Girls, Not Victims:
Exploring the Promise of Empowerment-Oriented
Partner Abuse Prevention Education in Australia

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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B. Ed., B. App. Sci. (Honours)

Discipline of Psychology, School of Health Sciences,
Portfolio of Science Engineering and Health

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Declaration

I certify that, except where due acknowledgement has been made, this work is that of the author alone; this work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of this thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Signed:

Kylie Ann Murphy

Date:
Acknowledgements

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Dissemination of Information

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Summary

Partner abuse in this thesis is defined as any pattern of interaction in a romantic or intimate relationship with the potential to result in social, emotional, or physical harm to one or both partners. In Australia, partner abuse is prevalent and costly. This thesis focuses on youth-targeted partner abuse prevention education (PAPE) as one strategy to prevent and minimise the harms associated with partner abuse.

To date, few rigorous evaluations of PAPE programs have been reported on, and none of these are Australian. While some overseas PAPE program evaluations have returned positive findings, it remains unclear what program components contribute to PAPE program effectiveness and how these components work. Despite this, a widely accepted assumption in Australia is that a focus on gender inequality (i.e., the relative powerlessness of girls and women) is a minimum requirement for effective PAPE.

A major objective of this research project was to test the potential efficacy of an approach to PAPE that eschews the customary focus on traditional gender stereotypes and, instead, attempts to capitalise on girls’ potential for positive self-agency. Specifically, a pilot program was developed with the aim to empower adolescent girls with skills for resisting the development of abusive relationship dynamics. This program was based on a gender- and sexuality-inclusive ‘dyadic slippery-slope’ model of partner abuse, which was developed for the purposes of this project and which conceptualised partner abuse as a dynamic two-person process resulting in harm, rather than as gender-determined behaviours perpetrated by one partner against the other.

This working model acknowledges the role of socio-environmental and developmental factors in determining one’s behaviour with a partner, but focuses more closely on the dyadic nature of partner abuse, and deliberately highlights factors potentially amenable to youth-targeted preventative psycho-education. This model recognises that chronic partner abuse is more likely when warning-sign behaviours (WSBs) are responded to accommodatingly and/or aggressively (as opposed to assertively), and that assertive responses to WSBs are more difficult, and less likely to be effective, if earlier responses to WSBs have been accommodative or aggressive. Possible reasons why assertive responses might become more difficult, and less effective in averting harmful outcomes, if previous responses have been non-assertive, are posited in the model. The model proposes that pre-existing emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural vulnerabilities can be exacerbated by one’s very exposure to WSBs, such that dynamics characterised by secrecy/silence, overdependence, anger and/or power imbalance can rapidly become entrenched. WSBs in the dyadic slippery-slope model
fall into five categories: general dominance-seeking, possessive/jealous, denigrating, conflict-controlling, and retaliatory behaviours. This working model, as well as key concepts drawn from Self-Determination theory, provided the conceptual foundations of the program trialled in this project.

In order to evaluate the impact of the program, a number of new measures were developed, including the Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD) scale. Principal components analysis revealed that, for the adolescent girls in the scale development study, the TREAD measure comprised three inter-related TREAD sub-constructs: Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD, Denigration TREAD, and Conflict-Retaliation TREAD. Low TREAD, particularly low Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD, was found to be associated with greater exposure to WSB by a partner. The program was piloted in ten secondary schools in Victoria with self-nominating adolescent girls in a special girls-group format over the course of one school day. Following their participation in the program, girls demonstrated increased TREAD and reported decreased exposure to WSB. Importantly, they were also less likely to endorse victim-blaming explanations for maltreatment by a partner.

Eight stand-alone papers comprise the body of this thesis. Paper One resulted from a review of the partner abuse research literature that exposed an apparent disjuncture between partner abuse research in developed nations and the way that partner abuse prevention education is practised in Australia. Paper Two presents the results of a preliminary online survey that focussed on young women’s experiences and perceptions of WSBs. Paper Three sets out the theoretical foundations of the program that was piloted in this project. Paper Four charts the development of the TREAD scale. Paper Five reports on significant aspects of the pre-program data collected from WSB-exposed adolescent girls. Paper Six reports the results of the pre-post program evaluation, including data collected from previously WSB-exposed and non-exposed girls. Paper Seven outlines a possible approach to delivering skills-focused empowerment-oriented PAPE in regular, mixed-gender secondary school classrooms. Paper Eight summarises evidence that supports the use of the dyadic slippery-slope model of partner abuse in the development and evaluation of PAPE programs generally.

In all, the findings discussed in this thesis challenge approaches to PAPE that presume that girls lack power to influence the course of their relationships. Given their gender-inclusiveness, the TREAD construct and the skills-based empowerment approach piloted in this project should be tested for their potential utility in mixed-gender education contexts. Further research is also warranted to examine the efficacy and social validity (i.e., likely uptake in schools) of empowerment-oriented skills-focused PAPE relative to challenge-oriented gender-focused programming.
Introduction

A range of prevention initiatives have been tried across Australia to reduce the prevalence of partner abuse, particularly partner violence by men against women (e.g., Donovan & Vlais, 2005; Flood, Fergus, Heenan, 2009; Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, 2003). Prevention education on this topic has aimed to raise young people’s awareness of different forms of partner abuse, its unacceptability, its early signs, and the services available to female victims and their children. However, there is little evidence that any Australian education campaign to prevent partner abuse has been effective (Donovan & Vlais, 2005; Flood, Fergus, Heenan, 2009; Quadara, 2010). A major concern driving the research reported on in this thesis was that raising young people’s awareness in this way might not be enough to stop women and their children from needing partner abuse victim services. It is argued in this thesis that, in addition to awareness, young people need skills to more safely navigate their relationship pathways. While there are a range of other promising avenues for the prevention of partner abuse (see Whitaker, Baker, & Arias, 2007), the focus of this thesis is on the primary prevention of partner abuse via youth-targeted education. The central tenet of this thesis is that Australia’s current approach to youth-targeted partner abuse prevention education (or PAPE) is compromised by its failure to provide young people opportunities to learn wiser ways to interpret and respond to potentially pivotal relationship situations before harm occurs. It is argued that a skills-focused, empowerment-oriented approach is worth exploring as a possible alternative to the status quo.

In an earlier study, adolescent girls’ beliefs and intentions vis-a-vis romantic relationships were explored (Murphy & Smith, 2010a). The results of that study pointed to the importance of examining how relationships become abusive (not just how they are abusive) and ‘the role that would-be victims might play—with the help of evidence-based empowerment-oriented prevention programs—in reducing the harms caused to women’ (p. 644). The end of that study marked the beginning of the current project. In this Introduction, the project rationale is set out, including a summary of the prevalence, impacts, and causes of partner abuse in Australia and other developed nations. Australia’s current approach to youth-targeted partner abuse prevention is then critiqued. It is argued that youth-targeted PAPE is warranted as part of a broader raft of strategies to prevent partner abuse, but that it (a) needs to be based on a gender-inclusive understanding of partner abuse, and therefore target girls as much as boys and (b) needs to promote skills, in addition to awareness, that might help young people resist the development of abusive relationship dynamics. This chapter ends by setting out the major objectives of the current project and an overview of the chapters that follow.
Nature and Prevalence of Partner Abuse

Definitional issues are rife in this area (see, for example, Cornelius & Resseguie, 2006; Hickman, Jaycox & Aronoff, 2004). In Australia, ‘family violence’ and ‘domestic violence’ tend to be used interchangeably to refer to what is often referred to as ‘intimate partner violence’ in the research literature; yet even the latter term is variably defined and not unanimously favoured in the research community. The term ‘partner abuse’ (Malley-Morrison, Hamel, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010) is used in this thesis, instead of intimate partner violence, because (a) ‘abuse’ compared to ‘violence’ better reflects the psychological manifestations of the problem and (b) use of the word ‘intimate’ implies that the relationship between the partners involves sexual activity and/or emotional closeness, and this is often not the case in abusive relationships. Herein, partner abuse refers to any pattern of potentially harmful interaction between partners or ex-partners, cohabitating or not, including but not restricted to acts of physical aggression. Psychological abuse refers to patterns of behaviour which, in the absence of physical force or threats of physical harm, are likely to result in social and/or emotional harm. Acts or threats of physical aggression with the potential to cause fear, pain, or injury, only, are referred to as violence.

In Victoria alone, police responded to over 12,000 family violence incidents in 2010/2011, and this rate is increasing (Victoria Police, 2011). Owing to the high prevalence and serious impacts of partner violence in Australia and in other developed nations, attention has begun to shift towards developing interventions to prevent the violence before it occurs (Rhatigan, Moore, & Street, 2005; Schewe, 2002; VicHealth, 2007). Stopping the violence before it starts describes the intent behind primary prevention programs. Primary prevention targets large populations of individuals (e.g., school students) who may or may not have already engaged in or experienced abusive behaviour (Rhatigan, Moore, & Street, 2005). The shift towards primary prevention has contributed to a closer focus on the nature and extent of abuse in adolescents’ romantic relationships.

In the US, ‘dating violence’ has come to be seen as a crisis issue in itself, believed to be responsible for hundreds of teenage homicides each year (Smith & Donnelly, 2001). Prothrow-Stith (1991) refers to adolescence as a ‘dangerous passage’ because a vulnerability to violence goes with the developmental characteristics of the age. She notes, for example, narcissism and acceptance of mythical notions about romance as points of particular vulnerability to violence in adolescents’ relationships. Approximately 12 percent of heterosexual high school boys and girls report having been physically victimised to some degree, at least once, by a partner in the previous year, but this percentage is as high as 40 percent in some areas (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008; Foshee & Matthew,
Approximately 13 percent of gay adolescent girls and 9 percent of gay adolescent boys report experiencing violence by a dating partner (Halpern, Young, Waller, Martin, & Kupper, 2004). Victimisation from psychological partner abuse is even higher, with approximately 29 percent of heterosexual high school students and 20 percent of gay high school students reporting having been psychologically abused by a partner in the past year (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001; Halpern, Young, Waller, Martin, & Kupper). While girls and boys are about equally likely to experience abusive behaviour by a partner, girls are more likely to receive severe injuries from partner violence (e.g., Foshee et al., 2009) and are more likely to feel hurt or upset by psychological and physical abuse (e.g., Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2006; Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O’Leary, 2001).

Many adults who use violence with their partners begin doing so during adolescence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006), with the first episode typically occurring by age 15, but sometimes at ages as young as 11 (Miller-Johnson, Gorman-Smith, Sullivan, Orpinas, & Simon, 2009; Taylor, Stein, Mack, Horwood, & Burden, 2008). Effective prevention programs for adolescents are therefore seen as being essential not only to prevent violence in young people’s immediate relationships, but also to circumvent possible trajectories towards violence in their future relationships (Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2002; Cornelius & Resseguie, 2006; Sudermann, Jaffe, & Hastings, 1995).

Research on adolescent partner abuse is more prolific in the US compared with Australia. However, research with Australian youth is particularly relevant if the aim is to develop youth-targeted programs to prevent partner abuse in Australia. At present at least, there are cultural differences between Australian and American youth, including between the ways they label romantic relationship experiences. For example, ‘dating’ and ‘dating violence’ are not concepts to which Australian adolescents relate (Crime Research Centre, 2001; see also Barter, 2009, for differences between US and British teens). While injuries and deaths caused by dating violence have a high profile in the US (e.g., http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/us/04abuse.html?pagewanted=all ; http://abcnews.go.com/US/teen-dating-violence-lauren-astley-murdered-boyfriend-accused/story?id=14010538 ; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/12/lausd-teen-dating-violence_n_1007250.html ), the issue of abuse in adolescents’ romantic relationships is relatively unheard of in Australia. Unlike issues such as body image, cyber-bullying, and alcohol abuse, partner abuse barely registers as an issue affecting the health and wellbeing of Australian adolescents. However, the impact of inter-parental abuse on the wellbeing of Australian youth is beginning to attract attention (e.g., Parkinson, 2011), and the prevention of adult partner abuse through youth-targeted interventions in Australia is seen as important.
(Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). In sum, while partner abuse in adult couples is seen as a significant social issue in both Australia and the US, caution must be exercised in generalising findings based on US teen samples to Australian adolescents (see also Hinton, 2008).

One landmark study has been undertaken with Australian youth. In 1998, the Australian Commonwealth commissioned a nationwide study into young Australians’ direct and vicarious (i.e., parental) experiences of partner abuse (Crime Research Centre, 2001). The results of the qualitative component of this study (i.e., interviews with mainstream and high-risk youth, respectively) suggested that education for young people in the highest-risk groups—such as homeless, indigenous, and developmentally traumatised youth—is unlikely, on its own, to prevent abuse in their relationships. Intervening early to address stressors and interpersonal processes in the family of origin offers more promise in high-risk cases than do school-based education programs (Crime Research Centre, 2001; Foshee, Benefield, Ennett, Bauman, & Suchindran, 2004; Schwartz, Hage, Bush, & Burns, 2006).

However, the quantitative component of the Crime Research Centre’s (2001) study, employing a nationally representative sample of 5,000 Australian youth, showed that partner abuse occurs in mainstream Australian society at high enough rates to warrant universal prevention education with all youth, as well as more intensive additional interventions with particularly vulnerable youth. Respondents reported on acts of abuse that they had personally experienced, perpetrated, or witnessed between their parents/carers. Importantly, a large range of abusive behaviours were surveyed from the perspective of both perpetrator and victim, and distinctions were made between behaviours that had occurred ‘once or twice’ versus those that had occurred repeatedly. This methodology has obvious advantages over surveys (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996) that collect only categorical ‘yes or no’ responses, from only women, and only pertaining to victimisation experiences.

Over one-fifth of the young Australians surveyed reported awareness of partner violence against their mother or female carer (22%) and/or father or male carer (21%), where partner violence was defined as ‘thrown something at’, ‘tried to hit’, ‘actually hit’ (not in self-defence), or ‘threatened to use a knife or gun’. Most young people who reported exposure to parental violence reported observing bi-directional violence by their mother and father (14%); fewer reported only uni-directional violence against their mother (9%) or father (8%). Very little of the bi-directional inter-parental violence observed by young people was committed only in self-defence: Only 1 percent of youth reported that their mother used violence only defensively, and likewise for fathers. Forms of psychological abuse between parents were also examined. Over a quarter of the respondents had witnessed their mother (28%) or father (25%) be repeatedly ‘yelled loudly at’. Over one in ten reported that their mother (16%) or
father (10%) had been repeatedly ‘put down or humiliated’. Smaller proportions reported that their mother (6%) or father (3%) had been repeatedly not allowed to ‘see family or friends’.

The same study (Crime Research Centre, 2001) found that the range of physically and psychologically abusive acts witnessed against mothers was greater in cases where bi-directional violence had been witnessed compared to cases where male-only violence had occurred. Similarly, abuse against fathers was worse in cases of bi-directional violence compared to cases involving female-only violence. The more severe outcomes found in cases of bi-directional violence compared to cases of male-only and female-only violence, along with the more problematic attitudes associated with witnessing bi-directional violence, led the authors to conclude that bi-directional partner violence is ‘the most serious and entrenched of the three situations’ (p. 110). US research has led to similar conclusions (e.g., Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007).

Examining young people’s own relationships, the Crime Research Centre (2001) study found that over half (54%) of the 12-14 year olds surveyed claimed to have had a boyfriend or girlfriend, increasing to 83% for 19-20 year olds, and about one-third of the relationship-experienced girls (36%) and boys (37%) reported experiencing some act of physical aggression by a partner. The proportion of relationship-experienced youth reporting such victimisation increased with age, from less than one-quarter of relationship-experienced 12-14 year olds to nearly half of those in the 19-20 year old group.

While boys and girls were equally likely to report experiencing aggressive acts by their partners, girls tended to experience a wider range of acts. For example, boys mostly experienced pushing/grabbing/shoving (19%), slapping (21%), object throwing (13%), and kicking/biting/hitting (13%), whereas girls tended to experience these same behaviours in similar percentages, but also ‘tried to control you physically’ (25% versus 11% of boys) and ‘tried to force you to have sex’ (14% versus 7% of boys). Over one-tenth (12%) of boys and girls, respectively, reported being repeatedly ‘yelled loudly at’ by a partner. Significant minorities of girls (13%) and boys (9%) also reported being repeatedly ‘put-down or humiliated’ by a partner.

These findings beg the question: Why has abuse in Australian adolescents’ relationships not attracted more attention? Perhaps few adolescent ‘victims’ of such acts perceive them as being particularly harmful. Indeed, qualitative research in the US (Noonan & Charles, 2009; Sears, Byers, Whelan, Saint-Pierre, 2006), New Zealand (Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2006), and Australia (Crime Research Centre, 2001) has found that behaviours that researchers and practitioners label as ‘abuse’ and ‘violence’ are not always perceived by young people to be problematic; it depends on the situational context and frequency of the given behaviour. In the
immediate term, certain behaviours may well be innocuous. However, substantial percentages of Australian youth who have experienced physical aggression by a partner (55% of girls and 22% of boys) report having been ‘really frightened’ and/or ‘physically hurt’ by the abuse (Crime Research Centre, 2001).

Even in cases where young people’s early experiences of partner abuse are not perceived as being particularly harmful, if abusive behaviours in their relationships become habitual, the longer term outcomes might prove serious. Psychological partner abuse in adolescent relationships is associated with future physical abuse perpetration and victimisation for boys and girls (O’Leary & Smith Slep, 2003); and exposure to mild forms of physical aggression early in adolescence is associated with a greater risk of experiencing serious partner violence by the age of 17 years for boys and girls (Foshee et al., 2004).

Impacts of Partner Abuse

Partner abuse in adult couples is most prevalent in very remote Australia, followed by remote and outer regional localities (Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics, 2006) and it disproportionately affects socio-economically disadvantaged couples (Crime Research Centre, 2001). However, partner abuse occurs in all geographical areas and affects individuals across demographic levels. It affects not only the victims, but their children, extended family members, friends, employers, and co-workers, with far-reaching social and intergenerational ramifications (Access Economics, 2004; Carrington & Phillips, 2006; Laing & Bobic, 2002). The consequences of partner abuse include the costs of bringing perpetrators of partner violence to justice, the costs of treatment and support for victims, the negative repercussions on victims’ parenting capacity and work productivity, reduced self-esteem and social connectedness of victims and their children, educational disruption for children, and the development of life cycles of abuse from one generation to another (Laing & Bobic, 2002).

Because the impact of the same abusive act can differ depending on the personal characteristics of each partner and the situational context, empirical findings regarding the impacts of partner abuse, however it is defined, are frequently inconsistent and cause-and-effect conclusions are rare (e.g., Follingstad, 2009). That being said, two findings are consistently reported in the research literature. First, poor physical and psychological health is associated with experiencing partner abuse, both psychological and physical, in male and female partners (e.g., Coker et al., 2002; Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005). Second, children’s exposure to psychological or physical abuse between their carers often co-occurs with more direct forms of child abuse and neglect (e.g., Apple & Holden, 1998; McGuigan & Pratt, 2001) and, independent of other forms of abuse, is associated with social, emotional, and behavioural problems in children (e.g., McFarlane, Groff, O'Brien, Watson, 2003).
Homicide is the most horrendous outcome of partner violence. Mouzos and Rushforth (2003) found that in Australia between 1989 and 2002, on average, there were 129 family homicides each year, of which 77 (or 60%) were related to disputes between partners. Women accounted for 75 percent of the victims. In most cases of partner abuse, however, trauma symptoms are better predicted by the level of psychological abuse (e.g., denigration and social control tactics) than by the level of physical aggression (Graham-Kevan, 2007; Henning & Klesges, 2003). While serious partner violence rarely transpires in the absence of high levels of psychological abuse (O'Leary & Maiuro, 2001), even psychological abuse in the absence of physical aggression can profoundly affect victims’ physical and psychological health (e.g., Coker et al., 2002; O'Leary, 1999). Despite this, research in this area has tended to focus on physical acts, including potentially one-off and relatively inconsequential physical acts, rather than partner abuse more holistically.

The emphasis on discrete physical acts is understandable if one considers the difficulties inherent in conceptualising partner abuse more broadly. Because partner abuse can take a wide range of forms, and specific examples of each type of abuse can vary in terms of frequency and severity, addressing partner abuse in general might be considered a larger challenge than addressing acts of severe partner violence only. For instance, our judicial system would struggle to respond to cases of partner abuse beyond those involving severe violence or threats of violence. In addition, empirical studies on the prevalence of, and risk factors for, partner abuse in all of its forms and degrees would be more onerous than research that focuses only on specific physical acts. For example, long lists of nuanced statements would be required to convey across-group and across-time comparisons if current primarily ‘physical’ conceptualisations of partner abuse were abandoned. Finally, focusing on the most extreme form of partner abuse—serious violence—is probably more effective in stimulating political action than focusing on more common, less extreme forms of partner abuse.

Ironically, however, severe partner violence might be more effectively prevented by focusing more on less severe forms of partner abuse, particularly low-to medium-level psychological aggression. Some form of psychological aggression almost always precedes and accompanies serious physical aggression (Hyden, 1995; Jackson, 1999; O’Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994; Stets, 1990; Stets & Henderson, 1991). Further, escalated psychological abuse can have more psychologically and physically detrimental effects on the victim than physical abuse (e.g., Coker et al., 2002; Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000; Follingstad, 2009). In short, neglecting psychological partner abuse may hinder the development of effective interventions for the prevention of serious partner violence (Cornelius & Ressegue, 2006; Hamel, 2007).
When psychological abuse is given primacy, extreme examples tend to be emphasised. Psychological partner abuse has been defined, for example, as the systematic and wilful infliction of mental or emotional anguish by threat, humiliation, or other verbal or nonverbal conduct (Hamby & Sugarman, 1999). It includes controlling the victim's freedom; effectively destabilising or isolating the victim; repeated name calling and acting to harm the victim's sense of self-worth; controlling the victim’s every move, including how to dress, what to eat, and where to go; denying the victim access to money or economic support; harassing the victim at work or school; threatening to injure, permanently disfigure, or kill the victim and/or loved ones; and threatening or physically abusing the family pet (Follingstad & De Hart 2000; Saltzman, Fanslow, McMahon, & Shelley, 2002).

The above forms of maltreatment are appalling and demand attention. However, from a primary prevention education standpoint, focusing on examples of severe and chronic abuse, physical or psychological, may be less constructive than focusing on the antecedent situations that can set the scene for these more extreme forms of abuse. Indeed, in universal education programs for adolescents, less extreme but more common forms of abuse than those mentioned above are arguably worth addressing in their own right. In addition, focusing on strengthening factors that might mitigate the impact of abusive partner behaviour—such as social support and self-esteem (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002)—might also be more constructive in prevention programs than focusing on examples of extreme abuse.

**Causes of Partner Abuse**

In the qualitative component of the Australian Crime Research Centre (2001) study, young Australians’ perceptions of the causes of partner violence appeared to be influenced by their personal experiences and/or observations of abuse. Youth in the ‘mainstream’ focus groups, with relatively little exposure to partner violence, believed it was caused by factors associated with the perpetrator (e.g., their childhood background, self-image, attitudes to women), general stressors (e.g., unemployment and the lack of freedom associated with having a child), and a lack of communication skills (e.g., inability to listen and empathise). Young people with greater exposure to partner violence explained its occurrence by focussing more on specific triggers that can lead to violent incidents; for example, children fighting, and nagging and put-downs by the other partner. Young Australians’ ideas are, thus, similar to those of US undergraduates (Mahlstedt & Welsh, 2005), and in keeping with the empirical research literature that suggests that macro- and micro-level processes interact with and reinforce each other in perpetuating social problems (Alexander & Giesen, 1987).

Compared to their non-abusive peers, partner-abusive youth are more depressed, more aggressive in general, more likely to experience harsh, disengaged, or inconsistent parenting,
and more likely to suffer trauma symptoms, use alcohol, have partner-abusive friends, and display problem behaviours in other areas (Foshee & Matthew, 2007). Consistent with these findings, a landmark prospective study with a large birth cohort in New Zealand (Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva 1998) found that the antecedents of adult partner abuse include socioeconomic disadvantage, strained family relations, poor educational achievement, and problem behaviours. This study found that these risk factors applied similarly to men and women, and the most consistent predictor was the presence of problem behaviour at age 15. The authors recommended that primary prevention of partner abuse should, therefore, peak in early adolescence and address individual risk-factors as much as broader socio-cultural attitudes. Similarly, in adult couples in developed nations, studies show that personal and relationship factors are equally or more important in determining the risk of partner-abusive behaviour than broader societal factors (DeMaris, Benson, Fox, Hill, & Van Wyk, 2003; O’Leary, Smith Slep, & Susan, 2007).

In the literature on partner abuse aetiology, social learning theory is one of the most prominent theories, underpinning the extensively researched ‘cycle of violence’ model (e.g., Riggs & O’Leary, 1996; Tontodonato & Crew, 1992). Children exposed to violence are theorised to be vulnerable to future perpetration and/or victimisation experiences because of beliefs and practices that they learn from adult models. Specific cognitions learned by children exposed to partner abuse include beliefs that being in control is important, that the use of aggression is an acceptable expression of need, and that coercive practices are effective (Spaccarelli, Coatsworth, & Sperry Bowden, 1995). However, model-observer learning does not provide a full explanation of the inter-generational transmission of violence. In addition to learning specific cognitions that justify aggression, often child witnesses of partner abuse (and other high-risk youth) exhibit unhealthy attachment styles, deficits in intellectual functioning, and maladaptive patterns of coping with stress (Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003), as well as poor interpersonal skills and deficits in emotional and behavioural regulation (Schwartz, Hage, Bush, & Burns, 2006). All of the above factors can contribute to a young person’s vulnerability to behaving abusively with a partner, particularly under stress.

It is important to note that, while prior exposure to inter-parental conflict and violence is a major risk factor for future partner abuse perpetration and victimisation, not all child witnesses of partner abuse are similarly affected (e.g., Hughes, Graham-Bermann, & Gruber, 2001). In any case, an individual’s propensity to behave aggressively may be of little consequence in the absence of threatening or stress-evoking events (Riggs, & O’Leary, 1996). That is, one’s personal vulnerability interacts with socio-environmental and inter-personal
stimuli in determining one’s probability of actually perpetrating abusive behaviour. It is also important to bear in mind that, in the absence of exposure to inter-parental partner abuse, or any other risk factor, individuals can nonetheless find themselves in an abusive relationship (Harway et al., 2001).

Clearly, partner abuse is a complex issue. However, current discourse on this topic in Australia (discussed below) tends to oversimplify the issue by focusing primarily on the atypical experiences of female victims of uni-directional partner abuse, rather than the multifarious experiences of the majority. That is, certain contexts, motivations, and consequences of abuse are ascribed greater importance than are others. Yet, any type of harm caused by any partner’s behaviour—emotional and social harm, as well as physical—is, by definition, harmful. Because harm in relationships typically occurs in contexts where both partners believe they have been treated badly (e.g., Foshee et al., 2009; Hamel, 2007; O’Leary & Vegam, 2005; Thomas, 2007), responding from the perspective of uni-directionally abused heterosexual women may not constitute the most effective means to minimise harmful relationship outcomes.

Conceptualising partner abuse as a dynamic process involving both partners (the dyad) may result in wider acceptance and more relevant prevention education messages than conceptualisations that disregard the experiences of the majority. How partner abuse is conceptualised matters because it influences the policies and programs that are developed to prevent it. Ultimately, the way in which partner abuse is defined determines the extent to which policy decisions in this area are able to minimise harm.

**Notions of Partner Abuse in Australia**

Government policy on this issue in Australia is concerned with women as victims and men as perpetrators (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011; Office of Women’s Policy, 2010). This approach responds to a large body of research conducted with partner-abused women seeking police protection or refuge in domestic violence shelters (e.g., Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Partner violence is seen as a form of ‘violence against women’ (VAW) along with forms of VAW, such as sexual assault, perpetrated by non-partners. In Australia, three factors are viewed to be key contributors to VAW: unequal power relations between women and women, adherence to rigid gender stereotypes, and broader cultures of violence (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011; VicHealth, 2007; Victorian Government, 2009). As violence between partners is conceptualised as a form of VAW, these factors are seen to be the primary causes of partner violence. This is despite a failure of analyses to confirm any of these factors as causal contributors to partner violence in developed nations (Holtzworth-Munroe, Bates, Smutzler, & Sandin, 1997). Personality variables (e.g., insecure attachment and trauma
reactions) have consistently been found to account for more of the variance in partner violence than have beliefs about gender (Dutton, 2007; Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2004; Stuart, 2005). However, through the lens of structural feminist ideology, gender-based explanations are inherently sensible: If partner violence is considered to be ‘part of a range of tactics to exercise power and control over women and their children’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 2) gender is clearly central.

Sexual assault occurs in some abusive partner relationships (e.g., Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004). However, there is no evidence of an overall relationship between partner abuse and sexual abuse. Sexual coercion is rare in partner-relationships compared with non-sexual forms of partner abuse (ABS, 1996) and is more often committed by a friend or acquaintance than by a partner (e.g., Carmody & Willis, 2006; Forke, Myers, Catallozzi, & Schwarz, 2008). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2006) found that, in 2005, 0.3 percent of Australian women had been sexually offended by a partner in the past year, but this represented only 21 percent of all sexual offenses in that period. This, of course, does not detract from the seriousness of sexual abuse by a partner. Though, it does challenge the conceptualisation of partner abuse as an issue aetiologically equivalent to sexual assault.

A growing number of gender- and sexuality-inclusive researchers (e.g., Archer, 2002; Kaschak, 2001; Merril & Wolfe, 2000) have drawn attention to complexities to which structural-feminist scholars can be blinkered by the sampling methods they employ (e.g., collecting victimisation data only from heterosexual female victims). Some researchers argue that, while concern for heterosexual female victims of partner violence is not misplaced, regarding these women as the only victims of partner violence is too narrow a view of the problem (e.g., Whitaker, Swahn, Hall, & Haileyesus, 2008). Where measures can be obtained for both men and women, male and female perpetrators and victims of partner abuse are found, and it is not only low to moderate levels of violence perpetrated by women (e.g., Dutton & Nichols, 2005). One danger associated with downplaying the significance of aggression by women is that its physical and psychological consequences might be trivialised. Women in same-sex relationships (e.g., Renzetti, 1997) and heterosexual men (e.g., Gadd, 2002; George, 1994) can be subject to systematic and prolonged partner violence. These individuals suffer not only physical and psychological harms, but specific problems associated with a lack of recognition of their plight. Other authors (Kelly, 2002; Straus, 1997; Temple, Weston, & Marshall, 2005) have warned of the dangers involved for women when aggression is their routine response to relationship conflict.

Calls to address partner abuse against men (e.g., http://www.oneinthree.com.au/) tend to be seen by women victims’ advocates as conflicting with, rather than helping, efforts to
reduce female victimisation (see Atmore, 2001). Unfortunately, somewhat of a dichotomist men-or-women mentality exists in the Australian VAW field, stemming largely from the reality that insufficient resources are made available to adequately address the needs of female victims of severe partner violence, much less the needs of all (female and male) victims. However, such dichotomy extends beyond funding issues. Categorical men-versus-women thinking by workers and policy-makers who subscribe to structural-feminist theory currently permeate the VAW field such that distinctions within, and overlaps between, gender categories, if acknowledged, are glossed over. Indeed, accredited training courses for partner violence workers explicitly inculcate gender-categorical thinking (e.g., DVIRC, 2006).

In Victorian VAW prevention forums, gender-based claims are frequently asserted by women victims’ advocates. Partner violence is claimed to be perpetrated instrumentally by men or enacted defensively by women. Partners in abusive relationships are considered to be perpetrators or victims. Women are assumed to be victims or potential victims. This last assumption is particularly intriguing. Because the causes of VAW—and therefore partner abuse—are believed to be cultural, women as individuals are seen as being powerless to avoid their own victimisation. While arguably valid in relation to some cases of sexual assault (Carmody & Carrington, 2000), this assumption is questionable in relation to the prevention of partner abuse.

