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Living with Coercive Control: Trapped within a Complex Web of Double Standards, Double Binds and Boundary Violations

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Abstract

Social workers engage with domestic violence in a wide range of practice and service contexts. Despite the increasing focus on the centrality of coercive control to domestic violence, the effectiveness of the profession in protecting women and children has been constrained by a pervasive historical emphasis on physical violence as the defining feature of domestic violence. Coercive control is critical for social work practitioners to recognise and assess, yet has proved difficult to operationalise. In this paper, a model entitled 'The Trap' is presented, based on a subsection of the results of a feminist study of the lived experiences of coercive control for women. A thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with thirty women in Tasmania either currently or previously facilitating shared parenting arrangements in a context of domestic violence also revealed the nuances of their pre-separation experiences of coercive control. 'The Trap' conveys how the entitled, superior and adversarial attitudinal style of their partners entrapped them within a web of double standards, double binds and boundary violations, denying them equality, autonomy or agency. This paper argues that it is incumbent upon the social work profession to develop the skills for assessment of coercive control to develop best practice in domestic violence.

Keywords: Coercive control, domestic violence, practitioners

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Introduction

The long-term negative impacts of domestic violence on women's economic, physical and mental health and the consequences for children and their life chances is indisputable within contemporary research (Laing *et al.*, 2013). Of urgent relevance to social work practice is the centrality of coercive control to domestic violence (Stark, 2007) particularly the fact that it may not include physical violence (Johnson, 2008; Allen, 2013). Such knowledge is crucial to correctly assess the safety and consequences for women and children living with domestic violence, especially if there are no indicators of physical violence, sexual assault or other chargeable offences.

In most industrialised Western countries, the socio-legal conceptualisations of domestic violence have traditionally hinged on discrete acts of physical violence (Stark, 2007; Laing *et al.*, 2013). Stark (2007) notes that the 'conventional definition of domestic violence has been adapted from criminal justice, which considers crimes to be discrete acts' (Stark, 2007, p. 86). Within this approach, the nuances and complexity of domestic violence are lost in the pursuit of legal substantiation for such acts reducing the ability of women to derive adequate protection or equality for either themselves or their children (Laing *et al.*, 2013; Allen, 2013).

As the core dynamics of domestic violence were gradually understood as non-physical, they were described as psychological or emotional abuse, or patriarchal or intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2008). The term 'coercive control' is now more consistently employed (Laing *et al.*, 2013; Allen, 2013) and may not include physical violence (Stark, 2007; Johnson, 2008).

A focus on coercive control has resulted in important policy and legal changes. In 2011, for example, the definition of family violence in the Australian Family Law Act was expanded to incorporate notions of coercion and control irrespective of whether it was accompanied by physical violence. Early in 2015, England and Wales criminalised coercive control. Challenges to both these changes are concerned with the lack of precision with which coercive control is currently assessed and substantiated. This paper takes up the task of further exploring the dynamics of coercive control in order to contribute to the ability of the social work profession to assess for it in women's lives.

The key efforts to conceptualise non-physical abuse and coercive control within domestic violence are traced in preparation for the presentation of the model 'The Trap'. The nuances within the participants' descriptions of their experience of coercive control are used to explain

the denial of their equality, autonomy and agency by their partner's attitudinal and behavioural stance. 'The Trap' is discussed with reference to earlier conceptualisations and the implications for social work assessment outlined.

Background and context of the research

In the 1980s and 1990s, the initial emphasis on physical violence in domestic violence was challenged by feminist activists as overlooking the role of non-physical abuse in domestic violence (Allen, 2013). Several key studies (e.g. Dutton and Painter, 1981; Ferraro and Johnson, 1983; Anderson *et al.*, 1991) had also described domestic violence as a powerful non-physical process, linking it with mind control and other forms of victimisation as opposed to discrete physical incidents.

A new focus on non-physical abuse gave rise to a greater understanding of the totality of women's experiences. Initially it was discussed as psychological, emotional, economic, sexual, verbal and social abuse. Of these, psychological and emotional abuse have been particularly difficult to define (Allen, 2013) yet women were consistently reported as saying that emotional and psychological abuse were more harmful to them than the physical abuse they had experienced (Tolman, 1992; Walker, 2000). Kelly (2004) describes how these less tangible aspects of domestic violence were heavily debated and contrasted in the research in the search for a reliable, consistent construct.

