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**THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TRADITIONALLY AGED COLLEGE WOMEN  
IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of  
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

Kelly Gentry

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

May 2022

Dissertation Chair: Dr. W. Matthew Shurts

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY  
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

**The Lived Experiences of Traditionally Aged College Women in Abusive Relationships**

of

Kelly Gentry

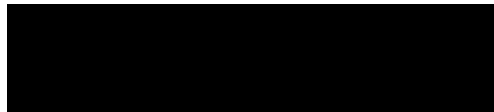
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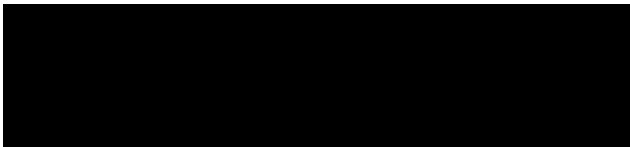
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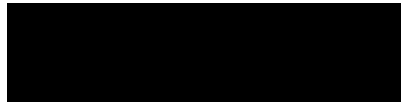


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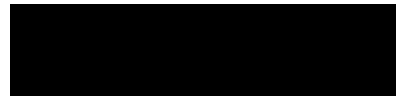
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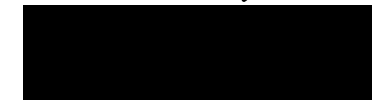
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April 20, 2022

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## ABSTRACT

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TRADITIONALLY AGED COLLEGE WOMEN IN  
ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

By Kelly Gentry

The prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) has been well established in the literature, but most of the research is focused on the rates, risk factors, and consequences of IPV among adults (Hamby, 2014; Jennings et al., 2017). However, IPV is most common among women (ages 18-24), which is also the age of the traditionally aged college student. This qualitative study explored the experiences of 12 women who were abused by an intimate partner during their college years. The goal was to understand the unique experiences of college women who experience IPV; Hearing directly from survivors allows for capturing a more accurate story of what it is like to name your abuse as a college student.

Participants ages 18-26 currently enrolled in college or recently graduated from undergraduate programs who experienced emotional, physical, financial, psychological, and sexual abuse at the hands of their partners during their college years were recruited to share their stories. Grounded in Feminist Theory a total of 20 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted among a group of 12 women. Carol Gilligan's Listening Guide was used to analyze the data and listen for the unique experiences of the participants. This required that each transcript be reviewed at least 3 times for plot, the "I", and contrapuntal voices. The findings suggest that college women's lived experiences with IPV can be conceptualized using two distinct voices: *The Voice of Recognition* and *The Voice of Empowered Maturity*. Within these voices women shared how difficult it is name and label abuse, particularly sexual coercion, the ways in which they came to understand mutuality and agency, and how they matured into

empowered women despite what they had been through. Implications for school counseling, higher education, counselor education, and future research were provided.

*Keywords:* intimate partner violence, college, higher education, women, abuse

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I have been thinking about what I would write in the acknowledgments portion of my dissertation for many years. There are so many people who have supported me and inspired me while I have gone through this process, and I wouldn't be here without them.

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To all of the other friends and family members (all the aunts, uncles, and cousins) who believed in me. Thank you.

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to all of the women who see themselves in these pages.  
And to Lily and Jack, for being my daily inspiration. Being your Mom is my favorite thing in the entire world. Remember to work hard, take breaks, and *always* stop to **listen and be kind**.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In October of 2018, 21-year-old college student Lauren McCluskey was abducted by her boyfriend while walking back to her dorm room and shot to death in the backseat of a car (Friedman, 2019). She had previously asked for help from campus police when she found out he had a criminal history and refused to accept Lauren's attempts to end their relationship. Campus police did not act, even though Lauren shared proof of his harassing text messages and of his criminal record as a registered sex offender (Friedman, 2019). When their relationship started, he was controlling about her friendships and the way she spent her time. Later, when she tried to end the relationship, he became more physical, forcing Lauren to have sex. Unfortunately, these controlling and violent behaviors, as well as the uncertainty of how to respond to them are all too common on college campuses.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant public health issue. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), 31.5% of women reported experiencing physical violence at the hands of a partner over the course of their lifetime, and partner violence accounts for as much as 15% of all violent crime (Breiding, 2015). Rates of partner violence are highest among women ages 18-24, a group likely to be attending college, dating, and/or in committed (but not marital) relationships. This age group is at a particularly crucial time of development, sometimes referred to as "emerging adulthood" that includes increases in risk taking behaviors like having unprotected sex and alcohol consumption (Arnett, 2000). They are also exploring their autonomy and experimenting with various types of romantic and sexual relationships (Arnett, 2000; Mitchell & Syed, 2015). The increase in relationship exploration means an increase in the likelihood of IPV.



The consequences of IPV are deleterious, negatively affecting self-esteem, self-worth, and interpersonal relationships. In addition to the physical effects of abuse, IPV can also cause severe anxiety, depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation, and social isolation (Swahn, Bossarte, Palmier, Yao, & Van Dulmen, 2013). For college students, IPV can have a direct effect on retention rates as victimization can lead to lower GPA, academic disengagement, and course or university withdrawal (Amar & Gennaro, 2005; Jordan, Combs, & Smith, 2014). Despite the well-documented high prevalence rates for college aged students, the literature focusing specifically on traditionally aged college women and their experiences with IPV while in college is limited.

### **A Brief History of Violence on Campus and in the Media**

At 1:00 AM on January 18, 2015, two graduate students were riding their bikes at Stanford University when they noticed a man on top of what appeared to be a lifeless body behind a dumpster (Koren, 2016). When the graduate students approached, the man fled, but they caught him and held him down until police arrived. The woman behind the dumpster was half-naked and unconscious. This is the story of Brock Turner and Chanel Miller – one that was very public and shed light on the gender-based discrimination, social inequities, and legal barriers that victims face when they choose to report and prosecute. Brock Turner was found guilty of three felony counts of sexual assault, which carried with them the potential of 14 years in prison (Koren, 2016). Instead, he was sentenced to six months in prison (less than the defense asked for), three years of probation, and was required to register as a sex offender (Stack, 2016). The judge's reasoning for the short sentence was that Brock was as a star swimmer who had forfeited his dream of joining the Olympic team and suffered enough from all of the media attention (Stack, 2016). Chanel Miller, who at the time was maintaining anonymity, was questioned about

her drinking habits, her promiscuity, and what she was wearing (Stack, 2016). Brock Turner was released from prison after three months (Koren, 2016).

Violence and harassment are issues of concern on college campuses across the country. In an effort to address the frequency of violence on campus and the mishandling of cases, the Obama administration began making changes aimed at increasing the enforcement of policies that address crime reporting and sexual assault on college campuses. These changes required swift and deliberate efforts to be made by college administrators to develop policy and programming to better prevent and effectively respond to reports of violence on campus (Koss, Wilgus, & Williamsen, 2014). Multiple types of violence, including physical violence, sexual violence (SV), domestic violence (DV), and intimate partner violence (IPV) are covered by these policies. Much of the attention has focused expressly on sexual violence because of incidents on numerous campuses across the country (like that of Brock Turner and Chanel Miller), which were publicized in the media. These stories gave accounts of college women who were discouraged from reporting their assaults by staff and administration, forced to continue attending classes with those they accused of perpetrating the violence, and told that what happened to them was their fault (Rhode, 2016).

More stringent enforcement of two particular policies, Title IX and the Jeanne Clery Act, was intended to encourage campus violence transparency with the goal of creating clear reporting procedures, improved judiciary processes, and effective preventative programming (Dunn, 2013). The initial focus on sexual assault and harassment was (and is) essential to the safety of students and the functionality of universities across the country. However, what was not made a consequential part of these efforts was increasing attention to the overwhelming occurrence of dating violence or intimate partner violence during college, which also falls under

the purview of Title IX. In 2013, President Obama reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act, which included a new provision referred to as the SaVE Act (Wies, 2015). The SaVE Act expanded upon the Clery Act by introducing additional categories of reportable violence that included, among others, domestic violence, stalking, and dating violence (Wies, 2015). However, just like with the other policies, colleges and universities were left to their own discretion when it came to deciding just how far they would go to abide by these policies.

Following the increased awareness of gender-based campus violence, public attention was soon brought to issues of domestic and intimate partner violence, not on campuses, but instead among professional athletes. Media reports of players being accused of physically abusing their family members and partners, and sometimes being caught on camera, began to surface (Dunlap, 2015). This spurred public apologies from famous athletes as well as national campaigns to raise awareness of domestic violence, including high-priced television commercials promoting DV awareness during the Super Bowl. It forced leagues to take a close look at their policies for players accused of violent behavior (not exclusive to IPV/DV) and how they were (or were not) being enforced.

Recently, the #MeToo movement has become a part of the efforts to fight gender-based violence. #MeToo was started in 2006 as a way for black women who had experience sexual assault to find solidarity in their experience (Zarkov & Davis, 2018). More recently it has resurfaced as a feminist social media movement intended to shed light on the rampant issue of sexual harassment and abuse. Celebrities started sharing their stories of sexual harassment, and the movement quickly gained steam in the mainstream (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). Celebrities all over the country began to disclose, in varying levels of detail, their incidents of harassment and abuse via social media. Although important, these high profile cases did not

necessarily help the general public effectively fight the endemic issue of violence against women (Dunlap, 2015; Zarkov & Davis, 2018). Instead, it highlighted the larger issue – if you are privileged and high profile, you are more likely to have your story heard and *possibly* believed. Still, with all this awareness brought to gender-based violence, through all the praise and criticism about the policies, campaigns, and movements, IPV and college women are often left out of the conversation.

When President Trump took office in 2017 and selected Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education, Title IX was at the forefront of the media again. This time, because Secretary DeVos wanted to change or reverse many Obama era Title IX policies. As mentioned earlier, Obama's policies were welcomed by many, especially victims' advocates, but were not universally praised. DeVos viewed the current policies as unfair to the accused and lacking in judicial enforcement (Green, 2020). To address these concerns, the new policy required that a formal complaint must be filed for a Title IX investigation to be initiated and that all investigations must include a live hearing during which both parties are cross-examined. Additionally, domestic violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence are clearly defined and are officially included in the definition of sexual harassment which was not previously true of Title IX. This policy, "the Title IX Final Rule: Addressing Sexual Harassment in Schools" was released in May 2020 with intention to be implemented by August 2020.

People on both sides seem to agree that codifying sexual harassment to include IPV, DV, and stalking is a step in the right direction. Overall, those who fought for the reform feel this makes enforcing Title IX fairer for all parties involved and less burdensome on college administration by providing clear guidelines on how to proceed and fewer circumstances in which they must get involved (Anderson, 2020). It "carries the full force of law" which many felt

was missing from Obama's Dear Colleague Letter (Education, 2020, p. 1). In contrast, those who oppose these changes feel that it is not trauma informed, victims will once again suffer, and reported cases will decrease because of the heavy focus on filing formal complaints and cross-examination (Anderson, 2020). Many in college administration are actually opposed to these changes because it is creating a "college court." Administrators view this as both a strain on resources and a step backward in fairness to students involved especially underserved students (Anderson, 2020; Green, 2020).

### **Intimate Partner Violence**

The CDC defines intimate partner violence as stalking, psychological aggression, physical violence, and sexual violence that occurs between two people in an intimate relationship (Breiding, 2015). This includes individuals who are dating, have an established sexual relationship, are married or divorced, or who consider their partner a boyfriend/girlfriend. Domestic violence, a term commonly used interchangeably with IPV, includes violence inflicted by intimate partners as well as immediate family members and relatives; it is commonly misunderstood only as violence between two people who cohabitate (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Walker, 2006). However, it is important to note that IPV occurs in relationships regardless of living situation, and in fact is most prevalent in dating relationships (Breiding, 2015). Moreover, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) 43% of dating college women report experiencing abuse from their partner (NCADV, 2015).

### **IPV, College Women, and Campus Support**

As noted earlier, traditional-age college women (18-24 years old) experience IPV at high rates. Often away from home, exercising control over their own lives for the first time, and in their first serious romantic relationships, college women may be particularly vulnerable to IPV

when compared to their non college going counterparts (Kaukinen, 2014). Additionally, research shows that exposure to violence and trauma can negatively influence levels of academic engagement, which leads to lower grades and retention rates (Adams, Greeson, Kennedy, & Tolman, 2013). Nevertheless, very little research focuses specifically on dating or intimate partner violence among college students (Kaukinen, 2014).

A clear connection has been made between experiencing dating violence and behaviors including alcohol and drug use, sexual risk taking, and mental health concerns for students (Lormand et al., 2013). However, Kaukinen (2014) points out that these are often listed as the causes or predictors of violence rather than consequences of violence. This focus on risk-taking behaviors as causes of violence can be perceived by some as coming from a victim blaming point-of-view, one that has presumably inhibited report rates, help-seeking behaviors, and the overall assessment of IPV (Rhode, 2016).

There is a lack of uniformity and urgency when it comes to screening women on campuses for IPV. Medical and psychological services providers often are uninterested or ill-equipped to detect, intervene, and/or treat survivors of IPV (Sutherland & Hutchinson, 2018). College survivors and bystanders are also often uncertain of when and how to report instances of IPV, but maybe even more detrimental is that law enforcement and medical personnel frequently are not trained in the proper procedures to assist when any type of IPV, not just physical IPV, is reported (Rhode, 2016). If we return to the story of Lauren McCluskey, we see a real-life example of how the campus law enforcement did not respond in a swift or effective manner (Friedman, 2019). Her original claims that her boyfriend was harassing her did not seem to be taken seriously enough for anyone to come to her aid, and her parents are now suing the university for not acting to protect Lauren. They believe that because Lauren was a woman, her

claims were not taken as seriously as they should have been (Friedman, 2019). This case draws attention to the lack of training of those who are supposed to protect victims.

There has been no research to address the varying needs of college students specific to their student status (part-time vs full-time), living situation (on-campus vs off-campus), and college type (community vs 4-year); any such research could help with the design of more direct and relevant prevention and response efforts from campus to campus (Hamby, 2014; Voth Schrag, 2017). Additionally, there is confusion about whether campus police or local police are charged with handling reports of campus violence, and this has affected many women who have sought to move forward with a legal case (Rhode, 2016). When Lauren McCluskey was not satisfied with the response she received from campus police, she decided to seek the assistance of the local city police department. The city police directed her back to the campus officers (Friedman, 2019) underscoring the lack of clarity in who should be protecting students. Title IX, The Clery Act, and VAWA all require, in different ways, that reporting procedures be clear and that new employees and new students must receive education or training about what constitutes assault or harassment and how to report it, but the enforcement and approach vary from campus to campus (Wies, 2015).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although the prevalence of IPV has been established in the literature, little research has focused on the unique experience of teens and young adults (ages 15-30) (Jennings et al., 2017); instead, the majority of research has been focused on adults (over 30). More research on “teen dating violence” has emerged in recent years, however studies specific to college student IPV are still scant (Hamby, 2014; Jennings et al., 2017). While technically inclusive of some traditionally aged college students, teen dating violence research does not necessarily apply to

individuals in their twenties, or to college students specifically, who are experiencing unique life changes that could be influencing and affecting their IPV encounters. Adjusting to the pressure associated with college life can be difficult and induce high levels of stress and anxiety that can significantly impact mental health, academic outcomes, and social involvement (Novotney, 2014). When combined with the consequences of IPV, the ability to cope with the pressures of college life becomes more difficult. For students who have experienced IPV, long-term negative effects on academic achievement, mental health, and career success become more likely (Banyard et al., 2017). Therefore, more research focused specifically on traditionally aged college women is needed to understand the connection between the college student experience and IPV.

In a systematic review of literature focused on dating and intimate partner violence in youth and young adults ages 15-30 published in the United States between 1981 and 2015, Jennings et al. (2017) found only 169 such studies over a span of 35 years; 42 of those studies were focused on interventions with the rest reporting prevalence rates, risk factors, and consequences of violence. Only a handful of those studies were qualitative, with the majority being quantitative analyses that most often utilized Straus's (1979) *Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTS) and its 1997 revision. Hamby (2014) pointed out that using a non-updated 40-year-old instrument is almost unheard of in science and research, and she encouraged scholars to embrace advances in science, technology, and research methodologies to advance what we know about intimate partner violence. When compared to a topic like the treatment outcomes of PTSD, which returned 152 articles over 20 years just on clinical trials (Erford et al., 2016), Hamby and Jennings' points are made clear; IPV research needs more attention, rigor, and variation.



IPV research, irrespective of the studied population, has brought to light prevalence rates, effectiveness of interventions and prevention programs, and risk factors for victimization (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Jennings et al., 2017). These are important research areas, particularly the establishment of prevalence rates, which draw attention to the need for prevention efforts and further study. However, there are still large gaps in the literature related to age-specific patterns of IPV, gender differences in perpetration and victimization, and same-sex IPV; the rigor of the research that has been done has been called into question (Hamby, 2014; Johnson, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2015; Kaukinen, Gover, & Hartman, 2012). Additionally, the operationalization of IPV terms is still not consistent, which affects the reporting data and therefore the results and implications for much of the research that does exist (Breiding, 2015; Kaukinen et al., 2012; Waltermaurer, 2005). The present study will address these gaps in the literature by adding to what we know about age-specific patterns of IPV in college using a qualitative approach that allows the participants to define abuse in their own terms.

### **Research Questions**

Given the absence of a clear definition of intimate partner violence, and the variable experience for each individual, it is important that researchers and counselors gain a better understanding of what survivors experience and why they choose to label their experience as IPV (Miller, 2011). These narratives can provide a clearer picture of pre and post IPV behaviors related to risk-taking and academic engagement, further informing preventative programming and screening procedures, as well as assisting in creating comprehensive outreach methods specifically for survivors of college IPV (Miller, 2011). Therefore, I will use the following question to guide my qualitative study: *How do traditionally aged college women describe their lived experience of being in an abusive intimate relationship during their undergraduate years?*

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of women who have been in abusive relationships while in college, how they define that abuse, and how that abuse influenced their path in life. While measurement tools have been influential in bringing awareness to the prevalence of IPV and the effectiveness of interventions and prevention programs, it is crucial to hear directly from survivors. Survivor stories, told in their own words, can paint a more accurate picture of what it is like to be a college student, be in an abusive relationship, and to name that abuse. Qualitative interviews can capture nuances and details that a quantitative instrument might miss. With more in-depth knowledge we can develop better informed policies, prevention measures, and response procedures to address the physical health and mental health consequences associated with college IPV.

### **Significance of the Study**

IPV is widespread among college students. Understanding a survivor's experience, shared through her own words and stories, is essential in gaining a holistic understanding of what IPV looks like. The majority of what we do know about IPV amongst the college population has been established through quantitative measures (Jennings et al., 2017; Voth Schrag, 2017). Quantitative instruments limit the ways in which we allow survivors to identify their experience and may contribute to the historical issue of low inconsistent report rates, and lack of an operationalized definition of IPV. Using a qualitative approach will allow survivors to describe experiences in their own words and contribute to the knowledge base related to "naming" IPV (Wies, 2015). As Demers et al. (2018) stated, "more qualitative and in-depth approaches to analyzing disclosure by women...would further advance our understanding and efforts to promote healthy environments for students, both on campus and once they graduate" (p. 69).

Disclosure rates are low for survivors of IPV, especially formal disclosure to counselors, medical professionals, or authorities. In a study of prevalence and disclosure rates among college students, Demers et al. (2018) found that when compared to unwanted sexual contact and stalking, IPV victims were far less likely to disclose their experience to a formal support and often described the incident as “not serious”. Survivors are more likely to share their abuse experience when directly asked (screened), and less likely to offer the information on their own without prompting (Sutherland, Fantasia, & Hutchinson, 2016). The stories shared in this study can add to the counseling and IPV literature by helping to expand and refine screening practices on campuses. Proper screening can lead to appropriate interventions and referrals for services by faculty and staff; it can also inform the government-mandated prevention programming on campuses (Voth Schrag, 2017).

Often, survivors only name or disclose abuse, and professionals only recognize or screen for abuse when it presents as physical or sexual in nature. However, IPV is inclusive of psychological aggression and stalking, and research shows that the effects of psychological abuse are often more long-term and severe than that of physical abuse (Follingstad, 2009). Through interviews, we can learn about the dynamics of the relationship and get firsthand accounts of the verbal abuse and psychological aggression experienced by the survivors.

There are also implications for administrators focused on retention rates, a key indicator of success for colleges (Banyard et al., 2017). If a student feels unsafe or unheard, often the case in instances of IPV, they are less likely to see their degree through to completion. Therefore, knowing the signs of IPV and resulting academic related consequences could add to the literature that informs responses to IPV during college.

Campuses have been tasked with creating policies that improve campus climate including the prevention and intervention of gender-based discrimination. Given, that IPV is a form of gender based discrimination, this research will extend beyond the research surrounding sexual assault and physical harassment and give attention to a group that is often left out of the conversation, but still effected by violence and abuse on campus, survivors of IPV.

### **Theory and Conceptualization**

#### **Power and Control**

IPV is often conceptualized using the Power and Control Wheel, a tool created in the 1980s as part of the Duluth Model (Pence & McMahon, 2008). The Power and Control Wheel (Appendix A) visually represents the physical and psychological tactics used by male abusers to control their female partners. The Duluth Model was created to educate the public about the complexities of IPV and to engage in a community response to the epidemic that also included treatment for the perpetrators (McMahon & Pence, 2008; Pence & McMahon, 2008). This model is important because it was created using the language of victims living in a battered women's shelter. The Wheel was developed using the lived experiences of women who wanted to highlight what "violence" in relationships really looks like and how abusers gain control (Pence & McMahon, 2008). The result was a Wheel that represents eight physical and psychological tactics that male perpetrators use to maintain power over their female partners. The current study is focused on female victims of violence during college, and the Power and Control Wheel will be used to conceptualize the stories told by participants.

#### **Feminist Framework**

Feminist research is rooted in the analysis of gender and power within a patriarchal society. Feminist researchers believe in complete transparency in their work in order to continue

“...respecting the perspective and the experience of the other” (Worell & Etaugh, 1994, p. 444).

The goal of this current study is to give voice to women who have experienced gender-based violence. Therefore, it is well suited for the use of a feminist lens.

Feminist research is based on the application of certain foundational themes, or tenets, that can be used to overcome bias in the design of any study and the analysis of any data, regardless of the guiding theory. For this reason, it is believed that any research can be feminist research, as long as the methodology uses the following guiding principles: 1) focuses on the lived experience of women; 2) minimizes the power differential between researcher and participant; 3) analyzes power differentials in relationships; 4) challenges traditional scientific research; 5) considers societal context; and 6) promotes social change (Beckman, 2014; Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Worell & Etaugh, 1994). Each of these principles, which will be discussed in detail later in this dissertation, are key elements in establishing a feminist framework for my study exploring college women’s experiences with IPV. Given the trauma that participants have experienced, this approach is ideal, as it will help to create a safe space for disclosure and, combined with the Power and Control Wheel, will allow me to analyze the gendered nature of IPV within each woman’s sociocultural context.

### **Methodology**

The focus throughout my research will be on how college women assign labels and meaning to their experiences with IPV. My aim is not to come up with a generalized description or capture the essence of IPV, instead it is to understand how participants have interpreted their lived experiences as survivors. Basic qualitative research is focused on understanding how people construct their worlds and assign meaning to their experiences, therefore making it a suitable methodology for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). By conducting two in-depth

semi-structured interviews with each participant, I can begin to uncover how women make sense of going through IPV in college.

As previously stated, survivors of abuse are more likely to disclose and share details of their abuse when directly asked (Sutherland et al., 2016). As a feminist researcher it is crucial to allow women a space to tell their stories. In-depth interviews are an opportunity for participants to use their own words to describe and label their experiences, which is important because language is created by those in power and is often not representative of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Johnstone, 2016). Semi-structured interviews provide a guide for staying on task during the interview while allowing for open discussion and following-up on any important or surprising items that come up (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This method tends to several of the principles of feminist research by minimizing the power differential, working to understand lived experienced of women, and challenging traditional methods of quantitative survey research more commonly used when studying this phenomenon (Burgess-Proctor, 2015). The literature shows that trauma survivors who participate in qualitative research find the experience therapeutic and empowering providing them new perspectives as well as new resources and knowledge (Burgess-Proctor, 2015).

Gilligan's listening guide will be the framework used to guide the interviews and analyze the data (Gilligan, 2015). Gilligan's method is in line with the feminist research principles that direct this study, as it is inherently based in the tenet of listening to a woman's voice. Gilligan encourages researchers to challenge the societal structures and oppressive powers that influence the gendered nature of women's experiences (Gilligan, 2015). Interview topics will center on how participants make sense of their experiences with IPV as women and as college students, as well as general knowledge around IPV as a construct. The listening guide provides a structure

for listening or reading through of interviews three to four times focusing on distinct characteristics each time (Gilligan, 2015). Through the use of the three types of “listening” established by Gilligan (2015) 1) Listening for the plot; 2) listening for the I; and 3) listening for contrapuntal voices) I will be able to analyze the data provided in the interviews to identify recurring patterns and themes.

### **Chapter Summary**

IPV, which encompasses physical violence and psychological aggression, is prevalent among traditionally aged college women (18-24 years old) (Demers et al., 2018). While there is an increasing number of studies looking at dating violence, there is a gap in the literature regarding the unique experiences of women, ages 18-24, who have experienced IPV during their undergraduate academic years (Hamby, 2014; Voth Schrag, 2017). College students are already experiencing anxiety and depression at elevated levels, and when combined with incidents of IPV, the likelihood of suffering negative mental health and academic consequences increases. The literature shows that experiencing violence has the potential to affect academic achievement and retention rates which makes it an important issue for administrators who look at retention numbers as a measure of success. Additionally, stricter enforcement of government policies addressing gender-based violence and harassment on campus, make understanding the nuances of college IPV an important and timely issue for creating prevention and intervention programs.

A majority of studies looking at violence on campus are quantitative in nature, leaving out the voices and individual experiences of survivors. Using a basic qualitative approach through a feminist lens, this research will attempt to gain in-depth descriptions of the lived experience of college women who survive IPV. This will provide data about how women name abuse and interpret the experience within the context of their lives and future relationships.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized in a five chapter format. Chapter one included a brief history of gender-based violence in the U.S. as well as the significance of studying IPV during college, the problem statement and research questions, as well as the rationale for the study and the use of qualitative research methods. In the second chapter, I will provide an in-depth review of the IPV literature. In Chapter three, I will review the qualitative research design that will be used to conduct the study, including the sample population and methods of data collection and analysis. I will provide a summary of the data collected in Chapter 4. The final chapter will be a discussion of the research findings and subsequent implications the results have on future research.

### **Definitions**

**Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)** is physical, sexual, and/or verbal abuse, psychological coercion and aggression, and stalking committed by a current or former dating partner, significant other, spouse, or sexual partner (Breiding, 2015). IPV can occur between any two people regardless of living situation, or relationship status.

**Domestic Violence (DV)** includes physical, sexual, and/or verbal abuse committed by current or former intimate partners *and* family members. Historically, domestic violence has been defined as the physical battering of women by men (Bloom, 2008). Now, DV is recognized as abuse that is not limited by gender identification or relationship status.

**Dating Violence** describes violence between teens and young adults who do not live together or who have not made a long-term commitment (i.e. dating but do not consider one another boyfriend/girlfriend/significant other) (Voth Schrag, 2017).



**Survivor** is being used to describe the participants in this study who are sharing their experiences of IPV. Throughout the literature, the terms victim and survivor are used interchangeably. However, this dissertation is being written from a feminist perspective and the use of the word survivor helps to alleviate the inherent power differential that is assumed when someone is considered a “victim.”

**Traditional-aged college student** starts their college experience soon after high-school and is between the ages of 18-24 years old.

**Title IX** is a policy enforced by the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights. It requires that all institutions receiving federal funding work to prevent and address instances of gender-based harassment and sexual violence. This includes providing counseling and advocacy services, and immediately responding to situations when they are reported (Conley & Griffith, 2016)

**The Clery Act** requires that all colleges provide annual reports of incidents of crime on campus and share them in a way that is easily accessible to the public (Dunn, 2013).

**Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)** as it applies to institutions of higher education, requires that statistics reported under the Clery act include domestic violence, dating violence and stalking (Dunn, 2013). VAWA also requires that victims receive written explanations of their rights and available resources, and that all parties involved have equal access to information regarding rights to and results of investigations and procedural hearings on campus (Dunn, 2013).

**Power and Control Wheel** was created to visually represent the eight tactics used by a male abuser to physically and psychologically control, coerce, and harm his female intimate partner.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the previous chapter, I gave a brief history of gender-based violence, explained the lack of literature that specifically focused on intimate partner violence in college, and made an argument for the need for a more qualitative approach to operationalizing and defining the issue. This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical lens through which this study is being viewed. Next, is a description of the history of violence against women on college campuses, with a specific focus on IPV. This will be followed by a discussion of the prevalence of IPV on college campuses and an in-depth detailing of the different forms of IPV which includes: physical abuse, sexual violence, rape, psychological aggression, and stalking. The mental health, academic, and financial impact of IPV on college women then will be outlined. This section will conclude with a discussion of the prevention and response efforts currently being implemented on college campuses to battle violence against college women.

