

**CANADIAN COUNSELLORS' EXPERIENCES: EXPLORING THE EFFECTS  
OF THE DE-GENDERING OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

**AMANDA SARICH**

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**AMANDA SARICH**

Approved:

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Supervisor: Blythe Shepard, Ph.D.

Date

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Committee Member: Suzanne Lenon, Ph.D.

Date

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Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies and Research in Education:  
Richard Butt, Ph.D.

Date

## **Abstract**

This project examined the consequences of the de-gendering of domestic violence on counsellors who work with female survivors of heterosexual physical, emotional, and sexual violence. The de-gendering of domestic violence is defined as the systematic removal of gender and power concerns from the conceptualization and study of violence against women (Berns, 2001; Nixon, 2007). Recent research indicates that after working with high caseloads of trauma survivors, counsellors experienced cognitive shifts in the areas of gender, power, safety, and trust (Garrity, 2011; Iliffe & Steed, 2000). This project directly examined the consequences of the de-gendering of domestic violence on counsellors who work with survivors of violence against women. Five female counsellors with high caseloads of survivors of violence against women took part in one 100-minute focus group. The themes that emerged from the focus group indicate that each of the counsellors who participated in this project have experienced negative cognitive shifts pertaining to gender and power. Participants experienced decreased trust in relationships, feelings of powerlessness, and shifting parental values as a result of the cognitive shifts pertaining to gender and power.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study**

My final project involved conducting a focus group for counsellors who work with survivors of violence against women. The focus group explored the effects of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors who work with female survivors of heterosexual physical, emotional, and sexual violence. The de-gendering of violence against women is defined as the pervasive and systematic manner in which gender and power concerns have been removed from the conceptualization and study of female intimate partner violence. The purpose of this project was to discover if the de-gendering of violence against women impacts counsellors who work with this population and to explore the strategies and resources used to cope. This project was framed around the following questions: (1) What are the effects of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors when working with heterosexual female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence? (2) How do counsellors' sense of self and worldview shift overtime when working with heterosexual female survivors of violence? (3) What coping resources and strategies do they use to resist gender neutral discourses?

### **Introduction**

Each day in Canada 3,300 women accompanied by their 3,000 children sleep in an emergency shelter to escape violence in the home (Statistics Canada, 2011). Compared to men who experience domestic violence, women are significantly more likely to suffer physical injuries and fear for their life (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2013). The physical, sexual, and psychological violence that thousands of women endure yearly is defined by the United Nations (1993) as gender-based violence.

How do professionals cope who bear witness to the gender-based violence faced by countless women? Experiencing some of the worst aspects of human nature on a daily basis and over time can have a variety of effects on a professional including low self-esteem, emotional numbing, cynicism, and a loss of confidence (VanDeusen & Way, 2006). McCann and Pearlmann (1990) also found that the psychological needs of professionals are affected, noting changes in their frame of reference, sense of identity, sense of safety, sense of control, and their ability to trust.

Family violence researchers and policy makers employ various terms to describe the problem of intimate partner violence including domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, violence against women, and women abuse. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, there are subtle differences in what each term conveys about the nature and scope of the problem. Over the past four decades the concept of violence against women has shifted from a gendered understanding of the root causes of the problem to a gender neutral conceptualization. Not only does such language shape societal beliefs but society also shapes the language used to define and describe root causes of violence against women. While the shift towards gender-neutral language might appear to be a small change in wording, its influence on our experience of reality is not trivial. When thinking back to when sex-biased language or the use of generic masculine words to represent the entire human experience were commonly used, individuals tended to accept masculinity as the norm (Lips, 2006). This subjective reflection of reality serves to diminish the authenticity of women's experiences and contributes to the existence of sexism and sexist practices in a given society (Krizsan,

Paantjens, & Lamoen, 2005). In a time when gender-neutral conceptualizations of violence are prevalent, how do counsellors resist these discourses and rhetoric?

### **Overview of the Project**

This project explored the effects of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors by conducting a focus group with counsellors that have high caseloads of female survivors of violence. The structure of each chapter is outlined in the following paragraphs.

Chapter 1 provides the introduction, background to the problem, statement of personal interest, and definition of terms. Here, I highlight the importance of examining the consequences of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors. I propose that understating the impacts of the de-gendering of violence against women is essential in order to equip counselling programs with the information required to best support and teach counsellors who wish to work with female survivors of physical, emotional, and sexual violence. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology, procedures used to gather data, participant selection and recruitment, and ethical considerations. Chapter 3 provides readers with an overview of relevant research pertaining to gender-based violence and its prevalence; highlighting the fact that compared to men who experience violence, women sustain more injuries and experience more fear (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2013). Chapter 3 continues with a comprehensive overview of both symmetry research and the feminist rebuttal. The symmetry/asymmetry debate provides readers with evidence of the trend towards de-gendering of domestic violence. Chapter 3 concludes with a review of burnout and vicarious trauma literature. Specifically, recent studies have shown that counsellors who work with survivors of physical, emotional, and

sexual violence have experienced symptoms of vicarious trauma including fear, anger, hopelessness, and increased awareness of gender and power issues are closely examined (Garrity, 2011; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; Trippany, Kress, & Wilcoxon, 2004). Chapter 4 summarizes the information gathered from the focus group pertaining to the potential consequences of the de-gendering of violence against women. Chapter 5 provides the reader with answers to each of the three research questions. Finally, this project concludes with a summary in chapter 6.

### **Background to the De-Gendering of Domestic Violence**

When counsellors first enter the profession they are often elated, filled with an exuberance and energy for helping clients overcome life's many obstacles. Graduate training programs equip new counsellors with the foundational knowledge and skillset required to excel. However, as counsellors begin to work in the field, their enthusiasm and energy are often met with feelings of frustration and anger as they encounter some of the worst aspects of human nature. Counsellors who choose to work with female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence can experience a wide range of unexpected emotions, leading to shifts in the way in which they experience the world around them (McCann & Pearlmann, 1990). The detailed stories of profound abuse and suffering counsellors hear, day after day, can affect the counsellors' sense of safety, their comfort with intimacy, and their feelings of trust and control in their personal relationships (Canfield, 2005; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlmann, 1990).

The manner in which violence against women is understood has shifted over the past four decades, becoming increasingly gender neutral (Berns, 2001; Enander, 2011; Grewal, 2013; Kimmel, 2002; Nixon, 2007). The gendered experience of heterosexual

female survivors of violence is, however, often in direct contrast to such gender neutrality. For example, research indicates that 90% of the patterned and injurious violence women experience is perpetrated by men (Kimmel, 2002). Policy makers, governments, the media, and education systems continue to send the message that men and women are equal in society (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013); this idealistic understanding of equality is further employed by symmetry researchers to conceptualize and study violence against women which occurs inside the home.

The anti-violence against women movement defines violence against women as a direct result of patriarchy and the general subordination of women in society (Hunnicut, 2009; Schechter, 1982; Yllo, 1993). A de-gendered understanding of violence against women masks the oppression and unequal power differentials behind the abuse and suffering experienced by millions of women every year in Canada. Counsellors must increasingly negotiate how to reconcile the gendered stories of powerlessness shared by their female clients with a socially constructed, gender neutral understanding of the problem. Garrity (2011) found that a number of counsellors with high caseloads of female survivors of violence experienced frustration and anger as they become increasingly aware of the pervasive sexism and inequality experienced by their clients. In a time when a disconnect exists between the depiction of women's experiences by the larger society and the actual lived experiences of women facing abuse, what type of coping strategies do counsellors use when working with this population?

McCann and Pearlman (1990) coined the term vicarious traumatization to explain the negative consequences some counsellors' experience as a result of their role as professional helpers when working with clients who have been victimized (Baird &

Kracen, 2006; Canfield, 2005; Cohen & Collens, 2013; Dunkley & Whelan, 2006; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Vicarious trauma is understood to result in long-term shifts to the schematic processing or cognitive reference points that help professional helpers make sense of the world around them (Cohen & Collens, 2013; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). The symptoms of vicarious trauma include fear, anger, despair, hopelessness, anxiety, and an increased awareness of gender and power issues (Canfield, 2005; Garrity, 2011; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; Trippany et al., 2004). Two recent studies have concluded that working with survivors of domestic and sexual violence increased counsellors awareness of sexism, oppression, and the unequal power held by men and women in society, leading to a shift in schematic processing (Garrity, 2011; Iliffe & Steed, 2000). Garrity (2011) found that many counsellors who reported an increased awareness of gender and power issues held a previous naïve notion of gender equality in society.

The naïve beliefs surrounding gender and equality reported by counsellors supports research which argues that issues of gender and power have largely been removed from the study of violence against women (Berns, 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Kimmel, 2002; Krizsan et al., 2005; Nixon, 2007). Many feminist scholars argue that violence against women has been de-gendered resulting in a loss of feminist analysis pertaining to the causes and consequences of heterosexual intimate partner violence (Berns, 2001; Krizsan et al., 2005). The very term used to name the violence which women experience at the hands of their partners has been transformed to indicate a gender neutral phenomenon (Nixon, 2007). Wording such as *relationship problem*, *misunderstanding*, *fighting*, and *arguing* decreases the legitimacy of women's experiences and masks the oppression and power imbalances latent in the violence

women experience. Feminist scholars contend that *violence against women* should be used instead of *domestic violence* as the former houses the gender and power connotation required to understand this type of violence (Berns, 2001; Nixon, 2007).

As early as 1980, research began to surface indicating that in 49.5% of domestic violence cases, husbands and wives were equally violent (Straus, 1980). This type of research, which continues to de-gender violence against women, is known as symmetry research. There are over 100 empirical studies that indicate the perpetration of domestic violence to be equal between the sexes as outlined by Archer (2000) in a meta-analytic review. Armed with 30 years of research, symmetry researchers have concluded that domestic violence is not a problem specific to women; it's a human problem (Archer, 2000; Hamel, 2009; O'Leary & Slep, 2006; Straus, 1980, 2004, 2008, 2011; Straus & Gelles, 1986).

According to feminist scholars, symmetry research serves as primary example of the de-gendering of violence against women (Berns, 2001; Kimmel, 2002). Symmetry research has played a tremendous role in the manner in which violence against women is conceptualized by society. Counsellors working with female violence survivors are faced with an asymmetrical depiction of violence as they bear witness to the gendered stories of powerlessness and oppression shared by their female clients. Working with high caseloads of physical, psychological, and sexual violence survivors can have a tremendous effect on counsellors including changes in frame of reference, feelings of safety, trust, and control (McCann & Pearlmann, 1990; VanDeusen & Way, 2006). Developing an understanding of the effects that the de-gendering of violence against women has on counsellors is essential in order to equip counselling agencies and

graduate counselling programs with the information required to best teach and support counsellors who aspire to work with female survivors of violence.

After conducting a literature review it became clear to me that relatively little research has been conducted which explores the effects of the current gender-neutral conceptualization of female intimate partner violence on counsellors working with this population. The purpose of this project was to understand the effects of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors who have high caseloads of female survivors of violence. This project is framed by the following questions:

- (1) What are the effects of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors when working with heterosexual female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence?
- (2) How do counsellors' sense of self and worldview shift overtime when working with heterosexual female survivors of violence?
- (3) What coping resources and strategies do they use to resist gender neutral discourses?

### **Statement of Interest**

My work with both the Edmonton Distress Line and Peer Support Center at the University of Alberta made me acutely aware of the powerlessness felt by female survivors of violence. However, as I worked as a crisis intervention counsellor, I began to notice a disconnect between what I was hearing on the distress line from female survivors of violence and the message of gender equality I was receiving from the world around me. The majority of my family, friends, and acquaintances seemed to believe that gender equality was no longer an issue. They believed the feminist fight had been fought and



won. I began to feel frustrated as I attempted to make sense of the stories of oppression and powerlessness I was hearing from women daily on the distress line. I felt isolated, feeling like the experiences of so many women were not being understood by the people around me. I did not see society and violence against women as gender neutral. I began this project with the intention to understand the degree to which gender and power issues were being discussed in the literature pertaining to violence against women. Instead I found over 200 empirical articles asserting that not only is gender no longer a concern with regard to violence against women but the violence is actually now being constructed as a phenomenon equally perpetrated by men and women. Domestic violence, in many research articles, is considered a problem that is not unique to women; it is considered a human issue (Archer, 2000; Hamel, 2009).

I do not believe that the violence women experience everyday inside the homes is a human issue. The devastating and pervasive violence against Indigenous women, the high number of celebrities like Bill Cosby and Jian Ghomeshi who have been convicted of staggering counts of violence against women, reports of sexual harassment on Parliament Hill, and the extensive number of women who are turned away from emergency shelters, every day, because they are full (Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, n.d.) supports my personal belief that violence against women is the consequence of interlocking systems of oppression such as patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, immigration, and settler colonialism. Violence against women is indeed a gendered issue. I believe my personal experience working with female survivors of violence coupled with my passion for re-introducing gender to the study of violence against women in counselling psychology training programs has provided me with the

motivation to examine the potential link between the de-gendering of violence against women and the impact felt by counsellors working with this population.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms have been operationally defined for clearer understanding.

- **Domestic violence** is a gender neutral conceptualization of the physical, sexual, or emotional violence which both men and women experience at the hands of their intimate partners.
- **Intimate partner violence** is a gender neutral term that "...refers to behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours" (World Health Organization [WHO], 2013, para. 2).
- **Sexual violence** "is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object" (WHO, 2013, para. 3). This term is gender neutral.
- **Symmetry research** is research which examines the prevalence of men and women's perpetration of intimate partner violence. Symmetry research contends that violence which occurs within intimate relationships is equally perpetrated by men and women.
- **Violence against women** is a gendered term. "Is any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (WHO, 2013, para. 1).

- **Woman abuse** is a gendered term which “...refers to various forms of violence, abuse, mistreatment, and neglect that women experience in their intimate, kin or dependent relationships” (Women’s Resource Society of the Fraser Valley, 2009, para. 1).

My project now turns to a discussion of the methodological framework for this study, including the questions used to guide the project, review of selected literature, an overview of qualitative research and focus groups, participant selection and recruitment, and ethical considerations.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

I investigated the lived experiences of counsellors in British Columbia who have high caseloads of female clients who have experienced violence against women. The purpose of this project was to discover the effects that the de-gendering of domestic violence has on counsellors who work with this population and to explore the strategies and resources used to cope. This project was guided by the following questions:

- (1) What are the effects of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors when working with heterosexual female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence?
- (2) How do counsellors' sense of self and worldview shift overtime when working with heterosexual female survivors of violence?
- (3) What coping resources and strategies do they use to resist gender neutral discourses?

Because of the exploratory nature of this project, a qualitative research design was chosen because there is a relatively small amount of research conducted in this area. This chapter will begin with a review of the selected literature, an overview of qualitative research, and an explanation of focus groups. Participant selection and recruitment will be discussed followed by an overview of the focus group procedures and ethical considerations.

### **Review of Selected Literature**

I began with a review of the current research pertaining to gender and domestic violence. However, after conducting an extensive literature searchers using PsychINFO (Via Ovid), Academic Search Complete, JSTOR, and Gender Studies Database, I instead

discovered a myriad of current research pertaining to the asymmetry/symmetry debate surrounding violence against women. Using the same databases, I became educated on the asymmetry/symmetry debate using journals such as *Gender and Society*, *Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *Journal of Men's Health*, and *Violence against Women*. After becoming familiar with the topic, I extended the literature search to include articles pertaining specifically to the de-gendering of domestic violence. Examining journals such as *Gender and Society* produced many relevant articles. Finally, upon reading the Iliffe and Steed (2000) article, I was able to make the connection between the de-gendering of violence against women and the possible effects on counsellors working with female violence.

### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is the detailed study of human experience. This type of research inquiry seeks to understand the phenomenon being studied through the perceptions, views, experiences, and contextual conditions of participants, providing a holistic representation from the vantage point of those who have experienced it (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative research design was chosen for this project as it was believed that the experiences and perceptions of counsellors working with female survivors of violence could be best understood through this approach. The level of detail derived from participant's unique experience through qualitative research is not possible with large scale quantitative research methods.

