

## PSYCHOLOGICAL & EMOTIONAL ABUSE WITHIN THE WHOLE FAMILY

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## A RESEARCH PROCESS

### • A CLINICAL QUESTION

What do therapists need to be attuned to in order to best facilitate conversations between family members in the wake of psychological and emotional abuse?

### • A RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the effect of psychological and emotional abuse on the family: functioning, relationships, sense of family, capacity for family members to talk about their experience in the wake of the abuse?

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## THE TERMS

### PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE - EMOTIONAL ABUSE

- Differing & overlapping trajectories over 40 yrs
- A gap between CA and IPV & DFV literature
- Terms ill-defined, used interchangeably
- Lack of definition, conceptualisation or methods to operationalise research on these forms of abuse
- Abuse in this research (as distinct from violence and aggression) is distinguished by the use of power and coercive control to intentionally impose one's will over another in relationship (Straka & Montminy, 2008)

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## OVERALL LITERATURE REVIEW

### INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY LEVEL

- May be the context for physical violence
- Subtle/nuanced behaviours difficult to recognise
- A precursor to physical violence in developing rxs
- May be a predictor, intensify episodes physical violence
- Experienced as worse than physical violence
- Decreases the capacity of victims to end violent rxs
- May continue following intervention or separation
- Involves and affects both male and female
- Strongly predicts trauma and PTSD symptoms
- A risk factor for intergenerational family abuse (P or V)

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## OVERALL LITERATURE REVIEW (ctd)

### COMMUNITY AND SOCIETAL LEVEL

- Families perceive themselves, construct their family in light of other families - silence, secrecy, shame, stigma,
- Notions of public vs private, family vs community
- May be differently perceived by victim, perpetrator, lay or professionals
- Is influenced by socio/cultural/political factors
- WHO figures suggest that 20-75 % of women experience some form of emotional abuse
- A 'pervasive and global problem that is both a human rights issue and a public health problem'

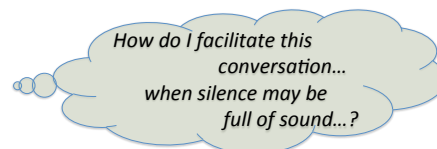
LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THIS RESEARCH  
FOCUS ON QUALITATIVE STUDIES P & E ABUSE IN PHYSICAL  
ABUSE CONTEXT & THEORETICAL & CLINICAL LITERATURE

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## A RESEARCHER'S ETHICAL DILEMMA

### VULNERABLE PARTICIPANTS - SENSITIVE TOPIC



'Academic discussion of social problems has a way of depersonalizing those problems ... it is important to remember that behind every research finding and every generalization there are real people' (Barnett et al., 2004, p.26)

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**What do you say?**  
*Marianne about conversations in her family*

*'We'd just sit and watch TV, not talk to each other,  
we'd eat, not talk to each other  
Just everything was just a way of not talking to each other  
Because if you talk to each other,  
then there'd be an argument  
And there'd be a fight and then there'd be a bad situation  
There's nothing really you can do  
People stay silent because, what do you say?'*

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**And the need to say...**  
*Claire speaking after the research interview*

*'You know it's the incredible amount of silence  
and um, distaste that people have for hearing this stuff  
To be with someone who is acting like they could hear it  
Like, it might be the only time in your life  
that you get to say that one thing  
and what a privilege it is to be able to say it...  
people can relax and start telling their story  
because they trust you to know that you'll stop us sinking'*

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**CONCEPTUAL COMPOSITION**  
*RELATIONAL*

WAYS OF BEING HUMAN - WAYS TO LIVE A TRULY HUMAN LIFE  
WAYS OF BEING IN THE WORLD- WAYS WE TREAT EACH OTHER

- Buber's dialogical philosophy operationalised in methodology
  - Knowing in intersubjective moments privileged over knowledge (Brown, 2017)
- Feminist understanding of the primacy of relational
  - Subjectivities of voice-centered relational approach (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003)
- Theoretical : Family Systems and Trauma
  - Numerous theorists

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**RESEARCH STORIES MEETS METHODS**  
*ETHICAL CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES*

- Recruiting participants – felt sense of stigma and silence
- Individual interviews - staying present to participant & self
- Not appropriating participants' voices
  - Multi-case study, 5 families, mid-socioeconomic  
9 participants – women (18-75), abuse from M & F  
11 interviews, multigenerational*
- Feedback meeting including dual consent process
- Creative multimodal - representation, audio, video
- Creative dissemination – Thesis as text + I-book

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**4 AREAS OF EXPLORATION**  
*Primarily a Qualitative Focus*

FOCUS ON 3 AREAS RELATED TO ABUSE  
Family functioning  
Family relationships  
Sense of family  
Conversation about the abuse in its wake

THREE LAYERS OF ANALYSIS  
Intersubjectivity: emergence of implicit knowing  
Subjectivity: collation of I-statements  
Systemic: consideration of interactional patterns

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**BEHAVIOUR, EFFECT, FREQUENCY**  
*Some Supporting Quantitative Data*

