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**Young Men Talk About Partner Abuse:  
Experiences, Beliefs, and Help-Seeking After Partner Abuse From Women**

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## Abstract

Partner abuse against men is a serious social issue, and one for which victims frequently have difficulty seeking help. There is a clear gap in the literature exploring the experience of abuse for men, and particularly young men. Common beliefs about masculinity and abuse may influence both the men's experiences, and the likelihood of men being offered appropriate support. The current research included two studies: the first comprised in-depth interviews with nine young men who self-identified as having experienced partner abuse from a woman. The interviews explored the men's experience of the relationship, their understanding of abuse and gender, and their decisions about seeking help. The second study involved focus groups with 16 young men and women who self-identified as not having experienced abuse, and used vignettes of partner abuse against men and women to stimulate discussion of their beliefs, knowledge and attitudes towards partner abuse in relation to gender and help-seeking. The data were analysed with a thematic analysis. The findings suggested the immediate and lasting impact of the abuse on the young men, including seemingly contradictory descriptions of their feelings about the abuse, and a perception of others as unlikely to be supportive or as potentially mistaking them for perpetrators. The focus groups described contrasting conceptualisations of men, women and abuse. These included ideas of men as invulnerable and not needing help, of women as unable to harm men, of partner abuse as an issue to be resolved privately, and of the importance of men expressing their distress if their stories are to be taken seriously. The findings suggest the need for increased support for men, education around the issue, and the adoption of an approach to partner abuse that includes men as victims as well as perpetrators. The limitations of these findings are discussed, along with suggestions for future research.

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## Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Partner abuse is a serious social issue that can occur in any romantic relationship (Hamel, 2005). It is an unfortunately common experience, particularly so amongst young people (W. L. Johnson, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2015). However, while researchers have frequently explored the issue of partner abuse against women since it was first popularised as a social problem, there remains very little literature examining abuse against men. What has been conducted thus far has for the most part been quantitative, and focused on abuse against men well in to adulthood. This is a pity, because abusive experiences in early relationships are an important influence on the course of later relationships (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007), and because the differences in living situation and relationship circumstances between younger and older men may preclude the generalisation of findings from one group to the other (Nowinski & Bowen, 2012). Similarly, it is unclear how applicable research with women is to men who experience abuse (Lievore & Mayhew, 2007). Furthermore, the high prevalence of such experiences among young adults suggests a dire need to understand the issue better, to better meet the need for prevention, intervention, and support for this group.

Alongside, and in a complex relationship with, this lack of literature is the debate surrounding the presence and nature of partner abuse against men. The dominant conceptualisation of partner abuse is of violence from a man to a woman, and this influences not only the research that is conducted and the way it is interpreted, but also the support that is made available to men, and the education available about partner abuse (Hamel, 2005). Researchers have thus far shed little light on men's experiences of abuse or their willingness and ability to seek help, and even less on the particular experiences of young men. Qualitative research has been particularly lacking in the literature (Randle & Graham, 2011), resulting in a lack of understanding of the experiences and complexities behind the statistics.

In this research, I sought the perspectives and understandings of those to whom this debate relates, and to explore the complexities of the issue. The study aims are to build our understanding of this experience for young men, and the factors that are important in their decisions and experiences of seeking help. For this, I have conducted two studies ; the first examines the accounts and understandings of young men who have experienced abuse in a past relationship, through in-depth individual interviews. Because of the possible importance of the gender of the partner to the experience of partner abuse for men (C. Brown, 2008), I have elected to restrict the current research to men's relationships with women. The second study uses focus groups with young men and

women who have not been abused, to explore the background of peer beliefs against which the men's experiences and meaning-making occurred.

There are five research questions addressed through this thesis:

- 1) How do young men who have been abused by a female intimate partner describe these experiences?
- 2) How do these men describe their decisions about and experiences of seeking help for partner abuse?
- 3) What recommendations do they make for helping other young men who experience partner abuse?
- 4) How do young men and women understand the issue of partner abuse against young men?
- 5) What beliefs and ideas do these young people hold about seeking help for partner abuse?

For my own part, I have approached this topic with an outsider's view: as a psychologist-in-training, a woman, and as someone who is well passed my 'young adult' years. However, I have also been motivated by my own experiences with relationship conflict as a young adult, and with hesitation in making the decision to confide in others. I believe that no one deserves to experience abuse, and no one should feel alone when they have gone through it. While my initial academic interests on starting my tertiary study journey were on women's issues, my realisation of the scarcity of research on men's issues and the lack of services available to abused men in New Zealand, alongside my conviction that support and compassion are important to any vulnerable group, have led me to seek the voices to the men who experience abuse. I will leave a more thorough examination of my beliefs and background to the methodology section. However, for now I will note that I have endeavoured to hold my difference from and attachment to this issue in perspective throughout the process of this research.

This thesis is structured in five chapters, including this introduction. Chapter two explores the relevant literature with regards to men, abuse, gender, and the current state of our knowledge on abuse against young men. This includes a brief examination of the history of the field, the prevalence of the issue, and the effects and social context of views surrounding the issue. Finally, the chapter outlines the current literature on men's help-seeking for abuse, and identifies areas that require further research attention. Chapter three describes the methodological frameworks that have informed the current research and the specific research methods employed. The chapter also addresses questions of rigour in qualitative research, and ethical considerations for the current research. Chapter four presents the findings of both parts of the current research. The list of themes

for each study is given at the beginning of the relevant section, and the findings of the thematic analysis are then outlined, divided according to the research questions. The final chapter reviews the findings in the context of the current literature, and explores the clinical implications and limitations of the research with suggestions for future research, before outlining the conclusions of the research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the literature that forms the background to the research. It begins with a brief outline of the social history of the field and conceptions of masculinity as they relate to partner abuse. It then explores definitions of partner abuse and the parameters of the current research, the prevalence of partner abuse against men, and the effects of partner abuse on men. Common beliefs and attitudes are then considered, along with the literature on men's help-seeking for partner abuse.

### **A very brief history of partner abuse**

In order to understand the current state of research on abuse against men, it is important to recognise the history of the issue for both men and women, and the political background against which the research thus far has taken place. This section is intended to provide a brief snapshot of this history, to enable the reader to place the current research and previous literature in context.

Partner abuse has had a varied history, in which it has been alternately criticised, tacitly or overtly supported, criminalised, and ignored (George, 2002). Researchers have suggested that for much of the Middle Ages, it was considered the proper place, even the duty, of a husband to keep his wife and children safe from devilish and improper behaviour by physically disciplining them (Dutton, 2006). It should be emphasised that physical punishment has been considered the appropriate method of dealing with many social and legal transgressions for many periods in history (Spierenberg, 1984), and the view towards 'wife beating' was perhaps part of a wider view of physical punishment as appropriate. However, it is also evident that family structure has largely been strictly hierarchical, with the husband assigned the highest status and the discretion to make decisions for the family (Dutton, 2006). The role of men as the ruler of society and the family unit is evident in many historical and even recent texts, and remains in many parts of the world today (Straus, 2010).

There are differing opinions as to when laws against violence between marital partners was enacted. Dutton (2006) concludes that laws against spousal violence were enacted around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while George (2002) asserts that earlier texts also evidenced examples of condemnation of men who abused their wives, including laws against such violence, and examples of successful prosecutions under those laws. However, the enforcement of these laws has depended

to a certain extent on the prevailing views of the time, and the social norms governing violent behaviour.

The problem has often been in the enforcement of these laws, due to the supposedly 'private and personal' nature of partner abuse. A surge in interest in women's rights and the protection of women is evident during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which societies for the protection of women were successful in influencing rapidly increasing sanctions for wife-beaters (Dutton, 2006). However, writers and speakers who attempted to draw attention to the issue of partner abuse of women, and the wider issue of women's rights, were often discredited and character assassinated, despite having the weight of law on their side (Dutton, 2006). Thus, the illegal status of abuse has not always afforded protection to victims. Of particular importance were the views of the abuse of women as rare, trivial, or that the victim must have in some way provoked the attack (Cook, 2009; Schechter, 1982). While the law stated that violence towards one's partner was not defensible, the attitudes of the general public, and the treatment of abuse victims has varied over time.

If the abuse of women has engendered inconsistent and sometimes pejorative responses historically, this is perhaps even more evident in the history of men's abuse in intimate relationships. Davidson (1977) and George (2002, 2003) described rituals regularly conducted around the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century in France and England, in which groups performed ritual public humiliations of men who 'allowed themselves' to be beaten by their wives. Beaten wives were not similarly derided. While we have little historical information regarding the abuse of women, the abuse of men has remained an even more taboo subject, and the prevalence of such abuse throughout history remains virtually unknown, although many individual cases have been identified (George, 2002). As I will discuss below, whether the violence meted out by one gender is comparable in nature, cause, or effect to that perpetrated by the other has long been a source of controversy, but it is important to note that examples of beaten and abused men have been reported throughout history.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of the women's movement, and renewed interest in the rights of women. Women fought harder than ever against the 'second class citizen' status afforded to them when compared with men, and the discrimination against women evident in society's structure and practices (Rupp, 1990). In the 1970s, feminist groups and the women's movement re-popularised discussion regarding the abuse of women (Schechter, 1982). Erin Pizzey, author of *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear* (Pizzey, 1974), opened the first women's shelter, and more and more services were set up to specifically cater for women who had experienced abuse. It was a turning point in bringing abuse out in the open (Schechter, 1982). This movement was greatly helped by high-profile writings on partner violence against women, including Pizzey's ground-

breaking book. This was later joined by empirical research such as that by Murray Straus, Richard Gelles and Suzanne Steinmetz, that provided evidence that physical partner abuse against women was far more widespread than had previously been acknowledged (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980).

While the statistics tell us that unacceptable numbers of women are still being abused, the women's movement can claim a victory of sorts in that the number of women who experience violence in their relationships have appeared to show a steady decline over time (Catalano, 2006; Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1994; Straus, Kaufman Kantor, & Moore, 1997), and public acceptance of such violence has decreased (Straus et al., 1997). However, it should also be remembered that the fight is far from over, and abuse remains a relatively prevalent experience for women around the world and in New Zealand (Lievore & Mayhew, 2007).

However, the gradual recognition of the partner abuse of women is not the end of the story. Data from the 1975 studies by Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz (Straus et al., 1980) suggested that while women were injured at an alarming rate, so too were men. While the literature on partner abuse is now extensive, it has thus far scarcely begun to explore the issue of abused men. Until recently, the majority of partner abuse research has been conducted by those interested in women's issues, reinforced by the conceptualisation of partner abuse as a women's problem (Nowinski & Bowen, 2012). Consequently, while our understanding of abused women has greatly advanced since partner abuse was first recognised as a serious social issue in the 1970s, our understanding of the abuse of men has remained limited.

While some researchers have now begun to examine abuse against men, the construction of abuse as a women's issue has continued to be common both inside and outside academia. This has been influenced by the widespread use of what has been labelled the 'patriarchal', or the 'feminist' perspective, in which partner abuse is conceptualised as a problem of men's violence towards women, directly caused by patriarchal structures that encourage men to use violence against women as a way to enforce their dominance (Hamel, 2007). Women's violence towards men is conceptualised as rare, inconsequential, and used almost exclusively as a self-defensive strategy against a violent or dominating male partner, rather than an abusive behaviour (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Saunders, 2002).

Other major theoretical approaches to the aetiology of partner abuse have included attachment theory (Cicchetti & Howes, 1991) and social learning theory approaches (O'Leary, 1988; Riggs & O'Leary, 1989) which focus on early learning and modelling of relationships and abuse;

power theory (Straus, 1977), which focuses on relationships with unequal power structures; and partner abuse typologies (Holtzworth-Monroe & Stuart, 1994; M. P. Johnson, 2008), which theorise different causes for different types of partner abuse. Despite the labelling of the dominant model as 'feminist', these models have also been employed by feminist researchers. I will not examine these theories here, as it falls outside the scope of this thesis, and the interested reader may refer to Bell and Naugle (2008), Shorey, Cornelius and Bell (2008) or Dixon and Graham-Kevan (2011). However, it is important to note that a wide range of existing theories leave open the possibility of men experiencing abuse from women, rather than conceptualising partner abuse as a problem strictly perpetrated by men and suffered by women.

Where the abuse of men has been examined, it has generated a heated debate on the nature of abuse, and its relationship with gender. Differences in epistemology, ontology, ideology and methodology between researchers has resulted in a strong division within much of the literature, between those who see abuse as perpetrated by men and experienced by women, and those who see abuse as a gender-inclusive 'human issue' (K. M. Bell & Naugle, 2008; Hamel, 2009; Lievore & Mayhew, 2007). It has also been fuelled by emotionally-charged attacks by each 'side' on the intentions and methodology of the other, in a manner similar to the criticisms of those who had tried to draw attention to the abuse of women more than 40 years ago.

The influence of theories that emphasise men as perpetrators of partner abuse rather than victims can be seen in the absence of men in many studies of abuse victims and texts on the subject, the relative lack of abuse-related services provided to men when compared with women (Cheung, Leung, & Tsui, 2009; Hines, Brown, & Dunning, 2007), the gendered language used in some state and national family violence laws (Cook, 2009), and the focus and language of policy and intervention strategies outside the academic sphere (Cook, 2009; Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Hines et al., 2007). Similarly, there is a lack of targeted services and recognition for people who have experienced abuse in same-sex relationships, as this is also inconsistent with the constructions of abuse as perpetrated by men against women (Duke & Davidson, 2009).

The work of the women's movement has resulted in an increasing recognition of partner abuse against women as a serious social issue, worthy of research and formal service provision. However, this has not been matched by a similar interest in partner abuse against men. There is continuing political tension over the recognition of abuse against men, and partner abuse continues to be predominantly conceptualised and treated as a women's problem. Despite a recent increase in the amount of research examining the prevalence of abused men, there remains relatively little information regarding the experiences or outcomes of abuse for these groups. It is clear that this is

an area in need of attention. Furthering our understanding of the issue may also help to bring much-needed clarity to this contested area.

### **Masculinity and partner abuse against men**

This section provides a brief outline of conceptions of gender and masculinity, with reference to the experience of partner abuse. Masculinity and constructions of maleness are important considerations when we reflect on the possible similarities and differences between the experience of abuse for men and women, and the way in which abuse against men and women is conceptualised and dealt with. For a more thorough analysis of masculinity and men's gender issues, see Connell's influential work on the subject (e.g. Connell, 2005).

Masculinity has traditionally been conceptualised as a unitary construct inherent in every man and consistent between men. However, there is growing recognition of the heterogeneity among men and both their identification with, and adherence to, the 'masculine ideal' (Anderson, 2009). This is referred to as 'hegemonic masculinity'- a hierarchical order in which some forms of masculinity are prioritised over others, as well as over femininity (Connell, 2005). The content of the 'ideal man' archetype varies over time and place, but in modern western societies, concepts of the hegemonic masculinity frequently reflect images of men as strong, powerful, unemotional, in control, and in a position of dominance. This is contrasted with qualities usually ascribed to femininity, such as vulnerability, emotionality or submissiveness (Emslie, Ridge, Ziebland, & Hunt, 2006; Hollander, 2001).

While this 'ideal' masculine archetype is also frequently referred to as 'hegemonic masculinity', I will follow Anderson's (2009) lead in referring to it as orthodox masculinity for the sake of reducing confusion. Anderson notes that it is only the *orthodox* masculinity that values the above qualities, and that not all masculinities are diametrically opposed to femininity (Anderson, 2009). However, these 'subjugated' or 'alternative' masculinities remain marginalised, due to the consistent dominance of the orthodox ideal (Courtenay, 2000).

Traditionally the attention of gender-related research has been focussed on the benefits men may enjoy as a result of gendered institutional power and gendered social structures. However, while this is important when examining issues on a societal level, it is less applicable to the complicated way that gender and relationships are played out in individuals' everyday contemporary lives. Unlike issues related to femininity which are usually described in relation to oppression, the difficulties associated with masculinity have most often been conceptualised as relating to

conflicting or unmanageable social expectations for men (Connell, 2005), or the costs men pay as a result of aspiring to orthodox masculinity (Anderson, 2009).

Much of the literature on men and masculinity has concerned itself with men's purposeful enactment of gender in order to achieve orthodox forms of masculinity, such as avoiding seeking help, in order to retain a sense of capable independence (O'Brien, Hunt, & Hart, 2005). However several writers (Kimmel, 2010; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) have also recognised the particular importance of others' assessments in men's gendered lives, in that orthodox masculinity represents society's expectations of men, as well as many men's expectations of themselves. Men's ability to achieve 'manhood' is compromised in the eyes of others when they display qualities that contradict orthodox masculinity, and men are invariably judged against this ideal, whether or not it is one they identify with (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Transgressions from the orthodox masculine path by men who have not otherwise cemented their place in the highest echelons of the hegemonic order are likely to result in denigration, harassment, and accusations of weakness, femininity or homosexuality (Anderson, 2009). Thus, men's lives are frequently characterised by an unremitting cycle of proving one's manhood to others, only to have it immediately brought in to question again (Kimmel, 2010).

While the literature has predominantly examined this difficulty in proving one's manhood in relation to gay or bisexual men, masculine hegemony may also be pertinent for the study of partner abuse against men, in that such men may be considered to inhabit roles stereotypically ascribed to women (Migliaccio, 2002). The concept of abuse victimisation and its emotional consequences are also likely to significantly deviate from the orthodox masculine ideal. This may place men who have experienced abuse at risk of the harassment, rejection and hostility often experienced by those who fail to 'measure up' (Anderson, 2009; Sloan, Berke, & Zeichner, 2015), as well as experiencing emotional costs of not meeting the masculine ideals (Emslie et al., 2006). The preponderance of evidence that abused men often feel emasculated or suffer emasculating reactions from others (as outlined later in this literature review) suggests the importance of masculine hegemony to the experience of abused men, and to the way in which they are treated by others.

Alongside the punishment men may experience when they are perceived to have transgressed the masculine norm, attempts to faithfully enact orthodox gender roles may be problematic for men who have experienced abuse, in that it may prevent them from successfully seeking help or support (O'Brien et al., 2005). The orthodox masculinity in Western cultures places a high value on the denial of weakness and vulnerability, and the maintenance of control (Courtenay, 2000). This could form a double-edged sword for men who experience abuse, who may be

simultaneously sanctioned for breaking gender role and limited in their ability to seek help, due to their attempts to regain masculine status.

As noted previously, our conceptualisations of gender have recently grown to include the presence of multiple forms of masculinity rather than seeing it as a unitary construct. However, traditional notions of gender remain popular among the general population (Dolan, 2010; Frej, 2008). These include conceptions of all men as being unconditionally privileged (Coston & Kimmel, 2012), and matching the orthodox ideal of strength, power and dominance, alongside notions of all women as non-threatening and emotional. Both hostile and benevolent sexism may draw from these conceptions, such as the creation of social rules against men's enactment of a 'violent nature' against 'defenceless and delicate' women (Kwiatkowska, 2013). The conceptualisation of men as a homogenous category fails to consider the heavy costs that many men pay as a result of gender socialisation (Connell, 2005), including the effects of living in accordance with orthodox masculinity and the social sanctions and often self-reproach experienced by men who fail to live up to the masculine ideal (Anderson, 2009).

As can be seen in the final two sections of this literature review, such ideas may affect people's conceptions of abused men, and abused men's conceptions of themselves. They may also result in the non-acknowledgement of abused men, and in responses to abused men that are informed more by the person's gender than their situation. Thus, it is important to understand how the issue of gender plays in to young men's accounts of abuse and meaning-making around it, as well as the role gender may play in the views and attitudes of others.

### **What is partner abuse?**

There is wide variation in the literature as to the definition of partner abuse; this has resulted in a lack of consensus as to its nature, effects, and aetiology (Randle & Graham, 2011). In this section I consider the range of definitions used in the literature and outline the parameters of the current research.

Partner abuse is also known as intimate partner abuse, intimate partner violence, domestic violence, dating violence, domestic abuse, wife beating, wife battering, gender violence, and family violence, among others (Cook, 2009; Hamel, 2005). All these terms may refer to violence and abuse between partners, but there are subtle (and less subtle) variations among them. In this thesis, I will be using the term 'partner abuse', as it encompasses a wide range of abusive behaviour, does not

exclude male victims, and specifies abuse between two intimate partners, rather than within the wider family or household.

The definition of partners has varied over time, with early studies focused entirely on abuse that occurs within marriage, while contemporary research has recognised the diversity of relationships within which abuse may occur, including married or cohabiting couples, and dating partners (Shorey et al., 2008). The definition of partner has also been widened in many studies to include ex-partners, in recognition of the high prevalence of abuse during or shortly after the separation of a couple (Craven, 1997).

Much of the literature has restricted the definition of partner abuse to physical acts of violence or threats of physical violence, as these have historically been more clearly legislated against and are somewhat easier to define (Cook, 2009). However, psychological and sexual abuse are increasingly included in research, and there is growing recognition that the inclusion of all forms of abuse is important in understanding the overall pattern, experience and effects of partner abuse (Sabina & Straus, 2008).

Physical abuse refers to physical attacks on a partner, such as hitting, kicking, biting, scalding, pushing, slapping, scratching, poisoning, and throwing objects or using weapons (Cook, 2009). While the exact definitions have varied from study to study, the term 'sexual abuse' is often used to refer to pressuring, coercing or forcing the victim to perform sexual acts, or otherwise engaging the victim in unwanted sexual acts (S. M. Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000). This may include the use of verbal manipulation, force or other means such as the use of substances to gain sexual compliance from a partner. The definition of psychological abuse is even more varied between sources (Follingstad, Helff, Binford, Runge, & White, 2004), and includes the use of controlling, demeaning, threatening, isolating, manipulating, and other psychologically damaging or controlling behaviours. In some of the literature, psychological abuse has been further differentiated into psychological and emotional abuse (such as O'Hagan, 1995), verbal abuse and control (such as O'Hagan, 1995), or psychological abuse and stalking (Dye & Davis, 2003). However, O'Hagan found that the different types very commonly co-occur, and others have found high correlations between dominating, controlling and demeaning behaviours, suggesting they may represent a unidimensional construct (Jones, Davidson, Bogat, Levendosky, & von Eye, 2005). In the current research, I will refer to all of these types of abuse as 'psychological abuse'.

Partner abuse has been variously defined according to objective behaviours such as kicking or punching; subjective views such as the victim or perpetrator considering the act abusive or

criminal or that the perpetrator intended to harm the victim; and according to their consequences, such as the partner being injured or experiencing fear or shame as a result of the relationship interactions. The distinction between those who define abuse according to the incident and those who define it according to the effects is important, in that it is in part responsible for disagreement between researchers as to the prevalence of abuse against men. Women are much more likely than men to report fear and injury for seemingly equivalent abusive incidents (Straus, 2010). This leads to differences in the number of men who are considered to have experienced abuse between studies that measure abuse according to fear and injury, and those who measure it according to the nature of the incident without requiring fear or injury to be present. However, as will be outlined later in this literature review, there are a range of other outcomes of abuse aside from fear and injury, and not all of those who report experiences of abuse identify as having experienced fear or injury, suggesting that using the absence of these outcomes as an exclusion criterion would exclude many men and women who have experienced aggressive, violent or controlling behaviours from their partners. Thus, in order to remain as inclusive as possible, the current study has employed a definition that considers particular effects of abuse as possible parts of the experience, rather than as essential defining features.

An exclusive focus on objective acts of violence does obscure differences in the valence of certain acts. For example, pushing a partner while playfighting, or pushing away a partner who is physically attacking may be classed as abuse when the reasons for violence are not taken into account (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). As I will outline, there has long been a debate over whether researchers are incorrectly classifying self-defensive behaviours, but research has suggested that this is less common than has been proposed (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011). However, when examining the accounts of those who have experienced partner abuse, an understanding of their subjective view of abuse is important in understanding their experience and decision-making. Therefore, an approach that combines a view of particular behaviours as abusive is best combined with an understanding of what those behaviours mean to the person in question.

A further definitional issue relates to the threshold for defining violence or conflict in a relationship as abuse. Early research focused on relationships with long-standing patterns of abusive behaviour and control, but more recently, there has been recognition that abuse and violence within relationships varies in its duration, frequency and severity, even over the course of a relationship (Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005). A large proportion of abuse in the general population consists of infrequent or isolated incidents, or abuse that results from an escalation of non-violent arguments, rather than a pervasive pattern of abusive behaviours (M. P. Johnson, 2006).

There are also a wide range of abusive experiences between the two extremes. An example of the importance of recognising even violence that happens infrequently is illustrated in LaRossa's (1980) interview with a husband who had slapped his wife once, resulting in enduringly submissive behaviour from his wife. The differences between high-severity violence that occurs over a long period of time and low-severity violence that occurs infrequently or even in isolation should not be forgotten. However, again the current research recognises the full range of abuse.

Although the focus of many of the definitions outlined here, as well as much of the literature, is on unilateral abuse (from one partner to the other), abuse may also be bilateral (both partners are abusive) (M. P. Johnson, 2006). The term bilateral does not imply that both partners are equally abusive, abusive in a similar manner, or that the abuse is mutual on each occasion, only that there is some degree of abuse perpetrated by each of the partners. Research suggests that bilateral physical violence is more common than unilateral violence between partners in the community (M. P. Johnson, 2008; Morse, 1995; Straus, 2010), although not within clinical samples (M. P. Johnson, 2008). While they have been examined less frequently, bilateral violence may also be more common for psychological abuse (Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010), and sexual abuse (Katz, Carino, & Hilton, 2002). Therefore, the current research recognises both unilateral and bilateral abuse within relationships in its definition of partner abuse, and does not seek to exclude victims who may also have perpetrated some form of abuse.

Partner abuse has been conceptualised in many ways, and the current study will use an inclusive definition that captures a wide range of experience, with the aim of allowing participants to set and explore their own parameters within this broad definition. In this research, abuse is defined as behaviours that are objectively or subjectively considered unacceptable between romantic partners, including current and ex-partners. It includes the broad spectrum of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Abuse may constitute anything between a single act and a long-standing, pervasive pattern, and may be unilateral or bilateral within a relationship. While the definition of abuse includes partners of any gender combination, the current study specifically explores the experiences of men in relationships with women.

### **How widespread is partner abuse against men?**

In order to appreciate the importance of research on abuse against men, it is useful to understand how often men experience partner abuse. Survey data suggests that up to 94% of men will experience some form of partner abuse at some point in their lives (Nowinski & Bowen, 2012).

However, as Nowinski and Bowen point out, this figure is somewhat misleading in that it obscures large differences in prevalence and incidence between different types of abuse, different levels of violence, and different populations. The literature on abuse against men has often been dominated by arguments around the legitimacy of the prevalence data, and thus these arguments will be briefly reviewed before examining the available data on the prevalence of partner abuse against men. The literature has predominantly been conducted in western countries, and while a comparison has not been made for young men internationally, research with young women suggests a wide range of variability between countries (Decker et al., 2014), meaning that the findings reviewed here may not be equally applicable to non-Western countries.

General population surveys are the most common source of prevalence data for partner abuse, and have generated the most controversy. Population surveys commonly use the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) (Straus, 1979; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), which uses objective behaviours such as hitting or kicking a partner to measure abuse. There is considerable debate around the comparison between abuse against men and abuse against women, and as mentioned previously in this literature review, theoretical, epistemological, methodological and ideological differences between researchers have resulted in a lack of agreement over the construct of abuse. They have also resulted in a lack of consensus over the interpretation of empirical findings, which most commonly support equivalent prevalence rates for partner abuse between men and women when defined behaviourally. Writers who argue that men are overwhelmingly the aggressors in relationships have criticised the use of this scale, on the grounds that it does not integrate the way in which patriarchy constructs the power relationships between men and women, or the causes and effects of violence into its measurement, which are theorised to be different for men and women (e.g.: Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Semple, 2001).

Population-based survey research that includes the same behavioural measures for men and women have found similar rates of violence or abusive behaviour of women towards men and men towards women, as rated by both perpetrators and victims (Archer, 2002; Esquivel-Santoveña & Dixon, 2012; Nowinski & Bowen, 2012; Straus, 2010). This result is not unanimous- a number of population surveys have found either that men are more likely to perpetrate partner abuse (e.g. Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000b), or that women are (e.g.: Archer, 2000; B. H. Hoff, 2012; Straus & Ramirez, 2007). Straus' (2010) review of the literature concluded that the majority of community-based surveys found similar rates between the genders or slightly higher rates of violence from women, while the lowest ratio of men to women in population surveys was found by the USA National Violence Against Women Survey, which found that 1/3 of victims were men (Tjaden &

Thoennes, 2000a). These pattern of results are similar when only women's reports are analysed (Stets & Straus, 1990) and when only the initiator of violence is counted (Hamel, 2005). It is also pertinent that the results obtained with the CTS are roughly equivalent to those obtained from other behavioural measures (Cook, 2009; Morse, 1995; Nowinski & Bowen, 2012), although this does not preclude the possibility of other measures having similar limitations to the CTS.

