

## Chapter 2

# Living with Violence in the Family: Retrospective Recall of Women's Childhood Experiences

This chapter looks at some key clinical themes that may arise when working with families where intimate partner violence has stopped or when working with clients who have grown up in families where there was domestic violence. Clinicians may also find these themes relevant during the course of therapy with other clients, who might initially be present to therapy with difficulties other than experiences of domestic violence.

In writing out this chapter, we draw from our clinical experiences, from the current literature and from a grounded theory study by one of the authors (Sammur Scerri 2015) which has focused on Maltese adult women's recall of their experiences of childhood domestic violence and their understanding of its continuing developmental and relational impact on their adult life. The use of the participants' quotes from the grounded theory study will hopefully illuminate both the intensity of the experience and its complex impact on the relationships in the women's family of origin and on the women's intimate and parenting relationships. Emphasis will be made on drawing out clear links between the research findings presented and the implications for practice for social and healthcare professionals working in the field.

### Key Clinical Themes

#### *Paying Attention to Dissonance, Double Binds and Dilemmas of Love and Abuse*

The women interviewed in the Sammur Scerri (2015)'s study lived the coexistence of two intense, paradoxical and unresolved experiences, which manifested in their lives in different ways. They were of an average age of 28.5 years, were well-functioning women, in paid employment, and had significant relationships in

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The original version of this chapter was revised: See the "Chapter Note" section at the end of this chapter for details. The erratum to this chapter is available at [10.1007/978-3-319-57789-0\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57789-0_10)

their lives but had lived in families where they witnessed physical assault by their father-only on their mother, which in some cases was callous and sadistic in nature. They also witnessed mutual emotional violence between their parents and experienced physical and emotional abuse by both their parents. In some instances this was perpetrated by the father, whilst in other cases, it was perpetrated by both their parents.

Some of these women were also physically and emotionally maltreated by their siblings. One or two women also had been physically and emotionally violent towards their younger siblings. However, these were not the same participants who reported being abused by their siblings.

The theme of dissonance was an ever-present core category in the women's narratives. At times, it was articulated by the participants; at other times, it was apparent in the participants' narratives. The core contradiction seemed to be organised around love and fear: My father loves me but he beats me till he almost kills me! How can mother love my father and be so afraid of him? How can my mother protect me from my violent father and then insist that I love him and respect him? The following subcategories and related quotes illustrate in more detail these contradictory experiences which might be helpful for clinicians working with similar intense double binds and dilemmas in therapy.

## Being Terrified of Father and Admiring Him a Lot

One of the participants, Geraldine<sup>1</sup> a 34-year-old woman, shared her very vivid childhood memories of witnessing horrible, physical and psychological abuse by her father on her mother. She also spoke about the abuse that she directly suffered at the hand of her father—of being sadistically, physically and psychologically assaulted by her father. Yet, during the same interview, she also talked about how much she admired her father as a child and imitated him in everything, including how he sat down, and how he spoke. The following quote brings forth her feelings of absolute terror of her father and the callousness of the abuse she suffered:

This was the time when my father had an accident with the ploughing machine and he had made this sacred promise to God that if his leg would not be amputated then he would carry heavy chains during the Good Friday procession, and once he got better and he could walk well, he did carry these chains ... Yes, the Good Friday procession. And he used to beat us with the same chains he carried in this procession. Of course you would think he was going to kill you, man!!

Because I knew ..., that the same chains he used on the Good Friday during the procession were the same chains he used to beat us with. I mean think about it ..., damn it! (blasphemes against God) ... he goes to walk behind the statue of Jesus and then ..., But he was a real great hypocrite! I used to get really angry that during the procession, Jesus, Good Friday,

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<sup>1</sup>To protect the anonymity of the participants, all names have been changed. All identifying details have been removed.

something so sacred and serious and so solemn and are you not fucking ashamed of God? Because God is supposed to know what you are dragging ..., then you beat us with them ..., do you understand? ..., (Geraldine I, p. 51-52).

In this same interview, Geraldine also said

My father had two things which I admired a lot- He was very good with his hands, a very practical man and he was very strong and very powerful... when I was growing up, I wanted to be like him – powerful and not take any shit from people (Geraldine 2, p. 72)

Thus, together with the dynamics of violence, fear and terror, the participants also spoke about instances of wanting to reconnect with father, highlighting the strength of the attachment bonds (Bowlby 1988). In the same manner, in her interview, Jessica told me

“Because at the end of the day, he is still your father... you cannot break the bond between you and him, even if he were a monster, you cannot” (Jessica, p. 19).

Even though Jessica’s father murdered her mother, she did not want to break her bond with him because she felt that having lost her mother, she did not want to lose her other parent and she did not want to deprive her children of having a grandparent.

Seana’s interview also illustrated how caught up participants were struggling with being abused and trying to maintain a connection with their father. The following quote from Seana, brings to light this dilemma:

He phoned me at home and he spent an hour on the phone and it is like he makes you cower and hide into your shell. So you start saying to yourself, I did something wrong. Let me see what I did wrong. But then when you start reflecting ..., you start saying but what did I do wrong? It’s not like I never did anything wrong, I did do wrong things for sure because I am human like everyone else but he did more wrong things especially in his role as a father ..., he did more wrong than I did. Because logic tells you or better it’s like a lot like how many Maltese people think, “He is your father so you must be submissive”.

Now the last telephone conversation ..., I went for the medical certificate and he told me now I will get it for you ..., because I spent the whole Christmas holidays in hospital because of a slipped disc and he told me that he will get me the certificate himself and so that he doesn’t say that his daughter wants to exclude him completely from his life or so that he does not feel ..., so I let him take the role of father ..., I went all out for him ..., I told him okay and he took very long to get it for me and when he got it for me, it had a mistake and I phoned him and I was almost in tears because he took 2 months to get it for me and at that time I told him ‘Can you tell me .. where I can go’ ..., and he started: ‘I am not your servant and leave me in peace’.. I told him, I ..., and I remember him telling me, but I don’t want to use his words ..., he told me I ..., ..of you ..., and at that time, it is like the world closed down and I cried so much ...

... Yes, I was like a bouncing ball ..., bashed against the wall and re-bouncing ..., . This is how I used to see myself ..., like a bouncing ball ..., I used to say but am I a puppet? But let me let it go so that I leave the family in peace as much as possible ..., but I was the one who suffered ultimately because I did not stand up to him (p. 46–48).

This struggle, where children are caught between two opposing emotions concerning their father, has been researched by Peled (2000) and also supported by Mullender et al. (2002). These children lived and continued living this dilemma in

adulthood. Donna, a 23-year-old woman talked about going back and forth, in a cycle of cutting-off and connecting with her father:

You really would like to build a relationship with him... because you wish that things, one day will be different, but then you rationalise... it is like you do recognise the need inside you but you know it is not helpful,... I believe that it is the feeling that every girl feels about her father... that he should be in her life but then reality kicks in and you realise that it cannot be possible.. (Donna 1, p. 61).

