

# Mortification of the self: Goffman's theory and abusive intimate relationships

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As is the case in most Western nations (Erez & Laster, 2000), intimate partner violence<sup>1</sup> remains a serious social issue in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Barwick, Gray, & Macky, 2000; Murphy, 2002). Despite comprehensive anti-violence legislation, both government and public support, and an active network of community-based anti-violence agencies, little abatement in the incidence of abuse against women by their intimate male partners has yet become apparent (Morris, Reilly, Berry, & Ransom, 2003). Such intransigence in the face of concerted and sustained opposition prompted the research underpinning this article, of which the following discussion is but a small part.<sup>2</sup>

Part of that research process involved an invitation to participants to review and comment on draft write-ups of the project, a strategy chosen to ensure analysis that was meaningful to participants. This invitation was taken up by a small group of four women. As analysis proceeded, I became interested in the applicability of Erving Goffman's ideas of the total institution and mortification of the self, introducing these to the group in order to see if their interest mirrored my own. During the course of our ongoing discussions, it became clear that Goffman's explanation of the way in which stigmatised individuals can become separated from a solid sense of self, or at least disinterested in maintaining this self (1968b) was attractive to participants. These women commented that this spoke to them, describing their experience of 'losing themselves' – and provided an intelligible explanatory framework of how it was that 'on to it' and intelligent women could reach a point of feeling utterly without either voice or value.

In the discussion which follows I will explore a re-framing and application of aspects of Goffman's work in relation to abuse within intimate relationships. Of particular interest will be ideas contained within *Asylums*, published in 1968. Within this publication, Goffman sets out to describe the process undergone by those admitted to institutions such as prisons and mental asylums. Labelling these as 'total institutions' because of their characteristically rigid and

complete control over every aspect of inmates' lives, he then introduces us to what he terms 'mortification of self', an induction process designed to systematically strip away an inmate's sense of self. As will be outlined below, such a process can be seen at work within many abusive intimate relationships, even though these institutions are premised upon emotional and psychological barriers rather than solid concrete walls.

### **Participants**

The twenty-five women involved in the research came from a diverse range of backgrounds in terms of socio-economic, educational and marital status, and ranged in age from twenty-two to fifty-nine years. The abusive relationships the women described ranged in duration from three to twenty-five years, with an average length of approximately eight years. Seventeen women were legally married to their abusers, and all participants were cohabiting with the abusive partner when the abuse occurred. Most were mothers, with between one and five children, although six women had, for one reason or another, remained childless. The majority described themselves as being of either Pakeha or New Zealand European ethnicity, with six women identifying as Māori. With the exception of one respondent who identified herself as lesbian (experiencing abuse from both male and female partners), all identified as heterosexual – currently, and at the time of the abuse.

### **Method**

Employing feminist informed qualitative methodology (Oakley, 2000), the work is based upon face-to-face interviews. In order to minimise 'shaping' of participant responses, the concept of abuse was left deliberately undefined in the initial advertising for respondents. The only criteria for participation were that respondents considered themselves to have experienced abuse, and had been living free from abuse for at least two years prior to participation. Of the women who ultimately chose to participate, all reported having experienced physical violence, mainly in concert with psychological, emotional and sexual violence.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with each respondent, ranging in length from one to three hours. The interviews (the majority of which were carried out in participants' homes), were

audio-taped and transcribed verbatim, with initial transcripts then returned to participants for comment and/or amendment – a process resulting in only minimal alteration, although several women chose to delete sections of text in the interests of confidentiality. The amended transcripts were then subjected to an analytic process aimed at identification of common themes, with these explored in more depth during a series of follow-up interviews, in order to ensure that analysis was congruent with participant understandings and experience.

### **Loss of self and the social construction of abuse discourse**

A ‘loss of self’ is a point noted in many accounts of domestic violence. Some, such as the influential ‘learned helplessness’ model developed by Lenore Walker (1984), trace this element of abusive relationships to the internal workings of individual psyches under the stress of severe and ongoing violence. Others employing a coercive control model, the underpinning to the majority of feminist analyses (Yllo, 2005), locate explanation of this diminution of self within larger social structures, using concepts such as patriarchy, domination and socially sanctioned male violence to present it as an understandable and logical response to gender-based oppression and abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 1980).