Some feminist academics assert that because patriarchal gender-relations are central to the problem of partner violence, wide-scale dismantling of these social structures under the direction of feminist women leaders is necessary (e.g., Pease, 2008). However, short of this, there may be insights and skills that might help individual girls and women to avoid becoming victims of partner abuse. That is, perhaps there are points between the status of ‘non-victim’ and the status of ‘victim’ where girls and women might be able to influence their relationship trajectory. While the after-effects of severe and chronic victimisation are usually obvious, in typical cases, abusive relationship dynamics develop over time. That is, it is not easy to identify the point in time at which victims become victims (e.g., Few & Rosen, 2005; Fraser, 2008). It is feasible that some victimised women might have been able to be helped to prevent or minimise the harms they suffered, through empowerment-oriented education early in their relationship careers. However, the structural feminist thinking that currently dominates the VAW field in Australia tends to shun efforts aimed at empowering individual girls and women with skills to avoid harmful relationship outcomes. In short, Australia’s current approach is not aimed at capitalising on girls’ and women’s potential for positive self-agency.
Youth-Targeted Partner Abuse Prevention Education in Australia

The Australian Government’s Office for Women provides policy advice to the Commonwealth in relation to improving gender equality, focusing especially on women’s economic security. As VAW is understood to be preventable by improving gender equality, the Australian Government boasts having developed VAW prevention policies in a range of areas; for example, in family law through to income support and crisis payments (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). Currently, the Commonwealth is working to prevent VAW by focusing on young people’s attitudes towards violence. This is despite findings that the relationship between attitudes and violence perpetration in Australia is precarious (e.g., Crime Research Centre, 2001; Kane, Staiger, & Ricciardelli, 2000).

In addition to funding the Australian Women Against Violence Alliance and the White Ribbon Foundation, the Commonwealth funds selected ‘respectful relationships’ education programs in schools. It is believed that helping young people to ‘better understand and develop respectful relationships’ will have long term impacts on the level of VAW (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 5). Workers in agencies for female victims of partner violence and/or sexual assault deliver these programs. Unfortunately, though, ‘time, money, and workforce constraints prevent many good programs from being implemented or evaluated more extensively’ (Victorian Government, 2009, p. 14).

One of the most developed and well resourced educational programs to be published in Australia was the 2004 Commonwealth Government’s ‘Violence Against Women, Australia says No’ Education Resource Pack for use with Year 11 and 12 students. This was distributed to every secondary school in Australia. The pack included a CD-Rom with teacher notes, lesson plans, and classroom activities, and a DVD documentary that portrayed an exceptionally violent relationship that left an adolescent girl permanently crippled. This program was self-described as a ‘preventative education tool to communicate directly with young people so they may identify and avoid abusive and violent relationships’. The six-lesson curriculum covered three broad topics: ‘having a healthy relationship’ (including identification of desirable qualities in a partner), ‘factors that influence abuse in relationships’ (focusing primarily on gender stereotypes), and ‘identifying abusive relationships’ (including types of abuse and sources of help for victims).

In 2007, government officials confirmed that no evaluation had been conducted in relation to the uptake or effectiveness of this program. While the program was well resourced, issues noted by teachers and student wellbeing coordinators included (a) that there was little opportunity within the programs of Year 11 and 12 students to deliver the program and (b) that programs were needed well before Year 11, in order to meet the needs of students most at
risk of engaging in abusive relationships. In addition to these issues, two further limitations apply to this and other Australian programs (for examples, see Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009, p. 59-79). First, the fact that often both partners in abusive relationships contribute to abusive dynamics is not acknowledged. Instead, language is used that suggests that there is only ever one abusive partner and one victim; for example, ‘the abusive partner uses threats, verbal abuse and intimidating behaviour to frighten and control the other’ (Part 3, p. 9).

Second, information regarding how one might avoid abusive relationships assumes either a would-be perpetrator’s perspective or an actual victim’s perspective. For example, for would-be perpetrators, tips are included for how to ‘reduce and release stress’ to prevent a violent response (Part 1, p. 10). For victims of partner abuse, sources of post-victimisation support are promoted, but no skills are promoted that might help young people to avoid becoming a victim.

Individuals are never responsible for the abusive behaviours of others. Responsibility for harm-causing behaviour always lies with the person who perpetrates that behaviour. Abusive patterns that develop in couple-relationships, however, are not a series of discrete, isolated behaviours; abusive relationship dynamics are often nuanced and inherently dyadic. Bundling partner abuse together with the issue of sexual assault, under the banner of VAW, has been effective in terms of attracting political attention and program funding. Both issues are harmful to women and detrimental to society at large. However, Australia’s current ‘one stone’ approach to preventing sexual assault and partner abuse is difficult to justify. Each issue may be better addressed by a specifically targeted prevention strategy (which may involve overlapping elements). Although the Australian Government recognises the need for improved evaluations of education programs on this topic (e.g., Carrington & Phillips, 2006), to date rigorous program evaluations have not occurred. Consequently, there is no alternative but to look overseas for evaluations of PAPE program effectiveness.

Youth-Targeted Partner Abuse Prevention Education Overseas

As mentioned earlier, universal programs aimed at the primary prevention of partner abuse in the US tend to focus on preventing ‘dating violence’ (see Cornelius & Resseguie, 2006; Foshee & Matthew, 2007; Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; O’Leary, Woodin, & Timmons Fritz, 2005). To date, there are thirteen published school-based dating violence prevention program evaluations, but only five have been randomised controlled trials. Two of these, the Dating Violence Intervention and Prevention for Teenagers (DVIPT; Kraizer & Larson, 1993) and the Building Relationships in Greater Harmony Together project (BRIGHT; Avery-Leaf et al., 1997), comprised five one-hour sessions taught in school by trained teachers. The five sessions of Kraizer and Larson’s (1993) DVIPT program focussed on violence in society and
relationships, the role of self-esteem in interpersonal violence, how to recognise physical, sexual and emotional abuse, the role of power and control in abusive relationships, how to build healthy relationships, including problem-solving and communication skills, and identifying resources for getting help. The five sessions in Avery-Leaf and colleagues’ (1997) BRIGHT program focused on how gender inequality may foster violence, individual and societal attitudes toward violence, constructive communication skills, and support resources available to victims of abuse.

In these two trials, only the treatment group showed significant favourable changes from pre-test to post-test (Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano, 1997; Macgowan, 1997). Macgowan’s (1997) evaluation of the DVIPT program found that, while improvements were made in knowledge about partner violence, no changes were seen in attitudes towards violence or in methods of dealing with violence. Also, male students in the treatment group who had the highest academic ability showed the greatest shifts. The BRIGHT program evaluation found that the treatment group showed slightly reduced tendencies to justify aggression, but not jealousy, in dating relationships (Avery-Leaf et al.). The authors pointed out a possible ‘floor effect’ in limiting attitudinal shifts. They did not, however, discuss why very low acceptance and justification of dating aggression was observed at baseline alongside substantial rates of self reported dating aggression. In both studies the post-test assessments were conducted immediately after the intervention was completed. Therefore, lasting effects may not have been achieved. It is also unknown whether the observed changes in knowledge/attitudes resulted in changes in behaviour or behavioural intentions.

The Ending Violence project (http://www.breakthecycle.org/education-programs) was originally a three session school-based curriculum taught by legal professionals that focused on legal aspects of dating violence. This program aimed to alter knowledge and norms about dating violence, to promote favourable attitudes towards seeking help for dating violence, and to decrease the prevalence of dating violence perpetration and victimisation. Jaycox et al. (2006) found significant treatment effects on knowledge of the laws relating to dating violence, acceptance of female-on-male violence, and likelihood of help-seeking for dating violence, but there were no differences between treatment and control groups in acceptance of male-on-female violence, abusive/fearful dating experiences, or dating violence perpetration or victimisation. Moreover, after six months, all program effects had dissipated except for knowledge of laws and perceived helpfulness of speaking with a lawyer about dating abuse. The offering agency has since revised this program so that it can be flexibly delivered by classroom teachers. Perplexingly, though no further evaluation has been conducted, the
relevant agency website promotes the program as being an ‘evidence-based’ program to empower youth to ‘build healthy relationships’.

Foshee and her colleagues’ (1998) Safe Dates project was developed in North Carolina and included a 45-minute theatre production, a 10-session school-based curriculum taught by trained Health and Physical Education teachers, and a poster contest. The in-class program targeted norms relating to dating abuse, gender stereotypes, conflict management skills, awareness of community services, and help-seeking. Students in 8th and 9th grades were assessed at baseline, one month after the program ended, and then yearly thereafter for four years. Positive program effects on self-reported perpetration of psychological, sexual, and physical dating abuse were evident at the one-month follow-up point (Foshee et al., 1998). After one year, the behavioural effects had disappeared, but effects on mediating variables such as dating violence norms, conflict management skills, and awareness of community services for dating violence were maintained (Foshee, Bauman, Green, Koch, Linder, & McDougall, 2000). Depending on the analytic strategy used, modest positive effects were observed at subsequent follow-up points. That is, beyond the one-year mark, positive behavioural effects were apparent when predicted means were used based on the ‘parameters of reduced models’ (Foshee et al., 2004) and when ‘random coefficient regression modelling’ and ‘within subjects multiple imputation procedures’ were used (Foshee et al., 2005). With the benefit of such statistical techniques, Safe Dates appears to have reduced psychological, moderate physical, and sexual dating violence perpetration up to three years post-intervention. However, given that the longer-term shifts in self-reported perpetration corresponded with changed social norms and increased awareness of community services for victims, but not with improved conflict management skills or belief in the need for help (Foshee et al., 2005), it remains unclear how the program worked.

Although the Safe Dates program was evaluated following its implementation in full (i.e., with the 10 lessons, theatre production, and poster contest) there is no evidence of any school implementing the full program since its original evaluation (Foshee et al., 2004), perhaps because its co-ordination requirements are untenable on an ongoing basis. Perhaps conceding the improbability of most schools annually committing to ten-sessions, a theatre production, and a poster competition on the topic of dating abuse, the commercially available program manual (Foshee & Langwick, 2010) suggests ways that the program can be collapsed into a four- or six-session classroom program.

The fifth school-based randomised controlled trial is Wolfe and his colleagues’ (2009) Fourth R program, aimed at reducing three interconnected risk behaviours in adolescence: violence (bullying, peer, and dating violence), substance abuse, and unsafe sex. The program
is a 21-session curriculum for Grade 9 students, taught by trained Health and Physical Education teachers. It includes school-based and parent information components. Compared to youth who received typical Health classes, 2.5 years after the program smaller percentages of male youth in the intervention condition self-reported perpetrating dating violence in the past year (3% versus 7%). Girls in the intervention and control groups, however, were equally likely (12%) to report perpetrating dating violence after the program. Acts of psychological abuse were not measured. Developed in Ontario, Canada, the Fourth R has now been implemented in more than 350 schools provincially, and has been adapted and implemented in six other Canadian provinces as part of a national dissemination strategy (Crooks, Wolfe, Hughes, Jaffe, & Chiodo, 2008).

The evaluation results of the above two programs are especially noteworthy because they utilised behavioural measures. These two programs have also achieved continued implementation—or implementation of some program components, at least—in their countries of origin. However, these evaluation results need to be considered in light of certain methodological limitations. One such limitation concerns the self-reporting of perpetration of physical acts, where the context of these acts is not captured. That is, in both program evaluations, respondents indicated whether or not they had performed specific acts, such as hitting, pushing, or threatening a partner, but did not indicate the motivations or circumstances surrounding these acts. This shortcoming limits the meaningfulness of the results obtained by existing behaviour-change measures. It is also possible that the terms ‘hitting’ and ‘pushing’ take on a changed meaning for some youth after participation in a ‘dating violence’ program, such that they may be uninclined to consider even their pre-program hitting and pushing to be ‘hitting’ and ‘pushing’ following their participation in the program.

A second limitation relates to the particular acts that were included in the measures used. In addition to sixteen acts of violence, (e.g., "slapped," "kicked," and "hit with a fist"), the Safe Dates program evaluation considered fourteen acts of psychological abuse (e.g., "damaged something " and "insulted in front of others"). Response options ranged from 0 for never to 3 for very often. The Fourth R evaluation was limited to eight physical acts only (e.g., “I pushed, shoved, or shook him/her” and “I threatened to hurt him/her”). Students simply marked actions (yes or no) that they had used in the past year toward a boyfriend or girlfriend. It is unclear why these particular items/acts were included, and bundled together, in the scales used in these two evaluation studies. Unfortunately, it is impossible to glean from the published results what specific acts were experienced and perpetrated by program
participants, and how frequently, before and after either program. In this sense, the evaluation results of these studies, while clearly indicating a positive effect, are somewhat nebulous.

Finally, the use of self-report measures where youth select from a range of given options provides a possibly incomplete indication of their actual relationship experiences and behaviours. Open-ended questions, in addition to closed-responses, might capture more accurately the full range of young people’s behaviours and the situational contexts of these behaviours (see Foshee et al., 2007). Existing measures also do not indicate changes in participants’ situation-specific intentions that may result from participation in a program. That is, they do not distinguish between students who have, and those who have not, learned new skills and resolved to use these skills should future inter-personal situations render them relevant.

The Importance of Skill-Development

Improving social and emotional skills is a hallmark of effective primary prevention programming (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumberger, 2005). It is widely agreed in the partner abuse prevention literature that, to conduct safer relationships, adolescents particularly need opportunities to learn assertive communication and conflict-resolution skills, and to practice applying these skills (e.g., Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Hamby, 1998; Noonan & Charles, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009; Whitaker et al., 2006). Many PAPE programs for youth aim to enhance assertiveness skills (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2006); however, simply being instructed in skills, discussing them, or writing out responses is unlikely to improve one’s skills let alone one’s confidence to employ these skills in real-life (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2006; Crooks, Wolfe, Hughes, Jaffe, & Chiodo, 2008; Office on Drugs and Crime, 2004). To foster skill development, it is critical that young people are given opportunities to practice new skills, and receive feedback, in scenarios that are as realistic as possible.

Even with accurate information and the behavioural skills to make healthy behavioural choices, motivation is critical to making good choices. In this sense, motivation is the critical determinant of a prevention program’s success. Attempts to motivate adolescents by relying on scare-tactics, however, are rarely successful, especially with adolescents prone to risk-taking (Wolfe, Jaffe, & Crooks, 2006). On the other hand, teaching skills that adolescents perceive to be useful or relevant, and using peer culture to increase motivation to use these skills, can be powerful strategies with adolescents (Cuijpers, 2002). Such strategies, however, are at odds with partner abuse prevention programs that focus on examples of extreme violence.

Although assertiveness skills-training is widely agreed to be important in PAPE, assertiveness-development has not been assessed as an outcome variable in any published
partner abuse prevention program evaluation. Presumably this is because there is no validated measure available to assess the effectiveness of assertiveness skills-focused partner abuse prevention programming. The only psychometrically validated measures currently available are attitudinal measures and, and as mentioned earlier, self-reported perpetration and victimisation measures (Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, & Behrens, 2005; Flood, 2008; Murray & Graybeal, 2007).

**The Question of Focusing on Gender**

A causal relationship between gender-based attitudes in young people and partner violence perpetration is yet to be established. In adolescence, subscribing to traditional gender stereotypes has been found to be associated with academic problems (Tallichet & Willits, 1986) and poor decision-making (e.g., failure to use contraception, Resnick & Blum, 1985). Perhaps not surprisingly, acceptance of traditional gender stereotypes has also been associated with attitudinal acceptance of partner violence in males (Check & Malamuth, 1983) and females (Finn, 1986). However, there is no evidence that traditional gender-role norms are causal influences in any of these issues.

Contemporary research with representative samples of young people has uncovered only very weak correlations between non-progressive beliefs about gender and self-reported violence perpetration (Crime Research centre, 2001), and no relationship between holding traditional gender stereotypes and being abused by a partner (Foshee et al., 2004). Traditional gender stereotypes are clearly inadequate in explaining partner violence, especially considering cases of abuse in same-sex relationships and cases of abuse initiated by female partners.

As mentioned earlier, young people tend to believe that personal and relationship-specific factors lead to partner violence. Despite this, some writers believe that basing PAPE programs on structural feminist theory makes them more effective (e.g., Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009). Indeed, some writers believe that delivering PAPE within a structural feminist framework makes it more effective because young people believe that relationship-specific issues cause partner violence (Mahlstedt & Welsh, 2005). It is certainly a popular view among academics in this field that addressing societal gender-based power-imbalance is critical in PAPE. However, young people are sensitive to messages on the topic of partner abuse that they hear as being overly simplistic and unfairly critical of males (Tutty et al., 2002). In addition, girls can resent suggestions that they are weaker than their male counterparts (Moretti, Catchpole, & Odgers, 2005). Findings that adolescents perceive a gender-based double-standard with regard to ‘getting away with abuse’ (Sears, Byers,
Whelan, & Saint-Pierre, 2006) are worrying. Programs that focus on gender-based power-imbalance risk adding to mixed messages about the acceptability of abusive behaviour.


However, especially where partner abuse is viewed as being synonymous with VAW, it is commonly asserted that ‘best practice’ PAPE programs focus explicitly on gender (e.g., Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009). This is despite a dearth of empirical evidence to support this position. There are no published studies comparing otherwise similar programs that do, and do not, focus on gender. Therefore, it is unknown whether partner abuse prevention programming without a focus on gender is less, equally, or more effective than gender-focused programming. Indeed, an evaluation of a completely gender-neutral PAPE program (that deliberately avoids notions of gender-based power-imbalance, gender norms, etc.) is difficult to find. Empirically testing assumptions about the value of focusing on gender in PAPE is an important challenge in the interests of ensuring that Australian policy and practice in this area is evidence-based.

It is not argued here that promoting gender awareness through, for example, media deconstruction activities is not worthwhile. Addressing societal gender inequities by exposing and countering problematic gender-conditioning is critically important. Gender is certainly not irrelevant to the issue of violence, including violence by girls (Artz, 1998). However, it is questionable whether focusing explicitly on gender is necessary and helpful in education programs intended to prevent partner abuse. This thesis explores the possibility that gender-neutral, empowerment-oriented partner abuse prevention programming might be a viable alternative to Australia’s current gender-focused approach.

**Rationale, Aim, and Objectives of this Project**

Australia’s current approach to preventing partner abuse includes addressing gender inequality, gender stereotypes, and cultures of violence. To maximise the effectiveness of PAPE, however, it is posited that partner abuse may need to be conceptualised differently
from sexual assault and, instead, in a way that recognises the role of both partners in the development of abusive relationship dynamics. It is suggested here that the presumption of male power and female powerlessness might be better replaced with an acknowledgement of girls’ potential for both abusive behaviour and positive self-agency. Developing girls’ assertiveness skills may be important to minimise any reliance on aggression and/or any tendency to accommodate abusive behaviour by a partner. However, the lack of a validated measure to evaluate assertiveness skills-focused PAPE programs is a barrier to testing their effectiveness.

The overall aim of this project was to explore the potential of an approach to PAPE that aims to capitalise on girls’ self-agency to influence the course of their own relationships. The specific objectives were to (a) develop and promote an evidence-informed, gender-inclusive theoretical framework for conceptualising partner abuse as a dynamic, dyadic phenomenon; (b) based on this model, develop, pilot, and evaluate a skills-focused program for adolescent girls that aims to increase their capacity to assertively resist abusive relationship dynamics; and (c) innovate a scale for measuring the effectiveness of assertiveness skills-focused partner abuse prevention programs.

Trialling a program with only girls may seem to represent anything but a gender-inclusive approach. Single-sex groupings are typically arranged to allow participants to discuss sensitive gender issues with increased comfort (e.g., Wolfe et al., 2009). That was not the reasoning behind the single-sex groups employed in this project. The messages in the program trialled in this project were no less applicable to boys than girls, and gender-based debate was discouraged by the deliberate use of gender- and sexuality-inclusive language. Rather, inviting only girls to participate in the current program trial was based on the experience-based assumption that few boys would self-nominate (i.e., volunteer) to participate in a relationship-education program trial. Due to ethical concerns, the pilot program was conducted separate from normal classes as an elective program, and evaluation data was collected from only consenting student volunteers, outside of class time (i.e., during lunch times). To minimise confounds in a mixed-gender education program trial, roughly equal numbers of boys and girls would be necessary. Though it was not possible to achieve this in the current project, it was hoped that the findings of this trial, if positive, might lead to larger trials of skills-based empowerment-oriented programs with representative (non-voluntary) samples of girls and boys in regular classroom settings in the future.

**The Structure of this Thesis**

While the three objectives of this project may seem to be sequential, meeting each was in fact integral to meeting the other two. As such, this thesis is not a linear story with a
beginning, middle, and end, but rather a number of inter-related stories—that is, stand-alone papers—each with implications relevant to one or more of these three objectives. Publication of the research undertaken during this project as stand-alone papers was important because, in order to maximise the impact of this research on policy and practice in this field, the findings needed to be disseminated. Eight chapters, each based on a published paper or report, comprise the body of this thesis.

Paper One resulted from an initial grappling with the partner abuse research literature that exposed an apparent disjuncture between partner abuse research in developed nations and the way that partner abuse prevention is practised in Australia. It captures the early development of the working model that is described in more detail later in this thesis. Paper Two presents the detailed results of the preliminary online survey that informed the program that was later developed. These findings were electronically distributed to VicHealth’s ‘Partners in Prevention’ (PiP) network. The PiP network comprises practitioners working in women’s domestic violence and sexual assault agencies who deliver youth-targeted prevention education. Disseminating this report was intended to encourage evidence-based discussion among these workers. Paper Three sets out the theoretical foundations of the program that was piloted in this project. Paper Four charts the development of the scale used to assess the impact of this program on participants’ romantic relationship-specific assertiveness.

Paper Five reports on significant aspects of the pre-test data collected as part of the pilot program’s evaluation. Paper Six reports the results of the pre-to-post evaluation of the pilot program. Paper Seven outlines a possible approach to delivering skills-based empowerment-oriented PAPE in regular, mixed-gender classrooms. This piece was written specifically for Australian Health and Physical Education (HPE) teachers. Paper Eight, the final chapter in this thesis, summarises evidence that supports the working model that was developed during this project. In so doing, this chapter highlights some key findings of this project and describes the potential utility of this model for others working to improve the effectiveness of PAPE. A General Discussion concludes this thesis.

Some papers presented in this thesis overlap in their themes and methodological elements, but each paper is unique in its purpose and implications. Taken together, this thesis strengthens the case for not only empowering girls with skills to resist abusive relationship dynamics, but also for considering PAPE as an area worthy of more concentrated applied research in Australia.
Paper One:
Rethinking Youth-Targeted Partner Abuse
Prevention Education in Australia

Abstract

Intimate partner abuse against women is recognised as a major public health issue. A number of partner abuse prevention programs targeted at youth have been developed in Australia. These programs are generally aimed at changing attitudes, and take the stance that girls should not be viewed as being responsible for protecting themselves against violence. In this paper it is argued that the current, dominant focus on physical violence, over other forms of partner abuse, limits the potential effectiveness of programs that might otherwise help young people to resist the development of abusive dynamics. It is also argued that programs that presume a victim status for girls and a perpetrator status for boys are both inconsistent with contemporary evidence and unlikely to empower young people at risk of chronic perpetration and/or victimisation to avoid such outcomes. A ‘dyadic slippery slope’ model of chronic partner abuse is proposed and new directions for prevention research in this area are suggested.

Introduction

Over one-third of Australian women who have ever been in a couple-relationship report experiencing violence within one or more of their relationships (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004). As a result of severe partner abuse, more than 20,000 women in Australia seek shelter in women's refuges and take out protection orders each year (Women’s Services Network, 2000). While men suffer abuse in relationships (e.g., Fontes, 2007), studies have revealed that the impact of partner violence tends to be more detrimental for women than men in terms of physical injury and psychological harm (Anderson, 2002; Bagshaw & Chung, 2000; Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005; William & Frieze, 2005). Further, compared to uni-directional violence by women, male-to-female and bi-directional violence is associated with more adverse outcomes both for the adult victims and children exposed to the violence (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001; Temple, Weston, & Marshall, 2005; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007).

Virtually all female victims of chronic partner violence report also experiencing psychological abuse by their partners (Graham-Kevan, 2007; Krishnan, Hilbert, VanLeeuwen, & Kolia, 1997). Psychological abuse, here, refers to emotional abuse (i.e., behaviour that impacts negatively on one’s self-esteem or self-confidence) or social abuse (i.e., behaviour that negates the quality of one’s other relationships or one’s sense of autonomy). Indeed,
longitudinal data suggests that psychological abuse is a precursor to violence in both adolescent (O’Leary & Smith-Slep, 2003; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003) and adult (Harper, Austin, Cercone, & Arias, 2005; Murphy & O’Leary, 1989) couples. Unlike partner violence, however, psychological abuse by a partner is unlikely to diminish over time (Timmons Fritz & O’Leary, 2004).

It is important to note that many women who experience chronic partner violence report that the psychological abuse that they experience is more crippling than the violence they have suffered (Hegarty, Hindmarsh, & Gillies, 2000; O’Leary & Jouriles, 1993; Tolman, 1989). This should not be surprising considering that being subjected to psychological abuse by a partner is related to lower levels of self esteem, higher levels of depression, higher levels of fear, and more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Arias & Pape, 2001; Baldry, 2003; Dutton, Goodman, & Bennet, 2001; Sacket & Saunders, 2001). In fact, the effects of emotional abuse can be profound in victims of both genders (Frieze, 2005; Harned, 2001). Children living in homes where caregiver relationships are not physically violent, but are psychologically abusive, are also adversely affected (Cummings & Davies, 2002; McIntosh, 2003; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002; Sanders, Markie-Dadds, & Nicholson, 1997).

The focus of this chapter is therefore not confined to violence but, instead, partner abuse. Expanding on the definitions proposed by Wekerle and Wolfe (1999) and Lavoie, Robitaille, and Hebert (2000), partner abuse is defined as any pattern of behaviour between partners during or following a consensually initiated romantic relationship that results in emotional, social, or physical harm. Violence between partners is a serious—and, indeed, criminal—form of partner abuse and, as such, has attracted a great deal of research attention. However, it is important to acknowledge that violence is neither a necessary criterion for harm to occur nor a feature that automatically renders a relationship more harmful than a non-violent relationship that is marked by high levels of emotional or social abuse.

Considering the serious harms associated with male-perpetrated abuse in opposite-sex relationships, reducing male-perpetrated partner abuse is critical. Given, also, that Australian women aged less than 25 years are at considerably higher risk of suffering violence at the hands of a partner than are those in any other age group (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996), the prevention of chronic victimisation of young women, starting from their earliest relationships, deserves priority. That said, it is argued that preventing abusive behaviour by both males and females against their partners is the most desirable outcome of any youth-targeted partner abuse prevention program, not least because this outcome stands to best protect young women and their children from the most harmful outcomes associated with partner abuse.
This chapter focuses on the question of how the preventative needs of young Australians might best be addressed via youth-targeted psycho-educational programming. While psycho-education with young people, alone, is unlikely to be able to eradicate partner abuse, adolescence provides an important window of opportunity for psycho-educational interventions to prevent abusive patterns from becoming established (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999; Whitaker et al., 2006; Wolfe, Crooks, Chiodo, & Jaffe, 2009). This chapter presents a case for developing youth-targeted partner abuse prevention education programs (herein referred to as PAPE programs) that equip adolescent girls and boys with (a) an understanding of the ways in which abusive relationships develop and (b) well-rehearsed skills to enable them to resist the development of abusive relationship dynamics. The next sections focus on the multifarious nature of partner abuse, and the consequent limitations inherent in current, dominant approaches to its prevention.

**Understanding Adolescent Partner Abuse**

While physical and psychological partner abuse has been associated with physical and psychological health problems for both male and female adolescents (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003; Roberts, Klein, & Fisher, 2003), other studies have found that adolescent girls suffer more problematic reactions than boys (Harned, 2001; Molidor & Tolman, 1998). For adolescent girls, violent relationship experiences may disrupt the normal development of self-esteem and body image (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002) and, although questions regarding causality remain unanswered, higher levels of psychological victimisation are associated with lower self-esteem in girls (Jezl, Molidor, & Wright, 1996).

It is important to note, however, that girls do not enter couple-relationships as powerless victims. In recent studies of adolescent partner abuse, high rates of bi-directional abuse have been documented (Foshee et al., 2004; Harned, 2002; O’Keefe, 2005; O’Leary & Smith Slep, 2003; Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O’Leary, 2001; Whitaker et al., 2007) and several of these studies have found that girls use physical aggression with their partners more frequently than do boys. Regardless of who is more likely to initiate physical aggression, females appear to be particularly susceptible to reciprocating their partners’ aggression (Luthra & Gidycz, 2006). The reciprocation of violence by girls is concerning because bi-directional violence in adolescent relationships (Gray & Foshee, 1997)—as it is in adult relationships—is associated with more frequent violence and more severe injuries than unreciprocated violence.

In Australia, 42% of 19 to 20 year olds in a nation-wide sample who reported having relationship experience reported being physically abused by a partner: including being shoved, physically restrained, hit, kicked, or physically threatened (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001). About one-quarter of relationship-experienced Australians aged as
young as 12 to 14 years reported such violence by a partner. Notably, male and female adolescents in all age groups reported approximately equal rates of perpetration and victimisation.

Despite findings of similar rates of physical aggression by young male and female partners, adolescent males more often inflict physical harm against a partner than do adolescent females (e.g., Foshee, 1996). In Australia, 11% of girls who had ever been in a relationship reported being physically hurt compared with 6% of boys (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001). Equally important, over twice the number of Australian girls who had ever been in a relationship reported feeling frightened and/or hurt by a partner (24%), compared with Australian boys (9%). Consistent with these findings, O'Keefe and Treister (1998) found that whereas female victims indicated "emotionally hurt" and "fear" as their two primary feelings in response to violence, males indicated that the violence either “amused” them or made them feel “angry”.

On the question of motives, O'Keefe (1997) found that anger was the most frequently mentioned reason for partner violence by both male and female adolescents. Similarly, in Australia, considerable proportions of young Australians were found to endorse a range of anger-provoking partner behaviours as potential justifications for violence (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001). Worrying proportions of Australian adolescents believed that it was “right” to hit a partner in response to being called useless or good for nothing (8%), or in response to being accused of infidelity (9%). Even greater proportions believed it was right to hit in response to a partner’s infidelity (22%) or to being hit (39%).

These same young Australians were twice more likely to believe that it was right or justifiable for females (compared with males) to respond to perceived provocation by a partner by hitting. Interestingly, 16 to 22% endorsed statements that it is right or justifiable for a male to hit his partner if she hits him, whereas 18 to 26% of respondents believed it was right or justifiable for a girl to hit her partner for behaviours other than hitting her (e.g., calling her useless through to sexual disloyalty). The problematic implications of attitudes that condone the use of violence by girls in response to a range of “unacceptable” partner behaviours, especially when mixed with attitudes that approve of boys hitting girls if girls hit first, are probably worth raising with young people.

In the same Australian study, higher rates of psychological victimisation (i.e., being yelled at, put down, or humiliated) than physical victimisation were reported by adolescents in all age groups. The young Australians interviewed in this study rarely labelled such behaviours as forms of ‘abuse’, but they were not insensitive to these actions as forms of hurtful behaviour. In fact, at-risk youth appeared to be “extremely susceptible to being wounded by
insults, verbal bullying, put downs, jibes, humiliation, malicious gossip, and so on” (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001, p.41). Young perpetrators of partner violence described instances where they had used force against their partners, perceiving themselves to be victims rather than perpetrators. Considering the high levels of bi-directionality in the abusiveness observed in the relationships of young Australians, it is likely that in many cases the line between victim and perpetrator is blurred, at least from the perspective of individual partners.

Given that patterns of perpetration and victimisation established in adolescent relationships can carry through into later relationships (Feiring & Furman, 2000; Murphy & O’Leary, 1989; O’Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994; Rickert, Wiemann, Vaughan, & White, 2004; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003), efforts to prevent the victimisation of adolescent girls by their partners are imperative. Primary prevention efforts with young people should be prioritised if only because young women can face substantial barriers to leaving abusive relationships: for example, fear that their partner will come after them; being in-love or over-dependant in the relationship; and feelings of guilt about events during the relationship (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001; Few & Rosen, 2005).

**Are All Abusive Relationships the Same?**

Empirical research in this area has tended to focus on physical abuse to the relative exclusion of other forms of abuse. However, the findings of violence-focussed studies offer useful insights into the ways that general abuse might play out differently from one couple to another. Many commentators have argued that understanding the general motives and specific triggers for an individual’s use of violence against a partner is important for effectively targeting treatment interventions (e.g., Hamel & Nicholls, 2007; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Arguably, efforts aimed at preventing partner abuse also stand to benefit from attention to such issues.

Considering general motives, Johnson (1995) proposed four types of partner violence in adult couples: common couple violence, patriarchal terrorism, violent resistance, and mutual violent control. *Common couple violence* was thought to constitute virtually all of the violence observed in general population samples. This type of violence was said to occur in the context of specific arguments in which, typically, both partners lash out at the other; the aim is to win control in emotionally heated situations. On the other hand, *patriarchal terrorism* (later relabelled *intimate terrorism*; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000) was thought to be far less prevalent but more severe, involving the use of violence by one partner as a tactic to maintain general control over the other partner. *Violent resistance* was thought to be perpetrated defensively by a subset of “battered women” and *mutual violent control* was
thought to be rarer still, involving both partners engaging in terroristic behaviours with each other.