Although qualitative research is a common and respected field of study, there is presently no singular way to perform qualitative research (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). There is no one clear method the researcher is expected to follow; no precise instructions

are available to increase the simplicity of data analysis (Creswell, 2013). The best and only tool available is the researcher. The researcher's ability to ask adept questions, to explore relevant subject matter, and to build a strong working relationship with participants will produce quality data (Creswell, 2013).

According to Creswell (2013), there are numerous reasons for choosing a qualitative approach. The research question is the largest determinate of whether a qualitative or quantitative approach is chosen. Generally, research questions which are appropriate for qualitative inquiry begin with how or what. Qualitative research is also chosen as the method of inquiry when the question posed requires a detailed exploration. Often topics that lack support from existing research require the level of depth provided by qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative design was deemed to be the most appropriate choice for this project as the topic of study has been covered only minimally by prior research, providing the need for a detailed exploration. Furthermore, it was believed that a detailed exploration of the experiences of participants would yield the richest data concerning the effects of the de-gendering of domestic violence on their well-being, sense of self, and their professional practice.

### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups allow the individual experiences, perceptions, ideas, and options of multiple participants to be gathered at one time (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Plumer-D'Amato, 2008). A focus group also allows participants to communicate with one another, sharing ideas and experiences, often resulting in data which is complex and rich (Plumer-D'Amato, 2008). Typically, a focus group is comprised of six to eight participants. Fern (2001) contends that researchers must consider a number of complex

and interconnected variables when designing and conducting focus groups. According to Fern (2001) group cohesion, the discussion process, the outcome, group composition, research setting, and the focus group moderator are integral factors when conducting focus groups. During data collection and data review each of these criteria were closely attended to.

*Group cohesion* refers to the factors that contribute to the participants feeling comfortable enough to participate in the discussion (Fern, 2001). Group cohesion is generally increased when the participant sample is homogenous (Fern, 2001; Plumer-D'Amato, 2008). For this project, only female counsellors who work with female survivors of violence against women were selected, making the sample homogenous with respect to occupation. Group cohesion was maintained during the focus group by working to establish a strong working alliance with the group. The researcher cultivated a working alliance by employing basic counselling skills such as active listening and paraphrasing while also providing the participants with warmth, empathy, and positive regard.

*The discussion process* refers to an environment in which all participants are provided with equal opportunities to speak (social integration), participants hear similar stories or views from other participants (mirror reaction), a collective conscious and unconscious is established (condenser phenomenon), and all participants engage in sharing (exchange; Foulkes, 1964, as cited in Fern, 2001). Each of the aforementioned elements of the discussion process was considered during this project. Through the use of linking (connecting participants experiences), probing (obtaining more information), and blocking techniques (redirecting the focus of the conversation) the researcher worked to

ensure that all of the participants were provided with the time to share their ideas and experiences as well as hear the experiences of fellow participants.

*Group outcome*, “Outcome is the total effect of the other six components of the framework on the intended consequences of the focus group session” (Fern, 2001, p. 16). During the focus group I attended to each of the aforementioned interconnected variables (group cohesion, the discussion process, the outcome, group composition, research setting, and the focus group moderator) in order to ensure the focus group outcome was successful.

*Group composition* refers to the individual participants who take part in the focus group (Fern, 2001). Each participant’s race, gender, culture, ethnicity, social economic status, and personality will influence both group cohesion and group outcomes (Fern, 2001). While the researcher has some degree of control over group composition, the manner in which the individual characteristics of participants interact with one another cannot be predicted (Fern, 2001). I believe that the homogenous sample that was chosen for this project positively influenced group composition and group cohesion (Plumer-D’Amato, 2008).

The *research setting* refers to the physical location in which the focus group is held (Fern, 2001). The focus group was held in the Women’s Resource of the Fraser Valley group counselling room. Fern (2001) maintains that participants respond more authentically if they feel safe. Through building a safe and supportive environment, participants will also feel more comfortable to express their thoughts and emotions (Corey, 2013). The group room at the Women’s Resource of the Fraser Valley is warm, inviting, and offered participants a sense of privacy.



The *focus group moderator* is an important position because the moderator is in charge of asking the correct types of questions in the correct order, ensuring that all group members are given enough time to speak (Fern, 2001). The questions asked in a focus group are generally sequenced as opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending questions (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Plumer-D'Amato, 2008). I acted as the group moderator. I believe that my counselling skills combined with my training in group counselling dynamics enabled me to correctly sequence the questions and moderate the group in an effective and skillful manner. The focus group consisted of nine open-ended questions (Appendix A).

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling or choosing the sample of participants based on the research question posed is commonly used in qualitative research designs (Gall et al., 2007). Because qualitative inquiry seeks to explore the phenomenon of interest through a rich and thorough understanding of the perceptions and lived experiences of participants, the type of participant chosen is extremely important (Gall et al., 2007). Counsellors who have high caseloads of female survivors of domestic and sexual violence were chosen as I believed this population would be able to provide the unique insight required to examine the complex consequences of the de-gendering of domestic violence.

### **Participant Selection**

Because of the nature of this project, the possibilities for examining the consequences of the de-gendering of domestic violence were numerous. Initially it was thought that studying women in women's shelters, thus targeting those who are potentially directly affected by the de-gendering of violence against women, would be

best. However, a review of the literature indicated that the consequences of the de-gendering of domestic violence on the counsellors who devote their lives to assisting female survivors of violence merit investigation.

The Domestic Violence B.C. (2014) website was used in an effort to locate counselling services in the Fraser Valley that offer counselling to female survivors of physical, emotional, and sexual violence. This website was chosen because it is the only website of its kind which offers the names and contact information of all of the counselling agencies in the Fraser Valley that offer counselling to female survivors of violence against women. In order to qualify for participation in this study, participants' must have held their position for two years or more. The rationale for insisting that participants held their position for at least two years was based on current research which indicated that the effect of working with high cases loads of trauma survivors on counsellors is gradual (Canfield, 2005; Cohen & Collens, 2013; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Moreover, it was anticipated that the more experience participants have had, the more information they would be able to provide.

### **Participant Recruitment**

After a great deal of consideration, it was decided that the best way to recruit participants would be through email. The Domestic Violence B.C. website offers the phone number and email address of each of the Stopping the Violence Counselling Programs in the Fraser Valley. A recruitment letter was sent, addressed to the counsellors at the agency, to the email address provided on the Domestic Violence B.C. website (Appendix B). Attached to the email was an overview of the research goals and the types of questions that I hope to ask. The significance of this research was also included in the

email. Once I heard back from the counsellors I had contacted I sent out options for possible times to run the focus group. The work demands of this population were an anticipated barrier to obtaining participants. In an effort to be as accommodating as possible to the participants' schedules, the recruitment email included two options for focus group times. The focus group time that worked for the most participants' schedules was held. Due to the relatively small-scale nature of this project it was deemed appropriate to only hold one focus group. The limitations of the narrow focus, qualitative research design, and convenience sample limited the generalizability of the project.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Lethbridge's Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee prior to beginning this study. Informed consent forms (Appendix C) were provided to participants at the beginning of the focus group. The informed consent indicated my intent and rationale for audio recording the focus group. The informed consent also explained the possibility of the interview being transcribed by a third party transcription service. Prior to beginning the focus group, participants signed the informed consent. I took the necessary time to ensure the participants understood that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions, that they could leave the group at any time, and that due to the nature of the group setting their confidentiality could not be guaranteed. I also verbally explained that participants were able to withdraw their data up until two weeks after the time of the interview. At the end of the focus group participants were thanked for their time and contributions; they were verbally reminded that if they had any questions or concerns they should feel free to contact me or my project supervisor. Every effort was made to ensure participants'

confidentially was maintained. After the focus group the recorded session was downloaded onto a USB. The USB is kept in a locked money box inside my home and the key is kept in a separate room.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The primary limitation of this project rests in the small sample size. Only five participants participated in a one-time focus group. Typically focus groups are comprised of six to eight participants (Plumer-D'Amato, 2008). Although qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable, the extremely small sample size did not allow the principal research questions to be explored in as much depth as originally anticipated. A larger focus group would have likely yielded a richer exploration of each research question.

Another limitation is the similar composition of the focus group participants. Although I sent out a number of recruitment emails to several counselling agencies in the Fraser Valley, only counsellors from The Women's Resource Society of the Fraser Valley responded. Because all the participants worked for the same organization, voices from counsellors who work at different agencies and potentially practice in different ways were not heard. The project would have benefited from a focus group comprised of counsellors from a variety of agencies that work with female survivors of physical, emotional, and sexual violence.

The varying level of education held by participants is an additional limitation to this project. Only two of the participants held a master's level degree in counselling psychology. The different levels of education held by participants made it impossible to examine the extent that master level programming prepared participants for their work with female survivors of violence against women. This limitation is not to discount the

value of experience. Several participants in the focus group have worked with female survivors of violence against women for over ten years and, in one case, for thirty years. The perspective of these long time advocates and supporters of female survivors of violence against women were invaluable to this project.

Finally, my lack of experience conducting focus groups is a limitation to this project. Although I have taken a course in group counselling skills and have facilitated several psychoeducational groups during my practica, I found running the focus group quite challenging. It was difficult to know when to move to the next question, and when to solicit more information from the participants. After listening to the audio recording of the focus group, I realized that I did not give participants the same amount of time to answer each of the interview questions. I should have allowed more time for each question and probed the participants for deeper answers by asking more open ended questions like: “can you tell me more about that” and “ is there anything else anyone would like to add?” Furthermore, after analyzing the focus group transcript I realized that the majority of my questions were concentrated on the counsellors’ world view and understanding of violence against women. I should have asked more open ended questions which would have allowed participants to consider the many possible ways that they might have been impacted by the de-gendering of domestic violence. Finally, if I could re-administer my focus group, I would have provided the participants with more concrete examples of what I meant by the de-gendering of domestic violence. I think that clarifying the meaning behind the concept would have yielded richer and more in-depth answers from the participants.

**Summary**

Chapter 2 outlined the methodology, procedures used to gather data, participant selection recruitment, ethical considerations, and project limitations. This chapter revealed the difficulty I faced as a novice researcher in designing the interview questions and conducting the focus group. Although I struggled throughout this process, the obstacles I faced taught me a great deal about the research process. Chapter three will provide the reader with a literature review outlining violence against women and its prevalence, the de-gendering of domestic violence, symmetry research, feminist critiques of symmetry research, vicarious traumatization, and the consequences of symmetry research on counsellors.

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

After conducting an exhaustive literature search, it became clear that no other study has examined the potential consequences that the de-gendering of domestic violence has on counsellors working with female survivors of violence against women. The lack of inquiry into this topic is surprising considering the extensive research available on both vicarious traumatization and violence against women. This literature review will begin by examining the issue and prevalence of violence against women. This will be followed by a thorough explanation of de-gendering of domestic violence, symmetry research, and feminist critiques of symmetry research. The review will then examine the most influential literature supporting vicarious trauma and the impacts that it has on counsellors working with high caseloads of trauma survivors. Finally, the consequences of symmetry research and the de-gendering of domestic violence on counsellors working with high caseloads of heterosexual female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence will be explored.

#### **Violence Against Women**

Violence against women affects millions of women every year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that one in four women are abused by their partners yearly; 14.8% of women who are abused sustain serious injury (CDC, 2013). Violence against women does not just pose physical threats to those who are forced to sustain it; violence can also be emotionally, sexually, or financially threatening (Eisenstat & Bancroft, 1999). The seemingly endless list outlining the physical consequences of violence against women includes bruises, broken ribs, fractures, head injuries, and injuries to the cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, immune, and reproductive

systems (CDC, 2013). A sample of the psychological consequences includes anxiety, depression, suicidality, post-traumatic stress disorder, and decreased self-esteem (CDC, 2013). The possible consequences of violence against women are divergent and immense. The pervasive and systematic violence that millions of women endure everyday, not only significantly impacts women's physical bodies, sense of worth, and mental health, but also it impacts families, children, and the health care systems (Campbell, 2002; Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008).

**Historical review.** A historical review of the literature indicates that prior to the mid-1970's violence against women was hidden from both public and government awareness (Schechter, 1982). When violence was suspected in a family, it was commonly considered a family matter that was best left up to the family to resolve (Schechter, 1982). During this time women who were abused had nowhere to escape from their abuser, until grassroots and feminist efforts pushed to change the hidden phenomenon of domestic violence. " 'Society' did not recognize battered women; feminist and grassroots activists did" (Schechter, 1982, p. 3). The first transition house for battered women was created in Canada in 1972 (MacLeod & Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1989). The Battered Women's Movement was instrumental in the creation of women's hotlines and crisis centers (Schechter, 1982). The first assistance that was available to women was provided by women (MacLeod & Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1989). The momentum and funding behind such services was largely orchestrated by grassroots and feminist activism (Schechter, 1982). Hotlines and crisis centers, for the first time, provided women with an opportunity to discuss the abuse they had sustained behind the closed doors of their homes. "Shelters offered the



supportive framework through which thousands of women turned ‘personal’ problems into political ones, relieved themselves of self-blame, and called attention to the sexism that left millions of women violently victimized” (Schechter, 1982, p. 2). It was through the relentless activism of these groups that the myriad of consequences resulting from violence against women could be treated correctly and effectively. These movements made it possible to offer the services that are available to survivors of violence against women today.

### **The De-Gendering of Domestic Violence**

Although the battered women’s movement was instrumental in the fight for women’s human rights, many feminist scholars maintain that overtime the monumental work of the battered women’s movement has been diluted, resulting in a de-gendered understanding of violence against women (Berns, 2001; Nixon, 2007; Worcester, 2002). De-gendering is the reorganizing, improvising, development, and evaluation of policy processes that shifts to a gender equality perspective in all policies, at all levels, and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making. While this may seem to be a sound policy-making base, when it comes to discussion of issues such as violence against women such de-gendering of the problem renders justice impossible to obtain, for women are often the victims and males are often the perpetrators. Statistics and studies prove this gender imbalance exists in the context of these issues (Statistics Canada, 2011; WHO, 2013). Hence, de-gendering of societal problems such as violence against women elides the gendered nature of this crime and consequently pushes women into the background (Berns, 2001; Worcester, 2002). For example, even the terms used to name the violence

that millions of women experience every year has shifted to indicate a gender neutral phenomenon (Nixon, 2007).

Although it was no big deal that people involved in this work gradually stopped calling themselves the battered women's movement and became known as people working against domestic violence, symbolically "women" visibly got left out of the name of the movement and out of the analysis of intimate partner violence. (Worcester, 2002, p. 1400)

Wording such as *domestic violence, intimate partner violence, relationship problems, spousal violence, and family violence* fail to attend to the gender and power structures which perpetuate violence against women (Berns, 2001; Naranch, 1997; Nixon, 2007; Worcester, 2002). Feminist scholars maintain that violence against women is directly linked to interlocking systems of oppression (patriarchy, race, class, immigration status, colonization, etc.; Collins, 1998; Fox, 2002) and, as such, the term *violence against women* should instead be used to conceptualize this phenomenon. Using the terminology *violence against women* is necessary to expose the structural inequalities which maintain this type of violence (Naranch, 1997; Price, 2005). "The language through which the experience of violence against women is translated has a profound impact on one's identity, how one is treated by the legal system, and the ways one goes about making public policy" (Naranch, 1997, p. 24).

**De-gendering in the literature.** At the same time that the Battered Women's Movement was working to increase the public's knowledge surrounding domestic violence, research began to surface proposing that women hit men as much as men hit women (Schechter, 1982). Feminist scholars were quick to label this type of research as a

backlash to the work the Battered Women's Movement was doing to increase public awareness (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Gordon, 1988). According to feminist scholars, this type of literature began to surface as the movement began to make considerable progress (Berns, 2001; DeKeseredy, 2011). The Battered Women's Movement was working to prove that patriarchy was the primary cause of violence against women (Schechter, 1982). The widespread attention received by the Battered Women's Movement, according to feminist scholars, was problematic for men who wanted to retain the type of power and control they were accustomed to (Berns, 2001). "Local communities and government agencies were not comfortable with the political argument that wife beating was a result of a patriarchal society" (Berns, 2001, p. 263). However, despite feminist scholars' best efforts, research proposing symmetry continued. A debate between symmetry and feminist researchers can be found in the literature as early as 1980 (Straus, 1980) and has continued until today. There is no indication that an agreement is soon to be reached. This debate, according to feminist scholars, delegitimizes the experiences of women by de-gendering and diluting the problem of violence against women (Berns, 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Kimmel, 2002).