The age of the sample may affect the gender ratio, with the finding of a higher prevalence of aggressive women than men being more common in younger samples than older samples (Archer, 2000, 2002). This is consistent with Straus and colleagues' (Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1994) and the US Department of Justice report's (Catalano, 2006) findings that while the rates of physical partner abuse against women is falling, the rate of such abuse against men has remained constant, changing the gender ratio over time.

However, as has been previously mentioned, the definitions of partner abuse employed by researchers have often been significantly different from one another, with some researchers defining abuse behaviourally, and others according to the outcome (injuries, or less often, fear or help-seeking). Because of the well-documented higher rates of injury of abused women than men (Archer, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a) and the higher rate of reported fear (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000b), defining abuse by injury or fear predominantly results in a higher rate of abuse directed towards women than towards men, as does research using support service data or crime records, which shows that those who seek help for partner abuse are predominantly women. As outlined above, defining abuse behaviourally is more likely to result in a similar prevalence of partner abuse towards men and women (Archer, 2000; Kessler, Molnar, Feurerc, & Appelbaum, 2001; Straus, 2011; Straus et al., 1980).

Several researchers have observed that violence used to control a partner and violence used to defend oneself are not treated differently in the CTS or similar measures, and argue that women's violence is likely to be self-defence, rather than abuse, whereas men's violence is not self-defensive (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; M. P. Johnson, 2006; Stets & Straus, 1990). However, while there have been few studies that have examined the prevalence of such issues, the small number that do exist have suggested that the use of violence as self-defence makes up a small proportion of violent acts towards a partner (Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Sebastian, 1991; Gonzalez, 1997). There appears to be a lack of agreement over the relationship of this with gender, with some researchers findings that self-defence as a motive for violence does not vary significantly by gender (Follingstad et al., 1991; Harned, 2001; Straus & Gozjolko, 2007), while others have found that women are more likely to use violence in self-defence than are men (Saunders, 2002).

Community data typically include a wide range of abusive relationships, with most research combining abuse that occurs infrequently or over a short time-frame as well as that which occurs more frequently or over a longer time period together for analysis, meaning that the data are frequently unsuitable to provide a comparison of the type of abusive relationship between groups.

It is not my intention to fully review the debate over the interpretation of research findings on the abuse of men, and for the purposes of this review, finding the precise ratio of men to women among those affected by partner abuse is not necessary. Instead, this review is concerned with the common finding that a significant number of men experience partner abuse in one form or another. The remainder of this section will review the available data on the prevalence and incidence of abuse against men. However, due to the limitations of the research which has more frequently concentrated on the comparison between men and women than providing estimates of prevalence among men, it has not always been possible to clearly differentiate the prevalence among men alone.

A review by Nowinski and Bowen (2012) found a wide range of prevalence rates have been found for men within the last decade, ranging between 0.2 and 94% of the general population, depending on the sample population, definition of abuse, and the timeframes involved. As noted previously, these differences mean that directly comparing between studies is akin to comparing apples to oranges, making a single estimate of prevalence difficult. In Nowinski and Bowen's review, the lowest lifetime estimate for overall partner abuse (not restricted to physical abuse) was found in Tjaden and Thoennes' national survey in the USA, which used the CTS along with measures of rape and stalking, and found that 7.3% of men in heterosexual cohabiting relationships reported ever having been the victim of partner abuse (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000b), while the highest rate was given by Paul, Smith and Long (2006), who found that 93% of men presenting to a general practice in Ireland reported ever having experienced psychological abuse, and 54% reported ever having experienced physical abuse. The majority of research has found estimates somewhere between these two figures, with the findings varying depending on the type of abuse measured, the sampling method, and the measurement instrument involved.

In New Zealand, the 2009 Crime and Safety Survey found that 3% of men reported being a victim of a partner offence (including assaults, threats to them and threats to their property) in the last year, and 10% reported having experienced a partner offence during their lifetime (New Zealand Ministry of Justice, 2011). This was a decrease from previous years, with the 2006 survey reporting that 18% had ever experienced a partner offence (Lievore & Mayhew, 2007).

Sexual abuse has received substantially less attention in the literature than physical abuse, in part because it has often been subsumed under the common heading of 'physical or sexual abuse'. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000b) found that 0.2% of men in heterosexual cohabiting relationships reported experiencing rape from a partner. Gámez-Guadix, Straus, and Hershberger's (2011) study of university students found that 19.6% of women reported verbally coercing a partner to have sex, and that 1.8% of women reported physically forcing a partner to have sex, although it was unclear what proportion of these partners were men. A study of New Zealand high school students reported 67.4% of male students reported having experienced at least one incident of unwanted sexual activity with a partner, friend or acquaintance, with the majority occurring in relationships (S. M. Jackson et al., 2000). Very few studies have thus far examined the issue of the sexual partner abuse against heterosexual men, and the majority exclude men from their samples, or include men only in perpetrator samples. Also, the definitions of abuse used in some studies may have somewhat restricted men's reporting (such as Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000b, who defined sexual abuse as rape only). However, the studies that have been conducted so far indicate that while women are more likely to experience sexual partner abuse, a substantial minority of victims are men (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2011).

Psychological abuse is relatively understudied in the literature, although there is some consensus that it is the most common form of partner abuse (Sabina & Straus, 2008; Shorey et al., 2008). Psychological abuse also commonly co-occurs with either physical or sexual abuse, or both, although it may also occur independently (Sabina & Straus, 2008), and there is considerable overlap between the concepts (Semple, 2001).

The prevalence of abuse against men varies between socio-demographic groups, with factors such as age, ethnicity, education, and socio-economic factors (Moffitt, Robins, & Caspi, 2001; Nowinski & Bowen, 2012), substance abuse and violence history (Renner & Whitney, 2012) and cohabitation status (Lievore & Mayhew, 2007; Moffitt et al., 2001) affecting men's risk of experiencing partner abuse. Nowinski and Bowen suggest that many of these factors may be related to the risk of partner abuse through differences in cultural norms (such as differences in beliefs about relationships and violence), and differences in living situations, such as marriage and whether the couple have children.

Partner abuse appears to be particularly prevalent in young adulthood, with research suggesting much higher rates of abuse than in any other age group (Archer, 2000; Catalano, 2006; W. L. Johnson et al., 2015). Unfortunately, while some of the research draws on university samples and is thus likely to reflect a relatively young population, the results have seldom been divided by

age and gender (or have not included young men in their samples as victims). As a result, there is little information available on the number of young men in particular who experience partner abuse.

Some examples of those who have reported data specifically about young men as victims or women as perpetrators include O'Donnell and colleagues (2006), who found that by the age of 20, around 35% of men reported being the victim of one or more forms of partner violence at some point in the past. In the USA, the 1999 Youth Risk Behaviour Survey found that among 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders (around 15-18 years), 9% of young men reported experiencing physical partner abuse (D. E. Howard & Wang, 2003). In Halpern, Spriggs, Martin and Kupper's (2009) study of 18-23 year-olds, 36% of the men reported experiencing physical or sexual violence from a partner, with the majority of those men first experiencing partner abuse during their young adult years. As cited previously, 67.4% of boys in Jackson and colleagues' sample of New Zealand high school students reported having experienced at least one incident of unwanted sexual activity (S. M. Jackson et al., 2000).

Fawson (2015) did not report on separate findings for men and women, but stated that 46% of young men and women reporting having experienced psychological abuse, 34% reported experiencing physical violence, and 17% reported experiencing sexual violence from a partner at some point in the past. There were no significant gender differences, suggesting that the prevalence of abuse among the men in Fawson's sample may approximate these figures. Johnson and colleagues' (2015) study found that 29% of young women aged 21-24 reported perpetrating physical violence towards their current or most recent partner, although as with much of the data, it was not specified whether these partners were men or women.

In a New Zealand study of a representative birth cohort, 9% of the young people reported they were in 'clinically abusive' relationships, defined as those that required intervention (Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2004). Thirty seven percent of women in the same group reported having perpetrated physical partner abuse against a male or female in the previous year (Magdol et al., 1997), while 3% of men reported being assaulted by a partner in the previous year (Langley, Martin, & Nada-Raja, 1997). Ninety percent of the men reported that a partner had been verbally abusive towards them (Magdol et al., 1997).

The literature does not provide a clear nor consistent indication of how common partner abuse is, and attempts to do so would likely be meaningless, given the vast differences in the population of interest and definition of abuse between studies. Prevalence estimates are highly affected by setting, methodological and definitional issues, and vary widely between groups. While the debate appears to be far from over, it is clear that partner abuse is not a rare experience for

women nor for men. The significant numbers of men, and particularly young men, who report experiencing abuse are not well served by the current scarcity of research on abuse against men, and it is clear that this is an area worthy of further investigation.

### **The effects of partner abuse on men**

Partner abuse has been linked with a wide range of physical and mental health problems in both women and men (Randle & Graham, 2011). While there is a substantial body of work on the effects of physical partner abuse on women, the effects of psychological and sexual abuse, and the outcomes for men have been relatively neglected in the literature. As with research on other aspects of partner abuse against men, there has been very little attention on the experiences of young adults. In this section, I will review what literature has been conducted thus far, with a view to identifying gaps in understanding and areas that require further attention.

Physical abuse can result in physical pain and injury for victims. The rates of injury for men have varied widely across studies, but there is mounting evidence that substantial numbers of men do sustain injuries from abusive partners. The National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) in the USA (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a) found that 18.8% of men who had been physically abused by a partner sustained an injury from the incident, and 3.8% of them reported needing medical care for the injury. The majority of injuries were minor to moderate, but others sustained more serious injury, with 2.9% of male victims in the NVAWS hospitalised as a result of the abuse. In the National Family Violence Survey (Stets & Straus, 1990), 0.4% of all men who had experienced physical partner abuse reported being injured badly enough to need to see a doctor, while 1% of those who had experienced severe violence reported needing medical help. Cascardi and colleagues reported that 2% of men who had experienced physical abuse suffered broken bones, broken teeth, or damage to a sensory organ (Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992).

The majority of studies that have examined injury rates for men have compared them with those of women, who are estimated to be injured at roughly twice the rate of men (e.g.: Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a). However, as many writers have pointed out (e.g.: Cook, 2009; Straus, 2010), the higher rate of injury for women does not negate the findings that a substantial number of men are also injured. Archer's (2000) influential meta-analysis found that 35% of those injured by a partner were men, while 39% of those in the general population needing medical care for partner abuse were men. Felson (1996) found that gender differences in injury were reduced when physical size and strength were controlled for, suggesting the greater risk of injury across the population relates

in part to physical differences in average power. These differences in size did not affect the likelihood of injury when weapons were involved.

Violence between partners may also include homicide, with an estimated 5% of male murder victims in the USA killed by their partners, and with male victims making up 15% of all intimate partner homicides (Catalano, 2006). In New Zealand, 4 men were killed by a partner in 2010, just under 10% of all homicides of male victims (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2012). As with injury, the intimate partner homicide rates of men are lower than those found for women (Catalano, 2006), but nonetheless constitute a substantial minority of victims. Other health problems that have been linked to partner abuse in men include poor current health and an increase in chronic disease (Coker, Smith, et al., 2002) and sleep difficulties (Rauer & El-Sheikh, 2012).

In addition to research on injuries, there are a growing number of studies that have examined the psychological effects of being a victim of partner abuse. While the literature has thus far mostly focused on women, there is mounting evidence that partner abuse can also result in psychological distress and negative psychological states, as well as psychiatric symptoms and disorders for men (Randle & Graham, 2011).

Follingstad and her colleagues (Follingstad et al., 1991) found that of men who had suffered physical abuse from their partners, 74% reported feeling angry about the abuse, 39% reported feeling emotionally hurt, 35% reported feeling sad or depressed, 29% felt guilty, 16% ashamed or humiliated, 14% reported feeling fearful or anxious, 8% reported feeling helpless, and 14% reported feeling that the perpetrator had a right to do it. Others have found that abused men are significantly more likely to experience stress (Stets & Straus, 1990) anxiety and fear (Hamel, 2005; Hines et al., 2007; Morse, 1995), loneliness and helplessness (Tilbrook, Allan, & Dear, 2010) than men who have not been abused. The National Violence Against Women Survey found that 20% of the men who had experienced physical abuse from a partner feared bodily injury or death (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a), and Morse (1995) found that 13.5% of older men and 9.5% of younger men reported experiencing fear in their violent relationships. The majority of studies have thus far focused on internalising symptoms, and little is known about the externalising symptoms experienced by victims. These may be particularly pertinent to male victims, given that externalising symptoms are a common response to stress among men (Comer, 1992).

A greater number of studies have examined the mental health correlates of experiencing partner abuse, and have found that men who experience partner abuse have a greater risk of developing psychopathological symptoms, including depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

(PTSD), anxiety (Randle & Graham, 2011), substance abuse problems (Afifi et al., 2009; Campbell, Baty, Laugon, & Woods, 2009; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001), and psychosomatic symptoms (Stets & Straus, 1990) than men who have not been abused.

Hines (2007) studied the association between partner abuse and the risk of post-traumatic stress symptoms in male university students at 60 sites around the world, and found an increase in risk for abused men in every site. Coker and her colleagues, using NVAWS data, found that 20% of the men who had experienced partner abuse reported moderate to severe PTSD symptoms (Coker, Weston, Creson, Justice, & Blakeney, 2005). Depression has also been linked to partner abuse against men in many studies (Caldwell, Swan, & Woodbrown, 2012; Chan, Straus, Brownridge, Tiwari, & Leung, 2008; Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005; Sabina & Straus, 2008; Simonelli & Ingram, 1998; Stets & Straus, 1990). A dose-response effect has been found for the relationship between partner abuse and both depression and PTSD, in terms of increasing risk or symptom counts for men who experience more abusive incidents or more forms of abuse (Hines, 2007; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001; Sabina & Straus, 2008; Stets & Straus, 1990)

Other negative effects of abuse may include legal problems, as a result of perpetrators misusing the legal system to harm victims. For example, Hines and her colleagues (2007) found that half of the callers to a domestic abuse helpline for men reported abusers gaining sole custody of the children under false pretences. A fear of losing one's children may cause some men to 'put up' with abuse (Cook, 2009; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001).

The evidence with regards to the importance of the victim's gender is mixed, and a common finding is that women report more fear in their abusive relationships than men (Straus, 2010). However, fear as well as other negative emotional states are reported by a substantial number of men in the majority of studies that have examined the issue (Hines et al., 2007; Morse, 1995; Randle & Graham, 2011). Other researchers have found certain emotions to be more highly related to men's victimisation than to women's (such as anger; Rutter, Weatherill, Taft, & Orazem, 2012), or have found similar emotional effects between men and women (Fergusson et al., 2005).

The differential effects of partner abuse on men and women with regards to injury and fear have been widely cited in the literature, and are indeed important when considering victims' support needs. However, the evidence suggests that there are more similarities than differences between the psychological outcomes of partner abuse for women and men (Fergusson et al., 2005; Migliaccio, 2002), and that male victims experience a substantial increase in their risk of psychological distress and psychiatric problems such as PTSD and depression (Randle & Graham, 2011), as well as injury

(Archer, 2002). This does not negate the hurt that many women suffer as a result of partner abuse, and the findings that men also suffer should not be taken to imply that is the case. Rather, research findings suggest that a large proportion of all partner abuse victims experience injury, distress or difficulty as a result, indicating a need for intervention and support.

While there is now a growing body of research examining the outcomes of partner abuse for men, this has predominantly been conducted with mixed-age samples or with men who are well in to adulthood. While research with men at other stages of life may give some indication as to the likely effects of partner abuse on young adult men, it is important to explore the particular experiences of young men, given the particularly high rates reported by this age group, and the possible effects of differences in common living situations and relationship status on the abusive experience (Lievore & Mayhew, 2007).

In the little literature that has been conducted thus far among young adults, as mentioned previously, Morse (1995) found that 9.5% of young men reported experiencing fear in their violent relationships. Gallaty and Zimmer-Gembeck (2008) found that psychological partner abuse against young men resulted in increased difficulties in their relationships with partners, friends and family, as well as an increase in the perceived stressfulness of such issues in their relationships. In New Zealand, Ehrensaft and colleagues found that 60% of the young men who reported being in 'clinically abusive' relationships, defined as those that required intervention, reported being injured as a result (Ehrensaft et al., 2004), although a later paper by the same authors did not find a relationship between partner abuse victimisation and later mental health diagnoses among men (Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2006). Jackson and her colleagues (2000), in their study of New Zealand high school students, found that the rates of particular emotional reactions differed depending on the type of abuse, with 44% of boys reporting feeling angry after psychological abuse, while 25% reported feeling angry after physical abuse, and few reported anger after sexual abuse. Their participants reported a range of emotions, including confusion, and feeling 'dirty' (after unwanted sexual contact), although a somewhat surprising finding was that between 32% and 49% of the boys reported 'not being bothered' by the various forms of partner abuse. Partner abuse during young adulthood may also increase the risk of further victimisation (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Young, Furman, & Jones, 2012).

A somewhat incongruous finding by several researchers has suggested that some male victims report laughing about instances of abuse or finding it amusing (S. M. Jackson et al., 2000; Molidor, 1993). As stated previously, Jackson and colleagues (2000) found that many adolescent boys reported 'not being bothered' by partner abuse, and some reported positive feelings around it,

although the girls in her sample also appeared to be less negative about the abuse they experienced than in other studies. Research suggesting men respond to abuse in this way has sometimes been interpreted as indicating that partner abuse against men is relatively inconsequential for them (e.g.: Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Holtzworth-Monroe, 2005b). However the reasons victims report laughing about abuse, and the precise meaning of abuse to men, have not yet been explored, and it is not certain what internal states are experienced by those who report such a reaction, nor whether external factors such as the social desirability of men reporting they have been negatively affected by abuse may play a part. Overall, the literature strongly suggests that the majority of men who experience abuse are upset by these experiences (Hines & Douglas, 2009; Randle & Graham, 2011). Nonetheless, these findings deserve further attention if we are to better understand the experience of abuse for men.

The link between partner abuse and psychopathology has predominantly been measured through cross-sectional studies, and thus it is difficult to imply causality. Longitudinal studies and work that examines men's experiences of abuse in detail may help to shed some light on this important distinction. Given the potential importance of gender to men's experiences of abuse (as outlined in 'Masculinity and partner abuse against men'), the particular part that gender and gender-based judgements have to play in this process are important to explore. Research thus far on the effects of partner abuse on both older and younger men is largely restricted to multi-choice quantitative measures, which restrict our ability to explore the full breadth of the possible effects of abuse, although for valuable case studies of abuse against older men, see Migliaccio (2001, 2002) and Allen-Collinson's (Allen-Collinson, 2009). While quantitative research is useful in measuring the impact of abuse across the population, it tells us little about what the experience of abuse is like for these groups. Randle and Graham (2011) have identified qualitative research on men's experiences of partner abuse as a particularly valuable area for research, to increase our understanding of the effects of abuse from a male perspective, and to alleviate our need to draw on research conducted with women in our understanding of abused men.

There is a clear need for further investigation in to this area, to investigate other potential outcomes of abuse, and to more fully understand the experience of both men in general and young men in particular. Furthermore, there is currently very little research on the effects of psychological partner abuse on men, and less still on sexual partner abuse (Hines, 2007; Randle & Graham, 2011). In research with women, psychological abuse has also been rated as the most damaging form of abuse, and the most related to self-esteem and fear (Sackett & Saunders, 1999), and there is

emerging evidence that this is also the case for men (Straus, 2010). It is clear that the effects of sexual and psychological abuse on men are important areas for future research to investigate.

While the literature has begun to explore the effects of partner abuse for men, this has largely been in comparison with women, resulting in a dearth of research that has examined men's experiences in their own right (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001). Abuse against young adult men in particular remains a relatively unexplored area, and there is also a particular gap in the literature in terms of in-depth research that can give a rich and contextualised understanding of how men experience abuse (Randle & Graham, 2011). The literature that exists suggests that partner abuse can have many negative and even severe consequences for men who experience it, and this highlights the importance of understanding the barriers and facilitators to men's access to support. However, not all researchers have agreed about the effects of abuse on men, and there have been some seemingly incongruous findings. If we are to better understand the issue of partner abuse and the needs of young men who experience it, as well as provide clarity to the debate around the significance of the issue, it is important to understand how men experience abuse, and how this impacts on their lives.

### **Beliefs and attitudes**

Dominant beliefs around stigmatized issues shape the experiences of those affected by them, as well as their willingness to engage with others and seek help when they need it (Williams & Mickelson, 2008). The following section provides a brief outline of some of the beliefs and attitudes around partner abuse against men that have been identified in previous research, and identifies areas for further exploration.

As has already been stated, one of the gains of the women's movement since the 1970s has been a decrease in the acceptance of men's violence against women. Johnson and Sigler (2000) found that the public had a low tolerance for partner abuse directed at women, and that these perceptions have become increasingly harsh over time. Similarly, Straus and his colleagues (1997) found that both men's and women's approval of men slapping their wives decreased substantially between 1968 and 1994, although women's approval ratings showed a sharper decrease. In Straus and colleagues' study, the number of participants approving of such violence was just over 20% in 1968, and fell to just half that in 1994. However, their findings also showed that over the same period, approval of a wife slapping her husband did not change, with approval ratings remaining at just over 20% approval over the time period.

Many studies have found that physical aggression between partners is viewed more negatively or as less acceptable if the perpetrator is a man and the victim a woman than the other way around (Archer, 2000; Bowen et al., 2013; Fergusson et al., 2005; Hamby & Jackson, 2010; Harris & Cook, 1994; Hine, 2015; Nowinski & Bowen, 2012; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012; Semonsky & Rosenfeld, 1994), and the same for psychological abuse (DeHart, Follingstad, & Fields, 2010). Others have found that abused men were viewed more negatively than abused women (Arnocky & Vaillancourt, 2014), that greater responsibility was placed on male than female victims in domestic violence situations (Harris & Cook, 1994; Hine, 2015), that women's abusive behaviour is less likely to be seen as illegal or requiring intervention (Sorenson & Taylor, 2005), and that women's physical partner abuse towards men is more likely to be rated as funny than physical abuse towards women (Hine, 2015). These differences are not due to differences in the severity of the incidents in question, as the majority of studies have used identical vignettes to compare between the genders.

Others have found that sexual aggression from women to men was seen as unexpected, and complimentary by many participants (Semonsky & Rosenfeld, 1994), or that the predominant view was that it was not possible to rape a man (Turchik & Edwards, 2012). As has previously been outlined, common ideas about manhood are inconsistent with experiences such as victimisation and sexual violation (Abdullah-Khan, 2008). While judgements about men's violence towards women tend to be consistently harsh, people's views of women's violence towards men are somewhat more variable, suggesting a lack of agreement, or ambivalence, over whether women's behaviour can be considered abusive (Hine, 2015; Sorenson & Taylor, 2005).

Perceptions of women's aggression as less serious may relate to perceptions of women as less able to inflict damage (Hamby & Jackson, 2010), or to social norms around aggression. Hamby and Jackson (2010) argued that difference in perceptions of women's and men's violence is warranted, given the difference in average size and power between men and women, and thus the average ability to cause physical harm. However, as has been explored previously, men suffer many physical and psychological injuries from partner abuse, and a perception of women's violence towards men as acceptable or trivial does not reflect the individual lived experience of many male survivors of abuse.

Results for medical and mental health professionals are similar to non-professionals. For example, Follingstad, DeHart and Green (2004) found that psychologists viewed psychological abuse differently when it was from a man towards a woman than the other way around, such that they were less likely to rate demeaning, controlling, threatening and economically abusive behaviours as 'definitely abusive' when the perpetrator was a woman and the victim a man. Even when their

participants classified the behaviour as abusive, their ratings for the level of severity and how problematic the situation was were significantly lower when the victim was a man than when the victim was a woman. This disparity was particularly pronounced for the behaviours the researchers had identified as 'severe', such as 'demanded spouse's unconditional obedience', 'threatened to hurt spouse's family, children or friends', and 'forced spouse to eat from a bowl on the floor'. In this study, gender was the only factor related to the psychologists' ratings, with the frequency and intent of abuse, and the perceptions of the victim making no difference to severity ratings.

A qualitative study of general practitioners by Mildorf (2007) found that many laughed while speaking about male clients who had experienced physical abuse, as well as describing such abuse as 'unexpected'. This was in strong contrast to the way the same practitioners described abuse towards women. While Mildorf suggests that it is unclear why some of the general practitioners laughed, she described at least one as saying that the situation was amusing. Hamel (2005) suggested that the differential conceptions of men's and women's violence are due to an underlying perception among many professionals that violence by women is rare, inconsequential, or a reaction to a violent man. Many academics have also reported a lack of concern over, or recognition of, abuse against men (Graham-Kevan, 2007).

The professionals' and the general populations' views of abuse are reflected in perpetrators' and victims' own views of their situation. Studies of female perpetrators have suggested that many women who have used violence viewed such violence as trivial, due to the perception that men could 'defend themselves' (Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997). The general trivialisation of abuse appears to be common among both women and men who perpetrate partner abuse (Henning, Jones, & Holdford, 2005), although the exact beliefs that are attached to this may be influenced by conceptions of gender.

Studies of abused men have suggested that many men are uncertain with regards to the legitimacy of abuse from a woman, often stating that behaviours were only abusive when men hit women, and not the other way around (Cook, 2009; Zverina, Stam, & Babins-Wagner, 2011). Follingstad and her colleagues (1991) discussed the possibility that men may not conceptualise themselves as victims even when they report experiencing abuse, after one of their participants demonstrated this on his questionnaire. In a New Zealand survey, 7% of men who had experienced partner offences defined it as a crime, compared with 39% of women, and nearly half of the men reported it was 'just something that happens' (New Zealand Ministry of Justice, 2011). Others have expressed difficulty with negotiating a 'victim' status against common constructions of 'men as the abusers' (Zverina et al., 2011), or against their conceptions of masculinity (Migliaccio, 2001).

Uncertainty as to whether one has suffered abuse has also been found in studies of battered women (Hamby & Gray-Little, 2000), but a need to resist constructions of abuse as directed towards women only is more specific to the experience of abused men.

As with the literature on the prevalence and effects of men's experiences of partner abuse, there has been little attention paid specifically to young adults, although work thus far has suggested similar themes to research with older adults. Young people predominantly seek help from peers rather than family or professionals for issues related to abuse (Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Weisz, 2008), and the attitudes and beliefs of other young people may form a particularly important part of the social context within which the abuse and any subsequent attempt to seek help occurs, as well as providing an indication of the beliefs that both the young men and their partners may have held prior to the abuse.

Research with adolescents suggests low acceptance overall of abuse, but that abuse by girls may be viewed more favourably than abuse by boys (Hertzog & Rowley, 2014). Bowen and colleagues (2013) found while adolescents viewed physical violence as acceptable for women or girls to use in relationships, but not boys, they described stereotypes and television portrayals of violence as the main influences on their beliefs about gender and violence. In the Dunedin Longitudinal Cohort Study, many young women reported that they felt free to hit their male partners, as the men would not be injured or hit back, and the police would not intervene (Moffitt et al., 2001).

Although the construction of partner abuse is of aggression from men towards women (Hamel, 2009), several researchers have found a strong social rule among boys and men that 'men don't hit women' (sometimes referred to as a 'chivalry norm'), and social repercussions for breaking that rule (e.g.: Archer, 2000; Cook, 2009; Hamel, 2005; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012). The apparent lack of a similarly strict social rule against women's aggression to men may have produced the variability in perceptions of such behaviour, despite the 'unexpected' nature of women's aggression (Semonsky & Rosenfeld, 1994). Qualitative studies have provided some support for the presence of such a chivalry norm, in that that men's violence towards women is considered unacceptable by the majority of men and women in the general population and among those in abusive relationships, and that women's violence towards men tends to be more readily accepted (e.g.: Harris & Cook, 1994; Hine, 2015). Many researchers (e.g.: Cook, 2009; Durfee, 2011; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012) have found the notion that men must not hit women back in abused men's narratives. The presence of a chivalry norm is also supported by findings that some women hit their male partners due to a belief they would not be hit back (Gonzalez, 1997; Moffitt et al., 2001).

The attitudes of the public to the abuse of men are important because they may affect the way abused men see themselves, the way others interact with them, and their likelihood of seeking help for abuse. Many abused men have spoken of the negative impact of speaking to others about the abuse, only to be met with disbelief or ridicule (e.g.: Cook, 2009; Lewis & Sarantakos, 2001). The next section will examine the issue of the response to help-seeking by abused men, but attitudes held by the public and abused men themselves are likely to affect whether or not they even take the step of seeking help. Family and friends are important in promoting young people's help-seeking from formal sources for partner abuse (Martin, Houston, Mmari, & Decker, 2012), and victims' beliefs that others will consider them the abuser is a barrier to seeking help among male partner abuse victims (Lewis & Sarantakos, 2001; Tsui, 2010), or even using self-defence when they are physically attacked by a female partner (Lewis & Sarantakos, 2001). Furthermore, a conceptualisation of abuse as perpetrated only by men and experienced by women may lead some men (as well as women in same-sex relationships) not to understand their own difficulties as 'abuse', and thus not realise that abuse-related services may be able to help.

