The impact of their life histories on the ways women who have experienced domestic violence decide on and engage with university study

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The impact of their life histories on the ways women who have experienced domestic violence decide on and engage with university study

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (Integrated)

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

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Bachelor of Nursing
Master of Education with Distinction (Adult Education)

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SEPTEMBER 2019
Certification

I, Kelly Lewer, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Social Sciences – School of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Kelly Jane Lewer

5 September, 2019
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Abstract

Domestic violence is a widespread, gendered problem. Within Australia, the publication of statistical information points to increases in the incidence of this form of violence. Domestic violence literature focuses on prevention and understanding. There is a growing interest in the challenges and opportunities for women who choose to leave a violent relationship. There has been little attention, however, given to women who embark upon university study in the aftermath of domestic violence. This study comes at a time of heightened acknowledgement of violence against women, particularly the issue of domestic violence within Australia addressing a clear gap in the current literature.

This inquiry analyses the narratives of nine women, enrolled at universities in New South Wales, Australia. They share the common background of having left a violent relationship. The narratives as the women move from childhood to adulthood focus on educational experiences during three key periods of the women’s lives – before, during and after the experience of domestic violence. They provide the opportunity to understand how the women negotiated the university environment in their own unique ways.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977) concepts of capital, field and habitus provides an insight into the development of their dispositions and capital during these three periods, with their entry and exit of a violent relationship signalling shifts in capital and dispositions. This thesis is about women who successfully engaged with higher education and persisted throughout their studies. It demonstrates how their capital and dispositions changed during and after the experience of domestic violence.

The data for the study was generated through semi-structured interviews, and participant journals. The findings in this thesis point to the motivations, benefits and challenges of university study while rebuilding a life after domestic violence. At the time of the study the majority of the women were post-graduate students or actively studying their second degree.

The study found that with the positive dispositions developed during their childhoods, most women felt comfortable within the university environment. It was evident from the study that changes were made to fit into the environment reflecting their new freedom, safety and capacity to choose as they rebuilt their lives. Importantly, support from their tertiary institutions varied, with most women desiring a less generic
approach to the support needed, and more understanding of domestic violence from professionals at their place of study.

This thesis has major implications for improvements to government and higher education policy and service provision for a unique student cohort who have been impacted by domestic violence.
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Part One
Chapter 1
Introduction

When a woman chooses to leave a violent relationship, often they are presented with opportunities to take on new ventures to improve their independence. Although education is a possible option for this, there is little within the literature to understand how such women make decisions about and experience higher education during this phase of their lives. This thesis will present the retold narratives of nine women from across the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) who shared the common background of having left a violent relationship and were studying at university at the time of the inquiry.

Background and Rationale

Domestic violence is a subset of family violence (NSW Government, 2018). Also known as interpersonal violence, it is characterised by one partner exerting tactics of control over another partner (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2018; NSW Government, 2018). For Indigenous and Torres Strait Island communities it is referred to as ‘family violence’ as this is closer to their understanding that this form of violence can be inclusive of other family members (Phillips & Vandenbroek, 2014). According to the World Health Organisation (2013) domestic violence is a gendered issue, as women are more likely to experience and report this crime. The World Health Organisation suggest that domestic violence occurs across affluent and developing countries alike, resulting in the oppression, violence and death of women.

Violence against women is widespread: domestic and sexual violence, in particular are considered “a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights” (World Health Organisation, 2017, p.1). The first worldwide analysis of statistics on the occurrence of domestic violence by an intimate partner, and non-partner sexual violence was conducted (World Health Organisation, 2013b). Titled, ‘Global and Regional Estimates of Violence against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-Partner Sexual Violence’ (World Health Organisation, 2013), this study indicated that 35% of women globally have experienced physical or sexual violence within a relationship (domestic violence), or non-partner sexual violence. In their response to these figures, the World Health Organisation (2017, p. 1) stated that “most of this violence is intimate partner [domestic] violence.” The
2013 study also demonstrated the impact of domestic violence on women in terms of oppression, injury and in some cases death. Alarmingly, the World Health Organisation (2013b) found that 38% of female homicides globally are committed by intimate male partners. The report also revealed that domestic violence occurs across affluent and developing countries, to women of all cultures, religions and educational backgrounds. In the words of United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon (2008): “No country, no culture, no woman young or old is immune to this scourge” (p. 1).

Countries such as the United Kingdom, United States of America and Australia have similar rates of domestic violence. Comparable surveys - the United Kingdom 2010 to 2011 Homicide, Firearms and Intimate Violence Survey (Smith, Osborne, Lau & Britton, 2012); the United States of America 2011 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, Merrick, Chen & Stevens, 2011); and the Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey (2013b) - show that one in four women, in these countries, experience domestic violence.

Specifically in Australia, the context for this study, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016a) Personal Safety Survey, since the age of 15, one third (33%) of women have experienced domestic violence. Of these, 18% of women, and 4.7% of men have experienced sexual violence by a current or previous partner; 16% of women and 5.9% of men have experienced physical violence by a partner; and 23% of women and 16% of men have experienced emotional abuse within an intimate relationship. In a study of homicide in Australia between 2008 and 2010, over the course of a year, one woman was killed per week by a current or former partner (Chan & Payne, 2013), and such deaths were more likely to occur within the home (Birdsey & Snowball, 2013). In addition, in Australia, domestic violence is the main reason for homelessness among women and children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013). Birdsey and Snowball (2013) suggests that despite such statistics, domestic violence remains an under reported crime. They suggest that failure to report this crime is likely to be because of fear of further violence, and shame by those who experience it. Women, such as those in this inquiry, are likely to have experienced challenges in seeking support and sharing their stories.

While it might seem that the safest and simplest solution would be to flee the relationship, according to scholars such as Chronister and McWhirter (2003), Khaw (2010) and Bell and Naugle (2005), leaving is often the most dangerous time for women, as the risk of violence escalates. In addition, when women leave a violent
relationship there are continuing repercussions, such as housing, legal, financial, parenting, physical and psychological health issues (Ambuel, 2013; Bonomi et al., 2009; Griffin, Resick, & Yehuda, 2005). According to Labronici (2012), adjusting to this life transition requires resilience, determination and courage. Increased research attention has sought to gain deeper understanding into the variety of ways such women rebuild their lives in the aftermath of domestic violence (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Oke, 2008; Pain, 2014). Chronister and McWhirter (2003) argue that, during this time, women are likely to focus on increasing their economic independence, Pain (2014) suggests that during this time women often channel their grief into activism to prevent domestic violence, and in her study of women recovering from violent relationships Wood (2017) found that many women take to helping women in similar situations. In the specific context of education, researchers Horseman (1999, 2004) and Duckworth (2014) have looked at the role of education in providing benefits for women rebuilding their lives post domestic violence. Their research has focused on the experiences of students in basic skills adult education courses. They provide particular insights but thus far other the potential role of other areas of education in this time of transition remain unexplored. Sustained engagement with higher education requires for any student considerably more motivation and what researchers in the field refer to as social and cultural capital than participation in shorter term courses. Yet research would suggest that higher education can make a difference in women’s lives (Stone & O’Shea, 2012; O’Shea, 2008) in terms of economic independence, confidence and opportunities.

If one looks to the higher education, there is currently a plethora of studies on women a range of social and cultural groupings of women as university students, including indigenous women (Gore et al., 2017; O’Shea, Harwood, Kervin, & Humphry, 2013); mature age women (Stone, 2009); women who are first in family to attend university (O’Shea, 2008; O’Shea, 2016); gay and lesbian women (Papadaki, 2016; Skene, Hogan, de Vries, & Goody, 2008); working class students (Reay et al, 2005, 2009); and female international students (Yan & Sendall, 2016). Missing so far from these groupings have been those women who enrol in university post domestic violence. Given the statistics of domestic violence, and the ongoing challenges experienced by women who leave this situation, understanding how these women interact with the university environment as students is a notable absence. Such information could inform policy and service development designed to support this group of students, in making decisions about university and engaging successfully with the university environment.
As someone who has benefited considerably in rebuilding my life through higher education, I decided to address this gap in our knowledge of women who have experienced domestic violence by investigating the experiences of women who were currently successfully negotiating the university environment having left a violent relationship. This thesis presents these experiences as the narratives of nine female university students who share the common prior to enrolling at university.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Much of the higher education literature cited above draws on Bourdieu’s (1977) concepts of capital, field and habitus (O’Shea, 2008, 2016; Reay et al, 2005, 2009) to productively explore how different groups of students fare in university environments, the inequalities that exist and their transformations in their capital, as they engage in education. They have also been used in the domestic violence literature to understand the impact of domestic violence on social capital (Larance & Porter, 2004). The use of Bourdieu in these contexts provided a warrant for exploring similar issues in my study. The concepts of capital, field and habitus provided a lens by which to analyse the changes and experiences of the nine women in my study as they transition through three phases of their life: their early school and family experiences; a violent relationship; and deciding to study and then engaging with university.

According to Roth (2018), Bourdieu developed the concepts of capital, field and habitus as a result of research in the French society in the 1900s, but as Reay (1998) points out, they are still widely used, particularly in educational research to explain Bourdieu (1985) viewed equality amongst individuals as simply not possible in society due to opposing forces and differences. These variances influence access to resources and class positioning within society (Bourdieu, 1985). For example, as Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) conclude from their study of working and middle class prospective university students in London, the aspirations and ways of choosing higher education for the working class young people in her class differ from those from the middle and higher class. They found that working class young people tended to moderate their aspirations based on where they felt they belonged, in comparison to middle class students who were more willing to look beyond to further opportunities. This literature inspired the use of Bourdieu’s concepts for this study, in addition to an increase in domestic violence literature using the concepts to understand the impact of domestic violence on women’s capital. Although Bourdieu’s theory of capital seems to suggest
that access to resources is relatively fixed depending on the social class into which you are born, others have argued against such determinism (Larance & Porter, 2004). These scholars suggest that Bourdieu’s concepts can be interpreted as allowing for change. This is an important understanding for my research which specifically investigates the development and shifts in capital for women influenced by their early family and schooling experiences, a period of living in a violent domestic relationship(s) and then how this impacts their engagement with university study. In the following section, I will outline the concepts, capital, field and habitus, and indicate their relevance for my research, including the questions that have guided my study and the analysis of the women’s narratives.

**Capital.** Capital refers to the different levels of resources and assets that people acquire during childhood and throughout their lives (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bourdieu, the amount of capital a person has determines their positioning within society. Inequality and differences in class are produced through the different distribution of capital. Education is considered a classed practice, where pathways are chosen, based on amounts of capital (Davey, 2009; Reay, David & Ball, 2000). The concept of capital can provide ways of understanding classed preferences and opportunities and hence how inequalities are produced in and through education. However as O’Shea (2016) points out, transformation within the educational environment is possible as students adjust to fit in, this opens up the possibility for change. For the women in my study, it is clear how their capital changes over time. Like the women in Larance and Porter’s (2004) study, capital considerably diminished during their experience of domestic violence – but was (re)constituted as they engage in tertiary study.

This inquiry then is particularly interested in mapping these changes in capital. It explores the following questions: How is capital accrued in early life negated or suppressed by life’s traumatic experiences? Can capital still be utilised to assist women post violence to negotiate education? To assist in answering these questions the following section will outline each form of capital, in the order that Bourdieu (1986) presents them - economic, cultural and social.

**Economic capital.** Bourdieu's (1986) concept of economic capital refers to wealth and social standing in the form of money and currency which can be used within a society. He claims economic capital is instantly transferable into cash; however, it can also be thought of as institutionalised in the form of real estate. Some forms of cultural
and social capital, as explained in Bourdieu’s publication, ‘The Forms of Capital’ (1986), can become economic capital if they are able to be changed into money (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital is commonly perceived as the only determining factor to a person’s social status. However, Bourdieu argues against this, instead insisting that the three forms of capital (economic, cultural and social) should be considered collectively in order to gain a thorough understanding of how a person negotiates new environments. As Bourdieu suggests, for this inquiry all forms of capital will be considered.

**Cultural capital.** Cultural capital is the knowledge, skills and competency resources one has that can be transferable to economic capital. The concept of cultural capital was initially developed by Bourdieu (1986) in response to research where he was attempting to explain the inequalities amongst children in education. He wanted to know why particular children succeeded at school, and how this was related to their social class. He theorised that family is the place where attitudes, meaning and values (which he designated ‘cultural capital’) are passed on to children and given value according to the social class of the family. Cultural capital is acquired through and develops during childhood schooling and education (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital occurs in three forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalised capital. These forms of are interrelated and overlap each other:

**Embodied capital** refers to physical mannerisms such tastes, personality, comfort, speech, and skills. As Bourdieu (1984) states: “Nothing more clearly affirms one's 'class', nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music ... there is no more 'classificatory' practice than concert-going, or playing a 'noble' instrument ” (p. 18). In this quote, Bourdieu (1984) uses music as an example, of how embodied capital ‘embodies’ the performance of class and also serves as a form of distinction which separates one class from another. In this case taste in music, where someone attends a concert, the skill of playing an instrument and the choice of instrument all tell a story about someone’s preferences and social standing. Adapting this theorising to the context of education then, one’s accent, preference for subjects (e.g. languages over vocational subjects), the school attended, and choices of clothing (hence one of the arguments for uniforms) can tell a story about preferences and social standing within the context of education.

**Objectified capital** includes physical choices such as, hairstyles and outward appearance, and other material belongings which reflect culture, such as ownership of
artwork and particular forms of literature. This form of cultural capital can also be transferred to economic capital in terms of the value of items. It also carries symbolic value which can assist a person to fit into various groups of people. For example, if a person has a rare record collection, their standing with those who appreciate music is enhanced (Bourdieu, 1986). Within an educational context, this could refer to material possessions which are owned or accessed by students (such as, the latest computer, a late model car).

*Institutionalised capital* refers to education, specialised knowledge, credentials and qualifications (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The value of this form of capital can be influenced by the institution the qualification comes from, as some are more recognised than others (Bourdieu, 1986). In the education context, this could refer to how previous education is recognised or valued. For example, private education may be held in higher regard than public education due to the classed value and prestige that is attached to certain schools or contexts.

*Social capital.* According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital refers to both the size of a person’s social network and the amount of capital or resources the members of the network own. Being a member of a social network gives a person rights to the resources of the group. These resources can be converted to economic capital but can be also institutionalised in the form of particular social titles.

*Habitus.* Bourdieu (1990) describes habitus as “society written into the body, into the biological individual” (p. 63). According to Bourdieu (1990), it refers to developed attitudes or dispositions. Habitus is considered to be fixed or at an unconscious level and acquired over time from childhood (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu (1984) reminds us that habitus is a helpful concept when considering classes in society, as it is influenced and shaped by the classed practices within the family.

Scholars raise the issue that there could be a problem in viewing habitus in isolation as it occurs at a deep personal level (Davey, 2009; Reay, 2004). Reay (2004) suggests that Bourdieu’s concepts were intended as a “conceptual toolbox” (p. 234). She refers to Bourdieu’s own words where he presents the concepts as an equation: “(Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101). Reay’s (2004) explanation of this equation provides a helpful insight into how to use the concepts of Bourdieu in relation to one another: “My understanding of this equation is one in which habitus lies beneath cultural capital generating its myriad manifestations. There is a
similarly close dynamic between habitus and field” (pp. 435-6). In other words, habitus is best viewed when all the capital, field and habitus are used collectively as a lens to view how a person interacts within certain environments.

Field. Bourdieu (1990) views society as a multi-dimensional space made up of a number of different fields. These fields are sites of inequality where people compete for and utilise capital. This competition influences how people behave (Bathmaker,2015). As a person crosses into another field, they adapt to the rules (known as ‘doxa’) of that particular field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), their life being a part of a variety of different fields including home, work and education. Higher education specifically is a field of inequalities with a set of rules, which students need to adapt to.

Given the depth at which habitus occurs within a person (Davey, 2009); it can be considered to be fixed or unchangeable. Bourdieu (1990), however, allows for possibility of transformation. According to Bourdieu (1990), when a person enters a new field, their habitus is transformed (Bourdieu, Accardo, & Ferguson, 1999). He terms such fluctuation as “a habitus divided against itself” (Bourdieu et al, 1999, p. 511). Scholars such as Reay et al. (2009) also suggest that transformation can occur, especially in times of change: “when an individual encounters an unfamiliar field, habitus is transformed” (p. 1103). Furthermore, according to Davey (2009), “habitus is open to possibilities and potentials rather than fixed certainties” (p.277). From this, we learn that times of change can lead to fluctuations of habitus. This study is interested in women who are in a time of change in the aftermath of domestic violence. More detail is provided on the specific concepts as they apply to stages of the women’s narratives in Part Two (Chapters Four, Five and Six).

Using Bourdieu’s concepts as a theoretical framework for this inquiry prompted the following research questions.

Research Questions

The main research question, which guided the project, is:

**How do the life histories of women who have experienced domestic violence impact the ways they decide on, and engage with, university study?**

The following sub-questions guided the research design and the analysis of research data:

1. **How have the women’s life histories influenced their decision to undertake university?**
2. *How has their economic, cultural and social capital influenced how they negotiated university study?*

3. *How did university study impact the ways women, who have experienced domestic violence, rebuild their lives?*

To address these questions, I will employ a feminist narrative inquiry approach to collect and analyse the narratives of nine women from across New South Wales, who identified as having left a violent relationship, and were enrolled in university at the time of my study.

**Outline of the Chapters**

This thesis is made up of three parts and contains seven chapters. Part One sets the foundation and background of the inquiry. Chapter One provides an overview of the inquiry, providing background information, purpose and significance of the inquiry. The theoretical framework has been outlined in this chapter as it forms a fundamental framework to the conception of the project including the research questions. In Chapter Two, a review of the domestic violence and higher education literature demonstrates the gap in knowledge this inquiry addresses while gaining a greater understanding of university students who have experienced domestic violence. Chapter Three explains the use of feminist narrative inquiry as a helpful methodology to ethically answer the research questions established in Chapter One. In addition, the particular characteristics of this methodology are explained, as is the procedure undertaken to recruit the women, collect, present and analyse the narratives.

Part Two of the thesis presents the narratives of the nine women who successfully engaged with higher education and then successfully persisted, through documenting the life histories of the nine women as they move from childhood to adulthood. According to Creswell (2013) life histories are typically presented in stage-specific patterns, where timing of changes are crucial. He refers to these periods as “multiple episodes” (p.73). I have divided the women’s narratives into key periods of time or ‘multiple episodes’ to better capture the changes in their capital and dispositions before, during and after the experience of domestic violence. Together these ‘episodes’ help to explain how each woman negotiated the university environment in her own unique way. Each of the following three chapters focuses on relevant experiences during three key periods of the women’s lives, with their entry into and exit
from a violent relationship signalling major shifts in capital and dispositions. These periods or episodes are as follows:

- before the experience of domestic violence (Chapter Four);
- during the experience of domestic violence (Chapter Five); and
- after the experience of domestic violence: engagement with university study (Chapter Six).

Chapter Four presents the narratives of education before the experience of domestic violence. These narratives detail education experiences from childhood, how the women’s experiences of their families and schooling influenced the formation of their dispositions towards education and their assessment of their own capacities and confidence as learners. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the aspirations the women had for their futures before they began the relationships, which so deeply affected the next period of their lives. Chapter Five takes up the narratives of the women’s stories from when they entered their violent relationships. These narratives provide insights into changes in capital experienced by the women during this time and document any attempts (or not) at further education. Chapter Six presents the narratives from the time the women left the violent relationships and entered a period of transition and rebuilding. It details their motivation for and enrolment at university, how they experienced the university environment and interacted with other students and academics and the consequences of this for rebuilding their lives.

Finally, Part Three contains Chapter Seven, which concludes the thesis with contributions to literature and theory, and recommendations for improvements in the way university students who have experienced domestic violence are acknowledged and supported. A platform for further research is identified, as is a new approach to supporting such students.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

This inquiry analyses the narratives of nine women, enrolled at universities in New South Wales, Australia sharing the common background of having left a violent relationship. The purpose of this chapter is to locate the inquiry within two separate, broad bodies of literature: domestic violence literature, and higher education literature. Domestic violence literature has a substantial focus on prevention, ongoing consequences, and ways of rebuilding if a woman decides to leave a violent relationship. Higher education literature relevant to this inquiry includes that which focuses on access, equality, student experience, and improvements in policies and services for “underrepresented” (Chojenta, 2017, p. 86) social and cultural groups (Duckworth, 2014; O’Shea, 2016; Stone, 2009).

Like this study, much of the higher education research draws on Bourdieu’s concepts of capital, field and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) to understand how students adapt to the higher education environment. Upon searching the literature, it became apparent that university students who have experienced domestic violence are an absent group, with little research about their experiences, and the impact university study can have on their rebuilding of their lives. Instead where the higher education literature mentions ‘violence’ towards women, it is in the context of sexual harassment or student welfare concerns when women experience domestic violence while they are studying (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017; The University of Adelaide, 2017).

Domestic Violence Literature

The nature of the problem

Realising the enormity of the issue, the Australian Government has made recent efforts to invest in the prevention of domestic violence and support for those leaving violent relationships. In 2015, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull pledged $100 million to stop domestic violence. In the same year Ms. Rosie Batty, was awarded Australian of the Year, for speaking out about domestic violence, following the murder of her son at the hands of his father (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). She used this role to advocate for women who were experiencing domestic violence, and successfully campaigned for the Australian school curriculum to introduce education
about respectful relationships. According to Batty (2015): “by teaching children, we can change the culture of violence against women” (p. 1).

There have been numerous reports and commissions into domestic violence, all of which have acknowledged that domestic violence is a significant issue in Australian society. Most recently in response to increasing concern over the rates of domestic violence, the Victorian State Government undertook a Royal Commission into family and domestic violence, releasing findings in March 2016, which pointed to the need for improvement in prevention of domestic violence and support for those affected (Victoria, 2016b). These recommendations included improved societal education and prevention strategies, involving “healthy relationship” education in schools. Education, leave allowances, and financial counselling were also included, allowing women the ability to seek increased support in the workplace if they experience domestic violence and/or leaving a violent relationship. Importantly for my inquiry, was the recommendation for the Victorian Government to actively seek an extension to the Australian Government Higher Education Contribution Scheme to benefit those employed within domestic violence support services. The implication of this scheme is an increased number of university qualified professionals employed within the domestic violence sector.

In 2015, the Queensland Government undertook the Domestic and Family Violence Taskforce Report (Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland, 2015) under the chairperson of former Governor General Ms Quentin Bryce. This report provided 140 recommendations, and like the Victorian Government (2016a), the Queensland Government implemented all recommendations. Similar to Victoria’s Royal Commission, these recommendations include improved education within schools around healthy respectful relationships, workplace support and entitlements. In addition, the Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland’s report (2015) recommended increased education about domestic violence in university undergraduate degrees. It was also recommended that the government provide subsidies for education and training opportunities for those experiencing domestic and family violence. From these provisions it would seem that the Victorian and Queensland governments of the time recognised that higher education can play a role in addressing the issue of domestic violence through assisting women to increase their financial independence and wellbeing.
The New South Wales Government has also implemented a number of initiatives. In 2016, NSW Ministry of Health (2016) report titled ‘NSW Domestic and Family Violence Prevention and Early Intervention Strategy 2017 – 2021’. This document provides a range of strategies designed to reduce domestic violence, and pledges $20 million to address the issue. Also during 2016, the New South Wales Government Department of Premier and Cabinet (2016) released a webpage addressing strategies to reduce domestic violence perpetrators who reoffend. Then in late 2018, the Australian Government amended the Fairwork Act 2009 to include five days of annual unpaid family and domestic violence leave. As reported by Bedo (2018), the New South Wales government then, increased this leave entitlement for government employees to ten days of annual paid leave. In the words of the New South Wales Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, “paid work is critical in providing financial stability to people experiencing domestic and family violence” (p. 1). These various recommendations by the different levels of government within Australia show that domestic violence is an issue on the political agenda. Importantly for my inquiry, within these recommendations is the inclusion of education as a strategy to assist women to rebuild their lives.

Feminist scholarship has long recognised that domestic violence is widespread within society (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2011, 2018). The standpoint that women are disadvantaged, or in the translated words of prominent feminist Simone de Beauvoir (1953), “This world has always belonged to males” (Borde & Malovany-Chevallier, 2010, p. 440) has led to further understandings of domestic violence. In the 1970s, the ‘battered women’s movement’ emerged as the United States of America and United Kingdom feminist movements recognised domestic violence as a widespread issue. In both countries this movement began fundraising and opening refuge shelters for women fleeing domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2011).

U.S based academic Mary E Gilfus (1999) discusses the history of how feminist scholarship has understood domestic violence. A pioneer of this scholarship, she describes her own involvement and observations:

For the past 25 years I have been involved, in one way or another, in the movement to end violence against women. I have spent most of those years crossing the boundaries back and forth as a social activist, a social work
practitioner, a researcher, a teacher, and a survivor interested in using the skills, knowledge, and power of all those roles to help women and end the violence. (p. 1238)

Gilfus (1999) explains that as the ‘battered women’s’ movement commenced, information about domestic violence was scarce:

In the early years of this wave of feminism, we struggled to name and document the reality of violence in women’s lives to prove the existence of so much hidden and privatised harm in the face of public and professional denial. (p. 1239-40)

Academics turned to medical trauma, and returning soldier theories to explain trauma and control. Although such attempts are helpful to explain the impact of domestic violence, Gilfus (1999) explains that the resilience and agency of such women also must be considered. In her words:

If we are to empower women, we must view women as whole beings embedded in strong social and historical contexts, that often give rise to their victimisation and strengths. Our research must be informed by women’s capacity for agency, resistance and self-determination. (p. 1255)

In 1984, feminist scholars, Pence, Paymar and McDonnell from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (based in Duluth, Minnesota) produced a model, depicting domestic violence. While facilitating a program for both perpetrators and those who had experienced domestic violence, they conducted a series of focus groups for 200 participants. From these groups they listened to the participants’ stories and recorded the most common experiences of abuse. The analysis of this data was then presented as the Power and Control Wheel (see Appendix A), representing the most common experiences (or tactics of domestic violence) amongst the focus groups (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2018). These tactics included the use of intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, children, male privilege, economic abuse, coercion and threats and minimising, denying and blaming. These tactics are represented as equal
sections of the wheel, while the outer ring of the wheel depicts the visible violence of physical and sexual violence.

The Power and Control Wheel is now an internationally recognised model which presents the pattern of controlling behaviour, from one partner in a relationship, as tactics of physical and sexual abuse (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2011, 2018). It shows that domestic violence is not an issue of losing control but rather gaining control over another person or being controlled by another person. This model continues to be widely used to this day to define domestic violence, and is the basis for defining domestic violence for this inquiry. Herman (1992) also defines domestic violence as a pattern of control. In her words:

Captivity, which brings the victim into prolonged contact with the perpetrator, creates a special type of relationship, one of coercive control. This is equally true whether the victim is rendered captive primarily by physical force (as in the case of prisoners and hostages), or by a combination of physical, economic, social, and psychological means (as in the case of religious cult members, battered women, and abused children). The psychological impact of subordination to coercive control may have many common features, whether that subordination occurs within the public sphere of politics or within the supposedly private (but equally political) sphere of sexual and domestic relations. (p. 378)

Although it is not clear from the statistics how the location of domestic violence (private or public) influences reporting, from the United Kingdom, Pain (2014) suggests that a residential premise or home is a hidden and private space, and that experiencing violence as an intimate partner in this context creates a position of further oppression for those who experience domestic violence. Similarly, Morgan and Thapar-Björkert (2006), on the basis of their analysis of the narratives of 13 women who had experienced domestic violence, found that the experience of domestic violence within the private context of family had further silenced the women’s voices beyond the actual experience of violence. This powerlessness may also explain the ongoing impact in the form of chronic fear (Pain, 2014), and loss of self (Oke, 2008) by those who have experienced domestic violence.
Leaving a violent relationship.
It may seem that the easiest and safest solution would be to remove oneself from a violent relationship, however this is a misconception because leaving domestic violence is complicated and dangerous (Brisbane Domestic Violence Service., 2018). According to Khaw (2010), who conducted a study with 25 women who had left a violent relationship, leaving such a relationship involves five stages. The first and second involve emotional disconnection from the violent partner, the third stage includes understanding the impact of the violence and preparing to remove oneself from the relationship, the fourth stage is returning to the relationship (this is likely to occur multiple times), and the fifth stage is leaving and remaining out of the relationship for more than six months.

Bell and Naugle (2005) argue that the difficulties in removing oneself from a violent relationship can occur for a variety of reasons including fear, isolation, parenting pressures, attachment and promises from the violent partner, cultural pressures, economic concerns and legal issues. In addition, they point out that, even if women are able to leave and remain out of the relationship, they are at a heightened risk of harm. For example, Humphreys and Thiara (2003) conducted a study which interviewed over 100 women who had left a violent relationship. They found that over three-quarters of the women experienced ongoing abuse and pestering from their ex-partners up to 12 months after separation, with one third of those suffering ongoing post-separation violence after 12 months separation. Keeping the women in my inquiry safe by only including women who had been separated for at least three years was important to its ethical conduct (see Chapter Three). Even with this provision, some of the women still reported ongoing harassment from their ex partners.

There is a strong connection between leaving a violent relationship and homelessness, with women and their children often left in the position of having to leave their home in order to be safe. A document titled, ‘The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness’, published by Commonwealth of Australia (2008), suggests that domestic and family violence is reported as a chief cause of homelessness for women and children who have fled the family home. In their survey of 159 homelessness support services in South Australia and Western Australia Walsh and Douglas (2008) found that the top reasons people in these services ended up without a home, were financial hardship and domestic violence. In another example, Bruton and Tyson (2018) interviewed 12 women who had left a violent relationship. They found
that after the experience of domestic violence the women in their study were left fearful of continuing threats and with reduced access to money. During the aftermath of domestic violence, reduced access to financial resources can in itself be a form of ongoing control and abuse as former partners refuse access to bank accounts and child support. The experience of domestic violence and the ongoing threat from former partners in the aftermath of domestic violence reach into women’s lives, post-separation, continuing to impact women’s choices. The dangers and difficulties in leaving a violent relationship provides a context for this inquiry by pointing to the ways these might impact women’s choices of education and careers as they try to rebuild their lives.

When women do leave a violent relationship, in addition to homelessness and safety concerns, there are many new challenges such as single parenting, legal, financial challenges and chronic illness (Ambuel, 2013). There are now many studies which demonstrate the ongoing physical and psychological challenges which women face well after leaving violent relationships (Bonomi et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2005; Mertin, Moyle, & Veremeenko, 2014). For example, Bonomi et al. (2009) analysed data from United States population-based National Violence against Women Surveys (1995/1996). They found a range of chronic physical and psychological conditions such as fractures, head injuries, gastrointestinal conditions and depression as potential results from domestic violence. Griffin et al. (2005) found there was a link between physical and psychological conditions, finding there were alterations in cortisol suppression (brain chemical levels) in women who had experienced domestic violence. This imbalance can lead to numerous psychological consequences, which are widely documented within the literature, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and low self-esteem (Laing, Irwin, & Toivonen, 2010; Oke, 2008; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; Pain, 2014).

Rebuilding a life.

Within the domestic violence literature (including studies from outside of Australia) the term ‘rebuilding’ is often used to describe the time following the decision to leave a violent relationship, however, there are a variety of ways that this term is described. Pain (2014) describes moving forward, Oke (2008) writes about self-discovery, and Anderson, Renner, and Danis (2012) focus on growth and resilience. Pain discusses
what happens after leaving a violent relationship. In a theme she terms “Aftermath: rebuilding” (p. 141), she describes rebuilding as “circular and zigzagging”. By this she means that emotions can be up and down as those who leave a violent relationship regain their control. One of the emotions Pain highlights is an ongoing sense of fear long after the abusive relationship has ended. Pain’s explanation of emotions is important for this inquiry because it captures the possible fluctuations that the women may experience post-domestic violence.

From a psychological perspective, the resilience required to move on and seize such opportunities has been an area of interest. Research from Humphreys (2003), Anderson et al (2012) and Senter and Caldwell (2002) describe how the psychological concept of resilience is relevant in understanding how women who have left a violent relationship rebuild their lives. For example, Humphreys (2003) invited 50 women residing in a refuge shelter to complete the ‘Resilience Scale’ (Wagnild & Young, 1993) which assesses “personal competence and acceptance of self and life” (Humphreys, 2003, p. 142). The three statements rated the highest among the 37 women were “I am determined” (pp. 144-5), “It’s okay if there are people who don’t like me” (p.145), and “I feel proud that I have accomplished things in my life” (p. 145). Humphrey’s argues that the women’s responses indicated that they had “strengths and resourcefulness during times of great adversity” (p.148). Humphreys (2003) argues for the importance of regarding “battered women from the framework of their strengths” (p. 148). This is a position that I have taken in investigating the trajectories of the women in my study as they undertake university education: what have been the strengths that the women bring to their engagement with higher education?

Similar to Humphrey’s (2003) focus on resilience, Anderson et al (2012) used a mixed-methods approach to understand how 37 women recovered from violent relationships. Using the results of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003), combined with qualitative data generated from interviews, they demonstrated that for the women in their study, although the rebuilding process took enormous strength, they also experienced personal growth: “in rebuilding their lives they experienced growth in their self-awareness, faith, and interpersonal relationships” (p. 1289).

It is this self-awareness or “rediscovery of self” (p. 555) which was a key finding in Senter and Caldwell (2002) study which explored stages of personal change after leaving a violent relationship. Senter and Caldwell (2002) conducted a
phenomenological study of nine women who had left a violent relationship. The participants participated in two interviews with open ended questions. From their analysis of the data, Senter and Caldwell (2002) identified 12 themes. Most pertinent to this inquiry is the theme of self-focus and development. This often occurred prior to a stage of new opportunities in terms of motivations, goals and ventures. In their words: “Once the women recognized that their identities had been fragmented in the relationship, an integration process began that allowed them to awaken, explore, experiment, and engage themselves in practices that were previously denied to them.” (Senter & Caldwell, p. 555). These different studies all point to stages of recovery post domestic violence. They provide a lens through which to understand how the women in my inquiry came to study and managed that study at university.