### **Symmetry Research**

A historical review of the literature reveals Murray Straus as the earliest and primary proponent of the symmetry argument. Straus has published substantially on the topic (Straus, 1979, 1980, 2004, 2011; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996; Straus & Gelles, 1986), and has been widely accepted and cited by those who support the symmetry argument. Straus's 1980 paper has been credited as the spark that lit the heated debate that continues today (Enander, 2011). Straus (1980) was among the

first to conclude that in 49.5% of cases, husbands and wives were equally violent. Only a few years later, Straus and Gelles (1986) found similar results, revealing that married men and women abuse each other at equal rates. The results of these initial studies caused an eruption of research examining symmetry in domestic violence. One after another, each study conclusively found evidence for symmetry (Archer & Ray, 1989; Arias & Johnson, 1989; Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryan, 1992).

Research finding equivalent rates of violence perpetration among men and women in relationships continued throughout the 1980s. However, in the late 1990s, research focusing on symmetry in violence against women began to steadily increase. As the volume of research began to increase, so did the sample sizes employed by such research. Using the results from his large-scale study, which examined 31 universities across 16 countries, Straus (2004) concluded that violence against women was symmetrical. Among the 5,919 women and 2,747 men who were given the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979), 25% of men and 28% of women indicated that they had assaulted their dating partner over the past year. Years later Straus (2008) replicated his 2004 study and found that among the 13,601 students sampled from 68 universities in 32 countries worldwide, mutual aggression accounted for the majority of violence (68.6%) between partners. Moreover, it was discovered that not only did men and women appear to participate equally in violence against the other, but women initiated the violence far more. Women were found to initiate violence 24% of the time, and men only 9.9% of the time. O'Leary and Slep (2006) found further support for Straus's (2004) original results, finding that women were more likely than their male counterparts to initiate violence. A year later Prospero (2007, as cited by Straus et al., 1996) also found that women and men

who responded to the Conflict Tactics Scale-2 (CTS-2), a modified version of the CTS, indicated similar patterns of abuse in the past year. Kar and O’Leary’s (2010) results also indicated that women perpetrated violent acts against their partners at a rate of 30%, and men perpetrated violence at a rate of 29%. Research has continued to indicate that the rate at which men and women perpetuate violent acts against their partners is symmetrical, in some cases indicating that women initiate and perpetuate more violence against their partners than men do against women.

**Meta-analytic reviews.** Providing further evidence for arguments of symmetry, a number of influential meta-analytic reviews have also indicated that domestic violence is equally perpetrated by men and women. Archer (2000) examined 82 studies and found that women were more likely than men to act in physically aggressive ways towards their partner. In another large-scale meta-analysis, Hamel (2009) similarly determined that domestic violence is equally perpetuated by men and women. Hamel (2009) calls for a gender-inclusive model of domestic violence, conceptualizing the term *post-patriarchal*. “Over the past few years, [IPV] research has built on previous data to provide further evidence for much greater gender symmetry than previously had been believed to exist” (Hamel, 2009 p. 46). Viewing violence against women through a post-patriarchal lens, Hamel (2009) maintains that feminist scholars have blatantly ignored the plethora of empirical data that continues to indicate symmetry in the perpetration of domestic violence. According to Hamel (2009), instead of focusing on patriarchal ideology as the root cause of domestic violence, feminist research should consider pro-violent attitudes when examining the prevalence of violence. Hamel contends that both sexes harbour pro-violent attitudes and as such both sexes are at risk for engaging in violent behaviour.

**Advocacy.** Symmetry research, armed with three decades of research indicating equal perpetration of violence among men and women, continues to advocate for radical changes to the policies surrounding violence against women. The call for dual arrests is common among symmetry researchers (Archer, 2000; Hamel, 2007; Straus, 2011). According to symmetry researchers, because the perpetration of violence is equal between partners, the policy of police to only arrest men when called to incidents of violence against women is outdated and incorrect. Symmetry researchers have had some success in this area; throughout the US and Canada, police have begun to mandate, or strongly suggest, dual arrests as a result of these calls (Miller, 2001). Hamel (2009) also maintains that gender bias, indicating that only men abuse women, needs to also be stripped from public education. Symmetry research asserts that policy changes will actually work to help women. Straus (2011) maintains that women's perpetration of violence is a threat to the safety of women, because violence has been found to escalate when both partners are violent.

### **Feminist Criticism**

While the myriad of research indicating symmetry is initially compelling, feminist researchers have continued to respond with equally compelling criticisms. Feminist researchers critique the term symmetry, the methods employed by symmetry research, and the motivation behind the efforts to prove that men and women are equally culpable in the perpetration of domestic violence. According to feminist researchers, the very term employed by symmetry research is problematic (Berns, 2001; Kimmel, 2002). For example, does gender symmetry mean that women hit men as often as men hit women? Or does it mean that an equal number of men and women hit each other? Does

symmetry refer to men and women's motivations for such violence, or does it mean that the consequences are symmetrical? These questions are often lumped together in reviews of literature and meta-analyses, which review existing data sets (Kimmel, 2002, p. 1334). The questions raised by Kimmel (2002) outline only a minuetia of the criticisms feminist research poses against symmetry research.

**Conflict tactics scale.** A review of feminist literature that argues against symmetry in violence against women repetitively indicates the CTS (Straus, 1979) as problematic. The CTS was developed by Murray Straus (1979), and was later revised, becoming the CTS-2 (Straus et al., 1996). The scale is intended to measure the extent to which heterosexual couples engage in physical violence against one another (Straus, 1979). Since the first studies that found symmetry in violence against women began to appear in the literature, the CTS and CTS-2 have been a point of contention for feminist researchers. One of the primary reasons the scales have received a high degree of attention is that every study to date that has found evidence for symmetry in violence against women has utilized either the CTS or CTS-2 to determine the results (Johnson, 1995; Kimmel, 2002).

Archer's (2000) large-scale meta-analysis, which reported domestic violence as a phenomenon that is equally, and unequivocally, perpetrated among men and women, sampled 82 peer reviewed journals; 76 of those cited used the CTS or CTS-2 (Kimmel, 2002). The validity and reliability of the scales that have been used to produce almost all of the data indicating symmetry in violence against women are especially important to examine, especially when considering the potential impact of this research. The numerous feminist critiques of the CTS and the CTS-2 remain the area of primary focus

here as such critiques embody a substantial portion of the feminist rebuttal to symmetry research. Furthermore, because symmetry research is one of the clearest indications of the de-gendering of violence against women, understanding the manner in which violence against women has been de-gendered by the CTS and CTS-2 is essential in order to understand the potential consequences of this research.

**Context.** The failure of the CTS and CTS-2 to consider the context in which violence occurs within intimate relationships is heavily criticized (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Enander, 2011; Johnson, 2006; Stark, 2006). The scales' inability to assess the context equates all types of violence as the same (Osthoff, 2002). "It can be readily seen that throwing a lamp at a partner is very different from throwing a pillow, and that actually hitting a partner is very different from 'trying to hit' a partner" (Dobash & Dobash, 2004, p. 329). If all acts are considered equal and rated as such by the CTS-2, a woman who is being beaten by her husband and who hits back in an attempt to protect herself is considered as having equally perpetrated violence in the relationship (Enander, 2011). It has been asserted that the CTS-2 is actually measuring a different social phenomenon; true acts of violence against women are not being measured (Enander, 2011; Johnson, 1995, 2006). Feminist critiques of the CTS and CTS-2 argue that because context is not taken into consideration, symmetry research has been able to conclude, for decades, that violence against women is a human problem, and not a gender problem (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Enander, 2011; Johnson, 1995, 2006, 2011; Stark, 2006). "Imagine simply observing that death rates soared for men between ages 19 and 30 during a period of a few years without explaining that a country has declared war. Context matters" (Kimmel, 2002, p. 1342).



The compelling nature of symmetry research makes the validity issues of the CTS and the CTS-2 problematic (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). Symmetry research boasts decades of empirical research, studying enormous sample sizes, reliably determining that the prevalence of violence against women is equal amongst men and women. However, the potential impact that such research has on public opinion, government agencies, and counsellors working with female survivors of violence against women is potentially detrimental (Dobash & Dobash, 2004).

**Motivation.** Not unlike context, the motivation behind incidences of violence within relationships is also not considered by the CTS/CTS-2 (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Johnson, 1995; Kimmel, 2002; Osthoff, 2002). Feminist researchers understand motivation and incidence of violence against women to be synonymous (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Enander, 2011; Johnson & Leone, 2005; Kimmel, 2002; Stark, 2006). According to feminist research, the desire to dominate and control one's partner results in violence against women (Berns, 2001). Acts of violence and violence against women are two very different things (Johnson, 2006; Osthoff, 2002). However, the CTS/CTS2 and research indicating symmetry do not differentiate violent acts from the motivation behind the actions; without controlling for motive, the pervasive cyclical phenomenon of violence against women does not exist (Kar & O'Leary, 2010; Kimmel, 2002). The scales' inability to consider context and the motivation behind incidences of abuse results in findings that indicate symmetry (Kimmel, 2002).

The scales have also been criticized for presenting violence to participants in a manner that is indicative of everyday normal occurrences.

No matter how well a couple get along, there are times when they disagree, get annoyed with the other person, or just have spats or fights because they're in a bad mood or tired or for some other reason. They also use many different ways of trying to settle their differences. I'm going to read some things that you and your (spouse/partner) might do when you have an argument. I would like you to tell me how many times ... in the past 12 months you ... (Straus, 1979, as cited by Kimmel, 2000, p. 1341).

The pervasive domination used by men who abuse women robs female survivors of violence against women control over their lives and bodies; this is not illustrated in the wording of the beginning paragraph of the CTS (Kimmel, 2002). The manner in which the CTS and CTS-2 frame violence would not be problematic if researchers who employed the scale reported the results as indicative of the situational violence that occurs between married and dating heterosexual couples (Johnson, 1995, 2006; Johnson & Leone, 2005). However, the results obtained from the CTS and CTS-2 are repeatedly used to prove that violence against women is a problem perpetrated equally by the sexes (Johnson, 1995, 2006, 2011; Johnson & Leone, 2005; Kimmel, 2002). The CTS and CTS-2 have been used to legitimize the de-gendering of domestic violence.

Furthermore, the CTS and CTS-2 only examines violence which has occurred in the past 12 months (Kimmel, 2002). Research regarding violence against women continues to conclude that this type of violence is long ranging and, unfortunately, enduring (CDC, 2013). The scale's inability to measure violence which has occurred for periods longer than one year is criticized as not being representative of the long-term

patterned nature of violence against women (Enander, 2011; Johnson, 1995, 2006; Kimmel, 2002).

**Consequences.** Critics of the CTS and CTS-2 argue that if the consequences of violence against women were considered, research indicating symmetry would not exist (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). Feminist critics argue that symmetry research has been unable to respond to the asymmetrical results of violence against women when women shelters and hospitals are surveyed (Enander, 2011; Kar & O’Leary, 2010; Kimmel, 2002).

A review of police and medical reports reliably indicate that women suffer exponentially more injuries than men at the hands of their partners (Johnson & Leone, 2005). When women and men survivors of violence are compared, women are found to sustain much higher rates of minor and major injuries; women are also shown to exhibit higher rates of psychological symptoms resulting from the violence they endure (Johnson & Leone, 2005). Predictably, Kar and O’Leary (2010) found that abused women were more likely than abused men to fear their partners. Measuring fear as a consequence of violence against women sheds further light onto the inability of the CTS and CTS-2 to capture the entire picture of violence against women.

Anderson and Umberson (2001) examined the manner in which men discuss violent acts inflicted upon them by their female partner. It was concluded that while symmetrical incidences of violence were present in most of the relationships, the interview data revealed that men continuously discussed their partner’s violent attempts as comical and ridiculous. Women’s use of violence was described as unthreatening by the male participants. It was suggested that the person at gravest risk was the woman herself, as she might hurt herself attempting to be violent (Anderson & Umberson, 2001).

The qualitative inquiry of Anderson and Umberson (2001), while not generalizable, adds a deeper and richer perspective to the empirical research of Kar and O’Leary (2010). The results of these studies highlight that the consequences of violence within relationships are different for men and women.

**Gender.** Symmetry research is also heavily criticized for its lack of inquiry into gender: “What is missing, oddly, from claims of gender symmetry is an analysis of gender. By this, I mean more than simply a tallying up of which biological sex is more likely to be perpetrator or victim” (Kimmel, 2002, p. 1344). Feminist researchers posit that by discounting gender, symmetry researchers have simultaneously ignored the unequal power held between men and women in society (Berns, 2001; Worcester, 2002). Power and control contributes to and sustains violence against women (Berns, 2001; Kimmel, 2002; Johnson, 1995, 2011; Worcester, 2002). By conceptualizing the phenomenon as gender neutral, symmetry research takes the focus off of men who abuse women (Berns, 2001). By concluding that violence against women is a human problem, not a problem specific to women, female survivors of violence are subsequently blamed for the abuse which is inflicted upon them (Berns, 2001).

Straus (2011) indicates that symmetry research works to help women. This research, according to Straus, helps women because violence escalates when both partners are violent, putting women at greater risk. This type of logic, according to feminist researchers, is victim blaming (Berns, 2001; Enander, 2011; Kimmel, 2002). Anderson (2013) contends that the failure to take gender seriously is the reason this debate has continued for over three decades. “We have spent too much time arguing about the “who is more violent” questioning and too little examining the “why does

gender matter” question” (p. 314). According to Anderson (2013), a conclusion to the symmetry/asymmetry debate will never be reached until symmetry researchers consider gender as a relation of power when measuring acts of violence between couples

Kimmel (2002) asserts that because gender is left out of the discussion, the literature in this area remains convoluted. One of the reasons that the inclusion of gender in discussions of violence against women is important is that men and women have been shown to disagree about the occurrence of violence in their relationship (Schafer, Caetano & Clark, 2002). Kimmel (2002) argues that men tend to underestimate violence while women overestimate. Because the CTS and CTS-2 only measured acts of violence, taking little else into consideration, the impact that gender might be having on incidences of violence against women is not considered (Berns, 2001; Kimmel, 2000; Worcester, 2002).

### **Johnson’s Typology**

In 1995 Johnson positioned himself in the symmetry/asymmetry debate in an attempt to resolve the long-standing argument between symmetry and feminist researchers. He was among the first to provide an explanation for the vast difference in results being produced by symmetry researchers and feminist researchers. However, despite Johnson’s intention to resolve the symmetry/asymmetry debate, Johnson’s work has contributed to the de-gendering of domestic violence.

The reason for the differences, according to Johnson (1995), was that both sides were measuring two very different things, resulting in different conclusions. Both sides were sampling different groups of the same population. Symmetry research relies on survey data, which samples primarily the general public. Feminist research samples

shelters and clinical populations (Johnson, 1995). The typology that Johnson subsequently produced in an effort to rectify the symmetry/asymmetry argument is an integral piece to the debate and stimulated a great deal of further research in this area. The typology includes three distinct forms of violence: patriarchal terrorism, situational couple violence, and violent resistance. Each type of violence is distinct, housing separate causes, actions, and consequences.

**Patriarchal terrorism.** Shortly after Johnson's 1995 publication, in response to the backlash from men's groups, patriarchal terrorism was changed to intimate terrorism. According to Johnson (1995, 2006, 2011; Johnson & Leone, 2005) intimate terrorism is what feminist researchers have been studying. Johnson defined intimate terrorism as the systematic control used to manipulate and abuse one's partner. The control that is indicative of intimate terrorism includes violent, emotional, sexual, and financial control tactics (Johnson, 1995, 2006, 2011). "The term patriarchal terrorism has the advantage of keeping the focus on the perpetrator and of keeping our attention on the systematic, intentional nature of this form of violence" (Johnson, 1995, p. 284). Johnson (2006, 2011) recognized that women can be intimate terrorists. According to his research, approximately 3% of women fit the criteria of intimate terrorist. However, the majority of intimate terrorism is inflicted by men. Johnson (1995) understood intimate terrorism to be a reflection of patriarchy and traditional gender roles. Johnson's definition of intimate terrorism corresponds with feminist scholars conceptualization of violence against women (Berns, 2001; Kimmel, 2000; Worcester, 2002). Because the pattern of intimate terrorism is systematic, coercive, and extremely violent, women who experience such

abuse are more likely to end up in shelters and hospitals, and are thus more likely to be studied by feminist researchers (Johnson, 1995, 2006, 2011).