One can hypothesise about the different explanations of why women/daughters like Seana, and Donna were caught in the cut-off/connection cycle. Perhaps they yearned for their father's love; perhaps besides the horrible memories of abuse, they also had other memories which they associated with love from their father; perhaps they also wanted to please their mother who wanted them to keep their connection to their father and because they also felt pressured by cultural beliefs around daughters' submission to their father's authority and by the beliefs around the need to keep the family together. Thus the relationship with the father was not only intrinsically complicated by way of the intense opposing emotions but also because it was embedded within the child-mother relationship and the cultural discourses around fathering, around being a daughter and about the importance of family in the Maltese context (Sammut Scerri 2015).

## Seeing Mother so Full of Love and Fear Towards the Father

The need to make sense and manage contradictions was not only in relation to the daughters' relationship to the father, but also in relation to how their mother related to their father. Seana was one of the women who found it very hard to understand her perception of her mother's very clear feelings of terror of her father and also her love for him

Because I used to see mum so frightened, so full of bitterness and yet so full love towards him... that I used to try and draw some conclusion—is it because my mum really loves him or because she is afraid of him? She was very frightened of him but she loved him a lot” (Seana, p. 8).

Other women also could not understand how their mother tried to protect her children from her husband's violence and at the same time minimised his violence and/or expected her daughter to respect him and pressured her to maintain contact with him. Donna explains it in this way

Mum did her best to protect us from him but it was not enough as she was terrified of him and he had a lot of influence on her....

She never gives up on trying to convince me to keep contact with him... she had been saying how much he had changed and how calm he has become, so I started wondering whether I was being too harsh; and finally I went with her for a visit. As soon as we went in, he started blaspheming and threatening that he would kill her. I was shocked and so angry

and devastated that she had put her life and that of my sisters and mine in danger again... I vowed to listen to my innermost feelings and not go there again" (Donna 2, p. 53).

Marika, a 20-year old, spoke of her great disappointment of her mother's minimization and justification of the father's violence (Bogat et al. 2013; Cooper and Vetere 2005). She also recalled an incident when Marika had filed a police report and after about a week or so, she had to withdraw it because her mother pressured her not to press charges against her father

And once he had punched me, here and in my stomach. Of course, he hit me with the table and pushed me on the floor. When I regained consciousness, I left the house and mummy came with me and we filed a police report. When they summoned us to court, my mother told me, 'Why don't you withdraw your charges?' You know what happens to my mum? Time goes by, things calm down, for example, a week goes by, and she then tells me, 'Drop the case. We only filed the report because we were angry.' So I could never take action against my father. I was under age, I had to live with them and obey them, and I didn't want them to hate and blame me if my father went to prison (Marika 2, p. 26).

Thus again these two opposing intense emotions in relation to their parents' relationships made it hard for them to process how they make sense of such experiences. The fact that they were involved in an intense, significant relationship with their parents, the contradictory nature of the experiences and perhaps their inability to comment about it are characteristically how double binds are defined in communication theory (Watzlawick et al. 1967; Gibney 2006). Bateson (1972) also highlights that when such situations are repeated, an individual caught in these double binds is unable to decipher this communication and to respond to it.

## **Further Reflections on Working with Dissonance, Double Binds and Dilemmas in Clinical Practice**

In our experience, we find that both in therapy and in supervision, practitioners need to manage these contradictions and dilemmas brought up by the family members. We find it that it is important to acknowledge the existence of these contradictions and to bring them out in the open to be talked about (See also chapter eight on supervision and consultation). Unless this happens there is a danger that in listening to the horrific experiences of these family members, we can only make sense of them by constructing the perpetrator as "all-bad", and we may find ourselves minimising or pathologising the attachment experiences of these adult children with their parents who were abusive towards them (Kaufmann 2002). But if we recognise, contain and attempt to integrate incongruent information—that someone can both love and hate another person—we remain consistent and enduring objects and help the family members in their turn, integrate some of their distressing and fragmented experiences (Lawrence 2014).

## **Paying Therapeutic Attention to Interpersonal Processes Such as Family Systems Triangulation and Parentification**

In working with families where there was violence, processes such as triangulation and parentification are helpful theoretical concepts with which to understand some of the persistent and intense family dynamics. All the women in the Sammut Scerri (2015)'s study described ways in which they were drawn, or drew themselves into the conflict with their parents—what early family therapists such as Minuchin (1974) described as triangulation. This finding supports and is supported by studies from the divorce and marital conflict literature (Amato and Afifi 2006; Buehler and Welsh 2009; DeBoard-Lucas et al. 2010; Fosco and Grych 2010) and by the work of Pat Crittenden (2008) on triangulation from dynamic-maturational attachment perspective.

As Dallos and Vetere (2012) clearly explain, Minuchin stated that the utilisation of one child in the spouses' conflict could take many forms. He distinguished three forms of rigid triadic processes: (a) The first form involves each parent actively recruiting the child to side with him or her, with the other parent interpreting the child's action as an attack; (b) In another form, which Minuchin called detouring, the parents, rather than focusing on their unsatisfactory relationship focus on the misbehaviour of the child, by diverting all their attention towards him or her, with the child becoming the family problem; (c) The third form—the stable coalition can take the form of one of the parents forming an alliance with the child against the other parent.

It is interesting to note that all three forms, in one form or another were present in the participants' families. Some of the participants were actively recruited to take sides by one parent whilst others felt that it was their duty to get involved (Fosco and Grych 2010), either because they wanted to protect their mother at all costs or because they saw themselves as being the most courageous person in the family.

Geraldine recalled a step-by-step routine in the way that she was explicitly triangulated in—that once her parents would start fighting, her father would invariably ask her to act as a judge and decide who should win the argument—him or her mother

First they used to mention Abraham Galea (name of first Maltese psychiatrist), then I would be judge. Always like that. Because in those days, I only remember Abraham Galea's voice on the radio. Then he used to accuse her of needing Abraham Galea ..., then she would tell him something back ..., not that she used to tell him a lot. The only time she would tell him ..., Then after Abraham Galea would be mentioned then I would end up being ..., on hearing Abraham Galea's name then I would say here it comes ..., Here we go again, do you understand? But the one who was mentioned a lot ..., not that the mental asylum was not mentioned but the name most mentioned was that of Abraham Galea. So it meant now it is time for the verdict. Do you understand? You have to give judgement. Do you understand? You have to pass judgement. Because the fighting used to have a pattern in those days (Geraldine 1, p. 40–41).