By mid-1990, an additional focus developed in the research on conceptualising non-physical abuse as a process rather than forms of abuse, and separating it from the experience of physical violence. Researchers such as Loring and Myers (1991), Kirkwood (1993), Chang (1995) and Smith *et al.* (1995) used non-structured interviews with women to conclude that non-physical abuse was a chronic, patterned and entrapping process which underpinned physical violence and could be difficult to detect. Kirkwood (1993) developed a helpful visual concept of emotional abuse as a web of six interconnecting and overlapping components: degradation, fear, objectification, deprivation, overburden of responsibility and distortion of subjective reality. The terminology of the web 'conveys the fabric of emotional abuse with respect to its delicate interconnections, which afford an overall strength and a capacity to entrap' (Kirkwood, 1993). Kirkwood successfully conveys the entrapment that women experienced which is not related to physical violence and posits that it 'laid the foundations for physical violence' (Kirkwood, 1993, p. 61) but did not necessarily result in physical violence.

More three-dimensional explanations of the non-physical process emerged as researchers and practitioners understood the nature of the 'contextualising features of intentionality and coercive control' (Almeida

and Durkin, 1999, p. 313) irrespective of the presence of physical violence. Almeida and Durkin describe domestic violence as a 'patterned and repeated use of coercive and controlling behaviour to limit, direct and shape a partners thoughts, feelings and actions. An array of power and control tactics is used along a continuum in concert with one another' (Almeida and Durkin, 1999, p. 313). The feminist view had always been that these tactics occur within the wider social and political control of women (Radford and Hester, 2006) and depict a range of coercive behaviours reminiscent of the 'constraints implicit in the normative enactment of gender roles' (Stark, 2007, p. 39).

The following contributions by Bancroft and Silverman (2002), Stark (2007) and Johnson (2008) take a similar view and their distinctive but complementary ideas on coercive control providing deeper insights into domestic violence (Arnold, 2015). Johnson (2008) takes a step further by bringing the issue of women's use of physical violence into focus in response to competing notions of gender symmetry in physical violence (Stark, 2007). He contextualised the role of women's physical violence by capturing the possibility of physical violence as situational rather than underpinned by coercive control.

Bancroft and Silverman describe the non-physical process of domestic violence as a tree, growing from attitudes and values, not feelings: 'The roots are ownership, the trunk is entitlement and the branches are control' (Bancroft, 2002, p. 75). To them, the most critical concepts in understanding the batterer's mentality are the overarching attitudinal characteristics of entitlement and superiority that created expectations of being physically, emotionally and sexually catered to. From this, Bancroft and Silverman deduce that there is a pattern of behaviours that infiltrates the relationships these men have with their partners, including double standards. They argue that the imposition of a pattern of control over their partners, which is carried out through tactics such as criticism, verbal abuse, economic control, isolation and cruelty, is central to domestic violence.

The concept of women trapped within a cage was proposed by Stark (2007) in order to convey the widespread social and economic inequality forced on women by coercive control. Stark explains the bars of the cage as a man's use of psychological subjugation, strategies of violence, intimidation, isolation, humiliation, exploitation and the micromanagement of his partner's everyday life. Irrespective of whether coercive control included physical violence, Stark's (2007) concern is that many of these tactics are rarely identified as abuse and have no legal standing.

Johnson (2008) proposes a typology of domestic violence depending upon the level of coercive control and physical violence in the relationship. He describes a pattern of emotionally abusive intimidation, coercion and control coupled with physical violence as Coercive Controlling Violence and emotionally abusive intimidation, coercion and control but

including no physical violence as Incipient Coercive Control (Johnson, 2008, p. 478).

Conceptually, it is evident that the main endeavours to understand the links between non-physical and physical abuse increasingly incorporate social and political factors and convey the chronic, intertwined and entrapping nature of women's disempowerment. Clearly, physical violence can no longer be relied upon as the only symptom of domestic violence (Stark, 2007) yet there lacks a clear framework for the assessment of coercive control. For truly effective policy and practice, more knowledge is needed on how the 'wide variety of acts and behaviours perpetrated by one person against another operate together and reflect on each other' (Wangmann, 2011, p. 19).