The role of employment and formal education post domestic violence

The power and control experienced within a violent relationship impacts women’s livelihoods in terms of their education and careers (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003). Chronister and McWhirter (2003) apply Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory to the women’s capacity to obtain education and career goals post domestic violence literature, to understand the lived experiences of women in violent relationships. Using this theory, they were able to identify three influences which were important to obtaining career goals: a person’s background; status such as social class and gender; and learning experiences. Importantly for my inquiry, they surmise that “a battered woman’s expectations for education, work or career related activities are likely to be influenced by the anticipated response of her abuser.” (p.420). In other words, it is likely that women will moderate their vocational and educational decisions to keep the peace and avoid further abuse. According to Chronister and McWhirter (2003):

In comparison, ‘battered women’ who are enrolled in academic courses may not be able to focus in class and successfully perform on tests, lowering both self-efficacy and output expectations. Abusers may prevent women from completing assignments, studying and purchasing required education materials.” (p. 420)
Later, Lantrip, Luginbuhl, Chronister, and Lindstrom (2015) used a case study methodology to understand the impact of domestic violence on career performance and progression in four women aged between 44 and 55 in the United States. All participants had recently undertaken a counselling and support program for those who have left a violent relationship. From this program they were given journals to assist with self-reflection. These journals, along with semi-structured interviews formed the means of data for the study. The interview questions largely focused on the women’s careers during their violent relationship, however there were some questions which addressed the impact of leaving a violent relationship. Lantrip et al (2015) found that, within their relationships, the women’s career performance and progression were disadvantaged due to the control exerted by their partners. In their words: “All participants described how their abusive partners, and the consequences of abuse, interfered with, undermined, and destroyed multiple aspects of their career self-efficacy, identity and interest development, planning, and goal pursuit and attainment” (p. 595).

The five overarching themes from the case studies painted a picture of how the experience of domestic violence stifled career opportunity. In terms of this thesis these themes clearly have a relationship to the impact domestic violence can have on education opportunities: “sabotaged job search and career planning” (p. 596); “interfered with job performance” (p. 596); “constrained career opportunities” (p. 597); “destroyed professional/career identity and confidence” (p. 598); “undermined professional competence and reputation” (p. 598); and “sabotaged career maintenance and advancement” (p. 599). The consequence of these actions was that the women largely moderated their career choices to prevent further abuse. For this inquiry the disruption caused to the careers and education of women during a violent relationship provides a context to explain the experiences of the women in my study during a time of rebuilding post domestic violence and how these may have impacted their educational choices and their experiences of university.

A number of scholars point out how engaging in new opportunities such as employment and formal education can lead to increased confidence and financial independence for women. This sense of independence can contribute to the rebuilding process and resilience following domestic violence (see Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Javaherian, Krabacher, German, & Andriacco, 2007; Oke, 2008). Oke (2008), for example, found that for the women in her study education made a considerable contribution in the process of rebuilding a life. Her cross-cultural feminist narrative
study of Australian and Mongolian Women who had left a violent relationship sought to compare their experiences in order to understand the similarities and differences in the oppression of women in the two cultures, and the ways they rebuilt their lives in the aftermath of domestic violence. Oke (2008) interviewed 22 women (eleven from Mongolia and eleven from Australia), three times over a two-year period and used narratives derived from the interview transcripts as her data. From there she conducted a thematic analysis and found ten overarching themes:

- Women's stories of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood: the naive self;
- Violation and survival: the divided self and the lost thread of meaning;
- Breaking down and breaking through: the lost self and the finding of new meanings, the beginnings of recovery;
- Reconnecting in the context of family, friends and acquaintances;
- Legal issues: women's encounters with the criminal justice system and the family law court;
- Women's interactions with medical and helping professionals;
- Women connecting and journeys of narrative identity within group contexts;
- Reconnecting with the self through reading, writing and inner, spiritual and philosophical practices and ideas;
- Commonality and narrative identity in the context of study, work, travel and relationships;
- Narrative identity, reflections and plots. (p. 421)

These themes provide new understandings about women’s life histories, their development of identity and experiences of rebuilding.

The most notable similarity between the two groups of women was that due to the experience of domestic violence: “Every woman lost her narrative identity or sense of continuity of self to overwhelming embodied emotional experiences such as anxiety, depression, confusion and self-blame.” (p. 152). However, like the stages of personal growth Senter and Caldwell (2002) identify, Oke (2008) also found that most of the women experienced a “breaking down and breaking through”, a period when they experienced a dramatic fluctuation from feeling helpless to an increase in their sense of identity and motivation to take on new ventures.
Importantly for my inquiry, Oke (2008) identifies a theme, which she calls “commonality and narrative identity in the context of study, work, travel and relationships” (p. 151). This theme refers to the vocational experiences her participants discussed during their interviews. Although not all her participants were students, and her study did not focus specifically on the student experience, Oke found that the women who did choose to engage with education experienced “a sense of empowerment, purpose, agency and independence, the perfect antidote to being controlled” (p. 153). Furthermore, Oke found that education “enabled a new life course, new knowledge, reconnection with the world and a strengthened, empowered narrative identity” (p. 153). Again, Oke (2008) surmises “undertaking education, for the majority of the women, enabled a new life course, new knowledge, reconnection with the world and a strengthened, empowered narrative identity” (p. 153). Oke’s narrative inquiry sets up the opportunity for further research to explore the student experience for women who have experienced domestic violence. Aspects of Oke’s methodology were helpful to my inquiry and are explored further in Chapter 3.

Javaherian et al (2017) and Costello, Chung and Carson (2005) point to employment and careers as key to women’s development of a new sense of self on leaving a violent relationship. Other studies have pointed to the need for services to support women’s transition into being independent and taking control of their lives. For example, Chronister et al. (2004) focus on the likelihood that women who have left violent relationships will turn to career counselling. In this article, they argue that vocational research, which addresses the post domestic violence period, has the potential to have a broad societal impact. In their words:

Given the role that career-development interventions may play in enhancing battered women’s economic independence, vocational research that addresses social justice issues, informs policy and empowers battered women in their career-related and personal-life decision making can make significant contribution to domestic-violence prevention efforts. (p. 905)

This quote suggests that supporting women to become professionals may assist more broadly as the women are likely to choose professions within domestic violence prevention and support and bring their experience to help others.

Career advancement after leaving a violent relationship, however, is not considered to be straightforward. Chronister and McWhirter (2006) researched two
career interventions for 73 women who have experienced domestic violence. The group that was given additional content, geared towards understanding the experience and impact of domestic violence, had more understanding of the impact of domestic violence and better progression towards achieving their goals. In their words: “Battered women likely need support to help them become more critically aware of the effects of domestic violence on their lives and goal achievement.” (p. 159). They found that such women are likely to need support around awareness of how the ongoing consequences might impact their lives and future achievements.

As discussed earlier in this literature review, Lantrip et al (2015) undertook a case study analysis to understand the career disruption for women who had left a violent relationship. Importantly for my inquiry, from the interview questions that focused on their lives post domestic violence, Lantrip et al (2015) found barriers to career advancement in the aftermath of domestic violence, including: “mental health” which encompassed anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, “[e]motional consequences [of the violence] and confidence”; low self-esteem and self-blaming and discrimination based on stage of life and age”. The older women in the study found it more difficult to find employment, citing “financial considerations” and lack of support, which mostly occurred due to a reluctance to share their situation with support workers (pp. 599-601). Women who engage in higher education post domestic violence may experience such barriers.

**Literature on Domestic violence during university study.**

Domestic violence and university study is mentioned within the literature only as a context affecting students and their engagement with university study during the period of abuse. For example, The University of Chicago (2019) has clear policies related to gendered violence and student experience of violence. Similarly, the University of Exeter’s (2019) website indicates policies related to domestic violence and sexual assault. Within Australian universities are following a similar trend with a variety of policies and services which are focused on responding to students who are currently experiencing domestic violence. For example, The University of Adelaide (2017) provides a webpage which defines domestic violence, and links to various support services and government resources.

Recently Australian universities, have engaged in an increased dialogue around the issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. In 2017, the results from a national
survey were presented by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2017). This survey was conducted at the request of 39 Australian universities and provided an understanding of sexual assault and harassment at Australian universities. While sexual assault and domestic violence are separate issues, sexual assault can occur within relationships as a tactic of domestic violence (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2011; NSW Government, 2018). The results from the survey reflected that of society, with concerning levels of sexual assault recorded. For example, 51% of students were sexually harassed during the year of 2016, and 6.9% were sexually assaulted during 2015 and 2016, with women three times more likely to experience sexual assault. Although the survey did not ask specific questions about domestic violence, 10% percent of the reported sexual assaults occurred at university residential settings. Like domestic violence, the sexual assaults were under reported, with 87% of students choosing to not disclose assaults. This national study has put sexual assault and university students in the spotlight, with all 39 universities pledging to implement improvements in policy and service provision in response to the alarming statistics. The relationship between the experience of domestic violence and later engagement with university study however remains largely underrepresented within the literature. This inquiry, then, comes at a time of heightened acknowledgement of violence against women, particularly the issue of domestic violence within Australia, and addresses a clear gap in the current literature.

“A quiet politics of activism.”

Many women who seek new careers seem to feel called to help other women in similar situations. In her study of the role of fear in women who had left domestic violence, Pain (2014) identifies a theme, “a quiet politics of activism” (p. 143), which describes something that goes beyond just rebuilding. In discussing this theme, Pain points to the “political agency” (p. 143) of the participants, who were often involved in quiet pursuits of resistance towards domestic violence, including taking up professional roles to support women in similar situations.

Many anti-violence movements and organisations have similar roots, if traced back in time, and higher than average numbers of individuals who work in them today, as well as therapists, volunteers, researchers and others who work to reduce violence or support victims, have experiences of abuse that have prompted their chosen specialism. (p. 145)
In her study of women who were working at domestic violence support services, Wood (2017) found a similar phenomenon. Of the 22 women she interviewed, 18 had experienced or witnessed some form of domestic violence and over 80% of these women spoke about how they had felt called to their work because of their desire to help other women in similar situations. The women described how their experience of helping other women helped them feel connected, whilst validating their own experiences. Wood argues that such women experience “post traumatic growth” (p. 310) or “survivorship” (p. 320). She terms the motivation to assist other women as “advocate-survivor motivation” (p. 317) and likens it to a similar motivation found in surviving cancer patients who feel drawn to help others with cancer.

**Higher Education Literature**

The other body of literature relevant to this inquiry is that conducted on the experience of university student transitions and particularly the experiences of certain student social and cultural groups. The current interest in this area reflects the increased numbers and variety of students within university populations. Larmar and Ingamells (2010) describe this phenomenon as a shift from “elite to mass education” (p. 210). Traditionally, university was a place which attracted students from mostly affluent backgrounds, however, in recent times, with political reforms in both Britain and Australia, higher education participation has widened to include a greater variety of students, particularly low socio-economic status students (Reay, Davies, David, and Ball, 2001). This group included students with different entry pathways compared to the usual high school leaver (Chojenta, 2017; Southgate et al. 2014).

Despite these reforms Reay, Ball and many other scholars (Ball, Reay, & David, 2002; Trotter & Cove, 2005) have argued that although higher education changes in the United Kingdom have included increased access and diversity, inequalities within higher education persist. Ball et al (2002) point out that, despite the increased variety of students, higher education as a traditionally middle-class field has meant that it is the working-class students who are expected to adjust to the environment. From their study of 65 ethnic students in the United Kingdom they conclude, drawing on Bourdieu (1977), that social class differences in cultural, social and economic capital impact potential student’s dispositions and hence their choices in terms of education and career paths. For the middle-class student in their studies, “University attendance is a well-established and expected route beyond school… To not go on to higher education is
virtually unthinkable, and certainly unacceptable to parents” (p. 342). These students have the adequate support to choose (both emotional and financial) which university to attend, and suitable courses. They expect to relocate from their family homes for the correct university and university course and come to higher education with confidence (Ball et al., 2002).

On the other hand, the working-class students in their studies made choices that were “qualitatively different from those of their more privileged middle-class counterparts” (Reay et al, 2001, p. 855). For example, in making choices about which university to attend they were more concerned with the location of the university in terms of cost of travel and the cost of the university than with the prestige of the institution. The differences in ‘higher education choice processes’ (Reay et al 2001, p. 855) resulted in differences in career opportunities for the working as compared to the middle-class students.

Ball et al. (2002), however, point to the complicating factor of ethnicity in making generalisations about class and dispositions to education. They argue that although parents from migrant backgrounds may not have access to high amounts of economic capital, their disposition towards education is such that they are able to provide their children with the necessary encouragement and emotional support. Such families view higher education as an opportunity where “[h]igher education becomes a break or hiatus in family and personal narratives.” (p. 337).

While the women in my study did not necessarily come from working class backgrounds, their experiences of domestic violence left them with few economic resources. The value of these studies for my research, however, is their use of Bourdieu as a way to understand and explain the resources students bring with them to education. The attention is primarily on school leavers, whereas the women in my study, for the most part, entered university as mature aged students.

**Mature aged students and higher education.**
Female mature aged students are an increasing group within higher education populations. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013a), the 2011 Census of Population and Housing showed that 41% of students were over 25 years of age, with two fifths of these students studying their first degree and it also indicated that higher education Australian women were engaging at higher rates than men, and were more likely to be enrolled in post graduate studies. The Australian Government Department
of Education and Training (2018) report titled, ‘Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2017 Student data’, provides recent figures which show that during 2017 over 65% of higher education students were over the age of 21 years, and over 17% of students of these students were from a low socio economic background. The completion rates of mature age students in 2009 was 57.9% compared to 69.9% for younger students. The figures in this report indicate that women were more likely to return to university after the first year of studies, and complete, than men, and most were enrolled in bachelor degrees, with an increasing number studying at a post graduate level in comparison to 2016. The increasing number of such students in higher education has prompted a flurry of university-based research examining their experiences, the challenges they face and the support the university might offer in the face of these (De Silva, Robinson, and Watts (2011).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013a) acknowledge the difference in enrolment rates among younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students in comparison to students of other backgrounds, however for mature age students this difference is considerably less:

Unlike the very different proportions of 15-24 year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people attending a higher education institution, there was only one percentage point difference in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous 25-64 year olds attending these institutions. (p.1)

The completion rates generally for Indigenous students differ considerably. In 2009 the completion rate of Indigenous university students was 47.7% in comparison to a rate of 74.3% for non-Indigenous students (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2018). In response, Universities Australia (2019) have implemented The UA Indigenous Strategy 2017-20 to improve enrolments, engagement and success of Indigenous university students. This has resulted in a range of support and services for students who identify as Indigenous at Australian universities.

The research on mature age students identifies time and balancing commitments as a particular issue with consequences for the level of their engagement with university (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Chojenta, 2017; Southgate & Bennett, 2014). For example, De Silva et al. (2011) conducted a survey, focus group and interviews to understand the needs of mature age students and the support response of the University of Western Sydney. Of the students who responded to their survey, 60% were women, 33% had caring responsibilities for children, and 52% identified as the first in their family to
attend university. The key issues for students were the conflicting demands on their
time—family, work and study. De Silva et al concluded that mature aged students,
“accept the sacrifice and rigour required to attain a tertiary qualification while juggling
the complexities of their lives” (p. 38). They argue, however that they also “need
recognition” (p. 38). In another study conducted at University of Western Australia,
while time was identified as an issue for mature age students at the University of
Western Australia, this was not associated with any desire to spend more time in social
engagement with other students, rather Podesta-Meaney (2010) concludes that “for the
majority, social integration [was] neither sort nor fretted over” (p. 2). Rather the main
concerns for the participants in her study were financial security and their academic
performance.

On the basis of her study of Australian mature aged students who had
transitioned from Technical And Further Education college (TAFE) education to
university, Joan Abbott-Chapman (2006) also points to how for these students the
combination of working, university study and family commitments led to stress and
financial pressure. Universities offer support for mature aged students, however,
DeSilva et al (2011) survey found constraints on time due to other commitments may
restrict mature aged students use of such services. The survey found that 30% of
students were not aware of available support services at the university, however they
wanted acknowledgement of their circumstances, and available information about
support services- with an out of hours option.

Chojenta is one of the few researchers in the higher education field who
acknowledges the particular case of women leaving abusive relationships as in need of
support. In his 2017 paper on enabling programs he discusses the challenges mature age
students face in the education environment. He suggests that mature age students have
often come from circumstances of hardship and notes that although there might be some
overlap with the formally recognised groups in government policy, often such students
don’t neatly fit into these categories, and are therefore underrepresented in regard to
support. Describing these hardships, Chojenta (2017) states: “Sometimes these are dire
situations; students who have lost their financially supportive partner due to death,
divorce or escaping an abusive relationship” (p. 89).

Many of the studies above have focused on the experience of working class
mature aged students. While the women in my study came from a range of family
backgrounds, as mature age students coming out of domestic violence relationships,
they faced a number of the challenges identified in this literature: some were sole
parents, they were often impoverished and struggling to balance employment and study.

The research most closely related to this study is that body of work that explores
the experiences of mature aged women in higher education. One of the main foci here is
on women who are first in their families to attend university. While this may not be the
case for all of the women in my study, the first in family literature is helpful in
providing understanding of issues such as lack of family support, financial struggles,
emotional stress and feelings of not belonging which are likely to be issues for women
entering university following a violent relationship. The same can be said of the more
general literature on female mature aged students, which also talks about financial
challenges, combining studies with other commitments (work and family) and
emotional stress. A feature of most of this literature, however, is that it focuses on
working class or students from low socio economic backgrounds (see for example, De
Silva et al., 2011; Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Habel, Whitman, and Stokes, 2016). With
such students, their adjustments to the field of education are often exacerbated by their
classed dispositions towards education (Reay et al. 2001). As Reay and a number of
other researchers point out, such students go through a period of adjustment and
transformation to fit into the new field (O'Shea, 2016; Reay et al., 2001).

Like much of the research cited above the focus particularly in the United
Kingdom literature is on social class. The Reay, Ball, and David (2002) study of the
student experience of 23 mature aged students enrolled in a university access course at a
London college points to very similar issues as those faced by mature age students in
the Australian studies. Reay et al. describe how the working class, single mothers in
their study, particularly struggled. Most of the six single mother’s previous attempts at
education were cut short due to their responsibilities towards their children. For this
course, they also felt overwhelmed by the burden of commitments, and again, most did
not complete the course. The participants who did not have children, on the other hand,
faired better, achieving high level results.

Southgate et al. (2014) focused their study on first in family students. Although
their participants did not all come from low socio-economic families (some may have
been from middle or even high socioeconomic backgrounds), being the first in family,
Southgate et al. (2014) surmise that they were likely to come from families “where
working class norms of interdependence are common” (p. 41). They argue that their
survey results are related to this difference in understanding the university environment,
in their words: “These different norms can contribute to a cultural mismatch for working class students entering university” (p.40). Working class, low SES students – provide a point of comparison and contrast with the stories of the women in my study whose early experiences of education located them across the class spectrum.

In her Australian study of mature aged university students, while Stone (2009) did not set out to specifically recruit low socio-economic students for her narrative inquiry of the experiences of mature aged students, she found that all of the mature age students who participated in her study came from low socio-economic backgrounds and families. Their parents had never attended university, and none had attended university themselves as a school-leaver. To understand the stories of this group of students, Stone interviewed 20 students who had entered undergraduate degrees via an enabling program at the Central Coast Campus of University of Newcastle, Australia. This included 15 women and 5 men. A selection criterion that participants had to be at least in their second year, ensured that Stone (2009) had participants that were able to reflect on a substantial amount of time in relation to their university course. All participants were aged over 30 years of age. Data collection involved a process of collecting and retelling narratives, in her words: “I intended to gather first-order narratives from students, from which I could construct a second-order narrative that would give meaning to their experiences” (p.51).

Stone (2008) describes how her participants were faced with “juggling … demands between home and family” (p.278), which in turn affected their ability to become financially independent. At the same time, however, Stone found that their positive time management skills showed an amount of resilience and determination. Stone also found that university study had an impact on the relationships women had with their partners. For example, some of the women in her study found that their studies were met with opposition. As a result, two of the women chose to end their relationships. Despite the challenges, Stone (2009) found that most of the participants credited their experiences of university studies with helping them develop a new confidence, identity and knowledge. Their narratives were stories of personal transformations. Stone (2009) found that the participants felt supported by university academic and support staff, however the social connections they made at university were valued the most.

In a further analysis of this data, Stone joined with O’Shea to explore the “the gendered challenges of higher education” for mature age female university students
Drawing on their two narrative studies, Stone’s (2008) study of mature aged students (both men and women), who had undertaken an enabling course to gain entry to university and O’Shea’s (2007) study of women who were first in their families to attend university, the authors identified several common themes: “time, money, leisure and guilt” (Stone & O’Shea, 2013, p. 95). A comparison of the experiences of the women and men in their studies indicated that “life was a constant juggling act.” (p. 100) for most of the female and male participants; however, women and men used time differently. The men were more likely to have full time employment and less domestic responsibilities. For the women in their studies, childcare, domestic duties and employment stretched their capacities. However, they also found that although this was challenging, the predominantly female participants had developed strategies to manage their time. In addition, although they acknowledged that their time with their children had diminished, they saw their university studies as making a positive contribution in their lives, by making them good role models for their children and that this enhanced the quality of the time spent with the family. In their words:

While they had less time to give to their children, there was often a sense that the quality of this time had improved; that being at university had raised their status in the eyes of their children, particularly older boys, who now treated their mothers with more respect. (p. 105)

When it came to leisure, most of their participants had discontinued certain activities, as their time was taken up with university. O’Shea and Stone found that for the women with young children in their studies, leisure time was extremely scarce. Guilt was felt for not having enough time for extended family. O’Shea and Stone also found that among the single mothers in their studies, there was a belief that investing in university studies, disadvantaged their children. Again, while the women in my study were not always first in family, their status when they left their violent relationship suggests that they too might have faced issues similar to those raised in these studies.

**Higher Education research and Bourdieu**

Much of the higher education research, which focuses on women and/or social class in education, has looked to Bourdieu to provide a useful conceptual lens to examine such inequalities, transitions and transformations. As pointed out in Chapter One, Bourdieu provides the concepts of capital, habitus and fields to understand inequalities within society and education, and how a person adjusts (or not) within a new environment.
According to Mills (2008): “Bourdieu has made significant contributions to understanding the role that schools and school systems play in reproducing social and cultural inequalities through the hidden linkages between scholastic aptitude and cultural heritage” (p. 3). This has been extended to studies of mature age women entering university.

In a further study of first in family women attending university, O’Shea (2008) draws on Bourdieu to help understand the capital resources such students have when they commence university. In a study closer to that described in this thesis, O’Shea interviewed 17 women four times over the course of their first year at university finding her first in family participants often viewed university as a complete experience beyond the classroom. Unlike Podesta-Meaney’s (2010) findings that socialising was not a priority for her mature age students, O’Shea found that social networks and activities at the university or socialising related to their studies, were just as important as formal learning to the women who participated in her study. This socialising was a resource, which helped the students to fit into university. She suggests that, “[s]tudents, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, often encounter educational situations and do not have the necessary cultural or knowledge capital to negotiate the implicit nature of an institution’s ‘hidden curriculum’” (p. 12). Successful engagement with the field, then was contingent on how their different dispositions and classed practices towards education (habitus and capital) provided the kinds of resources that enabled them to succeed. The first in family students in O’Shea’s 2008 study used socialising as way to achieve this.

The argument that education is a field of inequalities and a classed practice is further explored in O’Shea’s 2016 study of first in family students. According to O’Shea, these inequalities exist within the fields’ policies. As higher education is traditionally a middle class field (Reay et al., 2002), fitting comes easier for students of that background. She also argues that these inequalities are embodied within the students in the form of their different dispositions and classed practices towards education (habitus and capital) while using Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital to understand how students experience the university environment. While “Bourdieu has been critiqued for elevating the nature of structure in his theorisation and limiting the effects of agency, suggesting that individuals are constrained by structural forces largely beyond their control” (p. 63), to explain how capital operated for her first
in family, O’Shea looked to Tara Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework.

O’Shea explains that Bourdieu's cultural capital is based on what is valuable to “the dominant classes” (p.63), however “there are other forms of cultural knowledge that are equally valued by more marginalised and less powerful groups.” Yosso’s framework includes six forms of capital - “aspirational”, “resistant”, “linguistic”, “navigational”, “social” and “familial” (Yosso, 2005, cited in O’Shea, 2016, pp. 71-74). ‘Aspirational’ refers to having the disposition to imagine, dream and hope despite knowing there are challenges, ‘resistant’ refers to having the disposition and capability to question and overcome the current situation, ‘linguistic’ is understanding the importance of being able to communicate ideas through a variety of ways, ‘navigational’ is having the ‘individual agency’ and ‘social networks’ to be able to transition in new fields such educational environments. Social is the networks of friendships and support, and ‘familial’ is recognising the cultural knowing and ways of family and social networks. Women who have experienced domestic violence may come from a range of classed backgrounds however, as established from the domestic violence literature, this trauma often marginalises such women. These forms of capital are useful to this inquiry as they explain in a more nuanced way the resources the women might draw on within the field of university education.

As indicated above one of the main criticism of Bourdieu's work in education has been the idea that dispositions or habitus are relatively stable and unchangeable element in one’s life (Bourdieu, 1990). Clearly O’Shea and Stone do not regard capital or dispositions as fixed, likewise in her paper on understanding the potential for improvement among ‘marginalised’ school students, Mills (2008) takes issue with this to argue that habitus is fixed. She proposes two forms of habitus: reproductive and transformative. She suggests that one form of habitus can dominate the other depending on the occasion. This might occur at different stages of life for different people. Regarding education, Mills defines reproductive habitus as when students can only imagine “the future that fits them” (p. 82) in relation to their current social, economic and cultural capital. Transformative habitus, on the other hand, are the occasions when it is possible for the student to imagine the unimaginable and break away from perceived constraints. Mills describes this as being able to “recognise the capacity for improvisation” (p. 83).
The notion of capital that O’Shea (2016) brings to her study of first in family students and Mills’ (2008) observation that habitus, on occasions, can transform are important for this inquiry. The transformative potential identified by these and other scholars in higher education literature (Reay et al. 2001; Stone, 2009) leaves open the possibility that the women in my inquiry, who come from a range of social class backgrounds may experience personal transformations, following the damaging experience of domestic violence. Even the experience of domestic violence may instil the women with forms of capital, which are resources.

A further form of capital, which captures adjustment within the university environment, is proposed by Côté (2002). He uses the concept of “identity capital” to describe the classed practices that assist students to adjust to new educational environments, particularly in higher education, where the culture, expectations and norms are well established (Côté, 2002). Similar to Mill’s (2008) suggestion that habitus can be fixed or change, depending on the circumstance, Côté (2002) explains that “Thinking of these resources [classed practices] as ‘identity capital’ resources helps us understand how a person can nurture and develop the means of ‘fitting in’ and ‘becoming’ in an environment like the late-modern university, the workplace, and an adult community (p. 119). This is a process of developing identity to fit the field. To understand more about this process, He conducted a longitudinal study of Canadian middle class doctoral students. Côté (2002) found that the process of developing identity was a complex one, influenced by gender and other structures. He found with the women in his study, those that had parental financial investment in their education fared better than others.

Côté (2016) outlines the concept of the development of identity and how this can be a useful tool for social scientists to understand how people react within various settings. Like O’Shea (2016) and Mills (2008), Côté (2016) describes “educational competition” (p. 8), and in referring to Bourdieu’s concepts, he argues against people being “defined by ‘tastes’ and ‘distinctions’” (p. 54). Instead, he suggests that these can change. He explains the resources that students have are either “tangible” (p. 17), such as class, gender and cultural background, or “intangible” (p. 18) in the form of determination, confidence, purpose and ability. As a person develops their identity within a field, Côte (2016) describes the way they make “identity investments” (p. 18) with “exchangeable” (p. 18) resources such as capability, physical appearance, wealth and social skills, which fit with Bourdieu’s concepts of capital. Côte’s (2002, 2016)
concept of identity capital provides an additional way of understanding the resources that have enabled the women in my study to engage successfully with university environments following a period when as described above their personal and social resources are likely to be considerably diminished.

**Higher Education and Domestic Violence Research**

Although there is scant information available about the impact of violence on undertaking higher education, the work of Horsman (1999, 2000, 2004) and Duckworth (2014) are two exceptions and both of these are located not in universities but in adult learning colleges and basic skills courses. In the late 1990s Horsman investigated how violence (in many forms) affected the way women learned and participated in a vocational based literacy program. Interviews conducted with staff and students from across Canada provided Horsman with the understanding that women who had experienced various forms of violence (including domestic violence) had heightened sensitivity to perceptions of control within the classroom environment. She used the analogy of the ways canaries are used in mines to detect low levels of gas to suggest that this extra sensitivity is worth listening to as a way to acknowledge such women and make improvements to the learning environment. In her book, ‘Too scared to learn: women, violence and education’ (2000), she expands this concept of the value those who have experienced violence bring to education. Writing again in 2004, she argues that ongoing abuse experienced in the aftermath of domestic violence can spill over into the classroom:

> When women try to escape violent situations, they may often experience greater danger, leaving situations of public violence only to become more trapped in “private” domestic violence, taking on education only to be stalked and increasingly subjected to violence, leaving an abuser only to be mired in increased poverty, bureaucratic nightmares, and at greater danger from the abusive spouse. (pp. 2-3)

The response (or lack of it) from educational institutions can further contribute to the silence many women in this situation feel:

> Unless education at all levels acknowledges the violence in the lives of women and children and its impact on learning, many students will not only fail to learn, but may also experience the educational setting as a silencing place, or another site of violence, where they are controlled, diminished and shamed by institutional structures or classroom interactions. (p. 4)
Duckworth (2014) was interested in understanding the learning trajectories of previous students of a basic skills course. She singles out the experiences of those of her participants who had experienced domestic violence for specific attention (see chapter 8 of Duckworth 2014). The methodology for the larger study involved conducting life history interviews with previous students from a Northern England Further Education College, basic skills course, following them over a period of six years, in order to understand how “the public domain and the private domain of their lives” (p.1) influenced changes in their educational outcomes. She employs Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and capital, to explain the student’s narratives and changes they experienced, from childhood till their basic skills course, in the context of social inequalities. This involved analysing class and gender, the participant’s engagement with their studies and their journeys beyond education. Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and capital, in particular helped Duckworth to describe the participants’ identities and how these influenced and changed the habitus and the relationship between classed and gendered practices over their lives.

In her chapter on violence, Duckworth describes how some of the students were impacted by domestic violence either by witnessing it as a child or experiencing it as an adult. By viewing adulthood as connected to childhood, Duckworth allows for the possibility for changes in habitus. Regarding students who have been impacted by domestic violence she explains the changes that occurred:

I call this ‘scarring of the habitus’ as the violence and trauma on the learners' lives both in childhood and adulthood can influence the way they view themselves, the choices they make in the relationships they form, the reasons they make for these choices and their views of motherhood, fatherhood and the family. (Ch. 8)

She found that the students who had been impacted by domestic violence experienced a negative impact on their learning due to a reduction in various forms of capital. Despite this, she found that the participants also received many benefits from their education.

Duckworth explains that her participants had control and choice about where and when interviews would be conducted. She used semi-structured interviews to gather the life histories of her participants. These interviews were initially guided by her experiences and insights to generate conversation, she then used an approach where she was led by the participant’s discussion, from which further themes were generated for discussion at later interviews. Duckworth had a similar childhood and background to the
participants, she refers to herself as an “‘insider’ with ‘insider knowledge’ of marginalised communities” (p.1). She found that among the participants they had experienced violence, in a physical and a symbolic context. These experiences of violence influenced the participant’s identity within the field of education.

Duckworth’s study focuses on a concentrated geographical area with a known low socioeconomic position, her participants were all from the same course and their experiences with violence were varied. While Duckworth’s participants are very different from my own in geographical location (across rural and regional New South Wales), social class and site of their studies, Duckworth’s research provides both methodological and analytical insights into the use of narrative and of Bourdieu as an analytical framework to analyse how women’s lives might change following domestic violence.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated domestic violence is a global and gendered issue that affects women from all socio-economic backgrounds. The statistics and impact of domestic violence on health and wellbeing in women is alarming. For those women who choose to leave a violent relationship, there are many challenges to overcome, however, the research suggests that many women have the resilience and agency to take on new ventures to increase financial independence, as pursuits of activism and to take control over their lives.

Some of this literature points to how those women who choose to leave a violent relationship ‘rebuild’ new lives in ways that improve career opportunities through further education. The few studies addressing the impact of further education on women post violent relationship point to the role of education in increasing confidence and sense of self. As a result, they also advocate for increased employment and formal education opportunities for women leaving violent relationships. There has been little attention thus far to the experiences of women post domestic violence as they negotiate the higher education environment.

The higher education literature, on the other hand, does focus on student experiences and needs, particularly those of hidden/underrepresented cohorts of students. However, students who have experienced domestic violence remain an invisible population within this literature. Therefore, this inquiry will build upon the work of scholars such as Chronister and McWhirter (2003), Duckworth (2014), Oke
(2008), O’Shea (2008), and Stone (2013) by providing a nuanced understanding of this specific group of students within the university context.
Chapter 3
Methodology

Introduction
This inquiry required a methodology, which would allow me to ethically collect, for the most part, untold stories of women who had left violent relationships prior to commencing university studies. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p.2). They argue that story-telling, then, is a practice which is steeped in history, and since the 1980s, the use of story-telling or narrative as a research methodology has gained popularity. Creswell (2013) explains that narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology, which uses many different forms of narratives (stories) such as autobiography, biography or life history. According to Connelly and Clandinin educational researchers utilise this methodology as a way to examine and improve student experiences, and teaching and learning practices within the educational environment. For my inquiry, the methodology is useful in understanding the experiences of the women who participated in this research with a view to improvement of government and higher education policy and service provision for this group of students.

