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## Account-Making by Victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

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ACCOUNT-MAKING BY VICTIMS  
OF  
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)  
BY  
ROBIN A. JAMES

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MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

OF

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the published memoirs of six survivor's accounts of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) utilizing Harvey, Orbuch, and Fink's (1990a) *Account-Making in Response to Severe Stress* model with focus on the final stage of the model, *Identity Change*. The authors theorize that when the trauma survivor achieves this development, she will have fundamentally altered beliefs compared to when the abuse occurred. The consequence of failing to successfully engage in the final stage of Identity Change is *Failure to Learn/Adapt*, with the contention that the individual will repeat the stress and have a maladaptive response pattern.

This research was approached with the assertion that failing to successfully engage in Identity Change may be a factor in the maladaptive response pattern of returning-to or remaining-in the abusive relationship and therefore sought to answer 2 questions: Did the memoirs reflect evidence of Identity Change as depicted in Harvey et al.'s (1990a) model for successful engagement?; and, Was functional engagement in the Identity Change stage accompanied by evidence the victim had permanently left the abusive relationship?

The six memoirs selected for study were obtained by internet searches using keywords, and meeting further criteria established by this author. The process is detailed in the Methodology section.

The resulting analysis shows that five of the six survivors of IPV had successfully engaged in the Identity Change stage and permanently left their abusers.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## PREFACE

Each abuse victim should look inside and find how the willingness to tolerate such behavior came about. Your life is not a secret to you. The answers are there if you have the courage to look for them. Stop protecting others, and come to your own realizations about what has really happened to you. Then replace the myths of your life with the truth. Once you do so, you will know what to do about the abuse. It may mean you have to change your lifestyle, but you'll be gaining the most valuable thing a human being can have – your *self* – whole and with integrity.

Dianne Schwartz, 2000, p. x

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION/JUSTIFICATION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the United States an average of 20 people (85% of them women) are physically abused by intimate partners every minute (Thackeray, Stelzner, Downs, & Miller, 2007). Approximately 1.5%, or 4.8 million women are raped or physically abused by an intimate partner annually (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), most of them victimized more than once. Domestic violence hotlines nationwide receive more than 20,000 calls per day (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2016) and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in the United States is the primary source of violence among adults and adolescents (Heyman, Slep, & Foran, 2015).

IPV in the context of this thesis encompasses corporal (physical) violence, as well as psychological abuse including; threats, intimidation, humiliation, isolation, restriction, and degradation (Lewis, Griffing, Chu, Jospitre, Sage, & Primm, 2006). Current research in the field details the health consequences of IPV, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, HIV infection and AIDS, and other traumatic responses (Hien & Ruglass, 2009).

Studies suggest that a woman makes an average of five attempts to leave an abusive relationship before she does so successfully and that half of the women who do leave ultimately return to their abuser (Roberts, Wolfer, & Mele, 2008). The fact that so many victims of IPV who leave their abuser only to return to the relationship is of great concern to researchers, advocates (Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007; Thapar-

Bjorkert & Morgan, 2010), the community (Nabi & Horner, 2001), and the victims themselves (Griffing, Ragin, Sage, Madry, Bingham, & Primm, 2002; Enander, 2010). In my personal experience working with victims and their families, one of the first questions asked by a family member or close friend is, “why does she stay?”

Historically, researchers have struggled to find the answers to ‘Why does she remain-in or return-to the abusive relationship? Richard Gelles (1976) is credited with being the first to provide empirical evidence linking economic dependency and abuse risk (Bornstein, 2006). Gelles found that the fewer resources and the less power the woman felt she had, the stronger her feelings of being trapped, correlating with her decision to remain in the relationship. Psychological factors and social forces were the focus of the analysis of the relationship between dependency and IPV done by Robert Bornstein (2006). Citing numerous empirical studies, Bornstein concluded that with the complex nature of IPV and the many variables that play a role, dependency is an important variable in the etiology. This research builds upon that of his predecessors, strengthening the opinion that gaining further understanding of the correlation between partner abuse and dependency has implications for not only prevention and prediction of abuse, but for developing interventions strategies as well.

Griffing et al. (2002) examined self-identified reasons for returning to abusive relationships and found a common theme of emotional attachment (e.g., you missed him a lot, you didn’t want the relationship to end) in victims’ reasoning. They assert that advocates may not be addressing these factors and the focus on external factors may be a diversion from focusing on the internal factors that are integral in the decision making process of a victim when deciding to return to the abuser. They

suggest that the victim does not recognize that terminating the emotional connection will be so difficult and she may not be prepared for feelings that will arise. Indeed, participants underestimated their vulnerability when asked how likely they would be to return to their abuser: although 66.7% reported having returned to their abuser at least once, 74.1% stated they were “not at all likely” to return to their abuser in the future.

The psychological effects of repeated violence are substantially related to a victim’s disclosure, and providing multiple pathways for disclosure of that victimization is crucial to positive outcomes (Hlavke, Kruttschnitt, & Carbone-Lopez, 2007). Chang, Decker, Moracco, Martin, Petersen, and Frasier (2005) looked at the willingness of victims of IPV to disclose and/or seek help in focus group interviews with women who were currently or recently in violent relationships. Each participant completed a brief questionnaire and answered two open-ended questions based on the best way for practitioners to approach the subject of IPV and the most effective help the practitioners could offer. They answered positively to being asked by doctors and nurses about potential violence but were concerned with stigmas and judgments. The authors recognized that IPV victim’s progress through the stages of their emotional and cognitive changes, and the effectiveness of the intervention, was not solely based on safety and physical health outcomes. They suggest that practitioners realize that disclosing IPV is difficult even with the finest communicators under model circumstances.

Providing individualized interdisciplinary approaches to treatment and assessment that include exploring the victim’s distinct attitudes toward leaving the abuser

including causal attributions, culturally perceived norms, and their efficacy or control beliefs, are related to their future success (Lewis et al., 2006). Carla Smith Stover (2005) addressed the need for research on more focused interventions as well when working with victims and perpetrators of IPV to reduce recidivism rates. She found through her research over 15,000 articles published in the area of family violence revealing higher rates of victimization and future perpetration in children who were exposed to IPV. This early exposure leads to cognitive, emotionally dysregulating, and psychological behavioral problems that she believes contributes to the recidivism rates in IPV cases.

Due to the varied and complex nature of IPV as well as the unreliability of reported data due to many cases of repeated and first time violence going unreported to the criminal justice system, the search for answers to the questions of recidivism continues. Current research emphasizes the benefits of future research into what the victim identifies as important influencers of their decisions, the reasons given from each victim's own perspective.

In line with that directive this research explores the published memoirs of six victim's accounts of IPV as a tool to hear the account from the perspective of the victim, providing insight into factors that were prominent in their decision making processes during the relationships. This analysis considers types of attributions, causality, and/or responsibility, and dimensions of attributions: internality, stability, and controllability, utilizing Harvey, Orbuch, and Fink's (1990a) *Account-Making in Response to Severe Stress* model.

The focus is on the final stage of the model, *Identity Change*. The authors theorize that when the trauma survivor achieves this development, she will have fundamentally altered beliefs; that control is not something that can be ripped from her, that a sense of vulnerability can be combined with a continued search to make meaning, and that they are not the same person as they were when the abuse occurred. Harvey, Agostinelli, and Weber (1989) first found suggestive evidence of the identity change process in their research of newly separated partners of romantic relationships. Other research evaluating this conception has involved populations of respondents dealing from other types of trauma. Evidence has been obtained from Vietnam combat veterans, elderly persons who have experienced the loss of a loved one, and women who have suffered sexual assault (Harvey et al. 1990a). They expand on the elements of fundamentally altered beliefs stating that survivors will now have a new behavioral orientation for the future, and a new self that embodies new imageries and scenarios. The survivors may be able to look back, recognize what they've been through and see themselves as a totally different person. These beliefs also may involve a need to continue to make meaning out of their existence and a sense of vulnerability. Indications of functional engagement for this study include: shift from negative self-attributions and new perception of self; sense of meaning and understanding of events; perception of control over decisions and future behaviors; and, an increased self-awareness.

Evaluating the possible dysfunctional responses of failing to engage in this and earlier stages are also detailed in the model. In the final stage of Identity Change the consequence is *Failure to Learn/Adapt*, with the contention that the individual will

repeat the stress and have a maladaptive response pattern. Other pathological outcomes of failing to engage may include difficulty dealing with current or future loss, and prolonged grief and anxiety (Harvey et al. (1990b). My contention is that failing to successfully engage in Identity Change may be a factor in the maladaptive response pattern of returning-to or remaining-in the abusive relationship.

While this study will primarily look at evidence for the stage model in general, the focus will be on the final stage and evidence of the evolution of cognitions and affect.

This analysis explores two questions in the writings of six women to gather greater insight into the decision-making process.

Research Question 1:

Did the memoirs reflect evidence of Identity Change as depicted in Harvey et al.'s (1990a) model for successful engagement?

Research Question 2:

Was functional engagement in the Identity Change stage accompanied by evidence the victim had permanently left the abusive relationship?