While most participants demonstrated an understanding of the implications of structurally based analyses, they also communicated clearly that these fell somewhat short of capturing the lived everyday or ‘micro’ realities of their experience. Similarly, the notion of learned helplessness, while capturing their sense of victimisation, failed to account for their ongoing resistance to violence and the often creative strategies many employed to cope with and eventually end the abuse – basically extinguishing acknowledgement of agency on their part (Lamb, 1996). In addition, the implicit individualism of this framework tended to gloss over the various social elements and/or dominant discourses supporting their victimisation and inhibiting attempts to free themselves from it. In short, while all could see elements of their experience in each of these approaches, for a variety of reasons neither seemed a totally comfortable fit.

The primary point for these women was that the discourses of abuse circulating around them – most informed by some combination of the theories above, did not provide an adequate explanation of the actual day-to-day lived processes by which they somehow came to

'lose themselves' – and even take the blame for their victimisation. It is these processes that form the focus of this paper – the way in which many participants came to take on personal blame and responsibility for the abuse. The concept of discourse used here encompasses the 'forms of knowledge or powerful sets of assumptions, expectations and explanations governing mainstream social and cultural practices' (Baxter, 2003). As this implies, discourse is not a purely linguistic phenomena, but must be seen as expanding to incorporate all meaningful social relations and practices – material and otherwise (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

### **'It's my fault ... isn't it?'**

For many, their taking on of blame was not an easy issue to understand, and one they had spent considerable time deliberating over. The key question for them was why and how they had come to find themselves in such a position – especially given that most considered themselves intelligent and sensible women. There was a clear 'knowing' by these women that anyone with a degree of intelligence simply would not find themselves in such a situation and, if they somehow did, would (and should) remove themselves very quickly. They also communicated clearly the sense of dismay and shame attached to themselves upon realisation of their 'complicity' in the abuse.

All of the above are easily recognised as central components of dominant discourses of abuse (Dunn, 2005) – and were understood as such by these women. They 'knew' they were not to blame. They 'knew' they had not caused it. They 'knew' such relationships are often very difficult to end or escape from. Knowing any of this, however, did little to make their situation any easier to understand. Indeed, since leaving the relationship, many had decided to put questions of why and how on hold. Most were simply glad it was no longer a part of their lives and thought that since the understandings provided by the discourses available to them didn't quite 'fit', then perhaps their particular experience (or response) was somehow different to the 'norm'. For some women, however, this inability to make sense of their experience was problematic – leaving an unpleasant and unhelpful emotional residue (often of shame and/or guilt) around their part in the relationship. In short, they simply could not comprehend how they had 'allowed' themselves to be abused.

### **Goffman and the social construction of the self**

For the women reading the initial version of this paper, their experience became more easily comprehensible when placed within the framework advanced by Goffman in *Asylums* (1968a). The primary value of this particular work was that its adaptation not only provided a dramatically illustrative account of the experience itself (in that the women could ‘see’ themselves within it), but also of the process that had managed to reduce strong, ‘on-to-it’ women to the position of victim. Such a reading depends upon acceptance of a central, although not always explicitly stated, platform of Goffman’s work: an implicit understanding of the self as socially constructed (Burr, 1995; Weedon, 1997). Thus construction of self is an active process whereby human actors take up and perform identities constructed from the range of possibilities made available via the multiplicity of discourses within which we live. Such identities are flexible, amenable to alteration by actors – but within boundaries, these are also socially constructed and therefore culturally and historically specific and contingent. Of course, individuals *do* possess agency, both in terms of what identities they choose and how they choose to perform them, but these choices are not unlimited. Actors are inevitably constrained to a greater or lesser extent by the circumstances of individual lives. Also important to this understanding of personal identity is the belief that the self is a fluid, rather than a fixed entity – that it is in a constant state of flux and change (Weedon, 1997).

Such an understanding of the self as a ‘work in progress’ opens consideration of the idea that individuals can become disheartened and eventually disinterested in, and apathetic towards, trying to maintain a sense of an autonomous self. If the self is an ongoing process, constructed within the confines of our daily lives, control of this everyday experience by another individual will inevitably become part of that self – ownership of the project may well seem to be vested in another. As noted above, while individuals *do* exercise personal agency, this is *not* unlimited and is constrained by the circumstances of individual lives. If this constraint consists of control by one’s partner – an element generally seen as characteristic of abusive relationships, the self then becomes a project over which one seemingly has little influence. Goffman characterises this process as a form of moral loosening or fatigue, engendered by the individual learning “that the

self is not a fortress, but rather a small open city”, and thus less easily defensible (1968:152).

