cohesive strategy. This fragmentation is compounded by outdated conceptual frameworks that fail to recognise the complex patterns of coercive control. Incident-focused frameworks, such as the Duluth Model, while revolutionary in acknowledging

gender dynamics, have been critiqued by scholars like Evan Stark (2009) for their limitations in addressing the ongoing, patterned nature of coercive control. By focusing on discrete incidents rather than patterns, these frameworks lead practitioners to assess each reported event in isolation, missing the cumulative harm of controlling behaviours over time. Similarly, crisis-oriented frameworks that emphasise immediate physical safety without addressing long-term systemic entrapment reinforce an incident-based understanding of violence. These approaches often prioritise visible forms of abuse while minimising psychological, financial, and systems abuse tactics that significantly constrain victims' freedom and autonomy over time (Douglas et al., 2020; Katz, 2016; Stark, 2012a, 2012b, 2020).

A widespread lack of understanding about family violence dynamics contributes significantly to harmful institutional responses. For example, according to the Backbone Collective (2020), 57% of participants reported that the services they reached out to did not understand family violence. This knowledge gap results in professional responses that are misinformed, inadequate, and often damaging. Victim-survivors frequently encounter disbelief and victim-blaming, with service providers misunderstanding risk, using judgemental or minimising language, or positioning responsibility with the victim (Morgan & Coombes, 2016). This is particularly evident in child protection responses, where there is a long legacy of formal child support services indirectly blaming mothers for the abuse of the perpetrator (Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2012). In many situations, mothers take a disproportionate amount of responsibility for making the violence stop, with child services assuming that leaving the perpetrator stops the violence – which, if

not actioned, can result in the loss of children. The mother is considered to have "failed to protect" her children (Cashmore et al., 1993; Fast & Kinewesquao, 2019; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2012).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, this dynamic is given direct legal force. In the Crimes Act 1961, "Failure to protect child or vulnerable adult," makes it an offence, carrying a maximum sentence of ten years' imprisonment, for a person in frequent contact with a child to know the child is at risk of death, grievous bodily harm, or sexual assault from another household member's conduct and fail to take reasonable steps to prevent it. The section contains no defence that accounts for the protective parent's own victimisation, entrapment, or diminished capacity to act as a "reasonable person" might be expected to (Midson, 2014). A mother who has not left, has not disclosed, or has not removed her children – often for reasons inseparable from the coercive control she is experiencing – risks prosecution alongside, or instead of, the predominant aggressor whose violence she could not stop. Where this occurs, formal legal process reproduces the same misidentification this research identifies elsewhere in the system: the primary victim is recast as a culpable party, and the predominant aggressor's violence becomes a circumstance she failed to manage rather than a cause she could not control.

This system response persecutes the mother and victimises the child in cases where children are removed from the mothers' care, rendering the complexity of the situation invisible. Instead, the primary victim is made responsible for making the predominant aggressor's violence stop. What troubles me most about this approach is how it ignores that victim-survivors already have an analysis of the

violence, as evidenced in their responses and resistance –they are already actively engaged in safety behaviours (Richardson/Kinewesquao & Wade, 2008). However, these resistant responses remain unseen (Wade, 1997b), as the power of the child services responder overrules the victim-survivor's ongoing safety strategies and enacts a harmful response that puts both the primary victim and the children at higher safety risk while isolating the children from the non-violent parent.

Compounding these issues is the manipulation of systems by predominant aggressors. Victim-survivors report that perpetrators use "charm, deceit, and selective storytelling" to undermine their credibility, discredit disclosures, and gain institutional support (Backbone Collective, 2020, p. 15). In my practice, supervisees and clients report that perpetrators exploit non-violence programmes to continue their abusive strategies, including narrative control and institutional persuasion (O'Mahony & Trees, 2017). The FVDRC (2020) notes that most non-violence programmes function in isolation and focus narrowly on anger management, failing to address coercive control as a deliberate strategy. These approaches reflect an outdated, behavioural model of violence that minimises choice and circumvents accountability (Coates et al., 2019; Coates & Wade, 2004, 2007).

The inadequacy extends to systemic structures that enable ongoing harm, particularly through legal processes. The Family Court has been identified as a site where parenting orders and procedural requirements force continued contact between victim-survivors and abusers, providing further opportunities for abuse through contact changeovers or relocation restrictions (Backbone Collective, 2018; Cashmore et al., 1993; Douglas, 2018; Fitch & Easteal, 2017). While these outcomes

are often interpreted as neutral or procedurally fair, they perpetuate abuse through legal mechanisms that remain blind to coercive control dynamics.

Similarly, safety planning practices frequently employ generic templates rather than personalised approaches. These standardised safety plans fail to account for the unique circumstances of each victim-survivor's situation or their previous attempts to seek help (FVDRC, 2020). The one-size-fits-all approach represents a structural failure to respond to the individualised nature of family violence experiences and the specific risks each victim-survivor might face.

Harmful responses are also driven by empowerment models that, while well-meaning, can place the burden of safety on the person subjected to violence – reflecting a model of neoliberal individualism (Radtke et al., 2023). This discourse implies that freedom from abuse is a matter of individual empowerment rather than collective responsibility or systemic change (FVDRC, 2020). When combined with incident-based models that obscure the patterned nature of coercive control, psychological abuse, sexual violence, and coercive strategies often remain invisible to professionals (Stark, 2012a). Long-term recovery support is critically lacking. Given that violence and its effects do not end with separation, the limited availability of sustained, trauma-informed services undermines recovery (Backbone Collective, 2020).

Harmful responses are not merely gaps in individual practice – they are structural failings embedded in the very architecture of family violence response. Harmful responses are shaped by policies, procedures, practices, and professional codes

that restrict responsiveness, prioritise compliance over context, and devalue relational and cultural understandings of violence.

What concerns me is the lack of recognising how these patterns reveal that systems themselves can become sites of abuse. This is not merely about systems being unhelpful, indifferent, or inadequate; it is about a wider issue of coercive control. I have come to understand how institutions can actively participate in the dynamics of control that characterise family violence. When Family Court processes mandate continued contact between victim-survivors and perpetrators, when child protection services blame mothers for failing to protect while ignoring their active resistance strategies, when risk assessment tools systematically fail to capture the lived realities of coercive control, and when empowerment discourse places the burden of safety on those who are least positioned to achieve it alone, these systems move beyond providing harmful responses to becoming complicit in ongoing abuse.

Understanding this transition from harmful responses to systems abuse requires examining how institutional power, policies, and practices can mirror and amplify the very dynamics of control that define intimate partner violence.

Systems abuse

Systems abuse in cases of family violence is increasingly recognised as a devastating tactic of coercive control that causes ongoing harm and entrapment for victim-survivors (Douglas, 2018; Douglas et al., 2021; Tolmie et al., 2024). It occurs when perpetrators exploit legal, institutional, and other formal social systems to extend harm and control victim-survivors (Cashmore et al., 1993; Department of Social

Services, 2022; Douglas, 2018). While legal systems abuse takes place more frequently post-separation, other forms of systems abuse are maintained throughout the relationship. However, these forms of systems abuse that sit outside of legal frames, specifically Institutional Systems Abuse, are currently under-theorised and under-conceptualised. While the term "systems abuse" has gained traction in recent years, the primary focus has been on legal systems abuse, with less attention paid to the everyday practices that constitute social and Institutional Systems Abuse (Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration, 2024). Additionally, how Institutional Systems Abuse is enacted remains largely unexplained. Without an understanding of the mechanism, institutional systems continue to be used in abuse strategies due to their insidious and unseen nature.

Systems abuse and harmful system responses are interconnected phenomena. Harmful responses from institutions do not just reflect systems abuse – they actively perpetuate and amplify it. Systems abuse itself operates as a form of coercive control, where institutional power is manipulated to cause harm. The misidentification of predominant aggressors illustrates this dynamic clearly. When systems fail to correctly identify who is primarily responsible for violence, the harmful response becomes a tool of further abuse. This example also demonstrates how legal and Institutional Systems Abuse intersect and reinforce each other (Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, 2021; No to Violence (NTV), 2019; Reeves, 2021).

Despite growing academic and judicial attention paid to legal systems abuse (Douglas, 2018; Douglas et al., 2020; The Australian Institute of Judicial

Administration, 2024), Institutional Systems Abuse remains under-researched and poorly understood within practice settings. I outline legal and institutional dimensions, and trace how harmful responses operate both as symptoms and mechanisms of this broader coercive strategy. In doing so, it underscores the need for the distinction of Institutional Systems Abuse as a specific abuse tactic, with a clear definition that stands separate from legal systems abuse and the recognition of specific tactics and mechanisms of this abuse form, requiring improved training and greater accountability in family violence responses.

Legal Systems Abuse

Systems abuse occurs when a perpetrator of intimate partner violence exploits support systems to abuse the primary victim. The perpetrator manipulates legal and other systems to control, threaten, and harass a current or former partner (National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children, 2022–2032). Douglas and Reeves talk about systems abuse as legal and other; however, the other is less defined (Douglas, 2018; Douglas et al., 2020; Reeves, 2021).

An understanding of systems abuse as a tactic of coercive control has recently been established within Australia, specifically as a form of legal systems abuse. However, there is currently no specific reference to institutional abuse as a specific abuse tactic. Legal, institutional, and other forms are considered within the concept of systemic abuse (The Australian Institute of Judicial Administration, n.d.). Many studies on legal systems abuse are cited and presented in the Domestic and Family Violence Bench Book (Douglas, 2018; Douglas et al., 2020, 2021; Douglas & Fell, 2020; Reeves, 2020, 2021). These resources speak to how perpetrators misuse

legal, institutional, and other procedures to continue abusing primary victims. However, most of this research refers to legal systems abuse and is positioned as post-separation abuse, particularly within family law and child custody proceedings. A central theme is the misuse of legal processes through vexatious litigation. Family Violence perpetrators often file frivolous or malicious legal claims, including false reports to child protection services, repeated custody applications, and unwarranted intervention orders, to drain victim-survivors' financial resources and emotional resilience and to instil fear and control within their lives (The Australian Institute of Judicial Administration, 2024). Studies in Australia have highlighted that women, often the actual victims, are sometimes misidentified as aggressors and face significant disadvantages due to systemic gaps, such as inadequate training among law enforcement and judicial officers (Reeves, 2020, 2021).

New Zealand's legal framework currently lacks explicit recognition, definition, or remedy for systems abuse as a distinct form of family violence, highlighting a gap between how abuse operates in practice and how it is conceptualised in law. The Family Violence Act 2018 is the central piece of legislation and is notable for the following: defining family violence to include physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse; recognising patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour; and including psychological abuse, such as threats, intimidation, and manipulation. This legislation also makes it clear that abuse can be a single act or a pattern of harm conducted over time. However, systems abuse is not explicitly defined or named within the Act or its supporting documents (Family Violence Act 2018, No. 45, 2018). The implications allow this form of abuse being positioned as less severe, which

results in victim-survivors being retraumatised by state responses that fail to see through manipulative systems abuse tactics, both legal and institutional. These tactics can allow perpetrators to remain unseen and unaccounted for in their use of institutions and legal pathways as part of coercive control. Within practice, responders are left without clear conceptual practice tools that assess risk and safety of systems abuse. Additionally, the lack of legal reference to systems abuse makes it difficult to intervene or raise concerns effectively. This shortfall within the legal frameworks (The Australian Institute of Judicial Administration, 2024) threads through to the less explored yet equally consequential terrain of Institutional Systems Abuse as 'other', and this is the gap that this research is aimed to address.

From "Other" to Institutional Systems Abuse

The term 'other' forms of systems abuse broadly refers to and includes Institutional Systems Abuse, with a key focus on institutions such as child services, police and health systems (Backbone Collective, 2018, 2024; Cashmore et al., 1993; Clements et al., 2022, 2022; Department of Social Services, 2022; Katz et al., 2020; Stark, 2012a). Although there is some overlap between legal and Institutional Systems Abuse, they differ in terms of where they take place, legal being within a legal context and Institutional Systems Abuse within various social systems that respond to family violence, and as such, tactics differ accordingly. Although institutional systems can abuse, they can also lead to ongoing abuse through legal channels. One example is the problem of misidentification of the predominant aggressor, which can begin with the police misidentifying the PA and incorrectly positioning

the primary victim as the perpetrator, highlighting the overlap and difference in that a harmful police response can result in ongoing legal systems abuse (Reeves, 2021).

As Social Entrapment Theory posits that harmful, apparently inadvertent system responses result in compounding harm and ongoing entrapment, this research aimed to study these harmful responses to identify themes that may inform how such responses occur. This understanding grew beyond inadvertent harmful responses from family violence support institutions to include the manipulation of support systems of these services by the predominant aggressor. Institutional services include child protection, court report writers, court-approved counsellors, and restorative justice practitioners.

New Zealand reports, including the FVDRC Fifth Report (2020) and the Backbone Collective's findings (2020, 2024), demonstrate how fragmented, inconsistent, culturally unsafe, and outdated service responses exacerbate danger rather than create safety. Examples include fragmented services and lack of shared risk assessments (Backbone Collective, 2020, 2024; Te Puna Aonui, 2021), misidentification of predominant aggressors (Reeves, 2020, 2021), victim-blaming and disbelief (Coombes & Morgan, 2013; Fast & Kinewesquao, 2019, 2019; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2012; Richardson Kinewesquao & Fast, 2019), and overreliance on simplistic and behavioural stopping violence programmes that focus on men's anger as a measure on the tension scale and individualised neo-liberal understanding (Braidotti et al., 2018; Connell, 2005; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dobash & Dobash, 2011; Gavey, 2011; Radtke et al., 2023; Stark, 2009). Critical feminism offers a vital bridge of insight

here: it shows how these harmful responses are not random or isolated mistakes but are actively reproduced through systemic discourses that individualise responsibility, erase context, and maintain neoliberal, patriarchal, and colonial social structures. Recognising this connection reframes system failures not as practitioner shortcomings alone but as patterned, structural conditions that must be interrogated if responses are to create safety rather than perpetuate harm.

Systems abuse occurs when institutions are manipulated to harm individuals through two core but overlapping mechanisms. Legal systems abuse involves the deliberate manipulation of legal processes such as excessive litigation, delay tactics, or exploiting parental rights to control, harm, or exhaust victims through tactical, perpetrator-driven actions (Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration, 2024). Institutional Systems Abuse occurs when organisations like child protection services, healthcare systems, or housing authorities respond to victims in harmful or negligent ways, often through risk-averse policies, decontextualised responses, lack of cultural safety, or institutionalised victim-blaming. While legal systems abuse is typically intentional and tactical, Institutional Systems Abuse is primarily positioned as inadvertent (Ptacek, 1999). Both forms operate within broader networks of power, policy, and practice, often reinforcing each other to create webs of Systemic Coercive Control that trap victim-survivors and perpetuate social inequalities, revealing how systems can be mobilised, deliberately or inadvertently, and thus maintain control and cause harm.

Harmful Responses and Systems

Harmful responses do not emerge in isolation. They are the product of shortcomings within family violence response systems, many of which have been identified in the Te Aorerekura: National Strategy and Action Plan. Some examples include systemic disempowerment of Māori, fragmented and unsafe service responses, lack of coordination between health, justice, education, and social services, fragmented and siloed systems, victim-blaming approaches, risk-based models that often lead to surveillance and removal of children, such as fragmented service delivery, victim-survivors not being believed, not being safe, and being re-traumatised when seeking help from state services (Te Puna Aonui, 2021). Additional harmful responses can occur when support services operate without a nuanced understanding of coercive control or systems abuse. For example, the FVDRC Fifth Report (2020) and Backbone Collective research (2020, 2024) provide additional empirical evidence of harmful institutional responses in Aotearoa. These reports document instances where systems that should support safety instead amplify danger through fragmented and inconsistent service provision, as well as a lack of shared approaches to safety, misidentification of predominant aggressors, disbelief, judgement, and victim-blaming and the overreliance on outdated, behavioural-based stopping violence programmes.

Within Aotearoa, institutional family violence responders work from differing risk assessment tools and models that privilege separation or individualise responsibility to get safe, which fail to adequately account for the lived complexity of victim-survivors' experiences. Thulin (2022) provides empirical evidence that

individualised risk assessments are systematically inadequate, missing a quarter of risk variance that occurs at structural levels while ignoring the community context and protective structural factors that significantly influence intimate partner violence attitudes, thereby reducing a complex socio-ecological phenomenon to individual pathology. Te Puna Aonui (2021) released its risk and safety assessment framework, and this document makes references to responders using "red flags" to identify risk and safety requirements. Missing, however, is clarity on what the red flags represent, producing a site of fragmentation in the meaning of risk. In these settings, responses can become more than insufficient – they can be actively harmful, especially in situations of coercive control where patterns of abuse exist through the manipulation of complex systems. Such deficits reflect systemic gaps, not isolated errors. These responses not only fail to protect but also escalate risk, silence resistance, and erode trust. These failures are not coincidental; they are structural, reiterating the necessity to examine how such responses serve as mechanisms of systems abuse, reinforcing and compounding harm and social entrapment.

So far, I have discussed family violence as situated within interlocking systems of patriarchal, colonial, and institutional power, where violence is not only enacted by individuals but legitimised through social discourse, institutional complicity. Through the critiques of coercive control and Social Entrapment Theory, the limitations of incident-based, effects-driven, and individualised framings becomes visible. However, a critical question remains: how might practitioners respond differently, in ways that disrupt these systemic patterns and honour the dignity and agency of those subjected to violence?

Drawing from clinical practice and grounded in the ethics of social justice, Response-Based Practice offers a practical and theoretical lens for examining how violence is responded to and how those responses either compound harm or affirm resistance. Response-Based Practice places resistance, social response, and language at the centre of family violence understanding and responding. This framework provides scaffolding for the current project, particularly in its exploration of Institutional Systems Abuse, professional complicity, and the discursive construction of violence and responsibility. In the following section, I examine how Response-Based Practice theorises resistance and social responses, how language functions as a site of harm or healing, and how the contextual model offers a socially situated approaches to family violence.

Response-Based Practice

Response-Based Practice (Coates & Wade, 2007; Richardson, 2015) is situated at the intersection of practice, ethics, and social justice. As a practice-based framework, Response-Based Practice offers a critical counterpoint to models that locate violence within individuals or pathologise victim-survivors. Instead, it centres social responses, language use, and resistance as sites of meaning and ethical significance. In the context of this thesis, Response-Based Practice is a critical framework within the literature that illuminates how harmful responses are constructed, how violence is hidden, and how practitioners may resist complicity.

Response-Based Practice developed from clinical work with people subjected to violence and is found on the principle that all individuals resist mistreatment (Wade, 1997). This approach to family violence responding challenges traditional

psychological models that focus on the effects of violence and instead highlights the significance of resistance, perpetrator intent, and social responses in the context of violence, which includes those who are experiencing and using violence and social responders (Coates & Wade, 2004; Todd et al., 2004).

Effects-based frameworks often obscure the deliberate nature of violence and minimise resistance by portraying victims as psychologically damaged. As Richardson and Wade (2008) argue, such approaches risk misrepresenting those targeted by violence while ignoring the social context in which harm occurs. By contrast, Response-Based Practice emphasises the role of language in either concealing or revealing violence. Terms like "unwanted sex" or "domestic dispute" can obscure harm and deflect accountability, while precise language recognises resistance and affirms dignity (Coates & Wade, 2007; Hydén et al., 2016). Dignity restoration rests at the heart of Richardson Kineweskwêw et al.'s indigenous therapeutic approach to violence and oppression: "By acknowledging acts of resistance, we focus on preserving dignity and seeking justice, which are inherent to healing processes" (2021, p. 5).

Key principles of Response-Based Practice

Social Responses

Coates and Wade (2016) argue that social responses operate at the crucial point where broader social and material conditions intersect with the everyday lives of individuals and families experiencing violence. It is at this meeting point- where institutions, communities, and cultural norms interact with personal experience - that the dynamics and consequences of intimate partner violence are shaped. Their

work shows that violence is never simply a private matter; it is continually interpreted, reinforced, or resisted through the responses of others.

Building on this, Coates and colleagues (2019) emphasise that the reactions of social responders play a central role in establishing the social meaning of the violence. Social responses communicate whether the harm is recognised, whether responsibility is accurately located with the person using violence, and whether the person subjected to it is treated with dignity and concern. To illustrate how social meaning can be distorted, they analyse the familiar story of Beauty and the Beast, showing how cultural narratives can transform acts of violence into a romantic storyline. This example demonstrates how social responses can misrepresent coercion and abuse, reshaping them into something acceptable or even desirable.

I have been reflecting on the variability of yarn and how it mirrors the differing strands of dignity that appear in practice. Richardson Kineweskwêw's wider body of work makes this especially clear. She shows that when people resist violence, oppression, or injustice, the social responses they receive profoundly shape their recovery and their sense of dignity. In her writing, dignity is not a fragile or incidental element – it is a thick, resilient thread that runs through Response-Based Practice. Her work consistently foregrounds both resistance and dignity as foundational, weaving them together as the core of how practitioners should understand and respond to violence. Her Indigenous-informed perspective highlights healing as relational and collective, requiring institutions and practitioners to move away from deficit framings and instead recognise how people, families, and communities protect and reclaim dignity, even in contexts of profound harm (Richardson

Kineweskwêw et al., 2021, 2023; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Reynolds, 2012; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008, 2012). Situating dignity at the centre of analysis, as Richardson Kineweskwêw does, shows how systems abuse operates and why affirming resistance is an ethical responsibility.

Positive responses that acknowledge resistance can validate survivors' experiences and foster healing. By contrast, negative (unhelpful and harmful) responses often minimise, ignore, or misunderstand resistance, which can cause additional harm, especially in cases of overt resistance. Significantly, these responses do not merely affect psychological well-being – they actively shape opportunities for safety, access to resources, and pathways to justice (Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008; Todd et al., 2004; Wade, 1997).

Social responses in family violence situations refer to actions or inaction by others in the context of intimate partner violence. These responses occur on multiple levels: informal responses from family and friends and formal responses from institutional actors such as police, social agencies, healthcare providers, legal systems, and educational institutions (Backbone Collective, 2020; Carswell et al., 2020; Gear et al., 2024). The Response-Based Practice approach recognises that these interactions are never neutral as each carry implicit messages about responsibility, worthiness, and believability.

Research demonstrates that the quality of these responses is crucial not only to immediate and long-term safety but also to ongoing engagement with support services and the overall wellness of those experiencing violence (Coates & Wade, 2016; Hydén et al., 2016; Richardson Kinewesquao & Wade, 2008; Richardson

Kinewesquao and Fast, 2019). As Wade (2007) notes, many survivors report that negative social responses were more damaging than the original violence itself, creating what has been termed "secondary victimization" or "the second assault".

Wade and Richardson Kineweskwêw (2012) emphasise that when people are met with supportive responses after experiencing violence, such as being believed, respected, and affirmed, they are more likely to heal, speak openly about what happened, and engage with formal systems like the police or courts. However, when they are blamed, judged, dismissed, or face delays and/or inaction from the justice system, the harm is often compounded, leading to deeper and longer-lasting distress. These findings challenge dominant trauma-focused approaches that locate distress primarily within the individual rather than in the social ecology surrounding violence. This dynamic is particularly evident in child welfare contexts, where mothers facing family violence may be blamed for failing to protect their children, shifting responsibility from perpetrators to victims (Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2012). Such institutional practices not only misattribute responsibility but often lead to further harm through family separation, surveillance, and pathologising of protective behaviours.

Additionally, Cathy Richardson Kinewesquao (2012) highlights that negative social responses are more prevalent within marginalised communities. Those with disabilities, individuals identifying with sexual minorities, or people belonging to racial and ethnic minorities face compounded barriers to receiving dignifying responses. These patterns reflect how social responses to violence are mediated

through intersecting systems of power and privilege, creating layered experiences of harm for those who may already be facing structural inequities.

Richardson Kinewesquao expands this understanding of harmful responses by noting that systemic inequities can also involve "negative social responses" that include mistreatment and/or neglect in professional or medical situations (2012, p. 149). She provides examples of unequal access to medical systems and delays in legal system responses, extending our understanding of how systemic inequities reproduced through the injustices of colonisation, continue to perpetuate harm. These institutional responses do not occur in isolation; they are shaped by broader sociopolitical contexts, historical patterns of discrimination, and dominant discourses about violence.

Understanding social responses as contextual responses encourages analysis of how organisational mandates, policies, professional training, cultural norms, and systemic pressures shape the responses available responders. This contextual understanding creates opportunities for institutional awareness and informed responses to addressing family violence.

Resistance is a Fact

"Whenever persons are badly treated, they resist." (Wade, 1997, p. 23).

Response-Based Practice is premised on the understanding that violence is an affront to dignity and that individuals subjected to violence actively resist, whether overtly or covertly. Allan Wade (1997) articulates this premise by asserting that "Alongside each history of violence and oppression, there runs a parallel history of

prudent, creative and determined resistance" (p. 2). What this means for me in my family violence practice is that I am always trying to respond to people who have experienced abuse in a way that brings forward what they may have done to resist the violence. This view fundamentally challenges therapeutic approaches, which can render resistance invisible or misinterpreted as harmful behaviour. Wade (1997) explains that perpetrators of violence and oppression anticipate resistance from victim-survivors and those who would advocate on their behalf and take specific steps to suppress these resistant responses.

Resistance is an active stance against violence and oppression, yet it is always carried out within a relational world. This relational condition echoes the African proverb that opens my research – Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu – which reminds us that a person becomes a person through other people (van Breda, 2019). Understanding resistance in this way underscores that acts of dignity, refusal, and self-protection are shaped in relation to others and are sustained within communities of meaning. Richardson and Wade (2008) extend this insight by showing how therapeutic conversations that recognise and honour a person's resistance are more supportive and healing. Their work illustrates how acknowledging resistance not only restores dignity but also aligns with this broader relational understanding of personhood. Wade (2007) emphasises that whether resistance is outward or inward-focused depends on the circumstances, e.g. when open defiance is impractical or too dangerous, resistance is expressed inwardly at a micro level of social interactions. Victim-survivors make decisions regarding their safety and whether to resist overtly or covertly, depending on their unique insights

and knowledge of the situation. At times, when resistance appears invisible, it is because it is only safe to practise it in the mind, a place where safety can be sought – away from harmful responses that may misunderstand resistant acts. Richardson and Wade (2008) reiterate that decisions about whether covert or overt resistance is prudently applied in any situation depend on the primary victim's knowledge of the perpetrator and safety considerations (Morgan & Mattson, 2018; Reynolds, 2020).

Regardless of the direction of the resistance response (inward or outward), Response-Based Practice argues that resistance is always present and that dominant discourses should reflect this reality rather than positioning victim-survivors as passive or misinterpreting overt resistance as aggression (Wade, 1997, 1999, 2007; Weaver et al., 2007). Response-Based Practice reframes resistance as an intrinsic, dignified response to violence rather than a failure to act. By recognising and honouring resistance in all its forms, responders can foster healing and empowerment rather than reinforcing victim-blaming narratives (Fast & Kinewesquao, 2019). The integration of resistance into assessment frameworks, training, and policy is necessary to ensure that interventions align with the lived realities of victim-survivors and to increase understanding of resistant responses within social entrapment (Douglas et al., 2020; Tolmie et al., 2018).

Resistance works against violence and oppression as an active, strategic effort to counter violence and maintain dignity and safety, although not all acts of resistance are the same. Resistance can be a quiet internal personal form of responding, or it can be an aggressive outwardly-seen-by-others response, such as fighting back.

Allan Wade (2007) brings attention to the scope of resistance as he says, "I propose here that any mental or behavioural act through which a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression... may be understood as a form of resistance" (p. 25). This comprehensive definition highlights the two primary forms of resistant acts: overt resistance, expressed as open defiance, and covert resistance, performed in subtle, disguised ways.

Covert displays of resistance are more common yet less recognised, often employed for safety purposes and to reduce further harm (Todd et al., 2004; Wade, 2007). In my practice as a family violence counsellor, covert resistance manifests in subtle ways that hold meaning for the client whose story I am hearing. For example, a person might share something like subtle like, "I used to place books on a shelf in a particular way to avoid being put-down and shamed by him for my choices in reading" or "Sometimes I used to put my headphones on to block his voice out of my mind, the music made me feel better." Other examples include adjusting speech patterns or body language in an attempt to calm the situation or creating coded messages to convey distress without direct confrontation. I return to the example of The Beauty and The Beast fable, where the victim-survivor (Bella) uses "politeness" as a strategic form of subtle resistance to remind the Beast of social norms and declines to have dinner with him (Coates et al., 2019). Children resist violence, too. Bonnah (2016) shares powerful examples of how children use imagination, storytelling, and metaphor to resist harm. Through art, play, and language, they find ways to resist against violence and safeguard their inner worlds. Bonnah (2016)

begins her thesis by sharing a powerful example of resistance against sexual violence as told to her by one of her young clients as she says, "The fairies lifted me to the ceiling!" (p.10). These seemingly small acts represent sophisticated self-preservation strategies developed under oppressive conditions (Richardson & Wade, 2008).

Conversely, overt acts, understood as "open defiance is the least common form of resistance" (Wade, 1997, p. 29), are more visible expressions of opposition. These actions are frequently misinterpreted as violent behaviour, particularly in intimate partner violence situations. For instance, someone might share something like this: "I knew he wasn't going to stop until he had knocked me out, so I slapped him across his face as I knew that was the only way I could ensure that it wouldn't go on for hours." This figuration powerfully demonstrates what might superficially appear as aggression is an act of resistance rooted in self-preservation rather than violence.

Overt resistance can significantly increase the danger faced by a victim-survivor, as perpetrators often escalate their tactics to maintain control when faced with direct opposition. Consequently, many victim-survivors strategically engage in covert resistance. However, these prudent actions remain largely unacknowledged in therapeutic settings (Todd et al., 2004; Wade, 1997, 1999, 2007). Social perceptions reinforce the problematic idea that unless a person demonstrates visible resistance, such as fighting back or leaving, they do not resist at all (Wade, 1997). Such stereotypical discourses blame people experiencing violence for being passive or pathologise them as individuals who are attracted to violent people or who have become helpless – discourses that further obscure their resistance

(Walker, 1977). These harmful narratives position professional responders as powerful and all-knowing in their pathologisation of victim-survivors, thereby excusing perpetrators and rendering meaningful intervention redundant (Todd & Wade, 2004).

Within a social context, resistance is always shaped by the specific circumstances of an individual's experience, as "dangers and opportunities" are constantly assessed in response to violence (Coates & Wade, 2007, p. 522). Wade (2007) notes that "when open defiance is impractical or too dangerous, resistance is expressed indirectly and on a micro-level of social interaction" (p. 4). Victim-survivors make moment-to-moment decisions regarding safety, dignity, and resistance based on their intimate knowledge of the perpetrator and the situation (Richardson, 2008). This type of resistance serves the crucial purpose of preserving one's dignity and agency while maximising safety both during and after an assault (Richardson, 2008).

Working from an understanding of resistance as ever-present renders visible, within my practice and other similar settings, a positive contribution to recovery from violence through the preservation of dignity and personal agency. Resistance can be acknowledged as a natural response to conditions of violence and oppression. Unfortunately, resistance is often reframed through dominant discourses in ways that obscure its presence and significance, resulting in unrealised benefits and sometimes even harmful social responses (Richardson Kineweskwêw et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2015). For instance, overt resistance may be mislabelled as "interpersonal conflict", while covert resistance may be minimised as "marital tensions" (Coates & Wade, 2007, p. 517). These redefinitions effectively erase the

resistant actions of victim-survivors and, in turn, obscure the violence they experience.

Understanding resistance also normalises responses to violence, which social responders can often pathologise as anxiety or depression. In lived reality, these responses to persistent coercion and control are responsible responses to violence and not indicators of mental illness but valid expressions of resistance (Dworkin et al., 2019; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008; Ussher, 2023). A paradigm shift is required to ensure that responses are seen as appropriate rather than medicalised, with mental health issues, anxiety, or depression (Richardson Kineweskwêw et al., 2021; Todd et al., 2004; Ussher et al., 2023; Weaver et al., 2007). Response-Based Practice challenges psychotherapeutic models that cast resistance as pathology, reinforcing that these responses are rational reactions to violence (Wade, 1997).

Building on the significance of social responses, it is essential to consider how discourse itself functions as a form of power shaping what can be said, who is heard, and how violence is recognised or denied within institutional and interpersonal contexts.

The Language of Responses

The language of responses acknowledges that people are social *actors* who respond (mentally, physically, socially, spiritually) to others' actions, including violence. In this way, people are seen to have an active response and are not considered passive objects (Weaver et al., 2007). Response-Based Practice challenges dominant narratives that frame victims of family violence as passive or

broken. Instead of focusing on the effects of violence (such as trauma symptoms or damage), it asks: How did the person respond? What did they do to preserve dignity or resist harm? (Coates & Wade, 2007). This shift reveals resistance as a fact rather than an exception, thereby restoring agency to those subjected to violence. As such, Response-Based Practice avoids the language of "effects" and "impacts" as these terms frame people as objects rather than active responders. Instead, the language of responses provides an opportunity for people to discuss the experience in a contextual manner, exploring what was done and understanding the context of social responses, their responses to those responses, and, importantly, their resistance to the violence. The shift within Response-Based Practice from effects to responses represents a fundamental transformation in how we conceptualise family violence intervention (Coates & Wade, 2016; Hydén et al., 2016). While traditional psychology-based therapies often stem from effects-based discourse and victim-blaming pathology (Todd et al., 2004; Wade, 1997), Response-Based Practice focuses on understanding responses to violence, which, when considered in context, are reasonable responses (Coates & Wade, 2016). This purposeful shift redirects attention from how an individual has been affected by violence to how they respond within this context.

The significance of this concept lies in recognising that effects speak to predetermined outcomes in response to adversity (Ussher, 2023), whereas responses seek to understand the choices made in specific situations, acknowledging that outcomes are not predetermined (Coates & Wade, 2016; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008). This reframing advances a therapeutic

engagement that considers responses to responses, which is particularly valuable when addressing systemic social problems such as family violence, where context is crucial. Response-Based Practice (Wade, 1997, 1999) argues that women's emotional suffering, such as sadness is often reframed as psychiatric pathology (depression), which locates the problem within the individual woman rather than acknowledging it as a reasonable response to gendered violence, inequality, and structural oppression. Response-Based Practice immediately responds to the language of effects, establishing an immediate intolerance for victim-blaming. Richardson Kineweskwêw et al. (2021) advocate for a practice approach that seeks to make visible the various social responses to violence. When applying the lens of responses to violence and oppression, what becomes important is the social aspect of recognising violence as a social problem rather than a personal relationship issue, highlighting the importance of responses and, significantly, the discourse that informs responses (Coates & Wade, 2007).

The use of language that seeks to understand responses differs from mainstream discourses in that it establishes an immediate tolerance against victim-blaming pathology (language of effects). The problem becomes recentred within a social context rather than in the mind of the person experiencing violence (Fast & Kinewesquao, 2019). This approach signals a move from a pathology of violence to conversations about violence and those that centre on understanding responses, including resistant responses and the responses of others, are all interconnected within their social context (Coates & Wade, 2007, 2016; Hydén et al., 2015).

Response-Based Practice helps expose how harmful responses are performed, permitted, or ignored. Response-Based Practice offers an understanding of family violence that centres on the interactional and social context in which violence occurs, particularly the importance of social responses, the importance of language, and the dignity of those who resist violence in even the smallest ways.

At the heart of Response-Based Practice is the understanding that resistance is a fact. This principle reframes those subjected to violence not as passive recipients but as active, resisting agents, even when their acts of resistance are unseen, subtle, or misunderstood. Response-Based Practice recognises the inherent agency and dignity of those who experience violence, unlike Western individual pathology-oriented approaches (Dworkin et al., 2019; Todd et al., 2004; Weaver et al., 2007) Because it recognises recipients of active and resisting agents, Response-Based Practice understands resistance not only as open defiance but as any mental, physical, social, or spiritual act through which a person maintains their dignity in the face of violence, from subtle gestures to strategic compliance for safety (Hydén et al., 2016; Richardson Kinewesquao & Fast, 2019; Todd et al., 2004; Wade, 1997). Recognising resistance as active rather than passive draws attention to the importance of language, because the words we choose can either expose or obscure dignity, shaping whether social responses affirm resistance or reproduce harm.

Furthermore, I examine the discursive operations of language, exploring how words convey meaning, thought, and implication, and how responding to violence is shaped by the social conditions in which it is spoken and heard. This focus aligns

closely with Richardson Kineweskwêw's response-based work, which demonstrates that the language used to describe violence and resistance is never neutral but actively constructs social reality (Richardson Kineweskwêw et al., 2021; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008, 2010). Richardson and Wade (2008) show how minimising, victim-blaming, or pathologising language obscures resistance and undermines dignity, while careful and respectful descriptions restore dignity and support accountability. Richardson & Wade (2010) further illustrates how re-centring dignity and resistance in language enables survivors of colonial and interpersonal violence to reclaim agency and counter harmful narratives imposed by institutions and professionals. The response-based contextual model they developed, provides a structured way to examine six interconnected elements: social context, immediate situation, actions of the perpetrator, responses and resistance of the victim, social responses to the victim, and the victim's responses to those social responses. In practice, an approach informed by Response-Based Practice offers a shift in interviewing that acknowledges agency and reveals both resistance and the quality of social responses.

The Four Operations of Language

Language as a system of knowledge is a vital concept, inextricably intertwined with the entirety of my thesis. Language signposts thinking and often runs alongside actions; as such, it is a powerful social response. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise the power of discourse, particularly in responding to violence. The impacts of one's social position and subsequent power location encompass the power of language ability, which can be used as an instrument of power or oppression and, within this

context, an ability to help or silence women experiencing violence in responding to family violence situations.

Language in family violence responses holds power, the power to offer a response that can either help or harm women and children seeking support and safety. Language represents thought outcomes, and language can action actions; these actions can contribute to the consequences of the response. A key argument that Response-Based Practice puts forward is that in professional, academic, and public discourse, language is frequently used in a manner that conceals violence, obscures and mitigates perpetrators' responsibilities, conceals victims' resistance, and blames or pathologises victims (Todd & Wade, 2004). Their discourse analysis stems from "...a desire to prevent victim blaming, elucidate the full extent of the harm suffered by victims and demonstrate the need for specialised treatment methods and resources" (Todd & Wade, 2004, p. 14). They claim that discourse can fundamentally improve responses and wellness in family violence cases. In connecting ideas from Response-Based Practice to the responder response continuum, language reflects how a responder thinks about something, and how a situation is understood is demonstrated in specific ways of responding within the context of family violence. It is a powerful response practice approach that aligns with posthuman critique of Western Humanist ideals that uphold certain gendered privileges that can shape dominant social responses and affects outcomes (Braidotti, 2019). Therefore, thinking that drives language and actions manifest as responses, which can vary from helpful to harmful.

A response that conceals violence also mitigates holding the person who has used abuse accountable for their actions, as you cannot hold responsibility for what is not acknowledged. Additionally, if a primary victim's resistance is unseen, it can instead be represented as a violent action without context, implying that the person is equally violent. This is often seen on police reports where resistance is recorded as "mutual violence", or in a more covert internal response to violence, such as depression, pathologised as 'mental health issues' instead of a reasonable and natural response when someone you love continues to hurt you. These examples draw a hard line between discourse in family violence responding, which causes compounding harm to people experiencing family violence. This obscuring of responsibility can be a tactical move as Richardson (2008) explains, "...obscuring violence serves to perpetuate it and to discourage perpetrators from becoming accountable for it" (p. 138).

Within a family violence context, there are a myriad of responders who could enable the concealment of violence, such as informal and formal support services representatives, or any social actor who may be involved in responding. Practice examples can include the minimisation of certain violence forms, especially as they relate to coercive control. Over the years, many clients have recalled that they have been told by formal responders that they cannot help them until they provide evidence of the violence. Alternatively, perpetrators saying things like, "I don't know what happened, I just saw red", minimises the violence while positioning themselves as victims of their own out-of-control feelings, a response provoked through the actions of others. The violence is concealed in both examples, and if the violence is

concealed, then the woman's experience goes un-responded to. The predominant aggressor continues without accountability – highlighting the interconnections between the four operations of language as language is frequently used in a manner that conceals violence, obscures and mitigates perpetrators' responsibilities, conceals victim's resistance, and blames or pathologises victims (Todd & Wade, 2004).

Response-Based Practice identifies and challenges harmful discourses while simultaneously offering counter-discourses that foreground positive social responses. It provides a clearer and more accurate account of violence through language that names the actions taken against women and exposes the choices underpinning those actions. This stands in contrast to traditional stopping violence psychological education programmes, which perpetrators are typically mandated to attend. These programmes, delivered by family violence agencies, encourage people who use violence to focus on controlling their supposedly uncontrolled emotions that "result in" violent behaviour. Such approaches overlook the causes of violent thinking and, crucially, the fact that violence involves choice. Without attending to choice, it becomes difficult to hold perpetrators accountable for their abusive decisions.

Framed in this way, the person who uses violence is positioned as a victim of their own uncontrollable impulses. For example, when a predominant aggressor says, "I saw red," a response-based approach would ask, "What was happening before you saw red? What were you thinking?" and "At what point did you decide to punch her in the face?" These questions reinsert deliberation, intention, and choice into the

account. They also make visible who the violence was done to and who performed it. This deliberate use of language shifts practitioners away from unintentionally colluding with narratives that obscure violence. Response-Based Practice insists that violence is chosen and that accountability must remain contextually located with the perpetrator. This shift sets the foundation for the next discursive operation.

Gender symmetry comes into consideration in this context too, as the idea can present violence as gender-neutral and obscure the patterned, coercive, and injurious nature of men's violence against women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dobash & Dobash, 2017; Stark, 2009, 2012b). Such framings minimise power imbalances that reinforce stereotypes of women's provocation and men's aggression.

The second discursive operation is the use of language to obscure and mitigate perpetrator responsibility. If violence is concealed, as demonstrated above, then who takes responsibility for the harm done becomes unclear. According to Coates et al. (2007), professional discourse frequently excuses perpetrators by constructing violent behaviour as an outcome of psychological, social, or biological factors that position the person as lacking control or agency. Other examples from practice may include, "I never knew how to treat her because my father was abusive to me and my mother", "I have a problem with alcohol", or "I only did what I did because she was acting fresh with my mates at the club". These examples mitigate the perpetrator's responsibility and obscure the violence as non-deliberate, attributing it to social, psychological, gendered, and biological factors.

The reverse discourse presents an opportunity to counteract this misrepresentation of language, thought, and action by highlighting the perpetrator's responsibility. Response-Based Practice reinforces the idea that those who use violence do so deliberately (Coates & Wade, 2004; Hydén, Wade, et al., 2016). Evan Stark (2009) shares the same idea with Response-Based Practice in terms of violence being a choice, except coercive control makes known that the perpetrator is actioning an intentional abuse strategy that is enabled through not only tactics but also through the use of wider systems. In addressing this deliberate nature of violence, language exposes perpetrators and holds them accountable for their actions based on their choices. Not only does this language hold perpetrators accountable – it also calls for awareness to be given to how responders respond. Within this project, not calling out the deliberate use of abuse, or minimising or excusing this abuse, renders the practice harmful and the practitioner complicit in the abuse strategy.

The third discursive operation of language is the concealing of victim-survivor's resistances. As discussed in the previous section of this review, resistance to violence and oppression is ever-present (Wade, 1997). Victims conceal violence for strategic purposes related to safety, agency, and dignity, and perpetrators anticipate resistance, which is then, in turn, built into their abuse strategy. Social responders, both formal and informal, can conceal resistance through discourse by representing victims as passive or as mentally unwell, citing victims' responses to safety as mutually violent, or even by disacknowledging resistant acts. For example, the current Ministry of Justice code of practice workbook assessments does not provide opportunities to explore resistance. Failing to account for resistance can

lead to inadvertent victim-blaming discourses, such as "failure to protect her children", "if it was so bad she would leave", and "she must be attracted to his violence in some way as she does nothing to stop it". Additionally, Response-Based Practice aligns with discourses that critical feminists cite in Eurocentric neo-liberal ideologies of individualism, patriarchy, colonisation, and the multiple marginalisations that intersect with gendered power further compound these forms of victim-blaming narratives that misunderstand the value and role of resistance specifically in gendered violence (Bumiller, 2008; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Radtke et al., 2023; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2010).

Resistance is unique to each person. Victims decide how to resist abuse based on what they know of their perpetrator, what they need to do to be safe, and what they need to do to keep their dignity (Coates & Wade, 2007). The reverse – discourse in these situations – requires social responders to respond to the resistance as valid, moving past the language of effects (as discussed above) to acknowledging how the person experiencing abuse responded to it, in the undoing of victim-blaming discourse and as an effort to acknowledge victims' efforts to uphold their safety and dignity. In the examples above, thinking discourse that can assist in this shift is for responders to be made aware that leaving a violent relationship does not end the violence; in many situations, it escalates, and the tactics become more insidious, which I highlight within this research as third-party non-physical violence. Furthermore, due to the complexity and unique experiences of family violence, no one fully understands the complex dynamics that a woman is required to navigate when faced with the threat of violence or ongoing threats of losing her children.

These threats in coercive control situations can be an outward response to violence perpetrated as an act of self-preservation and/or self-defence – an understanding of resistance can never be assumed but should be anticipated in family violence responding.

The fourth and final operation of language is the misrepresentation of violence through language used to pathologise and blame victims; the connecting thread of this is already presented through the other three operations of language. This operation of language continues along the thread of blame, which can take the form of mental health pathology, effects-based thinking language, and stereotyping enabled through gendered norms and social power relations (Wade & Coates, 2004). Braidotti (2013) comes to mind here as she critiques the Enlightenment ideal of the "Man of Reason", a figure that universalises a White, European, heterosexual, able-bodied male as the norm for humanity. This so-called ideal man erases difference, sustains patriarchal and Eurocentric hierarchies, and positions women, Indigenous Peoples, and marginalised groups as deviations from the rational subject.