Temple, Weston, and Marshall (2005) underscored the importance of a typology that considers whether “couple” (i.e., mutual or bi-directional) violence is symmetrical or perpetrated primarily by one partner. Temple et al. proposed five types of violent relationships: those involving unilaterally female perpetrated violence, unilaterally male perpetrated violence, predominantly male perpetrated violence, predominantly female perpetrated violence, and symmetrical violence, respectively. Their longitudinal study found that a substantial proportion (54%) of young adult heterosexual relationships (in a low income area) were characterised by mutual violence: 6% of the relationships involved violence primarily perpetrated by the female partner, 29% involved violence primarily perpetrated by the male partner, and 19% involved symmetrical violence. The remainder of the relationships involved unidirectional violence by the male (15%) or female (9%), or no violence (22%).

Contrary to Johnson’s (1995) hypothesis that unilateral violence by males (equated with patriarchal terrorism) is more serious and recurs more frequently in the relationship than mutual violence (equated with common couple violence), Temple et al. (2005) found that violence was more frequent and severe when both male and female partners were violent, irrespective of the primary perpetrator’s (i.e., the perpetrator of the most frequent and severe violence) gender. Moreover, women in the three types of bi-directionally violent relationships experienced worse mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, interpersonal hostility) compared with women who suffered unilateral violence.

One concern raised by Temple et al. (2005) and others (e.g., Whitaker et al., 2007) is that some male partners’ behaviours might become more serious when their female partners respond aggressively to abusive treatment. Indeed, the most frequent and severe partner violence has been found to exist in relationship contexts characterised by negative reciprocity, rapid escalation, and a lack of withdrawal rituals (Stith, McCollum, Rosen, Locke, & Goldberg, 2005). Temple et al. suggested that an aggression spiral may occur whereby violence by one partner leads to a violent retaliation that subsequently triggers a more extreme violent act.

Investigation into the ways that partner abuse plays out in non-domestic contexts is relatively new. Drawing on a sample of adolescent perpetrators of partner violence, Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice and Wilcher (2007) reported that violent acts by females varied more in terms of motives, precipitating events, and the prior abusive behaviour of their partners, than violent acts by males. Foshee and her colleagues developed a typology of violence perpetration based on their interviews with female perpetrators that included four types:
patriarchal terrorism response (not necessarily self-defence; 38.5%), anger response (25%), ethic enforcement (19.2%), and first-time partner aggression response (17.3%). Young men, on the other hand, reported using physical force most often (on 78.6% of occasions) as a measure to prevent further escalation of their partners’ aggression.

Current educational approaches to preventing partner abuse among Australian youth tend to centre on two objectives: changing attitudes towards violence, and changing gender-based norms. Given the available evidence that different types of partner abuse transpire for a range of reasons and within varying dyadic contexts (typically involving bi-directional abuse), these approaches, alone, have limited preventative potential. In the next sections, it is argued that such approaches are limited by their adherence to two assumptions: (a) that partner abuse is viewed by individuals as a unitary phenomenon that is either ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’, and that behaviour follows accordingly, and (b) that partner abuse is a culturally determined phenomenon, rather than an outcome of dynamic, dyadic processes.

**Limitations of Attitude-Based Approaches to Preventing Partner Abuse**

Attitudinal change has been a central objective in efforts to prevent intimate partner violence against women in Australia (e.g., Taylor & Mouzos, 2006), yet the relationship between attitudes and violent behaviour against partners is far from straightforward. A number of theories have been proposed to explain the link between attitudes and behaviour.

The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985, 1991) proposes that a range of factors influence an individual’s intention to perform an instrumental behaviour (i.e., perceived usefulness of the behaviour, perceived norms, and perceived behavioural capability), but that perceived opportunities and previous experience play an important role in determining whether or not an individual will act on this intention. According to this model, a male who has successfully used intimidation as a means of gaining control (e.g., changing a partner’s behaviour) is more likely to behave this way in the future because he both perceives that he can effect the behaviour and has experienced success in so doing. Not incompatible with the theory of planned behaviour, rational choice theory is based on the belief that individuals are reasoning actors who weigh up the costs and benefits of possible actions and make rational choices (Cornish & Clarke, 1986 as cited in Clarke, 1997). According to this theory, individuals use socially unacceptable behaviour to meet everyday needs (for status, excitement, etc.), and meeting these needs involves making decisions that appear rational to the individual him/herself.

Indeed, Foshee, Bauman, and Linder (1999) and Riggs and Caulfield (1997) found that the perpetration of partner violence by adolescent males was associated with positive outcome expectations. In the context of the aforementioned theories, perpetrators’ attitudes supportive
of violence might be better viewed as the *products* of observational and/or experiential learning (about what responses work best to influence a partner’s behaviour) than as causal *determinants* of their violent behaviour. Promisingly, these theories suggest that individuals can be persuaded to refrain from engaging in problematic behaviour if they can be convinced that the rewards are minimal. In addition to generic attitudes towards violence, beliefs about the likely outcomes of violence in specific situations may be important to consider in the development of effective PAPE programs.

It is possible, too, that perceptions about provoking actions (e.g., as ego threatening or unjust) are as relevant in predicting violent behaviour as are attitudes about violence *per se*. For example, Foo and Margolin (1995) found that humiliation was perceived to be a sound justification for physical retaliation by male and female perpetrators of partner violence. In fact, perpetrators of partner violence who feel that their use of violence was justified tend to have difficulty in recognising that their behaviour was actually violent (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001). Campaigns aiming to sell the message that violence is unacceptable may have little impact in cases where one believes that their partner’s instigating actions are even less acceptable than retaliatory violence.

Generally, even violence prone young Australians agree that violence is not acceptable or, at least, not ideal; however, their life situations make them susceptible to the use of violence as a means of gaining control when they feel under threat, and to tolerating violence as a price of intimacy. It should not be surprising, then, that interventions that work to change attitudes towards violence are limited in terms of their capacity to reduce violent behaviour between partners (Murray & Graybeal, 2007; Nabi, Southwell, Hornik, 2002; Whitaker et al., 2006). In addition to general attitudes, situation-specific issues may need to be addressed in order to maximise the effectiveness of PAPE programs.

**Limitations of Gender-Based Approaches to Preventing Partner Abuse**

In Australia, a gender-based approach to preventing partner abuse predominates (see, for example, Donovan & Vlais, 2006). This approach to preventing partner abuse appears to be based on the sexual assault prevention literature (e.g., Carmody, 2006). In Australia, partner violence and sexual assault tend to be issues bundled closely together in governmental initiatives to reduce violence against women, even though sexual assault by partners is relatively rare compared with non-sexual violence by partners (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Mouzos & Makkai, 2004) and sexual assault by non-partners (Carmody & Willis, 2006; Murray, 2006).

The framing of partner abuse as a gender-based issue is motivated by second wave feminist thinking, which achieved strength during the 1960’s and through to the mid-1980’s
(for a discussion of the distinctions between first, second, and third wave feminist theories, see Fraser, 2008). At the heart of this approach to preventing partner abuse is the belief that harmful outcomes for females in couple-relationships can be attributed to social constructions of gender. According to this view, cultural beliefs need to be addressed, rather than the behaviour of individuals, in order to curb violence against women (Dyson, Mitchell, Dalton, & Hillier, 2003; Gourlay, 1996; Smith & Welchans, 2000). In particular, there is concern that attitudes that implicitly condone male violence against women might be reinforced by prevention initiatives that place any responsibility for violence prevention upon girls (Carmody, 2006; Fergus, 2006; Keel, 2005). The preferred alternative is to place responsibility with boys: to teach them non-violent conflict resolution skills; to encourage victim-empathy; to help them to examine the links between the social construction of masculinity and the use of violence, and to challenge their conformity to such constructions.

Many writers have argued against second wave feminist models of partner violence causation (see Hamel & Nicholls, 2007). There is no conclusive evidence that males with more sexist attitudes are more likely to use violence against a partner (Holtzworth, Bates, Smutzler, & Sandin, 1997). Other personality factors (e.g., insecure attachment, borderline traits, and trauma reactions) have consistently been found to account for more of the variance in male partner violence than have beliefs about male dominance (Dutton, 2007; Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2004; Stuart, 2005). High rates of partner abuse reported by youth and adults in same-sex relationships also challenge gender-based conceptualisations of partner abuse (e.g., Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004; Renzetti, 1997). Moreover, non-traditional sex-role beliefs have been found to be associated with greater perpetration of partner violence by young men and women in dating relationships (Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryan, 1992).

Some men do use particularly controlling behaviours with their partners. This is usually indicative of childhood maltreatment and/or attachment problems (Moretti, Penney, Obsuth & Odgers, 2007; Wolfe, Crooks, Chiodo, Jaffé, 2009). A general hunger for control contributes to the propensity of some boys and men to use violence instrumentally with partners (Graham-Kevan, 2007). The use of violence by these males, however, probably both results from and supports a hyper-defensive view of the social world (Foo & Margolin, 1995; Margolin & John, 1997). Therefore, while many boys might be receptive to the messages delivered in gender-based PAPE programs, challenging the most violence-prone boys on the basis of their gender may not be the most effective way to address their needs, real or perceived.
The contributions of second wave feminist theory and activism, not least in relation to the plight of victims of domestic violence (see Laing, 2000), are to be applauded. Feminist perspectives remain critical for driving further improvements in services for women who have suffered chronic and severe abuse by a partner. However, somewhat ironically, the current gender-based approach to preventing partner abuse tends to preclude interventions that might empower girls who are in, or who might enter, at-risk relationships (i.e., at risk of the development of coercive and hostile patterns) but who are yet to be psychologically or physically harmed by a partner. That is, the premise that all partner abuse stems from a culture that privileges men and denigrates women extrapolates to the idea that only an end to patriarchal ideology can end partner abuse; therefore, individual women must “wait for external changes to occur” in order to be safe in their couple-relationships (Few & Rosen, 2006, p.278). Consequently, as mentioned above, interventions that might assist young women to avoid or prevent their own victimisation are generally shunned. Instead, advice provided to girls tends to be limited to messages such as expect respect, violence against women is unacceptable, and seek support (e.g., call a helpline) if you are being abused.

There is currently a lack of evidence to conclude that a gender-based approach is effective in terms of the primary prevention of partner abuse (O’Keefe, 2005; Whitaker, 2006). However, there is little foundation to argue that this approach is not a helpful one, especially in relation to the objective of encouraging females to escape abuse that has already begun to cause harm. Putting an end to existing patterns of abuse is imperative, as the impact over time of different types and multiple episodes of abuse appear to be cumulative (Taft, 2003). That said, gender inclusive PAPE interventions that (a) acknowledge the perceived threats and wrong-doings that commonly precipitate acts of abuse by both boys and girls, (b) challenge the perceived functionality and defensibility of further wrong-doing in such cases, and (c) facilitate the exploration and active rehearsal of realistic alternatives to accommodating or reciprocating abusive behaviour, may achieve greater harm-minimisation gains than existing programs that involve young people, for example, in deconstructing gender stereo-types.

The ideas presented in the next sections are intended to complement existing attitude-oriented and male-perpetrator focused approaches to prevention; they are not intended to discourage the continued application and evaluation of current approaches to partner abuse prevention in Australia. The ideas presented below, however, are based on the premise that stakeholders in the prevention of harm should have an interest in seeing that would-be victims of partner abuse are empowered to safely resist pathways to chronic victimisation to the same extent that there is agreement that PAPE programs should discourage would-be perpetrators from behaving abusively.
A New Approach to Partner Abuse Prevention Education

Many partners, at least once, treat their counterparts disrespectfully, use manipulative or coercive tactics, demonstrate possessiveness or jealousy, or aggress verbally during a conflict (Murphy, 2009a / Chapter 2). Such behaviours can be socially or emotionally harmful per se, but also constitute risk factors for the perpetration of violence against a partner (Graham-Kevan, 2007; Harper, Austin, Cerccone, & Arias, 2005; Mouzos & Makkai, 2004). Perpetrating a wider range of such behaviours is associated with a greater risk of perpetrating severe violence (Dutton & Starzomski, 1997; Echeburua, Fernandez-Montalvo, Corral, & Lopez-Goni, 2009; Stacey, Hazelwood, & Shupe, 1994). Therefore, adolescents entering into their first relationships, particularly adolescents most at risk of victimisation (see Vezina & Hebert, 2007), may benefit from training in ways to discourage these “warning sign behaviours” (WSBs) should a partner display them.

Young people report that they want to learn how to negotiate their partner-relationships; in particular, they want programs that help them develop skills to handle unwanted situations (Carmody & Willis, 2006). Immediately leaving the relationship, or calling a help-line, is not a realistic initial action for all adolescents to take in response to the early warning signs of abuse which significant proportions of girls and boys encounter in their relationships (Jackson, Cram & Seymour, 2000; Murphy & Smith, 2010a); though such steps would be advisable if WSBs persisted or worsened.

The idea of a two-person (or dyadic) ‘slippery slope’ serves to illustrate the process by which female victims of chronic partner abuse ultimately come to realise that they are victims of abuse, regretting that they did not “see the signs” (i.e., WSBs) and act to protect themselves earlier. Female victims of chronic partner abuse tend to recall relatively minor transgressions by their abusive partners that progressed to more serious examples of psychological and/or physical abuse (Few & Rosen, 2005; Fraser, 2008). Female adolescents often perceive themselves to be at little risk of harm during interactions where high levels of emotional dependency are demonstrated and/or moderate levels of coercion and aggression are accommodated and reciprocated (e.g., Follingstad, Rutledge, McNeill-Harksins, & Polek, 1992; Gelles, 1997; Levy, 1990). After all, such WSBs have been found to be normative in at-risk groups (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999).

However, normative or not, girls’ responses to their partners’ WSBs—aggressive or accommodating on the one hand, or assertively discouraging on the other hand—are influential in determining to what extent socially, emotionally, and physically abusive dynamics will become entrenched aspects of their relationships. If passive and/or aggressive responses become habitual for girls, they may face a higher risk of re-victimisation (in the
same or subsequent relationships) than girls who learn to non-aggressively assert their needs for autonomy, to be taken seriously, etcetera, in response to their partners’ WSBs.

It is acknowledged that in many cases serious harm does not eventuate despite the presence of WSBs in a relationship. Rarely would major harm result the first time WSB occurs. However, in some cases WSBs are followed by increasingly frequent and/or serious abusive behaviours as each partner’s hostility and/or dependency on each other grows (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999; Few & Rosen, 2005). In a slippery slope fashion, the effects of each partner’s WSBs can exacerbate the other’s vulnerability to perpetrating or accepting further abuse. Each partner’s behaviours intensify and evolve in a dynamic interplay with the other partner’s responses until chronic abuse has set in or serious harm is done. Unfortunately, at this point, female victims’ emotional, social, and material dependency on their abusive male partners can be higher than ever (e.g., Bornstein, 2006) and they, with good reason, may fear the possible repercussions of attempting to leave the relationship (e.g., Wilson, Johnson, & Daly, 1995). Unfortunately, to ‘just leave’ the relationship, once a pattern of abuse is entrenched, is not an easy option for female victims (Keys Young, 1998). Metaphorically, the pit at the bottom of the ‘slippery slope’ is a deep one.

In summary, relationship dynamics characterised by hostility, overdependence and/or power imbalance can intensify over time, in a slippery slope fashion, spurred by the actions and responses of both partners in the relationship. In the context of developing psycho-educational programs for adolescents, the ‘slippery slope’ metaphor could provide a motivational basis on which to teach young people skills for ‘keeping a grip’ when faced with WSBs; the simple message that violence is unacceptable may be less motivating from the perspective of violence-prone individuals than the message that the ‘slippery slope’ can be skillfully avoided. Further, the use of the ‘slippery slope’ metaphor with young people, where the major focus is on exploring the smartest responses to WSBs, might constitute a less emotive and less adversative approach to preventing serious abuse between partners than approaches which have violence and gender as their major foci.

The potential worth of a ‘dyadic slippery slope’ model in psycho-educational contexts lies in its capacity to motivate acts of positive resistance in the early stages of at-risk relationships, but also in its deliberate failure to attribute blame for the development of abusive dynamics to any particular gender. The ‘slippery slope’ metaphor emphasises the importance of noticing and responding astutely to the early warning signs that sometimes arise in relationships. There is an implicit recognition, however, that neither partner can descend the ‘slippery slope’ without the other. The ‘slope’ itself is what each partner needs to be aware of and learn skills to avoid. While female partners stand to be worse affected by the slippery slope, boys and
Helping Girls Before They're Victims

Murphy and Smith (2010a) found that significant percentages of adolescent girls were unlikely, perhaps because they lacked appropriate models or ‘scripts’, to assertively discourage WSBs by their partners, even when they viewed the behaviours in question to be problematic. While girls tended to report that they would non-aggressively assert their needs in response to attempts by a partner to restrict their social autonomy, many girls proposed responses to denigrating, hostile, and emotionally over-dependent behaviours (by a hypothetical partner) that were passive/accommodating, aggravating/aggressive, or encouraging/rewarding.

Perhaps the major implication of such findings is that just selling to girls the message that ‘violence against women is unacceptable’ may not reduce their susceptibility to being chronically victimised by a partner, unless they are also given practical training in positive ways to respond to the early warning signs that tend to precede partner violence. In particular, at-risk girls may require help to learn ways to discourage WSBs by their partners without resorting to equally high-risk behaviours.

PAPE programs that incorporate teaching adolescent girls practical skills for responding assertively to specific examples of WSB, if developed, could be viewed as being in line with the social influence approach to preventing other high-risk behaviours (Sanci et al., 2002; Tobler, 2000). This approach to prevention emphasises the importance of young people planning and rehearsing responses to real-life social scenarios in order to resist succumbing to unhealthy pressures. The effectiveness of an adapted social influence approach for reducing girls’ tolerance and reciprocation of high-risk partner behaviours is worth testing.

Promisingly, adolescent girls have been found to be open and responsive to partner abuse prevention education (Fergus, 2006); adolescent boys report looking for cues about how to act within their relationships (Office of the Status of Women, 2003); and adolescence is a formative period during which attachment styles are open to change in response to new relational experiences (Collins & Read, 1994; Feeney & Noller, 1996).

Helping Boys Before they Perpetrate

There is little reason to believe that practical training in safer ways to respond to WSBs could not also be applied meaningfully to adolescent boys: Girls themselves display WSBs (e.g., Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Murphy, 2009a / Chapter 2). Presumably, girls’ and boys’ own use of WSBs will impact on their likelihood of responding protectively to similar behaviours by their
partners. However, it is conceivable, too, that learning how to respond protectively to their partners’ WSBs might reduce the extent to which boys and girls engage in similarly risky behaviours.

Whether boys or girls are the target for behavioural change, it is important to remember that their relationship behaviour is inherently dyadic. That is, it is shaped by influences that both partners bring to their interactions; including the responses of each partner to the other partner’s behaviours. For maximum effect, partner abuse prevention programs should not ignore the dyadic nature of adolescent partner abuse (O’Leary & Smith Slep, 2003). Unfortunately, in PAPE programs that focus disproportionately on the potential for boys to be abusive towards girls, there is a tendency to promulgate the message that female partners are never responsible for abuse that transpires in relationships, presumably based on the erroneous assumption that females are not capable of perpetrating hurtful or controlling behaviour or actively contributing to abusive escalations. Individuals should never be viewed as accountable for a partner’s abusive behaviour. However, this should not translate into a diminished sense of responsibility for one’s own behaviour.

**New Directions for Partner Abuse Prevention Education Research**

Generic school-based programs that aim to improve self-esteem and teach assertiveness and conflict resolution have not been evaluated for their effectiveness in reducing partner abuse perpetration nor victimisation. However, it is doubtful that such programs would impact substantially on young people’s susceptibility to the partner abuse ‘slippery slope’ unless appropriate scripts are also made available for how to respond to the early warning signs of partner abuse. Behavioural skills training (e.g., Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; Lundahl, Nimer, & Parsons, 2006) in anti-WSB skills may be crucial in order to achieve meaningful preventative gains; though this hypothesis remains to be tested in the field of partner abuse prevention. Such training could, of course, be incorporated into existing school-based programs or be delivered as a stand-alone special-focus program. Whether empowerment-oriented training in the skills to resist the partner abuse ‘slippery slope’ is more effective in mixed or single-sex groups is a question worthy of empirical investigation.

An equally important research question concerns whether such training should be offered universally to all students at a certain Year Level, or on an elective basis for students with an interest in romantic relationships (e.g., some students may elect to participate in such a program at Year 8, others at Year 10). Appropriate developmental timing is important because adolescents tend to engage better in learning when they perceive it to be personally relevant or useful in the short-term (Jafè, Wolfe, Crooks, Hughes, & Barker, 2004; Murdoch & Wilson, 2004).
Given that transference of skills learnt in one context to another context is not automatic (Mallot & Suarez, 2004), youth educators committed to the prevention of partner abuse may need to facilitate active planning and rehearsal of assertive (non-accommodating, non-aggressive) responses to a range of common relationship situations. Partners can demonstrate disrespectful and controlling behaviour in various contexts: during a heated disagreement, as a manifestation of jealousy, in retaliation for a hurtful act, in an emotionally needy way, by being generally domineering, by casually making fun of their partner in public, and so on. Given that different types of warning sign situations call for somewhat different responses in order to discourage further WSB, young people’s abilities to generalise their learning should not be overestimated. Presumably, the best warning sign situations for young people to practice asserting their needs in response to would include those identified by the program participants themselves as being potentially relevant.

Confidence in one’s ability to perform a specific behaviour to produce the desired outcome (i.e., self-efficacy) has been shown to be important in predicting positive attitudes towards the behaviour and actual uptake of the behaviour (Norman & Brain, 2005; Gillibrand & Stevenson, 2006). The role of self-efficacy, as well as other elements of Rosentock’s (1974) extended health belief model (as cited in Janz, Champion, Strecher, 2002) may provide fruitful avenues of investigation in this area. Merely engaging youth in theoretical discussions (e.g., about what they want from their relationships; about the costs of partner violence; about gender stereotypes; about the general characteristics that define self-respect, resilience, or assertiveness) is unlikely to be enough to empower at-risk individuals to non-aggressively assert their needs with their partners and, thus, resist the insidious pull of the partner abuse ‘slippery slope.’ However, rigorous research is needed—and, arguably, long overdue—to determine what specific types of psycho-educational intervention do help (Whitaker et al., 2006).

**Conclusion**

In the interests of maximising the effectiveness of PAPE programs, program developers may need to attend more to the not-yet-violent and not-so-harmful behaviours of boys and girls that can lead to serious harm, especially for females, in couple-relationships. In addition to directly addressing would-be perpetrators’ use of WSBs, skill-based interventions are probably needed to address the responses of would-be perpetrators and victims to WSBs by their partners. Such interventions may be crucial because the responses of young people to their partners’ WSBs can heighten their risk of serious perpetration and/or victimisation. Certainly, programs are needed for young people that do not presume a perpetrator status for boys and a victim status for girls. The challenge is to develop PAPE programs that help boys
and girls to acquire more assertive (i.e., less accommodating, less aggressive) responses to the early warning signs of partner abuse that are common especially among high-risk adolescents, and to determine how best to deliver such programs.

A continued focus on male would-be perpetrators of partner violence, and on general attitudes towards violence against women, may be warranted in social marketing strategies (but the popular focus on violence may do little to reduce the general abusiveness of many couple-relationships). Continuing to fund and promote sources of assistance and support for female victims of chronic and severe partner abuse is critical. Continuing to ensure that perpetrators of severe abuse are held legally and morally accountable for their actions is also crucial. However, efforts to help adolescent girls and boys to recognise behavioural warning signs of abuse and to learn responses that preclude accommodating and reciprocating these WSBs, from the outset of their earliest relationships, are also important. Such efforts are likely to achieve better prevention outcomes than campaigns and programs that fail to empower young would-be victims and perpetrators to take more conscious control over the course of their relationships.

As deserving of help as victims of partner abuse are, vulnerable individuals who are yet to be victimised are equally deserving of help. As inexcusable as perpetration of severe abuse is, vulnerable individuals who are yet to harm a partner also ought to receive help. Because victim and perpetrator roles are often not clearly defined in adolescent relationships, the preventative needs of young Australians are likely to be best met by complementing messages about violence against women with programs that help young people to recognise and respond wisely to the early warning signs of partner abuse, of which both boys and girls are capable. The following chapter examines 23 specific WSBs and how young women view and experience these behaviours.
Paper Two:
Young Women’s Perceptions and Experiences of Warning-Sign Behaviours in Romantic Relationships

Executive Summary
This study constituted the first stage of empirical research in a project aimed at developing a program to reduce adolescent girls’ vulnerability to chronic partner abuse. The online survey used in this research was designed to help ensure that the program developed in the next stage was responsive to the relationship-education needs of adolescent girls in contemporary Australia. It gathered information about 23 warning sign behaviours (WSBs), the views that young women hold about these WSBs, and the ways that young women respond to WSBs. Five domains of WSB were examined: general dominance-seeking behaviour, conflict-specific control tactics, possessiveness, denigration, and retaliation. Over 600 young women aged 18 to 25 years responded to the survey. This report presents young women’s responses in relation to these WSBs, with a focus on the implications of these results that might be considered in designing, refining, and delivering programs aimed at empowering young women to proactively resist the development of abusive dynamics. The major implications discussed in this report are summarised here.

Four ‘dominance-seeking’ WSBs were examined in the survey. Both males and females appeared to be capable of attempting to take charge and establish dominance. While gender influences how young people behave, in order to avoid unhelpful defensiveness by some program participants, partner abuse prevention workers should not presume that the propensity to seek dominance is unique to male partners. It is nonetheless of concern that significant minorities of the young women endorsed accommodative responses to dominance-seeking partner behaviours. Indeed, the qualitative responses of some of the respondents suggested that they regretted not having responded more assertively to their partners’ dominance behaviours earlier in their relationships. Adolescent girls might therefore benefit from opportunities to think through the likely long-term outcomes of responding submissively to early signs of dominance-seeking behaviour by a partner. Opportunities to plan and rehearse assertive responses may be helpful for some young women.

‘Conflict-control tactics’ were less commonly encountered by respondents compared with ‘dominance-seeking’ WSBs. However, experiencing conflict control-tactics was associated with a greater risk of feeling hurt or harm as a result. At the outset of their earliest romantic relationships, adolescent girls may benefit from opportunities to learn how to recognise signs
of ‘unfair control’ dynamics, including the use of passive and active conflict-control tactics. Many of the surveyed young women reported that they had accommodated and/or reciprocated the conflict-control tactics examined in the survey. At the outset of their relationship careers, many respondents would not have been prompted to think through the likely long-term outcomes of (a) accepting partner behaviours that ‘stonewall’ attempts to achieve a fair resolution, (b) accepting emotionally hurtful or physically intimidating conflict-control tactics, and (c) using or reciprocating such tactics with their partners. Some young women might benefit from opportunities to practice assertive responses to unfair control tactics in readiness for their first real-life encounters with such behaviours.

While ‘possessiveness’ WSBs were experienced to be hurtful or harmful by some respondents, many of these behaviours were considered to be more normative than abusive. In addition, although some of the behaviours were exhibited more often by their partners than by the young women themselves, each of the possessiveness WSBs examined was reportedly engaged in by at least a substantial minority of the respondents. The finding that most respondents did not perceive possessive behaviours to be particularly harmful means that prevention workers should perhaps frame such behaviours as ‘warning signs’ that harmful outcomes might eventuate, instead of trying to convince young people that possessive behaviour *per se* is abusive. Opportunities to plan and rehearse assertive scripts for responding to possessive behaviours, to minimise the risk of harmful outcomes, may be warranted. The survey showed that some young women who do appreciate the problematic nature of possessive behaviour can nonetheless inadvertently reward such behaviours (e.g., by offering reassurances, by reaffirming their commitment to their partner) instead of challenging their partner’s problematic cognitions.

Most of the ‘denigration’ WSBs examined were reportedly prevalent, and engaged in by respondents as frequently as they were experienced. Therefore, as with many of the other WSBs examined, it is probably important that prevention workers avoid overplaying the role of gender in determining how partners treat each other. Notwithstanding this, many young women are not primed to consider the worth of their relationships from a personal self-image perspective. The generally higher social status ascribed to adolescent girls who ‘have a boyfriend’ may overshadow some girls’ capacity to see an unhealthy relationship as self-esteem negating. Many young women reported having accommodated denigrating behaviours by a partner. It may be helpful for young women to be (a) made aware of the possible impacts of a partner’s disparaging comments and actions on their self-esteem and (b) equipped with assertive (non-passive but non-reciprocating) responses to draw on, with which to defend their
sense of self, should they encounter denigrating treatment. It may be equally important to make young women aware that denigrating their partners is not acceptable.

Approximately equal proportions of respondents reported experiencing and displaying ‘retaliation’ behaviour. That is, respondents were not substantially less likely to retaliate in response to perceived wrong-doing than were their partners. Because retaliatory responses typically occur in the context of heightened emotions, being prepared with non-retaliatory scripts to draw upon in such situations is important. Young men and women, both, might benefit from opportunities to plan and rehearse non-escalatory responses to a range of angering relationship situations.

Introduction

In unhealthy heterosexual relationships, the risk of serious harm, including physical injury, is greater for female partners (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005). Young women aged 25 years or less are at higher risk of experiencing violence by a partner than are older women (ABS, 1996). However, some young women are at higher risk of chronic partner abuse than are others (e.g., Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001; Cyr, McDuff & Write, 2006; Few & Rosen, 2005; Fraser, 2008; Harned, 2002; Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; O’Keefe, 2005; O’Leary & Smith Slep, 2003; Vezina & Hebert, 2007). The ultimate aim of the current survey was to develop a pilot program aimed at reducing adolescent girls’ vulnerability to social, emotional, and/or physical abuse during or following their consensually-initiated couple-relationships.

While sexual assault is a serious issue, it is important to note that reducing the incidence of sexual assault was not a primary focus. Sexual assault more often occurs outside of couple-relationships; that is, it is most often perpetrated by family members and casual acquaintances (ABS, 1996; Forke, Myers, Catallozzi, & Schwarz, 2008). In comparison with other forms of hurtful and controlling behaviour in relationships, sexual violence by partners is relatively rare (ABS, 1996). Given the nature of sexual assault, and the contexts in which it typically occurs, it is debatable whether sexual assault prevention programs should target girls (see Carmody & Carrington, 2000). However, unhealthy couple-relationships can be sexually exploitative and, in such cases, the abuse usually develops incrementally and in combination with one or more other forms of partner abuse (Catallozzi, Simon, Davidson, Breitbart, & Rickert, 2011; Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004). The current project aimed to reduce girls’ vulnerability to all forms of partner abuse.

The current survey was designed to help ensure that the program developed in the next stage, and new programs developed by others, are responsive to the relationship-education needs of young women at risk of chronic partner abuse. It is important, however, that the
findings of this survey are interpreted within a broader framework which acknowledges the full gamut of factors that directly and indirectly impact on young people’s behaviour in their couple-relationships. Young women have limited power to influence the course of their relationships. Responsibility for any relationship is shared by both partners, and young women must never be viewed as accountable for abusive behaviour perpetrated by their partners. The aims of the current project do not conflict with current efforts to address the socio-cultural factors that influence the ways that males and females behave in heterosexual relationships. Interventions at the community and individual level that ensure that abuse-prone male partners take responsibility for their own behaviour remain imperative.

This project in no way intends to diminish the accountability of abusive male partners for the harms that they cause. The project aims to complement the development and evaluation of male-focused campaigns and programs. Put simply, the project aims to elucidate an effective method for maximising young women’s self-agency within their couple-relationships, acknowledging the constraints and obstacles that bear on their capacity to achieve healthy self-determination. It is believed that such auxiliary work with young women might augment the effectiveness of efforts to change problematic cultural norms.

In order to develop an empowerment-oriented psycho-educational program for adolescent girls, aimed at reducing their vulnerability to chronic abuse, the online Risk in Romantic Relationships Survey was developed. This survey was designed to gather information about 23 WSBs, the views that young Australian women hold about these WSBs, and the ways that they respond to their partners’ WSBs. WSBs are behaviours in couple-relationships that increase the likelihood of one or both partners experiencing emotional, social or physical harm, during or following the termination of a relationship. A particular incidence of one type of WSB in a particular relationship may or may not constitute abuse; abuse, here, is defined as an interactional pattern or trend likely to result in emotional, social, or physical harm.

This report presents the results of the online survey in great detail. Because a great deal of data is presented, the results are summarised frequently and key findings and implications are discussed periodically throughout this report.