• Threats	• Monitor	• Degrade, humiliate, belittle
• Scare, terrorise	• Manipulation and Lies	• Use children
• Intimidate	• Distort language	• Attack or threaten rx
• Dominate	• De-stabilise perception of reality	• Sow division
• Accuse	• Minimise, Forget, Deny	• Reject
• Harass	• Isolate	• Indifference
• Use male privilege	• Criticise, blame	• Refuse to communicate
• Financial	• Sarcasm, ridicule contempt	• Withdraw, deny emotion responsiveness
• Targets parental role	• Discount, invalidate	• Ignoring
• Intellectual abuse	• Undermine, discredit	
• Superiority		
• Define reality		

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### Research participants speak of silence

- Remembering not having a voice (Claire as child, 40)
- Everything was just a way of not talking (Marianne as child, 30)
- I haven't got ... I've kind of lost my words (Sarah as partner, 50)
- I don't understand but I do now (Moirra as partner, 75)
- I think it was more a feeling than a thinking (Holly as child, 50)
- Memories in a blur (Holly as partner, 50)
- Words sort of feel unreal (Melanie as partner, 45)
- It's really hard for me to talk about (Ruby as child, 18)
- There and not there in all this undercurrent stuff (Kate as child, 55)
- Wanting and not wanting to see (Kate as partner, 55)
- Trying to sort it out without saying too much (Adele as child, 30)

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### OVERARCHING THEME OF

'FAMILY RELATIONAL ABUSE' (Brown 2017)

1. FAMILY FUNCTIONING
2. FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS
3. SENSE OF FAMILY
4. CONVERSATION ABOUT THE ABUSE IN ITS WAKE

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### THE RESEARCH FINDINGS PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE & EMOTIONAL ABUSE

FAMILY RELATIONAL ABUSE NEGATES HUMAN DIGNITY  
WITHIN FAMILY, COMMUNITY, & SOCIETAL LEVEL

by

1. Negating human safety (Family Functioning)
2. Negating relational reciprocity (Family Relationships)
3. Negating belonging (Sense of Family)
4. Negating openness (Conversations about the abuse)

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### FAMILY RELATIONAL ABUSE

*Presupposes relationship & involves relational Catch 22*

- Psychological abuse and emotional abuse generalised to whole family over time: partner (non-physical or single incident physical) to parent (often physical)
- Distinct forms of abuse target susceptibility: cognitive (psychological threat) or relational (emotional loss)
- PA intersubjective threat – EA intersubjective vacuum
- Non-physical abuse as primary (not secondary) context for physical abuse and/or sexual abuse
- Individuals as agent of own abuse or other's abuse: disempowering self or wielding power over another

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### What did the abuse look like?

Adele: *'It [the abuse] was all very insidious and all very sneaky. There weren't too many blindingly obvious things where you could go, "Ah! Emotional abuse. Right there. I caught ya!" He had it so well set up that it was all an unspoken threat. 'Cause he'd either sulk or pout, or just throw a tantrum if things didn't go his way. That kind of behaviour. But it was more the isolation and trying to play each of us off the other ... trying to put a wedge between us, all three of us. Things like that. And the overall effect of that is quite damaging but there isn't really many things we could just go, "Ah! Caught ya!" if that makes sense.'*

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### FAMILY FUNCTIONING

*Engenders cumulative individual and family trauma*

ONGOING CHAOS, CONTROL AND TENSION

- Family acculturated to ongoing abuse
- Nodal points of risk
- Fear and survival strategies at core of functioning
- Physiological responses remain active, even without threat
- Effects increase over time, longstanding after end of abuse
- Stress related physical conditions

FAMILY FUNCTIONING INFLUENCED BY:

- Memory as embodied, emotional, cognitive
- Individual coping (self-focus) and adapting (other-focus)
- Trauma within memories of past trauma

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### What was it like in my family?

Holly (child): *'There was a thickness in the air, in the house. It was never, it was never a relaxing place to be. Yeah... Well it was worse at the dinner table. See you couldn't get away from it there ... Yeah. There was a lot unsaid... When Dad was there, the, the air was thick, whether Mum was there or not ... It was just oppressive ... I used to just live in my room. I didn't feel comfortable anywhere else, really ... And now my sister creates the thickness wherever she goes ...'*

Researcher: And it sounds like everyone's in that thick, but they're actually all in -

Holly: *Their own little space of the thick. All separate.'*

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### FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

*Enacted through a family relational web of control*

EVER-CHANGING, DIVISIVE, POISONED, DISLOYAL, FRACTURED

- Abuser defined/manipulated self & relationships (friend/foe)
- Each to their own lessened joining, support, resistance
- Gender in terms of male privilege
- Sibling interactional patterns estranged, scapegoat, abused
- Older siblings care for younger - dis-engaged, abused parent

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS INFLUENCED BY:

- Lack of reciprocity in all relationships
- Centrality of abuser in positioning self and other
- Destructive & hurting relational patterns

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### The effect on relationships