Bourdieu’s concepts of capital, field and habitus, which acknowledge that prior experiences and beliefs influence how individuals engage in practices (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986), were used as a framework for this inquiry, and informed the decisions I made in relation to the research design. Inspired by Bourdieu, I viewed the education environment as a field, which sat in relation to other fields in the women’s lives, such as, family and work. In order to understand the field of education, I also needed to understand these other fields, to make sense of their experiences and changes in their capital and practices that occurred over time.

Feminist Narrative Inquiry
Scholars such as Gilfus (1999); Ngwainmbi (2004) and Woodiwiss, Smith, and Lockwood (2017) view feminism as a standpoint which advocates for equality and women’s rights. According to Ngwainmbi (2004), feminist research “seeks to present social reality and the world from a woman's point of view” (p. 93). Feminist narrative
inquiry was a suitable methodology for this project as it enabled me to place the women central to the research (Ngwainmbi, 2004; Woodiwiss et al., 2017). Furthermore, it provided for the ethical collection of rich data and the understanding of the women’s dispositions through the deconstruction of their experiences, beliefs and influences, whilst privileging and sharing their stories (Oke, 2008; Stone & O’Shea, 2012).

Although Bourdieu has been criticised for rarely addressing gender issues (Adkins, 2004), feminist scholars such as McCall (1992), Reay (2004), Skeggs (2010) and O’Shea (2016) have turned to Bourdieu to explain gender in relation to power and control within society. McCall suggests that Bourdieu “parallels and enhances feminist positions in that he recognises, like feminists, that theoretical narratives and political programs are themselves embedded in social relations” (p. 837). “Feminism with a Bourdieusian frame” (Adkins, 2004, p. 5) has been utilised by researchers to understand the position of women within society, and particularly education. For example, Skeggs (2010) provides a detailed discussion on using capital to inform the understanding of the position of women within relationships and society. She analysed ten reality television programs which presented stories of personal change. Data collection included analysis of the programs, focus groups, and interviews with 40 female viewers of the programs. She then used Bourdieu’s concept of capital to analyse the data to understand how the women were positioned within society. In her words: “Through this information we were able to map the volumes and compositions of different types of capital: economic, social, cultural and symbolic” (p. 31). In describing the analysis of reality television, Skeggs states: “It is the spectacle of women’s labour projected back to audiences (us). In this projection, value is coded and circulates through bodies and practices (p.47)”. From this analysis, Skeggs found that the viewers could relate to the value placed on the role and work of women within the home and society. Educational researchers have used this framework to understand the position of women within educational settings. Reay (1998), for example, studied the habitus of working class mothers to understand their belief system towards education, and O’Shea (2016) uses capital to explain first in family students’ experiences. These studies have inspired my inquiry and encouraged my use of both Bourdieu and feminism.

According to Reinharz and Davidman (1992), “women’s oral history is a feminist encounter because it creates new material about women’s experience, enhances communication among women, discovers women’s needs, and develops a previously denied sense of community” (p. 126). However, Birdsey and Snowball (2013) suggest
that women like those in my inquiry may not have previously spoken of their experiences due to shame and silence. For many of the women, the interviews were the first time they had spoken about how their past had impacted their current education. All of the women in the inquiry welcomed the opportunity to sit down and speak about their success and challenges as a university student. They were more likely to talk at length about experiences prior to and post domestic violence but were more reluctant to go into any detail about their experiences of domestic violence. Similar experiences in my own life facilitated my relationship with the women. The women knew that I had a similar background but were not told any details.

The design of my inquiry was inspired by other examples of feminist narrative research, such as Oke’s (2008) study of women’s experiences of domestic violence and their rebuilding of their lives on leaving the violent relationship, Stone’s (2009) study of mature aged students and O’Shea’s (2008, 2016) study of first in family women in higher education. These studies used in depth qualitative interviews to understand the experiences of women. Oke’s (2008) cross-cultural narrative study of Australian and Mongolian Women who had left a violent relationship involved a collaboration between herself and the women she interviewed. She describes narrative as a ‘contextualized, emplotted or meaningful account or story, told from a particular subjective view of the world’ (p. 149). Using semi structured interviews allowed the women to direct the conversation, and Oke was able to listen to their stories. This approach assisted the women to feel comfortable to engage in the interviews. In her 2005 paper, Oke presents the data as a thematic analysis, with ten overarching themes which provided new understandings about how the women rebuilt their lives. In an earlier article, Oke (2005) explains how she used these themes as chapters in her thesis to assist her to organise the way she reported her study.

For her doctoral studies Stone (2009) gathered the narratives of the twenty mature aged students in her study, via semi-structured interviews with open questions. She then constructed narratives to give meaning to their experiences. Stone explains her research was a “collaboration” (p. 51) between participant and researcher, where communication through listening and talking constructed meaning. This approach to narrative inquiry was helpful to my study as it explains the role the researcher and participant play in the data collection. The way Stone created her narratives was also helpful as a guide to organising the data and constructing the narratives. In her words: “I intended to gather first-order narratives from students, from which I could construct a
second-order narrative that would give meaning to their experiences” (p. 51), an approach I have also taken in the following chapters.

O'Shea (2008) conducted a feminist narrative inquiry which focused on university students who were the first people in their families to attend university. She interviewed each of the seventeen women in her study four times over the course of their first year at university and applied an interpretive approach, using grounded theory and narrative analysis as theoretical lenses to analyse and interpret the data. Narrative inquiry allowed a very detailed analysis of the experiences and motivations of these women and a new understanding of student’s perceptions. In a later study, O'Shea (2016) used open-ended interviews to gather data, and NVivo (10) to organise interview transcripts and code for themes. She used Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital as a framework to understand the women she interviewed in terms of how as first in family students they “drew upon existing and established capital reserves” (p.59). Her use of narrative inquiry helped in constructing my own study and representing my data. For both of these examples, feminist narrative approaches allowed detailed analysis of experiences and motivations, demonstrating the benefits of collecting and analysing the stories of women. These processes were taken up in my research through the use of open ended interviews, data organisation and coding via NVivo and the retelling of narratives.

**Ethical Considerations**

As with all research, it was important to approach this study in an ethical manner (Creswell, 2013; Hurst, 2014). The participants for this research project would be considered ‘vulnerable’ by the World Health Organisation (2001) due to the trauma and consequences of domestic violence, such as impaired physical and emotional wellbeing. In addition, privacy issues, legal issues and parenting responsibilities needed to be taken into account in research which documented such women’s experiences. Therefore, all of the precautions that apply to any research with a vulnerable group were applied.

Before commencing this inquiry, approval was sought and obtained from the University of Wollongong Human Ethics Research Committee (2015/147). The application included the explicit details of the research study including the initial research information sheet, an explanation that participants would be provided with full information by preparing an information sheet setting out the aims and possible outcomes of the research and consent form, and the questions for the first interview.
Then prior to the second interviews an amendment was sought from the University of Wollongong Human Ethics Research Committee and was approved, for the inclusion of questions for the second interview. These ethics documents can be viewed in Appendix B.

Guidelines from the World Health Organisation (2001) publication, ‘Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women’, were used to inform the ethical approach of this project and to maximise the benefits of the research. These guidelines urge a careful approach to research which focuses on domestic violence. Although caution is appropriate the World Health Organisation also suggests that researching such women is possible and beneficial: “studies show that research on domestic violence against women can be conducted with full respect of ethical and safety considerations” (p. 9) when interviewing women who have experienced domestic violence. The World Health Organisation guidelines are outlined below as headings, along with how each informed this project.

“The safety of the respondents and the research team is paramount and should guide all project decisions” (World Health Organisation, 2001, p. 10).

My inquiry was designed so that the participants had not been in a violent relationship for at least three years. This minimised the risk that the violent partner may have been in close contact with the participant. This decision was inspired by the above World Health Organisation guideline, but also by Humphreys and Thiara (2003) who found that the first 12 months after relationship separation was the time when most of their women were at risk of harm. A clear statement of withdrawal was provided to participants, allowing them to withdraw from the research at any stage or their data removed two months after last contact. Furthermore, participation in my research was completely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to their initial interview.

The interview questions were employed as prompts to guide the conversation, and were designed to be open ended and general, focusing on the participants’ education. The women, however, were free to discuss anything they wished. The interviews were audio taped, and the women were informed that the recording could be stopped at any time. The audio tapes were transcribed by myself and each participant chose a pseudonym for themselves at the commencement of the initial interview. To further protect anonymity, places and information that could reveal their identity were
also changed. All data were stored on a password protected computer and in a locked filing cabinet in my office at the University of Wollongong (University of Wollongong, 2011).

Preparation was made to handle potential emotional upset by providing sources of professional support to the interviewees and myself as researcher if need be. In the occurrence of re-traumatisation or emotional trauma there was the offer of counselling with the appropriate university counselling service as well as the national Domestic Violence Hotline 1800RESPECT or 1800 656 463 (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2016).

“All research team members should be carefully selected and receive specialized training and on-going support” (World Health Organisation, 2001, p. 14).

I had undertaken recent training at an annual conference as an ambassador of Domestic Violence New South Wales (DVNSW). The training addressed issues about vicarious trauma and self-care whilst working with those who have experienced domestic violence. Strategies such as access to debriefing and counselling via DVNSW and University of Wollongong counselling services were also in place to minimise harm caused to the researcher from professional vulnerability and vicarious trauma, as this can occur when researching marginalized populations (Ballamingie & Johnson, 2011). I also had ongoing support from DVNSW, academics who were also engaged in research with marginalised populations and the University of Wollongong Feminist Research Network.

“Protecting confidentiality is essential to ensuring both women’s safety and data quality” (World Health Organisation, 2001, p. 17).

The participants selected a pseudonym at the commencement of the first interview. All data thereafter were de-identified and no others were involved in reading the research (e.g. supervisors) had access to the real names or locations of the participants. In addition, the women chose the time and location of the interview meeting to enhance their personal safety and comfort.

Data Collection

The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of women who had enrolled at university in any courses, following a period of domestic violence. I chose to focus on the time frame following a period of domestic violence as most of the literature which focuses on domestic violence looks at women who are still within violent
relationships (Campbell, 2004; Fisher & Stylianou, 2019; Lima, Mattar, & Abrahão, 2019; Young & Hassan, 2018).

Noy (2008) argues that participant recruitment needs to be both ethically sensitive and effective in the quest for information rich participants. This inspired the following selection criteria. Firstly, women needed to be over twenty-one years of age. This ensured that the women were mature aged students, and able to reflect over more years than high school leavers would be. Secondly, the women had to have been out of any relationship involving domestic violence for over three years. This avoided women within the danger period of 12 months post domestic violence (Humphreys & Thiara, 2003), and allowed time for the women to have begun the rebuilding process. Finally, all women must have been studying at university for at least three years. This assisted the quest for information rich participants as there were more university years to reflect on, also it captured women who had persisted in their studies. The last criterion may have excluded women who were struggling, and who were at greater risk of discontinuing their studies. This is an important topic for further study; however, my initial focus was on finding women who were able to reflect on their past or current studies.

Populations who are largely underserved within the literature present particular challenges when it comes to finding research participants. In these situations, a number of strategies have been used including recruiting through services to target potential participants, and snowball sampling (Noy, 2008). For my study, Domestic Violence New South Wales provided the details of support services across the state, where information about the research design, including my email contact details, was made available in waiting rooms. Utilising these existing social and feminist networks, influenced the location of participants, and although not a part of the selection criteria, all participants were from urban, rural and regional New South Wales. To expand the number of participants I then used a snowball sampling approach. Snowball sampling has been used with success (Noy, 2008; Oke, 2008) in similar research targeting hard to find participants. This method seeks to find participants who satisfy the selection criteria and may have the social network to recruit further participants. From there, word of mouth helps to recruit others and momentum is gained.

Four of the women in the study had found the research information at their local support services: two were volunteers at different regionally based services, and two were staff members of regional and urban support services. One of the regional
volunteers informed me that she had told others about my research at a local domestic violence forum and posted information on her online student group. From there, a woman who had attended the regional forum made email contact with me, and another woman from the online student group and from a rural location also contacted me. Three regionally based students had heard through word of mouth at their universities, one of whom had close ties with her local campus feminist group. Two women made contact (it was unclear how they knew about the research) but did not fit the selection criteria because they were enrolled in vocational courses or had been out of their relationship for less than three years. These women were provided with information about programs run by DVNSW. Following the completion of the recruitment process, a total of nine women who met the criteria above agreed to participate in the research project.

Creswell (2013) suggests that narrative inquiry is characterised by a small number of participants. Nine participants for my narrative inquiry was considered an appropriate sample size in terms of the geographical distribution of the women, theoretical saturation and the management of the large amount of data a narrative approach produces (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Yin, 2003). Of the women who participated two identified as having Indigeneity, both of these women were brought up in homes where there was little information provided about this background. One of the women who participated had parents who had migrated from Italy and Malta to Australia.

**Data Sources**

Inspired by Creswell’s (2013) guidelines for narrative methodology, my inquiry had the fundamental elements, which are typical of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry should include multiple data sources from written and spoken words. A participant journal was offered to each woman at the first interview to provide opportunities for ongoing reflections; these were returned at the second interview. I also kept a journal in which I made notes about the research process.

Four women chose to keep diaries for the six months between the interviews. The data collected in the journals were used to provide deeper insights about each woman and capture day-to-day experiences of managing university study. It also allowed [the opportunity for] the women to engage with the research project in between the interviews. According to Pedersen (2016), writing journals allows ongoing
reflective data with the option of editing. The women each approached the use of the journals in their own unique way. As they collected the journals from me, I asked them to use them as a place to write any additional information arising from the interviews, and as a place where they could write in about events that occurred in the six months between the interviews. The use varied across the women, for example, Rachel, a PhD student used the journal to reflect further on the interviews, but also recorded moments as they happened. She used space and capitalisation to emphasise certain points. Please see Appendix F for a typed copy of an excerpt from Rachel’s journal. This process of constructing meaning was important for some of the women as they delved deeper on their thoughts and experiences. They used the journal as a way to update information as situations changed over the six months, others used the journal to reflect on the interview and add additional information that they felt relevant. The journals assisted in the retelling of the narratives, as an additional source of information.

The interviews formed the most important data for this project. Each woman was offered two semi-structured, conversational style, audio taped interviews (approximately one hour long each), six months apart (a couple of participants chose to be interviewed a month earlier to avoid meeting during summer student vacation). The women chose the time and places where the interviews were conducted. The venues included cafes, university library meeting rooms, and rural council chamber meeting rooms. Meeting the women in places of their choosing enhanced my understanding of their experiences and transformations as university students, as I was able to get a sense of their environment. The data collection was conducted in a variety of locations (rural, urban and regional) in New South Wales, with first interviews occurring from 14th of July 2015 until the 30th of September 2015, and second interviews from 8th of December until 29th of February 2016. This meant long hours of driving from one end of the state to the other, during the weeks the interviews were conducted. I used this time to reflect on the interviews, adding to my researcher journal at each stop.

The decision to allow the women to choose their own pseudonyms was made as it is in keeping with a feminist approach where the women are in a privileged position and have choice. The interviews had an autobiographical approach where the women were asked to start with their early experiences of education. Questions were used as prompts to support the conversation, but as the women were willing to share their experiences, for the most part they led the conversation. The topics for discussion covered the following topics: the impact university study had on life; friendships;
support and plans for the future. Following preliminary data analysis, the second interview further explored these questions and topics, as well as discussing themes which emerged from the first interview. During the interviews, prompting questions were asked in order to fully understand the stories, and to clarify any points. The women were aware that it was their decision what information they provided and that they were not obliged to answer questions, however were free to include any experiences they felt were relevant.

The interviews were candid, powerful and personal accounts with plenty of laughter, some tears, but mostly an overwhelming sense of pride and determination as the women recalled their education experiences. The interviews occurred in settings chosen by the women; this was both a methodological decision to gain a sense of the women’s lives (Creswell, 2013), and an ethical decision as each woman was able to choose a location where she would feel safe. As I am a registered nurse, with close to 20 years of experience in engaging with patients - recording their medical and social histories - my communication skills were of benefit for these interviews. Effective listening skills and understanding of principles of empathy, assisted in collecting quality, detailed data, whilst maintaining a professional approach. Having a similar background to the women also assisted the interview process; although women were privy to the fact that I had a similar background, no further information was provided.

After the data was collected and transcribed the texts from the interviews were arranged, as Creswell (2013) suggests, in a chronological fashion. For my research this meant arranging these narratives in relation to the women's educational life histories. In other words, they typically told of education from a young child up until the time of the interviews. For most of the narratives, I did not need to alter much from the order of the transcript as when I asked about their education, the women naturally told their stories from childhood. Some sought clarification as to where to start, to which I answered from childhood, or from when you were young.

Within the interviews and these narratives there were times when there would be apparent inconsistencies within the women’s stories. Calhoun, LiPuma, and Postone (1993) suggest that such contradictions and subjectivity in data is possible in qualitative research and can be understood from a feminist standpoint as expressions of what was accurate for the woman at that particular time. Member checking was conducted and at each second interview, the typed narrative from the first interview was returned to each woman for review. Following the second interview this process was repeated via email.
This time for the narratives I merged data from both interviews and arranged it in a chronological fashion. As the women reviewed these narratives, they were given the opportunity to read, correct any errors, and make any comments or changes they wished to make (Creswell, 2013). In this way further opportunity was given to the women for meaning making, a process which ensured the data collected were accurate from the women’s perspective and they were happy for it to be used to represent their stories. Most of the women did not want to make many changes to the narratives, others wanted to slight changes to wording, and a few removed some content about their children. Most provided feedback about how the process of the interviews had been a positive experience.

**Data Analysis**

I transcribed the interviews myself to maintain confidentiality and to allow for ongoing reflection and theorisation. After the interviews were transcribed, the transcript was read through whilst referring to the audio-tape to gain a full understanding of any pauses, laughter or changes in tone of voice during the interview. Analysis began with the first interviews so that in the second round, the interviews were built on salient ideas and metaphors identified from this analysis. From the first interview a coding tree in QSR Nvivo10 was established using the research sub questions and Bourdieu’s (1986) notions of capital, field and habitus to analyse the changes in the women’s dispositions and capitals over time within the field of education in relation to other fields in their lives. This coding tree was refined and added to with the analysis of subsequent interviews, thus allowing further themes to emerge.

Although QSR Nvivo10 provided an organised storage of the data and a means to manage the initial analysis, the themes were not clean cut. Rather they were twisted, frayed and braided into the stories. In other words, at times there were complicated crossovers and separation of the themes became a challenge. Following the Nvivo10 analysis, I read across the narratives, using sticky notes and highlighters to identify common themes. This analysis was then compared to the NVivo results to justify and confirm the themes, and whilst in most cases the themes matched up, conducting this second layer of analysis helped to provide more understanding and meaning about the themes. These themes informed the discussion in the final chapter of this thesis and helped organise the way this thesis was presented.
Challenges and Limitations

As with all research, this project had some challenges and limitations. This thesis provides a detailed understanding of the experiences of nine women within the state of New South Wales Australia, as such the findings are specific for this group of women, and any interpretations of their experiences are not intended to be sweeping generalisations. It provides a glimpse into the experiences of this specific group of women; however, further research would be required to thoroughly understand the experiences of women residing in other locations and other stages of university study.

While geographical distance provided variety within the sample, it also provided challenges in terms of travelling to remote locations. This made the project time consuming regarding hours spent on the road to ensure the interviews were conducted within a suitable time frame, and then this was repeated six months later. The furthest distance between the women was 700km, this meant driving up to eight hours between women, stopping along the way to meet the women who lived in between. As I am a busy mother myself, I used a week in each of the school holiday periods while my children were being cared for to take these trips. As I needed to stay in overnight accommodation during these weeks, I used this time to transcribe each interview and make notes in my researcher journal while it was fresh in my mind. Although the travel was a challenge, this approach was considered worthwhile as it provided each woman with the personal interview they deserved, rather than a phone interview. It also re-emphasised for me just how widespread and random domestic violence is.

Although the domestic violence services, which placed my research information, were considered inclusive, none of the women in my inquiry identified as non-English speaking, living with a disability, lesbian or transgender. The stories of such women as university students who have experienced domestic violence still remain largely untold. In addition, this research is focused solely on women as domestic violence is considered gendered given the over representation of women experiencing this crime. I acknowledge, however, that men also can experience domestic violence, and that this is also an area that is scarcely researched.

Conclusion

Feminist narrative inquiry approach was a suitable methodological approach because it positioned the women at the centre of this inquiry. Feminist narrative approach comes from a standpoint, which acknowledges the societal oppression of
women, however, it also provides a means to unravel these complexities through the sharing of women’s narratives. A synthesis of Bourdieu’s concepts of capital, field and habitus, and a feminist approach informed the research design, providing a framework which guided the ethical recruitment of information rich participants, and the gathering, retelling and analysis of the narratives. Analysis informed the way the findings are presented in the following chapters.
Part Two

The Findings: the Women’s Narratives
Prologue

Part Two of the thesis presents the narratives of the nine women as they move from childhood to adulthood. It is about women who successfully engaged with higher education and then successfully persisted. It demonstrates how their capital and dispositions changed before, during and after the experience of domestic violence. These narratives provide the means to explain how the women negotiated the university environment in their own unique way. The following three chapters focus on educational experiences during three key periods of the women’s lives, with their entry and exit of a violent relationship signalling shifts in capital and dispositions:

- before the experience of domestic violence (Chapter Four);
- during the experience of domestic violence (Chapter Five); and
- after the experience of domestic violence: Engagement with university study (Chapter Six).

Introducing the Characters

In introducing the women, I have arranged the following brief descriptions of their backgrounds and situations at the time of the study in an order which loosely groups the nine women according to my determination of their early educational capital and dispositions. For consistency, this order will remain in place for Chapters 4, 5 and 6 as their narratives are developed across the three critical periods of their lives in relation to their relationships with education. An overview of the demographic information and is summarised in Table Appendix G.

The first four women, Sophie, Mary, Rachel and Claudia were brought up in families where there was considerable encouragement for education, and relatively privileged experiences with schooling. This made university imaginable for Sophie and Mary, even though their parents had not attended university themselves. In contrast, Rachel and Claudia came from families where there was an assumption that they would attend university. Although Lynda and Dawn also had similar schooling experiences to these women, their family support was limited. Both experienced abuse within their families which reduced their confidence. Nancy also grew up with the experience of abuse; however, school was not a place she enjoyed. Finally, Tamson and Amelia were early school leavers, both running away from home at a young age.
Sophie. At the time of the study, Sophie was 44 years old and living in a quiet rural town located between two large regional centres. She was divorced and a single mother to three young children. At the time of the first interview, she was approaching her third year of a part time Bachelor of Psychology via distance education through a university located in regional New South Wales.

Mary. Mary was 41 years old, divorced, with two teenage children. Her parents had migrated from Italy and Malta before she was born. She lived in regional New South Wales and was working full time as a Registered Nurse in a managerial position. Following separation from a violent partner, Mary undertook post graduate studies to advance her career to show her children she could achieve. At the time of the first interview, Mary was nearing completion of her Master of Nursing. Prior to the second interview, she graduated.

Rachel. At the time of her interviews, Rachel was fifty-one and living in regional New South Wales with her two teenage children. She had been married for sixteen years, describing this time as controlling and abusive. Towards the end of her marriage, Rachel commenced a Graduate Certificate of Education, which led to employment as a ‘research assistant’ and a Master of Education degree at a regional university. After Rachel’s marriage ended, she relocated to be closer to the university and embarked on PhD studies, from which she graduated just prior to being interviewed.

Claudia. At the time of the study Claudia was 45 years and divorced. She was living in the city where she grew up. At the age of 40 years, Claudia was formally diagnosed and treated for ADHD, a condition she had long suspected since her teenage years. Following the end of her ten-year marriage to a man she described as ‘controlling’, she led a busy life of juggling fulltime work at a domestic violence support service, fulltime study at a regional university campus (a two hour round car trip) and being the principal carer to her three young adult children. At the time of the first interview, Claudia was nearing completion of a Bachelor of Psychology, with Honours.

Lynda. The oldest woman in the study was Lynda, a 55-year-old Indigenous woman. Very limited information was provided to her from her family during her childhood about her Indigenous background. She lived in a quiet farming town, which she described as a ‘tight knit community’. Having completed a degree in Health, Aging
and Community, at the time of the interviews Lynda was enrolled in her second degree, a Bachelor of Psychology, through a regional university, via distance education.

**Dawn.** At the time of the interviews, Dawn, a 51-year-old single mother of three, was living in a large regional town, flanked by city and farmland. She worked as a sexual assault worker and volunteered with the local domestic violence committee. Dawn spent her nights engaged in online learning via a regional university. Since leaving a violent relationship, Dawn had already completed a Bachelor of Social Science/Social Welfare and at the time of the interviews was mid-way through her Master of Social Work course.

**Nancy.** At the time of the study, Nancy was 44 years old, divorced, with two school-aged children. She grew up in England. After finishing school, she commenced a ten-year relationship, which she described as violent. Nancy left this relationship and decided to move as far away as possible, settling in Australia with her children. Once settled, she commenced a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature at a regional university, which led to employment as an academic and the commencement of her PhD studies. At the time of the interview, Nancy she was nearing completion of her PhD. Nancy opted to not participate in the second interview as she was going through a time of personal hardship.

**Tamson.** Tamson was thirty-four years old. She described herself as having an Indigenous background, of which limited information was provided during her childhood. She grew up in a small country town. Tamson left school in year 10, to enter what turned into a violent and controlling ten year long relationship, which she described as ‘very much the culture of that town’. Following a decision to leave this marriage, Tamson moved to a completely new location, and once settled, commenced studies at a small regional university campus. There she completed a Bachelor of Arts, followed by an honours degree. She had two young adult children from her first marriage and three young children from her current marriage.

**Amelia.** Amelia, the youngest woman in the study, was a 27 years old single mother to three young children. She lived in a regional centre. Along with her caring responsibilities towards her children, Amelia was enrolled as a full-time student in Bachelor of Social Work at a large regional university, close to her home. Amelia commenced university studies with scholarship funding won following completion of a TAFE Certificate IV in Community Development. She commenced these studies after
an eight year long relationship which she described as abusive and disruptive to her high school education, as she entered this relationship when she was 15 years old.

Conclusion

This prologue has set the scene for the following narratives by introducing the nine women who participated in this inquiry. Understanding the field of education in the Bourdieuan sense - of being a place of inequalities, with a set of written and unwritten rules (Bourdieu, 1984), prepares the way the following chapters outline and present the narratives of each woman in relation to these concepts. The next chapter will retell the women’s narratives in relation to their educational and family experiences as children and describe the development of their capital and habitus in relation to education.
Chapter 4
Before the Experience of Domestic Violence

The purpose of this chapter is to present the narratives of the women’s engagement with education before the experience of domestic violence. Commencing the narratives at the stage of childhood provides an understanding of the development of the women’s habitus in relation to education (Bourdieu, 1986). Whilst most scholars agree that habitus is a relatively stable and unchangeable element in one's life (Bourdieu, 1990), as pointed out in Chapter two, Mills (2008) suggests that habitus can be both reproductive and transformative. She argues that: “position in the field inclines agents toward particular patterns of conduct” (p. 86). Mills also contends that depending on the relationship to the field, one form of habitus can dominate the other. Which habitus (dispositions and cultural capital) dominates might differ at different stages of life for different people. In relation to school education, Mills defines ‘reproductive habitus’ as the times when students are aware of limitations and only imagine “the future that fits them” (p. 2) in relation to their current social, economic and cultural capital. Transformative habitus, on the other hand, are the occasions when it is possible for the student to imagine the unimaginable and break away from perceived constraints. Mills describes this as being able to “recognise the capacity for improvisation” (p. 83).

This is a study of transformation, where the women were able to imagine the unimaginable and persevere despite their perceived constraints post domestic violence. It also acknowledges, however, that habitus, dispositions and hence cultural capital are established early in life from interactions with family, community and education. As Reay (2004) points out,

The accumulation of cultural capital in its embodied form begins in early childhood. It requires pedagogical action, the investment of time by parents, other family members or hired professionals to sensitize the child to cultural distinctions. (p. 74)

As Reay indicates, the formation of capital requires a considerable investment on the part of parents and other educative agents; such investment contributes to social class differences in opportunities and engagement with education. It is important, therefore, to consider how the participants’ early years and initial encounters with education to help to explain their journeys and their engagement with and adaption to education environments in adult life (Dumais, 2002; Roberts, 2015).
According to the Australian Department of Education (2017) document titled, “Early Years Learning Framework”, education in the early years should focus on developing dispositions of ‘belonging, being and becoming’ (p. 7). These dispositions are necessary for children to feel safe whilst they make meaning of the world and develop (Roberts, 2015). Bullough, Clark, and Patterson (2003) argue that this early stage of education should foster positive attitudes towards learning, in order to promote the desire to take on further learning opportunities in adult life. Such dispositions are particularly helpful when participating in university studies where self-directed learning and high levels of motivation are keys to success (Bullough et al., 2003).

As Al-Othman (2014) and Dumais (2002) suggest, early family experiences that do not foster the kinds of cultural capital and habitus that predispose to a successful engagement with education, can be mitigated by the quality of children’s schooling. For example, Al-Othman (2014) points to the potential of quality early education in counteracting the impact of growing up in a disadvantaged or abusive home. Dumais (2002) argues that children from such backgrounds, if exposed to quality education, can view education as an opportunity: “exceptional students from the lower class may see the accumulation of cultural capital as a way to overcome the obstacles that are typical for those in their class position” (p. 47). Williams, MacMillan, and Jamieson (2006) suggest that it is not just academic ability that can assist children from such backgrounds, but sporting ability is also a way to accumulate the cultural capital needed to prepare for future opportunities. Elevated academic or sporting performance in childhood is often viewed as a protective factor (Williams et al, 2006), making school, for these children, a vital place to develop the resilience required for pursuing educational opportunities later in life. For some of the women in my study, these different forms of capital and dispositions seemed to ‘protect’ them or make the development of dispositions and capital possible despite abusive homes or backgrounds not oriented to their development.

The period that the following narratives cover includes early education experiences within the family, and primary and high school education. They help to predict the women’s educational and vocational trajectories of the women as they entered early adulthood, and then as mature aged university students. They also provide an insight into the dispositions and capital resources the women had to draw on, to fit into the new environment.
Sophie described herself as having had a good school education and loving parents who encouraged and supported her to complete high school and university. This provided Sophie with a positive disposition towards education and a solid foundation for her future. Her family viewed the field of education as a “place where you did your best”. Although her parents had not attended university themselves, Sophie explained how they “taught that education was a way to express [herself]”. Although Sophie concluded that she was “not the most brilliant child in the class”, and “not an A grade student”, she did not feel pressure from her family. She shared her parents’ view that her education was a "tool to enable [her] to become who [she] was meant to be." For Sophie, school was “a fun place” where she enjoyed friendships. There were several areas of learning which interested her. She described art as the site for some of “her best memories”. Sophie also enjoyed other subjects such as mathematics, music and languages, in particular German.

Sophie saw her teachers as the "encouragers" who had a positive influence on her. They encouraged her to always have a positive attitude towards school. She described her kindergarten teacher as a “role model” because she was very enthusiastic about being creative, trying new things and being non-judgmental. In the senior years of high school, Sophie began to think about teaching as an imaginable career for herself. Following high school, she gained entrance to study teaching at university. Upon completion, she began working as a casual teacher.

Sophie acquired cultural capital and very positive dispositions towards learning through her enjoyment of school and the various subjects she loved. Her social capital was in the form of a network of friendships at school with other students, and encouragement from her teachers. Economically Sophie’s family was able to support her schooling. These forms of capital put Sophie in good stead for later education. Although she was the first in her family to attend university, the support of her parents and teachers helped her to imagine herself as a university student. This disposition helped Sophie after she completed school, because she felt confident in her ability in education. Like many young women of her class and background, Sophie’s aspired to be a teacher but did not imagine herself in what might be regarded as more lucrative or higher status positions. While it is difficult to ascribe a particular social class location with any certainty to Sophie’s family, her parents’ education suggests that her
aspirations, like those in studies comparing the aspirations of working class and middle class young people were more likely to have had a preconceived limit (Reay, David, and Ball, 2005). As Reay et al. (2005) conclude from their study of working and middle class prospective university students’ in London, the aspirations and ways of choosing higher education for the working class young people differed from those of middle and higher class. They found that working class young people tended to moderate their aspirations based on where they felt they belonged. According to Huppatz’s (2010) study, which looked at the perceptions of working class and middle class nurses and social workers, for young working-class women, especially young women like Sophie, these dispositions of belonging are often focused around caring professions such as teaching and nursing over other higher status professions. A teaching degree was thus an imaginable goal for Sophie at this stage.

Mary

Like Sophie, Mary’s family had a positive disposition to education, despite, as she described them, being “not academically minded” and “labourers and working class”. Prior to Mary’s birth, her mother migrated from Malta and her father from Italy. Her mother left school at the end of year 8 and her father approximately year 10. According to Mary, her parents "always encouraged [her], never pushed [her], and never forced [her]". This assisted Mary to acquire an independent disposition towards education: “It was always on my own devices, on my own merit, my own sort of doing.”