### **Theoretical Lens: Feminist Research Methodology**

Women have a long history of needing to advocate for fair and equitable treatment in American society. In many instances, gender has been a sociopolitical barrier limiting women's professional and educational opportunities and causing them to be treated as if they are subservient to men (Worell & Remer, 2003). The feminist movement grew out of a need for women to have their voices, choices, and opinions heard and considered. Although the long history of feminism as a political movement is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to note that there are many sects or "waves" of feminism. These sects have evolved over time to address the multiple social locations and identities that women may hold (e.g., race, SES), and members of each sect vary in their beliefs about the root causes of gender inequality and how they approach change making (Bridges & Etaugh, 2000; Enns, 2010; Enns & Fischer,

2012; Turner & Maschi, 2015). In conjunction with the feminist social and political movements, feminist theory emerged in psychology in response to the absence of female representation in academia and the biased methods and language used to conceptualize women in psychological research (Bridges & Etaugh, 2000; Eagly & Riger, 2014; Worell & Etaugh, 1994). For instance, researchers often would use only male participants, but generalize findings to the entire population (Eagly & Riger, 2014). When participants of both sexes were included and compared, males would be held as the standard while the females' characteristics would be labeled as deviating from the norm (Eagly & Riger, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2013). In 1982, Carol Gilligan (to be discussed in detail later) was one of the first psychologists to produce research that explicitly challenged the idea that the male experience was the standard (Hesse-Biber, 2013). As feminist research has evolved, acknowledgment of the bias created by leaving out the social and political context of participants has become part of the methodological discussion (Eagly & Riger, 2014). Within the fields of counseling and psychology, there are various feminist approaches that can be used to gain a better understanding of power, oppression, and gender-based issues. For the purposes of this study, I will be using a feminist empowerment lens (Worell & Remer, 2003). The basic tenets of the feminist empowerment lens are: personal and social identities are interdependent; the personal is political; relationships are egalitarian; and women's experiences are valued (Worell & Remer, 2003).

Researchers cannot truly provide the space for story sharing with the goal of empowerment if their research is rooted in traditional methods of scientific inquiry that assert that there is "one objective truth and one method for discovering this truth" (Beckman, 2014, p. 165). Therefore, in order to support the feminist empowerment epistemological lens, I will adhere to several fundamental feminist research principles of creating knowledge. Feminist

psychology research methodology was born from the feminist belief that the roots of even the most scientific and objective psychological research was full of implicit bias and builds on the aforementioned empowerment principles (Eagly & Riger, 2014; Worell & Remer, 2003). Often based on a middle-class white male perspective, and enforcing a hierarchy within the researcher-participant relationship, traditional positivist research left out the voices and experiences of girls, women, and other diverse groups of people (Beckman, 2014; Burgess-Proctor, 2015). By employing methods of data gathering and sharing, feminist researchers work to make sure that the voices of women are heard (i.e., one tenet of empowerment feminism). Ultimately, what makes research feminist are the beliefs about the purpose of the research, how it should be conducted, and how it should be shared (Beckman, 2014). By applying the Six Principles of Feminist Research (Worell & Etaugh, 1994), which expand on empowerment feminist theory, researchers can more accurately represent and help others understand the experiences of women. These six principles, as described by Bridges and Etaugh (2000), are:

1. Challenging the traditional scientific method.
2. Focusing on the experiences of women.
3. Considering gender imbalances.
4. Recognizing gender as an important category for investigation.
5. Recognizing the importance of language.
6. Promoting social change.

Feminist scholars have critiqued traditional positivist research arguing there is bias from the androcentric, ethnocentric, restrictive, hierarchical, and context-free nature of these approaches (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Eagly & Riger, 2014; Worell & Remer, 2003). Feminist research principle number #1 challenges the traditional scientific method, and states that

qualitative inquiry is as important as quantitative. It also reminds scholars to include diverse groups of individuals, particularly women who may have intersecting identities, in their research sample (Burgess-Proctor, 2015). Traditional methods of psychological research relied heavily on “objective” quantitative measures that were administered primarily to men and/or women from dominant social groups. This excluded the importance of context in conceptualizing a topic or population and often made results non-generalizable to members of other groups (Eagly & Riger, 2014). However, by utilizing qualitative approaches that ascertain participants’ unique perspectives, and by explicitly focusing on the experiences of women (principle #2), the research stays grounded in feminism. By providing a safe space for women to tell their stories without attempting to fit them into any one category or label, the participants will have the opportunity to define intimate partner violence based on their personal lived realities.

Another way that feminist researchers address bias and combat traditional ideas of objectivity is by being purposeful in acknowledging their positionality throughout the qualitative research process (Beckman, 2014). This is done to address how their experiences, privilege, and role as the researcher may influence the participants responses and their own interpretation of the research findings. Reflexive tasks such as memoing, keeping a research journal, and discussions with critical friends are used to continually challenge the researcher’s assumptions and maintain research integrity (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

Feminist research principles #3 and #4 ask that researchers consider gender imbalances in power and identify gender as an essential category in their research (Bridges & Etaugh, 2000; Worell & Etaugh, 1994). The “personal is political” feminist theory belief is important when reflecting on these principles (Naples & Gurr, 2013; Worell & Remer, 2003). Recognizing that underlying many of the issues that women face is a patriarchal social structure that reinforces

negative stereotypes and promotes systems of inequality and oppression is central to feminism and feminist research practice (Beckman, 2014). Researchers are encouraged to use these principles to frame their investigations and understand their participants (Beckman, 2014). For example, historically, researchers often have asked what women did to elicit abuse or why women stay with abusive partners, rather than asking women how they named or experienced the abuse. This type of framing/questioning puts the onus on the women for being abused, rather than on the men for being abusers; it ignores the power differentials that give men power to be violent toward female partners; and it builds our understanding of abused women on an androcentric perspective that perpetuates the gender-based inequalities embedded in our social structures (Beckman, 2014). A feminist conceptualization of IPV maintains that it is the “situational, cultural, and structural variables that mediate...the event and the woman’s experience of it” (Worell & Remer, 2003, p. 275). Therefore, feminist researchers seek to understand how women experience relationships with respect to violence, as well as the patriarchal attitudes of men who abuse (Chesworth, 2018).

The Power and Control Wheel (McMahon & Pence, 2008) will be used to guide this study because it describes abusive relationships within the contexts of gender-based power differentials. The importance of language, principle #5, is relevant to how research is theorized, conducted, and framed (Bridges & Etaugh, 2000; Hesse-Biber, 2013). As mentioned in Chapter One, the term *survivor* will be used to refer to the participants in this study. Often in the literature and in the media, the term ‘victim’ is used when describing individuals who have been abused. However, describing the women in this study as victims reinforces the gender-based power differentials embedded in our American culture (Worell & Remer, 2003). Using the term survivor returns the power to the women naming their experience, with the hope that this

intentional language choice might assist in the empowerment process. However, if a participant states a preference for being called a victim, this change will be noted and implemented in order to provide a safe-space and promote the egalitarian relationship. When it comes to conducting feminist research, carefully chosen language is crucial to maintaining the integrity of the “naming” process for the participants. Because “if the research questions are not framed in language that reflects feminist principles...the “wrong” questions can lead to one-sided results that present a biased view of complex phenomena, leading to harmful rather than helpful effects” (Beckman, 2014, p. 167).

Consciousness-raising (CR) is essential to the feminist empowerment process. CR is a technique that focuses on the ‘personal is political’ viewpoint and aims to achieve the final feminist research principle of promoting social change (Bridges & Etaugh, 2000; Carr, 2003). CR has been used by feminists as a way for women to develop knowledge in order to enact social change, because “By sharing what appeared to be individual level experiences of oppression, women recognized that problems were shaped by social structural factors” (Naples & Gurr, 2013, p. 29). Although the present study will focus on individual experiences of IPV, interpretation and sharing of the data will bring attention to the ways in which institutions of higher education and law enforcement agencies manage instances of college IPV and what role that plays in the naming process for survivors. It will add to what we know about the identification of and reaction to IPV and will be accessible for use in program and policy development.

The use of a feminist research approach is not new in gender-based violence research. It is one of the most commonly used lenses in looking at both perpetrators and survivors (Chesworth, 2018). Over the decades, there have been many waves of feminism and the

development of many methods of feminist research practice (Hesse-Biber, 2013). In this dissertation study, a feminist empowerment lens (Worell & Remer, 2003) will be used to conceptualize the college women who are sharing their experiences of IPV. Through careful implementation of feminist research principles, the tenets of feminist empowerment can be applied to the collection and representation of data. This will be done by acknowledging intersecting identities (e.g., gender and race), always addressing power imbalances (i.e., using the Power and Control Wheel), and by collecting data via interviews, in order to allow for rich contextualized detail and accurate representation of the experiences of the participants.

### **History of Violence Against Women in College**

Violence against women, particularly on college campuses, is a topic that is frequently in the news. The discussion often centers on sexual violence, more specifically, rape, and is due in part to Title IX and the Jeanne Clery Act being more strictly enforced on campuses across the country (Jordan, 2014). Public discussion of the prevalence of rape and the mishandling of rape cases by universities led to the government carefully reviewing and reinforcing policies regarding crime, harassment, and unequal opportunity in education (Griffin, Pelletier, Griffin, & Sloan, 2017).

The Clery Act requires that statistics for crimes on or around campuses that were reported to police, security, or administration are made public (Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). It is intended to inform current and potential students about the safety of the college campus, and help institutions properly focus crime prevention efforts. The issue with the numbers in the triannual Clery reports is that they do not address the fact that all crimes, but particularly sexual crimes, are grossly underreported because of social stigma, self-blame, lack of awareness about what constitutes abuse (naming), and confusion about report



procedures (Fisher et al., 2010; Frederick Amar, Sutherland, Laughon, Bess, & Stockbridge, 2012). In addition, fear of looking like a high crime campus prevents many institutions from properly handling reports of harassment and violence on campus (Graham, Mennicke, Rizo, Wood, & Mengo, 2019). According to Cantalupo (2014), prevalence rates of gender-based sexual violence against women nationwide and on college campuses have been consistent, at around 20-25%, since the 1980s. However, sometimes schools will, either indirectly or directly, discourage students from officially reporting campus sexual violence, in order to avoid necessary implementation of Title IX and final statistical reporting for the Clery Act (Cantalupo, 2014). This leaves the schools that do properly handle reports of abuse looking like the more dangerous institutions, making them less desirable for applicants.

Often referred to as gender-based violence (Belknap & Sharma, 2014; Bolger, 2016), sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking have been highlighted as Title IX violations on college campuses (Russlynn Ali, 2010; Russlyn Ali, 2011; Conley & Griffith, 2016). According to the 2011 Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) issued by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), Title IX prohibits “discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs or activities operated by recipients of Federal financial assistance”; this includes gender-based harassment (Russlynn Ali, 2010) and sexual violence (Russlyn Ali, 2011). Gender-based harassment includes verbal threats, coercion, and intimidation, as well as physical violence based on sex or sex stereotyping (Russlynn Ali, 2010). When this type of harassment occurs against women on a college campus, it can create a hostile environment for the survivors, making it difficult for them to attend class, participate in social events, and otherwise benefit from the opportunities a school offers (Russlynn Ali, 2010).

### **Understanding Intimate Partner Violence**

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) has a long history in the United States. Today, it is generally understood as a pattern of power and control exercised by the abuser over their partner (Rennison & Addington, 2014; Walker, 2006). The CDC definition encapsulates all types of physical, sexual, and psychological violence in any kind of intimate relationship. However, this was not always the case, and a uniform definition of IPV does not currently exist, making it difficult to interpret statistics and create policy (Ørke, Vatnar, & Bjørkly, 2018; Rennison & Addington, 2014).

Over time, our understanding of violence in relationships has evolved. Originally, terms like ‘batterers’ and ‘battered women’ were used to describe physical violence in relationships (Walker, 1977). The use of these terms insinuated that all abuse was physical (e.g., slapping, pushing) and committed by a male against his female partner with whom he cohabited and/or to whom he was married (Carlson, 2008). Eventually, the term “domestic violence” was established to indicate the unsafe environment many women experienced in their homes (Kelly & Johnson, 2008).

Once there was recognition that physical abuse in families was a serious public health issue that needed to be addressed, the existence of other types of abuse began to surface. Soon feminists, advocates, and researchers highlighted power and control, coercion, and psychological abuse in relationships as significant problems. Some even noted that psychological abuse was more prevalent and more harmful than physical abuse (Walker, 1977). The psychological effects of being “battered”, which looks like learned helplessness (feeling powerless and unable to make change in the relationship subsequently blaming oneself for the abuse), soon became referred to as Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS) (Sussman, 2008; Walker, 1984; 2006).

BWS became a much disputed condition for a number of reasons including the implication that only women are physically abused and that they choose to stay because they lack the agency to leave (McMahon & Pence, 2003; Sussman, 2008). Many still hesitate to recognize that violence in relationships is bidirectional, but research shows that males are not the only perpetrators nor are females the only survivors (Kaukinen et al., 2012; Witte & Mulla, 2013). According to national statistics 14% of men have experienced severe physical IPV in their lifetime (i.e. beating, use of weapons, punching) (Breiding, 2015) and in a study of college student IPV Kaukinen et al. (2012) found that women were more often in a relationship where they were a perpetrator and a victim rather than just a victim. Individuals in same-sex relationships also experience IPV, although the research is scant. According to the CDC 44% of lesbian women and 26% of gay men experience IPV ("NISVS: An overview of 2010 findings on victimization by sexual orientation," 2010). The stigma attached to being in a same-sex relationships contributes to underreporting.

However, scholars caution that it is impossible to truly understand the cause of perpetration without a thorough examination of the context within which it occurred (Kaukinen et al., 2012). In other words, it is crucial to investigate whether physical abuse happens within the context of self-defense in situations of physical abuse and/or psychological aggression and coercion (McMahon & Pence, 2003; Walker, 2006). McMahon and Pence (2003) noted that the lack of understanding of the power dynamic and gendered nature of partner violence by advocates and policy makers fails the women who are in abusive relationships and leaves them feeling like the abuse is their fault.

Additionally, the role that race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and even geographical location play are also important to note when considering the context in which IPV occurs. IPV

is experienced disproportionately by black women, women with disabilities, Native American women, women in rural communities, and those who identify as LGBTQ (Brewer, Thomas, & Higdon, 2018; "Domestic violence and the Black community.," 2020; Duplessis & Pomeroy, 2015; Reckdenwald, Yohros, & Szalewski, 2018). Systematic racism and structural barriers put black men and women at higher risk of experiencing IPV in their lifetime and prevent them from getting the protection they need when seeking safety ("Domestic violence and the Black community.," 2020). In rural communities' lack of access to healthcare services, general isolation from others, and subcultural views of gender lead to rural women experiencing more physical violence with fewer options for seeking assistance than women in other contexts (urban and suburban women) (Reckdenwald et al., 2018). Similarly, Native American Women are at a greater risk for stalking, rape, and intimate partner violence which is often attributed to isolation and poverty (Breiding, 2015). Poverty and low-SES are associated with greater risk for experiencing IPV across all groups (Matheson et al., 2015). Cultural contexts are an important factor in prevalence rates, help-seeking behaviors, and even the creation and effectiveness of preventative programs and survivor services (Kulkarni, 2019; Niolon et al., 2017; Sutherland & Hutchinson, 2018).

Eventually, researchers demonstrated that dating violence was a serious problem for college women, and the term 'Intimate Partner Violence' was used to include not only domestic abuse but issues in other types of intimate relationships, both during the relationship and after relationships end (Belknap & Sharma, 2014; Niolon et al., 2017). The college years are considered a time of identity exploration and independence seeking, often referred to as "emerging adulthood" (ages 18-25) (Arnett, 2000). Love is a central theme in identity development for emerging adults, particularly those in college, who are often away from home

for the first time and experimenting with boundaries in romantic and sexual relationships (Arnett, 2000; Mitchell & Syed, 2015). This research will focus on gaining an understanding of the experiences of traditionally aged college women in violent relationships and the context in which the violence occurred; because women experience IPV at higher rates over the course of their lifetime, particularly between the ages of 18-24 which are the emerging adulthood years and the ages of traditional college students (Black et al., 2011).

### **IPV in College**

Defining and naming IPV continues to pose a problem in how cases are expected to be reported. It also leaves ambiguity in how reported incidents are handled by campuses and law enforcement (Duncan, 2014). To fully understand the nuances of experiencing and reporting IPV in college, it is necessary to briefly explore the evolution of the policies and laws that surround gender-based harassment and violence on college campuses.

Institutions of higher education are expected to comply with the regulations established by the Department of Education, including the Clery Act and Title IX (Dunn, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Title IX focuses on harassment and assault as a civil rights issue, whereas the Clery Act covers incidents of reported campus crime (Dunn, 2013; Griffin et al., 2017). The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) (1994) is a law that dedicates federal funds to building community response teams and government agencies specifically focused on preventing and responding to violence against women (Jessup-Anger, Lopez, & Koss, 2018; Sacco, 2019). The Campus SaVE Act, a provision to the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), addresses VAW on college campuses, and was put into place in 2014 (American Council on Education, 2014; Griffin et al., 2017). Under the Campus SaVE Act, colleges and

universities must include reports of domestic and dating violence as well as stalking in Clery Act statistics (Dunn, 2013; Marshall, 2014).

The SaVe Act also requires that schools put education and prevention programs into place (Duncan, 2014; Griffin et al., 2017). These programs must provide definitions of sexual offenses and abusive behaviors within the school's jurisdiction, as well as descriptions of signs of abusive behavior. The SaVE Act is intended to expand Clery reporting requirements, as well as compliment Title IX requirements by increasing transparency in reporting and discipline procedures, and actively working to prevent gender-based abuse on campuses (Griffin et al., 2017; Marshall, 2014; Sacco, 2019). SaVE is crucial in violence prevention and crime reporting efforts on campus, because while there are many suggestions about how schools should address Title IX violations and VAWA crimes "these guidance materials...do not enjoy the force of law" (Dunn, 2013, p. 570), whereas SaVE does. The SaVE Act is not without criticism, however. SaVE, like the original Clery Act, is an unfunded mandate (Griffin et al., 2017). This means schools are required to implement programming and training, as well as provide services without any financial assistance. In their study titled *Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act: SaVing Lives or SaVing Face?* Griffin et al. (2017) found only 11% of the 435 participating institutions fully complied with Campus SaVE requirements. This according to Griffin et al. (2017) makes it "little more than "feel good" symbolic policy" (p. 420).

Additionally, while SaVE provides definitions for all included offenses, each jurisdiction has its own definition of dating and domestic violence and what constitutes a reportable crime. Jurisdictions are what determine the campus code of conduct including who is covered (students, faculty, non-students, etc), the geographical region (on or off-campus; where off campus), the time frames, and the legal framework (contracts, and state/local laws) (Sokolow, 2001). The

definition of a crime for the purposes of Clery reporting may be different than the definition in the jurisdiction for a college (Duncan, 2014). If colleges are using jurisdictional definitions (as is required under VAWA/SaVE) in training students and staff that complicates reporting procedures based on Clery standards (Duncan, 2014). All of this highlights the issues regarding the absence of a unified definition for IPV and the effects it can have on training, reporting, and research outcomes.

As is mentioned in chapter one, when President Trump took office in 2017, his Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos made it clear that she would make changes to Title IX. These changes, referred to as “the Final Rule”, are being implemented in 2020. According to DeVos and her supporters the policy changes are intended to make the process of investigating gender-based violence and harassment on campus more fair (Anderson, 2020). However, victim advocates and even many college administrators do not see it that way. Instead, it seems that the policy will make it more difficult for victims to report and easier for accused to get away with their actions. The changes narrow what constitutes sexual harassment and the circumstances under which a school must respond to a report; only requires schools to respond to incidents on-campus or within an education program/activity within the U.S. (study abroad and off-campus school activities are not their responsibility); requires a live virtual cross-examination of all parties involved; and no longer includes explicit language protecting queer and trans students who report (Anderson, 2020; "What to know about the Title IX rule," 2020). When speaking specifically about IPV and the changes to Title IX, there is a hope in the fact that domestic violence, stalking, and dating violence have officially been added as forms of sexual harassment under Title IX.

The live cross-examination is the requirement that troubles victims' advocates and many college administrators as it deters victims from reporting (it could be retraumatizing and lengthy) and puts the onus on schools to create a courtroom atmosphere (Green, 2020; "What to know about the Title IX rule," 2020). The cross-examination can be conducted by the other party's chosen advisor which could be a lawyer, parent, or friend. This could present a social justice issue if the accused can afford a high-powered attorney and the survivor cannot (Green, 2020). There is a requirement that the questions must be approved by a hearing officer prior to the hearing, and that they must be relevant which generally means questions about sexual history, which in the past had been used to unfairly defame victims, will not be permitted (Anderson, 2020; Green, 2020). While approving the questions has the potential to be helpful overall there is agreement by many that this will set back any progress made in reporting and trauma-informed handling of cases (Anderson, 2020).

### **Prevalence**

When the movement to bring interpersonal violence to the forefront began, college campuses were often viewed as "safe havens," places where students were free to live their lives without fear of violent crime (Gibbons, 2008; Jordan, 2014). However, as more became known about sexual violence and physical abuse, it became clear that campuses were no exception. In 1981, Makepeace argued that the emphasis had been placed on violence within the family as a precursor to spousal abuse, rather than looking at "courtship" violence as a socialization process for later spousal abuse. In his research, Makepeace (1981) examined the prevalence of college courtship or dating violence. A list of various forms of violence ranging from verbal threats to assault with a weapon was given to participants, and they were asked to identify acts that they or someone they knew had experienced. He found that 61.5% of participants knew of someone who



experienced at least one incident of violence, and 20.2% had themselves experienced such violence. The most common forms identified were the physical acts of shoving or slapping (Makepeace, 1981). The results of this foundational study highlighted a gap in violence research, which Makepeace (1981) described as “almost a total neglect of consideration of the negative aspects of courtship, and particularly of the existence of courtship violence” (p. 101). This is very important, because during these years, college students are experimenting with deeper levels of intimacy and various types of dating relationships (Arnett, 2000). This time of increased courtship means a higher likelihood of courtship violence. The results of this study, which was conducted nearly 40 years ago, demonstrated a need for more attention on college partner violence, a gap that still exists in the research today (Hamby, 2014).

Fass, Benson, and Leggett (2008) found that intimate partner violence was occurring, in all forms, on college campuses. However, many participants did not label their experience as abusive. Using a sample from a small liberal arts college, Fass et al. (2008) found that 22.6% of students reported that they had not experienced violence in their relationship while at that college, but their *Revised Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTS2) responses indicated that they had experienced at least one physically violent act from a partner while at that university. Additionally, 29.4% had used physical violence at least once while at this university but had reported not ever being violent. These results highlighted several issues: the ways in which researchers measure and identify abuse (Dardis, Strauss, & Gidycz, 2019); a need for more education about IPV; and a deeply rooted issue in society regarding the acceptance of abuse (Fass et al., 2008; Montesanti & Thurston, 2015).

The most recent national statistics on violent crime, as reported in the 2018 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), indicate that after years of decline, violent crime is on the

rise (Brewer & Thomas, 2019; Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019) . Between 2016-2018, the number of victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, and intimate partner violence increased (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019). These numbers could reflect increases in reporting, which occurred in concurrence with the #metoo movement and the heightened attention brought to such issues. However, researchers are hesitant to attribute the change to increase on reporting only, especially given that *all* violent crime is on the rise (Kaste & Balard Brown, 2019). There is also a sense of uneasiness around who really benefits from the #metoo movement, and whether that would greatly change the reporting numbers. #metoo has been most closely associated with celebrities and the elite, and those who have the social capital to confront abuse and assault without fear of detrimental repercussions (Zarkov & Davis, 2018). Some believe that this movement has actually taken attention away from the idea that IPV, sexual assault, and sexual harassment happen often, in everyday life to ordinary people of all races and classes. Many feminists and anti-violence advocates fear that #metoo has removed the concept of a power dynamic from gender-based violence and harassment; instead creating a platform on which only powerful and/or wealthy people can accuse other powerful/wealthy individuals (Zarkov & Davis, 2018). If this is the case, college women may not identify with the movement, and it may not have impacted reporting numbers.

The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) collects data specific to IPV and SV, and results show that 47.9% of women who experience sexual violence, physical violence, and stalking by a current or former intimate partner, do so between the ages of 18-24, the age of the traditional college student (Breiding, 2015). These numbers make a strong case for focusing attention on IPV on college campuses. Yet, an issue that comes up frequently in interpersonal violence research is the lack of uniform terminology and definitions. Advocates,

clinicians, policy makers, and scholars define intimate partner violence and the related actions differently, making it difficult to validate findings and use them for prevention, policy, and judicial efforts (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Rennison & Addington, 2014; Walker, 2002). For instance, while the CDC includes dating violence as part of the definition of IPV (Niolon et al., 2017) colleges and universities are instructed via the Clery Act and Higher Education Act of 1965 to categorize intimate partner violence committed by a former or current spouse differently than violence committed in a current or former dating relationship (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Rennison and Addington (2014) outlined a research agenda to start the process of operationalizing the term “violence” in the literature addressing violence against college women. They made a case for spending more time reviewing the differences in the public health and criminal justice perspectives of violence to come up with a standardized definition. From the criminal justice perspective, violence against women is defined as threatened or actual physical or sexual abuse committed against women (Rennison & Addington, 2014). When the focal point of violence against women on campus was sexual assault, this definition fit because sexual assault is a physical act. However, from a public health perspective, violence against women encompasses more behaviors, including those that are not physical in nature (i.e., psychological aggression and coercion and those that are a part of IPV), but only considers acts perpetrated by an intimate partner or family member (Rennison & Addington, 2014). Rennison and Addington (2014) argued that with a standardized definition, research would produce more accurate and consistent results and therefore help inform practice and policy more effectively. Currently, research has developed to include aspects of both the criminal justice and public health perspectives but in doing so has diluted the importance of either (Rennison & Addington, 2014).

They identified three ways that violence against college women is currently operationalized and defined in the literature: sexual violence, dating violence, and stalking (Rennison & Addington, 2014).

### **Physical Abuse**

When the term “intimate partner violence” is used, it is most commonly thought to be associated with physical abuse (Policastro & Payne, 2013); one reason may be because early research on IPV focused almost entirely on people who were physically abused (Waltermaurer, 2005). Physical abuse can vary in severity and may include slapping, pushing, punching, and kicking. The effects of physical abuse can cause physical and mental health issues (Amar & Gennaro, 2005; Nolon et al., 2017). In their study of college students, Amar and Gennaro (2005) found that one third of college women were physically abused during their relationship, and those who were abused were significantly more likely to report symptoms related to mental health issues.

Hamby (2014) pointed out that although there is data on physical violence in adolescent and adult relationships, there is little to no data specifically examining college students. Due to methodological issues including ways in which demographic information is collected by researchers, there is no way to differentiate between a college and non-college individual, living situation (i.e., on or off campus), student status (full-time or part-time), all of which could help contribute to meaningful data in College IPV research.

### **Sexual Violence and Rape Culture**

In recent years, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the prevalence and prevention of sexual assault on college campuses across the country (Jordan, 2014). One of the more important messages that researchers and experts try to convey is that sexual assault is more

often committed by a friend or acquaintance, as opposed to a stranger. In 1982, Russell found that 88% of women who experienced attempted or forceable rape knew their perpetrator (Russell, 1982). Acquaintance rape, even if it is not forceable, is just as psychologically damaging as violent/forced rape and often leaves a women blaming herself and fearful of people not believing her (Conley & Griffith, 2016; Rhode, 2016). This information has been crucial, particularly for developing effective prevention programs that can provide the accurate language for identifying and reporting rape.

“Date rape” is a term commonly used to describe these experiences, because it often happens on a date or is committed by a frequent dating partner (Jessup-Anger et al., 2018). Sexual assault and abuse also can occur in long-term dating relationships, as well as be committed by former dating partners. There is a misconception, and there has been for some time, that a dating partner (e.g., boyfriend, girlfriend) or spouse/domestic partner cannot rape or sexually assault their partner, because they are in a committed relationship and sexual interaction is part of that commitment (Carlson, 2008). However, this is untrue and makes sexual assault or rape an important consideration when reporting instances of IPV. In fact, Gross, Winslett, Roberts, and Gohm (2006) found that perpetrators labeled as boyfriends accounted for 41% of sexually violent incidents in college. Pointing out the need for addressing sexual violence in relationships.