### **Mortification of the Self**

Once the individual comes to learn, via various processes Goffman terms ‘mortification of the self’, “[w]hat it is to be defined by society as not having a viable self, this threatening definition – the threat that helps attach people to the self society accords them – is weakened” (1968:151–2). A process described clearly by Sandy;

I lost total respect for myself ... and I think that that was the thing that got me in the end, was my self esteem. I compromised my beliefs all the time to suit his, and in the end, you hate yourself for it. Because I mean, you are nobody. You live in limbo. You lose all of your sense of caring and it's, you're only half a person. And I think that's the thing that got me in the end.

From the words above it is clear that this process can be linked to the experiences of abuse victims. Goffman's model, whereby individuals are systematically separated from or stripped of the elements necessary to maintenance of a robust sense of self, is premised on physical confinement.<sup>3</sup> However, there appear few reasons preventing extension of his analysis to encompass psychological and or emotional barriers. This is even less the case if one considers emotion as a key underpinning of human life – the motivating force for all human activity (Gergen, 1994). Indeed, from such a perspective, psychological and emotional barriers cannot be seen as anything other than equally as powerful in their effects. That they are often experienced as such is demonstrated by the way many victims of abusive relationships liken their experience to having been imprisoned, detailing often highly punitive, yet often intangible, restraints upon their lives (Anderson *et al.*, 2003; Jones, 2000). In many cases these depended on no more than the communication that some action/behaviour/thought was forbidden – underpinned by fear of implied (or actual) punishment of transgressions.

### **Role dispossession**

According to Goffman, the process of mortifying the self, consisting of seven clearly identifiable steps, begins with role dispossession. Individuals are, by virtue of their admission to the institution, denied

the freedom to organise the various roles played throughout the course of their normal lives – restricted to the role of ‘inmate’ and barred from participation in the wider social world. Common to most abusive relationships are gradual attempts on the part of the abuser to isolate his partner from the world (and potential support structures) outside the relationship (Arriaga & Oskamp, 1999; Bart & Moran, 1993; Bograd, 1988). Lynette’s partner, for instance, exercised total control over her contact with the wider world. Living in a rural area with no telephone service – and before the advent of cellular phones, even the postal service was under close surveillance.

I was never allowed a letterbox. I was not allowed a letterbox. It, he didn’t want any junk mail and yet where we lived, it was a very isolated place, and it was, nobody came with junk mail anyway. There was a post box [in town] so of course he got all the correspondence.

However, while some isolating tactics may entail actual physical separation, such as living in remote areas, and/or restricting access to vehicles, the chosen strategy is often psychological and/or emotional manipulation (Arias, 1999; Chang, 1996; O’Leary & Maiuro, 2001). The role of wife/partner is presented as of paramount importance – all other roles are at best secondary and therefore dispensable if this is required or demanded by the abuser. As Heather recounts,

He hated my Mum and Dad because of the times they stuck up for me. He used to say – Heather, you should choose me over your parents. I don’t want you seeing your parents ever again.

Heather’s words present a copybook account of this aspect of abusive relationships, in which victims are told that their primary loyalty must (and should) reside in the relationship. Outside ties with family and friends are seen as threatening and demonstrating a lack of love and commitment. Pauline saw this as an entirely deliberate strategy by her partner. As she explains,

You see, that was part of the process, I think, for him ... was to break me away from the family, and all friends. I had no contact other than him and the kids ... because I was cleaning at night and it was ... I just never, never had contact with other people basically. And that was on purpose. He did that purposefully.

For some of those participants involved in employment outside the home during the relationship, their partner’s isolation and control

strategies took a different shape. These aimed to either reduce or eliminate participants' workforce participation and were often played out via explicitly displayed and intense pressure to bear children and take up the role of full-time, at-home mother. Liz, for instance, describes the conflict her involvement in part-time work generated.

I started working part-time when [son] was six months old, doing a bit of nurse aiding and that caused a lot of fights because [husband] wanted me to have my next child when [son] was six months old. So it caused a lot of fights because he really did like, I guess the old cliché about barefoot and pregnant. He liked me at home. He liked it when he had control which meant me at home, him at work. Didn't have the money – didn't have the choices – kept me away from people ... and that suited him nicely.