Geraldine recalled that when she had to give her verdict it was like court sentence with people taking turns to speak. But at the same time, the whole scene seemed very fast and she had to pass judgement very quickly. Geraldine recalled that it was very hard for her to decide that her mother was right. She said that her father was a very good orator, like an extremely good lawyer and he always won the arguments. As a child, the only thing that she made sense of was that: “my father was right, he was intelligent, and my mother was ignorant... (Geraldine 1, p. 39)”. Moreover, whilst she admired his competence, she was terrified of him and his beatings, and consistently took his side against the mother, with whom she said that she had a rocky relationship. Being in this double-bind situation (Bateson et al. 1956), Geraldine’s focused her energy on surviving and not getting beaten by her father.

Marika, Donna, Rose, Mary, Sandra and Sara on the other hand, could not stand their mother getting hurt and got involved in their parents’ fight to protect her. A quote from Marika’s interview illustrates her process of triangulation

I: what did you (as children) do?

P: my sisters didn’t do anything. But I was the one who always got involved between them. It’s because these things bother me. It bothers me to see my mother getting hurt and beaten. So I used to go between them.

I used to get the punches, even though I knew I would be punched. As long as I managed to separate my mother away from him. That’s what I always used to do.

I: you got his punches?

P: yes, yes I get the punches

I: So you protected her?

P: Yes

(Marika 1, p. 20).

Donna, too felt that her mother tried to be the perfect wife and mother and there usually were not many arguments going on but once her father lost his temper, he would then become violent, without any provocation whatsoever. Donna felt that it was an injustice that her mother suffered so much (Jory et al. 1997) and as she grew older, she used to be the one to challenge him to protect her mother and her siblings. Donna remembered that as young as a 7-year old, she started putting pressure on her mother to leave their father and trying to convince her that they would be so much better off without him. Marika remembered doing the same thing.

When Marika and Donna were asked why they felt that they had to get involved rather than their siblings, they were not sure of the reasons. Marika said that she felt that it was her duty, being the eldest and having the reputation of being the courageous one in the family. Donna said that she felt her mother and siblings knew that she was competent and was able to stand up to their father and she felt that implicitly it was expected of her. This perhaps implies that the process of triangulation incorporated both precipitating and maintaining factors, which were

reinforced by the family dynamics including between the mother and the siblings and the relationships between the other family members.

The women also talked about the great distress that they experienced as their contradictions and dilemmas intensified and described how the more severe the violence, the more they felt the need to intervene. They did remark about how sometimes the violence between their parents and themselves got worse with their involvement. The process also was present across the life span of the clients: that is in childhood, adolescence and adulthood, although it was during adolescence, that these women felt a great need to stop the perpetrator from continuing to spread fear and terror in the family. Perhaps this was these young women's way of getting a sense of their power back and feeling less frightened and less out of control (Gorell Barnes and Henessy 1995).

For some participants, the process of triangulation was closely tied to a process of taking responsibility for their parents and their siblings as if they were the parents themselves—a process referred to as “Parentification” (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973; Chase 1999; Jurkovic et al. 1991; Minuchin 1974) as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Marika described how she felt that it was her responsibility to emotionally take care of her mother and her siblings instead of her father who had abdicated his role and instead of her mother who she saw as weak (Mullender et al. 2002). Again, Marika was not sure why she took on this role but she gave the same reasons that she gave for being involved in her parents' conflicts:

... because I am the oldest, I feel responsible, you see? In fact I always feel the responsibility to help my mother, my sister and my youngest sister. I took that responsibility. I don't know from where it came and how it came about but I took the responsibility because there isn't father and I think that in my case, I did it because my dad failed to take it as a father and my mother was too weak to take care of all of us. I took the responsibility as the oldest, not financially because I didn't earn any money but example if my mother is sad today, or if she is irritable, I try to find out what happened to her; I try to make her happy. I tell her “come mum, let us go out ...

Example, if my siblings need something, I have always bought it for them. When I started to work, I used to buy something for everyone so that I see a smile on everyone's face. They are small things but for you they mean a lot. Example, up to the present day, I still say that before I leave home, whether I get married or not, I would like to have my own house. Before I leave home, I would like to see everyone settled. Example, I would like to see my middle sister settled with her boyfriend. I would like to see my other sister [settled] at school. I want my mother ... mother will remain the same... I don't know (Marika 1, p. 21–22).

Donna recalled doing similar things-taking care of both her middle and youngest sister, including taking her baby sister with her to religion lessons as the father wanted the mother for him

He was abusive too ..., he was addicted to sex ..., it's like sometimes my mother would be asleep next to us, he used to watch a lot of pornographic movies, then he would tell her come on next to me ..., you understand ..., when we started growing up, then he would tell me go grab your sister and take her away from there ..., I never saw them during sex ..., but I knew what was going on ..., my younger sister, sometimes, out of curiosity would peep



through the keyhole ..., I would get angry at her, my mother really felt like an object ..., and that was it, I was always worried about protecting them ..., then when I started growing older I began to stand up to him and he disliked that (Donna 1, p. 6–7).

My sister ..., she is now 12 years old ..., she was the fruit of jealousy, my father wanted my mother completely to himself ..., it's like he did not want her to take care of my baby sister. So I had to feed her, change her, wake up during the night to look after her, and he would tell me take her with you, even if I went to religion lessons, and it's like if I took her with me to religion lessons there would be lots of things... (Donna,1, p. 9).

Donna, too, was not sure how she got to take on this role but she said that it was something that she grew into, since she was three years old. She also recalled making sure that the house was safe and every door was locked when her father had left the house. As highlighted earlier, Donna was not only a reference point for her mother when it came to issues of discipline and raising her youngest sibling but Donna felt that she was her mother's only joy in her life and that she owed it to her to do well at school so that her mother would be comforted

And I remember, I used to do well at school and I remember that I wanted to be her champion. And even during Parents' Day, they would tell her, you have such a bright and polite daughter and they used to praise me and so on and I knew what these words meant a lot for her, especially when in her family, there were a lot of delinquent children. She would say, 'So I must be doing something right?' I used to feel this a lot (Donna 2, p. 30).

In a similar way, Sandra was also sensitive to her mother's difficulty with making ends meet and she remembered that as a young girl, she would choose the least expensive packet of sweets so that her mother would not spend a lot of money. Sandra also recalled the many times she took care of her mother when she was depressed. Sara too as highlighted earlier took over the caring role of her siblings like a parent. However, Sara seemed less burdened than other participants, like Donna and Marika, for example, with her role and was more in touch with the fact that she had a lot of support from her family. Donna continued struggling not to take a parental role with her mother and her sisters well into her adulthood, and although she and her mother and sisters were working on interacting differently, their positions shifted back and forth across time. However, in situations of danger, Donna felt herself cementing herself and being cemented in that role again.