**Situational couple violence.** Situational couple violence, according to Johnson (1995), is the occasional violence that occurs within couples when an argument gets out of hand. This type of violence is not inflicted in an effort to coerce or control one's partner, it's not systematic, nor does violence escalate over time (Johnson, 1995). As the name implies, this type of violence is situational. Situational violence, according to Johnson (1995), is what symmetry researchers are studying. More specifically, this type of violence is what the CTS and CTS-2 measures. The consequences of situational couple violence are very different from those of intimate terrorism; rarely does this type of violence lead to hospitalization or refuge in shelters (Johnson, 1995). Situational couple violence is defined as a phenomenon quite different from that of intimate terrorism.

**Violent resistance.** The third type of violence included in Johnson's (1995) typology is violent resistance. This type of violence is defined as a response to intimate terrorism. Violent resistance is used primarily by women in an effort to resist the control and violence that is inflicted upon them by their partners. Violent resistance is not controlling or patterned, it is a response to the coercive controlling violence pattern (Johnson, 1995, 2006). This type of violence refers to a woman who has endured physical, emotional, sexual, and/or financial control responding with violence. Due to the fact that the CTS and CTS-2 fail to consider context when measuring violence against women (DeKeseredy, 2011; Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Enander, 2011), symmetry research could actually be measuring violence resistance and determining the violence to

be symmetrical (Johnson, 1995, 2006). However, Leone, Johnson and Cohan (2007) warn that violence resistance should not be discounted as it has led to homicide.

**Diluting the problem.** For over a decade, Johnson has continued to assert that his typology is the answer to the long-standing debate, maintaining that without first defining what type of violence is being examined (e.g., intimate terrorism, situational couple violence, or violent resistance) the field will remain in cyclical debate. The debate will logically never be concluded according to Johnson (1995, 2011; Johnson & Leone, 2005) because each side is examining and arguing about completely different subject matter. While initially compelling, Johnson's typology has not resolved the debate. In fact, according to some research, it actually worked to further convolute the arguments (Anderson, 2013; Stark, 2006). Johnson's work has been criticized as failing to attend to the interlocking systems of oppression which sustain violence against women in society:

Unfortunately, Johnson finesses the political differences between a feminist and mainstream paradigm by resorting to behaviorism. Instead of conceptualizing *control* as a political structure and consequence infused with social power and meaning, he pictures it as an "act" that can be catalogued alongside violence. (Stark, 2006, p. 1023)

### **Societal Consequences of Symmetry Research**

According to feminist scholars, symmetry research has real consequences on public opinion, policing practices, governments, legislation, funding, and policies at all levels (Berns, 2001; DeKeseredy, 2011; Dobash & Dobash, 2004). Berns (2001) examined the impact that symmetry research can have on public opinion. By examining men's magazines between 1970 and 1990, Berns was able to create a link between



research being produced in academia and the opinion of popular media sources. Berns (2001) reports that Straus (1980) has been cited numerous times in *Penthouse* and *Playboy* magazine. The de-gendering of violence against women not only removes women from the study of violence, but it erroneously implies that the fight for female equality has been fought and won. It is clear, according to feminist scholars, that this type of research is a backlash to feminism (Berns, 2001; Minaker & Snider, 2006). “We caution that such claims must be read as more than anti-feminist backlash but are increasingly becoming the new "common sense," the dominant lens used by policy makers, media, and influential interest groups” (Minaker & Snider, 2006, p. 753).

A number of researchers have asserted that our society has entered into a post-feminist era or a time in history when many people believe that men and women have reached a place of equality (McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2013). In a post-feminist era women and girls are no longer believed to need activism or support. Pomerantz and colleagues assert that the constant stream of post-feminist messages (e.g., girl power, etc.) sent to young girls by the media leaves women without a voice to articulate their oppression. Women are told that they have it all. “Postfeminism can be viewed as a component of neoliberal strategy that enables girls and women to internalize the narrative of the self-determined subject who does not require support, for example, within education, government, and social services” (Pomerantz et al., 2013, p.186). Not only has gender been removed from the study of violence against women but issues of gender and equality have been largely removed from popular and political discourse. Symmetry research aligns closely with postfeminism.

The consequences of postfeminism, according to feminist researchers, are detrimental to women, public opinion, policing practices, governments, legislation, funding, and policy decisions (DeKeseredy, 2011; Dobash & Dobash, 2004). The decrease of funding and government support to women's organizations over the past several years is evidence of the damage that postfeminism and the de-gendering of violence against women can have.

In addition, on October 3, 2006, Bev Oda, federal minister for the Status of Women Canada (SWC) announced that women's organizations would no longer be eligible for funding for advocacy, government lobbying, or research projects. SWC was required to delete the word *equality* from its list of goals.

A year later, in early September 2007, Conservatives' Prime Minister Stephen Harper added more fuel to an ongoing anti-feminist fire by eliminating funding to the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL), a non-profit women's group that tackles violence against women and other forms of female victimization. (DeKeseredy, 2011, p. 20)

The drastic decrease of funding and support to women's organizations speaks to the negative impact of postfeminist and the de-gendering of violence against women. The forced removal of the word equality from the Status of Women Canada list of goals (DeKeseredy, 2011) is in direct contrast to the experiences of the millions of women who face oppression and victimization every year. For example, last year in Alberta, Canada over 1,500 women were forced to make the choice between enduring abuse or homelessness (Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, n.d.). Dobash and Dobash (2004) contend that symmetry research impacts more than the advancement of knowledge in

academia; policy makers, governments, and community agencies all have clear interests in the results being disseminated.

### **Vicarious Trauma**

Counsellors who work with female survivors of violence against women are faced with some of the worst aspects of human nature. Hearing the detailed depictions of the emotional, physical, and sexual violence their clients have endured can be extremely difficult (Canfield, 2005). Working with high caseloads of these survivors has been shown to place counsellors at risk for a number of negative psychological consequences (Cohen & Collens, 2013). McCann and Pearlman (1990) coined the term vicarious trauma to explain the long-term shifts in cognitive schemas that some counsellors experience when working with trauma survivors. Vicarious trauma is based on a constructivist self-development theory which maintains that cognitive organizational structures called schemas allow humans to create meaning and interpret the world around them (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). McCann and Pearlman (1990) maintain that vicarious trauma results from shifts in counsellors' existing cognitive schemas related to safety, trust, power, independence, esteem, intimacy, and frame of reference. Alterations in any of the aforementioned schemas have been shown to result in a myriad of negative cognitive and emotional consequences (Cohen & Collens, 2013; Garrity, 2011; McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

**Safety.** Hearing the detailed depictions of physical assaults, attacks, and rapes can impact counsellors' safety schemas (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). "Therapists who work with victims of rape or other crime may experience a greater need to take precautions against such a violation" (McCann & Pearlman, 1990, p. 139). Alterations of safety

schemas can include an increase in vivid images related to physical violence, increased experience of personal vulnerability, and a heightened attentiveness to personal safety precautions (McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

**Trust.** Clients who have experienced violence are often manipulated, deceived, and coerced by those whom they trust. The majority of police-reported violence against women is perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner of the survivor (Vaillancourt, 2008). Working with clients who have experienced trauma has been shown to decrease counsellors' belief in people, causing increased suspicion and cynicism (Garrity, 2011; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Counsellors working with high caseloads of female sexual violence survivors can exhibit distrust towards their intimate partners, negatively impacting their personal and intimate relationships (Garrity, 2011).

**Power.** According to feminist scholars, violence against women is directly related to power and control (Hunnicut, 2009; Yllo, 1993). Perpetrators of violence use a variety of methods (physical, emotional, verbal, financial, and/or sexual violence) in an effort to gain or maintain a position of power (Hunnicut, 2009; Yllo, 1993). McCann and Pearlman (1990) maintain that counsellors' power schemas can become altered after working with clients who have experienced trauma. "In extreme cases, a therapist may find himself or herself experiencing feelings of helplessness, depression, or despair about the uncontrollable forces of nature of human violence" (p, 139).

**Independence.** Clients who have experienced trauma have often been, at least to some degree, robbed of their freedoms or independence (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). For example, many survivors of violence against women have experienced isolation (Berry, 2000). Counsellors who work with trauma survivors report experiencing a broad

spectrum of feelings. McCann and Perlman (1990) report that some counsellors experience a heightened need for personal independence while others feel increasingly vulnerable.

**Esteem.** McCann and Pearlman (1990) used the term esteem to explain the shifts in counsellors' perception of human nature after working with clients who have experienced trauma. A negative shift in the way counsellors conceptualize human nature, or the goodness of people, can be extremely painful (Garrity, 2011; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). Changes in the way counsellors view the world around them can lead to negative emotions, distress, and somatic responses (Cohen & Collens, 2013).

**Intimacy.** Working with high caseloads of trauma clients can also shift the manner in which counsellors relate to the people in their personal lives (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Counsellors can begin feeling disconnected from their family and friends (Garrity, 2011; McCann & Pearlman, 1990) "This sort of separateness is compounded by the requirements for confidentiality in psychotherapy, which precludes one's ability to reveal the disturbing traumatic material" (McCann & Pearlman, 1990, p. 141). Shifts to intimacy schemas can result in personal alienation (McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

**Frame of reference.** The final schematic shift which can occur for counsellors who work with high caseloads of trauma survivors is called frame of reference (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). McCann and Pearlman (1990) maintain that counsellors who work with trauma survivors can struggle with the task of conceptualizing the causality of the pain and suffering their clients have endured. In an effort to make sense of nonsensical

crimes, counsellors can become uneasy or disorientated (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Furthermore, counsellors can begin blaming their clients for the violence they have endured in an effort to cognitively make sense of the violence (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Blaming survivors for the violence they have endured is extremely damaging, it has the potential to disempower clients by making them believe that they are responsible for the violence that has been inflicted upon them (Koss, 2000).

**Prevalence of vicarious trauma.** Despite the pervasive and debilitating consequences, vicarious trauma is thought to be a relatively normal reaction to working with high caseloads of trauma survivors (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Lawson (2007) found that among the 506 American counsellors studied, 10.3% were at risk for vicarious traumatization. Furthermore, using the Professional Quality of Life Scale, Lawson (2007) discovered a negative correlation between the Compassion Satisfaction subscale (measures the amount of satisfaction acquired from one's profession) and the number of high-risk clients on counsellors' caseloads. The link between the percentage of high-risk clients and compassion satisfaction is important to note as this finding supports previous research that reports vicarious trauma to be positively correlated with high caseloads of trauma survivors (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). The conceptualized normality of vicarious trauma becomes evident when the correlation between caseload and vicarious trauma is compared to the finding that one third of the clients who seek the assistance of a counsellor, across all settings, are trauma survivors (Lawson, 2007). Thus, it can be concluded that due to the nature of their work, counsellors are placed at some risk for vicarious traumatization.

## **Coping Strategies**

Research indicates that self-care and coping strategies can help reduce or eliminate vicarious traumatization symptoms in counsellors working with high caseloads of trauma survivors. Recent studies have concluded that engaging in coping strategies may also act as preventive measures against vicarious traumatization. Coping strategies are defined as both behavioral and cognitive methods which help counsellors mitigate the stressful aspects of their profession.

**Supervision.** Debriefing cases and counselling experiences with supervisors and colleagues have been shown to aid in the prevention and reduction of vicarious traumatization (Bober, Regehr, & Zhou, 2006; Garrity, 2011; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Trippany et al., 2004). When counsellors begin experiencing the cognitive shifts associated with vicarious traumatization, they often isolate themselves from colleagues, friends, and family, thus magnifying the symptoms of vicarious traumatization (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Trippany et al., 2004). Client confidentiality standards also restrict counsellors from sharing their professional experiences with their friends and family, potentially causing counsellors to feel a deeper isolation (Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Research indicates that supervision works to normalize the symptoms of vicarious traumatization, leaving counsellors feeling more connected and less alone (Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Trippany et al., 2004). Garrity (2011) similarly found that supervision was a common coping strategy utilized among participants who were struggling with shifting beliefs about their personal relationships after working with high caseloads of trauma survivors.

**Caseload.** Effectively managing caseloads when working with trauma survivors is considered to be an integral step in reducing vicarious traumatization (Jordan, 2010; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Trippany et al., 2004). Counsellors who worked no more than 14-15 hours per week with trauma survivors did not experience any of the cognitive shifts associated with vicarious traumatization (Trippany, Wilcoxon, & Satcher, 2003). Iliffe and Steed (2000) similarly found that counsellors working with female survivors of violence against women reported managing caseloads as one of the most effective strategies for offsetting vicarious traumatization. However, considering that one third of clients who attend counselling are trauma survivors (Lawson, 2007), keeping trauma client hours to 14-15 hours per week is not manageable for all counsellors. McCann and Pearlman (1990) contend that counsellors who work with trauma survivors must develop realistic expectation for themselves. Counsellors need to realize that they cannot do it all; working with trauma requires setting personal boundaries and limits (McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

**Personal coping strategies.** McCann and Pearlman (1990) suggest that balancing personal and professional time and responsibilities can help alleviate vicarious traumatization symptoms. Devoting adequate time, each week, to personal coping strategies can assist counsellors in finding a healthy balance. Research indicates a number of advantageous coping strategies used by counsellors who work with trauma survivor, for example, engaging in leisure activities, exercise, vacations, mediation, relaxation, and television and movie watching, and obtaining adequate sleep (Bober et al., 2006; Jordan, 2010; Trippany et al., 2004; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). However, Iliffe and Steed (2000) contend that personal coping strategies can only be utilized once counsellors



become aware that they are at risk for vicarious traumatization due to the type of cliental they work with, or those counsellors already struggling with symptoms associated with vicarious traumatization. Self-awareness is an integral factor in coping with vicarious traumatization (Hayes, Gelso, Van-Wagoner, & Diemer, 1991; Iliffe & Steed, 2000).

**Connection.** Research has indicated that maintaining healthy relationships with friends and family can assist counsellors in alleviating symptoms of vicarious traumatization (Jordan, 2010; Trippany et al., 2004). Specifically, personal relationships can assist counsellors who have experienced shifts in their cognitive schemas related to trust (Garrity, 2011; Trippany et al., 2004). Garrity (2011) found that counsellors who were struggling with intimacy due to shifts in their trust schemas, eventually found support within their intimate relationships. The participants' personal relationships allowed them to make meaning of their difficulties with intimacy and trust.

**Education.** Recent research indicates that adequate education pertaining to trauma can assist counsellors in the prevention of vicarious traumatization symptoms (Adams & Riggs, 2008; Trippany et al., 2004). Adam and Riggs (2008) argue that while all training related to violence and trauma is useful for counsellors who work with trauma survivors, novice counsellors require semester long coursework dedicated to trauma theory and practice in order to mitigate the impacts of vicarious traumatization. However, despite the noted importance of education, few graduate programs provide students with adequate training related to trauma (Arvay, 2002). Newell and MacNeil (2010) assert that counselling programs have a responsibility to provide students with adequate knowledge pertaining to the signs, symptoms, and coping strategies related to vicarious traumatization.

**Social and political involvement.** Working with trauma survivors often increases counsellors' awareness of the social and political structures that contribute to and sustain violence and abuse (Ilfie & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Counsellors working with high caseloads of trauma survivors can benefit from social and political involvement (Ilfie & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Ilfie and Steed discovered political action to be among the most commonly employed coping strategy used by counsellors working with female survivors of violence against women. "Several participants note that their sociopolitical involvement enabled them to positively channel their feelings of anger and powerlessness regarding insufficient social and justice systems of DV [domestic violence] clients" (Ilfie & Steed, 2000, p. 409).

### **Cognitive Shifts Concerning Gender and Power**

Ilfie and Steed (2000) significantly contributed to the original work of McCann and Pearlman (1990) through the discovery that counsellors who work with high caseloads of trauma survivors experienced changes in their cognitive schemas related to gender and power issues. Specifically, participants reported becoming more aware of women's subordinate position in society.