The current evidence suggests that the public, people in abusive relationships, and the professionals who deal with them are somewhat inconsistent in their views and knowledge of partner abuse directed from a woman to a man, with a clear dichotomy evident between views of women's and men's use of partner abuse. However, it is less clear how this affects men who experience abuse and their willingness to seek help, or their experiences when they do. Furthermore, the literature has again concentrated on the issues of abuse against older men. Young people are particularly influenced by the beliefs of their peers, and it is important to understand what young people say about abuse if we are to better comprehend the social contexts of abuse against young men, and their decisions around help-seeking.

### **Seeking help, getting help**

Obtaining appropriate support and assistance from formal or informal sources can help to buffer the negative effects of partner abuse for victims (Douglas & Hines, 2011), and reduce their likelihood of revictimisation (Liang et al., 2005). The reverse of this, however, is that negative help-seeking experiences can reduce the likelihood the victim will leave their abuser (Koepsell, Kernic, & Holt, 2006), strengthen the negative outcomes of partner abuse (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Lewis & Sarantakos, 2001; McCarrick, in press), and leave victims feeling isolated and vulnerable (Dobash & Dobash, 1984). Understanding the current state of men's help-seeking and the factors that are

important in such decisions is crucial if we are to understand both what can help men to gain access to this support, and the overall experience of abuse for men. This section will therefore review the relevant literature, before outlining the questions addressed by the current research.

The rates of help-seeking among people living with partner abuse vary between studies, but most indicate that a large proportion of both women and men who experience abuse do not seek help or disclose their experiences to others (Black et al., 2008; L. M. Howard, Trevillion, & Agnew-Davies, 2010; Randle & Graham, 2011; Silber Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a). For example, Douglas and Hines (2011) found that 40% of men who were directly asked about the cause of abuse-related injuries by treating clinicians did not disclose the abuse. The rates of help-seeking for partner abuse are consistently lower for men than for women among both adolescents and adults (Black et al., 2008; Buzawa & Hotaling, 2006; S. M. Jackson et al., 2000; Silber Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a).

Young people are also less likely to seek help for dating violence. Silber Ashley and Foshee (2005) found that 56% of adolescent girls and 68% of boys did not seek help for physical abuse from a girlfriend or boyfriend. Black and her colleagues noted in their review of the literature that adolescents rarely sought help for dating violence, although their own sample showed a much higher rate of help-seeking, with 95.1% of girls and 70.6% of boys reporting that they had told someone about their physical abuse (Black et al., 2008). Jackson, Cram and Seymour (2000) found that around half of their sample of New Zealand male and female adolescents did not tell anyone about physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

When help is sought, it may be from formal or informal sources. Informal sources include friends, family, neighbours, and other non-professional supports, and are the most common source of help for abuse survivors (Coker, Davis, et al., 2002; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Randle & Graham, 2011). Young people are particularly likely to turn to friends rather than family or formal sources of help (Black et al., 2008; S. M. Jackson et al., 2000). Formal sources include community services, medical and mental health professionals, and legal professionals such as the police and lawyers. While women consistently show a preference for informal help sources, the results with regards to men have been mixed, with some suggesting men also prefer informal sources (Douglas & Hines, 2011), and others finding that men are more likely to use formal sources (Silber, 2000; Tsui, Cheung, & Leung, 2010). Douglas and Hines conducted the first large-scale, nationally-based study of men's helpseeking for partner abuse in the USA, and found that informal sources were used by 85% of help-seekers, two thirds sought help from online support, and the same amount from a mental health professional. Half sought help from local domestic violence agencies and police departments,

a quarter from domestic violence hotlines, and a fifth from medical professionals (Douglas & Hines, 2011). The NVAWS did not measure helpseeking from informal sources, but suggested that men are unlikely to seek help from formal sources with between 4 and 22% of men using formal sources after abuse (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a). Research with women suggests that support from informal helping sources may encourage abuse survivors to later seek help from formal sources (Liang et al., 2005).

Little is known about the reasons men are unlikely to seek help for partner abuse. Many researchers have suggested that this may relate to the lack of services available to men (Cheung et al., 2009), or a conflict between help-seeking and disclosure of abuse and traditional masculine ideals (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Tsui (2014) found that discrimination against men by partner abuse services, disbelieving responses to their help-seeking, fear of being arrested themselves, and shame were the major barriers to men's help-seeking after partner abuse. Liang and colleagues (2005) proposed a framework for understanding the process of women's decisions to seek help for partner abuse. They suggested that rather than a single decision to seek help, a series of decisions was required before action could be taken. I will use their framework here to explore men's help-seeking for abuse.

The initial stage involves recognition that there is a problem (Liang et al., 2005). As has been outlined above, the common construction of partner abuse is from a man to a woman, and many abused men do not recognise their difficulties as abuse (Zverina et al., 2011). Research suggests men are more likely to seek help for partner abuse when the abuse is severe or frequent (Silber, 2000), and it is possible that the recognition of behaviours as abusive becomes more prevalent as the severity of abuse escalates (Ansara & Hindin, 2010). Studies of adolescents have suggested that many boys do not see violence or aggression from a girlfriend as a problem (e.g.: S. M. Jackson et al., 2000), and traditional masculine ideals that overemphasise men's ability to withstand or repel abuse may encourage men to consider abuse to not be a problem (Tsui et al., 2010). Studies that have examined women's help-seeking have suggested that the likelihood of them seeking help increases exponentially with fear that their life is in danger (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011), and a relative lack of fear among men (Kar & O'Leary, 2010) may influence their lower rate of help-seeking. Liang and colleagues suggest that barriers at this stage may include both internal and external factors, including the reactions of others to any disclosure of partner abuse (Liang et al., 2005). There may be both internal and external struggles for men to accept and assume the identity of a victim, a label usually associated with women (Durfee, 2011; Zverina et al., 2011).

The second stage involves the decision that the benefits of seeking help outweigh the costs (Liang et al., 2005). This may be affected by the embarrassment and stigmatisation many men feel around the disclosure of partner abuse victimisation, and the acceptance of the help of others (Tsui et al., 2010). Other costs may include the possibility of their partners escalating the abuse when they discover the abused man has sought help (Hines et al., 2007). Men who ascribe to traditional notions of masculinity may again be discouraged from seeking help at this stage, due to the emphasis on men's ability to cope with their problems alone (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Research has suggested that a fear of disbelief or ridicule is a barrier for men deciding whether to seek help for partner abuse (Hines et al., 2007; Hines & Douglas, 2009). Similarly, actual negative experiences during previous helpseeking efforts are likely to affect victims' willingness to see help again (Liang et al., 2005). These experiences will be reviewed below, after consideration of Liang and colleagues' (2005) final stage.

The third and final stage involves selecting a help source. A frequently cited barrier to men seeking help is that services specifically targeting male partner abuse victims are seldom available (Cheung et al., 2009; Tsui et al., 2010). Cheung and colleagues conducted an internet search for such services worldwide and found none in Asia, Australia or New Zealand, and a total of 32 across Canada, the USA and the United Kingdom, although they found thousands of services aimed at women (Cheung et al., 2009). Although some services were available that can cater for male victims (such as general counselling services), the perception of a service as targeted specifically at the abused help-seeker, and thus more likely to understand their situation, increases the likelihood victims will find it approachable (Cook, 2009; St. Pierre & Senn, 2010). Furthermore, a perception that intervention services are targeted at a different demographic may dissuade people from using a service (Love & Richards, 2013).

Researchers have documented many negative help-seeking experiences among abused men, such as being turned away (Migliaccio, 2002) or experiencing ridicule from police, helpline counsellors or other professionals (Buzawa, Austin, Bannon, & Jackson, 1992; Cook, 2009; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Hines et al., 2007; Lewis & Sarantakos, 2001). Brown (2004) noted gender differences in the arrest for and prosecution of spousal assault, with the police generally unwilling to arrest women accused of perpetrating violence. Fearing such disbelief from others may also prevent men from seeking help at all (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Many men have reported encountering either covert or overt suggestions that they must be the real abuser (Cook, 2009; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Hines et al., 2007; McCarrick, in press; Zverina et al., 2011), or even reported being sent to batterer's programmes, sometimes under false pretences that the service was for male victims (Douglas &

Hines, 2011; Hines et al., 2007). Cook (2009) described this tendency after investigating services that claimed to provide services to male victims, but the support provided was for abusers.

Past research has documented variable responses from police to calls from abused men, with many men reporting that the police refused to arrest their female partner or arrested the caller instead, even when there was no evidence that the man was the abuser (Buzawa et al., 1992; Cook, 2009; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Migliaccio, 2002). Among the men in Douglas and Hines' study, those who called the police were just as likely to be arrested as their abusive female partner (Douglas & Hines, 2011). Some reported losing custody of their children as a result (Cook, 2009). However, Buzawa and Hotaling's more recent survey suggested an equivalent arrest rate for incidents involving female and male perpetrators, and cited the influence of 'pro-arrest' policies where female perpetrators would not have otherwise been arrested (Buzawa & Hotaling, 2006). This survey also suggested that male victims continued to receive less assistance from police than female victims, despite the more even arrest statistics.

Douglas and Hines' (2011) survey of help-seeking abused men found that 95% of men who sought help from a domestic violence agency said that the service was 'not at all helpful'. 40.2% of those who sought help from such an agency reported that they were accused of being the batterer. Over 25% of those who used an online resource reported that they were given a referral that turned out to be a batterer's programme. Open-ended questions resulted in 16% of the men who contacted hotlines and 15% of those who contacted local domestic violence agencies spontaneously reporting that the staff had made fun of them. 25% told of the police doing nothing and ignoring or dismissing them. Their help-seekers reported more negative experiences than positive, in stark contrast with research of abused women who had sought help, in which 80-95% had reported being happy with the help they received from similar services (Douglas & Hines, 2011). However, while the literature has begun to explore these experiences in formal help-seeking attempts, it has not yet addressed the presence or prevalence of such experiences in young men's formal or informal help-seeking.

These experiences are not unique to men; for example Shoham (2000) reported that many battered women thought the police did not understand their situation, or were suspicious of their motives. Furthermore, they should not be considered representative of all abused men's experiences, as the majority of studies have used self-selected samples, and are likely to include a high rate of those who have a 'story to tell'. Indeed, some surveys have suggested that the majority of male victims are more happy than not with the quality of help given, particularly support from informal sources (e.g.: Fortin, Guay, Lavoie, Boisvert, & Beaudry, 2012; S. M. Jackson et al., 2000; Tsui, 2010). However, others have suggested that reactions to help-seeking that discount or ridicule

the experiences of victims may be particularly prevalent for men (Douglas & Hines, 2011). The qualitative accounts of many men who have experienced such reactions suggest a direct link with their gender, such as a participant in Douglas and Hines' study who reported that the police "determined she was the aggressor but said since I was a man it was silly to arrest her" (Douglas & Hines, 2011, p. 480).

The quality of help-seeking experiences after abuse may moderate the effects of the abuse, with positive experiences reducing the risk of negative outcomes, and negative experiences increasing the risk (Douglas & Hines, 2011). When an abused man seeks help and is met with a disbelieving or ridiculing reaction, it reinforces traditional notions of men as needing to cope alone with their problems (Addis & Mahalik, 2003), and is likely to negatively affect the likelihood he will seek help again (Liang et al., 2005). As Dobash and Dobash (1984) suggested, responding to requests for help in a manner that blames the abuse victim further isolates them and leaves them vulnerable to further attacks. It can also contribute to or heighten PTSD in abused men (Douglas & Hines, 2011). In McCarrick's (in press) study, abused men described feeling so angry with being falsely accused of being the perpetrator of violence that they felt they could have fulfilled others expectations and actually become violent themselves.

Social support has been found to moderate the relationships between experiencing partner abuse and the development of psychopathology for women (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Coker, Smith, et al., 2002; Trotter, Bogat, & Levendosky, 2004), but the few findings for men have been somewhat less promising. Two studies have examined the effects of social support on adolescents. Several researchers (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Coker, Smith, et al., 2002; T. N. Richards & Branch, 2012) have found that while social support buffered the effects of partner abuse for adolescent girls, the effects were less strong or absent for boys. While it is unclear what has led to these gender discrepancies, it is possible that at least among adolescents, the support offered by friends is qualitatively different from that offered to girls. Little is currently known of other protective factors for male victims.

The response to men's help-seeking is also important in that research has identified a lack of support and assistance as an important barrier to leaving abusive relationships (Hollenshead, Yong, Ragsdale, Massey, & Scott, 2006). While it is extremely difficult to measure the scale of the problem, it is clear that many men and women do not leave abusive relationships as early as they would like to (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001), and men may be particularly likely to stay in relationships in which they are being abused (Ackerman, 2012). A small number of studies have examined men's reasons for staying in violent relationships, and the results have been similar to factors identified with women. Alongside a lack of support, factors included a sense of

commitment to the marriage, a desire to protect the children from a violent partner or spouse who might gain custody, fear that they may lose access to the children (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001; McNeely, Cook, & Torres, 2001; Migliaccio, 2002), rationalising and denying the abuse (Migliaccio, 2002), financial difficulty should they leave, feeling like their partner has control over them or that leaving the relationship would mean they had failed (Cook, 2009).

Regarding factors that facilitate help-seeking, abused men in Tsui's (2010) study suggested that free and affordable services, internet access, and trusting relationships with informal sources of help facilitated help-seeking among abused men. Anonymity may also be important for encouraging men's use of services (Hines et al., 2007). Douglas, Hines and McCarthy (2012) found that when men did seek help, they rated sources as much more helpful if they felt that their experiences were validated or were provided with useful advice and referrals. Tsui and colleagues' (2010) study suggested that increased public awareness of male victims and that male victims need help too, as well as increased services and specialised training for service providers, would encourage men to seek help. Young people have emphasised the importance of being able to talk freely without fear of judgement or incomprehension in response to questions about what they would find helpful if they needed to seek help for partner abuse (Martin et al., 2012).

The majority of the literature has focused on the many barriers men face to seeking help, and the identification and exploration of further facilitators would be beneficial to inform intervention efforts. Furthermore, very little is known about the factors that facilitate or impede young men's help-seeking or the outcomes of their help-seeking attempts, and considering the high rate of abuse and the low rate of help-seeking among young people (Silber Ashley & Foshee, 2005), this appears to be a particularly fruitful area for future research.

From this review of the literature it is clear that young men experience abuse in significant numbers, and that our current understanding of their experience is insufficient. In particular, the literature raises questions about how men understand abuse, how they experience its effects and how they make decisions about seeking help. The review also raises questions about the broader context that informs men's experiences of abuse. It suggests that society may find it hard to recognise abuse against men and there may be little acknowledgement or support of its victims. There appears to be a real need to shed light on the subtleties of this complex issue, and to understand it from the perspectives of those involved. This study therefore aimed to develop our understanding of young men's experiences of abuse in relationships with women, and the context of ideas in which they make sense of their experiences. The research employed a qualitative

methodology, comprising interview and focus group data, which were analysed with separate thematic analyses.

Study one addressed the following questions:

- 1) How do young men who have been abused by a female intimate partner describe these experiences?
- 2) How do these men describe their decisions about and experiences of seeking help for partner abuse?
- 3) What recommendations do they make for helping other young men who experience partner abuse?

Study two addressed the following questions:

- 4) How do young men and women understand the issue of partner abuse against young men?
- 5) What beliefs and ideas do these young people hold about seeking help for partner abuse?

## Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework that informs the project, and briefly review my reasons for selecting a qualitative methodology. I then introduce the methods employed in the research, with the participants, recruitment and data collection for studies one and two outlined separately, followed by a consideration of potential ethical and quality assurance issues and how these have been addressed.

### Theoretical framework

My orientation, and the viewpoint from which I have conducted this research is one of contextualism, and more specifically one approximating ontological realism and epistemological constructivism, as described by Smith and Sparkes (2006). That is, I accept the presence of some 'truths' within the physical world, but acknowledge a lack of objective human knowledge about this world, and in particular, knowledge of our social world. In this model, human knowledge and experience is formed by a combination of the events in question and psychological and social processes, and is formed, stored and reproduced within the guiding and constraining influence of the societal contexts in which we live and act. In short, there is truth in events, but not in our definitions, understandings, and discussion of them. Therefore, this research is conducted not as a systematic search for universal and stable truths about the experiences of all young men, but as an exploration of the types of stories and understandings that can follow the experience of abuse, and the social context within which this occurs.

This exploration is qualified with the understanding that what participants present to the researcher is also influenced both by the participants' expectations and desires for self-presentation, and by the actions of the researcher herself, as well as the subjective experience of the participants (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The researcher's theoretical orientation, worldview and interests shape the research design, the questions asked and topic discussed, the manner in which the discussion proceeds, and the interpretation of these discussions, and as such, the researcher must engage in a process of observation and reflection on what orientation she brings to the research, and how that orientation may affect both the research process, and the interpretive outcome (Hiles & Čermák, 2010). For this reason, I have provided a brief outline of my interests and motivations in this project later in the chapter, in the section entitled 'reflexivity'.

## **Qualitative research**

Qualitative methodologies are particularly useful when attempting to understand the ways a particular phenomenon is subjectively perceived and understood by those who experience it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; L. Richards & Morse, 2007). It is also useful for new areas of research, in that while research is never independent of existing knowledge and ideas, qualitative methods do not rely on the derivation of testable hypotheses from prior literature, and are more open to exploring unanticipated responses than are typical quantitative methods (Liamputtong, 2013). They are well suited to a contextualist framework, as they enable the researcher to explore and expand ideas and experiences, and the manner in which these are discussed without aiming to provide a statistical representation of 'reality' in the wider population (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995; Merriam, 2002).

As outlined in the literature review, qualitative work on abuse against men is particularly lacking in the current literature, and this has been identified as an important avenue to increase our understanding of the issue (Randle & Graham, 2011). Qualitative research also provides the opportunity for a more contextualised understanding of social phenomena (Coyle, 2007). While knowledge of the social contexts of the topic at hand is useful for any form of research, this may be particularly important with issues such as partner abuse, for which both the experience itself and the literature appear to be highly influenced by the social and political context in which they occur.

While there are many different methods for gathering qualitative data, I selected in-depth interviews of the men, and focus groups with other young people as the methods most suited to the research aims, and the reasons for this as well as the procedures involved will be further outlined in the 'data collection' sections of each study. As the methods of ensuring quality in qualitative research differ somewhat from those typically employed in quantitative research, I have also outlined some methods of ensuring quality at the conclusion of this chapter.

## **Methods**

This study was conducted in two phases, and the participants, recruitment and data collection for each phase will be outlined separately below, followed by a summary of several issues pertinent to both phases of research, including data analysis, measures to ensure ethical standards were met across the research, and a discussion of the methods employed to ensure quality in the research design and analysis.

## Study 1

**Participants and recruitment.** The participants in the first phase of the research were 9 young men aged 18-27, who had self-identified as experiencing a range of 'abusive' behaviours from a female partner in a past relationship. Because the gender of the abusive partner may affect men's experiences of abuse (C. Brown, 2008), the research was restricted to men in relationships with women. As can be seen in appendix A, the recruitment posters asked men to apply who had been physically attacked, intimidated or controlled, verbally attacked or put-down, pressured or coerced. The posters did not specify that the participant must consider the behaviours abusive, as research has suggested that many people, and particularly men, frequently do not consider such behaviours to be 'abuse', despite considering them unacceptable within romantic relationships (Zverina et al., 2011), and it was considered that the word 'abuse' on the posters may dissuade some men from applying. Rather, the recruitment aimed to give examples of behaviours that are frequently cited as abusive by researchers, professionals and the general population, with a view to exploring participants' own definitions and understandings of those experiences.

Recruitment posters were placed at tertiary institutions, counselling services and public noticeboards across the Auckland region to encourage as diverse a sample as possible. As can be seen in appendix A, posters encouraged participants to contact the researcher by phone, text or email if they were interested. Information sheets were sent to each participant via email before they committed to participating, and potential participants were invited to ask questions or request further information both before and at the time of the interview from myself, my supervisor, the head of department, or the university Human Ethics Committee. Participants were each offered a \$25 supermarket voucher of their choosing as a koha (gift) for participating, and were offered reimbursement for travel costs relating to the research. Interviews were arranged with participants for a time convenient to them at one of the University of Auckland Campuses. They were offered the chance to request an alternative neutral location if they preferred, but all participants were agreeable to attending the interviews at the University of Auckland.

All participants completed a brief demographics questionnaire after completing the consent form, which can be seen in appendix D. Some participants requested that their demographics not be linked with their story to avoid identification in their small communities, and I have thus decided to summarise their data together here, rather than outline each participants' demographics individually. The participants were nine young men, who ranged in age from 18 to 27, with an average age of 22. It was decided to include one participant who was outside the original target range of 18-25, as his relationship fell within the age range specified. There were a range of

ethnicities represented, with three of the men identifying as Pakeha/ New Zealand European, two as Korean, one as Maori, one as Sri Lankan, one as an Afrikaans South African, and one as British. The majority (seven) were students, including two who also worked, and two were working full-time. One participant declined to complete the 'income' question on the demographics form but of the others, the majority (seven) reported they earned less than \$19,000 per annum, and one between \$40,000 and \$59,000. Five were living with flatmates, three with their parents, and one with his spouse. The men described relationships that occurred at between the ages of 17 and 25, of varying lengths. Two of the nine men reported that they were officially cohabiting with their partner at the time of the relationship. The participants had no dependents.

Two potential participants who took part in the interview were excluded from the analysis: during the interview one was discovered to be well outside the age range targeted for the study, and while the other was in the correct age range for the study, he did not meet the criterion of having experienced one or more of the above forms of 'abusive' behaviour. He stressed that while he had felt unhappy in the relationship, he felt he had 'abused himself' by staying in the relationship when he did not want to, rather than feeling like his partner had behaved in an inappropriate manner. While there is much ambiguity over the definition of partner abuse, and I sought to include all those who felt they met the criteria, the decision that this man did not meet the criteria was taken in consultation with the potential participant, who had started the interview by expressing doubts as to whether his experience matched the study's focus. Thus, it was decided to exclude these two potential participants from the analysis, in order to retain the focus on young men and abuse.

I had originally intended to include a somewhat larger sample for study one, but due to the small number of eligible volunteers, I decided to finish data collection once data saturation had been reached. It was unclear why recruitment was difficult for the study, and it may have related to the requirement to disclose highly personal and stigmatising information. However, the recruitment of young men for study two was similarly difficult, suggesting that either the population in question (young men) was the reason for the difficulties in recruitment, or the subject matter (partner abuse) was not one that attracted young men in particular to a discussion. While research conducted outside New Zealand suggests that it is relatively common for young people (including young men) to experience abusive behaviours in their relationships (W. L. Johnson et al., 2015), it is also possible that many do not define their experiences as problematic (Follingstad et al., 1991), and thus would be less likely to volunteer for a study of this type. I will further explore the possible effects of this in the final chapter, under 'study limitations'. However, large numbers of interviews are not needed

for such in-depth methods of research (Emerson & Frosh, 2004) and the sample met the criteria for data saturation, suggesting an adequate, if slightly smaller than intended, sample.

**Data collection.** Interviews are a common method of gathering data, are useful for gaining a rich description of participants' understandings and experiences of a particular issue, and enable analysis that is sensitive to subtleties and contradictions within the data (Esin, 2011). While some interviews are approached with a pre-determined schedule of questions, they are more typically structured according to the flow of conversation and the particular pieces of information that are raised during the course of the interview (Rapley, 2004). They are typically conducted with a small sample size to allow for detailed examination of participant accounts (Emerson & Frosh, 2004; Merriam, 2002). The debate around abuse against men has often lacked the voice of the men whom it affects. In approaching this topic, the interviews were primarily driven by a desire to hear men's lived experience as they perceive it, and thus an in-depth narrative approach was selected for the initial enquiries in the interviews. However, the research also aimed to answer questions more particularly around help-seeking and the influence of gender, and thus a more targeted approach was adopted for later stages of the interview if participants had not addressed these questions as part of their initial narratives. However, the style of minimal prompting and open questioning was maintained throughout, in order to preserve as much as possible of the participants' own voices in their data.

After initial introductions had been made, the interviews began with an open prompt to "Tell me about the relationship you had in mind when you answered the advertisement". Some participants were comfortable beginning their story after this prompt, while others expressed difficulty knowing how to start. More directive questions, such as "Tell me a bit about how the relationship started" were used to facilitate their talk. This exploration was not conducted using a set list of questions, rather the direction of the interview and the wording of questions were influenced by the discussion as it progressed. Where possible, open questions were used to allow participants to tell their story in their own words, with more directive follow-up questions used to explore details of their story, and where participants asked for more guidance.

As can be seen in the interview guide (appendix D), when the men did not specifically discuss the issues of help-seeking, gender or their suggestions for facilitating help-seeking in their initial stories, they were then asked to elaborate on their experiences and thoughts around this using a variety of open prompts, such as "Did you ever think about seeking help?" or "Is there anything you think would help other men who experience something like that?". However, the majority of the

men raised these topics without the prompts, and were thus simply encouraged to give as much information as possible when they raised the topics themselves.

Discussion topics included the young men's story of their relationship, the emotional, cognitive and behavioural effects of their experiences, their perceptions of their partner and of themselves, whether they had sought help from others and what their experience of that had been, what had influenced their decisions, and the conclusion of the relationship. Other topics discussed included participants' understanding of partner abuse more generally, their help-seeking options, and the knowledge and views of the general public towards men who experience partner abuse.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour 45 minutes, with an average length of 72 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants, and were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. One participant sent an email with details of his experiences prior to the interview, and he gave his permission for this text to be used alongside the transcription of his interview.

## **Study 2**

**Participants and recruitment.** The participants in the second phase were 10 young women and 6 young men aged 18-25 who identified themselves as *not* having experienced abuse in a romantic relationship. The focus group discussions were focused on participants' beliefs, attitudes and knowledge of partner abuse against young people, and more particularly against young men. They also explored the participants' ideas about gender as it relates to abuse. Personal experience was not asked about, although some group members offered personal stories as part of the discussion.

As can be seen in appendix A, the recruitment posters invited young people to take part in a focus group discussing ideas about abuse in romantic relationships. The recruitment was the same as for the first phase, with posters placed at the same locations, and the procedures for contact, consent, koha, reimbursement, and the collection of demographic data the same. The focus groups were also conducted at the University of Auckland, with potential participants choosing between group times as best suited them.

One participant declined to complete the demographics form. However, he gave his gender and age at the time of recruitment, and I have thus included this information in the below analysis. Six participants were men and ten were women. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24, with an

average age of 22 years. Of the participants who completed the demographics form, six identified as Pakeha/ New Zealand European, three as Chinese, two as Maori and Pakeha, one as Pakistani, one as American (USA), one as 'European', and one who gave her ethnicity as 'Asian'. Fifteen of the 16 participants who completed the demographics form were students (three of these also working part-time), and one was a home-maker. All participants had an income of less than \$19,000 per annum. Five were living with their family of origin, five with flatmates, four with their partner or spouse, and one alone.

While participants were asked to self-identify that they had not experienced abuse before participating, one male participant recounted an experience of controlling behaviours in the focus group, stating that he now felt he identified with the vignette participants were provided with. Participants were not directly asked about their experiences during the focus groups, and it is uncertain whether others may have similarly identified with the vignette materials. However, personal experiences were seldom discussed by group members, and although some group members may have been cautious about expressing ideas after the one participant disclosed his experience, the group continued to converse freely, and the ideas expressed were not significantly different from those in other groups.

**Data collection.** Focus groups are a useful way of gathering information on attitudes, knowledge and beliefs in participants' own language (Wilkinson, 1998). They also provide an insight in to collective ideas and group discussion dynamics that are important in understanding 'societal constructions' of particular topics (Wilkinson, 1998). Focus groups typically employ open-ended questions to stimulate group discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2009), and a loosely structured approach that does not adhere to a set list of questions allows group participants to refer to aspects of the phenomenon that are important or salient to them, and to provide insight in to how they structure their ideas around a topic (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

Discussion aids may help to both stimulate and centre focus group discussion (Mason, 2002; Stewart et al., 2007). Brodani, MacEntee, Bryant and O'Neill (2008) found that their participants commented positively on vignettes as used in this manner. They suggested that this method provided a safe way to open the discussion on an issue they considered sensitive, as it did not focus directly on personal experience, but also facilitated deeper discussion by stimulating the group members' reflection on aspects of their own experience that corresponded with the vignettes. In the current study, it was also considered that the focus group participants may not conceptualise abuse against men in the manner intended in the study, as it conflicts with the dominant image of partner abuse (Hamel, 2005). The vignettes were thus used to facilitate group members' understanding of

the questions posed around abuse against men. Hennink (2014) suggested that such vignettes be presented to the group, followed by questions around the vignettes such as what advice the group members would give to the characters in the vignettes or how common this type of scenario is in their community.