Mary attended a local Catholic primary school where her best memories were the friendships that she made. From there, she went to a local Catholic high school where her favourite subjects were English, Reading and Cooking. By the age of 14, Mary had already decided she would become a nurse. There was no particular influence on Mary to study nursing; she described it as just a career that she could imagine for herself because she “enjoyed helping people”. Her older brothers finished year 10 and went on to complete apprenticeships. According to Mary, her parents allowed her to choose when to leave school and so she completed high school. From there, she went straight into studying at a nearby university where she completed a Bachelor of Nursing. She was the only member of her family to complete education at this level: “it was just me who went through to year 12 and then uni”. 
Like Sophie, Mary had supportive parents and a good education. Her disposition towards education was shaped by her migrant parents, who left school at an early age themselves, but who valued education for their daughter. As Umut (2010) argues, immigrants are likely to find new capital and positions in their new society. Similarly, Ball et al. (2002) explain that students with working class migrant parents are “contingent choosers” (p. 337). They argue that although such parents may not have access to high amounts of economic capital, their disposition towards education is such that they are able to provide their children with the necessary encouragement and emotional support. Such families view higher education as an opportunity, or in Bell et al.’s words: “Higher education becomes a break or hiatus in family and personal narratives” (p. 337).

In the Australian context migrants such as Mary’s mother and father came to Australia to provide a new life for their children, one that was better than their own. According to Vasta (1995) while first generation migrants generally take on working class employment such as cleaning, shop assistant, truck driver etc, their children on the other hand are more likely to turn to more professional roles. In addition, the role of women in such families has also changed from being home based to more likely to take up education. This could explain why Mary was encouraged to do her best at school and why she could imagine herself in a career that required further study.

**Rachel**

Rachel was the youngest sibling of five children and was brought up in a regional town in a family where education was important. In her words, “I was kind of the person on the little stool all the time in adult conversations and so for me, thinking and discussing ideas was something I grew up with.”

Her father was an electrical engineer: “I did not know that electrical engineering was a university thing when he studied but he did so well they named an award at a university after him.” Although she said that her mother had yearned to be a teacher, she worked as a florist. Both of her parents had studied at a theological college, where they passed the advanced assessment. Rachel’s parents provided more than just encouragement for education; they assumed that all their children would attend university. As Rachel explained, they “always had an assumption that everybody would go to uni [university] and always an assumption that we would try to do well”. For
Rachel then, her future education was a given, she never considered that she “would do anything other than go to uni”.

Her father died when she was aged eight and still attending primary school. Rachel’s mother continued her late husband’s expectations for his children’s education by ensuring any money he had left to the family was used to educate the children. Rachel admired her mother’s strength to continue looking after the family as a widow. She described her mother as being “made of really stronger stuff.” She watched her mother rebuild her life after her husband died, describing her as “not only my childhood role model but she is my adult role model” because she felt that her mother had walked a similar path to herself as a single mother. This seemed to provide Rachel with the attitude that rebuilding life was possible after unexpected and unfortunate circumstances. It also helped to shape her perception of gender roles, to view women as strong and skilful, as she saw her mother’s capabilities to look after the family.

In her early years Rachel described how she loved going to primary school but in high school her focus shifted. She became distracted as she socialised more with boys. She described how this led to a reduction in her school work and the realisation that she only needed to pass subjects to achieve at school. In her words, “study probably went out the window a little bit”. Despite this distraction, Rachel obtained a “principal’s report” (the equivalent of early entry into university). This enabled her to fulfil her father’s wishes and gain entry into university.

For Rachel thinking and discussing ideas was something she grew up with. Her interactions with her family were built around learning and in-depth discussions. Being the youngest sibling, she was always surrounded by adult conversations. From these discussions, Rachel observed the gender roles of her family. She stated that in her family there were “very opinionated strong women” who would “really wrestle with ideas.” On the other hand, Rachel saw the men in her family as “strong and gentle”. As a child, she observed the interactions between “all these incredibly intelligent, thinking blokes who married these hot women, hot minded women.” This taught Rachel that intelligence and opinion were desirable attributes for both women and men. She also had an understanding that men were respectful and gentle towards this attribute in women.

Following high school, Rachel travelled for a year before taking up her position at university in a Bachelor of Arts course, which she followed by a teaching qualification in the form of a Diploma of Education. She described her aspiration to
become a teacher as a “kind of a fall back” because she was unsure of what else to do. She explained that her inspiration to become a teacher was her mother: “my Mum always wanted to be a teacher, so I became a teacher”. Once she completed this degree, she took up a school teaching position, only to realise quickly that she did not want to teach children. Rachel left this position and commenced work within the adult education sector, teaching vocational programs.

From her childhood experiences and family interactions, Rachel came to view education as valuable. She came from a loving family with modest economic resources, as her mother tried to recover from Rachel’s father’s death. The disposition that education was something to strive for, though, continued to shape the way Rachel valued education. The discussions with her family as a young child and the examples of the men and women in her family provided Rachel with examples of gender roles, where strong intelligent women were not afraid to voice their opinion. By the end of this period of her life, Rachel had university credentials and an apparently secure career in adult education.

**Claudia**

Like Rachel’s family, Claudia’s family could also be regarded as middle class, both economically and in dispositions to education. Her father had attended university where he studied engineering and became a pilot. Later in his life, when he was in his sixties he returned to university studies, where he undertook an Information Technology course. This led to a new career at 64. Her father and mother owned newsagencies, which is where her mother worked as a secretary, until she had her first child. 

Like Rachel, Claudia grew up knowing her parents wanted her to go to university. She described how, during her early childhood, “learning within the home was very important”. She explained that her family had fairly firm boundaries and expectations. As a child, she stated that she was, “constantly reading, constantly encouraged”.

Claudia attended a public primary school in a large city. When she was 10 years old, a family friend, who was a teacher, asked Claudia to be a part of her university study: “I was the kid she would ask, ‘can you come and do this work’ when she had assignments and things.” Claudia described this woman as her “childhood role model”. She looked up to this woman as she was able to identify with her love for education.
This interaction inspired Claudia to consider university studies as a good pathway to take in the future.

Claudia attended a private boarding high school; however, she was not a boarding student. She stated that she “would have loved to have boarded in year 12. I thought that would help my studies, but my parents couldn't afford fees”. She enjoyed subjects such as biology, commerce and home economics. Her “best memory” of school, though, was sport. She loved sport competitions between the boarding students and the day students. Claudia described how she wanted “to make that team even though [in] individual events [she] could get further”. She recalled the feelings she had when she competed with the team: “you know I used to go to the change rooms and get into the special costume and everyone at the pool just chanted and there was war-cries across the pool and it was just, yeah, marching out in that team”. In her paper on the social positioning of girls within school education, Holroyd (2002) describes how independent girls’ school uniforms and teams provided the students in her study with “physical capital” and “school specific habitus” (p.1) that assisted with a sense of belonging and fitting into the field. The girls Holroyd (2002) refers to, like, Claudia, delighted in the friendships forged within and by these school practices. In this way, being a part of a team contributed to Claudia’s social capital. At this stage, the evidence suggests that Claudia was confident, enjoying school and comfortable with herself and others.

However, her confidence in herself and her ability at school declined dramatically towards the end of high school as she struggled with undiagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):

I think that my doubt in capacity was due to undiagnosed ADHD. I was diagnosed at 40, a month before starting uni [university], and have been medicated since. I believe it would have been very different if I had been diagnosed as a teen.

The onset of this disorder coincided with her brothers commencing and failing to complete university degrees. This seemed to reduce Claudia’s confidence further as she came to doubt her own capacity; if her older brothers were not able to cope with university how could she. At this point, Claudia decided that university was not for her and instead chose to use her love of cooking to complete a Commercial Cookery course at TAFE and commenced work in this industry.
Like the other women in the study who had positive experiences of schooling, Claudia’s early school experiences and the support of her loving and educated parents provided her with a very positive orientation to education and the expectation that she could do well. At this point in her life, research would predict that university would be a “predetermined choice” (O’Shea, 2016, p. 61) for Claudia; however, the onset of undiagnosed ADHD as a teenager set Claudia on a completely different path. She completed high school with no desire to attend university. Research shows that those with ADHD, especially if not medicated, can experience difficulties with academic performance (Lu et al., 2017). Speaking of his own experiences with ADHD in high school, through the lens of Bourdieu, Berezin (2014) states, "I possessed the preferred cultural and social capital of that field, and yet my performance, and thus my presence in the classroom, remained of lesser value" (p. 1). He describes this deficit as "disabled capital" (Berezin, 2014. p.1). Despite the cultural and social capital Claudia acquired during childhood, towards the end of high school, university studies became unimaginable. Instead, Claudia chose what she perceived to be a less demanding course at TAFE, after which she got married.

Lynda

Like Claudia, Lynda also grew up in the suburbs of Sydney, describing it as “all country then”. Like Claudia, she attended a private school and had educated professional parents; however, her cultural capital was complicated from a young age. She was brought up as having a “white” cultural background despite “rumours” of an Indigenous heritage (a background she later found more about). Early schooling and the influence of her engineer father and scientist mother, gave Lynda a love of learning. She always felt, however, that she was “under the shadow of a sister who was diagnosed as borderline genius”. Although Lynda tried to seek the approval of her parents, she said that she felt that she could never compete and that her parents had made that clear to her.

Lynda experienced physical abuse as a child at the hands of her mother: “I was honestly flogged till I was badly bruised at times, whipped and stuff like that”. At the same time, Lynda was attending a private Catholic school where she felt “nurtured” by the nuns. She was tempted to confide in the nuns and tell them about what was happening to her in her home:
We were on a school excursion on a train and I am thinking, ‘go up and tell the nuns’ because the nuns were nurturing, and I was thinking, ‘you can get out of this’. I was only 11 years old and I didn’t do it.

The private school provided Lynda with what she called, “a different culture”. She enjoyed the academic standard and was proud that hers was “pretty high”. She described herself as a “high achiever and a straight ‘A’ student”. Lynda enjoyed the “Steiner stream” program at the school, where in the afternoon, academic subjects were put to the side and the children concentrated on the arts. During this time, Lynda participated in painting and Polish Dancing. The confidence Lynda gained from the encouragement and achievement of this school left an impression that stayed with her, “that’s how come I knew I could be doing better”.

When Lynda was in her early teens, her parents decided to re-locate to the rural town where her family came from. She suddenly went into the public school system, a decision her mother made for Lynda’s education based on her own attitudes and education experiences as a child: “my mum was like ‘well I never got that, so you can’t’”. Lynda felt as though she “had to quickly educate [herself] after that because she [mother] wasn’t going to let me”. After the change into the public system, Lynda did not like school as much.

Lynda wanted to continue dancing but her mum wouldn’t let her. Instead, the only thing she would let Lynda do was to participate in dressage because her mother loved horses. Lynda loved this sport and her coach. He used to tell her that, “the sky’s the limit”. Lynda stated that, like the encouragement from the nuns, this reinforcement from her coach became "embedded in [her]." This helped Lynda understand that the success she had experienced at the Steiner school and dressage could be something she could experience again.

Lynda left school early because her mum did not want her to continue with school. Instead, she commenced nursing in the hospital-based training system. Lynda, however, “was not really into the education side”. She felt as though she was struggling with everything; however, after her first year she had settled in and started to focus and improve. She said to herself “you can do this, you are better than this’”.

The encouragement of the nuns and her coach left Lynda with an attitude that she was capable of achieving what she set her mind to. Research would predict that having two educated parents and a reasonably affluent family would provide a sufficient economic and cultural capital as a sound foundation for future educational endeavours.
(Reay, 2004). For Lynda, though, it was more complicated than that. The interaction within her family was not a simple story.

Reading the narrative through the lens of Bourdieu, Lynda’s story reveals her development of cultural capital in her early years from interactions with her family, community and education (Reay, 2004). The nuns at her private school and her dressage coach had direct impact on her confidence and self-belief. The inclusion of art in the curriculum provided Lynda with pleasurable memories of creating and dancing. The friendships she formed contributed also to her sense that education was a happy place to be. Lynda’s parents were educated professionals, and her upbringing afforded her opportunities like a private school, horses and sport. From these interactions, she formed a very positive assessment of her capacity and a positive orientation to education. However, Lynda was in an abusive family. Bourdieu inspired research on such families suggests that “abuse disrupts a child’s social capital, which has ramifications for later academic achievement” (Potter, 2010, p. 184). As a result of her family interactions, Lynda’s dispositions were not straightforward. On one hand, Lynda had confidence in her ability to achieve but it was fragile from the abuse she had experienced. Her mother’s influence on her education led Lynda to moderate her aspirations to undertake higher education by going into hospital-based nurses training. This also provided her with the means to leave home, as she was required to live at the hospital where she was employed.

Dawn

As a child, Dawn needed security away from her abusive home. School was her place of safety where positive learning experiences shaped her dispositions towards education. Born in Yorkshire England, Dawn described her “English chauvinist” father as a hard-working mechanic. She also remembered him as verbally violent towards her mother. She recalled that her older brothers did not remember the violence, but Dawn did. Her father was also sexually abusive towards her. He dismissed her intelligence by telling her older brother that, “he was the smart one”. He would ridicule Dawn, telling her “oh you are a pretty girl, you don’t need to study hard, you’ll get married.” Dawn’s mother also called her “stupid”. It is likely that Dawn’s aspirations and dispositions in relation to education were profoundly influenced by these negative comments. According to Reay et al. (2005), classed practices within the educational context are revealed through preferences. For Dawn, it was likely that, unless other mitigating
circumstances intervened she would choose an educational pathway which reflected the social class of her working-class family.

Although her mother was negative towards Dawn's intellectual ability, Dawn viewed her mother as "quite smart". During her childhood, Dawn watched as her mother made many failed attempts at improving her cultural capital by undertaking university courses including studying to be a teacher and enrolling in an arts and a psychology degree. Dawn stated that her mother had a “fractured life” as she had also grown up with a violent father (Dawn’s grandfather). She described the place where her mother grew up as “a pretty rough place”. Dawn’s grandmother, on the other hand, was “a strong woman”. She died when Dawn was eleven years old, but Dawn remembered being “very close” to her. Dawn enjoyed staying with her on the weekends, shopping and sewing with her. This relationship with her grandmother gave Dawn a different sense of self, compared to that produced in the context of her home.

In England, Dawn attended a public primary school that she described as “very strict”. Although the abuse continued at home, she stated that her “primary school years were fantastic because [she] hated being at home.” She was involved in many different activities outside of school hours in an attempt to be away from her home and the abuse. These activities included gymnastics and horses and music. She had a particular interest in music and played the saxophone and guitar. While Dawn viewed these activities as ways to be out of the home, they also provided her with experiences which influenced her cultural capital. In Bourdieuan terms, activities such as music and education are regarded as institutionalised cultural capital, with the potential to be transferred into valuable commodities within the workplace and socially (Bourdieu, 1990).

When Dawn was 13, her parents divorced. Her mother remarried and migrated with Dawn to Australia. Dawn described herself as “real fair skinned freckled, strawberry blonde hair, and skinny like a bloody stick”. She felt her appearance and broad Yorkshire accent made her different. She felt as though she didn’t quite fit in with everyone else and described her relocation as moving into “a different culture” and “a whole new world”.

In Australia, Dawn attended a large city public high school. At this age, she described herself as “a bit nerdy”. There were plenty of distractions for Dawn, however. Socialising with boys led to what Dawn described as ‘going off the rails for quite a bit” and being “quite promiscuous”. This prompted her mother to move Dawn to an all-girls’ high school, which Dawn described as “a bit of a better school”. Although Dawn
said she was “pretty quiet and shy at school”, at this new school she was a part of the “tough girls in the tough group”. Dawn labelled herself in this group as “the nerdy one doing everyone’s homework”. The distractions, however, continued for Dawn. At home, she was not getting along with her parents.

At the end of year ten, Dawn left school and left home. Like many young women of that time and level of education, she went to TAFE and studied a secretarial course (Truss, Alfes, Shantz, & Rosewarne, 2013). As she said, “that is what we did back then, either nursing or secretarial. Wasn’t much other choices but at least we could leave school and walk into a job.” She went on to become a clerk at an airport. During this period of employment, Dawn was sexually harassed by her manager. She described how “he would make her climb up ladders and wear short skirts.” This harassment angered her mother, so she took legal action. Dawn left this job and then took up the second option; she went into nursing.

From there, she worked in a convent hospice as a nursing assistant for a year, before studying nursing at a city hospital for two years. Dawn said she was “one of the last ones to go through the hospital training system”. She felt as though she was doing really well in her studies and described how she was “loved” by the matron. Six weeks before her final exams, Dawn was working in the isolation ward where golden staph was “rampant”. As a result, Dawn fell ill and moved back with her parents into their rural home. She did not complete her final exams.

At this point it could be said that in terms of future possible engagements with further education, Dawn had very limited cultural capital; that is, although she knew she was smart, she had minimal confidence or motivation to take on further studies. The exception was Dawn’s musical capacity fostered during primary school. Like Lynda, Dawn’s childhood, left her knowing that she had intellectual ability, however the experience of violence within the family squashed her confidence. At this point in her life, Dawn could not imagine university as a possibility so, like Lynda, Dawn looked to secretarial work and hospital-based nurse’s training that she recognised as feasible for someone of her gender, education and background.

**Nancy**

Unlike the other women in this study, Nancy did not enjoy her schooling as a young child. She grew up in England, where her mother and father were supportive of her education, in particular, her father, who had attended university himself. During her
childhood, Nancy was sexually abused. At the time of her interview she did not disclose any further details of this abuse, only to say that it had a negative impact on her schooling because she went to school feeling like “a victim and worthless”. She knew, though, that at school, she was “kind of really smart”, yet she also described how she hated every aspect of being at school, saying, “[it was] just torture”. At school she was bullied by other children at the school. However, she felt responsible as she believed that she deserved it; that bullying was “a self-fulfilling prophesy.”

Nancy was reminded of her isolation at school recently, when she did not receive an invitation to a school reunion, despite her sister being invited. She recalled her disappointment and stated: “How hard would it be, just give, just send it to you. They know where your address is, but so that is kind of how absent I felt from my school experience”.

Even though she did not enjoy high school, Nancy was intellectually capable. She completed high school achieving 3 British A levels and 10 O levels. When Nancy completed her British education, O level was considered a pre-requisite to study the advanced A-level subjects. Once the A levels were completed, the final high school certificate (the equivalent of the New South Wales, Australia, Higher School Certificate) was awarded, known as the General Certificate of Education (World Education News & Reviews, 2014). From there she worked in the retail sector, becoming an area training manager. She worked in this career for many years.

Like Dawn and Lynda, Nancy grew up having experienced abuse; however, school was not a place where she felt safe either. According to Evans and Smokowski (2015), bullying during periods of schooling can result in a perpetual lack of social capital for the ‘victim’, which enhances the domination of those who bully. They argue that being bullied at school can have a lasting negative impact on the confidence of the ‘victim’. Despite her experience of bullying, Nancy knew she had intellectual ability. However, following high school, university was not an imaginable pathway for Nancy as her experience of abuse and bullying had reduced her confidence, rather she commenced a career in retail work.

Tamson

Tamson grew up in a rural location in New South Wales where abuse towards women was “very much the culture of that town”. She identified as having an Indigenous background, however had learnt very little about this as a child. In her
my background is Indigenous, quite an offshoot back, so it is not something is not spoken about”. Her parents had both attended TAFE and during her childhood worked as graphic designers. Her mother worked in magazine advertising, whilst her father owned his own graphic design studio. Her parents separated when Tamson was eight, with her mother remarrying when she was ten. They encouraged Tamson’s education and she did well during her primary years. She also described herself as very sporty and active.

During her public high school years, she acquired a new group of friends, whom she described as “a bad group of people”. Tamson described how she “got caught up in other things” and lost interest in school. She began a pattern of truancy and very rarely attended classes in high school. At the age of 13 she commenced a relationship with a boy. Her schooling was finally curtailed in year 10 when Tamson left home and moved in with her partner. She soon fell pregnant with her eldest child when she was 16, closely followed by a second child.

Tamson’s attitude towards school and education fluctuated over the course of her childhood. During her younger years she was supported by her parents and enjoyed school. As she entered high school, however, her social capital changed and she began to mix with a new group of friends. With this new influence, her views of education changed. Like the adolescents who truanted or dropped out of school in the Drewry, Burge and Driscoll (2010) study, the combination of changes in family, friends and school resulted in reduced motivation to do well at school. Perhaps as a result of these high school experiences, Tamson did not imagine university as a possible pathway. Tamson did not engage with any further education or employment after she left school but focused on bringing up her children.

Amelia

Amelia described herself as having had a sheltered childhood in a regional town. Her parents spent lengthy amounts of time commuting to the city where they worked in an office. Her father was a manager and her mother an assistant. Both had left school around the age of sixteen and neither attended university.

As a young child Amelia said that she was “pretty much in care from the moment [she] was born”. She attended a local primary school and did not participate in any activities outside of school hours. At school she was bullied by other children
because “she got a little chubby”. Neither her home nor school life gave Amelia much freedom and as a result she described feeling “suffocated”.

At the age of 15, she volunteered for a local youth centre. There, she formed a relationship with a male youth. Soon after meeting him, Amelia “ran away from home” to live with him. Although living away from her family, she continued with her schooling, describing studying for the Higher School Certificate as “a complex time” and “all over the place”.

Amelia did not have much social capital as a child because she had limited interactions with her family due to their demanding work hours, and at school she did not have many friends. Her confidence decreased as she experienced bullying by other children at school. During her high school days, she was distracted from her studies and further alienated from her family as she left home. Although her parents did not attend university themselves, they both held professional positions and worked long hours. Amelia’s childhood was fragmented, with at least one parent a professional but both absent to a substantial extent from her life. She looked elsewhere for connection and was not completely engaged in her high school education. University was an unlikely aspiration at this point in her life.

**Discussion**

The narratives thus far provide an indication of the women’s access to economic, social and cultural capital and the dispositions formed through their interactions with families and schooling. Although this is only part of the women’s narratives, according to Bourdieu (1990), dispositions accumulated during childhood establishes attitudes in adulthood. Therefore, these narratives provide an indication of the kinds of resources the women’s early experiences provided and provide a basis for predicting their future engagements with education as adults. This baseline will assist in understanding how the women’s resources came into play in assisting (or not) the women to negotiate education as adults.

From their childhoods, most of the women were left imagining a future, shaped by the social class of their families and interactions with education (Ball, MacRae, & Maguire, 1999); their dispositions and capital were likely to have been profoundly influenced by their educational opportunities which were in turn influenced by their social class locations. According to Reay (2004), “entitled middle classes are able to use ‘choice’ to insert their children into better schools in better areas” (p. 80). These
differences are also seen in aspirations for further education. Children from working class families often distance themselves from the possibility of going to university (Ball et al. 2002; Ball et al., 1999), whereas, those with family members who have already engaged in higher education often have an assumption that they will also attend (O’Shea, 2016). This assumption can be seen in the families of Rachel and Claudia, whose parents were highly educated and who expected their children to also attend university, and also in the families of Sophie and Mary who, while they might be designated as having a low socio-economic status, had more middle-class aspirations for their daughters.

The shaping of attitudes towards education, though, is broader than just what occurs within families. Roberts (2015) argues that professionals such as teachers can also have an impact on shaping dispositions which may be useful for higher education environments (Bullough et al., 2003; Roberts, 2015). The provision of quality early education then can counteract the impact of coming from a marginalised background (Al-Othman, 2014). According to Dumais (2002), “exceptional students from the lower class may see the accumulation of cultural capital as a way to overcome the obstacles that are typical for those in their class position” (p. 47). This may explain why some children, such as Mary and Sophie, displayed what Mills (2004) describes as a transformative habitus by becoming the first in their families to attend university and imagining the seemingly unimaginable (Ball et al, 1999).

In contrast, at this stage in their narratives, quality education and success in sporting activities (Williams et al., 2006) was not enough to protect Lynda and Dawn from the effects of childhood abuse, and Claudia from the effects of ADHD. On the surface, research would predict that on the basis of Lynda and Claudia’s educated family backgrounds, university would have been imaginable for these women (Ball et al., 1999; Roberts, 2015; Williams et al., 2006); however, other issues stripped away their confidence. Instead they opted for imaginable careers, such as nursing, hospitality or retail.

Across the stories, most women settled for caring professions such as teaching and nursing. Research suggests that aspirations of young women like those in this study are often focused around these caring professions over other higher status professions (Huppatz, 2010). Teaching has historically been perceived as maternal and caring (Wright, Cooper, & Luff, 2017), whereas, nursing has long been thought of as a long term career, which provides women with a good balance between work and family.
(Burke & Singh, 2016). For the women in this study, it would seem that these careers were imaginable, assumed and in some cases expected. None of the women mentioned an aspiration for other higher status occupations or areas of university study at this point in their lives.

Amelia and Tamson’s parents did not attend university but they worked in managerial positions or owned their own small businesses which might have predicted further education for their daughters beyond school. However both women commenced relationships in their teen years, left school early and ran away from home. Holland (2008) suggests that during adolescence social networks can either assist with coping emotionally and with resources for employment or “exclude, marginalize, constrain and entrap people” (p. 9), and that “the trust and loyalties built through these bonding ties could lead them to ignore alternative opportunities and possibilities” (p. 9). Hollands’ words seem to sum up the effect of the social connections Amelia and Tamson made during their teen years; they distracted them from further education opportunities, with their focus firmly locked on to their relationships and for Tamson, her child.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the narratives of the women’s education experiences before they entered violent and controlling relationships. The narratives in this chapter illustrate the childhoods of the women, their early interactions with family, friendships and their school education. These experiences contributed to shaping the women’s habitus, providing the kinds of cultural and social capital that could become valuable resources and commodities later in life when they entered new fields. In the next chapter the narratives explore how the women’s lives were impacted by domestic violence.
Chapter 5
During the Experience of Domestic Violence

The purpose of this chapter is to present the narratives of the women during their time in a violent relationship. The narratives provide an understanding of changes in economic, cultural and social capital during this time. Bourdieu (1986) predicts that trauma can impact on capital, and scholars such as Pain (2014), Morgan and Thapar-Björkert (2006) and Reverter-Bañón and Thapar Bjorkert (2001) have found that the experience of domestic violence reduces confidence and increases feelings of fear, as the various tactics of control creates a situation of reliance on an abusive partner. As recalling the events remains personal and painful, there were some women who did not provide a lot of detail about this time; however, they did speak about why this was difficult for them. This has been included to provide a sense of how these events still impacted the women at the time of the study.

In Chapter 4, the women’s narratives indicated that the women came from a range of backgrounds, which afforded them different possibilities for the accrual of economic, cultural and social capital. Their attitudes towards learning were largely positive, although their levels of confidence in their abilities differed. At the conclusion of the period of their lives narrated in Chapter 4, most of the women had completed high school, with a few going on to university studies. The narratives in this chapter will provide further understanding of how the women’s capital and dispositions that were developed during their childhoods changed during this period of their lives as they experienced domestic violence. The narratives commence as the women are just starting out in their late adolescent and young adult lives. Some of the women had started families, some were engaged in early phases of study, and some were working or involved in a combination of all three but all were now involved in situations of domestic violence.

As explained in Chapter 2, violent partners use a range of tactics to gain control of their spouse (Pence & Paymor, 1986). Despite misconceptions, domestic violence is often not a result of losing control but rather attempts to gain control (Hayes & Jeffries, 2016). As Herman (1992) explains, domestic violence shares some of the same coercive control traits and consequences as hostage situations:

Captivity, which brings the victim into prolonged contact with the perpetrator, creates a special type of relationship, one of coercive control. This is equally
true whether the victim is rendered captive primarily by physical force (as in the case of prisoners and hostages), or by a combination of physical, economic, social, and psychological means (as in the case of religious cult members, battered women, and abused children). The psychological impact of subordination to coercive control may have many common features, whether that subordination occurs within the public sphere of politics or within the supposedly private (but equally political) sphere of sexual and domestic relations. (p. 378)

According to Reverter-Bañón and Thapar Bjorkert (2001), these controlling tactics of domestic violence impact the capital of those who are being abused. In relation to economic capital, the experience of domestic violence can contribute to or cause poverty for the abused partner, regardless of the affluence of the family (Eriksson & Ulmestig, 2017). In an interview study of 19 women who had experienced domestic violence, Eriksson and Ulmestig (2017) demonstrated how the experience of financial control was woven with other forms of domestic violence. Financial control, in particular, created situations of poverty which impacted the health, confidence, work and social connections of the women in their study. This sets up a situation where it became difficult for the abused person to leave the relationship due to the development of reliance on their partner. According to Powell and Smith (2011), financial control can include withholding access to money or employment, denying the purchase of necessary personal items, or preventing women from having a bank account. Slabbert (2017) argues that this form of control places the abused in a position of oppression, where choices and resources are limited.

As indicated in Chapter 2, cultural capital in the forms of embodied, objectified and institutionalised capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is developed within the family, as a child, and, while it may remain stable over life, can change during times of trauma (Larance & Porter, 2014). Specific literature addressing the impact of domestic violence on any form of cultural capital is sparse (especially institutionalised cultural capital), however there are plenty of examples in the literature (Birdsey & Snowball, 2013; Herman, 1992; Morgan & Thapar-Björkert , 2006; Oke, 2008) which provide an understanding of the squashing impact of domestic violence on a woman’s capacity to make choices, to speak for herself, and on her confidence; all of which could be described as embodied cultural capital. For example, in the following quote Herman (1992) describes
how the ongoing nature of domestic violence can radically alter a woman’s sense of self and capacity to function independently over time.

In addition to inducing terror, the perpetrator seeks to destroy the victim’s sense of autonomy. This is achieved by control of the victim's body and bodily functions. Deprivation of food, sleep, shelter, exercise, personal hygiene, or privacy are common practices. Once the perpetrator has established this degree of control, he becomes a potential source of solace as well as humiliation. (Herman, 1992, p. 383)

Morgan and Thapar-Björkert (2006) found that the controlling tactics of domestic violence “[take] away the voice from the victim because they are forced to adopt an obsequious attitude” (p. 447). And for the women in, Oke’s study (2009), they had grown so accustomed to the control that they had lost their sense of self:

Every woman lost her narrative identity or sense of continuity of self to overwhelming embodied, emotional experiences, such as anxiety, depression, confusion and self-blame. Several women also experienced a dissociated state, a sense of ‘doubleness’ or of leaving the self. (Oke, 2008, p. 14)

These examples demonstrate how cultural (embodied) capital in the form of confidence, the capacity to act autonomously and to speak for oneself can be stifled during periods in one’s life that are affected by domestic violence.

The impact of domestic violence on material possessions (objectified cultural capital) is complicated. On one hand, the abusive spouse may use tactics such as damage to property, or controlling what possessions one owns, and other times they may gift material possessions as a control tactic (Herman, 1992). As Morgan and Thapar-Björkert (2006), state “the perpetrator [abusive partner] would often try to win the ‘victim’ through material demonstration of gifts. This would in turn make the ‘victim’ emotionally and materially indebted” (p. 447) or, as Herman (1992) explains, “The capricious granting of small indugences may undermine the psychological resistance of the victim far more effectively than unremitting deprivation and fear” (p. 383). These are examples of the ways in which women’s cultural and economic capital can be substantially reduced/impacted by domestic violence, and further demonstrate an increased reliance on the abuser for decision making through the controlling of bank accounts and access to items of necessity such as food.

The loss of social capital is arguably the most widely documented form of capital within the domestic violence literature. Across the literature the tactic of
isolation is identified as a key control mechanism, thereby reducing women’s access to social capital. The way this works is illustrated in the following quote from Larance and Porter (2014):

Women who have been victimised by domestic violence, however, often have diminished stocks of social capital available for their use. This is so because they have usually been secluded from supportive familial and friendship networks by their abusers, who have kept them isolated and dependent. (p.678)

Davis, Taylor and Furniss (2001) conducted a study in rural Australia, collecting and analysing the narratives of women who had experienced domestic violence. They found that isolation was a common tactic, and identified four forms of isolation:

“Physical, as in geographical; social, as in lack of friends and social networks; cultural, as in living in an alternate community; and emotional, because of shame and loss of initiative” (p. 338). The attack on women’s social capital can have far reaching consequences. As Banon and Bjorkett (2001) point out, “besides having implications on survival and the well-being needs of women, violence also questions individual identity and freedom, the two essential elements for building social capital” (p.6). In other words, once women have had their social network limited, their ability to create new connections is also reduced. This further impacts their situation, making it more difficult to seek support (Banon & Bjorkett, 2001). This could impede accessing and seeking support if women are to take on further education during the period of the relationship. Although there are limited examples of literature which focus on women seeking help while in education, there are examples of support available for university students who are impacted by domestic violence (e.g. The University of Adelaide, 2017). For the women in this study, the experience of domestic violence made most of them hesitant about establishing new relationships and few specifically sought support.

In the following section, the narratives of the women illustrate how the economic, cultural and social capital the women had accrued before their violent relationships was impacted by their experience, and how this in turn, influenced the way they chose to (or not) engage with education during this time in their lives.

**Sophie**

Sophie shared only limited information about her life during her marriage. Instead, she chose to focus on discussing the challenges experienced by women like herself, which impact their capacity and willingness to speak out about domestic
violence. As explained above, literature would predict that for women like Sophie, speaking out would be difficult due to the silencing effect of domestic violence (Morgan & Thapar-Björkert, 2006; Reverter-Bañón & Thapar Bjorkert, 2001). However, in the aftermath of domestic violence, Pain (2014) suggests that women can often channel their anxiety into some form of activism. For Sophie, although she refrained from providing details of this part of her life, her commentary on why it was hard to speak, was her way of speaking out.

A few years after she commenced work as a teacher, Sophie married. She worked until she had children, and then cared for them. She did not undertake further education within her marriage. Sophie said that the circumstances of her marriage were difficult to share for a variety of reasons. She explained how some women have more freedom to speak freely about domestic violence than she felt she did:

Being able to share your story publicly after being through domestic violence, and your abuser passing away, is not something to be jealous about. These life experiences are horrible things that have happened to women. But they have been able to speak because of that legal freedom. That is not possible if you still have issues of confidentiality. Issues of shame for staying in relationships would also be an emotional hurdle that stop the sharing of information about the lives of families having experienced domestic violence.