## **The Impact of Triangulation and Parentification on the Women's Development: A Sense of Loss, Feelings of Distress and of Competence**

Both triangulation and parentification led to a loss of relationships with their parents and their siblings. Although Mary said, "taking sides is almost automatic when father is terrifying and feeling safe and secure only with mother" (Mary, p. 11); she also expressed how painful it was to lose her relationship with her father (Amato and Afifi 2006). Perhaps it is also this sense of loss that continues to propel the

daughters to remain open to some connection with the father. Seana expressed the same sense of loss at the cut-off between her father and her siblings as a result of divided loyalties and alliances between the siblings and a parent against the other parent and the other sibling. As mentioned earlier, with being parentified, Donna felt that she missed being cuddled and mothered by her mother. She also lost her sibling relationship with both her sisters. She was unable to relax with her family and, in some ways, this led her to feel different from them, and feeling isolated.

Getting involved through the processes of triangulation and parentification also meant that the daughters felt very distressed and angry (Gerard et al. 2005; Earley and Cushway 2002). Rose observed that whilst it was very difficult for her not to get involved and not protect her mother, her involvement sometimes made the fighting worse (Fosco and Grych 2010). Marika too felt distressed with taking on her mother's fight and sometimes her sister's fight with the father. She acknowledged that it was an extra burden, which did not end when the fighting stopped. She would then be left with worrying about the effect on her sister and also sometimes worrying about herself and wondering whether she was becoming aggressive like her father, as mentioned earlier

It's a lot of stress (said with emphasis). Because you would want to take control of everything that happens. Some time ago, my sister (the one after me) had a fight with my father and I went down and I tried to explain things to him and tried to make him understand. I ended up fighting with him because he is hard-headed. He does not accept that he makes a mistake. This kind of thing. So I continued fighting with him myself and then it's like you end up with your head hurting because this is all a hassle, it's stressful. This is an extra burden for me – because it is like you take in everything yourself. Then when they fight, you end up worrying for her (Marika 1, p. 23).

The women acknowledged developing a sense of competence and a sense of agency with being in the middle of things (Byng-Hall 2002, 2008). In some instances, when they got involved in their parents' violence, they did manage to protect their mother and they did manage to stand up to their father. In this way, they got in touch with their sense of power and as Donna recalled, although she was afraid of her father, she was adamant that she would not show it. They also got validated by the sometimes implicit and other times explicit approval of their family and extended family—Marika was known as the courageous one

In summary, the process of triangulation seemed ubiquitous in all the participants' narratives and it does seem strange that so far, the process has not been much more empirically studied in systemic literature (Dallos and Vetere 2012). In some of these participants' narrative, triangulation was closely related to parentification, with the relationship seemingly being proportional—that is the more a person was triangulated, the more, she felt that she needed to provide for her mother and siblings' needs.

In exploring such patterns, therapists can ask about gains and losses that their clients experienced such as feeling a sense of competence at having a pivotal role in the family dynamics and/or a sense of loss around losing their childhood or their relationships with their siblings when they related to them more from a parental role rather than as siblings.

The participants also described how processes like triangulation and parentification were long-standing challenges, which they regularly had to revisit especially in their relationships with their family of origin. Two of the participants, Geraldine and Donna also spoke about how they were able to find pockets of respite space from being triangulated in their parents' conflicts through a lot of psychological work in therapy and also through other alternative therapies like meditation, yoga and mindfulness.

This implies that therapists can help create a reflective space for clients to think about how best to position themselves and manoeuvre the sticky and difficult contexts of marital conflict, even when the parents have separated and the children are adults. Therapists can also keep themselves informed of research and clinical studies that have looked into how meditation, and mindfulness have been helpful methods for trauma-related distress (Briere and Scott 2015).

## **Drawing from Trauma Theory and Looking at the Traumatogenic Effect of Violence on the Child and Adult Development**

One can argue that the terrifying component and the impact of the violence in the family also exerted an important influence on hindering the reflective capacity of the children and all the family members involved. Drawing from trauma research and how the brain functions in conditions of high arousal and danger, we know that the prefrontal cortex which is normally associated with this function, is "bypassed" by the amygdala in the limbic system, so that persons operate more in a flight-flight-freeze mode and lose their capacity to think about the mental state of others (Asen and Fonagy 2012).

All the women narrated overwhelmingly horrifying experiences of abuse that led them to try and survive in different ways. Both Anita and Carmen described their childhood as "living in hell". Anita was terrorised by the frightening scenes between her mother and father and also remembered herself praying to God and pleading that He delivers her from the physical abuse, neglect and psychological abuse that she suffered at the hands of her mother and father. Anita described her father has an alcoholic and her mother as a person, who every so often, just stood up and left the house, when she could not cope anymore with what was going on in the family

When my mother used to leave home ..., she used to wake up one fine day and it's like, 'I can't take this anymore' and she leaves - my father was an alcoholic ..., when she used to leave home, he would drink more ..., but it almost was better when she left home because she was disorganised ..., the house was always topsy-turvy; she used to begin washing the clothes at 8am and it would come to midnight and she would still be at it ..., it was like that ..., today I know that she had some personality disorder ...

I remember when I was about 4 or 5 years old, I remember it very clearly ..., my sister and I spoke about it a few days ago ..., my eldest sister and I ..., my mother was pregnant with one of my siblings, he put a flick knife against her legs. Thank God someone knocked at the door because he told her I will slash you to pieces ..., that is what it was like at our house (Anita, p. 3).

Geraldine realised that she was raised not to feel anything and to shut out her emotions, what Kolk (2007) refers to as “emotional numbing” (p. 188), a process, which according to Geraldine led her to shut down her emotions in both trauma-related and everyday experiences in daily life.

On the other hand, Jessica remembered being constantly alert and preoccupied with her mother’s safety as a child: “I used to wake up, and go near mummy, checking that she is still alive. I could not sleep unless I made sure that she is okay [eyes welling up with tears]” (p. 6). Geraldine also remembered waking up at night and rushing to the top of the stairs, staying there, keeping very still, without moving one finger, to listen to what her parents would be saying to make sure that her mother was alright (Rivett et al. 2006) and then rushing back to the bedroom when her parents seemed to have stopped talking. Geraldine remembered not being able to understand all their words and straining very hard to listen. In such cases, both Geraldine and Jessica’s behaviour can be understood as forms of hyperactivating strategies (Mikulincer et al. 2003) as they tried to reassure themselves repeatedly that their mother, as their attachment figure, was safe despite the dangerous environment.

After her mother’s death, Jessica recalled needing medication to sleep, having panic attacks, and being constantly on the go. Sara recalled too that she was constantly on the go as a child. All the participants, as adults, understood their behaviours as being consequences of what they were going through, highlighting the overlap in the literature between hyperactive behaviour, post-traumatic stress disorders and the effects of children of witnessing domestic violence (Dallos and Vetere 2009):

Nowadays, I say that that I was feisty because of the things that were happening; that nothing used to scare me, do you understand? My brother says that I drew people’s attention because I used to know what to say to people if they told me something. I used to feel like I was a big (older) girl. I did not feel like I was a young child” (Jessica, p. 8).

