

A Framework of Intimate Partner Abuse Grooming and the Link to the Tremor

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In this presentation I will be describing the findings from the earliest warning signs of intimate partner abuse research project, which is the foundation of my PhD. It was a qualitative study of abusive heterosexual relationships where the perpetrator was male. The focus of today is on the intimate partner abuse grooming framework that was developed from my findings.

I've been a psychologist for 25 years working predominantly in the area of domestic abuse and sexual assault and I'm also a survivor of partner and family abuse myself. Right from the get go, I had training through living with abuse and it is informed my relationships and my choices during my life. That grounding in abuse makes it hard to identify it when it is happening to you. This has always driven my research and my clinical work – to help women recognise abuse and perhaps escape or make more informed decisions about their relationships. It has never been about blaming women or about imposing the responsibility of stopping abuse onto women. It is about empowering women with knowledge.

Definitions

I believe the words we use matter. It has been important to my research to attempt to identify the terms that are most appropriate. The first term is 'intimate partner abuse'. That is the term I use instead of 'domestic violence'. Domestic relates to something within a person's home. Violence refers to physical violence. We all know that is not actually what these relationships look like and I believe the continued use of that term reinforces myths and confuses women who are not in this sector about what it is that they're experiencing or witnessing. For clarity, I will be using intimate partner abuse and family abuse as these are more accurate descriptions of the phenomenon.

The second term is 'earliest warning signs'. This is something that I had to come to terms with and work out in my research: what was it that I was actually studying? There was a lot of prior research on warning sign behaviours and early indicators and red flags, and these terms were referring to when a relationship has existed for a period or a period of time, and they are identifying what is happening in the relationship that might need attention. The difference to my research is that I was focused on what the relationships look like at their beginning. These are the earliest warning signs.

The next term, 'veteran survivor', is more controversial. I'm happy to hear that controversy. I want it to spark discussion. I chose this term, and I received pushback from lots of people in my thesis, but I believe the controversy is valuable. This term is instead of using victim-survivor, and this decision was sparked by one of my supervisors asking, "What are you when you're no longer defined by your abuse and when this term no longer feels like it applies to you anymore?" As much as I would call myself a victim-survivor, because that is the term most people use, I do not relate to that term. I undertook an investigation with clients that I have and participants concerning their thoughts around the most appropriate term. The answers ranged from warrior to butterfly and included many other options. But I kept coming back to experiences I had attending webinars and training programs when veterans were welcomed as esteemed members of society. As most of my abusers are veterans of war, it made me question why I am not given the same level of esteem that they are given. The term veteran applies to

being highly experienced at something, for example, veterans of stage and screen. Throughout this presentation and in my thesis, I use the acronym VS and I will continue to do that to allow you to insert victim-survivor if you like that better or any other term that you feel you can relate to. I think we need to grapple with these terms and I want to encourage this process. We need to use the most appropriate terms, not just continue to use the ones that we have been using consistently out of habit.

In this presentation I will briefly describe the earliest warning signs of intimate partner abuse model, which is the main outcome of my research. Then I will talk about the background of the development of the grooming framework, explain in detail the grooming framework itself, and finally the implications of these models for prevention of IPA.

The Model of the Earliest Warning Signs of Intimate Partner Abuse

The Model of the EWS of IPA in Figure 1 reflects the results from my research. The first and most important part of this model is the tremor which sits at the middle of the sphere. The tremor is the gut feeling or feeling of unease that VS experienced in response to perpetrator's subtle abusive behaviours that were not labelled as the earliest warning signs of abuse. I called it the tremor because it forewarns of an earthquake of abuse to come because it is these behaviours that increase in severity and frequency over time in the relationship. Every participant in my study experienced the tremor.

If you look at this concept from a polyvagal perspective, the tremor is when neuroception picked up cues of danger in the environment, but it did not set off a full fight flight response. I will not go into full details about the Polyvagal Theory. I have talked about that in previous presentations. I will just provide a quick summary here as this is not the focus of this presentation.