This study contributes to such knowledge. It features an in-depth exploration of the nuances and complexities of thirty women's lived experience of Johnson's (2008) Incipient Coercive Control and Coercive Controlling Violence. From thematic data analysis, a model entitled 'The Trap' emerged which provides insight into how the acts and behaviours of their partners operated together and reflected on each other.

The methods and details of the study are now described.

Description of the study

This study aimed to investigate women's lived experience of post-separation shared parenting where there was a context of domestic violence. Approval was granted by the University of Tasmania Social Sciences Human Ethics Research Committee and all participants gave informed consent. The data collection process for the study also generated descriptions of the day-to-day experience of coercive control and this paper focuses on a model developed to illustrate how the dynamics operated from the participants' point of view. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with women who identified as having experienced domestic violence according to the definition outlined in the 2004 Australian Family Violence Act, with children who were currently or previously facilitating court-ordered or privately arranged post-separation shared parenting arrangements.

The participants were drawn from Tasmania, a state of Australia. A non-probability purposive sampling method was used in order to find 'information rich cases' (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005, p. 46) followed by snowballing sampling techniques. Participants volunteered in response to advertising and were sent an information package which included an introductory letter, information sheet and consent form. Langford's (2000) framework was used to guide the assessment of the women's physical safety to participate in the study given the real risk of harm from an ex-partner.

The final sample of participants ranged in age from twenty-eight to sixty years. The lengths of their relationships varied from less than one year to twenty-three years and they had been separated for between two and thirty-five years. The children ranged in age from eighteen months to forty-eight years. Of the thirty women in this study, fourteen experienced Coercive Controlling Violence. There were two distinct patterns of physical violence in this group. Four of the women experienced less physical violence (between one and five incidents) of varying severity and their pseudonym is followed by a P1 in the findings of the report. The other ten experienced frequent and severe physical violence and their pseudonym is followed by a P2. The remaining sixteen women experienced Incipient Coercive Control and therefore no physical violence. Their pseudonym is followed by an N.

The participants were interviewed using qualitative feminist interviewing methods that elicited detailed stories of the intimate and micro dimensions of their experiences of coercive control prior to separating.

The data were thematically analysed for commonalities and contradictions in accordance with the conventions of qualitative data analysis (Minichiello *et al.*, 2000). Particular attention was paid to the unexamined, common events described by the women in order to find the shared themes concealed within, and the muted language of 'not quite articulated experience ... where standard vocabulary is inadequate' (De Vault, 2004, p. 235).

There were four stages of data analysis of the women's stories. The first stage identified the macro themes of each individual story. The second stage identified the meta themes that transversed and connected the macro themes. The third stage focused on the use of mind maps to observe the cross-linkages between participants, and the final stage consisted of constructing and clarifying a visual representation of the web of interrelated attitudes and behaviours common to all the participants in the study that were based on the non-physical aspects of their experience of their partners. This became the model entitled 'The Trap', which is explained in the following section.

One of the important limitations to this study is that the findings cannot be considered representative of all women experiencing domestic violence, as the sample size is too small and the participants were not selected randomly or systematically. The goal of the study, however, was to contribute to theory building. It was guided by feminist standpoint theory with a view to contribute to a 'fusion of horizons' (Nielson, 1990, p. 29) between the diverse standpoints held by the women in this study. A further limitation is the focus on women's experience without reference to the perpetration of abuse towards men and children by women. The intention of this study was to explore a gendered experience of

coercive control in this case focusing on women with a view to future research on the experience of men.

Results

Thematic analysis identified three main findings regarding the dynamics underpinning the women's pre-separation relationships and common to all the participants irrespective of whether their relationship matched Johnson's typology of Incipient Coercive Control or Coercive Controlling Violence. These findings are captured within the model.

First, core to the dynamics was the women's experience of their partners' superior, entitled and adversarial attitudinal style. Second, the core attitudinal style led to a behavioural style featuring three different types of double standards and double binds as well as a lack of empathy. Third, within the behavioural style of their partners, there were three main types of boundary violations detectable. Despite the women's attempts for equality, autonomy or agency, they experienced these dynamics as consistently trapping them into an accommodating and a subjugated role.

Figure 1 shows 'The Trap', which provides a model that conveys the configuration of these findings of the women's relationships with their partners prior to separating.

Each aspect of the model is now described, starting with the attitudinal style of the inner circle and the core of the model and moving outwards in each section.

