Intimate Partner Violence and Social Relational Theory: Examining the influence of children and important others on mothers' transition out of violent relationships

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Abstract

Interviews with survivors of intimate partner violence were conducted in order to gain information on the transition from violent relationships to new non-violent relationships. A subset of this data was re-analyzed using Social Relational Theory to gain further insight into the roles of children and important others who were identified as impacting this transition for mothers who had exited violent relationships. This paper reviews two major themes discovered during the SRT analysis that were inherent in the women's experiences: 1) agency of children, family, peers, and community; and 2) power. In addition, this paper suggests implications for research, intervention, and psychotherapeutic practice.

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Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is recognized as a global epidemic, especially in the form of violence against women (World Health Organization, 2013). IPV is defined as "…physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse" (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2013). IPV has been widely found to impact women's well-being physically, mentally, and at systemic levels including relationally, economically, and politically.

While all genders are impacted by IPV, violence by men against women carries important gendered and cultural considerations and has been recognized as a global crisis (Butchart & Cerda, 2003). The World Health Organization (2013) recently reported that up to 38% of all female homicide victims were killed by intimate partners and approximately one-third of women who have been partnered have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence. Regionally, the Americas experience the second highest prevalence at approximately 30%; additionally millions of children witness domestic violence (Meltzer and others, 2009).

A variety of terms have been used to describe this phenomenon, including woman battering, wife beating, domestic violence, family violence, and intimate partner violence.   The term Intimate Partner Violence was chosen for this paper to be inclusive of non-marital intimate violence (e.g., dating violence) without expanding it to include other types of familial violence (e.g., child abuse).

A substantial body of literature exists that explores a wide range of aspects of IPV, and it continues to be explored across fields and perspectives. Studies have noted the importance of resources and the severity of abuse in both leaving abusive relationships and the IPV recovery process (i.e., Waldrop & Resick, 2004). The availability of social and support services for violence survivors also has a strong impact on these areas (i.e., Liang and others, 2005; Stith and others, 2012). A small body of literature focused primarily on North American populations has demonstrated that many survivors are not only able to escape violent relationships, but also enter into later nonviolent relationships (e.g., Dugan & Hock, 2006; Riger and others, 2002).

A large body of literature has demonstrated the vast range of negative effects that IPV has on survivors including child witnesses, whether or not they were the intentional target of abuse. Children are also recognized as a common tool that the abuser uses to control their partner (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Notwithstanding, abuse victims, including children, are not merely passive receivers and witnesses of violence. Studies such as Mullender and others (2002) and Neustifter (2009), show that children take a variety of stances to pursue their own and loved one's safety, resist long-term emotional damage, and strive toward ways to exit, reduce, or stop power, control, and violence in their lives.

Social Relational Theory

Researchers within childhood and family studies are increasingly adopting bidirectional models and strength-based approaches to better understand the dynamics of parent-child relationships and the influence of children's agency within and outside the family context (e.g., Schermerhorn and others, 2007). However, unidirectional models have remained influential in the field of IPV (Katz, 2013). Katz noted that it is only since the work of Mullender and others

(2002) that theoretical approaches from childhood and family studies that explicitly recognize children's agency have begun to be incorporated into IPV research. The inclusion of these approaches has led to criticisms of how children are positioned within IPV research. These criticisms centre on the over-emphasis within this research on children's passivity and negative outcomes (Katz, 2013). This approach is strongly deficit-based and unidirectional in how research questions are framed and examined.

Exploring the relevance of Kuczynski and colleagues' work (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski and others, 1999) to examine parent-child relationships and child development in families in which IPV is present, Katz argues that "incorporating a bilateral model into domestic violence research would represent a significant advancement" (2013, p. 10). We agree with Katz's argument and write this article to build upon her work. We agree that a bilateral model as proposed by Kuczynski and colleagues (Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997) is relevant to examine children's agency within families experiencing IPV. However, Kuczynski's more recent theoretical work on Social Relational Theory (SRT) moves beyond simple bidirectional models and recognizes that children as well as parents contribute to family dynamics by considering the importance of the relationship context that affects how individuals experience and exercise agency (Kuczynski & De Mol, in press; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2009; Kuczynski and others, 2009).