## Remembering and Forgetting

The theme or category of “remembering and forgetting” came up very often in the interviews and may have direct relevance on how family members tell their story in therapy. As the participants were trying to recall their experiences, some participants commented that they were able to remember only bits and pieces and that, sometimes, it was difficult for them to remember a coherent whole

I cannot remember what role my brother played, I cannot remember. In my mind, in the way that I remember things, perhaps he had a passive role ..., I cannot recall him ..., I think that he used to cry a lot but I don't think that this happened all the time. I think that he used to be in a daze ..., It is like I cannot see the whole piece ..., it is not coming to me (Geraldine 2, p. 84).

and Mary too

... yes, of pieces of episodes ..., and sometimes, you wouldn't understand what is happening so it's easier to see pieces ..., and there would not be that glue between them ..., (Mary, p. 20).

Rose was one of the participants who had difficulties to remember large aspects of her childhood experiences. Whilst she said that her relationship with her mother was good, she could not recall any specific instances, which illustrated such a close relationship. Her memories at times were not only fragmented but they also seemed incoherent, that is they lacked a sequence of events or other vital detail (Kolk 2014). I (Clarissa Sammut Scerri) also observed that she used a lot of minimisation, and distance from affect in her language (Crittenden and Kulbotten, 2007). When she was asked to describe what the atmosphere at home was like when she was young, she replied

What I don't remember is ..., the atmosphere at that time ..., obviously I was still young ..., what I remember is that there used to be ..., even when we came to live at (name of village), there was shouting, a little fighting in the family and the like (Rose, p. 3). I also remember that there was a bit of beating ..., and ehm ..., things flying (p. 5).

At the same time, in line with Kolk (2014) research on traumatic memory, Rose's memories for one particularly violent episode which involved her, were very clear and vivid

I remember one episode very clearly ..., I was eating ..., we have a combined kitchen and dining room just separated by an arch. He grabbed an ornament ..., mummy's, that her father had given her before he died; he grabbed this doll and broke it and threw it at me the ..., and I saw that it was coming in my direction ..., and so episodes like these ..., of this kind (Rose, p. 8).

Other participants recalled similar episodes very vividly too. Thus in similar ways, family members talking about their experiences, may remember things very vividly or have gaps in their memories or may narrate their stories in a fragmented manner.

Other participants also talked their experiences of intrusive reliving of traumatic events—which is the first PTSD criterion—re-experiencing of the traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association 2013). One particular striking example was that of Geraldine locking herself up at home for three days for fear that her boyfriend was going to come and beat her after he told her in the course of a conversation “You are right!”:

No...no...no...in front of people he would just tell you one word “You are right”. And that word for me it took me a long time to learn what it meant, even up to the moment when I was a grownup woman. It was very difficult when someone told me I was right. Because I used to say (haqq ghal Madonna- blasphemy against the Holy Mother) now a beating will follow.

Once I had a boyfriend. I do not remember what we were talking about but it was something trivial ... But I remember distinctly in the car, while he was driving and I was in the passenger's seat ok? He said you are right. Now you must keep in mind that he had the keys to my house. He used to use the key only when he was going to come over in the evenings and I would know he would be coming. Emm...and he said, we were talking and he said you are right.

I froze and I was focusing only on the fact that as soon as I arrive, I will scoot out of the car and gas down run into my house. I fell silent so he would leave as soon as possible... And then much later he phoned me at work

He phoned me at home and I ignored him. Then about three days after, I called him because I felt ridiculous. Then he said, 'you suddenly left without warning just like that for no reason ... my mother and aunt got worried too'.

Then I found the courage from somewhere and told him 'Please do me a favour, come over and we will talk..' I told him don't tell me 'You are right'. Do not ever tell me that word again. I told him because for me, you are right means ..., he had never raised his hand to me ..., it's true he had never done anything to me physically ..., but at that instant I had thought he is going inside the house with me and then he would ..., because for me you are right means a beating from hell is coming next. It means 'I will not beat you in front of people but when we are at home you will get ..'(Geraldine 1, p. 30–32).

Geraldine's memory triggers and subsequent flashbacks (Kolk et al. 2007) were distressing and had a disturbing impact on her quality of life and relationships. Geraldine also recalled being overwhelmed with pain in her head whilst travelling to work and what kept her sane was the tremendous support of her psychologist who had discussed with her the nature of flashbacks (Briere and Scott 2015). Geraldine associated the pain with the beatings that she got on her head whilst being dragged down the stairs by her hair by her father. The psychologist's explanation was vital to her mental health.

Trauma theory can also be a helpful lens to understand some of the experiences that the women went through as individual adults as part of legacies of trauma as well as how they understood the impact of these legacies on their intimate relationships.

In the interviews, the participants described their psychological pain emphasising that it was worse than physical pain. Rose talked about her father's insults which continuously played in her head as an adult making her feel incapacitated and finding it difficult to pluck up courage to go out alone to meet new people. Claire felt that part of the legacy of the immense fear that experienced in her childhood was her fear of being bullied, which remained very much with her in her adult life (Band-Winterstein 2014). She still feels very afraid in situations of conflict and chooses to withdraw rather than fight back.

He put a fist next to my face and I tried to hold off his hands but my father was really strong because he was into construction work at that time – so he was really strong and I remember that he had started telling me – almost in a jesting manner- come on, now tell me the opposite that I am telling you – and I now know that he was looking at me and “enjoying” the fact that he was seeing fear in my eyes- so that I will tell him – no, I will not do it because he knew that I would not oppose him because I was too afraid ... and I am still afraid, not only of him but of everyone because I am afraid of being bullied – so I will not answer back at anyone (Claire, p. 13).

The participants in the Sammut Scerri (2015)'s study also shared about their feelings of shame around the belief that they did not come from "a good, stable family", which came into the way of their sharing of their childhood experiences (Cooper and Vetere 2005). When such experiences were kept secret from their significant others, this in turn deprived their intimate partners from an important context from which to understand their partners' behaviour.

Carmen, Claire and Marika specifically talked about feeling very reluctant to talk about their family's background of violence to their boyfriends and prospective partners. Carmen was very afraid that although her boyfriend might accept her, his family would not

But then when I met my husband, all the anxiety that I had, was not whether I would get married to him or not, but my greatest fear was how I was going to go about telling him about my background. Because ok-he might accept you but then there is also his family, and sometimes it is the family that does not accept you, and many families do this, they stigmatise you and say that I would be like my mother (Carmen, p. 28).

Such fears need to be understood in the context of honour and shame that continue to be concerns in Mediterranean culture (Cassar 2003), where the role of the woman, especially in the older generations, is to avoid shame, "by keeping pure, by remaining loyal to their husbands and by guaranteeing the continuity of the family lineage" (p. 12). In this sense, then it was important for Carmen not to be seen as one that would bring shame to her future husband's family. These fears need also to be understood in the wider context of shame and humiliation surrounding domestic violence in families (Cooper and Vetere 2005)

One can thus argue that the ripple effects from family violence are far-reaching and very often go beyond the confines of the one's nuclear family, even when the violence stops. Fearing other people's judgement and of becoming socially bankrupt (Abela 1997), together with loyalty to one's family are very strong inhibitors of talking about what is happening in one's home. The social isolation and the accompanying suffering are usually enormous to the extent that one can understand why some family members do not look for support from their intimate partners.