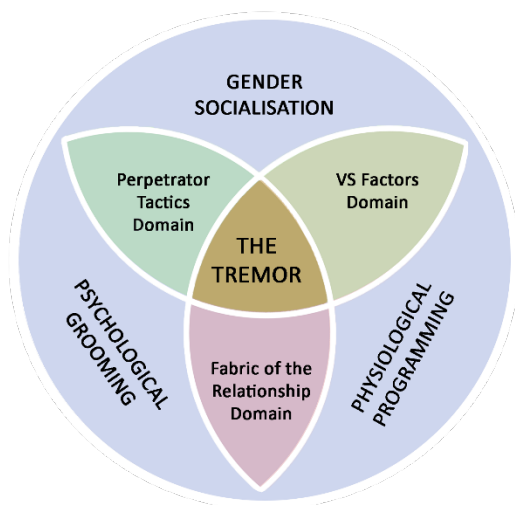


Figure 1: Model of the EWS of IPA

The reason that these behaviours do not set off the full fight-flight response is because of the vagal break. Stephen Porges (2007) developed the Polyvagal Theory. He described the vagal break as a flow control valve. This either allows or inhibits a full transition into the fight-flight response. Entering full fight-flight will only occur if the system identifies that the danger is serious enough to warrant it. The tremor is a partial release of that fight-flight response. A person may experience a gut feeling response but not have a full fight-flight response.

According to Porges (2018), the vagal break is primed or trained through life experiences. It is adaptive to exposure to positive experiences and to abuse or chronic microaggressions to be more or less sensitive to particular events. The full fight-flight alarm was not raised for the participants in my study when they experienced the earliest warning signs. They had the tremor, that partial response instead and this suggests that they've been physiologically programmed through chronic exposure to microaggressions from men throughout their lives to respond with limited release of the vagal break rather than have a full fight-flight response. If women had a full release of the fight-flight when exposed to the EWS of IPA, it might be easier to escape one of these relationships before it becomes more dangerous.

It is not just the tremor that makes the earliest warning signs so hard to see. The curvilinear triangles around the outside are called the domains of the earliest warning signs. That is the perpetrator tactics, the VS factors, and the fabric of the relationship domain. The outer sphere contains the layers of disguise. These are broader conceptual understandings taken from what the VS described in the interviews and are gender socialisation, psychological grooming, and physiological programming. All of these components around the outside influence and conceal the earliest warning signs of IPA. To demonstrate how hard the warning signs are to see, I am sharing here this quote from Brooke, one of the participants. Brooke explains,

I even knew about signs of family violence. I've worked in the area. And I did not see it coming... I was actually a feminist. I was really independent. I would've been what I thought the opposite that he'd want to go for... But it didn't happen like that. It happened slowly... You know, it felt very different to what I would've pictured it would have felt like on the outside... it was sometimes bad, sometimes great... It's funny being in hindsight, because, as I said before, you look at it and you're like, "I'm not an idiot. How did that happen?" (Brooke, aged 32, two-year relationship started at age 24).

As the model of EWS of IPA illustrates, it is not the fault of Brooke or any of us who have lived with abuse that we could not recognise the abuse in our relationships. Anecdotally, the feedback I receive from VS for this model is overwhelmingly supportive of the role of the tremor and the layers of disguise in their experiences of IPA.

The Intimate Partner Abuse Grooming Framework

The first step in the development of this grooming framework was the recognition that there is no transition from a healthy relationship to one with abuse. The earliest stages of the relationship contain grooming that may look like positive experiences like charm and love bombing, while also including subtle controlling behaviours. Abuse is always present.

Secondly, there are a number of grooming models that have been developed around sexual assault however I could not find one that reflected IPA. As a result, I combined the findings from my research with those of several others (Sinnamon's model of Adult Sexual Grooming, 2017; Monckton-Smith's model of femicide, 2020; Stark's technology of coercive control and entrapment, 2007; Keeling and Fisher, 2012; and Lang, 2011) to create this provocative framework of grooming in IPA. Further research is required on the application of this model, but I share it here to enable discussion and feedback. I realise that many of you are already familiar with the multi-layered progression in these relationships. This framework aims to generate a shared understanding for practitioners and clients to assist the recognition of the direction that these relationships are taking.

The IPA Grooming Framework in Figure 2 begins from the top and works downwards. The background image of a ribbon reflects the fluidity of the stages on top of one another. Rather than there being a firm boundary between each, they flow into one another.

The first stage is pre-relationship and connection which reflects before the relationship has commenced and where the first connections are made. The perpetrator's history of abuse, crime and their mental health challenges are one component of this stage. Monckton Smith (2020) explains that prior history of abuse can be predictive of future abuse. I have used the term 'target' here as this is used often in the sexual assault grooming models. In this pre-relationship stage, the perpetrator identifies the target and begins to create a context of charm while addressing the VS needs. They are building knowledge about the target, they're monitoring their physiological response to any misattunement or early tremor responses to the perpetrator's actions. Anytime that tremor occurs for the VS the perpetrator monitors their reaction and learns what causes the VS to have a full fight-flight versus a partial response.