The participants were divided into single-sex groups as suggested by Hennink (2014), with two groups of men and three groups of women being conducted. The number of focus groups and focus group participants was decided in accordance with advice from the literature (Liamputtong, 2013) and other researchers, as a manageable group size and number of groups likely to elicit a range of ideas. The decision to make the groups single-sex was taken to encourage free discussion, as focus group members may be less likely to share their ideas where they perceive others in the group to differ significantly from themselves (for instance by gender), particularly when those differences are important to the topic at hand (Hennink, 2014). The focus groups lasted 1.5 hours each, including brief introductions and conclusions. They were audio-recorded, and transcribed by the same transcriber as study 1.

I employed a semi-structured approach to study two that used vignettes as discussion prompts and allowed the discussion to flow naturally, but also ensured that all of the topics pertaining to the research were discussed at some point during the group. Each focus group began with the presentation and discussion of two brief vignettes, derived from study 1 (see appendix D). The discussion about the vignettes was followed by more general discussion of participants' ideas about partner abuse and available support, young people's relationships, and gender.

The vignettes portrayed heterosexual couples in which one of the couple was experiencing abuse from their partner. The first vignette depicted a woman who was experiencing emotional/psychological and physical abuse from a boyfriend, while the second depicted a man experiencing such abuse from a girlfriend. The behaviours described in each vignette were different, and they were selected in consultation with my supervisor to represent a similar severity of abusive behaviour in each vignette, and to be representative of the type of story commonly told in study 1. As can be seen in appendix D, after I presented the first vignette, I encouraged the group members to discuss their interpretations of the situation, the characters and their actions, how each character was likely to feel and act, and possible outcomes of the situation. I then presented the second vignette, and similar discussion topics were covered, along with a discussion about the similarities and differences between the two vignettes.

The focus group then moved to a semi-structured discussion of the issues of abuse, young people and gender, allowing the conversation to flow naturally across topics, and exploring relevant points as they arose, as suggested by Stewart and colleagues (2007). Any relevant topics not covered in the natural course of the conversation were introduced at times when the conversation had slowed, in the same manner as in study one. In general, participants were eager to discuss the ideas, and only very general prompts, such as “Can you tell me a bit more about that?” or “What ideas do you have about [that]?” were necessary to maintain the flow of the discussion. Some group members were less outspoken, and I was careful to give them opportunities to share their views on each topic as they wished, in order to elicit a range of views and to capture as much information as possible (Hennink, 2014). The group members generally appeared confident about both presenting their own views, and about challenging others in the group at times.

### **Data analysis**

I used a semantic thematic analysis for the data arising from both studies. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method in which patterns are identified across data combined from multiple participants. The method is compatible with any epistemological framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and is a useful tool for examining new ideas and shared discourses around a particular topic. Thematic analysis may be conducted on any form of qualitative data, either alone or in conjunction with other methods. An assumption of thematic analysis is that rather than ‘discovering’ themes that reside naturally in the data, analysis is an active interpretive practice, involving subjective decisions about what themes are present, important and useful (Taylor & Ussher, 2001).

A ‘theme’ is a patterned response that captures something important or useful about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Usually, the important themes appear frequently across the data, although less frequent themes that nonetheless identify something important in relation to the study question may also be identified. While there are multiple ways of conducting a thematic analysis, the method I have used is semantic thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which uses the participants’ words themselves as the data, rather than inferring their underlying message, although it remains necessary for the researcher to interpret and group the data during analysis. The data are analysed through a recursive process, including a thorough reading of the data, coding of excerpts, organisation of codes in to possible themes, reviewing and naming themes, and interpretation of themes.

The process of data interpretation began with immersion in the data by a thorough repeated reading of the transcripts and review of the audio recordings. I then coded the data and organised the codes into themes across the data set, with each theme appearing in a minimum number of interviews or focus groups in order to be included in the final theme list. In study one, a theme needed to be mentioned in a minimum of four of the interviews, although all but one of the final themes were cited about in at least five of the interviews. In study two, the final themes all appeared in a minimum of two focus groups, with at least two different speakers within each focus group describing the theme.

The analysis included a systematic search for disconfirmatory as well as confirmatory data for each theme. Although the data were combined for the analysis, the themes in study one were chosen with awareness of each individual's full account of their experiences, and as such the final theme list reflects coherence not only with the combined data set, but also with each of the men's stories. In study two, the themes were compared and checked for consistency both within and across the focus groups rather than for individuals, due to the difficulty identifying each individual's complete data set within the focus group data. When data suggested conflicting ideas, this was outlined in the final description of themes, to capture the complexities and strength of the themes. The final themes were reviewed to avoid an 'uneven' interpretation that did not capture the breadth of the perspectives represented in the raw data. The themes were discussed with my research supervisor and fellow students as outlined below to ensure that alternative readings of the data were considered.

### **Ethical considerations**

This study was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Potential ethical issues identified included issues related to confidentiality and anonymity, and potential distress of participants talking about their own abuse experiences, or talking about abuse more generally.

All participants were required to give consent before participating. Interview participants were informed of their right to withdraw their participation at any time before or during the interview, and to withdraw any data traceable to them up to 2 weeks after the date of the interview. As focus group participants' individual data were part of a conversation between all focus group members, it was not practicable to withdraw any one group member's data. Therefore, focus group participants were informed of their right to leave the conversation, but that their data could not be

withdrawn once they had participated in the conversation. All participants were informed of the limits to confidentiality, such as the duty to inform relevant authorities if the participant disclosed an imminent risk of harm to themselves or others, and my use of a transcriber who had signed a confidentiality agreement.

Qualitative research involves an increased risk that participants may be identified from their stories, relative to other forms of research, due to the personal content and style of the individual quotes presented in the research findings (H. M. Richards & Schwartz, 2002). All participants were assigned a pseudonym before the data were analysed, and identifying features were removed from the data in order to minimise this risk. Participants were informed of the increased risk prior to participation.

While interview participants were discussing what were often distressing personal experiences, research has suggested that talking about abuse experiences is a positive experience for the majority of research participants (Kuyper, Newman, Koss, & Bernstein, 1997). Participation may be beneficial through helping participants to make their voices heard, and helping them to be part of a process that may bring about positive change from what was likely a difficult time in their lives (Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2011). Qualitative research may also help participants to gain new understandings of themselves and the world through the exploration of experiences that they might otherwise not have considered in depth (Clandinin, 2006). Despite the greater risk, qualitative in-depth interviews allow participants to play a more active and potentially more meaningful part in the research than that which does not allow people to tell their story in their own way.

The men appeared well engaged and emotionally open in the interviews. Many stated they were eager to help other men by sharing their stories, and expressed their appreciation that someone wanted to listen. For several of the men, this represented the first time they had spoken to anyone about any aspect of their experience, and for the majority it was the first time they had shared more than a small portion of their experience. The interview was also difficult for some, with long emotional pauses, tearfulness, and emotions evident in many of their voices, and while my role as a researcher rather than clinician constrained my ability to provide support to the men during the interviews, I was careful to provide an empathic and safe environment, and to thoroughly explore their support options with them at the conclusion of the interview. However, all interview participants, including those who had found the conversation difficult, expressed that they were glad they had participated, with comments including that it had been good to talk about the experiences, that they were supportive of the study aims, and that they hoped their story may play a part in creating social change.

While focus group participants were not asked to discuss their own personal experiences or those of others, and indeed they were selected as people who self-identified as not having experienced abuse, abuse is a sensitive topic, and some focus group participants spontaneously recounted their own experiences of abuse or conflict in relationships, or the abuse narratives of friends. I was aware of the possibility of distress among participants when discussing the issue, and while I was careful not to frame abuse as a 'taboo' subject, I outlined participants' right to decline to comment on any part of the conversation or to leave the conversation at the start of the focus groups, and did not press participants to comment when they appeared reticent after initial encouragement to contribute.

All participants for both studies were provided with a list of suggested referrals at the conclusion of the interview or focus group, and I spent some time discussing the available options. As there were no services available that had advertised their availability to abused men, the list I provided to participants comprised several general counselling services which I had contacted prior to the interviews to confirm that they would be willing to speak with young men who had experienced abuse.

### **Quality in qualitative research**

Morrow (2005) outlines a number of criteria through which the quality or trustworthiness of qualitative research can be assessed. Criteria relevant to the current study include those of the adequacy of the data, the adequacy of the interpretative process, the transparency of research processes to the reader, and reflective work aimed at awareness of researcher subjectivity and the context of the research.

The adequacy of the data are ensured through the collection of adequate amounts of data, adequate sources of data and the gathering of information on the wider social and societal context within which the data collection occurred. Adequate data may be gained through quality, in-depth interviews that seek the spontaneous and rich elicitation of a range of perspectives and a range of examples of each perspective, to the point at which no new perspectives are elicited from the collection of new data. Disconfirming as well as confirming evidence should be sought for each perspective (Morrow, 2005). In order to ensure quality data in the current research, the interviews were in depth, finishing only when the men decided that they had given as much information and told as much of their story as they could or wanted to. The interviews were also conducted in an open manner that allowed the men to shape their stories and their data as much as possible. The

number of interviews was decided by data saturation- that is later interviews reinforced existing ideas rather than introducing new ones, suggesting that further data collection would not elicit new perspectives.

Regular discussion of ideas and interpretations with other researchers provides a forum for alternative interpretations to be discussed and ideas to be challenged (Smith & Sparkes, 2006), as well as bringing an external perspective to the researcher's reflective process. This is not the same process as the dual-coding process designed to find 'accurate' reflections in the search for 'truth', rather it is a technique intended to aid the researcher in her selection of trustworthy and useful interpretations, while acknowledging other possibilities in the interpretation of the data (Mishler, 1990). Indeed, good qualitative work should open up possibilities for alternative representations, rather than narrow the reader's view (Frank, 2012). As outlined under 'data analysis' I checked the analysis thoroughly for consistency, and consulted with my supervisor and fellow students throughout the research.

The transferability and dependability of qualitative research are achieved by transparency in the research processes and the position, interests and assumptions of the researcher, so that the reader might understand both how the interpretations were made, and in what circumstances the interpretations might apply (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2010; Hiles & Čermák, 2010). Reflexivity is important in qualitative research, and a contextualist epistemology emphasises the researcher's and the research's part in shaping data, alongside the wider social forces that affect both peoples' viewpoints and the ways in which they express these.

There are a variety of approaches to researcher subjectivity, and consistent with Morrow's (2005) suggestion, I believe that research is always a subjective practice. My approach is to manage this subjectivity, in order to maximise participant rather than researcher voice, with acknowledgement of the part that my own subjectivity has played in the research process. I therefore completed a self-reflective journal from the time of the data collection, in which I regularly reflected on my own thoughts, feelings, assumptions and experiences while conducting the research, and actively engaged with others to seek challenge and alternatives to my own methods and interpretations wherever possible. To provide transparency on my process and 'researcher voice', I have outlined my position and interests in the following section of this chapter.

## Reflexivity

In the interests of transparent and dependable research, I have outlined below some information relevant to this research, including my own background and reason for choosing this topic, and my experience of conducting the research. My epistemological orientation has been noted previously.

This topic stirs both passion and discomfort for me, and my reasons for choosing it are many. I began my tertiary education with a particular interest in women's gender issues, and moved to a focus on gender issues related to men, after realising the dearth of available literature on the subject. Partner abuse against men is not something I had thought about much before recent years, and it came to the fore for me only when I started thinking about how ideas around 'manhood' might affect men's lives. The 'collective image' of partner abuse I discuss in this thesis also matches my own automatic mental image when partner abuse is mentioned; that of a man physically abusing a woman. I am immersed in the same broad social and information society as the young people I talked to for this project, and I too have mainly seen partner abuse presented as men's violence towards women. My awareness of my own bias towards seeing abuse as a women's problem has spurred my desire to question and challenge these ideas, particularly when I think of the possible effects that biases may have on how I treat abused men as a clinician, friend or acquaintance, and thus on their experiences of abuse, stigma and support.

My desire to question dominant ideas has also been strengthened by my experiences when contacting helplines and support services to find appropriate referrals for my participants, as part of my preparation for the interviews for this research. While some helpline operators were apologetic about the lack of referrals on offer for men, others simply gave me referrals to treatment programmes for abusive men. I also experienced this with some domestic violence services that had claimed to support men as victims on their websites. The topic also attracted me as someone who has felt they had no-one to turn to when a relationship has turned sour, and my interest therefore in the experience of misunderstood traumas such as partner abuse against men is in part motivated by a desire to aid others who feel similarly.

This topic is both personal and yet one to which I am an outsider. I am not a young man, and I shall never know what it is to be one. My demographics, experiences and way of thinking are likely to significantly differ from the group I am researching. It has therefore been important for me to retain awareness of and to manage issues of power imbalances and differences in worldview. I am a researcher and psychologist and considerably older than the young men I interviewed and the young

people in the focus groups. I am also aware that as a woman I am both a member of the group to which the men's ex-partners belonged and an outsider to men's experience, and there is the potential for this to both influence what the men chose to say to me about their conceptualisations of abuse from women, and for me to lack understanding of their experience. However, I have taken great care to provide a balanced analysis of the data and have consulted with my supervisor wherever possible to ensure adherence both to the overall story told by the data, and the stories of each of my participants.

Partner abuse is an emotive issue. It stirs both passion and discomfort, and can involve great hurt and pain - not just for those directly involved, but also the people around them, and the wider public who contemplate these issues. And it is an area that for many decades women struggled to make heard, adding to the emotions around the issue. I think this is a topic that deserves simultaneous dedication to thorough and dependable analysis and to the emotions that it stirs, if we are to help both men and women fight partner abuse in all its forms.

## Chapter Four: Findings

This section summarises the findings of the thematic analyses of both study one and study two, with the findings for each study presented separately, and summarised in the tables at the start of each section. A discussion and comparison of themes will be covered in the next chapter.

### Study 1

The findings for study one have been divided in accordance with the first three research questions, which concerned the men's accounts of their experiences, their experiences of and decisions about seeking help, and their recommendations for helping other abused men.

*Table one: List of themes from study one*

<b>Participants' accounts of abusive relationships with women</b>
'She attacked me': Accounts of physical, verbal, sexual and legal attacks
'She controlled me': The use of manipulation and control
'It was hard to get out': Difficulties leaving the relationship
'I felt bad': Negative emotions about the abuse
'I don't feel safe anymore': Negative expectations of future relationships
'Maybe it wasn't that bad': The men's accounts of their ability to cope with abuse
<b>Participants' accounts and perceptions of help-seeking for partner abuse from women</b>
'I don't think people understand': Negative expectations of others' views and knowledge
'I wouldn't be supported': Negative expectations of help-seeking and self-disclosure
'They would think I was the abuser': Conceptions of men as perpetrators
'I pretended to be okay': Concealing the abuse and associated distress
'People supported me': Receiving help and support from others
<b>Participants' recommendations: what would help other men?</b>
'We need support for men': The importance of services that are openly available to men
'I would like to get help without people knowing': Anonymity as facilitating help-seeking
'Please tell people about it': The need for education

### Participants' accounts of abusive relationships with women

The analysis of the data relating to the participants' experience of their relationships elicited six major themes; 'she attacked me', 'she controlled me', 'it was hard to get out', 'I felt bad', 'I don't feel safe anymore', and 'maybe it wasn't that bad'. This section examines each in turn and an overall description of the findings that relate to the first research question.

**'She attacked me': Accounts of physical, verbal, sexual and legal 'attacks'.** All of the men described feeling attacked in some way by their partner, either physically, verbally, sexually or by harming them through the legal system. Six of the nine men described experiencing at least one incident in which their partner physically attacked them, including punching, kicking, slapping, scratching, shoving, choking, stomping and throwing objects at participants. For example, Jared described a violent incident during an argument:

We were in the car right. . . . Well she hit me in the face first, just all of a sudden. . . . I remember she just punched me on my face. . . . She also uses nails like scratching me. I think I was like bleeding on my face when she was scratching me. . . . Then she was choking me.

Darren described a prolonged attack in a public place at the time when he ended the relationship:

She came storming up to me, grabbed me by the sweater and pulled it over my head and pushed me down. . . . The shirt I was wearing . . . got torn off and I had scratches all over my back and everything. . . . She hit me in the side of the face and chipped a piece of tooth. . . . That was how the confrontation was going on for about 40 minutes or so.

For one man who described physical violence, this represented an isolated incident of violence within a relationship he characterised as including frequent verbal insults and coercion. For the others, violence was repeated, often many times, across a range of situations, and as can be seen above, the men sometimes described sustaining injuries as a result. Max spoke about a range of incidents, ranging from single punches to the head to more sustained attacks: "There was only like one or two times that something like major . . . happened. But it would always be like little things, . . . she would maybe give me a smack in the head kind of thing".

Most of the men also described some form of verbal attack as part of their relationship, including name-calling and put-downs, and volatile or frequent arguments. Name-calling and put-downs were generally described as frequent and hurtful. Although Tai also spoke about physical violence within his relationship, he described name-calling as the most hurtful element of the abuse: "She'll call me 'asshole' and 'dick' and stuff like that. The worse one she called me was those hurtful ones like 'loser' um, um just 'waste of space'".

The men also talked about feeling under attack from frequent or explosive arguments, such as Jared, who described this as strongly influencing his distress within the relationship: “At first it [arguments] didn’t happen a lot. It was like a normal relationship, just talking, arguing a couple of times. Towards the end it was crazy, it was toxic. . . . I couldn’t even deal with it”. While described as part of ‘normal’ relationships, arguments were also characterised as part of an indicator of an unhealthy relationship when frequent, volatile or impacting on their relationships with friends, such as when arguments took place in public.

Josh described sexual coercion and sexual violence within his relationship. He spoke about frequent pressure to have sex when he did not feel ready to do so, culminating in rape (forced penetration of his girlfriend):

There was a bit of an issue when the matter of sex came up and it was ah, again very much reflected the sort of the, the sort of coercion. . . . At that point in that relationship, yeah I wasn’t ready for it. . . . I remember her being very um, you know doing the whole extensive not very subtle hinting thing. . . . It led eventually to an event where I was at a party. . . . And she turned up and I was quite inebriated by that point. . . . I did start to feel incredibly strange after one particular drink, which leads me to suspect, and I’ve only got suspicions, that I was perhaps drugged. . . . I was very scared by that point. I was very disoriented. Everything was strange, numb, dull, and she led me off. . . . After that, it was entirely physical coercion, I wasn’t really capable of stopping that from happening or even I suppose fully aware of my surroundings. And it was only really after the fact that I really realised what had happened. Like a couple of days later I just started feeling filthy. . . . She was undoubtedly sober. . . . Only she herself could really tell us what had happened. But my speculation goes, and based on what I know of her, she turned up, um drugged me, saw that it was working and then led me off.

For Darren, although he described his relationship as including a broad spectrum of physical violence, verbal attacking and controlling behaviour, he described the most difficult part of the experience as what he saw as a deliberate attempt to harm him by misusing the legal system. He spoke about his ex-partner laying a false complaint with the police that he had raped and stalked her, after he ended the relationship:

She was emailing how sad she was that I broke up with her. . . . And then the police came round and said she’d made a complaint. . . . I lost my job because she went to the media and told them that one of [the staff members] . . . was being charged with rape. . . . I got charged

and I went to trial. . . . And in the end the judge threw it out because there was lack of evidence and he questioned the reliability of the key witness, which was her.

While the men predominantly described being attacked by their partners, with seven of the nine describing the abuse and violence as being exclusively perpetrated by their partner, two of the men described violence as coming from both parties. Jared described two-way violence as occurring within the context of escalating arguments, while Rob described being the first to use physical and verbal violence. For example, Jared said: “The whole relationship it also made me more aggressive as a guy. I was not very aggressive. Like my past relationships I’ve been quite mellow. . . . She was aggressive to me, I was, you know, kind of aggressive back”. In addition to the two who described two-way physical violence, some of the men reported learning to ‘return’ verbal insults within their relationships after experiencing attacks from their partners. For example, Tai described starting to copy the insults his partner said to him during the relationship: “You do it to me so I do it to you kind of thing”.

**Theme summary:** All of the men described feeling attacked by their partner in some way, including physical, verbal and sexual attacks, misusing the legal system to harm, as part of distressing arguments, or a combination of these. All of the men described some form of verbal attack, and six of the men described experiencing physical attacks. While a minority of the men stated that they had in some way reciprocated physical or verbal abuse received, the majority of men interviewed described seeing the abuse as ‘one way’, emanating solely from their partner, or that their partner was the initiating aggressor.

**‘She controlled me’: the use of manipulation and control.** All participants described having experienced some form of coercion or control in their relationship, including their partners ‘telling me what I can and can’t do’, using guilt and threatening to hurt themselves to change the men’s behaviour, monitoring the men’s actions or social contact, and making aggressive accusations when they suspected the men were being unfaithful.

The majority of the men described being pressured or ‘commanded’ to do things, either by overt comments or instructions from their partner, or through trying to avoid their partner’s upset or angry response if they did not do as she pleased. This included attending social events they did not want to, sticking to a particular curfew, completing tasks for their partner and changing the way they dressed. Leo described ‘commands’ to do things as leaving him feeling like he had no control: “The mood started getting like more aggressive towards me. Where at the start it was kind of like

'oh can we hang out more', it started becoming like 'you better come to this place now'". Similarly, Finn described his partner making 'rules' for what he could wear:

She would like get all my clothes, take all my approved clothes and she would take it with her . . . so if I wore a prohibited clothing to school she would make me get changed. . . . She would always wait outside just to make sure I was wearing like the right clothes. . . . I was controlled by her.

The majority of the men reported limiting their social contact during the relationship because of their partner's behaviour, and a sense of social isolation, and isolation from possible support due to this: "She isolated me from all my friends including boys and girls. . . . I wasn't allowed to see any of my friends" (Finn). In particular, the men talked about being isolated from other women as 'potential threats', including friends, acquaintances, and passers-by. Again, they spoke about 'rules', angry responses and sometimes aggression and violence towards the men or the perceived 'threat'. "[She was] asking me to ditch my friends, ditch my family. . . . And to completely isolate myself from other people that [she] considered obvious threats" (Josh).

Many of the men described their behaviour being monitored for infractions through cellphone records, social media, and 'interrogating' the men themselves or their friends to find out about the men's activities. Several of the men described their partners regularly checking their cellphone records and social media activities to ensure they were not 'hiding something'.

She would be like 'give me your Facebook account'. . . . I'm like 'why?' Cause, she would be like 'just so you are not flirting with other girls'. So I'm like 'I'm not going to show you my Facebook'. 'Oh so you're cheating on me now'. I'm like 'no'. 'Yes you are, you don't want to show me your account'. So I just ended up giving my password (Finn).

Darren described his support-seeking opportunities as greatly narrowed by his partner's monitoring of his communication with others:

If I spoke honestly about how I felt about the relationship it would get back to her. . . . She would find out somehow because I imagined, and this was eventually confirmed, she was interrogating everyone I spoke to on a regular basis about what I was saying. . . . Yeah so I felt scared. I felt like a prey animal really. Like had to, you know, to close off from a lot of people, that I had to keep myself to myself.

The men also described coercion and control as being accomplished through guilt; making the men feel sorry for their partner to the point where they agreed to do what the partner wanted. Josh described his partner's 'passive-aggressive' behaviour, and his resulting sense of guilt:

If I had other commitments, . . . it would start off pretty tame sort of like passive aggressive. 'No I know you're busy, it's okay, I'll just do my own thing' and everything and she would always go out of her way to sound very hurt about it . . . until I felt crap and either couldn't enjoy what I was doing or caved in and went to do something with her and felt terrible about that too.

Finn described his partner using a more direct approach, making frequent statements about 'not loving her enough':

Every time I had to go to meetings or practice she would just get real mad and say I don't love her. She would say I love music much more than her. So I started wagging music, not showing up to lesson, just because of her.

Darren described his partner using guilt to attract attention when she became upset, frequently running away late at night and sending him text messages with her location to take advantage of his concern for her:

Yeah she'd be pretty sort of like 'oh don't worry about me, just leave me to die' and all this crap but she'd keep texting me where she was and everything and so it was 'yeah I have to go out and grab you now just in case you do do something stupid'. . . . [She was] raging and sort of suicidal thoughts and saying stuff, not that she'd ever act on them. She was dramatic, drama queen sort of person. . . . It's pretty dangerous to be out by [location] at 11.30 at night when you're a girl by yourself and it's just, but she'd do that because she'd know . . . I'd think that was unsafe and she'd know that I'd come and find her.

As can be seen above in Darren's account, several of the men described feeling that their partner was using threats to harm or kill themselves as a way to incite guilt in the men, making them feel they needed go along with their partner's wishes, including staying in the relationship even when they wished to leave. This is outlined further below under 'it was hard to get out'. The men predominantly emphasised their perceptions of these threats as 'hollow', in that there was little evidence that their partner intended to follow through on the threats, and often the threats were repeated, despite no other indication that the partner was truly suicidal. Leo described his partner as using threats to control him:

One time she threatened to hurt herself. . . . I think I was supposed to pick her up after work or something and she was, and I turned up a little bit late and . . . she pretty much just said like if it happens again and things she's going to cut herself.

Scott described his partner threatening to take her own life as the main form of abuse within the relationship: "On two occasions she, well, threatened to commit suicide, . . . Like having seen her the next day, like she was completely fine and talking to other people that said she did it quite commonly".

**Theme summary:** The majority of the men talked about feeling coerced or controlled by their partners, including overt verbal commands and threats, but also less overt behaviours, such as stimulating the men's sense of guilt. Many of the men described close monitoring by their partners to ensure adherence, including questioning both the men and others around them, and monitoring electronic communications.

**'It was hard to get out': Difficulties leaving the relationship.** This theme was mentioned by all but one of the participants, with several stages described by many of the men: delayed realisation that their partner's actions were unacceptable, unsuccessfully attempting to end the relationship, and repeatedly leaving the relationship and reuniting before the final separation.

Many of the men talked about being initially unaware that their partner's behaviour was unacceptable or abusive once it had started causing them distress, and that this delayed their decision to leave the relationship. Jared talked about feeling confused by stereotypes of abuse and his beliefs around relationships, such that he did not realise for some time that his unhappiness was a sign of an unhealthy relationship, or a legitimate reason to leave the relationship:

I was like 'every couple goes through this so you know it's normal, so you don't break up over something that everyone goes through'. But I mean later on I realised, 'hold on a second, that's not right, that's not how it should be' you know.

Jared also described his difficulty with understanding his own situation as abuse, due to the dominant gendered portrayal of abuse:

You know how there are all these cases of guys abusing women and stuff. So it always seems like that. That's how media portrays it. But in this case I didn't know what to think because it was kind the other way around and it was just like, I mean I felt like a victim but at the same time I felt it was nothing because it doesn't happen, like it's not normally girls doing it to guys. . . . I didn't know what to make of it, you know basically, and I was confused.

Some participants described this sense of the 'normalcy' of their partner's behaviour as the result of desensitisation during the relationship or 'taking [their partner's] comments on board'. For example, Darren described his sense that the behaviour was normal as resulting from the chronic nature of the abuse, and the realisation that such behaviour was not part of a 'normal' relationship as a turning point in his relationship:

It became normal because I let it go on too long. Yeah and so you get like 'well I always feel like this, this is what being in a relationship is like'. . . . I think that's kind of the key thing for me is when I realised 'this isn't okay. I don't have to put up with this'.

Many of the men described then being convinced to stay in the relationship by their partner's threats, arguments and physical violence when the men stated they wanted to leave. Finn described repeatedly trying to leave the relationship, with his partner kicking him or threatening to harm or kill herself when he tried to end the relationship, as a result of which, he agreed to stay in the relationship that was making him unhappy:

[I've tried breaking up with her] at least half a dozen, at least. . . . She would either say she will kill herself or she will start crying to make me feel bad. But . . . when she said she would kill herself, I ran to her house. . . . I was really worried. I'd just go inside and she was there being normal. And that's when I realised that she's playing games.

Jared described being convinced to stay in the relationship by a partner he later suspected was untruthful:

I was like kind of like trying to break up with her, kind of tried, kind of failed, you know, kept trying. So I wasn't very concrete with the breakup but I attempted to. . . . She just called me up one day and said I'm pregnant. . . . I found out later she um just lied about it, just to keep me and all that.

Leo spoke about staying in the relationship long after he wanted to leave, because of his friends' advice:

They were just telling me oh all girls act like that. Just eventually it won't seem that bad and stuff. Then eventually it's like well this isn't kind of how my other relationships went, so then I wanted to break it up. . . . It kind of went on for a while as well because kind of got advice from my friends to not really just leave her straight away, to kind of try and ease out of it because my friends were like 'she might take it a bit bad and yeah go really crazy'.

In the third stage, several of the men talked about 'on-off' relationships in which they repeatedly ended the relationship but later returned after being convinced to 'give it another go', forgiving their partner for the abuse, or missing their partner. They often described mixed feelings at the reconciliations, with negative feelings from earlier abuse contrasting with attraction or positive feelings towards the relationship or their partner. Max described the 'cycle of violence' that developed within his relationship:

We would break up again from that [my partner's violence] and it would be a week later, like back together, same thing and it just turned into a big cycle sort of thing. And it just got worse and worse and worse.