As the influence of children's agency within the relationship context has been largely ignored in the IPV literature, an understanding of agency as informed by SRT is an important consideration. SRT is a dialectical approach for understanding parent-child relationships and socialization. In SRT, parents and children are considered agents that are embedded within a relationship context. *Agency* refers to individuals as actors who are able to make sense of their environment as well as make choices within specific contexts (Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis, 2003). Yet individual agency is constrained and enabled by the *relationship context* in which it is embedded. Factors such as past relationship experiences create relational representations from past interactions, and future goals are derived from the relationship context (Kuczynski & De Mol, in press) that affect how people interact in the present. In parent-child relationships, although parents and children are both considered to be agentic, they are unequal in power*;* the relationship can be understood as a dynamic interdependent asymmetry. *Power* is a bidirectional phenomenon in which both children and parents have individual, relational, and cultural resources to draw on within their relationship context. Within relational contexts, power is a reciprocal resource in which individuals can be considered powerful only in relation to partners upon whom they are dependent for gratification (Kuczynski, 2003). Kuczynski's conception of power is similar to feminist and social justice conceptions that recognise multiple sources, expressions, and impacts of power and do not consider oppressed or abused people to be without power, influence, or potential for a positive future. These include strength-based theory, "empowerment and liberatory approaches...; resilience literature; healing and wellness practice and inquiry; solution-focused orientations, as well as narrative approaches to [psychotherapy] practice" (Saleebey, 2000, p. 128). Therefore, SRT's definition of power is consistent with the

literature when taking a strength-based approach to IPV by recognizing the resources that the less powerful can access to support their acts of agency on behalf of themselves or others.

Recognition that agency, relationship context, and power are important potential contributions of SRT to IPV research, we then need to consider how these aspects can contribute to change. Another principle of SRT is its *transactional* and *dialectical* conception of change. Transactional models (Sameroff, 2009) propose that individuals are engaged in continuous, qualitative change. In responding to new and emergent characteristics of relational partners, both the individual and their relationships are altered (Sameroff, 2009). Transactions are dialectical in that contradictions exist within and between individuals that are antecedents for continuous change (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Kuczynski and others, 2009). Each transaction contains contradictions (opposing forces) and their synthesis promotes change. Following each synthesis, new contradictions emerge leading to further synthesis and a process of unending change. Contradictions may take the form of conflicting needs, perspectives, goals, and experiences of ambivalence and unexpected actions/responses that occur within relational contexts (Kuczynski and others, 2009). The tensions emerging from contradictions may lead to processes that result in change (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2009). Contradictions create uncertainty that engages a problem-solving process consisting of meaning-making, evaluation, and finding solutions (Kuczynski & De Mol, in press; Kuczynski and others, 2009). The outcome constitutes a synthesis (i.e., qualitative change) in which novelty may be created as individuals attempt to resolve the contradiction, even temporarily. For example, synthesis creates new meaning that may constitute a turning point in the relationship placing it on a new trajectory. Consideration of the process of change, then, is important when utilizing this lens for IPV research.

The primary purpose of this study is to build upon Katz's (2013) paper by examining the relevance of SRT as a theoretical lens in which mother-child relationships in families that have experienced IPV can be better understood. We believe that SRT can provide a strong theoretical lens for understanding parent-child, family, and non-family relationships experiencing IPV. SRT helps to understand IPV because of the focus on the relational context and that individuals are not isolated agents, but connected agents who are influenced by various types of relationships and contexts. Relationships both within and outside of a family context are important sources of power and agency that can support individuals ending violence in relationships or constrain and support on-going violence in relationships. The principles of SRT guided and informed a secondary qualitative analysis of four interviews conducted with mothers who experienced IPV and later successfully transitioned to a non-violent, long-term romantic relationship. The original interviews utilized the strength-based work of Saleeby (2000), merged with the feminist definition of IPV provided by The Duluth Model's Wheel of Power and Control (Pence & Paymar, 1993), and this strongly impacted our work. Through this investigation, we explored ways in which children and significant others demonstrated agency and resistance when a mother experienced IPV. The original interviews utilized the strength-based work of Saleeby (2000), merged with the feminist definition of IPV provided by The Duluth Model's Wheel of Power and Control (Pence & Paymar, 1993), and this strongly impacted the analysis. We examined ways in which children and significant others demonstrated agency and resistance when a mother

experienced IPV. We provide preliminary empirical evidence of the relevance of SRT and make recommendations for future research and practice incorporating SRT.