**Method**

**Recruitment**

With ethics approval (RMIT HREC Project #33/08), recruitment of participants to complete the online survey was by way of flyers distributed at Victorian universities and TAFE campuses, a small newspaper advertisement, and centrally distributed student emails at one Victorian university. Students were encouraged to email the survey hyperlink to friends if they met the inclusion criteria. The only inclusion criteria were that respondents were female,
were aged 18 to 25 years, and had some type of couple-relationship experience. Respondents may not have been sexually active with their partners, and may have engaged in same- or opposite-sex romantic relationships.

**Participants**

A total of 790 individuals visited the online Risk in Romantic Relationships survey. Of these, 618 young women began the survey. Progressively fewer young women completed each subsequent page of the 11-page survey, but 426 young women persisted to the last page. All data submitted by all respondents are presented in this chapter.

The mean age of respondents was 21.3 years. Most respondents (81%) attended a university; others were studying at TAFE, working or unemployed. The fact that most women were pursuing university level education means that this sample should not be considered representative of all young Australian women. Most young women who completed this survey can be assumed to have a greater level of access to the socio-economic resources required for self-determination than do young women not attending university. In particular, the results of this survey cannot be generalised to young women living in impoverished communities (e.g., in developing nations and in remote Australian communities) and to non-English-speaking young Australian women. It is also possible that previously partner-abused respondents were more inclined to complete the survey (i.e., are over-represented) because of its apparent focus on negative relationship experiences.

**Extent of Relationship Experience**

Whether or not respondents were sexually active with their partners, or engaged in same-or opposite-sex relationships, was not information sought by the survey, but questions were worded so as not to exclude any young woman from contributing to the survey on the basis of her sexuality. Most (55%) had spent 1 to 5 years in romantic relationships, but 20% had spent over 5 years in such relationships. The biggest proportion (42%) reported that their longest relationship had lasted 2 to 5 years; the next most common duration was 1 to 2 years, reported by 25% of respondents. Most respondents (63%) reported having had at least one partner in the last year, but that they had not lived with any partners; 28% reported living with at least one partner in the last year; 9% reported not having had a romantic relationship in the previous year. In summary, the respondents overall had a high level of relationship experience.

**Relational and Emotional Characteristics**

**Importance of Romantic Relationships.** The survey assessed how important romantic involvement was for respondents by asking them their reasons for engaging in romantic relationships. ‘Fun and laughs’ was reportedly a major reason for 51% of the sample. ‘Having
someone to care for me, protect me, or defend me’ was a small reason (31%), a major reason (28%), and a very important reason (23%) for seeking romantic involvement; only 7% said that this was something they felt they needed romantic relationships for. Most respondents reported that ‘Excitement and passion’ was a major (39%) and very important (34%) reason for seeking a partner. Most (37%) reported that ‘To feel good about myself, wanted and loved’ was a small reason for being romantically involved, but 22% felt being in a relationship was either very important or needed for this reason. ‘Emotional support, having someone there for me’ was considered very important or crucial for 39%. ‘To look after someone who needs my help, to feel needed’ was a very important or crucial reason to have a partner for 18% of the sample, but most (65%) respondents reported that this was only a small reason or not a reason at all.

In summary, the young women who undertook this survey reported looking to romantic relationships to satisfy a range of desires and, in some cases, needs. The perceived need for emotional support motivated many of the young women to engage in couple-relationships; other aspects were considered crucial by smaller proportions. Overall, the respondents reported varying combinations of reasons for seeking romantic involvement and attributed varying levels of importance to being in a couple-relationship.

**Anger.** The survey also measured respondents’ propensity to feel upset or angered by others’ actions. In response to the statement ‘I feel irritated in response to things that other people wouldn’t care about’ the biggest group of respondents (38%) reported agreeing somewhat/sometimes. In response to the statement ‘I get upset when I don’t feel valued or appreciated by a boyfriend or girlfriend’ the biggest proportion (39%) reported agreeing mostly/often; 31% reported feeling upset for this reason very much/always. In response to the statement ‘I notice little signs that someone doesn’t respect me, signs that other people might not notice’ the largest proportion of respondents (30%) reported agreeing somewhat/sometimes. In response to the statement ‘I get angry if a partner takes their problems out on me’ the largest group (35%) reported agreeing mostly/often; a significant percentage (21%) reported getting angry for this reason very much/always. In response to the statement ‘I get aggressive when I feel like I’m not getting the respect I deserve’ the biggest proportion (30%) reported agreeing somewhat/sometimes; 22% reported getting aggressive often or always.

Overall, the majority of young women reported experiencing some level of anger in response to disrespectful treatment and feeling these emotional responses sometimes through to frequently. In other words, passive acceptance of disrespectful behaviour (often assumed to be a traditionally feminine quality) was not normative in the current sample.
**Hostility.** Finally, the survey measured the extent to which respondents felt generalised distrust and hostility towards males as partners. In response to the statement ‘I think young men lie to get their own way with female partners’ most respondents (48%) reported agreeing somewhat/sometimes; 33% believed that men lie often or always. In response to the statement ‘I think young men care about their own interests more than the girl they are with’ most respondents (37%) reported agreeing somewhat/sometimes; 29% believed that this occurred often or always. In response to the statement ‘I think that to get respect, young women need to ’fight back’ in their romantic relationships’ most respondents (31%) reported agreeing somewhat/sometimes; 23% believed that young women need to fight back often or always. In response to the statement ‘I think women would be better off without men’ a great majority of respondents (80%) reported agreeing either not at all or a little/rarely, but 6% believed that women would be better off without men often or always. In response to the statement ‘I think men deserve to be treated as badly as they treat women’ well over half the respondents (68%) reported not agreeing at all, but 13% believed that matched retaliation is justified often or always.

To summarise, some of the young women who responded to the survey harbour feelings of distrust in relation to male partners in general. A few believed that men are damaging to women and deserve to be punished in kind. Inflated measures of distrust and hostility might be expected, however, in a sample of young women motivated to contribute to research on the topic of partner abuse. The above percentages may not be representative of 18 to 25 year old women in the general community.

**Survey Content**

A total of 23 potentially harmful behaviours in relationships were examined. Each warning-sign behaviour (WSB) is treated separately in the Results and Discussion section below. These WSBs fall into five conceptual categories: general dominance-seeking behaviours (in the absence of conflict); conflict-specific control tactics; possessiveness/jealousy; denigration (in the absence of conflict); and retaliation behaviours. These five domains and the specific WSBs within each domain were arrived at via a process which included a review of the ‘intimate partner violence’ and ‘dating violence’ literature (e.g., Babcock, Costa, Green, & Eckhardt, 2004; Fenton & Rathus, 2010; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Murphy & Smith, 2010a; O'Leary, Smith Slep, & O'Leary, 2007), and subsequent workshops with 14 to 18 year-old male and female school students and smaller focus-groups with relationship-experienced young women aged 16 to 18 years. The wording used to describe each WSB was deliberately gender-inclusive to allow women with same-sex relationship experiences to contribute to this study.
**Estimated prevalence.** Respondents were asked to estimate the prevalence of each of the 23 WSBs (as a percentage ‘of relationships at my age’), selecting from seven possible prevalence categories between 0% and 100%.

**Perceived risk.** To measure how risky respondents viewed the WSBs to be, respondents were asked to rate how problematic each WSB would be if it kept happening in a relationship. Respondents selected responses from a five-point scale, where the most serious possible response was ‘dangerous’.

**Experience and perceived harm.** To ascertain whether each WSB was experienced by at least some young women and some young men, and was capable of causing the subjective experience of harm, respondents were asked to report on whether they had experienced each partner behaviour, ever and in the past year respectively, and if ever exposed to the WSB, whether they felt hurt or harmed as a result.

**Self-engagement.** Respondents were also asked whether they had themselves engaged in each WSB with a partner in the past year.

**Intended responses.** Respondents were asked to select from given options the option closest to how they believe they would respond to each WSB if they encountered it.

**Actual responses.** Finally, in open-format, respondents were asked how they actually did respond to each WSB the first time, if they had previously encountered the WSB.

**Results and Discussion**

This section presents the responses given by the young women in relation to each of the 23 WSBs examined in the survey. Major findings and implications are discussed at the end of each section.

**Dominance-Seeking Warning-Sign Behaviours**

This domain of WSB was conceptually divided into two sub-domains: ‘dominance/demanding’ and ‘dominance/disregarding’. Two specific behaviours were included in the survey to represent ‘dominance/demanding’. Likewise, two specific behaviours were included to represent ‘dominance/disregarding’. Table 2.1 summarises respondents’ experiences with these WSBs.
Dominance/Demanding

‘He/she gives you tasks as if they are ‘in charge’ of you’. Only 28% of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Selecting one of five possible ‘problem’ categories, most respondents believed it is a medium problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; however, 24% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Approximately half (52%) of respondents had at some time personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 53% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 58% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 32% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 6% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Thirty-nine percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 17% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In summary, young women reported that this behaviour by their partners is not rare; however, the young women surveyed were more likely to have recently assigned tasks to their partner in a firm manner than their partners were. There is a 53% chance that exposure to this type of behaviour by a partner will be experienced by a young woman to be hurtful or harmful.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Options were predetermined in this section of the survey; this provided respondents with opportunities to familiarise themselves with behavioural options which they may not have been previously inclined to consider. The majority of respondents (62%) reported that they would respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem or asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour. On the other hand, 18% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., they said they would accept or ignore the behaviour); 2% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., insult them); and 18% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour.

Table 2.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominance WSBs</th>
<th>% experienced, past year (ever)</th>
<th>% felt hurt or harmed, ever</th>
<th>% engaged in, past year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gives tasks</td>
<td>42 (52)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires permission</td>
<td>42 (60)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persists annoying</td>
<td>67 (68)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persists scaring</td>
<td>42 (66)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In summary, while most reported that they would respond assertively to this WSB, a high proportion of the young women reported that they would either accommodate or reciprocate ‘in-charge’ behaviour with their partners.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed to it. A variety of responses were recorded. For example:

- "Yes sir"
- Make them aware of what they were doing, and tell them not to do it again.
- I did it anyway, because I love him and trust him, and because he knows more about some things than I do. We both know where we stand so I was happy to do as he wanted.
- Just ignored it and made a joke of it.
- Told them to ask me to do something, not tell me.
- The thing that I said or did, the first time a partner gave me tasks as if they were in charge, was complete the tasks out of love then later out of fear.
- I was happy and thankful-because I didn't have to be in charge. It was only later when I realized how it affected my mentally-where I lived for him and no longer for myself.
- I gave my partner a funny and intimidating look, I shrugged and said "yeah right, who says you are the boss?" Then we laughed about it and moved on.
- Yes, ok. Mainly because I act in that way towards him sometimes to, so i think it is fair to be able to exert dominance over each other occasionally, just not on a regular basis, so in the end we both know we are equal.
- Ok but how about asking my opinion first.
- Followed their instructions - felt no need to disagree or feel hurt.
- To tell them that I am not your servant, if you want it you get it.
- I did what he said, but now (over a year later) I really wish I'd stood up for myself more.

‘He/she expects you to ask for permission before you make certain decisions’ . Thirty-five percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a serious problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; however, 23% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Sixty percent of respondents had at some time personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 52% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 58% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 24% of respondents
reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 18% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Fifty percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 14% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In summary, young women reported that this behaviour by their partners is not rare; however, the young women surveyed were almost as likely to expect their partner to ask for their approval before making certain decisions as vice versa. As with the previous WSB, there is a fair chance that exposure to this behaviour in a couple-relationship will be experienced by a young woman to be hurtful or harmful.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Sixty-five percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem or asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour. On the other hand, 13% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., they said they would accept or ignore the behaviour); 2% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., insult them); and 20% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour.

In summary, while most reported that they would respond assertively to this WSB, a high proportion of the young women reported that they would either accommodate or reciprocate this behaviour with their partners.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- I didn't tell him about my decisions and kept it to myself.
- I think asking for approval is not such a bad thing, depending on the context. For example, I'll be going on a holiday without my partner, so I think that it is just natural for me to ask HER about her thoughts/approval.
- Why do I have to ask you?
- Asked ‘Is this ok?’
- First I said, okay, and then I asked why this was important for her to know. When I felt it was fair enough, I agreed again.
- Tell them they were crazy and I don't need anyone's approval but my own.
- I explained why he wouldn't need to be worried, so he should stop wanting that.
The thing that I said or did, the first time a partner expected me to ask for his or her approval before I made certain decisions, was talk it out with them. Later I grew used to this and saw it as a form of care toward me.

I told him I was an adult and it was my money so I could do as I please.

Just accepted it.

I said that this was ridiculous as I don't need their approval to do the things I want to do in my life. I am my own person.

I'm not going to do anything that will harm our relationship. I just want to do this. Do you understand that?

**Dominance /Disregarding**

*He/she doesn’t stop deliberately doing something to annoy you, after you’ve asked once*. Only 21% of respondents considered that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a medium problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; however, 38% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Sixty-eight percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 60% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 33% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 43% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 24% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Forty-four percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 11% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In summary, this WSB was reportedly more widely encountered than ‘general dominance – demanding’ WSBs, and slightly more likely to be experienced as hurtful or harmful. The young women’s partners were more likely to have displayed this WSB than they themselves were; nonetheless, over half of the respondents themselves reported acting this way with a partner in the last year. This WSB was relatively frequently encountered and displayed in the past year, compared to the other WSBs in this domain.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Fifty-four percent of respondents reported that they would respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “Tell them I have a right to have my limits respected”) or telling their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them they must stop as soon as I ask”). On the other hand, 23% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “Not say or do anything”); 6% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., insult them); and 18% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour, either then or later.
So, assertive responses to deliberately annoying behaviour are not as common as they were for other WSBs in this domain. Many young women said they would accommodate or reciprocate this behaviour.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- I told them to stop a few times, and I shoved him a few times too and whined a bit.
- "Why would you want to annoy me?"
- Some seductive actions.
- I got angry at her, and told her that she was not being fair to me. She then got angry at me, and told her the reasons why she was going it. And we cried about it. And then it was.
- Resolved as soon as tears came into place with "I'm sorry, I'll be better to you, I never want to hurt you".
- I confronted them about the situation and explained that what they were doing was disrespectful.
- I told you not to do that anymore, you know how much it annoys me, maybe I'll start doing things you don’t like, see how you like it?
- Angrily tell them to stop again. Left the situation.
- Silent.
- I let him continue with the behaviour.
- I made a joke out of it and laughingly threatened him.
- "You're a prick" then he stopped.
- Told him why it bothered me so much and asked that he think about it and try to remember to not do it in future.

‘He/she doesn’t stop deliberately doing something that scares you, after you’ve asked once.’ Thirty-four percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a serious problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; however, 7% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Sixty-six percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 86% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 58% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 30% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 12% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. The majority (79%) reported never having
behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 3% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

This WSB, therefore, was experienced slightly more widely than were ‘dominance – demanding’ behaviours. Not surprisingly, compared with other WSBs in this domain, respondents were much more likely to experience this WSB as a form of abuse (i.e., as actually harmful). Respondents’ partners were also considerably more likely than the respondents themselves to have engaged in this WSB.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Ninety percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem or telling their partner to stop or change the behaviour. Only 4% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., they said they would do nothing); 2% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., insult them); and 4% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour, either then or later.

Therefore, it appears that assertive responses to this WSB are normative for this sample; few respondents said they would accept or reciprocate this behaviour or aggravate their partner by insulting them.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- I never said anything in fear of him breaking up with me.
- Don't do this, it makes me anxious, and I hate it.
- Abusive language.
- Removed myself from the situation
- Nothing.
- "Stopppppppppppppppppppppppppppppppp!"
- Get annoyed, but didn't talk about it with them, which I should have.
- Please stop drinking. You have had enough, it would make me feel safer if you didn’t have another drink.
- Continue to ask him to stop.
- Keep quiet and stay angry.
- I felt upset but didn't want to push it, so I didn't say anything.
- Please stop it (I raised my voice).
Summary and Implications for Prevention

Each of the WSBs discussed in this section appear to be worthy of inclusion in partner abuse prevention programs intended for adolescent girls and, also, boys. Table 2.1 summarises respondents’ experiences with these WSBs. While deliberately persisting with anxiety-provoking behaviours appears to be more commonly performed by male partners, male partners and female partners, both, appear capable of attempting to take charge and assert dominance in particular situations. Youth-targeted partner abuse prevention workers should therefore not presume that the propensity to try to dominate in day-to-day interactions is unique to young male partners. Such a suggestion may inadvertently perpetuate unhelpful traditional stereotypes. Additionally, many girls and boys may respond defensively to such assumptions. The qualitative responses offered by young women also point to the fact that dominance behaviours are not necessarily problematic; situational nuances need to be acknowledged. Certainly, there are no simple ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to respond to dominance-seeking behaviour by a partner.

However, given the heightened risk of male-perpetrated violence in heterosexual relationships that are characterised by marked dominance/submission patterns, adolescent girls might benefit from well-facilitated opportunities to think through the likely short-and long-term outcomes of responding passively or submissively to early signs of power-asserting behaviour by a partner, should these signs occur. Some respondents indicated that they wish they had responded more assertively from the start. The possible long-term outcomes of responding aggressively and/or reciprocating power-asserting behaviour may also be worth addressing with adolescent girls.

Dominance behaviours in certain, specific interactions may not be problematic. It is reasonable to expect that young women who themselves exhibit dominance behaviours might prove harder to convince that these behaviours are potentially harmful. ‘Fair control’ in relationships could be an ideal to which young people are encouraged to aspire. Whichever partner stands to be more adversely affected by a decision or behaviour, that partner should have the greater say over what happens. It is not ‘fair control’, for example, if one partner’s actions cause the other partner to feel uncomfortable or anxious.

Opportunities to appraise the advantages of ‘fair control’ relationships should be afforded to all young people, preferably before they are confronted with ‘dominance-seeking’ WSBs in their real-life relationships. Being prepared might be the best defence. That is, awareness may help them to resist the development of ‘unfair control’ dynamics. In addition to general awareness-raising, opportunities to plan-ahead assertive responses to the types of WSBs discussed in this section are probably also warranted. Active, confidence-building rehearsal of
assertive responses that they could rely on, if needed, may help some young people to respond in less passive—less regrettable—ways to the first signs of ‘dominance-seeking’ behaviour that they encounter in their romantic relationships.

**Conflict-Control Warning-Sign Behaviours**

This domain of WSB was conceptually divided into two sub-domains: ‘conflict-control by passive means’ and ‘conflict-control by active means’. Two specific behaviours were included in the survey to represent ‘conflict-control by passive means’. Three behaviours were included to represent ‘conflict-control by active means’. Table 2.2 summarises respondents’ experiences with these WSBs.

Table 2.2

*Summary of Experiences regarding Conflict-Control WSBs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WSB (descriptor)</th>
<th>% experienced, past year (ever)</th>
<th>% felt hurt or harmed, ever</th>
<th>% engaged in, past year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stone-walls</td>
<td>38 (61)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deflects blame</td>
<td>41 (69)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls names</td>
<td>32 (56)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidates</td>
<td>15 (49)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grabs</td>
<td>12 (32)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Conflict-Control /Passive*

‘*He/she refuses to talk to you at all about something you disagree about*’. Forty-one percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a serious problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; only 6% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Sixty-one percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 86% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 62% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 28% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 10% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Sixty-nine percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 4% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In summary, nearly two-thirds of respondents reported having experienced this WSB and the majority of these young women reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. Despite this, many respondents believed that this WSB was a trivial problem, and a significant minority of young women (just under one-third of the sample) reported having behaved this way with a partner in the past year.
Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. The majority (82%) of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “Say I need a partner to work with me on problems”) or telling their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them they cannot deal with our problems that way”). On the other hand, 11% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., they said they would “apologise or not say anything”); 2% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., “Insult them in some way”); and 5% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour, either then or later.

Assertive responses to this WSB, therefore, appear to be the norm; however, one in ten young women said they would accommodate this behaviour even though the survey made them aware of a number of alternative possible responses.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Ignore him back and act angry.
- I got angry inwardly but didn't say anything either, because I'm stubborn unfortunately.
- Called him non-stop, every so many rings he would answer and curse at me, saying negative things towards me and hang up. Stupidly I would keep calling back. I always say "talk to me, we can't keep this silly disagreement ongoing" it was never the right time for talking for him, I could only bring a problem up at the right time for him.
- We had a cold war.
- Assumed it was all me, tried to get him to talk.
- Kept asking him what I had done wrong. It must have been my fault.
- To try my best not to talk to him either and make him cave in first.
- Annoyed him until he talked.
- I gave him time to cool down before I try talking to him again.
- Tried to argue more.
- I did not talk about it again...

‘He/she puts all the blame onto you for a problem that involves both of you’.

Approximately one quarter (26%) of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a
serious problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; only 3% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. The majority (69%) of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 89% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 59% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 28% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 13% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Seventy-nine percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 2% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In brief, most respondents had experienced this behaviour, and a great many had felt hurt or harmed as a result. A considerable minority reported frequent exposure to this WSB. This behaviour is reportedly much more commonly encountered by the respondents than it is displayed by the respondents.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Seventy-three percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem or telling their partner to stop or change the behaviour. On the other hand, 15% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “Get over it or just give it time”); 10% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., “Insult them or be cold towards them”); and 2% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour, either then or later.

In summary, as with most other WSBs in this domain, assertive responses were the norm; however, considerable minorities said they would respond accommodatingly or aggressively.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- I tried to explain that by not helping me solve a particular problem he gave me the impression he didn’t care much about the relationship, and all i wanted him to do was to be honest with me.

- I said sorry for what I had said in the calmest voice possible then asked him what he thought and if he was sorry to which he replied (yelling) "I already fucking said sorry" and I said "You're not going to take any responsibility for this argument, are you? To which he replied again "I already said sorry" and I said "Well that's not really the point, because you obviously don't mean sorry and we were talking about what issues started the fight" and he said "You think you're so smart. You always have to be right about everything. Alright, you fucking win".
I told him how hurt I felt and how irresponsible he is.
You are so selfish, you don’t even recognise when you are refusing to accept responsibility for anything that you do, its always my fault.
Yelled, cried and eventually took all the responsibility myself.
There are two of us here, we are both contributing.
Didn't say or do anything. Kept it to myself.
"You not wanting to deal with this problem makes me feel like you really don't care".
This is between us. It's my fault for doing/saying this. It's your fault because you said/did this.
I am not going to deny that part of this problem is because of me, but you cannot stand there and deny that you have caused this issue as well. And, if you continue to tell me that you had nothing to do with it, then there is no point in me continuing this conversation -and you can come back and talk to me when you come to your senses and step up like a man.

Conflict Control /Active

‘He/she calls you names when you disagree with them’. Thirty-nine percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a serious problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; only 4% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Fifty-six percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 88% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 68% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 22% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 10% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Seventy-two percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but only 5% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

To summarise, over half of the respondents had ever experienced this WSB; most experienced a sense of hurt or harm as a result. Respondents, overall, reported experiencing this WSB slightly more often than they reported displaying this behaviour.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Sixty-nine percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “We need to have equal control in arguments”) or telling their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them not to do that again”). On the other hand, 10% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., they said they would “Ignore it
or walk away – say nothing about it later”); 14% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., “Do something to belittle or spite them”); and 7% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour later.

In summary, assertive responses were most commonly endorsed, but accommodating, aggressive and reciprocating behaviours were reported by notable minorities in response this WSB.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Put him down and argued my case.
- To get up and walk away.
- I got angry and didn't speak to him.
- Cried I always cry...asked him why he hates me so much...why if I don’t understand something he says means that I am insulting him and his ability to explain, it’s just that I didn't understand what was said, I was listening I just didn't understand.
- Was hurt, upset, told him off for being a jerk.
- Kiss.
- Do you really mean that?
- Stood there in shock; probably said nothing.
- Said I have my own opinions and he needs to respect them.
- Told them to f@#k off.
- Just kept arguing.
- Went quiet.
  Say I didn’t appreciate it and walked away.
- Get upset, then retaliate.
- Cry told him what he said was offensive and asked for an apology after having a few days space.
- Got really annoyed, often leave the room or house if we have been arguing for a while. I react sometimes and try and put them down, or I become really defensive and then leave before they can defend themselves.

‘He/she uses threatening actions with you when you disagree with them’. Sixty percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a dangerous problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; only 2% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem.
Almost half (49%) of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 86% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 85% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 10% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 5% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Ninety-five percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 1% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In summary, slightly less than half of the sample reported experiencing this behaviour; and, as would be expected, most felt this was a hurtful or harmful experience. Relatively few respondents (one in seven) experienced this behaviour in the previous year, and even fewer reported using intimidating behaviour with a partner in that period.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Ninety percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship (43%) and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem or telling their partner to stop or change the behaviour. On the other hand, 5% endorsed an accommodating response; 4% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way; and 1% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour later.

Assertive responses, therefore, appeared to be a highly normative response to intimidating behaviour by a partner, at least when posed as a hypothetical scenario. Very few young women expressed an intention to aggress or reciprocate in response to this type of WSB (but the risks to such young women should not be discounted on account of their minority status).

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Walked out, ended the relationship for a few weeks.
- Cried.
- Don’t you dare touch me.
- That was not called for.
- I got both scared and upset, told them so, and told asked them to please stop.
- "Stop behaving in this way or i cannot be with you".
- Swore at him.
- Backed off because I was scared.
- Get violent myself.
- I got scared and called my mum to let her know of his intimidating ways. I ran off.
- Nothing much. Walked away.
- Didn't say anything as to not make the situation worse.

‘He/she physically grabs you, not to hurt you but to stop you disagreeing’. Seventy percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a dangerous problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; only 2% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Thirty-two percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 77% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 88% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 8% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 4% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. The majority (93%) reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 1% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

To summarise, relatively few respondents had experienced this WSB. One in nine respondents reported experiencing this in the past year. Clearly this and others WSBs in this sub-domain are high-risk WSBs in terms of their potential for causing harm; they could easily escalate into violence (i.e., actions deliberately aimed at causing injury). However, only three-quarters of those who had experienced this particular WSB felt harmed or hurt as a direct result (the other WSBs in this sub-domain were more often experienced to be harmful). Few of the respondents (one in thirteen) reported using this behaviour with a partner in the past year.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. The vast majority (85%) of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively.

Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem or telling their partner to stop or change the behaviour. On the other hand, 7% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “Ignore it, walk away, stop disagreeing – say nothing more”); 5% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., “Insult or hit them”); and 3% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour, either then or later.

So, assertive responses were reported by most young women to be their most likely response. However, a number of young women said they would accommodate this behaviour. That is, one in thirteen girls said that they would submit to the behaviour and “Say nothing more”. A small proportion said they would reciprocate or aggress in response to a partner’s use of this WSB.
Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Cried.
- Don't touch me, get away from me.
- Pretended that it was nothing, and joked a little bit about what we were disagreeing about. She was being too intimate with me, for the discussion.
- Moved away, got really upset, kind of looked at him in horror.
- Tried to hurt him back.
- That really makes you a man doesn’t it? Very mature way of not being able to get your own way.
- Cried because I was powerless.
- I told him he didn’t want to do that and he stopped and then we yelled at each other.
- Used physical contact in return (e.g., hugs/kisses). Continued to discuss the disagreement but in a softer manner.
- Slapped him.
- Let him know that he was hurting me and told him to stop.
- Did the same thing back.

**Summary and Implications for Prevention**

Each of the above WSBs appear to be worthy of inclusion in partner abuse prevention programs intended for adolescent girls and boys. These behaviours were less commonly encountered than were ‘dominance-seeking’ WSBs, but experiencing ‘conflict control’ WSBs was associated with a greater risk of experiencing a sense of hurt or harm. Generally, the young women reported encountering ‘conflict control’ WSBs more than they reported employing these behaviours. However, again, prevention workers should not presume that the desire and capacity to control conflict-focused interactions is unique to young male partners. Indeed, many young women may be more effective at verbally controlling the course of conflict-focused discussions than they realise, and this may prompt their partners to resort to non-verbal conflict-control tactics. ‘Fair control’ in conflict-focused interactions is an ideal which both partners should aim for and expect from each other, regardless of gender.

Negotiating situations involving conflicting views, needs, etc. is no simple task. There is no single ‘right’ way to resolve all types of conflict. It is especially difficult to deal with situations in which one partner is ‘stonewalling’ all attempts to resolve the issue or in some other way preventing the other partner from obtaining a fair outcome. Conflict situations in
which one partner achieves more than their fair share of control over the outcome should be conveyed to young people as a serious warning sign of abuse, if not actual abuse. Males will typically have the greater capacity to exert physical control compared with female partners and, ultimately, to end conflicts in their own favour. Moreover, the high value that many girls place on romantic relationships render them at risk of enduring long periods of unresolved (or unfairly resolved) conflict in order to preserve a power-imbalanced relationship.

Adolescent girls yet to enter their first romantic relationships deserve opportunities to learn how to recognise the first signs of ‘unfair control’ dynamics, including the use of passive and active conflict control tactics. They also deserve opportunities to think through the likely short-and long-term outcomes of (a) accommodating partner behaviours that effectively “stonewall” attempts to achieve a fair resolution, (b) accepting emotionally hurtful or physically intimidating conflict-control tactics, and (c) using or reciprocating conflict-control tactics with their partners. It is reasonable to expect that, if adolescent girls do not clearly challenge and resist their partner’s use of unfair conflict-control tactics then their partners will be unlikely to desist from using such tactics in the future.

Many women who find themselves in highly abusive relationships may have benefited from a greater awareness, early in their relationship(s), of the dangers associated with a lack of ‘fair control’ in the context of disputes. In many cases, the topic of the argument itself is not the main problem; the more harmful problem lies in the less obvious, unfair control dynamics that are becoming established in the relationship, often hidden by the surface issue. Girls and women can spend weeks, months, or years trying to resolve a surface problem with their partner, only to realise that the deeper problem (i.e., the use of unfair control tactics) has only become worse.

Adolescent girls who are beginning to embark on their romantic relationship journeys deserve to be forewarned about the dangers inherent in relationships wherein one partner tries much harder to fairly resolve problems than the other partner. The use of passive and active conflict-control tactics can cause female partners a great deal of suffering. Beyond awareness-raising, therefore, young women deserve opportunities to plan and rehearse possible, assertive scripts to use in response to conflict-control WSBs from the very first time they are encountered. Boys may benefit from such training too.
Possessiveness Warning-Sign Behaviours

This domain of WSB was conceptually divided into two sub-domains: ‘restrictive engulfment’ and ‘jealous responding’. Three specific behaviours were included in the survey to represent ‘restrictive’ WSBs. Three specific behaviours were included to represent ‘jealousy’ WSBs. Table 2.3 summarises respondents’ experiences with these WSBs.

Table 2.3
Summary of Experiences regarding Possessiveness WSBs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WSB (descriptor)</th>
<th>% experienced, past year (ever)</th>
<th>% felt hurt or harmed, ever</th>
<th>% engaged in, past year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swamps</td>
<td>47 (69)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolates</td>
<td>20 (50)</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional blackmail</td>
<td>20 (47)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checks-up</td>
<td>58 (66)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronts others</td>
<td>18 (45)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronts you</td>
<td>56 (37)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Possessiveness/Restrictive

‘He/she tries to be with you all the time, in time you want to yourself’. Thirty-two percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a medium problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; however, 32% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Sixty-nine percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; but, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, only 38% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 53% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 35% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 12% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Sixty-percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 7% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In summary, this WSB was reported to be reasonably common, but was not considered harmful by most of the respondents who had experienced it. This WSB was less commonly displayed by the respondents than it was by their partners; however, one-third of the respondents reported displaying this behaviour up to five times in the past year, and 7% did so more frequently.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. 58% of respondents reported that they would respond assertively. Assertive
options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “I need to be free to choose how I spend my time”) or telling their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them they can’t be with me all the time or pressure me”). On the other hand, 32% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “Either spend time with them or politely avoid them”); 4% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (i.e., “Tell them to @#$% off”); and 6% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour sometimes.

In sum, mostly assertive responses were endorsed in relation to this WSB, but accommodating responses were not uncommon.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- I would just like to sit alone and read this book, go and play the play-station or something. I would just like to be left alone for a while, thankyou.
- I told them that I really needed the time to myself, and I'd probably be really grumpy if they tried to be with me.
- I need alone time. it does now mean i love you any less.
- Got annoyed and yelled at him to leave me alone.
- "Alright, ill meet up with you tomorrow, even though i want to be at home".
- We spent that time together. It was easier than hurting his feelings.
- Nothing because i like that he wants to spend time with me.
- Let it happen. At the time I felt all the time was to be to him, I was stupid.
- He never understood why I would want to be alone when I could be with him. I would say "I want to be alone at home tonight and relax" he would say " I want you here though you can relax here with me".
- I often feel guilty and will spend time with him even when I am exhausted or busy with school or other commitments.
- I went along with spending time with him until it got to the point where I couldn't bear it and I told him in a teary conversation that I needed more time to myself.
- Repeatedly explain my reasons for wanting space.