**Theme summary:** Almost all of the men described some degree of difficulty in leaving the relationship, either because they took time to realise that their partner's behaviour was unacceptable or a legitimate reason to leave, because they were convinced to stay in the relationship by their partner or others, or because they returned to the relationship each time after leaving, despite the negative feelings this entailed.

**'I felt bad': Negative emotions about the abuse.** All of the men described multiple negative emotions and thoughts as resulting from their abusive experiences, including feelings about their partner's behaviour and their own.

The men described experiencing a wide range of negative emotions during their abusive relationships. Most of the men described sadness or 'feeling down'. For example, Josh described himself as "definitely very sad", while Darren said: "You just sort of get deeper and deeper into this you know pretty dark place and just feel real bad". Many of the men also reported a strong diminishment of self-esteem as a result of their experiences, particularly verbal abuse and insults, as they began to 'take on board' what their partner was saying to them. For example, Tai described feeling he was "worthless" during the relationship, while Jared stated:

I felt like it kind of brought me down as a human. . . . I was always thinking why is this happening, am I a bad person because we are at this, because it's like this, have I done something bad to deserve this?

Some of the men described feeling like a 'plaything' or a toy, rather than a human, such as Finn, who stated that his partner's forceful insistence that he change his clothes and activities to suit her left him feeling like "I was her Barbie doll, or Ken". Josh described feeling like an object to be used for the pleasure of others after his girlfriend sexually pressured and raped him: "I felt pretty used. Yeah, that was it, I just felt like someone's play thing", a feeling he described as remaining with him since

leaving the relationship, and which he described as continuing to affect his experiences of relationships since that time.

Many participants reported feeling angry, frustrated or resentful towards their partner during the relationship, such as Leo who reported “she would break down and cry and things and then you kind of did feel bad but you would also feel a little bit angry because she’s just constantly insulting you”. Darren described feeling angry and bitter after his partner laying false rape charges against him after he terminated the relationship.

The majority of cases it’s a serious thing to complain about rape and it takes a lot of courage and it makes me even more angry about my situation in that she’s gone and done something now which makes it harder for everybody else. . . . You’re just having a tantrum you know, and that leaves a bitter feeling.

Several of the men described feeling embarrassed and ashamed, especially in situations where others could see what was happening in the relationship. For example, Darren and Rob spoke about feeling embarrassed by public arguments and violence: “She’d come in and cause a scene . . . which you know you don’t want the public to be seeing and you don’t want anybody else to know about. You want to keep it to yourself” (Darren). “It was bigger for me because it [the slapping] was in public, like what if someone saw that?” (Rob). Some of the men also spoke about feeling ashamed at being a man abused by a woman, citing the conflict between this and what they saw as the expectations of others. Darren talked about feeling embarrassed over what he saw as a departure from expected male conduct:

People ask how things are going, ‘yeah fine, no worries’. . . it was partly for the embarrassment I guess. You know ‘you shouldn’t be letting your girlfriend treat you like this’ you know, I sort of, that’s how people feel. I had the sort of feeling, that’s how people felt about it.

Several of the men spoke about fear or a sense of vulnerability as resulting from their abusive experiences. For some, this related to a fear of physical violence, while for others it related to a sense of overall intimidation by their partner, or a fear of other unpleasant or harmful experiences. Finn talked about asking his friends to help keep him safe while he ended the relationship, due to his worry for his physical safety: “I tried breaking up with her, and I told my friends I was going to, so they are in the distance just making sure everything was alright. . . . Just to make sure I am safe.” Others spoke about a fear of non-physical consequences of ‘doing something wrong’, such as Josh, who stated: “I was very scared at the time. Basically it was a feeling that you

have to watch what you were saying. It was very much like... have you ever read George Orwell's 1984?"

Some of the men talked about feeling confused by what had happened to them, either because they did not know how to deal with their feelings and the situation, or because their experiences did not match their expectations of relationships. As cited in the previous theme, Jared described feeling confused by his experiences because they did not match his ideas about abuse. Josh also described feeling strongly confused by his experience of rape:

That particular incident did end up confusing the hell out of me, leaving me feeling very vulnerable and I admit that I honestly didn't know what to do or where to turn. I just dealt with it I suppose or attempted to. I sat there for days upon days. . . . I was sitting there thinking what the hell happened. What does it mean that it happened? What do I do now? And there was nothing that I could really do.

Even the men who described returning or initiating violence within the relationship reported negative emotional effects from their experience, including both having violence directed towards them, and using violence themselves. For example, Jared described his use of violence within the relationship as negatively impacting his sense of self:

Cause it was quite a physical relationship it kind of made me think, which I never would have thought before, like 'am I a dangerous guy, would I hurt someone in the future?' Cause it kind of made me question myself about my character.

While the quotes above relate to individual negative emotions, all of the men described experiencing a range of different negative emotions over the relationship and in response to particular events, rather than one emotion in isolation. For some these emotions built to an unmanageable level, for example, Jared describing self-harming as a result of his overwhelming distress. Josh spoke about experiencing a variety of emotions over the course of his relationship and persisting after the relationship ended: "I felt paranoid, scared, sad, used... Yeah, that was it, I just felt like someone's play thing".

**Theme summary:** All the men described experiencing a range of negative emotions as a result of the abuse, including feeling sad and diminished, angry, embarrassed or ashamed, vulnerable, and confused. Most described a range of negative emotional experiences, and some spoke about feeling overwhelmed by their emotions. Those who described bilateral violence also described an emotional impact of their experiences; both of receiving abuse, and of their own behaviour.

**‘I don’t feel safe anymore’: Negative expectations of future relationships.** Many of the men described the on-going effects of the abuse, in terms of alterations in how they viewed women and relationships. For some this involved a change in expectations of women or a loss of trust in them. For example, Jared described persisting fear of further violence from women:

When I just met her [my next girlfriend], I was actually kind of scared at first, cause she was taller than me and I was like ‘this girl’, I was thinking to myself obviously, you know ‘this girl could hurt me’.

Tai described feeling safer by not allowing himself to get “close” to others after his experience. Similarly, Max described changing his relationship behaviour as a result of the abuse, due to a perception that getting ‘close to’ a woman could result in a repeat of the abuse:

I generally used to like get a girlfriend and I would be content with them. . . . And then after her, . . . I would just go through chicks constantly like because I would never want to stay around a chick for a long time because . . . it’s going to bring out these negative things that I associated with my relationship with her.

Josh described a strongly altered sense of relationships and his rights to his body after experiencing rape, such that he no longer felt entitled to consent or decline sexual activity, rather he described his body as ‘a plaything’ to others, and a sense of obligation to fulfil his partner’s desires:

I don’t feel inclination to really fight anymore. People have things that they want out of you and they’ll take them if they want them. . . . My understanding of it before was that it was very, that it’s interdependent and it’s when two people very much like each other. . . . Now I’ve still got this sort of underlying feeling that . . . I have obligations to that person. . . . The concept of sex is it’s when someone else wants it. . . . And the way I view my own body kind of got very much affected by that event in particular and it’s put me in a point where it’s a toy, it’s someone’s toy. Putting it bluntly I suppose.

Josh acknowledged that this is perhaps an unhealthy way to view the world. This particular stance was common among the men who described alterations in how they saw women or relationships - participants frequently described the changes in viewpoint as unfortunate or a negative way to think, but that their experiences had opened their eyes to possibilities they had not been previously aware of, leading to extra caution and scepticism when approaching new relationships with women.

**Theme summary:** Many of the men described losing their sense of safety in relationships after their experiences of abuse, including fear of further abuse from women, avoidance of further

relationships or 'getting too close' to subsequent partners, and effects on their sense of entitlement to sexual safety.

**'Maybe it wasn't that bad': The men's accounts of their ability to cope with abuse.** In spite of the difficult feelings all of the men talked about in relation to the abuse, many also described the abuse as 'not that bad', or that they were 'able to cope' with it. For example, Jared said: "It wasn't like, the pain wasn't that bad that I had to go to hospital say or I felt like my life was in danger you know. It wasn't that bad. I could handle it", while Darren stated: "I got nothing serious. I got scratched up a little bit. You know she knocked my glasses off and they got bent a little bit and my tooth got chipped but that was about it".

Interestingly, as well as all of the men describing negative emotions, many those who described the abuse in the above terms were visibly upset during the interview while describing their experiences. Others made it clear that their emotions about the situation abated over time since the relationship ended, such as Scott, who talked about initially feeling concern and anger, emotions which lessened over time: "This isn't something I dwell on much at all now. I did a lot when I was in my teen years". Max described a change in emotions as part of his way of coping with the situation:

[Thinking about her] would anger me. . . . But now that we have completely parted ways and moved on, I just look back and find it, it's not hilarious, but it's funny when I see the dent in the wall [from her throwing her phone at me] or something like that. I deal with things by laughing them off.

Similar to Max, Leo described consciously attempting to "not care" as a way to cope with the issue, despite his negative feelings about the abuse.

Many described this as related to gender stereotypes - in that men were portrayed as able to handle physical violence. For example, Tai talked about only the verbal abuse as being hurtful: "Physical stuff I can handle cause I'm a guy. . . . It was just the emotional stuff that she kind of said, saying all of this stuff, like far out". Rob also described gender as influential in his decision that his experience was not a 'big deal', due to his perception that violence from women was socially acceptable: "I'm just too accustomed to this mindset that it shouldn't be a big deal and it's not. . . . If a guy does wrong he can get a few slaps. . . . These are things that you learn, the reinforcement of media". However, while this theme was more often cited with reference to physical abuse, it was also mentioned by some men who reported psychological abuse.

**Theme summary:** As well as describing negative emotions about the abuse, many of the men also described the abuse in less negative terms. Several of the men spoke about consciously attempting to ‘not care’ about their experience, or that later appraisals changed their feelings around it. The ideas that the abuse was not a ‘big deal’, or that the men could ‘handle’ it was most frequently cited with regards to physical violence rather than verbal, and was often linked with statements around men or manliness, such as society’s or participants’ expectations that as men, they can ‘handle’ physical abuse.

**To summarise the men’s accounts of abuse,** the men described feeling attacked and/or manipulated and controlled by their partners, including a range of physical, psychological and sexual forms of abuse. They described difficulty leaving their relationships, and all of the men spoke about experiencing a range of negative emotions as a result of the abuse. The men described losing trust in relationships, avoidance of emotional closeness in subsequent relationships, and the erosion of their perceptions of their right to sexual safety. However, many of the men also reported that the abuse ‘wasn’t that bad’ or that they were able to cope with physical abuse, with several relating this perception directly to their ideas about gender.

### **Participants’ accounts and perceptions of help-seeking for partner abuse from women**

Five major themes were identified that related to help-seeking: ‘I don’t think people understand’, ‘I wouldn’t be supported’, ‘they would think I was the abuser’, ‘I pretended to be okay’, and ‘people supported me’.

**‘I don’t think people understand’: Negative expectations of others’ views and knowledge.** All but one of the participants spoke about feeling that other people do not understand their experiences, in that they do not believe in or think about abuse against men, and that abuse against men is not treated as a serious issue.

Almost all of the participants described a strong sense that other people weren’t aware of the issue, and seldom thought or talked about it. This included the suggestion that people completely lack awareness that it is possible for men to be abused or raped, as Josh and Tai outline: “I don’t think they understand, I don’t think they think that women abuse guys at all really” (Tai). “[Friends] had said ‘well you can’t rape a man’” (Josh). Many of the men also spoke about abuse against men being something that the public seldom thought or talked about. “It just doesn’t seem to be something which is in the consciousness I guess” (Darren). Several of the men spoke

specifically about a lack of coverage of such issues in academia and the mass media, including news coverage, films and advertising.

You very rarely see a movie where a guy is getting abused by his wife you know or a TV show where that's, . . . you know it's not something which is very widely reported. Um, I can't think of a story that I've read on the news (Darren).

Several participants also spoke about their *own* lack of awareness of the issue before it happened to them, such as Max, who said: "I only found out not that long ago that you know like wives beat up their husband". Many of the men related the lack of visibility to a societal perception of partner abuse as perpetrated by men against women, such as Jared, who stated:

I think it would be hard for people to understand the situation, like a guy being the victim and the girl being, you know, the bad guy if you know what I mean. . . . Guys are kind of seen as more dominant and they are always seen like the bad guys.

The men linked this to stereotypes of gender roles and the 'hidden' nature of abuse against men, due to the lack of reporting by men, and discussion and coverage of the issue in the media.

Most of the men also spoke about a perception that when people do recognise partner abuse against men, they do not take it seriously. This included a perception that people 'don't care' about men who are abused or joke about abuse towards men. Rob, among others, talked about a sense that society does not care, saying "Generally speaking no one gives a shit". Finn spoke about feeling that people did not see the issue as important, saying: "It's less important in society. It's not seen as a big thing. Just like if they hear about it they will just laugh or shrug it off". Finn also spoke about his concerns that people found male rape funny: "It's like, like when a man gets raped by a woman, just everyone goes 'ha'. . . . It doesn't look like a serious offence or anything".

Many of the men also described a perception that men were expected to be 'strong', remaining emotionally invulnerable in the face of abuse and violence. Josh described a perception that men were expected not to experience emotions after experiencing abuse:

You are not allowed to feel sad or scared or, you know, vulnerable. . . . One of the things I've learnt is, horrible as it is, it is very possible, regardless of who you are and regardless of what society expects you to be, for that strength to be taken away from you, or to have it otherwise turned against you or removed completely. And it is truly terrible. It is terrible to be expected to retain that strength if it's been taken away from you. Like if someone is being emotionally manipulative or if they are being physically, you know, physically or

mentally abusive, then you can't be alright. You can't be expected to be alright. And having a Y chromosome doesn't make you any less vulnerable.

Related to the perception of men as emotionally invulnerable, participants described an impression that men were expected to 'harden up' or 'suck it up', rather than be emotionally affected by partner abuse. Darren talked about a perception that the public expect men to be 'staunch':

Guys are expected to kind of staunch it up a little bit more, yeah and it's not as okay for you to go playing the victim and things. Um, that's the perception of it. . . . Grow up, you're a man, be a man sort of thing.

Josh described a perception that people did not believe in male rape or take it seriously, which he described as strongly affecting his decision not to seek help for his experiences: "The debate against the concept of it, . . . it always seems to be a bit too much of a harden the fuck up attitude".

**Theme summary:** Almost all of the participants spoke about abuse against men as something that other people had little awareness or knowledge about, or that people were unaware that such abuse was possible. This included a lack of media coverage and public discussion, which participants saw as driven by dominant conceptualisations of gender. They also described feeling that when people do believe that women can abuse men in relationships, the issue is not taken seriously, or men are not expected to be affected by partner abuse from women.

**'I wouldn't be supported': Negative expectations of help-seeking and self-disclosure.** All of the men spoke about anticipating some form of negative reaction or outcome should they tell others about the abuse, including judgement, ridicule, or the potential help sources otherwise not taking the issue seriously. This was particularly cited with reference to seeking help from friends and family, but also for seeking help more broadly. Most of the men spoke about fearing judgement or shame as a likely outcome of any disclosure of abuse. Josh spoke about his fear of disclosing his experiences to others: "The reason that I haven't really sought help over this, . . . is that again there's a lot of stigma if you are male and you have been... I fear judgement. I fear judgement". Leo described his fear that he would be rejected by his friends should he attempt to seek help from them: "I was kind of yeah, kind of building it up to myself that if I go and ask people for this I would kind of face rejection".

Some of the men emphasised a fear that such judgement may lead to unempathetic responses from friends, parents and support services, such as Tai, who described the shame experienced by men and women when disclosing abuse as similar, but highlighted the differences in how he thought each would be responded to.

I don't think there would be a difference of how women or guys would want to talk to people about it. I reckon it would be the same. Men are too ashamed and women are I would say too ashamed as well. So I would say it's the same like that. Yeah but if people ask them girls would just say to leave him, yeah, the female or women's friends would just say 'leave him' and stuff but I reckon if a guy told his friends about that, I don't know, his friends would probably say 'harden up' or whatever.

The majority of the men in this study also described anticipating ridicule from friends if they were to disclose abuse, although many emphasised that the 'joking' and 'mocking' would be influenced more by their friends not taking the issue seriously than out of a desire to hurt them, although that may be one of the unintended consequences.

If I told my mates I went to get help because of the relationship they kind of just like, not in a bad way, they're my mates right, kind of laugh at you kind of sort of thing. . . . Not to hurt me or nothing, just in a joking way you know (Jared).

Guys will see it as like it's shaming to tell your mates that 'oh my missus beat me up', like you are going to get shit for that. Like someone is going to be like 'ha ha bro your missus beat you up'. . . . So you wouldn't want to mention it (Max).

Many of the men interviewed spoke about conceptualisations of masculinity and manliness as inconsistent with help-seeking, both in general, and for relationship problems in particular. They linked this with perceptions that men 'can deal with' any issues independently, and the risk of emasculation if one were to deviate from this. Jared described the emasculation that can be associated with help-seeking: "If a guy does get help, I think amongst your mates or something they kind of mock you for it. . . . It's kind of like saying they are a sissy". As was stated previously under 'I felt bad', Darren described his reluctance to seek help due to a fear of being judged as unmanly for having experienced abuse from a woman. Darren also emphasised men's customary emotional independence: "I wouldn't go ringing off and be like '[my partner's] hit me again, I want to talk about it'. You know it was, that's not what you do when you're a dude, you know". Several of the men specifically emphasised worry of feeling emasculated when describing their reluctance to speak to others, such as Leo, who stated he felt like he could not seek help for partner abuse, despite his desire to do so:

Men kind of feel like they're not really men if they need help with these problems. I think it's kind of a manly thing is you can't really ask for help on things really. Like you've got to try and do things by yourself.

One of the men talked about his fears as unlikely to match reality. Leo, who described avoiding seeking help due to his fear of rejection, stated that in hindsight the fear that he felt over seeking help may have been unwarranted, escalating in the absence of actual help-seeking experiences in the later stages of his relationships. He related this to his preconceptions about societal gender rules against the idea of men being abused, or seeking help for such matters: “I think I probably built up to myself . . . how people would react in a bad way. . . . I think people would mostly be sympathetic towards the situation”.

**Theme summary:** All of the men spoke about expecting a negative reaction should they attempt to seek help or disclose their experiences to others, including judgement, ridicule and being told to ‘harden up’. The men spoke about an incongruence between their ideas about manliness and help-seeking, and particularly help-seeking for partner abuse, and described a fear of emasculation if they sought help for such experiences. This theme was mentioned by all of the men, with many strongly and frequently emphasising these ideas when describing their decisions about seeking help. One of the men spoke about his perceptions of such a reaction as unwarranted.

**‘They would think I was the abuser’: Conceptions of men as perpetrators.** Many of the men described feeling at risk of being labelled the ‘true’ abuser in the relationship, whether or not they had perpetrated any violence towards their partner. As can be seen in the previous section, the men frequently described the common image of abuse as comprising violence from a man to a woman, and expressed a fear that this may result in the public not viewing men as victims of partner abuse. They spoke about the risk that rather than seeing them as victims, others would instead label them as the perpetrator of abuse.

Many of the men said they placed a strong emphasis on the importance of not using violence in return to their partner’s violence. This was sometimes linked to beliefs against the use of violence generally, but also to beliefs around violence against women, with many referring to social sanctions against violence from men towards women and the related likelihood that defending themselves physically could lead them to be seen as abusive. Many participants expressed concern about the possibility of inadvertently harming their partner back while using self-defence. Others described avoiding using any active self-defence for fear of harming their partner.

I didn’t fight back because I didn’t want to hurt her. I’ve actually got an extensive background in martial arts and stuff and could have hurt her but it was never, it was just better for me to cover up and roll over and not, block my head and stuff and not try and risk causing her any injuries (Darren).

Max reported that a particular belief against men hitting women meant that he did not retaliate towards his partner: "I wouldn't want to hit her back because that's pretty stink kind of thing. . . . I have just been brought up not to do that kind of thing. . . . Obviously that is a frowned upon thing, like you shouldn't hit girls". Alongside his fears of being seen as breaking rules against men's use of violence, Max specifically cited the risk of being seen as the 'true abuser' in his decision against 'fighting back', as he feared she would claim that he had instigated the violence:

'I was just minding my own business and then he came up and just punched me in the face', was what she would tell people, when really it would be she hit me in the face and then that would have happened. She would always be the one to mis-convey the whole thing.

Furthermore, several of the men expressed a fear that any requests for help may be met with additional danger to themselves, in terms of the risk of being labelled as the abuser in a society that conceptualises partner abuse as a problem of men's violence to women. Josh described this risk as a reason against using the police for help or support:

There was actually a threat thrown around now and then, and this was in a sort of one of her crazy moments, that she would tell the police I had beat her up. . . . I felt intimidated out of going to the police about it. . . . I can't prove without a shadow of a doubt that I haven't [hit her] except the fact that she's never been hit in her life. She's fine. But all she'd have to do was say and I would have been in a hell of a lot of trouble. Yeah, so doing that would have put myself at significant risk, greater risk than I was really in, greater danger than I was really in by just sitting there and taking it I suppose.

As Darren's story of being falsely charged with a crime against his ex-partner suggests, the risk of misuse of the legal system in this manner is not wholly imagined, although none of the other men described such actions being taken.

**Theme summary:** Several of the men spoke about the risk of being labelled as the abuser in the relationship, either because they had inadvertently harmed their partner in the course of self-defence, or as the result of an abusive partner's desire to control; using a societal bias to their advantage. This was described by the men as linked with constructions of gender that see men as the aggressors, rather than victims of partner abuse. Some of the men described this risk as a factor in their decisions not to use self-defence, and not to seek help.

**'I pretended to be okay': Hiding the abuse and associated distress.** The majority of the men described actively hiding their distress and the fact that abuse was occurring from friends and family, often citing ideas about masculinity or shame and defensiveness, alongside the above fears of the

reaction they might meet upon disclosure, as outlined above. For example, Josh described feeling an obligation to his girlfriend to defend her from the suspicion of others:

My family, my friends, they were asking me what's wrong, and they knew it had something to do with her. . . . And for the most part I kept defending her. . . . It was mostly a sort of, um, willingness to make effort for the relationship sort of thing, but it was that stupid kind of naïve everything is going to be alright if I just do everything I am told kind of deal. . . . I defended the relationship because I felt obligated to defend the relationship and because I felt it would get better if I played along.

As described above in 'I felt bad', Darren described feeling defensive about being the victim of abuse, due to a perception that others would look down on him for it. He described this as his reason to avoid social contact during a relationship characterised by both psychological and physical abuse:

When things went bad in the relationship going out and telling people that wasn't much of an option. So that's because of my own pride or whatever or a stupid pride but no people ask how things are going, 'yeah fine, no worries'.

Rob also described hiding his true feelings from friends when discussing being slapped by his girlfriend, in order to maintain his sense of masculinity:

I feel obligated to seem as if it was nothing. Like I don't feel that it's okay that I should make a deal out of it because it makes me the minority, the wuss, you know. So I feel um to keep my status within my circle of friends I have to, you know, act as if it was like 'she hit me, fuck it, whatever, I'm cool' you know.

Some of the men described attempting to appear emotionally unaffected even when they did decide to seek help from others, for example mentioning only very limited details or talking about the abuse in a casual manner that tested their friends' reactions, without exposing their true emotions around the relationship. For example, Leo described trying to protect his image by concealing his feelings:

Even when I mentioned it to my friends I did kind of mention it in like passing and then kind of would pretend like it doesn't really bother me. . . . I think it might have just been like trying to appear like more macho, no real feelings type thing, I don't know.

This strategy of 'testing' the reaction was sometimes cited as a precursor to more serious help-seeking, allowing the men to decide whether a more direct attempt to seek help was likely to elicit a

favourable reaction. Jared spoke about seeking help in this limited way, while being careful to conceal his reason for asking: "I think I might have at one time really briefly, subtly hinted it to my friend. I was like 'do you and your girlfriend fight, like physically fight'. Like I didn't mention anything about my relationship". Notably, those who spoke about talking to friends while concealing their distress over the abuse did not describe this as leading to social support or further help-seeking, as their requests were met with similarly casual responses. The men described avoiding any further disclosures, and feeling that their friends would not respond to help-seeking in the supportive manner they required.

**Theme summary:** The majority of the men described actively hiding both the abuse and their distress from others. In addition to the fears of others' reactions as described in the theme above, the men also described a desire to protect their partner, defensiveness, and a sense that they would be looked down on if they made their true feelings known. Some of the men described hiding their true feelings from others even when they did attempt to seek help by mentioning the abuse 'in passing', in order to assess the likely reaction to a more serious disclosure.

**'People supported me': Receiving help and support from others.** While the majority of the men reported concealing the abuse and their distress, for those who did tell others about aspects of what was happening to them, the experience was often described as a positive one, in which the participant received support, practical help or advice from others.

Only Tai reported seeking help from a professional- a counsellor, and described this as helping him to see the difficulty he was having leaving the relationship, by saying things in a "straight up" manner. Finn and Josh also described feeling supported by friends who helped them to leave their relationships:

They were all the encouragements that would make me try and break up with her. I would tell them like, 'stay in a distance just to make sure I'm safe when I try to break up with her'. . . . My friends were there for me, my family was there (Finn).

Finn described the relationship as both the best and worst experience in his life, emphasising that it had taught him that his friends were 'there for' him when he needed them. Josh described being helped to leave his relationship by a friend who showed concern for him when he began acting strangely:

He actually said 'just cut the crap, what's up'. And I didn't tell him. I didn't tell him [about the rape]. But I said 'look . . . , I feel like I am trapped. I feel like I am being messed around with, emotionally abused', all that sort of thing. And so I discounted his first

recommendation which was to just sock her in the jaw. . . . And then he's just like 'well would you be okay with me talking to her'. . . . It made me realise how hey you know this could be my way out, this might be a bit of support that I need to actually break free of this shit. . . . [Him] asking me what was up and then actually acting on what I had told him, . . . it was the life line I really needed.

Darren described feeling practically and emotionally supported by his father during and after the relationship, helping him to find his partner when she ran away at night, and relaying his support when the relationship ended: "I texted my dad, I said 'I broke up with you know, I broke up with her, she beat the shit out of me' and he said 'good job, sorry about the hiding'".

Of those who did speak to others, not all reported receiving helpful responses when they asked for advice and support. Max described experiencing mixed reactions from friends, depending on how close they were to him, with closer friends more likely to offer a helpful response:

Some people was 'I don't care bro, don't tell me' like cause they would be the ones that were like sick of it. . . . And other people, like sort of more my closer mates would sort of be like . . . 'have you thought of this or like, you know, is this what's going on, like maybe she is up to something'.

As outlined under 'it was hard to get out', Leo also talked about being given unhelpful advice by his friends around the relationship, causing him to delay ending the relationship when he knew that he no longer wanted to stay: "It kind of went on for a while . . . because my friends were like she might take it a bit bad and yeah go really crazy".

**Theme summary:** Many of the men who did talk to others about aspects of their experience described feeling supported by others, including practical help, advice and emotional support, whether they approached others for help, or whether the support sources were the first to reach out. A minority of the men described receiving unsupportive or unhelpful responses to their help-seeking.

**To summarise the men's accounts and perceptions of help-seeking for partner abuse,** the men described the public as knowing little about abuse towards men and as not understanding their experiences. They described a fear of others' reactions should they seek help for the abuse. They also described a fear of erroneously being labelled as the abuser in the relationship and taking active measures to prevent this, including avoiding self-defence, and not seeking help. The men described actively hiding the abuse and their distress from others, and some spoke about hiding many of the details and their feelings about the issue even when they decided to speak to others about their

experiences. This seldom led to further help-seeking, as the men's subtle disclosures were not met with a concerned response. However, many of the men who talked about disclosing the abuse to others described positive experiences of being given help and support.

### **Participants' recommendations for the future: What would help other men?**

The participants made three major recommendations for facilitating help-seeking and helping other men who experience abuse: 'we need support for men', 'I would like to get help without people knowing', and 'please tell people about it'.

**'We need support for men': The importance of services that are openly available to men.** Many of the men described feeling like there was no support available to them, either from formal sources or informal sources. When it came to formal support, many of the men described lack of services and advertising specifically aimed at men.

It just felt like there was a lot of ads and a lot of I guess organisations that's helping, like women's refuge . . . , but I don't see any for guys to turn to and it just makes it hard, you know, just who to turn [to] (Tai).

Specifically, many of the men highlighted the unsuitability of existing domestic violence services for their own situation.

I kind of view those as being for like wives that are getting beaten up. I know it's not but that's my general perception, that's for serious things, where people are getting the shit beaten out of them (Max).

The men emphasised both the perception that their situations were not serious enough to merit shelter-type support, and that existing services were women-only. Some of the men also spoke about unsuccessfully searching for services that advertised themselves as being for 'abused men', and suggested that this created a perception that there was no support available. There was somewhat less consensus on a more appropriate type of formal support, with some suggesting the need for men's-only services, while others recommended mixed services. What was more evident from their responses, however, was their preferences for formal support that clearly advertises itself as available for men who have experienced abuse.