Many participants recognized that their sensitivity to gender power and control issues has permeated many levels including the language they use, their behavior toward others, their counselling practices, and an increased awareness of power and control issues in their working environment. (Ilfie & Steed, 2000, p. 403)

The increased awareness pertaining to power and control issues resulted in counsellors feeling frustrated by the potential negative consequences of counselling (Ilfie & Steed, 2000). Counsellors reported feeling that the more empowered their clients

became, the higher risk they were placed in for being abused (Iliffe & Steed, 2000). Working with high caseloads of survivors of violence against women also caused counsellors to experience more frequent headaches, body tension, and illness (Iliffe & Steed, 2000).

Despite the fact that Iliffe and Steed (2000) made the connection between vicarious trauma and shifts in world view regarding gender and power issues over a decade ago, only one other study could be located which examined the link between gender and power awareness and vicarious trauma. Garrity's (2011) study contributed significantly to the literature in this area by specifically examining the impact that working with female sexual violence survivors had on counsellors' intimacy schemas. Using a feminist perspective, Garrity found that counsellors who worked with high caseloads of female sexual violence survivors developed a critical understanding of women's subordinate positions in society. The development of a critical understanding of female oppression significantly impacted the intimate relationships of the counsellors in the study (Garrity, 2011). The counsellors studied reported feeling angry. For example, one counsellor had only worked with FSV survivors for a year when interviewed, stating "I would have to say that I'm angry at sexism" (Garrity, 2011, p. 77). Counsellors also reported feeling an increased need for independence and respect from their male partners. Developing an understanding of female oppression resulted in many counsellors becoming less accepting of the unequal power balance which existed in some of their personal relationships (Garrity, 2011). While empowerment can be viewed as a positive consequence of their work; developing an understanding of female oppression also

resulted in decreased trust, understanding, and sexual intimacy in some counsellors' relationships with their male partners.

### **The Consequences of Symmetry Research on Counsellors**

The importance of the Iliffe and Steed (2000) and Garrity (2011) studies rests in the fact that a critical understanding of gender and power was developed only after counsellors began working with female survivors of violence against women. The finding that counsellors reported changes in gender and power schemas only after working with female survivors of violence against women implies that the notion of postfeminism together with the de-gendering of violence against women negatively impact counsellors (Iliffe & Steed, 2000; Garrity, 2011). Becoming aware of the systemic oppression women face in society caused counsellors to feel angry and experience mistrust in their personal relationships (Garrity, 2011). The development of an understanding implies a previous state of naivety or disillusion pertaining to the oppressive and systemic causes of violence against women. Violence against women exists within a patriarchal context (Herman, 1997). The manner in which violence against women is conceptualized by the wider society and represented in academic literature reflects the current political and public attitudes surrounding women's issues (Krizsan et al., 2005). Judith Herman, a respected and influential feminist voice in trauma research, has eloquently outlined that the manner in which trauma has been studied reflects the political movements of the time. "The systematic study of physiological trauma therefore depends on the support of a political movement. Indeed, whether such study can be pursued or discussed in public is itself a political question" (Herman, 1997, p. 8).

According to a number of feminist scholars the current state of naivety surrounding violence against women rests in the de-gendering of the phenomenon (Berns, 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Kimmel, 2002; Krizsan et al., 2005; Nixon, 2007). The finding that counsellors' report holding naive beliefs pertaining to the cause, experience, and consequence of sexual violence against women before beginning their work (Garrity, 2011) corresponds with research which indicates that gender and power have largely been removed from the study of violence against women (Berns, 2001; Nixon, 2007; Worcester, 2002). The shifts in gender and power schemas found in counsellors working with high caseloads of trauma (Ilfie & Steed, 2000; Garrity, 2011) suggests a previous lack of understanding surrounding the gender and power structures which exist within society and the impact that these structures have on women. While the link between the de-gendering of domestic violence and counsellors may not be as clear as the link between the de-gendering of domestic violence and female survivors of violence against women, the individuals who work to support women are an integral piece to the healing and empowerment of women survivors of violence.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 has provided an overview of violence against women and its prevalence, the de-gendering of domestic violence, symmetry research, feminist critiques of symmetry research, vicarious traumatization, and the consequences of symmetry research on counsellors. This chapter has highlighted the potential detrimental impacts of symmetry research and the de-gendering of domestic violence. I believe that until symmetry research considers gender as a social relation of power this area of study will remain convoluted. All researchers, symmetry researchers included, have an ethical

obligation to ensure the validity of their work. By focusing exclusively on acts of physical violence and subsequently concluding that domestic violence is not a phenomenon unique to women, this type of research risks negatively impacting the lives of millions of female survivors of violence against women. Chapter 4 will review and summarize each of the questions posed to participants during the focus group.

## **Chapter 4: Project Findings**

In this chapter the demographic information of the focus group participants will be outlined, followed by a review of each of the focus group questions. Summaries of the overall responses to each question are provided. The frequency, specificity, and emotional responses of the participants' answers were considered during the construction of each question summary. The answers from each question were grouped into key points. Tally marks were used to indicate the frequency of participants' answers. I also cut out the participants' answers from each question and arranged them according to key points on a large poster board; the poster board allowed me to see emerging themes. Finally I listened to the audio recording several times and made note of emotional responses. Direct quotations from each question are used in an effort to provide further insight to question summaries.

Overall participants were in agreement when answering the questions. However, I will identify when there is a discrepancy in participants' responses during each question summary. The participants were extremely engaged during the focus group. Participants spoke with passion about their professions and the impact of the de-gendering of domestic violence. During the summaries I will also identify the emotional responses of the participants.

### **Demographics**

Three female Stop the Violence (STV) counsellors and two female outreach counsellors participated in the focus group. The primary difference between STV counsellors and outreach counsellors is their educational level. STV counsellors require a master's degree while outreach counsellors require a bachelor's degree or a diploma in a

related field. Although STV counsellors require a master's degree, one of the STV counsellors who participated in the focus group held a bachelor's degree. She was grandparented into the position when she had acquired over ten years' experience in the field.

The 100-minute focus group was held on March 24<sup>th</sup> 2015 in the group room at The Women's Resource Society of the Fraser Valley in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Although I sent recruitment emails to several counselling agencies in the Fraser Valley only counsellors working at The Women's Resource Society of the Fraser Valley responded. The participants' ages ranged from 26 to 50 years of age. Two participants held a Master's degree in counselling psychology and three participants held a bachelor's degree. Four of the participants identified as white females and one participant identified as South Asian. The participants' years of experience working with female survivors of violence against women ranged from 3.5 years to 30 years with an average number of years of 12.9 years.

### **Focus Group Questions**

The focus group consisted of nine open-ended interview questions designed to explore the possible impacts of the de-gendering of domestic violence on counsellors who work with high caseloads of female survivors of heterosexual physical, emotional, and sexual violence. The purpose of this focus group was to discover if the de-gendering of domestic violence impacts counsellors and, specifically, how it impacts them personally and professionally.



***Question 1: What are your reactions to the statement men and women are equal in society?***

In response to the question, participants unanimously agreed that men and women are not equal in society. In fact, a number of the participants responded with anger to the statement. Unequal pay, physical strength, and the fact that women are still considered property throughout the majority of world were cited as reasons for believing that inequality existed in society. “We’re mostly seen as property in a good portion of the world. So, yeah, we have a long way to go.” Four of the five participants also discussed unequal housework and child rearing expectations as evidence of inequality among men and women in society. “We’re working, raising kids, cooking, cleaning, and doing everything.”

Until men and women physical strength is equal, um, which it never will be, we're not equal. And, until women make the exact same amount of money and representative all across the economic board, which we're not, you can't call us equal. And, the same thing applies for housework.

***Question 2: According to feminist scholars, the manner in which violence against women is understood has shifted over the past four decades, becoming increasingly gender neutral. This shift is believed to mask the oppression that women experience. Has this shift impacted you?***

Each of the participants felt as though they had been negatively impacted by gender neutral understanding of violence against women. A gender neutral understanding of violence against women was believed by several participants to silence women and delegitimize the work they do to ensure women have access to safety and support. “Well,

I think it's another way to silence women. I think it's another one of those institutional things that silences women.” Although participants discussed the negative personal and professional impacts of gender neutral conceptualizations of violence against women, none of the participants spoke specifically to the impact that gender neutral language has on understandings of violence against women.

And, so, um, I know that it impacts me in a way that just, um, makes me feel very – it makes me feel misunderstood. Like, it makes me feel that people look upon us who work with women victims as, um, like – we get the questions, why are you only working with the woman? Why aren't you working with the family? Why aren't you working with the male? Right? So, it's shifted from, now, working simply with the women. A lot of women's organizations are working with the whole family, working with the man, as well. Whereas, before, it was strictly a woman's support system.

Dual arrest policies were also used by a number of the participants as evidence of an increasingly gender neutral understanding of violence against women in society.

Participants felt as though police practices invalidated the work they do to support and empower their clients.

It affects you, because you work so hard to get these women to, you know – like, one of the first things I say to them is, be proud of yourself for coming forward and asking for help. But, then, to have a law that supposed to help them turn around and start questioning why they didn't say anything. Well, we know why they didn't say anything.

Several participants also discussed the need for police to obtain better training. “The police need, I think, more knowledge and understanding.” Participants’ believed that dual arrest policies and police insensitivity invalidate and blame women who are abused.

In my experience, that I've seen the woman come through our doors has been punched in the mouth, bleeding, but she's refusing to call the police because the last time she did she was arrested. So, that's what makes me upset, and that's why I still believe there's lots of room for men and women to say we're equal, because we are not. And, um, women are being arrested when they shouldn't be arrested. But, now that's discouraging them from getting the help.

***Question 2(a): How does the shift impact you professionally?***

Many participants reported being professionally impacted by the number of women who have been treated poorly by the judicial system. Participants felt considerable anger and frustration towards the system. “I get downright angry, and I have to kind of dial it down, a little, and always try to validate the client in front of me and listen to her story.” Participants believed that the legal system negatively impacts women by conceptualizing violence against women as a gender natural phenomenon. “I find it frustrating when I hear the stories of, um, police arresting women, instead of the man. Or, um, or arresting them both, when it's clearly, like, a power differential.” Several participants reported feeling that the work they do to empower women is diminished by a judicial system that makes women feel like they are at fault for the abuse they have endured.

Yeah. Because now, that's, you know, any sort of voice that we've given them has now, just, stripped them back to that. So, it's very frustrating. I would have to say,

you know, personally, no. Um, but, professionally I think it does. It affects you, because you work so hard to get these women to, you know – like, one of the first things I say to them is, be proud of yourself for coming forward and asking for help. But, then, to have a law that is supposed to help them turn around and start questioning why they didn't say anything. Well, we know why they didn't say anything. And, that's where the police need, I think, more knowledge and understanding. They're coming around, too, um, but we have seen a lot where that question is still asked.

***Question 2(b): How does this shift impact you personally?***

This part of the question explored the personal impacts of the shift in social understandings of violence against women. Half of the participants recognized that they had been negatively impacted by gender neutral dual arrest policies and court proceedings. However, several participants also commented on the importance of emotional regulation when working with survivors of violence against women. Although participants felt anger towards the system, they also recognized the value of being present, focusing on the positive gains of the feminist movement, and continuing to empower their clients.

I think I struggle with making sure that I am not cynical, and I don't roll my eyes every time I see, like, I don't know – if I see some injustice, or if I see, or if I hear something, or a man says something – or woman says something – or anything that, like, kind of triggers that little – those little alarm bells. I get very cynical, and so I have to fight that, and remind myself that even though there is inequality, it's – we've come a long way, number one. And, there's a lot of really good people

out there who actually – like, males who are feminists, and females who are feminists. So, it's – I have to remind myself that there's hope, and that, you know, that's why we keep kind of moving forward, and fighting, and empowering our clients.

***Question 3: Some counsellors with high caseloads of female survivors of physical, physiological, and sexual violence have found that their awareness of sexism, oppression, and unequal power held by men and women in society has shifted during their career. Have you experienced shifts in any of these areas?***

All participants identified an increase in awareness regarding sexism, oppression, and unequal power held by men and women in society. Many participants recognized that after working with survivors of violence against women, they began to see incidences of sexism, oppression, and unequal power regularly in their daily lives. “You see it in the workplace, and you see it in your friends, and you see it and you're like, oh my gosh this is just how we have become, like, in society.” Most participants concluded that women, in general, continue to be largely unaware of how oppressed they are. “A lot of people are not fully aware of, you know, that they are oppressed.” A number of participants’ also commented on the lack of knowledge among other professionals, including social workers, police officers, judges, and lawyers concerning sexism, oppression, and unequal power held by men and women in society.

I think I've experienced shifts, more towards recognizing that the oppression is still there, like, rather than it getting better. I mean, yeah, it's getting better in different pockets, but, I think, you know, when you start encountering, um, police officers, lawyers, and judges who are – and even social workers, you know, who

still – who want to view the problem as gender-neutral, um, and put that across on the woman. Like, that there's a certain responsibility that she holds, that she has held, and that she has to have in the future. Um, like, whenever I see that, it's, um, it's still shocking that they don't fully understand the difference, the power dynamics in the relationship, you know? So, for me, it's increasingly seeing, that lack of awareness in other professionals.

***Question 3(a): How did you previously conceptualize these concepts?***

This question examined the manner in which participants conceptualized violence against women before beginning their careers. Several participants recognized that before beginning their work with female survivors of violence against women they were unaware of the power and control dynamics behind violence against women.

Honestly, I thought it was just, um, relationship stuff. Like, honestly, I just thought that that was the way people treated each other, and that you – and it was dysfunctional relationships. I saw it all as kind of like interactions between two people, you know? And so, it wasn't until I started working in the field that I started to recognize, no, wait a second, there's a whole huge – there's a huge force behind [laughter] what comes out of a man, and what might come out of the woman. And so, it doesn't – it's not just a relationship issue. It's very much a power differential. And the reasons why men abuse, and reasons why women may abuse or lash out are very different.

Three of the participants also felt that prior to beginning their careers they found labelling and articulating incidences of oppression difficult.

Well, I would say, like, even, um, prior to work, I mean, even in my own family dynamic, I mean, growing up my father was very, you know, the man of the house, and my mom – my mom knew her role. We'll call it traditional. She cooked, she cleaned, she did this, she did that, you know, and then myself I said that's just not right. I could feel it, but I couldn't really make sense of why I was feeling this way.

***Question 3(b): How have these shifts impacted you professionally or personally?***

The majority of participants believed that their increased awareness regarding sexism, oppression, and unequal power held by men and women in society had heightened their desire to empower and educate future generations. The increase in awareness participants experienced as a result of their career was believed to be a positive change. “I think it's a good shift for me, personally, um, because it helps me educate my family and my children, and the women I work with.” Participants also recognized that childhood upbringing plays an instrumental role in people’s mindset regarding sexism and oppression.

I'm seeing that it's – the women are still fighting to say, like, we need recognition. And it's changed my belief systems, saying that we need to prepare a better generation. We need to educate. We need to tell our children, um, that men and women are equal. They can do what women can – men can do what women can do. Women can do what men can do. It's no longer this is the woman's job, or the man's job.

***Question 4: How has the way you view the world changed since you began counselling survivors of domestic violence?***

All participants reported that their world view had changed since they began working with survivors of violence against women. “Yeah. How can it not, eh?” An increased awareness pertaining to oppression and violence against women was identified as the primary shift in world view among participants. Four participants noted that since they began working with female survivors of violence against women they started to see violence and oppression everywhere they went. “And, you know it really was an eye opening experience, and I’m happy I have it, but it was really shocking when I first started. Like oh wow, yeah. Life really does suck for women.” Participants developed an increased awareness of violence and oppression in the media, the news, and in the public places they frequented.

Yeah. Well, you get to a point where you don't even want to see the news. I mean, like, this type of work, I mean we see the real – the real deal. And then, when you hear it – interesting enough, I mean, you think it's happening in celebrities, it's happening in sports, you know, now. And, you know, like, it is. It's everywhere. A number of participants reported feeling more judgmental and cynical as a result of their increased awareness concerning the high prevalence of violence against women. Participants experienced shifts in their ability to trust that heterosexual relationships are not abusive. “It's like, prove – prove you're not abusive.”