“Rape culture” on a college campus is characterized in the way harassment and pornography are tolerated, non-consent is disregarded, women are often blamed for their behavior (Conley & Griffith, 2016), and fraternities and sports teams “reward male conquests” (Rhode, 2016, p. 7). This culture is even promoted in the way prevention programs are developed (those required to comply with Campus SaVE). Often, these programs are targeted at

women and how they can change their behaviors or defend themselves. Griffin et al. (2017), found that among the schools in their study of Campus SaVe compliance, none offered a program that was solely focused on changing rape-supportive culture, and the majority were programs that taught self-defense and risk reduction for women like not walking alone at night, not using headphones/listening to music when walking alone, and carrying a rape whistle (Griffin et al., 2017). This perpetuates a culture of victim blaming and shaming that leads to underreporting and ineffective prevention efforts.

### **Psychological Aggression, Coercive Control, and “Non-Rape”**

Many terms are used to describe the non-physical or non-sexual abuse present in relationships. This includes psychological aggression, psychological abuse, and emotional abuse (Follingstad, 2009; Witte, Hackman, Boleigh, & Mugoya, 2015). Threats, isolation, name calling, and stalking are types of psychological aggression or abuse (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). The CDC considers psychological aggression to be any threatening behavior or use of coercive control, and it is measured in the NISVS (Breiding, 2015). The NISVS separates psychological aggression into two components: *expressive aggression* (i.e., name calling) and *coercive control* (i.e., monitoring and making credible threats to control a partner) (Smith et al., 2018).

Approximately 47% of women report experiencing psychological aggression (Niolon et al., 2017). What distinguishes coercive control from psychological abuse is that there is fear of retaliation due to a credible threat (Kennedy, Bybee, McCauley, & Prock, 2018). This fear often affects a victim's daily life and decision making leading to lifelong negative psychological affects (Hamberger, Larsen, & Lehrner, 2017). Using coercive tactics has been established as part of a cycle of psychological abuse that is a key component in women staying with their abusers and blaming themselves for the abuse (Belknap & Sharma, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2018;

Kernsmith, 2008; Walker, 2006). Coercion does not always end in physical violence, but it is often intertwined with violence and can be detrimental to the mental health of the survivor (Hamberger et al., 2017; Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Kennedy et al., 2018; Matheson et al., 2015). In their study of a small sample of college and non-college women between ages 18-24, Kennedy et al. (2018) found that coercive control was the most common type of IPV experienced in relationships. They also found that 21% of physical violence was cooccurring with coercive control.

The measurement of psychological abuse is a concern among IPV researchers. They cite issues with varying definitions, degree/severity of psychological abuse, perception of what constitutes abuse by the survivor (i.e., do they consider/recognize coercion/threats as abuse), and the lack of a truly reliable instrument to measure the abuse as reasons to proceed with caution (Follingstad, 2009; Witte et al., 2015). Recognizing that this type of “non-violent” abuse is difficult to define or corroborate, and thus is not given enough attention although it causes significant harm, Belknap and Sharma (2014) came up with the term “Stealth Gender Based Abuse” (p. 182) or SGBA. SGBA is typically used by men to control, violate, confuse, intimidate, and isolate women in ways that are less obvious (i.e., not leaving physical scars), perhaps even to the survivor (Belknap & Sharma, 2014). The absence of physical evidence of abuse leads to a lack of social acceptance that it is indeed IPV and makes it difficult for victims to recognize it as a form of abuse. The research that has been conducted identifies psychological aggression or SGBA as the most common form of IPV in college students, possibly with the most negative effects (Rennison & Addington, 2014; Witte et al., 2015). Witte et al. (2015) found that psychological abuse in the form dominance and intimidation was significantly related to physical health symptoms in a sample of college students.

Sexual coercion is a form of SBGA that is still widely contested in the public and on college campuses. According to Fisher et al. (2010), the degree of coercion happens on a continuum ranging from using psychological pressure to using physical force. Psychological or emotional pressure can include nagging, making disparaging remarks, and using sympathy to get sex from a partner. Using deception (i.e., lying about a future romantic relationship) to obtain sexual contact is also a form of coercion. Sexual coercion has long-term physical and psychological effects including sexually transmitted diseases, lower sex drive, lower sexual satisfaction and self-esteem, and depression (Sáez, Alonso-Ferres, Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2019). Alone, psychological and emotional pressure are not necessarily illegal; however, when used to pressure someone, even your intimate partner, into having sex or sexual contact, it is considered abuse and may include penalties under the SaVE Act. Unsurprisingly, coercion and psychological abuse are less likely to be taken seriously, because no signs of physical abuse or struggle are present (Leahy, 2014). Basing self-esteem and self-worth on approval from a partner, which often happens after continued SBGA occurs, can lead to women staying with their partner and subsequent abusive relationships where they are psychologically abused (Kennedy et al., 2018). This highlights the significant long-term effects this type of abuse can cause for survivors.

### **Stalking**

Stalking is an area of IPV that is under-researched and often absent from the literature. However, stalking is experienced by undergraduate college students at higher rates than any other group, making it an important part of the IPV discussion (Dardis et al., 2019). One in six women report experiencing stalking behaviors, and two thirds of the perpetrators are current or former intimate partners (Black et al., 2011), with the average length of a stalking episode lasting



60 days (Duncan, 2014). As with psychological aggression and coercion, stalking can be difficult to identify and therefore go unreported (Duncan, 2014), yet the emotional and psychological damage that can occur as a result of such a prolonged threat can be severe and long-lasting (Shorey, Cornelius, & Strauss, 2015).

According to Dardis et al. (2019), the variation in what constitutes “unwanted pursuit behaviors” (UPBs) has made reporting and studying this phenomena complicated. As with other forms of IPV researchers still do not have an agreed upon definition or set of criteria for stalking, often using legal definitions that identify stalking as a repeated pattern of behaviors that produce a fear in victims to guide their research (Shorey et al., 2015). The inconsistencies in how stalking is defined have even been noted by the CDC in their public health surveillance research (Breiding, 2015). In the Handbook for Campus Safety and Security Reporting, written by the US Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), stalking is defined as at least two direct or indirect acts that would cause a reasonable person to suffer substantial emotional distress or fear for their safety or the safety of others close to them. These acts may include showing up unexpectedly, receiving unwanted items from the perpetrator, and unwanted contact via digital media (to be discussed in more detail below) (Black et al., 2011; Shorey et al., 2015).

For universities, there are questions surrounding how to differentiate stalking from intimidation and how to report cyberstalking, because it can happen almost anywhere and does not necessarily fall within the geographical jurisdiction of the school (Duncan, 2014). This further complicates campus response and report as well as prevention efforts when it comes to stalking. Additionally, while women who have experienced stalking report chronic health conditions (i.e., chronic pain, frequent headaches, and asthma) as well as poor mental health, cyberstalking has been shown to cause depression and post-traumatic stress at equal or higher

rates than in-person stalking, making it an important consideration for IPV research and policy. However, little research has investigated the impact or overlap of both in-person and cyber stalking w.

### **Technology and IPV in College**

The use of digital media, such as text messaging and social networking sites (SNS), is so common it has been identified as a key influence in identity construction for adolescent social development and college student development (Baker & Carreño, 2016; Brown, 2016; Draucker & Martsof, 2010). For example, as emerging adults, college students use technology to explore their sexuality and to establish and maintain intimate relationships (Hellevik, 2019). According to Brown (2016) “contemporary college students, by virtue of growing up alongside technology instead of coming to it later in life, are having a profoundly different experience than those who came before them” (p. 61). Texting and SNS are used as ways to build relationships, and provide a space for self-disclosure of information that otherwise may not have been discussed in-person (Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Hellevik, 2019). However, the sense of anonymity associated with electronic communication and the ability to connect with large numbers of people via SNS, is also believed to be potentially harmful in developing the ability to build meaningful lasting relationships and communicate effectively (Draucker & Martsof, 2010).

The “disinhibiting” feeling many people experience when using technology also can lead to negative behaviors such as making racist or sexist comments, bullying, and abuse (Hellevik, 2019). The increase in electronic aggression (EA) has been a concern for more than a decade and as technology advances rapidly, so do the ways in which it can be used to cause psychological distress (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Hellevik, 2019). In particular, the use of digital media has been linked to stalking, coercive control, and psychological abuse of intimate

partners (Baker & Carreño, 2016; Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Draucker, Martsof, Crane, Romero, & McCord, 2017; Sargent, Krauss, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2016). Technology allows for long-term, widespread, and long-lasting abuse that can be perpetrated 24 hours a day (Sargent et al., 2016). A perpetrator can share photos and information that could conceivably live online indefinitely, and be accessed by anyone, anywhere, at any time. Abusers also can use cellphones and other forms of portable technology to track the locations of their victims (usually without their knowledge) (Baker & Carreño, 2016; Sargent et al., 2016). This is both a controlling behavior and one that may overlap with in-person stalking. The potential psychological damage that may be caused by cyber victimization is considerable given that it may be viewed as a continuous threat that can "...invoke an expectation of lifelong pain, humiliation, or shame due to the lasting online record" (Sargent et al., 2016, p. 546).

In their study of cyber victimization and mental health outcomes of 342 first-year college students, Sargent et al. (2016) found that cyber victimization and psychological IPV were positively correlated with one another and both contributed to depressive symptoms with cyber victimization also contributing to anti-social behaviors. Similarly Dardis et al. (2019) found that when compared with in-person stalking and even other forms of IPV, cyberstalking leads to higher rates of post-traumatic stress and symptoms of depression. This points to the importance of considering cyberstalking and bullying in IPV research and the need to look at multiple types of abuse to understand the affects and build effective prevention programming (Dardis et al., 2019; Sargent et al., 2016).

As noted earlier, cyberstalking does not fit neatly into the definition of stalking (Duncan, 2014) and may be more difficult to identify, report, and prevent (Dardis et al., 2019). Technology is rapidly advancing and changing, making it difficult to guard against its misuse, and not all

states have laws against cyberstalking behaviors (Dardis et al., 2019). However, the HEA includes threats made via electronic communication via email, texts, and social media its definition for stalking (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), which means that acts of cyberstalking that fall within the jurisdiction of the campus are considered reportable. What makes intervention and prevention challenging is the way people use social media to develop online personas. These personas become an extension of individuals' identities or selves, and they may be less inclined or willing to remove online profiles or make adjustments to their use of technology and social networking sites to stop or prevent abuse (Dardis et al., 2019). This differs from in-person stalking where a woman might be willing to change her route home or her schedule for protection (Dardis et al., 2019). The differences in both how cyberbullying presents and how it effects victims makes it a crucial piece of IPV prevention and intervention research.

This section summarized the well-established prevalence rates of IPV, as well as the various types of IPV and the ways IPV is defined for the purposes of research and policy. What is missing from the research is an understanding of how women come to name their experiences and the meaning it holds in their lives. The goal of this research is to tell a story about meaning making within the context of college IPV, and what role, if any, these classifications of violence and definitions play in the lives of the women who have survived abusive relationships in college.

Language and definitions are often created or developed by those in power leaving out the voices of those who actually lived through the experience (Johnstone, 2016). This study will add to the literature not by confirming high prevalence rates or trying to define IPV but by discovering the language used to discuss IPV whether it is physical, emotional, or technological. Rather than narrowing a woman's experience to a few checkboxes on a form, qualitative

interviews will highlight the absence of “their stories, their labels, and their representations of their experiences with their own words” (Johnstone, 2013, p. 4). Definitions are helpful but they describe the actions of the abuser, not the feelings of the survivor (Campbell, 2002; Johnstone, 2013). Understanding the emotions involved can illuminate the reasons why women do or do not label their experiences as abuse and why they choose to tell or not tell someone all in their own words. This can help to guide and improve future research and create more effective screening tools and prevention programs.

### **Impact of IPV on College Students**

Understanding the impact of IPV helps in contextualizing its severity and the types of services that survivors may need (Smith et al., 2017). As has been discussed throughout this chapter, all forms of IPV can affect the mental and physical health of survivors. More than 40% of women IPV survivors suffer a physical injury (Breiding, 2015). Many women experience chronic conditions that affect their nervous and musculoskeletal systems as well as reproductive issues (Niolon et al., 2017). In terms of mental health, there is a high correlation between IPV and post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression (Brewer & Thomas, 2019; Dardis et al., 2019; Niolon et al., 2017). Risk-taking behaviors, like consumption of drugs and alcohol and having unprotected sex, often are used as coping mechanisms or self-protective behaviors, and tend to increase after victimization (Brewer & Thomas, 2019). These behaviors can lead to other physical and mental health issues as well as academic issues. However, research and improved policy can provide insight and guidance as to the appropriate resources campuses should have in place to effectively address the impact that IPV has on college students; In turn, preventing increased risk-taking behaviors and long-term financial, academic, and career consequences.

The effects a college woman experiences vary by the type of abuse, interventions, and the perceptions of reporting. Many issues arise because schools sometimes ignore and mishandle reported cases, often by letting a perpetrator go with only a warning or minor punishment (Duncan, 2014). An example of this is the Brock Turner case referenced in chapter one. Turner was found guilty of three counts of felony assault, yet he was only sentenced to six months in prison, serving only three prior to his release (Koren, 2016). There is also victim blaming and failure to provide services or financial support for what has been outlined in Title IX, and a focus on protecting the reputation of the school rather than the student (Bolger, 2016). Even if all the appropriate measures are taken by administration, IPV still can create long-term issues for survivors.

### **Fear and Concern for Safety**

Fear and concern for safety are two of the categories that the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey uses to measure the impact of IPV. The survey revealed that of the women who report experiencing IPV, 62% felt fearful and 57% were concerned for their safety (Smith et al., 2017). In addition to the possible reoccurrence of abuse, fear and concern for safety also have to do with whether victims report, and whether or not they leave a relationship (Kennedy et al., 2018). Often, victims fear not being believed, being judged, and/or being blamed for what happened, which prevents them from reporting or telling anyone. Concern for the safety of self and people close to the victims is another reason women frequently cite for not leaving abusive relationships, especially if the abuser has made credible threats (Kennedy et al., 2018). Women of color are even more likely to be impacted by concern for safety because of racism and structural barriers on college campuses that increase the likelihood that they will not be believed, leading many not to report or seek help (Voth Schrag, 2017).

When college women stay in an abusive relationship and/or constantly live in fear, it increases the likelihood of subsequent mental and physical health issues. Many attempt to forget or numb the experience by turning to alcohol and/or drugs and severing relationships, thereby negatively affecting their long-term social functioning (Wood, Voth Schrag, & Busch-Armendariz, 2020). This highlights the need to minimize the stigma and blame attached to all types of IPV in college, especially for women of color, so that they are comfortable reporting and/or seeking help (Voth Schrag, 2017; Wood et al., 2020).

### **Self-Esteem and Identity Development**

Developmentally, traditionally aged college students are considered to be emerging adults (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults are exploring identity development and experiencing greater levels of independence and freedom. This is particularly true of college students, as college provides a space for them to start making more decisions on their own, sometimes to live on their own, and to explore deeper levels of intimacy (Arnett, 2000). The optimism about the future and the potential of what lies ahead personally and professionally is considered the *age of possibility* in emerging adulthood and is experienced at higher rates by college students versus their non-college counterparts (Zorotovich, 2014).

Women who experience IPV struggle with erosion of self-esteem and self-worth that often prevents them from remaining optimistic and open to the possibilities that lie ahead in their education, lives, and careers (Matheson et al., 2015). Decrease in self-esteem can cause depression and anxiety, especially for women who do not seek help with their mental health or who stay in the relationship (Matheson et al., 2015; McRae, 2020). Therefore, the effect that IPV has on self-esteem has the potential to result in long-term identity and career development challenges in addition to mental and physical health issues.

### **Depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

Rates of depression and PTSD are high among college women who have experienced IPV. Given the previously mentioned effects on self-esteem, feelings of safety, and stigma attached to IPV this is not surprising. In a study of eight colleges in the Southwest, Wood et al. (2020) found that IPV was significantly correlated with PTSD and depression. More specifically, they found increased symptomology for both PTSD and depression to be associated with higher levels of psychological, sexual, and cyber violence. Since psychological abuse has been found to be the most common form of IPV experienced by college women, this means that the rates of depression and PTSD are likely high among college IPV survivors (Rennison & Addington, 2014; Witte et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2020). Voth Schrag and Edmond (2018) found 20% of community college students who had experienced IPV reported symptomology that met the clinical cut-off for current PTSD. They connected PTSD-induced short-term memory loss with the ability of survivors to succeed academically.

A notable result from Wood et al's study (2020) is that living off-campus was associated with decreased symptomology for both PTSD and depression. This shows the important role that school enrollment (2-year vs 4-year college) and living status (on or off campus) potentially play in IPV, an area mentioned earlier as under-researched. This association could be tied to increased social support from family or feelings of safety related to being on or off campus (especially if that is where the abuse occurred or where the perpetrator lives).

Depression and depressive symptoms have been found to be both a predictor of experiencing IPV as well as a consequence of such trauma (Bonomi et al., 2018; Sargent et al., 2016). This points to a potential for a lifetime of IPV if a survivor does not seek help leaving depressive symptoms untreated and becoming more likely to stay in or find themselves in a new



abusive relationship. Sargent et al. (2016) found that cyber victimization and psychological IPV often co-occur and when they do there is an increased risk for depressive symptoms. Among college women, rates of both cyber victimization and psychological IPV are high (and have been found to be the most common types); therefore, rates of depression are likely high as well (Hamberger et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2020). More importantly, both are considered silent forms of IPV that often go unacknowledged by the victim and/or the people the victims turn to for support (Matheson et al., 2015). This means women may not seek or receive the help or resources they need because they do not recognize their symptoms, leading to long-term mental health issues.

### **Academic and Financial Impact**

Although there are documented effects of IPV on academics and finances, this area also continues to be under-researched (Banyard et al., 2017; Brewer et al., 2018; Niolon et al., 2017). Brewer et al. (2018) found that among college students, the negative health outcomes of IPV victimization lead to lower GPAs and increased academic difficulties. Long term, this can affect college completion and career opportunities, limiting financial prospects and often leading to financial difficulties from unpaid loans and bills (Bolger, 2016). Bolger (2016) noted that one way to prevent negative financial outcomes is for loan lenders to consider the mental and physical health consequences suffered due to gender-based violence as a reason for loan forbearance. After experiencing IPV, students often withdraw from courses still in progress (resulting in low or failing grades) or from school all together, which forces them to start repaying their loans. Forbearance would give students time to either reenroll in school once they are ready (putting them back into deferment) or to find a job if they do not return to school (making it more likely they can make the payments).

Additionally, researchers have found that experiencing IPV anytime during adolescence leads to lower lifetime educational attainment, which in turn negatively influences women's potential earnings lifelong (Adams et al., 2013). Banyard et al. (2017) found that students who experience stalking, IPV, or sexual assault have lower academic self-efficacy as well as lower commitment to academics and their academic institution. This spiraling effect, in which the health outcomes lead to academic and then financial difficulties, is important for college administrators to understand and address (Brewer & Thomas, 2019), particularly if they are interested in maintaining high retention rates (Banyard et al., 2017). Providing the necessary resources to victims can help to minimize the negative consequences of IPV and increase the likelihood of successful degree completion without significant financial burden (Banyard et al., 2017; Bolger, 2016).

### **Prevention, Intervention, and Campus Resources**

Very little research has been done to gauge what resources exist on campuses to address IPV (Sabina, Verdiglione, & Zadnik, 2017; Voth Schrag, 2017). Even when there are resources available, the communication about services often is lacking, which leads to underutilization (Sabina et al., 2017). However, given the potential long-term negative effects of IPV, services that address issues such as PTSD, safety concerns, and academic needs are necessary to help college women feel safe, rebuild self-esteem, and continue identity development (Matheson et al., 2015).

Campus resources fall into two categories: those that intend to prevent gender-based violence and those that respond and provide interventions (Demers et al., 2018). As noted earlier, universities are required to create preventative training programs, emergency intervention groups, and on-campus educational resources to combat gender-based violence on campuses

(Banyard et al., 2017). However, it seems that campuses across the nation are still unsure of how to do this effectively and without extreme financial burden to the university (Banyard et al., 2017). There are many reasons for this uncertainty, including a shift in the governmental enforcement of policies and procedures around Title IX and the Clery Act and an underutilization of student resources on campuses (Voth Schrag, 2017). Brewer and Thomas (2019) suggest that it would be most beneficial for administrators to focus on providing campus resources that address the four domains of well-being (physical, mental, behavioral, and financial health).

Many universities administer climate surveys, implement preventative programming, and develop task forces, but there is often little follow through or follow-up regarding the use of results or the effectiveness of programs (Graham et al., 2019). Insufficient training and inconsistent policy endorsement has resulted in lost opportunities for various members of the campus community to appropriately identify, prevent, and respond to IPV (Banyard et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2019; Sabina et al., 2017). For instance, students view faculty as an important source of support for their lives, not just their academics (Voth Schrag, 2017), and often disclose personal information or challenges to their professors, particularly to faculty in the helping professions (social work, counseling, psychology) (Graham et al., 2019; Hayes-Smith, Richards, & Branch, 2010). However, faculty and staff are often unsure of their role in these situations and may discourage students from disclosing to them. Furthermore, these faculty and staff may experience negative mental health consequences themselves as a result of a student disclosing to them (Banyard et al., 2017; Demers et al., 2018; Hayes-Smith et al., 2010). Faculty who are appropriately trained in how to respond when students disclose personal details like IPV seem to experience less strain from being used as a support. This shows that education about gender-

based abuse among students should not stop at the student level (Hayes-Smith et al., 2010). This is an opportunity for the academic and student affairs sides to come together and address the complex problems of gender-based violence on campus (Banyard et al., 2017).

Sabina et al. (2017) surveyed security officers at 45 four-year institutions to learn more about the services that were, to their knowledge, available to students who experience gender-based violence on campus. They found that the resources most commonly endorsed were counseling and police services, but that it varied greatly across campuses (Voth Schrag, 2017). Additionally, they found that few resources existed for financial and housing support, peer support, and sexual assault response (Sabina et al., 2017). This points to a lack of uniformity in what is available and/or a lack of knowledge about what might be available. As they point out, “if representatives do not report services in a research interview, it is unlikely that the...relevant information would reach victims” (Sabina et al., 2017, p. 11).

Universal screening for IPV on campus has been recommended as a way to make sure students get access to the services they need (Brewer & Thomas, 2019). In their study of colleges in the northeastern US, Sutherland and Hutchinson (2018) found that only 15% of college healthcare providers screened for IPV. This group included nurse practitioners, counselors, and doctors, many of whom cited the length of IPV screening, religious affiliation (religious affiliated schools can sometimes discourage discussion of sexual activity), and interruption of health center functioning (takes too much time/disrupts patient flow) as reasons they did not screen for IPV. As has been made clear throughout this review, all forms of IPV go underreported, and it is often because students do not realize that what they have experienced is abuse. If college healthcare providers were regularly screening and giving students the language to describe what they have been living through, it could help to highlight IPV issues and

contribute to appropriate IPV prevention and response efforts (Brewer & Thomas, 2019; Dardis et al., 2019). Additionally, ensuring culturally sensitive screening is important to help women who come from ethnic groups in which abuse is considered more acceptable and therefore often goes unacknowledged is a key part of improving screening as a resource (Stockman, Hayashi, & Campbell, 2015) .

A strong sense of community, connection, and support may play an important role in preventing occurrences of IPV and destigmatizing IPV in a way that encourages more reporting (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Voth Schrag, 2017). College students have identified the need to be educated about healthy relationships, to establish friendships, and to build community as the most effective ways to approach prevention efforts. For example, among college students, White and Carmody (2018) found that having real conversations about IPV and establishing peer mentoring relationships are the most effective ways to get the messages across about IPV issues on campus; whereas methods like creating pamphlets and hanging posters are less effective. These same students also identified engaging men in prevention efforts, rather than treating them only as perpetrators, as a crucial part of creating a safe campus. This research confirms that if students are made aware of the signs and given the tools to prevent abuse early in their college careers, there is potential for decreased gender-based violence on campus and a stronger more connected campus community (White & Carmody, 2018).

Rather than trying to adopt one-size-fits all prevention and intervention programs, universities may better situate themselves by developing programming that meets the needs of their specific student population(s) (Smith et al., 2017). Racial and ethnic minority groups experience IPV at higher levels, but often the reasons for underreporting and not seeking help differ based on cultural attitudes and other barriers (Smith et al., 2017; Stockman et al., 2015;

Voth Schrag, 2017). For instance, an institution serving a rural population may benefit most from educating about gender role stereotypes and healthy relationships. Intervention services at rural institutions might best be focused on healthcare access to combat the isolation and lack of access to screening, medical, and mental health services (Stockman et al., 2015).

General mistrust of the medical community is an issue for many ethnic minority groups. This means that training of college medical and mental health staff to screen for and respond to IPV in a culturally sensitive manner is crucial to help break down the barriers that prevent help-seeking particularly by Latina and Black women (Sabina et al., 2017; Stockman et al., 2015). Preventative education that aims to destigmatize mental health issues for these groups is also important to encourage women to utilize services to address issues that arise from experiencing IPV (Stockman et al., 2015).

Institutions across the country would benefit from educating all members of their campus community about IPV. Students can benefit from information about healthy relationships and resources specific to their demographic needs. For those campuses that have put resources in place, effectively sharing those resources with community, beyond posting them on a website or putting up a flyer, is important for both prevention and intervention efforts (White & Carmody, 2018). Additionally, social support plays a key role in both prevention (peer support) and intervention (familial, peer, faculty, and staff support) highlighting the importance of creating programs that destigmatize all forms of IPV and the associated mental health issues that it may cause (Sabina et al., 2017; Voth Schrag & Edmond, 2018; White & Carmody, 2018; Wood et al., 2020). During the interviews with the college women in this study, the goal is to gain insight into help-seeking behaviors and the process of naming IPV that may emphasize areas that still need to be addressed in prevention and intervention efforts.

### **Conclusion and Gaps in the Literature**

In this chapter, I reviewed the feminist lens that will be guiding this study and discussed its connection to gender-based violence and the use of power and control. This was followed by a review of the historical background of battered women and domestic violence that laid the groundwork for what is now considered intimate partner violence (IPV). Next the various forms of IPV and the impact they have on college women were examined. Finally, I addressed some of the campus resources and interventions.

Traditional-aged college women experience IPV at higher rates than any other age demographic with stalking and cyberstalking becoming more prevalent but under-researched. Women who have experienced IPV, whether it be physical or psychological, still feel stigmatized and unsure who they can turn to for help. In some cases, they do not even recognize that what they have experienced is IPV, and with no standardized practices for screening or educating students about IPV, it becomes impossible to tackle the issue on a large scale (Sutherland & Hutchinson, 2018). I hope that by interviewing survivors I can contribute to the literature surrounding the naming process.

This literature review also highlights both the consistency in IPV prevalence rates among college women and the inconsistency in how those rates are addressed across college campuses. Policies that have been developed require institutions of higher education to be transparent in their efforts to battle this public health crisis, yet they have not been implemented uniformly (Duncan, 2014). This is important because it influences student reporting and how different members of the campus community respond to when an incident is reported.

Although the literature that exists on IPV among college students is growing, much of it looks at prevalence and type, leaving out effectiveness of IPV programs and post-IPV health

outcomes (Hamby, 2014). More specifically, research in the areas of the academic and financial consequences of IPV during college could help to engage higher education administration in more effective prevention and intervention efforts (Banyard et al., 2017). These efforts need to go beyond the education of the student body and encourage collaboration between student and academic affairs. The focus of this dissertation is on the language used by survivors to describe their experiences with IPV. Often survivors do not report because they do not conceptualize what has happened to them as abuse; or because no one has asked them directly (screened them) about the things they have experienced. If healthcare providers, faculty, and staff understand the language of a survivor, they would have greater tools to help women name their experience (beyond a legal definition), and therefore increase reporting and improve prevention efforts.



### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In chapter one I provided the problem statement, research questions, and rationale for this study. This was followed by an in-depth review of the literature surrounding intimate partner violence (IPV), including the history of gender-based violence as an acknowledged phenomenon and the prevalence of IPV among college-aged women in chapter two. The IPV research highlights the fact that there is not an easily identifiable way to define and, therefore, accurately study IPV. In this chapter, I will describe why in-depth qualitative interviews were used to effectively capture the experiences of participants and answer the presenting research question: *How do traditionally-aged college women describe their lived experience of being in an abusive intimate relationship during their undergraduate years?* More specifically, I will discuss the criteria and procedures for my participant selection and recruitment, provide a rationale for the research design and the methods of data analysis, as well as address my positionality and the ways I maintained my research integrity.

#### **Feminist Research Methodology**

In Chapter Two, I described in detail the feminist lens I used to frame this study. In the following sections, I will discuss how I both collected and analyzed the data using feminist principles. Here I will review the feminist principles that guided the methodology of this research. Although this is not a comprehensive explanation of feminist methodology, it provides context for the feminist principles mentioned throughout the remainder of this chapter.