**Theme summary:** The men spoke about the lack of available support for men who have experienced abuse, and the unsuitability of existing services for men. There was little agreement on

whether an appropriate service would be restricted to men, but the participants clearly voiced their support for formal services that advertised themselves as being available to abused men.

**'I would like to get help without people knowing': Anonymity as facilitating help-seeking.**

Many of the men expressed a desire for an anonymous method of approaching formal support sources that would allow them to get information and test out a service before deciding whether they were prepared to attend a service in person.

I would probably go with a kind of service that would be like... - you phone in right, anonymously and you explain the problem. And depending on the situation they invite you in, you have a bit of an appointment and you can either continue to do it over the phone if you are not comfortable being face to face with someone (Josh).

Other men spoke about non-face-to-face sources such as helplines, letters and internet-based information as a useful starting point for finding and making contact with possible support to encourage men to consider seeking help. While some men stated they were more interested in face-to-face services where they might be able to talk about their experiences, others described themselves as preferring information and advice in a less personal manner, or that anonymity was necessary to avoid the embarrassment of others knowing about their situation.

If there is maybe like a more casual way of doing things. . . . Like having anonymous contact that might turn into um like non-anonymous contact. Having some sort of system maybe where people can just ask for advice on things, if they could kind of just maybe like a letter type approach asking for advice and could send back giving advice (Leo).

The men emphasised these methods of seeking help as likely to assist men where there was shame around the abuse and help-seeking, or where the men wanted minimal input, such as advice or information, rather than on-going support.

You want to talk to a stranger and when you know that it's going to be anonymous and it's going to be completely confidential, . . . because you don't want anyone else to find out how you truly feel about the situation (Rob).

**Theme summary:** Many of the men expressed a desire for anonymous and indirect methods of seeking help such as phone or internet contact before face-to-face contact, as a way to encourage men's help-seeking, particularly when the men felt ashamed or wanted minimal input.

**'Please tell people about it': The need for education.** Almost all of the men cited education as important for helping other men who experience abuse - both education for the men, and for

others. Many spoke specifically about the need for awareness around the fact that partner abuse against men does happen, so that the public might be more understanding, and so that men in abusive relationships might better understand what is happening to them.

I would like to get the message out there that, you know, guys not only abuse women or whatever, but women abuse guys also, . . . if there is an advert of a woman slapping a guy or constantly mocking him or getting smart to him, guys will say hey you know, that's what's happening to me (Tai).

Max spoke about public education on the likely course of abuse as a way to help men leave abusive relationships:

If you are in a situation and you've been educated on it, you can sort of go well I know what is happening here . . . and you can sort of like see where things are going before it gets there so you can steer away from it or just walk away completely.

Some of the men talked about the importance of the public understanding that abuse against men does affect them.

I suppose the one thing I would definitely like them to know is that regardless of what society expects of you, regardless of your gender, regardless of who you are or how strongly you are expected to be, everyone is capable of being vulnerable and controlled, under certain circumstances (Josh).

The men also spoke about the importance of delivering this message to men who are experiencing abuse, and suggested that this could help them to reach out to others.

Anna: "What kinds of things would they say in them [campaigns] that would be useful?"

Rob: "It's okay to feel like shit, like it's okay."

Similarly, some of the men emphasised the importance of the message that it is okay for a man to seek help for abuse- both to help encourage men to do so, and to help the public understand.

You know how they have those ads on TV like you know 'domestic violence, oh if you're a guy you can go and get help too, like it's okay' kind of thing, yeah something like that. That would definitely help. Cause it would make me feel like it's normal to feel this. It's normal, like it does happen. So it would be okay for me to go get help about this (Jared).

Finally, some of the men stressed the importance of encouraging men to reach out to others when experiencing abuse, despite the difficulties involved in doing so. "I think I would want them to know . . . it's okay to get help. . . . Don't feel afraid to get help (Leo).

**Theme summary:** Many of the men spoke about the importance of education for both male victims and the general public as a way to assist men who experience partner abuse. This education has four main facets - partner abuse does happen to men, it's okay not to feel okay about it, it's okay to ask for help, and it's important to ask for help.

**To summarise the men's recommendations,** the men expressed concern about the lack of available support and voiced their support for formal services that specifically advertise themselves as available to men. They suggested that anonymous and indirect methods to make contact with these help sources could assist men's help-seeking, and stressed the importance of education for both abused men and the general public.

## Study 2

The findings for study two have been divided according to the two final research questions, which related to young people's ideas about partner abuse and how these relate to gender, and exploring their ideas about young people's help-seeking for abuse. While the vignettes dealt with the issues of abuse against men and women separately, participants discussed both issues side-by-side during the vignette discussion and the remainder of the focus group. The data have therefore not been separated by vignette. There were also no consistent differences between the men's and women's groups in terms of the ideas discussed. Therefore, the data for the second study were combined across the vignettes and groups. The gender of the participants cited has been given for each of the quotes, with a 'w' for women and an 'm' for men. There was some variation as to whether the themes described below were labelled as a cultural stereotype or as participants' own views of gender as it related to relationships, and the implications of this will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Table two: List of themes from study two

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<b>Participants' views and beliefs about partner abuse against men</b>
'Men as invulnerable': Conceptions of men as powerful and inviolable
'Women as powerless': Conceptions of women as lacking social and physical power
'It's funny when women beat men': The humorous potential of partner abuse against men

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<b>Participants' views and beliefs about help-seeking for partner abuse</b>
'Don't seek help unless you have to': Help-seeking as a less preferable option
'No need for support': Images of men as not needing help or support
'How men present the abuse is important': Variability in men's presentation may relate to variability in the outcome of self-disclosure

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### **Participants' views and beliefs about partner abuse against men**

Three major themes were drawn from the data that related to abuse and gender: 'men as invulnerable', 'women as powerless', and 'it's funny when women beat men'.

**'Men as invulnerable': Conceptions of men as powerful and inviolable.** The focus group participants frequently spoke about a perception of men and masculinity as inconsistent with partner abuse victimhood, in that they were described as powerful, strong, unable to be sexually violated and emotionally impervious to abuse or violence.

The participants often described men as powerful masters of their circumstances, who were able to actively choose their experiences and find solutions where there were conflicts in a relationship. For example, statements such as "men tend to have more power" (w), and "guys are assumed to have more power" (m) were common during the discussion. The portrayal of men as powerful sometimes included a description of men as being in control of the situation where they experienced violence or abuse in a relationship, suggesting that they were consciously 'allowing' their partner to abuse them:

I don't think that female abuse within relationships is going to be like her beating up the man, it's just going to be her like slapping him and punching him in the nose and stuff, but like he could have won or whatever but she just sort of got away with it (m).

The idea that men are 'allowing abuse' was also reflected in participants' discussion of the vignettes. Many participants expressing surprise or frustration with the male victim for 'allowing' his partner to control and hit him, with comments including "Rose is more dominant it seems cause Tim's letting

her sort of control him" (w), and "Tim kind of let her do all that and then like I just kind of think if that happens with a guy, he's a bit of like the type of guy who is willing to be pushed over by women" (m). Other participants spoke of a perception of men as being in control of their exposure to abuse by being able to leave at any time:

Deep down I feel like she can't do anything to him because he's able to like stop her if he wanted to at any point, and I feel like he has autonomy to be like 'hey that's not okay, I'm going to leave you if you do it again' (w).

The description of men as being in control also included the implication that men cannot be controlled by a woman: "We assume that a girl being emotionally manipulative the guy is actually in control anyway like underlying there the guy actually has it together. . . . she's still not going to get him to do what he doesn't want to do" (m).

The participants variously described the concept of men as powerful as a cultural stereotype, and as their own viewpoint. However, some conflicting ideas were expressed, with some directly questioning the concept with statements such as: "There are scenarios where the girl does have power" (m), and "You said about men having more authority; I don't know if I'd agree with that entirely" (w).

As well as men's social power, the greater size and strength of the average man when compared with the average woman was frequently discussed by participants, with statements like "a woman is weak and a man is strong" (w), and "they're [the girl is] like this little person and he's huge"" (w). Participants again associated the portrayal of men as big and strong with the idea that men can either prevent or halt any violence against them by women:

It's always been thought that males should be sort of like maybe like stronger than females and . . . if the situation gets out of hand, put like the stop on the bottle. The male should be able to control these kinds of situations, when it comes to like physical violence. So I think maybe like the fact that a woman is like physically abusing a man, it just seems a bit weird I guess to a lot of people. It's like you are stronger than her, like how is she hitting you (m).

Many of the participants spoke about men as being able to halt physical violence from women by restraining them, 'fighting back', or 'taking care of' the situation: "When a female hits a guy it's not as scary, just because the guys can usually defend themselves" (w). However, while the perceived ability of men to prevent or stop violence was frequently linked with average physical size and strength, others emphasised the unique contribution of gender-based views over and above the perceived strength advantage:

I think there's still going to be something about gender there. I don't think even if the gender thing is mostly to do with like a physical thing and that, that men are stronger than women, um it's not going to go away just if the man's not as strong looking (m).

Some participants, both men and women, disagreed altogether with the notion of men as being able to restrain women. For a small number, this was related to the *difficulty* of restraining women, while others emphasised the *risk* of social sanctions to men if they hurt a woman:

If a girl instigates violence, I mean I'm sure that we can't see these people but judging that a guy could probably defend himself, but if he does and does anything to hurt, like leaves any kind of a mark, then that's game over (m).

The description of men as invulnerable was extended by many participants to include control over their sexual activities, such that forcing or coercing men in to sexual activity was described by some as unlikely or impossible: "You can't rape a guy because they have to, like, biologically consent" (w). Similar to the descriptions of men as able to stop violence and manipulation, several participants spoke about popular conceptions of men as being able to stop sexual attacks against them:

If the guy went and reported it [rape], yeah he's the victim but part of it might be like 'well why didn't' you do something about it', with the girl it's automatically you're the victim you know we need to support you (m).

Some participants described the sexual abuse of men as likely restricted to insults or 'withholding sex', rather than physical or verbal coercion of sex or rape, due to a perception of men as sexually inviolable: "Biologically it makes more sense for a guy to sexually abuse a girl than it does for a girl to sexually abuse a guy, . . . a woman's primarily way, and there's exceptions to it by all means, is to withhold sex" (w). It is perhaps notable that few participants discussed sexual abuse against men at all, and those who did predominantly discussed it in the terms outlined above. While one of the women commented on the perception that men cannot be violated by women as a societal stereotype, there were no comments that directly contradicted the assertion that men could not be raped or coerced in to sexual activity. Several participants commented on their surprise when the issue was raised, and related this to conceptions of sexual abuse as a problem of men's abuse against women, and of men as sexually inviolable.

Several participants described men as less likely to be emotionally affected by abuse and violence than women where it does occur: "I feel like it's more likely, if a girl hits a guy, the guy is more likely not to be bothered by it say than if it was the other way around" (m). While this was not

expanded by all of the participants who mentioned the theme, some described this as relating to a lower likelihood of men feeling to blame for the abuse they experience:

Women might more, I don't know, like make it more emotional about themselves, maybe internalise it a bit more. . . . And if men have experienced it, it might be, I don't know, a little bit more about the situation or they might dismiss it a bit more and externalise it (w).

However, there were some contradictions to this idea, with several male and female participants describing vulnerabilities and possible emotional consequences for male abuse victims, such as fear and shame:

Especially in New Zealand we are seen as this macho society where men are the macho men and they take that role and to be almost vulnerable in a situation like this it can be quite scary I would imagine for some men (w).

Thus, while some participants described men as emotionally invulnerable to abuse and violence, others did not support this subtheme, suggesting variation in the adherence to such a belief.

**Theme summary:** Many participants described their perceptions or cultural stereotypes of men as depicting men as socially and physically powerful, and invulnerable sexually and emotionally. They portrayed an image of men as impervious to abuse, with the power to either prevent abuse and manipulation, halt it, or leave an abusive situation with ease. This was linked with ideas of men as actively choosing to allow abuse where it does take place. The theme was not universally supported, with some participants expressing contrary views. However, the conception of men as invulnerable was strongly portrayed by many of the participants, and as will be outlined below, these ideas were frequently referenced when discussing appraisals of women's partner abuse against men and men's need for support.

**'Women as powerless': Conceptions of women as lacking social and physical power.** In strong contrast to their descriptions of men, participants frequently spoke about women as being powerless, vulnerable and defenceless, and as a result, being incapable of seriously harming a male partner.

Participants talked about women needing protection due to a greater vulnerability, and described both social controls on men's use of violence, and a duty to protect women as resulting from this. Many of the participants described a sense of duty to 'step in' when women are perceived to be at risk of violence, whether or not this is actually the case. Participants frequently described

this as a reason for the particular focus on helping women who are in violent relationships, rather than men:

Society has conditioned us to like, you know, like you said girls are seen as more fragile so if a girl gets hit then it's quite serious. Like 'she can't defend herself' like mentality and 'we have to help her' but if it's a guy it's like, like 'he'll stand up by himself', like 'he'll pick himself up off the ground', that kind of thing (m).

Participants also frequently spoke about social rules concerning men's use of violence towards women, and the social consequences of breaking such rules: "I was always conditioned and really drilled into me like don't you lay a finger [on a girl], like there's no grey area" (m). This included rules prohibiting men's use of force against an abusive partner, suggesting a conflict between perceptions of men as able to 'fight back' or physically restrain their partners, and the risk of facing social sanctions should they do so: "As society, we perceive it being okay to a degree for a woman to fight back, whereas if a guy does it straight away it's just no, you know" (w). As was noted briefly in the previous theme, several participants discussed the social and legal risk that men faced when using physical force as including any use of self-defence, as the use of any force by men against women was portrayed as 'never okay', no matter the reasoning: "You don't want to be in a scenario where you're restraining one another because . . . as soon as you use your physical strength, it becomes your fault" (m). Some participants also spoke about social rules around men's psychological or emotional abuse towards women: "I think it's quite to a degree . . . acceptable for a woman to kind of emotionally manipulate the guy to a small extent where if a guy does it in any kind of sense it's quite wrong" (m).

As noted in the previous theme, participants spoke about women as unable to manipulate men or harm them psychologically. Some participants also described a view or stereotype of women as incapable of physically harming a man:

I think men are seen or perceived to not be able to be hurt, you know by a woman, because a woman is weak and a man is strong and what damage could a woman do anyway, even if they did hit you (w).

Consistent with this, many of the participants described the female perpetrator in the discussion vignettes as 'not a threat', linked with the idea that she is unable to seriously harm her boyfriend, despite the vignette describing her as having already demonstrated physical violence towards him, with statements such as: "I think that if Rose was, you know, strong enough, she would probably knock him out. But she doesn't have that capacity" (w), and "As it is if she's kind of a slight figure I

probably wouldn't think that he's unsafe per se" (m). As can be seen from these quotes, participants referred to Rose's diminutive size when assessing her risk to Tim, despite having been given no such detail in the vignettes.

However, while participants did not portray women as a physical risk to men, they emphasised women's use of psychological abuse in terms of verbal attacks and manipulation: "When a man abuses a woman I think it tends to be physical more so than you know, when the woman abuses the man it's more like it could be the mental or psychological" (m). Some of the focus group participants (men and women) described women as *more* likely to be psychologically abusive than men: "You get a lot more emotional manipulation and, ah like derogatory comments and that kind of stuff from women than you necessary would of men" (m).

**Theme summary:** Participants frequently described women as powerless and vulnerable, and thus both in need of protection from men's violence and incapable of physically or psychologically harming men. However, participants also spoke about women as using psychological abuse within relationships, with some suggesting women were more likely than men to be verbally or psychologically abusive. As with the above theme, many participants described this theme as impacting on what they say about women's partner abuse towards men.

**'It's funny when women beat men': The humorous potential of partner abuse against men.** Similar to the description of men's use of force towards women as being 'never okay', some participants also described partner abuse from men to women as 'never funny'. By contrast, women's partner abuse towards men was described by many participants as potentially humorous: "The movies, there are some like, like the girl beats the guy or something but that's comedy, people laugh at that. It's funny. But when you know like the opposite happens, it's serious, you know" (m).

The participants related this perception of abuse as comedic to both physical violence and psychological abuse, but did not mention their perceptions of sexual violence. While the comments frequently related to participants' evaluations of partner abuse as depicted in the cinema, the humorous potential of real-life partner abuse against men was also mentioned by several participants, with emphasis on the above-mentioned theme of men as invulnerable to women, and the related assertion that if a man is not able to be truly harmed by abuse, it is not a serious matter as it is for women: "Deep down I feel like she can't do anything to him . . . that's why I think it's funny" (w).

Some participants emphasised the importance of gender over a consideration of size or risk to the victim when it came to deciding whether partner abuse was humorous:

I think people would be more likely to chuckle a little bit hearing about a little guy getting chased by a shot put throwing woman, you know. And even though it's not really any funnier than how tragic it is if it was a shot put throwing man chasing after a little woman like there seems to be a difference there (m).

However, a few participants also spoke about more serious abuse as being non-comedic, for example, talking about abuse as not funny past "the point when the girl has the ability to seriously harm the guy" (m), or saying "If it was something like stabbing then obviously nobody is going to be laughing about that" (w).

**Theme summary:** Many participants stated that abuse against men could be funny, both in the cinema and in real life, and linked this with conceptions of abuse victimisation as a choice on the part of the man, with violence by women not putting men at serious risk. In contrast, partner abuse against women was described as 'never funny'. A small number of participants asserted that a greater perceived risk to the victim could reduce the likelihood that the incident would be considered humorous, although others emphasised the particular importance of gender in people's assessment of abuse, rather than the risk to the victim.

**To summarise the young people's perceptions of partner abuse against men,** the focus group participants frequently spoke about perceptions of men as socially and physically powerful, and invulnerable sexually and emotionally. In contrast, they described women as powerless and vulnerable, requiring protection from men and being incapable of causing harm to men. They related these ideas to perceptions of abuse against men as potentially humorous, unlike that against women.

### **Participants' views and beliefs about help-seeking for partner abuse**

The analysis for the final research question yielded three themes: 'don't seek help unless you have to', 'no need for support', and 'how men present the abuse is important'.

**'Don't seek help unless you have to': Help-seeking as a less preferable option.** Participants predominantly spoke about seeking help as a less preferred option, even a last resort, for *both* young men and women experiencing partner abuse. This was predominantly linked with a portrayal of help services as supporting those who choose to stay in the relationship, as being for those suffering prolonged rather than short-term abuse, and that help-seeking may make the situation worse. This theme was discussed for both men and women as victims and particularly for young

victims, although there were some differences in the recommendations made for the men and women in the vignettes.

Professional help was frequently described by participants as inappropriate for situations in which the abuse was not prolonged, nor put the victim at serious risk of physical harm or death. This was particularly emphasised for police or domestic violence organisations, but was also cited for counselling support. The threshold for such involvement was predominantly described as the choice of the partner who is subjected to abusive behaviour or as dictated by whether they felt unsafe, although it was a frequent assertion that the threshold had not been met in either of the vignettes presented to participants: “You normally think like these are all quite private sort of issues and to get some professional domestic help I think it would have to be really at the high level” (w). As can be seen in this quote, several participants specifically cited the ‘private nature’ of abuse as a reason to avoid involving others if possible.

The advice that victims should only contact police or domestic violence services for serious risk was presented by some as being due to a likelihood that the partners may successfully resolve the issue or put a stop to unwanted behaviour independently, and by others as due to the potential to damage any ongoing relations between the partners should third parties be involved, because of the resentment or mistrust this may engender, causing damage to an already difficult relationship between the partners. One participant described this in relation to a woman experiencing abuse from her boyfriend: “I don’t see the point of you loving someone and then getting them arrested and going through all this hard time, . . . from the boyfriend’s point of view they will actually feel that, you know, ‘she was such a bitch to me’” (w). This was described as the case whether the violence or abuse was a single incident or prolonged, and was particularly emphasised where the perpetrator was deemed to have ‘made a mistake’, or expressed regret for his or her actions.

Many participants spoke about immediately leaving the relationship as the preferred option for responding to partner abuse, in preference to seeking help or support from friends, family or professionals: “I think there’s a point where people need to say hey you know what, it’s not working out, let’s just stop” (w). This was particularly emphasised for young people and people in newer relationships, as these were described as situations where it was easier to leave relationships: “[At age] 22 . . . you’re not married to that person so you have to make this thing work, so you can leave and you can find someone else” (w).

A second option that was frequently suggested was the partners resolving the issue between themselves privately, again in preference to seeking help. In particular, participants focused on the

importance of clear and assertive communication between the partners in preventing and resolving abusive behaviour. There was a strong emphasis placed by participants on the responsibility of the victim of an abusive action to communicate his or her distress and/or disapproval of the behaviour to the perpetrator, as a way of educating the perpetrator and resolving differences in accepted behaviours between the partners. This was described as the appropriate action whether or not the couple stayed together. Here, a participant describes this in relation to abuse from a woman to a man: “I think she should at least explain to him why, explain to him why it’s not okay to hit people and be verbally abusive so that in his next relationship he hopefully won’t do that again” (w).

The preference for private resolution of conflict and abuse was not universal, with some participants speaking about support from friends or family, or advice or intervention from professionals such as counsellors, domestic violence organisations or police as an option for both victims and perpetrators of abusive behaviours. However, this was a less commonly supported option during the focus groups, and many of the participants emphasised the desirability of options other than seeking informal or formal help for both young men and women who experience abuse.

Few participants commented on the different recommendations they would make for men and women who experience partner abuse, although there were slight differences in the recommendations made between the two vignettes. Most notably, although some participants cited contacting the police as an option for the female victim in the vignette, this was not advocated by any participants as an option for the male victim. Participants were also more likely to cite fear and safety concerns in their choice of help-sources for the abused woman than for the abused man, for example, one woman said: “She might be quite scared to talk to him, so I think there are definitely a lot of organisations out there that she could definitely reach out to if she felt unsafe”. However, the majority of comments continued to support a ‘private’ resolution of partner abuse by the victim communicating to the perpetrator as preferable to either gender seeking help from third parties.

**Theme summary:** Participants expressed a preference for young men and women who experience partner abuse to leave the relationship or resolve the issue independently between the partners, rather than seek outside intervention by a third party. Intervention by professionals was described as more appropriate for prolonged and continuing abuse, rather than single incidents or short-term difficulties among young people, and the possible risks of seeking help in terms of damaging ongoing relations between the partners were emphasised. There were some differences with regards to participants’ recommendations for young men and women and in particular, contacting the police was not proffered as an option for a male victim, but overall, the preference against seeking help from others was endorsed for all young victims of partner abuse.

**‘No need for support’: Images of men as not needing help or support.** While participants positioned seeking support as a last resort for both men and women who experience abuse, men were sometimes described as not needing support at all, either formal or informal. As one participant put it, a man can “handle it by himself” (m). Some participants spoke about men’s physical power when discussing the disparity in services available to men and women who have experienced abuse, and emphasised the lack of need for services, particularly those with primarily protective functions such as refuges, if men were able to independently prevent or stop violence against them: “Purpose of the Women’s Refuge though is to sort of really to physically protect her because the man can physically dominate her and physically stop her from leaving. . . . I just don’t see Men’s Refuge as being [necessary]” (m).

Several of the men in the focus groups also spoke about their perceptions that as men, they were expected not to require or use assistance.

It’s just so sort of like ingrained into our minds that as guys we should be independent, we should be strong, we should be able to handle, yeah like handle everything ourselves, we don’t need help, that kind of thinking. It’s very hard to break that (m).

Others emphasised the internalisation of the link between masculinity and independence in problem-solving, with men feeling confident that as men they wouldn’t require assistance: “He might just say to himself I’m a guy, I can handle this and keep it to [himself]” (m).

Several participants emphasised perceptions of men as powerful and privileged as a reason that men do not require support: “Men tend to have more power and that’s why you just think that they don’t need any help. Like they have the authority, why would they need [it]” (w). Others, while not ruling out the possibility that men may require support, described them as not deserving to be offered help because of their relative power and privilege when compared to women.

People just think like men are really privileged. There’s no way that they should deserve help . . . , they’re the one that’s seen with more money, they’re the one that’s seen with more power so it’s kind of like well they really wanted help they could just get it, I mean if they ever needed it (w).

While this was not a commonly discussed theme, it was strongly promoted by a number of participants as a reason for differences in approach to men and women who experience partner abuse. It should be noted, however, that while there was no direct dissent to the view that men’s power meant that they did not require assistance, some participants spoke of their concern over the

lack of services for men, or their hope that others would provide advice or support to men who disclosed abuse, suggesting variable endorsement of this theme.

**Theme summary:** Some participants spoke about ideas of men as not needing or deserving help when they experience partner abuse, and many cited conceptions of masculinity in relation to this, such as independence, power and privilege. This was again not a universally endorsed idea, but was cited by several participants as a reason against offering help or providing protective services to men who have experienced abuse.

**‘How men present the abuse is important’: Variability in men’s presentation may relate to variability in the outcome of self-disclosure.** Participants expressed an expectation that any disclosure of abuse by men might be met with disbelief by friends, family and professionals, and that this may mean that the available support people are unable or unwilling to provide men with the support they seek: “He’s a guy, so I’m worried that if he does get them [police or domestic violence organisations] involved they might not believe him” (w). Again consistent with study one, several of the men and women in study two spoke about the risk of ridicule to abused men, or being told to ‘harden up’ by friends, should they seek help: “My mates would just hassle me about it. Be like oh man up or whatever” (m).

A small number of participants described one possible factor that might influence the likelihood of a supportive response, in that the *manner* in which a man presents his self-disclosure may make a difference to the way it is received: “You get a lot from the way they present it to you” (m), such that it is less likely to be regarded humorously, and more likely to be taken seriously if the man presents his self-disclosure in a serious manner, displaying his distress and the serious nature of the abuse:

I think the thing is the different degrees that they say it, whether . . . they say it as a joke, the other person will take it as a joke, whether they say it you know a bit more serious then it will either be ‘harden up’ depending on the circumstances and the people or it will be ‘is there an actual problem’(m).

If someone just sat down and like hey I want to talk to you for a second . . . then you’d kind of assume that they’re not going to be exaggerating for a humorous effect or anything like that (m).

This subtheme was mentioned only by men, although it was not a central topic of the focus groups and it is unclear whether the idea would be endorsed more widely, including by women if directly asked about. The participants particularly discussed this theme in terms of the likelihood

that partner abuse against a man will be taken as humorous, and as can be seen in the above theme 'it's funny when women beat men', reference was made to the use of jokes about partner abuse against men by comedians and public speakers. The importance of men's self-presentation when disclosing abuse was contrasted with abuse against women, which was described as invariably 'not okay', and unhumorous, regardless of how it was presented: "If a girl was selling you the story about some guy hitting her and it was like humorous you'd be like 'no that's not on'" (m).

**Theme summary:** The participants spoke about the risk that men's help-seeking efforts may not be taken seriously, and suggested that the potential for an unsympathetic response to men's help-seeking may be reduced should a man present his experience in a 'serious' manner or display his distress. This was in contrast with their assessment of women's stories of abuse, which were portrayed as consistently eliciting condemnation.

**To summarise the young people's views and beliefs about help-seeking for partner abuse,** many participants expressed a preference for young men and women who have experienced abuse to resolve the issues privately and independent of assistance, and some described images of men as powerful as influencing the idea that they do not need assistance when they do experience abuse. However, they also expressed concern about the lack of appropriate support for abused men, including the risk of encountering an unsympathetic response to help-seeking. They suggested that this risk may be reduced where men clearly present their situation in a manner that emphasises their distress or the seriousness of the abuse.

## Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions

This thesis aimed to address the paucity of research on young men's experiences of partner abuse in relationships with women. The study examined the young men's descriptions of their experience of these relationships, their decisions around and experiences of help-seeking for their experiences, and their recommendations for facilitating help-seeking among young men who have experienced abuse. The study also examined the backdrop of peer beliefs and attitudes regarding partner abuse against men, the relevance of gender, and help-seeking for partner abuse. This chapter outlines the interpretation of the findings presented in chapter three, and places them in the context of prior research. It also outlines the limitations of this study, and its implications for both practice and future research.

### **Research question one: How do young men who have been abused by a female intimate partner describe these experiences?**

The findings from study one suggested the men felt attacked and controlled by their partners and had difficulty leaving the relationships. The men described both a complex mix of emotions and enduring modifications in their perceptions of relationships as a result of the abuse. The men's stories included a wide range of behaviours usually labelled as abusive, such as physical, verbal, sexual and legal attacks, control, coercion and manipulation. This is consistent with previous research which has found similar accounts of multiple different forms of abuse experienced by men as well as women, and often multiple forms of abuse and violence within the same relationships (Tsui, 2014).