## JUSTIFICATION

Abuse patterns in IPV relationships have been studied extensively to provide insight into what services were essential in the advocacy of IPV. The focus on services in the field of domestic violence has been economic stability, assuring the safety of the victim and their family, legal assistance, and maintaining their social networks (Griffing et al., 2002). Undeniably, this research and advocacy have had a positive impact but the focus of services has been primarily concentrated on external factors. The internal factors that contribute to the decision to return to the abuser have, for the most part, been overlooked (Griffing et al., 2002).

Learning what the victim identifies as important influencers is an ongoing struggle in research and advocacy. The timing and level of disclosure varies widely among victims, characteristics of the victimization, and life experiences. It is found that many don't disclose their experiences at all prior to being involved in a research project and that high rates of attrition have been found in studies where they attempt to directly interview victims (Stover, 2005).

Using memoirs as a tool to hear the story from the perspective of the victim is an approach that has the potential to stimulate conversation in the field of IPV research. The scholarly literature on account-making is largely based on accounts studied in therapeutic/clinical environments. Although accounts are presented in several ways, with conversation usually the most common (Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990c), in the field of IPV disclosure is sometimes fragmented, incomplete, or non-existent. In addition, disclosure occurring in conversations with therapists, counselors, and

advocates remains confidential and statistics from law enforcement are not always accurate.

The choice to conduct the analysis utilizing the *Account-Making in Response to Severe Stress* model (Harvey et al., 1990a) and the memoirs was based on previous research with victims of trauma. There is a great deal of time invested in developing a memoir that is ultimately published, and many authors approach their stories with the similar intention of reaching an empathetic audience, as Michele Weldon (1999) describes: : “My intent was also to make other women like me not feel so alone. If I could help one other woman feeling the same desperation and despair it was enough” (p. 24). Orbuch, Harvey, Davis, and Merbauch (1994) found that the length of time spent developing the account and the perception of empathy in the environment in which it was expressed were variables found to be contingent on the level of healing to occur. Their work suggests that accounts disclosed to empathic confidants may represent invaluable acts of meaning [to paraphrase Bruner’s (1990) thesis] in the process of recovery from trauma.

There are a number of shared symptoms experienced by survivors of trauma, referenced in the research of Harvey, Orbuch, and Weber (1990b), and victims of IPV, including depression, anxiety, somatization, and PTSD (Easton, 2013; Gorde, Helfrich, & Finlayson, 2004); and difficulty coping, lowered self-esteem, tendency to self-blame (Harvey, Orbuch, Chwalisz, & Garwood, 1991; Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007).

Harvey et al. (1991) found themes observed in reports from incest survivors such as rage, helplessness, isolation/alienation, and fear in their study of the role of



account-making in coping with sexual assault. Similar symptoms were experienced by the victims of IPV in the study done by Gorde, Helfrich, and Finlayson (2004) while looking at the trauma symptoms and life skill needs of victims from three domestic violence programs. Trauma-related symptoms suffered by the women included anger/irritability, defensive avoidance, and dissociation.

Self-directed negative attributions were a common theme in the research referenced above as well as the Orbuch et al. (1994) study on sexual assault survivor's account-making and confiding as acts of meaning. Attributions relatable to those victimized by IPV. Kim and Gray (2008) found that feelings of responsibility may affect a victim's decision to leave or stay in the abusive relationship. They believe that the victim's self-blame and their perception of societal blame may contribute to their staying with their abuser.

Intrusive ruminations are also discussed in the literature by both Harvey et al. (1990b) and Greenberg (1995). They agree that evidence suggests survivors who gain the ability to impose structure upon their memories of the trauma should adapt more successfully. This facilitates a sense of control over the events and plans for coping with anticipated consequences.

My hope is that this work will prompt further discussion in the fields of advocacy, communication, psychology, and other social sciences that will benefit in the recovery of victims of IPV.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Account-making as defined by Harvey et al. (1990a) refers to “the construction of story-like understandings for events in our lives, with the resultant accounts including attributions, plots, characters, perceived inter-personal and personal characteristics, emotional expressions, and behavioral expectations and plans for the future” (p. 46). The authors believe that account-making is especially beneficial to those trying to “come to grips psychologically” with personal loss and the effort to find some value as a consequence. The concept of accounts was first explicitly introduced to psychology by Weiss:

The account is of major psychological importance to the separated, not only because it settles the issue of who was responsible for what, but also because it imposes on the confused marital events that preceded the separation a plot structure with a beginning, middle, and end and so organizes the events into a conceptually manageable unity. Once understood in this way, the events can be dealt with: They can be seen as outcomes of identifiable causes and, eventually, can be seen as past, over and external to the individual’s present self. Those who cannot construct accounts sometimes feel that their perplexity keeps them from detaching themselves from the distressing experiences.

(Weiss, 1975, pp. 14-15)

Harvey, Wells, and Alvarez (1978) began introducing the term in attribution literature, reporting on a small number of accounts-evidence by recently separated persons in diary form. The initial scope of earlier work on the role of attribution in the termination of close relationships focused primarily on singular interpretations made by individuals about their partners and relationship events. The accounts introduced by sociologists were discussed in terms of excusing culpable behavior, and not given expansive story-like characterizations.

In the field of social psychology, work on accounts developed in close association to theory and research on attributional processes. Heider's (1958) "naïve psychology" or "commonsense psychology of person on the street" represented a metaphor that provided support for account-making activity. How stories about self and others, including images of actual events and imaginations of created events are formed, accessed, and modified over time.

Harvey et al. (1990c) began to expand the idea beyond its initial scope to create more theoretical clarity and prominence. Their focus on its "functions, determinants, and consequences, and possible significance in the psychology of close relationships" (Harvey, Weber, Galvin, Huszti & Garnick, 1986) resulted in a modest theoretical paper. They believed that account-making plays a vital role in the stress-response sequence and began to extend their ideas to encompass reactions to more general forms of trauma and loss. Research has revealed the potential of accounts to aid in scholar's understanding of coping and interpretive activities during and after traumatic events.

James Pennebaker (1986) discussed the health benefits of disclosure in his research involving victims/survivors of traumatic events who confided in others. Findings of the study showed that effective engagement in account-making had improved psychological and physical health. Focusing on the narrative of survivors of trauma and their personal accounts of their situations, Harvey et al. (1990b) agree that the process of formulating an account aids in coping with the psychological effects of severe stress. They reference a spectrum of experiences in which the *Account-Making in Response to Severe Stress* model (Appendix A) would be applicable, including the sudden death of a significant other, separation or divorce, and the occurrence of rape or incest. The commonalities in these traumas and those experienced in IPV relationships support the applicability for its use in the context of this analysis.

Previous research has articulated both cognitive and social processes people go through as they process a traumatic event through each of the stages. Extant research has not directly dealt with the traumatic event of IPV, a gap this study will address utilizing the seven stages in the model to analyze the accounts, exploring for discourse exhibiting the processes. Though Harvey et al. (1990c) concede that the methods of investigating account-making e.g., operational definition and coding, may present problems, they believe that it represents a technique of necessity for studying populations who experience difficulties talking about their highly sensitive personal traumas.

The early affect stages of account-making after trauma often associated with feelings of despair and hopelessness, feeling overwhelmed, and a lack of personal control. Harvey et al. (1990b) suggest that these intense negative feelings will be

followed by behavior signifying a cry for help. Denial in these earlier stages is rudimentary. Multilevel coping models have been utilized for interpreting trauma response (Lewis et al., 2006) and find that a combination of disengaged and engaged strategies are used to cope. Research found that a certain degree of detachment may have buffered the psychological impact of extreme levels of violence by an intimate partner. The victims were found to draw on inner resources due to the potential dangers of reaching out to external support systems under the hypervigilant eye of the abuser. It has been demonstrated in various studies that there is a qualitative difference in the effects of interpersonal and non-interpersonal forms of trauma. Interpersonal forms have been shown to be particularly damaging as they involve “a personal violation by a malicious perpetrator” (Lim, Valdez, & Lilly, 2015). Survivors may underplay the seriousness of the abuse they have endured at the hands of someone they trust and rely on to meet financial or emotional needs. These survivors have questions of personal autonomy and strength of their will, as well as a belief in a safe and meaningful benevolent world. These distorted cognitions can hinder trauma-related adjustment as well as result in a loss of the meaning and purpose of life.

Accounts during these stages reflect the dissonance experienced; the previously held beliefs in marriage and the abuser, thwarted by the violent episodes. The accounts at these stages are primarily in the form of self-talk, drawing on the survivor’s inner resources. Harvey et al. (1990c) discuss that the quest for understanding and meaning may go on in almost unconscious ways and this quest is at the heart of account-making. This private reflection is one of the characteristics that separate accounts from narratives. Though they are similar, an account may not involve telling others.