Attitudinal style

Central to 'The Trap' and to the women's descriptions of their partner was an attitudinal style that was characterised by a superior, entitled and adversarial stance.

The women described their partners as having an attitude of superiority and treating them as if they were inferior in comparison. They felt reduced to an extension and a possession of their partner. Jessica and Genevieve conveyed the sense of being owned and this was common to all the women who participated in the study:

> I was not a person to him ... I was there for his purposes and his purposes only. I was a commodity (Jessica, P2).

> I felt owned ... when I look back that's really how it was. There was this unspoken thing about having to receive his permission or ... like 'or else' ... there would be trouble ... he would say to me, I give you permission! (Genevieve, N)

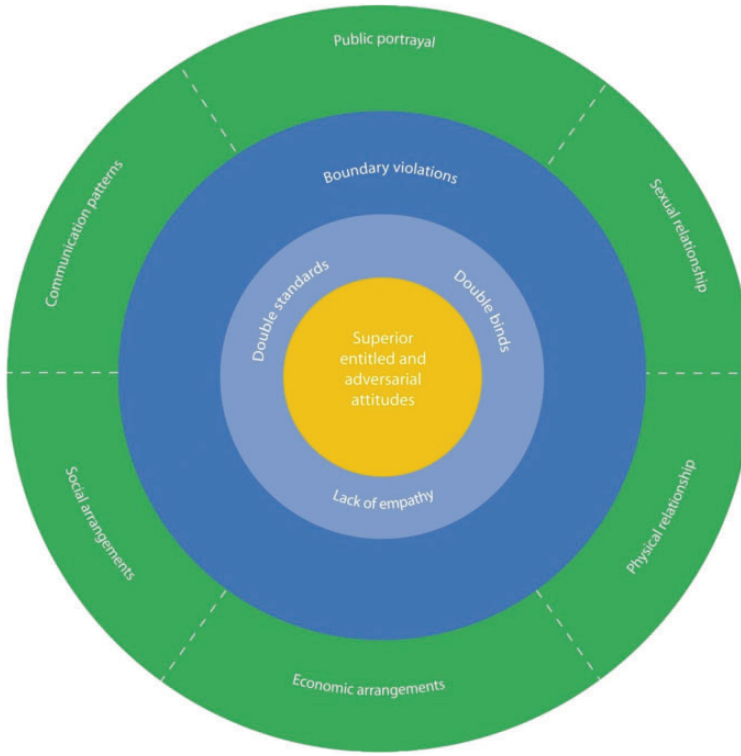

Figure 1: 'The Trap'

The women felt that their partners expected them to adjust and adapt to their partner's needs and described their partners as having an attitude of entitlement. Jane and Sebrina described trying to adjust to their partner's standards and needs:

> I had to conform to his standards at all times. I had my own secret life which kept me sane and able to deal with my other life (Jane, N).
>
> He was the one in charge, it was as if he didn't think I could or even should survive without him telling me what to do (Sebrina, P2).

The women were also unanimous in describing their partners as interacting from an adversarial attitudinal stance. Their partners insisted on always having to win and be in the right. An adversarial and competitive approach to the women was relentless and defeated most of their attempts for equality, autonomy or agency. This was neatly summed up by Sam and Sue:

> I was in a win/lose situation. He always won; I always lost (Sam, P2).
>
> I just accommodated … there was no point in discussing it (Sue, N).

The women detailed living with partners who interacted from a superior, entitled and adversarial attitudinal stance and thus privileged their own needs or standards at the expense of the women. Such double standards underpinned the women's entire experience of living with their partners and were visible in each area of the relationship. When the expectations of their partners were contradictory, the women described being caught in 'no-win' predicaments or double binds. These both created impenetrable yet intangible blocks to the women's efforts to achieve equality, autonomy or agency—something for which the partners had no empathy. The following section is captured by the second circle of the model.

Double standards and double binds

There were three main types of double standards evident in the participants' stories. These were the denial of same rights, the denial of reciprocity and the denial of accountability. Gabrielle and Anita provide simple examples of being denied the same rights by their partners:

> I had to account for my time; he didn't (Gabrielle, N).
>
> He gave me an allowance … I used to have to write out a budget to show I couldn't cope in order to get any more money … he spent what he liked (Anita, P1).