Several participants also noticed that with experience, they began to realize that violence and oppression impact women across all cultures, races, ages, and socio economic brackets. Participants became more aware of violence against women throughout the world. “I don't know if that will ever change anytime soon, but it's – it's just interesting how I become more aware just actually how much oppression there is,



somewhat in different parts of the world.” One of the participants, who identified as South Asian, explained that before working with female survivors of violence she erroneously believed that immigrant South Asian women experienced more violence than Caucasian women.

Coming from the Punjabi community, I thought that only happened, more like domestic violence, and you know, verbal abuse, was more, um, was more...prevalent in our culture. But was I ever wrong. It happens everywhere, and anywhere. It doesn't matter. You're rich, you're poor, you're professional, you're not. You're young, you're old, it just doesn't matter. It happens everywhere. But, again, it's our, you know – it probably, like – I can't talk for India or other countries, but for Canada I do see that it happens.

***Question 4(a): If yes, how did those shifts impact you professionally and personally?***

Several participants spoke to a shift in their ability to notice and articulate incidences of oppression in their personal lives. “And, so, I'll catch myself really buying into the patriarchy, sometimes. I'm like, whoa, that's not cool, I'm not going to do that.” Participants also reported an increased sense of personal agency and power in their personal lives. “But that has been a major shift, for me. I've been way more assertive.” A number of participants identified a powerful shift in their ability to stand up to their male partners, fathers, uncles, and strangers in their communities. “You definitely become more powerful.”

Now I'm much more likely to just be, like, uh, no. And just be like – I don't know, some guy at Home Depot was doing it. He was saying something so lame about – about, um – he was basically saying I was – insinuating that I was a

moronic woman for not choosing these door hinges, as opposed to these door hinges. And, um, and I just kind of said that. And I was like, oh, I wonder if you think I am incompetent to choosing door hinges because I am female? And he just looked at me like, okay, too weird. And he just kind of left. And I was like, I take that as a yes?

***Question 4(b): If yes how have you coped?***

Participants reported coping in a number of different, but interconnected ways. The primary theme among the participants' responses was that they enjoyed mentally removing themselves from their work once they were home for the day. "Like, just anything that is just something that just takes my mind anywhere else but there."

I like to just take total vacations in my mind about the whole – that whole big issue, you know, because it can get really heavy if all you're doing is noticing it everywhere. Whether you are at work or not –so I will just do these little vacations where, like – mental vacations – where I could be out in public, but I completely, completely ignore the fact that there's anything going on around me. Like, I just – you get into the point of saturation, where you don't wanna see – you don't want to have to see, or guess, or worry about another woman, you know? And, so, yeah, I just – especially if I go away somewhere, I just pretend that everybody's living happily, and I don't allow myself to go into that place of, you know, oh, what's really going on over there.

Participants reported coping by playing with their children, relaxing by doing nothing, gardening, walking, listening to music, and playing computer games. Several participants also spoke to the value of debriefing their cases with other counsellors.

We do a lot of that here, too. That's – that's part of it. We go and we vent, or we – I mean, sometimes we have to laugh about things just to get some other form or other of releasing it. But – but we, I think – yeah, you're right, leaning on each other, too.

***Question 5: Has your understanding of domestic violence shifted since you began counselling survivors of domestic violence?***

Several participants reported that their understanding of violence against women had shifted during their careers. Over time participants developed an increased awareness pertaining to the prevalence, consequences, and complexities of violence against women. “It shifted mine, because I didn't realize how common it is.” Before beginning their careers, and actually hearing the complex stories from female survivors, a number of participants reported conceptualizing violence against women in simplistic terms and victim blaming.

I think, again, even though I was a feminist when I was, like, really young, I think I still really didn't understand the dynamics of an abusive relationship, or a relationship that's abusive. Um, especially why a woman would go back into a relationship repeatedly. I didn't understand that, and I didn't realize I was blaming, in my mind, not even verbally – just, oh, I guess it came out, probably verbally – but I didn't realize I was blaming the victim until I started working here, I started learning all the reasons why women stay, and how actually – how, um, how hard it is to not just muster strength, but to get all the ducks in a row to leave, and how dangerous it is to leave. So, that kind of, and that way really, that changed my – or, shifted my perspective of domestic violence.

The need for increased education and knowledge in society pertaining to violence against women was also discussed by a few of the participants. “Um, there just needs to be more education and knowledge, that's what I'm going to keep saying.” One participant also reported that since beginning her career, she has recognized the need to raise a better, more informed, generation of children: “Um, there definitely needs to be more work, and needs to start with the way we raise our kids.”

***Question 6: In a recent study Hamel (2009) contends that “...intimate partner abuse is a human and relational problem, not a gender problem.” What are your reactions to this quote?***

All participants reacted to the quote with anger and frustration: “*Well, it's infuriating.*” Several participants reported that the quote had failed to consider oppression, sexism, and the unequal power differentials held by men and women society: “ One, I would have to say that as long as there's a power differential, be it physical or societal, or whatever, it's going to be a gender problem, period.”

I would love for Hamel to come and sit with me in a couple sessions. I would invite him to come and sit with me in a couple sessions, and really hear what is happening with some of these women. And as horrific, and it's disgusting, and once you do that, you'll see that it's not, um, it is not just gender-neutral. It is absolutely not gender-neutral.

The quote also stimulated a discussion among participants concerning the current lack of knowledge pertaining to the complexities of violence against women in society.

So, now there's more services, but surprisingly enough – I'm surprised that, considering all the services that are out there, and how much awareness there is, it

still amazes me that, um, there is still so much, you know, um, imbalance, or oppression, or abuse, or all of that. And, so, when I think about where the shift is, it's almost like why don't people know more?

Although a number of participants recognized that women were becoming more empowered in society and fighting back at higher rates, participants did not believe that women fighting back in violent relationships should be misinterpreted as constituting a gender neutral phenomenon.

Just because women are more assertive, and more loud – we are, we have found a voice over the last 40 years, comparatively speaking. So, because we're loud, and we're lashing out, perhaps, we're fighting back, maybe women are not taking the abuse maybe as passively as they did before, and so there are, there are options. That's a big thing. There are options, but women are also getting angry and are fighting back. Okay, so, is that the reason that it's become a – an equal problem? Is it because women are being charged as much as men? Again, it doesn't – they don't go on to the underneath of why are women lashing out?

***Question 7: There are currently over 200 empirical articles which content that men and women perpetrate domestic violence at equal rates, some proposing that women are abusive slightly more often than men. In what ways do you think that this research has, or could, impact the funding or government/community support that the organization you work for receives?***

All of the participants believed that empirical research concluding that men and women perpetrate violence at equal rates could significantly impact the funding the organization they work for receives. “They're going to take it away, uh, if the governments got a hold of this stuff.” Several participants spoke, with anger, about the current lack of funding their agency already receives. “I mean, one of the other, um, more local agencies, you know, almost closed down their transition house last year. That's huge.” The general consensus among participants was that if funding is cut, the countless women who are abused every year in Canada will suffer. “And, again, women will keep getting victimized.” Three of the participants also felt that this type of research works to delegitimizes and silence women. “It's another method that society uses to – water down the problems.” Participants also spoke to the danger of this research. Participants' felt that the high number of studies that concluded symmetry in violence against women could actually reverse the progress that the women's movement and feminist organizations have been fighting for over the last several decades.

It's just, I mean, it kind of makes me afraid. Not so much for my job, of course, but – comes into play – but, just, okay, are we going to go back, you know, 40 years? I mean, all this hard work that we've had, that we've done. And I, you know, of course I stand on the shoulders of giants. I did not do much of that work.

Maybe any, but, um, but all that work – what, is it going to go down the toilet?  
 And, okay, great, that on paper women and men are equal, and, in, you know,  
 somebody's blowhard version of the truth they're equal, but, really, it's just taking  
 us a step backwards. And, it's not only taking us a step backwards, but it's  
 removing any validation as a woman would have, or any – any voice the woman  
 would have had.

***Question 8: Do you believe that you were adequately prepared, academically and/or emotionally, by your program of study for your work with survivors of domestic violence?***

The majority of participants felt that their undergraduate or graduate programs of study did not adequately prepare them to work with female survivors of violence. “Can I curse again? Hell no!” The two participants with master’s degrees commented on the failure of their programs of study to include a course on counselling and trauma. “So, they were like, just read Trauma and Recovery, then you'll – you'll be set. Yeah, that was not helpful.” A theoretical understanding of violence against women was considered to be a gap in many of the participants’ programs. Although the participants concluded that a specific course on trauma would have better prepared them for their work with female survivors of violence, the majority of participants reported that they were unsure how else their universities could have adequately prepared them. Several participants’ felt that practical experience was required.

So, yes, in that sense, it didn't prepare you – or, prepare me – but, I would agree with my colleague that you have to – how are they going to prepare you for that? There's nothing in a textbook that can prepare you for, really, something like that.

Yeah, they can go through, like, a trauma course, or something. But, when you really get down to it, the nitty-gritty, you actually have to connect with people, and build relationships.

***Question 8(a): If no, do you believe that being educated on gender and power could have helped prepare you?***

All participants' enthusiastically reported that receiving a course on gender and power would have better prepared them for their work with female survivors of violence. "We are all just, like, yes!" Although participants' agreed on the utility of teaching gender and power in undergraduate and graduate programs, the majority of participants' did not receive adequate training in this area. "I did not get that, either. It's a separate course. Like, you can specialize in gender studies, or women's studies, but it's – it's not mandatory thing, which it should have been – it should be." Participants believed that a theoretical understanding of gender and power is crucial for working with female survivors of violence against women. The majority of participants felt that learning about gender and power would have enabled them to better support and empower the women they work with.

Something to actually help, like, the clients in front of us, not just ourselves. Like, when you can explain to a client, like, this isn't just your husband. You're in the web, in a context, in a society that values him for doing this, and he values you for experiencing it. Yeah. And, then, you know – to double back, explaining that to a client, I think it empowers them. Like, no, this isn't your fault. And, actually having, like, studies, and terminology to back it up, to, like, keep them armoured,



to wear when they're going through this. That would've been invaluable. I did not get that.

***Question 9: All things considered is there anything else you would like to add?***

Each of the participants provided additional comments concerning the detrimental consequences for women who experience violence if funding is cut due to symmetry research. “If we're going to cut funding, and say that men and women are equal, we're going to have more women staying.” Participants felt that if their organizations already insufficient funding is reduced, the fight for equality and women’s rights will be unable to move forward. “But, if we're going to cut down on funding, we are never going to move ahead. We are always going to go backwards.” The majority of participants also believed that a reduction in funding would result in increased mortality rates among women who experience abuse and violence. “So, yeah, we cut funding, or if anything really shifts in terms of that, we're going to have a lot of women that are going to end up probably dead, because they weren't able to leave.” Participants also spoke to the general oppression and inequality of women in society: “We are not equal.” The legal system was again used by participants as an example of a system that systematically oppresses women by conceptualizing violence against women as gender neutral. Female survivors of violence were considered, by a number of participants, to unnecessarily experience revictimization by a legal system that has failed to consider gender and power. “It also, um, just to be victimized in the judicial system, as well, too. We see it in the courts over time.” Participants felt that the legal system’s failure to consider gender, power, and women’s lower income (as a result of financial abuse and isolation) results in women

having unequal resources to defend themselves during a trial. “Women are now left having to go to a trial, self-representing themselves against their abuser.”

I cannot count how many times a mother has come in and said, “I should have never left, because now I have to send my poor little kids back into the lion’s den without me as a buffer. So, now they're suffering. So, I should have just, like – the courts screwed me over! Either way, I'm screwed, so I might as well just stay.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 began with a review of participants’ basic demographics. This was followed by summaries of the overall responses to each question. Using direct quotations from the participants of the focus group, this chapter highlighted the negative impacts of the de-gendering of domestic violence on counsellors. The lived experiences of the participants highlight the need for graduate programing to adequately prepare students for their work with female survivors of violence against women. Counsellors who devote their lives to empowering women impacted by violence against women deserve the training and support necessary to work with this vulnerable population. Chapter 5 will focus on reviewing and answering the three primary research questions. This chapter will also include a review of the limitations of the study, a personal reflection, and possible implications for future counselling graduate programs.

## **Chapter 5: Research Questions Answered**

This project involved an examination of the consequences of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors who work with female survivors of heterosexual, physical, emotional, and sexual violence. A 100-minute focus group was designed to answer the following three research questions: (1) What are the effects of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors when working with heterosexual female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence? (2) How do counsellors' sense of self and worldview shift overtime when working with heterosexual female survivors of violence? (3) What coping resources and strategies do they use to resist gender neutral discourses? This chapter connects the answers from the focus group questions provided in Chapter 4 with the literature review provided in Chapter 3. The primary focus of this chapter is to answer each of the research questions. The limitations of this study, a personal reflection from the researcher, and an overview of possible implications for counselling graduate programing are also provided.

### **Research Question #1: Effects of the De-Gendering of Violence on Counsellors**

Although I expected the focus group to provide insight into each of the three research questions posed, after reviewing the data it become clear that the most significant points of impact regarding the effects of the de-gendering of domestic violence were shifts in participants' world view. Therefore, the first research question, which explored the effects of the de-gendering of domestic violence on counsellors when working with heterosexual female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence, is not specifically addressed in this chapter. The shifts in world view that the counsellors experienced are addressed in question two: How do counsellors' sense of self

and worldview shift overtime when working with heterosexual female survivors of violence?

I believe the reason the first research question was not answered rests in the construction and delivery of the focus group interview questions. After reviewing the data it became clear that I should have included an open ended question which asked participants if they had been impacted by the de-gendering of domestic violence. My interview questions are primarily focused on understandings of violence against women, world view, education, and coping. The participants were never given an opportunity to discuss other ways that they might have been impacted by the de-gendering of domestic violence. Furthermore, once I reviewed the audio tape of the focus group I realized that I could have used more probing questions (i.e., tell me more about that) and longer periods of silence. The focus group was scheduled for 120 minutes and I finished facilitating the group after only 100 minutes. I believe that slowing down the interview process and asking more probing questions would have given the participants the time to expand on their answers and consider all of the ways they might have been affected by the de-gendering of domestic violence.

### **Research Question #2: Shifts in World View of Counsellors**

Counsellors who work with high caseloads of trauma survivors must regularly bear witness to the horrific details of their clients' experiences. Hearing the traumatic stories of clients, day after day, has been shown to place counsellors at higher risk for experiencing negative shifts in their world views (Cohen & Collens, 2011; Garrity, 2011; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Each of the counsellors who participated in the focus group experienced negative shifts in world view.

And, so, yeah, I'll be anywhere, and you'll see a look of the person's face, or you hear a word, or you hear, you know – you see what – and you automatically assuming that there's abuse going on in that relationship.

Negative shifts in world view was discovered to be the most significant effect of the de-gendering of domestic violence when working with heterosexual female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence. The negative cognitive and emotional consequences the participants experienced are mirrored by recent literature that has examined vicarious traumatization (Cohen & Collens, 2013; Garrity, 2011; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). McCann and Pearlman (1990) maintain that counsellors primarily experience negative cognitive shifts in the areas of safety, trust, power, independence, esteem, intimacy, and frame of reference. The following sections will explore participants' reactions to: a) gender and power issues, b) perceptions of violence against women, c) ability to trust, d) shifting parental values, and e) subjective power.

**Gender and power.** Since the beginning of their careers, all of the participants developed an increased awareness of sexism, oppression, and unequal power held by men and women in society. Participants reported that after working with female survivors of violence against women they began seeing incidences of oppression and unequal power among their friends, at work, and in the media. “And, you know, it was really like an eye opening experience, and I'm really happy that I have it, but it was really shocking when I first started. Like, oh wow, yeah. Life really does suck for women.” The participants unanimously agreed that since working with female survivors of violence against women they had developed an increased awareness of the prevalence of sexism and oppression in

society. “I think I've experienced shifts, more towards recognizing that the oppression is still there, like, rather than it getting better.”

An increased awareness of gender and power complements current research which similarly found that counsellors who work with high caseloads of trauma survivors experienced cognitive shifts in these areas (Garrity, 2011; Iliffe & Steed, 2000).

For a little while, I had to get a lot of my own, like, supervision, because I was seeing it everywhere, and I thought it was just, like, countertransference. Or, like, um, you know, I was being triggered by, like, what I was hearing and I realized, like, no, it really is everywhere. And, you know, not everywhere, but it's way more prevalent than I thought it was. Yeah, and it's – like even, like, now, it's like even the smallest thing, I'm like all – I catch myself, like, picking it apart. And I'm like, no, there's something unequal underneath that statement.