Harmful language practices as responses within Response-Based Practice can conceal violence, obscure offender responsibility, and pathologise victims' resistance. Instead, they advocate for straightforward, plain language that reveals harm, clarifies accountability, and honours victims' responses. As words and language carry meaning, they are instruments of relational connection. The power of discourse as inequities of social power relations can, in this way, be used to positively help uphold and support others in their journeys toward safety and

dignity (Coates & Wade, 2007, 2016; Hydén et al., 2015; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008, 2010; Wilson et al., 2015).

Response-Based Contextual Model

The response-based contextual model offers an example of a socially situated practice framework for responding to family violence. The contextual model foregrounds the social logic of resistance, the material and symbolic dimensions of context, and the power relations embedded in institutional responses. This approach aligns with feminist critiques of dominant models of intimate partner violence that rely on gender-neutral language, act-based measurement tools such as the Conflict Tactics Scale, and false equivalence between male violence and female violence. As Dobash and Dobash (2004) argue, such models break acts of violence down into discrete behaviours, ignoring motivation, context, consequences, and the historical power asymmetries that shape interpersonal and institutional violence.

The contextual model addresses this by attending to multiple interdependent dimensions that shape how violence is experienced and responded to. These include the broader social and material context, such as housing, income, immigration status, cultural identity, and community connections. These structural elements shape both vulnerability and resistance, reflecting how power is unevenly distributed across lines of gender, race, class, and disability. This orientation reflects intersectional feminist scholarship, which insists that violence cannot be understood apart from the social structures within which it is embedded (Crenshaw, 1991; Radtke et al., 2023). It also requires attention to the immediate social and physical

environment in which violence occurs. Whether the event occurred in private or public, who was present, what time of day it was, and whether the person had access to safety all critically shape responses. What may appear passive or compliant can be a strategic response to minimise harm. The model challenges victim-blaming questions such as "Why didn't she leave?" by situating responses within constrained conditions and acknowledging the logic behind survival choices. This rejects liberal assumptions of free choice and rational agency that dominate mainstream frameworks.

The contextual model insists on clearly documenting the specific actions of the person using violence, rather than relying on vague or psychological descriptions. Feminist scholars have long noted how institutional and therapeutic discourses minimise or obscure violence through euphemistic or mutualising language (Smart, 1995; Coates & Wade, 2007). Phrases like "communication breakdown" or "conflict" misrepresent the unilateral nature of abuse and erase perpetrator accountability. As Radtke et al. (2023) argue, discourse is not neutral. It reflects and enacts power, shaping the very possibilities for recognition, redress, and justice. Resistance is not occasional or exceptional, but constant. Whether expressed through refusal, silence, negotiation, or emotional endurance, resistance remains central to the contextual model's framing of dignity. This recognition interrupts the pathologising narratives of victimhood that dominate therapeutic models and reframes those subjected to violence as actors within constrained social fields. This approach aligns with posthuman feminist theorising, particularly Braidotti's (2013) reconceptualisation of subjectivity as relational and constituted through affective,

discursive, and material assemblages. In this view, resistance is not simply behavioural, but a relational negotiation of power, safety, and meaning.

Social responses from family, friends, institutions, and professionals play a central role in shaping how violence is understood and navigated. When these responses are supportive, they affirm the person's experience, aid recovery, and promote safety. When they are dismissive, blaming, or procedurally negligent, they compound the harm. The findings of the Backbone Collective (2018, 2020, 2024) provide evidence of systemic failures across child protection, police, and the Family Court in Aotearoa New Zealand. The response-based contextual social model challenges the assumption that responders are neutral or external to the violence. Rather, the inquiry itself becomes a social response, with ethical consequences (Wade et al., 2014). Finally, the contextual model includes an often-ignored layer: how individuals respond to the responses they receive. This recursive process captures how previous experiences of institutional harm shape future help-seeking. A woman who no longer calls police after being blamed for her partner's violence is not failing to act but acting in response to a system that punished her for seeking protection. Risk assessment tools often ignore this dimension, reinforcing a deficit-based view that fails to account for structural harm (Wilson et al., 2015; Reedy, 2018).

The contextual model provides a structured framework for applying these principles, examining six interconnected elements: social and material context, immediate social-physical situation, actions of the offender, responses and resistance of the person to the violence, social responses to the person/family, and

the person's responses to social network and institutional responses. This approach shifts focus from viewing victims as passive recipients of "effects" to recognising them as active agents responding to their circumstances.

Response-Based Practice offers a socially located contextual framework for understanding violence and supporting those who experience it. It positions violence as a violation of dignity and social order, not just a personal or psychological event. Its core propositions acknowledge that resistance is always present; violence is deliberate; social responses matter; and language shapes outcomes that offer a powerful critique of mainstream frameworks and a hopeful, practical counter-narrative and a critical bridge between theory and practice (Coates & Wade, 2007, 2016; Richardson & Wade, 2008; Todd et al., 2004; Wade, 1997).

Reflexive Traces: Ethical Anguish and Resistance

Braidotti's concept of affective residue helped me reframe what I carried as the ethical cost of bearing witness to injustice. As she says:

> *Subjectivity is a process that aims at flows of interconnections and mutual impact. Affect is the key term here, and it plays a structural function in the nomadic vision of subjectivity, related to the inbuilt temporality of the subject and thus to what is commonly known as memory.*
>
> (Braidotti, 2006, p. 154)

These residues of memory – emotional and sensory imprints – stay with the body. "What remains – residual, excessive, or unprocessed – are the affective traces of power and resistance" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 163). What began as internalised blame became, through posthumanism, a site of accountability. As Braidotti (2010, p. 410) explains, "the practice of accountability (for one's embodied and embedded location) is a relational, collective activity of undoing power differentials between bodies. Nomadic theory offered a process to map remembered pain, to give it voice and location, and render it visible as matter worthy of consideration, ultimately as an opportunity for hopeful change.

Vikki Reynolds and Cathy Richardson are practitioners and academics who are both engaged in social justice-oriented community work, a framework that they use addresses this affect too, through what they call "spiritual pain" arising from witnessing injustice. I have taken my lead, in this instance, from their concept of "spiritual pain", which they explain stems from witnessing injustice and provide concepts for sustaining practitioners through collective ethics, solidarity, and justice-doing (Reynolds, 2012; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Reynolds, 2012). I acknowledge their offering of shared experience as a gift of meaning, conveying their heart felt work and our embodied engagement, our connection to one another as a collective of togetherness. It was from here that I was able to contemplate the specifics of my own frontline practitioner pain. Their gift of meaning deeply resonated with me as an embodied felt experience of ethical anguish. The ethical aspects of my work felt for me the place at which the blade met my skin and heart, as ethical and moral cuts. The anguish feels for me like relentless suffering – a

connection of shared empathic deep wrestling that maintains my connection to the women who have shared their lived realities with me. It is as if I carry a piece of their anguish with me in my affective embodied response. Ethical anguish centres the social and political tensions that arise when a practitioner is caught between their ethical responsibilities and the institutional or systemic constraints that compromise our ethical practice values. It grounds the distress not in metaphysical pain but in embodied, situated ongoing ethical conflict – anguish produced by being complicit in practices that violate one's commitment to justice, dignity, or relational care. Ethical anguish signals a relational and structural failing, and the anguish comes from within oneself from being entangled in ethically untenable situations, such as responding to violence through state-mandated processes that reproduce harm. Mobilising the affect terms of anguish enabled the lived experience of the embodiment of ethical wrongdoings and the systemic failure that gnaw relentlessly at my bones. Ethical anguish can be positioned as a site of refusal, resistance, and critical insight that signals ethical responsibilities of care – to both myself and those that I work in service of.

While working in family violence support, I have been complicit in institutions of harm that followed policy and processes that mirrored injustices I did not align with. I have practised in systems that ignored coercive control and structural oppression and was complicit with structures that compounded the violence. I mobilise this lived experience "ethical anguish", the professional and ethical pain of being made complicit or working with inadequate practice knowledge, that have informed harmful responses of systemic injustice. For me, this is a natural response to

institutional violence that is unethical. Like my clients, I resist, sometimes by quietly refusing harmful policies and sometimes openly through activism against systems that perpetuate harm, as wherever power exists, so does resistance (Foucault, 1980; Wade, 1997).

My resistance happens, here in this research and within practice.

My ethics of resistance stems from being made complicit in injustice and is exercised through my overtly held position as a frontline activist and researcher. I entered the family violence sector as a volunteer in 2007, naive and inexperienced. At that time, I did not realise I had entered a relationship with power (co-located).

As I am within the system, as a representative of its power and critical of it. I enact and resist power simultaneously. I am not separate from the structures I work in, and I am seen by some as an extension of its power.

I am entangled by and through my location.

I remain attuned to the ways power flows through me, and how I might interrupt that flow in ways that centre justice; as such, my location of self is as an activist.

In that, I see my responsibility to calling out systems that facilitate abuse,

– no longer silenced.

Assuming an overt social position of resistance that names the injustice of power, family violence, racism, colonisation, and the harmful social system responses received by others is activism because remaining silent in my work is still a position.

As remaining silent positions my complicity.

This project is born from the hope that awareness and insight may result in positive shifts in how people are responded to by institutional responders in the context of family violence and that others may also centre their ethical anguish as their signpost for speaking out.

Connecting the Threads

In bringing together these interconnected threads, this literature critique has laid the foundation for a critical examination of institutional responses to intimate partner violence in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It has traced the legacy of colonisation, the gendered and racialised nature of harm, and the neoliberal framings that continue to shape policy and practice. My critique has situated Social Entrapment Theory and Coercive Control as core conceptual frameworks, while also highlighting the persistent problem of harmful institutional responses that further entrench the suffering and entrapment of those seeking safety. Response-Based Practice has been presented as both a theoretical and ethical framework that offers a contextual approach, centring on resistance, restoring dignity, and calling attention to the powerful role of social responses. Finally, by introducing the concept of Institutional Systems Abuse as a distinct and critical concept, this critique frames the central concern of this research: the function of Institutional Systems Abuse as a tactic of Systemic Coercive Control. The chapter that follows communicates the process of memory work in harvesting memories, the creative work in reimagining and establishing the figurations as the material to be analysed.

Chapter 4: RHIZOMATIC MEMORY RECOLLECTIONS

> *I prefer to think of this way of relating to memory in terms of transpositions, that is to say as creative and highly generative interconnections which mix and match, mingle and multiply possibilities of expansion and growth among different units or entities.* (Braidotti, 2006, p. 171)

Drawing on Braidotti's (2019) concept of nomadic figurations, I began with memory work as a cartographic practice to generate material to be analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis. This chapter moves from, and with the memory work, towards and through the (re)collection of embodied and embedded memory fragments (Farrar, 2007; Haug, 2008, Morgan, 2013). This process involved using personal memories as generative prompts to create composite (re)imagined figurations that map territories of harmful professional encounters without reproducing identifiable experiences.

Beginning as a cartographer with embroidery in hand

Like a geographical cartographer, I went out into the world and mapped what was already there. This research presents a map of understanding of our contemporary conditions. Embodying Braidotti's (2013, 2019, 2010) cartographic principles I traversed and zigzagged the landscape embodied, embedded and embrained as a nomadic subject. As a political and social being, I embraced subjectivity and endowed myself with agency in pursuit of a type of power that Braidotti advocates, for it is affirmative in hopeful potential. I envisioned through imagination the role of

a cartographer, whose purpose is to create valuable representations of landscapes through situational material. This approach demands transparency regarding my reflexive role as an active and interpretive agent in the co-construction of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Embroidery has been used as a metaphor within this research project. Specifically, I use a feminist theoretical frame to hold the composition in place, allowing the various threads of the project to be woven into an embodied tapestry of narratives that emerge from the essence of lived experience. I think of the tapestry as a living cartographic metaphor for all that is interconnected through this shared purpose and the ongoing harms that persist. Each thread, valuable and unique in its colour, texture, and weight, holds its own story, yet only in its interplay with others does the larger narrative emerge. It was here that I felt responsible to gather these strands of sticky pain memories and ethical anguish and collect, collate, and sort them into some meaning-filled tapestry. This image became so vivid for me on this journey that I wanted to know what it felt like to embroider. Therefore, I joined an embroidery course and started working on my own embroidery projects.

Some threads run straight and true, forming the steady backbone of the design. I imagine these as the theoretical frameworks, methodology, and method. Other threads are the storytellers, who twist and loop, adding heartfelt, meaningful, and lively depth, infusing the tapestry with insight. Some threads are soft, some are bold, and some may seem frayed. However, no single strand could carry the weight of the image alone, providing affirmation that every contribution matters. I imagine that some of the finer threads are the storytellers, and the thicker, more textured fibres

are the roots of frameworks that tighten the softer threads holding each other in place. In this context, I am both a threader and a thread stitched in and amongst other threads. As I begin this process of enquiry, I start with the thread of self in that I make my location known.

The Role of Memory in Nomadic Subjectivity

According to Braidotti (2013a), the function of memory is crucial in shaping nomadic subjectivity, reasoning that it helps individuals become politically engaged and morally aware. She argues that embracing the radical ethics and politics of philosophical nomadism requires recalling the suffering, sorrow, and injustice experienced by marginalised and silenced individuals (Braidotti, 2010). This process is not just a reflection on the past but a deliberate use of oneself, which challenges the importance of bringing the past forward within a social and political landscape. Effectively mapping and presenting a landscape for the purpose of positive change is the primary role cartographies serve.

Memory-based research, as articulated by Braidotti (2010, 2019a, 2019b) and other feminist theorists (such as Frigga Haug (2008) and Mandy Morgan (2013)), acts as a bridge between theory and lived experience. Braidotti (2010, 2013a, 2013b) critiques traditional methodologies built on static and reductionist views of identity and knowledge, advocating for a more interconnected approach. This approach recognises the fluid, dynamic nature of memory, acknowledging that it is shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts.

Memory work as a form of material collection invites attention to the fluid, selective, and affectively charged nature of remembering embracing the shifting, relational, and contextual memories as a site of meaning-making.

Reflexive Traces: I Recall Her Face

One night, a few months ago, I arrived home, and my partner asked how my day had been. I began by telling him about a memory I was holding. I said I was walking out of the shop, and just as I was about to cross the road from the shop to the car park, I saw a small crowd of people standing over a person lying on the road. My mind began to make sense of what I was seeing. Firstly, I noticed that someone was trying to put what looked like a shopping bag under the person's head, and I could see that she was a young female. The person doing this looked older than the younger lady on the floor; she seemed familiar to her. I assumed in my mind that they were known to each other, and I went as far as thinking it was her Mum. She had her hand resting on the girl's body. I hear her say, "Help is on its way, hold on, love." I saw a wheelchair and two other younger girls beside her. I saw their faces etched in distress. Some people circled around her.

One man was standing in the road, directing the traffic around her. I realised that at this point, stopping would only add to the people staring at her. I considered her dignity and privacy in such a moment. I decided not to stop and continued to the car. I started my car, and

my lights were on automatic switch-on mode. They beamed straight into her face as she lay on the tar. I glanced up and, in that moment, just before I turned my lights off to reverse out in the dark. I saw her face; it was so pale, glass-like, and damp. Her eyes were full of tears, she was crying from pain, there was clear sticky fluid running from her nose and mouth. Her body was on its side; ferociously, she was shaking. Her experience of pain stayed with me as I drove home and talked about this memory.

I bring it from the past, and it now lingers in my kitchen and home in this moment. Over the following week, she weaves through my thoughts, I question whether I did the right thing in not stopping, I question the impact of my car lights in her face, did I make that moment harder for her? And mostly, I wonder how long it took to be pain-free and if she is ok now. She begins to settle in my mind; my memories of her ebb, flow and subside I stop thinking about her…for a while.

A few weeks later, when I go back to the same shop to buy food, and I walk out of the shop to my car, once again, my memory recalls from the past into the present. I can see her lying there in my mind's eye, and again I think of her, I requestion my decisions that night, I feel that same regret for my car lights shining on her face, and mostly I feel a desperate sense of wanting her to be well, to be pain free.

I am reflectively zigzagging back and forth, recalling this memory from the past…

Bearing witness to human suffering is not a passive experience but full of vitality where these moments are embedded, especially those that carry pain, feelings of inadequacy, and complicity, as I have experienced within my family violence work. The recalling of the memory fragments that I reimagine into the memory figurations to be studied through reflexive thematic analysis resembles a similar process to the one presented above – as I am bearing witness, I am involved, and this includes my choices of inaction – some memories, like this one, return uninvited, and some I consciously recall.

Subjective Coordinates of Memory

Braidotti's (2010, 2013a, 2019a) concept of *cartographies of memory* offers ways of thinking that challenge dominant power structures and encourage a more inclusive and diverse approach to identity and belonging. Haug (2008) claimed that everything remembered constitutes a "relevant trace" because it is remembered as part of identity formation, understood as engagement with self (Onyx & Small, 2001). Braidotti's cartographic methodology centres memory, narrative, situated accountability, and embodied location as transformative pathways for reconfiguring power relations. As she says that "Memory is never neutral or objective; it is shaped by social, political, and cultural contexts, and it is always subject to contestation and reinterpretation *(Braidotti, 2017, p. 62)*.

Memory comes from the past, lives in the present, and can be used to shape a better future. For Rosi Braidotti, "memory is a vital component of subjectivity, contributing

to the formation of personal identity, agency, and experience" (2019, p. 125). Memory is not solely located in the brain; it is also embodied and situated within the individual's physical and social environment. In this way, memory is a cognitive process shaped by broader cultural and social frameworks, including power relations and discursive practices. Counter-memory can be used in research to challenge dominant narratives and reveal hidden or marginalised perspectives (Farrar, 2007; Haug, n.d., 2008; Keightley, 2010; Morgan, 2013; Onyx & Small, 2001). Researchers can use counter-memory to uncover alternative histories and narratives suppressed or excluded from mainstream discourse to bring forward the "missing people" (Braidotti, 2010). Conducting posthuman research through nomadic practices entails constant movement and boundary crossing. Using nomadic practices in research provides a means of overcoming the limitations of static and stable notions of identity and subjectivity that are typically associated with anthropocentric worldviews (Braidotti, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2019b). Rather than being limited to a linear stack of memories, individuals construct their perspective through a narrative of recollected experiences. Memory, as method, enables the narratives to be heard and then analysed through thematic analysis, and in this research, it is used to (re)tell narratives from family violence work. To understand how power operates within this sector, I offer analysis of how harmful responses may occur so that understanding may better inform our responses as formal institutional responders in family violence work. This subjective perspective is not the result of a linear accumulation of memories, but a position formed by narratives of recollected experiences and is therefore reflective of my lived practitioner experience, which can be considered limited through Eurocentric ways of knowing the world.

Individuals are no longer tethered to a definitive, irrefutable point of reference but to an interpretation of memories aided by nomadic theories (Braidotti, 2010, 2019b; Ionescu et al., 2023; Onyx & Small, 2001).

Braidotti (2010) positions writing from memory or heart as sameness, affective imprints that are more visceral: "Writing from memory, or 'by heart' involves a number of precise methodological steps" – that are not bound by checking against actual commentary that is solely focussed on citations and instead work from the non-linear affective traces of what is left over, "…caught and stuck around, the drags and the sediments…" (Braidotti, 2010, p. 414).

Sometimes the stuck memories can show up unwantedly, uninvited and intrusively, and sometimes we purposefully go and fetch and recall them. Nomadic transpositions are creative acknowledgements of interconnections that thread together as possibility (Braidotti, 2006b, 2010). The focus here is not on representation or citation (reproducing what is known) – it is on a reflection of what remains, the stubborn sediments of memory. In this way, sometimes I follow my memory threads of past experiences, as I am led in a way that is fluid, allowing the project to take a shape and sometimes the memories are self-directed, in that I actively pursue them through specific acts such as quite sitting and journaling. Embodied and embedded locations are relational, as such a collective activity against power differentials is linked to two fundamental notions: memory and narratives (Braidotti, 2010), in that recognition is given to partial and limited claims to knowledge, as a rejection of universalism, as the (un)following of dominant modes of teaching philosophy in the academic world today. Posthuman critical

theory is a form of inquiry that is post-anthropocentrism and necessarily relational (human and non-human) (Braidotti, 2013b, 2019a; Braidotti et al., 2018). As subjects, we are understood as relational, embodied, and embedded and being embrained in that knowledge can represent memory and narratives as critical elements within research that is socially and politically located, which Braidotti (2010) explains as the politics of location.

> *They activate the process of bringing into discursive representation that which escapes self-representation and can only be disclosed by the active intervention of others. Accounts of these 'politics of locations' are cartographies of power that go beyond genealogical self-narratives and express a view of subjectivity that is relational and outside-directed.* (Braidotti 2010, p. 409)

Therefore, to create a political memory of the past, empowering creative alternatives, I move with Braidotti as she talks about the importance of using ourselves as instruments from which we can obtain material worthy of study. Braidotti expresses that "[c]reativity is a nomadic process in that it entails the active displacement of dominant formations of identity, memory and identification. Becoming has to do with emptying out the self, opening it out to possible encounters with the 'outside'" (2010, p. 416).

Reflexive Trace: Sticky Pain

I reimagine a moment (built from many moments) in supervision practice, the supervisee said:

> *"I can't stop crying, I cry about most things these days, look at this scar across my chest, I have a machine in there now, pumping blood to my heart, I believe the stress of this work can kill you as it nearly killed me. I don't think I can do this work anymore; it's a pity as I am good at my job." She continued to share with me, "…I was listening to a person talk about how her partner smashed her head repeatedly on the kitchen counter and without realising it, in mid conversation, I raised my hands to cover my ears. I just couldn't listen anymore."*
>
> (Composite memory, anonymised)

My heart went out to them. I know that feeling, I know the reality of sticky pain narratives, and I know that some stories never leave us; they get trapped within, so eventually space to embed and embody becomes saturated. It is not the same as hearing ordinary everyday life stories that may leave a person feeling curious; pain narratives leave an affective pain imprint. In this situation I am referring to the residual emotional, sensory, and embodied traces left by experiences, interactions, or engagements with others. These imprints are central to the nomadic subject's process of becoming and are tied to memory, creativity, and relationality (Braidotti, 2013a).

It is from this knowing that I (re)present throughout this project materials from lived experience as my own memory fragments. The narratives I share draw on a collection of memories, things I cannot forget; as they struggle restlessly within me, they protest the undoing in my memory, they repeat on me like a bad meal that refuses to digest. They are a composite of what I have been told within my work as a family violence counsellor, supervisor, and educator. At this moment, my memory recalls my mother's voice. At the time of writing this, she died, and my heart aches with longing.

Reflexive Traces: Mumma Mishmash of Things

As I type, my eyes well up in response to this yearning for her. I focus on the comfort of her voice whispering quietly inside my head and heart as I hear her say, "A kind-of-mishmash of things, hey Jac," and I reply out loud to myself, "Yes, Mumma, a kind-of-mishmash of things." I linger here for a moment to catch my breath as my heart struggles to reconcile my loss of her as the pain pierces through my being.

Traversing and Zigzagging-Harvesting Material

I engaged with two main non-linear concepts of information gathering derived from the methodological foundations of nomadic nationalism: traversing and zigzagging (Braidotti, 2010). Braidotti's nomadic theory critiques the dominance of linear models of memory across the humanities and social sciences, proposing instead that critique and creativity must operate together in the pursuit of affirmative alternatives. In this view, memory is reimagined non-linearly: as a generative

process bound up with imagination, creation, and continual becoming (Braidotti, 2013).

Nomadism encourages researchers to traverse different fields and perspectives like a nomad moving through various territories without a fixed location. This process reflects my engagement with the literature on harmful responses and the harvesting of memory fragments as material for analysis. Traversing involves exploring different fields to gather information and perspectives, acknowledging that knowledge is not confined to a single domain; it is enriched by incorporating insights from various sources. The zigzagging of my memory complemented traversing the literature by emphasising the inquiry's non-linear and often unpredictable paths. Zigzagging acknowledges the memory recall processes fluidity, creativity, and complexity, mobilising an iterative and dynamic process that adapted to the evolving nature of the inquiry.

By integrating traversing and zigzagging as part of the material collection methods, I employed a combined approach that allowed for continuous interplay between traversing the literature and zigzagging memory recall. For Braidotti (2010), linearity poses a particular methodological problem for radical epistemologies and marginal discourses, since it raises the question of how to build a system of knowledge transfer that is coherent without being hierarchical – particularly when transmitting the cultural and political memory of the past, memory that official institutional culture often fails to recognise.

The traversal across literature and memory served as a fitting process in the collection of research material, honouring the rhizomatic process that enabled me

to assemble rhizomatic pathways to weave my stories together. Embracing these non-linear, dynamic processes, I produced information useful in reflecting complex social phenomena, moving beyond traditional static and reductionist approaches.

Reflexivity is not contained within a part; rather, it is something that is infused in each thread and between the threads that zigzag alongside each other, and it is intertwined within the tapestry of my research. The process of collecting the memories to build my figurations zig-zagged and flowed between recalling a memory and reading research on harmful responses, and sometimes that would prompt further memory recall. The flow between the two processes, traversing and zigzagging, was complementary and positive, creating progress and movement, each enhancing the effectiveness of the other.

I remained engaged in the activity of remembering for a period of 6 months. Once I had assembled enough memory fragments, I recrafted and reassembled them into reimagined figurations for study.

My memory (re)collection unfolded through both structured and unstructured processes. The assemblag(ing) process vacillated between times of active conscious memory recall and a more random process of memories surfacing unprompted throughout my day (and night). My memories initially flowed, and I noted them in various formats. I scribbled on bits of paper, I typed into a Word document, I jotted on the notepad by my bedside table, I scribbled notes on my hand as prompts for later recall, I left myself audio notes on my phone, and I filled many Post-it notes. I traversed various literature on harmful responses; some examples included Family Violence Death Reviews (2014), various Backbone

Collective reports (Backbone Collective, 2020, 2024), Social Entrapment Theory literature (Douglas et al., 2021; Ptacek, 1999; Wilson et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2015), legal systems abuse research (Douglas, 2018; Reeves, 2020, 2020b; Tolmie et al., 2024), and Response-Based Practice (Coates & Wade, 2007; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008; Wade, 1997b; Wade et al., 2007).

When I reached about one hundred memory fragments, I decided to stop collecting them. I transitioned to collating them into a Word document that I later moved to an Excel workbook. The number of collected memory fragments had no significant relevance to the technique other than I had given sufficient time to the remembering phase (6 months), and the content felt sufficient to transition to the next part of the research process.

Memory Traces – Shapeless, Disconnected and Messy

Once I had gathered what I had curated together, I just sat with it for a while, feeling overwhelmed and confused by how any of this could be helpful or valuable to anyone. I journaled about my doubts, I took it to supervision, and into my kitchen at home as I shared my doubts with family. A metaphor offering hope came to mind. I visualised my children's Lego on the floor; I would look at it and think, "What a mess." And then, as time passed, my boys would build something from what I thought was a mess. I am also reminded by Braun and Clarke (2022), who said that qualitative reflexive thematic analysis is messy, organic, and complex. I think they could have added "deeply frustrating" and "confusing".

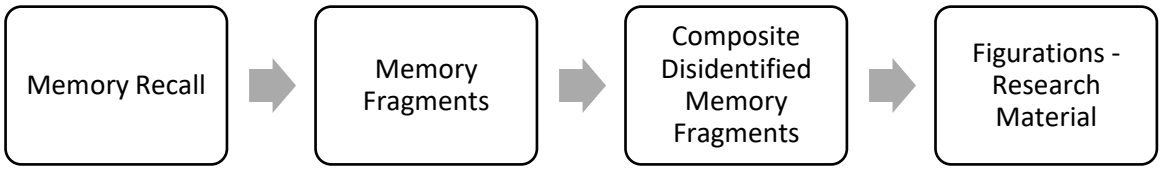
The words "rhizomatic repetitive flows" came to mind at this stage, and I went back and reread Braidotti's (2013a, 2010) work to find where I had read about this

concept, a non-linear, decentralised, and continuously evolving concept of growth and connection. Braidotti (2013) presents the idea of a rhizome from a root system that spreads out in various directions, forming connections without a central or hierarchical structure. In the context of knowledge and ideas, rhizomatic flows represent how concepts and practices can develop through continuous, repeated interactions and connections, forming an intricate web rather than a straightforward path. This approach enables multiple entry and exits points, reflecting the complexity and multiplicity of real-world phenomena, and fosters a more fluid and dynamic understanding of processes and relationships.

The concept of assemblages felt relevant here, too, as I loosely considered the threads that lay in front of me. Braidotti (2013) refers to assemblages as a way of understanding how power, agency, and harm are distributed across complex, relational networks of human and non-human actors as entanglements. I am reminded of Kuhn (2010) in her use of memory as a performed task, which is constructed and reconstructed through the act of remembering, often in response to material triggers like photographs, artefacts, or spaces. I began to see tiny glimpses of the systemic responses as assemblages composed of intersecting elements, such as policies, institutional practices, human actors, discourses, emotions, technologies, material things, and places. These components seemed to fit in as part of the rhizomatic collections, and I suppose in retrospect it was the beginning of realising that I needed to consider all aspects of the memories both human and non-human.

As I transcribed the memory fragments into the Word table as figurations, I took time to carefully curate these narratives to connect the narratives to the voices of women whose stories are the hearings I remember. Without identifying anyone, I have chosen women's names to accompany each story to protect and anonymise the voices, which later became threads and then thematic accounts. Kuhn (2010, p. 299) discusses the concept that "memory texts" are co-creations that serve as both containers and activators of memory. These texts do not merely record memories; they shape how memories are experienced and interpreted. In other words, they are co-creators of memory. Working ethically, as I formalised my memories into figurations to be studied as my material, I began dividing some of the stories into small fragments rather than one long story. Through this process of anonymising the narratives into fragments, they became entangled and interconnected, representing composite narrative sediments as figurations. The process of repeatedly working with assemblages through body, paper, and writing-mirrors reflected Kuhn's notion of memory work as a performative, affective practice (2010). When I gathered and laid out pieces, I was mindful that I was not retrieving objective facts but constructing memory through material and emotional engagements with and through affective recall.

Figure 2: *From Memory fragments to Figurations*



I repeated this process (Figure 2) many times, gathering fragments, laying them out, writing and re-writing them into figurations, looking both backward and forward. I moved through confusion while holding all the raw material between my body, scattered bits of paper, and the Word table. While I curated and created my figurations as material for the study, I realised that I had formally begun to engage with the first phase of reflexive thematic analysis, the familiarisation with the information. Reflexively, this recognition had been enabled through a non-hierarchical process of rhizomatic engagement with the "mess", as like my children's Lego, each resembling memory fragments as figurations and assemblages.

From here I stayed with the collection of figurations and assemblages to identify themes that ran through and between them. The themes supported and built the pathways that later mapped the findings maintained within the cartography through the analysis and discussion.

Chapter 5: THE REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This chapter describes my active engagement with the process and phases of reflexive thematic analysis and in the building of the of sociopolitical cartographic map and the subsequent pathways that lead me to this map. It is here that the cartographic map is overlaid with and through the reflexive thematic analysis as the former is the theory and the latter a process, and they work in collaboration with each other to build and inform the pathways.

A note regarding this raw material

In Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), the inclusion of full raw material is neither required nor always appropriate. Instead, the emphasis was placed on the transparency of the analytic process, reflexive engagement, and the use of illustrative extracts to demonstrate how meaning and themes were developed (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA explicitly rejects the notion of themes being "discovered" in data; instead, it frames them as actively generated through the researcher's interpretive lens. This necessitates an account of analytic decisions and the researcher's positioning rather than an exhaustive presentation of material. In contexts where materials are subjective, embodied, or ethically sensitive, such as memory work or trauma-related research, the reproduction of raw material can risk harm or misrepresentation, even when anonymised (Kuhn, 2010). Within feminist and posthuman frameworks, where the researcher's body is understood as both a site and source of knowledge, material may exist in affective and fragmentary forms and thus cannot be presented in the conventional sense. In these situations, what requires confidentiality, selected fragments, and reflexive narratives becomes the

primary method of evidencing analytic rigour, offering insight into meaning-making without violating the dignity or context of the lived experiences recalled. The raw materials provided for this research are threads of different memories, re-storied for the purpose of weaving the tapestry of my embedded, embodied, and embrained experiences. However, I added an additional layer into the process, to assist with relevance and rigor, which involved opportunities to share my findings with community. I wanted a sense of how valuable or useful my research might be to their work on the frontline. The feedback was positive, as I was invited to offer more workshops with attendees joining from throughout Aotearoa and even from Australia.

Reflexive Traces: Re-encountering the Past

Re-encountering the past, scribbled notes, patterns, and pathways an example of how they showed up as an imagined memory

I am awake now; I feel slightly nauseous. I sit up and swing my legs out of bed onto the floor. It is dark.

I glance at my phone; it is 2:59 am.

Without permission, my mind travels back to a group supervision session that I facilitated a few days before with a group of family violence responders. I imagine that I can see a clinician talking about a client situation, her eyes welling up with tears as she talks about this nameless, faceless woman who has touched her heart. The clinician re-tells this woman's story of a harmful institutional

response. A mother of five children, a victim-survivor of horrendous intimate partner violence, is accused of harming her ten-year-old son. She explains that her client has resisted his violence and protected her children for as long as she can remember. She describes her client's presentation as tough and guarded. Her body is strong, and her face wears scars and tattoos of belonging. She has resisted his violence, and she has been misidentified as the predominant aggressor in this relationship. The counsellor explained that the woman's son was experiencing repeated fractures and that she was accused and investigated for causing these repeated injuries. Later, after further medical investigation, it was found that he had a bone disease (osteoporosis), which was the real cause of the fractures.

In the moment I respond to the clinician's tearfulness, I feel my eyes well up with compassion. I don't know this woman, and I don't know the pain of being told your child is sick, but I know the pain of wrongness and injustice. I asked the clinical practitioner to share what was most distressing for her about this, and she said two things. Firstly, the harmful response, and secondly, her feelings of inadequacy as she explains her sense of initial hopelessness of her ability to make a therapeutic difference in situations like this – as there are many.

Once we have worked with the supervisees presenting concerns, I ask her towards the end of the session what she thinks has contributed to her client receiving a harmful response. She says that the responders judged her client based on how she presented herself. I mentally note how this experience connects to the pathways I have established, specifically concerning responder failures and the concerns already noted about the problems of simplistic presentations and predominant aggressors. I make a note as a reminder that simplistic presentations are pertinent to victims, too.

While sitting up on my bed in the dark, I am thinking, why am I involuntary reencountering this memory moment? Why is it jolting my body from sleep? Why is it causing nausea and wakefulness? Why is it restless? As I sit there, I realise that the impact of harmful responses is so disturbing that it has rippled through from the victims (child and mother) to the supervisee and now the supervisor.

The invisible threads of wrongness, injustice, pain, and cruelty tie us tightly together in the early hours of the day.

The harmful responses remembered refuse to remain within me; they are no longer exclusively contained within me. They sit and wait on the paper pad next to my bed, resting there in the dark until I add them to my research

spreadsheet. There, they connect and disconnect with the 'other othered' fragments of painful narratives recollected from memory. I'll then label them with a word, the word labels grow into themed clusters, the strings between the labels join to become composite figurations.

In this composite figuration, I used the code label of "simplistic presentation of victims and predominant aggressors" – this changed as I progressed through my themes. I decided that professionals responding to simplistic presentations was an issue worthy of consideration with both predominant aggressors and victims; this memory reminded me of this. Allowing myself to be led by the memory fragments, I nomadically traverse back to the literature, where it said predominant aggressors can present themselves as kind, charming, and vulnerable and victims as angry, threatening, and aggressive (Coates et al., 2019; Reeves, 2021). As I sat with this, I realised that this is not a theme but rather a condition that influenced a theme, not an entirely independent theme.

A Cartographic Engagement with Reflexive Thematic Practice

Braun and Clarke's six-phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) framework (2022) provides the procedural scaffolding for my analysis, while Braidotti's cartographic method offers the conceptual and ethical grounding. RTA's emphasis on flexibility, researcher reflexivity, and meaning-making aligns closely with Braidotti's vision of cartography as a situated, embodied, and affective practice that resists linearity and universalism (Braidotti, 2011, 2019). Rather than treating RTA's phases as sequential steps, I moved through them nomadically, reading, coding, theming, and refining

in a recursive, zigzagging rhythm that echoes Braidotti's call to think through complexity and trace the shifting forces that shape meaning. The process was both temporal and epistemological: I returned repeatedly to earlier phases as new insights emerged, revealing connections between memory fragments, silences, resistances, and institutional discourses.

Reflexive thematic analysis and cartography converge in their rejection of objectivity and their embrace of reflexive positionality. Both approaches understand analysis as a creative, iterative process shaped by the researcher's location, theoretical commitments, and ethical obligations. My thematic analysis is therefore not a neutral act of categorisation but a feminist cartographic practice – one that maps power, complicity, and resistance as they materialise in lived experience and institutional response. In tracing these entanglements, I honour Braidotti's imperative to produce critical cartographies of the present (2011) and affirm the researcher's role as a participant in the ethical and political work of meaning-making. Like Braidotti's nomadic theory, which emphasises non-linear, affective, and rhizomatic engagement, RTA encourages deep immersion, recursive reflection, and the researcher's theoretical positioning as central to analysis. Braidotti's call for "creative repetitions" (2022, p. 412) and "empowering alternatives" (2022, p. 414) resonates with RTA's emphasis on flexibility, fluidity, and ethical responsiveness.

Phase 1: Familiarisation – Mapping the Territory

The familiarisation phase for this project began almost 20 years before I formally engaged in this research, and then formally when I began to reimagine the memory fragments to be studied. It began when I started actively listening to people sharing

with me about harmful responses they had received within the context of family violence support services. The memory work section above details and explains how I collected the material from embodied memory. The familiarisation phase was formally initiated with remembering (memory work), which is the reflexive recall of memories of conversations and stories told. In this way, the memories are the material of analysis, and they are not 'raw' but inhabited by stories told and like the threads are already formed when the weaving begins. The stories told are spun into the threads, creating the different colours and textures to be studied. This re-submerged me deeply and formally in the familiarisation phase. This process felt visceral to me; it was a clinical reminder to me that remembering is embodied and embrained within (Braidotti, 2019a; Farrar, 2001; Van der Kolk, 2015). Once these memory fragments were harvested, they were repositioned as figurations of the material to be carefully studied. I use the adjective "carefully" to highlight both attributes of this word, paying careful attention to detail while working with a care-full mindset that honours these life experiences, not as data but as remembered memories of lives.

Once I had collected the memory fragments, I sat with them, realising that I had collected a pile of harmful responses, and at its essence was a pile of human pain narratives. In the first stage of familiarisation, I remembered what Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 12) had said about writing material up: "you will develop a far more thorough understanding of your data through having transcribed it". Initially, I typed the figurations into a Word table, thinking I might cut them up and arrange them like word puzzles on a fridge. However, once I had done that, I realised that with so

many figurations, it would be more confusing. I then transferred the figurations to a Word document table and then again to an Excel spreadsheet. I decided to use Excel, which allowed me to interact with the information through various functions, tables, and tabs. As mentioned, I entered the memory narratives as non-identifying memory fragments which I had drafted as cartographic figurations and assemblages. They were small snippets rather than long stories, while removing any identifying features. I considered this stage yet another opportunity to sweep the memory fragments clean, double-checking to ensure anonymity while immersing myself again within the memory collected.

In the second stage of familiarisation, the critical engagement stage, I went back through the figurations again (and again) and asked myself questions that deepened semantic and latent understandings. In conversation with myself and the memory fragments, I asked, "What did she say about the context of the situation?" and "What was important to her in telling me this story?" "Did she mention who was involved?" "What was important for her that she needed me to understand?" and "What was it about this story that caused so much pain for her?" These were questions to deepen my understanding of the who, what, and how of the harmful response. I set up a column in my spreadsheet in which I asked myself questions about the figurations. It was only afterwards, when I was reworking the process, that I realised that it was a formal suggestion within reflexive thematic analysis that I had engaged in intuitively.

At this stage in the process, it is not uncommon for some preliminary notes or ideas to be developed that may become initial codes in subsequent phases. I had some

vague thoughts, but nothing was clear at this stage; a small amount of panic began to surface as my research travel companions "doubt and overwhelm" hovered in the air as I worked. I acknowledged my insecurities and reminded myself that Braun and Clarke (2022) advocate for non-linear reiterative processes, an idea that connects nomadic theory and the importance of rhizomatic repetitive flows – a non-linear, decentralised, and continuously evolving concept of growth and connection (2013a, 2010).

Reflexive Traces: Feeling Lost

During the analysis phase, my son entered my study, and his gaze swept across the walls. His head tilted and I followed his eyes as they wandered across the walls that have transformed into a sea of Post-it notes.

> *He said, "Wow Mum, that's a lot of notes on your walls. What's going on in here?"*
>
> *I stopped what I was doing and looked up at him, and in that moment, I saw that the walls looked like a maze of scattered notes, like a scene from a detective thriller. I saw the chaos of my inner world reflected in his eyes and on my walls.*
>
> *In that moment, I said, "I am not really sure, to be totally honest.".*
>
> *He had a soft chuckle, and asked me if I was ok (clearly, I was not).*
>
> *I was still in the mess of it all.*

I was mindful that I needed to traverse backwards along a thread of understanding to see the pattern. This thought became my mantra throughout the analysis phase. I followed it through by asking more reflexive questions to ensure that I established the main pathways with rigour. I noticed that this example illustrated two supporting aspects of a central theme and a sub-theme that I had already developed: predominant aggressor manipulation and practice failures (later revised to harmful practices). This continual process of reconsideration and reconfiguration was ongoing, and I felt uncertain that it would ever be complete. However, the process led me to this thematic map, a pattern identified based on regularity, making it recognisable and built on its reoccurrence and relevance to the research aims.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes – Tracing the Fault Lines

I was still a little frozen at this point as the familiarisation phase did not bring about initial codes. Using my cartography compass, I decided to reorient towards my true north by reconnecting to my research aims, prompted by Braun and Clarke (2022). This was to understand how harmful responses take place in institutional family violence responses. I went back to the figurations and began asking myself questions to study and extract information from each line. I remembered Braidotti's golden rules for posthuman critical theory methodology guidelines: "cartography accuracy, with the corollary of ethical accountability; trans-disciplinarity; and the importance of combining critique and creative figurations; the principle of non-linearity; the powers of memory and the imagination" (2010, p. 163). As I had so far

harnessed these aspects along the way, I continued with a feeling of alignment and working with the figurations, looking closely for connections and patterns.

I embraced this aspect of creativity and imagination and asked the memory fragments questions that were designed to stimulate responses, whether imagined or real. What did this person tell me about how they thought this harmful response occurred, and what was felt in this lived experience?

I now had another column of coding information, which rendered visible more specific details, and I experienced this idea of labels as codes, which was highlighted in phase one. I reflected on this delayed experience in the process and felt that I had stopped short in my conversation with the memory fragments in phase one. I traversed back and forth between phases one and two, deepening my connection to the various threads and starting to see which could begin to thicken up collectively into yarn. The cartographic process aligns with this process in identifying recurring intensities, tensions, or relational patterns in the terrain. These are not rigid "codes" but markers, points of interest where forces, power relations, or discursive currents are active. The process now felt easier and my feelings of doubt and being overwhelmed had faded. I could flicker between semantic and latent understandings, promoted by my ongoing re-engagement with the figurations. Within reflexive thematic analysis approach Braun and Clarke (2022) advocate that the researcher must give qualitative material meaning, in that it does not appear but is created by the researcher. While picking apart each harmful response, in my mind's eye, I drew and scribbled on paper spider-like rhizomatic

storylines for myself that connected the threads together between the various fragments, which later evolved into more distinct pathways.

Phase 3: Generating Initial Themes – Plotting Cartographic Points

As I re-engaged with the figurations, I set up another column and pulled through threads from my previous notes to understand how this occurred. I also pulled through words and phrases that stood out for me regarding my research aims (who, how, and, what of understanding how harmful responses may happen in family violence work). At this stage, I copied aspects of the initial labels as codes that I had given, i.e. words like "manipulation", "manipulation of system actor", "process failure", and "policy failure", and I pasted them in the adjacent column. It was at this point I was aware that the word "failure" was being used instead of "harmful". I took a reflexive break to consider this shift, and I noted that the word "harmful" spoke to the impact, and then I thought it was a failure of some sort that caused the harm. I thought more about the word "failure" and decided that as I was looking for information in lived experience, initial labelling of the word "failure" felt like an authentic way to express harm and betrayal experienced by a system. As it validated the subjective impact of systemic inadequacies, for now, this word found a place to rest in my mind and within my spreadsheet. I continued with this thread of sense-making, and I asked myself what had failed. Although still a mess, like the children's Lego on the floor, it began to take on a shape of sorts. I noticed that I felt moved into action by the word "failure" and I again reflected and wondered if my personal affective feeling response of angry about this ongoing institutional harm was manifesting here.

I thought of Braidotti as she reminded me of the value of working towards a social horizon of hope from affective imprints. At this point, I thought if we can understand what fails, then we may know more about what can be changed. Within family violence legal and institutional responding, we know that harmful responses take place (Backbone Collective, 2020; Cashmore et al., 1993; Douglas, 2018; Ptacek, 1999; Wilson et al., 2021). However, less is known about how they take place, especially within in institutional responding, as harmful responses are abstractions; they have no ownership, no understanding of what took place to cause this harm, and subsequently no accountability. I felt encouraged as I began to identify various word group that formed cluster codes such as "failure, manipulation and misunderstood", as I was also picking up the threads from figurations that spoke to how perpetrators were able to gain favour and position themselves favourably within social communities, the experience of dichotomy between the women's experiences of the perpetrator, and the perpetrators' ability to solicit support within community. I felt a shift from impact to understanding was taking place, although I still could not articulate it. It was moving towards an understanding based on how the perpetrator enlisted others as allies in infiltrating social systems. This movement seemed to follow one hub of the figurations and then there was a second theme beginning to gather that related to codes and words that spoke to unhelpful professional responses, which circled back to the first few codes that came through, such as systems that failed. These affective flows thickened the threads of the tapestry, appearing as repeated manoeuvres of manipulation and recurring configurations of power and resistance. The process now embodied a feisty kind of energy; my curiosity was peaking, and I could not put it down, so I picked at the

spreadsheet at every moment I got. I then began drawing together overlapping and similar words and phrases, which appeared like loose and frayed ends in the tapestry. Gathering these threads into patterns was slow and time-consuming, as I returned to the sections of my memory notes, testing how each strand might be rewoven, added to others to form thickened yarn-codes, or whether to knot it into an existing cluster or begin a new strand.