Double standards also forced the women into a caring, adjusting and accommodating role for their partner but denied them any reciprocity for these efforts. Virginia and Jessica explained:

> He wanted me to treat him as if he was special but there was no way he was going to treat me as I was special (Virginia, N).
>
> So it was my job to put out [provide sexual gratification]. You know, that's basically the attitude … and nothing back (Jessica, P2).

The women were also denied accountability by their partners but were expected to hold themselves responsible. Their partners used but refused to accept blame, criticism, analysis, accusations or defamation. The frustration that this created for the women is evident in Genevieve's and Anita's comments:

> … it was like he held up a deflection board to me … any attempt I made to draw his attention to his contribution, or lack of, to something that had gone wrong was put back on me … he could criticize me like crazy if he wanted yet I had no right to (Genevieve, N).
>
> … if there was any problem he would say don't blame me … he was very keen to straight away lay the blame elsewhere … on me (Anita, P1).

These double standards were highly interrelated and effectively prevented the women from achieving equality, autonomy or agency.

he women also described being caught in double binds when their partner's expectations were contradictory. There were three main types of double binds that they felt trapped by: the familiar 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' double bind; the partner's expectation that they focus on and adjust to him but at the same time not depend on him; and being blamed for their response to or the consequences for being subjected to double standards and double binds. The first double bind was evident in the struggle for approval as described by Barbara:

> He was trying to turn me into the doormat but in his other rational times he'd be talking about people who … women who … allowed themselves to become doormats and I used to think, you're nuts … you're actually trying to do that to me by all these things that you are doing … you want me to be your slave, you want me to be your doormat … you want to smash me to bits yet you are criticising other women for being that (Barbara, P2).

The second type of double bind was evident in the lives of all the women within the expectation by their partners that they be the ones that the women focused on and adapted to but not depended on. Hayley aptly describes how this double bind trapped her economically in a no-win situation: '… he didn't want me to work … he would justify it by saying that a woman's place is in the home … that I am neglecting my family and my duties … but he wouldn't give me any money' (Hayley, N).

The third double bind was apparent when the women were reeling from double standards and then blamed for the consequences. Leanne, like the other fifteen women who did not experience physical violence, spoke of a wide range of sexually abusive behaviour by her husband. She described the double standard of her husband's promiscuity yet his monitoring of her sexually and the double bind she found herself in when he forced himself on her sexually, then blamed and defamed her for the consequences:

> Sex wasn't normal with him. He'd watch filthy disgusting porn videos and he would want to do similar. I'd get home and I could hardly force myself up the stairs because of the things I knew he would make me do … he'd force me into it … not physically … and I couldn't say no or he'd get me back in another way which would maybe be worse … I got herpes … he was sleeping with other women … and he blamed me for it … to others (Leanne, N).

The women who were sexually or physically assaulted by their partners all described how they were held responsible for both the assault and its consequences: 'He called me names and pushed aggressively for

sex. If I said no, I was having an affair. Three of my kids are due to … I have got them because he raped me' (Jasmine, P2).

The superior, entitled and adversarial attitudes of their partners allowed the existence of double standards and double binds within the relationship and at the same time denied the women any empathy for the way they were silenced and disadvantaged by them. Considering their partner's expectations seemed arbitrary and inconsistent, the women could not ascertain what would ensure they were treated with respect or provide emotional or physical safety on any level. A further feature of their partner's superior, entitled and adversarial attitudinal style was the way it created a particular behavioural style. This is represented by the third circle of the model.

Behavioural style

The attitudinal style described above created adversarial communication and behaviour patterns irrespective of whether the participants had experienced any physical violence from their partner. The behavioural style included three main types of response to their boundaries or needs.

One type of response was the communication and behaviour patterns which disregarded the women's attempts to negotiate or maintain good boundaries within the relationship. Their partners would refuse the verbal or behavioural engagement that would enable an egalitarian relationship and facilitate clear boundaries. For example, the women described how their partners would withdraw, refuse to communicate or withhold necessary information, empathy or reassurance, and generally avoid their responsibilities to the women:

> He would never get around to fixing my car brakes, even though they were dodgy and he refused to pay to get them fixed … even for the kid's sake (Genevieve, N).
>
> He would quietly walk out or turn the music up (Veronica, P2).