‘He/she discourages you from spending time with your family or friends’. Fifty-seven percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most (57%) believed it is a serious problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; only 2% believed it is either not a problem or a small
problem. Fifty percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 74% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 80% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 12% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 8% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. The majority (86%) reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 3% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

To summarise, half of the respondents reported experiencing this WSB, and most of the young women who had experienced this WSB reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. This behaviour was relatively uncommon for the respondents in the past year; less than 20% reported displaying or experiencing this behaviour over that time period. However, one in twelve respondents reported experiencing this behaviour by a partner on 6 or more occasions in the past year: This appears to be a significant problem for a significant minority of young women.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Seventy-two percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem and asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour (e.g., “Tell them they can’t interfere with my other relationships”). On the other hand, 6% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., they said they would accept or ignore the behaviour); 20% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (i.e., “Tell them to @#$% off”); and 2% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour, either then or later.

Assertive responses, therefore, appeared to be fairly normative in response to this form of socially controlling behaviour, but aggressive responses were not uncommon.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- I told him to drop it. My family is very important, and he could come along if he liked to as well.
- Felt it was wrong, didn't say anything. Lost them all and eventually got them back when the relationship was over.
- My partner always wanted all my time and always said that I always had more fun hanging with him. Whenever I wanted to go to a friend’s party he would say well I'm not going I wanted to stay here and hang out with you, I always gave in because I didn't want to leave him.
• Stay with her instead.
• You have no say in that.
• Cried—nothing.
• Told him I needed more freedom.
• Tell him just because he doesn't like them doesn't mean I shouldn't see them.
• I told him that when he spent time with his friends, I was okay with it, so he should respect my own time.
• Told them they didn’t understand the situation and to leave me to make my own decisions. I was upset. They stopped discouraging me (still does on rare occasions).
• I need to be with my friends, if you try and stop that I cant be with you.
• "Family always comes first"...then that leads into an argument...as in their minds they r just as equally important.
• I got angry but probably did exactly as I was told or met up with them behind his back as not to get him angry.
• I spent time with my family/friends, worrying about him, and texting with him.
• Told them to get stuffed!

‘He/she says things that would make you worried about them if you ended the relationship’. Forty-seven percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a dangerous problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; only 4% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Forty-seven percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 89% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 80% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 15% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 5% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. The majority (84%) reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 2% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

So, less than half of the respondents had experienced this WSB, but the risk of experiencing harm appears to be high when it does occur. Almost as many young women reported exhibiting this behaviour compared with those who reported being exposed to this behaviour by a partner.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Fifty-seven percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their
partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “Tell them I can’t accept responsibility for them”) or asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them not to put that responsibility on me”). On the other hand, 39% proposed an accommodating response (i.e., “Be there for them – get them help if I can – or ignore it”). Only 3% said that they would respond in an aggressive way (e.g., “Tell them they’re a loser or something similar”) and 1% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour, either then or later.

In brief, assertive responses to this behaviour were common; accommodating behaviours constituted the next most common type of response.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Called it for a bluff and told him to go ahead.
- Make sure that if it ended it ended well.
- I didn’t end the relationship as soon as I probably should have.
- Kiss.
- He said he would kill himself, I said that I was not going anywhere and please don’t leave.
- I started crying, and told him that wasn't fair on me.
- That's ridiculous. You were living perfectly fine before you met me, so you would be fine again.
- This isn't making me feel very comfortable.
- Told him that it was emotional blackmail and I wasn't going to feel responsible for his stupidity.
- I asked him why he felt like that and tried to work it out.
- Nothing, talked to my girl friends about it.
- Cry...but have recently learnt that those who talk about it are those that aren’t going to do it anyway.

**Possessiveness/Jealousy**

‘He/she ‘checks-up’ on your whereabouts and activities’. Only 26% of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a medium problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; 24% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Two thirds (66%) of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; but, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, only 50% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 42% reported
no recent exposure to this WSB, 35% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 23% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Thirty percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 21% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

So, this WSB is fairly common and not considered to be highly problematic by many respondents. However, half of those respondents who had experienced this behaviour perceived it to be abusive (i.e., harmful). More of the young women reported displaying this behaviour towards their partners than vice versa; however, if only cases in which this behaviour occurs frequently are considered, both genders appear to engage in this WSB equally.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Only 30% of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “Tell them I have a right to my privacy, to be trusted”) or asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them not to do that”). On the other hand, 48% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “Reassure them or do nothing”); 11% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way; and 13% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour sometimes.

Clearly, then, checking-up on one’s partner is not a behaviour which the young women in this sample believe is worth challenging or discouraging: Accommodating responses were more frequently endorsed than assertive responses. After accommodating responses, the next most frequently endorsed response was to “do the same thing to them”.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- I told him where I was.
- "Don’t you trust me?"
- That’s sweet, you care.
- I made sure he knew where I was so that he would feel at ease and not think I was doing something behind his back.
- Confronted him.
- Told him I can look after myself.
He always wanted to know where I was and when, it's how our relationship was when it started and it remained that way, I always told him everything just so he couldn't accuse me of lying.

Accepted it.

"Not everything I do concerns you".

Told him what I was doing. It wasn't a problem.

Told him 'I need to be independent' and changed my passwords to avoid it happening in the future.

Agreed that he should know I am safe and told him my whereabouts and plans. It goes both ways.

‘He/she picks fights with people they think are trying to steal you’. One third (33%) of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a serious problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; 11% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Only 45% of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; but, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 63% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 82% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 15% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 3% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. A sizable majority (93%) reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 1% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In sum, this WSB is considered to be relatively rare and, by many respondents, a serious problem. In fact, just under half of the respondents reported actually experiencing this behaviour by a partner. Nearly two-thirds of these respondents perceived this experience to be harmful. One in six respondents had experienced this WSB in the past year; only one in 13 had them-selves acted this way during the same period.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Sixty-five percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively.

Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “Tell them I need to manage this type of situation”) or telling their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them not to do that”). On the other hand, 7% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “Ignore it – stay out of it”); 23% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., “Tell them they’re stupid or something similar”); and 5% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour if the situation was reversed.
So, the most commonly endorsed response to this WSB was to tell the partner that this behaviour infringes on their needs, to tell them not to do it again, or to leave the relationship. The next most commonly endorsed response was to insult their partner’s intelligence.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Yelled back in their defence.
- Told them I didn’t appreciate it.
- I have lots of guy friends and my ex was jealous and I would tell him over and over that I wasn’t with them I was with him so he should not get upset
- Don't do anything.
- At first I was upset because it made me feel he didn’t trust me but then I was ok with it because I realised it’s because he cares about me.
- "You don’t have to protect me like that".
- Be there scared and stay out of it.
- He doesn’t confront them. He acts like a man with certain things but i really don’t think he has the balls. He just asks me to avoid them.
- I left without saying anything he knew.
- Leave them alone, if you trusted me this wouldn't be an issue.
- I gave a smile.
- Can you not make a big deal, I love you not him.
- If you think there is a problem, you come to me first, don’t take the situation into your own hands.
- Tell him he was over reacting. And that we'd been together so long, clearly I wasn't interested in the other person.
- I tried to make us both leave.

‘He/she gets angry with you because you talk to a particular person’. One quarter (25%) of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a serious problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; but 8% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Only 37% of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; however, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 73% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 64% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 26% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 10% reported exposure on 6 or more
occasions. Sixty-two percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 6% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In brief, this WSB was less often encountered relative to many of the other WSBs examined in the survey. However, most of the young women who had experienced this behaviour found it to be hurtful or harmful. Despite this finding, almost as many of the respondents reported displaying this behaviour compared with those who reported experiencing it.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Only 13% of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “Tell them I have the right to talk to whomever”) or asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them not to do that”). On the other hand, 66% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “Explain that what I was doing didn’t mean anything”); 13% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (i.e., insult them); and 8% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour if the situation was reversed.

In summary, reassuring (i.e., accommodating) responses to this WSB were by far the most common.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Ignored my partner and pretended I didn't notice he was angry, trying to make out as if the whole thing was no big deal.
- Laughed.
- To clarify what they were meaning that I was 'flirting'. I don't believe that I was but when she told me what I was doing I could understand how that would be perceived as flirting with this particular person. History behind it.
- Told him he was being silly. "I am allowed to speak to other guys, it doesn't mean I like them".
- Angry because I talked to another person. I asked why? We both understood each other’s reasons.
- If you trust me, you wouldn’t have such thoughts in your head.
- Told him that he was being silly and not to worry about it
- You are misunderstanding me.
- I can talk to whoever I like, but I go home with you.
- You should just trust me and everyone flirts, I don’t think it is a problem.
- We got in a fight because I didn't agree that I had been acting that way, and I told him that.
- "I wasn’t flirting, just because I’m talking to someone else doesn’t mean I want them, I wouldn’t be with you if I didn’t want you and only you".
- I’m sorry, I didn’t think I was flirting.

Summary and Implications for Prevention

Each of the above WSBs appear to be worthy of inclusion in partner abuse prevention programs intended for adolescent girls and boys. It is important to note, however, that while these behaviours were experienced to be hurtful or harmful by some respondents, many of these behaviours were considered to be more normative than abusive. In addition, although some of the behaviours were exhibited more often by their partners than by the young women themselves, all behaviours were reportedly engaged in by at least a substantial minority of the respondents. Therefore, it is important that partner abuse prevention program developers and facilitators avoid overstating gender asymmetry when discussing possessive behaviour. Possessiveness in a heterosexual relationship may disproportionately increases the risk of harm for female partners compared with male partners (i.e., males may be more likely to respond physically and hurt their partner in security-threatening situations), but possessiveness itself does not appear to be a particularly gender-based phenomenon.

The finding that most respondents did not perceive each WSB discussed in this section to be harmful means that prevention workers should probably frame such behaviours merely as warning signs that flag the potential for harmful outcomes. Workers should probably not direct their energies toward trying to convince young people that such warning signs are in themselves a form of abuse (i.e., harmful). It may be fruitful, however, to facilitate discussions with young people about the possible longer-term outcomes of relationships in which one or both partners believe that they need their partner; that is, could not cope without them. For example, young people could be asked to consider what might happen if a partner’s highly jealous and emotionally dependent behaviours are accepted for a while. What might happen if, at some point, the prized partner becomes unsure about whether they wish to stay forever in that relationship? Young people could also be asked to consider the pro’s and con’s of two very different types of ‘love’: Loving one’s partner so much that they want to keep their partner entirely to themselves versus loving one’s partner so much that they want their partner to be happy and to reach their full potential in life.
Many women who have been badly hurt by their partners may have benefited from a greater awareness, early in their relationships, of the risks inherent in relationships characterised by high levels of possessiveness. To feel badly needed by a partner, to be defended as a prized possession, is for many young women welcomed; some young women reported perceiving this to be a meaningful expression of love. Telling these young women that they are ‘wrong’ to feel this way may not be effective. That is not to say, however, that at-risk young women cannot be forewarned of the possibility that possessiveness may lead to abuse in the future. Young women can be equipped with scripts for responding protectively to possessive behaviour by a partner, with the decision about whether and when to use such scripts left at their discretion. If adolescent girls’ intuition and autonomy are not respected by prevention workers, efforts to empower young women may backfire.

As with each of the other domains of WSB discussed in this report, the findings of this survey again point to the importance of moving beyond awareness-raising with adolescent girls. Without opportunities to plan and rehearse assertive scripts for responding to warning signs of possessiveness, even young women who appreciate the risks attached to possessive behaviour may inadvertently reward such behaviours (e.g., by offering reassurances, by reaffirming their commitment to their partner), instead of challenging their partner’s problematic cognitions. On the other hand, by simply dismissing their partners’ insecurities, they might unintentionally challenge their partners to ‘prove their case’, possibly augmenting the very beliefs that underlie their possessive behaviours. Many young women may require help to distinguish between responses which unwittingly encourage continued possessiveness from responses that communicate their need for, and right to, social autonomy. Many girls do not have ready access to ‘scripts’ which can non-aggressively inform a partner that, while the relationship might be valued, they are not prepared to forego their personal autonomy in order to sustain it.

**Denigration Warning-Sign Behaviours**

This domain of WSB was conceptually divided into two sub-domains: ‘denigration by indirect means’ and ‘denigration by direct means’. Two specific behaviours were included in the survey to represent ‘denigration by indirect means’. Three specific behaviours were included to represent ‘denigration by direct means’. Table 2.4 summarises respondents’ experiences with these WSBs.
Denigration/Indirect

‘He/she says rude things about your gender, as if you are objects’. Forty-one percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most respondents believed this was a serious problem in a relationship; only 5% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. 56% of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 60% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 71% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 22% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 7% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Seventy-five percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 5% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In summary, this WSB was considered a serious problem; and it resulted in some level of hurt or harm by 60% of those respondents who experienced it. Approximately the same proportion of respondents (about one-quarter) reported being exposed to, and displaying, this behaviour with a partner in the last year.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Sixty-one percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “Tell them I need to be treated with more respect”) or asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them they can’t talk/joke like that”). On the other hand, 16% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “Ignore it, agree or laugh it off”); 12% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., insult them or hit them); and 11% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour later.

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Table 2.4

Summary of Experiences regarding Denigration WSBs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denigration WSBs</th>
<th>% experienced, past year (ever)</th>
<th>% felt hurt or harmed, ever</th>
<th>% engaged in, past year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objectifies</td>
<td>29 (56)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignores</td>
<td>27 (50)</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes fun in public</td>
<td>28 (55)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>24 (48)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>26 (44)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In other words, well over one-quarter of respondents said they would either accommodate or reciprocate this form of denigration, or punish their partner by insulting or hitting them. Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Felt offended, didn’t really reply.
- Told him he was out of line.
- Does not worry me, people talk.
- I told him to have some respect and pull his head in.
- Firstly I ignored him for a while then i said that I don’t appreciate you talking about girls that way when I’m around.
- I said: Stop being a sexist idiot.
- Even men are not as smart as they think....and it’s better to respect opposite sex too.
- Laughed because it was said in humorous light.
- I said that it was unfair to stereotype women like that.
- Shrugged it off.
- Said he was being rude and told him that I was smarter than him!
- Made a rude comment about men to even the score.

‘He/she totally ignores you in front of their friends, NOT because of an argument’.

Almost half (48%) of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Typically considered a serious problem in a relationship, 7% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Fifty percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; however, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 90% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 73% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 21% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 6% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Eight-eight percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 2% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

So, this WSB was generally considered rare and serious. However, it had been experienced by half of the respondents. It was very likely to result in a sense of hurt or harm for those respondents who experienced it. More respondents reported being exposed to this behaviour in the past year (about a quarter), compared with the proportion who reported displaying this behaviour in the same period (1 in 8).
Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. The majority (83%) of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem because it is disrespectful, or asking their partner not to do it again. On the other hand, 6% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “I wouldn’t say anything about it, then or later”); 3% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way; and 8% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour later.

In summary, the normative response to this WSB was to be assertive; that is, to insist on respect and/or tell them not to repeat the behaviour. Respondents very rarely endorsed aggressive responses to this WSB; slightly more said that they would reciprocate or accommodate the behaviour.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- I didn't know whether it was deliberate or not so I walked away and found a spot by myself and figured if he wanted me there he would come and get me. Then I would know.
- I didn't say anything to him. I did not have the courage to.
- Stop treating me like I'm invisible.
- That's really mature - it is them or me you are ashamed of?
- After leaving I pointed out that I felt I had been ignored, even if it had been accidental.
- Ha, ha - I cried. This is actually a recently resolved problem. I talked to him saying 'I felt excluded and left out and pushed to the side or almost like i was being punished for something'. It felt like I was being ditched, which I was. He didn’t really understand at first but I gave him examples and he said he will try to make an effort. So far it is working.
- Was angry, upset, humiliated, went and spoke to his friends.
- Confronted afterwards, that's after I went home and he rang me the next day. Later on when we were alone I let him know that I was upset that he had ignored me and he apologised.
- Became offended and quiet.
- Walked off, and ignored him.
- I left and went to see my own friends.
‘He/she makes fun of you in front of others, NOT because of an argument’.

Approximately half (52%) of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Again, most respondents considered this a serious problem; only 7% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Fifty-five percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 77% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 72% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 23% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 5% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Seventy-one percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 4% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In summary, this WSB was generally considered to be rare, but just over half of the respondents reported experiencing it. It resulted in a sense of hurt or harm for a large majority of those respondents who experienced it. An equal proportion of respondents (a little under one-third) reported being exposed to, and displaying, this behaviour with a partner in the last year.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Sixty-nine percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “Tell them later I need to be treated with respect”) or asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them they can’t treat me like that”). On the other hand, 10% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “I would go along with it – not say it was a problem”); 11% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., insult them or hit them); and 10% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour later.

So, most respondents endorsed assertive responses to this WSB; equal numbers endorsed accommodating, reciprocating, or aggressive responses.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Made fun of him back.
- Laughed along. Teasing is a part of our relationship, and done in fun. I give as good as I get. Well, to be honest, I give better!
- "HEY!" Then later when no one was around I explained that he made me feel bad.
- Laughed along and pretended it didn't hurt my feelings
• I ignored it while it was happening but told him afterwards that it upset me and that it was very rude and he apologised.
• I knew he was mucking around so just laughed and played along. Happens all the time its normal.
• Went home.
• I took it.
• I laughed, because it was not true.
• Hit him across the arm.
• I don't deserve that from you. I know it was a joke, but really uncalled for.
• Made fun of him about something I knew would hurt him.
• Nothing.
• Looking back now I'm not entirely sure if I was aware of what was going on at the time. It wasn't so much outright verbal abuse as sneaky insinuation and comments about my family or my behaviour in front of others. Because I wasn't aware of it, I rarely had a major reaction to it and therefore can't really describe or pinpoint a particular instance of what I first said or did.

\textit{Denigration /Direct}

\textit{‘He/she makes negative comments to you about your appearance, NOT while arguing’}.

Sixty-three percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Typically considered a serious problem, only 5% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Forty-eight percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; however, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 83% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 76% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 18% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 6% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Seventy-nine percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 4% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

This WSB, like the last, was generally considered to be a rare, but it had been experienced by nearly half of the respondents and it resulted in a sense of hurt or harm by a great majority of these respondents. Roughly equal proportions of respondents (about 1 in 5) reported being exposed to, and displaying, this behaviour with a partner in the past year.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Sixty-four percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their
partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “Tell them I have a right to be treated with respect”) or asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them they can’t say those things to me”). On the other hand, 17% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “Ignore it, agree or laugh it off”); 12% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (e.g., insult them or hit them); and 7% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour later.

In summary, a significant minority (1 in 6 respondents) reported that they would accommodate this WSB. Smaller proportions of respondents said they would aggress or reciprocate in response to having their physical appearance criticised.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Appreciated him being honest as he said it only in front of me and in a nice polite way. By the way, he just commented on my clothes that day...not about me being fat or skinny.
- Stopped talking to him. Withdrew myself from the conversation Told him how it made me feel when we were alone.
- I didn’t do anything, I just felt upset within myself
- Nothing.
- I took it to heart and did something about it.
- Internalize it and say nothing.
- Make a negative comment about his appearance and then explain how I didn't like what he said and asked him not to do it again.
- Have you looked at yourself.
- Did nothing, believed him.
- Discuss whether he was being honest. Maybe I really did look bad and should do something about it.
- I didn't really mind at that time but in time I realized that it had badly affected me.
- Nothing. Was in disbelief.
- I cried and said I wasn’t going out any more and I went and got in my bed and hid. He didn’t like my new dress, and thought I looked weird in it.
- Got angry.

‘He/she makes negative comments to you about your intelligence, NOT while arguing’. Fifty-nine percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in
less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Considered a serious problem by most respondents, only 3% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Forty-four percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; and, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 84% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 74% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 19% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 7% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Eight-three percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 2% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In brief, this behaviour was not uncommonly encountered—just under half reported ever being exposed to this behaviour—and it was experienced as hurtful or harmful by the great majority of those who experienced it. Respondents (about one-quarter) were more likely to report being exposed to this behaviour than displaying (one in five) it in the past year.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Sixty-four percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem or asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour. On the other hand, 14% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., they said they would ignore it, agree or laugh it off); 11% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way; and 11% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour later.

As with the other WSBs discussed in this section, while most respondents proposed assertive responses, significant proportions endorsed accommodating, reciprocating, or aggressive responses to this WSB.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Told him I felt hurt.
- Did nothing, believed him.
- Get upset and confused, but not show it.
- I told him to stop saying such things because I felt that I was quite a smart person. He kept telling me I wasn't as smart as I think I was.
- Got angry and fought back.
- Laughed out loud. I took the comment and worked harder at school, studied abroad and picked up law. Now I just show him my achievements whenever he tries to put me down, but that usually makes me feel bad, so I commonly do or say stupid things to make him laugh, and feel a bit better.
• I said "you either don't know me or are not that smart enough yourself to realise that what you said is not right."
• You make me feel like an idiot. You have no respect for me.
• Ignored it.
• Got really angry and abusive till he felt guilty and reassured me.
• Try to laugh it off and hide my hurt.
• Just because everyone's not as smart as you, why don’t you do it then if it’s that easy
• Kept quiet if it's true, if not, will argue

Summary and Implications for Prevention

Each of the above ‘denigration’ WSBs appear to be worth including in partner abuse prevention programs intended for adolescent girls and boys. However, again, while these behaviours were experienced to be hurtful or harmful by many respondents, significant minorities did not perceive these behaviours to be harmful. In addition, most of the behaviours discussed in this section (except for ignoring one’s partner in public and criticising a partner’s intelligence or abilities) were reportedly engaged in by respondents as frequently as they were experienced by them. Therefore, it is important that YRAP workers, again, avoid overplaying the role of gender in determining how partners treat each other. Denigrating behaviour with partners should probably not be portrayed as a gender-based phenomenon.

Clearly, factors in addition to gender must be looked to in order to explain why some young men and some young women, directly or indirectly, put their partners down. While some research suggests that put-downs in heterosexual relationships tends to affect female partners more detrimentally than male partners, ego-threatening treatment can have a particularly profound impact on boys and men prone to perpetrating violence.

The finding that not all respondents perceived the WSBs discussed in this section to be particularly harmful (though some level of hurt or harm was reported by most of the respondents who had experienced these behaviours) means that prevention workers should frame such behaviours as warning signs that harm might eventuate, not as examples of abuse. Workers should probably not direct their energies toward trying to convince young people that these behaviours are harmful in every instance, particularly given that put-down behaviours have, in studies with at-risk youth, been found to be normative. It may, however, be worthwhile to facilitate discussions with young people about possible long-term outcomes of sustaining a close relationship within which one or both partners do not have a high regard for the other partner’s self-esteem or public image. Similarly, it may be beneficial to facilitate discussions with young people about the responsibility each of us has to try to communicate
clearly to our partners each time the line between good, harmless humour and unwanted or hurtful behaviour has been crossed.

If a partner is not a source of healthy self-esteem for us, we have cause to question the worth of that relationship. Ideally, those who claim to love us will tend to focus attention on our strengths and desirable qualities and not highlight our weaknesses – if not, self-esteem and self-confidence will be difficult to develop or maintain. However, many young women are not culturally primed to consider the worth of their relationships from a personal self-image perspective. The higher social status ascribed to adolescent girls who ‘have a boyfriend’ may overshadow some girls’ capacity to see an unhealthy couple-relationship as self-negating. In psycho-educational contexts, girls could be encouraged to identify and question the social pressures upon them to enter and maintain couple-relationships even when their partner’s behaviour is not good for their self-esteem.

The effects of indirect and direct denigration, whether intended or not, can accumulate gradually and, consciously or unconsciously, undermine an individual’s sense of worth and self-confidence. It is important that adolescents—girls, especially—are made aware of the possible impacts of a partner’s comments and actions on the way they see themselves. It is equally important that vulnerable young people are equipped with assertive (non-passive but non-reciprocating) responses to draw on, with which to defend their sense of self, should they encounter derogatory behaviour.

**Retaliation Warning-Sign Behaviours**

This domain of WSB was not divided into sub-domains. In the survey, this domain was represented by three specific WSBs. Table 2.5 summarises respondents’ experiences with these WSBs.

Table 2.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retaliating WSBs</th>
<th>WSB descriptor</th>
<th>% experienced, past year (ever)</th>
<th>% ever felt hurt or harmed</th>
<th>% engaged in, past year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retaliates verbally</td>
<td>30 (45)</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically threatens</td>
<td>9 (25)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatens property</td>
<td>8 (25)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘He/she hurts your feelings (with words) because you insult, hurt or humiliate them’.

Forty percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Forty percent believed it is a serious problem if this occurs in a relationship; but 9% believed it was not a problem or only a small problem. Forty-five percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; however, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 91% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 70% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 21% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 9% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Sixty-nine percent reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 6% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In other words, this WSB was considered a relatively rare but serious problem. Interestingly, though, it had been encountered by almost half of the respondents. It resulted in a sense of hurt or harm for over 90% of those respondents who experienced it. Equal proportions of respondents (just under one-third) reported being exposed to, and displaying, this behaviour with a partner in the past year.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Over three quarters (76%) of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively. Assertive options in the survey included clearly telling their partner that the behaviour is a problem (i.e., “Tell them I need to feel safe even if I make a mistake”) or asking their partner to stop or change the behaviour (i.e., “Tell them not to do that again”). On the other hand, 9% proposed accommodating responses (i.e., “Accept it, ignore it, or laugh it off”); 20% said that they would respond in an aggressive or aggravating way (i.e., “Fight back even harder”); and 5% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour at other times.

So, following assertive responses, “fighting back even harder” was the next most commonly endorsed option in response to this WSB.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Just tried to ignore it really, but I couldn't, and I broke down in tears and that’s when he felt badly about his actions. Nothing really had to be said, he knew what he did was wrong.
- To apologize for my prior behaviour and that their response was understandable.
- "Call me in the morning when you're not drunk".
- Insult them back—you’re an asshole.
My partner and I spar all the time together and call each other names jokingly but this went too far so I called him on it, just acknowledged that it was intentionally meant to hurt me and I suppose I deserved it in a way for hurting him.

Always talked about it, tried to find the underlying issue, but also remind him being mean doesn't help sort stuff out.

I got angry and that made him angrier. He was drunk.

Fought back. Defended myself.

I apologised for insulting/hurting/humiliating them.

"How dare you say those things to me/why/how can you think that putting me down because you think I said something wrong is going to ever resolve anything....It will just breed resentment between us"/"you need to change your attitude".

We had a big fight so we both said nasty things.

I got angry and called him names.

‘He/she threatens to hurt you physically because you insult, hurt or humiliate them’.

Eighty percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most (84%) believed it is a dangerous problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; only 1% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Twenty-five percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; however, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 84% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 91% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 6% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 3% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. The vast majority (94%) reported never having behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 2% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

In summary, this WSB was considered a rare and dangerous problem. Indeed, this behaviour was more rarely encountered than any other WSB examined so far. Interestingly, however, only slightly fewer respondents reported experiencing this WSB to be harmful compared with verbally hurtful retaliation (the previous WSB). Slightly more of the respondents (1 in 11) reported being exposed to this behaviour, compared with those who reported using this behaviour (1 in 14) in the past year.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Most respondents (91%) reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively: 80% reported that they would “definitely leave” the relationship; 17% would tell their partner “not to do that again”; 21% would tell their partner “I need to feel safe
even if I make a mistake”. On the other hand, 2% proposed accommodating responses (e.g., accept it or ignore it); 6% said that they would “fight back even harder”; and 1% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour at other times.

So, the vast majority of respondents said they would assert themselves or leave the relationship in response to this WSB. Few respondents said they would reciprocate this behaviour. It is of concern, however, that any respondents said they would accommodate this dangerous behaviour or respond with aggression.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- Backed off. If only it had stayed at threat level.
- I told him that if he touched me I'd call the police and get a restraining order.
- I got scared and told them that they should not make threats like that, and that I was sorry for insulting/hurting/humiliating them.
- Walk away.
- I told him he "wouldn't dare" or he'd "better not".
- I said "don’t do that to me" (because he raised his hand) and turned away from him.
- I said nothing to my partner or to anyone about the incident.
- Called him names.
- Ran off on him, he chased me and ended up physically hurting me.
- I said "I know you won't."
- If you ever hit me, i will leave and you will never see me again.
- Ignored him giving him the silent treatment.
- Fight back - even it could not happen !!!!!
- Nothing. I was too scared and didn't believe he would actually do it.

*He/she threatens to damage your property because you insult, hurt or humiliate them*.

Seventy-two percent of respondents guessed that this behaviour was rare (i.e., that it occurred in less than 11% of relationships) in their age group. Most believed it is a dangerous problem if this behaviour occurs in a relationship; only 1% believed it is either not a problem or a small problem. Twenty-five percent of respondents had personally experienced this WSB; however, of those who had ever been exposed to this behaviour, 83% reported feeling hurt or harmed as a result. While 92% reported no recent exposure to this WSB, 5% of respondents reported being exposed to this partner behaviour up to 5 times in the last year and 3% reported exposure on 6 or more occasions. Almost all respondents (95%) reported never having
behaved in this way toward a partner in the previous year, but 1% reported acting this way on 6 or more occasions.

So, this WSB, too, was considered a rare and dangerous problem. This behaviour was encountered as rarely as the preceding WSB (i.e., threatened physical retaliation) and was equally likely to result in respondents feeling hurt or harmed. Also, as with threatened physical retaliation, only slightly more of the respondents reported being exposed to this behaviour compared with those who reported displaying this behaviour in the past year.

Respondents were asked how they would probably respond if a partner behaved in this way with them. Ninety percent of respondents reported that they would leave the relationship and/or respond assertively: Sixty-nine percent said they would “definitely leave”. On the other hand, 2% proposed accommodating responses; 5% said that they would “fight back even harder”; and 3% said that they would reciprocate the behaviour at some other time.

In summary, as with the preceding WSB, the vast majority of respondents said they would assert their needs or leave the relationship in response to this WSB. Interestingly, however, fewer respondents reported that they would “definitely leave the relationship” in response to this WSB. Again, even though their numbers are small, it is of concern that some respondents said they would accommodate this behaviour or “fight back even harder”.

Respondents were also asked to write how they responded the first time they were exposed to this partner behaviour, if they had ever been exposed. A variety of responses were given. For example:

- I told him, no please don't do it, but he didn't care. Most of the time he didn't do what he threatened he would do (e.g. destroy my locker, throw my belongings out), but still I was afraid he might.
- Tried to calm the situation and calm him.
- Called the police.
- I didn't say or do anything.
- I yelled at him, got upset, and left.
- Took out a restraining order.
- "You're a f*%@k head, why would you do that? I'm not staying with you anymore".
- If you are angry or upset with me, talk to me. Doing all this doesn't help in anyway.
- Asked him if he felt like a man now and told him he was gonna pay for a new windscreen for my car, and I made him do it to.
- I cried, he didn’t stop, but eventually calmed down, and got me a new chair.
• Tried to talk about it, told him that kind of behaviour was not on… he promised never to do it again.
• Nothing.
• Clench my teeth and usually verbally abuse him.
• Told my friends what he had done, and how stupid it was.

**Summary and Implications for Prevention**

Although WSBs in this domain were reportedly less prevalent than other WSBs, each of these behaviours appears to be worth including in partner abuse prevention programs intended for adolescent girls and boys. A pattern of retaliation in a couple-relationship is very likely to lead to serious, harmful outcomes. Approximately equal proportions of respondents reported experiencing and displaying retaliatory behaviour; that is, respondents were not substantially less likely to retaliate in response to perceived wrong-doing than were their partners. It is important, therefore, that prevention workers do not overplay the role of gender in determining how partners respond to hurtful behaviour. Again, factors beyond social constructions of gender must be looked to in order to explain why some young men and some young women are more prone than others to retaliate when they feel hurt. That being acknowledged, it is important to note that retaliation by males in heterosexual relationships is more likely to cause serious harm than that by female partners.

The ethics of retaliation is a complex topic. There is no simple answer to the question of whether it is right to retaliate after being hurt by a partner: Does it achieve ‘justice’, making a situation better; or does it simply lead to more unnecessary suffering than would otherwise occur? If retaliation is ever justified, there are no agreed guidelines about how one should retaliate, or regarding how one should respond to a partner who has retaliated against them. The relationship history is a crucial factor to consider in contemplating such questions; as is each partner’s individual deeds, circumstances, and perspectives. However, in order to empower young people to avert or minimise harm in their relationships, it is unnecessary to engage in such debates. Two simple facts are probably worth broaching, though: (a) retaliation often occurs as part of a cycle, and (b) retaliation cycles are prone to escalation.