An increased understanding of sexism, oppression, and unequal power held by men and women in society led to elevated assertiveness among the majority of participants. Participants reported that since the beginning of their careers, they began to stand up to incidences of patriarchy and oppression in their daily lives. Garrity (2011) similarly found that after working with female survivors of sexual violence counsellors began to question power dynamic in their personal relationships.

Three of the participants articulated their increased willingness to stand up to their male partners and family members. “And I think, sometimes, for my husband, it's a little powerful, yeah. You know let's talk about this more than just arguing about it. Or, why do I have to agree with you, you know.” Developing a critical understanding of sexism

and oppression resulted in a positive shift regarding participants' sense of personal agency.

**Understanding violence against women.** Each of the participants experienced a shift in their understanding of violence against women since beginning their careers: “One, I would have to say that as long as there's a power differential, be it physical or societal, or whatever, it's going to be a gender problem, period.” Several participants recognized that overtime they began to conceptualize violence against women as a gendered phenomenon. Previous research has indicated that counsellors began to understand sexual violence against women as a gendered phenomenon only after working with female survivors of sexual violence (Garrity, 2011). Before working with female survivors of violence, several of the participants recall being naïve regarding the prevalence, cause, consequences, and complexities of violence against women.

Overtime participants began to see power and control as the driving force behind violence against women. “And, it's actually very disturbing, if you think about it, as a trend in society. It's actually very disturbing. Lashing out is very different than trying to control and power over your partner.”

The manner in which participants conceptualized violence against women before beginning their careers corresponds with the current conceptualization of domestic violence by symmetry researchers (Archer, 2000; Hamel, 2009; Straus, 2011). It was not until working with individuals who have experienced violence and abuse that the majority of participants were able to align with feminist scholars and discern the power and control dynamics behind the abuse their clients experienced (Berns, 2001; Enander, 2011; Kimmel, 2002). Previous research examining the consequences of working with

trauma survivors has similarly found that overtime counsellor began to develop a gendered understanding of violence against women (Garrity, 2011).

Despite participants' previous naïve understanding of violence against women, all of the participants' exhibited a high degree of anger and frustration towards symmetry research: "Well, it's infuriating." All of the participants concluded that symmetry research has failed to consider the complexities of gender and the unequal power held between men and women in society: "It's actually very disturbing. Lashing out is very different than trying to control and power over your partner." The emotional reactions participants had towards symmetry research indicate a drastic shift in the participants understanding of violence against women since beginning their careers.

I would love for Hamel (a symmetry researcher) to come and sit with me in a couple sessions. I would invite him to come and sit with me in a couple sessions, and really hear what is happening with some of these women. And as horrific, and it's disgusting, and once you do that, you'll see that it's not, um, it is not just gender-neutral. It is absolutely not gender-neutral.

**Shifting conceptualizations.** The fact that the majority of participants only developed a critical understanding of gender and power after working with female survivors of violence against women corresponds with feminist research which argues that our society has entered into a post-feminist era (McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2013). Issues of gender and power are no longer viewed as relevant in popular and political discourse. Furthermore, the finding that several participants developed a gendered understanding of violence against women only after beginning their careers



mirrors current feminist research which maintains that violence against women has been de-gendered (Berns, 2001; Nixon, 2007).

Participants agreed that the interlocking systems of oppression (patriarchy as a relation of power, race, class, and immigration status) which sustain the high prevalence of violence against women in society have been masked by symmetry research (Berns, 2001; Kimmel, 2002; Nixon, 2007; Worcester, 2002).

I don't – I - Yeah, it makes me frustrated. I think that – I think there's still a gender problem. It's not a relational problem, because men still continue to think – they just continue to, you know, they just continue to think they are more superior, and that – that they're entitled, you know? They're entitled, and that they should have more respect than women, that their decisions are better than a woman's decision. And, you know, until we can get over that, you know, or – um, they can – the men can have that education, know the woman's decision is just as good as yours, um, I don't think it's a relational problem. It's always – even the power, like, the physical strength. Men are still more powerful than women.

**Trust.** The emotional challenges of hearing the detailed depictions of violence against women have been shown to lead to alterations in counsellors' trust schemas (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Recent research indicates that counsellors who work with trauma survivors are at risk for becoming less trusting, and more suspicious and more cynical (Garrity, 2011; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). The majority of participants reported feeling increasingly suspicious and cynical since beginning their careers. "Cynicism. I mean, I think one – I don't know if it's a worldview shift, but it's definitely, um, definitely a shift that's happened with me." All of the participants

explained that since beginning their work with female survivors of violence against women, they began to notice incidences of violence and abuse everywhere. Participants felt as though they were unable to escape the constant representations of violence and abuse in their personal lives. “I mean, I think just very basically it's what my colleague was saying, your little antennae are so formed, and you're so sensitive to all the little nuances of – of relationship, like, dynamics.”

Iliffe and Steed (2000) similarly found that counsellors with high caseloads of female survivors of violence against women felt as though they had developed a heightened ability to detect signs of possible abuse. Participants reported being less trusting of relationships in general.

You know, you hear it everywhere, you see it everywhere, you suspect it, you're a little bit more, um cynical, perhaps, of men and their ability to be in a relationship in a way that's, um, healthy. Although, we do know they – we do know they exist, but still, you – you're very – it's almost like, prove it, rather than just assuming.

**Shifting parental values.** An interesting finding was the high frequency of comments from participants regarding the need to better educate future generations. Participants reported wanting to use their knowledge of gender and power to ensure their children understood sexism and practiced equality. Working with high caseloads of female survivors of violence against women impacted the manner in which the participants raised their children.

So, I think when I said it didn't affect me personally, as a parent – from my childhood, to my workplace, to here – that's how it's affected me personally. It's just in how I – I don't want my son to be thinking that, you know, his wife or his

girlfriend, yeah, he is going to be waited upon. But I don't want my daughter, you know, feeling like she has – feeling like this is what she has to do.

Overall, participants felt that their increased awareness of gender and power issues had allowed them to become better parents and counsellors. The majority of participants felt better equipped to raise gender conscious children.

It's definitely made me more aware, and I think it's a positive awareness. It makes you look at, you know, the, um – what is sexism more in-depth, um, and oppression, you know, and, um, just more informed. I think it's a good shift for me, personally, um, because it helps me educate my family and my children, and the women I work with.

A number of participants reported feeling that the current climate of sexism and unequal power dynamic among men and women will never change unless society as a whole begins focusing on new generations and their understanding of oppression and violence against women. “Um, there definitely needs to be more work, and needs to start with the way we raise our kids.” Although the majority of participants felt that their increased awareness of gender and power issues positively impacted their ability to parent, two of the participants reported feeling so invested in creating a gender conscious generation that, at times, they pushed their children too hard to value equality among men and women. “And, then, the constant, like, maybe going overboard with my son to be, like, you will be a feminist, whether you like it or not.”

**Powerlessness.** Throughout the focus group each of the participants made several references to a loss of power. Participants reported feeling frustrated over dual arrest policies, police insensitivity, and the court systems.

Yeah, the attitudes of, you know, judges, lawyers, social workers. But, also, even just, you know, when you think about the limited amount of funds that there – legal aid, for example – we have women that will get legal aid because they've been in an abusive relationship, and that's the number one mandate. There's limited hours – what is it, 25 hours? Hopefully, in that 25 hour time, a woman will have custody, access, support, property, et cetera. That's not even talked about how. That gets put off till later, and if your hours have run out, oh well, too bad, you're on your own. Which leaves women, unfortunately, then, hours have run out. And sometimes men will still, you know, manipulate the system more now. They're prolonging – prolonging delays, knowing that the hours are being used. Next thing you know, the trial has come up, and they've run out of their hours

Participants felt that no matter how much work they did to empower their clients, the police and the courts minimized their efforts by making female survivors of violence feel isolated and at fault for the abuse they have endured. McCann and Pearlman (1990) maintain that powerlessness is a common cognitive shift in counsellors who work with high caseloads of trauma survivors.

It's very – again, I think it comes down to, um, frustration. Because we are here to empower the women to say this is what happened. We're here to say we will help you. We're here to say we will support you, you're not alone, we will do this. But, then, as soon as the male – or female – officer comes in and asks them why they didn't tell us that the last time, all of a sudden they now are back to where they started.

Participants believed that the judicial system has failed to consider gender and the unequal power held by men and women in society. According to participants, the judicial systems of gender neutral conceptualization of violence against women results in female survivors of violence being arrested alongside their partners after enduring abuse, feeling at fault for the abuse, and being forced to defend themselves in court against their abuser due to a lack of financial resources. Research indicates that dual arrest policies are a direct consequence of symmetry research. Symmetry research, armed with decades of data indicating equal perpetration of violence among men and women, strongly advocate for dual arrest policies (Archer, 2000; Hamel, 2009; Straus, 2011).

The current judicial system caused the majority of participants to experience powerlessness. Several participants also felt that besides providing emotional support, there was nothing they could do to help their clients when they encountered unsupportive police, lawyers, and judges. Iliffe and Steed (2000) similarly found that counsellors working with high caseloads of female survivors of violence against women experienced powerless due to social and justice systems.

It affects you, because you work so hard to get these women to, you know – like, one of the first things I say to them is, be proud of yourself for coming forward and asking for help. But, then, to have a law that supposed to help them turn around and start questioning why they didn't say anything... Because now, that's, you know, any sort of voice that we've given them has now, just, stripped them back to that. So, it's very frustrating.

Participants also reported a certain degree of powerlessness concerning the consequences of symmetry research. Participants unanimously agreed that symmetry

research could impact the funding of their current agency: “They're going to take it away, uh, if the governments got a hold of this stuff, I could see the government just saying, okay, well, we're wicking some of the money away from those women's programs.”

Participants also articulated a high degree of concern for the women they work to support. A number of participants concluded that if the government begins to take symmetry research seriously, and the funding for counselling agencies and transition houses is further reduced, women who experience abuse will suffer higher mortality rates.

Although each of the participants exhibited a high degree of anger and frustration towards the dissemination of symmetry research, none of the participants made any suggestions regarding advocacy against symmetry research. When discussing the potential consequences of this type of research, the participants' answers were void of personal agency. The participants all concluded that if the government takes symmetry research seriously, the instrumental work of the battered women's movement, feminists, and feminist agencies that work to provide support and shelter to women and their children who experience violence against women will be diluted. Participants generally believed that if funding is further reduced, women will be forced to return to a time where they had nowhere to run when they experienced abuse and violence behind the closed doors of the home.

It's just, I mean, it kind of takes me afraid. Not so much for my job, of course, but – comes into play – but, just, okay, are we going to go back, you know, 40 years? I mean, all this hard work that we've had, that we've done. And I, you know, of course I stand on the shoulders of giants. I did not do much of that work. Maybe

any, but, um, but all that work – what, is it going to go down the toilet? And, okay, great, that on paper women and men are equal, and, in, you know, somebody's blowhard version of the truth they're equal, but, really, it's just taking us a step backwards. And, it's not only taking us a step backwards, but it's removing any validation as a woman would have, or any – any voice the woman would have had.

### **Summary of Research Question #2**

All of the participants who participated in the focus group experienced shifts in their sense of self and world view since working with female survivors of violence against women. Participants developed an increased awareness of sexism, oppression, and unequal power held by men and women in society since the beginning of their careers. Participants also began to conceptualize violence against women as a gendered phenomenon. An increased awareness of sexism, oppression, and unequal power held by men and women in society caused the majority of participants to become increasingly assertive, to experience a decrease in their ability to trust, and to feel a sense of personal powerlessness against the judicial system and the potential consequences of symmetry research. Finally, the majority of participants also experienced a positive shift in their parenting styles and abilities.

### **Research Question #3: Coping Resources and Strategies used to Resist Gender**

#### **Neutral Discourses**

The third research question, what coping resources and strategies do they use to resist gender neutral discourses, was partially addressed by participants during the focus group. Although participants spoke to the coping strategies they employed to manage the

stress of their careers, none of the participants articulated specific coping strategies used to resist gender neutral discourses. Participants spoke to the strategies used to mitigate their constant exposure to oppression and violence against women, but no comments were made directly to coping with the de-gendering of domestic violence. The answers to the focus group questions primarily addressed general coping strategies.

I believe that the flawed design of the interview questions is the reason none of the participants were able to speak to the coping strategies they use to resist gender neutral discourses. After reviewing the data I realized that I should have asked the participants an open ended question pertaining to the strategies used to cope with the de-gendering of domestic violence. I only asked the participants one broad open ended question about coping during the focus group. Considering that coping strategies used by participants was one of my primary research questions I should have included more specific interview questions relevant to the topic.

**Mental escapes.** Mentally removing themselves from their clients' stories, sexism, oppression, and violence against women in general was the most common coping strategy employed by the participants. As previously mentioned, all of the participants reported seeing incidences of violence and oppression regularly in their personal lives after beginning their careers. For several of the participants, shutting down this awareness was crucial for coping. By purposefully distancing themselves from the realities of violence against women, a number of participants were able to better cope with the stories of violence, abuse, and oppression shared by their female clients.

Like, I just – you get into the point of saturation, where you don't wanna see – you don't want to have to see, or guess, or worry about another woman, you know?



And, so, yeah, I just – especially if I go away somewhere, I just pretend that everybody's living happily, and I don't allow myself to go into that place of, you know, oh, what's really going on over there.

**Peer supervision.** The majority of participants reported debriefing their cases with colleagues as a way to cope. Participants reported feeling supported, justified, and understood by their colleagues.

And, I think talking with other women who are doing the same work as you is key, because you're – the feelings that come up for you constantly, um, I know that for me, sometimes, I feel that my feelings can be, um – am I justified in feeling this way? And then you get validation from others when you hear, “Oh, my gosh, yes, totally. I would feel the same way.

Research indicates that working with high caseloads of trauma survivors can cause counsellors to feel isolated in their experiences (Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Trippany et al., 2004). Peer supervision has been shown to decrease isolation and encourage support and validation among colleagues (Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

**Family support.** A number of participants also indicated that spending time with their families allowed them to cope with their careers. Two of the participants reported that playing with their children allowed them to relax and disconnect from their work. For these participants, spending time with their children allowed them to mentally escape from the realities of working with female survivors of violence against women. Familial support as a coping strategy has been identified in research examining the impacts of working with female survivors of sexual violence (Garrity, 2011). One participant

articulated that her strategy for coping with oppression and the unequal power held by men and women in society was to have deep intellectual conversations about patriarchy and the benefits of feminism with her male partner. “And, I think that thinking of it more on an intellectual level, instead of just trying to rage against the machine has really helped me deal with this.” Overall, the support participants experienced from their families helped them cope with their careers.

**Personal coping strategies.** The majority of participants spoke to utilizing non-work related coping strategies to help them cope. Participants found value in utilizing downtime and engaging in activities that allowed them to disconnect from their work. “Like, just anything that is just something that just takes my mind anywhere else but there.” Participants reported that lounging, playing computer games, listening to music, gardening, exercise, and reading helped them remove themselves from their work. The personal coping strategies articulated by participants are not unique. Each of the coping strategies discussed by participants can be found in recent literature examining vicarious traumatization symptoms and coping (Bober et al., 2006; Jordan, 2010; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Trippany et al., 2004).

### **Summary of Research Question #3**

All of the participants who participated in the focus group reported engaging in coping strategies. The primary theme among participants’ responses was the need to mentally remove themselves from their work and violence against women in general once they were home. None of the participants spoke directly to strategies used to resist gender neutral discourses. Participants reported using mental escapes, peer supervision, family

support, and personal coping strategies to cognitively and emotionally manage the stress of their careers.