In the Intrusion and Working Through stages, the struggle to work through the memory and cognitive processes of distraction and obsessive review occurs. Memories of the trauma and intrusive thoughts are central to account-making. The key facet of this process is perceived control. Rumination and obsessive thought about the events without satisfaction results in depression and worry persists. If the events have not been adequately cognitively-emotionally worked through, the vivid memories of the trauma persist. Intensified account-making takes place during these stages and the accounts are shared with others. Harvey et al. (1990a) place considerable value on the activity of confiding in close others and the potential for allaying grief. They stress that this confidence has to be met with an empathic audience to be effective. When working through these stages, one would expect to see accounts that feature repetitive revisiting of unanswered questions about the cause of the violent episodes. The victim “doses” herself with levels of intrusion that she finds tolerable in order to begin working through the meanings of the events (Greenberg, 1995). The sets of strategies utilized potentially control the content, occurrence, or affective tone (Horowitz, 1986), a) controlling the mental set; the frequency, timing and duration of thoughts of the trauma; b) controlling schemata as organizers of information, what information will be utilized or disregarded, viewing the trauma from multiple perspectives; c) focus on the current implications and avoid regretting the past decisions and actions. Accounts are developed by individuals as if searching for a hypotheses to fit the data (Harvey et al. 1990c). The survivors seek the courage to continue and find a way to contextualize the events into their representation of their life-course. Struggling to link what’s

happening currently to who they are, who they want to be, who they may be becoming, why these events are occurring, and to the future in general.

During the Completion and Identity Change stages the accounts reflect completion of the story and possession of coping skills. The new identity and behavioral orientation for the future are in line with the account. Harvey et al. (1990b) discuss completion tendency as the struggle to match new information to older information and revising them both until they agree; completion occurs when new information and reactions to it are stored in active memory. These now developed accounts provide a sense of meaning and control over the events, anticipated further consequences, and plans for coping.

Researchers found that these meaning-making appraisals of trauma survivors with the successful integration of past and present may determine future resiliency and adaptation (Grossman, Sorsoli, & Kia-Keating, 2006). Typically facilitated through disclosure and active cognitive processing, posttraumatic growth relates to reflection and positive personal growth. These recognized benefits have the potential to be life-changing and span multiple dimensions such as increased introspectiveness, better understanding of healthy relationships, and self-protective behaviors. “Long-term successful adjustment likely involves the development of an account that provides more in-depth understanding of the event and an interpretation that takes the onus off of self as the responsible agent” (Harvey et al. 1991, p. 518).

Accounts play a wide role in an individual’s life (Harvey et al. 1990c). They do not merely explain events but also help make sense of loss in relationships, release emotions, and provide a sense of psychological control regarding the loss. Deriving

from the need to understand the circumstances surrounding traumatic, through account-making “we learn to develop and refine our explanations in their story form, and we also may learn – tentatively and selectively – to discuss them with others (p. 11).” They identify the motivations for account-making beginning with “enhancements of feelings of control and clarification of understanding” the need to understand elements of the relationship, why events occurred, and personal control over the situation and their future. The need for “self-esteem maintenance and enhancement” is another motivator, accounts are often designed to protect or enhance self-esteem. They find that accounts will most always have an enhancing or restorative effect on self-worth in their design. The need to purge oneself of unpleasant states to experience catharsis may also be a motivation. This “emotional purging” is undertaken to relieve the account-maker of emotional pain. The importance of closure is vital in the terms of psychological tranquility and an account may be developed as a “search for closure or simply as an end in itself”. Closure through accounts can provide stability that had been elusive to the account-maker allowing them to tie up loose ends.

Lastly, a superordinate to the motives discussed is “an enlightened feeling and enhanced will and hope”, simply explained as the will and hope to continue on. The accounts of IPV victims at this stage reflect a level of catharsis (Hlavka, et al., 2007), as well as personal growth, construction of self, and meaning (Neimeyer & Stewart, 1998) through their personal process of accounting the trauma and subsequent experiences. Harvey et al. (1990b) discuss these hopes and plans as closely following accounts, and believe that it may evolve from them “event→account→expectation” correlating with emotional purging.



This research includes identifying attribution themes throughout the stages of the model, and their association to successful engagement in Identity Change. Frisch and MacKenzie (1991) recognized in their study of formerly and chronically abused women that without further intervention, increased frequency of violence and the woman's repeated attempts to reconcile will foster the belief that she is to blame. Harvey et al. (1991) suggest that self-directed negative attributions are one of the most common patterns for survivors and the development of an account provides more understanding and takes the responsibility off of self as the responsible agent.

Attributions refer to the process used by individuals to arrive at subjective explanations for actions and events. Accounts are viewed currently as more than a collection of unrelated attributions and are considered packages of attributions of causality, responsibility, and blame. Accounts emphasize the emotional, cognitive, and social aspects of judgments, whereas attributions concentrate more strongly on just the cognitive aspects. Though not all victims experience debilitating symptoms of negative life events such as persistent and intrusive ruminations, loss of meaning, and the need to discuss the event with others (Tait & Silver, 1989), most experience adjustment difficulties where account-making would be central in their attempts to cope.

Difficulty in disclosing abuse is prominent with victims of IPV. Some reasons being; shame, self-blame and guilt, relying on the cultural assumption that being married was the right thing to do, and being bewildered by the violence so not knowing how to react. Wilcox (2006) looked at women's agency and the way identities are formed in the context of constraints of gender, poverty, and domestic

violence in her study. She found it important to analyze a woman's experience of domestic violence as "distinctly gendered". She considers domestic violence unique to other forms of violence because of societal norms and gender order. Her research showed that although women were hesitant to talk about the relationship, when they were encouraged to do so it was evident that they were always actively trying to make sense of it and what to do about it. Perpetrators coercion and external locus of control weighed heavily on the emotional stability of the victims. Her research data supported similar themes applicable to my research including psychological abuse, cognitive processing, attribution, and coping. These components were reflected in some or all of the memoirs in this study and provided further cohesion to the model.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Recognizing the heterogeneity of victims of IPV, it was imperative that the sources used for analysis were first-person accounts. Nabi & Horner (2001) found that limited research has been done on the voices of those who have been personally victimized by the violence in intimate partner relationships. They saw a need to look at their opinions and how those opinions may differ from the professionals in the field and the community at large. Their study of victimized women showed a difference both in the understanding of abuse and how it should be addressed at a broad level. They recommended a focus on the individuals who had experienced the abuse as experts, rather than victims needing to be rescued. Due to strong emotional responses when dealing with battered women, advocates sometimes have difficulty being objective and recognizing the woman as an individual and not a social construct (Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007). Nabi and Horner believe that such “typification” of victims overlooks the complexity and heterogeneity of IPV.

Harvey et al. (1990c) states that accounts are most often fully developed after the traumatic event is over and contain both interpretive and non-interpretive (descriptive) material. The initial impact of the trauma, shaking the reality and self-identity of the individual may have such an impact that it renders account-making impossible. The survivor’s pursuit to gain understanding and a sense of control is shown in their reflective memoirs.

### *Memoir Selection Process*

The memoir selection process, and resulting analysis, was undertaken with the recognition that these accounts are unique. The application of any results of this analysis to IPV victims in general is problematic because the majority of victims telling their stories do not possess the resources and/or the desire to be published for a number of reasons. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter many prefer to keep the disclosure to close confidants. Others do not possess the standards of literacy and financial resources required for publication. With that being said, the discourse contained in the selected novels brought richness and insight that I believe is valuable to this research.

The process began with searches on the internet websites Google, EBSCO Host, Amazon Books, Google Books, and Goodreads using the search terms: domestic violence memoirs; domestic violence autobiographies; domestic abuse memoirs; survivor memoirs; and interpersonal violence memoirs. The initial searches revealed a variety of genres, including child physical and sexual abuse, self-help for victims and/or survivors of abuse, educational text, and several others that did not fit the focus of this research and thus were disregarded. After the initial purge, the summaries provided by the booksellers and the reviews posted on the websites by professionals and/or consumers were read with focus placed on the following criteria;

True story;

fictional accounts were excluded

First person account;

‘lived by’, ‘written by’, ‘as told by’, etc. were excluded

Focus on self, abusive relationship, and moving forward;  
focus on childhood and/or parents specifically were excluded

Published date as current as possible, with a cut-off of 1995

Twenty-six texts were accessed (Appendix B) and then reviewed for further consideration through electronic sources, the public library, and the local bookstore. The list was narrowed at this point by eliminating texts; a) that included the author's discussion of multiple relationships, both familial and intimate; b) where the account-making appeared fragmented making it difficult to follow; c) that were only available in electronic editions (e-books), a format that I am not comfortable working with, or were not available through any of my resources.

The six selected memoirs contained discourse illustrating involvement in each of the stages, an essential component in the methodology construction. The memoirs included in this analysis are:

- 1) *A Survivor's Story: My Story of Survival from Domestic Violence*, Yvonne Davis-Weir (2015)
- 2) *I Closed My Eyes*, Michele Weldon (1999)
- 3) *Whose Face Is in the Mirror?*, Dianne Schwartz (2000)
- 4) *Through the Fire: One Woman's Experience Surviving Domestic Violence*, Harriet Cammock (2011)
- 5) *Crazy Love – A Memoir*, Leslie Morgan Steiner (2009)
- 6) *I Should Know Better: A True Story*, Christine Henderson (2013)

*Theme Development*

The analysis of the stories focused on the women's recounting their individual experiences as a victim of violence was done utilizing Harvey et al.'s (1990b) *Account-Making in Response to Severe Stress* (Appendix A). Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) were used to guide the text selection process. They suggest selecting passages by answering four questions as you read: 1) does it relate to my research concern of identity change? 2) does it help me understand my participants better? 3) does it clarify my thinking? 4) does it simply seem important, even if I can't say why?