First, it is important to understand that the foundation of a feminist research approach is putting the voices of women and marginalized populations at the forefront of the research (Beckman, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2013). Feminist methodologies focus on lived experiences (usually of women) and intersectionality of social identities (Beckman, 2014). My study focused

solely on the understudied phenomenon of IPV among college women. The semi-structured interview procedure I used allowed women to share their lived experiences in their own words. Additionally, the Listening Guide methodology is a labor-intensive approach that requires the researcher to make the participants' voices and exploration of experience the priority before analyzing interview data in relation to the research question.

Minimizing power imbalances and striving for an egalitarian relationship is a feminist research tenet that guided the design of this study and the interaction between participant and researcher. In order to avoid retraumatizing participants, or recreating societal inequities, a feminist researcher must be keenly aware of all of the power, privilege, and biases that they bring into their research and research relationship (Beckman, 2014). I outline the ways in which I addressed this in my discussions of in-depth interviews and researcher positionality, integrity, and trustworthiness. I used Gilligan's Listening Guide to understand each participant's story in multiple contexts. The rigorous methods suggested by the Listening Guide provide the researcher with steps to follow to focus first on the participant's story and first-person voice, before making any interpretations.

Finally, feminist researchers are purposeful in the use of the findings of their studies. According to Beckman (2014), "activism and advocacy are at the core of feminist research methodology" (p. 170). The goal is to use the data to create change and empower. This can be achieved by sharing the new knowledge about experiences of IPV with important stakeholders, rather than using the results for academic purposes only.

### **Design Overview and Rationale**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of traditionally-aged college women who have been in abusive relationships while in college and to learn how they

have come to name and describe that abuse. In order to explore the complexity of the individual experiences of each survivor of intimate partner violence (IPV), I conducted what Merriam & Tisdale (2015) refer to as a basic qualitative study, from a feminist research standpoint (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Worell & Remer, 2003). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015) a basic qualitative research study focuses on how people construct their social worlds, as well as interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences. I was interested in learning how participants understood, interpreted, attributed meaning, and assigned labels to their experiences of IPV, therefore a basic qualitative design aligned well with my research purpose.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 participants to allow for flexible and fluid conversations. This ensured that, to the best of my ability, I was keeping to feminist research principles (Hesse-Biber, 2013) and maximizing potential for listening to a wide range of narratives for thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semi-Structured interviews ensured that specific topics were covered, while allowing flexibility for storytelling and diving deeper into “markers” or topics brought up by participants during the interview (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

Conducting in-depth interviews allowed me to highlight the different ways in which women describe their experiences of IPV (Creswell & Poth, 2016). From a feminist perspective, this method can provide the opportunity for a woman to feel empowered by letting her share her story without imposing a definition or trying to generalize her experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Interviewing 12 participants allowed for a range of perspectives on the same issue, therefore providing a breadth of descriptions. I used Carol Gilligan’s Listening Guide to analyze the data for themes, rather than trying to search for a unified definition of IPV (Gilligan, 2015); this allowed me room to see each woman and her experience as unique before composing an analysis to determine common themes that answer my specific research question. This was

important because my goal was uncovering “the diversity of women’s realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated” (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 184). Each of these unique experiences together told a story about IPV among college women. In order to properly frame the design for this research, I will start with a discussion of feminist research methodology and the nuances of participant selection for this particular study. This will set the stage for a detailed discussion of data collection and analysis.

### **Participants**

In order to gather the data necessary to learn about the experience of IPV in college, current college women between the ages of 18-24 were recruited for this study. These women self-identified as having experienced intimate partner violence, although they may not have used that label, via a screening questionnaire (Appendix B). College women are at a key point in their identity development where love, sex, and relationships are some of the main themes being explored (Arnett, 2000; Mitchell & Syed, 2015). Although other women might have been able to retrospectively share their history of IPV during college, interviewing women who were still experiencing college life provided richer descriptions and contributed more to understanding the lived experience of IPV during college (Dardis, Edwards, Kelley, & Gidycz, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In the next section, the recruitment strategies and selection criteria will be discussed in detail.

### **Selection and Sampling**

A purposeful approach to sampling was necessary for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In other words, the best way to learn about the experiences of college women who have experienced IPV was to include participants who met the criteria of having experienced that specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Creswell and Poth (2016) in

purposeful sampling, the researcher must consider who to select, the specific type of sampling strategy, and the size of the sample. For this study, the participants met the following criteria: 1) woman between the ages of 18-24; 2) currently enrolled in a graduate or undergraduate program, or graduated within one year; and 3) self-identified as having experienced behaviors that fall within the definition of IPV.

It is important to define the characteristics of IPV that were used to make certain that the interviews captured the most information-rich stories and contributed to an in-depth understanding of IPV (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). There are many forms of IPV (physical, psychological, sexual), and participation will not be limited by a specific type. Interviewing women who experienced different forms of IPV aided in the development of a holistic account of IPV that better illustrates the complexities of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Recruitment correspondence asked about specific behavioral indicators of abuse rather than directly asking if they have experienced IPV at the hands of a partner. The screening forms used to recruit participants for this study were created using questions from various IPV, DV, and SA screening instruments used in medical settings. Research shows that those who actually experience IPV are likely to minimize those experiences and not label them as abusive (Dardis et al., 2017). Therefore, by asking specific questions about instances of physical abuse (hitting, pushing), verbal abuse (name calling), and psychological control (being prevented from speaking to family or friends) at the hands of a current or former partner, they identified experiences of IPV without needing that particular term (see Appendix B for full details). This helped in overcoming the semantic barriers in recruitment that could prevent building a diverse sample that includes women who may not use specific terms (IPV) and labels (abuse, victim) to describe their experiences (Johnstone, 2013).

Second, the recruitment materials indicated that this abuse may have been with a past or current intimate partner, as long as it happened during college. These types of intimate relationships are often fluid and difficult to label, making it nearly impossible to state with certainty whether or not the relationship is current (Dardis et al., 2017). Some abusive behaviors such as stalking, cyber-stalking, and psychological abuse often occur after relationships have ended (White & Carmody, 2018). Additionally, the CDC definition of IPV includes abuse by past and current intimate partners, therefore aligning the study criteria with an established definition of IPV (Niolon et al., 2017). Including participants regardless of current relationship status allowed for the collection of rich data that could be instrumental in the process of naming IPV. As is standard in research, the consent form (Appendix C) was discussed in detail in the beginning of the interview process and addressed any safety concerns. The participant was reminded that she was a volunteer and could withdraw at any time. All participants were provided with resources for advocacy services, free hotlines, and mental health services (Appendix D).

In order to gain a complex sense of this vulnerable population, 12 participants were interviewed. The goal of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of living through IPV through the eyes of a college woman (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Generally, a small sample size of about ten accomplishes this goal in basic qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hesse-Biber, 2013; Patton, 2014). This number provided enough information about the language that women use to describe their experiences with IPV to meet that purpose of the study and contribute to the understanding of IPV during college (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2014). Additionally, I built the sample as I moved along in the research

process, aiming for as much diversity in race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and geographic location as possible.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment was done via word of mouth, social media, and email outreach. I first shared the information about my research with colleagues in higher education and counseling. I also shared it with the membership of the American College Counseling Association (ACCA) and with my colleagues who work as sexual assault advocates in New Jersey. Additionally, I reached out to campus Women's Centers. I also recruited via Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn using the flyer in Appendix E. The Recruitment Email (Appendix F) explained the nature of the research and the procedures for contacting me if interested in being screened to participate. Prospective participants who contacted me were asked to complete a screening form (Appendix B). I then scheduled a time to speak by phone with those who met the criteria for the study (current college students between the ages of 18-24 who identify as having experienced indicators of IPV) based on the responses to the screening survey. The purpose of the call was to discuss the details of participating, including explaining consent, and to gauge their interest in committing to being a participant. After the phone call, sent the electronic consent form (Appendix C) and electronic demographic questionnaire (Appendix G) to those who were still interested. After they completed those documents online, we scheduled our first interview.

### **Research Design**

The design for this study was the basic qualitative interview approach described by (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The goal of a basic interpretive qualitative study is to uncover and interpret the meaning of a phenomenon, resulting in discovery of recurring patterns and themes. My intention was to share my interpretation of the stories and iterations of how women make

meaning of their experience with IPV during college, not to come up with a composite description of IPV in college (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This distinction matters because a definition and basic understanding of IPV exists; what is lacking are the voices of the women who have experienced it and what that experience meant to them in their lives. The language of survivors is missing in the research because the screening and research is done using language created by people in power, not by survivors. The goal of my research findings, then, was to tell a story about meaning-making within the context of college IPV, not to define IPV in college. The feminist methodology I worked well with this approach, particularly for this population, because it focused on listening and empowerment which is important when working with individuals who have otherwise been silenced and/or traumatized.

The interview study was conducted via in-depth virtual interviews. In-depth interviews are a tool by which a feminist researcher can stay true to the goal of listening to gain an understanding of the lived experience of women (Hesse-Biber, 2013). During an in-depth interview, the researcher asks questions regarding a specific topic related to the participant's life (e.g., IPV) with the intention of co-creating meaning, and it is the researcher's job to listen to the story and when necessary ask for clarification (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

### **Data Gathering: In-Depth Interviews**

In order to understand the process of naming IPV and the meaning the experience has had in the life of the participants, two 60-90 minute semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant and audio recorded (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Deciding on the length of the interviews was important in establishing a uniform approach to interviewing (Seidman, 2013). Interviews needed to be long enough to allow for conversations that provide rich data, but not so long that the participant would lose interest or get fatigued (Seidman, 2013).



During the first interview, some time was spent building rapport and evoking a conversation to learn about the participant and what motivated her to agree to the interview. This is a sensitive topic, and acknowledging that the participant has agreed to share such intimate information was important.

An interview guide (Appendix H) helped provide focus during the semi-structured interviews to assure that the topic areas for each 60-90-minute interview were covered. Since the first interview provided context for the second, it was crucial that the interview did not stray too far from the study's purpose (Seidman, 2013). A semi-structured approach allowed for open-ended questioning in which the order of the questions did not matter and was often naturally driven by the conversation taking place between the interviewer and interviewee (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This fluidity was beneficial because it allowed the participants to be heard while giving me the opportunity to listen for and follow-up on "markers", which are "important pieces of information that participants offer while they are discussing something else" (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 207). These follow-up questions took the conversation to a deeper level. I kept Gilligan's Listening Guide methods in mind during the interviews to ask questions from a place of curiosity without judgment and listen for what is unspoken (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). Although unstructured interviews would have given the participant the most control and are the ideal way of minimizing power imbalances for the feminist researcher, the semi-structured interview still allowed me to maintain feminist integrity by allowing the conversation to be fluid and not disrupting the participant's story telling (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

According to Hesse-Biber (2013), it is the types of questions asked that make the interview feminist, not the interview approach (i.e., structured, semi-structured, or unstructured). This means that as long as the questions or topics help to gain an understanding of women's lives

in a way that promotes social change, while also being mindful of the imbalance of power between the researcher and participant, the methodology fits into a feminist framework (Hesse-Biber, 2013). The guide for this interview included (but was not limited to) the following topics:

- I. Orientation to the term Intimate Partner Violence
- II. Women's accounts of their IPV experiences
- III. Talking about and naming abusive experiences
- IV. Women's experiences with the interview process

When viewing through a feminist lens, the interview process is a “cocreation of meaning.” Therefore, I was ready to stray from the agenda and follow the lead of the participant when necessary, because that is how they feel heard and help to develop a narrative with details that I, as the researcher, may not have considered (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Using broad, open-ended questions allowed me to see where the participant began her story, rather than telling her where to begin. The goal was to have a deeper understanding of the life of the survivor by listening to her contextualize her intimate relationship with her abuser. Transcriptions from the first interview were completed by a hired transcriber prior to the second interview in order to inform the creation of the second interview guide.

The second interview took place after completion of all first round interviews, and was used for clarification and member checking (Koelsch, 2015). Member checking is done to ensure that the information gathered and interpretation of that data represents what the participant identifies as her reality. To do this I shared with each participant what I heard during her first interview, and followed-up on any questions or themes that came up after reviewing the data (See Appendix I for Second Interview Guide). This included introducing ideas that came up throughout all of the interviews, to see if anything resonated with the participant that she had not

mentioned during the first interview. Through reflection of what was discussed in the first interview, the participant began to articulate the meaning of this experience in her life. I also asked the participant to share any thoughts and feelings that came up between interviews so that she felt heard. Employing these strategies served to continue to minimize any power imbalances, hopefully leaving the participant feeling empowered and in control of her own story and therefore reducing potential for retraumatization (Hesse-Biber, 2013). As a way to wrap up the final interview, Seidman (2013) suggests a question that is focused on the future. In keeping with this recommendation, I asked the participants to think ahead and imagine their lives and describe how they envision their future romantic relationships.

During this interview, I shared an *I poem* (Gilligan, 2015) developed from the first interview. The *I poem* was developed by using the participants own words (from the first interview) and it gave the participant the opportunity to hear what I heard, without the specific details of the abuse (Gilligan, 2015; Koelsch, 2015). It was a way to member check, but also remind her of the complexity of her situation and her sense of agency (Koelsch, 2015). The *I poem* is another tool that can be used to avoid retraumatizing a participant. It can be an effective way to reflect on sensitive data, without making the participant relive the traumatic experience (Koelsch, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews for this study were audio recorded and transcribed. According to Hesse-Biber (2013) qualitative data analysis is an iterative process and data collection and analysis should happen “almost simultaneously” (p. 223). Therefore, transcription began immediately after the first interview; and all first round interviews were completed before second round interviews begin. This is because responses from the first round of interviews were used to

inform the interview guide for the second interview. Data analysis were conducted using the procedures outlined in Gilligan's (2015) Listening Guide, which included reading the transcripts and listening to each recording multiple times to listen for the different narrative voices (i.e., variations in tone, contradictions in story, and shifts between points of view) of each individual participant. During these listenings, I also was attending to my feelings about the story being told and the person telling the story. This aided in the co-creation of meaning between myself (as the researcher) and the participant, and was crucial to effectively using Gilligan's (2015) Listening Guide to analyze the data and maintain the relational focus of the research.

### **Listening Guide**

In keeping with my stance as a feminist, I used Gilligan's Listening Guide to analyze my data (Gilligan, 2015). The Listening Guide has been used for almost 30 years and is both a method and methodology, providing a specific way to listen during data collection, and a nuanced way to analyze the data (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). Gilligan's approach is rooted in the idea that in order to understand the experiences of women, we must listen to what they have to say, in their own words, while also considering the societal structures that influence experiences.

Language is developed by those in power, forcing people who experience oppressive acts (like gender-based violence) to use the labels created by the same people who committed those acts (Johnstone, 2016). This can leave women who have experienced abuse feeling unrepresented in conventional descriptions of abuse, or unable to translate their experience in a meaningful or complete manner. According to Gilligan, for women to feel heard, we should avoid comparing them or their experiences to others, particularly men. To facilitate this process, Gilligan asks that researchers listen for and challenge cultural assumptions and patriarchal structures during interviews and data analysis in order to truly hear and understand the what and

*why* of responses (Gilligan, 2015; Hesse-Biber, 2013). Some examples of how cultural assumptions and the influence of patriarchal power structures could come through in this study were: a woman not thinking to label her experience as IPV because societal scripts have led her to believe that relationship abuse is only physical and usually involves visible injury; that someone who is identified as a partner cannot rape you (i.e. rape is only committed by strangers); that the abuse is her fault; or that IPV is a personal situation that must be dealt with in private (Demers et al., 2018; Johnstone, 2016).

The Listening Guide is a detailed feminist approach to the traditional qualitative methods of interviewing, coding, and developing themes. It provides the researcher with a way to access women's voices and analyze findings from a relational context. The guide provides steps for listening for contrapuntal voices and first person narratives, helping the researcher to find the connections between the participant's experience and the conflicts (both internal and external) it has caused that otherwise might be difficult to articulate (Johnstone, 2016). The Guide also encourages the exploration of the connection between the researcher and participant and the relationship that they build during the research process; Particularly in the way that researchers voice influences the detailing and interpretation of a participant's narrative (Gilligan, 2015; Johnstone, 2016).

The framework outlined by the Listening Guide encourages the researcher to listen to what is said and look for patterns in what is unsaid by approaching the participants as "experts on their own experiences" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 77). This is done by asking questions, without judgement, from a place of curiosity rather than from a place of expertise with a knowledge gap that needs to be filled (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). It makes the research a process of discovery, not a process of question answering. The Listening Guide establishes where the

participant is psychologically, so the researcher can then begin the process of understanding what brought them to that place (Gilligan, 2015). It is crucial to avoid categorizing or coding data during the interview because this interferes with effectively listening and building trust in the research relationship (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). This is of particular importance in working with a population being asked to reflect on intimate and traumatic experiences that could potentially have affected their ability to trust or be seen as worthy of being heard.

In summary, the Listening Guide focuses on "...the transformative nature of the relationship and power of listening as a route to knowledge" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 76). This is done by reviewing transcripts and recordings at least three times, each time listening for different voices that the participant uses. Musical concepts of melody and harmony form the basis for the Listening Guide principles and encourage the researcher to listen for the multiple voices or parts that make up a woman's story (Gilligan, 2015; Johnstone, 2016) The goal of each listen is as follows: 1) listening for the plot; 2) listening for the first person; 3) and listening for contrapuntal voices (Gilligan, 2015). These will be described in detail in the following paragraphs.

### ***Listening for the Plot***

In Gilligan's Listening Guide, the first listening of an interview is not meant for any kind of interpretation. Instead, the goal is to listen for details and descriptions, or what she refers to as *Listening for the Plot* (Gilligan, 2015). The focus is on the participant's words and how she tells her story (Gilligan, 2015). Learning who the participant includes (or does not include), where she sets her story, and if there are any "emotional hotspots" helps to see what makes this story and experience unique (Gilligan, 2015). During this run through of the interview, it was critical for me, as the researcher, to avoid combining what the participant was saying with what I already

know about IPV, again viewing this as a process of discovery, not comparison or judgment (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). This was also an opportunity for reflexivity; I kept a journal to see how I responded (internally and externally) and was affected by the story, and how that could be affecting the research (Gilligan, 2015).

### ***Listening for the “I”***

Attending to the first-person or *Listening for the “I”* is the guiding principle for the second listening of the interview. While listening for the plot is similar to what is done in other qualitative approaches, *listening for the I* is unique to the Listening Guide. This step specifically focuses on picking out every instance in which the participant says “I” and separating the subject and verb from the narrative (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). In order to do this, I highlighted every time the participant said “I” within a given passage and record those I statements in order of their appearance (Koelsch, 2015). This allowed me to look for patterns and better understand how the participant spoke about herself, particularly within the context of this story of abuse and intimate relationships (Gilligan, 2015). Completing this step helped to eliminate language that may not be representative of the participant, like labels and descriptions that have been developed by those in power and unconsciously used by the participant to describe her experience. This process “attenuates the urge toward objectivity by helping to focus on the unique subjectivity of each woman” (Johnstone, 2016, p. 278).

### ***Listening for Contrapuntal Voices***

In the third guided listening the musical aspect comes into play as Gilligan encourages researchers to *Listen for Contrapuntal Voices*; the various competing melodies that come together to create the full harmony (Johnstone, 2016). This step is key to honing in on the research question as you “listen for and identify voices that inform the inquiry” (Gilligan &

Eddy, 2017, p. 79). What makes this distinctive from other data analysis methods is the focus on listening for competing voices within one participant; this is a conscious effort to gain insight into the personal conflicts of their experience of intimate partner violence and to resist creating binary categories for analysis (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). During this review, I listened for quality of voice, tension in storytelling, contradictions in the processing of the experience, and for what may be silenced (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017; Johnstone, 2016). After I identified a voice, I went back and reread and coded each transcript for that voice.

### ***Final Analysis***

Taking the steps outlined in the Listening Guide to analyze and understand my data allowed me to focus on voices and stories to get to the root of my research question. Once all of the listenings were complete, I, as the researcher, was “guided to assemble a trail of evidence that then serves as the basis for composing an analysis or interpretation” (Gilligan, 2015, p. 69). I came up with themes or “voices” based on the codes that were determined from the multiple listenings. Then, I brought my voice back in to share what was surprising, what I learned, and how the different voices answered the research question.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a counselor, a woman, and a professional in higher education for 15 years, this study was salient to me personally and professionally. I have worked in higher education in various roles but working at a campus women’s center has most influenced how I related to this study. Among some of the eye-opening experiences was an instance in which a student was raped on campus and taken by campus police to a hospital that could not properly serve rape victims. She was told by officers (male and female) that she was overreacting when expressing her frustration at being taken to a hospital that couldn’t perform a rape kit, and asked what she had been



wearing and if she was “sure” that she was raped. I watched as the student and her roommate both struggled to make it through the semester. The institution chose to minimize the survivor’s experience by choosing not to address the grave mistake made by the campus police, and by encouraging the student to move on and not pursue an investigation.

Additionally, at this campus women’s center, I listened to stories of women who openly discussed verbal and physical abuse in their homes and how it impacted their academics. I know this has made me angry and distrustful of institutions and their handling of any kind of harassment and violence on campus, especially against women. I reflected on this when I interviewed, being sure not to make any assumptions about experiences the participants may have had when interacting with their institutions. I also considered this when addressing my status as an insider or outsider (Hesse-Biber, 2013). If it was known that I have previously worked in an administrative capacity in higher education, I could be viewed by participants as an outsider, making it more difficult to build rapport and minimize power-differentials. I shared my background as was necessary with participants, transparency, within reason was important especially as a feminist researcher. I used a journal to note my responses and reactions during interviews, in order to maintain research integrity and reflect on how it was affecting the data collection and interpretation. This helped to inform all interviews and listenings.

Although I have not experienced gender-based violence, I have experienced gender-based discrimination in the workplace. I understand the realities of this occurrence, and just how nuanced it can be. It affected my productivity and made me uncomfortable speaking up. I can see how this parallels with a college student trying to report IPV to people in power, feeling discouraged or choosing not to report so as not to risk their educational opportunities. However, being the same gender as the participants has the potential to make the participant feel safe and

“maximize opportunity” for their voices to be heard (Hesse-Biber, 2013). I have seen this in my practice as a counselor; women who are struggling in intimate relationships often seek out a counselor who is a woman. They feel they can trust another woman to share their story, especially when the story involves males exercising power and privilege over them.

Still, knowing all of this, I could not assume that my status as a woman would make participants feel safe, nor that my experiences, if I shared them, would make me relatable. I was as open as was necessary with participants. If I perceived that sharing my experiences in the campus women’s center or with discrimination would put the participant at ease or help the research relationship, I shared those stories. This is in alignment with a feminist ethic of care, which reminds us to respond to the relational need to build relationships and to feel connected in order to feel heard and to minimize the power imbalances (Gilligan, 1995).

### **Research Integrity and Trustworthiness**

An important part of any qualitative research process is maintaining trustworthiness and integrity as a researcher. Trustworthiness requires that I as the researcher establish my credibility and interpret data in a way that raises new questions, attends to diverse voices, and is transformative (Creswell & Poth, 2016). When research is transformative, it addresses political and ethical implications and leads to change and new possibilities (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Most importantly, the research has to “resonate” with the intended audience and include participant feedback (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In order to establish trustworthiness and credibility in this study, I engaged in reflexive practices to address my own biases, worked with critical friends for peer-review, and used member checks to check for data accuracy.

**Reflexivity**

For the duration of this research, I kept a journal for my field notes where I wrote down any observations I made, questions I had, or feelings I experienced during the research process. Practicing reflexivity in this manner is common in qualitative research and an important way to keep track of research related thoughts, especially when noting reactions to information gathered in interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hesse-Biber, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2015). Reflexivity helps in guiding data analysis by providing space for finding themes and raising new questions, as well as assisting the researcher to identify hidden privilege, power differentials, and ethical concerns that may be preventing participants from fully engaging in the research (Beckman, 2014).

I also wrote analytic memos to keep a trail of my thoughts and musings with regard to patterns, codes, and themes in the data (Saldaña, 2015). These memos included reflections on how I related to the participant's story, how the research question connected to the data, how codes were being defined, or how theory was emerging from the data (Saldaña, 2015). Analytic memoing is reflection focused specifically on the data and the way it has been or is being analyzed, whereas journaling is focused on subjective observation and interpretation of interaction with participants (Saldaña, 2015). I kept memos and journal entries separate, as they are two different approaches to reflexivity.

**Critical Friends**

Critical friends are individuals who are familiar with the research process and/or the phenomenon being explored, but who are not a part of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These individuals provide peer-review of data by serving as a sounding board for ideas, keeping the researcher honest about potential issues and biases that may be getting in the way, and by

helping the researcher process feelings about the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I engaged two critical friends from my doctoral program throughout my research process. I spoke with them as needed during the interview and data analysis process when I was feeling stuck or wanted to process anything that was going on with the participants or data. Additionally, I worked with my methodologist on the formatting of the *I poems* before sharing them with the participants to ensure that the content of the poems was in alignment with the methodology and the research question. I also talked through my data with my dissertation chair and the members of my committee, to help me think through my coding, themes, and overall interpretation of the data.

### **Member Checking**

Member checking is a way to keep participants engaged and to make sure that data analysis and interpretation are representative of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Koelsch, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). During the second interview, I asked for confirmations and challenges to ideas and themes derived during the first round. The member check is also an opportunity for the participants to share their experiences and emotions in relation to the data and data collection process (Koelsch, 2013). Sharing the potential themes and ideas to be discussed brings the participant into the research process and minimizes the power differential which is important to me as a feminist researcher.

One specific way I did that in this study was by sharing the *I poem*, because “the storyteller’s viewpoint ought to be present within the interpretation” (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 399). The *I poem* is a narrative illustration of where the participant has placed herself within the story, her sense of self within the context of abuse (Koelsch, 2015). It is a way to tend to the relational nature of the research and show the participant that they have power in this research process by

showing that their words, not mine, are what matters and that she has been heard. I read the *I poem* to the participant and ask her to reflect on what was surprising, what does not feel right, and what it meant to her.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented the details for how I conducted my qualitative research study. I started the chapter by discussing participant criteria and recruitment including my purposive sampling procedures for finding traditionally aged college women who have experienced IPV. This was followed by a discussion of data collection via online interviews that were transcribed for data analysis. Data analysis was then completed through a feminist lens using Gilligan's Listening Guide. The chapter concluded with a discussion of my positionality as a researcher and how I established trustworthiness in my study through the use of reflexive writing, member checking, and critical friends. In the upcoming chapters I will share my data and discuss my research findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The goal of doing this study was to understand how women came to name their experience with intimate partner violence (IPV). This is important because often IPV goes left unsaid or unrecognized. The literature shows that the number of women who experience IPV and the number of women who report IPV differ greatly. The assumption is that women do not want to report, are too fragile, hurt, or embarrassed to tell their story, or just want to move on and leave this experience behind them. While this explains part of the discrepancy between the reported and unreported, based on what I learned in my research, it is far from the main reason. The college women who I interviewed shared intimate details of relationships in which they were verbally, physically, and psychologically abused. They did so with very little hesitation once the conversation started, and while they may have used words like shameful, dumb, or embarrassing to describe how they felt about the relationship, the rawness, and honesty with which they narrated their experiences to me, did not match those emotions. They came across as strong, certain, and agentic, knowing that whatever it was that they had experienced was important enough to be shared, in order to stop it from happening to others.

Twelve women participated in this study (see appendix K for participant data). The process consisted of a screening call and two interviews. Eight of the women returned for a second interview which served as a way to member check. The second interview also allowed women to share anything else that they felt needed to be heard since our first interview. Two voices were present in the way that college women described their lived experience of being in an abusive relationship: *The Voice of Recognition* and *the Voice of Empowered Maturity*. Within each voice, there were subthemes that helped to conceptualize how women were describing their experiences.

It seemed as though participants needed to speak themselves into knowing. It was not the self-proclaimed shame or embarrassment, but instead, an uncertainty that the specifics of what they had experienced were worthy of any particular name or label. This was clear during the recruitment process. The real data collection actually began with the screening calls, during which many of the women wanted to confirm that what they experienced was, indeed, intimate partner violence or abuse. They saw themselves in the language of the recruitment materials, “Has a current or former partner ever stalked you, tried to control you, physically or sexually abused you, or harassed you online?” but minimized and questioned their experience so much that they would say things like “but he only stalked me. Does this qualify for the study?” even with the words right there on the paper. I immediately realized that the reason it was difficult to find participants was not because women did not want to talk (although that is certainly true for some), it was because they were unsure what they had to say was “bad” enough to be talked about; almost like they had never before recognized a safe space in which they felt their voices would be heard. This is how I came to understand the first of the voices I heard, *The Voice of Recognition*. The second voice *The Voice of Empowered Maturity* was present in the ways that the participants spoke about their understanding of relationships and how they have come to understand their growth and development.