Figure 2: IPA Grooming Framework

Stage two is building intensity and trust and this is where the fabric of the relationship (one the domains of earliest warning signs in my findings) is being built. Perpetrators use exceptional charm, confidence, and love bombing in this stage, to rapidly move the relationship towards commitment. VS often describe this as intense and wonderful. Early declarations of love are made and women feel swept off their feet. Gendered socialisation encourages women to seek relationships that feel like this – as if they are in a fairytale - and perpetrators can use this socialisation to reinforce their strategies. Additionally, the perpetrator is fostering dependence through these actions, suggestion that they are the only person that can give the VS what they are looking for, or that the VS is the only one that the perpetrator could ever be with. Several researchers in IPA (for example, Murphy & Smith, 2011; Eivers, Towler & Frey, 2017) have found that the VS in this stage will justify the perpetrator's jealousy and possessiveness as signs of love.

Priming is the focus of stage three of the framework, which involves pushing the VS away then pulling them close. There are beautiful times in the relationship during this stage mixed with periods of intimidation and control. This increases confusion and doubt for the VS where they are questioning what

is real and what is not. This is related to Walker's (1979) cycle of violence that illustrates how these relationships move from tension building, an explosive event, then into a remorse/romance period. Walker (1979) explained that women living in these relationships have difficulty seeing the pattern that is occurring which can lead them into learned helplessness. Stark (2007) used the term *perspecticide* to describe the result of gaslighting and manipulation where women lose clarity around what is real and what is not. Through this process of priming, the perpetrator increases the vulnerability of the VS and can assert control over life decisions.

Stage four is commitment and the right to control. In this stage the severity and frequency of the aggressive undertones increases through the perpetrator using strategies that include micro-regulation, sexual coercion, constant criticism, and manipulation. The VS will likely experience a constant feeling of underlying fear: the fear of violence but this could also be the fear of withdrawal of attention or disconnection. There are a lot more negative aspects in the relationship and less positive in this stage.

Finally there is the entrapment stage, where the liberty of the VS is diminished. The life of the VS becomes focused on ensuring the perpetrator's needs are met for fear of the repercussions. They are often deprived of basic needs like finance, sleep, personal integrity, choice, work, and decision-making. The perpetrator maintains control through secrecy, guilt, blame, isolation, and promises of positive experiences. Stark (2007) explained that when entrapment occurs most VS have lost access to all of their internal and external resources, yet it is at this time when they need these resources the most to be able to make escape possible.

As I mentioned previously, there is no hard border between each of these stages. My research has focused on the beginning of abusive relationships and this framework is designed to illustrate the progression through the early phases to entrapment.

As a practitioner that works with many women living within abusive relationships, looking in from the outside it often feels like you are watching a train wreck about to happen. It is more obvious from the outside to see where the relationship is heading. But when you are inside the relationship it appears foggy or unclear. You cannot see what is going on around you and you cannot see the stages of progression that are occurring. This is how the layers of disguise work to reinforce the impact of the abuse.

Prevention Strategies

There are three prevention suggestions that flow from this research:

- 1) We need to enhance knowledge for women of what is happening in these relationships as well as across society more broadly. This framework and the model of the earliest warning signs require more research. However, increasing knowledge of the tremor, the layers of disguise, and the patterns within these relationships is critical for the safety of women.
- 2) We need to expand prevention programs to focus on femininity as well as masculinity, and to challenge the stereotypes around femininity and the socialisation of women. Sharing with women that listening to their gut is a power that protects them and we need to build their skills in utilising this power.
- 3) What is actually required is gender transformative strategies. To use Ibram Kendi's words, "We don't need to be saved, we need to be liberated"; liberated from rigid gender indoctrination and the negative repercussions they have on every aspect of our lives, for men and for women.

Conclusion

We are looking more at a cultural transformation around this issue and we require community-wide collective action at every level, every event, and long-term, community by community. We seem to be throwing darts of prevention at a wall but unless we become more focused we will not break through to the end of violence against women on the other side. First Nations people, multicultural groups, disability communities, and the LGBTQIA+ community have already been implementing transformative collective action in their communities for decades. We must hold this expertise with the esteem it warrants and ask them kindly if they could please help lead this work.

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