Following these guidelines, I developed a chart to categorize discourse into the corresponding stages and realized recurring themes. The stages of the model and corresponding recurrent themes are reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. Recurrent Themes

<p align="center"><b><u>Account-Making</u></b> <b><u>In</u></b> <b><u>Response to Severe Stress</u></b></p>	<p align="center"><b><u>Recurrent Themes</u></b></p>
<p><b><u>Traumatic Event</u></b> <b><u>Shock</u></b> Feeling Overwhelmed, Numb</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dominant practices at first seemed normal, sign of depth of love</li> <li>- Disbelief/Shock</li> <li>- Retreat from their bodies - Mentally switch off from what is going on to distance self from emotions</li> <li>- Violent behavior bewildering, making it difficult to know how to react</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Outcry</u></b> <b><u>Emotional Expression</u></b> Panic, Exhaustion, Despair, Hopelessness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not knowing when violence would occur – no pattern</li> <li>- Try to prevent violence in any way - keep quiet, do better, be better, anticipate needs</li> <li>- Emotional exhaustion</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Denial</u></b> <i>Early Stage of Acct-Making</i> <b><u>Escapism</u></b> Avoidance, Isolation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attribute partners violent behavior externally; self, others, circumstances 'he is the good guy'</li> <li>- False perception of self 'not the battered wife'</li> <li>- Minimization of violence</li> <li>- Holding perspective that children are less harmed by remaining than leaving the household</li> <li>- Avoiding friends, family</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Intrusion</u></b> <i>Continued/Initial Account Making</i> <b><u>Flooded States</u></b> Distraction, Obsessive Review</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identity as nurturing, caring; able to support and help loved ones</li> <li>- Self-directed negative attributions</li> <li>- Unable to manage emotions</li> <li>- Intertwining fear and necessity</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Working Through</u></b> <i>Intensified Account Making</i> Confiding with Close Others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Confiding in others</li> <li>- Realization that both she and children are involved in 'negotiating minefields'</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Completion</u></b> <i>Completion of Story</i> Acceptance, Possession of Coping Skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Development of meaning</li> <li>- Gains acute awareness of dangers</li> <li>- 'He is an abuser' - 'I am a battered woman'</li> <li>- Coping with feelings of loneliness and emptiness</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Identity Change</u></b> Behavioral Expectations in Line with Account</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New perception of self</li> <li>- Enhancement of self-esteem</li> <li>- Perception of control over decisions and future</li> </ul>

This analysis also includes the discussion of other psychological processes that Harvey, et al. (1990b) associated with account-making in the earlier stages:

The type of affect often associated early in the sequence is a lack of personal control and intense negative feeling. The outcry point is also when the individual has deep feelings of loss, despair, and hopelessness. These feelings are followed by a discharge of energy, “some type of behavior signifying an outcry for help” (p. 199). Literature on children coping with the loss of a parent found that they had better long and short-term coping skills if they were encouraged to talk about their feelings immediately after the loss in a supportive environment.

Also evident is discourse reflective of the cognitive and emotional “working through” the trauma. Most accounts are comprised of “numerous episodic representations” (Harvey et al., 1990b, p. 200) dated in the account-maker’s past and the struggle to develop stories that provide meaning and a sense of control over the problematic event(s) and memories, both central to account-making. These cognitive and memorial processes are most evident in the working-through and completion stages. Perceived control is thought to be a key facet of this process and these recurring vivid memories are persistent until they are cognitively and emotionally worked through.

Recognizing the influence of my theoretical framework on identifying themes and my choices of what to include and exclude from this analysis, I kept a personal journal with notes of reflection. I used these journals as a self-monitor to recognize any personal biases brought by my belief that our experiences do not determine us; that we make meaning of the events in our life and make choices based on those meanings.



The Individual Psychology approach of Alfred Adler (1931) has had a great deal of influence on my perspective, “No experience is a cause for success or failure. We do not suffer from the shock of our experiences – the so-called trauma – but we make out of them just what suits our purposes. We are self-determined by the meaning we give to our experiences; and there is probably something of a mistake always involved when we take particular experiences as the basis for our future life. Meanings are not determined by situations, but we determine ourselves by the meanings we give to situations” (p. 8).

For purposes of full disclosure, it must also be noted that I am an abuse survivor and also an active advocate serving in the community. Admittedly my goals to raise awareness, gain insight, and further efforts in minimizing the violence experienced by too many drove me to the focus of this thesis research.

The memoirs are written reflectively; the authors are survivors of IPV who have permanently left their abusers. I have made a conscious choice to not detail the violence that the authors of these memoirs endured and accounted. I was able to perform and reach the goals of my analysis respecting both the authors, who shared their accounts in hopes of reaching an empathic audience, and the readers of my thesis, who are doing so for academic purposes.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

The memoirs used for this analysis reflect personal violations both physically and psychologically in graphic and heartfelt detail. Though they are written by just a minute sample of the population of victims and survivors of IPV, the authors expose the reader to a world of constant turmoil. Endless days, hours, and minutes questioning everything. Watching all that they held to be true crash and burn only to wonder how it came to this and where to go from here: “Sometimes it starts as a forgotten match, then life engulfed in flames” (Weldon, 1999, p. xi). “The wildfires raging in the median and on both sides of the highway was just like the fire that I lived through. I realized that my life in this fiery furnace of a marriage could be consumed if I didn’t do something about it” (Cammock, 2011, p. 56).

#### **TRAUMATIC EVENT, OUTCRY, DENIAL**

The survivors accounted the feelings of despair and hopelessness they experienced after the first episode of violence and subsequent episodes early on. They were shocked by the behavior and felt confused and overwhelmed.

The survivors discourse reflects their optimism entering into the relationships with expectations of building a future:

- “My high school sweetheart and I were married” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 2)
- “Attractive and charming, accommodating and sensitive” (Weldon, 1999, p. 19)

- “One of the handsomest men I had ever met, while also being charming and very friendly” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 29)
- “Charming and very seductive” (Cammock, 2011, p. 11)
- “Conor looked so handsome, so hopeful-exactly like that man in the Tiffany ad proposing marriage with an eggshell-blue box hidden behind his back” (Steiner, 2009, p. 85)
- “I met a very enticing man, who over the next year won me over with his charms” (Henderson, 2013, p. 4)

The first episodes of abuse, physical or psychological, were met with disbelief and shock:

- “I sat there on the ground dazed, because everything happened so fast... maybe I was still in shock” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 24)
- “I forgave him because I didn’t want it to be true” (Weldon, 1999, p. 10)
- “I sat staring, with my mouth hanging open. Where was this anger coming from?” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 36)
- “It began to finally dawn on my young and naïve mind that there must be something wrong with this picture” (Cammock, 2011, p. 22)
- “My heart seized as if I’d stumbled upon a snake on the path behind our house” (Steiner, 2009, p. 138)
- “I covered up for him at times, made excuses, had periods of disbelief, and was incredibly embarrassed” (Henderson, 2013, p. 64)

They minimized the violence and didn’t accept that there was a pattern. They saw each violent episode as an isolated occurrence and often attributed it to external forces. The

dominant control tactics used by their abusers including coercion, isolation, and economic control were initially seen as normal and signs of love:

- “I kept telling myself that his behavior was as a result of his stressful situations he experienced on the job” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 9)
- “I treated it as if it were only a minor transgression, like forgetting to take out the garbage” (Weldon, 1999, p. 10)
- “Each instance was an isolated incident that could be explained away, I did not connect them to see the pattern. Just a blip on timeline, after bruises were gone and blood was bleached ‘I am not a battered wife’” (Weldon, 1999, p. 16)
- “I was stunned by the belief that no one had ever loved me this much” (Weldon, 1999, p.23)
- “I tried to find justification for his behavior” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 41)
- “I still would not listen to the tranquil, small voice in the back of my head, telling me that something was glaringly wrong with this picture. I just thought that these things were normal and married people have disagreements like this all the time” (Cammock, 2011, p. 19)
- “And anyway, he just grabbed my throat. He couldn’t have hit me. We were getting married” (Steiner, 2009, p. 160)
- “He was apologetic and said he would never hurt me again” (Henderson, 2013, p. 24)

The survivors indicated that these violent episodes were such a divergence from the marital schema that they had envisioned that they became confused and bewildered:

- “When and how did it start? It all happened in such a deceitful way that before I realized, I was receiving my daily dose of beatings on a constant basis.”  
(Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 21)
- “He has to know what he is doing is wrong. He is logical, intelligent” (Weldon, 1999, p. 12)
- “John told me that he had required a lot of affection so I was confused”  
(Schwartz, 2000, p. 36)
- “What was real became blurred” (Cammock, 2011, p. 13)
- “The fact that it was me marrying Conor, the man I loved who’d just choked me and bashed my head into a wall-in other words, the rest of my life was at stake-seemed basically irrelevant” (Steiner, 2009, p. 161)
- “I began to feel trapped, and had a difficult time separating fact from fiction”  
(Henderson, 2013, p. 33)