Others spoke of partners hiding or throwing away contraceptives, or simply forbidding their use, as Angie describes in her account of her partner's behaviour following the loss of her job.

I was made redundant and he wouldn't let me go back to work. He decided that, no, you can stay home and we can try for children. So what I was doing was sneaking off to the doctor and having the depo [IV contraceptive] until he started coming into the doctors with me. He'd come into the doctors and sit there while they spoke to me.

### **The information game**

While the initial separation from family, friends and workmates generally comes at the instigation of the abusive partner, over time the victim may become more active in supporting isolating practices as part of what Goffman terms the 'information game' (Goffman, 1968b) – a process whereby stigmatised individuals attempt to control/deny access to potentially discrediting information. In the event of stigma becoming realised – resulting in the individual becoming discredited (for instance if an abusive or violent event occurred in front of others), then the information game becomes one of limiting damage or even attempting to reframe the event in less discreditable terms. This is a point illustrated clearly by Anita's comments below in which she details a strenuous and lengthy effort to explain away visible signs of abuse.

I nearly got busted when the Christmas between my second and third year at Teachers' College, [large industrial plant], had a huge shut down. And they were looking for tradesmen, assistants or tea-ladies, whatever



... and it was over that period that I had three black eyes in three weeks. And the first black eye, everyone said ‘Oh, what happened to you Anita?’, and I said ‘oh, at my Mum’s – because when you walk up her balcony and up to the back door step the window comes out. And she pushed it out to see who was coming’, and I explained it away. ... And that hadn’t quite healed up and I had another black eye, but on the other side. And a friend who knew [partner] and his family, when I went to deliver some morning tea, said ‘he hit you, eh?’ and I said, ‘No, he didn’t!’ And I tried to explain it, and he said, ‘don’t lie to me Anita, he hit you eh?’ and I said ‘It’s none of your business, and no he didn’t’.

### **Identity trimming**

Next in Goffman’s mortification process comes ‘identity trimming’ and ‘programming’ as the inmate undergoes a series of indoctrination procedures – aimed at distancing them from their previous life and instructing them in the rules of the institution. This process is relatively brief and speedily done within the physical confines discussed by Goffman. In an abusive relationship, however, it may be an ongoing long-term project on the part of the abuser, most notably in terms of learning the rules – what is and is not permissible or expected within the confines of the relationship. This component of the process was most often demonstrated by participants in ways closely aligned with traditional gender roles – especially around issues like housework. Theresa remembers this point clearly:

I wasn’t allowed a toy on the floor when [partner] came inside for tea – nothing was allowed out of place. You know what I mean, and if I hadn’t done the washing I’d hide it somewhere in the spare room till he’d gone to work the next morning and then I’d finish it.

Or, as Anita recalls,

I had to make sure I was home, before he got home. Because, if I didn’t, that would guarantee a hiding and I had to have the washing and everything done, and a meal almost on the table. Now if he came home and the washing machine was going, or the dryer, or even the hair dryer ... or because I was prettying myself up, or drying my hair, that would be disturbing for him. And I discussed it with his mother and she, you know her advice to me? ‘Well, he listens to a chainsaw all day, so the last thing he wants to hear when he gets home is another machine, so Anita, get your shit squared away, and don’t have a machine going when he’s

home'. Her other solution was 'Have a baby, so that you are at home all the time anyway, and you can do all the jobs'.

Combined with the role dispossession discussed above, it is not difficult to see the way in which a victim's attachment to previous identities and roles can rapidly assume a tenuous (and even indefensible) quality.

### **Identity dispossession**

The third discussed element concerns the dispossession of name, property, and 'identity kit'. Via this process individuals are deprived of various items necessary to the performance of their previous identity – in short, the 'props' used to sustain their presentation of self, for instance, clothing and cosmetics, the equipment to maintain these, along with access to services such as hairdressers and clothing stores. This, according to Goffman, is important to the mortifying process as these items may have a special significance to the individual, thus exacerbating the impact of their removal. As he notes, '[t]he individual ordinarily expects to exert some control over the guise in which he (sic) appears before others ... to be stripped of his (sic) usual appearance and of the equipment and services by which he (sic) maintains it [means] suffering a personal defacement' (1968:28–9). This is an issue repeatedly surfacing in participant accounts, with women recounting instances either of destruction of such items or intense control by the abuser over what should be worn, along with when, how and for whom. As Laura recounts,

It was the subtle abuse ... being made to wear, like absolutely plainness so that nobody could ever find you attractive. Not allowing you to wear makeup. Um, not allowing you to have your hair in a nice attractive style ... I had long hair, right down to here 'cause I was never allowed to cut it. Only had it trimmed, was never allowed to cut it.