Another type of response by their partners was the communication and behaviour patterns which were more active in that they obstructed the women's attempts to negotiate or maintain good boundaries within the relationship. Such oppositional behaviour was achieved by a wide range of behaviours including the use of self-pity, a focus on their own distress and sense of victimisation at the expense of understanding the situation the women found themselves in, or the use of charm, deflection and blame in order to win and to assert that they were in the right. These behaviours were guilt-inducing and obstructed the verbal or behavioural engagement characteristic of an egalitarian relationship.

Penny experienced persistent physical violence in the relationship but was successfully obstructed from being able to challenge his behaviour

or taking steps to leave with guilt-inducing behaviour: '... his best effort at trying to make me cave in and love him was to take an overdose of insulin one night and lie down on the couch and wait for the coma to kill him' (Penny, P2).

There were also behaviours which simply obstructed the women from achieving what they hoped for because their partners did not support it:

> I wanted to go back to school and finish my final year ... because it meant I would not be home for three days a week. He just put things in place so that I couldn't make it ... there was always something we had to do ... always something that got in the way to get my license ... if I wanted to go somewhere he'd have to take me (Emanon, P2).

The third type of response by their partners was the more overt communication and behaviour patterns which overpowered the women and their attempts to negotiate or maintain healthy boundaries. They were used by their partners to force the upper hand and ensure the women remained obedient and accommodating. Tactics included the use of verbal and physical intimidation through the use of indirect and direct threats, overt deception, deprivation or restriction, and could include physical force or sexual assault.

An experience common to all participants was of being physically or verbally threatened or intimidated. Lola Lucia and Sharni expressed the underlying fear they felt:

> I really did believe he would kill me and the kids (Lola Lucia, N).
>
> I asked him to leave. He threatened to kill all of us and set the house on fire. I was very scared (Sharni, P2).

The behavioural style of their partners disabled the ability of the participants to negotiate or maintain good boundaries within the relationship. All three boundary violations were highly interwoven rather than linear and governed the entire relationship. They played out in such varying and quick-changing combinations that it was very difficult for the women to comprehend let alone respond to. Compounding their confusion was their partner's adversarial and guilt-inducing communication patterns. Critical to the women was monitoring their own behaviour for fear of their partner's hostility and propensity for retaliation. This is well explained by Sebrina:

> Where can I set good boundaries without being repercussed ...? I avoid doing things that might make him hit the roof ... because he gets so spiteful, so cruel and mean ... I was a bit afraid he might hurt me to get the insurance (Sebrina, P2).

A level of fear and trepidation was common to all the women from not knowing how their partners might retaliate. Virginia explains: 'I was always skating on ice ... I didn't know what he was capable of or how far he would go' (Virginia, N).

The apparent intent of the partners, whether unconscious or otherwise, to control the women's lives resulted in the erosion of their culture, exploitation of their resources and deprived them of any egalitarian, non-adversarial collaboration. Of the thirty women interviewed, eight were left by their partner for other women. The relationship came to an end for the other twenty-two women after a series of defining moments such as helpful interventions or finding concrete evidence of duplicity.

The final circle of the model conveys that the attitudinal and behavioural stance of their partners occurred within their physical and sexual relationship, their economic and social arrangements, their communication patterns and in the way their partner publically portrayed them. A forthcoming article describes the similarity of these dynamics to colonisation and explores domestic violence as a process of interpersonal colonisation which the Western legal system unwittingly supports post separation at the expense of women and children.

Discussion

One of the most fundamental findings of this study was the similarity of the women's descriptions of coercive control irrespective of their experience of physical violence. 'The Trap' conveys the commonalities of their partners' attitudinal style which inevitably led to their experience of a disempowering behavioural style within every aspect of their relationship.

The structure and terminology of Kirkwood's (1993) web are heavily drawn upon by 'The Trap' to provide a basic framework that links the more subtle and chronic patterns of behaviour and the overt, episodic incidents of neglect, control or injuries into a comprehensible pattern. Kirkwood's terminology of a web also explains the interwoven, interrelated and complex nature of the dynamics of the relationship that the women in this study experienced.