Phase 4: Developing Cartographic Themes

I continued to engage with the narrative figurations that I had created. I was reminded by Braun and Clarke that "[I]t will become evident that some candidate themes are not really themes … while others might collapse into each other … other themes might need to be broken down into separate themes" and others absolved (2006, p. 16). I modified and adjusted themes, accordingly, noting specifically that some memory fragments relate to harmful legal responses, which was not the focus of this research project. Instead, I focused on social and institutional responses.

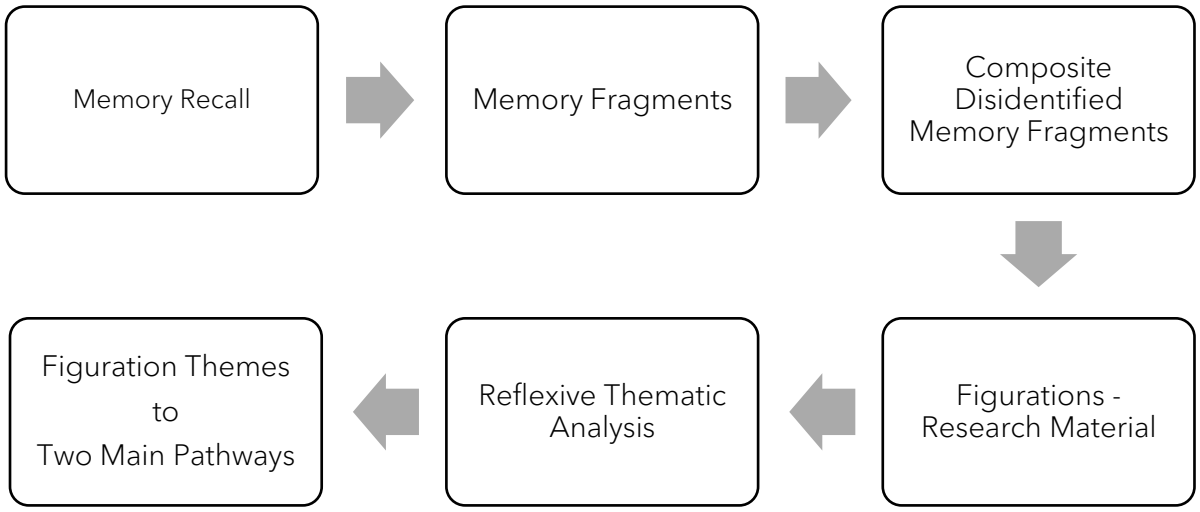
I continued systematically organising and grouping figurations into meaningful themes, tracing how threads of connection began to weave into patterns. In qualitative research, this process is essential for making sense of the material, allowing recurring themes, relationships, and insights to be recognised. The practical aspect of moving the information appealed to me, so I started to use Post-it notes again, but this time with potential themes, not the individual figurations. I pasted them over my walls and moved them around in the hope of seeing more. Like my children with Lego, I began interacting with the information, moving parts from here to there and seeing what fitted together. I re-read each figuration,

reflecting on and engaging with them while the research aims acted as the fabric hoop that held the material taut, setting the guiding boundaries. Like a cartographer following true north, these boundaries kept me aligned, ensuring that the threads I traced stayed connected to the larger cartography of inquiry. I wondered what we need to know as institutional responders that may help us understand the lived experience of harmful responses and what we need to understand that may inform a better response. What are clients collectively saying, and where do their narratives overlap? I listened for the patterns that connect these stories, as both cartographer and weaver. As a cartographer, I traced the gridlines and marked the contours of the terrain; as a weaver, I noticed how the threads knotted and entwined, thickening into motifs of meaning. Through active engagement with the memory fragments, I began to sketch maps and stitch tapestries, generating themes that hold both the texture and the shape of the ground I was charting.

Phases 5 and 6: Analysis: Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussions of phases five and six (refining themes and the write-up) are presented as the analysis, an approach advocated by Braun and Clark (2022). This was an appropriate approach, as it enabled the conceptualisation of the findings and the research aims to come together, providing relevant and contextual understandings within the specific location of family violence work, thereby remaining located and situated. The figure below is a journey summary map that reflects the process that began with memory and led to the creation ofpathways.

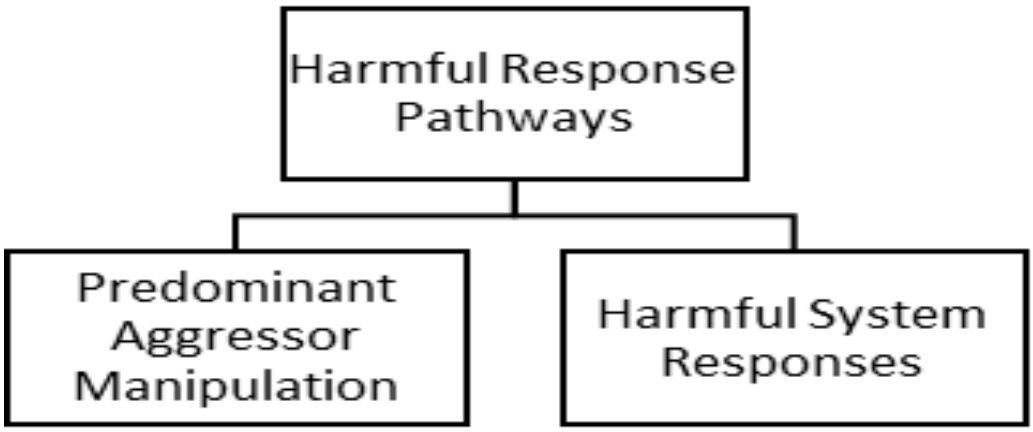
Figure 3: *Moving from Figurations to Pathways*



The figurations are the foundational research material that allowed for the construction of the two main pathways. I identified the two main pathways (see figure below) through engaging with reflexive thematic analysis and the embedded cartographic method of working iteratively with the phases and process, involving familiarisation, coding, and theme development - that establish the cartographic map of harmful responses. These pathways provide insight into how harmful institutional responses may occur in the context of family violence work. I have presented them as pathways because they demonstrate more than commonality; they demonstrate the ways in which harmful responses can happen, and the point of a pathway is that it is not only relevant to a cartographic map but also highlights a path – a path for disruption. The two main pathways are Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) and Harmful System Responses (HSR). I then added four sub-pathways to the PAM pathway: 1) Manipulation of social communities, 2)

Manipulation of organisations, 3) Manipulation of professionals, and 4) Manipulation of formal support institutions. The pathway of Harmful System Responses (HSR) contains two sub-pathways: 1) Harmful Policies, Procedures, and Processes and 2) Harmful Practices. It is significant to note that there is overlap between the pathways in that a harmful response may involve more than one pathway or sub-pathway. The analysis and discussion that follows over the subsequent chapters demonstrates how I came to understand and establish these pathways and sub-pathways.

Figure 4: *Two Main Pathways*



Reflexive Traces: Stitching and Drifting

I am sitting in my embroidery class with a group of welcoming-women. They are older than me and come from different walks of

life, yet we are stitched together in this space by the sound of the thread moving in and out of our drum-like fabric, stretched tightly between the wood on the embroidery hoop. The room is sun-filled, it smells of tea, and women natter joyfully. Their conversation relaxes my mind, and soon, my mind starts to drift… I look at the pattern I have traced onto my fabric and carefully follow it with my needle. It weaves in and out of the fabric, making a tiny popping sound each time it pierces the taut skin-like-fabric.

Stitching and Drifting

As I stitch, my thoughts drift back to my research project, and I begin reflecting on the significance of patterns. My inner voice continues to drift… I think patterns are the underlying order of things. They represent the structure and logic behind seemingly random aspects of life – from nature to mathematics, art, and even human behaviour. I wonder if I am looking for a human behaviour-type pattern, a way of understanding something that is not random but potentially predictable in some ways. Mathematical patterns, I remind myself, are foundational to understanding the world scientifically. Equations, sequences, and geometrical shapes all follow patterns that describe everything from the motion of planets to the growth of populations. I continue to follow the line I am stitching and thinking… patterns not only provide information that allows us to

predict behaviours, trends, and phenomena but also provide some understanding about the regularities beneath the surface.

I glance up to see if anyone has noticed my disappearance; they have not. I refocus my attention on the leaf pattern on my embroidery hoop while I embrace the warm nattering of the women.

Later, when I return to my desk, I scribble more on this thought. Patterns are always there, whether we notice them or not. All we do is bring them to light. Today in embroidery class, I was stitching a leaf using a stem stitch and offered it my full attention. In doing this, I considered the most prominent pattern in the leaf, its venation, and the arrangement of veins will determine the outcome and success of the pattern I stitch. The fine detail requires my close consideration of this leaf's pattern. I must closely look if I am to see the spirals of a seashell, the branches of trees, the symmetry of flowers and the venation of this leaf, as it is here that all complex phenomena are governed by underlying principles that show the inherent order in the world we live in.

This small leaf pattern that rests on my embroidery hoop has allowed me to travel to unexpected places today, yet I am still circling back to the importance of considering patterns to understand the underlying order of things. While a leaf's texture or colour might offer alternative analytical pathways, inviting attention to affect, tone, or surface response, it is the venation that speaks most directly to structure, pattern, and movement. It draws my attention, not to what is seen at first

glance, but to what shapes and constrains how the leaf holds itself, just as institutional structures shape and constrain responses to family violence.

Chapter 6: ANALYSIS – PATHWAY ONE

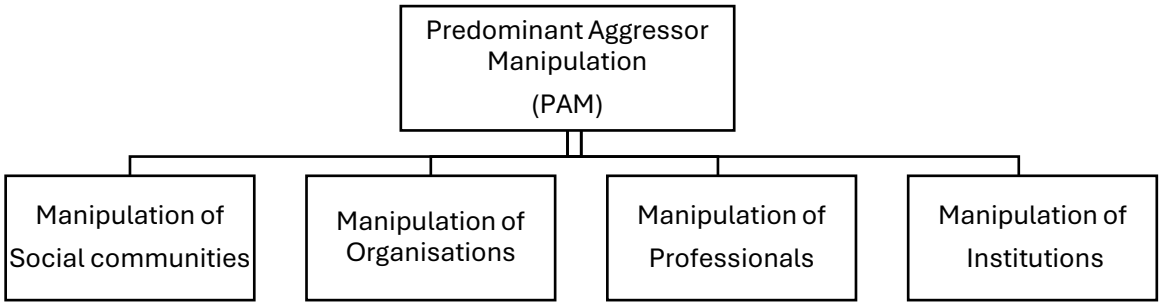
PREDOMINANT AGGRESSOR MANIPULATION (PAM)

I learnt from listening to the women who shared their lived experiences with me that some of the most devastating violence leaves no visible mark. It is delivered in words, behaviours, silences, and the careful bending of a person's sense of reality. In the intimate space of a relationship, manipulation and gaslighting work together to erode certainty, to unhinge a woman from the very core of her inner knowing. This is a tactic performed with precision inside coercive control, designed to destabilise, discredit, remove agency, restrict freedoms, and make resistance look unreasonable or unstable. This abuse form is likened to "intimate terrorism", where the abuser uses manipulation and control to entrap primary victims, depriving them of autonomy, dignity, and liberty (Beckwith et al., 2023; Chapman, 2023; Stark, 2009, 2012b).

In the composite figurations that follow, I return to the moments where manipulation was not just a private cruelty – it was a public performance. These figurations speak to the Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) pathway that present a set of strategies where the patterns of deception, distortion, and reality-rewriting that are used in direct relationship abuse with the primary-victim are now extended to social spaces. The same tactics of manipulation are repurposed to extend control through friends, colleagues, professionals, and entire systems that reposition her response to his abuse as unstable, vindictive, or untruthful. The consequences are profound: her isolation deepens, her access to safety and justice narrows, and systems meant to protect her can be drawn into amplifying the abuse.

In this chapter, I extrapolate the various aspects of this abuse form from the intimate sphere into the social spaces where it flourishes and trace how coercive control becomes the foundation for institutional and community-level manipulation. What follows is a presentation of curated figurations analysed to convey social manipulation. I closely considered them to understand how they benefited the perpetrator and how they further harmed the primary victim. I applied a posthuman critical feminist lens (Braidotti, 2013b, 2019a; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gavey, 2011; Radtke et al., 2023), coercive control (Beck, 1993; Beckwith et al., 2023; Stark, 2009) and Response-Based Practice (Coates & Wade, 2007; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008; Wade et al., 2007) ideas to make sense of the social response in relation to power and gender relationships. The analysis of this first group of figurations marks the first sub-pathway. It was from the social figurations of manipulation that I then mapped the other figurations across three additional sub-pathways of the main pathway: Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM). The first sub-pathway that I present speaks to The Figuration of Social Manipulation. The remaining three sub-pathways follow from this.

Figure 5 *The Sub-pathways of PAM*



SUB-PATHWAY 1: Figurations of Social Manipulation

The first group of figurations of women's voices described their social experience of the predominant aggressor within their community and their response to their social location. This understanding formed an initial meaning of interpretive cluster patterning. It did not connect the narratives on the surface, as they were presented differently, yet in terms of their lived experience they were connected by the thread fibres that ran between the themes and under the surface as a web of relational forces and flows.

The first figuration is that of the father who was the Vegan Soccer Coach at his children's school.

Figuration: The Vegan Soccer Coach

> *He was very entrenched at our daughter's school. The mums thought he was a devoted dad, but he was not; he was using her (daughter) to control me. He was the vegan soccer coach. He liked people to think that he was like a*

Buddhist monk, projecting a clean-living-harm-free approach to life, but he was anything but that!

I questioned what social response this figuration of the Vegan Soccer Coach may influence and what discourse powers this figuration is able to mobilise (Gavey, 1989; Radtke et al., 2023). To do this, I considered the favourable nature of this man's performance, the connection to posthuman thinking, the intra-actional relational response, and the compounding consequences for the victim-survivor.

Feminist scholarship has challenged the normative and institutional narratives that frame family violence in ways that obscure its gendered, structural, and systemic nature (Braidotti, 2019a; Braidotti et al., 2018; Bumiller, 2008; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gavey, 2011; Radtke et al., 2023). Dominant discourses represent family violence as a private, individualised problem, often reduced to misunderstandings, communication breakdowns, or mutual conflict between partners (Braidotti, 2008; Coombes & Morgan, 2013; Pihama et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2015). Depoliticised accounts of oppressive structures and violence fail to account for the broader socio-political structures, particularly patriarchy and gender inequality, that produce and sustain power imbalances within intimate relationships (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gavey, 1989; Ptacek, 1999). Such framings are not neutral; they serve to naturalise male dominance and render women's subordination and suffering as either accidental or mutual.

It is from here that I worked within feminist knowings to unravel the discourse and the concepts used to examine how knowledge, power, and language shape

subjectivity, agency, and the interconnectedness of human and non-human entities within posthuman feminism (Braidotti, 2019).

I divided the threads from the figurations into three strands: the triadic analysis of the figurations of the Devoted Dad, the Vegan Soccer Coach, and the Clean-Living Buddhist Monk. I then consider the performative conditions of each figuration as moral assemblages, to understand how communities can become mobilised to respond favourably to these social performances. This triad of interwoven figurations contributes a distinct performative layer to the assemblage of social manipulation, strategically curated to position the perpetrator as morally trustworthy, ethically consistent, and relationally aligned with the social values within that social community.

The Devoted Dad Figuration

In *The Posthuman* (2013), Braidotti discusses how the human subject has been historically constructed through Eurocentric, masculine, rationalist norms, and how such knowledge regulates bodies, including reproductive and caring bodies. She argues that contemporary neoliberal societies value bodies based on their productivity and performance, which has implications for how women's reproductive and caregiving roles are regulated, exploited, and made invisible. Here we see the figuration of the Devoted Dad and his performance as exceptional, while the other women at the school offering the same level of parenting devotion are not exceptional but performing an expected everyday life role. He is able to solicit a community response that favours him above her, as he is the devoted father who is taking an engaged interest in his children's schooling in that he positions

himself differently to other dominant men's roles and asserts himself as one of the "everyday" mothers doing motherhood.

His performance demonstrates that not much has changed since the seminal work of Adrienne Rich (1976), which brings distinction to the patriarchal requirement of motherhood. Feminist scholars have long critiqued the way parenting, particularly mothering, is constructed as a moral and social imperative for women. This maternal location reflects deeply embedded patriarchal assumptions that women are inherently better suited to caregiving due to their biological capacity for childbirth and nurturing. In this way, the construction of gender-based social roles is designed to maintain hierarchies that privilege men. Rich argues, as does Braidotti (2013, 2019), that maternal roles are politicised, used to reinforce heteronormative, gendered power. Rich's seminal work, *Of Woman Born* (1976), explores the distinction between the lived experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood, the latter being a patriarchal structure that enforces caregiving as a woman's destiny.

The Devoted Dad figuration mobilises dominant discourses of fatherhood as moral virtue, drawing on cultural ideals of paternal involvement as both rare and redemptive (Connell, 2005). In Western contexts, particularly under neoliberal and patriarchal conditions, fathers who display emotional expressiveness and visible care work are often lauded as exceptional, "going above and beyond", while mothers are held far more accountable to the dominant standards expected from traditional motherhood (Radtke et al., 2023; Stark, 2009; Ussher, 2023). It is through this placement that his public parental involvement and emotional availability solicit

admiration and trust, particularly among school staff and parents who view engaged fathering as exceptional. Traditional gender roles are deeply embedded cultural scripts that shape how individuals behave, how their actions are interpreted, and how others respond to those actions. These scripts often cast men as rational, authoritative, and protective, while positioning women as emotional, nurturing, and dependent (Connell, 2005; Gavey, 2005). In contexts of family violence, these norms obscure the dynamics of coercive control by naturalising male dominance and female subordination. As a result, controlling behaviours by men may not be recognised as abusive, while women's resistance is pathologised or criminalised (Stark, 2007; Wade, 1997).

This performance has material effects relevant to coercive control (Elizabeth, 2015; Stark, 2009), as it renders him more believable, and simultaneously, it positions the mother on the outside of the social school community. She is no longer the person receiving support for the harms done to her – instead, she is further isolated through his favourable social positioning as the Devoted Dad.

In this composite figuration, he used their daughter, her school engagement, and her achievements as relational and non-human assemblages to structure his figuration of manipulation as an extension of coercive control. Her experience was one of disqualification: she described how others looked to him as the reliable parent. If she expressed concern or resisted his control, it was not interpreted as a call for support but as an interruption of his performance. His social legibility became her social erasure. People did not want to accept her account, not because they were overtly hostile, but because accepting it would require re-evaluating him.

The Vegan Soccer Coach figuration drew on a different set of moral discourses held in high regard with social communities, those of health, discipline, and care for others. His volunteer role at school, his plant-based lifestyle, and his alignment with progressive parenting values were all materialised through non-human assemblages: coaching, uniforms, school photos, team rosters, food choices, and event attendance. These became artefacts of legitimacy, of external validations that he was good, grounded, and ethical. For her, these were not neutral. They were surveillance tools, symbolic threats, and constraints – reminders of the persistent and now socially maintained power imbalance. They served as threats, to his ability to rally power, to isolate her further and to discredit her narrative – threats that reminded her to keep silent as continuous omnipresent acts of coercive control – subjugating her and restricting her freedoms to choose as the non-human artefacts symbolically held her captive in his control, reminding her that freedom was not about leaving him as now he had structured her unfreedoms through the power of others.

The Clean-Living Buddhist Monk figuration activated social machinery projected through spiritual purity and non-violence. His calm demeanour, restrained presence, and minimalist lifestyle all communicated discipline and balance. And it made her visible distress a problem to be corrected, not a sign of real harm, and pathologised through gender constructs maintained within and between community members based on histories that have privileged men and silenced women (Connell, 2005; Elizabeth, 2015; Radtke et al., 2023). In practice, these discrepancies between the person that micro-managed their every life moment

caused self-blame and doubt, as clients often said that they struggled to reconcile their experience of the person versus the one they projected within the community. This Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde figuration and the public charming man/private violent figuration are not new in family violence work but continue evolving from individual pathology into more subtle landscapes (O'Mahony & Trees, 2017). It is not about pathology, it is about choice (Coates & Wade, 2004) and as Evan Stark (2009) articulates, coercive control is a strategic course of conduct designed with the intention to impose gender inequalities in personal life by dominating, exploiting, and degrading a partner and depriving her of basic rights and resources. In this figuration, social communities become unknowingly part of the abuse strategy as they are manipulated into responding in ways that support the perpetrator's coercive control.

This strategy of control involves not just humans but non-human assemblages as objects, roles, performances, and structures support and uphold the figuration. For example, the child's schoolwork, awards, and behaviour were interpreted as signs of his success as a father, not as evidence of coercive pressure at home. Uniforms, volunteer rosters, community praise, and photos in school newsletters served as public affirmations of his "goodness". These elements in a posthuman reading are active participants in the assemblage. They co-produce the figuration (Braidotti, 2013, 2019). For the victim-survivor, this triadic figuration extends his abuse by presenting within social communities in ways that they would respond favourably too. In turn, his morally favourable appearance disguises his violence, restricting her agency through isolation from being in relationship with those he has already

secured relationship, with the result of silencing her and the stories of her experiences. She is cut off from her local community support and gaslighted as she may doubt or question her own private experience of him because it is rendered invisible through his manipulative public-pleasing moral performance. This is the subtle and insidious nature of coercive control with isolated acts that seem trivial; when considered in a pattern of coercion, control, and domination they overshadow a person's lived experience of the loss of freedom to choose, invalidating their experiences (Kelly et al., 2014; Stark, 2009). The figuration of manipulation spirals deeper when the same tactics are deployed within powerful social institutions that have the power to instil the perpetrator's abuse strategy, as discussed in the subsequent pathways.

This is not about an individual or isolated figuration – it is about a broader social condition that stems from patriarchal origins, that undervalues mothering through everyday expectation, where motherhood is an institution of gendered power control (Rich, 1976). This is about strategic social control through discursive power and gendered privileges (Braidotti, 2013b; Radtke et al., 2023), which Stark (2009) has highlighted as a key attribute of coercive control.

Figuration: The Academic

> *He was highly educated and held an academic role. They all thought everything he said was the truth.*

This figuration held a prestigious academic role at a university before moving to New Zealand, he contributed to feminist literature, and he positioned himself as a person who was pro-equality between the sexes. He gained public recognition endowed by institutional power as a prestigious performance of credibility and influence. His position functions as a discursive shield against allegations of harm. Prestige in academia evokes the 'man of reason' built on the ideal of the man as rational and all-knowing, perpetuating practices and social positions of privilege while marginalising the othered (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 1988). It reinforces the myth that family violence does not occur among "these types of people", and is one reason why coercive control, as an invisible pattern of violence, often goes unnoticed by social responders, particularly in cases where the discourse of the figuration is socially empowered.

In this (re)imagined composite story he was able to use language to deflect scrutiny and reinforce control, and when she tried to explain her experience of being controlled and micro-managed, she was isolated by others, recast as being ungrateful as he was "only" trying to take care of her and protect her. In isolating her, as she became afraid to speak up as others, such as the lawyer for the child, would refer to him as reasonable. The more he manipulated others with his performance of reason, the more others framed and dismissed her resistance to his control as emotional instability.

Figuration: The Heartbroken Father

> *He told people at our son's school that I had left him and that he was heartbroken, they felt sorry for him.*

The figuration of the heartbroken man conveys vulnerability and emotionality to others, as he recasts himself as the victim of a relationship breakup. This discourse hides that she left the relationship after years of being put down, criticised, and ridiculed. She left at a point at which she thought that if she stayed that he might kill her as his abusive behaviour was escalating. Her resistant response was to remain quiet about his abuse and not share it within the community as she was afraid of what he might do if she did (Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2016; Wade, 1997a; Weaver et al., 2007). This allowed him to centre an uncontested emotional response to the relationship breakup as "heartbroken", from which he was able to elicit social responses that maintained his performance of victimhood, such as sympathy and inclusion, and social responses that excluded her.

The heartbroken position dismisses her experience of being abused, a demonstration of coercive control that Stark (2009) argues often continues post-separation through reputation management and public emotional manipulation. Her choice to leave was a resistant act, yet it is erased, unseen as a natural response to subjugation (Coates & Wade, 2007). His favourable social position of inclusion serves as an extension of coercive control, and its shifts from the interpersonal domain to the social domain as isolation are now funnelled through social actors.

The shared cultural meaning of heteronormative "heartbreak", grounded in assumptions of romantic love, obscures the dynamics of coercive control in their

relationship. If she resists his control, he may claim the position of the heartbroken partner – a narrative that draws on myths of romantic love to legitimise his loss and suffering. The consequences for her, however, are profound: social exclusion, the shifting of blame onto her, and the erasure of his accountability. In this framing, her narrative is silenced, and her lived experience of being gaslit becomes not only personal but social as well, as the discourse of heartbreak conceals coercion and control beneath the veneer of romance. From this we can see that power is contained not just in the relationship (by him); now it shifts to the social context that sustains it. In these situations, overcoming power is no longer a matter of relationship disengagement, as he has amplified his power through the community.

In community workshops that I offer, attendees find the concept of flying monkeys from the *Wizard of Oz* a useful notion to understand the ways in which perpetrators recruit or mobilise others in their abuse strategy, whether family, friends, professionals, or members of the wider community, to sustain their narrative and extend their control. These actors, often unaware of their complicity, help to reproduce the power imbalance by legitimising the perpetrator's position and discrediting the victim-survivor. In the context of heteronormative "heartbreak", for example, they may position him as the wounded partner while shifting blame onto her, thereby silencing her narrative and erasing his accountability. In this way, flying monkeys operate as extensions of coercive control, demonstrating how individual tactics are reinforced by social and communal responses that compound entrapment. Additionally, what is being highlighted is that the social context maintains gender and power imbalances linked to patriarchy, highlighting its

prevailing presence within today's understanding of intimate partner violence (Braidotti, 2013b; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Stark, 2009). His ability to gaslight her is now maintained socially and reinterpreted as her instability and pathology (Ussher et al., 2023). Community members become unwitting assemblages of surveillance, reinforcing his control and suppressing any signs of her resistance or attempts to speak out. His ability to gather sympathy and support from the community not only isolates her but also functions as a persistent threat: it signals his capacity to extend the same manipulative strategies into formal support systems, such as legal, educational, and welfare institutions, where they can be amplified and legitimised by systemic power, further entrenching the coercion and making her escape or credibility even more difficult to secure.

Figuration: The Savvy Lawyer

He was a defence lawyer. He had an answer for everything. People in the community sought his opinion. But for me, at home, it was hard to get heard, or to have a view about things that mattered to me because he had an argument for everything; no matter what I said, I was incorrect, to the point at which I doubted myself and began to blame myself for making him angry.

When she came to counselling, she believed that if she could change her behaviour, he would not get angry at her. As we talked more, she was able to name some of his actions towards her, which included repeated insults, put-downs, withholding affection and giving her the silent treatment, and blaming her for making him angry, which included symbolic aggression such as wall punching (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2013; Elizabeth, 2015; Stark, 2009).

His ability to blame her, to disguise his abuse, and rally his social powers of patriarchy all served as assemblages of social responses to maintain his abusive position and confirm his view of her (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; National Mortality Review Committee, 2025; Radtke et al., 2023). Towards the end of their relationship, she began to talk back at him as an act of overt resistance. The talking back became loud shouting, and then one day she shoved him backwards to get away from him, and he hit his head. Soon after, he applied for a Protection Order against her.

The "savvy lawyer" figuration represents a socially endorsed embodiment of reason, authority, and credibility as the ideal man (Braidotti, 2019). His professional identity as a defence lawyer is not separate from his capacity for coercive control – it is integral to how he actualises it. This figuration also speaks to the myth that violence only happens in certain households. This notion is entangled with Eurocentric discourses of respectability, civility, and racialised class stratification. Within dominant Western frameworks, particularly those shaped by colonial, white, middle-class norms, violence is often constructed as a deviance located elsewhere: in marginalised, racialised, or economically disadvantaged communities (Dobash & Dobash, 2017; Douglas et al., 2021). His figuration obscures the pervasiveness of violence across all social locations and reinforces a Eurocentric myth of moral superiority (Braidotti, 2013b; Braidotti et al., 2018). Eurocentrism functions here not only as a geographical or racial bias but also as a universalising epistemology that presumes Western, white, middle-class norms as the standard for healthy families and civilised behaviour. Within this framework, households that deviate from these norms are marked as "at risk", while violence within privileged, white,

heteronormative, nuclear families remains hidden, minimised, or exceptionalised. This epistemic violence reproduces colonial logics that associate control, order, and restraint with whiteness and Western modernity, while projecting disorder and harm onto the Other. These discourses further discredit her narrative, as lawyers and academics do not fit the demographic, yet coercive control is prominent within all classes and races (Stark, 2009). In my experience, family violence does not discriminate. The myth, then, is not neutral; it is a colonial patriarchal figuration that serves to protect white, Western masculine innocence and authority while conducting surveillance and disciplining those outside its bounds, including White women, as their narratives are discredited.

His gendered position enables him to manipulate legality to obscure violence. In everyday interactions, he uses legalistic argumentation to undermine her confidence and recast her resistance as unreasonable or aggressive. She is caught in a discursive trap: any challenge to his narrative is reinterpreted as evidence of her emotional instability or irrationality. His ability to "have an answer for everything" creates a communicative environment where she is persistently positioned as wrong, and over time, she begins to embody this harmful untruth. He works to erode her inner sense of self, as coercive control filters through to disrupt her agency as gaslighting.

His professional status confers social legitimacy, which he extends into community and institutional settings. Because he is a defence lawyer, the public and professional presumption is that he understands what abuse "looks like" and would never commit it himself. This becomes a form of discursive armour, rendering

coercive control invisible, especially in a legal system where physical violence remains the primary threshold for formal intervention. Her inability to produce visible injuries or evidence of assault means that her experience of being entrapped, controlled, degraded, and silenced is not only socially denied but legally irrelevant as well. Stark (2007) identifies this tactic of coercive control that often flourishes under formal and legal frameworks that privilege incident-based, physical forms of violence (Douglas, 2018; Reeves, 2021).

When she began to resist, he applied for a protection order, saying she was aggressive, and he was afraid of her (Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration, 2024; Department of Social Services, 2022; Reeves, 2020b, 2021). This performance works like a pre-emptive strike. By positioning himself as the victim, he reframes her resistance as aggression and casts himself as the one requiring protection. What he achieves is the displacement of accountability: responsibility for his violence is deflected onto her, while his own actions are legitimised.

For her, the consequences are devastating. Her victimhood is erased and instead of being recognised or supported, she is denied help and forced into the position of defending herself against his claims. This not only silences her narrative but actively reverses it, turning her resistance into evidence against her. In this position, her recovery and wellbeing are profoundly compromised. The energy that should be available for safety, healing, and restoration is consumed by the demands of defending herself within systems that have been recruited to sustain his control. Through this performance of manipulation, the abuse is entrenched and extended,

and it is preserved not only in the interpersonal sphere but embedded within institutional processes that continue to subjugate her.

Braidotti (2013) traces the location of the ideal man, the man of reason to traditional Western self-purported ideals, a social construct maintained within family violence discourse aligning with feminist literature that critiques how the DARVO tactic (Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender) (Harsey et al., 2017) operates in avoiding accountability and silencing the women through the exploitation and reinforcement of gendered binaries – the "rational, stable male" versus the "unstable, emotional woman", a view embedded in the patriarchal agenda of violence against women, as emphasised by Dobash and Dobash (1979). This narrative framework is rooted in a hierarchical masculine binary system of sameness and difference, where masculinity is understood through rationality, credibility, and emotional stability and femininity as irrationality, hysteria, and emotional volatility (Connell, 2005). When men employ DARVO tactics, they strategically invoke this cultural script by presenting themselves as calm, reasonable victims of "crazy" or "vindictive" women, effectively manipulating and pathologising women's resistance and emotional responses (Reynolds, 2020; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008; Wade et al., 2007). The effectiveness of this gendered DARVO strategy demonstrates how patriarchal structures are maintained not only through overt domination but through sophisticated discursive practices that make women's resistance appear as evidence of their inherent instability.

Her experience illustrates how coercive control is actualised and amplified by social responses to his figuration: community members defer to him, institutions validate

his claims, and the law is unable to name the violence she has endured. The consequence is that he is elevated as a trustworthy, rational man, while she is emotional, silenced, sanctioned, and displaced. This systemic failure is not neutral; it actively reproduces the conditions of her social and systemic entrapment that has shifted beyond interpersonal entrapment.

Figuration: The Community Do-Gooder

> *He drove the cancer patients' bus. He volunteered to drive people to treatments each week. People thought he was a saint.*

The Community Do-Gooder discursive figuration displays a character society recognises and admires, which frames him as indispensable in society through public contributions. Community members in this composite case uphold his community contributions above relational justice. Although women have for centuries conducted unpaid community and family roles, men as community contributors are seen as valuable amplified figures, which by contrast, devalues the community work performed by women. In this way, community members become enablers, offering protection and reinforcement through praise and support. Social relational responses conceal his abusive behaviours as the dominant discourse of his community role prevails over her experience of his abuse.

Perpetrators of coercive control strategically curate figurations that are socially recognisable identity performances by aligning themselves with dominant cultural values. The Community Do-Gooder figuration is constructed and sustained through assemblages of both human and non-human elements. Human elements are his visible helpfulness, charm, and manner of speaking, expressed through community

members who praise and vouch for him and professionals who write reference letters or speak of his kindness. The non-human elements are the cancer bus itself as a material symbol of virtue, volunteer rosters, social media posts documenting his service, community newsletters, local recognition, and the rhetoric of heroism embedded in public health narratives.

Together, these assemblages form a virtuous figuration of manipulation that displaces suspicion, centres his public value, and renders his private abuses socially unthinkable.

Social responders (formal and informal) are unable, in this composite situation, to see the violence because they are geared to respond to and defend what society already values: male-coded public service, restraint, reason, and contribution. These values are not neutral; they are gendered, racialised, and classed, and when respondents value these social performances of manipulation, they unintentionally become complicit in perpetuating the figuration that conceals abuse.

Figuration: The Likeable Professional and the Servant

He was so smart and likeable; they hung on to every word he said.

He performed the figuration of "the smart professional" with ease: confident, charming, attentive. In public spaces, people gravitated toward him, drawn in by his competence and easy charisma. He embodied the discursive ideal of professionalism: composed, articulate, reliable. That of the ideal man within traditional humanism (Braidotti, 2013): respected, trusted, and admired. It also made him a man she could not safely name.

She said, “No matter where we went, people always gravitated to him.”

That gravity in this context was not just social flattery – it was power bestowed on him through others. This is how power moves from relational abuse to socially embedded and sustained abuse. It is given unknowingly by others, as coercive control is largely invisible, only seen in patterns, not incidences like other forms of violence (Stark, 2009). It is class-less, it is the kind of violence that attaches itself to dominant ideals of professionalism, of success, of masculinity (Connell, 2005; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). It is even positioned in modern-day fairytales, such as Beauty and the Beast, – where beasts dominate and dainty princesses conform, and masculinity is not only excused but romanticised (Coates et al., 2019).

She said that at home, “He was different, he changed.”

At home, she “knew her place”. Her place, she said, was servant-like: childcare, cleaning, compliance, and silence. And even then, nothing she did was ever up to his required standard. This is the lived reality of coercive control and why an incidence model does not account for male dominance and micro-management of daily life (Kelly et al., 2014; Stark, 2009, 2009, 2012a). Her words mattered less than his. Her friends became distant. Her movements were scrutinised. She was forbidden from talking about what happened between them.

He, meanwhile, maintained a seamless image of composure and credibility. When others saw him, they saw competence. They saw a good man, hardworking, thoughtful, perhaps even misunderstood. Her experience of his abuse was overwritten by his performance of respectability.

I needed to have everything ready by the time he came home, including my own make-up done – and if I didn't meet his standard, I was made to sleep in the lounge.

The smart professional displays competence and reliability, which rallies social responses that maintain relational and professional trust over her experience of his abuse. His figuration reveals the enduring power of the normative public/private divide, rules for her and the allowances for him, and the way they convey a sense of normality in social areas as he is breadwinner and she the home maker. Once again, we are remined about the imposed obligations of gender, and the idea of mothering and the institution of motherhood and relevance that it maintains within modern day family violence (Morgan & Coombes, 2016; O'Reilly, 2017; Rich, 1976; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2012). The public domain continues to function as a stage for masculinist performance where trust, credibility, and reason are most often coded in male, white, Western terms. His professionalism is not neutral; it is racialised, gendered, and exclusionary (Braidotti, 2016; Braidotti et al., 2018). It rewards the ability to perform authority, to appear rational, to conform to standards of individualism and emotional control.

The private domain, by contrast, is where this power consolidates into control. Within the home, her role was embedded in gender norms: caretaking, servitude, and silence. The very language she used, such as "servant-like" and "knew my place", evokes long histories of patriarchal domesticity (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). These are not incidental roles. They are structured by a system that continues to

divide women's labour, autonomy, and legitimacy along spatial lines (Connell, 2005).

Even where gender equality is perceived or claimed in public institutions, private dynamics of control and subordination persist. The illusion of public equality often masks the violence and inequality maintained within the domestic sphere. And when those private harms are disclosed, they are often discredited, especially when the alleged abuser embodies the professional ideal.

This figuration is not a unified individual; it is socially produced. The social responses she received – disbelief, isolation, silence – were not anomalies but effects of this figuration's power and, importantly, the power it is able to bring with it through social communities. His public professionalism was not just a performance; it was a protective shield, one maintained and reinforced by community.

Figuration: The Educated and Dedicated Dad

> *The children did well at school, always winning awards for their academic achievement. People would comment on how well-behaved they were, but no one knew how he treated them at home, his over-the-top homework regime, his endless lectures at dinner about good is never good enough – he sucked the life out of our children to ensure that he looked good.*

The Educated and Dedicated Dad figuration romanticises patriarchal educated relational roles, which denies the entanglement of harm. The mother and the children are required to follow a strict regime that feeds his performance as the educated, devoted father. The children must perform to a high standard so that the

family continues to receive social responses that uphold his Western ideal of success. Braidotti (2016) critiques dominant Enlightenment ideals of the human subject as rational, white, male, autonomous as the foundation for Western notions of success, value, and subjectivity. She argues that these ideals shape professional and public discourse by privileging certain bodies, behaviours, and affective performances while marginalising others. In the home his regimented corporal approach restricts the family members from making personal choices and instead they are forced to support the discourse of being a highly educated family. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity offers a link between masculinity and success in Western culture, including how it is performed and rewarded in public and professional contexts. This figuration is supported and built through non-human structures too, that serve as tools of control and as evidence of his social value. The School Awards and Achievement Certificates are material artefacts that act as symbols of success, placed on public display as evidence to uphold the figuration. On the surface, they represent the children's academic performance. In practice, they become proof of his position as the 'good father '– both curated positions are instruments for deflecting scrutiny and gaining support (e.g. "how could there be abuse if the kids are doing so well?"). These symbolic objects circulate and parade socially and physically (school assemblies, newsletters, household walls), anchoring a public narrative that protects him and isolates her and the children.

The children become objects to use, as Evan Stark explains (2009) in this composite figuration: through the homework routines and schedules, as non-human agents of

discipline are woven into a regime of control, they produce exhaustion and anxiety while appearing, externally, as care or involvement. Mothers often say, in practice, the children return from time away with the other parent as tired and sick, a view confirmed in Emma Katz's research on post-separation coercive control enacted through children's lives (Katz et al., 2020). In a case presented by Evan Stark into the murder of a 4-year-old boy, he highlights the use of coercive control to silence the mother and lack of systemic responses to the father's abuse and control – specifically that each were viewed in isolation and that "…perpetrators design coercive control to encompass family members and other perceived obstacles to the monopolization of privilege" (Stark, 2020, p. 270). In this way, coercive compliance is enacted through structures, not discrete incidents of violence. Even the dinner table is a discursive space, as it is repurposed here into a space of endless lectures and monologues of control. The table, in this reading, is not neutral – it is co-opted into his performance of discipline and intellectual superiority. The social institution of schools often reflects the success of their students onto their parents. His alignment with the school's value system (academic performance, behavioural compliance) becomes a feedback loop of institutional endorsement that shields against disclosures of abuse.

Figuration: The Generous Man

> *He used his money to buy support from people, and he donated a lot to school fundraisers, making sure every child had what they needed.*

The figuration of The Generous Man functions as a socially rewarded performance of kind generosity, crafted through public displays of virtue and material generosity.

In this figuration, the man buys himself a relational position of moral credibility through visible acts of donating to school fundraisers and the various positive social responses to his generosity. Community members respond to the figuration of generosity and the non-human assemblages of material positions by recognising him as someone who "gives back", thereby reinforcing his social standing and obscuring his violence. He uses his money to harm her indirectly (community) and directly (material deprivation) as financial abuse. She experiences financial ruin and instability post-separation, where his economic capital functions as both material and symbolic control. He uses wealth to curate a figuration of moral authority – displacing her voice, recasting her as undeserving, and distancing himself from accountability. This scenario exemplifies what Evan Stark (2009) identifies as core to coercive control: economic abuse acts as a persistent and invisible strategy of domination. Stark outlines how abusers restrict access to finances, sabotage autonomy, and manipulate economic narratives to retain control. In this figuration, financial abuse operated through withholding shared resources during and after the relationship, leaving her in poverty, especially as the sole caregiver for children, and his performance in rewriting social narratives with himself as responsible, stable, and generous.

In a posthuman framework, financial capital itself must be recognised as an agentic force (Barad, 2014) as relational and affective assemblages (Braidotti, 2013b) – not merely currency but an affective and discursive actor within the abuse. His wealth functioned as a discursively linked tool of goodness and provision through control of financial systems and public perception, serving as a means of surveillance and

silencing. Non-human assemblages – money as bank notes, bank accounts, donation records, school newsletters, tax receipts, and social media posts – co-opted and amplified the figuration. Financial abuse is not only intimate but relational, social, institutional, and discursively assembled through social scripts, economic capital, and social complicity.

Figuration: Unemployed and Vulnerable

> *He had lost his job, and we had separated. The school Mums rallied around him, bringing him casseroles and inviting him to coffee groups.*

This man, who had become unemployed, leveraged vulnerability to evoke pity, protection, and support from social responders. His vulnerability deflects his responsibility for harmful behaviours. Unemployment is framed as a challenge to masculinity and reinforces the notion of men as providers, which can leverage social responses that are protective or excuse behaviour. This client said that when the children told others about how "angry daddy" got, that he smashed things at home, his behaviour was rationalised as suffering from the consequences of unemployment.

This social figuration considers community responses to relationship breakdown inadvertently perpetuate gendered harm through seemingly benevolent acts of care. By examining how male suffering is privileged over female resistance in community narratives, this work reveals how intimate partner violence can be sustained through collective social practices that appear compassionate but function to isolate victims and conceal perpetrators' coercion and control.

Coates and Wade's (2007) Response-Based Practice provides a crucial lens for understanding how victims of violence are routinely blamed or erased through language and social responses, while perpetrators are recast as misunderstood. This theoretical approach reveals how community responses often mirror and reinforce the dynamics of abuse itself – positioning the perpetrator as the primary subject worthy of concern while rendering the primary victim invisible. Wade (1997) further argues that social responses to violence frequently involve misunderstanding the victims' acts of resistance, such as leaving an abusive relationship, which are reframed as the problem requiring intervention, rather than the violence that necessitated resistance. The social responses of others play a critical role in either disrupting or reinforcing the conditions for abuse. Community reactions that appear supportive may extend the reach of intimate partner violence by legitimising the perpetrator's narrative and isolating the victim.

Stark's (2009) position on coercive control involves a pattern of behaviour that seeks to take away the victim's liberty or freedom, to strip away their sense of self, and to dominate their everyday life through micro-regulation, isolation, and the strategic use of tactics designed to instil fear and dependency. In this way, coercive control extends beyond the private relationship to encompass social and community responses that either challenge or reinforce the perpetrator's control. In this figuration, the community's response serves to extend the perpetrator's coercive control by maintaining the victim's isolation while rehabilitating his social standing. Social Entrapment Theory (Stark,1999) demonstrates that coercive control operates through social systems. This includes the manipulation of social relationships and

community perceptions to maintain control over victim-survivors. The "school mums" become unwitting agents in this social entrapment, as their care for him simultaneously signals social disapproval of her decision to leave.

Within patriarchal cultures, men's suffering is often granted greater social legibility than women's, particularly when expressed through socially acceptable forms like job loss or loneliness rather than through direct acknowledgment of harm caused to others (Connell, 2005). This aligns with hegemonic masculinity theory, which suggests that even wounded masculinity retains certain privileges and claims to sympathy that are not equally available to women (Connell, 2005, 2009).

The school mothers in this figuration perform highly feminised social labour of cooking and emotional support – inclusion that draws from normative ideals of maternal care. The "school mums" enact care as a gendered obligation, but their care is strategically directed only toward the figure who fits acceptable narratives of victimhood. The figuration reveals how community responses can inadvertently become mechanisms of coercive control. The perpetrator of coercive control engages in social sabotage by deliberately undermining her social relationships and reputation to increase isolation and dependency. In this case, the perpetrator's performance of wounded masculinity mobilises community resources to maintain control over her, post-separation, with perpetrators using community sympathy and social networks to continue exercising control over their former partners.

Stark (2007) identifies isolation as a core tactic of coercive control, achieved through turning others against the victim and manipulating social perceptions. This figuration demonstrates how such isolation can be maintained through community

responses that can privilege his narrative as the dominant story. Traditional feminine caring roles are activated in his service, and her exclusion from community care signals social punishment for leaving. Post-separation abuse and coercive control represent some of the most dangerous periods for victim-survivors of intimate partner violence. Research has shown that leaving an abusive relationship does not end the abuse, and that in many cases the violence can escalate (Beckwith et al., 2023). This figuration demonstrates how coercive control adapts to separation by mobilising community resources to maintain the perpetrator's power and the victim's isolation.