Miriam adds to this in noting what happened when she made attempts to assert control over her appearance.

I'd have a shower and I might put some lipstick on and kind of feel a bit happy, you know. He didn't like that. It, cause straight away, it would be, 'what've you got that shit on your face for? Where've you been? Who'd you meet?'

In essence, these women's stories describe attempts on the part of their abusers to 'make over' and control aspects of the self they

present to the outside world. Women in the current study spoke also of having these types of items destroyed or their use forbidden altogether. As Heather notes;

When I was with [partner], he took all of my wages, and if I did buy myself a dress or something, he told me I looked like a slut in it. And he wouldn't let me buy makeup.

Control tactics such as these can operate to further inhibit women's interaction with others, particularly those still committed to an information game strategy of disguising the abusive nature of their relationship.

### **Degradation and forced deference**

The next item in Goffman's framework is one hugely relevant to the description of domestic violence – the imposition upon the inmate of degrading postures and deference patterns. As he notes, 'certain movements, postures and stances will convey lowly images of the individual ... any regulation, command, or task that forces the individual to adopt these movements or postures may mortify his (sic) self' (1968:30). Included within this aspect of the mortifying process is the likelihood that the inmate may be required to provide humiliating verbal responses – a 'forced deference pattern'. This may consist of being placed in the position of having to beg or make humble requests for simple 'favours' – such as permission to make telephone calls – or even use the toilet. As Nancy recalls:

When I was in [small provincial city], I would ask if I could go to the toilet. I would ask 'is it all right to put the heater on?' I would ask for anything that I needed to do. I had to ask.

Instances of behaviours such as the above characterise virtually all discussions of domestic abuse and the accounts provided by participants in this project were no exception (Sleutel, 1998; Taylor, Magnussen, & Amundson, 2001; Towns, 2000). For many, humiliation was a routine everyday aspect of their lives – precisely how this was manifested seemed limited only by the abuser's imagination. This is illustrated with stark clarity in these comments from Miriam:

He had a thing about ... total control. He, he used to prevent me from going to the toilet. One time he actually did it over twenty-four hours. I mean, in hindsight I just know how dangerous that could have been for

me, physically and he would do things, like I'd get, I'd wake up in the morning and he wouldn't let me go to the toilet.

### **Contaminative exposure**

Next in Goffman's list is another easily identified element of most abusive relationships – contaminative exposure, whereby the 'boundary that the individual places between his [sic] being and the environment is invaded and the embodiment of self profaned' (1968:32). While Goffman outlines several ways this may occur, for the purposes of this discussion, the most important is that which is accomplished via direct physical contamination at the hands of another person. Clearly identified by many participants as an intensely humiliating and shame-filled part of their relationships were repeated instances of unwanted sexual contact – either coerced or as a result of direct physical force. As Lorraine describes:

I don't know if you'd call it marital rape or what, but he did have his own way sometimes when I was trying to get away from him. He just took what he thought was rightfully his, and just left me absolutely stunned that he'd even consider that. So, that was a real nasty part and, but that was just something I couldn't cope with. It was just absolutely disgusting and turned my stomach. I couldn't believe that he'd want to put me through something extra like that.

Or as Sandy explains,

He was always at his worst when we'd been away somewhere, and had had a good time and then had come home. It was like he had to stamp his mark again. It [sex] was a real power thing ... and incidentally, after he knocked me around he always had to have sex. That was the big thing. It was like he had to reclaim his stake so to speak.

Although forced sexual contact was the most frequent (and extreme) example of contaminative exposure within participants' stories, it was by no means the only instance. Anita, for instance, recalls an incident with her partner that impacted heavily on her physical well-being and self-care strategies for the remainder of the relationship.

I remember one time being in the shower and, I'm 5'11 and I was probably about a size 12 ... I was never much more than a 12. I had a little tummy. I had just eaten quite a lot and I was in the shower. I always showered before he got home and I'd kick myself if I didn't get out of the shower on

time. Anyway, he caught me in the shower. He ripped the shower curtain back and he went ‘ooh look at your tummy, is my baby in there?’ And I felt like vomiting ... he was touching my tummy, and going ‘Is my bubba inside there?’ And when he left ... when I managed to get him out of the bathroom, I felt like ripping my body apart, literally. I honestly did ... I just looked at my tummy and thought – you bastard of a tummy! And then I went into diet mode. I just didn’t eat ... I’ve got photos. I was a stick. I went down to a size 10. There was no way I was eating ever again. I wasn’t ever to be accused of having his bubby again.