Sophie explained that for many women, this freedom is not possible due to the risk of breaches of confidentiality. As Birdsey and Snowball (2013) point out, for women who remained in violent relationships, their feelings of shame also work to silence them. Sophie appreciated women who are able to speak publicly to the media, although she acknowledged the risks involved:

So, it is a really positive thing that those women that we see in the media who have the freedom to do that, that they have chosen to do that and that they have done so when they had the opportunity. But it is a great difficulty. You cannot share without there being an agreement of privacy beforehand, and even then, fears enter your mind about what negative consequences could arise. And you are constantly thinking ‘what did I say?’ ‘I didn’t say a name, but I could have alluded to something or what I am doing or the period of time’.

Although Sophie provided limited information about her marriage, it is evident that her experiences frightened her to the point that she was unable to speak about them. It would appear that the confidence in herself that she had as a child was significantly
reduced during her marriage. As indicated above, the research would predict that women like Sophie would experience a loss of voice (Morgan & Thapar-Björkert, 2006), fear (Pain, 2014), reduction of self-identity (Oke, 2008) and shame (Birdsey & Snowball, 2013).

Mary

Shortly after graduating from her Bachelor of Nursing course at university, Mary gained employment in the nursing sector and married. She described the marriage as abusive. Mary combined motherhood with full time managerial employment in the health sector. She described her career as an important way of ensuring her independence and capacity to care for her children if she decided to leave the marriage: “I never had a doubt, even when I was still with him, I never had a doubt that when I did decide to leave, that I would be the one standing on my own two feet.”

She attempted postgraduate studies in Nursing whilst married but did not complete her course: “I tried to do my grad cert in mental health nursing, didn’t finish and then had a long, long break.” She did not provide a specific reason why she did not complete this course, but she did state that she “wasn’t bothered [to continue the course]”.

Mary described how despite her positive disposition and desire for education, she was unable to execute her goals. Like Sophie, Mary provided limited details about this time in her life. Her economic and social capital at this point is not clear, although as she held a managerial position, her access to money may have been adequate. It is clear that her positive, independent disposition from her migrant parents remained with her as she combined motherhood, full time employment and an attempt at further university studies, however further study did not seem to be a priority at this point.

Rachel

Soon after commencing work in the adult learning sector, Rachel got married and had two children. She lived in the city with her husband and two children. Although she did not elaborate on many details from this marriage, she described her husband as being “controlling”, especially in relation to her employment and their finances. As the domestic violence literature suggests, financial control can be a tactic of violent partners, setting up a situation of poverty within the relationship for the abused partner (Eriksson & Ulmestig, 2017). In Rachel’s situation, she felt pressured to contribute to
the family’s finances after the birth of her children, “my husband at that point had been pressing for me to go back to work”. Rachel did as her husband asked and attempted to find employment. She returned to her teaching career only to realise that, like the women in Oke’s (2008) study, being in an abusive relationship had left her with very little confidence. In Rachel’s words: “I wanted to go back teaching but had really lost all my confidence. I just knew things were hard at home and I didn’t have any confidence to stand in front of a class and teach them.” Rachel’s cultural capital in the form of confidence and skill was so diminished that she was no longer able to continue working. As Bourdieu (1986) suggests, some forms of cultural capital are transferable to economic capital. In this circumstance, the impact of domestic violence not only reduced Rachel’s confidence, but also her ability to earn an income by using her skills and qualification.

Despite her abusive marriage, Rachel’s positive disposition towards education remained. She wanted to undertake further education. Realising that she was unable to use her previous skills and qualification due to her reduced confidence, she turned to post graduate studies as an attempt to assist the family’s finances. To do this, Rachel needed to seek her husband’s permission: “I thought that doing a little bit of study would be good. I asked if I could. Oh, that sounds so bad doesn’t it?” Rachel commenced a Graduate Certificate of Education at a university which was over half an hour driving distance from her home. Whilst some of the course was distance education, she attended face-to-face classes during the evening. Like so many women in the higher education literature (Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Stone 2009; O'Shea, 2008), Rachel’s university studies led to a boost in her confidence: “I got straight into the Graduate Certificate of Education and after doing four weeks of that, realised that I loved it, so I changed over to a Masters, it really helped me with my confidence.”

Powell and Smith (2011) argue that abusive partners often use tactics to hold their partner back from their career or workplace, such as harassment at the workplace or preventing their spouses from seeking employment. In Rachel’s case, as she continued with her studies and her confidence grew, her husband became “quite insecure”. This seemed to escalate the tension in her already volatile marriage. She stated, “at that point [university study] also was part of the catalyst [of marriage breakdown].” In her words, shortly after commencing her university studies, her marriage “deteriorated” and “broke down”. At that point, Rachel left the family home with her children and relocated closer to her university.
Rachel’s childhood disposition towards education as a positive experience carried through into her adulthood. When her family’s finances became stretched during her marriage, she had hoped that obtaining another university qualification (institutionalised cultural capital), would be transferrable into economic capital through enhanced employment opportunities. Unlike the early support she had from her parents, this time her university studies were met with resistance from her husband. There are many examples within the literature which examine the impact of university studies on relationships, particularly for women mature aged students. For example, in O’Shea (2008) found that many women felt burdened by the time demands of study, with feelings of guilt arising towards their responsibilities towards their children and partners. Stone (2009) had similar findings, but also found that the pressure led to relationship breakdown for a number of her participants. For Rachel, though, her relationship was abusive and controlling prior to her university studies. Rachel persevered with her university studies, however, even when she knew that her marriage was ending. It could be argued that the disposition and capital she had developed as a child meant that she was confident in the university and environment which in turn provided her with the strength she needed at a time of personal hardship.

Claudia

Whilst working within the commercial cookery industry, Claudia got married and had children. She lived in the city with her husband and children. Her economic capital seemed similar to that of her childhood. During her marriage, she had a big house and lots of possessions. For Claudia, however, these material possessions provided a façade to hide the abuse she was facing behind closed doors. In her words: “From the outside in, we looked like a David Jones Christmas brochure. Like we had the big tree, the big house, we had the lot and it was just fake”. Behind closed doors though, Claudia felt as though she was homeless. Recalling how she felt at the time, she stated: “if you are not safe in your own home, you don’t have a home”. Her cultural capital in the form of the sense of belonging (Bourdieu, 1986), from her private school days was stifled during her marriage.

Claudia's partner reduced her social networks of support by isolating her from her friends. As Claudia says, in hindsight she was aware of her husband’s controlling tactics, stating: “During the relationship I had very few friends and that was part of his behaviour. He would destroy my friendships”. But she also lost friends because people
did not understand the consequences of leaving the relationship. As Larance and Porter (2014) suggest, bystanders to domestic violence are often ill informed and perceive that leaving a violent relationship is the easiest solution.

She described how she still dreamed of future university studies, although at the time, she thought that it would be impossible within her abusive marriage and did not make any attempt to enrol. Claudia’s positive disposition, however, towards education remained. Rather than planning for future education, she described how, like many women within a violent relationship, she lived in isolation and fear. Her focus was on keeping herself and her children safe and caring for her children: “There was concern that he would kill us”. Claudia felt frustrated when people would tell her to leave her marriage, because to her there was no simple solution: “A lot of people very early on told me to get out but I couldn’t, it was too dangerous, it took years to plan and get out safely, so very few people understand that and that impacted friendships”. At this point, Claudia’s fear for her life was so great that she felt that she needed years to plan how to escape. After 10 years of marriage, she found the courage to leave:

I had to pack my car and get out and I lost everything. It was nasty. The situation was the reason it took so long, there was concern that he would kill us, so the goal was to get out of the relationship and have us all to survive, that was first and foremost.

The cultural capital Claudia had as a child in the form of confidence in her capacities as a student and the friendship networks from her private school days appear to have been stifled during her abusive marriage. Although she had economic capital that seemed to be comparable to that of her childhood, she seemed to have no control over decision making in terms of her own needs. Instead of pursuing her dreams, Claudia was immobilized by fear and focused on survival for herself and her children.

**Lynda**

Lynda’s nursing studies did not continue after she formed a relationship with a man, whom she later married. She moved to the city with her husband and whilst the marriage seemed to increase her economic capital and material possessions, like Claudia, her control over meeting her needs was limited. She described the house they shared as “a beautiful home, the pool, land, horses. The house was huge, it was made out of bush rock, it was just absolutely beautiful”.

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During her marriage, Lynda cared for her daughter and son. Her son had special mobility needs, requiring a wheelchair and much attention. She also worked part time as an assistant at a school, where she described having “a lot of support” in the form of friendships. At the same time, Lynda had very little support at home. She described her husband as “abusive” and “controlling”. She changed the way she dressed and expressed herself to suit her husband. Although she preferred to wear “hippy style” clothing, during her marriage she kept this choice “low key”. Before the marriage, she thought of herself as an activist: “the type that would get out there”, and “protest”. Now, during her marriage however, she suppressed this attribute as her husband “would not have allowed [it]”. As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, this control over her embodied cultural capital (her voice, tastes and choices) is not uncommon within a violent relationship; women are often left in a silent position of obedience towards their abusive spouse and experience a loss of self.

Like most of the women in this research project, during her marriage, Lynda’s positive disposition towards education, developed in her childhood, remained strong. By the time her children were teenagers Lynda had made several unsuccessful attempts at TAFE studies. Each time studying became “impossible” and she was unable to complete because her husband became, in her words, “resentful”. Despite his opposition, Lynda was determined and persisted with her education: “I tried to do a few certificates and tried to do a higher one and my marriage was getting too stressed and I pulled out”. Whilst in her marriage, Lynda considered one final attempt at education, this time a university degree. This, however, caused further tensions in her already volatile marriage: “When I went on to go a step further, he became jealous”. Soon after this last attempt at further education, Lynda left her marriage, children and home. She returned to her parents’ rural home and grieved for her children who remained in the care of their father.

During her marriage, Lynda social capital was considerably reduced through her partners control over her choices. Although Lynda wanted to pursue education throughout her marriage, at this point in time, university seemed unimaginable as Lynda was at a point of crisis and grief. Her habitus remained oriented to education but her social capital in the form of support and networks was considerably reduced and limited to her workplace. On the surface Lynda ostensibly had access to economic capital; however, her husband controlled her access to money, limiting her choices. Her cultural capital was reduced as a result of her lack of confidence in her ability as she found
herself in circumstances which severely limited her choices and her expression of herself.

Dawn

Instead of recommencing and completing her nursing studies after the illness which she contracted from her nursing work at the hospital, Dawn started a short relationship with a man. Looking back on this time, Dawn describes how she “met him and just let it [nursing studies] all go.” After this relationship ended, Dawn, then 21 years old, went overseas and travelled.

Upon returning to Australia she took up a legal clerk position with her mother’s help. She still held a positive disposition towards education, describing herself as “still quite a bit nerdy”. From there she applied to study law at university and was accepted. However, these plans were disrupted, and instead of accepting the offer, and enrolling in university, she commenced another relationship with a man. She fell pregnant and focused on looking after her child whilst within the relationship, while she “copped all sorts of abuse”. During the relationship, her partner was involved with crime, and was imprisoned. Despite this, Dawn waited for his release and the relationship continued. Like so many in this situation, Dawn looked back on the situation and asked “why did I stay?” It’s that big question that we all ask as professionals because no one can really answer it”.

As with many abusive relationships, during this relationship Dawn lost contact with friends and family. Her partner moved her to an isolated rural location where the violence escalated. Within the literature, it is not an uncommon scenario for an abuser to relocate to an isolated location (Davis, Taylor &Furniss, 2001). This is arguably one of the most controlling tactic, as the abused partner’s social capital is significantly reduced, and access to resources radically diminished.

Some years later, Dawn escaped the relationship with her then five-year-old daughter to a nearby community that Dawn described as a “hippie commune place”. This community provided Dawn with a social network and access to their resources in the form of care and safety. The women took care of Dawn, hiding her from her partner: “They really took me under their wing and they rallied around me.” Looking back on this time, Dawn stated that the support of these women “was the key” that helped her stay out of the relationship.
A year later, she formed a relationship with another man who was also known to her ex-partner. He worked as a tattooist and covered Dawn in tattoos. In hindsight, she realised these tattoos were a form of his control. She described them as her “lasting reminders” of the relationship: “he covered me with tattoos which I regret now but that was all part of the control, he was also very violent.” Dawn had her second child, a son, to this man.

During the relationship there was ongoing violence between her current partner and her ex-partner, which caused her to flee from this relationship. Eventually her daughter’s father committed suicide because Dawn would not return to him. Dawn felt sure that if he were still alive, her life would have been threatened: “I really don’t think if he was still alive I would be sitting here talking to you with a degree under my belt. I don’t think I would be alive. I would be one of those statistics definitely”.

Away from the abuse Dawn provided “a nice place” for her children. She completed a TAFE Welfare Certificate 4, and then commenced a Diploma of Welfare. Just prior to completing this Diploma, Dawn commenced another relationship, and had her third child, another son. She described this partner as “the antz pantz”; however, he was also abusive. With her partner, she got involved with rough groups of people and drugs. Dawn describes this as a time when she “lost the plot.” She stayed with this man for a couple of years. She described her then 16-year-old daughter as “starting to get into bad things”. Dawn described this as “the catalyst” which made her realize that she needed to leave the relationship: “I had a newborn baby, an eight-year-old son and my daughter who was 16. “I was like, I really need to get out of here’”. Dawn relocated her children to a regional town, a place she described as her “saviour”.

Looking back on this time in her life, like most of the women in this research project, Dawn described the challenges in keeping good friendships:

It has been really hard to be my friend because I have been so involved in violent relationships and we know through DV you don’t keep friends because people can’t be around you or my husband isolated all of my friends and that is just you know the nature of DV. We don't make close friendships.

Like her grandmother, and mother, Dawn found herself in an abusive relationship. Domestic violence literature suggests that there are “strong intergenerational effects of domestic violence” (Bowlus & Seitz, 2006) p. 1142), where
observation of domestic violence as a child (the time when cultural capital and habitus are formed (Bourdieu, 1986)) increases the likelihood of a person abusing or becoming abused as an adult within a relationship (Bowlus & Seitz, 2006). For Dawn, she did not have one abusive partner, but fell into a pattern of abusive relationships. Her frequent relocations and pattern of abusive relationships seriously limited her social capital and access to resources. Like Lynda, she had made a number of attempts at education and had not been successful in completing. Dawn, however, had made those attempts mostly in between relationships. Her attempts to return to education suggest a positive disposition towards education and further study.

Nancy

While living in England, Nancy entered a 10-year relationship which she described as abusive. During this time, she worked in the retail industry, and was required to travel often. Her partner seemed to have considerable economic capital. She described him as having “lots of available cash” which he had earned from his employment in the hospitality industry. Although Nancy worked herself, she was in a position of dependence on her partner for economic capital, in her words she: “relied on his income”. She had an arrangement with her partner where she was able to stay with him at no cost to her, in return for her doing all the housework. During the times when she was away for work she described feeling “really anxious” about arriving home because she would often find “another woman there, wearing [her] clothes”.

When speaking about the more negative aspects of the relationship Nancy was very hesitant with long pauses between words. Although she did not provide a lot of information about what life was like during this time, she did point out that she was prevented from participating in some activities that most would take for granted. For example, she described how during the ten-year relationship, her abusive partner kept her from using technology: “He had a computer at home and all of that but I was not allowed to use it.” She also described how the ongoing abuse she experienced prevented her from developing any skills in relation to technology: “when you are spending the majority of time in hospital, you are not really keeping up to date with technology”.

As with her childhood, Nancy had very few friends as a young adult, and none were from her school days. The limited number of friends she did have became even smaller during her relationship because her partner controlled whom she kept company with. According to Nancy, “friendships were monitored”. She described how her partner
used the “usual techniques of isolation”, involving “threatening people, trying to isolate friends and making [her] feel paranoid about friend’s motives so there was almost nobody [she] could talk to”.

Towards the end of the relationship, Nancy regained some control and planned her escape. She opened a bank account that her partner could not access and began to save a small amount. She also borrowed money from her parents. With these funds, Nancy was able to “escape” the relationship and relocate to Australia. She chose Australia because of its great distance from England. This distance removed the “temptation” for Nancy to return to the relationship and provided her with a sense of safety where he could not find her.

Nancy found herself trapped in an abusive relationship. Like most of the women in this study, and as the literature would suggest, she was isolated from friends (Larance & Porter, 2014), and relied on her partner for financial assistance (Eriksson & Ulmestig, 2017). During this period of her life education was not at the forefront of her mind, as she struggled to find a way to safety.

**Tamson**

Tamson moved out of her family’s home at 16 years and in with her partner, whom she described as “abusive”. She fell pregnant at the age of 16 years. She continued to live in the country town where she had grown up; however, Tamson described how she wanted to “get away”. When her baby was just two months old, Tamson fell pregnant again. She explained that this pregnancy ‘just put everything [her already abusive relationship] into turmoil’. Although her partner wanted her to terminate the pregnancy, he married Tamson because of pressure from his parents, and expectation of the small country town where they lived.

Tamson spoke openly about her experiences, detailing the physical violence she suffered whilst pregnant: “he used to punch me in the stomach”. She explained that while she was pregnant, her husband used to “go to work and lock all the cupboards” to restrict her from eating food because he thought she was “fat”. Then, when he returned from work: “he would come home and shove food in my [her] mouth and say: “come on, eat, feed this baby”. After her baby was born, her husband commenced work on a farm. During the next six months Tamson stated that “he [her husband] and a group of males sexually abused me over a period of six months”
Tamson stayed in this relationship, and blamed herself for the abuse, “I thought for some reason I was causing this.” She described how she was told by her husband and the other men who were abusing her that, “you brought this on yourself”. This would often be followed by an apology, “then the next day he would be, ‘I am so sorry we have done this’ and ‘don’t you feel special, you have been chosen, don’t you feel special?’”

About six months later, when her baby was one year old, her husband brought home a 16-year-old girl to live with them. Over the next year, Tamson prepared to make the decision to move out. She moved to a small house in the same town and attended counselling with her husband. Her husband told Tamson that “everything was alright”, and like many women in abusive relationships (Bruton & Tyson, 2018), Tamson forgave him. Just as they were about to reconcile, her husband had a breakdown and did not want to reconcile with her. Tamson described how this felt ‘like another whack in the face.’ From there, Tamson relocated with her children to a town a few hours away and moved in with her mother.

Tamson’s narrative tells of her abusive marriage where any capital she had as a child from her primary school days seems to have disappeared as she battled to survive. Like other women in violent relationships, including the women who participated in this research, she had limited resources in terms of friendship and support, and was subjected to many forms of domestic violence.

Amelia

Like Tamson, Amelia was a schoolgirl when she entered her eight yearlong abusive relationships. She met her new partner at the local youth centre, where she volunteered her time. As a result of the relationship she ran away from home. Tamson’s story is different, however, unlike, Tamson, Amelia continued with her schooling (Higher School Certificate) while in the abusive relationship; this made studying at high school a complicated time for Amelia. Her economic capital reduced as a result of living away from her parents, with no employment and little money of her own. This placed her in a position of reliance on her partner, however, the small amount of money she did have was often taken from her by her partner: “I spent most of the time in financial hardship. My ex loved to take my money/cards when I slept or by force. He pawned a lot of things.”
The cultural capital that she had when she was younger was also under strain as she struggled to achieve at school. Although Amelia completed her Higher School Certificate, she did not achieve the results she felt she was capable: “I have a lot of regrets, about the HSC [Higher School Certificate] because I was in such a complex place.”

Her social capital was also considerably diminished. Although Amelia tried to remain connected with friends, her friendship circle was all but extinguished as friendships were controlled by her partner. She described how she missed out on attending social events at school: “I did not go to my prom or anything like that.” Being in an abusive relationship caused Amelia to feel that she was different to her peers, and a burden to them, “I always felt like that was going to encroach on other people.”

Soon after the Higher School Certificate, Amelia had three children to this man. She spent this period of her life focused on caring for her children. At the age of 23, Amelia found the courage to leave the relationship, going to her local police station for assistance. It was there that she was provided with protection and safety, along with some unexpected inspiration for her future.

Discussion

Across the narratives, the women entered abusive relationships from their mid teen years to early to mid-twenties. For most of the women, their relationships began at a time when they had recently completed post high school studies and were engaging in the early stages of their careers. Most of their relationships lasted over eight years, and most involved children.

Although the women had different family backgrounds and schooling, the experience of domestic violence impacted their capital in similar ways. In general, the women experienced significant reductions in their capital due to the tactics of power and control which their partners used. On the surface, Lynda and Claudia were affluent in comparison to the other women in the study, with their big city homes and material possessions. However, like most of the women in similar situations (Eriksson & Ulmestig, 2017), they had very little control over their finances; they felt far from secure, and in the end chose safety rather than financial wellbeing.

Domestic violence literature tells us that there is a link between the control exerted in abusive relations and the loss of social capital (Reverter-Bañón & Thapar Bjorkert, 2018). In this inquiry, most of the women described huge losses in friends,
causing feelings of isolation and loneliness. Resources that they once had to draw on were now diminished, and in some cases the women moved great distances away from their supports. Claudia, Amelia and Dawn realised that being in an abusive relationship created a boundary, or in Amelia’s words “a divide” between themselves and others. They perceived a lack of understanding from their friends and were further hurt when their friends would ask the questions, “Why don’t you just leave?”

The lack of social support, loss of voice and reduced confidence are interconnected impacts of domestic violence which most of the women in this study experienced. The confidence that was built up in their childhood, was pushed so far down that speaking out about the horror of their situation became near impossibly difficult. Moreover, this lack of confidence began intruding into their working and study lives. Rachel and Lynda were the only women in the study who attempted to undertake university studies while in a violent relationship. In both cases, these attempts coincided with the marriages ending as their confidence began to re-emerge.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the narratives of the women as they recalled their experiences of being in a violent relationship. This has provided an understanding of the changes in economic, cultural and social capital. As Bourdieu (1986) predicted, times of trauma can alter capital in a person. This became apparent across the narratives, where there was a broad reduction in all forms of capital, even among the women who appeared more affluent. The tactics of control imposed on them by their partners placed the women in a subservient position, reliant on their partners for access to money and decision making for their wellbeing. Positive dispositions towards education, however, remained for most of the women, despite their lacking the opportunity to attempt further education within the relationship. Those who did successfully enrol in university courses during their relationship found that, like the mature aged women students in O’Shea (2008) and Stone’s (2016) studies, increases in their confidence and learning were met with resentment. Most of the women spent their time in their relationships caring for children and focusing on keeping safe. Many of the women spent years preparing for their escape from the controlling relationship, in preparation for a new safer future.

The following chapter will commence at a time when the women had just left their relationship. It will detail the stages of recovery they experienced as they rebuilt
their lives firstly focusing on increasing their independence, and then looking beyond themselves to new ventures, including university studies.
Chapter 6
After the Experience of Domestic Violence: Engagement with University Study

The purpose of this chapter is to present the narratives of the women constituted from their reflections on their experiences of university studies post domestic violence. All women were successful in accessing and engaging/managing university studies, despite the considerable losses of capital that described in Chapter Five. Some were studying their first undergraduate degree, others completing doctorate study. Some of the women started with more capital in their early years than others. In Chapter Four, like the children in Potter’s study (2010), for some of the women their experiences of abuse as a child diminished their social capital and seemed to predict less chance of future educational success. Others had nurturing families and exposure to education experiences which Roberts (2015) argues enables positive dispositions towards education. This chapter picks up from when the women were freshly separated from their relationships, and in the process of finding new accommodation. At this point all the women have very limited economic capital.

Research would predict that having left their partners, the women would be entering a time when they would continue to feel controlled by their ex-partners and would experience a reduction of capital, particularly economic capital. As Humphreys and Thiara (2003) found in their study, when women choose to leave a violent relationship, abuse and control can often increase. This ongoing abuse can manifest in many ways (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2011): control in the form of ongoing financial abuse such as withholding child support; delaying settlement; or taking money away is widely documented (Eriksson & Ulmestig, 2017; Walsh & Douglas, 2008). The implication of this for trying to engage in university studies with absenteeism, fees and parenting responsibilities makes it difficult to cope with the demands as a student. For the women in my study although these challenges were experienced, they were met with determination and perseverance.

In Australia, there are a range of financial support available to assist students like the women in this study. The Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), allows the deferment of the payment of fees until certain income is earned, at which point payments are incrementally deducted via the taxation system. In addition, Parenting Payment is a social security payment for people with children aged under six.
Once the youngest child is over this age, New Start Allowance is provided, and in many cases, studying at university is deemed as meeting the participation requirements, therefore, job searching is not a requirement until after the course is completed. In addition, some students qualify for Austudy, a means tested income support payment provided to Australian students aged 25 years and over, or Abstudy (a payment specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students). Other postgraduate scholarships such as the ones Amelia and Rachel benefited from, are offered by universities to assist students with the cost of their degree. Scholarships are limited in number, provide little more than a subsistence allowance if this is included, and require a lengthy application period.

The literature also suggests that women like those in this study are likely to experience a range of ongoing physical and psychological consequences (Oke, 2008; Pain 2014). In addition, those who leave violent relationships face other pressures such as workplace disruption, chronic fear, single parenting, legal issues and grief (Griffin et al 2005; Bonomi et al 2009, Pain, 2014). Amidst these challenges, many are also likely to transition through a period of internal growth and activism as a way to gain back control over their lives both financially and emotionally (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Humphreys, 2003; Pain, 2014). Bland (2004) argues that it is often at this point that women change their tastes and preferences as an attempt to move further away from their past. In Bourdieu’s terms, such changes would signal an alteration in the outward expression of cultural capital.

During such transitions, undertaking education is likely to impact cultural capital. Referring to the results from her narrative inquiry with Mongolian and Australian women who had experienced domestic violence, Oke (2008) states that education ‘is likely to facilitate a sense of empowerment, purpose, agency and independence, the perfect antidote to being controlled’ (p. 153). Education can also make way for new careers. As pointed out in Chapter Two, research suggests that women like those in this research project often take on employment within the domestic violence sector as a way of making sense of their own reality (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Pain, 2014; Pence, 2001; Woods, 2017). Most of the women in this study chose degrees in ‘helping’ disciplines such as social work and psychology with the view to establishing a career which would support women impacted by domestic violence. Many of the women had experienced domestic violence support services themselves as clients, and like women in similar situations,
(Breckenridge & Hamer, 2014; Laing et al., 2010), they perceived a need for improvement. They felt that their experiences and university education could contribute to such improvements.

The narratives that follow will describe the changes the women went through in an attempt to gain back some control in their lives after leaving their abusive relationships, particularly as they made choices about further education. They will provide an understanding of how the women’s habitus and capital, established early in their lives and then for some through further education, influenced the ways they negotiated the field of higher education and were impacted in turn by their engagement with the field as they attempted to rebuild their lives.

Sophie

In the aftermath of her abusive marriage, Sophie’s positive disposition that she could always try her best helped her to rebuild her life amidst ongoing challenges. Undertaking studies at this time of her life became a source of stability, comfort and familiarity. As the principal carer for her children, for Sophie, caring for her children was her highest priority; however, she described seeing this time of transition from an abusive relationship to single parent, as an opportunity to take on new ventures that she had not previously had the chance to do. As she began to research what options she had, she came to the realisation that, she could either return to the workforce as a teacher or undertake further study. Anticipating the burden that working long hours would put on her caring responsibilities towards her young children, she realised that studying via distance education would provide her with a way to secure her future whilst caring for her children. She also spent time at her local domestic violence support service in a voluntary capacity, as a way to develop experience for future employment.

Sophie decided to undertake university studies over other forms of further education, because she understood it could lead to secure employment. In her words: “I needed a career.” Initially she wanted to upgrade her teaching qualifications. Finding a suitable university course, however, was not as straightforward as Sophie had hoped. After looking at a variety of universities, she enrolled in a bridging course which would lead to upgraded teaching qualifications. This course then failed to proceed due to lack of numbers. This did not deter Sophie; she was determined to find another university course. Again, her positive disposition towards education helped her, as she viewed this setback as an opportunity to choose a completely different discipline. So, Sophie
decided to apply for the Bachelor of Psychological Science, a discipline she said she had always been interested in because:

I have always been interested in how people tick. I tend to be more of a quiet observer to see how people work together and perhaps a little perception I think. Maybe, I don’t know what it is. I seem to be able to understand people a bit, with a little bit of empathy in there as well.

Sophie felt happy when she was accepted into this course and was excited about how this qualification could help her to assist women in similar situations. She described how she could use her psychology degree:

To fit into a workforce where I can actually be out helping women and children who are struggling. I don’t know whether that is in the political arena or if this is in an association or whether that it is with people who are escaping domestic violence and needing assistance to get their lives together.

For Sophie, going back to learning as a mature age, single parent university student, was in her words, “comforting”, because as she explained, it gave her confidence in being able to be a different kind of person and to be seen as a person who is able to overcome adversity and achieve:

University gives me confidence; it gives me a goal that I could actually achieve. It makes me feel like people will see me differently and that I will also have some kind of recognition, that I won’t just be saying, “you know, I was just a teacher and then everything went wrong. And that everything fell apart and I just had to do whatever I could to scrape things together.” I feel it is a better way to feel about myself. It is more constructive. That is proactive. It’s a way to sort of get over the things that have happened and recognise the talents I have within me.

Although she said she had mixed feelings about not meeting any fellow students face to face, she said she preferred to mix with students via online forums, because this gave her control over when and how she communicated with others. Receiving positive responses from other students through online forums enhanced the student experience for Sophie. She enjoyed talking with likeminded people and the online discussions added another dimension to her life; it made her “feel good”.

I suppose it is also a different arena, you are mixing with people who are fairly likeminded, talking about similar issues. Your friends are not always on the same wavelength you know. When you pick a course, you are all interested in a
specific field. So, you know you have comments online that interest you. And yeah, that is something that has added interest to my life.

Despite living some distance from her university, Sophie felt supported, knowing that at any given time she could make a phone call and speak to academics and support staff about issues that concerned her. She preferred this form of communication over searching for support on the internet. There were times when she needed to seek time away from her studies to attend to ongoing legal matters. In order to seek a leave of absence from her studies, Sophie was required to provide documentation as proof:

On a couple of occasions, I was concerned about my schedule and deadlines not being met from university. I approached them and said this is what is happening and of course they made leniency for me that these things were happened. It is good that they actually listened to those events that have happened. Of course, I needed to provide some type of documentation that I had to be away at court or whatever.

In particular, Sophie, recalled supportive academic staff with whom she felt comfortable to discuss these issues. At her university, as a distance education student she was appointed a supervisor- a contact person whom she could engage with for a range of issues related to her studies. She felt that having a female academic supervisor helped her as it made her feel as though “she might actually understand and actually enable me to get through this.” Having this support combined with positive academic feedback helped Sophie to do her best and achieve results she felt proud of. Her success at university resulted in an increase in Sophie’s confidence and the way she perceived others viewed her.

Studying online provided Sophie with the flexibility to make time for activities that encouraged her children’s education. Sophie also engaged in activities to support her children’s education. She regularly volunteered at her children’s school, describing these occasions as a time to dress up, get out of the house and feel good about herself. Although she did not feel she required such support anymore, she saw her contact with her local domestic violence services as a connection which might translate into future opportunities to support assisting women in similar situations. Other outings included socialising over coffee, with friends she had known from school, and friends that she had met more recently. These social outings helped Sophie to feel connected with others and provided a break from study and caring responsibilities. Sophie also realised the value of her social circle as a source of support for her as a single mother:
I am trying to build friendship supports, so having opportunities for me to have friends that understand me, knowing that I am not alone, that they don’t think I am a green Martian because I have been through this stuff. That I don’t feel weird. Also, having children be able to go and stay somewhere to give me a breather is great to have those friendship bases. But the biggest support I have is my family. My mother and father have been, oh, a wealth of support. There is no dollar you could put on that.

Despite the ongoing consequences from leaving a violent marriage such as attending legal appointments, this positive attitude helped Sophie remain optimistic about how she could use those experiences and her current university studies to make a difference. This motivation helped her to persevere with her studies:

I have always believed that we can use what we have been through to make good whether that is within a small circle or a big circle, but we can use what we have been through to make something good.

Sophie had the built social capital, cultural capital and positive dispositions towards education which assisted her to succeed at university. Her level of comfort in the learning environment from her previous education experiences helped her to navigate her way through university. Like most of the women in this study, prior to choosing her course and during her studies, Sophie developed a new set of goals for herself to help other women in similar situations. Like Pain (2014) suggests, it is possible for women like Sophie to channel their fear into activism, and like the women in Chronister and McWhirter’s (2006) study, Sophie was aiming to utilise her degree to obtain a position as a professional with a shared background to clients. At the time of the last interview, Sophie was approaching her third year of part time, distance studies.

Mary

Mary approached her university studies with the same sense of independence and determination that she had approached her schooling in her private school days. As Senter and Caldwell’s (2002) stages of recovery and resilience in the aftermath of domestic violence suggest, women are likely to go through a period of self-care before taking on new ventures. For Mary this involved taking time to settle with her children as a single mother. She described the hardship that she felt at this time:
It was hard because I had gone from having a family, a marriage, kids and a house, a home to nothing. I still had my boys but all those material things, you have nothing, and I was prepared to leave with nothing.

Once she felt settled, she began her postgraduate studies by enrolling in a Graduate Certificate in Leadership Health and Management, and then transferring to Master of Nursing. Mary’s positive disposition towards education assisted with the decision to study at university: “I wasn’t scared of going back [to university], I knew I could do it, I guess.” Whilst she studied for her Masters, she continued with full time employment in a managerial position in mental health services. Despite heavy financial losses after her separation, Mary saved her money and eventually purchased a family home. Mary said that she did this to show her two sons they could move forwards and achieve together as a family:

Starting all over again, buying my own house and moving into it and doing all those things. Every year is another year where “we have done this guys”, especially for the boys, “we have done it, we have done it on our own.”