What makes this figuration particularly insidious is that coercive control, e.g. manipulation, isolation, and emotional harm, is maintained not through direct threat but through acts of communal kindness. The community's care produces and maintains the social conditions that enable continued control, which emphasises that coercive control is fundamentally about the deprivation of liberty and autonomy (Stark, 2012b). In this figuration, the victim's autonomy is further constrained through social consequences for her resistance, while his liberty is symbolically restored through community rehabilitation. Ahmed's (2004) work on "affective economies" helps explain how emotions circulate to create and maintain social bonds. In this case, the community's emotional investment in the man's rehabilitation creates an affective economy that explicitly excludes the woman. The casseroles, coffee invitations, and expressions of sympathy are not neutral – they are affective investments that reaffirm patriarchal hierarchies and maintain coercive control.

The figuration demonstrates how intimate partner violence extends beyond the private relationship to co-opt the community in maintaining gendered harm. Through acts that appear benevolent, such as casseroles, coffee, and compassion, communities can inadvertently sustain the isolation that is central to coercive control and the manipulation of a perpetrator through the embodiment of performative figurations.

Figuration: The Wallflower and the Charming Man

The established understanding of the "charming man" as an abuser in family violence cases (O'Mahony & Trees, 2017; Scott, 2021) is described as charismatic and socially competent. In my practice, many clinical conversations include references to the abusive person performing charming acts, often heightened at the early stages of the relationship. Described as "love bombing", I recalled one client saying, "I called my Mum and told her that I had found my Prince Charming." She explained that her charming man even opened her car door for her when they first met, and she also said that 3 years later, he used that same car door to crush her leg.

I have learnt from practice and all the memory fragments presented as figurations above that it is not always the charming man who engages in social abuse. The "wallflower" can rally social-relational responses as much as the charmer. There is no specific typology, but rather, a specific agenda of control through a curated social position. For example, a person of feigned vulnerability subtly influences others through emotional cues, such as sadness, insecurity, or anxiety, as an overall introverted position. As I write this, I hear a client saying, "He was the wallflower

type." Demonstrating how one can influence social responses through their perceived lack of social confidence, I remember her telling me a story of becoming confused:

> *I went over to him at the school quiz night and made an effort with him. I suppose that is why it was so confusing, as it always seemed like my doing. He used to remind me that I pursued him, and then when he became abusive, he would still say it was my fault, that it was my behaviour that caused him to be excessively distrustful and jealous. It was because of the way I interacted with him initially. It felt like a set-up from the start of endless mind games. Nothing made sense. I felt so confused.*

In this figuration, he portrayed himself as shy and introverted, remaining on the outskirts of social gatherings.

> *He described himself as "geeky", but I think it was all part of his disguise as harmless, shy and vulnerable. Looking back, I think I was the perfect catch for him, as I am empathic, kind and inclusive, it's part of my nature to reach out, to help and to include. All parts of myself that he took advantage of.*
>
> *Now I feel like a shadow of who I used to be.*

She and others believed that he adopted a facade that allowed him to position himself on the outskirts while deeply observing the fine details of her and others. While observation is not inherently violent (in the sense of stalking), it becomes coercive surveillance when it is uninvited, sustained, and specifically, when it is used to gain tactical insight into another's vulnerabilities, and in this figuration, to exploit

her empathic nature. The intent shifts to seeking insight into obtaining control of her personhood to disrupt or constrain agency. In these figurations, the process of coercion and control typically occurs slowly, over time, in subtle, unseen micro-moments. While she may hold hope, love, and responsibility for him and their family unit (Wilson et al., 2021), the micro acts are subtle, twisted, and hidden; what is not hidden is her deterioration. She shows up, if at all, to the counselling conversation as worn down, tired to the bone, sad, and confused.

The figurations presented above establish a frame of understanding, from which to transition to the next level of analysis and discussion that the figurations demonstrate of manipulation (of human and non-human). I have showcased the complicity in intra-relational responses that can have the potential to hide and perpetuate violence against primary victims. The basis of these social figurations of manipulation serves as a foundation for understanding the figuration of manipulation when applied in more formal systems that have the power to compound harm and further entrap primary victims. The figurations of manipulation presented above, those that sit within social communities and have been analysed to demonstrate how systems are manipulated by predominant aggressor to maintain and instal tactics of coercive control. It was from here that the ongoing analysis and discussion traces and maps the capacities of the predominant aggressor to manipulate societal norms, institutional logics, and interpersonal trust. These figurations are not static representations but strategic performances that demonstrate how social ideals like the “ideal man”, the “devoted father”, or the “selfless professional” operate as mechanisms of coercive control.

What gives these performances their power is their resonance with socially sanctioned values. Admiration for generosity, empathy toward heartbreak, respect for logic, and loyalty to community contributors are socially expected responses and therefore appear appropriate. However, in contexts of intimate partner violence, these responses can be strategically manipulated by the perpetrator to obscure harm, undermine and isolate the victim, diminish resistance, pathologise resistant responses, avoid accountability, and preserve his position of power used to instil and maintain coercive control, now extended through social responses (Coates & Wade, 2004, 2007; Stark, 2009; Wade, 1997a). These are not isolated incidents but extensions of coercive control, consistent with Stark's (2009) typology of tactics: isolation, subjugation, gaslighting, and the erosion of personal freedoms.

Systematic distribution of favourable social responses is what sustains the figurations. It allows him to construct a moral shield while simultaneously eroding the woman's credibility. Her disclosures are not simply disbelieved –they are made invisible by contrast. She is repositioned as bitter, irrational, or vindictive, which is out of step with the figuration society prefers. This is why figuration is not simply a representation but a social infrastructure. It functions as a relational system of power, through which the predominant aggressor gains control over how others respond to him and to her. Asymmetric social systems of power and patriarchy in which we are all embedded enables individual manipulation because of the very Eurocentric structures that reproduce violence, from in the home, on the internet to the social structures that dictate normality and acceptable behaviour (Ahmed, 2004; Braidotti, 2013b; Radtke et al., 2023). Drawing on Braidotti's posthuman figuration,

these identities are effective because they are legible, dominant, and desirable (2013, 2019). They are rewarded, not just socially but institutionally, through court bias, therapeutic narratives, and professional deference. The result is that the woman is not only socially erased but ethically abandoned as well.

By making this manipulation visible, analysis reveals how violence is diffused across structures of trust, gendered expectations, and institutional practice. It is not located in individual acts alone; it emerges from a distributed, networked form of abuse that thrives on relational and systemic complicity. Complicity, in this project, arises as part of these relational networks, reflecting how power, influence, and harm are distributed and sustained within these connections.

Facebook as a Site of Isolation and Shame

The sub-pathway of manipulation and misuse of social communities that are analogue digital and/or augmented to further the agenda of abuse and strategic entrapment includes religious communities, cultural and ethnic communities, political groups, and online communities (e.g. Facebook and Instagram).

She said:

> *I don't know when this will stop. It feels like he's attacking every part of my life that matters most to me and getting away with it. He's trying to take away everything I care about. He put-on this "I am a nice guy, good guy vibe" to our friends – everyone saw him as the doting husband and father. No one, except my mother, knew about all the restrictions I was under or how I was constantly walking on eggshells around him.*

To our friends, he was this lovely, successful, educated man. But at home, he was different – controlling, micromanaging, and downright scary. One night, he began with his regular interrogation sessions, always convinced I was seeing someone else. That night, he made me sit on the kitchen stool, he placed a knife on the kitchen counter and told me I was to sit there until I confessed. That morning, after 8 hours of no sleep, I pretended to take my son to Kindy, but instead, I drove to my mother. I finally managed to leave, taking our three-year-old son with me, we moved in with my mum. A few days later, he went on Facebook and made a post that he sent to all our mutual friends, claiming I had left him without reason and that I wasn't allowing him to see his son, which wasn't true. People who I thought were my friends started criticising me, siding with him, and turning against me. I imagined him sitting back and watching people criticise me, he had cleverly managed to get others to do what he always did, abuse me, while still looking like the nice guy.

The abusive man maintains two distinct performative presentations. His public presentation is part of his manipulation strategy; he is seen in the figurations as a "nice guy, a good guy", portraying himself as a doting husband and father. This positive public image serves a strategic purpose: it allows him to build social credibility while isolating her from her friend groups and continue to abuse her while repositioning himself as the victim needing support. This aligns with research showing that perpetrators of coercive control often present a positive and charming facade to outsiders, effectively disguising their abusive behaviour (Beckwith et al., 2023; Stark, 2009).

The phrase "I don't know when this will stop" reflects the experience of entrapment as the abuse continues to restrict, coerce, and control her life even post-separation, as the abuser continues to wield power through systems abuse, such as public shaming or false accusations. The fear and uncertainty about when or if the abuse will ever truly end is common in cases of coercive control, where the perpetrator's primary goal is to maintain dominance over the victim's life, even post-separation (Katz et al., 2020).

The perpetrator manipulates her social system to isolate her, a key tactic of coercive control. He has inadvertently recruited members of their shared social circle in this abuse tactic. Research on the Internet of Things (IoT) confirms the use of this as a tool of abuse and the ability to bolster an abusive person's reach, "…breadth of internet of things, connected systems may increase perpetrators' influence significantly" (Brown et al., 2025, p. 2). In effect, social isolation and manipulation of digital, analogue, and augmented social networks are used to maintain control and instil entrapment. This tactic of PAM is an example of manipulation of social communities as a form of social systems abuse. The manipulation of social communities is further seen in religious or cultural communities. For example, a professional woman married to the son of the head elder of a church community spoke about how she spent years trying to reconcile her relationship with God and her duties as a wife. Before her marriage, her faith served as a place of safety and strength until her own faith was used as a tool of oppression and abuse. An understanding reflected in research is that "Spirituality/religion can have a dual role in relation to intimate partner violence (IPV). It can serve as an important coping

mechanism for women experiencing IPV but can also contribute to the drivers of IPV" (Truong & Ghafournia, 2024, p. 5). Strategic manipulation of something intrinsically important to a person as a weapon used against them is a demonstration of a powerful non-physical abuse tactic that, like the other sub-pathways of PAM, leverages an external force in the abuse strategy.

> *The church elders told me that my role as a wife, required me to ensure that all my husband's needs were met, and I had to honour his position as the head of the family, as our faith dictated. This meant I was responsible for most household duties, including being the primary caregiver. I was not allowed to question or contradict him in public, as doing so would be seen as disrespecting God's order for our family. Sex was considered his right, and I was made to feel that it was my religious duty and obligation to comply, no matter how I felt.*

This extract focuses on the figuration of religious or spiritual abuse, where the victim-survivor's autonomy is undermined through the misuse of religious doctrine or beliefs to justify control (Truong & Ghafournia, 2024). Agency and autonomy in non-physical coercive control equates to the "unfreedoms" that transcend temporal space and harness the omnipresence of coercive control (Stark, 2009).

I remember Ruth's words as she spoke about spiritual manipulation:

> *I stayed because I was told women in our faith don't leave their husbands.*

Her parents told Ruth this, and being a member of a religious community, the shame of her leaving her husband outweighed the beatings her parents knew he was

giving her. This type of abuse occurs in intimate relationships, particularly within rigidly structured patriarchal religious frameworks. This form of manipulation is deployed through religion as a tool for gender-based oppression, reinforcing patriarchal norms under the guise of faith. The abuser's ability to invoke religious teachings makes it harder for the victim to escape, as doing so could be perceived as defying not just the husband but also religious doctrine (Simon-Kumar, 2019; Truong & Ghafournia, 2024).

The manipulation of social systems abuse is a powerful tactic as the person using abuse recruits' others in their abuse strategy, including God. At the same time, they leverage guilt and shame for not complying with their demands, enforcing isolation by being seen as a religious outcast, representing the divine intertwining of faith as a social community that can be used to control her.

The Power of the Silver Tongue and Mr Too-Good

The metaphor of a puppeteer within the context of coercive control is a common and apt representation of the Predominant Aggressors' (PA) coercive control (Susser et al., 2018). Evan Stark vividly examines in his work on the technologies of coercive control how abusers use intimidation, isolation, and control over daily activities to entrap their partners, stripping their agency and freedom away (Gavey, 2018). These technologies or tactics include the manipulation of normal social responses to specific performative figurations, to rally institutional systems and organisations as mechanisms that amplify power imbalances, maintain control, and suppress the autonomy of the primary victim.

Through these figurations, that have been presented we can see how perpetrators use manipulative behaviours as direct relationship forms of abuse and within wider social systems. This tactic is presented as sustained, invisible, and pervasive, comparable to pulling the puppet strings from behind the scenes in an act of deception used to trick others into believing them. In this way, predominant aggressors can use people and systems to maintain power and control.

> *My friends used to call him Mr Too-Good, which, in retrospect, pretty much summed it up correctly. The relationship started beautifully. I was in love, I was love bombed, as he said and did all the right things to make me feel so very special. It felt like he was a mirror of myself; he was my male version. But now, two years later, I realise it was all a scam; he was a master manipulator.*

Predominant aggressors recruit unsuspecting others into their act of deception and the overall strategy of control and entrapment by exploiting them, and these people are often those in helping professions in family violence institutions and other social systems. Perpetrators manipulate these systems by deploying people and systems to leverage relationship power and control over victim-survivors. This under-researched abuse tactic is informally referred to as Institutional Systems Abuse, which is similar to legal systems abuse (Douglas, 2018; Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2013; Tolmie et al., 2018).

This pathway of Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) reflects the hidden, insidious nature of non-physical violence tactics performed relationally using manipulation, which in this context is defined as an action taken to influence or control another. While they may appear personable and armed with good social

skills, they aim to influence others for harmful gain, as this is a mechanism of coercive control.

Many clients try to make sense of their partners' behaviours through their own research and may ask me if I have heard of the dark personality triad. Within this reference, a character is sometimes referred to as Machiavellian (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), a reference that refers to someone who is strategically manipulative and willing to deceive to achieve their goals while often maintaining a pleasant or charismatic exterior. This is not about personality traits and pathologisation that takes the responsibility away from the perpetrator, because it is itself harmful and abusive in that it silences the victim-survivor while negating perpetrator responsibility. While I understand their sense-making initiatives, the pathologising of his behaviour is not key to this theme. What is relevant is the common thread that links the lived experience of the victim-survivors, of how predominant aggressors can spin yarns built of thick threads that essentially position them as incapable of being violent in the eyes of the community. This form of social manipulation is a shared experience within the various figurations, and within this one as the "silver-tongued" performance, the abuser manages, through his use of language and character performance, to sway others socially while he is strategically pursuing malicious intentions. They are socially astute and understand how to appeal to people, making them highly influential. Their ability to appear genuine and trustworthy can make it difficult for others to discern their intentions. Their methods usually involve an agenda of harm-filled suggestions aimed at enhancing power and control in the context of intimate partner violence.

This figuration serves as a reminder that abuse disguised through the figuration of charming manipulation operates as a calculated performance in which the perpetrator uses social likeability, charisma, and helpfulness to disarm others, gain their trust, and manipulate public perception. This curated identity is persuasive and often admired, making it difficult for others to believe or recognise the underlying abuse he enacts in private. His charm becomes a shield that protects him from scrutiny and a weapon that isolates, silences, and discredits the woman.

Wolves Still Wear Sheep's Clothing – They Just Widen their Territory

The old idiom of wolves wearing sheep's clothing as a guise of deception is relevant to understanding the pathway of Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM). As wolves still wear sheep's clothing, they widen their territory to include second-level system actors and systems, and the effects and embodied affects of coercive control extend past the perpetrator's power over women's bodies through one-on-one manipulation to the manipulation of non-human entities to perpetuate control, violence, and harms. This pathway of harm is centred on a specific form of manipulation that enables the perpetrator to gain the support of the formal social support systems by disguising their malicious intent. When the perpetrator makes manipulation a powerful and devastating social systems abuse tactic by leveraging the power of these systems, they can magnify and extend the harm inflicted on the victim-survivor. This manipulation serves to tightly secure the victim's entrapment, as the perpetrator infiltrates what should be a circle of trust, safety, and protection but instead entraps her in ongoing harm.

Eurocentric figurations of the "man"

Working in the margins, I held these voices of missing women, of those with whom I have shared a listening space, the marginalised, and the unheard in the context of coercive control. The discursive representations they shared and still share became part of a more extensive system of societal manipulation embedded within power relations, within social-political systems that are complicit in the perpetuation of social manipulative tactics. The memory fragments highlight the patriarchal neoliberal legacy that values certain types of knowledge, and actors (the academic, the lawyer, the soccer coach) and values (the male volunteer, the vulnerable guy whose wife left him) are often seen in the community as favoured, protected, and superior. By contrast, the "(m)others", who may have less access to manipulative discursive representations, are sidelined. The use of discursive representations to shape perceived performative privilege and maintain power over the women in these figurations reinforces gender hierarchies already maintained within relational intersections of power, knowledge, and social belief as a network of assemblages that have come together to produce conditions and power imbalances that perpetuate gendered non-physical violence (Braidotti, 2010, 2019a, 2019b). Concerns have been raised in family violence work and research regarding how a person's behaviour is used to determine their role in a violent relationship, where a person who is behaving violently is assumed to be the predominant aggressor, which in most situations is a reasonable assumption. However, family violence is complex, as the primary victim always resists violence, overtly and covertly (Wade, 1997a; Wade et al., 2007; Weaver et al., 2007). Some of these violent presentations may, in context, be forms of resistance. It is through the social contextual analysis

that the pattern of violence, the history, and social responses to violence in these figurations can offer a more accurate view of who did what to whom (Douglas et al., 2020; Hydén, Wade, et al., 2016; Reeves, 2020b, 2021).

The concept of "simplistic presentations" within the context of legal systems abuse in Australian legal frameworks refers to the tendency of legal systems to interpret complex patterns of abuse in a reductive manner. This oversimplification or stereotyping how victims/perpetrators should look or behave can lead to misidentification of victims and perpetrators, thereby facilitating further abuse through legal mechanisms (Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration, 2024; Nancarrow et al., 2020). Primary victims are thought of as passive and perpetrators as aggressive. I remember hearing something like, "I have been thinking about what to wear and say in court so that the Judge will see me as a victim." The identification of family violence practitioners responding to simplistic presentations is already highlighted as a contributing factor in legal systems abuse (Reeves, 2020, 2021). From my praxis experience, I have witnessed how surface presentations can cause harmful responses, often lacking in contextual understanding, which can lead to the perpetuation of power imbalances, as presented in the various figurations above (Beckwith et al., 2023; Stark, 2012b). This understanding of family violence is relevant to building an understanding of the strategic application of discursive presentations as third-party manipulation. There is a relational overlap between the voices of the missing women (the marginalised, the silenced), as the figurations are all characterised by conforming to some "favourable presentation" of masculinity-in-relationship and the context in which intentions are actioned as they shape each

other. Staying with Braidotti and the power of discursive representations, I took time to consider the ways to understand the social-relational processes that can facilitate abuse. Posthuman theory challenges the traditional view of humanism as a patriarchal legacy preserving power imbalances that sustain male privileges within colonised systems (Braidotti, 2013b, 2019b; Braidotti et al., 2018; Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018). It is here, in family violence work, that the micro- and macro-agendas of the neoliberal man-made stratagems seem to converge as power relations, and the exclusion of various forms of otherness to maintain a hierarchy's embedded inequities and individual responsibilities. The agenda of this form of individualism and the justification of oppression in humanist discourse creates a system where others are marginalised and their agency compromised, reinforcing social power imbalances that are complicit in the agenda of strategic entrapment within intimate partner violence (Ptacek, 1999; Radtke et al., 2023; Tolmie et al., 2023; Ussher et al., 2023). This understanding allows me to trace the threads that connect the agency of social entrapment with the micro-agencies embedded in inequities and individual responsibilities. Violence, understood as performative, is woven through relational and discursive representations that become entangled in abuse strategies. As I followed the threads of power intersecting within theory while thinking with theory, I began to stitch these strands into practice, remaining committed to forms of understanding that are both embodied and useful. In this movement, theory and practice are not separate fibres but interlaced textures, re-worked into a living praxis.

It was through the recognition of the narrative pattern that I was able to identify a theme related to how the perpetrator mobilised others and systems to their advantage, centred on the storying of lived experience as manipulation. Manipulation is an action aimed at coercing another person to act in accordance with the manipulator's strategy, at the expense of others (Monich & Matveeva, 2012). I know from practice, and research also suggests, that manipulation as an abuse tactic runs through almost all cases of intimate partner violence (Butts, 2023; Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, n.d.; Sanchez-Rabaza et al., 2023). It would be rare to find a risk assessment that did not include manipulation as an abuse tactic. Unlike overt abuse, manipulation is hidden from the targets (systems, system actors, and primary victim), who initially can be unaware of its impact (Dotsenko, 2003). Within family violence cases, this form of abuse amplifies when perpetrators use social systems to their advantage, enlisting unknowing system actors to extend their control over the victim-survivor. The abusive person had extended their use of manipulation as a relationship tactic to others outside of the direct relationship to include third-party manipulation. To recognise predominant aggressor manipulation, it becomes necessary to identify a pattern in which predominant aggressors occupy discursive positions recognisable as figurations of good men, good fathers, and good community members, as well as the parallel figuration of manipulation that works to coerce others into acting in ways that marginalise and isolate the primary victim.

This pattern of perpetrator manipulation, specifically that of a curated social performance does not stop at the edge of the school gate or the boundary of a

friend's kitchen table. It travels, slipping across thresholds into the spaces of independent organisations where authority is formalised and trust is institutional. Schools, banks, and community agencies can become unwitting stages for the same performance, only now the consequences are higher, and the reach is wider. Here, the aggressor does not just rely on personal persuasion; they draw on policies, procedures as assemblages of manipulation, and the authority of the organisation itself to add weight to their strategy of harm and control. The next section turns to these settings, following the thread of manipulation as it threads through the path of formal community life, showing how everyday institutional practices can be manipulated by the coercive controller.

SUB-PATHWAY 2: Figurations of Organisational Manipulation

The thread of the second sub-pathway of PAM relates to the perpetrators' manipulation of organisations, including private organisations, insurance organisations, banks and other financial institutions, workplaces, and educational organisations, such as school kindergartens.

"I Was Set Up": The Timely Manipulation of the School Actors

Jane had recently given birth and was already overwhelmed with the demands of caring for a newborn while taking care of her other three children. At this vulnerable time, her ex-partner, without her full consent, moved their children to a school much closer to his new home and much further away from her home. Initially, he had promised to help with the additional petrol costs and to assist with driving/taking/transporting the children to school for the first 6 weeks after she gave birth, promises he never followed through with. Instead, he used this situation to

leverage more control, following Stark's (2009) understanding of coercive control as a calculated strategy of control and entrapment.

Jane says:

> *Every morning became a struggle for me. The new school was much further away, and with a newborn to care for, getting the older children to school on time felt nearly impossible. Despite my best efforts, we were often late. I was physically and emotionally exhausted as I was feeding the new baby on demand, but I pushed myself every day, determined to manage everything on my own as best as I could.*

Initially, Jane did not think much of the occasional tardiness. She was doing everything she could to keep things together under challenging circumstances, and the school knew that she had recently given birth.

I met with Jane again, this time over Zoom, as it was easier for her with the new baby. As she joined the online conversation, I could see the dark rings under her eyes, and she looked exhausted.

She began by saying:

> *You will not believe what he has now done to me. I am struggling to see how I will ever be free from him. Oranga Tamariki contacted me as the school filed a report of concern, saying that my kids being late sometimes for school drop - off was affecting their education. It felt like a slap in the face as if they were judging me as a bad mum. I was already doing everything I could, and now it*

seemed like they were questioning whether I could even handle it. They have no idea how far I must drive now that he has moved them to that school. They have no idea that he promised to help me over this time and then he didn't. They have no idea that he is not doing this because he cares about the impact on the children, he is doing this to hurt me. To make sure I look bad. He has done this on purpose; this is my punishment for leaving him. Then, as I thought more about it, I realised that this wasn't just some random thing. That bastard had set it up, timing it perfectly to mess with an upcoming court hearing about our parenting arrangements to sway the court against me. He wanted to use the report to make me look like I couldn't even get the kids to school on time, like I wasn't fit to care for them. It was a calculated move.

What struck me most as Jane shared her story was the use of third-party manipulation in fracturing the mother-child relationship, a targeted tactic due to its profound consequences for mothers (Beckwith et al., 2023). Here was a woman, freshly postpartum, doing her best to care for her children under incredibly challenging circumstances. The school, the children, and the legal system had all been manipulated to work against her, all due to her ex-partner's strategic coercion.

The school became another instrument for her ex-partner to use against her. Furthermore, the legal system, designed to protect the best interests of the children, was being twisted by his manipulation to further his agenda. Jane's feelings around never being free from him speak to the non-physical social systems abuse tactic when she says, "I am struggling to see how I will ever be free from him";

this is the strategy of entrapment in action, which Evan Stark calls the "unfreedom" (2009).

As time passed and Jane was able to piece together how this had happened, she learnt that he had gone to the school and had expressed concern about the children's grades, which he then had attributed to their tardiness, putting pressure on the school to make a formal notification to child services. According to Jane, the drop in the children's grades was not related to the tardiness but to the recent separation and the ongoing post-separation abuse in which the children were being used. Research on fathers who are coercive and controlling has demonstrated that the abuse does not stop post-separation; it is often maintained through the children (Katz et al., 2020; Stark, 2020).

Jane's experience underscores the critical need for those working within these organisations to recognise how they can be manipulated. A Backbone Collective report presented the views of victim-survivors that tactics of family violence should be widely educated in communities (2020). As the school was aware of the recent separation and the protection order, it would have been appropriate for them to have had a conversation with her before making a notice of concern. The notice of concern was closed, with no further action required. However, the tactic of having it in place at the time of the parenting order review meant that the judge only gave her weekend care. Jane believed this was also part of her ex-partner's plan, as she had no time with the children during the week, which she said felt like her punishment for leaving him, and he had always threatened her she would lose the children if she left.

The figuration of Jane exposes the lived experience of an example of how the perpetrators manipulation operates. In this example he is the educational gatekeeper and has secured the school grounds as an assemblage to be used as he postures as the protector of the child's educational future, using the language of concern, future potential, and structure. The manipulation of the school actors as a figuration obscures their manipulative intent by invoking the high-stakes narrative of education, portraying themselves as the only stable or competent parent. In this composite example he masquerades in plain sight, leveraging socially trusted roles such as the school to enact his abuse strategy. Gatekeeper school figuration curates a particular narrative that compels institutional actors into alignment. In doing so, it becomes a conduit for harm.

Through manipulation of the school actors in the figuration of Janes imagined lived experience, the institutional response becomes complicit, not through overt intent but through the uptake of his figuration. The woman, already exhausted from caring for a newborn, is further harmed by the system actors. In this moment, his narrative is prioritised over the well-being of the children and the safety of their mother – he is centring himself.

Had the response been grounded in critical inquiry that centred the children rather than his manipulative figuration, a different response pathway may have been taken. A consultation with Oranga Tamariki (OT) would have clarified that the concern did not meet their threshold for investigation. From there, a respectful conversation with the mother, offering support and understanding of her situation, would have aligned better with both the children's and the mother's needs. Instead, the system's

uptake in this figuration resulted in harm: she is shamed (for allegedly failing to protect), silenced (her context and voice never sought), and ignored (her exhaustion and circumstances rendered invisible). His control is extended and targeted to hurt her by restricting her access to her children. Cathy Richardson's work emphasises that in cases of family violence, Indigenous children are too often seen through the lens of risk, deficit, or pathology, rather than recognised for their acts of dignity, resistance, and care within violent contexts (Richardson Kineweskwêw et al., 2021; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008, 2010). Similarly, Denise Wilson (2016; Wilson et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021) highlights how Māori children are frequently subject to state intervention practices that reproduce colonial harm by severing whakapapa connections and undermining cultural identity. Both argue that safety cannot be achieved through the dislocation of Indigenous children from their families and communities, but through responses that honour their resilience, restore dignity, and uphold cultural belonging. The consequences of making a report of concern without proper contextual grounding are far-reaching, exposing the woman to further surveillance, undermining her authority as a parent, and reinforcing a pattern of systems abuse that mirrors the control tactics of the perpetrator (Douglas & Fell, 2020; Katz, 2016; Katz et al., 2020; Miller & Smolter, 2011; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2012).

The Stolen Car and the Cancelled Insurance Policy

The stolen car and the cancelled insurance policy figuration of PAM reflect the lived experience of economic abuse orchestrated through third-party manipulation of an

insurance policy, the compounding economic impact, and childcare responsibilities as enduring harm and entrapment.

Mary said:

> *I had meant to change my car's insurance policy into my name, but with the endless parenting hearings, it hadn't been a priority. Life was chaotic, and I kept putting it off. Then, last Thursday morning, as I'm rushing to get the kids out the door for school, we walked outside, and the car was gone. I stood there in disbelief, my mind racing. I started second-guessing myself, as I wondered if had I parked it somewhere else? Did I somehow forget where I left it? But no, it was gone. My neighbour was kind enough to help get the kids to school, but when I got home and called the police and the insurance company, I was hit with the awful truth. The car wasn't insured. I hadn't switched the policy over yet, and he cancelled it as it was in his name. My heart sank. But as I stood there, my mind started thinking about how many times while I was with him, he'd play these mind games, making me doubt myself and question my own sanity - crazy - making stuff that left me feeling confused and lost. And in that moment, I knew. It was him. It had his fingerprints all over it. This was exactly the kind of thing he would do - to hurt me, to maintain control.*

The figuration of the man and the stolen car story provide an example of Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) through the use of an insurance organisation, illustrating how the abuser leverages an independent system as a form of economic abuse. The figuration of the man who steels the car is disguised as attending to everyday practical matters, such as insurance ownership. In the

context of coercive control and posthuman assemblages, both human (the insurance agent) and non-human (the insurance policy, the car, and digital traces, which reveal her movements) are drawn together by the perpetrator to form a system of domination, surveillance, and harm. The process highlights how the abuser's manipulation transcends direct relationship abuse by extending into her post-separation life. The missing car triggers self-doubt and confusion, something she may have felt many times in the relationship. He is able to continue this form of gaslighting through the systems, as the loss of the car creates compounding challenges in terms of everyday obligations such as getting the children to school and other activities and additionally compounding isolation as she loses her freedom to travel to be with others. His timing, like his tactic, is non-incidental; he leverages system knowledge and his entitlements as a policy owner to exploit institutional gaps, all under the disguise of his responsibility and her neglect.

Economic abuse involves behaviours that control, exploit, or sabotage an individual's economic resources, including employment (Postmus et al., 2020). Economic and financial abuse in the context of family violence has long since been established as a powerful tool of control and entrapment (Conner, 2013). However, the prevailing view of intimate partner violence as primarily resembling incidents of physical violence still dominates the Aotearoa New Zealand landscape, particularly in responding to family violence, despite research and practice insights (Backbone Collective, 2020; Katz et al., 2020; Stark, 2012a) indicating the dangers of coercive control, and, specifically, non-physical forms of violence (Postmus et al., 2020). While it is evident that responses to physical violence must take priority in

responding, they should not neglect non-physical forms of abuse, as these forms, when understood as a pattern, can be just as lethal (Family Violence Death Review Committee 2013, 2016, 2014; Stark, 2009, 2020).

Highlighting the imperative of working from an understanding of coercive control renders the hidden and the often-invisible forms of economic abuse visible and, fundamentally, the role of economic abuse in compounding relationship entrapment (Postmus et al., 2020). It is in this gendered context that coercive control makes known the exploitation of male privileges in leveraging traditional women's roles as the primary carer, rendering financial dependence "…with the range of sacrifices women are expected to make in their roles as homemakers, parents and sexual partners" (Stark, 2007, p. 230).

Persistent neoliberal forces embedded within Eurocentrism, racism, and gender discrimination began gaining momentum in the 1960s and persist in contemporary times (Braidotti, 2013b; Coombes & Morgan, 2013; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Radtke et al., 2023). Social factors paved the way for sustained economic insecurity as intertwined with gendered inequities, such as the gendered nature of care, gendered employment discrepancies, the undervaluing of unpaid domestic work, and workforce discrimination, all contributing to women consistently experiencing poorer social and economic outcomes (Postmus et al., 2020; Stark, 2009).

Family violence responders are aware of the direct economic abuse tactics, but the focus here is on the perpetrators' manipulation of a system as an abuse tool. This deliberate and specific tactic of systemic economic abuse is increasingly being recognised as a form of coercive control, often involving the manipulation of

organisations to further the abuser's agenda (Fitzpatrick, 2024; Merry, 2023). In Australia, the Centre for Women's Economic Safety was established to support victim-survivors of economic abuse and advocate for social, structural, and systems change to better support women's economic safety. Their recent report, specifically dedicated to highlighting this grievous form of abuse, highlights the insidiousness of manipulation as abuse, and the lack of awareness within the sector. As Fitzpatrick emphasises, the "misuse and manipulation of general insurance products by people using violence is one of the less well-recognised ways they exert control, and create fear, uncertainty and costs for victim-survivors" (2024, p. 2).

Additionally, the report stresses that becoming disentangled financially from an abusive partner is often thought of as an extension of the abuse they have been subjected to, demonstrating the long trail of ongoing control (Conner, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2024; Merry, 2023; Postmus et al., 2020). This is reflected in Mary's words: "This was exactly the kind of thing he would do – to hurt me, to maintain control".

Additionally, their report, *Designed to Disrupt: Reimagining General Insurance Products to Improve Financial Safety* (Fitzpatrick, 2024), uses the language of manipulation to explain the tactic, which reinforces the lived experiences woven through the narrative fragments. Furthermore, it extrapolates an understanding of how this transpires and the need for organisations to exercise responsibility in responding to victim-survivors impacted by economic form of systems abuse. The report calls for an active stance in designing insurance services that support the safety of vulnerable communities, such as victim-survivors of family violence. The

research asserts that not taking an active stance is a form of unintentional abuse, calling for Australian regulators to address the gap. “Now it is time to recognise the nefarious tactics of perpetrators and for the industry to take proactive steps to design out the potential for harm” (Fitzpatrick, 2024, p. 4).

Coercive control tactics between figurations differ, as abuse strategies are specific to each relationship as the tactic is located within a seemingly unrelated abuse location, of an insurance organisation. For example, a person may say, “His abuse was getting worse; he had threatened to ‘end’ me, but when I found out that he had taken out life insurance on me, I knew he meant it.”

Many insurance organisations now include “conduct of others” clauses that are used to ensure that victims are protected when their insurance policies are used as a means of abuse. In the life insurance figuration above, his abuse is a threat to her life, he is sending a message that he will kill her and is incentivised through naming her on the policy. This form of coercive control is harder to prove, due to the insidious nature of such tactics and often goes undetected as the act is assumed to be part of everyday insurance business. Ther are more tactics that are similar that include asset removal from a joint policy, joint policy cancellations, using insurance claims for control, purposeful dishonoured payments to cause policy lapses, and other similar tactics to create intentional debt, harm, and ongoing control (Fitzpatrick, 2024; Merry, 2023; Postmus et al., 2020).

The direct relational abuse tactics are now extended into social areas, as illustrated in Mary’s figuration of the thief’: “He would play games with my mind, which caused me to doubt myself”. This demonstrates how the abuser deliberately fosters

uncertainty. Even after the relationship has ended, psychological manipulation leaves lasting effects with the victim-survivor as she continues to question her judgement.

The abuser's theft of the car, coupled with his knowledge that it was not insured as he had removed the car from his policy without letting her know, exemplifies PAM as a form of systems abuse – the exploitation of institutional systems to control the victim. By strategically timing his act, the abuser capitalises on the victim's vulnerability. Several elements of PAM are evident, particularly the ongoing use of third-party non-physical violence of Systemic Coercive Control. Her statement, "I just knew it was him", highlights a critical element of coercive control: the deep understanding victim-survivors develop through their abuser's behaviour towards them, yet often do not share these understandings for fear of not being believed and instead being accused of being suspicious and unreasonable (Backbone Collective, 2020; Reeves, 2021). Mary's recognition of continued abuse reinforces the abuser's control, as she continues to live in fear of his actions. Additionally, he has, remotely through the system, been able to enhance her isolation, which is evident in the theft of the car. The loss of transportation physically isolates Mary, preventing her from performing essential tasks like taking her children to school. This act of economic sabotage through third-party manipulation further restricts her independence as it demonstrates how the abuser's control limits the victim-survivor's ability to function freely in her daily life (Kelly et al., 2014; Stark, 2009).

The story above, which I created from memory, illustrates how Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) operates through institutional uptake of the social

figuration of the economically entitled. The economically entitled male figure is a curated and strategic performance of reasonableness, responsibility, and financial entitlement, one that grants him credibility, authority, and the benefit of the doubt in the eyes of institutions. The economically entitled figuration is framed as privileged as the one who pays, who provides, who acts in accordance with rational financial management. As highlighted above in the sections on the various figurations of manipulation, Braidotti (2013) offers a powerful critique of the "ideal man" and argues that it is a highly specific, exclusionary construction – white, male, able-bodied, heteronormative, autonomous, and rational– that underpins many of the oppressive systems and hierarchies embedded in Western culture, law, and institutions. This figure operates by presenting itself as the normative standard against which all others are judged. It naturalises privilege by coding male, white, and rational autonomy as the default for humanity, while relegating women, Indigenous Peoples, and marginalised communities to positions of lack, deviation, or excess. In family violence contexts, this figure is replicated in institutional practices that privilege perpetrators' narratives of rationality, credibility, and self-control, while dismissing women's accounts as emotional, unreliable, or provocative. Thus, the "ideal man" is not a symbolic abstraction but a discursive and material force that legitimises coercive control and sustains institutional complicity in gendered violence. Social responses to figurations of manipulation are often related to what is already privileged within social relational content. In financial institutions, this is the person who owns and pays for the financial product.

His control over money, insurance policies, and property is not seen as coercive but as normalised entitlement, legitimised by dominant cultural narratives as gender norms and stereotypes and normative assumptions of masculinity and responsibility (Connell, 2005; Conner, 2013).

These narratives aid in the obscuring of coercive intent, enabling him to manipulate financial systems, policy ownership, and bureaucratic technicalities in ways that seem orderly, while in reality they enact harm and entrapment.

The woman is responding, not as someone resisting violence but as someone disorganised, emotional, or unstable. The posthuman lens reveals how non-human actors (e.g. insurance policies, vehicles, digital access, institutional timelines) are not neutral elements but participants in a coercive assemblage that furthers her isolation, fear, and loss of freedom. Her ability to act, to move, to mother, and to seek redress is deliberately constrained. This example reveals how coercive control is sustained through the figuration of the Economically Entitled, which simultaneously silences, discredits, and constrains the woman. It is through these gendered figurations, enacted and upheld by systems, that manipulation is masked, and abuse is compounded.

SUB-PATHWAY 3: Figurations of Professional Manipulation

The manipulation of professional actors highlights the use of family violence practitioners, police officers, Lawyers for Children, court psychologists, court report writers, social workers, and teachers as part of the abuse in the strategy of entrapment.

"He Seemed Very Nice", Said the Lawyer

Claire said:

> *I told my lawyer I was afraid he might apply for a PO against me, as he had threatened me with this. Saying things like, "Be careful, Claire, if you don't stop, I'll have you silenced by my lawyer". My lawyer said I did not have enough evidence to apply for a PO. And now, four weeks later, I was served with a PO. Overwhelmed with worry, I called my lawyer, who said that she had spoken with him directly and she said to me, "He seemed very nice, and he said that he would drop the PO" but he has not, and he won't, she does not know him like I do. She just sees him as charming and nice.*

Claire then goes on to say:

> *I felt as if everything I had ever told her about his behaviour was pointless. Instead of feeling protected, I felt revictimized by having my fears minimised.*

This figuration of a manipulated woman violated, oppressed and silenced through the performance of the charming man composite figuration illustrates the PAM sub-pathway, which is third-party manipulation of system actors and other professionals in family violence situations. In this situation, the predominant aggressor's lawyer applies for a protection order on his behalf as a pre-emptive strike. Then he uses the tool of manipulation, specifically his strategic charm, as an act to pacify Claire's lawyer into believing he would drop the protection order and influence her overall approach in this figuration. While Claire's lawyer is waiting for a notice of withdrawal, the protection order is making its way through the formal channels, setting off a string of requirements that will require Claire to continue to protect and

now defend herself, resulting in the PV being repositioned within the system as a perpetrator. The lawyer is uninformed regarding a systemic entrapment understanding of coercive control, which relates to the second pathway identified - Responder Failures – which will be elaborated on in the discussions that follows; however, it is important to note the overlap and intertwined threads of the pathways.

This ill-informed and violent response is enabled through the social conditions and inequities of women's lives. This situation of manipulation through applying for a protection order and failing to withdraw the application as promised discredits Claire's own accounts as a victim-survivor before she is able to seek protection from him (Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2013; Miller & Smolter, 2011; Reeves, 2020). By filing the protection order against Claire, he is attempting to flip the narrative of himself as the perpetrator, positioning himself as the victim and her as the aggressor (Harsey et al., 2017; Nancarrow et al., 2020; Rosenthal & Freyd, 2022). It is a devastating phenomenon that sets off a course of issues requiring primary victims to defend themselves instead of being protected from further violence against them; they become entrapped and controlled (Douglas et al., 2020; Reeves, 2021). Resonating with Claire's story, Douglas and Fitzgerald (2013) found a general understanding among the lawyers they interviewed that, in some situations, cross-applications were useful as a tactical advantage for the perpetrator in family court proceedings. These advantages included avoiding child contact arrangements, obtaining custody, and obtaining occupancy orders concerning housing.

In clinical practice, I have witnessed these manipulation tactics many times. When this happens, generally, the counselling narrative shifts exclusively to the pain

connected to the felt injustice in her experience of him being supported by the systems, and the system's inability to prevent systems abuse. The process of recovering and rebuilding from the relationship abuse gets put on hold as the client is forced into a position of defending the abuse allegations as a respondent on a protection order. Claire said to me, "I feel as if I have been re-traumatised by him and her (lawyer) and the injustice of the system."

Masculinity is performed as a figuration of manipulation, to appear "really nice" and "charming" in front of Claire's lawyer (Connell, 2005). He, as the predominant aggressor, assumes a normative position of masculinity that enables the manipulation of the system as deception, as a strategy and the lawyer responds from an uninformed position of how coercive control and systems abuse operate to entrap and harm women. Claire believed the lawyer's lack of awareness was due to her working primarily with cases related to physical and sexual violence; she lacked experience with coercive control. Within the context of the literature, this is systems abuse in practice (Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, 2021; Reeves, 2020, 2021).

Through the sub-pathway of perpetrator manipulation of professionals, this figure of the charming and rational man's word carries a much more weight than the emotional knowing woman. This is a deliberate tactic used to manipulate social system actors, like lawyers, lawyers for children, and other professionals. Claire's lawyer, influenced by her conversation with the rational, charming, nice man who is using control, expresses a misplaced trust in his "niceness", believing that he will drop the protection order. The third-party non-violence tactic of manipulation is

now targeted at the lawyer; she becomes unknowingly complicit in his abuse strategy, a lived reality documented in research that sits between legal systems abuse and coercive control (Cashmore et al., 1993; Douglas, 2018; Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2013; Nancarrow et al., 2020; Reeves, 2020). This response demonstrates the power of a curated positive presentation of masculinity, power, and gender (Braidotti, 2013b; Connell, 2005; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Elizabeth et al., 2012; Ptacek, 1999; Radtke et al., 2023), as a figure of charm used not just to manipulate social norms to control and coerce his partner but also manipulate them to coerce professionals to aid in her control.

The violence that takes place reflects a broader systemic failure to recognise coercive control as a severe and devastating form of non-physical third-party violence. System responses often prioritise physical abuse (Stark, 2009, 2012a) over the more nuanced and often invisible tactics of Systemic Coercive Control, leaving victims like Claire exposed to ongoing control.

SUB-PATHWAY 4: Figurations of Institutional Manipulation

This sub-pathway of PAM relates to the predominant aggressor engagement with formal support institutions to further their non-physical abuse strategy of control and entrapment. Formal support institutions can include family violence specialist agencies, various government agencies such as WINZ and Oranga Tamariki, victim support services, and counselling agencies.

Notice of Concern – Dismantling of Julia's Career

She told me that he had dismantled her career, and when I asked her to explain, she said:

> *He knew how much my job meant to me; it was my dream job. I was working for a child charity. He made a false notification to Oranga Tamariki and then sent an anonymous letter to my Boss saying that I was under investigation for child abuse. I was stood down until further investigation. They never knew that I was in an abusive relationship. I was too ashamed to tell them. I never went back to that job. I never went back to work for four years as I was always afraid of what he might do if I did. His message was clear.*

This figuration of masculinity highlights how the perpetrator was able to manipulate both a formal support organisation and an independent organisation (her workplace) as a mechanism of harm, control, and entrapment. I understood from the client that the main aim was to sabotage her work for, as she said, it meant the "world" to her. It was an abuse strategy that can rally a string of compounding harms, which include loss of income, restricting access to legal support, restricting daily living requirements, emotional distress related to shame and work confidence, and isolation from others (Douglas, 2018; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Nonomura et al., 2022; Postmus et al., 2020; Stark, 2009; Tolmie et al., 2024).

Coercive control as an abuse form is specific, as it targets the details of a person's life to reduce autonomy, personal agency and freedoms (Kelly, Sharp, et al., 2014; Stark, 2009; Tolmie et al., 2024). As seen in the figuration of Julia's job sabotage, she said, "he knew how much I loved my job". Her work was important to her. She

took pride in working for a children's charity, and it had taken her a long time to secure the role. It was because her career was deeply important to her, that it became a target of sabotage as coercive control strategies are often strategic and specific in creating deliberate harms to a particular victim-survivor. The use of this non-physical abuse tactic caused long-term consequences for her future career, which she believed would be without end; as she says, "he would never stop trying to destroy me" – conveying the strategic use of coercive control as entrapment that extends across space and time, while reaffirming that leaving does not always end the abuse.