Before deciding whether to retaliate in any situation, young people should be aware of the real risk that further retaliation will be triggered, in a ‘slippery slope’ manner. Young people should be made aware of the potential problems associated with *excusing* retaliatory behaviour by a partner, as well as the risks of *responding* to retaliation with further retaliation.

It would be more constructive to consider the defensibility and utility of retaliation with young people before, or at the outset of, their first couple-relationships rather than after they may have succumbed to the retaliation ‘slippery slope’. It is imperative that young people
who have been seriously hurt by a partner—particularly young women—are not seemingly blamed for abuse perpetrated by their partners against them, even if their partner’s actions occurred in the context of a retaliatory spiral.

Youth could be encouraged to consider two questions as they enter their first relationships. First, if a partner’s hurtful behaviour cannot be addressed and stopped without ‘hurting them back’, should that relationship continue? It is worth noting here that reciprocated aggression is associated with more harm, including more frequent and severe violence, worse mental health outcomes, and more harmful effects for exposed children, than non-reciprocated aggression.

Second, to what extent are we responsible for our own behaviour versus our partner’s behaviour? Ideally, empowerment-oriented psycho-education would have young people conclude that hurting a partner is wrong, no matter how the partner has previously behaved; that is, abuse is never justified. The victim of an abusive act is never to blame for that act. However, a victim is responsible for any abusive act that they perpetrate.

If a partner’s behaviour is not acceptable, reciprocating that behaviour is clearly not a solution. If change in the partner’s behaviour is not feasible, instead of responding aggressively, appropriate support should be sought and the relationship should be terminated as soon as possible. Young people, particularly girls and young women, need to be made aware of available sources of support and safety strategies, especially if they intend to terminate an abusive relationship. Retaliatory responses by girls and boys typically occur in the context of heightened emotions; so, preparing boys and girls with non-aggressive scripts for emotional situations is important. It is not easy to respond to hurtful treatment non-aggressively (i.e., to resist ‘hurting back’), and it is especially hard in the absence of assertive scripts to draw on. Young people should therefore be provided with ample opportunities to plan and actively rehearse non-escalatory responses to a range of potentially angering situations, including relationship break-ups.

**Conclusion**

In this report it was assumed that assertiveness (as opposed to passivity and aggression) is important to encourage in young people’s relationships. That is, clear, respectful communication of one’s wishes, rights, and boundaries is seen as preferable to behaviour which accommodates or rewards undesirable behaviour or which is likely to cause offence or escalate emotionally heated situations. However, it is acknowledged that there are a range of potential obstacles to assertiveness. Cultural and situational factors bear upon a young person’s propensity to assert their needs and rights. For young women in particular, situational factors can affect the safety with which they might self-assert. Individual young women’s intuitions regarding risks to their safety must be respected. That being
acknowledged, it would be unreasonable to believe that for every example of WSB discussed in this section, in every case, there is a direct threat to a young woman’s immediate safety. It is highly unlikely that, in all or most cases where young women have reported that they responded non-assertively to their first encounter with a WSB, this was due to safety concerns. Non-assertive responses are more likely due to socio-cultural conditioning, including the models/scripts that young women have access to, than to fears about personal safety.

Readers of this report are urged to be mindful of the heightened risks associated with young women behaving assertively with violence-prone men. Young women who find themselves in a violent relationship require intensive support and assistance to safely end the relationship, rather than assistance with assertiveness. But readers are also asked to bear in mind that assertiveness in the vast majority of young people’s early relationship situations is likely to lead to more preferable outcomes than passive accommodation of WSBs or aggressive, escalatory responses. That is, in the context of young people’s early romantic relationships, it is almost always ideal to clearly identify undesirable behaviour as being unwanted and/or to ask for change, the first time the unwanted behaviour is encountered. Interventions to increase young women’s assertiveness in romantic relationships, including exposing young women to empowering counter-cultural messages, may be crucial in achieving cultural changes conducive to increasing young women’s safety in relationships.

While each WSB discussed in this report is specific in terms of some aspects of context (e.g., the purpose of the behaviour, the presence or absence of conflict, the nature of preceding events), it should be noted that other aspects of context are not specified (e.g., the presence of other WSBs in the relationship). Notwithstanding its limitations, this survey illuminated overall differences in the ways that young women think about and respond to particular WSBs relative to other WSBs. This report includes a number of findings that youth-targeted partner abuse prevention workers may find helpful to consider in designing, delivering, and evaluating education programs for young Australians, particularly adolescent girls.

In terms of the reasons why they pursue relationship involvement and their relational/emotional tendencies, the young Australian women surveyed in this study were highly heterogeneous. Generalisations about young women are difficult to justify. The vast majority had encountered one or more WSBs in their couple-relationships. It is important to note, however, that WSBs are not necessarily harmful and the harms that WSBs might cause are not always serious. Adolescent girls should not be led to believe that their couple-relationships are potential minefields fraught with danger. Chronic and severe partner abuse is
not predestined or inevitable for any young women. This report should not be read as cause for gloom or doom.

Experiencing one WSB as a fairly isolated event does not carry with it the same level of risk as encountering that same WSB repeatedly or in conjunction with other WSBs. The wider the range of disrespectful and controlling behaviours engaged in by a partner, the greater their risk of perpetrating severe abuse (e.g., Dutton & Starzomski, 1997; Echeburua, Fernandez-Montalvo, Corral, & Lopez-Goni, 2009). It is therefore of concern that some young women in this survey had encountered a range of WSBs and encountered some WSBs frequently. Many young women also reported experiencing harm. Possibly, in some cases at least, this harm was not minor. Because of the real limits of self-agency in respect to influencing how one’s partner behaves, even highly aware and assertive young women will not always be able to avoid harm. However, by delivering relevant empowerment-oriented interventions with girls early in their relationship careers, some girls might be helped to prevent or minimise the harm they might otherwise suffer.

It would be counter-productive if adolescent girls emerged from an empowerment program feeling more vulnerable and less powerful than before the program; that is, less confident in their ability to positively influence the course of their relationships. Learning about the potential risks involved in relationships (i.e., the various ways that females can be harmed by their partners) without learning practical ways that one might mitigate these risks, is unlikely to be experienced as empowering. Stories and images of female victimisation, which have tended to dominate recent efforts to reduce violence against women in Australia (e.g., the Howard government’s “Violence Against Women – Australia Says No” Education Resource Pack), risk reinforcing stereotypes of girls and women which are disempowering. Arguably, a major aim of any program for adolescent girls should be to equip them with the necessary awareness, skills, and self-efficacy to achieve as much positive control as is possible over the course of their relationships.

The results of this survey showed that harmful outcomes for young women in relationships can occur via a multitude of possible pathways, involving one or more of the 23 WSBs examined in the survey. One implication of the findings of this survey is that simply selling messages to girls that they should ‘expect respect’ and that ‘violence against women is not acceptable’ is unlikely to be enough to help young women to reduce their risk of victimisation in relationships. Chronic abuse can result when specific WSBs are accommodated or reciprocated; therefore, young women need the awareness and skills to respond assertively to specific WSBs. The results of this survey suggest that a wide range of WSBs are worth addressing in youth-targeted PAPE programs.
In hindsight, many victims of partner abuse describe their pathway to chronic and severe abuse as being like a ‘slippery slope’ which they realise too late that they are on, and which becomes harder to ‘get off’ the longer they are on it. Some of the qualitative responses to this survey suggest that some respondents have themselves experienced this ‘slippery slope’ phenomenon. In view of the results presented in this report, early efforts to empower young women with the awareness and skills to resist the gravity of the partner abuse ‘slippery slope’ are important. Situation-specific assertiveness training (i.e., opportunities to learn and practice assertive scripts for communicating that a specific WSBs is unwanted) early in adolescent girls’ relationship careers may impact positively on their relationship trajectories.

In conclusion, the ultimate aim of PAPE with adolescent girls should be to enhance their capacity for self-determination, as far as is possible within the socio-cultural and situational constraints that bear upon them. Achieving this aim via psycho-education is by no means a straightforward affair and, in itself, will never be sufficient to eradicate abuse between partners. Efforts to empower young women to resist chronic abuse must never be misconstrued as supporting a victim-blaming agenda. Victims of chronic and severe abuse must be assured access to non-judgemental assistance and support. However, while a range of other approaches to reducing the prevalence and impact of partner abuse are important, working to empower individual girls to resist pathways to chronic abuse should be viewed as no less important. Adolescent girls deserve to be forewarned about the WSBs that flag the potential for harm, and to be given every opportunity to rehearse well-deliberated responses to WSBs should they occur.

This report has highlighted a number of issues that are worth considering in developing and refining programs to help adolescent girls to view themselves as worthy, instrumental beings in their own relationships. The next paper in this thesis describes a program that focuses on the importance of the WSBs examined in this chapter and how they are responded to.
Abstract

The Safe at Heart program aims to reduce adolescent girls’ vulnerability to chronic emotional, social, and/or physical partner abuse. Based on a ‘dyadic slippery slope’ model of chronic partner abuse, the program aims to equip 14 to 17 year-old girls with the motivation, skills, and self-efficacy to resist the development of slippery-slope dynamics (silence, over-dependence, anger, and power imbalance) in their current and/or future couple-relationships. In this paper, the aetiological and behaviour change theories underpinning the Safe at Heart program are outlined and the content of the five program modules is overviewed. The limitations of an empowerment approach to preventing partner abuse are also acknowledged.

Introduction

Despite calls for partner abuse prevention programs which are based on clearly articulated and empirically supported theories (Murray & Graybeal, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006), a worldwide shortfall in the development and evaluation of such programs continues. The genesis and trialling of the Safe at Heart program is an attempt to counteract this shortfall. It is also an attempt to achieve a shift towards a skills-based empowerment approach to partner abuse prevention in Australia. Currently, education programs in this area tend to be limited to awareness-raising objectives; for example, deconstructing gender stereotypes and promoting sources of support for victims (see Murphy & Smith, 2010b / Chapter 1).

Safe at Heart is a group program for girls aged 14 to 17 years. It is an elective, co-curricular (i.e., school-based but out-of-class) program, co-facilitated with groups of 8 to 15 girls by the program developer (and author of this paper) and a school-employed nurse, counsellor, or wellbeing co-ordinator. The program requires five hours of face-to-face delivery time. Safe at Heart aims to build participants’ motivation, skills, and confidence to respond to early warning-signs of partner abuse in ways that reduce the risk of harmful dynamics becoming entrenched. The prevention of partner abuse and sexual assault are often concurrent goals in prevention programs for youth in this area; however, it is important to note that Safe at Heart does not purport to be a sexual assault prevention program.

This paper serves as a stand-alone summary of the Safe at Heart program’s rationale and content. The development of this program was motivated by an understanding of the aetiology of chronic partner abuse that credits both partners with the capacity to influence the course of
their relationship both positively and negatively. Specifically, the program is underpinned by a ‘dyadic slippery-slope’ model of chronic partner abuse (see Figure 3.1). Evidence informing this theoretical model, and the model’s potential advantages in psycho-educational contexts, are presented elsewhere (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 8), but the model itself is described here. Other theories which have guided the development of the Safe at Heart program—namely self-determination theory, protection motivation theory, and the theory of planned behaviour—are also briefly discussed, and the limitations of empowerment-oriented approaches to partner abuse prevention education are acknowledged.

**Dyadic Slippery-Slope Model of Chronic Partner Abuse**

Some individuals are more at risk than others of succumbing to chronic partner abuse (e.g., Kane, Staiger, & Ricciardelli, 2000; Vezina & Hebert, 2007), but it is misguided to believe that partner abuse is a unitary phenomenon predicted by a set of variables relating only to victims or perpetrators. As a result of recently burgeoning research which taps into the experiences of male and female partners, evidence is accumulating that abuse in couple-relationships is mostly bidirectional in contemporary western society (e.g., Harned, 2002; Kaura & Allen, 2004; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007), and self-defence fails to account for this reciprocity (Harned, 2001). Defying simplistic theories, chronic partner abuse is best understood as multifarious, complex, and dynamic. The dyadic slippery-slope model, represented in Figure 3.1, reflects such an understanding.

In essence, the model recognises that chronic partner abuse can eventuate when one or more of the warning-sign behaviours (WSBs) examined in Paper Two are responded to accommodatingly and/or aggressively (as opposed to assertively), and that assertive responses to these WSBs are more difficult, and less likely to be effective, if initial responses to WSBs have been non-assertive. The model also identifies reasons why assertive responses might become less likely, and less effective in averting harmful outcomes. That is, one’s emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural vulnerabilities can be exacerbated by one’s exposure to WSBs, such that dynamics characterised by secrecy/silence, overdependence, anger and/or power imbalance can rapidly become entrenched. Importantly, the model highlights the important role of each partner’s actions, but also each partner’s reactions, in contributing to relationship dynamics that amount to partner abuse. Partner abuse here is defined as patterns of behaviour between partners likely to result in social, emotional, and/or physical harm to one or both partners.
Figure 3.1. Dyadic Slippery-Slope Model of Chronic Partner Abuse
The dyadic slippery-slope model is gender-inclusive in that it recognises that, while high-risk dynamics (silence/secrecy, overdependence, anger, and/or power imbalance) may be primed to occur in heterosexual relationships because of gender-based differences and norms, they become established and intensify over time due to the behaviours of both partners in the relationship. Rather than limit its focus to one type of abusive relationship (such as heterosexual relationships in which only the male partner is abusive and the abuse involves physical violence), the model accommodates a myriad of ways and contexts in which abuse occurs in couple-relationships (including in same-sex relationships; see Renzetti, 1997) and the full gamut of harmful outcomes that can eventuate.

Five types of WSB can lead to harmful outcomes for one or both partners in a relationship (see Chapter 2), especially if these behaviours are accommodated or reciprocated (Fraser, 2008; Graham-Kevan, 2007). WSBs include dominance-seeking behaviours (in the Safe at Heart program these are referred to as “Bossiness”); possessive behaviours (called “Ownership”); non-conflict-based denigration (called “Meanness”); conflict-specific control tactics (called “Unfair arguing”); and retaliatory responding (called “Revenge”).

The slippery-slope model recognises that assertive communication in response to WSB is ideal in terms of preventing abusive dynamics (see Markman & Rhoades, 2012; Rhoades & Stanley, 2011). In the model, assertiveness is also referred to as Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (or TREAD). Assertive or high-TREAD responses, here, are defined as those which clearly identify a partner’s WSB as being problematic. While an assertive response constitutes an effort to influence a partner’s beliefs about what types of treatment are acceptable in the relationship, it involves no attempt to hurt or embarrass the partner or control their behaviour (i.e., to seek revenge or ‘teach them a lesson’). In other words, assertive/TREAD responses are neither accommodative (i.e., accepting or rewarding the WSB) nor aggressive (i.e., trying to hurt or control one’s partner). If assertive responses prove ineffective at curbing a partner’s WSBs, the only alternative sure to circumvent the slippery-slope is to safely terminate the relationship. However, if ending the relationship is not a desired option, accommodating the WSB is seen as preferable to responding aggressively.

Harmful outcomes are more frequent and severe in contexts of reciprocated aggression (e.g., Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001; Temple, Weston, & Marshall, 2005; Whitaker et al., 2007).

Disturbingly, significant minorities of young women view domineering, possessive, denigrating, conflict-controlling, and retaliatory behaviours by a partner to be acceptable (see Chapter 2). Even when such behaviours are perceived to be problematic, many girls nonetheless report a propensity to respond accommodatingly or aggressively (Murphy &
Smith, 2010a). Such interactions may prove pivotal in setting the trajectory of girls’ relationship careers and future wellbeing. As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, women stand to suffer profound and long-lasting effects as a result of chronic partner abuse. Despite this, most girls embark on their couple-relationship careers with little formal preparation in terms of strategies for steering clear of the metaphorical relationship slippery-slope; that is, for ‘keeping a grip’ when confronted with a partner’s WSBs. Sadly, the effects of a partner’s WSBs can exacerbate one’s vulnerability to accommodating and/or perpetrating (further) abuse in the future (see Chapter 8). That is, as indicated in Figure 3.1, each partner’s behaviours can intensify and evolve in a dynamic interplay with the other partner’s responses until serious harm occurs.

This complexity is not reflected, however, in the messages delivered to young people in partner abuse prevention programs that are currently popular in Australia. At best, girls are taught that violence by a partner is unacceptable and that they should seek help (e.g., call a helpline) if they are being abused. Obviously this advice is of little worth compared with interventions that also equip girls with the insights and skills to consciously resist the partner abuse slippery-slope should WSBs begin to occur. Without a substantial emphasis on practicing assertive scripts for responding to a partner’s WSBs, it is difficult to see how general ‘expect respect’ messages might empower girls to have greater control over the course of their relationships. That is, such messages do not help girls to become more conscious and active participants in their own relationships.

Likewise, prevention programs which presume that abusiveness towards a partner is a male preserve are unlikely to be perceived by boys as empowering. Messages delivered in such programs are likely to be dismissed by some boys as unrealistic and unfair. Because WSBs are displayed by both boys and girls (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Harned, 2001; see also Chapter 2), boys might respond more positively to partner abuse prevention programs which, instead of focussing on gender, help them to acquire skills for ‘keeping a grip’ when faced with potential slippery-slope situations. The development and evaluation of an empowerment-oriented program for mixed-gender groups, however, remains a challenge for the future.

In summary, the Safe at Heart program has been developed for girls in response to the dyadic slippery-slope model of chronic partner abuse outlined above. It aims to promote girls’ awareness of slippery-slope dynamics (secrecy, overdependence, anger, and power imbalance) that can lead to social, emotional, and physical harms. It also provides girls opportunities to develop specific assertiveness skills for resisting these dynamics. In doing so, the Safe at Heart program draws significantly on three theories of behaviour change,
particularly self-determination theory. The links between the Safe at Heart program and each of these theories are discussed next.

Other Theoretical Foundations

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) is concerned with the centrality of meeting one’s needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness for psychological wellbeing, and the potency of these needs as intrinsic motivators for behaviour change. Meeting one’s needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness has been found to be associated with a sense of personal wellbeing and relationship quality (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006). In particular, relationship satisfaction has been found to be greatest when each partner supports the other’s needs for self-determination. The Safe at Heart program reflects the basic tenets of SDT in its objectives, content and delivery.

In terms of its objectives, the Safe at Heart program is driven wholly by the broad goal of healthy self-determination for its participants. The program aims to equip participants with the awareness and skills required to make conscious relationship choices, to assert their needs for self-determination, and to make use of available supports and provide helpful support to others when challenges to self-determination are encountered.

In the Safe at Heart program, the psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness are referred to as ‘human needs for happiness’. This conceptualisation is thought to be appropriate because, while these needs are not necessary for survival, these needs must be satisfied in order to maintain psychological wellbeing. When these needs are first introduced to participants, it is stressed that all people have these needs, regardless of their age, gender, background, culture, etcetera. Participants are encouraged to view their needs for happiness as no more and no less important than their partners’ needs. In other words, care is taken not to pit partners (or genders) against each other. Interestingly, some participants have expressed that they found this aspect of the program to be its greatest strength.

Of course, few adolescents enjoy having to learn unfamiliar terms. The youth-friendlier terms used in the Safe at Heart program are confidence (in place of competence), choice (in place of autonomy) and connectedness (in place of relatedness). Below is an overview of the kinds of specific needs that are highlighted in relation to each of these three overarching needs: Feeling confident involves being able to develop our skills and achieve good things, being acknowledged for our strengths and contributions, being taken seriously, and feeling worthwhile; having choice means being free to be who we want to be, being free to change our mind, making our own decisions, being in charge of ourselves, and being free from pressure, intimidation and fear; and being connected means having a support network, feeling
cared for, having positive relationships, being part of a group, and having access to help when
needed.

In the *Safe at Heart* program, participants consider, generate, practice, and model strategies
for maintaining one’s confidence, choice, and connectedness in ways which also respect these
needs in one’s partner. The *Safe at Heart* philosophy of positive self-determination (or
empowerment) is reflected in the very titles of the five modules that comprise the program:
Choosing, Noticing, Responding, Ending, and Bouncing Back. The Choosing module
provides opportunities for participants to consider why couple-relationships are important to
many young women in our society, focusing on both push and pull factors. Participants then
assess the risks (i.e., the possibility of regret or disappointment) associated with particular
reasons for entering into a relationship.

At the beginning of the second module, titled Noticing, a simple definition of *love* is
proposed: Love means *wanting who we love to be happy*. Partner abuse is defined as
behaviour which makes it hard for the other partner to meet their needs for happiness,
resulting in social, emotional, physical, or threatened harm. These definitions do not assume
that love and abuse are mutually exclusive; indeed, they can co-occur (see Fraser, 2007). Nor
is it assumed that harm is always maliciously caused. For example, feeling socially restricted
can result from a partner’s expressions of insecurity, or a high level of general neediness, and
not a deliberate attempt by that partner to cause harm.

Participants are then exposed to a wide range of real-life outcomes of partner abuse (social,
emotional, physical, and threatened harms). They identify what needs for happiness
(confidence, choice, and connectedness) have not been met in each case. Participants then
think through ways in which the four slippery-slope dynamics (silence, overdependence,
anger, and power-imbalance) can lead to such harms. Finally, they consider ways in which
WSBs from five WSB categories (Bossiness, Ownership, Meanness, Unfair arguing, and
Revenge) can contribute to these dynamics and, thus, lead to harms.

The Responding module is of critical importance in achieving the aims of the *Safe at Heart*
program. In this module, participants read, hear and generate a range of assertive (not
accommodating but not aggressive) scripts that could be used in response to specific WSBs,
in order to prevent the establishment of slippery-slope dynamics. After discussing the upsides
and downsides associated with aggressive, accommodating, and assertive responses,
gen generally, each participant models to the group self-scripted assertive responses to specific
WSBs of their choosing. In their scripted responses, participants are encouraged to (a) identify
why the WSB in question is a problem and (b) clearly state their needs. Participants then
reflect on how likely their responses would contribute to (or resist) the four slippery-slope dynamics, respectively.

The Ending module focuses on safety-conscious strategies for ending a slippery-slope relationship, where one’s partner cannot or will not respect one’s needs for confidence, choice, and connectedness. This module also covers tips for, and provides telephone role-play practice in, supporting a friend who is in a slippery-slope relationship. Finally, the Bouncing Back module involves exploring ways to better meet one’s needs for happiness in the future, if these needs have not been met in the past.

In terms of process, Safe at Heart is facilitated in a way which recognises participants’ pre-existing knowledge and insights, and celebrates the strengths they demonstrate. This is seen as important for building participants’ self-confidence. Participants are also given numerous opportunities to explore options and make their own judgements in a pressure-free, supportive environment. The aim is to foster a sense of respected choice. The program is also facilitated in a way which creates a sense of care and belonging within the group, which allows participants to share their ideas in pairs and small groups, and which might lead to new connections with others. The aim, of course, is to nurture connectedness.

To recap, SDT has contributed in a range of ways to decisions regarding the content and delivery of the Safe at Heart program. Two other theories have informed the development of the program; these are described next.

**Protection Motivation Theory**

The protection motivation theory of health (Janz, Champion, & Strecher, 2002) suggests that adopting health-promoting (and avoiding health-compromising) behaviours is predicted by five factors: (1) believing that one is susceptible to the threat, (2) perceiving the threat to be serious, (3) perceiving significant benefits and few barriers in relation to undertaking preventative behaviours, (4) observing cues to action, and (5) believing in one’s own competence to undertake these actions. This model has accurately predicted many health-related behaviours including sexual risk-taking (Aspinwall, Kemeny, Taylor, Scheider, & Dudly, 1991). It is reasonable to speculate, then, that these elements might also relate to young people’s propensity to respond protectively to warning-signs of partner abuse.

In other words, it is unlikely that a young person would take steps to resist slippery-slope dynamics without also (1) believing that they might otherwise experience unwanted outcomes, (2) believing that these outcomes are serious, (3) believing that assertiveness brings a range of rewards with few downsides, (4) being prompted to consider changing their current intentions or behaviours, and (5) believing that they are capable of displaying...
assertiveness should they be confronted with a partner’s WSB. The Safe at Heart program provides learning experiences aimed at strengthening all of these beliefs.

Theory of Planned Behaviour

The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985, 1991) has also met with considerable success in predicting behaviour (e.g., Astrom & Rise, 2001). It suggests that behavioural intentions are formed on the basis that one believes (a) that the behaviour will produce a particular outcome and that this outcome is desirable enough to be worth the effort, (b) that significant others (e.g., one’s partner or peer group) think the behaviour is acceptable or desirable, and (c) that one can successfully perform the behaviour. There are obvious overlaps between this theory and the protection motivation theory outlined above, but perceived norms (i.e., the beliefs thought to be held by significant others) are emphasised in this model. This consideration underpinned the decision to include cross-modelling of self-prepared assertive responses in the Responding module; that is, to normalise these types of responses or, at least, help participants to see that such responses are also endorsed by members of their peer group.

The theory of planned behaviour is also relevant to the Safe at Heart program in a different sense: It underpinned the decision to discourage Safe at Heart participants from accommodating (i.e., tolerating or rewarding) WSBs by their partners, if it is possible and safe to do so. According to this theory, if a partner learns that they can successfully exhibit a hurtful or controlling behaviour, and the outcome is experienced as desirable, he or she will likely repeat that behaviour, perhaps with even greater conviction in the future. It is likely that favourable responses from an individual’s real-life partner (or any other observed model) in response to mean, possessive, manipulative, or intimidating behaviour, will speak louder to that individual than messages presented in a partner abuse prevention program.

Limitations of Empowerment Training for Girls

If the Safe at Heart program is delivered early enough, girls might apply the assertiveness skills they learn from the outset of their first couple-relationships, when behaviour patterns are being established for the future. By changing the behavioural responses of girls to early signs of partner abuse, problematic attitudes and behaviours of their partners might be curtailed or weakened. However, it is important to note the limitations of this approach to partner abuse prevention.

First, the Safe at Heart program does not address broader socio-environmental and developmental contexts (e.g. poverty, substance abuse, cognitive limitations, psychopathology, etc.) that may contribute to interpersonal aggression (see Chapter 8). Second, empowering girls with the know-how and confidence to positively influence the
course of their *partner* relationships will not reduce acts of abuse, such as sexual assault, by non-partners. Third, even in partner relationships, empowering girls with the skills to positively influence the way they are treated by their partners should not be interpreted as implying that it is possible (or even ideal) for girls to control how their partners behave. The skills-based empowerment of girls should be viewed as neither a panacea nor a goal which abrogates their partners’ responsibility for their own behaviour. Finally, it should be heeded that in some rare cases, serious partner abuse may not be preceded by less harmful WSBs. Enhancing girls’ awareness and skills for protective self-agency in response to WSBs would in these cases prove futile.

**Conclusion**

The content and limitations of the *Safe at Heart* program, and its empirical and theoretical underpinnings, have been summarised here. The remainder of this thesis reports on the development of a key evaluation measure to assess the efficacy of the *Safe at Heart* program, and discusses the implications of the ultimate evaluation findings for advancing partner abuse prevention practice in Australia. Regardless of the results of the current *Safe at Heart* evaluation, resignation is not an option. Few factors negate human happiness as much as close relationships that become abusive. Researchers and practitioners in this field must continue working to develop, lobby for the widest possible implementation of, and continually improve programs to help young people manage their relationships safely.

1 Kiri Bear at the Domestic Violence Resource Centre, Victoria, is gratefully acknowledged for her input in labelling these categories in youth-friendly terms for use in the *Safe at Heart* program.
**Paper Four:**

**Development of the Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD) Scale**

**Abstract**

There is consensus in the partner abuse prevention education literature that a skills-focus is needed. However, appropriate instruments for evaluating the effectiveness of skills-focused programs do not exist. Against this background, and based on the dyadic slippery-slope model of partner abuse, the Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD) scale was developed. TREAD is defined as one’s tendency to respond assertively or protectively in situations involving warning-sign (potentially hurtful or controlling) behaviours by a partner. The scale’s development drew on the input of three Australian samples: mixed-gender adolescent focus groups, 426 young women respondents to an online survey, and 152 adolescent girls participating in a school-based program trial. When tested with the 152 adolescent girls, the TREAD scale had acceptable internal consistency and high inter-rater reliability. Principal components analysis identified three interrelated TREAD subscales – Conflict-Retaliation TREAD, Denigration TREAD, and Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD, all of which were negatively associated with frequency of exposure to warning-sign behaviours. This paper charts the preliminary development of the TREAD scale, presenting evidence supporting its validity as a change-target for partner abuse prevention education with adolescent girls and, potentially, boys.

**Introduction**

Partner abuse affects more than one-third of the romantic/intimate relationships of Australian adolescents and adults (Crime Research Centre, 2001), and is similarly prevalent in other developed nations (e.g., Fletcher, 2010; Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). Partner abuse, particularly psychological abuse, affects the health and wellbeing of both male and female victims (e.g., Coker et al., 2002) and their children (Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007; O’Leary & Jouriles, 1993). Given that abusive patterns can appear early in young people’s relationships (e.g., Miller-Johnson, Gorman-Smith, Sullivan, Orpinas, & Simon, 2009) and carry through into their later relationships (e.g., Smith, White, & Holland, 2003), preventing the development of unhealthy dynamics in adolescent relationships is an imperative challenge for professionals involved in partner abuse prevention. Adolescence is a ‘sensitive period’ for learning about relationships (Fraley, Brumbaugh, & Marks, 2005) and, therefore, provides an important window of opportunity for preventative education.
In recent years, research on this topic has begun to focus on the dyadic (two-person) processes that lead to harmful relationship outcomes (Bell & Nagle, 2008; Murphy & Smith, 2010a; Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005; Winstok, 2007). This coincides with calls to include significant skills-development components in programs intended to prevent partner abuse (e.g., Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Whitaker et al., 2006). However, most programs in this area still address only awareness-raising and/or attitude-focused objectives (see Flood, Fergus, & Heenan; Weisz & Black, 2009). This chapter charts the development of a psychometric scale intended to encourage the development of skills-promoting partner abuse prevention programs by providing a tool for evaluating their effectiveness. The scale is designed to measure young people’s Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD) or, in other words, their skills for responding assertively to warning signs of partner abuse. First, the theoretical model underpinning the concept of TREAD is described.

**Dyadic Slippery Slope Model of Chronic Partner Abuse**

Research with partner abused women (e.g., Few & Rosen, 2005; Fraser, 2008; O'Leary & Maiuro, 2001; Short et al., 2000) has found that serious abuse tends to be preceded by relatively innocuous behaviours: mild to moderate levels of emotionally hurtful and/or controlling behaviours. The dyadic slippery-slope model of chronic partner abuse (discussed in more detail in Chapter 8) delineates the mechanisms by which these precursor behaviours can evolve over time and lead to serious harm. According to this model, within a feed-back loop, one or both partners engage in increasingly hurtful and/or controlling behaviours, as the other partner’s responses become more aggressive or accommodative. That is, in a slippery-slope fashion, each partner’s behaviours evolve in a dynamic interplay with the other partner’s responses until dynamics characterised by secrecy, overdependence, anger, or power imbalance become entrenched, and serious social, emotional, or physical harms are suffered. Typically only with hindsight, abused partners come to recognise their partners’ early behaviours as slippery-slope warning signs and regret that they did not respond more assertively and protectively when these warning-sign behaviours (WSBs) first appeared.

Although partner abuse research has traditionally focused on the experiences of adult heterosexual female victims, dyadic slippery-slope processes likely also apply to adult heterosexual male victims (Fontes, 2007; Frieze, 2005), to adolescents and adults in same-sex relationships (Bunker Rohrbaugh, 2006; Halpern, Young, Waller, Martin, & Kupper, 2004), to men and women in relationships in which both partners are abusive (Temple et al., 2005; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007), and to adolescents in abusive heterosexual relationships (e.g., O’Leary & Smith Slep, 2003). Given the prevalence of abusive relationships, the development of universal, school-based programs to empower young people
with skills to resist relationship abuse slippery-slopes (secrecy, overdependence, anger, or power imbalance; S.O.A.P) is warranted. However, a measure to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs is difficult to find. Existing scales measure young people’s attitudes regarding gender roles, violence, etc., and self-reported rates of violent victimisation and perpetration (Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, & Behrens, 2005; Flood, 2008; Murray & Graybeal, 2007). No validated scale is available that measures young people’s propensity to respond assertively (non-accommodatingly but non-aggressively) when faced with the earliest signs that abusive dynamics may be developing.