### **The Voice of Recognition**

We assume, or at least I did when I started this research, that once women name their experience, that is when they might leave the relationship (if there is one) or report that something bad has happened to them. But I soon discovered that the path into naming is not so linear, predictable, or definitive. After analyzing the data, I came to understand naming as synonymous with awareness, and awareness didn’t necessarily mean being able to put a specific

label on the abuse. Naming was often associated with feeling uneasy or uncomfortable while labeling was more ownership of terminology (i.e. “I was abused”). There were also differences in who was involved in these processes, as naming seemed to be more internal and lonely, while labeling often was accompanied by a sense of community. Naming and labeling were both part of women recognizing their experiences. Below I will describe two subthemes that conceptually form *The Voice of Recognition* and address the complexity of the naming and labeling process:

1) *“I didn't really know what to call it”* and 2) *Knowledge of IPV*.

### **“I didn't really know what to call it”**

For many of these women, naming or labeling did not happen until they shared their stories with me during our interviews. I would ask “while it was happening, did you recognize what it was?” and almost all of the responses were some version of “no.” Upon reflection, I realized I had been thinking of naming and labeling as interchangeable terms, and that was incorrect. Instead, the research revealed naming and labeling as two separate processes experienced very differently by each participant. What follows is a description of the ways in which women came to acknowledge their experiences broken into two subthemes, 1) Naming and 2) The Language of Labeling.

#### ***Naming***

Naming was seeing something was not right or questioning if things could or should be different. Naming is what helped many of these women leave these relationships or begin to speak pieces of their experiences out loud to others for reassurance that what was happening was not quite right. The process of naming sounded lonely and often included self-blame and tendencies toward problem-solving to fix the relationship. Andy, who was stalked and verbally abused, said “I felt like it was my fault. I felt like all of it was consequences of my actions and I needed to be patient with him because of it.” Similarly, Nicole said “I didn't recognize it as



abuse or whatever. I thought it wasn't cool. It wasn't right and I was like let's try and work on this a little bit and we did have a lot of good times together, too."

Taylor shared a story about an instance in which her partner mistreated her in front of her family, and she first realized that the relationship might be unhealthy, but she blamed herself,

I knew that this was not a good sign, but I was still, "No, it's my fault. I should've done better. I don't want you to leave me." And that became a trend. We'd get into an argument, it would be totally his fault, not in any way anything I did, and then I'd apologize, which in hindsight now I can see all of that.

Here Taylor is beginning to name her abuse but thinks it is something she needs to fix about herself. There is an absence of a label, but still some sort of acknowledgment that something is wrong. While reading Beca her i-poem, which was about sexual coercion, during our second interview, she expressed the conflicting feelings associated with naming these experiences for oneself, "...if one of my friends were to tell me that I'd be like girl, you know what? Dump him. He's not worth it, dump him. You know?" Here is a piece of Beca's i-poem (see appendix J for i-poem in it's entirety)

I should have known since the first date  
 I think that he wasn't in the best place mentally  
     he wanted to have sex,  
 I said that I didn't want to.  
 I wasn't ready, you know.  
 I had just been raped a couple of months prior.  
 I'm used to just being left after sex.  
 I wasn't going to go through that again.  
 ....he got mad

Charlie mentioned that a professor noticed she was not herself but she denied anything was wrong because, "It felt like something that I have to go through alone." Once again, there is

acknowledgment, but not an official label or even sense that others would understand what she was experiencing.

Nicole shared that she now sees her experience as abuse, but did not even consider the possibility of that as a label until the manipulation, control, and verbal abuse she was experiencing started to turn physical,

I didn't recognize it as abuse or anything like that because like I said, I grew up in a very unhealthy household and it was acceptable or enabled. But when it started with the little amount of physical abuse and then threatening to be more physical, I just kept thinking in my head, "I'm not about to be doing that".

### ***The Language of Labeling***

As previously mentioned there is a difference between naming and labeling the experience of IPV, but both are part of the process of acknowledgment. I also wanted to dig deeper into the intricacies of the actual language used to label these experiences. Generally, when discussing women who have been abused, the terms "victim" or "survivor" are assigned and sometimes used interchangeably. Language and definitions are usually created by those in power, and I wanted to make sure that I was giving each participant the opportunity to define things in their own words (Johnstone, 2016). In having these conversations, it also was apparent that the language surrounding sexual abuse, which was pervasive among participants, was very challenging for participants. Therefore, three subthemes make up The Language of Labeling: 1) *Labeling* 2) *Victim vs Survivor*, and 3) *"I felt like I wasn't in my body"*.

**Labeling.** Labeling was present when participants began to use a specific term to describe their experience. It was saying "I was abused." It seemed more burdensome and less certain than the process of naming. Labeling gave weight to an experience that many wanted to

forget. It made it difficult for these women to see any of the good in order to hold on to the relationship or convince themselves that the abuser was ever well-intentioned. Labeling made them part of a group that had a shared experience. They were no longer alone, and in fact, may have found comfort in being part of the collective who have come to understand their experience as one that has been had by many other women. For many of these women, participating in this research was the first time they were becoming part of that collective.

During the interview process, after each participant shared their story with me, I would ask “Would you label this experience as abuse?” and every participant would respond affirmatively. However, as the interview would continue or during the follow-up, I found many of them backpedaling and minimizing their experiences. For instance, Taylor confirmed that she did consider her experience abuse, but throughout the entirety of our first interview, it was clear to me as the researcher that she was not quite ready to own that label; she was still working through naming. This illustrates how the processes of naming and labeling are different, but not always clearly distinct or permanent. Taylor faltered between acknowledging that it was the appropriate label and minimizing it because as she stated: “I wasn’t necessarily physically abused.” Yet when I asked why she was interested in participating in this study she said,

You mostly just hear about domestic violence, like physical kind of abuse, and so then I was like, “Well, maybe I need to tell my story and hopefully get it out more so that people realize that it’s not just physical abuse.”

You can hear the conflict in her words. On the one hand, she does not consider her experience to be worthy of a label because the abuse was not physical: “There’s a part of me that was still kind of uneasy about whether or not it counted enough as abuse.” On the other hand, she is participating in this research and she wants to share her story so that other women know that

maltreatment does not have to be physical for it to be considered abuse. The friction and resistance I hear in Taylor's words are what Gilligan refers to as contrapuntal voices (Gilligan, 2015). Listening for contrapuntal voices requires the researcher to review interviews for counterpoint, often unsaid but present in the way a participant speaks and tells their story. In the stories I listened to, women were telling detailed stories of abuse, yet inconsistently declaring it abusive. They meandered through declaring a label and completely discounting their entire experience as not harmful enough to mention.

In Andy's response, you can hear her struggle between what she is coming to understand as violence and the outside voices that are forcing her to question the validity of her experiences, ...trying to distinguish exactly what, quote, unquote, violence is is still kind of tricky because I've now come to learn that emotional violence is a thing and counts, but it's even whenever you explain it to someone sometimes they just don't get it. They don't get why it's as scary because they're like, well, why don't you just yell back or talk back or leave. And it's just not that simple.

In contrast, Rebeca was being told by her friends that she was being abused but could not see it herself,

Whenever I would tell them that he would just ignore me for days, despite knowing that that would hurt me and that would get me real anxious to the point where I would get like a panic attack. My friends would be like, "Hey that's abuse." And I would be like, "No it's not."

Kim also stated that even though she reported him to the police, labeling still came later,

I only labeled it when I think I was like in court. Like I would just say I had a crazy ex-boyfriend. I could never like just – like look like for me to say to you like yeah,

it was definitely IPV, but it honestly just sounds weird to say to me. I just like – I don't know why, maybe because just like the emotions that come with that, but it definitely – looking back at it now it was intimate partner violence.

Just in these few interview excerpts, I can hear the complexities of labeling abuse.

As these women continued to share their stories with me, I realized that many of them were in that moment speaking themselves into recognition. Internally they had recognized it before, but many of them had never named *or* labeled **out loud**. Narrating their stories was an exercise in empowerment. These women shared intimate details of abuse and the emotions they felt, how they found themselves in abusive situations, the reasons they stayed, and why they decided to leave (if they did). They came to understand their experience as one worthy of sharing while I was listening to them.

For instance, during our second interview, when I asked Taylor what she had been thinking about since our first interview, she said “I think I re-evaluated a lot of what ... just processing. Accepting that what happened, happened.” This shows that she is still hesitant to accept the label. Participating in the first interview was just another part of her naming process. The same was true for Andy when she reflected on what she shared in our first interview,

...it's been a long time since I've thought about first boyfriend in particular, and so just kind of remembering and talking to someone about how bad it was, it's kind of surreal because I don't necessarily remember it in my head as bad as it was. Saying it out loud makes it sound a lot worse.

Hannah, who was a social work student, points to the role that becoming educated about IPV played in her labeling process and the sense of community owning that label brought her,

it definitely took me having to take classes and learn about other stuff before I could even say, oh shit this is what it's called and this happens to other people. And it was nice to be able to label it and say whatever, because it made me feel like I was not the only one who was going through this. So, yeah I think at this point I would just probably call it abuse, period, but there were so many different layers and types that were involved in this situation it took me forever to peel through all of the negative things that had happened.

***Victim vs Survivor*** Many of the women felt that neither the term “victim” nor “survivor” truly encompassed how they felt or would describe their experience. The common thread that ran through these discussions was the fluidity of the language; that “victim” and “survivor” were not stand-alone terms, but rather were differentiated by one’s emotional state, which was ever-changing. When I asked what term participants preferred, they reflected on their past and compared it to where they felt they were now. For instance, Ash said,

I flip between “victim” and “survivor”, based off of almost where I was mentally. Based on what I’m saying. So during the time immediately after, I would definitely say victim because it was something that affected me for days and weeks and months after. But now that it’s kind of ebbed – the severity of how much it affects me. Now that it’s more of a passing thought than a constant loop in my head, I definitely tend toward saying survivor.

Similarly, many participants stated that it was whether or not they were removed from the situation that determined the language they used. Charlie shared, “...so for me I felt like I was the victim at the time but right now after I’m – I feel much better about it. I feel like I’m a survivor if that makes sense?” and Blessings said, “yeah, now that I’m out of it and I’m not dealing with him in any way, definitely a survivor.”

On the other hand, Cydney, who is still married to her abuser, said she did not feel she could call herself a survivor,

So, because I am not out of it, I do not – when I think of “survivor”, I think of somebody who has gotten out of the relationship or someone who has essentially saved themselves. If that makes sense. I can’t think of the word to describe it, but someone who has gotten out of the relationship, that’s who I look at as a survivor. But when it comes to myself, I still – it’s weird because I really don’t like the victim, I don’t like – because I feel like it’s the victim mindset. So it’s difficult, it really is...Because when I think of somebody declaring themselves as a “victim”, that victim mentality is the first thing that comes up in my head. And I don’t want to – it makes me feel like my experiences aren’t real. So it’s difficult defining myself as the victim, but at the same time, I don’t feel like a survivor.

In this excerpt, you can hear Cydney’s frustration with finding the words to describe what she is still experiencing. She assigns a negative connotation to the term victim but struggles with the fact that she is still in the relationship and therefore cannot see herself as a survivor. There is also a sense of shame and guilt present in her words because she has not been able to “save” herself.

Andy also spoke to the connotations that go along with using certain terminology and summed up how many of the participants felt about the language,

Complicated. I think sometimes people sort of make it into sort of a badge thing if I will never be a victim, I’m a survivor. And I feel like that can be dismissive of the way that harm sticks with you. It doesn’t go away. The hurt doesn’t go away. You can heal from it and you can grow, but it’s in spite of harm...At the same time having the knowledge that you have been through all this shit and here you are, you made it, that sort of thing of being a survivor of abuse is also really powerful...So I think both terms are important in

their own ways and I think that people should be able to use whatever term they feel best represents where they are with things, whether that's both or one or the other or neither

**“I felt like I wasn’t in my body”**. During the interview process, all but one of the participants discussed their experiences with sexual coercion and/or rape. As has been clear in the previously shared interview excerpts, acknowledging or recognizing abuse is far more complex than identifying abusive behaviors. However, amongst the participants I interviewed, the prevalence of sexual coercion and rape was high and the process of acknowledging this was different from that of other forms of abuse the participants experienced. Therefore, I feel compelled to highlight this particular type of IPV and how it has shaped the women I interviewed.

Sexual coercion is an incredibly nuanced concept. Society often characterizes sex as something that is expected or required in a relationship. Most of the women in this study experienced their first abusive relationship in high school, and several of them were in relationships with partners who were older, sometimes by four or more years. This is important, because the expectations that the male partner had regarding sex often were different than what the participants were ready for at that time in the relationship.

Taylor’s partner was 21, and four years her senior, when they started dating. He would tell Taylor he wanted a “normal adult relationship”, which was his way of saying he wanted to have sex,

I think we had four arguments about it before – eventually, I caved...So at that point, I had turned 18, and then it was like a month or two after I turned 18, and I was like, “Well, I guess I’d better do this so that he doesn’t leave me.” It was horrible.



Developmentally they were likely in very different places, and the age difference put Taylor's partner in a position of power that made her feel like she needed to give in to his persistent demands for sex. There was no physical force, but there was a power differential and manipulative behavior that made this participant feel like this was something she had to do to maintain this relationship, "I don't know, it wasn't ever a great experience, but I couldn't not do it because he would get mad." When I asked her if she was coerced into sex she said "mmhmm."

Taylor described her experience with sexual coercion during our first interview. I created an i-poem from that part of our interview and read it to Taylor in our second interview. Here is a portion of that i-poem (see appendix J for i-poem in its entirety),

I was like, "Well, I guess I'd better do this so that he doesn't leave me."  
It was horrible.  
I didn't want to do it so it was really painful  
I was like, "No, I don't want to do it. No, I don't want to do it."  
...it kind of became a problem again  
And he tried to force me to do it one time  
then got mad when I set my boundary  
He would get upset if I said no

Her response to listening to the i-poem captures the struggle that the participants had in permanently labeling their abuse,

But I think hearing the, like hearing how I talked about it was definitely like strange. But also kind of, I don't know how to like ... validating. Like, maybe I'm not really sure. I think I'm still like processing, but I definitely feel like better about it. Because like maybe, I don't know, maybe there's a part of me that's still like processing that. Like that wasn't OK. But hearing how I talked about it, and how I described it helped.

Left alone with these stories, Taylor seems to question her own truth. Hearing them out loud though, brings her closer to being able to accept and label her abusive experiences. Again, highlighting how lonely the process of naming can be.

Nicole also described feelings of dissociating when her long-term partner coerced her,

I kept on refusing to have sex with him, he was never – I guess he was still forceful but he was never physically forceful I don't think. He would yell and belittle me and call me a "stupid bitch" and "why are you being such a fucking cunt right now. Why won't you let me put it in or why won't you give me head?" I was just like – maybe I was scared in the back of my head. I just didn't know.

I think around this point it was like – I was kind of starting to shut off my emotions quite a bit and become emotionless and I was like whatever, I'll just go ahead and do whatever you want me to do...I would just do it so he would shut up basically. I would do it so he would leave me alone and quit yelling at me...So in my head, I was like yeah, this isn't consensual but I was like just to get him to leave me alone for a little bit.

In our second interview, when I mentioned to Nicole that sexual coercion was a main theme that came up in my interviews, she described the process of naming that experience for herself,

I felt gross and violated afterwards. And then I didn't want to vent to the wrong people 'cause then some people would be like oh, well, that's your man. You've got to. Like no, it hurts, I don't want to. I don't have to...I'm glad that I realized that and ugh. But yeah, it wasn't consensual and some people just don't think of it like that. They just think oh, you should since you're in a relationship with him. No, I don't have to. Especially if we're going through a rough time and I'm just not feeling that with him or if I just had a long day and I'm just not feeling it. You know?

Nicole touched on the cultural scripts surrounding sex and relationships and how that complicated her naming process. The expectations that she had internalized about sex and

relationships made her question whether her needs, concerns, or desires were enough to justify her not wanting to have sex.

Learning about coercion in her social work classes helped Hannah label that as part of her abusive experience after she had removed herself from the situation,

I don't think, I think after, of course, taking classes about this and seeing it, I was like, oh shit. It definitely took a lot to understand that coercion part, because I was like, OK, people don't think about that being abusive or horrible, they're just – if you say no and they do something. But that was probably the hardest part. Of course, the physical stuff, I was like, OK, this is abuse.

In this excerpt, you can hear Hannah grappling with labeling her coercion. Her “I don't think, I think” shows her uncertainty. She was able to clearly recognize physical abuse as such, but the verbal and coercive behaviors were less clear to her. It was not until she was able to identify with the collective through shared stories in her classes that she realized there was a name for what she had experienced.

Charlie used the word “forced” to describe her first sexual experience with her partner. This relationship started in high school and continued into college. There was no age difference but she was 16 and from a culture that places high importance on purity. She told her partner that she did not want to have sex because she did not feel she was ready,

we were just literally just hanging out and then he wanted to do sexual stuff and I said I really don't want to. But then I was like – he was like – and then he like forced me so I was like – I was like, all right, fine, whatever. But then by the time – that was my first time so it hurt really bad so I...I told him to stop but he didn't stop...It felt like my body didn't really belong to me. And like a lot of the times when – after that when like he

wants to do it or whatever, I just kind of lay there and I'm just kind of like letting him do whatever until he's done because I just don't really want to.

I asked Charlie if she would label this as rape, "I think so. It's a strong word but ..." She trailed off and then went on to share another story about her abuser. Even when it seemed participants were willing to label their experiences, sitting with these labels was clearly very difficult.

Ash was raped by her high school partner, and then by her college partner after they had broken up. She described an out-of-body experience similar to Charlie's, "I felt like I was watching myself. I felt like voyeuristic almost. Like I was...this isn't me. This isn't happening to me. This is happening to somebody else that is just also kind of me." Ash very clearly used the word rape to describe her experience, but was also aware of the path it took for her to get there,

I called it my hard R word. It was really striking, because like women respond to that word so much differently than men. And, you know, I would talk to – my senior year, I was actually living with a girl that was getting her degree in counseling – her master's. And I remember I was talking to her about it and she was like, "You change the way you talk about that situation depending if you're talking to a man or if you're talking to a woman...And I would say to women that I was interested in dating like, "yeah, this guy raped me." But to men I would be like, "Well, this man assaulted me." I would kind of dance around it.

The idea of "dancing around" the labeling of sexual coercion and rape encapsulates was heard throughout the interviews.

### **Knowledge of IPV**

In trying to understand how these women came to name their experiences, I wanted to get a clearer picture of their prior knowledge of intimate partner violence. I was curious to find out if

they had ever been educated about any kind of partner abuse and the role that played in their story. I was especially interested in what they knew before they experienced abuse versus what they understand about abuse now. My assumption was that many women were unaware of what IPV was, and that is why they didn't have the language, tools, or resources to seek help. The data told a different, more nuanced story of the disconnection between having knowledge and recognizing your situation. This is described in two subthemes 1) *Defining IPV* and 2) *“Well, at least they're not raping you”*

### ***Defining IPV***

In an effort to gain a better understanding of each participant's current interpretation of intimate partner violence (IPV), one of the first questions I asked in each interview was, “What do you think of when you hear the term ‘intimate partner violence?’” Many of them described sexual assault and physical abuse. For instance, Charlie said, “Mostly rape.” Participants did not refer to details of their own experience, but instead named terms and definitions that are common to the cultural scripts of domestic violence. This script usually paints a picture of a battered woman with visible bruises resulting from physical violence. Savannah mentioned that image here, “I first think of intimate partner violence I always think of like, you know, the classic like physically abusive relationship and things like that.” Kim alluded to this cultural representation of IPV when she described how her understanding of what constitutes IPV has changed over time,

... because growing up I always kind of like thought of it like the stereotypical like the movie scenes, like the TV, and things like that. And then I think going through more school, and like now that the world's more vocal about it, I think that kind of shifted my mindset.

Kim did not refer to her own experience as influential in changing her views about what constitutes IPV. Instead, she reflected on the fact that it is more widely recognized in society. This highlights the role that cultural scripts and societal views play in women acknowledging their own experiences. It is also a reminder of how these participants were “dancing around” their own stories.

Nicole’s response underscores the confusion around the specific terms that comprise intimate partner violence,

I think of not just the physical aspects of it but I think of all the things that lead up to it as well, since I always think of it builds up to that eventually. I don’t think it goes straight to partner violence. I think it builds up.

In this, you can hear that while Nicole has labeled her experiences with coercion, emotional abuse, and control, she sees IPV, particularly the word violence, as something bigger. This connects to the earlier discussion of participants wondering if their experiences were enough to qualify as abuse.

Many of the participants were educated about intimate partner violence and yet could not recognize it for themselves. Kim was trained and volunteered for her university’s campus violence awareness program while she was in her abusive relationship,

I didn’t understand it when I was in it. Like I knew what it was, I knew that you are manipulated, and you are – like they say awful things to you, and it can get physical, but I – like when you’re in it, it’s just tunnel vision. Like you just get so deep into it that you don’t realize it’s really happening. And it’s crazy because like you’re being strangled, and you’re like, uh, it’s my fault...

Blessings was working to build a business to support young women who are pregnant or in abusive relationships, and she had also experienced abuse in prior relationships,

I really should have like left or called for better help. Like being put in that situation it's crazy because like I know about resources and stuff, you know, and it's like none of those came to my head; like I was in a domestic violence relationship until after...

By getting out of it like it's like you're in this coma and you're just trying to figure it out, like you're just trying to go through the maze. I know I deserved so much better.

Similar to Kim's "tunnel vision", Blessings described the relationship and the process of getting out like a "coma" and a "maze". Both women were familiar with abusive relationships and resources that could help but could not help themselves.

This shines a light on a disconnect between the language surrounding IPV and how women are actually living these experiences. While some of the issues with naming can be attributed to a general lack of education about IPV, there is also some distinction being made between being knowledgeable and being able to label one's own experience. Charlie explained it best: "It's kind of like those things, it can't happen to me. Like yeah, I hear about it in the news or like in articles but they cannot happen to me." This viewpoint enabled these women to survive in their relationships.

***"Well at least they're not raping you"***

Since the participants of this study were college women, I thought it was important to find out what types of information (if any) they had received about abuse, assault, or healthy relationships from their institutions. The impetus for this study was the fact that although the prevalence rates of IPV are high among college women, it appears that campus sexual assault by strangers seems to be the main thing portrayed in the media. Having spent more than 15 years

working on college campuses, it has been my experience that while acquaintance rape and sexual harassment are mentioned in educational materials, the language in prevention programming is generally focused on sexual assault by a stranger. I suspected that participants would share similar stories. So, I asked what information they had received from their schools about IPV and resources that were available to them if they were seeking help. In listening to their responses, I heard a common story that whatever was being taught did not match what they were experiencing. They were being given bits and pieces of information about rape and/or abusive behaviors, but it was inconsistent and nothing was explicitly describing IPV. Andy expresses that here,

I was not aware of any specific resources at my college. They had programs about things like date rape and such, which are goodness knows important and dates that would push too far and “no means no” and all that kind of thing, but because of the specific context in my relationship, none of it seemed to quite fit...it was never talked about in a way that covered my experiences.

Charlie went to both a community college and a four-year university and received similar information from both schools, “It was about rape and also – what was it, gaslighting, I think that was it, just rape and gaslighting.” Learning about gaslighting is certainly part of understanding IPV, but there was still a piece missing that left these women feeling unseen. Additionally, Charlie described the gaslighting she experienced in her relationship throughout the interview and yet did not explicitly mention that what she learned played a role in her beginning to name her abuse. Perhaps there is something missing in the translation of the information being taught and how it can be applied to one’s own experiences.



Cydney also only remembered seeing resources related to sexual assault, “the only thing honestly I really remember about seeing anything dealing with the college campus like that is seeing just a poster, if you’ve been sexually assaulted or whatever, then call this number.”

Savannah added how anyone experiencing physical abuse can more directly connect to resources,

I never really got information to do about emotional issues and things like that and I, you know, thought most places – basically, you know, if someone hits you, you have resources and things like that but it’s harder to prove that someone is emotionally abusive...And so I got, you know, the basic things that you get about sexual assault and consent.

Savannah’s response also touches on an important point: before you access resources you will have to be able to “prove” that something happened to you. In some cases it may be less about what resources might be available and more about whether or not women feel they will be heard and believed.

Hannah more pointedly described the mixed messages received from campuses,

I think that in college there’s this kind of weird covert rhetoric that, “oh well, if your boyfriend calls you names that’s not horrible.” And everything is like, “Well at least they’re not raping you.” It’s like “Well he beats me and stuff.” “But is he raping you?”  
So...

The message that Hannah received was not only about proof, but about what was worthy of mentioning. Campus climate efforts are so focused on sexual assault awareness and prevention that women are interpreting their other IPV experiences as not reportable.

As I suspected, receiving information about campus sexual assault was pretty consistent across participants. The way they all spoke about it revealed a sense of feeling invisible, as if boxes had been created for what was “bad enough” to report, and their experiences did not fit into those boxes. Therefore, they continued in relationships that were unhealthy, even when it began to affect their mental health, physical health, and in some cases their grades or ability to attend class.

In detailing her experience with seeking safety from her stalker on campus, Ash mentioned mixed messages received from institutions,

And they’re like, “Well, you didn’t go to the police and he hasn’t hurt you.” I’m like, “This is impacting my academic performance and I’m a scholarship student, so it is actually financially hurting me, potentially.” Like I failed two classes because of this and like I’m trying to graduate and go to law school. This is affecting my future. So, yes, it is.

And they’re like, “But he hasn’t physically hurt you.” I’m like, “He has. I’ve got evidence. He sexually assaulted me four weeks ago. And the reason he’s stalking me is because he’s trying to keep me from going to the police.”

You can hear how Ash felt she was being ignored because she did not file a report for physical or sexual abuse. The difference in this story is that Ash knew enough to ask for help, but was turned away when she did because her request was not made in a way that university felt justified assistance. This response by the institution perpetuates cycles of abuse and contributes to the negative effects that IPV can cause. It also underscores how ill-equipped many institutions are to handle or prevent gender-based violence issues on campus. It is no wonder that women keep their stories secret and/or do not report.

In her response, Taylor honestly admitted that there may have been more resources for her, but because she assumed she already knew about harassment and abuse, she did not need to pay attention to them,

I think that our school sends out e-mails sometimes about that stuff, but it's not mandatory. I was like – I should've taken it. I was always like, "Uh, I know what that is. I don't need to take that." I was like, "I know what sexual harassment and abuse is. I don't need to do a course on it." And in hindsight, I had no idea.

Not only do these responses shed light on the lack of communication and resources regarding IPV on campuses; they reaffirm how difficult it was for women to see themselves and their experiences in any education and training being provided. The best example of this is the fact that the majority of the women who participated in this study were coerced or raped and yet did not see their experience in the campus information about rape and consent. Presumably the internalization of these mixed messages also helps to explain why participants were uncertain if they qualified for this study after they had already volunteered.

### **The Voice of Empowered Maturity**

Gilligan suggests that a researcher focus on what stories the participants are telling about which relationships. At first, the answer seemed obvious in my study; the participants were sharing stories about being abused, about who abused them, and how it happened. But when I asked myself as the researcher "what stories about which relationships?" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017), I found myself hearing something different. I heard women telling a story about a relationship with themselves, rather than a relationship with a partner. I heard each woman describing her self-esteem and self-worth, coming to an understanding of her past and how that influenced her relationships, and coming to a realization about the cultural scripts that kept them

in this perpetual cycle of abuse. So little of what I listened to was actually about the abuser; instead, I was listening to participants describe how they matured into empowered women.

Another reason that I chose to study women who had experienced IPV in college is because the college experience tends to be viewed as a growth-fostering experience.

Traditionally aged college students are in emerging adulthood, openly exploring their identity through new relationships, sexual experiences, and exposure to new concepts, career choices, and options for the future (Arnett, 2007). When envisioning my participant pool, I had imagined women who had lived on campus at a four-year college away from home, studying hard during the week and socializing and partying on the weekends. Instead, very few of my 12 participants lived on campus, and several of them did not go to a traditional four-year school (community college, culinary school, seminary school). However, despite the variety in their experiences (and the assumptions I made about the experiences I thought they would be sharing with me), they all seemed to describe their experiences similarly. The way that they framed their stories spoke more to the significance of growth-fostering relationships (or lack thereof) and how that may have hindered their entry into emerging adulthood as well as their experiences as students and women.

This *Voice of Empowered Maturity* is how I came to understand the collective developmental experiences/processes of the women in this study. Although each participant had a unique story, they also each seemed to have conceptualized their experiences outside of what we have come to understand as the typical emerging adulthood schema of college students.