In clinical practice, a conversation with a client who is experiencing coercive control might begin with her saying, "I would like to talk about my relationship; it is not abusive but maybe unhealthy." She may describe her thoughts about his behaviour as troubled and sometimes unkind – rather than abusive. As the conversation progresses, the client shares their sense of self-blame, feeling responsible for the other person's behaviour, they are confused, and their confusion is often intertwined with a feeling of love. Sometimes, clients cannot specifically name the tactics of coercive control; instead, they explain it through their personal experience. They may say, "I feel like a shadow of my old self." Clients have over the years often described their experience of coercive control as feeling as they are a "shadow" is sometimes explained as a loss of self-belief or a disconnect from one's inner knowing. The "shadow" speaks to the success of the perpetrator's goal as a critical strategy of coercive control dismantles another person's sense of self, agency, and autonomy. Coercive control entrapment is demonstrated through the

predominant aggressor's intention to target a woman's sense of self, her future confidence, and her livelihood. The consequences for Julia may include her never going back to her role; as she said, "I felt ashamed", and she never disclosed his abuse. She lost her financial freedoms, which restricted a multitude of choices going forward and effectively stripped away her independence and professional identity. Furthermore, the shame of his abuse and the fear of potential judgement from her colleagues left her not wanting to contest or defend his letter. Instead, she was isolated further.

Although the main aim of this non-physical abuse tactic was to cause loss of employment, loss of confidence, shame, ongoing fear, and coercion, the mechanism through which the social abuse tactic was activated was through the government body of child services, which would have required the proper process. Although the notice of concern was closed and no further action was required, the overall effect and consequence were achieved. I remember the women saying that it was never about concerns for the children, it was always about how else they could control and hurt them, without having to use physical violence. A recent study by Clements et al. (2022) highlights the importance of recognising the use of children as a distinct form of IPV with severe implications for survivors' mental health, which calls for greater attention from both practitioners and researchers. The figuration of masculinity evoked in this memory adds to the growing understanding of how abusers exploit children as leverage in coercive control, particularly in the context of post-separation abuse (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2013; Katz, 2016; Katz et al., 2020; Parkinson et al., 2011). By manipulating institutional systems,

the abuser effectively erodes the victim's autonomy and independence, causing long-lasting harm; a tactic that demonstrates the pathway of PAM as a form of systems and system actors' abuse. The problem of malicious allegations of child abuse is recognised in the context of family law disputes as a tactic of coercive control used to fracture the mother-child relationship and instil ongoing control using the children (Chapman, 2023, 2023; Douglas & Fell, 2020; Elizabeth et al., 2012; Nonomura et al., 2022). However, Douglas and Fell note that "despite the growing recognition of systems abuse generally, and the awareness of false reports of child abuse, the literature discussing malicious allegations of child maltreatment as a form of systems abuse is limited" (2020, p. 8).

The abuser targets a woman's connection to her job through his act of manipulation. Despite the accusations being resolved due to no concerns identified, the misuse of child services to file malicious allegations created significant, long-term consequences, effectively achieving the abuser's aim of entrapment. These tactics, which exploit systemic processes to harm victims, demonstrate the intersection of coercive control, systems abuse, and predominant aggressor manipulation (PAM). The limited literature on the manipulation of child services through false child abuse allegations as systems abuse underscores the need for greater attention to this devastating form of intimate partner violence in practice and research. Professionals responding to family violence are often targeted for perpetrator manipulation because they hold significant influence within social and institutional systems. As systems actors, they have access to agencies and processes capable of exerting

control over victims. This makes them powerful conduits through which third-party, non-physical forms of violence can be enacted on behalf of the perpetrator.

PAM – The Four Sub-Pathways Combined

Pathway One, Predominant Aggressor Manipulation, focuses on how third-party social responses are recruited and shaped through the various figurations of social manipulation. It examines how systemic harm occurs when a predominant aggressor deliberately manipulates both human and non-human systems to extend relational abuse into broader institutional contexts. This manipulation is not accidental or incidental but part of a deliberate strategy of Systemic Coercive Control. By influencing community networks, organisations, professionals, and formal institutions, the predominant aggressor transforms interpersonal abuse into institutionalised systems abuse. In doing so, Pathway One traces the movement from relational harm within private contexts to institutional complicity embedded in social structures. This pathway provides a framework for understanding how social and institutional responses are strategically targeted.

The analysis shows that this form of systemic harm is enabled through gender and power privileges. Patterned abuse often escapes detection because conventional risk assessment tools or incident-based frameworks rarely capture it. It manifests as a cross-sectoral pattern across policing, health, education, welfare, and legal systems, making it difficult to identify as a unified form of coercive control. The PAM pathway exposes this pattern as purposeful, structured, and devastating in its cumulative impact. Discursive representation becomes a central mechanism of abuse. Informed by posthuman theory (Braidotti, 2013, 2019), discursive

representation is understood, here, as a system of knowledge, language, and power shaped by values and assumptions that influence both institutional responses and social imaginaries. Women who resist, speak back, or do not conform to the socially prescribed 'ideal victim' role – calm, passive, and grateful – often become targets for misidentification. Their actions may be recoded as instability, aggression, or pathology (Dobash & Dobash, 2017; Ussher, 2023; Wade, 2007). Meanwhile, coercive controllers frequently perform calmness, reasonableness, or vulnerability that aligns with socially valued subject positions, often rational, white, male, and composed (Braidotti, 2019a, 2019a, 2019b; Connell, 2005; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gavey, 1989; Radtke et al., 2023). These performances leverage prevailing norms of credibility and respectability to secure favourable responses.

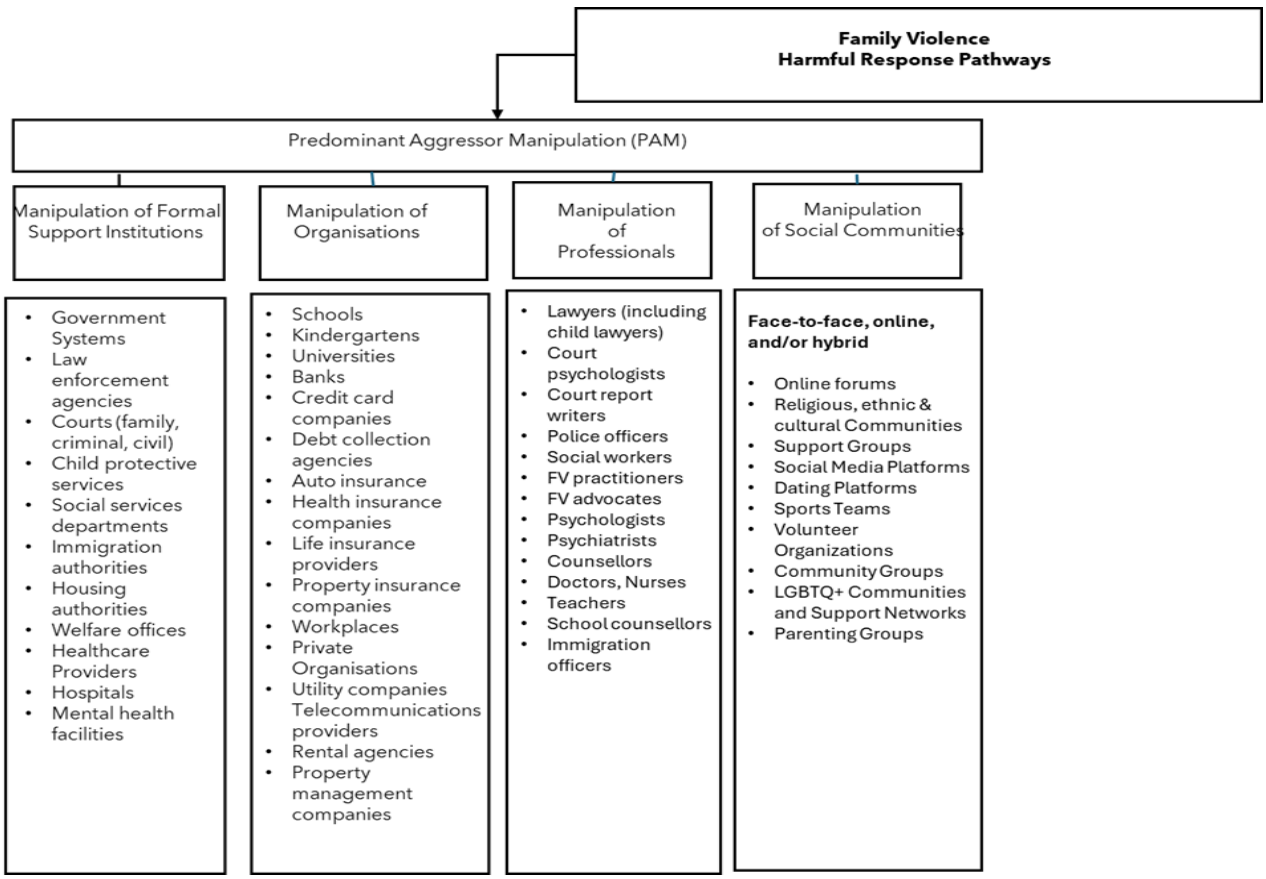
The manipulation described here aligns with findings from the Backbone Collective (2020), where women reported that abusers manipulated services for their own benefit, used charm to discredit victims, refused to acknowledge abusive behaviour, exploited service gaps to isolate and control, and benefited from professionals' lack of understanding. Such manipulation is often misrecognised or minimised within professional responses, resulting in secondary harm (Ptacek, 1999). Recognising this extended form of coercion enables responses that are more closely aligned with victim-survivors' lived realities and opens space for both perpetrator accountability and practitioner reflexivity.

The PAM pathway challenges the idea that institutional failings are merely inadvertent or indifferent (Ptacek, 1999; Tolmie et al., 2024). While earlier literature acknowledges unintentional complicity, this research calls for responder

accountability. All acts of violence receive a response, and those responses are never neutral. They can either resist or reinforce coercive control. Understanding the intentionality behind manipulative strategies and the conditions under which they succeed are essential for disrupting systemic complicity.

In summary, the PAM pathway shows how a predominant aggressor deliberately mobilises social and institutional actors to perpetuate harm. It reframes systemic abuse as a structured and predictable outcome of targeted manipulation, where responses themselves become a site of harm. This analysis lays the foundation for Pathway Two, Harmful Systems Responses, which examines how institutional processes, policies, procedures, and practices themselves create, entrench, and reproduce harm.

Figure 6: *Pathway of PAM the Four Sub-pathways (with detail)*



Reflexive Traces – All Tapestries Begin with a Single Thread

The loose threads of (re)remembered memory fragments woven into figurations lay restlessly on my wall.

I think I am frustrating them, as they already know what they want to say, like the leaf, its patterned venation is already there – I just need to see it.

Each one carries its own texture, colour, and knot. I run my fingers over them, feeling where the thread thickens, frays, or changes texture.

My focus in these early days is to keep the threads from both untangling and tangling.

The familiarisation phase allows me to lay out the base cloth, the fabric on which everything else will be stitched. I mark faint chalk lines, as codes of where I notice repeated movements: a steady, measured voice; the recasting of a woman's resistance into instability; a neighbour carrying his story as if it were their own. These chalk marks are my early codes, light enough to change, strong enough to guide.

I begin to anchor these threads to the fabric with small, neat stitches as codes spreading to themes of failure, manipulation, misunderstanding, and social communities (friends, professionals, and formal systems).

The figurations gather like the threads

I feel the anger of the women, I hear them connect their shared lived experience and utter dismay at how the very person who uses violence against them manages to weave himself into the trust of community leaders,

neighbours, friends, workplaces, lawyers, and child services. I can see how this embroidery spreads outward, one thread passing the needle to another, until the whole social fabric carries his yarn.

I choose to begin here – looking at the theme of how social inclusion is achieved by him at her exclusion – because this is where the first stitches are set.

The design takes shape, and once it is in the community fabric, it can be extended into new cloth without losing its pattern. By starting here, I can trace the original thread through to where it is sewn into organisations, picked up by professionals, and embroidered into the formal patterns of institutions.

From these first community stitches, I work outward, sewing the figurations into the cloth across schools, housing agencies, and faith groups, each time using the thread that was dyed and spun from his yarn in the social community.

Then from the first patterned map of his yarn in communities, I see the pattern maps across from the formal communities to organisations, professionals and formal institutions; here I see it's not only the voices that thread his violence within these locations – it is stitched neatly into the official designs of their paper, reports, and forms.

Only then do I turn to the second pathway led through the first pathway, as I start to look at the structures of systems – not just the actors. This is the second of the pathways; I call this Harmful Systems Responses. Here, the fabric

changes. I am no longer following his thread but examining the institutional cloth itself: its weave, its knots, the places where the fabric is thin enough to tear, I see that the violence is embedded and woven in the cloth, and then it is thickened by the assemblage(ing) of threads – policies, procedures, processes, and practices.

I am getting ahead of myself.

I need to walk you through how I got here from the first theme of figurations; from those first chalk marks I made on the fabric.

As all tapestries begin with a single thread, as does this one.

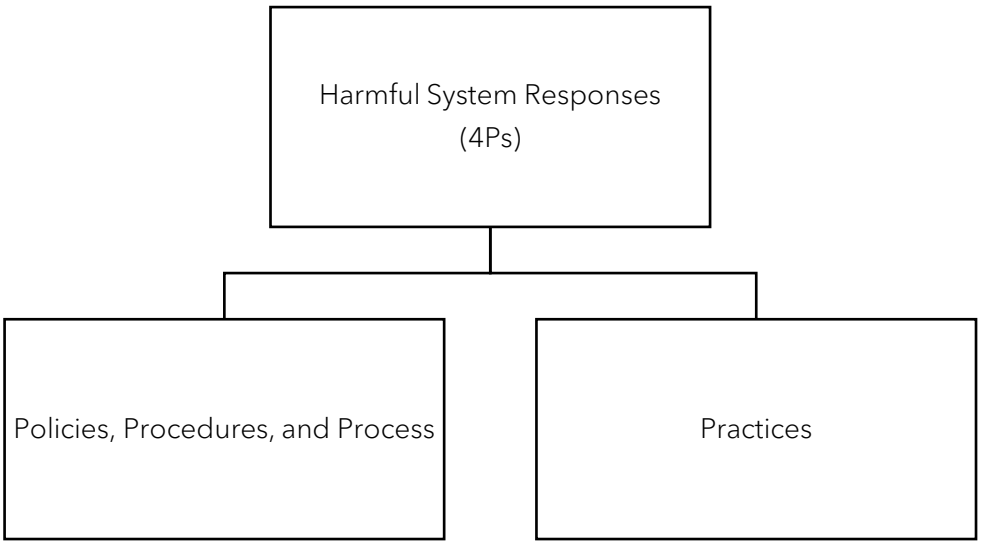
The first thread is the pathway of Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM). The second is the pathway of Harmful System Responses, where policies, procedures, practices, and processes (the 4Ps) reproduce harm instead of offering safety. These institutional mechanisms, often framed as neutral or protective, can in practice misrecognise victims, legitimise perpetrators, and entrench inequities. The analysis and discussion of these harmful responses follow in the next chapter of this cartography.

Chapter 7: ANALYSIS - PATHWAY TWO

HARMFUL SYSTEM RESPONSES (4Ps)

The second major pathway I present, analyse, and discuss is called Harmful System Responses, which has two sub-pathways. The first sub-pathway relates to the harmful responses that can occur in connection to policies, procedures and processes. The second sub-pathway of Harmful System Responses is harmful practices.

Figure 7 *Harmful System Responses (4Ps)*



These two sub-pathways comprise the 4Ps (policies, procedures, processes, and practices). They are represented separately because the first three, – policies, procedures, and processes – function as non-human assemblages that structure institutional responses, but the fourth P – practice – reflects the human assemblage of the responder. Yet these elements are never discrete. Human and non-human

assemblages are interwoven, as responders act through the frameworks, scripts, and constraints set by institutional structures, while those same structures are continually reproduced through human action. I have grouped these together as agential assemblages that offer a way to think about agency that moves beyond the idea of a single, self-contained, human subject making decisions in isolation. I have positioned them not as separate aspects but as interconnected parts of a larger (con)figuration of institutional harm: the violence that is embedded in agential assemblages. An assemblage is a dynamic constellation that changes over time, and its components can shift, detach, or recombine (Braidotti, 2013b, 2019b). These components can be human (people, communities), and non-human (policies, laws, documents, code of practices, technologies, material objects). Therefore, agency is not located in a single person who is practising in a harmful way; instead, I suggest that we need to consider agency as distributed across the assemblages of the 4Ps. When Braidotti (2013) talks about agential assemblages, she highlights relational ethics as responsibility shared across the network of relations and not just held by individuals. I believe her relational approach to ethics is critical in disrupting harmful responses. It takes blame or isolated blame attributed to one of the 4Ps away from the practitioner and focuses on the connection between each assemblage and our responsibility to our clients and to each other. It draws attention to the parts of systems – institutions, discourses, and technologies – that carry and enact agency, sometimes reproducing harm. While highlighting the transformative potential, which is the ultimate goal of the cartography, assemblages are not fixed, so their relations and flows can be reconfigured to produce affirming outcomes as collective responsibility. The approach to affirmative ethics is in

alignment with Braidotti's critique of the Eurocentric, humanist idea of the autonomous individual as the sole bearer of agency (2013). Thinking with agential assemblages encourages thinking that emphasises embodied, embedded, and material relations, noting that power and inequality are built into assemblages. The harmful system response pathway shifts the focus from the manipulations of perpetrators to examine the institutional mechanisms that sustain or even legitimise harm. While the first pathway focused on how perpetrators deliberately manipulated social communities, systems and system actors to further their control, this second pathway focuses on the systems themselves. It is through these institutional responses that harm is sustained and amplified.

While the pathways follow different lines, their stitched edges often meet, weaving together in places within the broader embroidered design. When this happens, the overlapping threads can tighten around the victim-survivor, compounding harm as multiple forms of manipulation and systemic response converge. Perpetrators often exploit the vulnerabilities of institutional systems, reinforcing their ability to control, entrap, and harm their victims. The harmful systems response pathway that I have created is not merely a theoretical construct. It has been shaped from my own practice memories as a family violence responder. Here, I deconstruct and reconstruct these memories into figurations and assemblages to reveal how institutional harm is not just a theoretical idea but an embodied experience. As I reflect on my practice, I see the threads between the 4Ps weaving through every decision, every policy, every procedure – these are the assemblages that shape the harmful responses I have witnessed and, at times, participated in.

At the heart of this analysis lies posthuman theory, which rejects the traditional view of the autonomous individual and instead embraces a more complex, networked understanding of the subject. In this framework, the posthuman subject is not a solitary, rational entity but one formed through interactions with both human and non-human actors (Braidotti, 2013, 2019). When we look at the 4Ps through this theory, we see the intricate connections that bind policies, practices, and procedures to the lived experiences of those subjected to family violence. This is where Braidotti's notion of the assemblage is particularly powerful. These systems, whether through formal policies or informal practices, come to shape the very subjectivity of both the individuals subjected to violence and those responding to it.

The shift in perspective from individualistic to relational is not just theoretical. It is a call to action. By adopting a posthuman perspective, we begin to understand the interconnectedness of the systems that we, as responders, are part of. Rather than viewing our responses as isolated actions, we recognise that we are embedded within a web of relationships, both human and non-human. These relationships are not just theoretical; they have real-world consequences for those who experience them.

SUB-PATHWAY 1: Harmful Policies, Procedures, and Processes

The sub-pathway of harmful policies, procedures, and processes provides insight into how the woven layers of inadequate guidelines, practices, and operational steps can cause harmful responses, which can be understood as structural systemic deficiencies. This pathway represents the interlinked components that ensure

effective functioning, consistency, and quality outcomes within institutions that respond to family violence. The entanglement of the non-human assemblages such as structural rules, administrative practices, and operational processes are the connections where policies govern structures that shape organisational priorities and define acceptable procedures and processes. For example, many family violence agencies and organisations hold Ministry of Justice (MOJ) contracts and are required to practise in alignment with the MOJ Code of Practice (Ministry of Justice, 2023). The MOJ Code of Practice contains policies with guiding principles that establish the framework of an organisation's rules, guidelines, and standards for practice. Within these documents, processes are stipulated and are the structure for client implementation and MOJ reporting, as they define how policies are carried out within the organisations. Practices are the real-world application of the day-to-day actions of the policies and processes by individuals within the organisation. In effect, policies set the standards, processes outline the steps, and practices are the actions that link these three components as a service response (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

The idea of diffraction as a posthuman term explains the concept of ripples of influence that can amplify, distort, or transform outcomes. Barad's (2014) term is important for considering the various assemblages within these situations. In this way, assemblages intra-act through shared agency, and we can see how power flows through and between various combinations of assemblages, each influencing the other. For example, an outdated or inadequate policy can ripple through the system, triggering harmful procedures and processes representing a force of the

social power relations involved and intertwined with harmful practices. Some examples include siloed institutional practices, inadequate risk and safety policies, processes and practices, and processes and procedures that do not provide adequate predominant aggressor victim and primary victim analysis (Reeves, 2021; Te Puna Aonui, 2021).

Within this sub-pathway, as with the others, the narratives on the surface appeared both similar, familiar and different, and it was only through traversing the consequences of the harmful response that the location and connection of the 4Ps became relevant. What follows are curated memory fragments that speak to these varied yet similar situations of harmful responses.

The Unmarked Letter That Left Her Unconscious

The memory fragment of the unmarked letter provides insight into how a policy and procedure caused compounding physical harm to the victim-survivor and further social entrapment, as she decided, because of this response, that it was not safe to reach out to support services. A local family violence agency had a policy that required the advocates to send an unmarked follow-up letter to victim-survivors' home addresses if they had been unsuccessful in following up on the case using other forms of contact.

> *Debbie says, I had gone to hospital for a broken finger, he had bent it backward onto itself, I heard it snap I knew it was broken as I couldn't move it. Usually I don't go to hospital, I try to avoid all that questioning and judgment. I never tell the truth about what's really going on at home, as I am afraid that people will make my situation worse. But this day I did; I just couldn't take it*

anymore. I told them the truth; I also told them that if I wanted support, I would reach out to them. I saw on my phone that they tried to call me a few times after my hospital visit, I deleted the missed calls off my phone thinking that I was safe but then got home one night and he was standing there with a piece of paper in his hand and "the" look on his face and I knew something bad was going to happen I just did not know how bad. He beat me until I was unconscious. I never went to work for a week, and I never went to the hospital, it wasn't safe.

The composite story about "Debbie" demonstrates how a deficient policy caused compounding harm. By drawing on these survivors' experiences and current research, the importance of safe policy is made apparent. This response is harmful due to several critical policy, procedure, and practice failings that relate to privacy, consent, and a lack of understanding of the complex dynamics and risks in family violence situations. I remember hearing about situations when surveillance included removal of the toilet door.

The Backbone Collective (2020) survey on victim-survivor perspectives on longer-term support after experiencing violence and abuse resonates with Debbie's experience of being reluctant to engage with services based on the fear that they may make the situation worse. They report that "a significant number (37%) said they did not feel safe reaching out for support in case that made their situation worse" (p. 14). In this situation, Debbie declined the offer of support services, yet

her request for non-engagement is disregarded, as is her privacy and confidentiality, while policy, process and practices are prioritised.

The family violence specialist agency's policy, procedures, processes, and practices (4Ps) – requires staff to follow up with clients by sending a physical letter. Applying this default communication pathway to a victim–survivor, without her explicit consent and without assessing the potential safety risks, constitutes a significant harmful response. In the context of family violence, a posted letter can be intercepted, disclose her engagement with services, or alert the perpetrator to her attempts to seek help. Because this practice is embedded in the agency's systems rather than tailored to individual safety needs, it exposes the victim–survivor to further harm and demonstrates a failure to ensure safe and confidential communication. In cases of coercive control, predominant aggressor tactics include a rigid regime that ensures isolation. It is because of this that formal supports need to maintain the strictest confidentiality about any outreach or follow-up communication, as abusers often monitor their partners' day-to-day, even moment-to-moment interactions, to limit outside communications that can be a threat to their control. Research has shown that breaches in confidentiality can place victims at a greater risk of violence, as abusers instil rigorous monitoring to ensure that control is maintained (Stark, 2009).

In this instance, sending an unmarked letter to Debbie's house negligently discloses her engagement with a family violence service, resulting in a violent response from the abuser, causing her more physical harm, and forcing her deeper into isolation

as her trust in services has demonstrated that not only could they not keep her safe and entrapped her further within the relationship.

Debbie's composite story demonstrates deficiencies that intra-act between policies, procedures, processes and practice (4Ps) that reflect a lack of client-centred responding, where she is not considered the knower of her world and her lead is not followed (Insight Exchange, 2024; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Fast, 2019). When the victim declined initial contact, it would have been safer to respect her decision and allow her to reach out on her terms if she chose to do so. This approach respects her autonomy, which is essential in rebuilding a sense of control over her life.

Restorative Justice and the Unseen Coercion

The appropriateness of Restorative Justice (RJ) within family violence cases can be a contentious topic that often divides people in discussions. Despite being a victim-centred process built on the foundation of facilitating healing and ensuring accountability, there are harms identified in the memory fragments that reflect deficiencies within policy, practice, and process. These harms include an inadequate assessment of Systemic Coercive Control, the problematisation of working from an incidents-based approach, cultural harms, and the consequence of performance remorse undermining accountability, illustrating how restorative justice can compound and perpetuate victim-survivor harm and embolden perpetrators.

Aroha, a single Mum of three children, had engaged with the family violence agency as the applicant on a Protection Order. While attending her individual safety

programme, she talks about her experience of "unhealing and unsafety" in response to a recent family violence restorative justice session.

> *I had no choice but to attend the RJ hui, the facilitators had no idea how I "really" felt. As they never knew that he had been texting and calling me from a mobile in prison, they are not supposed to have phone access, but he can get anything in there. He told me that I better be there and that I better "sort myself out", which means I must do a good job in the room. For me, I only feel safe when he's on the inside. It was pretty stressful for me, as he told me to sort myself out, which meant that I better not let up, and throughout the conference he was looking at me, the way he does, it's a way that lets me know, that if I f… this up for him, I will pay the price. I never told the facilitators about his threats from prison; I just lied when they asked me some safety questions. But they never knew the whole story, the history of our relationship. To be honest they never really asked about all the years before this beating.*

The abuse strategy of coercive control operates continuously over time to instil fear, extend unfreedoms, and impose isolation (Stark, 2009). It is oppressive, restricting victim-survivor's life choices and removing personal agency, which is why Evan Stark posited coercive control as a liberty crime, a human rights crime (2009). Unlike isolated violent incidents, coercive control functions through an accumulative, pervasive restriction of a victim's autonomy and freedom, infiltrating physical, social, and virtual spaces.

Aroha's story fragment illustrates coercive control as the victim describes his ability to coerce and control her even from prison, using a certain look during sessions as a threat that only she understands. This threat was hidden from facilitators, a common form of resistance used by victim-survivors to uphold dignity and maintain safety (Kinewesquao & Fast, 2019; Morgan & Mattson, 2018; Wade, 1999).

Dominant understandings of family violence have focused heavily on physical incidents, as shown in situations where the victim may say, "they never really asked about all the years before this beating". This reveals a gap in understanding the cumulative pattern of coercive control and its impacts. Policy, procedures, and processes in this area often exclude comprehensive risk assessments for coercive control, potentially leading to harmful system responses.

In restorative justice composite cases, like Aroha's story where policy requires facilitators to conduct a risk review and prepare a safety plan, the limitations of an incident-based understanding become evident. Facilitators cannot assess what is not asked about or disclosed, especially when the policy lacks a specific assessment of coercive control risk. This reliance on incident-based assessments has been documented as unsafe (Stark, 2009; Tolmie et al., 2018), yet restorative justice cases typically focus on specific incidents rather than recognising an ongoing relationship of harm.

In this situation, the restorative justice policy's lack of a coercive control assessment resulted in a harmful systems response. Instead of repairing harm, promoting accountability, and supporting healing, the process inadvertently enabled the abuser to further coerce and control the victim-survivor, ultimately improving his

standing when viewed by the judge. In Aroha's composite story, the incident-based procedures within the restorative justice system created an opening for the predominant aggressor to manipulate the process. Because these procedures focus on single events rather than recognising coercive patterns, he was able to conceal his ongoing threats and present himself as cooperative. This example shows how the two pathways – the perpetrator's manipulation of system's own procedural limitations systems, and system actors which are guided by those limitations – can become stitched together in resulting in a harmful practice outcome for the victim-survivor. Their overlap not only enables the perpetrator to evade scrutiny but also exposes the victim–survivor to further risk. Highlighting this intersection makes clear why policy adaptations and practitioner expertise are essential for safe and effective support in cases of coercive control.

Restorative Justice and Offender Discounts

The restorative justice facilitator shares a reflection after attending a community training that I was offering in harmful system responses:

> *That stuff you said, got me wondering about family violence cases of intimate partner violence that I facilitate. I was thinking if perpetrators get "discounts" for attending RJ and for attending courses like anger management and drug and alcohol rehabs, and I facilitate this process of discounting perpetrators does that mean I am colluding with the perpetrator? … She continues, as a facilitator, sometimes I feel as if the process gives more to the offender, than the victim as they get a discount on sentencing and her (the victim) can't even get counselling. And worse, what if we are unaware that they are being*

coerced into being there? It feels like sometimes we help the offender to take less responsibility, while the victim may or may not be further abused in the process.

We discussed her thoughts on this further. After a while, she said, "So it's less about the discounts, it's more about a safe process and accountability," which I thought was a good summary. The policy of restorative justice is built on the idea of receiving a reduced sentence, a factor that can muddy the reconciliation process, accountability, and the restorative aspect of restorative justice and intimate partner violence. Performance remorse can undermine accountability, which circles back to pathway one, on predominant aggressor manipulation as insincere accountability that can cause ongoing harm to the victim-survivor.

Is Intimate Partner Violence Really an Anger Issue?

Another concern with the restorative justice figuration relates to the assumption that attending an anger management course equates to accountability. This is particularly troubling in policy contexts where anger management is used as a corrective response for behaviour change in family violence cases. This approach rests on the premise that an inability to control one's temper is the cause of intimate partner violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Radtke et al., 2023; Stark, 2009). Within the reimagined composite figuration, restorative justice facilitators speak of judges offering "discounts" on sentences to perpetrators who complete anger management programmes.

Within coercive control (Stark, 2009), anger is not the all-encompassing reason for violence; in fact, physical anger can be entirely absent. The violence of coercive

control is deliberate, calculated, and deployed strategically to entrap, rather than the product of a momentary loss of control (Beckwith et al., 2023; Chapman, 2023; Stark, 2012a, 2012b). This distinction matters because it reframes the perpetrator not as someone with a 'temper problem' but as someone exercising power with intent. Research confirms that anger is not the cause of abuse, highlighting the deeper deficiency in system responses that continue to treat violence as an anger issue rather than a deliberate tactic of domination (Stark, 2009, 2012).

With coercive control, the interplay of the relationship between power and gender becomes impossible to ignore. The entitlement that underpins coercive control is not gender-neutral; it is rooted in patriarchal norms that afford men social permission to discipline, regulate, and diminish women who resist or fail to comply (Braidotti, 2013b; Connell, 2005; E. Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gavey, 1989; Pearlstein, 2024; Radtke et al., 2023). Policies and agency programmes for stopping violence that treat intimate partner violence as an anger problem depoliticise this gendered power dynamic, erasing the structural context in which such violence thrives. They individualise the problem into a self-regulation issue rather than recognising it as a gendered project of control.

Similarly, "discounting sentencing" for participation in drug and alcohol programmes implies that substance use is the reason for abuse, when in fact it is not. While drugs and alcohol may exacerbate the frequency or severity of abusive incidents, they are not the cause, nor do they speak to genuine accountability. In practice, such framing obscures the true driver of the abuse – the exertion of power and control – and gives perpetrators a socially acceptable alibi. As Pfitzner (2019)

notes, this misattribution of cause shifts the focus away from deliberate choice and strategic harm, allowing perpetrators to position themselves as victims of addiction rather than agents of abuse.

Victim–survivors in practice and research (O'Mahony & Trees, 2017; Stark, 2009) frequently describe "love bombing" – the deliberate use of excessive kindness, generosity, and affection to draw a woman into the relationship. Rather than an expression of genuine care, love bombing is a calculated reinforcement tactic designed to entrap, creating a sense of safety and a false sense of care for her that the perpetrator later exploits. Its existence also makes clear that anger and violence are not uncontrollable outbursts; they are purposeful, contrasting tactics within the same coercive control strategy. By alternating between intense acts of care and punitive anger, the perpetrator creates confusion, instability and self-doubt, leading the victim–survivor to sometimes believe that the person is both loving and capable of change. This dynamic is a direct form of relational manipulation.

Although this is only a small part of a much broader conversation about entitlement, gendered control, and strategic entrapment agendas, the point is clear: when policies, processes, and procedures allow for sentencing reductions based on anger management or substance misuse, they risk perpetuating harm because the violence that he chooses to use, is instead recast as anger management a problem that is thought to exist outside of his choice, however he chose to use positive reinforcement (love bombing) as he did violence to maintain power and control. They do so by obscuring the accountability of violence, a key aspect of Response-Based Practice, as is evident in their position of language discourse (Coates &

Wade, 2007). Additionally, coercive control is a gendered crime that misuses power, not an emotional regulation or addiction issue and in attributing them causality they fail to demand meaningful accountability from those who choose to abuse.

Social Responses to the Manipulative Figurations

In the context of this project, third parties refer to the systems and system actors that inhabit the broader socio-political cartographic landscapes that are often fraught with neoliberal Westen ideologies of the privileged historical man-scape (Braidotti, 2013b, 2019b). Within a coercive control strategy, third parties are drawn into the relationship abuse as intermediaries of non-physical violence. They become assemblages through which harm is transmitted, functioning as conduits for the perpetrator's manipulation and control. These assemblages are diffractive and agential in their intra-connections, meaning that their participation is not linear or isolated but produced through ongoing, relational entanglements of discourse, practice, and institutional power. Their agency is not independent but emerges through these intra-actions – the subtle exchanges, interpretations, and institutional responses that refract and reconfigure the original violence. In this way, harm is not only repeated but amplified through the relational networks that link human and non-human actors within the system. Through calculated narrative control and strategic manipulation, the predominant aggressor co-opts these intermediaries, using them as tools to perpetrate abuse by proxy. In doing so, the perpetrator not only extends the reach of their coercion and control but also embeds it within the legitimising authority of systems and institutions.

This tactic is neither random nor gender-neutral. It is sustained by Eurocentric institutional logics that normalise masculinist authority and render women's resistance unreasonable and unstable (Connell, 2005; Ussher et al., 2023; Wade, 1997b, 1997a). Within patriarchal power arrangements, third parties, whether individuals, agencies, or bureaucratic processes can be easily mobilised to police, silence, or discredit women. Here, systems are not passive backdrops but active assemblages in which human and non-human forces intra-act to reproduce harm. Braidotti's posthuman feminist (2013) theory allows us to see these assemblages as more than static structures – they are fluid configurations of discourse, policy, technology, and actor-networks that produce material consequences for those targeted.

The effect of third-party abuse is to isolate, control, subjugate, restrict, and entrap without direct contact, while the predominant aggressor distances themselves from visible accountability. Layers of social and institutional interaction are positioned between the abuser and the harm, creating a protective shield for the aggressor and a near-impenetrable barrier for the woman victimised. Disrupting these tactics requires more than procedural safeguards; it demands the naming and formal recognition of third-party abuse as a deliberate social and systemic tactic, coupled with a critical acknowledgment of the complicity embedded in Eurocentric institutional norms that make such tactics possible.

Procedures and Process of the "Fake" Sorry

Aroha is my composite tangata whenua figure, and I am privileged that she and the others came to talk with me. Within my practice, I adopt a view of cultural humility, taken from my cultural supervisor a position that is continually seeking to understand more (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). I also take influence from Indigenous academics in this work to ensure that I travel relationally as I am not the knower of her world – she is (Richardson Kineweskwêw et al., 2021; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2010; Wilson et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2015). I own my location as tauiwi in relation to my client's position as tangata whenua in that I remain open, I begin from a place of not knowing, and I keep a curious open and learning mind as she allows me passage into her world as a visitor. And on this day, as I listen to her as she shares with me the compounding harm of her situation, she says:

> *Within my culture are Māori principles of justice, such as whānau (family), mana (respect), and whakawhanaungatanga (relationship-building), all of which emphasise collective responsibility and reconciliation, are so important to me. But with the process of having to listen to his "fake" sorry, so he can do less time, it takes away from what is important to me. Instead, the aspects that I hold sacred are held without care. There is no mana, and no whakawhanaungatanga. It feels like a tick-box process.*

Mainstream restorative justice may lack the profundity of cultural comprehension and community engagement present different cultural systems, potentially resulting in culturally insensitive or tokenistic procedures, as they do in this situation.

The second sub-pathway highlights the importance of the consideration of the various assemblages, their overlap, and connections. For example, an outdated or inadequate policy can ripple through the system, triggering harmful procedures and processes that lead to harmful practitioner practices. This diffractive wave is sometimes invisible, rendering the practitioner responsible for wider system failures, in that one element can amplify harm throughout the system, although not all responder failures connect back to weaknesses in policies. The imposition of Eurocentrism and Western gender norms on Māori through colonialism and a system of restorative justice that does not necessarily acknowledge that the violence is reproduced through colonialist oppression that makes the justice system; however it is framed, it is incongruent with different relational ideologies (Jackson, 2021; Pihama et al., 2014, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2016).

The entanglement of policies, procedures, and processes in family violence responses can be understood as relational assemblages that can shape practice outcomes. These elements are not unrelated or sequential; rather, they intra-act, influencing one another. For example, an outdated policy may reinforce procedures that rely on rigid, checklist-style assessments, which, when enacted through processes, fail to account for the nuanced realities of coercive control. These systemic gaps ripple through the relational assemblage, materialising in harmful practice outcomes such as victim-survivors being misidentified as aggressors or children being placed in unsafe shared custody arrangements. Practices, therefore, do not emerge in isolation but as the lived enactment of these interconnected elements, embodying the broader systemic patterns and discourses they produce.

By viewing practice outcomes as part of this relational assemblage, it becomes possible to trace the entangled threads as agential forces at play and to disrupt and reconfigure them in ways that foster safety, dignity, and justice for those impacted by family violence.

SUB-PATHWAY 2: Harmful Practices

> *The ethical subject of sustainable becoming practises a humble kind of hope, rooted in the ordinary micro-practices of everyday life: simple strategies to hold, sustain and map out thresholds of sustainable transformations.*
>
> (Braidotti, 2006, p. 278)

The harmful practices pathway maps harmful practices, which are understandings of unhelpful or harmful responses that take place when a family violence service user engages with institutional systems actors. Harmful responses occur when professionals within institutions fail to provide a helpful response that upholds safety and dignity and instead may compound harms and entrapment. Institutional responders can include police officers, social workers, healthcare providers, report writers, legal professionals, psychologists, and other professionals who respond within the context of family violence. Some known examples of how responders fail include victim blaming, lack of understanding of coercive control, mutualising of violence, inaction on Protection Order breaches, and minimisations of disclosures (Backbone Collective, 2018, 2024; Coates & Wade, 2007; Reeves, 2021; Wade, 1997, 1999).

While posthumanism de-centres the individual as the sole unit of analysis, it does not erase the significance of subjective experiences as situated, everyday micro-practices (Braidotti, 2013, 2019). Rather, these lived, embodied encounters become valuable entry points for tracing the broader social material entanglements that shape and are shaped by them. In this framing, personal accounts are not isolated anecdotes but nodes in a complex network of forces as material, discursive, and historical, and they produce specific conditions of possibility for action, resistance, and harm.

Everyday micro-practices are particularly critical when considering how dominant knowledge systems often rely on quantitative measurements that strip away historical and contextual depth. Such material sets, while appearing neutral, are unable to fully account for the sedimented *affects* of inequitable social power relations, colonial histories, Eurocentric worldviews, heteronormative frameworks, rigid gender norms, and stereotypes that underpin institutional structures (Braidotti, 2019b; Braidotti et al., 2018; Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Radtke et al., 2023). Also, they cannot adequately address the impact of chronic under-reporting, particularly in contexts like family violence, where systemic disbelief, fear of retaliation, and institutional discrimination actively shape what is recorded, how it is recorded, and what remains invisible.

Braidotti's posthumanist theory (2013, 2019) encourages us to read subjective experiences diffractively, situating them within these layered power arrangements rather than treating them as either self-contained truths or material points to be generalised. This approach resists the Eurocentric tendency to universalise from

decontextualised metrics and instead insists on the co-existence of multiple, situated knowledges that recognise the asymmetrical distribution of vulnerability, authority, and voice. In doing so, it becomes possible to see how the micro-level practices of everyday life – the subtle acts of manipulation, the resistance strategies, the moments of silencing – are deeply entangled with macro-level forces such as law, policy, economics, and culture.

Recognising entanglement of micro- and macro- through power relations and forces is not simply; it has methodological and ethical implications. It foregrounds the need to treat subjective accounts as more than "qualitative supplements" to statistical data and instead values them as vital sites for mapping how systemic inequalities are lived, enacted, and reproduced. Going forward, this means holding in tension both the personal and the structural –recognising that the individual story is both uniquely situated and inseparably bound to the wider assemblages of power that give it shape. Personal experiences of othering or marginalisation can reveal how power operates through material-discursive networks. As with the previous fragments presented in the first pathway, the harms done are not necessarily understood or seen on the surface of the figurations. This is not a project in listing harmful responses as others have done that (Backbone, 2017, 2020). The aim here is to unravel the threads of understanding that relate to how the harmful responses may occur as themes to strengthen responses and offer a map of disruption.

The Unseen Gate Gargoyle and the Lawyer for Child

The Care of Children Act (2004) states that the relationship between parents and their children should continue and be strengthened. From working as a child and

women family violence specialist, my practice experience echoes the concerns presented by the Backbone Collective (2024) in their report *Lawyer for Child*. The report confirms, through listening to and hearing hundreds of mothers and many children and young people's experiences that they do not want a relationship with the abuser. However, the report suggests that the Family Court, through current legislation, enforces a continued relationship with the perpetrator through legislation. This happens despite women's and young persons' fears of further violence and abuse and the situated knowledge that forced care and contact are not in their best interests. The report highlights some serious concerns for the welfare of mothers and their children. The children's right to be heard is not being upheld, as many children are not given adequate opportunities to express their views to their Lawyer for Child and children's views are often not considered or presented accurately to the court by Lawyers for Children. Lawyers for Children frequently fail to protect children from violence and abuse, sometimes minimising or ignoring safety concerns raised by children. Some Lawyers for Child also blame mothers for violence and abuse or accuse them of parental alienation, despite its discreditation (World Health Organization, n.d), drawing on gendered stereotypes of mother blame and neoliberal ideologies of individual responsibility (Chapman, 2023; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Neilson, 2018; Rich, 1976; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2012). Lawyers for Child sometimes recommend unsafe care and contact arrangements with abusive fathers (Backbone Collective, 2018, 2017). The omnipresent nature of coercive control confirms that time and separation do not stop the abuse, made known through lived experience and

research that coercive and controlling fathers commonly extend this abuse to and through their children (Katz et al., 2020; Stark, 2009, 2020).

Across multiple sessions, mothers shared accounts of the abuse they had survived while in relationships with ex-partners with whom they were now required to share 50/50 custody of their children. Within these narratives, a recurring description emerged of former partners as "disturbingly controlling", revealing how coercive behaviours did not cease with separation but continued through parenting arrangements and custody structures.

In remembering and reimagining I hear them saying something like this:

> *Every moment of my day needed to be accounted for and that by the time he came home from work, everything needed to be as he liked it, right down to the exact placement of the knives on the dinner table. I learnt that if things were not as he expected, then he became mad with rage, which meant that I would be kept up all night by his "talks", or I got hurt. He was careful about how and where he hurt me, he would punch me in my lower back or kick my kneecap – never anywhere that couldn't stop me doing my duties and it would be something that could be explained as an accident to others. Such as burn on my wrist from the gas stovetop. No matter what, I was to maintain the idea of our perfect marriage to all our friends and myself as clumsily hurting myself.*

She thought that the coercion and control that she had endured while in the relationship was ongoing, as she believed, based on her children's experiences, that this control had been extended to them and was being enabled through the court-directed custody arrangements and the actions of their Lawyer for Child.

I remember her sense of dismay as she shared her feelings of frustration related to the Lawyer for Child:

> *How can my children say what they need to say when she (Lawyer for Child) is interviewing the girls in his house while he is in the next room monitoring their every word and watching them like a guard at the gate?*

For her, the Lawyer for Child failed to identify the coercive control tactics of the father and instead agreed to interview the children at their father's house with him present.

To help make sense of the enactment of coercive control through this narrative, I deployed a metaphorical (and mythical) gargoyle as the gatekeeper to reflect understanding. A gargoyle is not representative of a watchful guardian, i.e. someone or something that serves to guard and protect. Instead, it serves as a fearsome or intimidating presence that wards off threats to his gate, and in this figuration, as an oppressive influence of coercive control, rather than a protective one. This idea of performative behaviours and social responses relates to the first main pathway that I articulated through PAM, where third-party non-physical violence is used through the manipulation of others.

She said to me:

> *How are my girls supposed to speak openly and honestly if the lawyer for the child is interviewing at the home while he's in the other room? They would never say anything that would in any way imply that he is abusive towards them. The girls are terrified of him as they know what will happen if they say*

anything to make him look bad or if they say that they want to live with me full-time. They just would not compromise their safety with him right there like a guard at the gate.

The abusive father positions himself in this situation, according to the mother figure, as a gatekeeper, an act of symbolic aggression reminding her children that one wrong word could result in harmful consequences for them. The manipulation in this figuration is the performance of the abusive father figure as he assumes the role of a safe parent, while the mother is excluded from the interview, the territory is no longer neutral, and she is silenced through exclusion. Lawyer for Child are experts in law and not in Systemic Coercive Control, they are not child counsellors or psychologists, and they are not family violence experts. Lawyer for Child becomes a very destressing circumstance for a mother who has separated from an abusive partner. Backbone Collective have reported the harm related to this lived reality of many women and children: "Children desperately need an advocate in the adult-centred environment that is the Family Court, but Lawyer for Child is not the competent choice to fulfil that role; they may know the law, but they do not know how to work with children and how violence and abuse impact on children" (2024 p. 24).