## **Other Trauma Legacies and Challenges in Relationships-"It Feels like You Are Trying to Make a Mountain Move"**

One of the participants, Mary, echoed some of the other women's sentiments when she stated that very often she did not have the awareness of what she was bringing into the relationship but she only realised it when she found herself with the same problems again (Herman 1997). Mary succinctly described how as a result of her childhood experiences, she missed very important relational foundations, both in herself and how to deal with others (Briere and Scott 2015):

For example ..., I don't know ..., I missed the sense of security, the sense of belonging, the sense of being seen for who you are and you have to get these from somewhere. And

someone has to give them to you ..., yes, you need to work on yourself but there needs to be someone to give them to you and if you do not find them, then, these experiences ..., you keep living with a lot of symptoms ..., symptoms of wrong beliefs, for example, where men and women are concerned, where relationships are concerned ..., beliefs about yourself ..., it's like there are a lot of things ..., it is very complex ..., for example even the way you behave, for example by being angry and leaving ..., it's like nobody would have taught that you stay and talk ..., and sometimes, it could be that you would know this as well, you would have learnt it but to actually do it, feels like you are moving the trauma mountain that you went through, it feels like you are trying to make a mountain move (Mary, p. 25–26).

Mary's words conveyed some of the great struggles that some of these participants had to continually contend with, in the relationship. She shared how upset she was when she found herself in circumstances similar to her parents, even though she had been determined not to replicate her parents' story. Jessica too found herself in a joy-less marriage, as described earlier. She felt un-validated and unloved by her husband. With hindsight, she reflected on how difficult it must have been for her ex-husband to understand and cope with the rage that she had, that came out of a sense of injustice and unfairness of having been abused and downtrodden for 20 years (Johnson 2004). Jessica believed that her husband had tried to get along with her but perhaps he saw her as too quarrelsome, and too determined to make her point at all costs. All this might have been too much for him. She also tried to speak to him about her dreams and wishes but felt that she was not taken seriously and he dismissed her words as adolescent fantasies.

Marika and Rose spoke about the difficulty that they had with managing their anger and coping with difference and conflict in the context of an intimate relationship (Briere and Lanktree 2012). Marika felt unable to deal with her frustration and she coped by leaving the conflictual situation, a behaviour that invariably had negative consequences on her relationship with her boyfriend. Rose echoed the same feelings, including her inability to talk about what was bothering in the relationship

And how do you say it ..., even the fact that I am afraid ..., I have very low self esteem, very, very low ..., even the fact that I am afraid to state my opinion or that I keep myself back ..., I have been affected a lot by this ..., so I am either aggressive or ..., .So in relationship with other people, it is a bit difficult for me not to become aggressive ..., .once I reach that point up there, I up and leave ..., It does create a little (difficulty) because it does create ..., .the other person, that is next to you would not know that you are going to take something negatively ..., so that this turns out against you.. (Rose, p. 26–27).

During her first interview, Marika spoke about how she thought that her bad temper was stronger than her and that hard as she tried, it always got the better of her. Interestingly, in the second interview, whilst Marika was dating another boyfriend, she felt more secure in the relationship and this helped her deal better with her anger (Mikulincer and Goodman 2006). Although she was still vigilant over her boyfriend's behaviour as to whether he would turn out to be aggressive like her father, she felt that he was more committed to their relationship and this helped cope better with her temper. Although Marika did not specifically state this, her anger perhaps hid fears around being unhappy, like her mother, and around being



alone and unloved in the future. This statement resonated with what Jessica also stated in her interview, “behind all the anger, the hurts are still there” (p. 76).

Geraldine too spoke about how she had to be mindful of her need to be always right in her relationships. She saw her aggressive behaviour as an echo of how her father was in control over her and everything, in her family of origin. She needed to continuously keep herself in check so that she would not engage in such power struggles—with her need to win and be always in the right, which she saw connected with her need to be in control.

### ***How the Relationship with My Father Affected My Relationship with Men***

Some participants made a connection between their relationship with their father and their relationships with men, in general. This connection is supportive of research that highlights the significant impact that the father has on his daughter’s romantic relationships (Nielsen 2014). Rose explained that thanks to her father, she ended up hating men. Some boys also rejected her and this fact did not help her relationships with men in general: “Re: relationships., thanks to my father., I ended up hating men/not being able to stand men., and also I sometimes got rejected by some boys” (Rose, p. 29).

Sandra spoke about looking at men as inferior to women and seeing herself as trying to manipulate them to get what she wanted. Sandra made a connection to how she used to have to manage her father so that he would not be in a position to blackmail her and also linked her behaviour and attitude to her having been sexually abused as a teenager by a family friend

And I think that something that affected me too and I think that it affected me a lot is that I used to look at a man as inferior to a woman ..., this is something that I struggle with, today, not in a sexist way or feminist way but this is something that I need to learn more about myself ..., But I always used to try and manipulate a man ..., so I used to say ..., so it was difficult for me to find a person that is a man to go out with ..., I also was sexually abused so this affects me too...

I : so how did this belief come about, that you can manipulate a man as you please? P: because I used to see myself as more intelligent than a man... even in the way that I communicate with my father and my brother... I was good enough to manipulate (them)...I had to learn how to get what I want from my father so that he does not keep blackmailing me for example, or even from the other experience that I went through, so that the abuse stopped (Sandra, p. 25).

Both Rose and Sandra explained how their beliefs and attitudes hindered their intimate relationships with men. On the other hand, both had loving intimate relationships with women. Both, however, did not label themselves as gay. Although Rose had come out to her family as gay, she was at a point in her life where if the opportunity for a relationship with a boy came along, she would consider it because she was “discovering that not all boys and men are the same ..., I am not saying the word ..., not all are cruel sadists” (Rose, p. 30). Similarly, Sandra

did not want to label herself as gay as this was not something that she felt as describing her completely. She said that being in a gay relationship with someone was part of her present but that anything could happen in the future. These findings are consistent with those of Hlazo-Tawodzera (2006) and others like Diamond (1995) who suggest that sexual identity and behaviour are not fixed for life but can fluctuate and change over a woman's life span.

Seana on the other hand, found it difficult to trust her boyfriend completely—that he will not be violent, just because he was a man, like her father. Despite the fact that he was supportive of her throughout their eight years of courtship and has never been aggressive, she was still afraid that one day, out of the blues, he would betray her trust and turn violent

This is after 8 years, almost, so there are still things that I don't tell him because I am afraid that that devil that is in my father, will one day will appear in him, do you understand, I start saying to myself, after all he is a man. And I know that a man is totally different from a woman (Seana, p. 40).