'The Trap' also concurs with and incorporates the chronic, patterned and entrapping nature of the victimisation process within domestic violence irrespective of physical violence as pointed out by Loring and Myers (1991), Kirkwood (1993), Chang (1995), Smith *et al.* (1995), Almeida and Durkin (1999), Bancroft and Silverman (2002), Stark (2007) and Johnson (2008). Almeida and Durkin (1991) clearly describe domestic violence as an array of tactics that operate in a patterned, chronic, controlling and entrapping manner along a continuum and in concert with one another. This description is visible within 'The Trap' yet is further depicted as not only emerging across the entire relationship; the array and the consequences of different double standards,

double binds and boundary violations and their consequences may actually be mapped out for each aspect of the relationship.

Bancroft and Silverman (2002) explain from their work with men that their overarching attitudinal characteristics of entitlement and superiority lead to a belief that one has special rights and privileges without accompanying reciprocal responsibilities. They deduce that there is therefore a pattern of behaviours that infiltrates the relationships these men have with their partners, including double standards, 'such as the belief that he can have outside sexual relationships but that it is not acceptable for his partner to do so' (Bancroft and Silverman, 2002, p. 8).

'The Trap' draws upon and extends this idea with the addition of adversarial attitudes and their consequences for the entire relationship. Adversarial attitudes were integral to the women's experience in this study of the unremitting desire of their partners to win and be right. They feared standing up to their partners because of the likelihood of hostility and retaliation. The ability of 'The Trap' to name and substantiate a pattern of three different double standards and double binds also allows greater insight into the complexity of how coercive control may operate. Double binds do not feature in the research on domestic violence but 'The Trap' implies that they are an inevitable result of double standards and will permeate the entire fabric of any relationship where a superior, entitled and adversarial attitudinal style is being perpetrated.

Coercive tactics are considered in 'The Trap' as predictable and patterned consequences of the attitudinal stance and are classified as a web of disregarding, obstructing or overwhelming boundary violations. The range of overpowering boundary violations, such as threats, intimidation, force and violence illustrated in the data in this study, are socially recognised as abusive and are well documented by researchers such as Kirkwood (1993), Stark (2007) and Johnson (2008). Yet these tactics are not understood as part of a fast-moving and elaborate pattern of various types of boundary violations. A focus on the entire range of boundary violations possible in each area of a woman's relationship allows for a more nuanced understanding of the way coercive control may operate and its consequences.

Stark (2007) argued convincingly that coercive control is part of a widespread social and economic inequality forced upon women by men. He explains it as a cage, the bars being men's use of psychological subjugation, strategies of violence, intimidation, isolation, exploitation and micromanagement of everyday life. 'The Trap' concurs with and to some extent sums up Stark's ideas into a visual representation conveying how the bars play out and interplay in a woman's life. It echoes his concern that many tactics of coercive control can evade professional assessment and attract no intervention or legal standing.

The typology of domestic violence provided by Johnson (2008) allows the idea of differing levels of coercive control and physical violence within a relationship and provides the framework for the focus in this study on Coercive Controlling Violence and Incipient Coercive Control. 'The Trap' does not dispute Johnson's findings but extends them to depict coercive control as underpinned by the same dynamics irrespective of whether it includes physical violence at any stage of the relationship (such as post separation). 'The Trap' also allows for the possibility of a more concentrated influence of tactics in one area of a woman's life than another. For example, Virginia and Genevieve were 'allowed' more social freedom than other participants yet experienced sexual assault. Gabrielle, Jodie and Penny experienced sexual abuse via disregard and disrespect rather than sexual assault, yet were far more economically deprived and socially constrained than Virginia and Genevieve.

The advantage of 'The Trap' is that it incorporates and extends earlier conceptualisations of non-physical abuse as well as provides a more nuanced lens through which to examine the process of coercive control. It depicts the commonalities underlying a diversity of experience and successfully overrides an incident and injury approach by integrating, but not focusing on or separating itself from, the experience of physical violence. In sum, 'The Trap' provides further insights into how the variety of acts and patterns of behaviours by the participant's partners operated together and reflected on each other (Wangmann, 2011). How this could contribute to the ability of the social work profession to assess for coercive control is described in the following section.

Implications for assessment

Whereas social work has a long-standing commitment to address the issues that arise from the existence of domestic violence in Western society, the traditional definition of domestic violence as synonymous with physical violence still underlies much practice in the field (Laing *et al.*, 2013). Social work needs to consider coercive control within domestic violence as a cross-cutting issue as opposed to a specialty field of practice (Danis and Lockhart, 2003) and research ways to assess for and map the consequences of coercive control for women and children pre and post separation (Allen, 2013; Laing *et al.*, 2013; Stark, 2007).