A key recommendation made by the Backbone Collective in this report is the call to establish a national network of independent, urgent, specialist-trained children's advocates to provide safety assessments for the judge (Backbone Collective, 2024). In the Gargoyle figuration the lawyer was oblivious to the gender inequities,

asymmetry and women's lived experiences of violence, and the minimisation of coercion and control, and instead negligently facilitated the perpetrator's ongoing control over his children's choices.

Over the years, many clients have shared their frustrations with what they describe as the power and incompetency of their children's lawyers, and local evidence confirms this (Backbone Collective, 2018). In any situation when power and privilege are combined, risk escalates for those impacted by family violence (Braidotti, 2013b). New Zealand legislation affirms that children involved in Family Court proceedings have the right to be heard and to express their views on matters that affect them (Care of Children Act 2004). The Family Court and Lawyer for Child are also legally obligated to protect children from all forms of violence (Backbone Collective, 2018, 2024). Crucially, this protection must extend beyond physical harm to include the ongoing, often unseen dynamics of coercive and controlling violence. Evan Stark's discussion of the Daniel and Magdalena Lucek case (2020) illustrates the catastrophic consequences of failing to recognise these less visible forms of abuse. This case underscores the critical point: when systems overlook coercive control, they fail to uphold children's rights and place them at serious risk. From my supervision practice, I know first-hand that even practitioners working in the family violence sector struggle to conduct coercive control risk assessment, as there is no one accepted risk assessment to support practitioner practice, and traditional models focus heavily on incidents of physical and sexual violence (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, n.d.; Te Puna Aonui, 2025). Additionally, while the local Aotearoa New Zealand Government moves towards standardising

practice levels of family violence, Lawyers for Child offer more than legal suggestions in their reports – they offer suggestions about wellness, yet they have no psychological qualifications and no specific family violence mandated training, so the policy inadequacies can trigger a string of harmful practice outcomes.

A mother's story of harmful responses, as narrated above, demonstrates the complexity of coercive control and systems abuse through system processes, policies, practices, and with this sub-pathway of harmful practices. Told through this pathway, it emphasises harmful practices, highlighting the lawyer's lack of education on the dynamics of coercive control, her neglect of the children's safety, and their subsequent silencing being a direct consequence of failing to establish a pressure-free environment. Interviewing the children with the abuser in proximity when he was a respondent on a protection order hindered any form of confidential conversation and concern. Lack of recognition of harmful practices can lead to tragic consequences.

In 1994, an abusive father, Alan Bristol, killed his three daughters while they were in his custody. Even though he was facing charges for assaulting his wife, he had custody arrangements with his children. Since this tragic loss of life, The Care of Children Act (2004) introduced a set of clauses called "The Bristol clause" to ensure legal provision in New Zealand's Family Court system was designed to protect children from being placed in unsafe situations with a parent or caregiver who had a history of violence. This clause required judges to deny unsupervised contact between a child and a parent who had previously been abusive if there were concerns for the child's safety. However, the clause was removed in 2014, which in

effect removed children's rights to be protected from fathers who used violence. The removal of this clause placed particular importance on the Lawyer for the Child's understanding of family violence dynamics and their ability to provide an adequate assessment of potential ongoing risks.

The Torture of My Prince Charming

Of particular concern is police misidentification of the primary victim, as this system response failure sets off a chain of harmful responses, resulting in compounding harm and entrapment. The Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (FVRIM) report anticipated that 12% of female respondents are estimated to have been misidentified as perpetrators (2021). The misidentification of the predominant aggressor is discussed in both sub-pathways of harmful system responses, as this system failure can overlap with harmful practices and failures related to policies, processes, and practices. The following extract reflects the experiences of women whose partners manipulated their positioning as the predominant aggressor, and of responders who, failing to recognise the complexity of this abuse, did not provide safety to the primary victim.

When Francesca met Dennis, he seemed to be her perfect match.

> *I thought I had found my Prince Charming. He used to open the car door for me. He always checked on me, and I felt safe and protected by him. I trusted him completely, I told him things about myself that I had not shared in previous relationships, about my childhood struggles, including my battle with depression and that I used to cut myself when I was a young adult. Years later, after we got married, everything changed. He became jealous,*

controlling and threatening. It was after the birth of our first child that I honestly believed that he wanted me dead; his cruelty had escalated. He was travelling more and more, and he resented me being pregnant. I came home from the hospital after giving birth to our son, who was just two days old. I was in pain, severely exhausted and sleep-deprived. That's when Dennis started to interrogate me, accusing me of having an affair and saying he was not even sure the baby was his. He told me I was fat and no longer attractive to him and that I was so pathetic I couldn't even manage to cut myself properly, referring to the cutting I had done to myself as a young adult. He went on and on, I begged him to please stop.

In this extract, she shared with me how the relationship started, the point at which she remembers things changing, and then the extreme escalation of coercive control.

This was devastating for me because I had trusted him with the most vulnerable parts of my past. While I was exhausted and sleep-deprived, he continued to torture me. I begged him to stop, but he continued, taunting me for hours, wearing me down emotionally and physically.

Using coercive control as an abuse tactic can be likened to those used on prisoners of war is used to induce psychological disorientation by reducing victims to the point of extreme physical and emotional exhaustion while stripping away their sense of identity (Stark, 2009). Stark articulates that coercive control is more aligned with capturing crimes than an incident of physical and sexual violence, as the

technology of coercive control is a "hostage-like condition of entrapment" (2012, p. 3).

The Francesca's figuration victim explained that in her desperate state, needing sleep and wanting him to stop tormenting her, she cut herself, not because she wanted to die but because she hoped the act would make him stop. Maybe then he would leave her alone. As she says:

> *I just wanted him to stop! My milk had come in, my breasts were in pain, I had had a C-section, and I wanted to sleep so that I could attend to the baby through the night, but no matter how much I begged, he would not stop, so I thought if I cut myself maybe he would stop.*

As she cut her arm, he did not rush to help her; instead, he video-recorded her. She said, "He stood there, filming me as I screamed at him." As it turned out, he was capturing the moment for future evidence against her. Then, without another word, he left the room. She heard him on the phone outside, telling the police that his partner was threatening him with self-harm. This was a tactic he had used before – manipulating her resistance and recasting her mental and emotional distress, casting her as unstable and dangerous, especially in the eyes of authorities. The couple were already known to the police, but he spun the story every time in a way that made him seem like the vulnerable partner.

At the point of police attendance, as was the situation of the man that pressured his wife into cutting herself, especially during family violence call-outs, the assessment process is often cursory or incomplete. Rather than conducting a thorough risk and context-based evaluation, officers may default to removing the person who appears

most physically dangerous under the Police Safety Order provisions, or they record the situation as "mutual violence", obscuring the presence of a predominant aggressor.

When people request her police records, most of the information is redacted, washing the reports clean of the most relevant information pertinent to cases. However, one thing that always stuck with me was how the police write up family harm reports is the noting of violence as "mutual" although violence is never neutral – one person is being violent and the other responding, research confirms the difference between men's violence to women and women's violent responses to men (Dobash & Dobash, 2017; Wade, 1999). To understand this perspective, it is important to peel it backwards to understand who did what, to whom, and who is using violence and resisting it (Coates & Wade, 2004; Wade, 1999).

Transitioning back to the figuration of Francesca's narrative, when the police arrived, they did not see her as a victim of his psychological torment. They saw only a woman who had hurt herself in the presence of her newborn as a perpetrator of abuse, using her self-harming as psychological abuse against him, just as he had told them. Without fully understanding the situation, they removed her from the home and placed her on a 3-day Police Safety Order, separating her from the newborn baby. She became outraged and used what little energy she had left to resist her removal from the baby. Victim-survivors are particularly vulnerable to this misidentification in cases where the victim-survivor exhibits signs of anger or defensive behaviour; the police proceeded to remove her from the home without conducting a primary victim versus predominant aggressor analysis, which

necessitates a full contextual history of the relationship (2021; Reeves, 2021; Tolmie et al., 2018).

In family violence policy and frontline responses, Eurocentric gender norms routinely shape assessments, favouring the trope of the "calm", rational male and the emotionally "unstable" woman (Braidotti, 2013b; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Ussher, 2023; Weaver et al., 2007). This bias is embedded in policing practices, where victims, typically women, are more easily cast as hysterical or overreactive, even mentally unwell (Dworkin et al., 2019; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2008; Ussher et al., 2023; Wade et al., 2007) while men are presumed to have their behaviour rooted in reasoned discretion. Such gendered framing is reinforced by dominant social stereotypes that uphold traditional masculinity and stigmatise emotional expression in women, distorting both perception and institutional response to intimate partner violence (Connell, 2005). These embedded stereotypes undermine the credibility of women's accounts and contribute to gender-biased policing, where frontline policing may misclassify and mishandle family violence complaints due to assumptions grounded in gender norms.

The Francesca figuration highlights the overlap between the pathways, as his preparation of a narrative to use in manipulating the police is a demonstration of PAM. However, the focus of here is on the system responder's failure, and of the sub-pathways of the policy, procedure, and process as a critical factor that contributed to harmful responses where officers failed to investigate the context of incidents, leading to the incorrect identification of the aggressor based on surface-level observations (FVRIM, 2021; Reeves, 2020b, 2020, 2021). This highlights a

significant police harmful practice that relates to an inability to assess the nuances of coercive control and the profound impacts of abuse on victims. In this situation, where coercive control is present, police failed to identify who was really the predominant aggressor and who was the primary victim, which resulted in the mother being removed from her newborn and placed on a Police Safety Order. The Police Safety Order was for 3 days, which meant that she had no access to her newborn, leading her into a state of extreme distress compounded by the natural flow of post-birth hormonal mothering responses. This type of inadequate response not only disregards the complexities of family violence but also exacerbates the trauma for the victims, as seen in the which in the mother and baby figuration. Harmful practices by the police have been attributed to other system-related aspects due to a lack of training in proper identification (Reeves, 2021; Tolmie et al., 2018), suggesting that better training for police to distinguish between self-defence and patterns of coercive control is critical. The misidentification of the predominant aggressor verses the primary victim is an ongoing, harmful response that affects both pathways and sub-pathways. Due to the significance of this phenomenon, it is further explored in additional detail through subsequent extracts.

"Dye", "Phatpig", I Will "Kilu"

A theme within the bank transaction figuration is that non-physical violence is not always viewed as a serious crime worthy of Protection Orders. Nor is responding to non-physical Protection Order breaches, which leads the victim-survivor to feel unsafe and without protection. This is evident in coercive control and the focus on

non-physical third-party forms of violence, protection orders, and breaches that lack an adequate response. As Evan Stark says:

> *The current policy, legal, and criminal justice response to partner abuse is based on a "violent incident model" that equates abuse with discrete assaults and gauges severity by the degree of injury inflicted or threatened. Although the application of this model by police has reduced serious and fatal partner violence, it has not significantly improved the long-term prospects of battered women.* (Stark, 2012, p. 1)

Breaching a protection order can occur through various non-physical forms and can, in my clinical experience, include actions as such as showing up in areas where the protected person is likely to be, sending threatening messages that seem harmless on the surface via emails or letters, using third parties to send cryptic symbolic messages, gift sending, popping a letter in her post box, and sending a pizza. They are breaches of a Protection Order in that these examples are acts of coercive control that let a primary victim know that the perpetrator knows where they can be found; this is the omnipresent tactic of coercive control (Stark, 2009). These non-physical breaches take on a subtle disguise, as demonstrated in the following extract.

> *After I left him, he kept finding ways to threaten me, as he said, "I will never be done with you". Even small acts would send me into a state of terror; my body would start shaking I would feel sick with nausea. He was very cunning. We still had a joint credit card, so he changed the card's name to "Phatpig" - Then, when he made deposits for the transaction details, he would put in an*

important court date as a threat. Once he deposited 4.00 and wrote "kilu", which I knew was a threat to kill me. On my birthday, he deposited a small amount again and wrote "dye". This was visible in my banking app. I reported this to the police, but they closed the case because they did not consider this a breach.

Local reports confirm this theme of harmful practices related to a police person's inaction in response to Protection Order breaches (Backbone Collective, 2020, 2024; Hann, 2004). When the police do not arrest for breaches and instead give a warning to the abuser, women feel that their safety is at risk. Breaches of Protection Orders are treated as past behaviour, not something that needs to be actioned urgently or relevant to the current safety of women and children. Moreover, not all breaches are always viewed as serious crimes, especially the less obvious and subtle abuse tactics (Hann, 2004).

A recent Backbone Collective (2024) report that focused on police responses in FV cases found that for numerous participants, harmful responses stemmed from the police's inaction about the violence and abuse, which included the failure to arrest, prosecute, and address violations of Protection Orders. The inadequacies of a competent police response resulted in victim-survivors experiencing insecurity, trauma, and despair, with some reporting being perceived as the perpetrator, being unable to see their children, or being compelled to vacate their residences. Numerous participants in the survey recounted police treatment that resembled his tactics, including intimidation, harassment, belittlement, abuse, false accusations of deceit regarding the abuse, portraying the victim-survivor as the perpetrator,

trivialising the violence, assigning blame to the victim-survivor, and exhibiting disrespect surmounting in a devastating harmful practice (Backbone Collective, 2024).

She Keeps Poking at the Hornet's Nest

Professional practitioner of negligence speak to various figurations of social responses that are construed as unintentional victim-blaming. This form of victim-blaming, in my experience, shows up in supervision discussions. It is unintentional, inadvertent and can stem from practitioner inexperience, lack of training, lack of self-awareness, and reflexive practice, and it is indicative of the lack of policies that stipulate professional standards required for family violence work. It is a form of practitioner negligence that demonstrates a failure to understand the complexity of family violence, specifically social entrapment intricacies and subtle forms of victim blaming (Dworkin et al., 2019; Ussher et al., 2023; Walker, 1977). I imagine a composite figuration related to clients that return to their abuser, a family violence practitioner might say:

> *I am struggling to work with my client, as she keeps going back to him, I don't know how to keep her safe. She knows he's a violent man, but she keeps going back, she keeps hitting the wasp's nest and then acts surprised when she gets stung.*

This statement mobilises gendered discourse about intimate partner violence, where she is positioned as irrational, complicit in her own victimhood, and made responsible for provoking him (Ussher et al., 2023; Wade, 1997b). Feminist analyses (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kelly et al., 1996) identify this as victim-blaming that

reinforces patriarchal control: women are expected to "manage" male violence by avoiding provocation, staying silent, or leaving. This form of victim-blaming suggests that the victim-survivor actions provoke the abuser, implying that she is responsible for his behaviour as she "stirred it up", unfairly shifting responsibility from the abuser to the victim, suggesting that she should change her behaviour so that he will not abuse her (Hill, 2020). The hornet's nest metaphor portrays violence as an inevitable natural reaction to her "provocation", erasing the man's choice, accountability, and strategic use of violence (Coates & Wade, 2004). Blaming her for the cause of his behaviour minimises his accountability, which further suggests that her agency should be undermined, now endorsed by the practitioner (Coates & Wade, 2016; Douglas et al., 2020; Hill, 2020). Response-Based Practice ideas of Wade and Coates (2007) critically examine how language and social interactions influence perceptions of violence, victim resistance, and perpetrator accountability. An understanding of this is presented in the four discursive operations of language, as power through language can facilitate misrepresentation, concealing violence, obscuring perpetrator responsibility, concealing victims' resistance, and blaming victims for the perpetrators' violence, all of which are factors evident within this narrative fragment (Coates & Wade, 2007). Harmful practices related to victim blaming can occur when professionals pathologise victim-survivors' responses to violence, as shown in the following figuration of neoliberal discourse, that individualises responsibility (Bumiller, 2008; Ussher et al., 2023). In contrast with Braidotti's affirmative ethics, the priority would be to understand the relational field in which her movements occur, such as the coercive ties, material constraints, and

affective entanglements, rather than reducing her to an individual moral failing (2013).

The Counsellor said:

> *I was addicted to the intensity of the relationship and that's why I can't leave.*
>
> *She said I have Stockholm syndrome.*

The Doctor said:

> *My GP said that she can't help me as I have learnt helplessness syndrome, as I haven't left him.*
>
> *She's surprised that I stay with him. Now that I've seen the pattern of abuse and understand it. This made me feel bad about myself. I felt blamed for staying.*

In the extracts presented above, the blame takes on a form of pathologising. Pathologising is when responders, often people in a position of empowered privilege, such as counsellors, doctors, or psychologists, interpret responses to violence as symptoms of mental illness or personal dysfunction (Ussher et al., 2023). Shifting the focus from the perpetrator's actions to the victim-survivor response obscures the perpetrators' violence by attributing responsibility to the victim-survivor (Coates & Wade, 2007). Harmful practices are sometimes attributed to thinking that denotes a linear understanding of family violence, which lacks awareness of complexity within context.

> *She didn't understand our history, she didn't understand my hopes, for her it was simple, he hurts you so leave, but it's never that simple.*

Family violence is complex, and this figuration is a demonstration of the kind of complexities that can exist within intimate partner violence and is often intertwined with relational components of responsibilities, love, fear, and hope within violent relationships (Wilson, et al., 2021). The Backbone Collective surveys (2020) confirm that victim-survivors' experiences highlight the lack of responders' understanding of the complexities within the family violence within the sector, and the need for practices that enable better responses (Wilson et al., 2015). Situating micro-practice as everyday interactions within the broader contextual contribution of systemic responses allows us to see how harmful practices emerge from social-material entanglements.

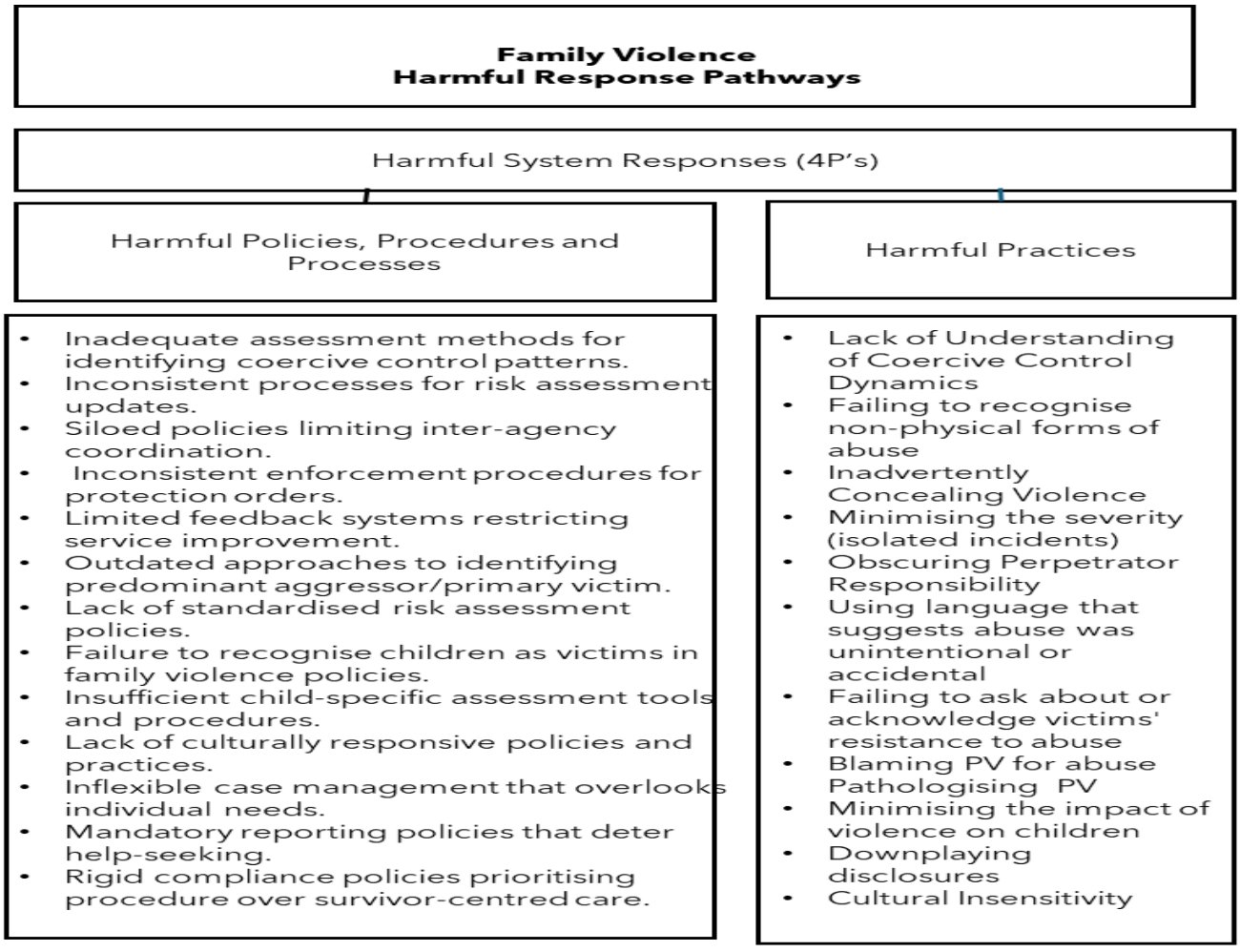
The Map of Harmful System Responses of the 4Ps

Harmful Systems Responses occur when the very institutions and actors tasked with responding to family violence fail to provide safe, helpful, and dignified responses. Instead, their actions or inactions compound the harm and deepen the entrapment of the victim-survivor. Within the cartographic map, this forms the second primary pathway and is expressed through two sub-pathways collectively known as the 4Ps: Harmful Policies, Procedures, and Processes, and Harmful Practices.

The first sub-pathway, Harmful Policies, Procedures, and Processes, captures the harms created by systemic limitations and weaknesses, such as inadequate policy frameworks, poorly designed processes, or procedural gaps. These shortcomings can inadvertently cause further harm to survivors or fail to hold perpetrators to account. The second sub-pathway, Harmful Practices, focuses on the actions of humans within systems whose decisions, behaviours, or interpretations of policy

perpetuate harm. Together, the 4Ps illustrate how systemic and individual practices are interconnected in producing harmful responses that sustain Systemic Coercive Control.

Figure 8 *Harmful System Responses – Policy, Procedure, Process and Practice*



The preceding chapters traced the theoretical and methodological pathways that shaped this research, assembling the cartographic tools needed to map Systemic Coercive Control. With these tools in place, the focus now returns to the figuration of Sarah, a composite (re)imagined figuration that draws together multiple strands of practice experience. Sarah's figuration is not a case study in the conventional

sense but a mapped terrain where lived realities of coercive control intersect with the systemic forces that sustain it. In moving through her coordinates, the analysis follows the two primary pathways: Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) and Harmful Systems Responses (HSR). These pathways act as routes through which strategic systems abuse is enacted and maintained, making visible the points where social, organisational, institutional, and legal landscapes converge. Mapping Sarah's figuration in this way grounds the abstract in the tangible, showing not only the patterns of harm but also the sites of ethical anguish, practitioner resistance, and potential disruption.

Chapter 8: MAPPING THE FIGURATION OF SARAH

Circling Back to Sarah

Circling back to the beginning of this research journey, I introduced Sarah's story as the first figuration drawn from my practitioner memories, and it remains one that continues to linger with me. Some stories do that; they stay in the body, reappearing at unexpected times, hovering in the shadows of sleep. Sarah's words, her trembling body, and her bewilderment at how the system could recast her as the abuser still echo.

I do not need to repeat every detail here, because what matters is the memory of all the Sarahs, and in this figuration, what stays with me is the way she asked how he could manipulate the system into treating her as unstable, how his control became institutionalised. It was not only Sarah's voice but the collective weight of all the Sarahs that pressed on me then and still presses on me now. These are the stories that carry injustice – the ones that remind me why I began this research, and why the questions of responsibility, resistance, and systemic complicity cannot be avoided. This is a story not of inadvertent harm, not of indifference, but of Institutional Systems Abuse, of strategic predominant aggressor manipulation and system responses that compound harm and entrap women socially, relationally, and systemically. It is also a story about a mother's resistance. As I move across patterned layers of telling, listening, and writing pain narratives of all the Sarahs, I feel the responsibility of stitching them together and then picking them apart to understand the system harms, "It is this delicate process of circulating narratives passing on

stories, laying on hands local and far away, that deserves some thought" (Fine, 2017, p. 108).

Pathway One – Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM)

Sarah's experience illustrates how her ex-partner executed a strategic entrapment plan, anticipating her understandable response to her son's potential distress, then leveraging formal systems to enforce harm and extend his control. When Sarah was in the relationship, he told her that if she ever tried to leave him, she would lose her son. Despite Sarah leaving the relationship, his threats about her son still weighed heavily on her, as she knew this would be her greatest punishment for leaving him. This level of direct relationship abuse, as manipulation, threats, and gaslighting, directly instilled fear into Sarah's concerns for her son's wellbeing, which exacerbated her distress when she could not make contact with him on that Sunday. Her partner's deliberate orchestration is mapped across the four sub-pathways of the first pathway of PAM.

1. **Manipulation of Social Communities:** Before that Sunday, he had already done the groundwork to ensure the community would see things his way. In conversations with neighbours, school staff, and mutual acquaintances, he carefully curated the image of a devoted, protective father doing his best for his son. Alongside this, he seeded subtle but damaging narratives about Sarah, describing her as "mentally unstable" and prone to unpredictable outbursts. By the time the incident occurred, the story of who Sarah was – and who he was – had already been told. So, when she acted urgently to protect her son, her behaviour was not seen through the lens of a concerned mother

responding to distress but filtered through the damaging portrait of an unstable woman.

2. **Manipulation of Organisations:** Using technology, he was able to reposition her resistance as unreasonable and even mentally unstable and dangerous (Douglas et al., 2020, 2021; Elizabeth et al., 2012; Tolmie et al., 2023, 2024; Wade et al., 2007; Weaver et al., 2007) through accessing and misusing her historical mental health records to discredit her (Coates & Wade, 2004; Fanslow & Robinson, 2004; Ussher et al., 2023).
3. **Manipulation of Professionals:** When the police arrived, Sarah, visibly distressed, shouting, and banging on the door, was perceived as the aggressor. By contrast, his calm demeanour reinforced the curated story of her being dangerous. This is an example of responding to simplistic presentations devoid of the context and curated self-presentations: the harmful assumption that a perpetrator will look threatening while a victim will appear meek or fearful (Wilson et al., 2015). He set up a front door camera to record a scenario he had engineered. This video, stripped of the coercive context, was later used to manipulate the police and the court as "proof" of her aggression. He presented himself as the calm and responsible father in fear of Sarah's aggression, exploiting professional assumptions that the aggressive-appearing party is the perpetrator (FVRIM, 2021; Nancarrow et al., 2020; Reeves, 2020).
4. **Manipulation of formal Support Agencies:** He withheld their son, ignored her repeated calls and texts, and knew her distress would compel her to act. This deliberate provocation was the foundation for securing a protection

order against her, by using the power of the system and the system actors to maintain power and control.

Pathway Two: Harmful Systems Responses (The 4Ps)

Sarah's figuration contains a series of harmful responses, the most obvious being the failure to identify coercive control, the rapid issuing of a Police Safety Order, the police report, and misidentification of the primary victim. As Stark (2009, 2012) argues, incident-based models of family violence overlook the cumulative, oppressive nature of coercive control. In Sarah's case, coercive control extended beyond physical violence into torturing her with worry about her son, inciting fear and resistance that any mother might display, then punishing her with separation from her child, now enforced with the power of the system. Local Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia research (Backbone, 2020; Douglas et al., 2020; Reeves, 2020, 2021; Tolmie et al., 2018) points to the lack of police training and the absence of tools to map patterns of coercive control as key contributors to these harmful responses. Eurocentric embedded ideologies, such as patriarchy, reinforce vulnerability and limit resistance, enabling men to use systems to abuse (Bumiller, 2008; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dobash & Dobash, 2017; Gavey, 1989; Radtke et al., 2023).

1. **Harmful Policies, Procedures, and Processes:** The New Zealand Police Family Harm Policy states that identifying the predominant aggressor and primary victim is critical, yet it does not provide the means to accurately do so in complex cases (Backbone Collective, 2024; Police, 2024). Australian research shows similar gaps, where police misidentify the predominant

aggressor when the primary victim uses overt resistance (FVRIM, 2021; Nancarrow et al., 2020; Reeves, 2020, 2021). Policies that focus on isolated incidents rather than patterns, and which lack embedded requirements or tools to identify coercive control, increase the risk of misidentification (Katz, 2016; Stark, 2012a). In Sarah's case, a policy that mandated mapping the pattern of coercive control, including recognising acts of resistance, could have changed her trajectory by ensuring she was supported, her child's safety was prioritised. Instead, the procedure applied was an arrest-first approach that prioritised visible aggression over contextual assessment. Sarah's resistance response of banging on the door to reach her crying son was interpreted as aggression, and she was arrested based solely on what officers observed in that moment, without any investigation into the pattern of behaviour that led to it (Nancarrow et al., 2020). Mothers get blamed for not protecting and then punished for trying to protect their children (Douglas & Fell, 2020; Mackenzie & Herbert, 2014; Morgan & Coombes, 2016; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2012).

2. **Harmful Practice:** Sarah's emotional distress was interpreted as a situation to be contained; this shows how practice norms can invert victim-perpetrator roles and facilitate systems abuse. However, what is important to note is that the police responders were following policy, yet too often the frontline responder is blamed for harmful policies that dictate practice.

Sarah is a composite figure, an embodied thread that holds the lived realities of many, as she is woven through the tapestry of history, context, coercive control,

systems abuse as harmful responses through memory and affective pain and anguish. Within the tapestry of harmful responses, the most obvious is the use of "systemic" coercive control and the failure of the responders to identify his tactics and their profound consequences for her. Additionally, here lies the issue of ethical anguish: responders such as myself, the policeperson, and others on the frontline are co-opted into systems abuse. Sarah explains that she was set up, and he manipulated the situation based on a strategic entrapment plan, anticipating her response to her son's potential distress and his plan to leverage the system to enforce harm and control. This situation speaks to Evan Stark's (2009, 2012) concerns regarding ineffective and harmful responses from support services because they are based on incident-based models of violence, which overlook the cumulative and oppressive nature of coercive control. The Sarah figure demonstrates that coercive control extends beyond physical violence, as the ex-partner tortures her with worry, inciting fear and resistance responses. Resistant responses are those that any mother might engage in if their child seems distressed. He set a trap that resulted in the ultimate punishment: separation from her son. As such, he restricts her autonomy and reinforces his control over her life, but now it is with the support of the system. This illustrates the complexity and detrimental consequences of policing that continue to work from an incident-based model of understanding family violence. Research (Backbone, 2020, Douglas et al., 2020; Reeves, 2020, 2021; Tolmie et al., 2018) highlights factors that contribute to this harmful response, such as the lack of police training in identifying the pattern of coercive control, and no actual means to map the pattern of coercive control.

Stark (2012) argues that "battering" is never the work of a single man: it also relies on the wider system that sketches the conditions through which his abuse can take hold. The outlines of this broader tapestry – the structural inequalities, institutional habits, and discursive silences – are drawn in ways that heighten women's vulnerability and delimit the pathways available for resistance or escape. What is traced, and what is left untraced, matters. The figurations that emerge in practice are shaped both by the visible threads of institutional response and by those absent or excluded lines where women's affective memories are muted, dismissed, or rendered illegible. For change to occur, we must attend to the specific ways these systems fail, including the parts of the pattern they refuse to see, and consider where responsibility for accountable and ethical responding must be deliberately and consistently stitched back in.

Misidentification of the Primary Victim

Sarah is misidentified as the predominant aggressor in this situation. Although the New Zealand Police approach notes that identification of the primary victim is critical, there is a gap between the espoused principles in the Police Family Harm: Policy and Procedures manual and the details and tools for assessing and responding to these complex family violence situations (Family Harm Policy and Procedures, 2024). Australian research into the accurate identification of the person most in need of protection from family violence notes that police can be confused if a person does not present themselves as an ideal victim, such as a woman who may "fight" back (Nancarrow et al., 2020). A significant finding was the disconnect between the consistency of police and courts in responding to intimate partner

violence. This research found a gap between policy, intention, and practice, which was "largely due to lack of comprehension of key concepts, uncertainty about procedural expectations and organisational practices and culture" (Nancarrow et al., 2020, p. 12).

Similarly, my research highlights system response failures related to the 4 Ps: policy, procedure, process, and practice. Police policy needs to have more explicit guidelines that direct and ensure proper process and practice to avoid the sequence of harms that stem from misidentification, such as tools for police to assist in identifying patterns of coercive control that would be able to assist in identifying who is the predominant aggressor and who is the primary victim, and who may be acting in self-defence or violent resistance. Identifying patterns of coercive control would assist police in providing positive responses and distinguishing the predominant aggressor and the primary victim in ambiguous circumstances instead of observing mutual violence, which would also assist in determining whether a protection order is necessary. In the figuration of Sarah, a response built on a sound policy, process, and practice of identification could have changed the trajectory of her experiences. Instead, if we imagine a positive response, the police would have supported her in ascertaining her son's safety, her abuser could have been charged, and she could have applied for a Protection Order and received the support entitled to her as a victim-survivor.

Simplistic Presentations and Curated Self-Presentations

In the first pathway of PAM, I paid considerable attention to the idea of moving away from simplistic presentations of perpetrators and victim-survivors of family violence,

in that it is harmful to assume that predominant aggressors will present as aggressive and threatening and primary victim's vulnerable and afraid. In Sarah's composite case, when the Police arrived, she was kicking down a door; she appeared violent and aggressive. By contrast, her ex-partner's calculated behaviour illustrates the tactics used by some perpetrators to manipulate the police responder. He strategically withheld their son, recorded Sarah's desperate attempts to ensure her child's safety, and later leveraged both her mental health history and the video footage to reinforce a portrayal of her as violent and unstable. This demonstrates a non-physical third-party coercive control tactic used to exploit systems and system actors as a form of social systems abuse. I have called this, Systemic Coercive Control tactic - Institutional Systems Abuse (ISA). Institutional Systems Abuse is a tactic enacted primarily through the Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) pathway, yet its effects unfold across both pathways to include Harmful Systems Responses (HSR). This interaction reveals how individual manipulation and structural conditions become mutually reinforcing.

Through PAM, the predominant aggressor strategically curates a narrative that positions him as calm, reasonable, and credible, while casting the woman he is harming as unstable, aggressive, or non-compliant. He mobilises institutional actors - including Police, to validate this narrative by exploiting known systemic vulnerabilities: gendered assumptions, high workloads, procedural shortcuts and the prioritisation of surface-level indicators such as presentation, demeanour, or who appears "cooperative." By doing this, the perpetrator deliberately recruits the institution as an instrument of coercive control.

At the same time, HSR is activated when the Police response is shaped not solely by the perpetrator's manipulation but by the institution's own embedded policies, procedures, processes, and practices (the 4 P's). These structural elements create conditions in which misidentification of the predominant aggressor is not an anomaly. The absence of primary victim verses Predominant aggressor analysis, inadequate training on resistance, Systemic Coercive Control, entrapment practice, mapping tools for risk assessments, lack of awareness of third party non-physical violence, the unmaking of Institutional Systems Abuse and its diverse locations and rigid or outdated operational policies all contribute to a system that is predisposed to respond harmfully. The Police responder's failure to identify the primary victim and predominant aggressor demonstrates this entanglement. The officer's assessment is influenced simultaneously by the perpetrator's curated performance (PAM), and the institution's policies that result in practice responses (HSR). These logics are threaded through every level: from high-level policies that inadequately centre coercive control, to procedures that prioritise incident-based evidence, to processes that reward rapid resolution over relational inquiry, and finally into frontline practice where officers rely gendered presentations and assumptions. Thus, the officer's harmful decision is not simply a frontline error. It is the point of convergence between the perpetrator's manipulation and the institution's structural limitations. The perpetrator exploits these limitations, and the limitations in turn amplify his manipulation. In this sense, Institutional Systems Abuse is not only enabled by the perpetrator but also materially produced by the institution. The two pathways (PAM and HSR) converge, compound and instil systemic violence that entraps her within the system and the relationship.

Unseen Misunderstood Acts of Resistance

Sarah's behaviour is an act of resistance, yet the police responders misinterpret it, and this misinterpretation contributes directly to their harmful response. Drawing on Wade's work, resistance is understood as a constant and inevitable response to mistreatment, occurring whenever a person's dignity is affronted (Wade, 1997). People who use abuse and oppression anticipate resistance from their victims. They take specific steps to conceal or suppress, and they will incite violent resistance if it fuels their entrapment strategy. Resistance can be overt or covert, seen or unseen, quiet or loud, obvious or hidden, but the intent is the same: it protects the inherent rights of victim-survivors by instilling boundaries of preservation and rights to safety, dignity, and autonomy, which are often the targets of strategic entrapment.

Reflexive Traces: Practitioner Resistance to Resistance

> *After Sarah shared her resistant response with me, I was unsure what to do. The MOJ policy did not provide an alternative route to guide cases like this, and it still does not. Being an inexperienced practitioner at the time, I followed my gut and asked Sarah if she would like a cup of tea. I looked down at the workbook, which included a mental health assessment, and an extensive behaviour checklist of abuse used, pages and pages of boxes to tick. I turned it over and went to make Sarah a cup of tea.*
>
> *This was my resistant response to the MOJ system, which intended to make me complicit in harming her further. She accepted the offer of tea, and we spent the rest of the session chatting casually. I reflected on the time spent with Sarah that day, and I realised again that she resisted oppression, the*

oppression of me, and all that I symbolised. Sarah's courage to share her story during our time together, her trembling body, and her hesitant, tearful voice reveal the emotional toll of her experiences and reflect her resistance in recounting yet another system actor.

This was a significant act of reclaiming her agency, one that directly counters the narrative imposed upon her by her ex-partner, the police, the legal system, the Code of Practice, and the family violence agency, myself included.

Being required to practice in ways that contradict one's ethical values go beyond both duty of care and the capacity to care, which creates a profound moral discomfort that I experience as ethical anguish, and it exceeds witnessing – it is a forced complicity.

Policy and Procedural Compliance that Harms

As Sarah is a respondent on a Protection Order, she is required to attend a mandated assessment to determine her suitability for a non-violence programme. Sarah's case was of a newly employed practitioner conducting an assessment for women who offend in the context of family violence. The Code of Practice (Ministry of Justice, 2023), which outlines the policies, processes and procedures for conducting practice assessments in relation to women who offend in family violence remains unchanged in that resistant responses are processed with the same approach as men - despite family violence being predominantly a gendered crime.

I remember approaching my clinical manager back then and saying, "This is a mistake. Sarah shouldn't be put in a group with other women who use violence -

she has been set up." My manager responded, "Work the programme; we don't have other alternatives." I was newly qualified and relied heavily on the advice of my supervisors and the policies guiding our work. I wondered if I, too, was now colluding with the perpetrator. I assessed Sarah and many other Sarahs as unsuitable for a group programme, which meant that I could tailor the programme to suit them when offered individually; however, the post-programme assessment feedback forms always asked about the client's ability to stop using violence, which was obviously irrelevant in clients who used resistance.

The Code of Practice (Ministry of Justice, 2023) serves as a guideline for compliance but fails to provide specific tools for addressing the complexities of female offending, which can lead to harmful practices. Although the CoP acknowledges the importance of identifying the predominant aggressor and recognises responses to coercive control, it does not incorporate these considerations into assessment workbooks or programme content. Additionally, while the CoP emphasises understanding the context, intent, and effects of violence before and after incidents, this emphasis is not reflected in the assessment workbooks, rendering these critical practice guidelines practically invisible.

Intersectional System Discrimination

Intersectional systems discrimination is not an ancillary concern to Systemic Coercive Control; it is integral to understanding how power operates at the silences and frictions of social life. It speaks directly to the ways that multiple systems of oppression, including gender discrimination, racism, ableism, classism, and colonialism, are not simply parallel forces; they are interlocking and co-constitutive.

In the context of family violence, these convergences are not only social but institutional: they are embedded in policies, practices, and discourses that compound vulnerability while erasing lived realities. Bumiller's (2008) *provides* critique on how state responses to violence often re-inscribe structural inequalities under the guise of protection. She demonstrates how the carceral and bureaucratic mechanisms of the state frequently misrecognise the lived realities of those most marginalised, producing punitive rather than protective outcomes. This insight is crucial here: intersectional systems discrimination operates not only in the overt biases of individual actors but also in the very architecture of institutional response, where intersecting oppressions are sustained and amplified through law, policy, and administrative practice (2008). Like Braidotti's (2013, 2019) critique of Western categories, intersectional analysis refuses the universalising tendencies of dominant frameworks. It questions the colonial and patriarchal logics that sustain the very categories by which subjects are named, sorted, and governed. Research highlights that intersectional factors can contribute to women being more likely to be incorrectly identified as the predominant aggressor, with research confirming this skewed demographic reality (Nancarrow et al., 2020; Predominant Aggressor Identification and Victim Misidentification, 2019; Reeves, 2021; Tolmie et al., 2018). Systems fail to recognise the unique challenges faced by marginalised individuals, increasing the likelihood of misidentification and further victimisation. Many harmful threads are woven in Sarah's case. For example, her ex-partner and father of her children positioned her mental health as a matter of concern, with the police saying that she was "unstable". While we were chatting, Sarah mentioned that she had been anxious about coming to the "Assessment" because she was worried that I

would judge her and think her unfit to parent. Unsurprisingly, these terms speak to a medical model or pathology, both of which are harmful responses (Coates & Wade, 2007; Wade, 1999). The narrative highlights that the language of assessment speaks to not only pathologising concerns but also conveys a sense of power over another person: "I am the knower, and I will assess you". It highlights how colonisation persists though policies created and sustained through neoliberal systemic practices and responses rooted in historical dominance, privilege, and patriarchy (Bumiller, 2008; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dobash & Dobash, 2017). These colonial legacies continue to influence family violence responses in New Zealand and result in approaches that may lack cultural sensitivity or awareness of Indigenous and marginalised experiences of women (Richardson Kineweskwêw & Wade, 2010; Wilson et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). Neoliberal bureaucratic systemic process, such as the ones mentioned above and in the figuration of Sarah, perpetuate power imbalances and create ethical distress for practitioners, who are required to uphold policy requirements that cause cultural and ethical harm, positioning the practitioner as complicit in the systemic harms, which perpetuates practitioner ethical anguish.

Reflexive Traces – Sorry I Missed Supervision

Sorry I missed supervision last month; I have been having a few health problems.

I had terrible migraine.

I am sorry to hear that.

Yeah, I landed up in the hospital on a heart monitor. My chest was so tight, I think I had a panic attack. They say it's really bad anxiety.

How are you doing now?

Well, I am working from home today….

(She goes quiet; I feel as if she is trying not to cry, I feel her pain)

I am not coping, it's just too much, and my manager does not get it. Two of my team members have been going through performance management processes this week. They made terrible mistakes. Mistakes that could have cost people's lives, mistakes that caused one client to be beaten by her partner for two days while locked in her home, and the other did not follow basic safety screening criteria, which led to the client returning to the abusive partner and resulting in a police callout that same day, she should have been listened to and admitted based on a thorough safety assessment. We are hiring wrong; we hire people who want to help – but they have no formal qualifications. We do not have proper induction training, our safety processes are not clear enough and safe houses are unsafe, but my manager does not hear me. I love this mahi, but I can't watch people being treated like this. I am scared someone is going to die because of how we work.

The Centring of Ethical Anguish

Vikki Reynolds repositions vicarious trauma as a reasonable response to a worker's spiritual pain – the pain that emerges when hopelessness sets in. She observes that "the harms in our work are most often from oppressive structures and do not allow for the resources and practices needed to respond to human suffering with dignity"

(Reynolds, 2019, p. 164). In my supervision practice, I hear this pain often. It appears in the stories practitioners share about the systems that fail both them and the people they serve.

Institutional language frequently misnames this experience as "vicarious trauma" or "burnout" – shifting the responsibility onto individual practitioners, framing it as a failure of self-care or personal resilience. This framing erases the systemic and structural causes of harm, placing blame on the worker rather than on the oppressive systems that restrict ethical, dignified practice. In reality, this embodied distress is not a sign of weakness; it is a form of resistance. As Wade (1997) reminds us, alongside oppression runs resistance, and this applies not only to those we serve but also to the workers themselves.

Ethical anguish is the humanness of saying: "No, this is not right, and I am not okay working like this". Workers are harmed at work, and this refusal is a resistance to complicity in systems that harm. This position can be understood as ethical praxis of resistance that directly contests the policies, procedures, processes, and practices (the 4Ps) through which institutional harm is reproduced and sustained. In my supervision practice, I began meeting others at the point of their tension – the ethical crossroads where anguish gathers. From these encounters, the language of ethical anguish became central, offering a way to name the embodied distress that arises when moral dilemmas leave practitioners, myself included, feeling complicit in harm. Reflecting on my own experiences and the stories others shared in practice and supervision, I adopted a centring approach to help navigate these moments. Introducing this in clinical supervision received positive feedback, as it supported

practitioners to stay grounded, uphold dignity, and resist complicity. This experience became the entry point to my research and a way of naming the ethical stakes in the work.

The concept of ethical anguish is a reflective tool for practitioners facing being made complicit or working in a way that crosses ethical boundaries, causing them to question their ethical practice. Drawing from person-centred approaches in healthcare (Sturgiss et al., 2022) and the concept of moral distress (Jameton, 2017; Summers, 1985), I extend these ideas into family violence practice through the work of Richardson Kineweskwêw & Reynolds (2012, 2023) based on their concept of spiritual pain, a response that can be felt by practitioners who witness systemic injustices. Richardson's response-based lens reminds us that dignity and resistance are always present, and that failing to recognise them produces further harm. Bringing these strands together, I frame ethical anguish in family violence work as a signpost of complicity, responsibility and possibility – a recognition that responders are entangled in systems that can reproduce harm, but also that moments of distress can open space for ethical redress. I translate this into reflexive practice by asking questions such as "Who or what is being centred in this moment?" This becomes both a practical and ethical orientation, guiding decisions about whose voice, safety, and well-being are prioritised in service delivery and institutional responses. I invite practitioners to visualise various "circles" representing what could be centred: a policy or procedure, the direct client, an indirect client such as a child, or themselves as the responder. We then place each in the centre in turn, exploring how it feels, the consequences of each position, and whether re-centring is possible.