Kate (partner): *'My low self-esteem and the fact that I had self-doubted anyway was enough for him to just help me to self-doubt more by just sort of making me feel like it, "Oh, no, no, I didn't say that ... or you're imagining it". And the moods too were just so, he used them as such a weapon because I just couldn't stand the fact that he'd just storm off, go to his room, go to bed and, and I'd be left wanting to have a discussion, like a normal couple would (laughs) and he would just shut me down. Just right there. And he'd be gone, and I'd be left in this um... awful despair!'*

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### SENSE OF FAMILY

*Upheld by othering processes based on societal norms*

GUARDED, ISOLATED, EXPECTING COMMUNITY JUDGEMENT

- None, or limited sense of family; grieving its loss
- Interaction with community increases isolation
- Different to 'normal' families & to abusive families
- Being othered by 'normal' - othering of 'abusive' families
- Increase society recognition increases family secrecy/shame

SENSE OF FAMILY INFLUENCED BY:

- Othering both ways
- Whose shame over decades - behaviours vs victim response
- Stigma and exclusion discourse – victim or survivor

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### The inside of my family?

- Ruby (child): *'What was on the outside was nothing like what was going on beneath. It was definitely um, Dad was in charge ... Dad would have definitely made a big effort to make you believe that we were a happy family. (Rx: **But inside?**) Oh it was very very ... It wasn't relaxed at all. It was very, uptight all the time and you always had to watch what you were doing because, if we stepped like even a little bit out of line, Dad would flare up and punch walls, and smack me, smack Ben, scream at us, call us names.'*

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### FAMILY CONVERSATIONS

*Compromises family communication to silence*

DAILY INCOMPETENT, ABUSIVE, THREATENING, REJECTING

- Past communication patterns influence the present
- Pain, incomprehension, dissonance and disavowed abuse
- Children wish to speak during; adults wish to speak after
- Differing perceptions of abuse and its severity
- Differing responses to abuser linked to different abuse

FAMILY CONVERSATIONS INFLUENCED BY:

- Space between individual's vulnerabilities, susceptibilities
- Silence or return to silence, lack of hope in communication
- Secrets within limited awareness of intergen. risk factors

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## A Catch 22

- Claire (child): *'I think of myself as very empathic and there wasn't a lot of empathy in my family ... It was considered melodramatic ... [story about her guilt at brother's loss of girlfriend] ... And I had been involved in that, she'd done that because she'd seen how he'd treated me. That's crazy that I felt guilty isn't it. Fuck! That I felt sorry for him but she had witnessed how he treats me and it meant that he ... Yeah it's a shame. Poor me...I can't even speak my pain because it means that even the abusers will feel a lot of pain and loss.'*

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE & A PERSONAL RESPONSE

### QUESTIONS TO HOLD IN MIND

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE OVERALL FAMILY RELATIONAL ABUSE

- *What is the predominant form of abuse for each family member?*
- *What is each person's vulnerability in terms of the predominance of psychological abuse or emotional abuse?*
- *Is there physical or sexual abuse in the couple or parent/child relationship?*
- *Who may be carrying responsibility for the abuse and to what degree?*

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE FAMILY FUNCTIONING

- *What is the overall effect of trauma upon family functioning?*
- *What is the risk of triggering trauma memories for each family member?*
- *How are trauma memories likely to be manifested for each person – whether embodied, emotional, cognitive?*
- *What were past adaptive and/or coping strategies, and who may be reverting to them now?*

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

- *What was overall influence of lack of relational safety on family relationships, how does it manifest now?*
- *How does the experience of non-reciprocal experiences influence family relationships with each other now?*
- *How may each individual's past positioning of themselves and others, and their own positioning by others in the family, be manifesting now?*
- *How did family members respond to each other when they were emotionally hurt. How does this occur now?*

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE SENSE OF FAMILY

- *What was the effect of the family's past experience of being isolated or integrated into the wider networks?*
- *How much growth in recognition of abuse by individuals, family, and their wider social and community networks?*
- *What experiences of shame have individuals and/or the family encountered, and how have they dealt with them?*
- *How have any experiences of stigma affected the individual and family view of themselves or their family?*

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### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE FAMILY CONVERSATION ABOUT ABUSE

- *How much have the family been able to engage in conversations together over time, intergenerationally?*
- *How is each family member most susceptible if they engage in family conversations about the abuse?*
- *What patterns of communication were possible in the family about difficult topics, or about any topic at all that involved speaking together?*
- *How much do each family member believe they need to speak together about the abuse in its wake?*

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### SAFETY IN PRACTICE

#### *Conditions for conversations*

#### WHEN WORKING WITH INDIVIDUALS OR FAMILIES

- Intersubjective (in professional relationship)
  - Practitioner integrity, honesty, transparency and respect counteracts past intersubjective threat or neglect
- Subjective (individual family members):
  - A structure that supports safety and agency in the room counteracts past experiences of chaos and powerlessness
- Systemic (interactional within family)
  - The management of unsafe interactional patterns in the room counteracts unsafe past communication patterns

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