Methodology

The secondary qualitative analysis was of data from Neustifter's (2009) study of survivors of IPV who built a new, non-violent romantic relationship. Children's agency was evident in Neustifter's original grounded theory analysis, whereby coding related to children and parent-child relationships was an emergent theme. Given the strength of this unexplored theme and our stated purpose of examining the relevance of SRT in IPV research, our goal was not to produce substantive theory, but to explore the emergence of themes related to SRT within the experience of IPV using thematic analysis. This was a theoretical thematic analysis in that our inquiry was driven by the research question in order to produce an explicit analysis of these data relating to SRT (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The investigation was conducted using SRT as a theoretical lens by the second and third authors to reduce potential bias because the first author conducted the original study (Neustifter, 2009). Coding focused on generating codes that related to the influences of children, family, and significant others discussed by the women. As the stated purpose was to examine the relevance of SRT in IPV research, themes were selected that related specifically to the SRT themes of agency, power, relationship contexts, and transactions. After completing the analysis, themes were reviewed to ensure their congruence and relationship to SRT; to do this, the second and third authors reviewed the coded data within each theme and refined the coding to ensure consistent meaning and fit within each theme.

Four female participants (of 11 from Neustifter's original study) were chosen because they raised their children during their previous violent relationship and discussed interactions with their children. Table 1 contains demographic information about the women. All four identified as Caucasian and self-selected pseudonyms for the interviews.

Table 1. *Sample Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Age	Income (annual, US$)	Sexuality	Nonviolent Relationship Length	Education
Ann	56	30,000-50,000	Hetero	2 years	Tech/Trade School
Marta	52	0-30,000	Bi	15 years	Tech/Trade School, Some College
MS	38	70,000+	Hetero	12 years	Graduate Degree
ST	37	50,000-70,000	Hetero	4 years	Some College

Findings

The thematic analysis provided preliminary empirical evidence of the relevance of incorporating SRT as a theoretical lens to understand parent-child and non-family relationships. The interviews did not explicitly include questions that would highlight key principles of SRT

(e.g., agency, power, relationship contexts, transactions); yet the analysis demonstrated that the concepts were inherent in the women's experience of IPV and provided an understanding of employing an SRT-informed analysis in qualitative research. Two main themes emerged from the analysis: 1) agency of children, family, peers, and community; and 2) power. We provide an interpretation of the dominant themes and subthemes along with direct quotations as examples.

1) Agency of Children, Family, Peers, and Community

Agency within the experiences of IPV was not limited to the women or their children. Agentic acts against domestic violence were present in the actions and thoughts of the women's children, family members, peers, and larger community within which the women were embedded. This theme represents the activity of any agent to make choices, decisions, and actions against the use of IPV. The two subthemes that emerged were *agency of children/family members* and *agency of peers/community*.

Agency of children/family members. All four women discussed the influence of their children in their experience of IPV. Children demonstrated awareness of the violence occurring within their parents' relationship and made attempts to minimize the severity, prevent abuse, and challenge the use of violence against their mothers. ST stated, "One time my ex-husband had a knife to my throat…He said 'I'm going to slice you.' My son went over there to hit him, trying to get him off me." In this example, the son physically trying to protect his mother was an overt act of agency whereby he attempted to prevent violence by putting himself between his parents.

Children also attempted to protect their mothers by preventing or minimizing the negative impact of abuse. One strategy was removing triggers that they perceived would initiate abuse. MS recalled that her four-year-old daughter, "…was my saving grace because we were sitting…and there were a few toys around the living room. She said 'Mama, let's hurry up and clean this up before daddy gets home so he doesn't get mad'". This example demonstrated that children were aware of triggers perceived to instigate abuse and purposeful in their actions to try avoiding further abuse being experienced. Children also provided a support system that encouraged and supported mothers to leave the abusive relationship. Speaking about her adult daughter, Ann noted, "She'd say, you can do this, mom, you deserve this, you can do it. And it probably would have taken me much longer if it hadn't been for her encouragement".