I found the inclusion of arguments in the men's descriptions of the distressing aspects of their relationships interesting, as it was not commonly included in the literature that was reviewed in chapter one. The men did not specifically label the arguments as abusive, but were clear that these engendered significant effects on their wellbeing, such as feeling 'under attack', and that the relationship was 'toxic'. It is possible that the men's emphasis on the arguments within their relationships reflects a differing focus between the victims of abuse and those who research it. Contrary to much of the literature, which focuses on abuse as socially unacceptable behaviours perpetrated by one partner against another (e.g. I. M. Johnson & Sigler, 2000), the men may instead have focused on aspects of their relationships they found difficult or distressing. This is in line with a recent move in the literature towards a wider and more inclusive scope for conflict research to

encompass bilateral and less severe violence (e.g. M. P. Johnson, 2008), and it may be beneficial to further broaden this scope in the future to examine difficult experiences in relationships more broadly, rather than treating the experience of abuse and other relationship distress as separate phenomena.

Sexual violence, while only reported by one of the men, also merits consideration, as sexual violence against men is frequently overlooked in the literature. While only mentioned by one participant within the current study, it is clear that sexual violence should be considered when the full spectrum of partner abuse is explored. Josh is not alone in his experiences - other men have reported sexual assaults by women (New Zealand Police, 2015), and young men have reported being held down and forced to have sex by partners (S. M. Jackson et al., 2000). Josh's account and the distress he described supports the importance of both researching sexual violence against men, and taking seriously the possible consequences of such violence. Another less frequently mentioned form of abuse was misuse of the legal system. While such incidents are likely to be rare, false reporting, ostensibly to harm one's partner, has been recorded in past research (e.g. Hines et al., 2007), and it may perhaps be an important area for further examination to inform intervention, particularly given the direct part that public services play in the enactment of such abuse.

The men described having difficulty leaving their relationships, including making the decision to leave and successfully enacting this. This is in contrast to the finding from study two, in which the young people spoke about men as powerfully in control of their circumstances, and able to leave the relationship easily whenever they want to. Difficulties with identifying that there 'is a problem' worthy of leaving have been frequently identified in the literature that has examined adult men's decisions to leave abusive relationships (Migliaccio, 2002) as well as women's (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010), and may be a factor in men's lower rates of leaving abusive relationships (Ackerman, 2012). The young men in study one also emphasised being 'talked out of' leaving by their partners or others and returning to relationships that had made them unhappy. This is a little explored facet of the leaving process for both men and women, although Fanslow and Robinson (2010) identified 'he asked me to' as one of the reasons many women return to abusive relationships. The finer details of these conversations and their influence on people's decisions to stay or leave is not known, and deserves further attention if we are to better understand the barriers and facilitators to both men's and women's leaving abusive relationships.

Past research has focused on older men than the current study, and has identified factors such as financial dependence, legal or practical issues around marriage or having children, the possible loss of familiar living conditions, and psychological dependence to be reasons why men may

delay or refuse to leave relationships in which they have been abused by women (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001). The men in the current study did not have any children, none were married, and few were officially living with their partners at the time of the relationship. They may thus represent quite a different group to those examined in the past. The current study found that the decision and act of leaving the abusive relationship was nevertheless difficult for them, and suggests that it is not only women and older men who have difficulty leaving abusive relationships, but also young men.

The men cited a similar range of emotions to previous research with abused men in general and abused young men in particular, including sadness, anger, shame, fear and confusion (e.g. Follingstad et al., 1991; S. M. Jackson et al., 2000). The literature on women's experiences has also identified a similar range of emotions, including fear, low self-esteem, depression, anger, and shame (Jordan, Nietzel, Walker, & Logan, 2004). As with Durfee's (2011) study with older men, the men appeared to place less emphasis on their experiences of fear than women, and there was no clear evidence of PTSD symptomology which often appears in women's accounts. However, several did speak about fear, and the range of emotions reported in this and other studies appear to be broadly similar across the accounts of men and women, and younger and older populations, although the proportions of each population reporting different emotions may vary (e.g. Follingstad et al., 1991; Migliaccio, 2002).

Some researchers have argued that partner abuse against men is likely to be less serious, due to their relatively low levels of reported fear (e.g. Holtzworth-Monroe, 2005a). The current study, along with the results of previous research which has found similar emotional reactions, suggest the importance of widening the focus past fear, to encompass the full range of emotional experience of both men and women in abusive relationships. The current emphasis on fear not only limits the recognition of men's experience, who may be less likely to report feeling fearful for the same experience (Holtzworth-Monroe, 2005b), it also limits our understanding of women's experience of abuse. The men's stories affirm the lesson that there is no one way to feel about abuse, and it is a complex issue that results in complex emotions.

While there were only two men who reported bilateral violence, their stories suggest that bilateral as well as unilateral abuse may cause distress, and that young men may hold negative and distressing emotions about both their victimisation and perpetration experiences. The effects of perpetration and victimisation within abusive relationships have seldom been differentiated, and it may be useful for further research to investigate how this might affect the treatment needed by people in bilaterally abusive relationships. It is also interesting to note the men's focus regarding the outcomes of abuse, in that they emphasised the emotional effects of abuse over the physical, even

when there was physical violence. Some of the men did report sustaining injuries, and yet they specifically emphasised the emotional effects of the abuse as more difficult to sustain than the physical ones. This may be due to a downplaying of physical vulnerability, in line with popular constructions of masculinity (Hollander, 2001), or may reflect a lesser frequency or importance of physical effects for the men over the previously noted emotional effects.

Young adulthood is frequently a time where people form their first romantic relationships, and learn about how to behave in relationships (D. L. Bell, Rosenberger, & Ott, 2015). The young men spoke about alterations in their perceptions of relationships as a result of the abuse, suggesting they may suffer lasting consequences in terms of reticence to form new relationships or emotionally intimate bonds in those relationships, or may feel unable to protect themselves from further abuse or unwanted experiences. This is relatively unexplored territory for partner abuse research, and the possible effects of abuse on young men's conceptions of relationships warrants further investigation.

Alongside the difficult emotional experience that the men all described, many simultaneously asserted that the abuse 'was not a big deal'. Previous research that has identified similar reactions, such as men saying they felt okay about the abuse or laughing when speaking about it, have concluded that this may be an indication of the lack of consequences suffered by men after partner abuse (e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Holtzworth-Monroe, 2005a). However, the current study suggested that assertions that they can 'handle' abuse or that it was 'okay' do not correspond with an absence of negative effects. Their responses may instead be linked with a wider pattern in which men are unsure of the legitimacy of their experiences as they differ from the stereotype of partner abuse (Hamel, 2005), or are expected (or expect themselves) to 'harden up' and maintain control over their life circumstances (Courtenay, 2000). Indeed, the men spoke about such expectations in their descriptions of the public's views on partner abuse (as can be seen in the next section of this chapter). Their descriptions of their experiences as 'not that bad' may also reflect a tendency for men to cope with difficult situations through avoidance or denial, particularly when those experiences also conflict with masculine ideals (Warren, 1983). Again, this would reflect the presence, rather than the absence of distress.

Thus, the men in the current study described multiple forms of abuse, including feeling physically, sexually, verbally and legally attacked, manipulated and controlled. They also described difficulty leaving the relationships, a complex mix of emotions, and alteration of their perceptions of relationships. Many of the themes identified in the men's accounts of their experiences have also been identified in previous research with older men (e.g. Follingstad et al., 1991; Migliaccio, 2001);

this suggests similarities between the experience of abuse for men of different age groups, despite the differences in living situation and relationship status (Nowinski & Bowen, 2012). The findings add to the evidence that men, including young men, can be negatively affected by partner abuse, and that the range of negative outcomes associated with abuse are much wider than the often-cited fear and injury. This study further identifies a potential conflict between reports that the abuse 'wasn't that bad' or reports that they have 'laughed off' abuse, and a negative underlying emotional and cognitive experience, supporting the importance of further investigating the experience of victims who describe themselves as 'coping' or unaffected. The findings also support the importance of conceptions of masculinity to the way in which men understand and respond to partner abuse, including their understanding of and feelings around their experiences, and the way in which they talk about it to others.

**Research question two: How do these men describe their decisions about and experiences of seeking help for partner abuse?**

The findings from study one suggest that young men who experience partner abuse may feel invisible and misunderstood by others, including the risk of being seen as the 'true abuser' in the relationship. They described a fear of an unempathetic or negative reaction if they told others about the abuse, and spoke about hiding both the abuse and their distress from others. However, this was contrasted with the few who had disclosed aspects of the abuse to others, who predominantly described it as a positive experience.

The men spoke about their perceptions that the public were unaware of the issue of abuse against men, that it lacked recognition in the public discourse and the media, and that when it was acknowledged, this was frequently with a lack of awareness of the gravity of the issue. Consistent with the findings from study two, the men also linked these perceptions to wider discourses around masculinity and manhood, such as the description of men as emotionally strong. However, the men did not report that they thought *themselves* unmanly for having experienced abuse, rather their discussion focused on their fears of being thought unmanly by others. This supports the particular importance of gender hegemony and the need to prove oneself as a man to others, as suggested by writers such as Anderson (2009), in men's experiences of abuse.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given their expectations of the public's attitudes to abused men, the men all described a fear of an unsupportive reaction from others when seeking help, such as being judged, ridiculed, rejected, or told to 'harden up'. The men spoke about masculinity and

constructions of 'real men' as being incompatible with seeking help, particularly for partner abuse, and that they may face denigration or emasculation should they choose to tell others about their experiences. Past research has also identified embarrassment and stigmatisation around the abuse or a fear of disbelief and ridicule as barriers to men's help-seeking for abuse (Hines & Douglas, 2009; Tsui, 2010), and while the literature has focused on these worries with regards to peers and professionals, the current research suggests that young men may also fear similar reactions from their parents.

Stigma and anticipated stigma have similarly been consistently noted as prominent barriers to women's help-seeking for abuse, with stigma primarily relating to shame around staying in an abusive relationship, that others may think the women had 'brought it on themselves', or that they may not consider partner abuse to be an important issue (Moore, Sargent, Ferranti, & Gonzalez-Guarda, 2015; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013). However, while stigma and judgement were frequently cited by the young men in the current study as reasons to avoid seeking help, the social discourses they spoke about specifically related to manhood and abuse, such as a lack of understanding that men can be abused, and expectations of men to be 'staunch' and to deal with their problems independently. It is possible that while fear of stigmatisation is a common experience among both men and women, the particular social context of abuse for each gender influences the particular content of those fears.

The findings of previous research, along with the current study, suggest that the men's perceptions are unlikely to be entirely unreasonable, given the public's gender-based discourses around abuse and its effects (e.g. Zverina et al., 2011). However, whether or not these conceptions reflect the beliefs of the public, they are important in that they are likely to strongly impact on the men's sense of isolation and decisions about whether they seek help and support. Abuse victims often weigh up what they perceive to be the likely costs and benefits of seeking help (Liang et al., 2005), and if their conceptions of the attitudes and knowledge of those around them are unfavourable, this may influence the men's decisions about seeking help from them. Indeed, the men described their fears that these beliefs may translate in to an unempathetic reaction by their friends, parents or professionals as part of their decision not to seek help from these sources. Importantly, the men's accounts often suggested a desire for support and fear of seeking such support, rather than a lack of interest in support as might be supposed if they strongly identified with orthodox masculinity. This is similar to findings in the field of men's physical health (O'Brien et al., 2005), and again supports the importance of gendered social expectations in the lives of men (Connell, 2005).

Several of the men also expressed a fear that requests for help may be met with further danger to themselves, in terms of the risk of being labelled as the 'true abuser' in a society that conceptualises partner abuse as a problem of men's violence towards women. This was also cited as a danger for men who inadvertently harmed their partner in the course of self-defence, or whose partner falsely accused them of abuse. Consistent with research that has suggested that women's abuse towards men is a self-defensive measure (e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 2004), and interviews with men who have felt accused of being the perpetrator when they have sought help (e.g. Douglas et al., 2012; McCarrick, in press; Migliaccio, 2002), the men's stories demonstrate the consequences of highly gendered conceptions of abuse. This can include a reluctance to defend themselves when they are put at physical risk (Lewis & Sarantakos, 2001), meaning that men may be prevented from taking measures to keep themselves safe when in physically violent relationships. It can also heighten the emotional difficulties, confusion and fear experienced by men after being subjected to abuse (Allen-Collinson, 2009; McCarrick, in press).

The theme also demonstrates the effects of chivalry norms that prioritise women's safety above men's, and condemn any harm that comes to women from men, no matter the cause. One could conceptualise the feared label as a form of victim-blaming, something that has been identified in research with both men and women (Hine, 2015; Moore et al., 2015). However, the men's stories, along with those in previous research support the particular difficulty men encounter in not only conveying the legitimacy of their victimhood, but also in working against assumptions that they have perpetrated violence or abuse themselves.

While the prevalence of such experiences for young abused men is unclear, past research has frequently cited examples in which older men feared such reactions (Hines & Douglas, 2009; Tsui, 2010), and in which they experienced ridicule, were denied help from formal sources, or were accused of being the 'true perpetrator' (Douglas et al., 2012; McCarrick, in press). As I stated in chapter three, my own experiences of searching for support for young men was consistent with this, being given multiple referrals to men's perpetrator programmes when I contacted domestic violence hotlines and organisations. The current study suggests that young men may fear such reactions from both formal and informal sources of help. Again, the men's perceptions may or may not represent an objective risk of being labelled in this manner, but could influence their decisions to seek help, and their decisions to use self-defence measures where they are at physical risk.

The men also described hiding the abuse from those around them. They related this to the potentially negative reaction of others should they find out about the abuse, as well as feelings of defensiveness or desire to protect their partners from others' negative opinions. Indeed, research

has consistently shown low levels of help-seeking among men who experience abuse (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a), as well as women (Liang et al., 2005), and qualitative work with young women suggests similar themes of 'putting up a front' to avoid others knowing about the abuse (Reynolds & Shepherd, 2011). Several of the men further described hiding their true feelings and the extent of the abuse even when they did seek help from others, by mentioning only small aspects of the abuse, and pretending that it did not bother them. Some described this as a way of 'testing' the potential reaction to help-seeking, in order to assess whether a more serious attempt at help-seeking should be made. None of the men who described using this strategy went on to seek help from the people in question. This issue will be further outlined later in this chapter, under 'Young people's views and beliefs about help-seeking for partner abuse'.

While many of the men described hiding the abuse from others, those who did talk to others generally described this as a positive experience, in which they received advice, practical assistance and support. This is in strong contrast to the expectations that the men described, as well as the young people in study, and suggests that there is some appropriate support available for men, although the men also remarked on the need for more targeted formal support sources. However, successful experiences of help-seeking did not appear to preclude fear around further help-seeking from other sources. Although previous research has indicated that successfully seeking help may encourage abuse victims to seek help from other sources (Liang et al., 2005), it appears this may not have been the case for the men in the study. It is possible that the common discourses around partner abuse lead men to see successful help-seeking as the exception to the norm, rather than an indication that others will be similarly helpful or sympathetic.

It is unclear whether the generally positive response described by the men was representative of what others would experience if they had sought help. If this were the case, it would suggest that the fears of a negative experience of seeking help relate more to the men's own fear of emasculation or shame than to a society that does not take abuse against men seriously. However, for those who chose not to disclose some or all of their experience to others, this decision may have been affected by a lack of supportive responses in the past for similar issues, or the presence of other factors that signalled that a negative response was likely, thus suggesting that the fears of judgement and ridicule may indeed be founded on real-life experience. While it is unclear how likely young men are to encounter unempathetic responses to their help-seeking for partner abuse, the fear of such responses may be enough to prevent them from seeking help, even when they have received help and support previously.

To summarise, the men described hiding their experiences from others, a perception that abuse against men is misunderstood, and that people were likely to respond negatively to them if they disclosed their experiences, including the possibility that the men would be mistaken for the abusive party in the relationship. These fears did not appear to be alleviated for those who had successfully sought help, and may put young men at further risk if they are unwilling to seek support that might enable them to leave an abusive relationship, or if they are unwilling to defend themselves from physical attack. It is clear that men's ideas around gender-based social expectations are an important consideration when seeking to understand or influence their decisions about reaching out to others. However, given the predominantly positive reception they described when they did disclose some of their experiences to others, it is unclear whether others are similarly influenced by gender in their dealings with young abused men.

**Research question three: What recommendations do the men make for helping other young men who experience partner abuse?**

The men gave several suggestions for facilitating help-seeking for other young men who had experienced abuse. Firstly, they frequently cited the lack of available support as a concern, and as a reason for not seeking help, which has also been identified in past literature (Cheung et al., 2009). They described the need for more formal services to support men who have experienced partner abuse. Some suggested services specifically targeted at abused men, while others preferred a broadening of existing services to incorporate such support. However, as in previous research (e.g. Tsui, 2014), the men clearly stated a preference for services that make themselves visible as available to abused men, as they perceived existing services as unsuitable or unfriendly. While the participants in this research did not comment on this specifically, previous research within the mental health field has also suggested a particular need for services aimed at young people, as young people often perceive mainstream services aimed at adults to be inappropriate to their needs (Vanheusde et al., 2008).

The men expressed a preference for anonymous help-seeking, or an anonymous way to contact services before deciding whether to attend face-to-face. Young people frequently cite issues of stigma and confidentiality as a primary concern when deciding whether to seek help or support (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010), and as outlined previously, a fear of stigma and shame are often cited as concerns among abused men. The men in this study also emphasised shame and a fear of the reaction they may encounter if they sought help, and anonymity or a non-threatening method

of contacting services may be important for young men beginning their help-seeking journey. The effectiveness of phone or other indirect methods of providing on-going support to men who experience abuse is uncertain. However, the anonymity they provide may encourage men to disclose partner abuse when they are not willing to do so in person (Hines et al., 2007).

Finally, and again consistent with the enduring message in the literature (e.g. Tsui et al., 2010), the men spoke about the need for gender-inclusive education for both the public and young men about partner abuse, as a way to increase the public's knowledge of abuse against men, to encourage their support of abused men, and to help young men both understand their own experiences, and to feel comfortable about seeking help for them. The men's message involved four main ideas: partner abuse does happen to men, it's okay to not feel okay about it, it's okay to ask for help, and it's important to ask for help.

Thus, the men's recommendations for helping other young men who experience abuse included services that made their support for abused men visible, anonymous or indirect methods of contacting those services, and the need for education for the services, young men, and the wider public. These will be revisited in the section entitled 'clinical implications'.

#### **Research question four: How do young men and women understand the issue of partner abuse against young men?**

The findings of study two provide a picture of the social backdrop against which young men's experiences and their decisions about seeking help occur. They outline the young people's ideas about partner abuse and gender, including the prominence of images of men as invulnerable and women as powerless, and the idea that partner abuse against men can be considered humorous.

While not a universally endorsed theme, descriptions of men as powerful and invulnerable were common, including the portrayal of men as in control of their relationships even when they are subjected to abuse, and linked with ideas of men as actively allowing any abuse they experience, and as able to leave an abusive relationship with ease. This portrayal contrasts sharply with the men's descriptions given in study one, in which they described themselves as feeling controlled and dominated, having difficulty leaving the abusive relationship, experiencing difficult emotions as a result of the abuse, and feeling unable to defend themselves physically for fear of being considered the aggressor.

The findings support the notion that young people are judged against orthodox ideas of gender in the context of partner abuse. However, the young people's expectations appeared to be more for the men to 'not be taken seriously', rather than the hostility and harassment predicted by Anderson (2009) for when men contravene the masculine ideal. It is possible that because previous research such as Anderson's has predominantly focused on the experience of homosexual and bisexual men, deviations from the norm by other groups may result in quite different reactions, albeit ones that are nevertheless informed by hegemonic masculinity.

The strong emphasis on the '*impossibility*' of forced or coerced sexual activity, while perhaps not surprising given the prevalence of such views among the population (Abdullah-Khan, 2008; Turchik & Edwards, 2012), alongside assumptions of sexual abuse as being a man towards a woman (Semonsky & Rosenfeld, 1994) stands out in terms of the lack of contradictory statements, and the low frequency with which sexual abuse against men was mentioned at all among the focus groups. Views of sexual abuse as impossible or restricted to unkind comments are likely to impact on people's treatment of sexually abused men, and the findings of the current study suggest that sexual abuse against men may be an important part of public education on the issue.

The image of men as able to repel or prevent abuse against them from women has been identified in previous research with the general population (Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997; Tsui, 2010), and the current findings suggest that these ideas are also referenced by young people. The description of men as invulnerable within discussions of men's victimisation is not limited to abuse - for example, Hollander (2001) found that people strongly identified women with vulnerability to crime and men with dangerousness and invulnerability, even within discussions which focused on men's crime victimisation. It appears that even when men are acknowledged as victims, gender-based discourses may continue to influence how that victimisation is perceived.

The particular contention that men were in control of their own abuse (and thus choosing to be abused) is uncomfortably similar to the images of abuse against women that the women's domestic violence movement has long fought against (Cook, 2009; Dutton, 2006; Schechter, 1982). That such ideas are invoked should not perhaps be a surprise, indeed although comments that blame abused women for their victimisation have become much less common over time (Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1994), they continue to be a source of concern (T. Jackson, Witte, & Petretic-Jackson, 2001). However, the young people particularly invoked ideas of *men* as invulnerable as opposed to all victims, and particularly contrasted the image of men as choosing to be abused with images of women as *not* having chosen such treatment. This is consistent with previous research that has suggested that the public hold more negative views and place more blame on abused men

than abused women (Arnocky & Vaillancourt, 2014; Harris & Cook, 1994; Hine, 2015). Male victims may require special attention in public education against 'victim blaming', as it appears this message may be contrasted by images of male victims that are strongly influenced by orthodox ideas about gender.

The images of men as invulnerable and women as powerless were sometimes described as the young people's own views and sometimes as stereotypes they were aware of. Bowen and colleagues suggested that while young people describe particular views of partner abuse and gender as stereotypes, they may simultaneously endorse these ideas (Bowen et al., 2013). However, whether or not the young people endorse the ideas personally, they are part of the background of ideas that influences men's decisions about help-seeking while they weigh up the costs and benefits of doing so. Both the young men and the young people in the focus groups showed strong awareness of gendered conceptions of abuse, and research has suggested that young people are heavily influenced by peer discourses and peer pressure (Bradford Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008). The discourses among young people are thus likely to impact on young men's decisions about seeking help, whether or not the ideas are actually endorsed by the potential help sources.

The young people's descriptions of women as physically and socially powerless are in line with traditional images of women as being weak, incapable of harming others, and in need of protection (Emslie et al., 2006; Hollander, 2001). They spoke about a duty to protect women as noted in past research that has examined 'chivalry norms' (Reeves & Orpinas, 2012), and the 'zero-tolerance' attitude to violence and psychological abuse against women that has been promoted by the women's domestic violence movement. It again suggests the success of the movement to date, as such attitudes to violence towards women appears to have become much more prevalent since the promotion of this message by the movement (Fanslow, Robinson, Crengle, & Perese, 2010; Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1994).

However, the young people appeared to take a significantly different stance on violence from women towards men, in that it was frequently (although not exclusively) cast as inconsequential and the choice of the man. A similar split between zero-tolerance attitudes towards partner abuse against women and a more ambivalent or varied attitude towards partner abuse against men was found in Hine's (2015) and Sorenson and Taylor's (2005) research, and along with research that has found stark differences in the public's attitudes towards male and female victims of abuse (e.g. Bowen et al., 2013) suggests a strong dichotomy in the public's images of men's and

women's abuse, in contrast with research findings that suggest more similarities than differences between the experiences of abuse for men and women (Migliaccio, 2002).

Consistent with Hamby and Jackson's (2010) paper, some of the young people spoke about the average size and strength difference between men and women as fuelling the different reactions to abuse against men and women. Hamby and Jackson concluded that the different reactions were therefore grounded in real-world differences in the abuse, as there is a well-documented difference in average size and strength between men and women. Indeed, the size of partners may influence the injury rate (Felson, 1996). However, the young people in the current study emphasised that the differences in reaction to the genders could not solely be explained by relative size. Given that the size difference between men and women is an *average* difference (and therefore not every couple fits this particular size configuration), alongside the considerable damage and distress that has been reported by men who described being larger than their abusive partners (Migliaccio, 2002), it appears that actual size differences between partners may not fully explain people's response to individual abused men, rather, dominant ideas about gender may play a significant role.

Some of the young people drew attention to the use of partner abuse against men in comedy, and the comedic potential of real-life stories of abuse against men. They related this to aspects of the above theme, such as abuse against men as being inconsequential, and the choice of the man, although they emphasised the influence of gender over and above these factors. Again, there was a strong contrast between how abuse against men and women was described by the young people, with abuse against women seen as never being amusing. There are clear implications here for men's help-seeking for abuse, as the men in this study and others (Tsui, 2010) cited a fear that their stories of trauma may be taken as a joke as a reason against seeking help.

To summarise, the young people's discussion suggested the influence of orthodox conceptions of masculinity and femininity, namely images of men as invulnerable and in control and women as powerless and vulnerable, within the context of partner abuse. While not all of the young people claimed to support such ideas, these discourses were frequently referenced when discussing abused men and partner abuse more generally, and were cited as influential in the young people's assessments of partner abuse against men. The ideas discussed are similar to those discussed by the men in study one ('I don't think the public understand'), and together they suggest the influence of orthodox constructions of gender on both the prevailing constructions of abuse and the social context of abuse and related support-seeking.

### **Research question five: What beliefs and ideas do these young people hold about seeking help for partner abuse?**

The findings from study two also explored the young people's ideas about help-seeking for partner abuse among young people. They suggested that young people may prefer their peers to deal with abuse privately, and like the men in study one, the young people described men as likely to meet a negative response to help-seeking for partner abuse. However, they also suggested that men may be more likely to elicit a helpful response if they present their abuse and distress in a 'serious' manner.

The young people in study two described preferences for young people who had experienced abuse to deal with the matter independently, with help-seeking described as a less preferred option. They particularly emphasised formal support sources as inappropriate if abuse has not been prolonged and did not put the victim at serious risk, and cited the danger of further harming an already difficult relationship between the partners. The preferred options were leaving the relationship independently, and communication between the partners. Many of the young people spoke about the victim as having a duty to communicate the issue to the perpetrator so that it is less likely to happen again, even if they decide they do not want to continue in the relationship.

The ideas of abuse as a private matter, to be resolved between the involved parties, and of victim's responsibility in this process are certainly not new (L. A. Hoff, 2009; Liang et al., 2005). Much research and education has been targeted at altering these perceptions, to encourage help-seeking and the provision of help in cases of abuse. While these discourses are certainly still present, the support for them appears low (Fanslow et al., 2010). However, the current study suggests the continuing influence of these ideas among young people, with reference to abuse against both young women and young men. The study also suggests a particular preference among young people that young men should not use support services or be offered help for partner abuse, as seen in 'Don't seek help unless you have to', and 'No need for support'. As with all of the themes in study two, there were a range of views expressed within the groups, and some of the participants supported help-seeking as the preferred option for both victim and perpetrator, although this was less commonly supported than resolving the matter privately. However, as has previously been stated, the actual level of endorsement of the themes may be less important than the awareness of such discourses among their peers.

It is possible that these ideas relate more to a general preference for self-reliance among young people, as seen with other issues such as mental health (Gulliver et al., 2010), than to a

preference to resolve partner abuse privately in particular. However, whether this preference relates specifically to abuse or not, it may influence the way young people respond to abuse victims who do seek help, and whether they decide to seek help themselves should they become involved in an abusive relationship in the future.

The themes of men as invulnerable and women as powerless were linked by several participants to the lack of services available for abused men, with some asserting that formal services, and particularly refuges, are not needed for men because of their perceived superior strength and social power, and some describing men as not needing help at all, or not deserving of help. As has been noted previously, the portrayal of all men as hegemonically masculine (and thus unconditionally powerful and privileged) is inconsistent with the lives of many men (Coston & Kimmel, 2012), and the literature has recently moved towards acknowledging multiple masculinities (Connell, 2005). While the men in the current study did not specifically speak about whether they felt powerful or privileged in their everyday lives, their stories of abuse suggest quite a different picture to that suggested by orthodox conceptions of masculinity. There is a need for public education on men's need for help when they have experienced abuse to encourage both services and the people around men to support them (Tsui et al., 2010).

The young people suggested that young men who have experienced abuse may encounter unhelpful or unempathetic responses to their help-seeking, with their predictions broadly similar to those from the men in study one. They also suggested that men may be more likely to encounter a positive response to help-seeking if they openly display the seriousness of the abuse or their distress around the situation, although they also emphasised that this did not guarantee a helpful response. This finding is perhaps particularly pertinent in light of the findings from study one of the men hiding their distress from others. As has been outlined previously, several of the men spoke about disclosing to friends in a casual manner that did not reflect their true distress, as a way of 'testing' friends as potential support people. The men who described using this strategy did not seek help further from these friends, as their response did not appear to be one of concern. This suggests a conflict between the men's cautious preliminary attempts at help-seeking, and the type of disclosure that is likely to elicit a concerned response.

The presentation of abuse in a 'serious' manner is likely to conflict with ideas of 'real men' as being invulnerable to women's abuse, ideas which the abused men expressed awareness of. It is possible that there is a cycle for many men between the expectations they feel to be 'okay' and 'in control' where there is abuse and violence, their subsequent portrayal of themselves as 'okay' despite their distress, and a lowered likelihood that they will be offered help as a result. A negative

experience of help-seeking has been previously identified as a barrier to further help-seeking among abused women (Liang et al., 2005), and a similar effect may operate for men. Such a cycle is also likely to reinforce existing beliefs regarding men and abuse, such as assertions that partner abuse against men is not of serious concern (Saunders, 2002).