**Shortcomings of Existing Program Evaluation Measures**

In the context of evaluating skills-focused programs, existing measures have significant limitations. On the one hand, attitudes towards partner abuse are only weakly linked to behaviour (e.g., Crime Research Centre, 2001; Kane, Staiger, & Ricciardelli, 2000). On the other hand, scales that seek to measure rates of perpetration and victimisation (a) may lack short-term sensitivity, given that program effects on these measures may not occur until months or years after the program has been completed; (b) are of questionable validity due to the likely influence of social desirability (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Whitaker et al., 2006); and (c) are ethically fraught. Perpetration and victimisation measures are clearly unsuitable for use by school-based practitioners seeking to collect evidence of relationship skills-development for regular student-assessment purposes, or for the purpose of sustaining external-provider funding, because the ethical use of such measures would, on each occasion, entail applying for Education Department approval, seeking the informed written consent of students and their parents, arranging alternative activities for non-consenting students, following up on disclosures of criminal acts, and so on.

Logically, a measure of romantic relationship-specific assertive tendency would have utility in evaluating prevention programs intended to increase that type of assertiveness. However, measuring young people’s tendency to assert themselves in romantic relationships is problematic with youth who have not yet begun to engage in romantic relationships or who have not been exposed to WSB in the relationships they have had. For example, a girl might not report being assertive in a certain WSB situation because she is uninclined to respond assertively in that situation or, alternatively, because she has simply never encountered that situation. If a partner abuse prevention program aims to increase young people’s likelihood of responding assertively to WSBs, efforts to evaluate that program must include measures to uncover participants’ intentions in respect of warning-sign situations that might occur in the future.
Behavioural intention is the most proximal determinant of actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1988), and the principle of compatibility dictates that the more specific the proposed behaviour, the more predictive the individual’s intention will be of their actual behaviour (Ajzen & Timko, 1986). Reference to specific hypothetical situations is therefore essential in any assessment of young people’s intentions to respond assertively, if their intentions are to correspond with their behaviour. However, a number of issues can impact on the validity of participants’ responses. Closed-format items such as Likert scales and multiple-choice questions are convenient to researchers because the data they collect is immediately ready for quantitative (parametric or non-parametric) analysis. However, open-ended questions requiring free-hand responses have an advantage over questions accompanied by pre-determined response options because they do not prompt participants to endorse obviously desirable responses. Further, requiring young people to read and select from a range of response options (for a particular relationship scenario) runs the risk of tiring respondents and eliciting disingenuous responses. Being asked to imagine and record what one would do in specific hypothetical relationship situations is likely to stimulate young people more than having to read and select from a significant amount of text. On the whole, while presenting greater difficulty in terms of scoring participants’ responses, open-ended “What would you do?” questions are likely to elicit a more realistic indication of adolescents’ actual or potential behaviour than closed-format, fixed-option questions.

The assertive tendency of adolescent girls in romantic relationship contexts has been measured via open-format items in a previous study (Murphy & Smith, 2010a). In that study, the assertiveness of participants’ open-ended responses to hypothetical WSBs was assessed on a three-point scale. Despite the limited sensitivity that one would expect to be associated with the use of a three-point scale, Murphy and Smith found that the degree of hypothetical assertive tendency demonstrated by their participants was negatively related to their reported exposure to WSBs in their real-life relationships. The current study builds on this research, with the aim of producing a finer-tuned five-point scale for rating the assertiveness of open-ended responses to hypothetical WSBs.

**Aims of the Current Study**

The ultimate purpose of this study was to develop a TREAD scale/test that (a) is suitable for evaluating the effectiveness of programs aimed at reducing adolescents girls’ (and potentially boys’) vulnerability to slippery-slope dynamics, (b) is helpful to school-based practitioners in fulfilling their relationship-education teaching, assessment, and evaluation responsibilities, and (c) is supported by content-, construct-, and criterion-validity evidence. The development of such a test was seen as important because the existence of a valid tool to
evaluate the effectiveness of skills-focused programs in this area might encourage the development of programs which emphasise the acquisition of relationship-management skills.

Programs aimed at increasing TREAD, and measures to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs, are relevant to both female and male youth. Indeed, maximising TREAD is important for boys at risk of perpetrating harm against a partner because young men typically report aggressing in response to WSBs by their partner (Crime Research Centre, 2001; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Miller & White, 2003). However, in the current study, a convenience sample of secondary school girls was recruited primarily because it was assumed that girls would have a greater interest than boys in volunteering their free-time (i.e., during school lunchtimes) to complete questionnaires on this topic. It was intended that, if the TREAD construct proved to have validity with female volunteers during out-of-class timeslots, future validation studies with normative, mixed-gender student populations (e.g., conducted during their regular classes) would be pursued.

**Method**

Concerns about the valid scoring of an open-ended assessment task should begin before the scoring rubric is developed: A well-designed rubric cannot correct for a poorly targeted assessment tool (Rudner & Schafer, 2002). In the context of program evaluation, since establishing a test’s validity is dependent on its purpose, the learning objectives against which the success of programs is to be judged must be clearly stated. In this study, the learning objective was deemed to be the development of romantic relationship-specific assertiveness. More specifically, the TREAD test was intended to detect changes in participants’ propensity to non-aggressively defend their needs or rights in response to WSB by a partner. The first step, therefore, was to ensure that the WSBs included in the TREAD test were partner behaviours which could, indeed, lead to the subjective experience of harm. This would ensure that the TREAD scale had content validity. Further steps involved testing the assumption that TREAD (i.e., the tendency to non-aggressively defend one’s rights and needs with a partner) was a measurable, consistent, and meaningful construct. This involved collecting evidence that TREAD had construct and criterion validity.
Participants

Prior adolescent focus groups. In her work as a family violence prevention educator, the author has collected the input of many adolescents about the dynamics (actions and reactions) that occur in young Australians’ romantic relationships. Through class-room brainstorms and focus-group discussions with over 300 Australian students in Years 8 through to 12, she has collated a range of potentially harmful behaviours that occur in their relationships. Questions addressed in the youth forums included ‘What types of bad relationships are there?’, ‘In what ways can bad relationships affect partners?’, ‘How or why do relationships become bad?’, ‘What situations/behaviours can start-off the problem of Secrecy (and Overdependence, Anger, and Power Imbalance) in a relationship?’ and ‘Are there categories that these behaviours fall into?’ The youths’ responses to these questions formed the content-validity foundations upon which the preliminary TREAD scale was built, in the form of 23 WSBs falling into five WSB categories. These WSBs are listed in Table 4.1.

Online survey respondents. With appropriate ethics approval (RMIT HREC Project #33/08), a convenience sample of young women aged 18 to 25 years and with significant levels of romantic relationship experience responded to the online content-validation survey. An external online survey provider (SurveyMonkey) was used. A total of 426 respondents completed the survey; a further 192 young women began the survey but did not answer all questions.

Recruitment was by way of flyers distributed at Victorian universities and TAFE campuses, a small newspaper advertisement, and centrally distributed student emails at one Victorian university. Respondents were encouraged to email the survey hyperlink to their friends upon completing the survey. The only inclusion criteria were that respondents were female, were aged 18 to 25 years, and had some type of couple-relationship experience. Respondents may not have been sexually active with their partners, and may have engaged in same- or opposite-sex romantic relationships. Many more respondents \((n = 618)\) began the survey than finished it, probably because (seeking more information than that reported in this chapter) the survey required over 30 minutes of reading and responding. For this reason the sample is not considered representative of all young women. Moreover, it is possible that previously partner-abused respondents were more inclined to complete the survey because of its apparent focus on negative relationship experiences.

The mean age of the online-survey respondents was 21.3 years. Most respondents (81%) attended a university. Most (55%) had spent one to five years in romantic relationships, but 20% had spent over 5 years in such relationships. Most respondents (42%) reported that their longest relationship had lasted 2 to 5 years; 25% reported a longest duration of one to two
### Dominance WSBs (Demanding and Disregarding)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>He/she gives you tasks as if they are ‘in charge’ of you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>He/she expects you to ask for permission before you make certain decisions (e.g. clothing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>He/she doesn’t stop deliberately doing something to annoy you, after you’ve asked once *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>He/she doesn’t stop deliberately doing something that scares you, after you’ve asked once</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Possessiveness WSBs (Jealousy and Engulfment)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>He/she picks fights with people they think are trying to steal you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>He/she gets angry with you because you talk to a particular person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>He/she ‘checks-up’ on your whereabouts and activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>He/she discourages you from spending time with your family or friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>He/she tries to be with you all the time, in time you want to yourself *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>He/she says things that would make you worried about them if you ended the relationship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Denigration WSBs (Direct and Indirect)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>He/she says rude things about your gender, as if you are ‘objects’ *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>He/she totally ignores you in front of their friends, NOT because of an argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>He/she makes fun of you in front of others, NOT because of an argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>He/she makes negative comments to you about your appearance, NOT while arguing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>He/she makes negative comments to you about your intelligence, NOT while arguing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Conflict-Control WSBs (Passive and Active)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>He/she refuses to talk to you at all about something you disagree about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>He/she puts all the blame onto you for a problem that involves both of you *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>He/she calls you names when you disagree with them **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>He/she uses threatening actions with you when you disagree with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>He/she physically grabs you, not to hurt you but to stop you disagreeing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Retaliation WSBs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>He/she hurts your feelings (with words) because you insult, hurt or humiliate them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>He/she threatens to hurt you physically because you insult, hurt or humiliate them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>He/she threatens to damage your property because you insult, hurt or humiliate them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Following principal components analysis, these WSBs were removed and not used in calculating final TREAD scores, but were retained for computing Recent Exposure to WSB scores
** Following principal components analysis, this item was relocated from the Conflict-Control domain to the Denigration domain for the purpose of computing both final TREAD and Recent Exposure to WSB scores
years. Finally, most respondents (63%) reported having had at least one partner in the last year but never having lived with a partner; 28% reported living with at least one partner in the last year; and 9% reported not having had a romantic relationship in the previous year.

**TREAD test participants.** With appropriate ethics approval (RMIT HREC Project #06/08), the ultimate TREAD scale-validation sample was a convenience sample of girls who elected to partake in the pilot program trial reported on in Chapter 6. A total of 152 self-nominating English-speaking girls ($M = 14.7$ years, range = 13 to 17) were recruited from ten secondary schools across Victoria, Australia, with appropriate university, ethics, departmental, principal, and parental approvals. These schools were located in middle- to low-range socio-economic areas. Each school nominated the year level from which girls could be invited to participate in the program trial.

In addition to completing the TREAD test (which required less than 20 minutes, on its own), participants answered questions about any WSBs that they had recently (in the last few months) experienced in any boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. Complete Recent WSB Exposure data (explained below) was submitted by 146 girls. Forty one percent (66) of all participants reported recent romantic relationship involvement; 17 percent (27) reported being in a relationship for the whole three months prior to testing.

**Warning-Sign Behaviours in the TREAD Scale**

**Content-validity evidence.** As mentioned earlier, prior adolescent focus groups had generated lists of partner behaviours that might lead to silence/secrecy, overdependence, anger and/or power imbalance in a relationship (see Table 4.1). All of these behaviours were worded in inclusive terms such that each behaviour could feasibly be engaged in by female and male partners in cohabitating and non-cohabitating romantic relationships. To ensure that all of these WSBs were experienced by at least some young women and some young men, and were capable of causing the subjective experience of harm, the online-survey respondents were asked to report on whether they had experienced each partner behaviour, ever and in the past year respectively, and if ever exposed to the WSB, whether they felt hurt or harmed as a result. Respondents were also asked whether they had themselves engaged in each WSB with a partner in the past year. Percentages of respondents reporting WSB exposure, perceived harm, and engagement, as discussed in Chapter 2, are summarised in Table 4.2.
Table 4.2. Respondents who reported being exposed to each WSB, feeling harmed as a result, and engaging in each WSB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WSB (descriptor)</th>
<th>% experienced, past year (ever)</th>
<th>% felt hurt or harmed, ever</th>
<th>% engaged in, past year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dominance WSBs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (gives tasks)</td>
<td>42 (52)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (requires permission)</td>
<td>42 (60)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (persists annoying)</td>
<td>67 (68)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (persists scaring)</td>
<td>42 (66)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Possessiveness WSBs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (confronts others)</td>
<td>18 (45)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (confronts you)</td>
<td>56 (37)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (checks-up)</td>
<td>58 (66)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (isolates)</td>
<td>20 (50)</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (swamps)</td>
<td>47 (69)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (emotional blackmail)</td>
<td>20 (47)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denigration WSBs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 (objectifies)</td>
<td>29 (56)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 (ignores)</td>
<td>27 (50)</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (makes fun in public)</td>
<td>28 (55)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 (appearance)</td>
<td>24 (48)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 (intelligence)</td>
<td>26 (44)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conflict-Control WSBs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 (stone-walls)</td>
<td>38 (61)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 (deflects blame)</td>
<td>41 (69)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 (calls names)</td>
<td>32 (56)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 (intimidates)</td>
<td>15 (49)</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 (uses force)</td>
<td>12 (32)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retaliation WSBs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 (retaliates verbally)</td>
<td>30 (45)</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 (physically threatens)</td>
<td>9 (25)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 (threatens property)</td>
<td>8 (25)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Construct-validity evidence.** Construct validity concerns the extent to which the test measures the intended psychological construct. Evidence in support of construct validity can take many forms. One approach is to demonstrate that the items within the measure are inter-related and therefore measure one construct (Rudner & Schafer, 2002). Relationships were therefore explored among the test participants’ responses to all items/WSBs in Table 4.1. The response scoring procedure is described below. Principal components analyses were conducted with the response-scores to identify potential TREAD sub-constructs. Three-, four- and five-factor solutions were tested, seeking a ‘simple structure’ where each item loaded significantly onto only one factor (Thurstone, 1947). Items were deleted as required to optimise both internal consistency and the simplicity of the rotated component matrix. Pearson’s $r$ correlations were then performed to test for inter-relationships between the final TREAD subscales. Finally, a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient provided a measure of the internal consistency of the overall TREAD scale.

**Criterion-validity evidence.** Criterion-related validity evidence demonstrates that the test scores are systematically related to theoretically linked outcome criteria (Rudner & Schafer, 2002). This evidence was sought by testing for a relationship between the test participants’ TREAD scores and their self-reported Recent Exposure to WSB.

**Test Administration and Scoring**
To measure test participants’ TREAD, for each WSB shown in Table 4.1 test participants were asked “What would you say or do if a boyfriend/girlfriend acted this way with you?” The questionnaire was completed during a lunch-time under the supervision of a school staff member. Participants ate their lunch while they completed the questionnaire. They were not financially compensated for their time; however, lollies were offered during the testing as a token of appreciation. A leaflet listing support services regarding family violence and relationship abuse was distributed to participants at the end of the questionnaire session.

When introduced to the TREAD questionnaire, participants were instructed to write specifically how they would respond in each situation (e.g., not just ‘talk about it’). Participants were asked not to write what they would think or feel, but to record what they would do. If they would ‘leave’, participants were instructed to specify whether they would leave the situation or leave the relationship. Participants were instructed to write ‘I don’t know’ if they did not know what they would do. The importance of honest, realistic responses was stressed, and standard test conditions were imposed (i.e., no talking or looking at others’ responses).

All girls were informed of their right to cease work on the questionnaire at any time. Supervising staff reported that no girl expressed discomfort at any time during the TREAD
test or the Recent Relationship Experiences questionnaire; however, the girls were not actually asked how they felt after completing the questionnaires. Few girls took away with them the document listing support services. However, at least ten girls did subsequently talk to school-based welfare staff about concerns they had regarding their own or friends’ experiences. This was viewed as a beneficial consequence of the testing, rather than an adverse outcome.

**TREAD scores.** Item TREAD scores were assigned based on the scoring rubric described below. Following some practice using the rubric, each TREAD test typically took one to two minutes to assess; only in exceptional cases did participants record more than a brief sentence in response to each WSB. TREAD subscale scores were then calculated by averaging the item scores within each TREAD subscale. Total TREAD scores were then calculated by averaging these subscale scores.

**Recent Exposure to WSB.** To measure participants’ recent exposure to WSB, they were asked, for each WSB in Table 4.1, “In the past few months, has a partner behaved this way with you?” Response options included no (scored as a 0), once (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), and very often (5). Mean Recent Exposure scores were calculated for each of the five WSB domains shown in Table 4.1. Total Recent Exposure scores were then calculated by averaging these domain scores. A total Recent Exposure score of 1 meant that in the last few months, on average, every WSB was experienced once, or where one WSB had not been experienced, another had been experienced more than once.

**TREAD Scoring Rubric**

Assigning TREAD scores to individuals involved first assigning scores to their individual item/WSB responses, essentially modelling the approach followed by Murphy and Smith (2010a). The intended purpose of the TREAD test, however, guided the development of a new scoring rubric. Sensitive discernment of WSB-specific assertiveness was required, so a 5-point rubric was desired. Following a preliminary examination of ten participants’ responses, five levels of assertiveness were discernable. These five levels (i.e., no objection or reciprocate, vague objection, clear and specific objection, explained objection, and terminate and/or help-seek) formed the basis from which a detailed 5-point scoring rubric was developed. The detailed rubric is included as an Appendix to this chapter.

In brief, level 1 (or 1-point) responses were those at risk of fuelling hostility (e.g., hit him) or in which there was a total absence of objection (e.g., say “ok” or don’t tell him about it). Level 2 responses were vague protests and/or failed to address the WSB clearly (e.g., say “get over it” or walk away). Level 3 responses directly and specifically discouraged the WSB at hand (e.g., say “don’t do that”). Level 4 responses identified a personal right or need, or
explained to the partner why the WSB was a problem (e.g., say “I need to make my own decisions” or “I need to spend time with other people too”). Level 5 responses included help-seeking (e.g., ask an adult for help) or non-aggressively ending the relationship.

**Maximising the Reliability.** A scoring rubric with well-defined score categories assists in maintaining consistent scoring regardless of who the rater is (inter-rater reliability) or when the rating is completed (intra-rater reliability). To maximise both forms of reliability, the first 30 participants’ TREAD tests were rated by the first author using a draft five-point rubric, and this rubric was continually refined until all 30 questionnaires could be rated without diffidence. Potential ambiguities were addressed by including more detail on the rubric; that is, specifying more precisely what elements necessitated or precluded a particular score.

**Testing the Reliability.** The inter-rater reliability of the final rubric was computed by submitting the scores independently assigned by the author and her two supervisors, respectively, to a one-way random-effects Intra-Class Correlation (ICC). The identity of participants was unknown to all three raters, and the participants’ responses were assessed independently using only the final detailed rubric.

**Results**

**Content Validity**

Given that TREAD is defined as the tendency to respond assertively to behaviours which could possibly lead to harmful outcomes, on the basis of the results shown in Table 4.2, all 23 WSBs were included in the preliminary TREAD test. All WSBs were reportedly experienced by at least some young Australian women and at least some of their partners and all are capable of leading to the subjective experience of harm for at least some young women.

**Construct Validity**

Initially, TREAD scores (incorporating all 23 WSBs) were normally distributed with a mean of 2.47 ($SD = .53$, range = 1.37 to 3.93). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .74, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity reached statistical significance ($p < .01$), supporting factorability. Principal components analyses were conducted initially with Oblimin rotation, as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007). This exploration revealed three TREAD sub-constructs with simple structure (minimal cross-loadings of items), but only when items 3, 9, 11, and 17 were removed from the original 23-item scale. These items loaded onto conceptually non-meaningful factors and/or reduced the internal consistency of the entire scale to an unacceptable level. While the three-component solution for the 19-item scale explained only 36.2% of the total variance in TREAD scores, this solution was structurally simple and conceptually consistent with the WSB categories generated during the earlier workshops and focus groups. The three-component solution was, therefore, considered
satisfactory. The component correlation matrix showed that the three factors were only weakly related, with co-efficiencies ranging from .18 to -.24; therefore, a Varimax rotation was performed, as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell. Table 4.3 shows the pattern coefficients resulting from the Varimax rotation, suppressing coefficients smaller than .3.

Table 4.3. *Pattern Coefficients for the 19 Items on the Final TREAD Scale*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WSB</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>WSB</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>WSB</th>
<th>Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 (stone walls)</td>
<td>.457</td>
<td>12 (ignores)</td>
<td>.517  *</td>
<td>1 (gives tasks)</td>
<td>.694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 (intimidates)</td>
<td>.630</td>
<td>13 (makes fun)</td>
<td>.605</td>
<td>2 (permission)</td>
<td>.511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 (uses force)</td>
<td>.578</td>
<td>14 (appearance)</td>
<td>.635</td>
<td>4 (persist scaring)</td>
<td>.374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 (retaliates verb)</td>
<td>.604</td>
<td>15 (intelligence)</td>
<td>.698</td>
<td>5 (confront other)</td>
<td>.421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 (phys threatens)</td>
<td>.539</td>
<td>18 (calls names)</td>
<td>.657</td>
<td>6 (confront you)</td>
<td>.433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 (threatens prop)</td>
<td>.514</td>
<td>7 (checks-up)</td>
<td>.545</td>
<td>8 (isolates)</td>
<td>.455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10 (emotional)</td>
<td>.503</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Coefficients smaller than .3 have been suppressed.
* Item 12 also loaded onto Conflict-Retaliation TREAD with a coefficient of .424.

Due to the nature of the items loading onto it, the first factor was labelled Conflict-Retaliation TREAD. This sub-construct explained 20.0% of the total variance. Scores on this subscale correlated very strongly with total TREAD scores ($r = .80, p < .01$). The second factor, labelled Denigration TREAD, explained 9.1% of the total variance, and also correlated very strongly with total TREAD ($r = .83, p < .01$). The third factor, called Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD, explained 7.1% of the variance, and correlated strongly with total TREAD ($r = .54, p < .01$). Mean scores on the three subscales inter-related significantly with each other ($p < .01$), with coefficients ranging from $r = .23$ for Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD and Conflict-Retaliation TREAD to $r = .41$ for Conflict-Retaliation TREAD and Denigration TREAD. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the total 19-item scale was .77, representing acceptable internal consistency.
**Criterion Validity**

Scores on the final 19-item TREAD test remained normally distributed with a slightly lower mean and slightly greater variability ($M = 2.42, SD = .58$, range = 1.36 to 4.13). Using the revised scores of the entire test sample, total TREAD scores correlated significantly with total Recent WSB Exposure ($r = -.29, p < .01, n = 145$), and all three TREAD subscales were significantly negatively correlated with Recent Exposure to WSB. Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD had the strongest relationship with total Recent WSB Exposure ($r = -.37$) and correlated most strongly with exposure to Possessiveness WSB ($r = -.42$) and Retaliation WSB ($r = -.33$).

For the 66 girls who reported some level of exposure to WSB in the past three months (i.e., their Recent Exposure score was greater than 0), their total TREAD was even more strongly correlated with their total Recent WSB Exposure ($r = -.35, p < .01$). Table 4.4 shows the percentages of this subset of girls scoring particular TREAD scores along with their respective levels of Recent WSB Exposure. Compared with the other subscales, Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD scores were most strongly correlated with total WSB exposure ($r = -.39$). In fact, Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD was the strongest correlate of exposure to Dominance WSB ($r = -.20, p > .05$), Possessiveness WSB ($r = -.46, p < .01$), Conflict-Control WSB ($r = -.26, p < .05$) and Retaliation WSB ($r = .40, p < .01$). However, Denigration TREAD was more strongly related to Denigration WSB exposure than was Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD ($r = -.33, p < .01$ versus $r = -.28, p < .05$).

Table 4.4. *TREAD Score Frequencies among WSB-Exposed Participants and associated Total WSB Exposure Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TREAD Score</th>
<th>Proportion of Participants</th>
<th>Mean Recent WSB Exposure (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1.75</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>1.38 (.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>1.00 (.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2.25</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>0.74 (.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2.5</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>0.62 (.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 or greater</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>0.50 (.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or greater</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>0.17 (.11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Only the 66 participants who recorded Recent Exposure to WSB at Time 1*
**Reliability of the Scoring Rubric**

A one-way random-effects ICC was computed with the three raters’ total scores for 30 randomly selected TREAD tests. The single measures ICC coefficient was .93, $F(29, 60) = 42.64$, $p < .01$, indicating that the TREAD scoring rubric had very high inter-rater reliability.

**Discussion**

This study tested the validity of a romantic relationship-specific assertiveness construct as a potentially worthy change-target of relationship abuse prevention education with adolescents, particularly girls. The aim was to develop a scale which could measure adolescent girls’ Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD), and which could be utilised by professionals developing and evaluating skills-based relationship education programs for young people. TREAD was defined as one’s propensity to respond to warning-sign behaviours (WSBs), if they arise, in ways which minimise the risk of abusive dynamics becoming established. WSBs were defined as partner behaviours which have the potential to trigger dynamics characterised by secrecy, overdependence, anger, or power imbalance and lead to the experience of emotional, social, or physical harm. In order to maximise the validity of TREAD scores as indicators of participants’ propensity to respond assertively to WSBs, TREAD scores were assigned based on the assertiveness demonstrated in participants’ free-hand responses to open-format “What would you do?” questions, rather than their responses to Likert scale items or multiple-choice questions.

Initially, 23 possible WSBs were generated by adolescent boys and girls. Each of these behaviours was believed by adolescents to have the potential to trigger one or more slippery-slope dynamics (secrecy, overdependence, anger, or power imbalance) and result in harm. All 23 WSBs were subsequently validated with young relationship-experienced women via an online survey. Adolescent girls then underwent the preliminary TREAD test, responding to all 23 hypothetical WSBs, and their responses were scored to reflect their level of assertiveness or protectiveness. Factor analysis uncovered a conceptually meaningful, simple three-factor structure, following the removal of four of the original items/WSBs. All items in the final 19-item TREAD test inter-related adequately and all but one item (item 12) loaded onto only one of the three identified sub-constructs: Conflict-Retaliation TREAD (6 items), Denigration TREAD (5 items), and Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD (8 items). Finally, each of the three TREAD subscales, and total TREAD, was found to negatively correlate with participants’ actual exposure to WSB. The girls’ Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD was a particularly strong correlate of their exposure to possessive and retaliatory WSB. This suggests that TREAD and WSB exposure may be causally related, either uni-directionally or
bi-directionally; however, it may be that a third variable may influence both of these variables.

The dyadic slippery-slope model (discussed further in Chapter 8) posits that the negative relationship between TREAD and exposure to WSB is bi-directionally causal. Exposure to WSB is hypothesised to reduce young subjects’ TREAD via its effects on their beliefs, attitudes, or emotions, or via behavioural modelling or conditioning. Their reduced TREAD, in turn, increases the risk of further WSB exposure and, hence, self-perpetuating slippery-slope dynamics. Conversely, when the first displays of WSB are responded to assertively (versus accommodatingly or aggressively), it is hypothesised that the subjects’ exposure to further WSB is limited, their self-esteem, social autonomy, and self-efficacy is maintained, and their capacity to resist abusive dynamics in the future is also maintained. The next chapter (Chapter 4) provides a discussion of the possible mechanisms that might explain the specific association between Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD and exposure to possessive and retaliatory WSB, including the possible role of perceived self-agency.

The dyadic slippery-slope model suggests that program-induced increases in girls’ TREAD might reduce their exposure to WSB in the short-term and impact positively on their long-term relationship trajectories. Preliminary evidence presented in Chapter 6 suggests that carefully designed programming can achieve increases in TREAD and corresponding reductions in WSB exposure. However, further research is needed to determine whether program-induced increases in TREAD do in fact cause reduced exposure to WSB. To address this question, controlled experimental studies are required. If, in the future, intervention-induced increases in TREAD are found to lead to reduced exposure to WSB, investment in universal (i.e., school-based) TREAD-increasing programs would be justified.

**Cautions**

Two cautions relate to the reliability findings reported in this paper. First, internal reliability properties are joint characteristics of the test and the examinee group, not just properties of the test. Internal reliability statistics should be computed for any new population with which the TREAD test is applied. It should also be noted that, as more students master the intended skills, test variability tends to decrease, along with internal reliability coefficients (Rudner & Schafer, 2002).

Second, well-designed scoring rubrics cannot completely eliminate intra- and inter-rater discrepancies. Factors external to the purpose of the assessment can affect how a rater scores an individual’s responses (see Rudner & Schafer, 2002). For example, a rater may become fatigued such that certain responses may receive different scores from what they would have received had they been scored earlier. ‘Knowing who a respondent is’ or being motivated to
show that one’s program or teaching has been successful may also impact on the scoring process. In order to maximise consistency during the TREAD scoring process (and during any rubric-guided scoring process) raters should (a) take steps to ‘blind’ themselves to the identity of the respondent; (b) revisit the rubric criteria frequently; (c) stop scoring if concentration levels begin to wane; (d) where possible, score the responses of students who complete programs conducted by someone else, rather than their own students; and (e) where possible, have two raters assess each student’s TREAD test responses.

A final precaution relates to the broader issue of ethical testing. Test validation is the process of accumulating evidence that supports the appropriateness of the inferences that are made for specified assessment purposes (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999). This study supports the validity of using of the TREAD test to assess changes in girls’ intentions to assert their needs in response to WSB. In this sense, the TREAD scale is not unlike any other criterion-referenced test utilised in classrooms across the globe. Unlike norm-referenced tests which determine how a student compares to others, criterion-referenced tests determine what the test taker can do relative to a predetermined (e.g., previous) level. Health Education curricula frameworks customarily stipulate objectives relating to the development of assertive communication and conflict-resolution skills. The TREAD test could be used in assessing students—and, in turn, programs—against these objectives. However, the TREAD test is neither intended nor validated for use in categorising individuals. Such use of the TREAD scale would risk contributing to stigmatisation and unethical victim-blaming discourses. It is important to remember that low TREAD is a concern only when the subject is exposed to WSB by her or his partner; the behaviour of two individuals results in slippery-slope dynamics, never just one partner.

**Future Research**

While TREAD should not be used as a normative measure by which to compare young people, it may prove useful in measuring the effectiveness of empowerment-oriented skills-based partner abuse prevention programs with adolescent girls. Further research is needed (a) to validate the TREAD test with other, more diverse samples of adolescent girls, (b) to uncover what kinds of intervention maximally increase girls’ TREAD, (b) to experimentally determine whether increases in TREAD cause a reduction in girls’ subsequent exposure to WSB, and (c) to explore the validity and utility of the TREAD construct with adolescent boys.

Given that, according to the young women who responded to the online survey, all WSBs in the TREAD scale can be experienced in young **adult** couples, the TREAD scale might also
prove useful with post-adolescent individuals. However, findings discussed in the next two chapters suggest that TREAD-focussed programming may be more effective with participants who have not yet encountered significant levels of WSB. Further research is important to ascertain the conditions (e.g., age, previous WSB-exposure) under which TREAD-focussed prevention programming is most productive, and to identify any conditions under which such programming might be counter-productive.

Conclusion

This study establishes TREAD as a psychometrically sound indicator of English-speaking Australian adolescent girls’ vulnerability to slippery-slope dynamics in their romantic relationships. The results reported here suggest that TREAD may be a worthy change-target for skills-focused partner abuse prevention programming with adolescent girls. With further research, TREAD might also prove useful as an indicator of the effectiveness of partner abuse prevention work with boys and, potentially, young adults. While low TREAD should never be thought to excuse harmful treatment by a partner, proactive interventions to increase young people’s TREAD might bring about long-term harm-minimisation gains unlikely to be achieved by programs that neglect to equip youth with specific skills for responding to WSBs. It is hoped that this preliminary study prompts further validation research with the TREAD scale. Above all, it is hoped that this research will encourage more widespread implementation and evaluation of skills-focused partner abuse prevention interventions with young people.