With regard to 'The Trap', mapping the consequences of coercive control means mapping the consequences of double standards, double binds and boundary violations within every area of the relationship that create inequality for women and children and diminish their life chances. For example, how do these play out in the physical and sexual relationship, the social and economic arrangements, the communication patterns and the way in which the women are publically portrayed?

'The Trap' implies that assessment for coercive control must avoid a reliance on discrete incidents or traditional forms of abuse and observe whether there is a more complex pattern of double standards, double binds and boundary violations operating. Kirkwood's (1993) web suggests that, to understand how coercive control operates in just one aspect of a woman's life, it is imperative to study the interplay across all parts of her life. For example, if there is evidence of just one type of double standard in the communication pattern with her partner, this will prevent equal communication for the woman and will affect every other aspect of their relationship for her as well. 'The Trap' also conveys the idea that, if there is one type of double standard, there could be all three types operating across the entire relationship. Double standards inevitably result it double binds and boundary violations. The pattern may be more overt in some areas of the relationship than others, depending upon the style of her partner.

Assessment for a pattern of coercive control is critical for best practice in domestic violence, particularly as the tactics are often reminiscent of the normative constraints for women in society (Stark, 2007) and can be hard to identify, or for women to articulate. Effective assessment requires social workers to be fully cognisant and critically reflective of their own experiences, assumptions and biases around coercive control and domestic violence in order to work objectively, without preconceived notions or emotional reaction if they need to hold a male accountable or listen deeply to a woman.

The ability to detect the perpetration of a pattern coercive control by a male is also critical to assessment. The women in this study were deeply affected by their partner's lack of empathy and avoidance of responsibility. Their partner's use of obstructing boundary violations such as self-pity, a sense of being victimised, along with using charm and blame blocked and deflected the women's attempts to hold them accountable. These behaviours routinely obstructed any real negotiation or evolution of emotional intimacy within the entire relationship. Bancroft and Silverman (2002) also refer to the men in their practice as adroitly creating sympathy for themselves in the negative portrayal of their partners. Stark (2007) notes how 'controlling partners perceive events through a veil of primary narcissism that suggests that they are the real victims, not their partners, and may persist in claiming to be battered themselves even after being confronted with evidence of the harms they've caused' (Stark, 2007, pp. 246–7). To avoid the temptation to collude with blaming the woman, it is helpful to consider that, despite all protestations to the contrary, mapping out what happens in each area of the relationship and who makes the decisions as to who can decide what (Stark, 2007) will provide a clear picture.

Apart from good assessment tools, social work practitioners must have patient listening and probing skills as well as the ability to

build trust and rapport. Inappropriate victim blaming or unempathic responses will push women deeper into the trap that they are already in (Stark, 2002). Women will not necessarily want or know how to reveal the true state of their relationship (Wangmann, 2011). Coercive ontrol changes their worldview and how they feel about themselves and they may fear retaliation (Laing *et al.*, 2013). The effects of coercive control allow an understanding of why women may appear to behave in ways that are unattractive or destructive to herself or others (Stark, 2007). Although this does not imply that it is acceptable, in the context of her entrapment, it is simply more understandable.

Conclusion

This study found the participants had been trapped within a web of double standards, double binds and boundary violations arising from the attitudinal and behavioural stance of their partners. The consequences were experienced in a patterned and predictable manner, irrespective of whether the women experienced Incipient Coercive Control or Coercive Controlling Violence. The women were not only denied equality, autonomy or agency within each area of the relationship; their partners had no empathy for or insight into how this trapped and disadvantaged them. 'The Trap' provides useful insight into aspects of women's lived experiences of domestic violence that are rarely observed, articulated or understood.

Currently, insufficient knowledge leaves women and children unprotected because of a lack of recognition of the inequality that coercive control perpetrates (Stark, 2007; Allen, 2013). Given social work's mission to work towards social justice and equality, it is fundamental to be able to accurately assess and then decide on best practice for coercive control. A limited conceptualisation 'obstructs overall social development' (Stark, 2007, p. 13) as it weakens the profession's ability to enhance the full citizenship of women.

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