A comparable possibility was outlined in Durfee's (2011) study of physically abused men's applications for protection orders. Durfee found that the men presented their stories of abuse and trauma in a 'masculinised' manner, emphasising their power and control in the relationship and rejecting the label of 'victim', even as they described severe violence within the context of seeking protection. She suggested that while the men's presentation was consistent with dominant constructions of hegemonic masculinity, such a presentation could affect the likelihood of a protection order being granted, as it de-emphasised the risk to the applicant. Similarly, Williams and Mickelson (2008) described a 'paradox of indirect support-seeking' in their study of women with financial difficulties. They wrote about the self-fulfilling prophecy invoked by women who seek help indirectly, such as hinting about their problems without giving explicit details, as a way of preserving their self-esteem. Indirect help-seeking was related to fewer offers of support and increased responses they considered unsupportive. They suggested that while stigmatised people did seek help, they were likely to do so in a manner that was unlikely to elicit help, and often confirmed their fears of rejection. It is possible that young men are trapped in a similarly self-confirming prophecy of indirect help-seeking and a resulting lack of support after experiencing partner abuse from women.

Thus, the young people's discussion suggested a preference against young people seeking help for partner abuse, and particularly emphasised abused men as not needing help. They related this again to conceptions of men and women as inconsistent with men being harmed by partner abusive women. They also emphasised that men may not be taken seriously when they report abuse to others unless they openly display the seriousness of the issue. This may conflict with the constructions of manliness and partner abuse as described by participants in both studies, as well as the wider literature on partner abuse and masculinity. It is possible that young men's ideas about masculinity and their fear of emasculation are part of a cycle that keeps them from successfully seeking support for partner abuse, and this possibility deserves further attention if we are to understand how young men may overcome the barriers they encounter to help-seeking for abuse.

## **Implications for clinical practice**

The findings of this study have important implications for the manner in which we provide support to young men who have experienced abuse, how we might encourage them to seek help, and the way in which abuse is conceptualised.

There is a clear need to widen the choice of resources available to men who have experienced partner abuse, and the men specifically cited this as a current barrier to help-seeking. Appropriate support may include specialist services, more broadly targeted health services, men's only services, or services that cater to men and women. What is important is the availability and visibility of support services to men. There is a strong need to address abuse against men without compromising existing support for women. Partner abuse is a bigger issue than is currently acknowledged and the recognition of men as victims as well as women would suggest the need for increased resources rather than a simple redistribution from already stretched services.

Services that may assist young men who have experienced abuse should increase their visibility, by advertising their availability to men. The men suggested that they looked specifically for services that took such measures, and were unlikely to contact services they perceived as being for women only. One method may be to include greater diversity in advertising materials, with both men and women represented. The young men in the study also suggested that indirect and anonymous methods of contacting services such as telephone, text, mail or internet-based options could facilitate initial contact, and may be preferable for ongoing support for some men.

It is essential that workers who may come in to contact with young men and abuse victims understand both the existence of this issue, and the associated difficulties men experience. This includes taking any reports of abuse or violence from men seriously, regardless of whether they fit the stereotypical image of partner abuse. As the majority of services that support partner abuse victims are currently targeted at women, it is likely that staff will need to adjust their approach and expectations if they are to provide appropriate support for men. The findings of the current study suggest that as well as demonstrating complex and conflicting emotions around the abuse, the young men also deliberately hid the abuse and its emotional impact from others. As is the case with women who have experienced abuse, it is clear that we need to look past men's presentation, and not to dismiss suspicions of abuse or the harm it has caused based on our ideas about what abuse 'should look like'. If men hint at issues in their relationships, this should be taken seriously in the same manner that it should for women.

Best practice guidelines for working with victims of abuse stress the importance of treating anyone reporting abuse with respect and responding to them in a manner that empowers, rather than accuses (World Health Organisation, 2013). It is important to understand that men can be victims, and not to treat them as perpetrators, either overtly or covertly, as this may affect both their own distress around the abuse, and their likelihood of seeking help again. While there are undoubtedly some cases of self-defensive violence, an assumption about this cannot safely be made by a help-seeker's gender (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011). This may require adjustment in policy and both handout and staff reference materials if the current guidelines frame abuse as perpetrated by men and experienced by women. It is also important for people who work supporting young men or abuse victims to critically examine their own assumptions, beliefs and biases, and to build the skills and knowledge necessary to work with the issue in a respectful and effective manner.

Education for the public is also important, and may be achieved through public campaigns, programmes in educational institutes, through the media and advertising, as well as visible changes in the landscape of partner abuse support services. Such education could provide information about and examples of partner abuse against men in order to increase awareness, normalise the issue, and reduce the related stigma. Furthermore, the messages that men do not choose abuse, that it is not easy for people to leave abusive situations, and that 'real men seek help' may be important in changing public attitudes, as well as information about alternative masculinities that 'break down' the image of all men as stoic and invulnerable.

Finally, education for young men is important, and may be achieved through the same channels and messages as education for the wider public. It is not enough to give information about partner abuse against women and hope that it will generalise to people understanding partner abuse against men. It appears that young people do not see such information as applying to themselves or to other men, particularly given the strong contradiction that influential orthodox images of men and women present to such information. There is a strong need for information specific to male victims to counter this: 'It does happen, it's okay to feel bad, and it's okay to ask for help'.

### **Study limitations**

The study has, of course, several limitations that should be taken in to account when interpreting its findings. Firstly, the sample of men in study one was a small self-selected group from the same city, with the majority comprising university students. The experiences of this group, and

their ideas about gender and abuse, may vary from those of other groups of young men, and as with all small-scale studies, the findings should not be considered to statistically generalise to other populations. Indeed, the self-selection process is likely to have produced a disproportionate number of men with a 'story to tell' about abuse against men, and as such this group may have been particularly likely to have experienced or been aware of difficulties related to their gender when it came to abuse. Similarly, while the selection of the focus group participants from the same population perhaps provided a more accurate image of the social context within which the men lived than if I had used young people from more varied backgrounds, their applicability to other social groups may be limited. However, as with other exploratory qualitative research, the purpose of the current study was not to produce statistically generalisable findings but to open up new avenues of enquiry (Ambert et al., 1995; Frank, 2012), and further research is required to investigate the ideas generated in this study, as well as to explore other aspects of the experiences of abused men.

I specifically chose to limit the sample to young cisgender men in heterosexual relationships rather than allow the full spectrum of ages, gender identifications and sexualities, as the experiences of different groups of men are likely to vary significantly as a function of their differing relationship, occupational and social status, and gender-related circumstances (Nowinski & Bowen, 2012). For example, the decision to leave a relationship or seek help for a married man with children who is financially interdependent with his wife is likely to be significantly different to that of a young man in a dating relationship with no dependents (Shorey et al., 2008), and the discourses around men and women are likely to vary in their relevance to men's relationships for alternative genders and sexualities. Thus, the current findings should not be considered to necessarily apply to the experiences of older men or men with differing relationships to those of the men in this study.

The current investigation was based on my particular interests in the matter and was shaped by my reading of both the data and the literature. While I endeavoured to honour the men's stories as they told them naturally, they were undoubtedly shaped by both their awareness of the focus of my research and my part in the interview when I asked for clarification and further information. This awareness may have shaped the men's stories to provide more focus on gender-related issues and barriers to help-seeking than if they had freely told their story to a researcher without a similar focus. Thus, while the ideas expressed were the men's own, the heavy emphasis in the findings of difficulties associated with gender and help-seeking may not have represented their major concerns.

Research is a subjective process, and the findings are always the product of the researcher as well as the participants (Morrow, 2005). I consider my position to be essentially a feminist one, because of my interest in the examination and challenge of the ways in which we have traditionally

understood gender, and measured both men and women against gender-based judgements, assumptions, and social and legal structures. However, I recognise that due to the wide variation among 'feminist' perspectives, others with different feminist ideals and ideas to my own may have proffered a different reading of the data to that presented here. For example, consistent with several writers on the subject (e.g. Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011), while I regard gender as an important contributor to the experience of violence and abuse, I also acknowledge the contribution of other factors, including wider cultural norms, belief systems and biological, social and psychological factors. I have predominantly explored the issue of gender in the data, but I have also cast a wider net to look for factors outside those suggested by earlier feminist theory, which focused on patriarchal structures. While researcher perspectives may differ given similar data, I have acknowledged dissent against my themes and interpretations wherever I encountered it, and consider the final product to faithfully reflect my own reading of the data.

The lack of structure in the interviews, while allowing the men to tell their own story in their own way, may also have meant that some men might not have thought to speak of issues they considered important during the course of the interview, or may have chosen to omit aspects they considered uncomfortable or distressing. I did not directly ask the men for the full picture of their relationship or abuse experiences, nor did I gather the 'other side of the story' in terms of their partners' version of events. The stories I analysed are what the men chose to present to me, and they should not be considered to provide a full picture of 'reality'. However, the objective 'truth' of events was not the focus of the current research, and indeed in a contextualist framework it is never possible for research to represent such truth (Smith & Sparkes, 2006). Rather, I investigated the men's experiences and understandings, which must be gathered through the somewhat 'imperfect' image of the accounts they choose to give in retrospect. I have also acknowledged both my desire to aid young men's voices on this issue, and the constraints of interpreting young men's accounts through the lens of my experiences as a woman. This is a difficulty inherent in conducting research in which interpretations must be made as an outsider to the participants' experience, and I have worked to challenge my own preconceptions and interpretations through the self-reflexive process, and through consultation with my supervisor and colleagues. There is a need for survivor-led literature on this issue from an 'insider's' perspective, as well as further research across groups to add to our understanding of the rich tapestry of men's experience.

## **Directions for future research**

This is a little understood issue, and there is a need for further qualitative and quantitative research examining similar and differing populations of young men, as well as research on the wider issues of partner abuse and partner abuse against men. This includes the relatively overlooked issues of sexual partner abuse and misuse of the legal system as a form of abuse, as well as further exploration of the barriers and facilitators young men may encounter in seeking and finding support. It should also include further investigation of meaning-making around abuse, and a wider focus on the effects of abuse for both men and women, rather than a narrow focus on fear and injury. As suggested in the discussion of the men's accounts, it may be beneficial to consider the wider issue of distressing and unhealthy relationships, as well as more specific research on 'abuse'.

The findings of the current study include several questions and possibilities that should be further explored, such as the contrast between the complex mix of emotions described by the men and their evaluations of the abuse, the effects of the abuse on their ongoing concept of and behaviour in relationships, and the possible 'paradox' involved in the men's help-seeking strategies. Further investigation of useful intervention and social change mechanisms is also pertinent, given the great difficulties the men described and the unhelpful discourses identified by both the men and the young people. It is clear that we are yet working in the dark on this issue. Finally, as suggested under 'Study limitations', survivor-led research and research with differing populations is needed to shed further light on the experiences of men in abusive relationships. The literature on this issue is currently small, and while I have outlined a few suggestions here, it is clear that there remains a multitude of possibilities and unexplored avenues.

## **Conclusions**

This study explored young men's experiences of partner abuse and help-seeking, and the social context of views that surrounds them. The young men described difficult experiences that resulted in a range of difficult emotions and lasting changes in their expectations and ideas about relationships. These difficult experiences and emotions may be masked by their seemingly contradictory statements about the abuse, and their tendency to conceal both the abuse and their true emotions from others. The men described a fear of emasculation and other negative gender-based reactions such as being ridiculed or labelled as the 'true perpetrator' of the abuse if they did seek help for the abuse or defend themselves from attack. While few had told others about the

abuse, the majority of those who did find it helpful. However, they still described fears of the public's reactions to further help-seeking.

Both the young men and the other young people described these experiences as at odds with the expectations of the public around men, women and abuse. They spoke about dominant discourses of men as invulnerable and not needing help, of women as unable to harm men, and of abuse as an issue to be resolved privately. They also described expectations that abused men who seek help would be met with unempathetic or inappropriate reactions to their trauma stories, particularly if their stories are not presented in a manner that emphasises its seriousness. This may conflict with the way men feel they have to present themselves to avoid emasculation, and therefore reinforce the likelihood that men will not successfully seek help for partner abuse.

This study supports the notion that the widespread construction of abuse as a problem exclusively of men's violence towards women limits our understanding of the issue and reduces the chance of many victims feeling understood or being treated with the understanding and empathy they deserve (Hamel, 2005). Regardless of one's stance on the relative prevalence of abuse towards men and women, it is clear that people suffer when their trauma experiences and difficulties are denied (Hines et al., 2007). While gender is important to the experience of abuse, it is evident that this does not function in the simplistic manner of defining who does and doesn't experience abuse, rather gender is a complex factor that shapes men's understanding of their experiences, their perceptions of help-seeking, and the social landscape that surrounds these.

The findings of this study strongly suggest the need for increased and visible support for abused men, education around the issue, and a change in the way abuse is approached to include a wider range of experiences than is currently acknowledged, and to recognise men as possible victims of abuse. While the debate around this issue has been fierce, we need to remember that no-one deserves to feel alone, ridiculed or disbelieved when they have experienced abuse.

## Appendices

## Appendix A: Study advertisements

# Men

Have you been in a relationship with a woman in which you felt:

- Physically attacked
- Intimidated or controlled
- Verbally attacked or put-down
- Pressured or coerced

I'm interested in talking to young men aged **18-25** who have experienced any of the above in a past relationship with a girlfriend or female partner.

Participation will involve a 1-2 hour interview. I will remove identifying information before using the data to protect your identity.

**Participants will receive a \$25 supermarket voucher and will be reimbursed for travel costs relating to the research.**

**If you are interested in telling your story, please email me at [apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz), or text or call 022 1272160, and I can provide you with further information about the study.**

This study is being conducted by Clinical Psychology Doctoral student Anna Shum-Pearce, and supervised by Dr Kerry Gibson ([kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz)) at the University of Auckland.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE on 19 November 2012 for 3 years. Reference number: 8764

Men's study Anna: <a href="mailto:apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz">apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz</a> 022 1272 160									
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## Are you 18-25?

I am looking for young men and women to take part in a focus group discussing ideas about abuse in romantic relationships.

Participants should not have been in an abusive relationship themselves, and will not be asked about personal experiences.

Focus groups will last 1.5 hours, and **participants will be given a \$25 supermarket voucher** to thank you for your time. Travel costs will be reimbursed if arranged in advance.

Men and women will take part in separate focus groups. I will remove identifying information before using the data to protect your identity.

**If you are interested in taking part, please email me at [apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz), or text or call 022 1272 160.**

This study is being conducted by Clinical Psychology Doctoral student Anna Shum-Pearce, and supervised by Dr Kerry Gibson ([kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz)) at the University of Auckland.

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Focus group  
Anna: [apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz)  
022 1272 160

## Appendix B: Participant information sheets



**THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND**  
**NEW ZEALAND**  
Department of Psychology  
Building 721, Tamaki Campus  
Cnr Morrin & Merton Roads  
Glen Innes  
Auckland, New Zealand  
Telephone (09) 373 7599 x86886

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**  
Interview participant

Project title: Young men talk about abuse from women intimate partners  
Researcher: Anna Shum-Pearce, supervised by Dr. Kerry Gibson

Hello, my name is Anna Shum-Pearce and I am completing a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the University of Auckland. As part of my training to become a Clinical Psychologist, I am conducting a research project investigating the experiences of young men who have experienced abuse from a female partner.

There is currently very little research on the experiences of young men who have had abusive partners, and particularly their help-seeking experiences. Men are often overlooked as victims by support services, academics, and the general public. My research aims to raise awareness and understanding of partner abuse towards men, and to produce guidelines for support services on how they may support such men.

I am interested in men's experiences of abuse and help-seeking, and the things that make it easier or harder for them to seek help. I will also be talking to young men and women who have not experienced abuse, to find out what they know about partner abuse.

I am inviting you to participate as a young man who has experienced abuse from a girlfriend / female partner in a past relationship. I am interested in talking to 15-20 men- both those who have and haven't sought help. Participation is entirely voluntary.

**If I choose to take part, what is involved?**

You will take part in an interview lasting between one and two hours. I will ask you to tell the story of the relationship, and how you have made sense of what happened. You will be given the opportunity to tell your story in your own words.

At the start of the interview, you will be asked to fill out a short questionnaire of demographic information such as your age and occupation. This is to give me an idea of the range of people participating, and will not be linked to your name or interview data.

Interviews will be conducted at the University of Auckland Psychology Clinic, or a neutral location convenient to you.

**What are the risks and benefits of participation?**

In the interview, we will discuss a part of your life that may have been very difficult. Talking about abuse can be both a positive and distressing experience for research

participants, and I would like to make this experience a positive and empowering one for you.

Through your participation, I aim to let other men know that they are not alone if they experience abuse. I aim to publish my results to raise awareness among academics, support services and the general public, and to produce guidelines on how they could best support men who have experienced abuse.

You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to, and you may leave the interview at any time without needing to give a reason. You may withdraw your data up to 2 weeks after the interview. At the end of the interview, I will give you a list of support services that you might find useful, and can discuss them with you. It is your choice whether you contact them.

If you disclose information that indicates that you or someone else is currently at risk of harm we may be obliged to report this information to an appropriate agency to ensure that you or others remain safe.

You will be given a \$25 supermarket voucher to thank you for your time, and reimbursement for travel costs relating to the research can be arranged when you schedule your interview time. If you decide to withdraw from the study after the interview has begun, this will not affect your eligibility for the travel costs reimbursement or voucher.

If you would like to receive a summary of the results of the study, you may request this on the consent form.

#### **Data recording, storage and retention**

Interviews will be audio recorded using a digital recorder. The data will be transcribed by a University-approved transcriber, who will sign a confidentiality agreement before transcribing the recordings.

Data will be stored for ten years following the completion of the research. Hard copies of transcripts and electronic files on a memory stick will be kept in secure storage within the Department of Psychology premises, and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access. After ten years, the data will be destroyed under secure conditions (electronic data will be deleted and paper documents will be shredded).

#### **Right to Withdraw from Participation**

You have the right to withdraw participation at any time before or during the interview, and to withdraw your data up to two weeks after the interview, without giving a reason. This will not affect reimbursement of your travel costs, or your eligibility for the voucher.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

The interview will involve you telling a detailed story about your experiences. This involves a greater risk than other forms of research that you could be identified from your personal story. However, all possible measures will be taken to protect your identity. This includes assigning you a pseudonym, removing possible identifying information from your data before analysis, and where necessary, introducing disguise in the non-essential details of the story. Only I will know your real name and details.

If you disclose a risk of imminent physical harm to yourself or others, I may need to refer you (or them) to emergency or crisis management services. I would talk to you about the referral before I did so, if at all possible.

### **Contact Details**

**If you would like to take part or wish to know more, please email me at [apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz) or phone me on 022 1272160. I will arrange a time to meet with you.**

Alternatively, my supervisor is Dr Kerry Gibson, who may be contacted by phone on (09) 3737 599 Extn. 88556, or by email at [kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz).

The Head of Department is Associate Professor Douglas Elliffe, who may be contacted by phone on (09) 3737 599 ext 85262 or PA on 88557, or by email at [d.elliffe@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:d.elliffe@auckland.ac.nz).

Chair contact details: For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Research Office, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone (09) 373 7599 extn. 87830/83761. Email: [humanethics@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@auckland.ac.nz)

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE on 19 November 2012 for 3 years. Reference number: 8764



**THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND**  
**NEW ZEALAND**

Department of Psychology  
Building 721, Tamaki Campus  
Cnr Morrin & Merton Roads  
Glen Innes  
Auckland, New Zealand  
Telephone (09) 373 7599 x86886

## **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

### Focus group participant

Project title: Young men talk about abuse from women intimates  
Researcher: Anna Shum-Pearce, supervised by Dr. Kerry Gibson

Hello, my name is Anna Shum-Pearce and I am completing a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the University of Auckland. As part of my training to become a Clinical Psychologist, I am conducting a research project investigating the experiences of young men who have experienced abuse from a female partner.

There is currently very little research on the experiences of young men who have had abusive partners, and particularly their experiences of help-seeking. My research will investigate young men's experiences of abuse, and what other young people know and think about partner abuse.

I am inviting you to participate as a young person who has not been in an abusive relationship. I am interested in talking to both men and women aged 18-25. Participation is entirely voluntary.

### **If I choose to take part, what is involved?**

You will take part in a focus group discussing your understanding of partner abuse with 5-7 other young people. Focus group participants will not have experienced partner abuse. You will be asked about your ideas and views on partner abuse among young people. You will not be asked about your personal experiences. Men and women will participate in separate focus groups.

Demographic information such as your age and occupation will be collected anonymously through a short questionnaire before the focus group starts. This is to give me an idea of the range of people in the focus group, and will not be linked with your name or other data.

Focus groups will last 1.5 hours, and will be conducted at the University of Auckland Psychology Clinic.

### **What are the risks and benefits of participation?**

All focus group participants will be given a \$25 supermarket voucher to thank them for their time, and will be reimbursed for travel costs relating to the research.

Reimbursement is to be arranged with the researcher when you confirm your place in the focus group. If you decide to leave the discussion after the focus group has begun, this will not affect your eligibility for the vouchers and travel costs.

Your participation will help me to understand what young people know and think about partner abuse. I aim to use this information, along with my interviews with young men, to raise awareness among support services, academics, and the general population, and to produce guidelines on how they could best support men who have experienced abuse.

Some people find it distressing to discuss the idea of partner abuse. You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to, and you may leave the focus group at any time without needing to give a reason. At the end of the focus group, I will give you a list of referrals that you may contact if you need support or wish to discuss the topic further.

If you would like to receive a summary of the results of the study, you may request this on the consent form.

### **Data recording, storage and retention**

Focus groups will be audio recorded using a digital recorder. The data will be transcribed by a University approved transcriber, who will sign a confidentiality agreement before transcribing the recordings.

Data will be stored for ten years following the completion of the research. Hard copies of transcripts and electronic files on a memory stick will be kept in secure storage within the Department of Psychology premises, and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to them. After ten years, the data will be destroyed under secure conditions (electronic data will be deleted and paper documents will be shredded).

### **Right to Withdraw from Participation**

You have the right to withdraw before the focus group has begun, and to leave the discussion at any time during the focus group. Leaving the discussion will not affect reimbursement of your travel costs, or your eligibility for the voucher. However, you may not withdraw your data from the study after the focus group has begun, as this would compromise the rest of the focus group data.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Your name and identifying information will be removed from the data before analysis, and pseudonyms will be assigned to protect your identity in reported results. Your real name and details will not be published, and will not be available to University of Auckland staff. However, members of the focus group may wish to discuss their experience with others once they have participated. This means that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

### **Contact Details**

**If you would like to take part or wish to know more, please email me at [apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:apea052@aucklanduni.ac.nz), or phone me on 022 1272160.**

Alternatively, my supervisor is Dr Kerry Gibson, who may be contacted by phone on (09) 3737 599 Extn. 88556, or by email at [kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz).

The Head of Department is Associate Professor Douglas Elliffe, who may be contacted by phone on (09) 3737 599 ext 85262 or PA on 88557, or by email at [d.elliffe@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:d.elliffe@auckland.ac.nz).

Chair contact details: For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Research Office, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone (09) 373 7599 extn. 87830/83761. Email: [humanethics@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@auckland.ac.nz)

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## Appendix C: Consent forms

**Consent form for study one**



**THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND**  
**NEW ZEALAND**

Department of Psychology  
Building 721, Tamaki Campus  
Cnr Morrin & Merton Roads  
Glen Innes  
Auckland, New Zealand  
Telephone (09) 373 7599 x86886

**CONSENT FORM**  
Interview participant  
**THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS**

Project title: Young men talk about abuse from women intimate partners  
Name of Researcher: Anna Shum-Pearce

I have read the Participant Information Sheet and, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time before or during the interview, and to withdraw any data traceable to me up to two weeks after the interview. (date: \_\_\_\_\_)
- I understand that if I disclose an imminent risk of physical harm to myself or others, I may be referred to emergency or crisis management services.
- I agree to be audio-recorded.
- I understand that a third party who has signed a confidentiality agreement will transcribe the recordings.
- I give permission for my interview data to be quoted anonymously in publications arising from this study.
- I understand that data will be kept for 10 years, after which they will be destroyed.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings.

Please supply your email or postal address if interested: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Consent form for study two**



**THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND  
NEW ZEALAND**

Department of Psychology  
Building 721, Tamaki Campus  
Cnr Morrin & Merton Roads  
Glen Innes  
Auckland, New Zealand  
Telephone (09) 373 7599 x86886

**CONSENT FORM**  
Focus Group participant  
**THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS**

Project title: Young men talk about abuse from women intimates  
Name of Researcher: Anna Shum-Pearce

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that I am free to leave the discussion at any time.
- I understand that my data may not be withdrawn after the focus group has started.
- I agree to be audio-recorded.
- I understand that a third party who has signed a confidentiality agreement will transcribe the recordings.
- I understand that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, as group members may talk about their experience to others.
- I give permission for my data to be quoted anonymously in publications arising from this study.
- I understand that data will be kept for 10 years, after which they will be destroyed.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings.

Please supply your email or postal address if interested: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS  
COMMITTEE on 19 November 2012 for 3 years. Reference number: 8764

## **Appendix D: Interview and focus group guidelines**

**Demographics form for both studies**

**Demographic information**

- Gender: M/F
- How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
- What cultural or ethnic group(s) do you identify with?

\_\_\_\_\_

- Are you working or studying? What do you do?

\_\_\_\_\_

- What is your approximate income per year?

Less than \$19,000	\$20,000-39,000	\$40,000-59,000	\$60,000-79,000	\$80,000+
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- Who do you live with?

\_\_\_\_\_

## ***Interview guidelines for study one***

### Interview guidelines

**Demographic information:** See 'Demographic Information' form.

#### **The body of the interview**

The interview will be conducted in the form of a conversation using prompts to assist the participant to tell his own story in his own words. The interview will begin with an open prompt: "Tell me about the relationship you had in mind when you answered the advertisement", and further prompts may be given as necessary if the men have difficulty starting, such as "Sometimes people find it easiest to start by telling me how the relationship started". Areas of interest or of particular relevance to the research questions will be further probed either as they arise, or at the conclusion of the participant's story, as appropriate. During this initial phase of the interview, the researcher may ask questions to facilitate the participant's account but will not direct the course of the interview, in order to allow the participant to tell his own story in his own manner.

#### **Participants may be prompted to elaborate their accounts, and to provide examples:**

- Can you tell me a bit more about that?
- Can you tell me what happened in a bit more detail?
- Can you give me an example of that?
- What stood out for you as important about that experience?
- How did you make sense of that experience?
- What do you think was happening there?
- How did you feel about that?

The researcher may then ask some open questions about the particular topics of relevance to the research if they have not already been covered.

#### **Participants may be asked questions such as:**

- Tell me about an incident that you feel really affected you, or one that stayed in your mind.
- Did that affect how you saw yourself or your partner? If so, how?
- Did you ever think about seeking help from friends, family or professionals? What would you have thought about that idea?
- Did you ever seek help? What was your experience of that?
- What made you decide to seek/ not to seek help?
- What could have made it easier to seek help?
- At some point the relationship ended. Can you tell me a bit about that?
- How would you define 'abuse' in romantic relationships?
- What do you think other people know about experiences like yours/ abuse against men?
- Is there anything you'd like others to know?

## ***Focus group guidelines for study two***

### Focus Group Guidelines

**Demographic information-** on demographic information form

**Vignettes derived from the first phase of research will be presented: vignette one and then vignette two, with time to discuss each before moving on. Questions such as those outlined below will be used to stimulate discussion.**

- What do you think was happening here?
- How would you describe the relationship?
- How would you describe each person?
- How do you think each person felt in this situation?
- Do you think the people in the scenario are likely to tell their friends what happened? What do you think the response would be if they did?
- What do you think they should do now?
- What do you think will happen in the future for these two?
- What is different between the scenarios? What's the same?

**Participants will also be asked questions not relating to the vignette:**

- How important do you think this is as an issue?
- If I talk about abuse in intimate or romantic relationships, what does that mean to you?
- What do you think is and isn't okay in relationships? What is and isn't abusive?
- What kinds of abuse do you think young men and women experience in relationships?
- What do you think causes abuse and conflict in relationships?
- What effect do you think abuse has on young men and women?
- What kind of help or support do you think that young people who experience abuse need?
- What do you think would make it easier for people who have experienced abuse to seek help?
- What role do you think gender has in partner abuse? Do you think it's different for women and men who experience abuse? What's different and what's the same?
- What have you heard in the media about this kind of thing happening to men? What about information campaigns, lectures, or other sources of information? What about from family and friends?
- What do you think the public needs to know about men experiencing abuse?

**The researcher will use prompts to assist participants' discussion. These may include:**

- Can you tell me a bit more about that?
- Can you give me an example of that?
- Can you give me a bit more detail?

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