Mary attributed her current success at university at least in part to her earlier experiences in school, “My earlier education experiences probably helped with my studies because I didn’t hate it and I did relatively well at it so I wasn’t scared of going back, I knew I could do it, I guess.” Although there were initial time management challenges to overcome with the combination of university studies, fulltime employment and single parenting, she soon settled into a routine. She planned her days around working, writing assignments and looking after her children. On occasions, Mary would take leave from her work to devote time at home to write an assignment. She described how on these occasions she would engage her children in making decisions about dinner ahead of time so that at the end of the day she did not need to worry about cooking the evening meal. She enjoyed these days and found a sense of independence and achievement in meeting her deadlines.

As Mary reflected on her busy life, she spoke of how proud she was that her children had supported her through her study.

My boys were very supportive of my study. They would play on the floor in the lounge room while I studied and they never once complained. They showed interest in my learning and were proud when I graduated. I was happy to show them that, you know, learning is lifelong.
In contrast, outside of the family home, Mary had very little support. Her parents now lived many hours away. She hadn’t remained in contact with any of her school friends, but she made the most of the small circle of friends she had made as an adult. Social support and networking at university was not an option either, as her course had a large online component. She was very quick to add, however, that she preferred her independence as it added to her sense of pride and achievement. For this reason, she had chosen to not seek any additional support from the university, however was sure that it would have been available if she needed it:

You just do what you have to do, I have never said that I have any other choice, obviously it was my choice to go to uni, I was determined to finish it, so I just had to do what I wanted to do and that was to do the assignments. If it got too much, the last year I started to do two subjects but it just got too much for me and I just dropped back to one. I am sure there are supports out there but I didn’t have any supports, I didn’t think I needed any supports.

Outside of the university, Mary continued to see the psychologist who had been providing support after separation from the abusive marriage. As the research suggests, the experiences of violence do not easily go away, despite progress in other aspects of women’s lives (Oke, 2008):

I did see my psychologist and do continue to do so, you think you are ok but there is always something, you know nightmares are always there or there is something that happens when you kind of just go ‘oh I am not really as good as I thought I was doing’.

As Mary reflected on the completion of her university studies and graduation, she recalled the feelings of joy and disbelief she shared with her parents. University study had become much more than just a requirement for her employment; rather it had become a personal milestone and achievement: “everyone is capable of doing whatever they set their mind to, especially for women who have left violent relationships.” She felt this sense of achievement was particularly helpful for women who have left violent relationships: “To women in a similar situation I would say, follow your dreams”.

Like most of the women in this study, relationship separation impacted Mary’s economic capital, however, perhaps due to her managerial position; Mary appeared to have more options available to her. She was able to purchase a home and commence postgraduate studies. Her cultural capital from her Catholic School days assisted Mary to feel comfortable, indeed “at home”, at university. As with all the women in this
study, Mary was faced with the challenge of managing her time with limited social support. Although this was difficult, Mary described how overcoming this obstacle provided her with a sense of independence and accomplishment. At the last interview, Mary had recently graduated from her studies with a Master of Nursing.

**Rachel**

Before the end of her marriage, Rachel was working in vocational education, and was enrolled in Master of Education at university. These studies became the catalyst for the end of her marriage. As indicated in Chapter Four, Rachel’s husband became resentful and controlling towards her. When the marriage ended, she made a decision to relocate closer to the university campus. In her journal, Rachel described what this place meant to her: “uni has been a catalyst for change & healing in my life. It has offered me a safe place & challenged me over and over to step up & be ME” (03/08/2015). The relocation impacted her both economically and socially: “We didn’t know anybody and we didn’t know what we were going to do, so I was pretty desperate actually.” Rachel was left with a “debt and just $700”. Despite the overwhelming challenges, Rachel found satisfaction in feeling safe and making decisions for herself and her children, particularly towards education.

Rachel commenced employment at her university as a research assistant and secured a scholarship funded PhD position, which allowed her to provide for her family. Despite this assistance, Rachel continued to feel limited in the choices of what she could provide for herself and her children: “We would have sausages and mashed potato, the worst food. School came first.”

Rachel described challenging times of juggling single parenting, working and studying with limited family support due to geographical distance. She devoted her weekends with her children where possible, saving her university study for weekends they were on access visits with their father.

In her diary Rachel reflected on the positive impact her university studies had on rebuilding her life; an awareness that enabled her to keep focused and motivated to continue, even during challenging times:

13 September

The last 2 weeks have been hectic-my son broke both arms in school sport & I was nominated for a thesis award by my supervisor.

Kelly, I don’t know if you want this extended version but here it is.
Coming into uni to do a research degree taught me
1. About a topic
2. About how to do research
It also took me to real points of ‘sink or swim’. I had to do it all. And on my own b/c [because] that’s how it works- either I learn or I don’t. And in undertaking this mammoth task- the degree – I saw me
A woman who doesn’t give up.
A woman who can find/ask for help when needed.
A woman who is neither overbearing nor a door mat.
I learned to juggle...& sometimes to juggle with grace.
And I’ve received recognition for my efforts.
And all this in a safe environment
Safety is paramount.
Being able to rebuild!
I guess for most students, they are building- for me I got to re-build!
And it’s exciting b/c the new look is working in the professional world -where I can deal with 2 broken arms [her son’s] & be cool about it.
Of course, ‘education’ is not the magic bullet. It’s a combination - my personal traits, my strong Christian beliefs, a loving Mum & kind children. But I think taking time to study allowed me time to think, to achieve & to rebuild - where I could build a reputation, a past & friendships. The safety of uni cannot be underestimated.
BUILDING PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING & CONFIDENCE & EXPERIENCE
The academic atmosphere of university opened Rachel’s eyes to a new world where she could feel positive, safe and nurtured; and where she could also make a difference. This assisted her to overcome aspects of her past and pursue new goals for herself. While these goals were mostly related to her career and studies; however, as her confidence grew she found new ways to express her thoughts on the topic of domestic violence. Over the years she said she had refrained from speaking about this topic to protect her children. However, her new skills (cultural capital) acquired through her PhD studies translated into her being able to speak out about domestic violence whilst protecting her privacy. For example, she used her improved writing skills, to find creative ways to express herself - such as writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper to
voice her opinion. Although she said that she wished she could be even more vocal, through her writing she could contribute to the current dialogue surrounding domestic violence. At the same time Rachel made a decision to keep her own past private. By doing this, she enjoyed being able to interact with other students on shared academic interests rather than their knowing the details of her life. For Rachel, this made her feel as though she was on a level playing field with other students and academics, and not disadvantaged.

Despite the benefits of university study and graduating with a PhD, like most of the women in Humphreys and Thiara’s (2003) study, ongoing abuse from her ex-husband continued to unsettle her. Recalling the early days of her PhD, Rachel stated:

I remember sitting there and I remember weeping a little bit in my office but I don’t remember reproducing anything at all, mostly pretty sad, consistent abuse at that point, not physically anymore, we didn’t have physical contact but just sending letters that were so vile because we had moved.

For Rachel though, this abuse continued beyond the 12 months that Walsh and Douglas (2008) flag as commonplace. In her journal, she documented an example which occurred while she continued her employment at the university, in between the first and second interviews of this study, over four years since she separated and after she graduated:

22 August 2015

This week was horrible. Uni has always been a safe place for me. But this week my former partner sent me an email - to my student email a/c [account]. He used to stalk me after we split up. I was hopeful he’d stopped. While his email was dressed in ‘nice’ terms it was not nice. I was so shaken that I had to leave work for the day in order to arrange to have my uni student email account deleted & go to the police. While I was a student, I felt I had time to heal from many of the effects of D.V. And my former partner didn’t have access to me there. So, this email frightened me & brought back old memories.

Although this occurred after graduation, it shows the potential for the sense of safety at university to be violated. At the time of the last interview, Rachel was still impacted by this incident.

It took determination and persistence for Rachel to re-engage and to succeed in her university studies. The familiarity of education, specifically university as being a place she loved assisted her to fit into the field, this time though, she was a single
mother overcoming the trauma of domestic violence. This made the experience different for Rachel, as she hid this part of herself in order to fit in with the students. A PhD was a big undertaking for Rachel, which was largely motivated by the financial independence afforded by her scholarship so that she could provide for her children. In addition, she understood that this qualification could translate into better employment opportunities, and the new prestigious title of Doctor. At the point of the final interview, Rachel had recently graduated from her studies and was continuing her research assistant work.

**Claudia**

Although she had planned to leave for many years, after ten years Claudia fled from her relationship and family home, taking only her children with her. This decision resulted in a sudden reduction in economic capital in the form of money and accommodation. Despite this, she said that she was happy to have reached safety and chose to invest her remaining money in education for herself and her children, rather than a family home. In Bourdieuan terms, at this point in time, she valued institutionalised cultural capital over institutionalised economic capital. For Claudia, serving her children “scrambled eggs” was a worthy sacrifice if it meant they had good education.

Prior to embarking on her journey of university education, she attended medical appointments to seek treatment for ADHD. Once diagnosed and on medication she began searching for a suitable university offering the course she wanted to study, a Bachelor of Psychology. Although she was working fulltime, and single parenting, she preferred on campus delivery of course content over distance education as she felt that university campus was a place where she would be able to concentrate and learn. The university she chose was a regional university which was over an hours drive from her home in the city. Despite combining the lengthy car travel to and from the campus with full time work at a domestic violence support service, and single parenting, Claudia was able to describe the positive impact her university studies had on her life:

I already had the confidence. I did university to confirm my capability. I think I believed in it otherwise I would never have left and I would never have done that if I didn’t believe that I was a strong person and capable. I think university - to do that the outside could see, yes, I have confidence. I work in a different area. And it is interesting, although I have a degree, and I have life experience
and I work in an area of trauma. My degree gives me the foundation of why things happen, I have that complementing. It gave me an understanding and not anger.

Claudia had hoped that undertaking university studies would help her to be a positive role model for her children. She longed for her children to think of her in a positive light, trying desperately to repair damage caused by their dad’s ongoing negative comments about her:

I could assist my children further. I think they were able to speak a lot more highly of me and I think that was really helpful for them. Like I know they liked to say ‘Mum is at uni’. For them to see the value in me because I was stripped fairly low.

The abuse however continued and impacted her university studies. In her journal she wrote: “Choosing to return to study was done knowing he could no longer object, although he regularly undermined” (written after Claudia graduated).

Claudia enjoyed the accomplishment of completing assessments and thrived on the positive feedback from academics. She was adamant about the need to keep her private life separate from her university life when mixing with other students “I wasn’t there to socialise, I was there to get into class and get out of class and get my studies done”. Through her own observations Claudia realised there were other students in her course who were in violent relationships themselves, she noted how this impacted their studies:

There were a few students with a similar background to me actually. Some people were in current relationships where there was domestic violence, some of it physical, I know a couple where there was emotional stuff, you know the putting down and they didn’t succeed. And when I say they didn’t succeed they didn’t complete, and I think that [domestic violence] had a big impact on that. I would hope they can go back to it later if they can get out of that relationship and have that confidence to be able to get back to it.

Claudia herself experienced a lack of sensitivity to the issue of domestic violence when she sought academic consideration to attend Family Law Court.

I think it would have been nice to have a little bit more understanding and not have to go into detail, so to say ‘I have to go into family law court, I won’t be there this day’, and for them to say ‘ok well you don’t have to be there this date’ but maybe there needs to be a little bit more understanding that maybe there is a
bit more going on, it would have been probably helpful, but that is in the individual level.

While it is not clear how far this lack of sensitivity extended, Breckenridge and Hamer’s (2014) research suggests that supporting those who have experienced domestic violence requires an approach which is informed and evidence based, to reduce the chances of re-traumatising.

As Claudia entered the final stages of her course, she felt uncertain about attending her graduation, blaming her past for a lack of interest in celebrations. After encouragement from her children, however, she attended. She described a joyous occasion which inspired her children to undertake study themselves:

I wasn’t going to go to my graduation, because you know maybe in my past, we usually don’t do a big fan fare. I have re-partnered and he said ‘yes you have to go’ and my son did. So, I went with my son and my mother and it was good and I am pleased that I did it. My son came to my graduation, he thanked me. He has just done his HSC and got a scholarship to do commerce at uni, so you know. I also have a daughter who is pregnant quite young, and she is studying during pregnancy.

The cultural capital that Claudia had built up during her school years, and which had then been so badly eroded during her marriage was rediscovered through her university study. In her words: “After the relationship I was a shell - similar to an empty box, I knew I wanted to feel alive again, worthy and be able to support others. Studying Psychology was a means to start that journey. Going back to education was comforting, familiar and safe.” Her psychology degree provided her with the means to continue to assist other women in similar situations. She felt that the theory she learned increased her professional standing within her workplace, giving her more options what she could offer as help to other women. Claudia also experienced a transformation of her own, finding that her new knowledge was helping her to deal with the emotions of the aftermath of domestic violence. Claudia found that her previous feelings of anger over what she had experienced were being replaced with more positive and useful attitudes of activism.

At the time of the last interview, Claudia had recently graduated from her studies and re-partnered. She was continuing her employment at a domestic violence support service. She had aspirations to pursue post graduate university studies but was pleased to be able to have a break with her family.
Lynda

Lynda left her marriage when her children were almost teenagers. For Lynda, leaving her husband, the abuse and her children led to a lengthy time of rebuilding her life from loss to self-discovery. In the weeks that followed her marriage separation, Lynda lived at her parent’s house in the country. She continued to feel “scared” of her estranged husband. Retreating from the relationship in a fearful state, as Lynda points out below, resulted in significant losses for Lynda – economic loss and loss of her children (as their father retained care of them):

He scared me out of asking for money that he owed me, he scared me out of going through with the charges with the police. The police had found evidence and everything. He convinced the kids that I was having him charged and the police had no evidence, and they [children] to this day they believe him. Police don’t charge without evidence. I was stuck paying half the mortgage for a while, should have gone for half of his super. I didn’t do it, too scared of him. I had a lot of difficulties. He took off with my children, the police were involved and that and those relationships have never been recovered.

Lynda felt she could have “reversed the whole thing” by reconciling with her husband, however, unlike other times during her marriage when she had forgiven her husband, this time she asked herself the question: “Well how often are you going to allow people like this in your life?” Instead of celebrating Christmas with her children that year, Lynda returned to her parents’ home in the country, where she spent the hot summer grieving for her children on her mother’s couch with her cat for company. She described the weeks of grief as “coming to be a mental health problem” and felt that she needed to “take control.”

Lynda reached out to her only social network she had during her marriage, the work friends she had. She contacted a man she worked with, who, at the time, lived in a regional town a few hours drive away. After he learned of Lynda’s situation, he continued to support her through phone calls. At the time, he was having car problems, making his travel to attend his postgraduate studies at university difficult. So, he asked her to stay with him so that he could borrow her car while it was being fixed. Lynda saw this as an opportunity to move on and to test out her independence:

I was never allowed to drive that far before with my ex-husband and so I thought, give me directions, never driven that far before in my life, got in the car
and I thought, “You can either turn this into an opportunity, do new things, have a chance to do things you have never done before or you can sit there on the lounge and get sick.”

Lynda then stayed with her friend for two weeks. During the days when he was at university, she explored his town. After visiting all the tourist attractions, she found the nearby university campus and looked at the courses on offer. She took particular interest in the subjects in the Bachelor of Health, Aging and Community degree. So, she enrolled and chose to study via distance education. She described this decision as a “move outside the box”, telling herself “this is good.”

Soon after, her estranged husband contacted her asking to reconcile. Lynda described feeling “stunned”, however, she used her recent university enrolment as an excuse to decline his offer:

I said to him, “Oh I am sort of busy with uni, I just signed up” and he said “are you going to throw away twenty years of marriage over uni? That’s a poor excuse like just that you are going to throw our marriage away” and I went “mmm you’re right, I will ring you back.” And he is still waiting for the phone call.

During her university studies, Lynda commenced a relationship with the man she had stayed with. Not long after, they got married and with their shared interest in education they spent time travelling and assisting the Indigenous community:

We have moved around heaps and have unbelievable experiences and that is connected with our education. When we have been able to get work that education gave us the opportunity to live. I have lived practically everywhere in New South Wales and Queensland now.

The work with the Indigenous community led Lynda to discover that she did indeed have an Indigenous heritage:

I am open about my Indigenous background now. I went out west with my husband and started up a program because I saw the poverty out there and one of them [Indigenous person] said ‘do you have Aboriginal in you?’ and I said ‘actually there are rumours in my family and I am not sure’. They asked me to bring in my family history and I brought it in and the interesting part about it was that my great grandfather was a member of the stolen generation and was put into a home in Yass [town in New South Wales].
Her university studies enabled Lynda to make new choices in her life. She described this time as one where she was able to have “a different level of conversation.” She found herself taking on “new ways”, completely changing whom she chose to interact with, and, as she says below, having “a whole different mindset about a whole different perspective on life.”

I heard someone once ask me that ‘being Indigenous, being in a violent relationship, quitting that, why did you go to university?’ and I said, ‘well, it’s basically the opening and its basically getting away from mindset that you belong in that poverty type area’.

She credited her university studies with a new sense of self-identity.

I think really deep down when you have been put into this situation and your life has been controlled and you come out and you do go into higher education. I am not saying everybody will do that, I am saying that you will find that the person you are is in there.

While friendships and supports during her marriage were limited to her interactions with work colleagues, after her marriage separation, Lynda enjoyed the control she felt over choosing whom she mixed with. However, she still kept her distance from other people; stating that she “didn’t want anybody’s baggage in [her] life”, and when she spoke about friends at university, she described them as being “more like acquaintances.” Despite keeping this distance, in her words: ”nine out of ten times the people I meet at university I like. There are very few people I could say that I have met and I walk away and say. I really don’t like them.”

Lynda’s new husband supported her university studies, providing guidance especially during her first semester,

I remember my first assignment, my current husband said, “you can’t hand that in.” I was mourning everything, I was mourning my kids. I had to get it together.

That was my first one and that was a bit hard to get through.

Following this, Lynda found a number of ways to seek support during her degree. At times, she stayed on campus to visit the university library and attend workshops. During one of these visits, Lynda met an Indigenous Elder at the university accommodation. This woman was studying the same degree, and without Lynda asking, this woman helped Lynda with her studies.

Following Lynda’s separation and during her new marriage, Lynda’s economic capital remained limited. The house in which she lived with her husband was broken.
into and possessions were stolen. Lynda and her husband decided to put his home on the market to recover their losses. Without a home to live in, Lynda’s husband took a transfer with his teaching position, while Lynda took any work she could to financially support her studies. A friend from her childhood offered her cheap accommodation in an old leaking farm cabin in return for Lynda’s help at the farm’s bed and breakfast. With no access to electricity or TV inside the cabin, Lynda completed her assignments on the verandah in the rain.

Lynda pushed herself to achieve the best she could, and when she did not get the results she hoped for, she felt disappointed. In her diary, she recorded the day she received a marked assignment back: “1-10-15, I was really disappointed with the grade for my report. I usually receive HD or at worst D but this time I only managed a C.”

The loss of Lynda’s children distressed her and was a constant preoccupation. This was made more difficult because her daughter was attending the same university, but Lynda was forbidden to speak to her. As she wrote in her diary following her final exam:

14-10-18 8:00am Day of final. Concerned. 4:30pm Well I got over the exam and not sure how I feel. I should have been more focus but every time I go to uni I look for my daughter who is also a student. This is her last trimester and I have not seen her for years. Her father told her if she has anything to do with me he will never speak to her again. I can’t even go to her graduation.

The following morning, Lynda again thought of her daughter: “15-10-15 Woke up this morning feeling a little disappointed about the exam and that fate did not arrange for me to bump into my daughter.” In the days that followed, Lynda continued to grieve for her children. She purchased a sewing machine to make clothes in the hope of being reunited with her children, and future grandchildren.

Maybe I will learn to make cute things for children like they have in the Steiner Shop [attached to her primary school]. You never know I may find my own children and find I have grandchildren who I can spoil with lots of homemade clothing.

A couple of months after this diary entry, Lynda was able to speak to her daughter on the phone. She learnt that her daughter had completed her university degree. Lynda described feeling pleased about her daughter’s achievement. However, Lynda stated she was “heartbroken” when her daughter did not want her to attend her graduation. In Lynda’s words: “2-11-15 She told me out right, her father does not want
me to go to her graduation, so it would be best if I didn’t. The abuse never goes away.”
This disappointment stayed with Lynda in the weeks that followed, in her journal on the 26th of November 2015, she describes a bad dream - “Had a dream about my daughter last night. We were together at her graduation. Just before it started she told me I had to leave because her dad will be arriving soon. I woke up and started to cry.”

Determined to keep the limited contact she had with her children. Lynda continued to attempt to speak to them. She had a short conversation with her son in the weeks prior to Christmas. Then on Christmas Day, she managed to speak to both her daughter and son.

25-12-15 No presents just lots of cooking and caring for my parents. I decided to take a gamble and ring my children. Both of them answered the phone (they did not go to their father’s place for Christmas). My daughter said she loved me and my son asked me if I would him to send me something for Christmas and then told me he loved me. I couldn’t ask for anything more. Best present ever. First Christmas in over 10 years I have been able to talk to both my children. SO HAPPY.

This elation was short lived though. In the weeks that followed Lynda continued to contact her children with conversations that ended in arguments when her children accused her of saying things to make them feel bad. Lynda reminded her daughter that she had not been in their life for a long time and had no way of saying anything. Lynda’s daughter later recalled that it was not her mother who had said the negative comments; it was actually her father and his new partner who had said the hurtful words.

Lynda graduated from her Bachelor of Health and Ageing with distinction. This increased Lynda’s confidence and her desire to learn. Without any break between degrees, she enrolled in Bachelor of Psychology, also via distance education and through the same university. Her motivation for this second degree was to help break preconceived ideas around domestic violence. She wanted to use her new knowledge to help others in similar situations and felt a particular interest in supporting women from affluent backgrounds who leave violent relationships. Lynda described such women as a “minority group” within the domestic violence sector in comparison to less affluent communities. In her words: “from the outside [it] looks like a very wealthy, happy family and that is what people don’t realise, it’s usually [not], and that [misinterpretation] was one of the things my husband used over me.”
During her second degree, Lynda sought assistance from university tutors throughout to maintain the quality of her results. She was glad she had returned to the same university as she felt supported: “It is all very clear, there are support services for race, age. You get nurtured, you know when you walk into it you feel like they are setting you up to achieve and that you have someone there who wants you to achieve.” This support from the university reminded her of the encouragement which her coach and nuns had provided during her childhood: “That’s how I knew I could do it then, and that is how I know I can do it now.” From her schooling experiences Lynda had an understanding as to the norms of the field of education, and she used this to her advantage. This support she felt from the university was a form of social capital and a network of support for her.

During her second degree, while she had two subjects left to complete, Lynda’s husband had a heart attack and bypass surgery. This prompted them to return to her family home in the country town. There, Lynda continued with her studies despite also caring for her elderly parents, whom she still resented:

I care for my parents now and sometimes I sit there and sort of resent them because she makes out that she was a nice person but I was honestly flogged till I was badly bruised at times, whipped and stuff like that.

Lynda felt that she and her husband could no longer travel as they previously had, due to his heart condition: “It is too dangerous for us to go out there [remote locations].” She said that she felt more financially secure because she realised that she would one day inherit the family home. She also acknowledged that selling the family home would be a way of letting go of bad memories:

When my parents go I get that house that brings back bad memories. I live with them all the time. It will be sold and the choice of where I go is my choice and only mine, and it’s going to be about me.

In the small country town, Lynda’s circle of friends remained small and selective. Her love for arts and crafts, which was instilled in her during her childhood schooling at the Steiner school, assisted Lynda to make connections with the local quilting club which gave her a chance to learn how to sew and meet new people. Lynda felt that at her age (54 years), finding employment was limited; however, if she was able to find the opportunity, she wanted to support women in similar circumstances:

If I was given the opportunity to support women I would. I think more women that come from wealthy backgrounds need more support. If they came in from
the commission area they would expect it. We don’t really have highly skilled qualified people here in community sectors really, unfortunately we have a community centre but they have done makeshift diplomas and that. It’s got to start being regulated it’s got to be people in degrees from health, stuff like that and they need help.

In this narrative, we see that Lynda experienced a transformation from much diminished cultural, social and financial capital, to a recuperation of these capitals to a greater or less extent and a sense of agency about how she might live. Despite the overwhelming grief for her children, and loss of economic capital, Lynda's confidence and cultural capital re-emerge in the embodied form of choices, such as about the types of clothing she liked to wear and political activism she wished to participate in. Her positive disposition towards education, and her knowledge that she could achieve, developed through her early experiences of education assisted Lynda in her university study. Her strong sense of self and direction in life came from her new knowledge of her Indigenous heritage, and marriage to an educated man. At the end of the narrative, we see Lynda's hopes turn towards retirement despite having the desire to help other women. At 54, she felt that it was unlikely that she could find the employment to match her aspirations and institutional capital. At the time of the last interview, Lynda had recently graduated and had decided on having a break from studying.

**Dawn**

After leaving her abusive relationship, Dawn settled into a housing commission home in her regional town. At the time of the study, she was single and focused on providing safety and a better life for her children. Her “passion”, to help other women in a similar situation, led her to take on a voluntary position with the local domestic violence committee. Shortly after commencing this committee position, Dawn worked at a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) which provided emergency accommodation services, firstly as a caseworker, and then assisting women in court.

Whilst working with the NGO, Dawn completed a computer course, a Certificate IV in Welfare, and a Diploma in Welfare at Technical and Further Education college (TAFE). Completion of this course provided her with the institutional capital to enrol at university. Her love of learning, cultivated in her years of schooling, where she thought of her school as her “safe refuge”, sparked a desire to help other women: “I am
passionate about education, especially for girls…it is our way out [of violence]”. She realised that through furthering her own education at university, she would gain:

A bigger picture about the sociology side of it [domestic violence], the patriarch and misogyny…You can work with all the passion in the world but until you get the theory it can be really dangerous to the clients to the victims so I think it really good that you have Rosie Batty and the ASU [Australian Services Union] that are really pushing that the money goes to professionals, ED [Emergency Department] nursing staff, doctors, social workers, police.

She realised to join the ranks of these professionals she “needed to have a degree.” Dawn commenced and completed a Bachelor of Social Science/Social Welfare and then without a break, went on to study for a Master of Social work. Although she chose different universities for these courses, both were via distance education. As she reflected on her university studies, she mostly spoke about these courses collectively.

Dawn combined university studies with single parenting, paid work and volunteer work. Her confidence fluctuated in the early days of her first degree. She knew that she “still had a good academic base to start from” as a result of her early schooling. Dawn saw education as “[her] way out of poverty”; however, during the first few weeks of university, Dawn described herself as "very, very nervous, very unconfident.” She described how she would ask herself, “What do you think you are doing? Do you really think you can do this?” Although her schooling provided her with some confidence in her capacities, Dawn also attributed this “self-doubt” to her childhood experiences: "I grew up with DV because my father was violent and my mother always tried to start something and never finished it, just like I used to.” These feelings were further influenced by disparaging comments from Dawn's mother about her university studies: "She sort of really put me down, it was like, 'Oh Dawn, you are a single mum. What are you doing? Just get a job. Stop having all these airy fairy ideas.'".

Once Dawn began to receive positive feedback Dawn for her assignments, however, her confidence grew. In her words, she was "spurred on" and “knew [she] could do it”. She described the feedback from her lecturers as "the best experience of university". Whilst this feedback was welcome, she also described moments when support "away from the actual academia” would have been helpful. For example, some of the course content, particularly for a child psychology subject during her first degree, triggered bad memories: "I had the guilt’s thinking, ‘What have I done to my kids?’ Knowing all the things it does to children when they witness domestic violence. That
was hard.” When she considered contacting the current general student support at her university, she described how she thought to herself, “oh no, they are going to think I am no good and mark me down.” She recognised these thoughts as "that shame thing again." Dawn felt it would be helpful if there were someone she could talk to who would be "non-judgemental and confidential", who understood both university policy as well as "the barriers" experienced by women who had experienced domestic violence.

During her first degree she did not meet with any other students face to face, rather, all communication was done via online class discussion boards. While she enjoyed this communication, she felt that she needed to be “guarded” and not disclose personal information. With her Master’s program, she attended the campus orientation where she met other students. Dawn found this to be a better experience and wished that she had more opportunities to meet with other students locally on an ongoing basis.

Enrolling in a university degree did not initially bring the respect that she had hoped for from work. She described feeling "a lot of conflict", particularly with her manager, after she commenced university. Her manager, who held a diploma, "was almost resentful of people with degrees" and "got quite nasty" with her, stating: "oh these people with degrees, they think they are so good. Just textbooks most of it, just textbooks" and "f’ing university students think they know it all." Dawn suggested that her manager was "threatened" by her new education, and that this disposition towards education was widespread in the domestic violence sector. In Dawn’s words:

You know the NGOs [Non-Government Organisations] they are not really qualified, which to me, now sitting here doing my Masters I get a little concerned about professionally because as you know, working with such vulnerable people, they can go in there working with a lot of passion but not enough educational training behind them to use that passion in the right way.

In Dawn’s opinion, there was very little support within the sector for staff who had university qualifications. She felt that her university qualifications as a domestic violence support worker would provide her with “a bit of an inch further" because she had "done enough study and enough work on [herself]" and "done the miles". Her colleagues who had also experienced domestic violence but did not have university qualifications were "very raw, very angry" from their situations, expressed, she suggested, as resentment towards her qualifications. Halfway through her first degree, Dawn left the job at the refuge and commenced work as a sexual assault worker in the
health sector. There she claimed to have seen the same disposition in the form of resentment towards university educated staff: "It is really awful."

Outside of work, Dawn preferred to socialise with a small circle of friends who had a similar background to herself. They were also single mothers and worked in the domestic violence sector in her town. Like her, these women were recently university educated in disciplines such as law, psychology, mental health and criminology. Dawn said that the stories of such women were important to tell in an effort to overcoming the current perceptions about domestic violence only impacting women from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Dawn described her new university education as providing her with new understandings about society. She particularly enjoyed the sociology and feminism subjects. Like Lynda, she felt inspired to “break down the myth that domestic violence only happens to housos [housing commission tenants]”. She said that she wanted society to realise that domestic violence is widespread: “People think it is women from low socio-economic backgrounds, uneducated, not as we know. It [domestic violence] does not discriminate it affects all facets, I think that is all part of it.”

Dawn was also concerned about the psychological impact of all forms of domestic violence on women and children; how they were “terrorised, controlled, financially, emotionally.” She asked the question: “How many kids go home from school worried about how dad’s going to come home from work if he is going to be angry?” Dawn used her own story as an example to demonstrate to others that leaving such environments and taking on new learning and new identities is always possible.

I have often thought why they don’t see the positive because some of us do get out of it and we live good lives, we become strong independent women and we lead good lives and we make a better life for our kids because it’s not all doom and gloom.

Despite these optimistic words, the elation and pride Dawn was looking forward to as she graduated from her Bachelor of Social Science/Social Welfare in her "gown and hat" was crushed by both her mother’s dismissal of her achievement: “Oh Dawn don’t be ridiculous you are an adult, it’s just for the young ones, you just get a certificate anyway”; and the expenses involved in travelling to the university, accommodation and graduation fees. Although Dawn contacted the University to explain her situation, they did not offer any assistance. Instead, Dawn missed her graduation. Instead, she purchased (via lay-by) a ring as a “silent victory” to celebrate
the achievement. Dawn felt that missing out on her graduation “perpetuates the whole thing [experience of domestic violence]” because “no matter how much you get away from it, it will still be there.”

Away from the violence, Dawn’s economic capital increased gradually; she was able to purchase a home and provide safety for her children. The positive disposition towards education that she held in childhood, where education was her refuge from violence at home, assisted her to achieve her goal of obtaining the credentials and knowledge needed to assist other people, like her, to overcome their lack of confidence and the hardships produced through domestic violence. Through her university studies and accomplishments within her community (she was awarded with a medal for her 10 years of service to the local domestic violence committee), Dawn’s confidence re-emerged. Although the social capital she might have built up through friendships at school had been crushed by her experiences of domestic violence, away from the abuse and control, Dawn made new connections with women who had a similar background. At the time of the last interview Dawn was still studying her Master of Social Work and working within the sexual assault sector.

Nancy

After leaving her relationship, Nancy borrowed money from her parents and used any savings she had to relocate from England to Australia. Despite attempts during her relationship to enrol, Nancy was 29 when she first attended university. Nancy felt that she needed to totally relocate to feel that there was a safe distance between her and her former partner, to prevent her from returning to the relationship. In her words:

I came to Australia to escape that part of my life like. I could not have rebuilt it in England or in [the city] where I was because it would have just been too tempting to go back or be tempted back. I always felt there needed to be a safe distance and there wasn’t enough distance.

She also felt this distance was needed to begin thinking about returning to education:

I think I had to come here to even think about educating myself again because I had always known I was capable of it but part of the kind of myth that I believed about myself was maybe I was just a smart ass, too smart for my own good. Like it would be that I didn’t deserve to have that kind of status of an education.

On her own in Australia, with three British A levels and ten O levels from her United Kingdom schooling, Nancy commenced a Bachelor of Arts, with a major in
English Literature, at a regional university. During the initial weeks, Nancy experienced many challenges. For example, University expectations around the use of Information Technology, such as computers and the internet, were a particular challenge, as her former partner had controlled her use of computers during her relationship. She recalled the overwhelming feeling of fear she had when she sat in her first lecture and the lecturer began to talk about using the internet:

I remember sitting in a lecture. I didn’t know what Google was, I had never used a computer properly, like ever. I had never had an email account, like things that are just second nature and if you said that to anyone around they would have been like “what?” Like I am a dinosaur.

Despite these apprehensions, the self-belief that she held as a child, that she was a “really high achiever”, re-emerged and she was able to teach herself quickly:

[I] had to teach myself really quickly and I did, but you feel like you are wondering around like you have come here by mistake almost. “Why am I here? Because I don’t think I am ever going to get this” and then you suddenly do.