They indicated that there was no pattern in the abuse and they found themselves not knowing if or when it would happen again:

- “In spite of me being understanding and empathetic, things got worse. I also started to notice the ‘little things’ that caused him to get into his ‘not so nice’ mood” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 9)
- “I could not predict when the abuse was coming, and I was surprised every time” (Weldon, 1999, p. 101)
- “You go back and forth between tension building and explosion, with no reprieve” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 50)

- “I spent many of my waking hours praying that today is the day that I will not be beaten within an inch of my life” (Cammock, 2011, p. 27)
- “Thwunk went my skull against the reinforced glass. I started to cry but I didn’t even pull the car over. I just kept driving. Damn him. Not again. Not on our honeymoon” (Steiner, 2009, p. 175)
- “I was constantly walking on egg shells. I could make the same statement two different times and he would react differently” (Henderson, 2013, p. 40)

They each found themselves emotionally exhausted but hesitated to disclose their situations to anyone. They recognized the dangers of reaching out to external support systems and questioned who they could trust:

- “I had to do something to keep my sanity, because I was not able to converse with my family back home in the islands” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 7)
- “I lived between the betrayals, trying to hide what I needed and acting as if nothing was wrong” (Weldon, 1999, p. 93)
- “She gave me a strange, sideways look. I hadn’t been ill once since owning the store, and I was afraid she’d seen the bruises on my face” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 23)
- “I think I wanted someone to help me, but for some reason, the abuse was never shown to others...I never told a soul what I was going through” (Cammock, 2011, p. 131)
- “Keeping Conor’s attacks secret seemed my only way of preventing the violence from being real, the only piece of this ugly situation that I could

control. I was alone again with the truth. I would be alone forever” (Steiner, 2009, p. 214)

- “I started to isolate myself for fear of them finding out” (Henderson, 2013, p. 42)

Three of the six survivors discuss utilizing disengaged strategies of coping under the extreme levels of violence that they were being subjected to. Using these psychological tactics of detachment to retreat from their bodies.

- “There were several times when I imagined myself back home in my room curled up into bed reading a book, with not a care in the world” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 11)
- “I was already beyond it; I had flown past it and above and could no longer be touched...I could not attend to him for I was somewhere else, always, somewhere he could no longer touch me” (Weldon, 1999, p. 6)
- “I had to develop a means of escape because I couldn’t physically escape. But I could escape mentally” (Cammock, 2011, p. 35)
- “Many days I would sit as still as stone while being mentally and emotionally demeaned, and I literally would allow my mind to tune out his words. My mind would take me to a peaceful state. This allowed me to survive the extreme mental and physical violence I had to live through” (Cammock, 2011, p. 90)

Denial became a common form of discourse as the violence escalated. The survivors held on to the beliefs that each violent episode was unique and declined to see their

circumstances other than as they had predicted. They hesitated to question their belief in a meaningful and safe benevolent world:

- “Instead I held on to the thought that nothing would interfere with my enchanted world” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 2)
- “This has to be the last. This can’t happen again... I didn’t want to see what he had promised he’d never do again” (Weldon, 1999, p. 6)
- “I remembered the good times at the lake and was turning my back on the important lessons I had learned in therapy. Why? Because it was easier than trying to continue to change. The ostrich was sticking its head back in the sand” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 103)
- “He promised the sun, the moon, the stars and all the galaxies in between. He promised that things would change for the better” (Cammock, 2011, p. 85)
- “I want to be with him forever. His mother never protected him, Winnie. Who can blame him for being so f\*\*king angry? He needs help, my help. You don’t abandon your soul mate” (Steiner, 2009, p. 196)
- “I wanted to make him happy, after all I was carrying his child and wanted to make him happy” (Henderson, 2013, p. 77)

Denial included attributing the abuser’s violent behavior externally. The survivors were not only in denial to themselves at this point. They were skilled at avoiding the topic, covering up bruises, isolating themselves, and creating lies in order to keep the secrets of the abuse within the walls of their home:

- “I became such a good liar that I even began to convince myself that I did in fact walk into those walls and fell down the stairs” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 22)



- “It was a game I played, pretending time erased the past. It was no more complicated really than telling myself my husband wasn’t really abusive; he was just angry much of the time” (Weldon, 1999, p. 76)
- “Like an ostrich its head in the sand. It was easier to pretend nothing had happened” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 22)
- “I always did a great job of hiding bruises, cuts, and scars” (Cammock, 2011, p. 131)
- “When my family and our wedding guests started arriving, the ten small reddish brown bruises around my neck were so faint no one noticed them” (Steiner, 2009, p. 160)
- “I could not handle my family life and the outside world view me as a failure” (Henderson, 2013, p. 34)

The survivors find themselves no longer able to look at each violent episode individually and struggle with understanding. Their feelings of hopelessness increase and they strive to find a meaning to their circumstances.

### **INTRUSION, WORKING THROUGH**

In these stages strategies of coping intensified as the physical and psychological violence in the relationships escalated. They struggled to uphold their identities as nurturer and caretaker while doubting their abilities to care for themselves in the face of constant fear and degradation.

Scenarios played over and over in their minds to the point of obsessive review.

Intrusive memories interrupted daily routines, their interactions with others, and their sleep patterns.

- “Managed to fight back by erasing things that didn’t fit with my fairy tale lifestyle held onto the thought that nothing would interfere. No matter what happened must do what is necessary to ensure that the unity of my family stayed intact even if it hurts me” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 2)
- “memories aggressive and ravenous as tigers will not let me forget” (Weldon, 1999, p. 12)
- “I’m worried about my abuser’s disapproval of me. I’ve lived only for his favor; and now it’s gone. This creates enormous fear inside me” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 208)
- “The abuse had finally begun to take its wear on my physical and mental capacities. All the energy I entered into the marriage with was beginning to drain from me, and with no sign of escape, I began to lose hope” (Cammock, 2011, p. 132)
- “Keeping Conor’s attacks secret seemed my only way of preventing the violence from being real, the only piece of this ugly situation that I could control. I was alone again with the truth. I would be alone forever” (Steiner, 2009, p. 214)
- “I was scared and ashamed and every time I spoke up I was told I should know better” (Henderson, 2013, p. 41)

This dissonance resulted in self-doubt and negative self-attributions. Fear and necessity became intertwined:

- “Resigned myself to the fact that all of the things he said were true, and I started to believe them because I didn’t think I would be anything else. Yes, I’m stupid, can’t do anything right” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 20)
- “Wrestling with rationality, he was not a violent man...I can’t be that stupid, I am not a battered wife” (Weldon, 1999, p. 14)
- “Oh, I hate myself. How can he respect me when I don’t even respect myself?” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 192)
- “The shame of the events that occurred was so debilitating it forced me into silence” (Cammock, 2011, p. 143)
- “When it came to a choice between him and me, I chose Conor” (Steiner, 2009, p. 218)
- “I was ashamed that this is happening to me. I was depressed and just trying to keep it together and would leave work if he was upset” (Henderson, 2013, p. 40)

The survivor’s account-making to this point was entirely internal, self-talk. The discourse reflected reasons including blame, shame, denying that outside support was necessary, and feeling that outside intervention would exacerbate the situation. The relationships depicted in the memoirs spanned varied lengths of time and progression of the physical and psychological violence also varied. That being said, it was evident that as the violence escalated the survivors began to work through their circumstances. There was a noticeable difference in the discourse beginning with the realization that wanting, wishing, praying, and sacrificing themselves to make it stop was not working.

They realized the violence was not going to end:

- “After all that happened, I started to have heart-to-heart talks to myself”  
(Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 38)
- “I felt I could no longer straddle the line between what I knew to be true and what I wanted to be true. There was an ambivalence I could no longer hold at bay, keeping everything in check, making sure I did not bleed my secret in public” (Weldon, 1999, p. 116)
- “My life began to flash through my mind, and I thought how I had basically thrown it all away” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 115)
- “Whether I liked it or not, my circumstances had now placed me in the category of helpless. I had become hostage to an individual who now held the reigns of my life” (Cammock, 2011, p. 1390)
- “I heard a faint voice. It came from inside me. You know this man. Use what you know. The voice was calm. Its tone suggested a shrug: Hey, it’s up to you to decide the outcome here. It’s okay if you want to give up right now. Him or you. Your choice” (Steiner, 2009, p. 252-253)
- “I felt as if I was constantly defending myself...nothing I said or did was enough to convince him I was on his side and not out to get him” (Henderson, 2013, p. 64)

For the survivors who had children, facing this reality brought new challenges, changes in perspective, and fears for both themselves and the children. Weldon (1999) recalled the dissonance she experienced: “I could have left anytime I wanted to. But I needed to think this through, all the way through...he is my husband. He is their

father” (p. 77). Five of the six survivors have children during the relationships discussed in the memoirs. Weldon (1999), Cammock (2011), and Henderson (2013) make references applicable to this thesis subject and are quoted below.