Within this voice are three subthemes: 1) “*I didn't know what healthy interactions looked like...*”

2) *Relational Maturity*, and 3) *Agency and Empowerment*.

**“I didn't know what healthy interactions looked like...”**

Without prompting, almost all of the women in this study shared details of their childhood experiences with unhealthy relationships. This included abuse they personally experienced or witnessed within the family unit, as well as instances of sexual assault and abuse by partners prior to beginning college. In sharing their childhood and adolescent experiences, they began to map out a developmental journey that started with an explanation for how they came to be in the abusive relationships that were the focus of this study. Participants described ways in which abuse was normalized and a lack of any kind of education about or modeling of healthy relationships. Relational images are created from these negative early experiences, they are then internalized, and used to create a template for how the women in this study perceived their relationships (McGriff, 2018). For example, Andy, who left behind a family and life of religious radicalism, could clearly identify how she found herself in an abusive relationship,

My family was abusive as well. So that was my norm. I didn't know what healthy interactions looked like...It ran amuck from physical to emotional to even some sexual. It was just - and religious...I was extremely ignored. I didn't have the chance to develop social skills and he was awkward, too, and we kind of bonded.

Growing up abused and isolated, Andy's development was stunted from the beginning. In a way, her pursuing a relationship was in and of itself the first step in her empowerment process. She was considered rebellious for wanting to date, but she was seeking connection and thought she found it with this boy. She gathered the courage to ask her parents for permission to spend time with him during church activities. The relational images that had been created for her included women being treated as less than and avoidance of emotional attachments to anyone so as not to affect what she could later offer to her future husband. Her perception was that any one who paid

attention to her, whatever that attention might look like, was a worthwhile and healthy connection.

While Kim was not abused as a child, she saw a link between the way her parents interacted and her beliefs about what relationships look like,

But with my parents that I lived with my whole life, I just didn't see any sort of affection, or like respect, or trust about like financial things, and things like that. So I think that kind of was a recipe for disaster as well.

Never having seen affection or mutual empowerment, Kim had no reason to question the gaslighting and manipulation she was experiencing. She was not set-up to seek out growth-fostering relationships and found herself with a toxic partner instead.

When describing how her partner would call her names and try to control her Nicole, who was physically abused, coerced, and manipulated, mentioned how this connected to her life growing up several times throughout our interview. For instance, "...him [her abuser] and my dad act so much alike. They are both alcoholics, they are both manipulative and controlling."

However, she also directly pointed to her experiences with verbal abuse as one of the reasons she decided to leave the relationship, "that's another thing that made me break up with him. I just kind of looked around me and I thought I don't want this; this is not what I want."

Here she has recognized the images that she internalized and described how that template set her up for an unhealthy relationship. Consequently, having an understanding of those early images eventually brought her to a breaking point, where she began to challenge how she was being treated. Unlike Kim and Andy, who made the connection to their childhood experiences after their relationships had ended, Nicole realized sometime during the relationship and it was the

push she needed to begin standing up for herself, as she did not want to recreate the experience she and her mother had with her father.

For Ash, her parents were a good team, and despite her Dad's struggle with alcoholism, she did not point to any specific experience with abuse as her relationship model. Instead, she described growing up with a parent in the military,

We just didn't know where he was or if he was alive. And that was hard and I think it definitely affected what I'm willing to accept from men and like why I get so attached to men that are like, "I want to be with you all the time." I'm like, "Yeah, this is it." It's not, though. It never is.

Having these experiences early on left participants with a weak foundation on which to explore their identities and build future relationships. Internalization of negative and unhealthy relational images is what keeps women in a perpetual cycle of disconnected and abusive relationships (Mcgriff, 2017). If there is awareness of these images, the process of deconstructing them can begin, eventually leading to the construction of healthy and positive relational images that allow women to seek out true connection and relationships that are growth-fostering. By identifying their negative early childhood experiences as their foundation, the women in this study were able to see what perceptions they needed to shift in order to seek healthier growth-fostering relationships.

### **Relational Maturity**

This subtheme was present in the ways that women began to critically evaluate their social world while navigating their intrapersonal world (Christens, 2012; Jordan 2004). Often this began with a reflection of their age and/or maturity at the time they experienced the relationship they were discussing, and ventured into stories about adjusting to life at college and

negotiating personal relationships with new people. They would describe themselves as young and lacking the skills to discern which of the many new people they would encounter in college would be a good fit in their lives. This was best expressed by Beca,

...usually when women go to college, they're just straight out of high school.

Most of them if they come from I guess, just a blendable background, they've had somewhat of a safe family structure. And so they're in this cocoon for all of their life, and then they start college and they start seeing new things, exploring new things, meeting all different types of people. And sometimes when you're young and naïve, you know you meet people that maybe are more experienced, or that have maybe not the best intentions in mind. And that can really sidetrack you.

Meeting new people and experimenting with new relationships is not unique to the college experience. But the idea that the participants felt they were young or not prepared for mature relationships is contradictory to the dominant dialogue surrounding adolescents who have experienced abuse. Often they are described as mature or having to grow up more quickly than other adolescents. Most of the women in this study experienced partner abuse and/or rape while in high school, and yet while they found themselves in more adult kinds of situations in college (abusive relationship, living together, being without support from family, etc.), they did not describe themselves as more mature or grown-up. Instead they described the process of becoming relationally mature. Nicole expressed the overall experience of relational maturity when explaining why she thought IPV was so prevalent in college, saying “also you have to kind of figure out people too. Learn how they work whenever you do get to college. I feel like I really have over the last couple of years. When I say that out loud, it makes sense.” Relational maturity was best defined by two subthemes: 1) *Disconnected*, and 2) *Seeking Mutuality*.



*Disconnected*

The emerging adulthood literature describes this time period (ages 18-25) as one in which the focus in dating and relationships is surrounding oneself with like-minded individuals to foster growth. There is an expectation that many relationships may be transient, but will contribute to overall social and emotional development. In the case of these participants, a lack of growth-fostering relationships, often starting in childhood (within the family unit) and continuing into romantic relationships in high school led to continued disconnection in college relationships. Instead of exploring multiple new friendships and partners in search of growth-fostering connection, these women tended to move from one disconnected committed relationship to another, "Giving up relationship for the sake of relationships" (Gilligan, 1995). Beca conveyed this early in our first interview,

...when you're young, I don't know if it's just me, or if it's just that I'm naïve. I

tend to see the good in people. And so sometimes I see the red flags and just ignore them. Blessings mother disapproved of her abuser when they started dating and kicked Blessings out of the house. This led to her living in temporary housing. In describing why she decided not to call the police the first time her partner physically abused her (he had already been abusing her in other ways and this act of violence was caught on camera at a rental house), Blessings said this,

I guess at the moment because I was in a dark situation. And if I was by myself in that temporary housing, I guess I could call it situation it would have been worse by myself.

So I guess having him and the kids there I felt like I wasn't alone. So yeah.

Blessings had isolated herself from her mother and found herself taking care of her boyfriend's children while she worked and did online seminary school. He did not pay for anything (rent, food, car, etc), called her names, and eventually began to physically abuse her. Yet, for

Blessings, being physically alone was a less desirable outcome than being with an abusive partner. This characterizes the interdependency and intricacies between being alone versus being lonely and disconnected.

Charlie described her isolation and dwindling connection with her parents as one of the reasons she stayed in her relationship

...back in Indonesia, we were upper middle class but we had a lot of workers under us, so a lot of times I spent a lot of time with my family and suddenly when we come here, my parents are working constantly...So a lot of it was just like I have to wait for my parents to get home and usually they don't get home until really late, until 11 PM or whatever. So I don't really have anyone to talk to because I feel like if I were closer to my parents at the time, that something like this wouldn't have happened. It's just at the time, I didn't have anyone to talk to and I didn't know who to turn to.

By blaming themselves (or being blamed by their partner), suffering to avoid conflict, and isolating themselves, these women were living disconnected lives. Some of this was already described in the earlier examples of sexual coercion that were provided. Women gave in to their partners' needs and desires (sex) to avoid causing conflict in their relationships, but in turn, began to withdraw from their partner because of the resentment they felt and the connection they craved. This concept is referred to as the central relational paradox (McGriff, 2017) and was expressed by Nicole when she described the confused feelings she had toward the end of her relationship, "I was like at least I'm trying to fix it for you. I'm trying for you here. I was tired of the fighting and I was eventually like giving up, not caring but still at the same time walking on eggshells..."

Some women stopped taking care of themselves (disconnected from self) because they experienced so much shame and isolation from being in the relationship. This is best characterized in Nicole's story,

...a few months before I ended my relationship with him, he – I got myself weighed at the women's clinic and I was almost 200 pounds and I never realized how much weight I gained. I was like holy crap. And it was kind of like that was an eye opener. Like, am I eating because I am so stressed out? I didn't realize I gained like 60, 70 pounds.... And then another thing, my hair, I just started throwing it up in a bun almost every day. I have really thick hair, it's wavy, curly, whatever, stupid thing...One day, I guess around that time I took it down and I felt through my hair and literally my hair was matted. I was like I'm paying absolutely no attention to myself and I'm just kind of letting myself go. I had to cut them out. I had to cut out those knots because they were so bad.

Many of these women jumped into new relationships immediately after leaving their abuser, some even marrying their new partners. For some of them the good feelings they experienced in their new relationship enabled them to name their previous relationship as abusive. Taylor had this to say,

I got into probably the healthiest relationship I've ever experienced in my entire life with my current boyfriend, and then I was really kind of like, "Holy crap, everything I've been through in the last year and a half was just so beyond wrong on every level."

Similarly, Charlie said, "...the reason why I started to notice a lot of it is because my current partner – at the time he was just a friend – he treated me like a full human being. He just respected me."

Unfortunately, for most participants, the experiences in new relationships were not as positive as the one's shared by Charlie and Taylor. Andy was seeking immediate physical and emotional safety from her abusive partner and found it in someone she met at college. In describing that new relationship she said, "...And he listened. And I guess the cycle kind of repeated itself from there...We had a lot in common. And I trauma bonded with him real hard." They ended up marrying and having two children together. Eventually, his verbal, emotional, and financial abuse led to her divorcing him and gaining custody of her children. In this situation Andy was seeking safety, and in some ways did not have the time or the knowledge to explore a new relationship to see if it was a good fit for her. Instead she felt an immediate bond and committed to the relationship.

These women lived somewhere in the liminal spaces of emerging adulthood. They certainly were not adolescents nor were they mature adults, but they were not quite experiencing relationship exploration in the same way that others in their age group might. It also was clear that their development was not context specific. That is, being a college student did not immediately throw them into emerging adulthood, nor was it a major factor in the telling of their story.

### ***Seeking Mutuality***

Mutuality is an important part of healthy relationships and a building block of relational empowerment (Lenz, 2016). If mutuality is present, then there is a sense of respect, empathy, and understanding that promotes mutual growth and maturity in relationships (romantic or otherwise). As women told their stories, I began to hear them unfolding ways in which their desire for mutuality (whether blatant or not) shaped the way they conceptualized their relationships.

In describing the last few weeks of her relationship, when her partner was mostly ignoring her, Beca showed how she used her understanding of mutuality to encourage relationship growth,

I would just tell myself, “Oh he’s just having a rough day at work.” He’s just not a people person, he’s an introvert, he needs time. But then it got to a point where I was just like, you know what, my needs are being neglected. And I kind of approached the issue kind of like, maybe he doesn’t know what you’re feeling. Like let him know and you guys can change that.

One of the ways Nicole showed an attempt at creating mutuality was in addressing her boyfriend’s mental health issues, “He said there were a couple of counselors that he went to...that said he had bipolar disorder. And I was like well, I’ll learn about it and I’ll work on it with you. I’ll do my best.” She later goes on to share that he stopped taking medication and refused to seek therapy and how she tried multiple times to suggest things to help him, but he refused and got angry with her. She felt that if she could help him and work with him on his bipolar disorder they could continue to build a healthy relationship, but his refusal showed lack of a desire for mutual growth.

When Blessings described the way she felt when her partner was abusing her finances, she said “we’re supposed to be a team; you’re supposed to make compromises.” She was expressing her understanding of what relationships were supposed to be like: two people being together and working together to find common ground and grow together. She was missing a sense of mutuality in her relationship that she recognized was important to the partnership growing.

When I asked Andy what she would want to tell someone who was going through a similar abusive experience, her response embodied that of someone who had recognized futile attempts to build a mutually-beneficial and mature relationship,

And you don't owe anyone the patience to change. You really don't. Like, you're not getting extra good person points for letting somebody hurt you over and over again...but it's, like, if you think you're helping them become a better person by extending your face to be slapped again, you're not.

Attempting to create mutual growth and empathy was one of the most common ways the participants conceptualized the abuse early on in their relationships. In detailing their stories, these women were growing into understanding how their thwarted attempts to evolve with their partner were a sign that the relationship was not healthy. In doing so, they were exhibiting movement toward relational maturity.

### **Agency and Empowerment**

When sharing their experiences, lessons learned, and reasons for participating in the research, each of the women in this study exemplified agency and empowerment. They were reclaiming power over their narrative. Each time they took action (telling their story, seeking help, leaving the relationship), they were agentic and building their self-efficacy, or belief that they had in themselves that they could attain their goals and continue to take action (Turner, 2015). Additionally, they were exhibiting consciousness-raising behaviors and developing critical consciousness. Consciousness-raising occurs when someone develops awareness about a situation (social or political in nature) and attempts to change or improve that issue through the sharing of that knowledge with others (McGirr & Sullivan, 2017). Participating in this interview was a consciousness-raising activity for the women in this study.

Critical consciousness is understanding that one's own individual experiences with oppression are actually larger issues rooted in social and political dysfunction and taking steps toward dismantling the causes (Carr, 2003). Critical consciousness is considered to be fundamental to personal empowerment. Through these processes, the women in this study established connections with themselves and the world around them. Agency and empowerment were best characterized in the following subthemes: 1) *"It's always hard asking for help."* 2) *Moving toward becoming critically conscious empowered women.*

### **"It's always hard asking for help."**

Throughout the course of the interviews, many of the women shared the resistance they had to seeking any kind of help. This was partly because the difficulty of naming their abuse was a barrier to them realizing they needed help. However, help-seeking behaviors proved to be a turning point for participants; when they asked for help, it seemed to empower them. Three subthemes represented these experiences: 1) *Seeking Informal Assistance*, 2) *Mental Health*, and 3) *Reporting*

**Seeking Informal Assistance.** Some women discussed the ways in which they sought out help on campus by sharing experiences with professors or other campus staff. Asking for this informal help on campus usually had to do with physical safety concerns, and more specifically was usually related to stalking behaviors. Stalking and cyberstalking were experienced by more than half of the participants in this study, often leaving them fearful of being alone and/or of leaving their rooms/homes. The psychological impact that various types of stalking had on women was enough to push them into asking for her help, even if they did not label it as stalking at the time. It is important to note that this subtheme does not include official reports made to police or campus administration (which is discussed later), some of which also refer to stalking behaviors.

Ash was being stalked by her ex boyfriend (abuser). He would follow her to class and sit in the room, then when the professor arrived he would leave. One of Ash's professors noticed him in class one day when he arrived and he also noticed Ash's changed behavior when he was around. He asked her about it after class,

“What do you want to do?” And I was just like, oh. He's like, “The ball's in your court. I have to report this, but I'm not going to. We could be talking hypothetically for all I know.” And I was like, “yes, right now we're talking hypothetically because I don't want you to report it.” And he was like, “OK.” And like just giving me that space to decide how I wanted to handle it when I felt like I had not been given that opportunity was so much. It helped.

Having someone acknowledge her situation while also leaving the decision making up to her made Ash feel like she had some control over the situation. Everything had felt so out-of-control for a long while and this helped her gain some sense of self back.

Bri also was being stalked on campus at her culinary institute. She informed instructors so that she could leave class at different times and always stayed in large groups as a safety measure, “My instructors knew what was going on because I kept them informed. I said, “I may have to leave class early because of so and so. They said OK. Just let me know.”” While it is unfortunate that she had to operate in this manner, it does show agentic behavior.

**Mental health.** Several participants also mentioned the importance of seeking counseling services on and/or off campus. Seeking counseling seemed to be both an act of empowerment and an empowering process. When Savannah began naming her abuse, she sought out counseling for validation and help in ending the relationship,



...I did go to a school counselor just to kind of talk through how to do it and realizing that not only did the relationship turn unhealthy, but also either way it was probably a relationship that I was going to end up leaving anyway, and that's OK.

By sharing her negative experiences with the school counselor, and the counselor helping her understand how her relationship was unhealthy while working together to safely remove herself from the relationship, Savannah engaged in consciousness-raising.

Charlie described her struggle with seeking counseling due to cultural norms that frown upon asking for help. She saw posters around her campus for counseling services, and saved the information, but hesitated to make an appointment. Eventually, a friend reported her for a wellness check on campus, and she was connected with the campus counseling center. When she first started counseling, she did not immediately discuss her abusive experiences, she thought she was "over it" but now sees how important it was, "It's OK for you to seek help in whatever ways, whether that's through your friends or your family or whatever it is. It's OK. You're not weak for asking for help. If anything, you're stronger for asking for help."

In acknowledging the role her cultural upbringing had in her hesitance to seek help, Charlie was developing critical consciousness about how a larger social issue was impacting her individual experience. Her decision to seek counseling despite those cultural norms and her openness about that experience in our interview were efforts in consciousness-raising.

**Reporting.** It is well known that IPV is underreported. Fewer than half the participants in this study reported their experiences in any official capacity (to police or other officials); a couple of the participants did try to report in some way, but were discouraged either by the process in general or someone who they thought should have been helping. However, the women

who did report showed agency and in many cases movement towards critical consciousness rendering themselves empowered women.

Kim experienced the most physically violent non-sexual abuse of all of the participants and was also the only participant to have reported her abuse to the police. When I reflected back to her how difficult it must have been to go to the police she said,

It was so hard, but I told myself that if I didn't do this, and if I saw him on the news, and he was killed like his family in a few years, I could never forgive myself. But I was just trying to like – maybe that's like my social work me, I have no idea. I just was like – I could just so – like if he did this with this other girl, and he did this with me, like it's clearly like something is really wrong with him, and let him like slip away with this, like I could – like I would hate myself for the rest of my life.

Although the experience was quite traumatic for Kim, she saw a need to report for the greater good. She was empowered to go through the legalities of reporting.

As discussed earlier, stalking behaviors came up frequently in my conversations with the participants. Taylor was stalked by her partner after their relationship ended. He was in the military, and when she truly began to feel like her safety was compromised because of his access to guns, she decided to file a restraining order,

We explain everything and that he was stalking me, basically still harassing my friends, really not giving up on any of it and explain the barn situation... And we let him know, we were like, "He has a lot of guns." I was like, "They're either in his truck, his trailer or his room." I'm like, "He apparently has a concealed carry permit, probably not real, but he's not supposed to have any weapons in his barracks or in his vehicle or in the trailer he owned." And it took about an hour and a half and he calls back and he says,

“Okay, can I have your daughter’s driver’s license number? Because she has a protection order against him.”...Plus, I figured that he must’ve admitted to something or they found his guns or something because just to go off of the word, our word about what we told him and get a response that fast, I was really glad because the military’s not very well-known for that...

You can hear the discord in Taylor’s statement as she finds relief in gaining the restraining order, but questions whether her story mattered or the abuser was found guilty of something else. This symbolizes the ways in which women feel unheard or not taken seriously in abusive situations.

Ash attempted to report her rape to the city police immediately after it happened and her stalking to campus authorities, but was met with obstacles at every turn. The police actively discouraged her from reporting the rape, commenting on the amount of paperwork and how unlikely it was that anything would come of it. She eventually left the police station without filing a report. When she asked her school for safety from his stalking behaviors, they responded by telling her that because she did not report to police they could “only do so much.” She felt that her experience with stalking was something that needed to be discussed more in college,

But specifically like it’s not talked about like how much it’s brushed off. And like everyone talks about this is the statistics and like if they do this, they’re very likely to do this. But nobody talks about why that is. And it’s because colleges create a culture that not only blames victims, but imposes on them.

The way Ash situated her experience with reporting within the context of the larger issue of institutional mishandling of reports of IPV, provides perspective into why so many women did not report and/or felt that they would not be believed if they shared their story.

*Moving toward becoming critically conscious empowered women*

During the second interview, I wanted to gain an understanding of how women believed their experiences influenced them as women and members of society. The responses during this interview epitomized movement toward critical consciousness and becoming empowered women. Each woman was looking at something bigger than themselves, and moving past their discomfort or uncertainty to contribute to making large scale change (critical consciousness).

Taylor exemplified this when she mentioned her fear regarding her stalker finding out,

“Well, I can just use a different name and hopefully help someone.” That trumped the fact of being nervous about it. And I really wasn’t sure how I would react to telling the entire story, and I was also still kind of like uneasy.

She was navigating between her fear and her desire to prevent this from happening to other women.

Participants made connections between seeking healthy partnerships and being strong and independent. There were references made to societal norms and expectations (whether directly or indirectly) as well as discussions of gender identity. Some even spoke discerningly about moving past gender norms as a part of the process of becoming independent. Additionally, intersectionality came up often and without specific prompting. Several of the participants discussed how their other cultural identities influenced how they thought they were supposed to feel about being a woman and what they were rejecting from those cultural scripts. Andy was modeling what she experienced when she received help,

And getting the support and getting out that has kind of gotten me to a place where using what I know and what I've learned helped get other people out of those

situations is really, really important to me...And so whatever experiences I have if I can I'd like to be able to use to help someone else.

As mentioned earlier, part of the labeling process is identifying with the collective group of women who have been abused. For some of these women, participating in this research was the first step in group identification. However, I saw it as part of a consciousness raising process for each of them regardless of where they were in the naming and labeling process. This was present in some of the data shared earlier in which women expressed that only physical violence and sexual abuse seemed to be mentioned on campuses. Here Cydney mentioned how she hoped being a participant in this research would shed light on the lack of support on college campuses specifically,

Because a lot – there's not, I don't feel like there is very many resources for women out there in college...And a lot of – it's not really talked about, like how much it can really mess with your life, your education, your work, just different stuff. It can really, really mess you up. And I think that a lot of people really need to be made aware of what exactly is a healthy relationship and what is not a healthy relationship, because I think that that's where the lines get blurred a bit.

Two participants, Andy and Ash, specifically mentioned their disdain toward the phrase “what doesn't kill you makes you stronger” because of the way it minimizes the social and political causes that allow abuse to be so pervasive. According to both participants, it places a lot of responsibility on the woman. Andy said,

I don't agree with the whole statement of ‘what doesn't kill you makes you stronger’. Because even though you can come out an incredibly strong person growing

from the things that have hurt you, no one should have to go through that in order to grow.

And upon reflecting on feeling strong after being raped by two previous partners Ash explained,

Rape is not like a build-up toward a woman's narrative or life and like we shouldn't see it as some kind of stepping stone to growth. Did I grow and learn things because of it? Yes. But it wasn't because I was raped. It was because of what happened afterwards. It had nothing to do with the cause and everything to do with the effects that I felt of that cause.

...rape is about power. And I realized, I was like, none of these men just couldn't handle their urges, themselves. They wanted to show me they were more powerful than me and that was always what got them off. Always. Always, always, always.

And the only way they stop being more powerful than me is if I decide that they're not. And so I have to choose that. And they've already shown me that they're not more powerful than me because I have never felt so weak in my life that I needed to violate another person to prove my strength. I've never needed to take something from someone that they didn't want me to take in order to show them how strong that I was. I can do that in a million other ways.

Here she poignantly describes how the narrative that encourages growth from abusive situations puts the onus on the woman to find strength rather than on society or the abuser for what they have allowed to happen. As a student on campus, Ash also worked to dismantle the rhetoric that abuse was acceptable through her work in sororities and fraternities. She would give presentations during which she would share her personal story,

Let me tell you about all of this horrible shit and what it looks like and how innocently it started. And by the end of it, like, I had kind of picked out which dudes didn't give a fuck and like weren't affected and all that. And I wasn't doing it to teach them not to rape. Because I shouldn't have to tell you guys not to do that. One, you're grown men. Two, I shouldn't have to tell you that, period, for any reason. Three, I'm doing this to tell which one of you are potential threats. And that's what this was for.

Nicole spoke to the possibility of research like this creating programs,

I'm lucky to have made it out alive, and I'm lucky to like know – understand what it – not lucky, but like I understand what it is, and how it feels, and what it does to you, I definitely want people to be more aware of this, and more programs to come out of this.

When she corrects herself for using the word “lucky” to describe her experience there is a sense she is still struggling with naming her experience, but is still willing to share it to raise awareness.

Charlie spoke to the intersections of being a woman, being Asian, and studying STEM,

To me, to society, it feels like being a woman is just being an object. Especially right now when there is a lot of activism going on and it's starting to get more attention. It's moving very slowly.

But being a girl in the STEM world, especially being an Asian girl in the STEM world, means something completely different than if I am blonde and in the STEM world. Some of my friends whose very brilliant and much, much smarter than I am when it comes to understanding the concept of a lot of abstract math, a lot of people assume that she slept her way through. But for me, it was expected of me to get a good grade because

I am Asian. And it's just kind of like oh of course you got a 90, you're Asian. So it just kind of feels like them belittling my grade because of my race...

Throughout the interviews, Charlie mentioned how her Asian cultural identity impacted her experiences. In the preceding excerpt, she spoke to a larger social issue regarding perceptions of women in STEM and how her Asian identity has in some ways protected her from being lumped in with other non-Asian women. Yet, it intersects with stereotypes about being Asian that she feels minimize her true intelligence and ability.

Beca also mentioned her culture,

Like growing up religious and growing up Hispanic, I was always taught 'oh well, you have to learn how to cook 'cause you have to be a good wife. And you have to have kids. And you know, you have to be super feminine and you have to have the best manners all of the time.' And now it's like I still like dressing up in dresses. You know, and I want to have kids someday. But I really don't care if others see me as feminine or not now. You know, it's like I am a woman. I was born a woman. I identify as a woman and I think that just being a woman is just being whoever you want to be.

By questioning the expectations of how she is supposed to act and look based on her cultural upbringing and saying that she should be whoever she wants, Beca is expressing an empowered sense of self.

Andy described how growing up religious also influenced how she was "taught" to be a woman,

So that's a great question. I don't know. For me, personally, it feels like a role that I have been taught to play and came out right-ish. It feels like it's better than any alternatives I think, but it's kind of like being a donkey in a pen full of horses, so it's functionally very similar.



A lot of the things that I grew up being taught to associate with womanhood, namely like parenting and that kind of thing; that I do resonate with a lot. My kids are – not just beyond simply being a parent and your kids playing an important part of your life, that’s something that I click with really well. I do great in childcare. It’s a thing for me. But I don’t know, it’s weird. I don’t quite know how to answer that question.

In her response you can hear how Andy feels she identifies with some of the things she learned, but struggles to accept that because she is working through rejecting what she was taught by her abusive parents. She is moving toward critical consciousness while also showing how difficult it is to deconstruct deeply ingrained cultural scripts about being a woman. Reconciling the difference between what is oppressive and what she is experiencing that might be oppressive to others, but is actually positive for her is complicated. But in sharing her awareness of these issues, and her love and acceptance of her skills as a mother, I heard an empowered woman.

Finally, in discussing how she viewed future relationships, Blessings represented the empowered maturity that participants exhibited throughout the interviews,

Not to be in a relationship right now, but like to get to know somebody right now would be nice. But then not rushing it too because I still have to get myself together, to create the right relationship. I have to be able to bring something to the table that will benefit both of us and they have to bring something to the table too.

Here she demonstrates an empowered sense of self through her expression of a desire for mutuality and an understanding of what healthy relationship exploration might look like for her.

### **Chapter Summary**

The goal of this study was to understand the lived experiences of women who experienced abuse during their college years. This meant that the actual instances of abuse were

not the main focus of my analyses. Instead, I was interested in how participants spoke about and made meaning of their abusive experiences and connected them with their identities (woman, college student, partner, survivor). Through the process of analyzing the data using Gilligan's Listening Guide method, I came to understand these experiences as paths to becoming relationally mature. I heard this through two voices, *The Voice of Acknowledgement* and *The Voice of Empowered Maturity*.