### **Looping**

The penultimate step in Goffman’s mortifying process consists of the disruption of the usual relation of the individual actor and their acts. This occurs through a form of ‘looping’, whereby an individual’s defensive responses may be collapsed back into the initial situation and become the target for subsequent attacks. In the course of normal civil life, Goffman suggests, individuals enjoy a degree of latitude in the way they may respond to actions that cause offense – various ‘face-saving’ strategies such as sullenness, anger, or the lack of usual deference signs. Within a total institution however, such behaviours can become grounds for further punishment. Thus the inmate is denied an important self-protection element in that ‘he [sic] cannot defend himself in the usual way by establishing distance between the mortifying situation and himself (sic)’ (1968:41). This was a common feature of participants’ stories. Many women detailed instances when attempts to protect themselves – either by trying to reason with the abuser or by non-responsive strategies such as ‘being quiet’ or ‘keeping their head down’ – or trying to do exactly what was demanded, were construed as demonstrating a lack of respect or the appropriate level of deference and resulted in renewed or intensified abuse. Penny offers clear illustration of this in her description of the way her attempts to preserve the peace often resulted in precisely the opposite:

He used to have mates round for a beer and most of, I mean, I just didn’t like most of them very much and he’d do things like make me run round getting drinks and stuff. And he was sometimes pretty happy then so it was okay to do that stuff to keep the peace but then he’d get pissed and it’d go all pear-shaped. Like he’d yell at me or whack me ‘cause he reckoned I’d been disrespectful of him or his mates but sometimes if I talked to them

I'd get a whack too 'cause he'd say I was trying to get off with them. It got so I was too scared to say or do anything. If I talked I was cheeky or flirting. If I didn't talk I was disrespectful and stuck up.

Tania echoes this unpredictability in her account of repeated attempts to 'get it right':

It was really weird too 'cause I never knew really what I was supposed to be doing. Like, I always got it wrong. I remember one time, no, lots of times it was, like, he'd come home from work and I'd have tea ready and we'd have tea and I'd go to start the dishes and he'd say 'no, come and watch TV with me. We never sit and watch TV anymore'. So I'd think okay, 'this is what he wants' so I'd do it and everything would be nice. But then in the morning I'd get shit for being a filthy slut for not cleaning up. But then other times if I didn't get up and start clearing up straight away I'd get something thrown at me. It was like he couldn't decide what he wanted. Didn't matter if I did what he said or not.

### **Self-determination**

Finally, and also clearly congruent with accounts of abusive relationships, are the restrictions upon individual autonomy, self-determination and freedom of action that characterise total institutions. Goffman suggests that by the time individuals in normal civil society reach adulthood they have come to expect and take for granted relatively high levels of personal freedom and autonomy of action, along with the right to self-determination. These rights are stripped from the individual upon entry to the total institution, to be replaced by extensive and pervasive surveillance and control of the individual's activities – a process made even more humiliating for some women because of their 'collusion' in the abuse. As Sandy describes,

I tried very desperately to be the best wife I could, to him. I tried to do the thing that he wanted and I turned inside out to do them. And of course the more I did it the more he wanted. It was never-ending. We were never going to win on that. I don't think of myself as a victim, just as a martyr. I tried to manipulate myself. I tried to change my personality and it didn't work. You can't do that with your own personality.

This was a process readily identifiable within participants' accounts, often in an extreme fashion, with some women literally not allowed out of their abuser's sight.

### **Shifting goalposts**

One important difference from Goffman's model did emerge from some participant's stories however. Whereas within Goffman's total institutions the aim is the control of inmates in line with a generally clear set of institutional guidelines, within the relationships described by participants the process was fluctuating and unsteady – with constantly shifting goal-posts. While women were thus aware that they were under a virtually constant form of surveillance and control, this was accompanied by a feeling of confusion – of not knowing the rules, because these tended to change frequently and arbitrarily. Julie tried for many years to 'get it right' with her husband before reaching a realisation that this simply wasn't going to happen. As she explains,

I thought this isn't right, but I sort of just hung in there, and I think being my first relationship – you want it to work. You know, and I really tried my best. I tried all kinds of ways to please him, but there was nothing I could do to make him happy. I mean, where was the problem? I actually blamed myself. But I mean, the house was clean and the food was cooked, everything was done, so, washing was done. There was nothing he could have complained about – but there was always something wrong.