The safety of the children, physically and psychologically, was a priority; they felt guilt for ‘taking them’ from their fathers:

- “Disappointment for myself, an adult, is heartbreak enough, but feeling as if the choice I had made will forever disappoint my children is paralyzing” (Weldon, 1999, p. 167)
- Cammock (2011) did not express the guilt shared by the others due to the psychological abuse her daughter endured; “She would often tell me, in that angelic voice of hers, that I was a good person, and one day, we’re going to get out of this” (p. 63)
- “I have a lot of guilt for leaving their father. I am saddened, feel responsible, and guilty for the fact that he is not a good parent” (Henderson, 2013, p. 71)

While at the same time believing it was best:

- “Doing this for them as much as for me. It is better to have no father in the house at all than to have one that acted violently” (Weldon, 1999, p. 115)
- “Furthermore, statistics showed the older a child gets in domestic violence situations, the more likely the abuser will turn his attention to the child. This has to end” (Cammock, 2011, p. 131)
- “I could not stay in this environment if I wanted my children to see that a healthy relationship can exist and no one deserves to be abused” (Henderson, 2013, p. 74)

Weldon (1999) shared that this was the point where she began to get honest with her children concerning the abuse, they were her first confidants. After months of hiding and covering the bruises, lying when they asked if everything was alright or questioned a loud noise, she told the truth; “Brendan who was four years old, “Did Daddy hit you?” for the first time I did not lie to him or to any of the boys, “Yes”. I knew what I had to do” (p. 115).

The survivors worked to understand how they arrived to this point in their lives and began to seek out support first by confiding in friends and family. They found that doing so helped them to ‘sort through’ the recent events and view them from multiple perspectives:

- “After a while I took off the rose colored glasses, began to see things as they really were” (Davis-Weir, 2015, p. 2)
- “There is an eclipse when you are changing your life’s stance, a darkness as your past slides by your future. All you can hope for is that the light will emerge so you will see again” (Weldon, 1999, p. 118)
- “I wanted, with all my heart, to live the life I was meant to live. I think my sincerity finally showed through” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 143)
- “So I decided to look around for help...I had finally come to the realization that I should confide in someone” (Cammock, 2011, p. 143)
- “I managed to work my way down the list. I faxed a letter to my father at this hotel in Switzerland. I called my cousin. My three bridesmaids. My best friend from camp. Kathy from *Seventeen*. Everyone sounded stunned except for one person” (Steiner, 2009, p. 263)

- “It took leaving the situation, getting support, therapy, and positive reinforcement in order to gain clarity that I was a victim of domestic violence and only I had the power to change the circumstances for myself and my four children” (Henderson, 2013, p. 64)

With the exception of Davis-Weir (2015), they discuss widening their support system by reaching out to formal groups, law enforcement officials and community advocates.

As they continued to experience the intrusive memories, their self-talk intensified:

- “That small thought, okay this is who I am, this is my past is empowering. Accepting yourself and all that has happened to you, is the germination of the unfaltering, tireless strength necessary to rebuild a life without regret and negativity, without the suffocation of remorse” (Weldon, 1999, p. 197)
- “The insight I received came about as a result of going into my own mind and admitting why I allowed myself to be battered. This required total honesty and no excuses” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 140)
- “I was trying with the broken emotional equipment I had, using the scenarios I just explained to find a way to escape the fire I had been living through” (Cammock, 2011, p. 177)
- “Exactly where had shutting myself down, never getting mad, trying always to see Conor’s point of view, wanting to help him, gotten me?” (Steiner, 2009, p. 266)
- “Once I opened the door and began to confront the cycle of abuse, I knew I could not stay in this environment” (Henderson, 2013, p. 74)

Working through the events both cognitively and emotionally is reflected throughout the last stages of their accounts. Knowing they had to leave was both heartbreaking and freeing simultaneously.

\*Note: The memoir of Davis-Weir (2015) is not included in the analysis from this point forward. The explanation for exclusion is detailed in the discussion of Research Question 2 that follows.

Conscious decisions were made and they worked to focus on the future and not continue to ruminate over the past:

- “What compelled me to finally act was the abysmal realization that this is what my life would always be like” (Weldon, 1999, p. 113)
- “When I looked ahead, I could not see where the violence would end. But I could no longer look back” (Weldon, 1999, p. 119)
- “With my new determination to find my purpose in life, I started a new ritual. Each morning after completing all the opening chores at the store. I would sit at my desk and pray. I asked God what my mission in life was. I asked for divine guidance, knowledge, and wisdom. I was truly tired of running in circles and trying to be what others thought I should be” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 142)
- “Abuse did not encompass my entire life. I wasn’t born to be abused...It was simply a fact of life that had happened to me. Nothing more, nothing less. And now, I was able to reverse the effects of it” (Cammock, 2011, p. 186)
- “It was my elemental mistake that I did not listen to my own voice trying to warn me about the danger I was in. Why didn’t I listen then? Would I listen now?” (Steiner, 2009, p. 269)



- “The one thing an abusive individual cannot tolerate is the victim taking a stand, but it is the only way to break the cycle of violence for the next generation” (Henderson, 2013, p. 72-73)

## **COMPLETION, IDENTITY CHANGE**

Coping skills that they possess are revealed, and the survivors discuss how they left their abusers at this stage of the accounts. They make plans for the future and the account reflects how their behaviors are in-line with their intentions. Their external support systems are widened and the breadth and depth of disclosure increases. Different methods of leaving their abusers were used, all involved the criminal justice system in some capacity. They did so fearing the potential repercussions; knowing that the risk of violence increases when a victim attempts to leave their abuser:

- “I did not dare to let on what I would do, I was afraid of what he could do to me...to the boys” (Weldon, 1999, p. 118)
- “I don’t know if being served the divorce papers set him off or if he was just vindictively acting out, as always” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 125)
- “I slept with a steak knife under my pillow so I could feel some semblance of protection” (Cammock, 2011, p. 180)
- “I reached for the phone. I was alive. I took a deep breath and picked up the receiver to call the police” (Steiner, 2009, p. 254)
- “Failure to recognize that trying to leave an abusive relationship is the most dangerous time” (Henderson, 2013, p. 92)

The discourse illustrated the struggles that the survivors sustained when they looked for answers to why this happened in their relationships. They have memories

of beautiful times - courtship, marriage, childbirth and then the horrific painful events that followed.

They found it difficult to accept the reality of the end of the relationship and the dissolution of the family:

- “Divorce is so painfully and inextricable tied to immense personal hurt that just entering the Richard J. Daley Center on Clark and Dearborn streets would make me feel as battered and dejected as a night after he hit me” (Weldon, 1999, p. 139)
- “Admitting to the mistakes I had made with my kids brought about a healing in my daughters’ lives. It took the pressure off them to know that I owned up to my responsibility” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 175)
- “I began to realize, through therapy this wicked fiery furnace of a marriage was just one aspect of my life” (Cammock, 2011, p. 185)
- “He almost killed you, Leslie, I said to myself as I sat clutching the phone until my hand ached. This struck me as a pretty good reason not to see him. A second later it would seem irrational and paranoid-how could I think my own husband might try to kill me? But he had” (Steiner, 2009, p.275)
- “It is not acceptable behavior, as a mother I want my children to grow up knowing what a healthy, loving relationship looks like!” (Henderson, 2013, p. 74)

Their efforts to cope with feelings of fear of future violence and feelings of loneliness and emptiness were evident in the memoirs, with the exception of Henderson (2013):

- “Sometimes the only one you can forgive is yourself... I knew, that this hurt that I was feeling would always be there” (Weldon, 1999, p. xvi)
- “If he could have gotten his hands on me, he would have killed me. I had no doubt about that, but I no longer cared. My heart and soul had been held captive by his threats too long” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 129)
- “Abuse renders a woman incapable of trusting anyone else... she finds it difficult to form relationships with new persons” (Cammock, 2011, p. 176)
- “This was loneliness: The only person who would understand was the last person I could turn to. One thought broke through the clutter in my mind: I couldn’t let loving Conor destroy the future, even if I had to go it alone” (Steiner, 2009, p. 270)

The survivors presented evidence of identity change and corresponding behaviors but as they expressed in the memoirs, this self-realization was an arduous process. In order to change and claim their new identity they had to accept how they had once identified:

- “I could no longer pretend I was not who I was, a battered woman, a beaten wife. My husband abused me. Nothing prepared me for the blazing shock of this admission. Nothing was as frightening as saying it out loud” (Weldon, 1999, p. 116)
- “Change is something we are very fearful of. Why else would we remain with an abuser? Our victimization is deeply rooted. It is also a part of us that we have grown familiar with. But it isn’t comfortable, and eventually we will

understand that familiarity and comfort can be two very different things”  
(Schwartz, 2000, p. 157)

➤ “The emotional damage it did over time was such that it wore me down. If I had faced it, then I would have had serious problems dealing with myself”  
(Cammock, 2011, p. 144)

➤ “Conor is gone. He may appear in my dreams every few years, but he’ll never have power over me again. I don’t regret loving him. But I’m happy to bury our past in a corner of my basement, next to the furnace, where it belongs”  
(Steiner, 2009, p. 322)

➤ “Now that I am divorced and knowing that I do not have to see him allows me the freedom to feel safe again and once and for all eliminate the victim mindset” (Henderson, 2013, p. 80)