*The Voice of Acknowledgement* conceptualized the process by which women came to name their abusive experiences. This voice had to do with knowledge and understanding of IPV as it related to the participants and their individual situations. *The Voice of Empowered Maturity* described the journey that women went on to understand themselves within the context of others. This included familial history, past partners, and even those perceived to be in charge of their safety. Most importantly though, this voice is where I heard them speak about themselves and how they connect with both their inner and outer worlds (shaped by the abuse they experienced). I heard growth and a clear understanding of how their individual experiences were actually part of a bigger problem. The included excerpts from the interviews illustrate these voices. In chapter 5, I will provide a more detailed discussion of these findings as well as the implications they have for future practice, counselor education, and research in counseling and higher education.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of traditionally aged college women who were abused by an intimate partner in college. Specifically, I wanted to hear how they came to name their experiences and what that meant contextually in their lives. Using Gilligan's Listening Guide and analyzing narratives through a feminist empowerment lens helped me to identify the voices that conceptualized the experiences of the participants. My goal was to move away from discussing the specifics of abuse and instead listen to how women spoke about themselves. In doing this I heard women who had reflected on their lives and decisions speaking from a place of empowerment and maturity that they felt they did not have when they started college. Participants were able to place their experiences within larger cultural contexts and provide a historical narrative as to why and/or how they experienced IPV, what cultural scripts they had come to identify as part of the problem, and what the cultural scripts and past experiences meant for them currently, as well as how they pictured their lives in the future.

What also was evident was how complicated and circuitous the process of naming can be for women who have been abused. During the first interview, everyone I spoke to was very open and shared deeply intimate details about their physical and emotional experiences. Participants all agreed to take part in two interviews, yet four of the women who participated in the first interview did not respond to my requests to schedule a second interview. These four participants were unwilling to elaborate about the experiences they discussed and possibly labeled during our first interview. This could be interpreted in many ways and is evidence of the complex nature of discussing and naming abusive experiences.

### **The Voices of College Women Who Have Been Abused**

I heard two distinct voices addressing the original research question: *How do traditionally aged college women describe their lived experience of being in an abusive intimate relationship during their undergraduate years?* The first voice, *The Voice of Recognition*, provided a deeper understanding of what it is like to acknowledge abuse and to see oneself in the preexisting terminology used in both the criminal and public health definitions of IPV. The other voice, *The Voice of Empowered Maturity*, described how participants felt these experiences affected their path in life, especially related to how they viewed themselves and their future relationships. My justification for conducting this research was to give voice to an issue that, for many, has mostly been numbers and statistics; and by creating a space to discuss IPV in the words of those who have actually gone through it, I was able to gain a much deeper understanding of how college women lived their abusive experiences.

#### **Naming and Labeling**

It is important to remember that language is created by those in power and is often not representative of the actual experiences of those affected (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Johnstone, 2016). This was true for the participants in this study, both in labeling the acts of abuse and labeling themselves as victims and/or survivors. It became apparent that many of the participants had never found a safe place to discuss these experiences. Taking part in this research was, for many of them, the first time anyone had ever asked them directly about their experiences in a way that made them feel heard. Research has shown that often the only time when women disclose abusive experiences is when they are asked directly (Sutherland, Fantasia, & Hutchinson, 2016) and by inviting their voices into the conversation about abuse, the women in this study were able to begin their own individual journeys of making meaning of their

experiences. Several of the participants had never shared their abusive experiences with anyone, and others had shared bits and pieces mostly with friends. This is consistent with the literature in that survivors of IPV are more likely to disclose to informal supports (i.e. friends) (Demers et al., 2018).

As has been previously mentioned, there is no one universally accepted definition of intimate partner violence, dating violence, or violence against women in general. This presents issues with regard to acknowledgment, reporting, research, and the overall safety of women (Rennison & Addington, 2014). Recruitment for the present study was done intentionally to try and capture all types of violence and abuse against women committed by an intimate partner. This meant defining both “abuse” and “intimate partner” broadly. In order to try and capture various types of abuse, the wording in the recruitment materials included a multitude of behaviors rather than a blanket term like “abuse” or “violence” that, if left open to interpretation, may have limited potential participants. The language was as follows: “Has a current or former partner ever stalked you, tried to control you, physically or sexually abused you, or harassed you online?” Including a wide variety of terminology allowed for a participant pool that consisted of women who experienced violence typically associated with violence against college women (sexual assault) as well as other forms of violence that are often left out of the conversation (e.g., stalking, coercion, psychological abuse, cyberstalking, and revenge porn). Additionally, the CDC (2016) definition of intimate partner, which includes current or former dating partners, sexual partners, and/or committed partners, was used. Whereas most of the participants shared stories involving former committed partners, a few participants detailed instances of violence that happened after partnerships ended, with friends, or with sexual partners.

The issue that seems to plague the research regarding violence against women is the operationalization of the word “violence” (Rennison & Addington, 2014). This proved to be true for the participants of this study as well. In the “*I didn’t really know what to call it*” subtheme, women shared their hesitance with using words like “violence” and “abuse” to describe their experiences, particularly if they were not physical, forceful, or sexual in nature. By technical definition, all the participants in this study had experienced intimate partner violence. They named the abusive/violent behaviors (coercion, manipulation, stalking, etc), but often stopped short of labeling them as forms of violence. Participants shared sentiments of their experiences not being “bad enough” to be considered truly abusive or violent. In contrast, the women who experienced rape and physical abuse were more willing to use labels, but acknowledged that using the terminology was difficult for them. This opens the door to future considerations for the use of the word “violence” and whether it is misleading or confusing for women who have non-physically violent experiences, therefore discouraging reporting and help-seeking behaviors.

The literature surrounding violence against college women is generally limited to identifying and preventing sexual violence (Fisher, Daigle, and Cullen, 2010; Rennison & Addington, 2014), and this was supported by the participants in this study within the *Knowledge of IPV* sub-theme. Participants reported learning about sexual assault in their campus programming, but not about any other types of gender-based violence. This focus on only one type of violence influenced their ability to conceptualize their own experiences as abusive. Interestingly, two participants who viewed themselves as knowledgeable about IPV also did not perceive their own experiences as abusive. This points to a disconnect between how survivors interpret the severity and significance of their experiences and the way that IPV is represented on campus and in society.

What stands out about the disconnection between definitions and experiences is the struggle in naming and labeling psychological abuse and coercion. Psychological violence has been shown to be more common than other types of physical and sexual violence (Rennison & Addington, 2014), and every participant in this study reported experiences with psychological control and coercion. Participants discussed how psychologically abusive behaviors (e.g., name-calling, making threats, controlling behaviors, manipulation) had been normalized in their lives, and therefore they did not consider them abusive at the time. For some of the women, these behaviors turned into physical violence, which is also consistent with the literature (Kennedy et al. 2018). When the abuse became physical, they made the connection between the physical violence and psychological violence and were able to name the behaviors. However, some of the participants did not experience physical violence and were only able to name the psychological abuse after the relationship ended and they experienced what they interpreted to be a “healthy” relationship. Ultimately, the most pressing concerns are the societal structures in place that normalize power and control in relationships.

Another part of the labeling process is how participants labeled themselves using victim/survivor language. Choosing to call oneself a “victim” or a “survivor” is a personal decision, and yet is often made by others (i.e., media and society). The participants in this study shared reasons why they had felt the identity of both a victim and a survivor at different times. Feminist researchers have suggested that using the term “victim” reinforces societal power differentials based on gender, while “survivor” returns the power back to the woman who was abused (Worell & Remer, 2003); In most cases, this aligned with how participants labeled themselves. They described associating with the term “victim” while they were experiencing the abuse and immediately following any naming of the experience or the end of the relationship.

During these times they described feelings of powerlessness and a lack of self-worth. However, once they began to remove themselves from the abusive partner or they sought help in trying to understand their experiences, they began to feel empowered and associated more closely with being a survivor. In all of these conversations, participants acknowledged how they continue to move fluidly between the terms because of the lasting impacts of experiencing IPV, including mental health issues and difficulties in building healthy relationships.

### **Building Connections**

In the “*I didn’t know what healthy interactions looked like*” and *Relational Maturity* subthemes participants discussed the role that family interactions and relational development played in their experiences with IPV. The women in this study described how their foundational understandings of relationships provided for weak and unhealthy connections as they approached emerging adulthood. The idea that early exposure to abusive or unhealthy relationships can lead to attachment issues and increase the likelihood of experiencing IPV in emerging adulthood is supported by the literature (e.g., McClure & Parmenter, 2020). This is also consistent with the tenets of relational cultural theory (RCT), which posits that a lack of growth-fostering relationships in childhood can stunt psychological growth and development impacting future connections (Brown, et al., 2018; Jordan, 2009).

Participants in this study all shared how they eventually realized that early exposure to psychological abuse, name-calling, financial abuse, and in some cases, physical abuse within their family units and prior relationships set them up for being accepting of abusive behaviors. This can be explained using the RCT concept of relational images (Brown, et al., 2018; Jordan, 2009). Relational images are the messages and constructs individuals internalize, often from early life experiences, that later inform the ways in which they view themselves within



relationships (Brown, et al., 2018). If negative relational images are internalized, it can lead to feelings of low self-worth, expectations of mistreatment in relationships, and difficulty building connections in relationships. When one partner has power over the other in a relationship (i.e. IPV), this further contributes to the negative ways women perceive themselves in relation to others. It leads them to believe that they are to blame for their partner's abusive behaviors, reinforcing the perpetrators power and dominance (Brown, et al., 2018).

RCT suggests that all individuals seek connection through relationships, and if they are in a constant cycle of disconnected relationships (i.e., IPV), perceptions of self and the world around them begin to suffer (Jordan, 2009). The women in this study described having low self-esteem, struggling with anxiety and attachment issues, and feeling isolated/alone, which shaped the way they approached and viewed their roles in intimate relationships. Some research exists on the relational rebuilding process for survivors of IPV (see Brown, et al., 2018), but not specifically for college women who have experienced IPV. This could be an important area of exploration for future research.

Social connectedness and positive relationships with others have been shown to be successful interventions for IPV and on a college campus it may be easier for women to access resources that address these areas. This was true for participant Kim, who was supported by the Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention program on her campus. She was assigned an advocate whom she was able to speak with confidentially and who supported her through her trauma recovery and reporting procedures. The advocate even encouraged Kim's roommates to redecorate her room (where she experienced severe physical abuse) as a way for her to start to see positive change in her life. Having someone to support her and help her build new positive growth-fostering relationships on campus helped Kim feel safe and continue her education.

Some of the participants who did not have this support dropped out of college or had to take time away. Of course, not every campus has this kind of support, and not every woman reports or asks directly for help the way Kim did. Therefore, it may be beneficial for colleges to consider creating prevention programs that are widely promoted on campus and include assigned advocates who work closely with survivors whether or not they decide to report. Researchers suggest creating permanent staff positions that are built into the campus structure and culture, and not reliant on temporary grant funding to ensure continuous prevention and intervention efforts on campus (CDC, 2016; Lichty, 2018).

There is, however, an important distinction to be made among this particular group of women, all of whom had some history of IPV prior to beginning their college careers. In some ways, they began their relationship and identity exploration at a disadvantage, having had a limited understanding of what a growth-fostering relationship might look like, and instead they either continued in or began new relationships that were disconnected (from an RCT standpoint). The literature shows that disconnection brings about feelings of shame, isolation, and disempowerment (Jordan 2009; Brown, McGriff, & Speedlin, 2018) and that “IPV is the epitome of disconnection, and undermines one’s ability to engage in healthy connections” (Brown, et al., p. 142, 2018). This implies that the participants in this study may have experienced entrance into emerging adulthood while engaging in more adult-like behaviors (e.g., living together, being in an abusive relationship, being financially independent) than those of their peers, but while lacking feelings of self-worth or confidence that might be expected to accompany those behaviors.

Mutuality, or the belief that within relationships each person experiences individual growth while sharing in the growth and wellbeing of their partner and their relationship, is a

central principle in RCT (Jordan, 2017; Lenz, 2016). Mutuality, as a construct, emphasizes the possibility and importance of having a sense of self while also building and maintaining a connection with someone else. The women in this study reported an absence of mutuality in their relationships; this is not surprising given the disconnection in abusive relationships, and it is consistent with the existing IPV literature (e.g., Brown, et al., 2018). IPV is built on a foundation of power and control of the abuser over the survivor. Therefore, participants did not see that the behaviors of their partners as abusive or harmful, and instead felt as though it was their job to make changes to fix the relationship. In reflecting on how they had changed their own behaviors to try and improve their relationships while their partners had not made an effort to change for their sake or the sake of the relationship, participants realized they desired mutuality. This realization was a catalyst for movement toward relational empowerment and maturity.

### **Empowered Maturity**

Ultimately, the women in this study showed agency and began moving through a process that I came to understand as *Empowered Maturity*. This was apparent in the way they shared their stories and made changes in their lives. Please note, my intention is not to portray IPV as an empowering experience. Empowerment is not at all the objective (or the result) of the power and control exerted by the perpetrator in an abusive relationship. As a reminder, in Chapter 4, I described how multiple participants mentioned the phrase “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” to be an inaccurate narrative in response to their experiences. They felt it removed responsibility from the perpetrator and invalidated the experiences of the survivor. Instead, they wanted it to be clear that one does not have to have horrific, abusive, harmful experiences to be strong. But, despite having been through these abusive experiences, the women in this study emerged with a stronger sense of self and, in some cases, a sense of purpose that resembled

critical consciousness, which is defined as becoming aware of the role that oppression plays in one's life and taking steps to overcome or deconstruct the norms in place that allow them to happen (Carr, 2003; McGirr & Sullivan, 2017). Although each participant's experience was unique, there was a collective developmental process that was illustrated throughout the interviews.

Multiple theories of empowerment exist, and for the women in this study, empowerment presented as a developmental process, rather than an outcome of a linear progression of events or experiences (Carr, 2003). Previous research has shown the importance of empowerment as a tool for healing in survivors of IPV (McGirr & Sullivan, 2017). As the participants began to reclaim power over their narratives, they exhibited components of both psychological empowerment and relational maturity that together resulted in a process of *Empowered Maturity*. In other words, as they began to critically reflect (a part of the empowerment process) on their relational experiences, the participants came to realize that they (or their relationships) were not as mature or adult as they had originally thought. In an effort to take back control, they began engaging in agentic behaviors to establish maturity. One of the ways they accomplished this was by seeking out connections grounded in mutuality (e.g., trying to repair their relationship by working with their partner on mental health, financial, and emotional issues impacting the relationship). RCT views connections, rather than individuality/independence, as the central component to well-being with mutuality as a symbol of maturity (Jordan, 2010).

Agency was present when participants attempted to set boundaries or change unacceptable norms with their partners. This was a step toward establishing a more growth-fostering relationship that included mutual empowerment. However, these efforts were almost always met with resistance or ignored and subsequently empowered participants to seek help in a

variety of ways (counseling, reporting, informally sharing their experiences). Additionally, when making connections between their childhood experiences, relational images, and their abusive relationship, they were developing critical consciousness.

As participants continued to move away from relational disconnection toward connection and mutuality, they felt more empowered and continued to make changes. As critical consciousness grew, they began to engage in consciousness-raising activities in an effort to combat the norms that permit gender-based violence to continue. This looked different across participants, but was present for all just by their participation in this study; each participant identified hopes of raising awareness of IPV among college women as the primary reason they participated. Participants joined women's groups or groups for survivors on campus and in the community; they shared their stories with members of Greek life as a preventative strategy; and they pursued degrees in helping professions with the goal of helping women with similar experiences. Identifying with a group (in this case other survivors of gender based violence) is part of the process of consciousness raising (Carr, 2003) and helped participants mobilize toward social action, again reinforcing feelings of empowerment. Going through this process left them feeling more mature and prepared to make decisions and build new relationships (romantic or otherwise); they matured themselves into being empowered women.

### **Implications**

Few studies have looked at IPV specifically among college women using a qualitative approach. The narratives shared allowed for a deep exploration of how college women experience IPV. The findings of this study can inform the work of counselors in a range of settings who work with women who have experienced IPV. School counselors as well as staff and faculty who work at institutions of higher education (IHE) will find the results of this study

particularly relevant. For school counselors, there are implications for both prevention and intervention work with students and staff. Most notable though, are the implications for IHEs, as the results of this research indicate that women who experience IPV in college do not feel that IHEs are equipped to prevent gender-based violence or address the needs of survivors.

### **School Counseling**

An unexpected finding of this study was the connection between IPV in middle and high school and IPV in college. Almost all of the participants had experienced IPV or sexual assault in middle and/or high school, and for many of them, that same abusive relationship carried on into college. Based on these results, it can be inferred that there is utility in explicitly educating middle and high school students about healthy relationships and IPV in order to prevent it earlier.

Across participants, the importance of being educated about healthy relationships during early adolescence was repeatedly mentioned. Participants said they learned about sexual health, and sometimes sexual assault, during middle and high school, but never about what it meant to be in a healthy relationship or what red flag behaviors to look for to make sure they were being treated appropriately (and how to treat others properly). There are existing programs schools can implement to teach students explicitly about healthy relationships, effective communication, and dating violence (e.g., Safe Dates, The Fourth R), but this is a choice for each individual school rather than a universal requirement. Social and emotional learning/awareness and bullying prevention programs, usually delivered by school counselors, may indirectly address some areas of healthy relationships. However, there is a gap in students' knowledge and awareness of the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships, and even when programs are implemented, without consistent review or reinforcement, the behavioral changes and knowledge gained begin to disappear sometimes within a year (Crooks et al., 2019). To address this gap,

school counselors can incorporate education about healthy/unhealthy relationships, teen dating violence, and gender-based violence into the curriculum regularly throughout the middle and high school years. This can be done by establishing partnerships within the community and bringing in experts to discuss IPV; infusing information about healthy/unhealthy relationships into courses and academic curriculum (perhaps in courses like health, history, communications, and psychology); and focusing on increasing communication skills and changing negative attitudes toward IPV and help-seeking (Crooks et al., 2019). Collaboration among school counselors and faculty/staff to create comprehensive programs that include the aforementioned approaches and are taught/offered to students in every grade, at their developmental level each year, will help to more effectively prevent teen dating violence, encourage help-seeking behaviors, and increase knowledge retention.

The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA, 2016) Ethical Standards for School Counselors state that "All students have a right to...A safe school environment promoting autonomy and justice and free from abuse, bullying, harassment and other forms of violence" (p. 1). Additionally, the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (ASCA, 2021) state that it is the job of school counselors to provide instruction and counseling that addresses social skills and social/emotional development which includes "acceptable behaviors that improve social interactions" (p. 3) and helping students "manage emotions and learn and apply interpersonal skills" (p. 3). Learning about healthy intimate relationships, beyond the scope of bullying and sexual assault, would fall within these standards. Helping to make staff aware of the signs of teen dating violence is also important, as teachers spend a great deal of time with students. According to ASCA (2016) standard A.11.D, school counselors are to "Develop and maintain the expertise to recognize the signs and indicators of abuse and neglect. Encourage

training to enable students and staff to have the knowledge and skills needed to recognize the signs of abuse and neglect and to whom they should report suspected abuse or neglect” (p. 5). This standard can be interpreted to include programming/training on signs of intimate partner violence that includes faculty and staff for further prevention and intervention. Teachers, counselors, and other staff in schools that implement some of the existing programs mentioned earlier (Safe Dates, Fourth R) receive training to become facilitators, and therefore become more knowledgeable about IPV, dating violence, and unhealthy relationships. However, these are optional programs, and only the facilitators receive the training, therefore the systemic problem with the knowledge gap related to IPV in schools is not truly being addressed.

### **Higher Education**

Colleges and universities are required to implement prevention and awareness programs regarding date rape, sexual assault, stalking, domestic violence, and dating violence. However, according to the participants in this study, most of the information being shared and/or absorbed on campuses is about sexual assault. The women did not see language or materials that reflected their experiences in the information being provided to students on their campuses. It is important to note that the participants in this study were from 12 different post-secondary institutions spread across the country, therefore this is likely a widespread issue. Many of them expressed that they may have sought out help or tried to end the relationship sooner had they 1) had a better understanding of what was happening to them, and 2) known where they could seek support. According to the Campus SaVE Act, any institution receiving federal financial aid is to implement “Programs to prevent dating violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking include both primary prevention and awareness programs directed at incoming students and new employees and ongoing prevention and awareness campaigns directed at students and



employees” (Clery Center, 2017, p. 13). Based on the responses of participants, the information they received did not clearly address all of these issues, nor was it ongoing.

**Awareness and Prevention Efforts in Higher Education.** The findings of this study indicate that institutions of higher education may need to focus efforts on providing prevention/intervention training and programming that more directly addresses dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking. Clearly defining these terms and providing more descriptive examples is crucial to helping college students recognize when their experiences fall within the purview of these terms. Furthermore, the methods that schools are using to train seem to be ineffective; it may behoove institutions to assess the effectiveness of their programming and make changes accordingly. This is not surprising, as researchers have frequently discussed the difficulty institutions of higher education face in trying to figure out how to address the requirements of Title IX (Banyard et al., 2017; Lichty, 2018). Currently, most institutions seem to be focusing on implementing bystander intervention programs and few institutions are systematically implementing or evaluating programming (Azimi, Fleming, & Hayes, 2021; Graham et al., 2019). Bystander intervention education has been proven to be effective, but it is meant to teach bystanders to intervene and is not necessarily a beneficial way to educate about how to prevent things before they happen. Most of IPV happens behind closed doors and is psychological not physical in nature, so bystander intervention education may not be the most efficacious tool, especially for promoting understanding about the broad scope of IPV, relationship red flags, and where to go for support and reporting.

A more intentional approach to ongoing programming seems to be key. It is important that training/programming is diversified to meet the various needs, learning styles, and identities of stakeholders. There is no evidence to support the effectiveness of stand-alone/one off

approaches like a single online training for freshman (CDC, 2016). Students often get their Clery Act/Campus SaVE programming at the start of their college career when they are just beginning to adjust to being college students (Lichty, 2018). It is also a time when they are overloaded with new information, and they may quickly disregard any Title IX/Campus SaVE related training, which at that time may not seem applicable to them. At least half of the participants in this study were still enrolled in college when I interviewed them, and they could not even remember exactly when they received training or specifically what the training stated beyond defining sexual assault. If the programming were continuous, as is required, participants likely would have been more familiar with whatever information their institution had been providing. This can be done through academic coursework, participation in campus athletics, clubs, and Greek life, as well as commuter and residency programs. For instance, coaches can work with athletes on addressing “hyper masculine peer norms” and campus leaders (club leaders) can receive training on healthy relationships and promoting safety and respect on campus (CDC, 2016). Similarly, residence hall directors can promote healthy relationships/healthy sexuality and educate residents about where they can go for help (CDC, 2016). Commuter student programs can address what IPV might look like on or off campus, and how commuters have access to campus resources even if an incident happens at off campus events or off campus housing. Bringing campus law enforcement into dorms and commuter lounges/programs to show a community awareness of IPV will also continue to heighten awareness and increase feelings of support. When programming moves beyond a singular required online module and is infused into the other areas of a student’s life it will increase knowledge and start to promote positive social norms.

Additionally, students may benefit from programming that addresses dating violence and partner abuse exclusively rather than combined with other types of prevention programming

related to sexual assault and other violence. This way it may be easier for them to retain the information as well as recognize their own experiences. Psychological aggression and abuse in particular are difficult for survivors to recognize. Therefore, training or programming that explicitly addresses these issues is paramount.

**Taking a Trauma-Informed Social-Ecological Approach.** While increasing programs that are specific to IPV and building prevention education into school clubs and activities is important, one piece that seems to be missing from the implementation of the prevention and intervention of IPV and gender-based violence (GBV) in general (e.g. sexual assault, IPV, harassment) in higher education is a move toward a trauma-informed campus that approaches change from a social-ecological perspective (CDC, 2016; Lichty, 2018). Trauma-informed approaches, “... are expected to integrate knowledge about the effects of trauma into all aspects of service” (Kulkarni, 2019, p. 58). As mentioned in Chapter 2, gender-based violence awareness does not begin and end with students; it is a community issue (in this case, the college campus) and therefore requires a community response (Lichty, 2018). This includes appropriate training of all members of the university (administrators, faculty, staff, students) with regard to Title IX policies and procedures including awareness of what constitutes domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking (Lichty, 2018; Voth Schrag, 2017) as well as accessible and consistent information for reporting incidents.

A social-ecological approach focuses on addressing GBV on campus at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels so that all efforts complement and interact with one another (CDC, 2016). Implementing a comprehensive strategy using a social-ecological model means that policies and programming would inform one another, and they would be consistently applied and communicated across campus (the community level). Institutions of higher education

would be focusing on redefining social norms around all GBV in addition to educating about what constitutes IPV and communicating policies and procedures.

The women in this study who reported help-seeking behaviors most often reached out to mental health providers and counselors on campus (which is an individual-level intervention), but also mentioned significant interactions with professors and other staff that ultimately affected their feelings of safety. Previous studies have shown that faculty, staff, and campus police often do not receive training on GBV, and that resources on campus were commonly difficult to find, reinforced rape myths, and were not victim-centered/trauma-informed (Sabina, 2014). Operating from a trauma-informed perspective, members of the campus community who interact with students would have an understanding that past and present trauma may be affecting students' abilities to fully engage with their education (Davidson, 2017; Imad, 2020). They would actively work to create an environment in which the student can be the most successful and feel safe (Davidson, 2017). This is not to say that all faculty and staff are expected to serve as counselors or even know specifically what a student is going through. For faculty, operating from a trauma-informed perspective starts with knowing how to spot possible traumatic responses and behavior changes in the classroom (which can be related to all types of trauma, not just GBV trauma). This can be followed by sharing resources and referrals that assist in helping students advocate for themselves and their education which can make all the difference to a student struggling with trauma (Davidson, 2017). Additionally, flexibility and understanding with things like assignments and due dates can help a student succeed. Experiencing trauma can effect information processing and cognitive functioning (Kulkarni, 2019), therefore students may have a difficult time meeting deadlines.

Similarly, staff and administrators can use trauma-informed approaches to assist students who are seeking help or services regarding their academics, finances, accessibility to resources, or who are looking to report an incident. For instance, when Ash asked for help preventing her stalker/rapist from being in certain buildings while she had class, she was not met with empathy. Instead, she was told that because she did not report the incident to the police, nothing could be done. This type of response perpetuates victim-blaming and can retraumatize a survivor. It left Ash feeling unsafe and unheard. Had the staff member who assisted her responded from a more trauma-informed perspective, she may have been more empathetic and provided her with further resources or suggestions for ensuring her safety. For instance, she could have shared information about how to file a restraining order or formally report to police and/or where to find counseling services. Any of these suggestions would have addressed the traumatic situation Ash was experiencing and provided options to help her feel safer. This incident also leaves questions about the effectiveness and clarity in reporting procedures.

Law enforcement on and off campus are another important part of the social-ecological model at the societal level of IPV and an important part of the reporting process, therefore it is crucial that they are trained to be trauma-informed. Participants in this study spoke about not reporting due to fear of not being believed and instances in which the police mishandled incidents and/or discouraged reporting. When law enforcement discourages reporting IPV, it can be retraumatizing. Ash experienced this when she was raped by her ex-boyfriend at a party and went to the police station:

like this guy (police officer) is giving me every indication that even if I do push past this and make him do his job, he's not going to do it right and it's going to be for fucking nothing so I might as well just avoid having to report this. The stalking started after she attempted to report this incident, but ultimately decided not to given the law enforcement officer's discouragement. Perhaps if this was handled differently by

police, Ash would have reported, and further legal action could have been taken to ensure her safety. Instead, the cycle continued, and she endured more IPV.

### **Counselor Education**

Counselor education programs also can benefit from the findings of this study and strive to better educate future counselors about the role that GBV may play in their future careers. Programs can begin by infusing more information about gender-based issues and IPV into the curriculum, particularly for school and college counselors. Previous research has shown that counselors feel unprepared to assess for IPV and to work with clients who have experienced IPV (Musson, 2016). As mentioned earlier, almost all of the participants in this study experienced IPV during middle and high school. Therefore, school counselors play a role in early prevention and intervention of IPV. This implies that it may be advantageous for school counselors in training to have more education and training about GBV in their curriculum. Currently, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), an accrediting body for counseling programs across the country, requires that all counseling curricula for all specialty areas address issues of power and privilege and how to assess for trauma and abuse (CACREP, 2016). However, there is no mention of a need to specifically address GBV. And while the standards specific to the College Counseling and Student Affairs specialty explicitly state that “models of violence prevention in higher education settings” (CACREP, 2016, p. 28) must be addressed in the curriculum, the school counseling CACREP standards do not mention anything about violence awareness/prevention, or gender-based issues. I would recommend that CACREP include language specific to addressing violence in schools, inclusive of GBV, in their standards for school counseling. This would encourage CACREP

accredited programs to include this information in their school counseling coursework and better prepare future counselors to deal with GBV once they join the workforce.

Interestingly, as mentioned earlier, the ASCA standards, by which school counselors are to abide, require that school counselors be knowledgeable enough to recognize the signs of abuse and also encourage students and staff to receive training regarding the indicators of abuse (ASCA, 2016). This suggests that there may be a gap between what school counselors are learning in training and what they are expected to do in practice. The women who participated in this study were clear that they may have learned about sexual health and sexual assault in their K-12 years, but none were able to recall learning about healthy relationships or signs of IPV. Counselor education programs should consider infusing more information about IPV and violence prevention into curriculum and programming, particularly for school counseling students. This information can be included in required courses such as social justice and multicultural issues and marriage and family counseling. It can also be included in elective courses that address trauma, ethics, and gender issues. Offering professional development opportunities like workshops and webinars addressing IPV in schools would also be beneficial.