Agency of family members, either the woman's or the abusive partner's family, was not as prevalent as for children. Within IPV it is common for women to not disclose that they are being abused (Hegarty, 2011); nevertheless, some of the women did discuss family members' awareness of the abuse occurring and how they attempted to communicate concern. Within SRT, family members are a relational context that may enable agency and provide relational resources to the individual through their other relationships (Kuczynski & De Mol, in press). MS shared her mother's concern about the relationship and potential for abuse:

> He didn't lay his hands on me in the beginning, but it was violent outbursts. I was terrified. My mother mentioned it to me early on. I can remember telling her, "oh he's just had a bad day" or making up excuses.

ST also recalled that her abusive partner's sister expressed concern and tried to warn her about the abuse:

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> I think with that first black eye. I told my family my son did it...his one sister didn't believe me. She knew because there were three wives before me and there was a history of violence and convictions…[*she*] said, "I know he [*son*] didn't do that, and I knew it was violent, abuse."

These examples demonstrate how immediate family members exercised their agency within their relational context to express their concerns about the potential for and occurrence of abuse.

Agency of peers/community. Peers and community members were also agentic, providing both positive and negative influences on the prevalence of abuse in the women's lives. Peers and community members, such as police officers and neighbours, acted as positive influences by providing relational resources supporting the women's agency through their actions against the abuse. Negative influences occurred when peers and community members did not act against this abuse or contributed to its continuation. A theoretical assumption of SRT is that for a relationship to act as a resource for agency it needs to be embedded within a relational context (Kuczynski & De Mol, in press). The likelihood that an individual will act as a resource depends on the history of the relationship and the cultural expectations regarding non personal institutional relationships. Therefore, if peers and community members do not have an investment in the safety and protection of women experiencing IPV, they cannot be a relational resource.

Peers were positive influences in the women's lives, especially when the relationship was within a relational context with a shared history and investment by the peer. Marta described how a good friend exerted a positive influence in her life:

> A very good friend said to me one day…"You can't say his name anymore to me" and then she said, "if the thing you're frightened of is being a single parent, I will move into your house and I will parent [*child*]."

In this example, the friend not only spoke out against the abusive relationship continuing but also addressed fears or barriers which could prevent the woman from leaving (e.g., being a single parent). The friend's relationship with Marta enabled her agency to intervene and made Marta receptive to the intervention. Another participant, MS, discussed the support of friends in providing a safe place to live, "I ended up going to a friend of mine… I stayed with another friend a little bit and finally got a friend to share renting a house with me." By exercising their agency the peers made choices, acted against abuse, and supported the women in their choice to leave their abusive situations.

Community agency was demonstrated by individuals from the women's communities and members of law enforcement who had a relational investment with the women and were perceived as being positive influences against abuse. Marta discussed how her neighbours helped to prevent her partner from physically removing her child from their home after she screamed for help:

> My neighbour G. and neighbours I did not even know came out to the sidewalk…All of a sudden we were surrounded by people and V [*abusive partner*] said "Call off your dogs [protective friends]" and I said "These are not my dogs, these are my neighbours".

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 This example demonstrates the collective action of neighbours against violence even when not personally acquainted with the woman. Within SRT, the neighbours can be perceived as a relational resource because they cared about their community and the individuals living within it. This demonstrates an investment in a specific relational context, community, which becomes important for the individuals living in that context and their choices to exercise agency. These acts of resistance against violence were also informed by the context of the neighbourhood as recent acts of violence left an impression and became further impetus for action.

Police officers were also identified as community-based sources of influence, both positive and negative. MS spoke about the positive influence of a police officer. This institutional relationship had a personal aspect of both a history of interactions and an investment by the police officer. The relational context became more personal because the police officer cared about her situation and became a relational resource that supported her agency to make choices against IPV. MS stated:

> There was a really good police officer and he knew what was happening. He would put a stop to things and help me to get restraining orders…I can remember telling him on subsequent times when he would come and deal with the problem. He would say, "do you want to press charges?" and I would say, "yeah, but they're not going to do anything". And he said, "at least if you are pressing charges, you are leaving a paper trail."