With the work of self-reflection, and the empathic listening and understanding of external support, they began to gain a new perception of themselves. They found the strength and will to take control of their decisions and future:

➤ “I slowly began to replace thinking from a position of dread into a frame of mind of positive anticipation. I had to retrain myself not to think, Oh God what will he do next? to, What will I do next? (Weldon, 1999, p.199)

➤ “You make up your mind that you are tired of being in the victim mode, and you just stop doing it. I was sick and I am now well” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 155)

➤ “I was no longer going to sit back and be a bystander to my own life”  
(Cammock, 2011, p. 197)

- “Most people don’t get second chances in life. I was able to marry again, to raise children with a stable, loving man, and to pursue a career that has given me financial freedom and professional rewards beyond my childhood dreams” (Steiner, 2009, p. 322)
- “It has taken me almost a year to recover and feel whole again. I am now able to stand up for myself and my children. I refuse to be battered again...I have emerged as a victor, not a victim” (Henderson, 2013, p. 80)

With the exception of Cammock (2011) and Henderson (2013), they reflect on how they began building larger support groups, having greater focus on their children and family, and reconnecting with those they had been isolated from:

- “I started soliciting groups where I could give speeches about parenting, about the humor in daily life” (Weldon, 1999, p. 196)
- “I located a local volunteer agency and told them that I wanted to work with battered women” (Schwartz, 2000, p.176)
- “I was struck by the kindness of people that I barely knew. The vet. My therapist. All the people at school who did not ask questions” (Henderson, 2013, p. 301)

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The first question was:

Did the memoirs reflect evidence of Identity Change as depicted in the model for successful engagement?

All but one of the six memoirs (discussed below in Research Question 2) reflected evidence of Identity Change, both explicitly and implicitly. Weldon (1999)

revealed early in her account that she refused to call herself a ‘battered wife’ and would repeat ‘I am not a battered wife’ as she was struggled with intrusive memories. As her account develops and she talks about sorting through those traumatic memories, she states “I could no longer pretend I was not who I was, a battered woman, a beaten wife. My husband abused me. Nothing prepared me for the blazing shock of this admission. Nothing was as frightening as saying it out loud” (p. 116). She goes on to say that it was not until she could make this admission that she was able to end the relationship and leave her abuser for good. Hammock (2011) shared that she also had to work through the views that she held “It was important for me to identify within myself the key areas he attacked and see myself as a victor and as an overcomer in those areas” (p. 185).

As evident by their published memoirs, the survivors explain that their primary instrument used for coping has been writing “Equated to an individual who has been traumatized, when a starfish loses a limb, regeneration and new growth occurs. That is the exact progression I have chronicled through the creation of this book, a new beginning and transformation” (Henderson, 2013, p. viii).

Their behaviors are indicative of their new identities. Writing the memoirs in hopes that they will reach others who are involved in a relationship with an abusive intimate partner or know someone who is reflects the generative growth that Harvey et al. (1990a) believe is facilitated by accounts. The survivors expressed how gaining the tools necessary to effectively cope with their experiences gave them the resolve to share their stories in the hope of helping others. “Others may also come to cherish these human stories we tell in and after our seasons of deepest anguish” (Weldon,

1999, p. xi). They further this generativity by speaking in public and contributing to the IPV advocacy community: “I located a local volunteer agency and told them that I wanted to work with battered women. They put me in touch with a shelter” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 176); “It was at that time I determined somehow, when I got out of this, I was going to become a voice for those women who had no power” (Cammock, 2011, p.243). Harvey et al. (1990c) explain how stories may be re-told and by sharing these stories individuals gain an enlightened feeling, and enhanced will and hope. This motivation may involve a desire to contribute to others in a somewhat selfless way and strongly represent an uplifting experience.

A common attributional pattern for the survivors early in their accounts was self-blame: “you secretly question how you’ve brought out these bad qualities in him” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 202), “I am saddened, feel guilty for the fact that he is not a good parent” (Henderson, 2013, p. 71). There was a feeling of ‘I can fix him’ early in the accounts: “Every other woman had given up on Conor. I wouldn’t. He needed someone who loved him enough to help him” (Steiner, 2009, p. 190); “I came to the rescue. I could make this problem go away. I had all the answers” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 31); “I could perform the magic, saving him, saving me, saving all of us” (Weldon, 1999, p. 98). Harvey et al. (1991) suggest that self-directed negative attributions are one of the most common patterns for survivors and the development of an account provides more understanding and takes the responsibility off of self as the responsible agent.

Through their accounts they did obtain a deeper understanding of the events and saw that they were not responsible for their partner’s behaviors “If I tell the truth,

then perhaps it will help to dissolve the myths about abuse: that battered women ask for it, that they are familiar with violence, that they don't want to leave the abuse, that it was somehow their fault" (Weldon, 1999, p. 2190. These early accounts were developed and reviewed exclusively in their own thoughts. Harvey et al. (1990c) discussed how this type of account-making immediately after trauma was common and that the pervasive waking thoughts of many people were compelled by unresolved mental turmoil and nagging worries.

While they come to acknowledge that they are not responsible for the actions of the abuser; they do also come to realize and accept responsibility for their actions: "The gift I give to my boys and myself is the honest account of how and why this happened in our lives and how I could have possibly allowed it, how I stopped it all, and how we survived" (Weldon, 1999, p. 219); "You can't help a woman who has been beaten by stroking her hair or rubbing her shoulders while telling her how sorry you are. Of course you have to show compassion... what I'm trying to say is, pity will not help her extricate herself from the situation – making her question her own motives will" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 177).

With this acknowledgement comes empowerment: "Don't do as I did and keep it to yourself and silently scream, hoping someone will hear you and come to your rescue; only you can come to your rescue" (Cammock, 2011, p. 151); "It's taken me years to understand the particular, dangerous chink in my self-esteem that let Conor slip in. But in one profound way I was lucky. While still in my twenties, I learned to spot – and stay away from – abusive men" (Steiner, 2009, p. 322).



The survivors now have increased an introspectiveness; “Three months alone, without having to hide bruises and swollen eyes, brought a tincture of clarity, as well as questions that were too confusing to answer” (Steiner, 2009, p. 235). Through their accounts, they saw that there was so much more to them than wife, mother, and victim; “Abuse didn’t encompass my entire life. I wasn’t born to be abused, I wasn’t created to be abused, and I wasn’t called to be abused. It was simply a fact of life that had happened to me. Nothing more, nothing less. And now, I was able to reverse the effects of it” (Cammock, 2013, p. 186).

The second research question asked:

Was functional engagement in this stage correlated with permanently leaving the abusive relationship?

Functional engagement in the Identity Change stage was exemplified in five of the six survivors’ accounts. Furthermore, this functional engagement was associated with permanently leaving the abusive relationships by these survivors.

Weldon (1999) “We moved to a house where my children felt safe and it didn’t hurt me to breathe. A house that had only known love in its walls. I could not change the past, but I could shape the future. I would live with my boys in a house where no one felt afraid. I would make for my boys a home without ghosts, without the shadows of tears and hurt. I would make for my boys a future that did not include violence” (p. 247).

Schwartz (2000) “Because I got well myself, I was able to be attracted to, and attract, a healthy man. In the same respect, I began to attract healthy events and people into my life” (p. 176).

Cammock (2011) “As we walked out of the courtroom and stood on the courthouse steps, I extended my hand to his and said, “This is it. It’s over.” Imagine that what once began as a love story was now ending with a handshake” (p. 251).

Steiner (2009) “Some women don’t learn from their mistakes...Conor is gone...he’ll never have power over me again” (p. 322).

Henderson (2013) “Now that I am divorced and knowing that I don’t have to see him allows me the freedom to feel safe again and once and for all eliminate the victim mindset” (p. 80).

The account of author Davis-Weir (2015), did not illustrate any of the characteristics of functional engagement in the Identity Change stage. She engaged and progressed through the earlier stages of traumatic event, outcry, denial, and began working through as illustrated in her discourse quoted earlier in this analysis.

Her attempt to work through the personal meanings of the trauma was presented as quotes from other texts she referenced in the memoir. She discusses the events without expressing the levels of intrusive thoughts or unanswered questions as the other survivors in this analysis had. One prominent deviation was her focus on external attributions to both her behavior and that of her abuser, primarily blaming God and the devil “What kind of a loving God are you?” (p. 31).

Her initial attempt to leave the relationship was on the urging of her abuser’s friend suggesting she move to another state with him and his wife. She describes initially refusing the offer and he getting very angry at her refusal, so she submitted; “The next day I gave my friend my response and as was expected, he became angry and reminded me of the numerous times that I was abused. So I gathered a bit of

courage and finally said yes” (p. 41). They put her and the children up in a hotel until plans were finalized to move out of state. She was located by her abuser and he begged her to return home; “I still loved my husband and for the first time in a very long time, I felt like he loved me too” (p. 43). She called her friend to tell him her decision, she stated; “He rushed over to the hotel and he shook all 112 pounds of me (in a nice way), and asked if I was crazy. He began to remind me of the things I experienced at the hands of this person, the black eyes, busted lips, and bruised marks all over my body...He also reminded me that apart from him, I had no real friends in that part of town” (p. 44). She goes on to describe how he “did a good job” at convincing her, and that she and her children moved away with them.