Seana's gendered beliefs about men and violence are theoretically supported by writings about hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005), which associates manhood with power achieved through sexual domination of women, and the exclusion of women through various means including violence. In Seana's case, the experiences that she lived through and was still living through at the hands of her father were a living testament of these beliefs. Thus one can understand Seana's fears around trusting that her boyfriend will not be violent. At the same time, one can also understand, that these gendered beliefs about men and violence and men in relationships exert a lot of pressure on both partners, in an intimate relationship. In fact, Seana found herself wondering whether she was a relationship-material.

It seemed as if the spectre of the violence always hovered over the relationship of this participant and her boyfriend "like a shadowy third in the couple's milieu" (Johnson 2004, p. 513).

In a similar way, Donna saw herself as putting a lot of restrictions and conditions in the relationship with her boyfriend, so that she made sure that her boyfriend was not like her father. However, this created a lot of distress in her, in her boyfriend and their relationship, and they ultimately decided to go for couple therapy

They were things of the past, for example, I was being too rigid with him, I laid down rules and regulations for him, don't you dare get jealous about every single person I talk to and things like that, don't you dare do this or that and for him these were things he would not even dream of doing but I had to tell them to him ..., don't you dare raise your hand to me, don't dream of becoming jealous and ..., let me give you an example, I am free to speak to anyone that I want to, I want to go to Junior College, and no one is going to stop me, I want to work not like my mother ..., at first she was not working because he was jealous, then he forced her to go to work even to the extent of sending the youngest daughter to a residential home because he wanted her to earn money. You totally cannot understand his thinking this man ..., so I had stood up to him (her boyfriend) to the extent that even when he said he loved me, I did not attach any particular value to it ..., how can I put it, there would be things, for example ..., there were certain things like the truth and he used to tell me it's my principles and my word as man that are the core of my living ..., if it's black it's black ..., and although he used to tell me that and he appeared to be genuine, I still ..., I don't know, for

example, I send him a message and he tells me something that was not exactly as he had said it the day before or as I thought he would say it ..., my goodness I would create a whole scene ..., and he would tell me so you're telling me that I am lying to you? And I would tell him, no you're not outright lying to me, you're just bending the truth ..., I would have then created so much fuss about something that nowadays I cannot even believe I would have created so much stress about it. Then I came to a point where the relationship was going to end. I told him, listen let's do something about our situation because I am tired, I was not even concentrating at Junior College and we went to counselling ... (Donna 1, p. 40–42).

Both she and her boyfriend found it helpful for him to witness her individual work but also to work together on how he can support her and they both can support their relationship (Whiffen and Oliver 2004). She learnt that it was important for her to trust a bit more and to let go some of her control. This related not only to her relationship with her boyfriend but also to her way of managing her relationships in general. Having her father tell her so many times that people's betrayal was the order of the day, she found it very difficult to trust and also very difficult not to be ever-vigilant for when the next catastrophic event was going to happen, indicating her insecure-attachment style of relating and her strategies to protect herself from danger (Crittenden 2008; Dallos and Vetere 2009).

It was also helpful for Donna to have her boyfriend's support over what she went through in her childhood. Had not she talked about what she went through in the context of therapy and he had not been there, Donna was convinced that it would have been too difficult for him to understand her experiences

You cannot control anything ..., I had to work very hard ..., I was always crying with him, and through counselling he started to understand. He realised the harm that my father had done to me. In the beginning he used to tell me you hate your father too much, then when he saw me crying all the time and sobbing my heart out ..., then we started doing some progress, we began to learn how to protect ourselves and care for us, thinking of where to go ..., those ..., for example... (Donna 1, p. 43).

For us, these experiences highlight the importance of looking at the couple system when working with clients who have gone through trauma experiences and exploring further how these same experiences may filter in the intimate relationship system (Catherall 2005).

## **Looking into Replicative and Corrective Scripts in the Lives of the Family Members: Struggling and Piecing Together the Puzzle Pieces When Becoming Parents**

Another important, and persistent category in the women's narratives in the Sammut Scerri (2015)'s study was their strong yearning to not repeat their family of origin's script (Byng-Hall 1998). Many were afraid that because of their family backgrounds, they were destined to either become abusers or victims of family violence in the future. This perhaps reflects the embedded assumptions of researchers, clinicians and policy makers that children raised in violent homes tend to replicate what they have experienced in their family of origin (Widom 1989a, b).

A brief look into the current literature on intergenerational transmission of violence seems to indicate that the process is complex and influenced by a number of factors such as the age of the child at the time of the violence, whether the violence is maternally or paternally perpetrated, by the relationship of the child with her parents, and her siblings, and by the presence of other significant others who could offer a safe mental and physical space to the child, amongst others (Sammut Scerri 2015). More specifically, the process through which important adults deal with emotionally distressing interpersonal relationships and how they in turn help the children regulate their emotions, particularly their feelings of anger in intimate relationships continues to be underlined as important (Mikulincer et al. 2003; Moretti et al. 2014).

For those participants who were mothers, being a parent was seen as an important opportunity to provide their children a different life than the one that they had as children. They felt very protective towards their children and they did everything for them, determined that their children were going to be happy and not burdened by adult problems. Carmen and Jessica, both said that they still had a close relationship with their children even as their children became teenagers. Carmen highlighted how protective she was of her three sons

... No one hurts my son, no one. And since you have gone through so many things in your childhood, you want to show your children how precious they are for you. I tell them 'don't let anyone hurt you' because if they hurt you, they will have to deal with me. No one hurts them. I tell you ..., I don't even allow my husband sometimes to get angry with them, let alone... (Carmen, p. 56).

While the participants were reflective about their childhood experiences so as not to replicate the same experiences of violence with their children, it was also difficult for them not to go to the other extreme. In the case of Claire, being exposed to violence and experiencing violence, helped her immensely to control her temper (Chang et al. 2003) with her daughter and not vent out if she was distressed about work or about other things which did not relate to the daughter. At the same time, as a parent to a 6-year-old daughter, she was remembering more and more her childhood and connecting with anything in her daughter's life that reminded her of how powerless she felt when being physically abused by her father as a 6-year-old child (Courtois and Ford 2013). Such experiences then made her react aggressively towards the husband, to the extent that her husband told her that that she becomes a "monster" when commenting about how aggressive she was with him when he disciplined the daughter over something that she did wrong

You might tell me-you don't cry about what happened to you? Rarely do I cry but on matters that concern my daughter – yes. That hurts me because I know- that hurts me because as parents they should have realised that they were doing something to me – that I had no control over, something that I could not fight. A while ago, my husband started getting angry with our daughter – he had come back from work, he was tired and he shouted at her. He tells me that I become a monster when something happens between him and our daughter. I don't even realise that I have lost control. I don't want anyone to shout at her for nothing. I: Are you very protective? P: Yes, a lot. Over-protective - a lot, a lot and this is because of what happened. I feel that this is because of what happened (Claire, p. 26-27).