Many women also noted a sense of shame at the extent of their own complicity in maintaining their abuser's surveillance over and control of their activities – feeling foolish that they had so easily believed in their abuser's (claimed) ability to track their movements and activities. Paula, for instance, reported that she took extreme care to follow her abuser's instructions to the letter when he was working out of town, even though logically she knew he could not possibly be aware of what she was doing.

### **Conclusion**

So, given the discussion above, Goffman's notion of the total institution appears a good fit as an explanatory framework for participants' accounts of abuse. Perhaps, more importantly, it provides some insight into the way separation from a sense of self, or even apathy towards the utility of maintaining self, can occur under specific conditions. From this position it is not difficult to see how this could easily render as highly problematic any proactive response to the abuse.

While there are, of course, differences between the barriers described by Goffman and those detailed above – the similarities

of *effect* are strikingly apparent. In some cases it seems that the psychological and emotional constraints of an abusive relationship may be even more devastating than actual physical incarceration. In the case of an abusive intimate relationship, the person responsible for the humiliation and punishment is a person with whom the victim has been, or still is, often strongly emotionally involved – as opposed to institutionally based strangers (Towns, 2000). Second, few of the punishment limits controlling and regulating the behaviour of institutional staff members exist in abusive relationships. Abuse can, and often does, continue unabated for extensive periods of time – unless or until serious injuries come to the attention of authorities. Even this is sometimes no guarantee of safety, with information game strategies often coming into play to conceal the source of the injury (Peckover, 2002; Rodriguez, Quiroga, & Bauer, 1996; Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). Third, domestic abuse, by definition, generally occurs in the victim's home – a space expected by most people to provide a safe environment becomes a dangerous and unpredictable place for abuse victims.

Finally, except in extreme cases, institutional incarceration is normally a finite episode in an individual's life – and the inmate can reasonably expect to exit the institution with at least minimal knowledge of how to avoid further episodes. Such encouraging expectations and/or protective guidelines were absent from the accounts of many participants. Not only did they report feeling that there was no way out of the abuse (fortunately an unfounded pessimism for these women), but the way many found themselves suddenly, and/or unexpectedly, involved in an abusive relationship has severely damaged belief in their own sense of judgment. They now doubted their ability to detect early warning signs and, for some, the only safe strategy has been to avoid intimate relationships altogether.

It appears then that a lack of solid institutional walls detracts little from the suggestion that abusive relationships can indeed be equated with the total institution model advanced by Goffman. Quite to the contrary it would seem from the discussion above. Far from weakening the institution, replacing more tangible boundaries with their psychological and emotional counterparts may ultimately be more effective, and the impact on inmates/victims lives perhaps even more subtle and durable. When these psychological barriers consist



of a sense of shame and associated emotion states – engendered, communicated and performed within an environment of socially generated and supported stigma around abuse – the power of the abusive relationship – as a total institution – is unmistakable.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The literature surrounding harm suffered by women within their intimate relationships demonstrates great diversity in relation to conceptual terminology, for example, abuse versus violence, domestic versus intimate relationship. This reflects debates within the field around questions of how best to describe and talk about this phenomenon; questions that remain open today. This conceptual diversity is mirrored within popular discourse, with no one descriptive term or set of terms clearly dominant. It is hardly surprising therefore that the stories of participants in this research failed to exhibit a shared descriptive language. Because of these two points (and because I believe each holds both advantages and disadvantages), I have chosen to use the terms ‘intimate partner abuse’, ‘intimate partner violence’ and ‘domestic abuse’ interchangeably. I hope through this strategy to avoid privileging one woman’s voice over another.
- <sup>2</sup> The larger project explores shame in relation to abusive intimate relationships and is interested in tracing connections between discourse, discursive practices, human interaction and emotional experience – in the context of these abusive relationships.
- <sup>3</sup> See ‘Battered women: The home as a total institution’ by (Avni, 1991) for an example of the application of Goffman’s model to violent relationships – a discussion based upon research with women who had been physically confined by their partners.

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