Where re-centring is not possible, we consider what can be advocated for. This process often clarifies the source of discomfort (ethical anguish) and activism as resistance.

The analysis of Sarah's figure shows how the two pathways of Systemic Coercive Control, Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) and Harmful Systems Responses (HSR), operate in relation to one another. These pathways do not function as separate or independent systems. Instead, they form an interconnected set of coordinates that a perpetrator can strategically move through and exploit. They also highlight the ethical anguish faced by practitioners who encounter harm but are constrained in their ability to prevent it, in this way they are morally harmed too and become complicit in the abuse strategy. The pathways serve not only as a map for practitioners to better understand and trace Systemic Coercive Control in Institutional Systems Abuse – they also act as a map for our own ethical anguish to render our own complicity visible and to consider our own responsibility in the disruption of it – as the site of practitioner resistance.

The cartographic work in this chapter brings into view the terrain upon which Systemic Coercive Control operates, not as a series of disconnected incidents but as a patterned, strategic use of systems abuse.

The concluding chapter that follows draws together the reimaginings of affirmative ethics that have guided this research journey. It reflects on how the pathways and insights emerging from this work have been received within the community, and how these engagements have contributed to shifts in understanding, practice, and theory. The chapter traces key milestones along the way and considers both the

theoretical and practical implications of the findings. It also offers reflections on theory, methodology and method, woven with personal and professional insights that have shaped the work. The chapter closes with a reflexive trace of hope as a gesture toward ongoing connection, collaboration, and becoming with others.

Chapter 9: REIMAGININGS OF AFFIRMATIVE ETHICS

A cartography provides a dynamic, relational map that helps trace the fluid, interconnected nature of power and social structures of the present, while offering ways to resist and reimagine affirmative futures (Braidotti, 2010, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2019a; Braidotti et al., 2018). It is both theoretical and methodological, offering not only posthuman feminist analysis but also a framework for future possibilities and ethical practices. In this way, I was able to build a cartography of exactly that – a sociopolitical map of Systemic Coercive Control in intimate partner violence - a map capable of capturing the rhizomatic web of intra connections that spans between and across diverse locations, across figurations and assemblages. It is the mapping that makes visible the complexity of overlapping and compounding aspects of systemic harm – a harm that entraps primary victims. A map that highlights the intersectional points at which embedded violence takes place through assemblages of gendered power structures, which assists in narrowing down the moment where responders are co-opted and made complicit. Highlighting the ethical anguish that practitioners face and making resistance an imperative for responders, as I have learnt that a social political map is never neutral, and a reminder that silence is still an active position. Encouraging responders to call out and centre their ethical anguish as a resistant response, not only for the injustice we bear witness to but because of the injustices we are forced to embody. Practitioner resistance in this way is an act of safety and dignity to self and others.

Before I created this cartographic map, the places where disruption could occur felt dispersed and difficult to locate. There was no shared frame to hold them together.

The map now provides that fabric and frame, a guiding outline that shows where the threads of disruption can be woven. Like any tapestry, the work begins with the structure that supports it. The map offers this structure, bringing coherence to the threads that can be drawn through practice to interrupt harm.

This research began from wanting to know more about how harmful system responses occur within the context of intimate partner violence and specifically seeking to understand how formal social systems can become mechanisms of harm despite their stated purpose of providing support, safety, and protection. What started as an examination of individual harmful formal system responses evolved into a deeper analysis of systemic complicity in perpetuating patterns of Systemic Coercive Control. It is here that I reflect on the journey travelled in terms of shifts and insights, milestones in the cartographic journey - as contours mapped, trajectories realised and points of arrival that move with the continuations. Moving from mapping to meaning and how the theoretical and methodological offerings and insights as outcomes and creatively forge pathways forward for both research and practice. While sharing the unexpected learnings that come from vulnerability and the venturing into new territory academically, professionally and personally.

Reflexive Traces: Researcher-Practitioner

> *As a researcher, I've discovered the value of making sense of what already exists in the world and of what resided within me as "affective residue" (Braidotti, 2019). I realised I wasn't alone in this painful place – this sense of being in the world meant something worth taking time to understand. The pain and anger I felt about systemic harms were not the result of personal or*

professional inadequacy, often blamed on practitioners' self-care failures (Reynolds, 2019). Instead, both my lived experience and the experiences of others were worthy of research-able consideration.

Posthuman critical feminist theory provided the means for me to make meaning of lived experience by tracing the subjectivity of affective threads and fault lines to where real-world experiences intersect with academia, theory, practice, power, and injustice. The personal connection to politics – holding each other with anger and hope – represents intertwined, reflective parts of our connected worlds. Yet, from my practitioner's position, this pathway had run alongside my life unattended for too long.

Today, when I sit in a space of listening with others, I feel differently. I have something meaningful to contribute that reflects individual experiences within a broader relational context, enabling me to validate the harms inflicted by systems. Through widening my practice, I can now offer an understanding of what previously existed as vague, disjointed, abstract individual experiences without understanding or responsibility. Additionally, and importantly, I have experienced firsthand the transformational power of transitioning from practitioner ethical anguish connected to oppressive systems that resided within me into the outward enactment of my ethics of resistance, specifically against the abuse of institutional systems.

Becoming with Community – Cartography in Motion

In posthuman nomadic terms, a cartography is never static, as it is a situated, embodied, and relational mapping of power relations, a living document that traces the flows, blockages, and intensities that shape a given context (Braidotti, 2013, 2019). My cartographic map of Systemic Coercive Control was not intended to remain fixed on the page; its value lay in the way it might travel, resonate, and open space for shared language. From the outset, I understood that the map's integrity depended not only on the concepts it captured but also on its capacity to move through the relational spaces where family violence work is lived. Like most journeys, we always return to the place that we began from, and, in my case, it was from the frontline of family violence work.

When the cartographic map began to take shape, I wondered if I had traced an individual map or a shared map – not in terms of accuracy, but in terms of relation placement. In Braidotti's (2010, 2019) framing, a cartography is not a fixed artefact but a living, ethical practice that is a way of mapping the situated, partial, and embodied coordinates of a phenomenon to think with others, not merely about them. It became clear to me that the map needed to move. It had to be carried beyond the writing desk and into the relational spaces where family violence work unfolds.

This was not an exercise in collecting feedback; this was an act of placing the cartography into circulation, allowing it to meet others in the sector as an offering rather than an inquiry. I began presenting the map in contexts where dialogue could occur, and I was able to open various spaces for this, such as at the 2024 National

Family Violence Conference, in professional development workshops, in group and individual supervision sessions, and in open community educational workshops.

The map travelled further than I had expected. Practitioners from across Aotearoa and Australia engaged with it in ways that extended its reach by inviting me to community workshops, integrating the concepts into their own learning spaces, and sharing that it gave them language for phenomena they had long witnessed but struggled to articulate. In these moments, the cartography was doing what it was meant to do: offering coordinates for naming harm, resisting systems abuse, and mapping and thinking critically about the patterns of Systemic Coercive Control as violence that is always socially located. They also told me that they wanted to know how to disrupt systems abuse, which led me to developing a practice approach of engaging with the map as a tool for mapping Systemic Coercive Control and specifically that of institutional and social systems abuse.

For me, this stage became part of the research journey itself. It affirmed that a map gains depth not only through its content but also through the movements it makes and the encounters it generates. The cartography was no longer just mine – it had entered into a shared process of becoming, travelling along unexpected lines and across multiple thresholds. This movement confirmed what I had hoped: that mapping harmful responses could be more than an academic exercise; it could be a means of connection, shared analysis, and, ultimately, a resource for disruption. The women in my head and heart pushed me from a place of affect, my supervisors from understanding and theory and community from practice.

In this way, the cartographic process was not confined to the analytical stage of the research. It was itself nomadic – travelling and shifting across contexts. This stage affirmed that mapping harmful responses could be more than a method of analysis; it could be a means of connection, collective thinking, and, ultimately, a resource for change, leading us back to Sarah, and her story, with which I began this research journey.

Milestones in the Journey

The study constructed two main pathways for understanding harmful responses. The first sheds light on Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM), revealing how discursive placements enacted as performative states can result in responders becoming complicit in Systemic Coercive Control. The PAM pathway demonstrates the cross-section of social systems that can become sites of manipulations, which demonstrates the extended and compounding consequences for the victim-survivor when multiple social systems are manipulated into the abuse strategy. The second pathway traces the connection between harmful practices and the assemblages of the 4Ps – policies, procedures, processes, and practices – demonstrating how violence can be embedded in inadequate or outdated foundational frameworks, which can manifest in harmful practice responses.

These pathways revealed that harmful responses are not isolated failures but part of a broader pattern of systemic complicity, where institutional processes risk reinforcing the very dynamics of coercion they are meant to disrupt. The findings necessitate a shift away from neutrality in family violence response toward an approach that actively resists oppression. Understanding more about harmful

responses facilitated an 'understanding bridge' into Institutional Systems Abuse. This insight was an unexpected outcome of the research – namely, the connection between harmful responses and the tactic of Institutional Systems Abuses within Systemic Coercive Control.

Theoretical Implications, Policy and Praxis Recommendations

The primary goal of this research was to understand how harmful responses occur in family violence situations and to map the mechanisms by which social systems are manipulated to harm, entrap, and control victim-survivors. This goal was achieved through the development of a conceptual framework of Systemic Coercive Control that maps the interconnections between third-party non-physical violence, systemic complicity, and social entrapment.

An unexpected dimension of this work was to differentiate between how legal systems abuse and the 'other' forms of systems abuse are understood in both research and practice. While legal systems abuse, which may include filing frivolous lawsuits, misuse of Protection Orders, and jurisdictional manipulation, is more widely acknowledged (Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration, 2024), this thesis identifies Institutional Systems Abuse as a precursor that can legitimise and entrench further harm through the legal system. Legal and institutional abuse are not the same tactic; they differ in location, arenas, and systems, and the actors differ in statute and abuse tactics. Although they are assemblages of Systemic Coercive Control, their relation is diffractive, with institutional abuse often establishing the trace for systems abuse. This demonstrates that responses to systems abuse need to take place before they reach our courts. It is through these tactics that the abuse

becomes visible and, subsequently, possible to mitigate by disrupting the pathways.

The research evolved beyond its initial focus on the abstraction of systems and actors being 'weaponised' to a more specific understanding and the naming of "manipulation", marking an ethical pivot in language that better honours the intentional, strategic nature of predominant aggressor tactics while acknowledging institutional responsibility.

Theoretical Implications – Naming of Institutional Systems Abuse

This research extends Social Entrapment Theory into a more specific and targeted formulation of Systems Abuse – by asserting that referring to systemic harm as a generalised 'consequence' of Social Entrapment Theory but instead name the specific tactic of Systemic Coercive Control as systems abuse. Systems abuse is positioned as a deliberate strategy of Systemic Coercive Control with three distinct but interconnected territories: social, institutional, and legal. Each is worthy of separate naming, each with its own tactics and terrains, and each capable of inflicting profound harm.

The cartographic mapping of Harmful Systems Responses traces coordinates across the varied and interrelated landscapes of social systems, institutions, and organisations, many of which are not formally connected, nor explicitly tasked with responding to family violence. These coordinates reveal secondary abuse targets: third parties such as professionals, community members, and institutional actors often unknowingly, become part of the abuse strategy. The research makes clear

that these secondary targets are vulnerable and must be informed of this risk if they are to resist complicity.

This work also calls for the un-othering of Institutional Systems Abuse (ISA), bringing it into full visibility alongside Legal Systems Abuse (LSA) and social forms of systemic harm. It positions systems abuse as not incidental but central to Systemic Coercive Control, giving precise language to its tactics and shifting attention from incident-based understandings of violence toward the non-physical, third-party tactics that sustain entrapment. This cartography also demonstrates how these tactics operate through discursive representations embedded in gendered power relations, aligning with feminist theories that expose how institutional language and narratives can reproduce harm.

This research makes visible the connections between practitioner practice and the policies, procedures, and processes that govern it. It is neither accurate nor helpful to locate blame solely at the level of individual practitioners without examining the systemic origins of their responses. Often, practitioners are required to act within frameworks that embed them in the practice of a harmful response, which forces them into complicity through the assemblages of the systems themselves. Understanding this dynamic is essential for creating conditions where practitioners can resist and disrupt harm rather than reproduce it.

It argues that models for education, professional training, and client engagement should be perpetually and relentlessly positioned as social and always attentive to the systemic contexts in which harm occurs. This means mapping the intra- and interconnections of systems abuse as a whole map: a patterned, systemic, and

relational view of Systemic Coercive Control that moves from the direct relational control to a recognition of equally precise control orchestrated across entire systems, often without visibility.

By tracing not only the experience of entrapment but its performance through systemic mechanisms, this study reframes family violence as profoundly relational and social, requiring that coercive control be recognised as Systemic Coercive Control to ensure its social dimensions are perpetually mapped. In this framing, Social Entrapment Theory is not abandoned but expanded: systemic institutional complicity is recognised as lived and material, and institutions and their actors, both human and non-human.

Importantly, this research makes the case for reframing of social entrapment as "systems abuse" – understood as a deliberate tactic of Systemic Coercive Control. The pathways developed here provide not only extensions to social entrapment but also pathways for disruption that acknowledge the ethical anguish inherent in responding to systemic harm. The cartography offers the tools, both conceptual and practical, to recognise these patterns, to name them precisely, and to act in ways that disrupt the orchestration of harm across systems.

Methodology and Method Reflections

My methodological journey was not a predetermined path but a living compass that guided me through uncharted territories of knowledge. Traditional research frameworks would have rendered my experiences "unresearchable", i.e. too subjective, too personal, too emotionally entangled. Yet it was precisely in embracing these qualities that this methodology found its strength and purpose.

This approach positioned me as the researcher, not as an objective observer but as inherently valuable – my inner knowing, my practice memories, and my embodied pain all became legitimate sites of inquiry. Rather than demanding I separate myself from my research, this methodology granted permission to be creative, imaginative, and personal. It liberated me from the constraints of traditional academic postures that demand objectivity, rationality, and methodological obedience. These are the same systems responsible for the cause of violence, patriarchy, and colonisation as the condition that underpinned my analysis of current-day violence. My resistance required that I did not fit my research and those I spoke for into a pre-established traditional humanist methodological container. Instead, I crafted a methodological combination that honoured the unique nature of my research – stitching together posthuman critical theory, nomadic cartography, reflective thematic analysis, and memory work. What conventional research might dismiss as methodological impropriety became, within this framework, a powerful space for transformation and meaning-making. This methodology recycled what is often considered problematic in research – subjectivity, emotion, memory, imagination – into sources of value. In doing so, it embodied the very process of repositioning that runs through the heart of this work. The margins became the centre, the personal became political, the subjective became informative.

Unlike traditional approaches, where methodology functions primarily as upfront validation to justify research choices, my methodology lived and breathed throughout this project. It was not a static framework but an evolving companion that shaped and was shaped by the research process itself. I held it in my mind like

a guiding compass, pointing to my true north, giving me the courage to follow the pain I held for myself as a practitioner and for those who shared with me, those whose voices were never heard despite their screams.

This methodological stance dissolved my professional and academic aloneness. It connected me to others who value what traditional research often dismisses – the embodied, the affective, the relational. It reminded me that there are many ways to map a journey, and each one carries significance. This is my story, which is woven into the methodological fabric, not as an indulgence but as an essential thread in this tapestry of meaning. Through the personal narrative of my practice memories, broader patterns of systemic harm were revealed. My individual cartography is connected to collective experiences, demonstrating how the intimate and the institutional are inseparably entangled.

In the end, this methodology did not just enable research – it transformed what research could be. It created space for voices and knowledge that have been systematically silenced, turning sites of pain into sources of insight and possibility. It honoured the complex, messy, embodied nature of family violence work while providing ethical and relational frameworks to make meaning of these experiences.

Personal and Professional Reflections

Beyond my espoused aims for this research, the process aligned with an inner need for restoration and meaning, as I attended to and addressed the visceral rage that I carried from witnessing enacted harm on those who needed support, safety, protection, and space for recovery. This process also helped restore my sense of inadequacy as a practitioner. Through posthuman critical theory, a nomadic

trajectory emerged that was never intentionally plotted, yet it enacted care for the self that became essential to the research itself. The research process attended to my personal ethical anguish and the relational pain of others, validating the initial rage and anger, not as unprofessional but as profoundly human and worthy of consideration.

New learnings offered affirmative hope that softened the burning blaze carried into the research. Through expanding knowledge about harmful responses, I have been able to gather others who have felt the same ethical anguish, and this has emerged as collective community resistance in the family violence community.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The policy and practice applications have emerged as threads woven through the entire process - these threads gathered force as I continued offering practice-based community workshops on the findings. In response practitioners and victim-survivors asked for resources and handouts, these can be accessed from www.jacki.co.nz or www.coercive-control.co.nz. Additionally, members from various family violence agencies and victim-survivors themselves began asking me to write reports for people experiencing coercive control, which led to the development of the: Systemic Coercive Control Assessment (SCCA) and Summary Patterning Index (SPI). The key practice insights are situated within the appendices, here you can find information on the map of harmful responses, the pathways of systems abuse, the shift to Systemic Coercive Control, the differentiating of systems abuse, the specifics of Institutional Systems Abuse as a discrete tactic, and the

centring of ethical anguish as well as additional information can be found at www.jacki.co.nz or www.coercive-control.co.nz .

This research identifies policy, procedure, process, and practice (the 4Ps) as interlocking sites through which harm is produced and compounded, not as separate domains. Policy shapes the procedures practitioners are required to follow; procedure shapes the decision-making processes through which a case moves and process, in turn, produces the practice, the language, the documentation, the judgement calls, through which individual responders may act. A practitioner working within an inadequate Code of Practice is not exercising free professional judgement, they are practising within the harm the policy has already structured. Equally, a well-designed policy will fail in practice if practitioners are not equipped, through training and supervision, to recognise resistance and identify manipulation accurately.

For this reason, the recommendations that follow should be read as entangled rather than discrete. A change in practice without a corresponding change in policy will leave practitioners attempting to act ethically inside a structure that does not support them, generating exactly the form of ethical anguish this research identifies as a signpost of systemic harm. A change in policy without corresponding investment in practitioner education will leave new provisions unimplemented or inconsistently applied. Each recommendation, therefore, names both the structural change required and the practice capability needed to enact it, in recognition that meaningful reform requires both to move together.

Name and Legislate Institutional Systems Abuse

1. Name Institutional Systems Abuse as a distinct tactic of Systemic Coercive Control, un-othered from legal systems abuse.

This research defines and names Institutional Systems Abuse as a discrete tactic of Systemic Coercive Control, demonstrating that institutional and legal systems abuse differ in location, arena and tactic, and that Institutional Systems Abuse often establishes the trace through which legal systems abuse later proceeds. Institutional Systems Abuse must therefore be named in its own right, rather than absorbed into the more visible category of legal systems abuse, or positioned as "other" forms of systems abuse, and/or dismissed as institutional indifference or inadvertent harmful response.

2. Amend the Family Violence Act 2018 to name systems abuse, institutional and legal, as a recognised form of family violence.

The Act currently recognises patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour but names neither form of systems abuse. In Aotearoa New Zealand, litigant abuse orders were introduced by the Victims of Family Violence (Strengthening Legal Protections) Legislation Act 2025 and are now provided for in s 12B of the Family Court Act 1980, highlighting the need for protection from legal systems abuse. Institutional Systems Abuse remains unacknowledged, leaving responders without conceptual or legal means to identify or intervene.

A Note on Civil Reform First before Criminalisation of Coercive Control

The Decision Not to Recommend Criminalisation of Coercive Control

A reader engaging with these recommendations, particularly one familiar with current debates in this field, may reasonably ask why - given the thesis's sustained argument regarding institutional systems abuse in systemic coercive control - criminalisation of coercive control is not advanced as a recommendation. This is not an oversight. It follows directly from the thesis's central argument, and the reasoning is set out explicitly below.

The self-referential problem

The argument advanced throughout this thesis is that institutions — policing, courts, child protection, and family law systems — are not merely imperfect responders to coercive control but can themselves function as sites through which coercive control is extended and reproduced. Legal systems abuse, in this sense, is not incidental to institutional process but can be constitutive of it (Douglas, 2018).

This creates a structural, rather than merely practical, difficulty for any recommendation to criminalise coercive control. A new offence would be investigated, charged, and adjudicated by the same institutional apparatus identified as a vector of the harm under study. The system positioned to administer the remedy is not external to the problem; it is implicated in it. This is illustrated where misidentification of victim-survivors as predominant aggressors has continued (Reeves, 2021). When the underlying harm persists, is not a reliable site for a new criminal offence to be layered onto without first addressing that capacity for self-misrepresentation.

This concern is not abstract to victim-survivors themselves. Reeves (2025) found that the majority of victim-survivors they interviewed doubted that a coercive control

offence would reduce legal systems abuse - their lived experience of misidentification led them to expect that such an offence would furnish perpetrators with a further means of compounding it, rather than resolving it.

This concern sits alongside and compounds, the more familiar grounds on which criminalisation has been critiqued: the mismatch between coercive control as a cumulative pattern and the criminal law's incident-based logic (Tolmie, 2018); the disproportionate risk of misidentification and the empirical evidence that, even where the offence exists, coercive control cases face disproportionate procedural barriers relative to other family violence offences and are less likely to proceed to prosecution. The concern is that the criminalisation of coercive control risks reasserting traditional, individualised conceptions of responsibility and ultimately serves to fail those it is intended to protect, by extending the power of a criminal-legal state that has not yet demonstrated competence in recognising coercive control when it occurs.

Prioritising reform of the civil system — police screening and risk-assessment practice at first contact, screening of cross-applications for patterns consistent with systems abuse, judicial training, resourcing of legal representation and interpreters at the point of application, and genuinely independent, ongoing monitoring of implementation (rather than one-off legislative "ticking the box") — over the creation of a new criminal offence. This position is advanced as a sequencing argument, not an absolute one. The recommendation made here is accordingly conditional - that criminalisation remains an open question for future reconsideration, but only once civil-system reform has been implemented and independently demonstrated —

through monitoring of actual practice rather than legislative or policy assertion – to have measurably reduced misidentification, institutional and legal systems abuse. Recommending criminalisation in advance of improved responses, on the findings developed in this thesis - risk extending the reach of the institutional mechanisms of harm identified as systemic coercive control.

Advance Social Entrapment language to Systemic Coercive Control

3. Position Systemic Coercive Control as a necessary and critical extension of Social Entrapment Theory.

Social Entrapment Theory correctly identifies that the harms experienced by victim-survivors are systemic (Ptacek, 1999), but it frames the systemic harm as indifference or inadvertent, without naming the deliberate tactic through which a predominant aggressor produces that systemic harm or assigning responsibility to the responders who enact it. Nor does it highlight the mechanism for disrupting it. This research's contribution is precisely that naming: Predominant Aggressor Manipulation identifies the predominant aggressor's strategy as deliberate and traceable across institutions, while the 4Ps identify the specific policy, procedure, process and practice failures through which responders become complicit rather than protective. Where Social Entrapment Theory names indifference, this research argues for an active stance against Systemic Coercive Control, in which responders work against entrapment rather than merely failing to prevent it. Systemic Coercive Control therefore extends Social Entrapment Theory by making both the predominant aggressor's deliberate strategy and the responder's complicity legible, where Social Entrapment Theory alone leaves both out of view.

4. Adopt Systemic Coercive Control as the foundational framework for understanding family violence, so that systems-abuse tactics are routinely anticipated and screened for, rather than recognised only in hindsight.

Current frameworks are predominantly incident-focused and assess primarily direct relationship abuse, with no category for harm enacted through third parties or systems. This research demonstrates that Predominant Aggressor Manipulation operates precisely outside this frame: a predominant aggressor's manipulation through a formal institution is not a direct-relationship incident and is therefore invisible to an incident-based framework altogether, not merely identified late. A foundational Systemic Coercive Control framework recasts institutional and legal responses as objects of assessment in their own right and surfaces the social entrapment that constrains a victim-survivor's options instead of reading her resistance as risk. Its value is in widening what is screened for, not only when: the framework directs attention to where systems abuse is occurring, including outside the direct relationship, so that harm is named while it can still be interrupted.

5. Shift every response from an incident basis to a pattern basis, since current models primarily assess direct relational abuse and have limited capacity to detect abuse enacted through systems.

Incident-focused models, including anger-management and crisis-oriented responses, assess events in isolation and miss the cumulative architecture of coercive control (Stark, 2009) particularly when the violence is largely non-physical. This research identifies non-physical, third-party violence, enacted through systems and institutions rather than directly, as a strategic tactic of Systemic Coercive

Control in its own right, not a lesser or peripheral harm. An incident-based response has no means of detecting this form of violence at all. The non-physical violence, the third-party non-physical violence, and the pattern of resistance, not the single incident, must become part of risk analysis if institutions are to respond safely to the real-world complexity of family violence.

6. Responders should understand that their response is never neutral, but either harmful or helpful, and should acknowledge their responsibility and accountability accordingly.

Framing institutional harm as indifferent or inadvertent obscures its patterned, predictable production and absolves responders of their responsibilities. This research argues instead for an active expectation of resistance to systems abuse as ethical responsibility, working against Social Entrapment Theory's framing of indifference toward an active stance against Systemic Coercive Control. Centring Ethical Anguish (CEA) is offered as the everyday frontline approach operationalising this responsibility, giving responders agency to recognise discomfort as a signpost for disruption rather than a problem to be managed away. See www.jacki.co.nz or www.coercive-control.co.nz - for a handout resource on how to centre practitioner ethical anguish.

Policy and the Ministry of Justice

7. Locate the reform of systems abuse at the level of policy, since policy dictates the procedures, processes and practices through which harm is reproduced.

Frontline practitioners will continue to be blamed for harmful responses for as long as the policies that govern their procedures and processes remain unattended. This research demonstrates that the practitioner is required to act within frameworks that embed harm and is then held responsible for it. Reviewing and reforming the harmful 4Ps, policy, procedure, process and practice, must therefore begin with policy, so that accountability is placed where the harm originates rather than where it surfaces. To do this it is recommended that the MOJ F is reviewed not only through their internal policy advisors – but with and through the family violence community which would include representation of family violence experts and those with lived experience, including marginalised communities and specifically Māori.

8. MOJ should revise the Code of Practice, its assessment workbooks and programme content suggestions to operationalise predominant aggressor/primary victim analysis and responses.

The Code acknowledges the importance of identifying the predominant aggressor and of context, intent and effects, yet does not carry these into the workbooks or provider programme content, rendering them practically invisible. The workbooks must provide structured means to explore, identify, document and respond to resistance, and must be designed as the default instrument of frontline practice, built around risk assessment that works systemically, so that a practitioner using them can see and assess the risks the system itself carries, not only those attributed to the individual.

9. MOJ should establish a distinct, resistance-informed pathway for women who offend in the context of family violence, who are misidentified as the predominant aggressor, who are respondents on a Protection Order, and/or who use resistant responses to violence against them.

This research identifies Predominant Aggressor Manipulation as a patterned tactic in which a predominant aggressor co-opts social communities, organisations, professionals and formal support institutions to curate a credible public narrative, variously performing as the "Devoted Dad," the "Savvy Lawyer," or the "Heartbroken Dad," while recasting the woman's resistance as instability, aggression, or non-compliance. By the time this narrative reaches the legal system, it is already entrenched and arrives at MOJ pre-legitimised, not as an isolated misjudgement at a single point of contact. The Code of Practice, as currently structured, has no resistance-aware checkpoint capable of intercepting a narrative built across multiple institutions before it reaches court. This is compounded by Harmful System Responses identified in this research: the inconsistent approach to predominant aggressor and primary victim identification, and an inadequate Code of Practice (Policy); the absence of standardised, resistance-aware risk assessment (Procedure); decision-making processes that reward the predominant aggressor's curated credibility while erasing context (Process); and a documentation practice that records resistance as deficit, "uncooperative," "unstable," "non-disclosing," rather than as a survival response (Practice). Women processed this way are then mandated into non-violence programmes built for predominant aggressors, which teach her to understand her own resistance as violence while the violence

committed against her goes unaddressed. In this way, the Code of Practice becomes the final, undefended checkpoint through which Predominant Aggressor Manipulation is legitimised and enforced.

Meaningful change requires:

- Family Violence MOJ agencies and judicial education on Predominant Aggressor Manipulation, so that frontline and judicial responders can understand their own vulnerability to this tactic (third party non-physical violence) and recognise curated performance and resistive behaviour as distinct, traceable patterns, rather than defaulting to a binary victim or perpetrator reading of an isolated incident.

- A trauma-informed, resistance-aware assessment process embedded in the Code of Practice itself, addressing both immediate presentation and intergenerational trauma, rather than processing each case as a discrete, context-free event.

- An alternative programme response capable of holding complexity, attending to a woman's experience of violence and her use of resistance together, rather than forcing a binary choice between victim and perpetrator at intake.

Women who use overt resistant responses to violence are currently processed through the same Code of Practice designed for predominant aggressors, despite family violence being a predominantly gendered crime. Until MOJ's processes are built to recognise Predominant Aggressor Manipulation as it moves through Harmful System Responses, women who resist violence will continue to be

processed, and programmed, as if they had perpetrated it and the ministry will continue to compound their harm.

10. Provide education and require programme providers to work from a Systemic Coercive Control model, rather than a behavioural, anger-management, or incident model.

A key finding of this research is that current models used by agencies are built to primarily assess direct relational abuse, with no framework for identifying abuse that takes place through systems and third parties. Incident and behavioural models assess single acts in isolation and cannot capture coercive control as a deliberate social strategy, nor the non-physical and third-party violence this research identifies as a strategic tactic exploited through Predominant Aggressor Manipulation. What is required is a model that responds to abuse occurring within and through systems, not only abuse occurring directly between two people.

From this research I have created a Systemic Coercive Control Assessment that captures relational, systems and systemic inequities – from this I am able to offer a SCC pattern summary including accounts of resistance. These assessments and reports can be accessed at www.jacki.co.nz or www.coercive-control.co.nz. They have been used in many different situations such as: in support of protection order applications, parental hearings, legal aid write offs, immigration support applications, refuge support, criminal defence cases, as well as many people asking for help to make sense of their experience of coercive control which is often insidious in nature and absent from physical forms of abuse making is difficult to capture and articulate. A frontline provider, such as a judge, a police officer, working

from an interpersonal relationship only model that is primarily focussed on the direct acts of violence by the predominant aggressor, has no basis for distinguishing genuine accountability from curated compliance and a system built on this model cannot see its own vulnerability to being co-opted, leaving lived experience uncaptured and harm uninterrupted.

11. Establish meaningful client feedback loops and an independent reporting body to ensure ongoing accountability and systemic responsiveness.

Without an external channel, institutions remain the sole assessors of their own conduct, and the patterned harm this research identifies stays invisible to the very systems able to correct it. Client feedback and an independent oversight body are needed to make the institutional response itself accountable, creating the loop through which systems abuse can be surfaced rather than absorbed.

12. Establish an external family violence expert review panel to assess cases where a person believes a judge or police officer failed to offer protection due to a lack of understanding of Systemic Coercive Control, instead misidentified as "high conflict" or "mutual conflict".

This research demonstrates that misidentification of the predominant aggressor, and failure to recognise resistance, non-physical and third-party violence, frequently stems from a lack of judicial and police understanding of Systemic Coercive Control rather than an absence of harm. Where a person believes a protection decision was wrongly declined or a predominant aggressor was misidentified for this reason, an external panel of family violence experts or at least an expert should be able to review the case and decision, offer a report - providing

an accountability mechanism distinct from appeal processes that do not test for conditions of systemic violence.

13. Redesign stopping violence and safety programmes around meaningful change outcomes, and require providers, facilitators, and approval processes to reflect victim-survivor and community expertise.

Current programme designs inadvertently position men as victims of their own anger, in need of behavioural correction, while positioning women as needing education and self-esteem improvement, and in doing so risk blaming women for choosing violent men. This research demonstrates that a predominant aggressor's violence is strategic rather than a loss of control, and that this strategic use extends to non-physical violence enacted through systems and third parties. Programme content and facilitator training must reflect this finding rather than an anger-based model. Outcomes should be monitored by behaviour change and no discounts should be given on the basis of attendance but on the basis of behaviour stopped. State-funded providers and behaviour-change interventions providers should be designed and approved with representatives of victim-survivors, including women, and family violence experts from multiple communities, including but not limited to Māori, disabled, Takatāpui, Rainbow, Pacific, and ethnic communities, so that contemporary frameworks, lived experience and academic experience shape the programmes provided.

Frontline Assessment must Account for Systemic Coercive Control

14. Operationalise Systemic Coercive Control in frontline family violence work. Specifically State, Police and Corrections assessment, through a nationally shared, Systemic Coercive Control-specific instrument.

Police support is too often declined for those experiencing non-physical violence: without an assessment capable of capturing this form of harm, a woman who has not been physically or sexually assaulted is less likely to receive police protection. Police policy already recognises coercive and controlling behaviour, cumulative harm, predominant aggressor and primary victim analysis, entrapment and resistance, yet the assessment structure does not translate these into a developed, pattern-based instrument, and adopting overseas instruments piecemeal risks fragmenting the response. The instrument must remain inclusive of physical and sexual violence while mapping the entire pattern of non-physical violence, embed the victim's own assessment of danger as a primary indicator, account for the systemic and institutional dimension, and translate what it detects into an appropriate response, drawing on the pathways map developed in this research and available online at www.jacki.co.nz or www.coercive-control.co.nz.

15. Treat documentation as assessment: record resistance as resistance rather than exclusively as risk to be managed and treat responders themselves as potential sources of risk.

The form and degree of a victim's resistance is often the clearest read on the severity of harm, and recording it accurately protects the record against the misidentification that follows when a resistive act is entered as evidence that the victim poses risk.

Individualised risk assessment systematically misses the structural and systemic risk that a shared framework must capture.

Mandate Courts and Judiciary Education on Systemic Coercive Control

16. Educate the judiciary in Systemic Coercive Control, Predominant Aggressor Manipulation, and the 4Ps of system failure, including the consequences of misidentification and of "failure to protect" reasoning that blames mothers for the violence of others.

Judicial reasoning carries disproportionate weight in a victim's entrapment: a bench that cannot read the pattern will mistake coercive control for high or mutual conflict, and resistance for instability or pathology, reproducing the very misidentification that "failure to protect" reasoning sustains. Education equips the court to recognise the architecture rather than the incident, and to locate accountability with the predominant aggressor and the responding system.

17. Recognise psychological and third-party non-physical violence, and post-separation continuation and its consequences for children, as serious and protectable harm.

Coercive control does not end at separation and is frequently sustained through Family Court-mandated contact with the children (Katz et al., 2020). This research identifies non-physical, third-party violence as a strategic tactic of Systemic Coercive Control, not a lesser or incidental harm, and rulings must protect women and children from its omnipresent reach accordingly. It is because of this that relocation should not be used in a court's decision to decline a protection order. Too often, protections are declined on the basis that - he is on bail, in prison, or in another

location, which demonstrates that a judge does not understand the social and systemic nature of coercive control, the relentless omnipresence of fear, third-party fear mongering or the absence of psychological safety as a right to live free from fear and control.

18. Protection Order must protect against Systemic Coercive Control

The Family Violence Act 2018 requires only that family violence has been, or is being, inflicted, and that an order is necessary for the applicant's protection. The Act defines psychological abuse to include intimidation, harassment and monitoring, and directs decision-makers to recognise that behaviour which looks minor or trivial in isolation may form part of a cumulatively harmful pattern, and that family violence often is or includes coercive or controlling behaviour rather than acute danger. Parliament has therefore already legislated for the harm this research identifies: patterned, non-physical violence that does not present as an emergency. Protection orders are nevertheless declined on the basis that an applicant's safety is not "imminently" at risk; a devasting real-life consequence that leaves victims unprotected through systemic failure based on an inadequate understanding of violence – such as those noted in this research (incident response instead of a patterned response, non-physical violence, third-party non-physical violence, and other relevant systemic failures such as noted in the 4Ps).

19. Prioritise children's safety over parental contact rights and treat parental alienation as a discredited concept that functions as a tactic of interpersonal, legal, and systems abuse.

Children are too often used as instruments and channels of third-party non-physical violence. Furthermore, parental alienation has been widely and comprehensively discredited as a clinical concept (World Health Organization, n.d) and is recognised in this research instead as a tactic of interpersonal, legal, and systems abuse. Where parental alienation is referenced in reports, assessments, or judicial reasoning, this requires explicit analysis and discussion to contextualise the concept and clearly state its lack of credibility, rather than being treated as a legitimate explanatory framework. Treating it as legitimate erodes child-centred decision-making and ongoing recognition of coercive control (Neilson, 2018).

20. Make pattern-based Systemic Coercive Control assessments and reports available to women and admit family violence experts who understand Systemic Coercive Control to assist the court.

Courts must be directed to consider the pattern rather than the discrete incident, and the pathways map developed in this research offers one means of structuring that analysis.

21. Establish formally qualified Systemic Coercive Control report writers as official court report writers in complex family violence cases.

Courts currently have no formalised, professionally qualified report-writer role for Systemic Coercive Control, despite its complexity and the consequences of misreading it as high conflict rather than a pattern of coercive control. Official SCC report writers, whose reports judges are required to read in the same manner as restorative justice reports, would allow courts to determine whether a case reflects mutual high conflict or a pattern of Systemic Coercive Control. This research notes

that detailed reporting is too often sought to support a predominant aggressor's sentencing discount, while equivalent rigour is rarely applied in service of a woman's safety; formalising SCC report writers addresses this imbalance directly.

22. Establish a public judges' benchbook in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Unlike comparable common-law jurisdictions, New Zealand's benchbook is not publicly available. A public resource would make transparent what the judiciary considers in cases of Systemic Coercive Control and would itself function as a mechanism of accountability. It should contain a dedicated chapter on Systemic Coercive Control that treats Institutional Systems Abuse and legal systems abuse as two distinct tactics, each with its own architecture of harm, rather than collapsing one into the other.

Practice, providers, and the workforce

23. Operationalise the pathways map developed in this research as a practice assessment and disruption tool in cases where systems abuse is relevant.

The map of the two pathways, Predominant Aggressor Manipulation and the Harmful System Responses of the 4Ps, gives responders a shared frame for tracing where coercive control is being routed through systems, and for locating the points at which complicity can be interrupted. It should be adopted as an assessment and disruption aid wherever systems abuse is in view. Practice-based handouts are available at www.jacki.co.nz or www.coercive-control.co.nz.

24. Integrate resistance into assessment frameworks, training, and policy (Wade, 1997), so that resistant responses are recognised and understood rather than misread as isolated aggression or pathology.

The Responder Accountability to Disrupt Systems Abuse as Everyday Praxis

25. Embed Centring Ethical Anguish in everyday supervision and practice as a form of collective ethical resistance, explicitly not as neoliberal self-care or individual resilience.

Misnaming practitioner distress as "burnout" or "vicarious trauma" relocates systemic harm onto the individual. Named instead as ethical anguish, it becomes a signpost of complicity, responsibility, agency and possibility: a practitioner's discomfort signals the collision between professional obligation and ethical responsibility, repositioning the worker's agency, honouring their wellbeing, and naming their own resistance to systemic complicity. This reframes the responder's task as an active stance against Systemic Coercive Control, rather than the passive indifference Social Entrapment Theory identifies in systems more broadly. A resource on how to use and cite the Centring Ethical Anguish approach can also be found at www.jacki.co.nz or www.coercive-control.co.nz.

Methodology and Future Research

26. Pursue family violence research through methodologies that sit outside the traditional humanist paradigm.

The objectivist and rationalist humanist frameworks that dominate research share their underpinnings with the very structures that produce family violence, including colonisation and patriarchy. Posthuman, feminist, Indigenous, and other critical

methodologies are better able to render systemic harm researchable, rather than reproducing the logics that sustain it.

27. Cartographic Methodology as the Norm not the Exception

Extend the cartographic methodology through multiple practitioner-researchers and collective memory work, across gender, culture, ability, economic marginalisation, and Indigenous and non-Western contexts, and into clinical training, practitioner reflection, and risk-assessment tools that treat institutions not as neutral backdrops but as potential agents of harm.

These recommendations follow from the critical finding that Institutional Systems Abuse is a deliberate, patterned tactic of Systemic Coercive Control, and that no institutional response to it is neutral. They fall into two streams that impact the frontline response. The implications for policy concern naming and legislation, the Ministry of Justice Code of Practice and its workbooks, judicial education and the public benchbook, and the reform of the harmful 4Ps at the level of policy that governs them. The implications for practice concern frontline and court assessment, the operationalisation of the pathways map into the Systemic Coercive Control assessments developed since the submission of this research, the integration of resistance, and the care of the responder through Centring Ethical Anguish. The through-line holds across both: naming is the first act of disruption, the pattern rather than the incident is the unit of analysis, and responsibility belongs with the predominant aggressor and the responding system.

Endings and Continuations

This research emerged from my lived experience of embodied affective practitioner ethical anguish, that comes from seeing, hearing, holding and enacting responses that cause harm. Memory pain fragments are not data; they are composite stories, acts of affect and resistance that surface ethical direction and demand that we see violence not only as a personal or relational problem but also as - social, political, and systemic. This thesis refuses the silencing of these forms of knowledge, revealing that harmful systemic responses are not anomalies – they are mechanisms of abuse. As I write, I wish I could go back in time to those women who shared with me and validate what they told me, that the system (me and you) could not see what, how and who was being manipulated and how systems were failing to keep them safe. The threads of his non-physical violent yarn were strategically dispersed across third-parties both human and non-human. To people and places that seemed unrelated and therefore difficult to evidence, these locations were spread wide from social communities to independent organisation, to professionals, and community services and into legal arenas too – each strand too thin to be recognised as part of a larger design. Too often, the full picture only became visible when it was too late, when the perpetrator's tactics had already escalated into legal systems abuse.

Working against Institutional Systems Abuse as a Systemic Coercive Control tactic in intimate partner violence requires two critical imperatives. The first is that Institutional Systems Abuse is named as a formal abuse tactic with specific reference to this within family violence legislation. Secondly, that the binary view of systems and system actors as support systems are simultaneously understood as sites of

violence and that the undoing of this resides in resistance. Resistance is the acknowledgment of felt ethical anguish, and the active response to this that calls out the harms and advocates for change. This research aimed to make visible perpetrator manipulation through the invisible harms of leveraging third-party (systems and actors) in non-physical violence, to offer tools for practice that honour pain as ethical, and to shift our systems from collusion to accountability.

Through theory, I came to understand that pain should neither be silenced nor romanticised but transformed into a site of potential for becoming response-abled. As posthuman theory attends to suffering that is relational, it allowed me to imagine new assemblages of ethical care, social responses, and collective resistance as affirmative ethics that seek to repair through the forward movement of hope, of conditions where harm is neither denied nor repeated as an ongoing embodied response.

This research is driven by injustice and hope. They sit on the same continuum, and affirmative ethics sits on the other side of ethical anguish. Braidotti articulates affirmative ethics as a praxis that sustains joy, endurance, and transformation. It is "not about individual morality but about a collective construction of modes of existence that enable the sustainability of life" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 190). Ultimately, affirmative ethics is an ethical stance towards the world that insists on sustainability, interdependence, and transformation (Braidotti, 2013). Posthuman theoretical philosophy allowed me to trace the politics of power and pain within social relational response systems. It offered a way to listen to what lingers –sedimented

harms and interrupted resistances – and to make these felt realities speak as valid knowledge.

I have been listening to harmful responses, those responses that wound, silence, and entrap those experiencing violence. I never knew how deeply the act of listening would settle within me, shaping who I am as both a practitioner and a person. The listening built in me an affective residue, an accumulation of pain fragments of stories heard and that I could not name. I blamed myself for what I interpreted as inadequacy. I did not realise that this was not a failing but a sign of ethical relationality, and that my rage was a reasonable response. When the affective pain continued to swell, I turned to theory for holding and meaning-making. Theory turned the heartfelt memory fragments into a map of knowledge gained from those I heard. I travelled with the voices that are unheard, silenced and positioned as othered; they moved with me through theory and returned, newly visible, into practice. I began this project not knowing where it would lead, but now, I can see that it has led me here – not to closure, but to an understanding, not to resolution, but to ongoing resistance within family violence work.

This research does not conclude the conversation; it opens new questions about the violence of systems. The pathways traced here offer only one possible route through the terrain of Systemic Coercive Control and Institutional Systems Abuse. Future inquiries could extend this cartographic methodology by engaging multiple practitioner-researchers, opening space for collective memory work and more diverse, entangled figuration. Posthuman feminist cartographies might be adapted to trace lived experiences across broader intersections of gender, culture, ability,

and economic marginalisation, especially in Indigenous and non-Western contexts where systemic harm takes different shapes. Further exploration is also needed into how these frameworks could be translated into clinical training, practitioner reflection, or risk assessment tools that do not treat institutions as neutral backdrops but as potential agents of harm. As researchers and practitioners, we carry not just responsibility to those we work with, but to the systems we work within. Deepening our understanding of how ethical witnessing becomes a form of resistance, individually and collectively. This study offers an opening to the tributaries feeding a larger river of understanding. The two pathways mapped here do not offer comprehensive explanations, but they do begin to reveal how Institutional Systems Abuse functions as a distinct and deliberate tactic. What emerges is both a challenge to current frameworks and a call for action grounded in ethical witnessing.

My Closing Reflexive Trace: Hope "With" Others

It was just a few words,

but we already know that words matter.

My world shifted, I felt hope.

Hope is so deeply important in this work, it is the spirit of forwardness.

I remember just a few weeks ago,

I was invited to attend a meeting of the judges with other local family violence community members,

The host went round the room and asked a representative from each organisation to introduce themselves, I didn't think I would be invited to introduce myself – as who am I?

But something very unexpected happened after I fumbled through a clumsy unprepared introduction.