This quote again further illuminates the implications for clinical practice—that the understanding of one’s childhood experiences never stops and different life stages and the related developmental tasks trigger different memories. If these memories are not overwhelming in terms of their distress, they can be used to learn from adversity. At the same time, in such circumstances, the participants also reflected that despite their immense desire to make sure that their children were happy, they could not protect them from everything.

## **Looking for Turning Points and Examples of Agency and Resilience**

Amidst all the suffering that these women went through both as children and as adults, they also recognised the psychological growth which was also part of their experiences (Smith 2013). Even here the dialectic of the trauma (Herman 1997) was apparent—suffering and growth, despair and serenity in the same interview. This, for us highlights the importance of keeping our attention also focused on any incidents, however small, that underline the clients’ resilience together with honouring the suffering that they went through in the context of our work with them.

The participants volunteered detailed descriptions of what had been key turning points in their lives.

## ***Change Through Observation, Social Comparison and Feedback as the Women Grew Older***

A number of participants mentioned how, as they were growing up, they observed their teachers and modelled on them how they could be different from their mothers as girls and future women. From their teachers’ occasional comments about their personal family life, the participants as older children also realised that family dynamics at home could be different and these observations were very meaningful for them. Donna explained how

It could be that school was so helpful for me because this was the time where I could escape from home, mentally and physically. So in that space....a lot of students say “‘what a pain – school!” But I really enjoyed school. It could be that I saw them as role models, no one in particular really. Role model in the sense that you see a woman, smartly dressed, like you know, with earrings, and she is in authority. So probably I used to say: Wow! Look at these!... and you know sometimes, they used to say.... Because my daughter....- and you get a hint about what is happening at their home. And so you say, - these people are serene in their family – serenity and peace does exist. It could be that I did this in secondary school. The guidance teacher was a like a mummy to me and my gosh, I used to observe her a lot. And when they share their personal experiences with you— you know- nothing elaborate, simple things, but for you, it is like they gave you a gift!.. even when they tell you – yes it is like that... they help you say: There are people who think in the same way that I do! Also I was proud of the fact that I did well at

school, I used to feel...eh...for instance, I used to always want to help out with the books, that kind of role (Donna 2, p. 22-23).

Hannah, too, found her “news of difference” (Bateson 1979, p. 79) in books which she read for her studies. The desperation that Hannah read about in women in the Second World War resonated with her desperation about her family situation and she became convinced that she was now responsible for her happiness and she had to be careful in her partner choice so that she does not perpetuate the sadness and desperation that she felt in her childhood into her adulthood. Interestingly, this finding is supported by research which shows that exposure to the literature arts such as poetry and fictional literature provide a novel context for thinking about one’s life and identity and thus support the development of coherent life stories by organising personal experiences (Mackenzie 1989):

Such experiences continue to highlight the importance of a systemic approach when working with such families and looking for supportive relationships in the different client sub-system, for example, looking into of the teacher–student relationships and the school system as a venue for change in a person’s life (Boyce Rodgers and Rose 2001).

### ***Getting Support/Talking About the Violence, Bringing Things Out in the Open, Cautiously and Slowly***

Seeking and getting support was not always very straightforward. In many cases, seeking help and support was met with a number of complicating factors especially when it was the children who were seeking help. However, these factors can also be important for adult survivors of childhood domestic violence experiences. The minimisation of the violence by the mother, the shame of not having a good family like other people had, the fear of reprisal by the father who may have always wanted to keep the violence a secret, and the extended family’s fear of the father’s violence and their reluctance to get involved all may come into the way of family members talking about their experiences of violence in their family.

The participants also feared that as children, they would be taken away from their mother by professionals, and they would have liked the professionals involved with the family’s difficulties to intuit to “read their minds” that there were domestic violence issues, without them having to disclose what was happening at home. However, the participants also spoke about helpful social workers, residential care workers, psychologists, teachers and other mentors, as has been highlighted earlier.

### ***Naming the Childhood Experiences as Domestic Violence***

This was another important process. Some of the participants, like Sandra and Mary, spoke about their difficulties of naming their experiences as domestic

violence. These participants spoke about their inability to recognise their childhood difficulties as growing up with domestic violence, unless they had help. Mary recalled that it was not until she started working in a domestic violence unit that she realised that what she went through in her family was as a result of domestic violence between her parents and this realisation helped her to start putting the puzzle pieces together:

I started realising what this experience was all about when I started working in the domestic violence unit and I found myself working there because I had never wanted to work in the DV..., I wanted to work in child protection, with children..., I did not want to work in DV. And then when I found myself in the DV unit, it started dawning on me..., and we're talking about a time when I had already got married and had the children and that I had done my degree and look how long it took me to see it as DV. And there I started learning..., there I started understanding..., when I used to read on dv, and how children experience dv, I started saying..., oh..., this is the same as I used to feel because I had never seen it in this way.....And I think, working in dv, reading and studying..., it was therapeutic for me because this was a way, I could understand and when you understand, you contain. (Mary, p. 31–32).

Such reflections perhaps illustrate the extent of the disconnection between the process of experience and the making-meaning process that is difficult for children and adults to do without help from an adult, possibly a social and healthcare worker, or an older sibling to help them make sense of what is happening. Naming and speaking aloud about what has happened are in fact very important starting points—for the processing of experiences, which till then are internal, often “unconscious, unintentional remembrances” (Smith 2013, p. 76).

In summary, the availability of having someone to talk to in their lives, and someone who loved them, someone who had a special place in their hearts for them, someone who went out of their way for them was an important source of resilience. Perhaps it was their mother, a grandparent, a teacher, their psychologist or a relative. All this supports and is supported by the resilience literature (DuMont et al. 2007; Ungar 2013). Perhaps it is in the nature of these relationships, including the therapeutic relationship, that the participants develop their reflective function despite the adversity that they experienced and because of these contexts, they can then start processing some of what they had gone through and gradually draw meaning from it.

## Conclusion

The women's process of trying to make sense of their childhood experiences was a recurrent theme in these participants' lives. They talked about how the process was an emerging one that started to develop as they grew older, perhaps when they were likely to have the intellectual and emotional resources to support such understanding and reflection (Mullender et al. 2002). When they were young, they were focused on surviving day by day, which many a times when like trying to predict what was unpredictable (Swanston et al. 2002). As they grew older and with help, they started to embark on a process of naming their experiences, trying to

understand the dynamics of their family relationships and some of the seemingly unreconcilable dilemmas.

Practitioners working with such families in turn need to contain the dissonance—responding both to the anger, hurt and possibly cut-off from the parent or sibling who has been abusive—and to their need for connection with the family member who has abused them. In the same way, workers also respond to the suffering of family members as children and adults and validating their sense of agency and their ability to carve out a life that is different than their parents.

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2017, X, 179 p. 1 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-57788-3