Davis-Weir eventually moved back to Jamaica for a time to be with her family and discusses one more conversation with the friend regarding threats the abuser was making. She stated her friend; “made the long trip from where he resided to ‘straighten’ me out again” (p. 48).

Her memoir goes on to discuss her religious faith, support for those involved in IPV, and brief synopsis of her life currently. There is no further mention of how or when her relationship with the abuser ended.

I was confused by the organization of this text and her repetitive reference to self-help books and the Bible. Her relationship with the friend that she references raised concern, they did not have what I would consider a healthy, platonic relationship.

Evidence of, and functional engagement in, the Identity Change stage as depicted in the model was reflected in five of the six memoirs. The authors of the five: Weldon

(1999); Schwartz (2000); Cammock (2011); Steiner (2009); and Henderson (2013), all recounted permanently leaving the abusive relationship.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Harvey et al. (1990c) believe that accounts are more than the sum of their individual attributions and that emphasis should be placed on the Gestalt, or overall story encompassed in the accounts. They contend that there isn't a need for one "singularly definitive" procedure for learning about accounts, and that operational definitions need to be established according to the theoretical framework under test.

As illustrated above the *Account-Making in Response to Severe Stress* model (Harvey et al., 1990a) was a useful tool in gaining insight into the cognitive and memorial processes of the six women whose memoirs were used for this research. Their accounts reflected their bewilderment when first faced with violence inflicted by a partner they had expected to share a life with. Their disbelief and denial were evident and they found themselves questioning everything around them, bringing them to emotional and physical exhaustion. Because of their hesitance to reach out to external support their accounts consisted completely in self-talk to the point, at times, of excessive review. Three of the survivors used detachment strategies by imagining themselves separated from the abuse they were suffering. Hiding bruises and making excuses was part of their everyday lives.

As they began to work through their accounts further they were sorting through the self-doubt and blame, realizing that no matter what tactic they used, the violence in their home was not going to end. They experienced dissonance through the concern

for the safety of themselves and their children, and the guilt for having no choice but to leave. As they reached out to support, they began to sort through their experiences and their self-talk intensified. They began to be able to see that they were not responsible for the violence being inflicted and attribute it to the abuser.

Through that realization became one of their biggest impediments. They expressed that acknowledging that he was to blame did not alleviate the strong emotional attachment they held for their abuser.

Four of the six women revealed that therapy, through counseling and support groups aided in their process of permanently leaving and building a future: “I began to realize through therapy, this wicked fiery furnace of a marriage was just one aspect of my life...you must begin to imagine a life after abuse and focus on the good that will reflect the remainder of your life” (Cammock, 2011, p. 185); “I spent two hours each week with my therapist...At the end of every session I expected her to proclaim, sadly, that years of therapy were needed to fix me upso I never married a psychopath again. Instead, we laughed and talked about my future” (Steiner, 2009, p. 290-291); “From experience, I can assure you that counseling will change your outlook about life – virtually every aspect of it” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 225); “I was one of them, they were part of me: a sorority of good, kind, smart, trusting women who loved men who abused them” (Weldon, 1999, p. xv).

Similarities in the trauma symptoms of IPV and of other traumas studied in the frame of account-making were discussed in the Justification section of this thesis, highlighting the relevance of using the model for my analysis. The results revealed that the account-making of the women-authors who suffered the traumas of IPV

communicated positive outcomes comparable to individuals in the studies by Harvey et al. referenced in this thesis.

The discourse illustrated a new found sense of empowerment, and control over self and future decisions. Progressing through the stages their negative self-attributions shifted to correspond with placing responsibility on the abuser for his behavior. They were able to develop their accounts further by reaching out to external support systems, which in-turn aided in relieving their sense of helplessness.

Controlling and working through the intrusive memories allowed them to focus their energies on friends, family, and their future. The hope and will that they held developed into the process of generativity, allowing them to deal with the trauma by aspiring to strengthen others in similar situations.

I acknowledge the limitations of my research including the small sample of IPV survivors in my study, as well as the utilization of a model that has no prior extant research in the area of IPV. Also recognizing any unconscious bias on my part that may have played a part in my analysis. With that being said, I believe that there are several points contained in this analysis that could be built upon with further research and used in advocacy.

First, this sample has shown that the account-making process facilitated in their leaving the abusive relationships. Research has shown difficulties in obtaining the perspective of the victim and also the bias victims are sometimes met with when they seek external support. I believe providing the tools necessary to develop an account, whether that be through writing or face-to-face; making the victim aware of the model and providing guidance, would be an effective inclusion in advocacy.

Next, exposing counselors and advocates who work with victims to the effectiveness of account-making. Greater emphasis upon systematic, in-depth account-making may prove to be one of the most promising approaches to coping with life's major stressors (Harvey et al., 1990c). They believe that the public at large, as well as the health-service community needs to be more familiar with this logic and work toward nourishing the gift of account-making. Utilizing the process to promote self-awareness in advocacy; increasing the victim's introspection would facilitate in the developing coping strategies and promote empowerment. "I excused his rage because I could not bear seeing him as he really was. That meant I would see myself as I was. But it was not until I could make that admission that the abuse could possibly end. It was not until I could say out loud what he had done that the carousel of pain would stop, and I could get off the painted horse and walk away" (Weldon, 1999, p. xv).

Also, using this model for further research in the field of IPV to gain insight from the victim's perspective. Similar to Jerome Bruner's conclusion on the topic of life as narrative: "I cannot imagine a more important psychological research project than one that addresses itself to the 'development of autobiography' – how our way of telling about ourselves changes, and how these accounts come to take control of our ways of live. Yet I know of not a single comprehensive study on this topic" (Bruner, 1987, p. 15).

Taking responsibility for decisions made in the relationship is not accepting blame for the abuse. Someone cannot be blamed for what they don't know, and many victims do not know how to navigate their way out. With guidance and the right tools they can gain the strength they need to guide their own futures. "We have to own up to



our faults and mistakes. We can learn from them and move on. If we don't take this important step, we will remain emotionally tied to our abuser. We must not only leave physically, but emotionally as well" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 179). Harvey et al. (1990c) have seen that self-insight and the sense of personal control contribute positively to self-esteem.

There are references to closure when discussing account-making; I feel with this form of violence and personal loss, closure is a difficult goal to attain. "Relationships are as much symbolic events and images to the involved parties as they are interactional episodes or histories. We may put spaces or time or other people between ourselves and formerly significant others but we maintain the relationships in our mind" (Harvey et al., 1982, p. 119). The work continues throughout the lifetime, a point that was made in several of the memoirs. Survivors sharing their stories are not only helping current victims but also continuing to account their experiences. Harvey et al. (1990c) explain that the central thesis of their book is that account-making is especially beneficial to the person trying to come to grips psychologically with personal loss, and to find something of value as a consequence.

"Imagine the changes that could be made in our society if more formerly battered women began to speak out about their own experiences and help others who are living the nightmare. One person, speaking from experience, can make a great impact. But, if you've never been abused, all you can do is quote statistics" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 179).

If I've accomplished nothing else with this research, I've spoken up. By providing a victim something relatable, to know that she is not alone and can ascertain

the tools to be autonomous and free from violence is the greatest gift we 'who've been there' can offer.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

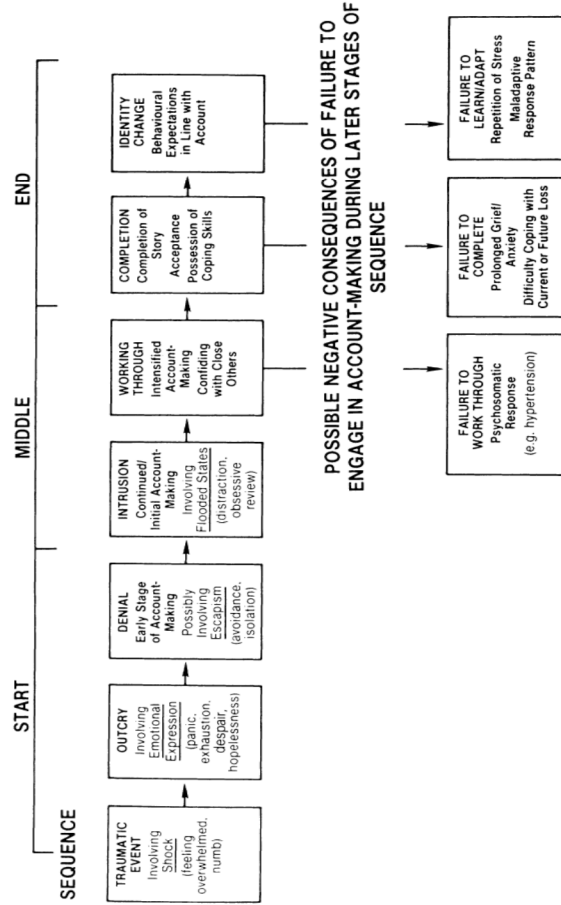


Figure 1 Model of occurrence of account-making in stress response sequence (adapted from Horowitz, 1986, p. 41)

Harvey et al., 1990b, p. 197

## APPENDIX B

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