A section 132 Oranga Tamariki Report Writer stood up and in conversation with the Judges advocated for the work that I had been doing with local community in education and working with others on understanding more about systems abuse in Systemic Coercive Control.

For a moment I wonder who she was talking about,

It was me – who am I?

I looked down at the floor as my eyes filled with tears – I quietly berated myself for not being strong enough or professional enough to look up – as hope flooded through the inside of my body and snuck out through my eyes.

Hope, because she wasn't standing for me,

Because who am I anyway?

It was the hope I felt represented something so much bigger.

*She was standing **with** me and against systems abuse.*

That is the embodiment of hope.

***The ethics of joy is thus at heart a process of becoming**.*

Because such a becoming is not contained in present conditions, and cannot emerge from them, it has to be brought about creatively by a qualitative leap of collective praxis and ethical imagination. To accomplish an ethics of joy, 'we' need to compose a community and produce a qualitative leap that breaks productively with the present. The first step consists in reaching an adequate cartography of the conditions of bondage. The ethics of joy proposes an alternative way of extracting knowledge from pain, that starts with and is conveyed by the quest for an adequate understanding of power. The analysis of power as a complex and multi-layered situation subjects are caught in is consequently the beginning of ethical wisdom.

(Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018, p. 223)

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Appendices

Cartographies of Practice and Theory

These appendices extend the same commitment to theory and practice that shaped the beginning of this thesis. I began this research project by locating myself at the intersection of lived experience, professional practice, and scholarly inquiry – the hyphenated space of being a practitioner–researcher who has witnessed harm, participated in systems that have caused harm, and refused to remain silent. The appendices that follow arise from this place. It is here where I gather the tools, concepts, and practice resources that have been forged through listening, remembering, reconfiguring, and theorising. Each appendix offers a way of making the theoretical contributions of this thesis usable in the everyday realities of family violence work – supporting practitioners to recognise Systemic Coercive Control, interrupt harmful systems responses, and hold fast to their ethical commitments.

Appendix 1 The Map of Harmful Response Pathways

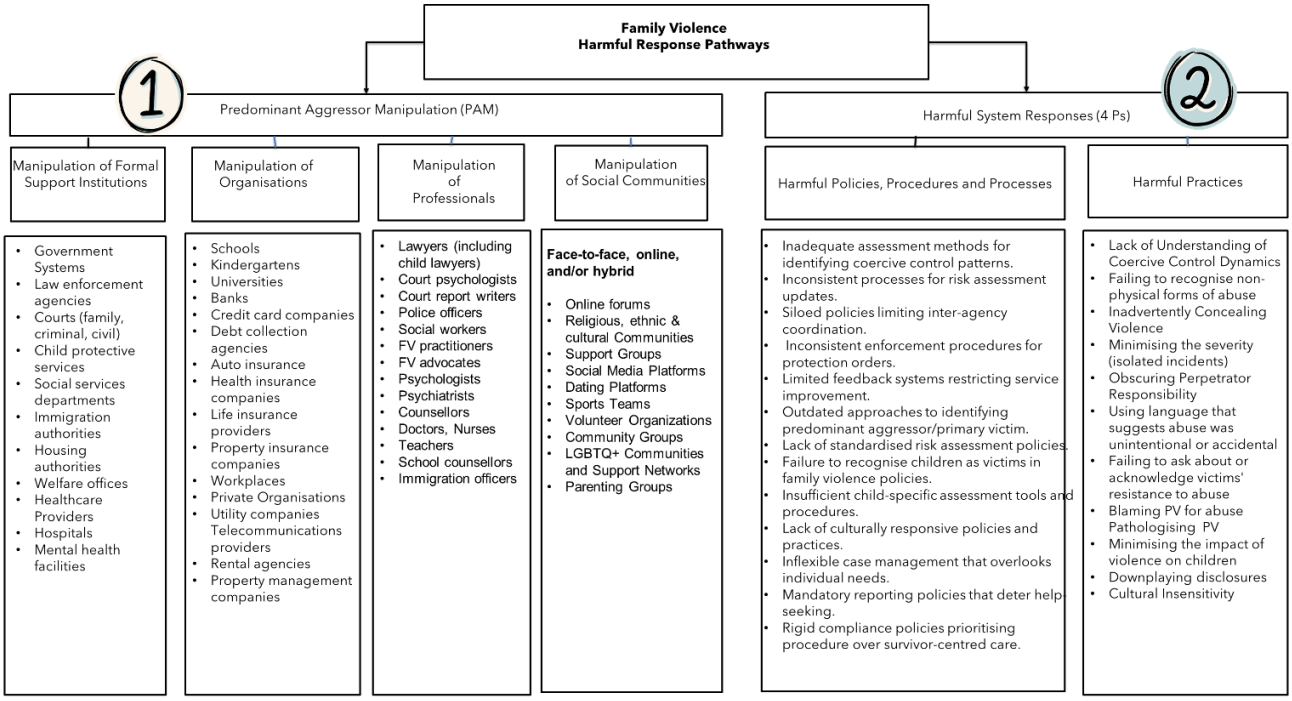
The cartography of Harmful Response Pathways emerges from the convergence of all mapped coordinates developed through this research from the figurations and assemblages, the two pathways of Predominant Aggressor Manipulation and Harmful Systems Responses, and their sub-pathways. As a cartographic outcome, the map spans social, organisational, and institutional landscapes, tracing how Systemic Coercive Control is enacted through both social and institutional systems. The cartography of harmful response pathways does more than represent a blueprint for disrupting social entrapment; it names the strategic application of systems abuse as a deliberate tactic of coercive control. By differentiating between

Legal Systems Abuse and Institutional Systems Abuse, I advocate for the "un-othering" of the institutional dimension of systems abuse, making visible forms of harm that have remained hidden within the ordinary operations of policy, procedure, and practice. By recognising these patterns, understanding the role of third parties as secondary abuse targets, and identifying the vulnerabilities of responders across systems, the map offers a way to see what cannot be observed from within a single system. Instead, I offer a wide view that tracks the magnitude of social and institutional abuse territories and the interconnectedness of harm that is often difficult to trace over such diverse territories.

The findings demonstrate that the two main pathways are not mutually exclusive. Instead, there is often overlap between them and the various sub-pathways in which primary victims could experience multiple forms of harmful responses, which deeply compound harms and entrapment. This map serves as a visual socio-political cartography through which harmful responses can be traced in understanding experiences of systemic entrapment. The cartographic map of the two main pathways, presented below, is not an example but a fluid, dynamic, affective, living map of harmful response pathways.

The two main pathways, Predominant Aggressor Manipulation and Harmful Systems Responses, represent the full cartographic map, tracing the threads that run between them and illustrating how third-party non-physical violence tactics of social manipulation, structural assemblages, and interpersonal practices converge to create overlapping, compounding harms and systemic entrapment.

Figure 9 *Systemic Coercive Control Map*



Ethical Coordinates of the Two Pathways

The mapping of the two pathways, Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM) and Harmful Systems Responses (HSR), has produced more than an account of patterns and mechanisms. Together, these pathways offer a set of values that orient practice, theory, and policy toward more ethical, accountable, and dignifying responses in family violence work.

Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM)

In tracing the first pathway, Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM), I identified the strategic exploitation of social and institutional systems. These are systems that were originally designed to support, but in practice, they are co-opted and turned

into mechanisms of continued abuse. I came to see how, when perpetrators manipulate these systems, institutional processes and practices are transformed into mechanisms that both amplify harm and conceal the aggressor's abusive intent beneath the mask of engagement.

PAM highlights this deliberate shift: abuse that begins in a relationship does not stop there but extends outward, taking hold of social and institutional systems until those very structures become sites of violence. I found that manipulation of third parties, such as independent organisations, formal family violence response services, social communities, and professionals, emerged as a critical tactic in systemic coercion, control, and entrapment.

Through this research, I began to see third-party manipulation as a distinct form of Systemic Coercive Control. What I witnessed was a form of non-physical, third-party violence in which social and legal structures themselves are strategically exploited. Key manipulations I observed included perpetrators presenting themselves as victims to authorities and within social settings, curating images of themselves as caring fathers, distressed partners, or falsely accused men. These presentations played powerfully with professional expectations – for example, appealing to parental concern in custody disputes or drawing on dominant discourses of fairness and shared parenting. Fundamentally, understanding PAM demands that we consider and examine our own roles as family violence responders by recognising complicity in social responses, as systems abuse is not an individual problem – it is sustained through relational and institutional complicity. It is also essential to be aware of the role of discursive representations in perpetuating harmful responses,

as they shape social responses to intimate partner violence, often reinforcing the aggressor's curated narrative.

Policies, Procedures, Processes, and Practice (4Ps)

The Harmful Systems Responses (4Ps) pathway represents the key foundational structures of policies, procedures, processes, and practices as assemblages that govern and guide practice outcomes within organisational systems. The 4Ps shape the conditions in which Systemic Coercive Control occurs. When responders work within outdated or limited frameworks, system structures can be manipulated by the predominant aggressor, making practitioners vulnerable to being drawn into harmful responses. A Systemic Coercive Control lens helps practitioners recognise these vulnerabilities and act to prevent institutional complicity.

Appendix 2 The Shift to Systemic Coercive Control

Evan Stark's conceptualisation of coercive control has significantly reshaped the understanding of intimate partner violence by shifting the focus from isolated physical and sexual incidents of violence to a pattern of controlling behaviours that undermine a person's autonomy. He argues that coercive control is a gendered form of oppression that operates through tactics such as intimidation, surveillance, isolation, and micro-regulation of daily life. Unlike episodic incidents of violence, coercive control is a sustained strategy aimed at depriving people of their independence and agency (Beckwith et al., 2023; Stark, 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2020; Stark & Hester, 2019).

The conceptualisation of intimate partner violence as coercive control is an advanced development in theory; however, it does not fully account for situations where women are no longer only controlled by his direct abuse, coercion, and control. In the figurations in this thesis, when abuse extended into systems, often became impossible and women spoke of leaving the country or of taking their own lives. This is the place of utter despair and hopelessness. The recent Femicide report (National Mortality Review Committee, 2025) underscores how the hopelessness felt in practice is not just a matter of emotion; it reflects actual lived outcomes tied to systemic failures. Between 2006 and 2023, there were 41 reported cases of maternal suicide (that is, women who died while pregnant or within a year after giving birth); of that number, 26 cases (63%) involved women who had a police-recorded family violence history (2025).

Tolmie et al. (2018) and Douglas (2018) advocate that coercive control must be situated within a broader conceptualisation of intimate partner violence as social and systemic entrapment. Social Entrapment Theory has provided an essential foundation for recognising how systems and social conditions compound victim–survivors' vulnerability. My concern is not with its validity, but with the limits of what it can offer when used in isolation. On its own, social entrapment explains that systems entrap, but it does not detail how this occurs in practice.

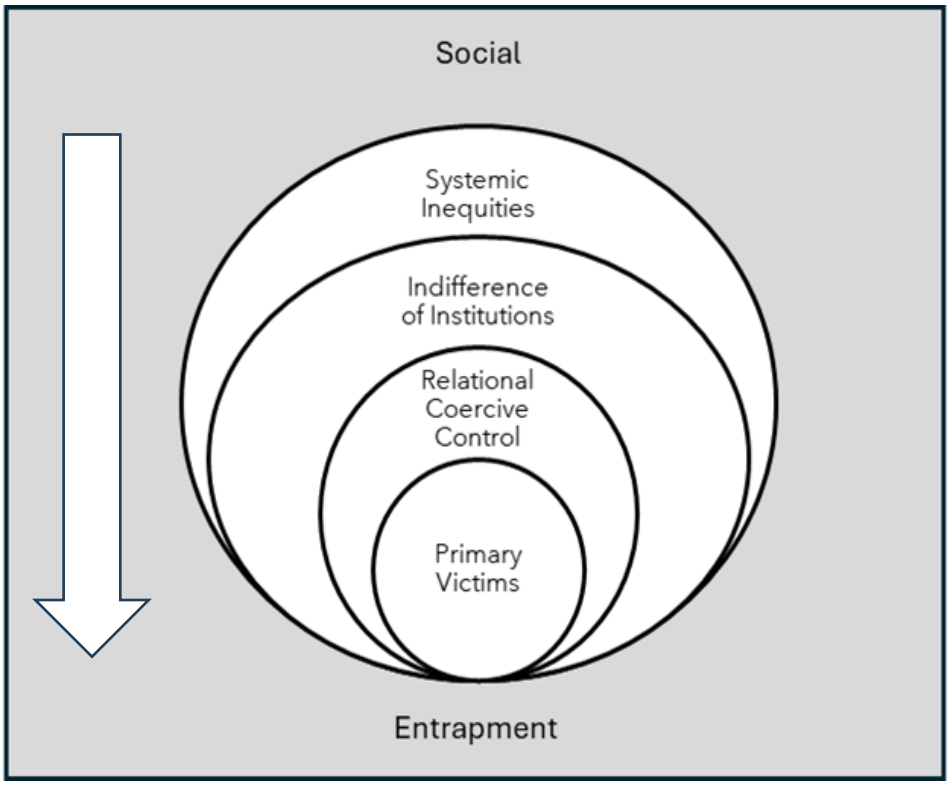
In my analysis, the absence of a detailed account of mechanisms can leave systems abuse resembling a life-threatening condition with no known cause or remedy. Therefore, my work builds on Social Entrapment Theory by tracing the specific mechanisms through which Systemic Coercive Control is enacted and sustained, opening possibilities for disruption and systemic change.

The social–spatial extension of non-physical violence using third parties, particularly in formal systems abuse, means that entrapment is extended from the restricting of everyday decisions into systems being leveraged to instil additional restrictions that entrap a person within the control of an abusive relationship that is now enforced through formal systemic factors.

Top-Down vs Bottom-Up Models of Understanding and Responding

The traditional model of Social Entrapment Theory demonstrates the compounding layers of abuse that entrap primary victims – a top-down approach that positions all the forces of harm on top, pushing down on the primary victim.

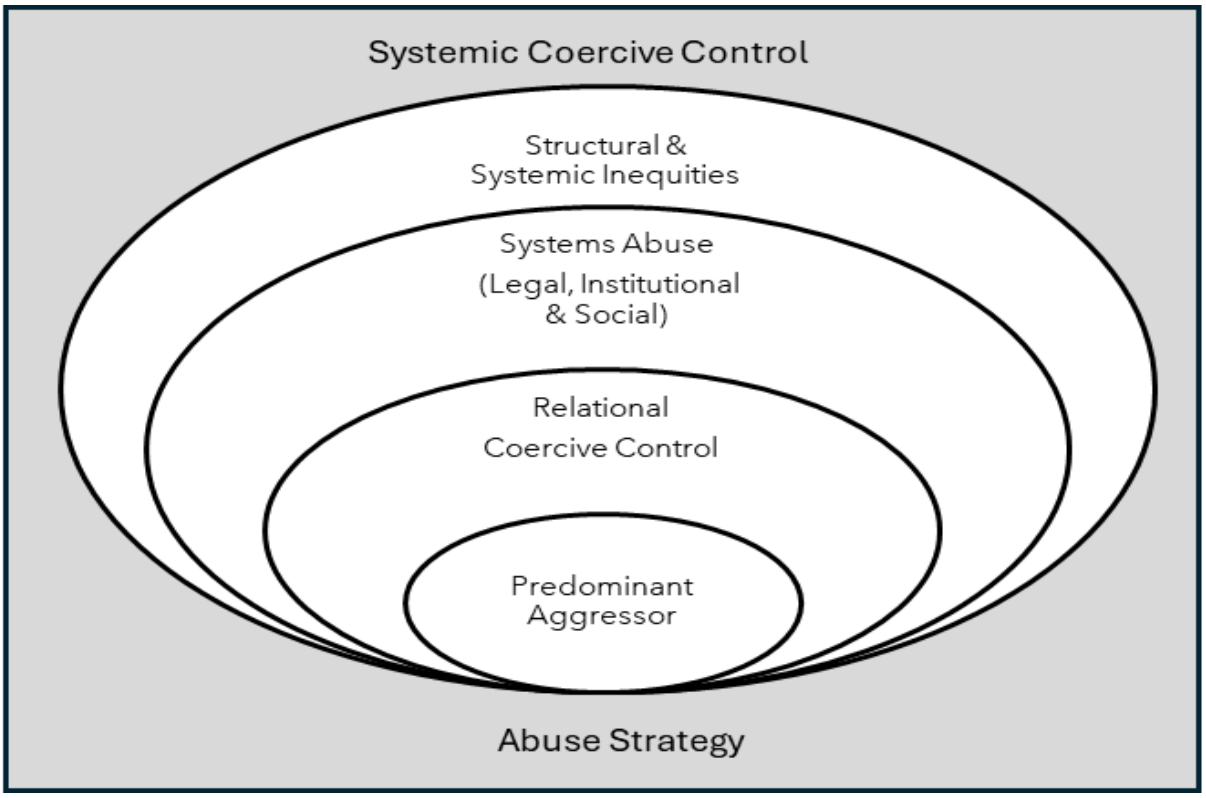
Figure 10 *Top-Down Model of Social Entrapment Theory (1999)*



The Systemic Coercive Control model works from the bottom up to include both social entrapment and systems abuse in intimate partner violence. It demonstrates the strategic abuse executed by the predominant aggressor through systems, highlighting the targets in his strategy of coercive control, which include social systems, legal systems, institutional systems, and the various actors within them. This positions responders not as indifferent but instead as vulnerable – suggesting that systems include themselves in risk and safety assessments. The pathways demonstrate the "how" of strategic manipulation, and the focus then shifts from indifference to strategic manipulation as the explanation for the "why" of social

entrapment. Explanations are thus shifted from blaming responders to understanding the strategy of abuse by the predominant aggressor. Responder responsibilities focus on the importance of working from a conceptual model that renders the tactics of the predominant aggressor in plain sight and on coming together to work against systems abuse by disrupting these pathways.

Figure 11*Bottom-up Model of Systemic Coercive Control*



Extending Coercive Control

Through the findings and analysis of this research, I advocate for an extension to coercive control, emphasising the systemic factors of coercive control, to explicitly

account for perpetrators' tactical use of social systems to coerce and control primary victims. The manipulation of third parties is a key aspect of Systemic Coercive Control. Perpetrators strategically exploit social systems and individual actors as tools in their abuse tactics. This form of non-physical, third-party violence often occurs without responders realising they have become secondary targets of the aggressor's strategy. These manipulations involve curated performances – claims of victimhood, parental concern, moral alignment, and/or charm – that draw on existing discourses and social expectations. Understanding these tactics is essential for recognising how Systemic Coercive Control operates across social and institutional settings.

The experience of entrapment includes recognition that abusive people co-opt systems and system actors as an abuse tactic and that systems can become complicit through their lack of understanding of coercive control. We can shift from the language of social entrapment to naming the abuse specifically as systems abuse, which moves the focus away from blaming individual responders and towards the wider system of harmful responses and the aggressor's strategic coercive control.

A practitioner's conceptual framework of family violence fundamentally shapes their response. The relationship between understanding and responding manifests across practice. Stark and Hester highlight challenges for police within family violence situations: "The particularity of coercive control, the strategic ways in which a specific abuser individualizes his abuse based on his privileged access to personal information about his partner, could also prove elusive for policing" (2019, p. 87). If

a police officer responds from an incident-based understanding of family violence, their responses typically focus on seeking evidence of physical harm, measuring severity through individual incidents, and focusing on immediate safety planning around presenting circumstances. By contrast, practitioners who understand family violence as a pattern of Systemic Coercive Control tend to look for an ongoing pattern of harmful behaviour that recognises non-physical forms of abuse, considers the cumulative impact of multiple tactics, and understands the loss of free choice for a victim.

Duluth Wheel and Post-Separation Wheel

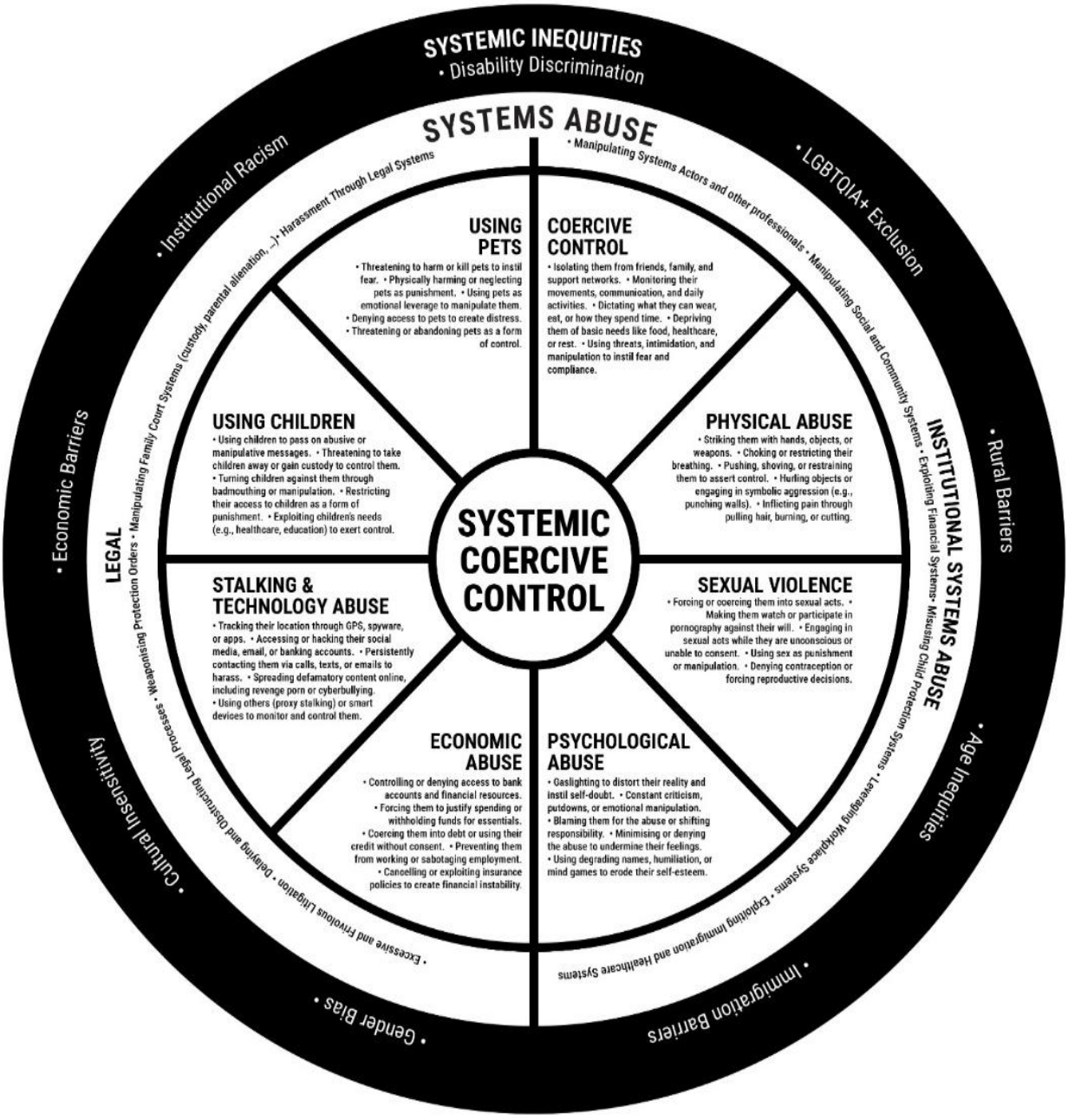
Traditional models such as the Duluth Power and Control Wheel (1984) and the Post-Separation Power and Control Wheel (2013) remain widely used, but they focus primarily on interpersonal tactics and do not account for systems abuse or the ways perpetrators manipulate institutional and legal structures. These models pre-date digital technologies, overlook third-party and non-physical forms of systemic coercion, and rely on gender-binary and Western assumptions that limit their relevance across diverse contexts. As a result, while they remain useful for illustrating patterns of relational abuse, they do not provide the systemic analysis required to recognise or disrupt Systemic Coercive Control.

Family violence models are tools that are used in interventions and advocacy. As such, it is important that models offer broader insights into the mechanisms of harm, moving beyond naming tactics to identifying possible social pathways and responder responsibilities. These models are widely recognised, applied, and disseminated within the family violence sector.

Systemic Coercive Control Wheel

Through analysing the memory fragments, I compiled a Systemic Coercive Control Wheel, in a similar process to the Duluth wheel, based on victim-survivors' lived experience of family violence. The Systemic Coercive Control wheel positions intimate partner violence as a social problem, fundamentally centring coercive and controlling dynamics as the overarching mechanism of harm, which includes systems abuse (legal and institutional) tactics and compounding systemic forms of harm. It extends understanding into the subtle forms of Systemic Coercive Control, which are inherently social and, as such, capture aspects of non-physical third-party forms of violence.

Figure 12 *Systemic Coercive Control Wheel*



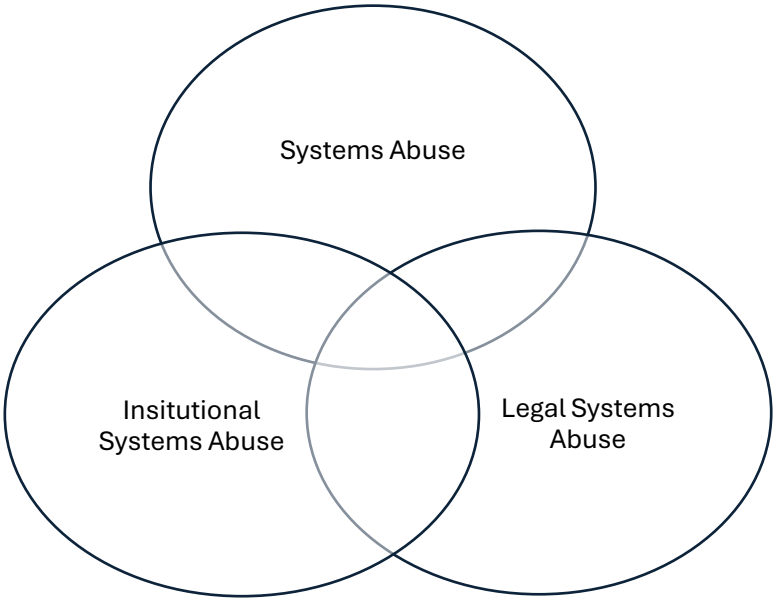
Appendix 1 Differentiating Systems Abuse

Current literature on systems abuse typically refers to legal and "other" forms of systems abuse (Douglas, 2018; Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2013; Fitch & Easteal, 2017). The "other" forms of systems abuse, often mentioned alongside legal systems abuse, are less defined and lack detail and location. In general, it is assumed that these other forms of systems abuse account for abuse that takes place outside legal systems – but still within a systems arena.

For example, the following definition of systems abuse highlights the importance of understanding how systems perpetuate harm and names two forms of systems abuse: legal and other. The former is more easily understood; however, the latter (other) forms of systems abuse are positioned as vaguely implying all else outside legal systems abuse:

Systems abuse refers to the manipulation of legal and other systems by perpetrators of family violence, done so to exert control over, threaten and/or harass a current or former partner. The existing system has largely prioritised crisis, legal responses and mainstream responses to violence. However, systems, legislation and services can unintentionally promote women's dependency on men and perpetuate discrimination. (Department of Social Services, 2022, p. 19)

Figure 12 *Systems Abuse Overlap*



Although legal systems abuse is known to take place within family violence situations, the protections against this form of abuse have been limited. However, on 13 February 2025, the New Zealand Parliament presented legislation to protect victims from litigation abuse in family proceedings. This initiative underscores the government's stated commitment to prioritising primary victims within the justice system and ensuring that courts are not exploited to perpetuate abuse (New Zealand Government, 2025).

To better understand the Systemic Coercive Control tactics of systems abuse, and to work together to reduce the harm caused by this abuse form, it is important to identify and articulate its various mechanisms of harm clearly. The Domestic Violence Death Review Team (2020) supports this imperative by highlighting "…the need for greater awareness and understanding around non-physical manifestations of domestic violence, including technology-facilitated and systems abuse" (p. 3).

Many of the examples contained within other literature on systems abuse reference both legal and institutional forms of systems abuse, which include child protection services, police, family violence professionals, or welfare agencies used to perpetuate harm (Australasian Institute of Judicial Administration, 2024; Department of Social Services, 2022; Douglas, 2018). The enduring point is that a significant portion of systems abuse referred to as "other" is institutional and should be named accordingly.

An institution in this context is thought of as a structured system of social power that includes social rules, practices, and relationships that serve important functions in society. Institutions can be formal organisations like schools, hospitals, governments, or courts, or they can be more abstract social arrangements like marriage, religion, or sporting communities. Importantly, institutions (formal or informal) have the capacity to impact and shape social behaviour and outcomes. Institutions are not just organisations – they are systems that have both formal structures and informal practices, with the power to influence social life (Bumiller, 2008).

Legal systems abuse represents a pattern where legal frameworks designed to protect and serve justice are manipulated to perpetrate harm. As communicated by Heather Douglas (2018), legal systems abuse occurs within formal support services and legal frameworks, where perpetrators deliberately manipulate legal processes to continue patterns of control and harassment. This form of abuse has gained significant recognition within judicial administration, mainly through the Australian

Institute of Judicial Administration's research initiatives (Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2013; Fitch & Easteal, 2017).

Research by Cashmore et al. (1993), later expanded by Douglas (2020), identifies several common tactics used in legal systems abuse. These include procedural manipulation through repeated adjournment requests, the strategic filing of counter-allegations and cross-orders, and the deliberate prolonging of proceedings by calling irrelevant witnesses.

Legal systems abuse represents a significant challenge to the integrity of justice systems and the protection of vulnerable individuals. Understanding its mechanisms, impacts, and potential remedies is crucial for developing effective responses and ensuring legal systems fulfil their intended protective function. The current conceptualisation of systems abuse as a combined understanding of institutional (other) and legal abuse under a single umbrella term presents theoretical limitations without adequate differentiation. Through practice-based observation and theoretical deconstruction of Social Entrapment Theory, it became evident through this research project that systems abuse operates through a complex interplay of legal and institutional mechanisms, necessitating the formalisation of Institutional Systems Abuse as Systemic Coercive Control.

From the findings and discussion, I move from the idea of harmful responses into locating this phenomenon as social systems abuse – specifically, Institutional Systems Abuse. This form of systems abuse builds on existing research of abuse, such as legal systems abuse as a coercive control tactic (Douglas, 2018). Similarly, I refer to Institutional Systems Abuse as a tactic of coercive control, whereby systems

and system actors are manipulated as part of the ongoing and often unseen abuse strategy. Because of the systemic nature of this abuse form, I refer to coercive control as Systemic Coercive Control to convey abuse forms that are located outside the direct relationship and within systems. Institutional social systems abuse is often a non-physical form of violence orchestrated using third parties, rendering them complicit in the abuse tactic. By understanding the mechanisms that perpetuate harmful responses, practitioners can better support victim–survivors and actively work against Systemic Coercive Control. This can include practice-based actions such as integrating systemic abuse tactics into family violence risk assessments and broadening the framework of coercive control to include institutional dynamics.

Appendix 2 The (Un)Othering of Institutional Systems Abuse

How a responder understands family violence dynamics and complexities is evidenced in their response. For example, if a responder does not understand resistant responses, they may perceive the violence as mutual rather than unilateral (Coates & Wade, 2007). Family violence is a social problem because it occurs within a social environment that includes both informal and formal support systems, meaning that social responders are inevitably intertwined and entangled in these situations. Social Entrapment Theory (Ptacek, 1999) confirms that social systems can compound harm and entrapment, as not all social responses are helpful, an insight further supported by The Backbone Collective (2020), which notes that social responses can shift from helpful to unhelpful, and even to harmful. These harmful responses are shaped by several complex factors and, within this research, are understood as an extended form of Systemic Coercive Control.

Importantly, leaving a violent relationship does not always stop the abuse; in many cases, the abuse escalates post-separation. Although the tactics may change, the overarching strategies often remain intact, becoming more insidious and less visible, manifesting as non-physical, third-party systems abuse, including both legal and institutional forms (Douglas, 2018; Douglas et al., 2021). Manipulation remains a key tactic of direct relational abuse, and post-separation, the predominant aggressor often continues to employ manipulative strategies by extending this abuse into broader forms of social manipulation. This includes the manipulation of social systems and actors, including children, to sustain coercive control (Katz, 2016; Katz et al., 2020). While social actors and systems may be unintentionally complicit

in these abusive strategies, they carry a duty of care to understand how abuse is operationalised within systems.

In this project, harmful responses are understood as relational responses and are linked to the interconnection of policies, processes, procedures, and practices – the 4Ps – which are conceptualised as human and non-human assemblages. A key outcome of this research is the identification and naming of Institutional Systems Abuse (ISA) as a distinct tactic of systems abuse, underscoring the critical need to include systemic factors in all risk and safety discussions related to Systemic Coercive Control.

Institutional Systems Abuse

Institutional Systems Abuse, as I understand it through this research, refers to the strategic manipulation and/or exploitation of formal social systems and system actors by a predominant aggressor to exert and maintain control, intimidate, harass, further abuse, and entrap a victim–survivor of intimate partner violence.

Institutions in the context of this research are structured systems of power that include system actors. Institutions sit outside formal legal systems. However, they include people who can influence legal matters, such as court report writers, court communication counsellors, and Lawyers for Children.

Institutional Systems Abuse represents a distinct form of systemic violence that operates through social structures and institutional mechanisms of intersectional power operating across multiple systems outside formal legal structures yet may often lead to legal systems abuse. This includes systems and system actors such as

child services, educational institutions, report writers and professionals, government agencies, police services, religious communities, various social communities, and healthcare systems.

The concept of social entrapment provides a theoretical framework for understanding systemic harms. This is supported by research from Douglas et al. (2021), Stark (2009), and Tolmie et al. (2018). It encompasses theories of entrapment that place restrictions on victim–survivor autonomy and freedom to decide. It demonstrates the broader systemic patterns of harm that can have continued impact post-separation while highlighting the systemic factors that enable this abuse. Although the concept of Social Entrapment Theory makes known the systemic harms, it lacks specifics regarding how this abuse form transpires.

A Canadian law brief notes the overlap and connected relationship between legal and institutional abuse, with a specific mention that understanding institutional abuse will further support legal abuse understandings (Nonomura et al., 2022). Institutional Systems Abuse must be recognised and examined as a distinct form of systemic structural violence rather than being peripherally addressed as a subsidiary component of what is referred to as the "other" of legal systems. As evidenced in the findings, Institutional Systems Abuse is constituted through unique mechanisms of Systemic Coercive Control that distinguish it from legal systems abuse, revealing its embedded and relational nature within institutional practices.

This research project has located the mechanisms of harm within the 4Ps of systems: policies, procedures, processes, and professional practices. These mechanisms are presented through the pathways of Predominant Aggressor Manipulation and

Harmful Systems Responses, which can perpetuate harm by enabling the predominant aggressor. Institutional forms of systems abuse intersect through various complex interactions between multiple institutional systems. I have included a sample of these in this research: healthcare systems, educational institutions, social service agencies, law enforcement and judicial systems, various social communities, government agencies, and financial institutions, all comprising many social services outside the legal framework.

Perhaps most significantly, this research introduces and theoretically grounds the concept of Institutional Systems Abuse as a distinct tactic within systems abuse, a group of tactics that runs alongside legal systems abuse as a form of Systemic Coercive Control. By naming and theorising this phenomenon, the research makes visible previously obscured mechanisms through which predominant aggressors exploit institutional vulnerabilities and, importantly, socialise intimate partner violence in that responders and their responses are located within the problem of family violence.

Appendix 5: Centring Ethical Anguish

A reflective framework for ethical resistance in family violence praxis

This appendix presents the current, practitioner-facing version of Centring Ethical Anguish: the reflective framework for ethical resistance that emerged from this research (Rowles, 2025). It operationalises the concept of ethical anguish discussed in the body of this thesis, translating that conceptual contribution into a resource that practitioners can use directly in practice and supervision – the full resource can be found at www.jacki.co.nz or www.coercive-control.co.nz

I recommend it as a resource for everyday practice: a way of noticing ethical anguish as it arises, staying response-abled to it, and acting accountably to disrupt the systemic pathways through which institutional systems abuse is produced and reproduced, principally the 4Ps and Predominant Aggressor Manipulation, both discussed elsewhere in this thesis. Used individually, in supervision, or in team reflection, it is intended to support practitioner wellness alongside system disruption, rather than as a substitute for it.

This appendix also illustrates the bidirectional relationship between theory and practice that runs through this research. Rather than knowledge flowing only from theory into practice, deep listening to survivor accounts and to my own practice experience reshaped the theoretical account offered in the body of this thesis, and that theory, in turn, took shape in the framework set out below. The threads of connection between practice and theory move in a tidal current, each pulling on the other, and what follows is one of the practical forms that exchange took.

Why this framework exists

As a frontline family violence practitioner, I carried visceral anger in my body that I had no language for. It was not vicarious trauma, nor the fatigue of sitting alongside distress. It was something else entirely: the fury that comes from bearing witness to injustice and to being made complicit in harmful responses - from systems that fail to protect, system responses that harm instead of protect, institutional processes that render the responder as complicit and compound violence rather than interrupt it. I felt entangled in these responses that betrayed my ethics of relational care – to myself and those I was working in service of.

I felt the weight of being made complicit in harms I could see clearly but felt constrained from naming or interrupting. Ethical anguish, for me, emerged in the folds between knowing and doing - through embodiment and affect - as a visceral, felt response to systemic harm.

I began to question my ethical responsibilities in contexts where injustice prevailed, and where my actions - or my silence - carried real consequences for the people I worked alongside and the impact of this on my own wellness.

Centring Ethical Anguish emerged from this reckoning. It is not an attempt to resolve the anguish or resolve the injustice. It is a way of listening to it - of treating ethical anguish not as something to be suppressed, but instead as a signpost: to notice our resistance, and to re-centre what matters ethically to us as family violence responders. It honours our embodied responses to injustice as part of our ethical responsibility, both to our own wellbeing and to those we serve. In doing this we attended to our practitioner wellbeing and our accountability as activism against system harms.

This framework is grounded in the idea that: taking an ethical position, even when systems cannot be changed, is always better than silent complicity. In this way centering ethical anguish is neither pretty nor heroic.

Three commitments

We notice the ethical anguish, we stay response-abled to it, and we act accountably by calling the harm out and that act of accountability serves to re-centre our wellness and calls out the injustice or harm which aligns us with safer practice.

Three commitments hold the loop in place. Wellness is the work of sustaining our capacity to keep resisting as collective and structural, never privatised self-care, and never a way of feeling better about staying silent. Response-ability is being able to respond witnessing injustice creates obligation and is a mirror of the resistance that survivors themselves enact. Accountability is the action of calling the harm out - naming it, advocating against it, and refusing to be made complicit, both to the people we serve and within the systems we are placed in.

Read this way, ethical anguish is not a feeling to be managed but the entry point to a praxis. The movements that follow trace the loop — noticing, response-ability, accountability — and close by returning to wellness, the thread that keeps it sustaining rather than corrosive.

ONE — NOTICE: Attending to ethical anguish

The loop begins here: refusing to move past the discomfort that tells us something is ethically wrong.

What ethical anguish is

The concept of moral distress originates in healthcare ethics, where it was introduced to describe the experience of knowing the ethically appropriate action to take but being constrained from taking it by institutional barriers.

The framework is also shaped by the work of Cathy Richardson Kineweskwêw and Vicky Reynolds, who describe the witnessing of injustice as spiritual pain (Reynolds, 2012; Richardson Kineweskwêw & Reynolds, 2012). Reynolds (2012) writes that when we are unable to enact our ethics, we experience a profound pain that arises from being required to violate the very values that brought us to this work.

I use the term ethical deliberately. The pain described here is not about spirituality; it is about the violation of ethical and moral values within professional practice. I use anguish rather than pain to capture its ongoing, unresolved nature. Ethical injustice cannot be accepted or resolved through adaptation; it is continually lived, felt, and wrestled with - an affected and embodied experience of knowing, witnessing, and being unable, or seemingly unable, to respond in ways that align with one's ethics.

So defined, ethical anguish is both at once: an affective, bodily response to institutional failure, and a form of practitioner resistance - resistance to being made complicit in harmful responses and systemic failures. Resistance is a response, it is the body refusing what the system asks of us. It emerges not from individual fragility but from ethical awareness, and it requires centring, which is the heart of this framework. It is the lived suffering that arises when practitioners are positioned within systems that create or perpetuate harm while holding responsibility for ethical care for those we serve.

In short, ethical anguish is:

- A moral response to injustice
- A signal that ethical values are being threatened or compromised
- Both a felt response to injustice and resistance to being made complicit
- A response that points outward - toward systems, structures, and responses that require ethical re-considerations
- Above all, a sign for "doing resistance" and one that requires acknowledgement

A note on: The parallel process of resistance

Just as the victim-survivor is entrapped and resists within the relationship, the practitioner is placed in systems where we, too, are subject to harm: positioned within the predominant aggressor's manipulation of systems and system actors (PAM), and made complicit in harmful system responses through policy, procedure, process, and practice (the 4Ps). The anguish we feel is the practitioner's form of that same resistance - resistance to being made an instrument of the very control we are meant to interrupt.

This is a structural parallel, not an equivalence: the practitioner's position is not the victim-survivor's. And, like theirs, the act of centring ethical anguish is neither pretty nor heroic. It is often small, partial, uncomfortable, and unwitnessed - an everyday refusal carried in the body rather than a decisive rescue.

It is NOT Determined by the systems we change but the moments we advocate for or against that moves to centre the ethical anguish – for ourselves and others.

How it shows up in practice

In day-to-day work, the experience may be subtle or intense.

- Listening and hearing about lived experience of those of which have suffered from systemic failure, endured a harmful response, accounts of harmful responses and systemic entrapment
- Ethical discomfort when made to practice in a way that feels harmful or unjust
- Feeling trapped in complicity with harmful systems or institutional responses
- A felt sense of violation when required to act against one's ethical compass
- A sense of moral betrayal by systems, supervision, or one's professional role
- Witnessing of harms and injustices, systems that fail to protect
- Systems, policies, procedures and process that require practitioners to practice in ways that cause harm
- Noticing when polices, processes, procedure result in forced harmful practices
- Witnessing and directly being a secondary victim of predominant aggressor manipulation

In family violence work, it most often arises in response to institutional harm, systemic manipulation, or responses that centre the wrong voice and create further risk - for example, responding to women who offend in the context of family violence without responding to their resistance, services that respond only to

incidents of violence rather than patterns, or working within outdated policies and inadequate risk assessments.

TWO – RESPONSE-ABILITY: Staying able to respond (response-abled)

Noticing creates obligation. Once we have seen, we are response-abled – and the work becomes staying able to respond.

From responsibility to response-ability

To be responsible, in this framework, is to be response-abled - able to respond. Witnessing injustice creates obligation; it makes us response-able for what we have seen. This is the practitioner's mirror of the resistance that survivors themselves enact (Wade, 1997a, 1997b). As responders, we hold a profound responsibility: our actions can either compound harm or contribute to safety, agency and dignity.

Centring: a reflexive practice

Response-ability is exercised through centring.

It does not measure success by the extent of systems change achieved. It is concerned instead with:

- The harms we are willing to name
- The change we advocate for
- The ethical lines we refuse to cross
- The institutional inadequacies we refuse to embody as practitioner pain

- And the actions we feel comfortable to take – this varies per person and situation

Centring, in this sense, means identifying who or what is given priority in decision-making, responses, and actions. It is contextual, dynamic, and ethical and examining it reveals where ethical tension sits, where complicity may be occurring, and what alternative ethical positions might be possible.

The Centring Approach is therefore both an ethical and a wellness-oriented practice, supporting practitioners to honour their own resistance, maintain ethical integrity, and remain accountable to themselves and to those they serve.

THREE – ACCOUNTABILITY: Calling the harm out

Accountability is what we do with what we have noticed – naming the harm and refusing to be made complicit.

Re-centring as action

Re-centring is not only reflective; it is enacted. The approach supports ethical re-positioning even when systemic change is not possible or safe – through what we are willing to name, the advocacy we attempt, the dilemmas we refuse to carry alone, and the ethical stance we take without increasing harm. This is where wellness and accountability meet: the act of calling out the harm is itself a form of personal resistance and agency that re-centres our own wellbeing.

Doing nothing is not neutral. It is a passive ethical position that often reinforces harm.

What's at stake in family violence practice

When centring goes unexamined, the consequences are concrete: centring the wrong voice can compound harm and deepen systemic entrapment.

- Institutions and systems are not neutral.
- Practitioners are actors within systems of power — and we can ourselves be subject to systemic coercive control. Part of this work is becoming aware of our own vulnerability and our own responsibility.
- Unexamined responses often default to centring perpetrators, policies, or organisational protection.
- Survivor-centred positioning reorients practice toward safety, dignity, and justice.
- Perpetrator manipulation thrives when centring is left unexamined.

Where the harm lives: the 4Ps and PAM

Accountability needs a direction. Two pathways of systems abuse show where the harm we are called to name actually lives — two terrains where systems and system actors become complicit in systemic coercive control:

The 4Ps — Policy, Procedure, Process, and Practice. The institutional mechanisms through which harmful responses are produced and reproduced: policy shapes procedure, procedure shapes process, and process shapes practice. The companion guide, Disrupting the 4Ps, offers concrete and accountable actions for interrupting harm along this pathway, including documentation as a site of ethical resistance.

PAM — Predominant Aggressor Manipulation. The patterned, deliberate tactic by which a predominant aggressor manipulates systems, institutions, and system actors to legitimise and extend control. Through curated social performances and the manipulation of communities, organisations, professionals, support institutions, and legal systems, the abuse shifts from relational to social — and a community or system may unknowingly act in the aggressor's interests. The companion resource, Predominant Aggressor Manipulation (PAM), maps this pathway in detail. Centring Ethical Anguish is the practitioner's reflective anchor across both. The anguish we feel is often the first sign that we are being positioned to participate in one of these pathways - and the first invitation to resist it. The full resource, and others for family violence practice, are available at www.jacki.co.nz or www.coercive-control.co.nz.