These initial weeks made Nancy realise that the abusive relationship had restricted her taking up opportunities. In her words: “My past made me realise how much time I wasted. I am very conscious of the fact that almost ten years of my life are missing and I can’t get them back.” This led to Nancy feeling that she had to “have an edge on everybody”. Her desire to make up for lost time led Nancy to be competitive:

So, I am starting later. So, I feel like I have to have an edge of everybody. Like I feel like I have to be better. If I get a class I have to bring more to the table. Everything that I am doing. I am conscious that I have to be very competitive. Not that everyone is my rival just that I started really, really late. I wasted too much time.

The effort she made with her studies was rewarded with good results. Although her studies focused on English Literature, she developed new goals to help other women with similar backgrounds. After graduating from her degree, she remarried and had two children before commencing a Doctor of Philosophy and work as a tutor at her university. She described a knack she had of identifying students who were experiencing domestic violence:

My experiences help me when I am teaching because if there are students in similar situations, I can pick them a mile off and I am: “they are either going through this or they know someone who is”. And there are all the traits. Their
reactions, they want to talk about this but they don’t know how to, that confusion. It is very evident when you see people in this [violent relationships].

Despite being able to recognise the signs of domestic violence, Nancy did not intervene. She was unsure of what support was available for such students at the university.

During her PhD studies, her marriage ended. She explained that there were a number of reasons for the separation, but conceded that the relationship had also become controlling:

One of my supervisors jokes about how obtaining a PhD is almost like it brings divorce to the table because it is a real test and certainly my then partner struggled with me becoming what he thought was above him and our relationship didn’t survive it because I was not going to accept something lesser this time because it’s not really on the table. You either have to negotiate. It became a controlling relationship because he felt desperately unhappy and felt forced into a lot of things. So, did I, parenthood was something that took us by surprise. We had two children really close to each other and our kids are amazing, they are brilliant but he felt positioned into a life that he never really wanted and because of that it had the potential to become kind of emotionally heavy, and it was just because we were two very unhappy people and I don’t bear him any ill will now. You know I feel better for not being in a relationship that makes me feel guilty.

Like many of the other women, Nancy also found socialising at university confronting, feeling that she was forced into a position where she had to get to know others. This was a new experience for Nancy, as in her first relationship her friendships had been monitored and she had been isolated. She made friends cautiously, feeling as though people would change their mind about her if they knew about her past.

Nancy described how her university studies translated into her career as a university tutor. It also gave her confidence and insight which she used to protect herself against control and abuse.

I mean it [PhD/university study] has brought me my career. I am now teaching, that is what I do for work. So, it [confidence] kind of enabled me to get through the divorce with my Australian partner because I now have skills which I can translate into currency to keep me and the children safe and secure. So, it
[university studies] has given me a lot more confidence, certainly it has allowed me to have the kinds of conversations regarding. “This [control] isn’t for me and I am not going to do this anymore”. You know like: “this is where it stops. I can see where this is going and I am not participating in it.”

Nancy succeeded at university through sheer determination and persistence. Her past traumas created some stumbling blocks when it came to her lack of familiarity with technology. Nancy felt a need to have a competitive edge in order to push through these challenges and succeed. The fact that she continued on to PhD studies is testament to her motivation to succeed. At the time of the interview, Nancy was nearing completion of her part time Doctor of Philosophy studies. Like most of the women in this inquiry, as a result of her university studies, she had experienced increases in her economic and cultural capital. She understood that by investing in cultural capital, that her economic capital would benefit, and this was achieved through her employment at the university.

Tamson

After four years Tamson left her abusive relationship, taking her children to a small house on the other side of town. She sought counselling, and as a result of the violence, was diagnosed with an eating disorder and spent subsequent years in and out of hospital. As she recovered, she began to realise that getting away from the relationship was the right thing for her. Eventually, Tamson moved completely away from the town, choosing a coastal location not far from her mother. There, her mother supported her by caring for the children. This provided Tamson with time to consider her future goals. With her school certificate, she gained entry into a teacher’s aide course at TAFE. Although she did not state this explicitly, her teachers’ aide course would have provided her with the institutional capital to enrol in an undergraduate university program. Her own Indigenous background was a topic that intrigued her, since it was very rarely spoken about by her family and this influenced her choice of university course, a Bachelor of Arts (Community Culture and Environment) with a double major in English Literature and Aboriginal Studies. In her words: “I thought by doing this study [her chosen course in Aboriginal Studies] I could tap into it [her Indigenous background] a little bit.”

Tamson made the decision to attend university after attending an open day for a small rural satellite campus of a large regional university:
I can’t remember how I got onto the uni. It was a small campus of a larger uni and I think they were having an open day. I thought “I may as well go along and see what it is all about.” That [the open day] was fantastic. It [the open day] gave me the confidence to realise that I could do stuff.

After enrolling, it did not take long for her to feel a sense of belonging and identity, in her words: “I have never really been given the chance to think what I wanted to do with my life, it was like, and ‘well this is your path’”. Her confidence flourished in contrast to the ten years of abuse where she was often told that she “didn’t have a brain”.

Tamson was able to combine single parenting with her university studies, with the support of her small, rural campus and her mother. She had an informal arrangement with the local campus librarians where she was able to bring her children to the library after school hours and a homework room would be provided for them, whilst she studied. Tamson described how she felt that the staff were understanding of her situation, and how she regarded the small campus as a nice close community. She said that she thought the manager of the campus might have had a similar experience to her own and that assisted her better understanding of Tamson’s situation. In her words:

Our tutors were just amazing; they let me bring my kids to class if they were sick. You know quite willing to let someone take notes for you if you had to run off and get a sick child or my kids seem to live at the university library. Often after school we would go back there to the library and they would give them a room to sit in and watch TV while I did work. I can’t say enough about them. They were fantastic. I think one of the managers had a similar story to myself. I think that might have helped they were wonderful. Everyone I came across was wonderful.

The enthusiasm Tamson showed at university led to her representing the university at various engagements, employment as a university tutor, and a new circle of friends with the many mature aged students at the campus (including her now husband). These opportunities inspired a new sense of self, evident in changes in the cut and colouring of her hair and new choices in clothing and footwear: “I felt like I could take on a new persona. I cut my hair really short and I just took on a whole new persona. I changed my hair colour. I now wear high heels.”

Tamson had a child to her new husband. She then commenced an honours degree but found studying with a new baby to be “way too hard”. With her husband, she
then relocated, a move she described as a “tree change”. Once settled, she recommenced her honours degree, this time choosing to study via distance education.

Looking back on both her degree and her honours year, Tamson described how her university studies had encouraged her to begin to engage in feminist ideas, generate new goals and realise the effects of her past trauma.

Helping women in a similar situation is a passion. When I met my husband, he got me to write a goal and one of them is helping women, I am still finding out exactly how. When I started uni, I lived day to day, learning how to cope. Going to uni helped. You find out a lot about other people’s lives and that made me think that it was wrong what happened to me and the whole feminist thing. It made me realise that everyone has rights and mine were violated.

Tamson was determined to succeed at university. Her persistence combined with the support from her partner assisted her to achieve her goals. Whilst studying, Tamson kept active within domestic violence support circles, where she received support and engaged with women from similar backgrounds. This support provided Tamson with opportunities to attend domestic violence forums. At the time of the last interview, Tamson had graduated and became an author, telling her story in her own words.

Amelia

When Amelia decided to leave her relationship, she attended her local police station for support. There she noticed a poster hanging on the wall advertising a job for a domestic violence worker. Amelia described this as a pivotal moment, instrumental in inspiring her to help other women in similar situations. She asked the officers how she could become a domestic violence worker herself and they put her in touch with community services, who directed her to the online links to the TAFE course that she subsequently enrolled in.

With no HSC, her TAFE study, as a transition, provided the institutional capital she needed to enrol in university. She succeeded so well academically at the TAFE course that she obtained a scholarship to study at university, where she enrolled in a Social Work degree. She described how her success at university triggered her competitive disposition and made study exciting: “I have always loved winning and being successful in everything that I do, so that feeling is really good. Just passing feels great, so when I do better, then that it is really exciting.”
Her new-found enthusiasm helped Amelia to overcome the feelings of worthlessness she had experienced during and upon leaving her relationship. While she revelled in the successes that came from achieving in examinations and anticipating graduation, it was the daily education journey that Amelia was most excited about. Course content and academic conversations within her classes provided her with a new sense of freedom to have opinions and learn about topics that she thought were often censored in the world outside the university.

It just makes me more passionate I guess about things because it is not just about domestic violence, there is so much more than that in the world, and it keeps my eyes open and I like that. I think uni keeps you real, there is so many things happening here, like people rallying for something and it just feels like ‘man I didn’t even know that’ and I just really like that. It [university study] has changed my life that way, I just feel I am more of a real part of things, I just feel like there is not much that is censored here, but when I watch TV, I just feel there is a big censor there, whereas uni there is not. It has made me feel more, when I left my relationship I felt very worthless, I slowly feel like I am worth something when I come to uni, so yeah, I guess I still struggle with that but not nearly as much as I was before.

Like other women in the study, part of her pleasure and her feelings of worth was in demonstrating to others that she could do well and that she had found a direction in life.

Uni has been great for the whole confidence thing. And it has just been, it has been good to just show everyone I can do it as well, like everyone, like my parents thought “what are you doing, you know, your life is complicated enough, what could you possibly be thinking of, getting into social work, which is like, haven’t you had enough of that whole theme?”

As her confidence grew, Amelia’s outlook broadened. She began to apply for employment in the social work sector: “Yes I have finally started applying for jobs and I feel much more able to do more and tackle the world.” Her university studies also impacted the choices she made about the ways Amelia cared for herself (embodied capital). Amelia began to attend support such as counselling, fitness classes and lifestyle workshops, as well as adopting new choices in fashion for herself. She also found herself mixing with other students within the classroom, describing them as people she would not usually talk to. Despite these new connections, however, like most of the
women in this study, Amelia chose to keep her university life separate from her private life. She was self-conscious of her single mother status and that she lived in housing commission accommodation:

I don’t know, single mother in housing commission like, you know it’s not something you just tell people, you know there is a lot of judgement around that and yeah with domestic violence too, people just think it is your own fault so I am very careful with what I tell people at uni as well. And that is just people in general as well; you know I am not quick to advertise that I have got kids or where I live because it can get very, very interesting.

She felt especially distant from other students and did not join them after class at the university bar or wear the popular university branded clothing. Although adamant she did not want to fit into this campus culture, she was the same age (early twenties) as the other students and sometimes felt she missed out on the fun. In her words:

I enjoy having fun as much as the next person as well and I wish could say “hey let’s study all day, chill out and drink”, all that kind of stuff cause I still like doing all those things, just don’t do them often. And I guess I envy that, and other people to. I guess I am aware that we really are all different levels in class, they are very carefree and I don’t even know if I was ever like that so I just get really funny feelings so you know, like I am not buying uni hoodies, and you know doing things in groups and stuff like that, I am more of just a bit of a loner I think, you know.

Like the single parents in Reay et al’s (2002) study, Amelia described how combining single parenting with full time university study was at times overwhelming. She would arrive late to university most days as she needed to take her children to school. Amelia said that she felt unable to explain her situation to the university academic staff. In comparison, she described the TAFE lecturers as more understanding and willing to provide her with a flexibility when needed; her relationship with these staff was closer in comparison with the university academics. Amelia said that she did not know where to look for support at the university even if she needed to.

Despite these challenges, Amelia excitedly described how her university studies would provide a better future for her and her children:

Oh my God, when I finish uni, I am going to work, I am going to go on holidays, and I am going to hopefully buy a new car before that. I really just like to move out of my house, I would just like to work and be in a job that I love
and kind of live a better life really, I just be happy that university is going to help me get that kind of dream, to get that job, buy the food I want, and provide a stable, fun life. We are really big on fun, me and the kids, it is kind of a new outlook we have on life. I am hoping that is what is going to happen when I graduate.

Amelia was the youngest woman in the study. She had very limited resources and was sole provider for three young children. Her narrative shows her transition from a violent relationship to being a single mother and TAFE student, before transitioning to university. Her success in her TAFE course enabled her to transition to university despite having left school at 15. After her relationship, her cultural, economic and social capital was limited. During her university studies her positive disposition for learning re-emerged as she enjoyed the feeling of competition and winning. Her social capital remained limited; however, conversations with other students and engaging in volunteer work provided Amelia with enough connection with others. In Bourdieuan terms, to be a part of a social network means to be able to access the collective benefits of the group such as being able to voice her opinion. Amelia did this within the classroom as part of her education experience; however, she viewed university as a field where she was not able to initiate or maintain these connections outside the classroom (even though she wished she could). Her anticipation for her future showed an optimism and strength which gives the impression that she has been able to move beyond and build on her experiences of being a teenager in an abusive relationship. However, like many mature aged students within the literature, particularly those who are single parents (see for example, Reay 2002), Amelia’s commitments as a single mother, and her very limited social network framed her narrative up to this point. At the time of the study, she was still studying towards her degree, so whether her optimism and determination were able to carry her though these challenges to a successful completion is not known. At this point in time, it did seem, however, that targeted university support was not part of the story.

**Discussion**

This chapter describes what could be regarded as a turning point in the women’s narratives. After leaving a violent relationship, the women in my study experienced further changes in their capital related to rebuilding their lives following the experience of domestic violence. They generated new goals for their lives, including the goal to
study at university. For most of the women, there was an expectation that this would lead to future improvements in financial independence for their families.

It is important to acknowledge that these are women who persisted – sometimes with support from universities and sometimes from those around them, but mostly it seems through their own determination and persistence. For most this was also coupled with resources in terms of cultural capital accumulated from their early schooling and positive family dispositions to education. There are likely to be many other women, who did not meet the criteria for this study, who were unable to make it to university, or were unable to continue.

University impacted the ways they rebuilt their lives through the “juggling” of the university student experience, and overcoming challenges in the aftermath of leaving a violent relationship. The women in this inquiry had the challenges related to leaving a violent relationship such as single parenting and legal issues (Bonomi et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2005) combined with assignment deadlines and exams. The inclusion of university studies at this time in their lives was not an easy task; however, generally, it provided distraction from grief and resulted in feelings of achievement.

Academic staff played a pivotal role in assisting the women to achieve their successes in their education. Feedback from assignments translated into a boost in confidence for most of the women. Support from professional staff, however, drew a mixed response from the women. Some of those who did not seek support were adamant that they were able to be independent. Others who wanted to seek support about issues related to their past, were disappointed when they could only find academic support. The women who were able to access support beyond their academic needs, felt that the general student services offered to all students lacked understanding of the unique situation students find themselves in following the experience of domestic violence.

Unlike O’Shea’s (2008) first in family participants who enjoyed socialising beyond the classroom, most of the women, both those studying face-to-face and distance education, distanced themselves socially, whilst enjoying academic conversations. Although the women described a variety of social engagement activities provided by the universities such as cafes, bars, university clothing and outings, most of the women did not participate in these. In fact, for many of the women, hearing talk of these social occasions made them feel uncomfortable as they did not want to engage in it. Most of the women, preferred to keep their past circumstances to themselves, so by
maintaining some distance between themselves and other students, they were able to achieve this.

Tamson seemed to fare the best when it came to support. She attended a small university campus which was set up to cater for ‘non-traditional’ students - where staff understood her needs and set up a homework room for her children whilst she studied. Tamson credited this support to having staff members who had similar stories to herself. She was also the only woman in this study who broadened her friendships at university. She attributed this to her small intimate university setting where she felt able to socialize with students and teachers, leading to eventually meeting her current husband.

The generation of new goals, however, had another element to it. Most of the women chose to take up study towards careers of helping other women in similar situations. The connection between those who have experienced domestic violence and the desire to support women in similar situations has been made within the literature. In Chronister and McWhirter’s (2003) words:

Battered women’s exposure to different occupations is mostly through their experiences with social and health care providers in domestic violence shelters and advocacy centres, counselling agencies, hospitals, urgent care clinics and dental offices. As such there is often a disproportionate representation of battered women’s career interests in social service and health care professions. (p. 421)

Chronister and McWhirter (2003) argue that women who have experienced domestic violence should be viewed as assets to domestic violence assistance and prevention programs for the unique understanding they bring to such positions. Similarly, Pain (2014) argues that ongoing fear is often channelled into such activism, providing women with a voice against domestic violence:

Many anti-violence movements and organisations have similar roots, if traced back in time, and higher than average numbers of individuals who work in them today, as well as therapists, volunteers, researchers and others who work to reduce violence or support victims, have experiences of abuse that have prompted their chosen specialism.

Wood (2017) uses the terms “advocate-survivor motivation” (p. 317) to describe this desire to support other women. Most of the women in this inquiry had similar goals to those which are described in the literature (Chronister and McWhirter, 2003; Pain, 2014; Wood, 2017); however, they specifically chose university study as a way to
become a professional to achieve this. The combination of the goal for financial independence and this form of motivation assisted the women and fuelled their determination to overcome their adversity and succeed.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an insight into the transitions in economic, cultural and social capital the women experienced, as they decided on and engaged with university study. Understanding the backgrounds of the women provides the context in which to explore influences beyond their childhood on their dispositions.

Most of the women compared the challenges of being a university student to the trauma they had already faced in their relationships. In light of this, they generally welcomed the challenges of rebuilding their lives and university study. As Rachel put it: “Challenges were no longer potentially life threatening and were often fun”. Most of the women found the challenges a good distraction from grief and enjoyed being able to show others that they could overcome the challenges.
Part Three
Chapter 7
Discussion and Conclusion

The study described in this thesis has explored the experiences of a group previously absent from the domestic violence and higher education literature: women who have left a domestic violence relationship prior to enrolling in higher education. According to Chojenta (2017) recent widening participation has placed responsibility on universities to ensure underserved groups of students are acknowledged and supported. While there has been a substantial recent research focus on first in family and mature aged students, which has recommended greater improvements in recognition and service provision specifically for these students (O’Shea, 2009; Stone & O’Shea, 2013), there has been very little attention to women who are entering university after leaving a violent relationship.

Despite increased political and public awareness of the issue of domestic violence (Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland, 2015; Victoria, 2016b), university students who share this background are rarely represented in the literature, with little evidence to support an informed approach to policy and service provision. Furthermore, while Oke (2008) suggests education as an advantageous remedy to overcome the tactics of control of domestic violence, little is known about how this would apply to the context of university studies. My study fills this gap by providing narratives that both collectively and individually provide a detailed insight into how women with this shared background engaged with and managed their studies in higher education. It does this by drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977) concepts of capital, field and habitus to provide an insight into the development of their dispositions and classed practices from three key periods of their lives: early family and schooling experiences; during a violent relationship; and after a violent relationship as a university student. This chapter is organised to respond to the following research question which has been designed to be addressed by three sub-questions. The first question provides an overview of the women’s lives and narratives leading to their decision to undertake university; the second sub-question deals more specifically with the theory, addressing how they negotiated the university environment; and the final sub-question is concerned with the practices of the universities, and leads to the implications of my study:
How do the life histories of women who have experienced domestic violence impacted the ways they decided on, and engaged with, university study?

(1) How have the women’s life histories influenced their decision to undertake university study?

(2) How has their economic, cultural and social capital influenced how they negotiated with university study?

(3) How did university study impact the ways women who have experienced domestic violence rebuild their lives?

How Have the Women’s Life Histories Influenced Their Decision to Undertake University?

Education is not a level playing field (Bourdieu, 1977), and as such, the women’s experiences of education in my study varied, influenced by differing family expectations and assumptions in relation to the value of education. Generally, the women were from mostly middle-class families, with exposure to one or more of the following: private school education, encouraging parents, music and sport. Just over half of the women, however, experienced abuse during childhood such as witnessing domestic violence, physical abuse, sexual abuse and/or being in an abusive relationship as an adolescent. Their narratives demonstrate how these experiences reduced their confidence and engagement with high school education to the point that most did not complete their senior years, and profoundly moderated their career aspirations.

According to Dumais (2002) it is possible for abused children to view education as an opportunity, despite their circumstances. For Lynda and Dawn, their schools represented a place of safety, away from their homes. This sense of safety at school, however, was not consistent across all of the narratives. Despite being a high academic achiever at school, for Nancy, education represented another field where she felt “victimized” and “dreadfully unhappy”. Although not providing specific details, she claimed school was a place where other students bullied her.

As with school, engagement with extracurricular activities such as sport and music were viewed by most as a way to be out of the family home. This was another potential place of support. Although it was not apparent how sport assisted in lessening the impact of abuse for the women in my study, as Williams et al. (2006) suggest, the
benefits for cultural capital do accrue from participating in the sports field; this was also apparent for the women in my study as they became mature aged university students.

A substantial decline in academic achievement and aspirations occurred for the domestic violence as adolescents. Amelia and Tamson’s narratives, for example, provide an insight into the scantily documented experience of domestic violence during adolescence. Both entered an abusive relationship during their teen years and left the sanctuary of their family homes to be with their abusive partners, ultimately leading to the disruption of their high school education. While Amelia continued to attend and finally completed high school, education was a field where she felt she no longer belonged. Her friends became estranged as she tried to cope with the impact of the abuse. For Tamson, entering an abusive relationship led to her leaving school at the age of 16.

There were only four women in my study who completed high school: Rachel, Mary, Claudia and Sophie. They were also the only women who did not experience some form of abuse during childhood. Their families provided them with high expectations for their futures, encouragement and security. School was their place for fun and learning, where they engaged with other school children, and the teachers as Sophie states were the “encouragers” that they could turn to for support. These women provided more detail about particular subjects they enjoyed at school such as music, art, languages and reading. Extra curricula activities, such as sport, were also an important part of their childhoods, which they suggested contributed to the development of their confidence and a sense of belonging.

For Claudia, though, her senior high school years were complicated by the onset of undiagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Like the students in Berezin's (2014) study of students with this disorder, Claudia experienced a moderation of her aspirations, choosing technical education over university studies. Sophie, Rachel and Mary were the only women then to successfully transition straight from high school to university study, and of these three, Sophie and Mary were the first in their families to attend university. Like the participants whose parents had migrated to England in Reay et al. (2001) study of middle class and working-class university student parents, Mary’s first generation working class migrant parents also considered university studies as translating into opportunities for their daughter.

The women’s mostly middle classed educational practices became derailed in early adulthood due to the experience of domestic violence. Regardless of their socio-
economic status, the impact of ongoing control by their abusive partners was debilitating on all forms of capital. Most of the relationships were long term, but they ranged from a few years to twenty years, with an average of ten years. All but one of the women had children within these relationships. Most lived in rural or regional areas in New South Wales. Some were in what might be regarded as working-class relationships and others in middle class relationships. Sophie, Amelia and Rachel for example, were in single income relationships where their partners worked, their focus was on caring for their young children and homes. Rachel sought employment once her children were older. Mary, Tamson, Claudia and Lynda, on the other hand, were in middle class relationships and were employed in either fulltime or part time work. Most of these women shared home ownership in desirable locations. Because of these observable material advantages, they feared that others would not believe they were abused: “From the outside in, we looked like a David Jones Christmas brochure. Like we had the big tree, the big house, we had the lot and it was just fake” (Claudia); “I had a beautiful home, the pool, land, horses” (Lynda); “People think it is women from low socio-economic backgrounds, uneducated, not as we know. It does not discriminate it affects all facets” (Dawn). Dawn’s words echo those of the World Health Organisation Department of Gender (2001) and the United Nations (2009) that domestic violence occurs across all of society. Generally, for most of the women, regardless of income, reliance on their partners for financial wellbeing made it difficult to leave the relationship.

Lynda, Rachel and Mary were the only women to enrol at university whilst in an abusive relationship. However, their attempts were unsuccessful, as their partners became resentful: Lynda recalls, “I tried doing more studies with him and it became impossible”. Shortly after their enrolment, Lynda and Rachel, decided to leave their relationship: “he became jealous and then we split up” (Lynda), “My husband became quite insecure when I did well, so that things deteriorated and then my marriage broke down in the middle of that” (Rachel). For Lynda and Rachel, this signalled a shift in the relationship and prompted them to turn their attention to planning how they would leave.

Leaving a violent relationship takes enormous courage, planning and determination. For all the women in my study escaping their abusive relationship was a life changing and brave decision. Claudia was adamant that she had saved her and her children’s lives, likewise Dawn described how close she had come to being “a statistic”.

Senter and Caldwell (2002) and Humphreys (2003) conducted studies looking at resilience and recovery post domestic violence. Both studies found similar themes which suggest it is likely for women who leave violent relationships to experience various recovery stages. After leaving their relationships most of the women in my study went through a period of self-care before engaging in other activities such as education. This initial stage was a time when they focused on practical considerations of safety, accommodation and finances. This is similar to the stages Senter and Caldwell (2002) refer to as “Looking within/focusing on self” (p. 551) and “making adjustments to a new way of living” (p. 555). Unlike the women in these studies, none of the women in my study accessed shelter or refuge style accommodation; however, all had left their family homes, most with their children, and needed to find new accommodation. With extremely limited access to money and very few friends, they either stayed with their parents, found cheap rental or housing commission accommodation. Their social networks were limited at this point, having lost friends during the relationship as a result of control. Rachel, Lynda, Nancy and Tamson had relocated considerable distances to ensure safety, further exacerbating their already low social resources. With what money they did have, they moderated their choices in food and clothing in order to invest in education for themselves and their children. For the most part this stage of their recovery was all about surviving and gaining independence.

By understanding the life histories of the women, it is clear that their individual experiences, especially within their families, impacted the formation of their dispositions and their cultural and social capital. Those with the support of family fared better during their schooling than those who experienced various forms of abuse during their childhood. School and extra circular activities became places of safety and potential support, but it seems nothing could protect those who experienced abuse from reduced confidence and moderated aspirations. To fully understand the stories of these women we need to know what occurred within the university environment and how the women utilised their capital resources and dispositions to fit into the new field.

**How Did Their Economic, Cultural and Social Capital Influence How the Women Negotiated University Study?**

When the women began university study post domestic violence, most were still in what Senter and Caldwell (2002) describe as stages of “Helping others/reaching out” (p. 558) and “embracing a new perspective of self, others, and life” (p. 559), where they
were focused on setting and achieving goals to achieve financial independence and were willing to help women in similar situations. At this point their social and economic capital was still low, however, this was a turning point for the women which demonstrated their determination and persistence to move forward in their lives. It was at this point in the narratives, that they were able to call on their cultural capital developed before their abusive relationship. While my study builds on the work of Duckworth's (2014) study by further highlighting education as an option post domestic violence, this re-emergence of the cultural capital in the women in my study differs to that of Duckworth’s study of mature aged working-class students by with a background of domestic violence found their dispositions and attitudes had been suppressed.

According to Reay (2001), middle class students, like the women in my study, have an easier transition to university in comparison to working class students. The women in my study, despite recovering from domestic violence, entered the field of university education with high expectations to achieve, driven by sheer determination. At the time of the study, most had completed at least one degree, Mary was a Masters student, and Rachel and Nancy had enrolled in a PhD. Amelia and Claudia were the only women still studying for their first degrees. Amelia was approaching her final year, and achieving good results, and Claudia graduated prior to the second interview, and was considering post graduate studies.

The dispositions associated with education and achievement from their mostly middle classed childhoods resurfaced as they entered the field of university study - the women in my study did not want to just pass their subjects, they expected high grades including distinctions and high distinctions. They had the cultural capital to understand and meet the requirements in order to achieve these results at university. These women were different to the mature aged female students Reay et al (2002) and Stone (2009) studied. In Reay’s study, the working class single mothers struggled to meet the demands of university education, but for the mostly single mothers in my study, university became their place to thrive. This was particularly noticeable in the narratives of the women who had not completed high school, their middle-class childhood education dispositions resurfaced as they entered the new field of university studies. They competed with other students for good grades, accessed support from academics and communicated with other students as strategies to advance their education. Most of them were protective of their opportunity, in comparison to what was taken from them during their years in a controlling relationship: “no one can take education from you”
exclaimed Claudia. Their middle-classed backgrounds combined with this sense of ownership and freedom resulted in their comfort within this new field. Once again education became their place of safety, and now their place to achieve. The way some women described the university environment was as if they had come home. At this point of the narratives, the words of Lynda’s childhood sport coach became her mantra which assisted her to persevere with her university studies: “the sky’s the limit”.

These changes also were a sign of the women’s strengthened and empowered identities, resulting in changes to their decision making and their outward expression (embodied capital). To further explain these changes, it is helpful to look beyond Bourdieu and consider Cote’s (2002) identity capital - the classed practices that assisted the women to adjust to the university environment. Côté (2016) explains that as a person develops their identity within a field, they make “identity investments” (p.18) with “exchangeable” (p. 18) resources such as capability, physical appearance, wealth and social skills. Cote’s concept of identity capital provides an additional way of understanding the resources that enabled the women in my study to engage successfully with university environments following a period when, as described above, their personal and social resources were likely to be considerably diminished. The women in my study made changes in their decisions and outward appearance - their styles of clothing, hair, makeup and shoes which were now different to what they had worn during the period of their relationship. While these changes were made to fit into the university environment, they also symbolised new freedom, safety and capacity to choose, as they rebuilt their lives.

Their pathways to university varied according to their previous education. Unlike the working class students in Stone’s (2009) study, none of the women in my study attended enabling courses to gain entry into university. It is unclear why this was the case, although in Stone’s study the vast majority of students were from working classed backgrounds. The women in my study were able to access a variety of pathways to gain entry into university. Mary, Sophie and Rachel had already completed university studies undergraduate degrees, post high school. They followed pathways which would be expected for middle class students - they gained entrance into further university courses based on their prior studies. Sophie had wanted to build on her existing teaching degree, however, the course she selected did not proceed. She was not deterred by this set back, but rather viewed this as an opportunity to choose a discipline, Psychology, that had always interested her, especially since her relationship breakdown. Mary built
on her existing nursing qualification and enrolled in postgraduate studies. Rachel, having recently completed her master’s degree, gained entry into a Doctor of Philosophy program. Claudia and Lynda gained entry via previous TAFE qualifications they had obtained following high school. Claudia was enrolled in Bachelor of Psychology, and Lynda having already completed a Bachelor of Health and Aging, was now enrolled in Bachelor of Psychology. Nancy gained entry based on her United Kingdom high school results where she achieved 3 British A levels and 10 O levels. For Nancy, this became the beginning of a long stint of university study as she proceeded from a Bachelor of Arts, honours year and then at the time of my study she was a Doctor of Philosophy student. In comparison, most of the women who had moderated their aspirations following high school took pathways that resembled a series of stepping stones. Amelia, Dawn and Tamson completed TAFE courses after leaving their violent relationships. Amelia and Dawn completed Social Work courses, and Tamson completed a Teacher’s Aide course. This allowed them to re-enter the field of education. The sense of achievement they experienced in their TAFE studies was not something they had experienced with their schooling and encouraged their aspirations to pursue university studies. At the time of the study Amelia was enrolled in Bachelor of Social Work, Dawn had completed an undergraduate degree in Social Work and was now studying her Master of Social Work. Tamson was nearing completion of her Bachelor of Arts with a double major in English Literature and Indigenous Studies.

As a number of scholars writing in the area of domestic violence (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Pain, 2014; Wood, 2017) suggest, women who experience domestic violence are often drawn to help other women in similar situations. For the vast majority of women in my study, this was also the case, with most developing new goals which involved helping other women in situations similar to their own. Most of the women commenced university courses that would help them gain qualifications and employment in domestic violence services – Psychology and Social Work. I would agree that their motivations for choosing university education over other forms of education were largely a result of their middle-classed understanding that higher education could translate into financial independence and professional positions which would put them in a better position to help other women. Claudia, Sophie, Dawn and Amelia were already working in paid or unpaid positions within domestic violence support services at this point and realised that university qualifications would provide
them with positions which would be better for their financial independence but also better in terms of supporting women.

As O’Shea (2016) and Mills (2008) suggest, personal transformation and adjustment to the field of higher education is possible. O’Shea (2016) uses Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth framework (2005) to explain certain forms of capital that she argues the first in family students in her study possessed which assisted them to fit into the new field of university education. - “aspirational”, “resistant”, “linguistic”, “navigational”, “social” and “familial” (Yosso, 2005, cited in O’Shea, 2016, pp. 71-74). The women in my study had similar forms of capital. For example, they had ‘aspirational capital’ – they were able to imagine, dream and hope despite knowing there were challenges; ‘resistant capital’- they were able to overcome their challenges; and they had ‘navigational capital’ – they had individual agency which strengthened during their studies. From their experiences of domestic violence, they had additional resources in the form of persistence, resilience and determination which assisted them to engage with their studies and provided the motivation to help other women.

Despite their attempts at rebuilding their lives, most of the women experienced forms of ongoing financial control from their former partners, meaning that access to bank accounts and child support was a challenge. Control also came in the form of stalking and undermining their parenting through children returning from visits to their fathers with negative messages. Despite these overwhelming circumstances, the women in my study were resilient. The inclusion of higher education in this phase of their lives demonstrates their strength to be able to overcome or rise above their adversity. With their positive dispositions towards education that they developed during childhood, they had an understanding that investment in university studies (cultural capital) would eventually lead to a good return in the form of a future of financial independence (economic capital) and choice.

Not all the women in this inquiry explained how they were able to afford university. Most were single mothers and had part time or full-time employment. As they were all Australian students, they would have had access to some government benefits - such as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), Parenting Payment, New Start Allowance and Austudy. Furthermore, the women made considerable sacrifices and/or moderated their lifestyles. Throughout the narratives there are examples of how their living circumstances, choices of food and clothing changed in order to be able attend university and care for their children with little support. For
example, Claudia and Rachel described how scrambled eggs, mashed potato and sausages became a regular feature of their diet because this is what they could afford. Rachel and Lynda described how they now shopped at second hand clothing stores for affordable clothing for themselves and their children.