### **Summary**

Chapter five has included answers to each of the primary research questions. This was followed by limitations of the study, a statement of personal impact, and implications for counselling. This chapter exposed the negative consequences of the de-gendering of domestic violence and symmetry research on counsellors who work with high caseloads of female survivors of violence against women. I believe that the shifts in world view concerning gender and power that each of the participants experienced since beginning their careers, highlights the importance of re-introducing the topic of gender as a social relation of power into counselling graduate programming. Chapter six, the final chapter, will provide the reader with a statement of the personal impact of working with women survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence and implications for counselling.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

This project was designed to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the effects of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors when working with heterosexual female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence? (2) How do counsellors' sense of self and worldview shift overtime when working with heterosexual female survivors of violence? (3) What coping resources and strategies do they use to resist gender neutral discourses? Recent literature coupled with the participants' responses from the focus group indicated that counsellors are impacted by the de-gendering of domestic violence. Each of the counsellors who participated in this project experienced negative cognitive shifts pertaining to gender and power. All of the participants developed an increased awareness of sexism, oppression, and unequal power held by men and women in society since the beginning of their careers. Several participants also began to conceptualize violence against women as a gendered phenomenon after working with female survivors of violence. Participants experienced decreased trust in relationships, feelings of powerlessness, and shifting parental values as a result of the cognitive shifts pertaining to gender and power.

### **Statement of Personal Impact**

While writing this project I was simultaneously completing my counselling practica. I obtained two practica this year. One was a full time practicum position working with female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence. The other was a part time position working at a private practice. When I took on both practica I thought that the private practice would act as my break from trauma. However, as it worked out, the majority of my clients at the private practice were female survivors of

violence against women. This experience mirrors the previously discussed research finding that one third of clients who attend counselling are trauma survivors (Lawson, 2007). As a result, I found myself managing a very high caseload of trauma survivors.

When I first started practicum I was extremely excited to work with female survivors of violence against women as this work was the primary reason I choose to enter into the field of counselling. Before I started seeing clients I believed I had a solid understanding of sexism, oppression, and the unequal power held by men and women in society. I also thought that the copious amount of Women's Studies courses I took during my undergraduate degree had equipped me with an understanding of the social and political systems which support and maintain violence against women. However, when I actually started working with women who had experienced violence against women I was significantly impacted by the realities my clients faced. I understood that when I started working with survivors of violence against women that I would, of course, hear stories of violence. However, nothing could have prepared me for the level of pain and torture my clients had experienced at the hands of their fathers and male partners. My clients' stories were almost unimaginable. I was also shocked by the complete lack of power my clients experienced. Before starting my career, I understood what oppression was, but it was not until I sat down with these female clients that I truly began to understand the systemic and devastating impacts of patriarchy and oppression. My clients felt powerless against their male partners and a system which had made them feel isolated and guilty for the abuse they had experienced. Not only were my client's lives in danger but their personhood and sense of self was robbed by a political system which does not prioritize

the support of women who have nowhere else to turn. Similar to the participants of the focus group, I began to become angry at the judicial system.

I also began to experience some vicarious traumatization symptoms. By Christmas time I had created the stability and safety required for trauma processing with almost all of my clients. During the second semester of my practicum I found myself processing abuse with three to five clients a day. The processing stage of trauma counselling involves exploring traumatic events so that clients can make sense of the abuse and learn to heal and move forward. This stage often requires hearing the specific details of childhood and adult sexual and physical violence. Some days were so hard that as soon I got into my car to drive home I began sobbing. Similar to the participants of the focus group, I started seeing signs of abuse everywhere. I become very suspicious of relationships. I also began developing a plethora of somatic symptoms. In less than two months, I developed three separate colds which required me to take a few days off practicum; I developed pink eye, a staph infection on my face, and I ended up in the emergency room with a horrible stomach flu. Before I started practicum I was very rarely sick. Iliffe and Steed (2000) also found that counsellors working with high caseloads of trauma survivors developed a lower immunity to illnesses.

The emergency room stay was finally my wakeup call that something was wrong. Nothing was physically wrong with me (according to the blood work) but I was a wreck. Interestingly, despite researching and writing this project on vicarious traumatization, it took an emergency room visit for me to face the fact that I was impacted by trauma. Until that day, I did not want to admit it. I lacked the self-awareness required for adequately coping with vicarious traumatization symptoms (Iliffe & Steed, 2000). I spoke with both

of my supervisors about what I was experiencing. Both supervisors listened to my counselling tapes each week and confirmed that my counselling was not being impacted. They both suggested that I seek my own personal counselling. I found a psychologist in the area who decided to see me for free because she reported that she had “been where I am.” After several sessions I began to feel better. I began engaging in coping activities such as running and meditation each day. I also began debriefing with my colleagues much more often. My practicum taught me that working with survivors of violence against women is challenging, it takes patience and a firm belief in the resilience of human beings. Although I was impacted by my clients’ stories I also learned what true strength looks like. All of my clients are survivors.

### **Implications for Counselling**

Researching, conducting the focus group, and writing this project taught me that I am not alone in my experience. Other counsellors have experienced an increased awareness of the prevalence and profound impact of violence against women, as well as the oppressive political structures which maintain this type of violence. My practica coupled with the experience of writing this project allowed me to develop an even stronger passion for re-introducing gender and the study of violence against women into counselling psychology training programs. It is time to re-introduce gender to the study of violence against women. Without gender, the true realities of this horrific phenomenon cannot truly be understood (Berns, 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Kimmel, 2002; Krizsan et al., 2005; Nixon, 2007).

The University of Lethbridge does offer a mandatory gender and culture course as part of the Master of Education in Counselling Psychology program. However, only a

small portion of the course is devoted to studying violence against women. I believe that since one in four women are abused by their partners each year (CDC, 2013), this course should warrant a heavier emphasis on violence against women. Furthermore, the gender and culture course offered by the University of Lethbridge uses the term domestic violence to teach students about the violence women experience, I believe the term violence against women should be used instead. Novice counsellors might feel better prepared to work with female survivors of violence against women if they are taught the gendered realities of this phenomenon.

Finally, I believe that my experiences coupled with the experiences of each of the participants who participated in the focus group shows that all Universities with a counselling master's program, including the University of Lethbridge, should offer a trauma course. Considering that one third of the clients who seek the assistance of a counsellor, across all settings, are trauma survivors (Lawson, 2007), counselling master programs that fail to include a trauma course are acting unethically. Developing the emotional and practical skillset to work with trauma survivors will not only act as preventive measure against vicarious traumatization (Adams & Riggs, 2008; Trippany et al., 2004) but it will equip counsellors with the skills to better assist the vulnerable and amazing women they work to support.

Although this project is small in scale and houses many limitation, this is the only study to date which has specifically examined the consequences of the de-gendering of domestic violence on counsellors working with a high caseload of heterosexual female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Further research is required to examine the consequences of the de-gendering of domestic violence on counsellors. I



hope that this initial exploration of the topic acts as a spring board for future research in this important area.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. Given your professional work and the clientele that you work with, what are your reactions to the statement “men and women are equal in society?”
2. According to feminist scholars, the manner in which violence against women is understood has shifted over the past four decades, becoming increasingly gender neutral. This shift is believed to mask the oppression that women experience. What is your reaction to this information?  
If you believe that this shift has occurred, in what ways has this shift impacted you?
  - A. How does the shift impact you professionally?
  - B. How does the shift impacted you personally?
3. Some counsellors with high caseloads of female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence have found that their awareness of sexism, oppression, and unequal power held by men and women in society has shifted during their career. In what ways have you experienced shifts in any of these areas?
  - A. How did you previously conceptualize these concepts?
  - B. How have these shifts impact you professionally and personally?
4. How has the way you view the world changed since you began counselling survivors of domestic violence?
  - A. If yes, how did those shifts impacted you professionally and personally?
  - B. If yes, how have you coped?
5. In what ways has your understanding of domestic violence shifted since you began counselling survivors of domestic violence?
6. In a recent study Hamel (2009) contends that “...intimate partner abuse is a human and relational problem, not a gender problem.” What are your reactions to this quote?
7. There are currently over 200 empirical articles that contend that men and women perpetrate domestic violence at equal rates, some proposing that women are abusive slightly more often than men. In what ways do think that this research has, or could, impact the funding or government/community support that the organization you work for receives?
8. Do you believe that you were adequately prepared, academically and/or emotionally, by your program of study for your work with survivors of domestic violence?
  - A. If no, do you believe that being educated on issues of gender and power could have helped prepare you?
  - B. If no, what else could have prepared you?
9. All things considered is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Email

Dear [name of organization],

My name is Amanda Sarich I am a graduate student at the University of Lethbridge within the Faculty of Education. As a graduate student, I am required to conduct a final project as part of the requirements for a master's degree in Counselling Psychology.

The purpose of this project is to discover if the de-gendering of violence against women impacts counsellors who work with high caseloads of female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence and to explore the strategies and resources used to cope.

The understanding of domestic violence has shifted over the past four decades, becoming increasingly gender neutral (Berns, 2001). However, the gendered experience of female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence is often in direct contrast to the popular conceptualization. For example, research indicates that 90% of the patterned and injurious violence women experience is perpetrated by men (Kimmel, 2002). Policy makers, governments, the media, and education systems continue to send the message that men and women are equal in society (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013); this idealistic understanding of equality is further employed to conceptualize and study violence against women which occurs inside the home.

This project is focused on the consequences of research that indicates men and women are equally culpable in domestic violence. This research, which my project calls symmetry research, has been published for over 3 decades. However, over the last 10 years this type of research has begun to greatly increase. This research finds that men and women hit each other at equal rates, determining domestic violence a human problem, not a women problem (Archer, 2000; Hamel, 2009; O'Leary & Slep, 2006; Straus, 1979, 2004; Straus & Gelles, 1986).

The battered women's movement defines intimate partner violence as a direct result of patriarchy and the general subordination of women in society (Schechter, 1982; Yllo, 2005). A de-gendered understanding of intimate partner violence masks the oppression and unequal power differentials behind the abuse and suffering experienced by millions of women every year in Canada (Berns, 2001). It is believed that counsellors must incorporate the gendered stories of powerlessness shared by their female clients with a socially constructed, gender neutral, understanding of the problem. My project will explore the effects of the de-gendering of domestic violence on counsellors who work with female survivors of violence.

I am contacting your organization because I believe that counsellors who work with female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence are in the unique position to be able to answer the following questions: (1) What are the effects of the de-

gendering of violence against women on counsellors when working with heterosexual female survivors of physical, psychological, and sexual violence? (2) How do counsellors' sense of self and worldview shift overtime when working with heterosexual female survivors of violence? (3) What coping resources and strategies do they use to resist gender neutral discourses?

Participation is completely voluntary. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to partake in one 120 minute audiotaped focus group. The focus group will consist of nine open-ended questions. The focus group will be held at the Women's Resource Society of the Fraser Valley in Abbotsford in British Columbia. The questions asked will explore your experiences working with survivors of domestic and sexual violence. You will be asked to fill out an informed consent prior to beginning the focus group. If you choose to participate you can be assured I will protect your anonymity. Your name and identifying information will be kept confidential.

If you are interested in participating in this important study, please contact me by email at [a.sarich@uleth.ca](mailto:a.sarich@uleth.ca) or by telephone at (604) 701-1466.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,  
Amanda Sarich, BA

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form



### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

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***Canadian counsellors' experience:  
Exploring the effects of the de-gendering of domestic violence.***

You are being invited to participate in a project entitled Canadian counsellors' experience: Exploring the effects of the de-gendering of domestic violence that is being conducted by Amanda Sarich. Amanda Sarich is a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by telephone at 604-701-1466.

As a graduate student, I am required to complete a final project as part of the requirements for a degree in Counselling Psychology. This project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Shepard. You may contact my supervisor at (403- 329-2383).

The purpose of this project is to discover the effects that the de-gendering of domestic violence has on counsellors who work with survivors of violence against women and to explore the strategies and resources used to cope. Degendering is the reorganizing, improvising, development, and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making. The degendering of problems such as domestic violence prevents the genderization of the blame and consequently pushes women into the background.

This project is framed around the following questions: (1) What are the effects of the de-gendering of violence against women on counsellors when working with domestic and sexual violence? (2) How do counsellors' sense of self and worldview shift over time when working with domestic and sexual violence? (3) What coping resources and strategies do they use to resist gender neutral discourses?

This type of research is important because working with high caseloads of clients who experience physical, psychological, and sexual violence can affect the well-being of counsellors. Developing an understanding of the effects that the de-gendering of violence against women has on counsellors is essential in order to equip counselling agencies and graduate counselling programs with the information required to best teach and support counsellors who aspire to work with female survivors of violence.



If you agree to voluntarily participate, your participation will include engaging in one 120 minute focus group that will be audio-taped. The purpose of this focus group is to gain an understanding of the possible consequences of the de-gendering of violence against women, from the perspective of counsellors who work with survivors. The focus group interview will consist of nine open-ended questions.

In order to qualify for participation in this study, you must have held your position for two years or more. The rationale for insisting that participants have held their position for at least two years is based on current research which indicates that the effect of working with high cases loads of trauma survivors on counsellors is gradual. Moreover, it is anticipated that the more experience participants have had, the more information they are able to provide. Participants will be chosen based on their experience working with survivors of domestic and sexual violence. It is suspected that counsellors who work with survivors are in the best possible population to answer my interview questions. Participants contact information will be obtained from the Domestic Violence B.C. website.

Participation is voluntary. During the focus group, if you do not feel comfortable answering any of the questions, at any time, you can choose to skip questions. You will also be free to leave the room or to withdraw your consent at any time, for any reason. Refusal to participate will not initiate prejudice or penalty. Should you decide to withdraw your consent, your data will not be used in the analysis or dissemination of the project. I will work with you after transcription to identify your responses and remove them.

There are no known associated consequences to participating in this focus group interview. However, some of the questions may elicit some strong emotions and as a result, you may feel uncomfortable or upset with answering them. If this occurs, simply let me know and we can move on with the focus group or you may choose to end your participation at any point of the focus group. A list of suggested resources have been included if you wish to seek counselling services following the interview. (The questions being asked will focus on your professional and personal experiences working with survivors of violence against women. At no point in the focus group will you be asked to break client confidentiality).

The support which you offer to women, your organization, and your community requires a great deal of time and commitment. Participation in this study may be an inconvenience of your time and may interfere with your already busy schedule, however, the opportunity to share your options, worldviews, and experiences with likeminded professionals may be beneficial. Furthermore, understanding the consequences of the de-gendering of domestic violence not only has the potential to benefit counsellors, but this research could fill a large gap in the literature, benefiting the state of knowledge in this area.

The researcher may have a relationship to potential participants as the researcher is a practicum student at the Women's Resource Society of the Fraser Valley. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following steps to prevent coercion have been taken: participants will not be recruited on a personal basis and participants who are in a position of authority over the researcher or other participants (supervisors) will not be eligible for participation in this project.

Every effort will be made to ensure your anonymity is maintained. However, due to the group setting of the focus group I cannot guarantee that other members will protect your privacy. With that in mind I ask that you disclose only what you feel comfortable discussing. As the focus group moderator, I will highlight the importance of group confidentiality through regular reminders.

The only person who will have access to your informed consent form is the thesis student, Amanda Sarich. As some of your responses to the questions may make your identifiable, I want to assure you that only Dr. Blythe Shepard, my supervisor, and the third party company used to transcribe the focus group will have access to the actual transcripts. No names will be audio recorded during the focus group and no names will be provided to the transcription service. The third party transcriber will sign a consent form that indicates that no copies of the data shall be made and that confidentiality of the information transcribed will be maintained.

In terms of protecting your confidentially, your data will be handled with the utmost care. The focus group interview will be downloaded onto a USB. The USB and the informed consent forms will be kept in a locked moneybox. The key will be kept in a separate room. There are, however, some circumstances when we may have to share information without your knowledge or consent (though we will discuss it with you as soon as we can). If we believe that you or someone else are in harm's way (i.e., abuse, threat of life, neglect) then we are obligated to get extra help. This extra help could mean but is not limited to police, Child and Family Services Authority, or 9-1-1 to help us keep you and others safe. Also, if a judge or court of law subpoenas us to court or subpoenas the information gathered from this focus group we will have to provide the information that is requested.

Legally your data must be kept for ten years. You can be assured that your data will remain secure in a locked filing cabinet for the full ten year period. At the end of the ten year period all electronic information will be permanently deleted and all paper documents will be shredded

The results of this focus group will be disseminated for academic purposes only. The results of this focus group will be used for my final graduate project, for possible presentations at scholarly meetings, and potentially for publication in academic journal articles. However, your name or identifying information (such as the organization that you work for) will never be revealed.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and her supervisor at phone numbers provided, you may also verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***