### **Counseling Practice**

Research suggests that there may be discrepancies in the expectations that clinicians and survivors have with regard to services provided for IPV (Kulkarni, 2019). Providers often see the goal as getting the client to view the relationship differently, whereas the survivor sees the most benefit in relationship building and focusing on personal growth and identity development unrelated to IPV (Kulkarni, 2019; Melbin, Jordan, & Fels Smyth, 2014). The literature describes various ways that professional counselors can work with clients on feelings of low self-worth, shame, guilt, depression, and anxiety that are the consequences of IPV. By creating a safe space

for psychological growth and wellness using empowerment practices, feminist approaches, and focusing on relational rebuilding practices clinicians can effectively work with clients to increase self-esteem and improve social connections (Brown et al., 2018). This was also true for the women in this study. Although, they did not all seek counseling, they described ways in which learning to build healthy relationships and feeling empowered to set boundaries and focus inward helped improve their self-worth and encouraged them to make changes. For clinicians who work with this population it is critical they listen to what the clients hope to gain from receiving mental health services, as this will help them to feel heard and begin the process of empowerment and relational growth.

There were also some participants who sought out counseling but did not immediately (or ever) share their experiences of IPV with the clinician. These women expressed feelings of shame, embarrassment, and lack of understanding what they were experiencing (labeling/naming). They felt that they would not be understood because of societal scripts and negative internalized relational images. Some women eventually shared their experiences after building a rapport, and some shared minor details but were never fully transparent about the severity of the abuse with the clinician. This points to the importance of screening practices. Survivors are more likely to disclose when asked directly because they often do not recognize the abusive behaviors or they feel if they disclose, they will be ignored or blamed (Sutherland, et al., 2016). Professional counselors who work with women in emerging adulthood may want to consider screening for IPV immediately at the start of the clinical relationship.

As was mentioned earlier, survivors often feel that what is most beneficial to them in counseling is focusing on their own strengths and accomplishments rather than on their abusive relationship. This could explain why some do not disclose their experiences. However, if



counselors build a strong authentic connection with clients and create a safe environment in which strategies of disconnection are addressed, mutuality is apparent, and shame is minimized clients may be more willing to share their IPV experiences (Brown et al., 2018). In sharing these experiences possible PTSD can be addressed (if needed) and clients may begin to learn and grow from their experiences while focusing on themselves rather than their view of the perpetrator.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

There is little qualitative research about college women and their experiences with IPV. This research offered a safe space for 12 women to share their experiences. Although this is a standard sample size for a general qualitative study of this nature, and the data provided was rich, the results cannot be generalized due to the size. Additionally, there was a lack of racial and ethnic diversity among the group of participants as seven of the women were white, one was Asian, three were bi-racial, and one was African American (see Appendix K for full details). Had the sample been more diverse, the experiences shared may have been different.

However, a strength of this group is the geographic diversity and the various types of institutions of higher education they attended. Participants were from all over the country including Texas, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Montana, New Hampshire, and Arkansas. They attended community colleges, traditional four-year universities, culinary, and seminary schools. Therefore, they were able to provide various perspectives on the ways that IPV is experienced in different cultural contexts. This provided for insight into societal scripts that influenced how different campuses and communities influenced the experiences of the participants.

Synchronous interviews were conducted using the Zoom video platform and were audio recorded using a password-protected encrypted voice recorder. Given the sensitive nature of the topic at hand, it is important to address both the positives and negatives associated with

conducting virtual interviews. This includes my access to participants and participant access to the study; concerns with safety and confidentiality; and interview tone and co-creation of meaning.

Conducting interviews via Zoom allowed access to a greater field of participants. Video interviews can be conducted any time and any place, thus opening recruitment beyond local college students (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). One possible negative with this approach is that participants must have access to the technology necessary to conduct the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Individuals from lower SES backgrounds or who do not have strong technology skills may have been excluded from consideration. This is particularly concerning from a feminist perspective, because the goal of feminist research is to provide an opportunity for those who feel unheard to tell their story, often those are individuals from marginalized groups (like low SES), who might not have access to technology. This would prevent an online only study from being able to truly address issues of inequity (Hesse-Biber, 2013). However, this study recruited college women, and college students generally have access to technology and the skills to use it effectively. Therefore, I did not consider access to technology to be a limitation for this study.

IPV is a personal topic that many women may find difficult to discuss. Creating a safe space and ensuring confidentiality are crucial to making participants feel comfortable enough to share their stories. If the interview was being conducted in person, we could choose a neutral confidential location to conduct the interviews. However, for an online interview, the participant had to find as private a space as possible in which to have the conversation. This was of particular importance for participants still living with the abuser, and I was sure to address this before each interview. Additionally, while all the appropriate measures were taken to maintain

confidentiality of the recorded interviews, there is always the possibility of a data breach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Again, all of these issues were discussed with the participant prior to the first interview to make sure they were aware of the potential risks involved.

Finally, there are some questions as to the ability to build rapport, read non-verbal cues, and co-create meaning when interviews are conducted online (Hesse-Biber, 2013). For the feminist researcher, this can inhibit the ability to reduce the power differential between participant and researcher (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Seitz (2016) noted the possibility of loss of intimacy and difficulty in obtaining in-depth responses to sensitive topics as a concern with online interviewing. This can be due to lack of in-person connection, distrust of the privacy of the video element of the interview (even if the video isn't being recorded), and/or internet connection issues during the interview (Seitz, 2016). If calls get dropped or there is a time lag that forces the researcher to re-ask questions and the participant to retell deeply personal stories, this can disrupt the building of rapport and the flow of the interview (Seitz, 2016).

However, other researchers have found that online interviewing may actually be comforting to those who are more introverted or who have experienced something traumatic and personal like IPV; the technology provides a buffer for a participant that can give them a sense of protection and even anonymity that may make sharing easier (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Seitz, 2016). Ways to minimize the negative impacts of online interviewing are to make sure that researcher and participant test out the video platform and connection strength before starting the interview; to encourage the participant to find a quiet, private space where they can avoid interruptions as much as possible; to be cognizant of making eye contact by looking at the camera rather than the person on the screen; and reminding the participants that only the audio was recorded (Seitz, 2016).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The results of this study suggest multiple needs for future research in intimate partner violence especially as it relates to higher education and the counseling profession. A plethora of literature regarding IPV exists, but there is still a dearth of information regarding IPV within the context of higher education. Based on my findings, the interplay between emerging adulthood theory and experiencing IPV in adolescence is an area of particular need for research. Participants in this study centered their stories around their growth and development as women. Future research can examine how entrance into emerging adulthood may or may not be affected by experiencing IPV and the long-term impacts of those experiences.

Participants in this study had a variety of experiences with acknowledging abuse and help-seeking. It would be beneficial to conduct a study in which all of the participants experienced IPV and also actively sought help on campus (successfully or unsuccessfully). A qualitative study on this topic could highlight several important factors related to both IPV awareness on college campuses and barriers to reporting. Interviews could reveal details as to why women attempted to seek-help and where they went for help (counseling, professor, advocate, police, etc). The information gained could be used to inform campus training and programming for all community members. It could also add to the existing literature surrounding underreporting of IPV if participants attempted but were deterred or unsuccessful in officially reporting IPV.

In order to improve the outcomes of campus awareness programming, a large-scale review of current methods and materials being used by college campuses would be beneficial. Women in this study were clear that they did not see their experiences reflected in whatever information they had learned. While this study has a small sample size, the current literature

shows that campuses are struggling to successfully develop and implement effective training and programs regarding gender-based violence on campus (Lichty, 2018). A search of the literature and a summary of the experiences of the participants in this study reveals that what is being addressed is primarily about sexual assault leaving survivors of IPV out of the conversation.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing IPV on campus. Each campus has its own common norms and distinctive student body that can and should inform the type of programming and the method of delivery being used. Researchers suggest that a lack of context (i.e. college going vs non-college going survivors) for survivors of IPV has led to insufficient data to properly understand and address the issue (Rennison & Addington, 2014). Studies comparing college survivors of IPV and non-college student survivors have been recommended (Rennison & Addington, 2014), but there is also a need to compare the experiences of students in various types of academic institutions (e.g., community colleges, culinary schools, etc) and in various parts of the country. Intersectionality is a key component to effectively addressing issues of social justice and must be considered when creating interventions.

The women in this study were located all over the country and were from a variety of backgrounds, which led to different experiences and needs (all within the shared experience of IPV). A study surveying IHEs (students, staff, and faculty) throughout the country about the ways they are addressing Title IX and specifically Campus SaVE, how effective the programming/policy is, and the location and make-up of the student body could provide a great deal of information for consideration. A quantitative analysis would provide for more generalizable results and help to increase understanding of what information is being received by whom, and whether it is effective. In turn, schools can begin to create more tailored approaches

to addressing IPV on campuses by adopting programs and procedures that work for populations similar to their own.

Based on the results of this study, further research on IPV in K-12 settings is strongly recommended. The current literature reflects data about prevalence rates, but information on how students and staff perceive and address IPV is lacking. The women in this study all experienced IPV/teen dating violence during adolescence, but did not recall explicitly learning about IPV, teen dating violence, or healthy intimate relationships. Surveying middle and high school counselors regarding their knowledge of IPV and how they address it in their schools could inform both counselor education and school counselor practice. Although a small amount of literature regarding preparedness to work with clients who have experienced IPV exists, none is specific to school counselors, who do serve in a different context (Ayaba 2016; Musson, 2016). If school counselors feel they are not prepared to address gender-based violence issues when they complete their education, perhaps graduate counseling programs will begin to examine ways in which they can address this, specifically for students on the school counseling track.

### **Conclusion**

The in-depth narratives shared by the participants in this study provided a great deal of information about the lived experiences of college women who have experienced intimate partner violence. The existing literature is primarily focused on prevalence rates and not specific to the experiences of traditionally aged college women. The results of the analysis offered insight into how women come to name their experiences with IPV and cycle through a process of empowered maturity that had not been previously described. This study also highlighted implications for counselor education, school counselor practice, and institutions of higher

education, as well as important areas for future research relevant to understanding and preventing IPV.

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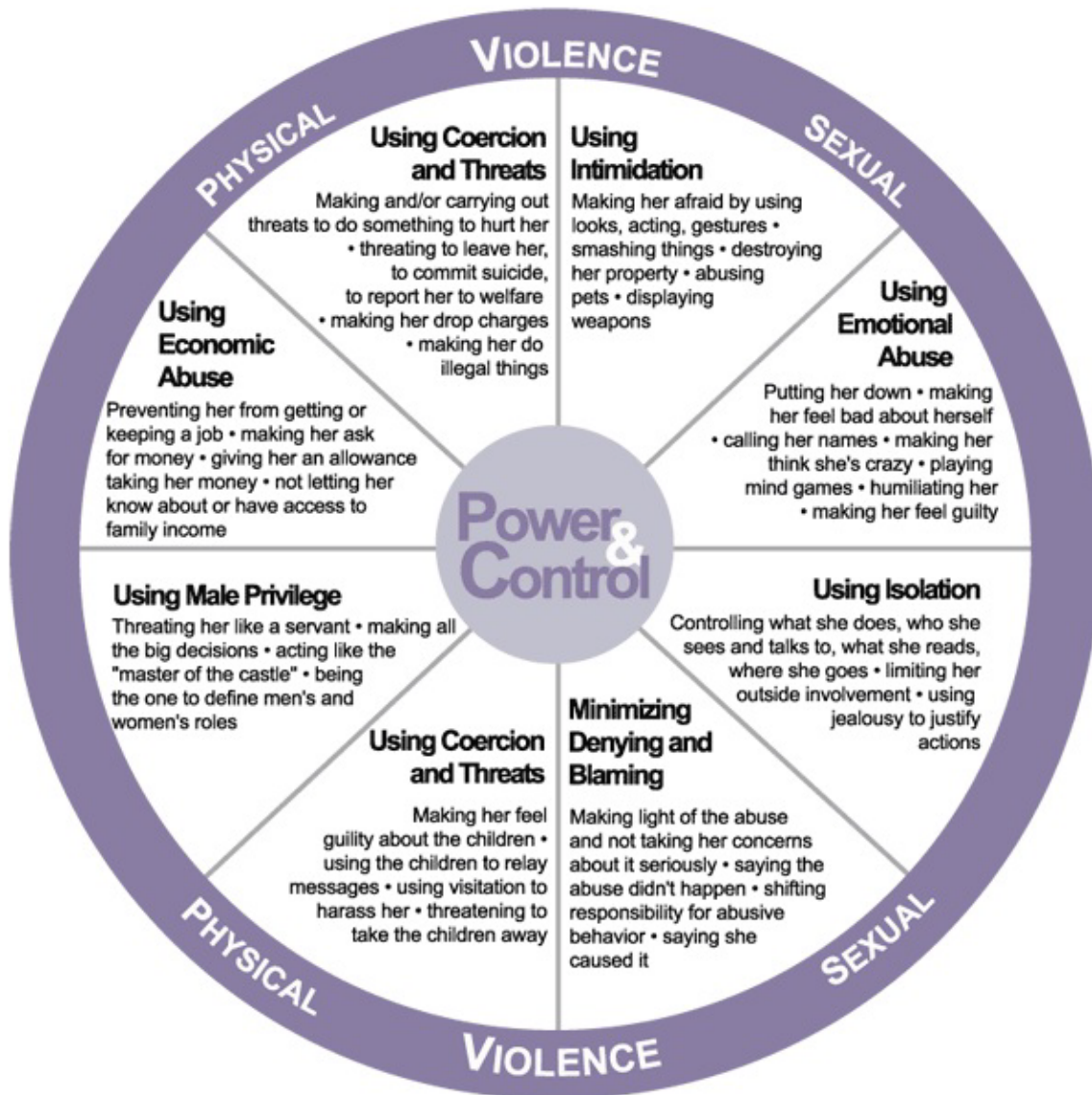
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Appendix A

Power and Control Wheel



**Appendix B**

## Screening Questionnaire

**Screening Form: Kelly Gentry Doctoral Research**

For prospective study participants

\* Required

1. Name \*

---

2. Best email address to contact you \*

---

3. Current Year in College \*

*Mark only one oval.* Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Other: 

---

4. During College have you ever had an intimate partner who prevented you from: (check all that apply)

*Check all that apply.* Leaving the house Going to work Going to class Seeing or communicating with family or friends Spending money

5. During college have you ever had an intimate partner who: (check all that apply)

*Check all that apply.* Made you feel afraid Abused you Threatened you with physical violence Called you names Hit, pushed, kicked, or slapped you Made you have sex when you didn't want to Gotten jealous and tried to control you Followed you or stalked you Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to

## Appendix C

### Consent Form

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

**Title:** College Women's Experiences with Relationship Abuse

**Study Number:**

**Why is this study being done?** The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of women who have been in what could be considered abusive intimate relationships while in college, how they define that abuse, and how that abuse influenced their college experience.

**What will happen while you are in the study?**

You can expect to:

- Complete a demographic questionnaire.
- Participate in two in-depth interviews, each 60-90 minutes long. These interviews will take place via Zoom. During this interview we will discuss the responses on your questionnaire, your personal experiences with abuse, and your knowledge of intimate partner violence. These interviews will be recorded.
- Upon completion of the interviews you will be provided with resources about intimate partner violence.

**Time:** This study will take between two-three hours, broken up between two separately scheduled interviews.

**Risks:** We anticipate there may be some risks to you. You may have recollections of trauma as a result of the interview process. This may result in some difficult memories, emotional reactions, and possible discomfort regarding the material being discussed. Additionally, during the course of the interviews, you may become restless or bored and want to discontinue your participation. You are free to skip questions that you do not wish to answer or to stop the interview at any time. All participants will receive resources for free hotlines and mental health services.

Although we will keep your identity confidential as it relates to this research project, if we learn of any suspected child or elder abuse, or harm to yourself or others, we are required by NJ state law to report that to the proper authorities immediately.

Data will be collected using the Internet; we anticipate that your participation in this presents no greater risk than everyday use of the Internet. Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though we are taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through email or internet could be read by a third party.

Finally, given the nature of the study and qualitative research as a whole, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed if you have shared or plan to share the same information with the researcher as with other people in your life. To help safeguard your anonymity, identifying information (i.e. names, places, dates) will not be included in presentations or publications.

**Benefits:** There are potential benefits to you and society. This study gives you the opportunity to speak candidly about your lived experience. You will gain access and information regarding resources you may not have known about before. You will also have the opportunity to know you are contributing to the development of knowledge that can help support other college women who experience relationship abuse. This study will help to highlight the different ways in which college women experience and name abuse; this information can be shared with college administrators and staff to help create preventative programs on campuses. It will also be beneficial to the counseling field by providing more information on how to identify IPV when working with clients.

**Compensation** No Compensation

**Who will know that you are in this study?** You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential.

You should know that New Jersey requires that any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or acts of child abuse shall report the same immediately to the Division of Child Protection and Permanency.

**Do you have to be in the study?**

You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be included in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. You can leave the study at any time.

**Do you have any questions about this study?** Contact me, Kelly Gentry, at gentryk1@montclair.edu. You can also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Matthew Shurts. at shurtsm@montclair.edu.

**Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant?** Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Dana Levitt, at 973-655-2097 or reviewboard@montclair.edu.

**Future Studies** It is okay to use my data in other studies (your data will remain confidential in any and all future uses):

Please initial:            \_\_\_\_\_ Yes            \_\_\_\_\_ No

As part of this study, it is okay to video record and transcribe our interview:

Please initial:        \_\_\_\_\_ Yes        \_\_\_\_\_ No

Statement of Consent

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_

---

Print your name here

Sign your name here

Date

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix D

### Resources

- [National Domestic Violence Hotline](http://www.thehotline.org/): <http://www.thehotline.org/>
  - Call 1-800-799-7233 and TTY 1-800-787-3224.
- [Love is Respect National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline](https://www.loveisrespect.org/): <https://www.loveisrespect.org/>
  - Call 1-866-331-9474 or TTY 1-866-331-8453
- [Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network's \(RAINN\) National Sexual Assault Hotline](http://www.rainn.org/get-help/national-sexual-assault-hotline): <http://www.rainn.org/get-help/national-sexual-assault-hotline>
  - Call 800-656-HOPE (4673) to be connected with a trained staff member from a sexual assault service provider in your area.
- [National Resource Center on Domestic Violence](http://www.nrcdv.org/): <http://www.nrcdv.org/>

Tell Your Story: <https://us.breakthrough.tv/thegword/>

## Appendix E

### Research Participants Wanted

Are you a woman currently in college?

Has a current or former partner ever stalked you, tried to control you, physically or sexually abused you, or harassed you online?



- I am looking at how undergraduate college women experience relationship abuse.
- I would like to learn how women define that abuse and how it affects their college experience
- This study will take 2-3 hours over the course of two interviews via Zoom.
- Participants will be asked about personal experiences with abuse, and knowledge of intimate partner violence. These interviews will be audio recorded.

Kelly Gentry, Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Counseling at Montclair State University, is conducting this study.

If you are interested in participating or have more questions, please contact her at [gentryk1@montclair.edu](mailto:gentryk1@montclair.edu).

This study has been approved by the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, MSU IRB #FY-19-20-1856



## Appendix F



## Recruitment Email

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Kelly Gentry, and I am a doctoral candidate in Counseling at Montclair State University under the supervision of Dr. Matthew Shurts. I am recruiting participants for my qualitative dissertation study that seeks to explore the following question: **How do traditionally aged college women describe their lived experience of being in an abusive intimate relationship during their undergraduate years?**

For this study I am recruiting women who are between the ages of 18-24, currently enrolled in college, or who have graduated within one year, and who can answer yes to any of the questions below. Each participant will be asked to take part in two interviews each 60-90 minutes in length. The interviews will take place over Zoom, and be recorded. Information will be kept confidential and all identifying information will be changed or removed. The results of this study will be used in academic publications and presented at conferences.

If you can answer yes to any of these questions, you may be qualified to take part in this study: **During college** have you had a partner (current or former) who has:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prevented you from:                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Called you names  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leaving the house                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Hit, pushed, kicked, or slapped you   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Going to work                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Made you have sex when you didn't want to   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Going to class                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Gotten jealous and tried to control you   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seeing or communicating with family or friends | <input type="checkbox"/> Followed or stalked you   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spending Money                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them no to |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Made you feel afraid                           |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Threatened you with physical violence          |  |

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at [gentryk@montclair.edu](mailto:gentryk@montclair.edu) and I will send the link for the screening survey. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Thank you!

Kelly Gentry, MA, LPC

[gentryk@montclair.edu](mailto:gentryk@montclair.edu) | 631-617-1487

## Appendix G

### Demographic Questionnaire

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender Identity: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Current Year in School:
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Freshman	<input type="checkbox"/> Senior
<input type="checkbox"/> Sophomore	<input type="checkbox"/> Recent Graduate
<input type="checkbox"/> Junior	Graduation year _____
4. Religious/Spiritual Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_
  - No affiliation
5. Race:
 

<input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaska Native	<input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
<input type="checkbox"/> Asian	<input type="checkbox"/> White
<input type="checkbox"/> Black or African American	<input type="checkbox"/> Other:
6. Ethnicity:
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic or Latinx	<input type="checkbox"/> Unknown
<input type="checkbox"/> Not Hispanic or Latinx	
7. **During college** have you had a partner (*current or former*) who has:  
(please check all that apply)

Prevented you from:

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leaving the house<br><input type="checkbox"/> Going to work<br><input type="checkbox"/> Going to class | <input type="checkbox"/> Seeing or communicating with family or friends<br><input type="checkbox"/> Spending money | <input type="checkbox"/> Made you feel afraid<br><input type="checkbox"/> Abused you |
|---|--|--|

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Threatened you with physical violence | <input type="checkbox"/> Hit, pushed, kicked, or slapped you | <input type="checkbox"/> Made you have sex when you didn't want to |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Called you names                      |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Gotten jealous and tried to control you   |

8. How long ago did this happen?

- Currently in Relationship/Currently Experiencing
- 1-3 months ago
- 3-6 months ago
- 6-12 months ago
- More than 1 year ago
- other \_\_\_\_\_

9. Partner's gender identity: \_\_\_\_\_

10. When these actions took place what was your relationship status:

- |   |                                       |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Committed Partner      | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Former Partner         | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dating (not committed) |                                       |

11. Current relationship status with this person:

- |   |                                       |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Committed Partnership  | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Former Partner         | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dating (not committed) |                                       |

12. Did you speak to anyone about your relationship experience:  
(please check all that apply)

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Counselor/Therapist/<br>Psychologist | <input type="checkbox"/> Professor/Faculty Member |
|---|---|

Family Members

Friends

Health Professional (Doctor, nurse)

Other:

\_\_\_\_\_

No, I did not share this experience with anyone

13. Housing status at time of relationship:

On Campus Housing

Off Campus Housing

With Partner

At home with family

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

14. Current housing status:

On Campus Housing

Off Campus Housing

With Partner

At home with family

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Is there anything else you would like to share with the researcher?

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## Appendix H

### Interview Guide - Session #1

#### **I. Orientation to the term Intimate Partner Violence**

- A. This is a study about intimate partner violence. When I use that term, what kinds of things do you think of?
- B. Describe that for me. How common do you think that is among the women that you know in college?
- C. And when you heard about the study, what led you to volunteer?

#### **II. Women's accounts of their IPV experiences**

On the questionnaire that you completed, you indicated that you had an experience of \_\_\_\_\_.

- A. Tell me about that experience.
- B. What went through your mind after this experience happened?

#### **III. Talking about and naming abusive experiences**

- A. Have you ever told anyone about this experience?
  - i. If yes, what was that like for you?
  - ii. If no, "and why not?"
- B. Have you found it difficult to name or label your experience?

#### **IV. Women's experiences with the interview process**

- A. How has it been for you to talk about these things with me?
- B. Any areas that I haven't asked you about that you think are important for me to know?
- C. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about with me?
- D. Do you have any questions for me?

#### **V. Share Resources and schedule a check-in call between interviews.**

## Appendix I

### Interview Guide - Session #2

#### **I. Check-In**

- A. Some time has passed since our first interview; what have you found yourself thinking about since that first conversation?

#### **II. Member Check**

- A. I have some follow-up questions from our first interview to make sure I'm clear on what you were telling me.
- B. These are your words from our first interview put into what is called an "I poem." I would like to read it to you, or if you are more comfortable, you can read it aloud... (after reading) How did it feel to hear your own experience/feelings this way?

#### **III. Connections between IPV and personal intimate relationships**

- A. Have your thoughts or feelings about your experience with IPV changed at all, since the interview?
- B. Given all that you have told me in these interviews, when you think ahead to romantic relationships, what kinds of things do you find yourself thinking about?

**Appendix J**

## i-poems

**Taylor's i-poem**

I'm like  
 I wasn't an adult  
 I don't know how you could ask that of me  
 I think we had four arguments about it  
 – eventually I caved  
 I had turned 18  
 I was like, "I'm not going to – you already shouldn't be dating me,"  
 I think  
 I had turned 18  
 I was like, "Well, I guess I'd better do this so that he doesn't leave me."  
 It was horrible.  
 I didn't want to do it so it was really painful  
 I was like, "No, I don't want to do it. No, I don't want to do it."  
 ...it kind of became a problem again  
 And he tried to force me to do it one time  
 then got mad when I set my boundary  
 He would get upset if I said no  
 Before I went to college it was really hard for me to say no  
 I was like, "I don't want you to leave me."

**Beca's i-poem**

I should have known since the first date  
 I think that he wasn't in the best place mentally  
 he wanted to have sex,  
 I said that I didn't want to.  
 I wasn't ready, you know.  
 I had just been raped a couple of months prior.  
 I'm used to just being left after sex.  
 I wasn't going to go through that again.  
                                       ....he got mad  
 I think the rest of the ride home  
 was just me trying to reassure him, "Hey, it's not you, I'm just not ready."  
  
 I sent him like a long ass message  
 "...I really like you but I'm not ready."  
 he picked me up  
 I felt like crap.  
 he was still mad at me  
 I didn't know that



I was like, "OK, we're going to talk, we're going to have a good time."  
I overheard him  
I was right next to him  
I was like, "OK is it an emergency?"  
he was like "Yeah, I'm going to have to go"  
And so I was like, OK.  
I'm here with you  
if I didn't like you  
I wouldn't be here right now  
I told him  
And so I got upset  
I started crying  
I was so angry  
I was just like really  
You said that you understood where I was coming from.

I cooled off.  
I finally calmed down  
I had sex with him  
I think out of guilt  
I shouldn't have  
I wasn't ready.  
the next day I had a panic attack.

## Appendix K

NAME (AGE)	RACE/ETHNICITY	TYPE OF ABUSE	PARTNER STATUS
Nicole (23)	White	Threatened you with physical violence, Called you names, Hit, pushed, kicked, or slapped you, Made you have sex when you didn't want to, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Followed you or stalked you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Committed Partner
Cydney (21)	White	Threatened you with physical violence, Called you names, Hit, pushed, kicked, or slapped you, Made you have sex when you didn't want to, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Committed Partner
Beca (22)	White/Hispanic	Threatened you with physical violence, Called you names, Made you have sex when you didn't want to, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Followed you or stalked you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Dating (not committed)
Taylor (19)	White	Made you have sex when you didn't want to, Followed you or stalked you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Committed Partner
Kim (24)	White/Hispanic	Threatened you with physical violence, Called you names, Hit, pushed, kicked, or slapped you, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Committed Partner
Ash (24)	White	Threatened you with physical violence, Called you names, Hit, pushed, kicked, or slapped you, Made you have sex when you didn't want to, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Followed you or stalked you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Multiple
Blessings (19)	Black or African American	Threatened you with physical violence, Called you names, Hit, pushed, kicked, or slapped you, Made you have sex when you didn't want to, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Followed you or stalked you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Committed Partner
Savannah (21)	White	Called you names, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Followed you or stalked you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Committed Partner
Bri (22)	White	Called you names, Made you have sex when you didn't want to, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Followed you or stalked you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Dating (not committed)
Andy (24)	White	Threatened you with physical violence, Called you names, Made you have sex when you didn't want to, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Followed you or stalked you	Committed Partner
Charlie (22)	Asian	Called you names, Hit, pushed, kicked, or slapped you, Made you have sex when you didn't want to, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Committed Partner
Hannah (22)	Black or African American, White	Threatened you with physical violence, Called you names, Hit, pushed, kicked, or slapped you, Made you have sex when you didn't want to, Gotten jealous and tried to control you, Followed you or stalked you, Tried to communicate with you via text, e-mail, or social media when you asked them not to	Committed Partner

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