For those who were entering the field of university education for the first time, like many mature aged students in the literature, there was a period of adjustment (O'Shea, 2016). Like the mature aged students in Podesta-Meaney (2010) and Stone and O'Shea (2013), every woman in my study spoke about the time constraints of combining work, university study and family commitments. The women in my study, though, were juggling other balls - fear for their safety, family law court proceedings and the business of rebuilding a life. Most of the women used the term jugggle or juggling to describe their time management. For the women in my inquiry, though these challenges were embraced as they provided a sense of independence and control. Their positive disposition towards education meant that they were able to overcome such challenges and achieve. This confirms and elaborates on Oke (2008) suggestion that education would be a positive inclusion in the rebuilding process.

Unlike the women in O’Shea’s (2008) first in family study who enjoyed socialising at university, most of the women in my inquiry were happy to attend classes and then go home; they did not rely on or seek out social networks to enhance their already limited social capital. According to Podesta-Meaney (2010) living a parallel live to university is not uncommon for mature aged students due to the competing commitments of family and work. The women in my inquiry, however, had the added burden of shame and silence. They felt that their backgrounds would be poorly understood and did not disclose their experiences to anyone at university. They did, however, enjoy conversations within the classroom context where they could share in learning with others. This provided them with the sense that they were on a level playing field with other students, with education as the shared background. While most women were satisfied with this, some wished that there was more connection with others, especially the youngest of the women, Amelia, who like Horsman (2004) suggests, found the education environment a silencing place. Tamson, on the other hand, as the only woman to attend a smaller satellite campus of a larger regional university, found a nurturing environment with staff who spoke about a similar background. She felt comfortable to openly tell her story and university became a place of social support, and one where she met her new husband. As Bourdieu (1984)
describes social capital, Tamson was able to access the collective assets of the group - in this case the university staff. Being a part of the social connections translated into practical offers of support with staff ensuring that she was able to combine single parenting with university studies.

According to Bourdieu, we are agents within various fields, in this case the women were agents within the field of higher education. To fully understand the women’s negotiation of this field, a closer look at the women’s perceptions of the policies and practices of the universities is required.

**How Did University Study Impact the Ways Women Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence Rebuild Their Lives?**

Having transitioned through stages of recovery and self-care prior to enrolling at university, the women’s new identity assisted them in adjusting to the university environment. There they found a sense of agency. Their feelings of confidence, safety and comfort assisted them to overcome most challenges independently. Most of the women in my study attended campuses for their lectures and tutorials, where they were more likely to approach academic staff more than professional staff for guidance and formal support. As would be expected, this support was mostly pertaining to their academic progress. Their academic feedback played a pivotal role in helping the women achieve successes in their education; this translated into a boost in their confidence. For most of the women, this was a vastly different experience in comparison to the control felt within their relationships. Rachel described the feedback on assignments as encouraging. She noted that even when there was criticism, it was constructive and respectful. Rachel realised how different this was to the relationship she had left. This feedback assisted her to improve her academic performance but also contributed to her self-esteem. Amelia enjoyed a similar experience; however, she explained that the feedback and marks received from academic staff spurred on feelings of competition for her to be the best. Claudia had described herself as “an empty box” after leaving her violent relationship; her communication with academic staff assisted her to fill that box. Their encouragement translated into Claudia’s feelings of worth.

Most of these women, however refrained from seeking support from academic staff for their personal circumstances. Feelings of shame and the perception they would disadvantage themselves blocked them from seeking this form of support. The small satellite campus that Tamson attended, on the other hand provided an environment
where she felt able to approach academic staff directly for assistance with her recovery from a violent relationship. She shared her background and current circumstances with academic staff, so they would understand her situation. She was met with warmth and understanding and encouraged to speak out about her background. By doing this, Tamson also learnt that others at the university had a similar story. This provided Tamson with a boost in confidence and acceptance. She described how she engaged in public speaking at her campus open days to encourage women with similar backgrounds, to consider university studies.

For the most part, like the mature aged students from Podesta Meany’s (2010) study, seeking support was not always their first response to problems. Reluctance to speak about the issue of domestic violence is well documented within literature. Such silence can come from those who have experienced domestic violence, as a result of loss of self (Oke, 2008) and voice (Morgan & Thapar-Björkert, 2006), and chronic fear (Pain, 2014). Those in the position of providing support, however, can also contribute to the silence as documented within the literature. For example, general practitioners (medical officers) (Mertin, Moyle, & Veremeenko, 2014), mental health services (Laing et al, 2010) police officers (Goodman-Delahunty & Crehan, 2016), and legal services (Roberts, Chamberlain & Delfabbro, 2015) have been criticised for lacking understanding and awareness of domestic violence, and inadvertently contributing to the silence surrounding the issue. The women in my inquiry found a sense of satisfaction in problem solving. Almost none of those who attended university campuses chose to approach professional university staff for support related to their circumstances. Those that did seek assistance did not find the services particularly helpful. For example, Claudia approached professional staff at her university’s student help centre when she needed to be absent to attend her Family Law Court date. To qualify for the leave of absence, she needed to retell her story to the staff member and provide documentation to prove her circumstances. She wished for qualified staff who had “a little bit more understanding that maybe a bit more is going on [when a student asks for an absence of leave to attend Family Law Court].”

Mary, Amelia and Rachel chose not to seek support from professional staff because they were concerned that revealing their circumstances or being seen to be in need, would disadvantage their university studies. Instead, they preferred to find their own solutions to any issues that arose. For Amelia, the feelings of shame she felt as a consequence of her circumstances, meant that she kept her background and parenting
responsibilities private, which in turn prevented her from seeking support even though there were clearly times when the burden of caring for three young children and university studies was great. A breach of privacy Rachel experienced prior to the second interview is an indicator of the potential risk the women were exposed to when information was made available to outsiders. In this instance, Rachel was contacted by her ex-partner via her student email account. Needing assistance with securing her email address, Rachel turned to the police for support. Tamson seemed to fare the best when it came to support, this time from university professional staff. Library staff at her small university campus would set up a homework room for her children after school whilst she studied. Tamson’s narrative provides an example of university staff who recognised and acknowledged domestic violence as an issue and students who may have been impacted. Their sensitivity and practical support provided the means for Tamson to combine university studies and single parenting with minimal stress.

Distance students, Dawn, Sophie and Lynda also turned to academic staff for guidance to improve results. They too desired higher marks and used the academic feedback and guidance to achieve excellent results. This support was via email and telephone calls, which for the most part suited the women. Seeking support from professional services related to the ongoing challenges and consequences post domestic violence, such as absenteeism due to family law court commitments was not as straightforward for these women though. They either felt a basic level of support, or unsure of where to find support or fear surrounding seeking support. Needing to find the phone number or email address for a particular support person caused confusion. Dawn wished her university provided a contact person who could speak to her about her circumstances, that is someone who was specifically trained to support those who are impacted by domestic violence. This became even clearer to Dawn when she realised that travel, accommodation and graduation expenses were too great for her, meaning she would not be able to attend her much desired graduation. It took courage for her to contact her university, retell her story and explain her financial circumstances. Unfortunately, she was not met with understanding nor support, and was not able to attend the graduation. For Dawn, she believed her university achievement was not just about getting a degree, it was about rebuilding her life. Graduation symbolised the culmination of many years of rebuilding her life, and finally achieving a long-term goal. Dawn’s resilience shone through, though, when she saved towards purchasing a ring as
a personal reward. In the interview she proudly waved it around and told me that it was her celebration for completing her university studies.

Support within the field of university education does not always need to be formal. It can be informal such as gaining support from other students. Social networking for the women in my study was limited to the classroom; most of the women (Claudia, Dawn, Lydna, Nancy and Rachel), however, claimed they could identify other women who had experienced domestic violence. Claudia and Rachel were aware of other students on campus who had left violent relationships. Dawn and Lynda were able to identify students with a similar background through reading their posts on the student online forums. Nancy, in her role as tutor, observed students whom she felt may have a similar background. However, although she wished to support these women, she was unsure of what steps to take. None of the women were aware of any student led support or awareness around domestic violence. There were no designated safe places on campus where they could go for informal support and respite. The only option for them to share about their stories on campus was by their own means. Most were reluctant and fearful to do this in the public spaces on campus.

There are two dominant issues when answering this research question. Firstly, across the narratives, fear and shame silenced the women, making it challenging for them to seek support from the universities about their circumstances. There was no apparent difference in this between those who had experienced abuse as a child and those who had not. Most had built an invisible protective barrier between them, staff and other students. They did network with others and access resources to benefit their university studies - such as academic feedback, and communication with other students in class - but there was a limit. The chronic fear that Pain (2014) signals was evident within the ways the women fitted into the field of university studies. The women were hypervigilant as they protected their background, creating a barrier for them in terms of support within the field.

Secondly, most universities have support services, however for the women who did seek support, they perceived that there were deficits in the support provided. They may not have known about or used the professional counselling services that most universities offer. The lack of specialised support was reminiscent of the generic support on offer which Laing et al. (2010) found within mental health services where services on offer were not specialised and were designed to be generalised and suitable for all. Whilst university is not a designated domestic violence support service, given
the statistics and the wide variety of students attending universities - it is now a place where those who have experienced domestic violence may want to seek support. In recent times, universities have provided designated safe places for students who identify as LGBT (Skene et al. 2008). These spaces provide assistance in terms of financial support and understanding. Although there was a multitude of benefits from the inclusion of university studies in the aftermath of domestic violence, the time commitment created additional challenges such as economic constraints and child care challenges, on top of the burdens that come with leaving a violent relationship.

Horsman (2004) argues that within the field of education, care must be taken to not re-traumatise those who have experienced violence. Furthermore, according to Breckenridge and Hamer (2014) domestic violence support involves many disciplines. Higher education can be included as one of these sectors. To ensure such support is adequate, Breckenridge and Hamer (2014) argue that support must be based on informed and best practice principles: “a critical reflexive approach that involves the meaningful participation of practitioners in professional development, formal evaluation and research partnerships will ensure continuing ‘evidence-based’ innovation in the DFV field.” (pp. 9-10). In the field of university education this would involve staff engaging in professional development around the issue of domestic violence, evaluating the current policies and procedures for students who have experienced domestic violence, and partnering in research to further improve these policies.

The findings from this study contribute to existing work by Chronister and McWhirter (2003); Duckworth (2014); Oke (2008), O’Shea (2008) and Stone (2008). Chronister and McWhirter viewed women who have experienced domestic violence as potential contributors to domestic violence prevention and services in a professional capacity. My study builds upon this demonstrating that for most of the women in my study undertaking university study was a means to become employed within the domestic violence sector in a professional capacity. Duckworth focused on students from a working class background and found that the experience of domestic violence had changed them, suppressing their dispositions and attitudes. The mostly middle women in my study experienced a resurfacing of their dispositions within the university environment. My study built upon the work of Oke (2008) by demonstrating that education provided many benefits for women post domestic violence. According to O’Shea (2008), first in family students are more likely to extend their socialising beyond the classroom, for the women in my study including those who were first in
family, they preferred to limit their social interactions with other students. Finally Stone (2008) showed that the working class students in a transition course experienced challenges with balancing family, work and study commitments. The women in my study experienced this ‘juggle’ with the addition of tending to matters related to the aftermath of domestic violence.

**Recommendations**

My study has identified a number of areas for policy and service improvement within the field of university education. The following recommendations would assist in the transition of students who have experienced domestic violence.

Firstly, across most of the narratives of the nine women who participated in my study there was a consistent lack of perceived *awareness and acknowledgement* of students impacted by domestic violence within the enrolled universities. The women generally felt that university was not a place where they could identify with their backgrounds, fearing that they would be disadvantaged. For all of the women, there was no form of recognition or awareness programs at their university campuses or online. Although they were aware of other students with similar backgrounds, the university environment did not provide the space to engage in conversation about domestic violence. The exception to this was Tamson. Her narrative was in complete contrast to the others. There could be a number of reasons for this - perhaps she was more willing to be open about her background and from there was able to access awareness and acknowledgement from staff. Also, it was a small university campus where policies and procedures could be adjusted or modified such as the provision of a homework space for her children. But this also could be the opposite with the chances of a small community gossiping and knowing the parties involved. I argue though, that awareness and acknowledgement need to be in place without having to ask, and in a way that would protect safety and privacy. As my study has demonstrated there are many who will not ask.

From this, university education ought to be a field that addresses rather than silences the issue of domestic violence. This awareness needs to include some form of recognition that there are students who may be impacted by this form of violence. Staff and student awareness and acknowledgement can be in many forms from art installations, to activism rallies. Since my study began, the conversation at my university around domestic violence appears to have increased. Inspired by my study, I
managed a multi-disciplinary team known as Project ADVOCATE (Awareness of Domestic Violence on Campus at Tertiary Education) (Lewer, Eady, Bell, Crozier De Rosa, Middleton & Rutherford, in progress). We were awarded a University of Wollongong Community Engagement Grant to design a draft staff awareness package. To design this awareness package, the team looked at other projects which have provided university staff with awareness around social issues. The ALLY Network provided an example which has encouraged improvements in service and policy provision for awareness of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI), an underserved student group. This project was initiated by Skene et al. (2008) at the University of Western Australia and a student scholarship. Once staff participate in the training, they are known as an “Ally” and identified as such through a database and placing the network’s logo on their door.

To inform the design of our ADVOCATE draft awareness package, academic and professional University of Wollongong staff were recently invited to participate in a knowledge, attitudes and behaviour survey, designed to understand how university staff perceive the issue of domestic violence and students who may have been impacted by this issue. The survey was met with a positive response, with some staff members identifying as being impacted by domestic violence themselves and making contact with the research team to praise their efforts to speak out about this issue. From there the team designed a draft awareness package which was informed by the survey results and the expertise of local Women’s Health Centres, Women’s Health New South Wales and Domestic Violence New South Wales. The ADVOCATE training package is an important step forward, because, whilst universities are not specific domestic violence service providers, they are places where support may be sought.

Most universities have support services such as counselling, however specific Services may reduce the potential risk of re-traumatisation. As Laing (2014) warns, the offering of generic services to cater for women who have experienced domestic violence is not sufficient. It is clear that those recovering from the impact of domestic violence have unique needs which deserve appropriately trained staff for support. Breckenridge and Hamer (2014) recommend that providers of domestic violence support should adopt a best practices model, specific to the needs and challenges of this cohort. If these services were freely available and easy to find, students may feel that they have somewhere to turn to at university. An alternate model could be to draw support from domestic violence services and have such staff on campus and available to
students in the same way other services such as medical, dental, financial are on offer to students. This could also extend to the provision of practical and affordable childcare options available at or near university campuses, including after school care and occasional care. This would support women, particularly single mothers, who are required to be on campus to complete their studies and have no other support. In addition, facilities provided on campus which make universities family friendly would assist women with the “juggle” of work, children and university studies. In addition, this could have a positive impact on the children, as they develop their own dispositions towards education.

To assist students like the women in my study, recent government initiatives need to be extended. For example, the 2015 Queensland Government initiative to provide subsidies for education and training opportunities for those experiencing domestic violence, to include the other states and territories in Australia. Likewise, the 2016 Victorian Government’s attempt to extend the Higher Education Contribution Scheme to benefit domestic violence support workers should be taken up to increase the qualifications within the sector. Furthermore, the 2018 New South Wales unpaid family and domestic violence leave for workers should be extended to include university students to allow for students to be granted leave and extensions.

University support in this cohort needs to go beyond the student level. With increased research efforts, universities can contribute to societal awareness and understanding of domestic violence. This inquiry has provided a platform for future research into university students who have experienced domestic violence, and those who support them. Although my research focused on adult women, as they reflected on their childhoods, experiences of abuse surfaced. Given that the family and childhood education is a site of cultural capital transfer, and the time when habitus is formed, research which looks into the role of educators and carers for children who have experienced domestic violence, may assist with improvements in this area.

Women who have experienced domestic violence, though, should not be framed as students who just need support. Similar to O’Shea’s (2016) argument for a “strengths perspective” (p. 60) for first in family students, I argue that students who have experienced domestic violence should also be viewed this way. Although many of the forms of capital O’Shea (2016) found within first in family students were also found in the women in my inquiry, the women in my study differed. They had the motivation that Wood (2017) described that led to their determination to work with and help
women in similar situations. Chronister and McWhirter (2003) also recognised this desire to help other women as a positive attribute. They viewed women who have experienced domestic violence as potential contributors to domestic violence prevention and services in a professional capacity. Chronister and McWhirter (2003) call for investment in such women, as a contribution to the issue of domestic violence at a society level. I argue that universities ought to acknowledge students who have experienced domestic violence as a contribution to society. Universities need to ask what can be learnt from this group of students, and how can they be utilised? Many students were able to identify others who had been impacted by domestic violence but without the support in place, were unable to initiate conversations to help. Such students could be utilised in a peer support style with informal gatherings and support.

My study attracted mostly middle-class women as participants. This was an unexpected angle for the project, and it is unclear why this occurred. It could be that university study in the aftermath of domestic violence is more likely to attract women with middle class dispositions, and/or only those who have adequate cultural and economic capital are able to take on university studies. Little is known then about women who had hoped to, but were unable, to attend university or like the single mothers in the Reay et al. (2002) study, women who had commenced university but were unable to complete. In addition, two participants identified as being Indigenous, and one as having parents who had migrated from Europe. Perhaps with a different or greater mix of backgrounds in the sample, the findings may have reflected the current issues around access and assistance at Australian universities for people of Indigenous and migrant backgrounds.

These limitations raise further questions for future research such as: What more could be done to make university an option for more women post domestic violence? What community-based engagement programs could bridge the gap? What forms of community support options could enable women to have more choices post domestic violence? How many students withdraw from enrolment due to the impact of domestic violence? Why do students that have experienced domestic violence withdraw from enrolment? What support would have helped to minimise this attrition?

My enquiry only focused on university students. Most of the women in my study had gained entrance based on prior TAFE education, or university studies. Further investigation into women who undertook other forms of education such as vocational, or enabling courses, and the impact this had on the ways they rebuilt their lives would
assist with a better understanding of the pathways for such women. Possible research topics could include: Are there differences between the experiences of university studies compared to vocational studies, on the ways women rebuild their lives? Do vocational studies such as TAFE attract a different group of women? How often do women turn to TAFE studies to assist with goals of activism?

From the narratives a clear issue for the women was a lack of socialising at university. Whilst this is their choice, and perhaps forms part of their coping with the environment, there was a sense of silence for these women, and some desired more connection with other students but just could not do this. Alternate options for socialising should be researched, for example, support groups for students impacted by domestic violence, designated quiet spaces for such students, and the use of social media to link students from other universities to provide an option for socialising.

**Conclusion**

My study presents the narratives of nine women after leaving a violent relationship and undertaking university study. The narratives were understood within the context of Bourdieu’s (1977) concepts – capital, field and habitus. These concepts allowed for an understanding of the whole picture across three key periods of the women’s lives. The concept of capital assisted my understanding of the resources the women had prior to and during their university studies. During their childhoods, most of the women had access to quality education and families with positive dispositions towards education. For some of the women, their aspirations were moderated as they experienced various forms of abuse during childhood. Within their abusive relationships all the women experienced control from their partners which restricted their access to money and friendships. Their cultural capital in the form of confidence was suppressed. Understanding university as a field helped to explain the ways the women used the capital they had accrued during their schooling and early lives to navigate higher education. At this stage their access to money remained limited and the rebuilding process encompassed a range of emotions, including trauma, grief, hope and liberation; however, the cultural capital they had acquired before their abusive relationship assisted them to feel comfortable at university and succeed. The women came to university looking for a new direction and goals. Like the women in Oke’s (2008) study, education post domestic violence was beneficial to their recovery. - In my study education was in the form of university studies.
It is important to note that no questions were asked directly in the interviews about perceptions, knowledge and/or use of specialised support services on campus. The women’s narratives, however, did reveal gaps in the types of university support on offer for women post domestic violence. Their place of study also became a place where some of the women sought support for academic consideration to attend to legal matters arising from leaving a violent relationship. These women felt improvements could be made for the provision of more relevant, private and sensitive support. This perceived lack of services implies that perhaps there needs to be increased promotion, availability, accessibility and staff awareness so that such women are not left feeling unsupported. Recently scholars in this area (e.g. Breckenridge & Hamer, 2014; Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Laing et al., 2010; Pain, 2014) have called for a more informed approach to supporting such women, suggesting leaving behind the more generic models of support.

As domestic violence occurs throughout society (World Health Organisation, 2001), there would be many women who leave a violent relationship without the skills or capital resources to gain entry at university. Furthermore, those who do gain entry, may find they lack the capital required to fit into the university environment. My study did not capture the narratives of students who failed subjects, withdrew their enrolment or did not even envisage the possibility of further study. The women in my study were from mostly from middle class backgrounds and were already well-disposed to university study. My study provides a platform for further research which captures the stories of those other women who are absent from universities to inform the development of community-based support services, to assist such women to gain entry and succeed at university.
References


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Khaw, L., B. L. (2010). *Leaving an abusive partner: exploring mothers' perceptions of boundary ambiguity using the stages of change model*. (Ph.D.), University of Illinois University of Illinois Retrieved from [https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/16051](https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/16051)


APPENDIX A

Power and Control Wheel

Developed by Domestic Abuse Intervention Program, Duluth, Minnesota

(Reprinted with permission)
APPENDIX B
Research Approval Letters

APPROVAL LETTER
In reply please quote: HE15/147

18 June 2015

Ms Kelly Lewer

Dear Ms Lewer,

Thank you for your response dated 17/06/15 to the HREC review of the application detailed below. I am pleased to advise that the application has been approved.

Ethics Number: HE15/147

Project Title: How does university study impact the ways women who have experienced domestic violence rebuild their lives?

Researchers: Ms Kelly Lewer, Professor Ian Brown, Dr Michelle Eady

Approval Date: 18 June 2015

Expiry Date: 17 June 2016

The University of Wollongong/Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District Social Sciences HREC is constituted and functions in accordance with the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. The HREC has reviewed the research proposal for compliance with the National Statement and approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with this document.

Approval by the HREC is for a twelve month period. Further extension will be considered on receipt of a progress report prior to expiry date. Continuing approval requires:

- The submission of a progress report annually and on completion of your project. The progress report template is available at http://www.uow.edu.au/research/ethics/human/index.html. This report must be completed, signed by the researchers and the appropriate Head of Unit, and returned to the Research Services Office prior to the expiry date.
- Approval by the HREC of any proposed changes to the protocol including changes to investigators involved
- Immediate report of serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants
- Immediate report of unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

If you have any queries regarding the HREC review process, please contact the Ethics Unit on

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Associate Professor Melanie Kandle
Chair, UOW Social Sciences
Human Research Ethics Committee

Ethics Unit, Research Services Office
University of Wollongong, NSW 2522 Australia
AMENDMENT APPROVAL
In reply please quote: HE15/147
Further Enquiries Phone: 4221 3386

16 October 2015

Ms Kelly Lewer

Dear Ms Lewer,

I am pleased to advise that the amendment requested to the following Human Research Ethics application has been approved.

Ethics Number: HE15/147
Project Title: How does university study impact the ways women who have experienced domestic violence rebuild their lives?
Researchers: Ms Kelly Lewer, Professor Ian Brown, Dr Michelle Eady
Amendments: Interview Questions for second interview
Amendment Approval Date: 16 October 2015
Application Expiry Date: 17 June 2016

Please remember that in addition to reporting proposed changes to your research protocol the HREC requires that researchers immediately report:

- serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants
- unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

The University of Wollongong/ Illawarra and Shoalhaven Local Health Network District (ISLHD) Social Science HREC is constituted and functions in accordance with the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

A condition of approval by the HREC is the submission of a progress report annually and a final report on completion of your project. The progress report template is available at http://www.uow.edu.au/research/so/ethics/UGW009385.html. This report must be completed, signed by the appropriate Head of School and returned to the Research Services Office prior to the expiry date.

If you have any queries regarding the HREC review process, please contact the Ethics Unit on phone 4221

Yours sincerely,

A/Professor Melanie Randle
Chair, Social Sciences
Human Research Ethics Committee

Ethics Unit, Research Services Office
University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Invitation to participate in research

I am a PhD student at the University of Wollongong. I am interested in learning more about women who have experienced domestic violence and are now studying at university.
If you fit the below criteria and would like to participate, please contact the researcher as detailed below.

- Women must be over twenty-one years of age
- Women will need to have been out of any relationship involving domestic violence for over three years.
- All participants will have studied for at least three years at university.

Participation in this study is voluntary, confidential and separate to any domestic violence service.

Researcher:  
Phone:  
Email address:  
APPENDIX D

Participant Information and Consent Forms

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

PROJECT TITLE: How does university study impact the ways women who have experienced domestic violence rebuild their lives?

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH
This project aims to better understand the stories of women who have experienced domestic violence and are now undertaking university study.

The research is being conducted as the requirement for Ms Kelly Lewer’s Doctor of Philosophy degree.

Domestic violence is physical, sexual and/or emotional violence perpetrated by an intimate partner.

To participate in this research project:
- Women must be over twenty-one years of age
- Women will need to have been out of any relationship involving domestic violence for over three years.
- All women will have studied at university for at least three years.

WHAT WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO DO
If you participate in the research you will be initially interviewed by Kelly Lewer for about one hour, in a time and place to suit you, with one follow up one hour interview.

The interviews will be interactive, that is, they will be a conversation between Kelly Lewer and yourself.

Only Kelly Lewer will know your real name and contact details. A different name will be chosen by you and used when you are at the interview, and when the taped interview is transferred onto the computer.

The interviews will be taped using an audio tape; some written notes will also be taken. The tapes of your interviews will be kept at all times in a safe locked place and destroyed when no longer needed. At any time, you can request that data collected about you is withdrawn.

Immediately prior to the first interview you will be consulted about the nature of the research and about how the project will be carried out. You will have the opportunity to discuss the process, and your feedback will be taken into account in the ongoing implementation of the project.

The first interview will introduce questions and topics for discussion about the impact of university on your life, friendships, support and plans for the future. The second interview will further explore these questions and topics, as well as discuss issues raised in the first interview.
You will not be asked to include experiences of the violence in your story, as the focus of the research is to learn about the ways you are rebuilding your life and your educational experiences. However, you may include experiences you feel are relevant. Kelly Lewer will ask questions in order to fully understand your story, and to clarify any points she does not fully understand. It is your decision what information you provide, and you are not obliged to answer questions which you might feel uncomfortable about.

Please note that if criminal activity is disclosed, relevant mandatory reporting requirements will be followed according to the current New South Wales Government guidelines. Mandatory reporting is required if it is suspected that a child is at risk of significant harm. Mandatory reporting involves the researcher contacting the NSW Department of Family and Community Services and providing details about the child and the risk of significant harm.

Kelly Lewer will provide you with a journal at the start of the first interview. This journal will be a place for you to document your thoughts and experiences and will be handed back to Kelly Lewer at the second interview (six months later).

Kelly Lewer will be keeping her own research journal. The researcher’s journal will be used to document the research process and the non-verbal cues from the interviews. It will also be used to document occasions where the recording is stopped and advice is given. The audio recording will be stopped at any time at your request and support offered.

At the second interview, you will be given a copy of a typed story based on the transcript of your interview, to read, correct any errors, and make any comments or changes you wish to make.

The final report in the form of a thesis will then be written up by Kelly Lewer. Your story (with changed personal details, and any alterations requested by you) will appear in its original form. It is possible that part or whole of the final report may be published or included in conference presentations and future academic journal articles. At no stage will your name or identifying details be included in any transcripts, reports, publications or conference presentations.

There will be no actual payment for participating.

POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS
You can withdraw from the study at any time, and you will be offered the option of an exit interview. If you become distressed during the study you will be offered referral to counselling services. Please see below for a list of support contacts.

BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH
It is hoped that what is learned in this study from hearing, sharing and understanding these stories will assist you and others in feeling more supported at university and will enable those who provide support to do this work more effectively in the future.

Any questions you may have about this project can be directed to the Senior Investigator who is supervising the project, Professor Ian Brown (02) 42213590.

If you have any complaints or queries that the Senior Investigator has been unable to answer, you may contact the Ethics Officer, Human research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong on [redacted].
CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH TITLE: How does university study impact the ways women who have experienced domestic violence rebuild their lives.

RESEARCHERS: Ms Kelly Lewer
               Professor Ian Brown
               Dr Michelle Eady

I have been given information about ‘How does university study impact the ways women who have experienced domestic violence rebuild their lives’ and discussed the research project with Kelly Lewer who is conducting this research as part of a Doctor of Philosophy degree supervised by Professor Ian Brown and Doctor Michelle Eady in the Faculty of Social Sciences, School of Education at the University of Wollongong.

I have been advised of the potential risks and benefits and have had an opportunity to ask Kelly Lewer any questions I may have about the research and my participation. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Kelly Lewer 0403871773, Professor Ian Brown (02) 42213590 or Dr Michelle Eady (02) 42213613, or if I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics.

By signing below, I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

☐ Participation in two interviews which will be audio recorded.
☐ Participation in keeping a journal for six months.

I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for publication, including in a thesis, presented at conferences and published in journals, on the condition that my name is not used.

Signed ………………………………………………………Date…../……/…..
Name (please print)……………………………………………………………….
APPENDIX E

Examples of Interview Prompts

Examples of questions to be asked in interviews:

1. Tell me what brought you to university study, what helped you to decide to come? Why did you choose to come to university at this time in your life?
2. Tell me about yourself as a child, where did you attend school?
3. What was school like as a child? Tell me about your friendships at school?
4. Are you still in contact with those friends?
5. How important is friendship for you at university now?
6. Has coming to university changed you in any way?
7. Are there any new challenges university study has brought? Did any of these surprise you?
8. Are there any new benefits university has brought you? Did any of these surprise you?
9. Tell me about the supports you have as a student?
10. Do you live in a city, rural or regional area? Have you lived there all your life?
11. Do you need to travel far to attend university?
12. How old are you? At what age did you start planning to go to university?
13. Did your parents go to university? In your family home when you grew up, was education encouraged?
APPENDIX F

Typed copy of an excerpt from Rachel’s journal

13 September
The last 2 weeks have been hectic-my son broke both arms in school sport & I was nominated for a thesis award by my supervisor.
Kelly, I don’t know if you want this extended version but here it is.
Coming into uni to do a research degree taught me

(1) About a topic
(2) About how to do research
It also took me to real points of ‘sink or swim’. I had to do it all. And on my own b/c that’s how it works- either I learn or I don’t. And in undertaking this mammoth task- the degree – I saw me
A woman who doesn’t give up.
A woman who can find/ask for help when needed.
A woman who is neither overbearing nor a door mat.
I learned to juggle...& sometimes to juggle with grace.
And I’ve received recognition for my efforts.
And all this in a safe environment
Safety is paramount.
Being able to rebuild!
I guess for most students, they are building- for me I got to re-build!
And it’s exciting b/c the new look is working in the professional world -where I can deal with 2 broken arms [her son’s] & be cool about it.
Of course, ‘education’ is not the magic bullet. It’s a combination- my personal traits, my strong Christian beliefs, a loving Mum & kind children. But I think taking time to study allowed me time to think, to achieve & to rebuild- where I could build a reputation, a past & friendships. The safety of uni cannot be underestimated.
BUILDING PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING & CONFIDENCE & EXPERIENCE
The Apprenticeship!
FINAL ENTRY
Working on this project has been a wonderful challenge; fun; tear-jerking; a good point to stop for a moment & reflect.

My studies have done things for me on several levels. Learned about a topic and gained a Doctorate i.e. professional standing
Allowed a space for me to immerse myself- this was so vital so I could HEAL.
By concentrating so hard I had time to get a break from the intense sorrow
The learning & space gave me confidence. I had to keep getting out of bed & doing my stuff everyday:

- study
- kids!! ♥♥
- family
- finances
- home
- making my life work
- work

In doing all this I saw myself in a very different light- I came to see myself as:

Hardworking
Logical
Resourceful

Generous
Even tempered
Not manipulative
Not pathetic
Not dependent
Intelligent
Kind
Un selfish
Creative

So many times, I was blamed or accused, in my old life & I was worn down & believed the lies.

But during this extended period, while I studied & through the study + work → I saw better things.

So, I’m thankful for the study, the hard work & the challenges & the relative flexibility this study affords people, esp. people like me- in transition
## APPENDIX G

### Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Before relationship – childhood and young adult</th>
<th>During the abusive relationship</th>
<th>At university</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Bachelor of Psychological Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Working class/middle class</td>
<td>Completed year 12 Bachelor of Nursing</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Middle class. Father-engineer, mother florist. Both Theology graduates.</td>
<td>Assumption that all children in the family will go to university</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claudia</td>
<td>Middle class. Father-engineer. Parents valued education</td>
<td>Undiagnosed teenage onset Attention Deficit Disorder</td>
<td>Chef/cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynda</td>
<td>Middle class. University educated parents. Catholic girl’s city primary school- Rural high school</td>
<td>Left school after year 10 Hospital based nurse training</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
- **Socio-economic background/dispositions**
- **Influences on development of cultural capital**
- **Post school trajectories**
- **Career before relationship**
- **Socio-economic capital**
- **Attempts at education**
- **Career and work**
- **Education**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before relationship – childhood and young adult</th>
<th>During the abusive relationship</th>
<th>At university</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strict English public primary school- her safe place. In Australia-pubilc city co-ed high School, then girls’</td>
<td>Left school after year 10 Hospital based nurse training (did not complete)</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>public high school-rebelled a bit as a teenager.</td>
<td>Various secretarial positions</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Middle class. Father university educated. Migrated from England as an adult</td>
<td>Childhood abuse. Felt bullied at school.</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English public school-felt bullied at school, achieved academically</td>
<td>Completed the United Kingdom equivalent of year 12.</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamson</td>
<td>Middle class- both parents working in management</td>
<td>Parents divorced. Got into bad crowd</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public school-enjoyed the primary years</td>
<td>Left school after year 10 Moved in with abusive partner</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>Middle class- both parents working in management</td>
<td>Very sheltered during childhood. Felt bullied at school. Achieved academically</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public school and after school care. Felt bullied at school. Achieved academically</td>
<td>Completed year 12 while living abusive partner</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>