Other positive influences from the community were also apparent. Marta talked about her relationship with an individual who, as part of the legal system, provided consistent support:

> B was the assistant prosecuting attorney for [*the county*]…He said, "you know it's really easy for you to get an order for protection." What was great about him was he said, "you know your home is your castle. You have every right to be safe in your home."

These examples demonstrate that individuals who are part of the network of relationships that constituted the women's relational resources can be sources of support by providing information and encouraging women to make choices against the continuation of the abuse.

The women also described the negative influence of the police in continuing the cycle of abuse. For example, ST shared how the police failed to acknowledge the abuse occurring in her relationship perhaps because there was no relational context or investment by the police:

> The police didn't believe my story. My son told them what happened and they didn't believe him. He was four, so they just told him [*abusive partner*] to go sober up for eight hours and don't come home again. Three days later, he came home again and pulled a gun on us. The police came again and just took the bullets out, had him go sober up too because he was drunk that day. Four days later, I called them again because he hit me and they didn't do anything. They just told him he needed to cool off. They didn't arrest him.

The presence of alcohol abuse has been documented in the experience of IPV (Leonard, 2005). In this example, the police focused solely on the alcohol abuse as the problem. A relational context to support agency may have helped the police to disrupt the pattern of violence or provide relational resources.

Overall, the agency of children, family members, peers, and communities were perceived as having an influence in the women's experiences of IPV. These individuals were agentic in that

they were actively trying to make sense of their environments as well as make changes. It is important to acknowledge the relationship context of these diverse relationships and that they were only effective agents on behalf of the women when an investment was made in the relationship context.

 2) Power

Power between parents and children is assumed to be unequal or asymmetrical (Kuczynski, 2003). Within SRT, power can be conceptionalized as a dynamic interdependent asymmetry that implies a constant state of change based on the relational context and the individual, cultural, and relational resources individuals have drawn on in their relationships (Kuczynski & De Mol, in press). This interdependent asymmetry can also be seen in romantic relationships in which IPV occurs. In relationships with IPV, the abusive partner imposes their agency and power by drawing upon their resources to dominate their partner. By doing so, the power and agency of the abused partner is ignored and discounted. Power was demonstrated through subthemes of *unequal power* in intimate partner relationships as well as the women *reactivating power* when choosing to leave the relationship.

Unequal power. Unequal power was demonstrated when the abusive partner tried to control the women and the women perceived that they did not have any power or could not use their power to make changes within the relationship. This was an extreme form of asymmetrical power in which the women were constantly in the position of lowering their power or having their power diminished while the abusive partner was raising/asserting their power. Marta discussed her lack of power, stating:

> When I was with M [*abusive partner*] I didn't have any power… There was always this underlying feeling of he's in control. I was very much a victim and I don't do the victim real well at all. There's turmoil in my own mind, but you're in this position and he's got the control and there's nothing you can do.

This example demonstrates the woman's awareness of the asymmetrical power dynamic in which she experienced a lack of power in that particular relational context. Ann described her experience of unequal power as, "Always that sense that I didn't have a right to make decisions". This example underscores the connection between power and the exercise of agency. Lack of power made and individual more vulnerable to negative influence. MS spoke about how her partner used his power to diminish her self-esteem by using insults: "He always told me nobody else would ever want me, nobody else would ever put up with me...and [that] I was a horrible mother".

Relationship contexts not only enhance agency; they are also a source of vulnerability. Participants also discussed how their abusive partner used their children to try to maintain power. ST discussed how her abusive partner indirectly abused her by abusing their child and continued to do so even after she ended the relationship. She stated:

> Now he takes it out on my son, so now the abuse has continued. Our son is ten now and he's had four police reports filed. He's cut my son's face. Now that he can't get me, he goes on to our son, and he's back in that cycle of violence and there's nothing I can do.

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These examples demonstrate the imbalance of power as well as agency within specific relational contexts making one person receptive and vulnerable to another's influence (Kuczynski & De Mol, in press). Relationships that experience IPV demonstrate an imbalance in receptivity and vulnerability of relational partners. The abused partner perceives that they must be receptive to the abuser's influence while the abuser may not perceive that they are receptive or vulnerable to the abused partner. This imbalance of influence may sustain the abuse.

       Reactivating power. Reactivating power occurred when the women made any attempt to regain their sense of agency and power in their relationships with their abusive partner. This theme was less frequent than *unequal power*; however it highlights the women's awareness of the power imbalance and their strategic choices that affect their sense of agency and, in turn, their sense of power. Ann stated, "I told him that I just couldn't live that way anymore. I wanted a divorce and I was going to move back home". This example highlights Ann reactivating her power and agency by making the decision to leave the abusive relationship and end the relational context that made her vulnerable. Similarly, MS discussed how cultivating power from other aspects of her life helped her to leave:

> I don't really want to say the word power, but that's really what it is. All these other hats that they [*other women*] wear have the power to help pull themselves out of this situation. They know if they work…or if they go volunteer somewhere or if they're at their child's school, there is a certain level of respect and power that you get when you walk through that door into that building. You're a parent, right? So there's a level of respect that goes along with that. Pull from that. If you're active in your church, pull from that. If you're active in your family, pull from that. And some women don't have this, and I understand that I was in a very lonely situation, and a lot of these extra-curricular type events never happened for me.

MS was able to draw on many relational resources with multiple relationship contexts to cultivate her sense of agency and power. Cultivating their sense of influence was a way for these women to increase their sense of power and realize that they could choose to leave their abusive relationship.

Discussion

       This study provides preliminary evidence for the relevance of utilizing SRT to inform analysis of mothers' experiences transitioning out of violent relationships. An SRT-informed analysis of the interviews demonstrated that the concepts of agency and power were inherent in the narratives of the women's experiences of IPV. One contribution from this analysis was that SRT can be used to investigate both family and non-family contexts. In particular, the exploratory analysis highlighted the agency of relational contexts that included children, family, peers, and community members. This supports Katz's (2013) assertion of bi-directional influences within mother-child relationships as an important area of consideration for research in IPV. Furthermore, this study builds upon the usefulness of bidirectional models for studying IPV through the incorporation of SRT, specifically the inclusion of relationship context and dialectics in addition to power and agency.

The main contribution of this study was highlighting the importance of power and agency and that these concepts occur within specific relational contexts. With regards to women's experiences of IPV, their children, family, friends, and community members were important and agentic sources of support, which aligns with existing literature (e.g., Liang and others, 2005; Stith and others, 2012). These individuals were influential by not only supporting but also challenging the women to make a change. They provided warnings, offered protection, attempted to minimize harm, and supported the women when leaving the abusive relationship. Although family members, peers, and community only indirectly experienced IPV, they were still active agents.

This study was exploratory in nature and limited by the small sample size. Furthermore, the original research questions were not specifically designed to investigate SRT in IPV; instead these themes occurred naturally from the data. Future research is required in order to expand on the themes we have identified and should be conducted to investigate a broader population including men, larger ethnic variation, and both same-sex and cross-sex couples. Researchers wanting to adopt an SRT-informed approach should explore not only explore agency and power, but also the influence of individual transactions with family and non-family members, to better understand their importance in supporting women to make a change or leave the relationship. Researchers also need to be aware that not all relationship contexts will be helpful to the women.

Researchers interested in using SRT to study IPV should consider using naturalistic, contextual, and open-ended methods, such as the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). These methods would focus on both relational partners' agency simultaneously and how each partner understands their relationship with the other. Parents may have difficulty talking about children's influence because they may be unaware of giving in to children's influence or feel that giving in is socially unacceptable (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). Using methods that contextualize the participants' responses would enhance researchers' ability to identify and discuss the phenomena.

Mental health professionals and support services for families experiencing IPV may also benefit from this study. Professionals should seek to develop a fuller understanding of beneficial and detrimental significant others in the lives of these parents and children in order to navigate and leverage these larger systems successfully. Mothers and children may provide these benefits to each other and each have unique knowledge of individuals to turn to and to avoid for particular support needs. For professionals working with clients recovering from past violence and no longer at risk, exploration of the role of others may help clients to reflect upon the dynamic ways in which they resisted and responded to harmful past situations.

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