Appendix: TREAD Scoring Rubric

Category 1 – Response is likely to fuel hostility or lacks any indication of objection

- Aggressive: The response includes active retaliation in the form of a clear attempt to hurt or humiliate (but assign normative responses among youth, e.g., “fxxx off”, to category 2)
- Accommodating: The response does not in any way discourage the WSB or may be received favourably by WSB instigator; e.g., reassurances that respondent won’t break-up with him/her
- Reciprocating: The response matches or exceeds the instigating WSB

Category 2 – Response is vague or the protest does not address the WSB specifically

Category 1, 3, 4 or 5 must first be ruled out

- “Don’t know” or vague or undecipherable response
- Mildly or passively aggressive, or vague reference to ‘getting angry’
- Does not address WSB or underlying issue specifically; i.e., response indicates some objection but does not identify the actual WSB as being the problem, or respondent ‘argues the details’ rather than making it clear to the partner that the WSB is unacceptable
• Tentative or dependent on the situation/person; e.g., “if x then y”, “would do x or y”, or “might break up”
• “if it happens again/repeatedly, tell them to stop” – this implies that first-time occurrence of the WSB would be accepted

**Category 3 – Response specifically and directly discourages the WSB**
Category 1, 4 and 5 must first be ruled out
• Direct, non-aggressive request to stop the specific WSB or not do it again
• States that the specific WSB is unwanted or unacceptable

**Category 4 – Response identifies a personal right/need or explains why WSB is a problem**
Category 1 must be ruled out
• Requests/suggests a specific alternative behaviour relevant to the situation
• Includes expression of a self-determination need or right – for confidence, choice, or connectedness (*not* just “I need you to trust me”)
• Explains to partner the pertinent issue (i.e., identifies potential for secrecy, overdependence, anger, or power imbalance; identifies lack of respect for self-determination needs – for confidence, choice, or connectedness; or identifies bossiness, ownership, meanness, unfair arguing, or revenge, in these or other terms)
• Conditional breakup; i.e., *if it continues*, breakup
• Any category 5 response combined with category 2 aggression

**Category 5 – Response is highly assertive or protective**
Category 1 must be ruled out
• Two or more category 3 or 4 responses are included in the response
• Tell someone (e.g., parent, police), implied for help or protection (for self, not for partner); *not* “talk to a friend” in response to a putdown (assign this response to category 2)
• Definitely break-up, with no aggression (if category 1 aggression is also present, assign to category 1; if category 2 aggression is present, assign to category 4)
Paper Five:

Adolescent Girls’ Assertive Tendency, Risk Sensitivity, Self-Confidence, and Warning Signs of Partner Abuse

Abstract

Factors associated with chronic exposure to warning-sign behaviour (WSB) in girls’ romantic relationships need to be understood in order to develop responsive prevention programs. Data was provided by 152 Australian adolescent girls ($M = 14.7$ years, range = 13 to 17), 66 of whom reported recent relationship experience and exposure to at least one WSB. Guided by the Dyadic Slippery-Slope model of partner abuse, relationships were tested between frequency of WSB exposure, perceived WSB risk, confidence in self-agency, and assertive tendency in romantic relationships. Girls who reported more assertive responses to WSBs reported less frequent exposure to WSBs in the past three months. Risk sensitivity, while weakly related to assertiveness in non-WSB-exposed girls, was unrelated to assertive tendency in WSB-exposed girls. Girls with greater WSB exposure had lower perceived self-agency, and lower perceived self-agency was associated with less assertiveness in response to Dominance and Possessiveness WSBs. These results are discussed in relation to dyadic slippery-slope theory, and point to the potential importance of strategically timed, empowerment-oriented programming in partner abuse prevention.

Introduction

Governmental support for ‘Respectful Relationships’ education in Australian schools (e.g., Commonwealth of Australia, 2010; Victorian Government, 2009) reflects an awareness of young people’s involvement in intimate relationships (Smith, Agius, Mitchell, Barrett, & Pitts, 2009) and the unacceptable prevalence of intimate partner abuse in Australia (Crime Research Centre, 2001). Abusive relationships have profound effects on psychological health in the partners involved (e.g., Coker et al., 2002; O’Leary, 1999) and their children (e.g., Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007; O’Leary & Jouriles, 1993). Healthy relationships, on the other hand, contribute positively to wellbeing (e.g., Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006; Ducat & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). Effective relationship education with young people stands to play an important role in partner abuse prevention and the promotion of mental health generally.

Adolescence is a ‘sensitive period’ for learning about romantic relationships (e.g., Fraley, Brumbaugh, & Marks, 2005). School-based relationship education during this developmental stage has the potential to prevent harmful outcomes in adolescents’ future relationships.
Since the 1980s, a plethora of youth-targeted partner abuse prevention programs have been developed. Many of these programs have been effective at changing attitudes (see Hickman, Jaycox, & Aranoff, 2004; Whitaker et al., 2006); a few have reduced self-reported engagement in specific acts (Foshee et al., 2005; Wolfe et al., 2009). A weakness in this field, however, is the lack of formative studies upon which to develop effective partner abuse prevention programs for young people. At present, educational programming on this topic tends to be based on untested assumptions (for examples, see Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009) rather than empirically supported aetiological theory.

The dearth of evidence-informed partner abuse prevention programs is not due to a lack of risk factor research. A multitude of studies have investigated partner abuse risk factors (e.g., Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Medeiros & Straus, 2007; O’Keefe, 2005; Vezina & Hebert, 2007). These studies, however, tend to focus on de-contextualised physical acts. The relative lack of research on risk factors for psychological abuse is problematic for three reasons. First, more relationships in Australia involve psychological abuse than physical aggression (e.g., Mousos & Makkai, 2004). Second, the effects of psychological abuse on mental and physical health are typically worse than the effects of physical aggression per se (Sackett & Saunders, 1999; O’Leary, 1999; Coker et al, 2002). Third, psychological abuse in relationships almost always precedes partner violence (O’Leary & Maiuro, 2001).

The weak connections between theory, evidence, and educational programming in this area probably owe to the relative lack of research on risk factors amenable to educational intervention. Little is known about what beliefs increase a young person’s risk of succumbing to abusive patterns of interaction with romantic partners. Knowing the beliefs of individuals who have hit, or who have been hit by, a partner is of limited relevance in formulating prevention education objectives. On the other hand, knowing what beliefs are associated with behavioural tendencies that can feed high-risk dynamics can steer program developers ‘upstream’ in the formulation of proactive prevention education objectives.

The dyadic slippery-slope model of chronic partner abuse (described in detail in Chapter 8) draws attention to the potential significance of behavioural skills, relational/emotional factors, and beliefs/attitudes in determining young people’s interactional tendencies in at-risk romantic relationships; that is, their responses to warning-sign behaviours (WSBs). WSBs include attempts by one’s partner to establish dominance, to restrict one’s social autonomy, to weaken one’s self-esteem, to control the course or outcome of a conflict, or to seek revenge for a perceived wrongdoing (see Table 5.1 for examples). In brief, the model posits that
aggressive or accommodative (i.e., non-assertive) responses to WSBs can contribute to dynamics such as secrecy/silence, overdependence, anger, and power imbalance, and lead to physical, emotional, or social harms for one or both partners.

Table 5.1

*Examples of Warning-Sign Behaviours (WSBs) in the Dyadic Slippery-Slope Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WSB Domains</th>
<th>Sub-Domains (and Example Items)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominance-Seeking</td>
<td>Being demanding (e.g., gives you tasks as if they are ‘in charge’ of you)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disregarding your wishes (e.g., doesn’t stop doing something that scares you, when you first ask)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessiveness</td>
<td>Being hyper-jealous (e.g., gets angry with you because you talked to a particular person)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Swamping you (e.g., ‘checks-up’ on your whereabouts and activities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration</td>
<td>Indirect put-downs (e.g., totally ignores you in front of their friends, NOT because of an argument)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct put-downs (e.g., makes negative comments about your intelligence, NOT while arguing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-Control tactics</td>
<td>Controlling a conflict passively (e.g., refuses to talk to you at all because of something you disagree about)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controlling a conflict actively (e.g., verbally puts you down because you disagree with them)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaliatory responses</td>
<td>Trying to hurt you back (e.g., threatens to hurt you physically because you insulted, hurt, or humiliated them)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Educational programs that focus on behaviours that can trigger and sustain ‘slippery-slope’ dynamics (i.e., interactional patterns or trends characterised by secrecy, overdependence, anger, or power imbalance) might be more effective at minimising harm than programs that focus only on the outcomes of these dynamics. That is, programs that focus on ways that relationships can become emotionally, socially, or physically harmful may be more constructive for adolescents embarking on romantic relationships than programs that focus on examples of extreme violence (e.g., the Howard Government’s ‘Violence Against Women,
Australia Says No’ Curriculum Package). Teachers with experience delivering such programs (including the author of this thesis) have found that violence-focussed curricula can cause some students undue anxiety, or a sense of disempowerment or resentment, while being rejected by other youth as ‘scaremongering’ more applicable to others than themselves. Violence-focused programming may also fail to sensitise young people to more common, but nonetheless damaging, forms of partner abuse.

The dyadic slippery-slope model suggests that encouraging young people to respond assertively (i.e., non-passively but non-aggressively) at early, pivotal moments in their relationships (i.e., in response to early displays of WSB) might enable them to avoid or curb the development of high-risk dynamics such that violence is averted before it becomes a concern. The model posits, however, that personal vulnerability factors influence an individual’s propensity to respond assertively. That is, particular experiences and beliefs might obstruct, or alternatively augment, a program’s effectiveness in encouraging relationship-assertiveness. The current study, therefore, tested for possible associations between experiencing particular relationship situations and holding certain beliefs, on the one hand, and assertive tendency in intimate relationships, on the other hand.

**Study Aims and Scope**

This study aimed to contribute to formative research in partner abuse prevention education in Australia. It was intended that this study might encourage the development of education programs that are responsive to the beliefs and behavioural tendencies of at-risk girls. That is, this study was concerned with the perspectives of girls who, at the commencement of the larger program evaluation study reported on in Chapter Six, indicated recent exposure to one or more WSBs in their romantic relationships. The WSBs of interest in this study were the same as those discussed in Paper Four.

**Research Questions**

Five questions based on the dyadic slippery-slope model were addressed in this study. First, does exposure to WSB in adolescent girls’ romantic relationships tend to be sporadic or, instead, systematic? Second, is girls’ tendency to assert their needs or rights in response to different types of WSB related to the extent to which they are exposed to these types of WSB? Third, is there a relationship between sensitivity to WSB risk and assertive tendency? Fourth, is the extent of girls’ WSB exposure related to their level of confidence in their self-agency? Finally, is there a relationship between girls’ perceived self-agency and their propensity to respond assertively to WSBs?
Method

Recruitment

This study drew on cross-sectional data collected at the beginning of the larger, longitudinal study discussed in the next chapter. Self-nominating participants were recruited from ten secondary schools across Victoria, with ethics approval (RMIT HREC Project #06/08), and principal and parental permission. These schools were situated in low- to middle-range socioeconomic areas in semi-rural and metropolitan regions, and included six government and four Catholic secondary schools. Meetings were held with members of each school’s Principal Class and Student Wellbeing team in order to communicate the ethical and administrative requirements of the trial. Each school nominated a year level from which girls would be invited to participate: Two schools nominated Year 8, five nominated Year 9, and three nominated Year 10.

Participation in the current study required participants to consent to participate in the larger pilot-evaluation study. Participants nominated to be involved having been informed of the study’s aims and participation requirements, and assured of standard ethical practices (e.g., their right to withdraw at any time). These requirements and assurances were advertised during brief information sessions held for girls at each host-school and on the Plain Language Statement distributed to interested girls at these sessions. Girls were informed that the pilot program would be conducted during class-time, but that they would be required to complete a 30-minute questionnaire package during a lunch-time prior to and, again, after the program, so that any impact on their views and intentions could be evaluated. Only data collected at the beginning of the larger evaluation study (Time 1 data) are reported in this chapter.

Participants

Of the 152 girls who contributed Time 1 data to the evaluation study, 66 girls reported exposure to WSB by a partner in the previous three months (see Measures, below). The mean age of the total sample was 14.7 years ($SD = .88$, range = 13 to 17 years). The mean age of the 66 WSB-exposed participants was 14.9 years ($SD = .94$), and the mean age of the non-WSB-exposed girls was 14.5 years ($SD = .83$). All participants spoke English as their first language. All girls who reported recent relationship involvement also reported recent WSB exposure. Over one-third of the 66 WSB-exposed girls (27) reported being in a relationship for the entire three month period. Almost three-quarters (48) reported having talked with someone about a personal relationship problem on two or more occasions in the preceding three months; over a quarter (17) reported having done so on eight or more occasions.
Measures

**Exposure to WSB.** To measure participants’ recent exposure to WSB, participants were asked, for each of 23 WSBs, “In the past few months, has a partner behaved this way with you?” Between three and six WSBs represented each of the five WSB domains shown in Table 1. Response options included *no* (scored as a 0), *once* (1), *rarely* (2), *sometimes* (3), *often* (4), and *very often* (5). Mean Recent Exposure scores were calculated for each WSB domain. Total WSB Exposure scores were then calculated by averaging these domain scores. A Total WSB Exposure score of 1 meant that in the last few months, on average, every WSB had been experienced once, or where one WSB had not been experienced, another had been experienced more than once.

**Assertive Tendency (TREAD).** Assertive tendency was measured using the 19-item Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD) scale discussed in Chapter 4. For 19 WSBs, participants were asked “What would you say or do if a boyfriend/girlfriend acted this way with you?” An identity-blind rater then assessed the assertiveness of each written response using the rubric summarised below. This scale has construct- and criterion-validity, as well as high inter-rater reliability (with a three-rater intra-class correlation coefficient of .93, *p* < .01). Principle components analysis on item-scores (with four of the original 23 WSBs/items removed) revealed three inter-related TREAD subscales: Conflict-Retaliation TREAD, Denigration TREAD, and Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD. In the TREAD scale, three WSBs represent the Dominance domain, five represent Possessiveness, five represent Denigration, three represent Conflict-Control, and three represent Retaliation behaviour.

As mentioned above, participants’ written responses were quantitatively coded to reflect their assertiveness or protectiveness; this process involved the use of a five-point scoring rubric (see Chapter 4). Mean scores were calculated for each TREAD subscale (Dominance-Possessiveness, Denigration, and Conflict-Retaliation, respectively), and total TREAD scores were derived by averaging these scores.

**Risk Sensitivity.** The Sensitivity to Risk in Romantic Relationships (SRRR) scale was developed to measure participants’ sensitivity to the risks associated with WSBs. In relation to each of the 23 WSBs, participants were asked “How risky do you think this behaviour would be if it kept happening?” The response options on the SRRR scale ranged from 1 (*Absolutely no risk of harm*) to 7 (*Very high risk of harm*). Means were calculated for each WSB domain separately, and total mean Risk Sensitivity scores were calculated using these domain scores. Good test-retest reliability of this scale has been established using the total
mean scores of first year Psychology students with a test-retest period of one week ($r = .84, p < .01, n = 39$).

**Confidence in Self-Agency.** Confidence of participants in their own personal agency was measured by a single item: “How confident are you in your ability to positively influence how you are treated by a partner?” where possible responses ranged from 1 (*Not at all confident*) to 7 (*Extremely confident*).

**Procedure**

**Testing.** A member of each school’s Wellbeing team supervised participants as they completed the above measures. Participants ate their own lunch while they completed the questionnaires. Participants were not financially compensated for their time; however, lollies were offered as a token of appreciation. When introduced to the TREAD questionnaire, participants were instructed to write *specifically* how they would respond in each situation (e.g., not just ‘talk about it’). Participants were asked *not* to write what they would think or feel, but to record what they would say or do. If they would ‘leave’, participants were instructed to specify whether they would leave the situation or leave the relationship. They were instructed to write ‘I don’t know’ if they did not know what they would do (such responses were assigned a TREAD score of 2). The importance of honest, realistic responses was stressed, and standard test conditions were imposed (i.e., no talking or looking at others’ responses).

**Data analysis.** PASW Statistics Version 18 was used for all analyses. Cases with missing data were deleted pair-wise, not list-wise. Missing item scores were not substituted or imputed; missed items rendered the relevant subscale unusable.

**Results**

**Exposure to Warning-Sign Behaviours**

Considering only those 66 girls who reported some recent romantic relationship experience (all of whom reported exposure to at least one WSB), the most frequently reported Dominance WSB ($M = 1.05$) was ‘partner didn’t stop deliberately doing something that annoyed me, when I first asked’ (reported by 40% of WSB-exposed girls). The most frequently reported Possessiveness WSB ($M = 1.42$) was ‘partner checked-up on my whereabouts and activities’ (53.3%). The most frequently reported Denigration WSB ($M = .72$) was ‘partner made negative comments about my intelligence, NOT while arguing’ (29.5%). The most frequent Conflict-Control WSB ($M = .77$) was ‘partner refused to talk to me at all because of something we disagreed about’ (29.7%). Finally, the most frequent Retaliation WSB ($M = .42$) was ‘partner tried to hurt my feelings (with words) because I insulted, hurt, or humiliated them’ (15.4%).
Again considering only the 66 WSB-exposed girls, most reported being exposed to a Possessiveness WSB (80.3%) and least reported being exposed to a Retaliation WSB (16.9%). Table 5.2 shows mean WSB Exposure scores and dispersion statistics for these girls. As can be seen in Table 5.2, their extent of exposure to WSB varied considerably.

Table 5.2

| Levels and Prevalence of Recent Exposure to WSB by Domain |
|------------------|---------|-------|-------|---------|------------------|
|                  | Min    | Max   | Mean  | SD     | Girls Affected  |
| Conflict-Control Exposure | .00    | 3.25  | .45   | .79    | 30.4%           |
| Retaliation Exposure     | .00    | 3.33  | .29   | .76    | 16.9%           |
| Denigration Exposure     | .00    | 4.50  | .55   | .97    | 56.1%           |
| Dominance Exposure       | .00    | 3.50  | .70   | .93    | 55.4%           |
| Possessiveness Exposure  | .00    | 4.00  | .86   | .89    | 80.3%           |
| Total WSB Exposure       | .03    | 3.10  | .57   | .71    | 100%            |

Note. Results represent only those girls with any Recent WSB Exposure (n = 66)

Girls who reported high frequency exposure to one type of WSB were likely to also report high frequency exposure to WSB in other domains (see Table 5.3). This was especially the case for girls exposed to Retaliation behaviour. The more Retaliation behaviour girls were exposed to, the more they were exposed to Conflict-Control behaviour, Denigration behaviour, Dominance-Seeking behaviour, and Possessive behaviour.

TREAD and Exposure to Warning-Sign Behaviours

WSB-exposed girls had significantly lower total TREAD scores ($M = 2.30$) than the girls who did not report recent exposure to WSB ($M = 2.52$), $t(143) = -2.3, p < .05$. Table 5.4 shows, for WSB-exposed girls and non-exposed girls, respectively, mean TREAD scores and the percentages recording TREAD scores below 2 (i.e., responses that reciprocated or accommodated WSB). Substantial proportions of WSB-exposed girls recorded low TREAD scores: Over 40% reported that they would reciprocate or accommodate Denigration WSBs and a similar proportion responded likewise to Possessive WSBs. Table 5.4 also shows that considerably more WSB-exposed girls reported low assertiveness in response to Possessive WSBs (43.3%) compared with non-WSB-exposed girls (18.7%).
Table 5.3

Correlations between Levels of Domain-Specific WSB Exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Retaliation Exposure</th>
<th>Denigration Exposure</th>
<th>Dominance Exposure</th>
<th>Possessiveness Exposure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-Control Exposure</td>
<td>.81**</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.65**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaliation Exposure</td>
<td></td>
<td>.68**</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.69**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration Exposure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance Exposure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.53**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Results represent only those girls with any Recent WSB Exposure ($n = 66$)

**p < .001.

Table 5.4

Descriptive Statistics for Total and Sub-Scale TREAD Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$M$ TREAD &lt; 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WSB-Exposed Girls ($n = 66$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-Retaliation TREAD</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration TREAD</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dom-Possessiveness TREAD</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total TREAD</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-WSB-Exposed Girls ($n = 80$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-Retaliation TREAD</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration TREAD</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dom-Possessiveness TREAD</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>2.38**</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total TREAD</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>2.52*</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Higher score than corresponding score of WSB-exposed girls, $p < .05$.

** Higher score than corresponding score of WSB-exposed girls, $p < .001$. 


Further non-parametric analyses were conducted to identify the percentages of girls in each subset (WSB-exposed versus non-exposed) who reported highly protective responses to WSBs (i.e., TREAD scores higher than 4). Only 6% of WSB-exposed girls and 7% of non-exposed girls recorded a Conflict-Retaliation TREAD score of above 4. Similarly, 5% of WSB-exposed girls and 8% of non-exposed girls recorded a Denigration TREAD score of above 4. No girls recorded a Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD score of above 4. Only 8% of non-exposed girls recorded a Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD score of above 3, and no WSB-exposed girls recorded a Dominance-Possessiveness score as high as 3.

For WSB-exposed girls, their WSB exposure was negatively related to their assertive tendency ($r = -.35, p < .01, n = 65$). All TREAD subscales were negatively related to exposure to at least one type of WSB. Lower Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD was particularly strongly related to higher exposure to Possessiveness and Retaliation WSBs. All correlations are shown in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Conf-Control Exposure</th>
<th>Retaliation Exposure</th>
<th>Denigration Exposure</th>
<th>Dominance Exposure</th>
<th>Poss’veness Exposure</th>
<th>Total WSB Exposure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-Retaliation TREAD</td>
<td>- .23*</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration TREAD</td>
<td>- .25*</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.33**</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dom-Poss’veness TREAD</td>
<td>- .26*</td>
<td>-.40**</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.46**</td>
<td>-.39**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total TREAD</td>
<td>- .32**</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.37**</td>
<td>-.35**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Results represent only those girls with any Recent WSB Exposure ($n = 66$)

*p < .05. **p < .001.
**Risk Sensitivity and TREAD**

Table 5.6 shows that risk sensitivity was highly variable for girls, whether they had been recently exposed to WSB or not. Mean risk sensitivity was highest for Retaliation WSB for both subsets. While it was not a statistically significant difference at an alpha of .05, risk sensitivity regarding Possessive WSB was considerably lower for WSB-exposed girls compared with non-exposed girls.

Table 5.6

*Descriptive Statistics for Risk Sensitivity Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>WSB-Exposed Girls (n = 66)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conf-Cont Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaliation Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poss’veness Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-WSB-Exposed Girls (n = 80)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conf-Cont Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaliation Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poss’veness Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>4.50&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Risk Sensitivity</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Difference between non-exposed and WSB-exposed girls approached significance, \( p = .07 \).

Notably, risk sensitivity in romantic relationships appeared to be a fairly unified construct. That is, risk sensitivity in relation to one WSB domain was strongly correlated with risk sensitivity in all other WSB domains. All correlations are shown in Table 5.7.
For the subset of girls who reported no recent exposure to WSB, total risk sensitivity and total TREAD were weakly correlated ($r = .22$, $p < .05$, $n = 80$). For these non-exposed girls, Retaliation risk sensitivity correlated relatively strongly with Conflict-Retaliation TREAD ($r = .36$, $p < .001$, $n = 75$). However, for WSB-exposed girls, total risk sensitivity scores were unrelated to total TREAD scores ($r = .04$, $p = .37$, $n = 65$). A more detailed analysis uncovered no relationship between any TREAD subscale score and risk sensitivity in any WSB domain.

**Exposure to Warning-Sign Behaviours and Confidence in Self-Agency**

For non-WSB-exposed girls ($n = 76$), the mean score for Confidence in Self-Agency was $M = 5.29$ ($SD = 1.13$, range = 2 to 7). For WSB-exposed girls ($n = 66$), the corresponding statistics were similar ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.56$, range = 1 to 7). For WSB-exposed girls, self-confidence was weakly negatively related to total WSB exposure ($r = -.21$, $p < .05$, $n = 65$). Confidence in self-agency was not related to exposure to Denigration or Possessiveness, but was significantly associated with lower exposure to Conflict-Control ($r = -.24$), Retaliation ($r = -.23$), and Dominance-Seeking ($r = -.21$).

**Confidence in Self-Agency and TREAD**

For girls who reported no recent exposure to WSB, confidence in self-agency was not related to total TREAD ($r = .14$, $p = .25$, $n = 76$) or any TREAD subscale. However, for
WSB-exposed girls, while confidence in self-agency was unrelated to total TREAD ($r = .13, p = .15, n = 65$), higher self-agency confidence levels were associated with greater Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD ($r = .22, p < .05, n = 65$).

### Discussion

The dyadic slippery-slope model of chronic partner abuse suggests that psycho-education for young people, before they embark on their romantic relationship careers, could increase their WSB-specific assertiveness (TREAD) and help to minimise harms. Guided by this model, the current study was undertaken to inform program developers about the beliefs and behavioural tendencies of girls at risk of ‘slippery-slope’ dynamics (i.e., girls who reported repeated exposure to WSBs).

First this study sought to determine whether adolescent girls’ exposure to WSB is sporadic or systematic. The fact that all girls who reported recent relationship involvement also reported exposure to at least one WSB suggests that some WSBs (especially those in the Dominance-Possessiveness domain) may be normative in Australian adolescents’ relationships. It is appropriate that WSB behaviours, therefore, be conceptualised as warning-sign behaviours rather than necessarily as forms of abuse. However, the results indicate that girls frequently exposed to one type of WSB are likely to also frequently encounter WSBs in other domains. This finding is consistent with the dyadic slippery-slope model, which posits that WSBs can (if they are not assertively discouraged) contribute to one or more slippery-slope dynamics which pave the way for further WSBs and, potentially, serious harm.

These results are also consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Murphy & Smith, 2010a; O’Leary & Smith-Slep, 2003), suggesting that, in developed nations, verbally aggressive, jealous, and controlling behaviours in adolescent relationships tend to co-occur like they do in abusive adult relationships (O’Leary & Maiuro, 2001). Abusive patterns consolidated in adolescent relationships may carry through into adult contexts (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). Given the possible adverse impact on girls’ wellbeing and their future relationship trajectories, findings of systematic WSB exposure in some adolescent relationships are concerning. Youth-targeted partner abuse prevention efforts are warranted.

The second question concerned whether girls’ tendency to assert their needs with a partner is related to the extent to which they are exposed to WSB. As posited by the dyadic slippery-slope model, assertive tendency (TREAD) was negatively related to recent WSB exposure. Lower Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD was particularly strongly related to greater exposure to Possessiveness and Retaliation WSBs. The difference between girls who were, and who were not, recently exposed to WSBs was the greater extent to which WSB-exposed girls exhibited low TREAD (scores $< 2$) rather than the greater extent to which non-exposed
girls exhibited high TREAD (scores > 4). These findings suggest that low TREAD and WSB exposure frequency may be causally related. It is certainly feasible that clear, discouraging responses to early displays of WSB (TREAD scores of 3) might reduce one’s risk of ongoing WSB exposure. However, it remains unclear whether a causal relationship between low TREAD and WSB exposure, if one exists, is unidirectional or bidirectional. For example, girls in this study who had been exposed to possessive partner behaviour may have initially accommodated this behaviour, which in turn might have reinforced their partners’ emotional overdependence and perceived control. These beliefs might have led to retaliatory responses by that partner if/when their sense of security or control was subsequently threatened. In addition to conditioning girls to accommodate possessive (i.e., over-dependent) behaviour, such retaliatory responses might have activated other slippery-slope dynamics (e.g., secrecy, anger, or power-imbalance) and, hence, reduced girls’ likelihood of responding assertively to future WSB.

Indeed, the dyadic slippery-slope model (detailed further in Chapter 8) posits that the negative relationship between TREAD and exposure to WSB is bidirectional. Exposure to WSB is hypothesised to influence young people’s TREAD via its effects on their beliefs and/or emotions, and/or via behavioural conditioning. Low TREAD (i.e., low assertiveness), in turn, facilitates slippery-slope dynamics and, hence, further WSB exposure. Conversely, the model hypothesises that when youth, early in their relationship careers, respond assertively to WSBs, their exposure to such behaviours decreases, their self-esteem, social autonomy, and self-efficacy is maintained, and their capacity to resist abusive dynamics in the future is maintained. This suggests that early, program-induced increases in TREAD might reduce girls’ exposure to WSB in the short-term and impact positively on their long-term relationship trajectories. The pilot study reported on in Chapter 6 yielded promising results on this question; however, randomised controlled intervention studies are required to determine whether increases in TREAD can cause reduced exposure to WSB.

On the third question, whether there is a relationship between girls’ risk awareness and their assertive tendency, no relationship was found in the WSB-exposed girls. It perhaps should not be surprising that some girls, despite knowing the risks associated with WSBs, would not respond assertively. It is possible that the further advanced slippery-slope dynamics are, the less likely assertive responses are to be effective. In any case, assertiveness is a learned behavioural skill-set (Paterson, 2000). Without exposure to assertiveness ‘scripts’ that are relevant to specific relationship situations, a girl may simply not know how to formulate assertive responses appropriate to such situations (see Murphy & Smith, 2010a). Assertiveness skills training may be needed to address behavioural vulnerabilities and, thus,
bring girls’ responses to WSBs into closer alignment with their perceptions of risk. Without skills training, however, rather than respond assertively, it appears that at-risk girls are equally likely to accommodate or reciprocate WSBs that they view to be risky. There is, therefore, little basis for the assumption that programs that heighten young people’s risk awareness will increase their tendency to resist abusive dynamics. This runs parallel to conclusions drawn in other areas of preventative health education where risk awareness has little effect on behaviour (Hansen, 1992; Office on Drugs and Crime, 2004).

The fourth question concerned whether girls’ WSB exposure is related to their perceived self-agency. Consistent with dyadic slippery-slope theory, WSB exposure was negatively related to perceived self-agency. This relationship was evident for Conflict Control, Retaliation, and Dominance-Seeking WSBs. This finding should not be surprising given that a common effect of partner abuse in adult women is learned helplessness (Launius & Lindquist, 1988; Wilson et al., 1993). The possibility that perceived self-agency might be compromised by relationship experiences in girls as young as 14 years of age is concerning. It may be that, for some girls, early exposure to WSBs and a resultant decline in self-agency contributes to slippery-slope processes. Alternatively, it is possible that pre-existing low perceived self-agency impacts on TREAD from the time girls are first exposed to WSB. Both possibilities point to the potential importance of beginning empowerment-oriented relationship education with girls before significant levels of WSB are encountered.

In relation to the final question, whether there is a relationship between girls’ perceived self-agency and their assertive tendency, there was a weak relationship between perceived self-agency and Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD. Confidence in self-agency might increase Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD, and thus reduce exposure to WSB. Alternatively, higher Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD might limit WSB exposure and, subsequently, result in a greater sense of personal agency. Educational experiences that encourage girls (and boys) to view themselves as potentially powerful players in navigating their own relationship pathways would seem desirable. However, the correlation between TREAD and self-confidence was not strong. This suggests that encouraging a sense of self-agency alone (i.e., in the absence of skills-training) may not translate into more assertive responses to WSB.

One further implication of the finding that self-confidence correlates only weakly with assertive tendency is that universal relationship-skills training may be required in order to meet the empowerment needs of at-risk girls. Elective relationship education programs will not necessarily attract enrolment by all those who might benefit. That is, self-nomination into
programs may miss girls (and boys) who feel confident but who actually lack WSB-assertiveness skills.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The correlations reported in this study tend to be moderate, possibly owing to the relative lack of ‘opportunity’ for mid-adolescent girls to encounter WSBs. In any case, the strength of correlations between TREAD and WSB exposure will always be limited because girls’ TREAD only matters if they are actually exposed to WSB (i.e., it is possible that a girl with low TREAD might never be exposed to WSB). Had this study been conducted with a representative sample of girls, including girls uninterested in attending lunch-time questionnaire sessions, or with older girls who are at greater risk of exposure to abusive partner behaviours (Crime Research Centre, 2001), the results might have been different. It is difficult to estimate the effect that the sampling bias of this study had on the results. Larger-scale, representative samples are needed in future studies on this topic, including mixed-gender and culturally diverse samples.

**Conclusions**

However, from the results of this small study, a few conclusions are possible. First, when WSBs occur in adolescent relationships, they might form part of a wider pattern of WSB; that is, they may contribute to the development of one or more abusive dynamics. WSBs in adolescent relationships should therefore not be considered trivial. Second, for the girls in this study at least, educational programming that addresses attitudinal and behavioural vulnerabilities holds more promise than programming that targets attitudes and beliefs alone. Third, due to the possible impact of WSB exposure on assertive tendency and perceived self-agency, educational experiences implemented after WSBs have become established may not be as effective as those implemented earlier. Finally, because self-confidence does not necessarily correspond with assertiveness skills, universal/compulsory relationship education is probably required in order to maximise reach to vulnerable youth.

Chronic partner abuse, as conceptualised within the dyadic slippery-slope framework, is a complex and inherently dyadic process that begins with WSBs by one or both partners and is sustained by accommodative and aggressive responses to those WSBs. A great deal more formative research may be required to establish the foundations necessary to design optimal prevention programs for youth, including large-scale studies with representative samples. To progress, this field needs programs that are based on well articulated and rigorously tested theory (Murray & Graybeal, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006). This study takes one small step towards that end. The next paper reports on the results of an evaluation of a pilot program based on the dyadic slippery-slope model of chronic partner abuse.
Paper Six:
An Evaluation of an Empowerment-Oriented Partner Abuse Prevention Program with Adolescent Girls

Abstract
A program to help girls avoid chronic partner abuse was piloted as an elective program in ten Victorian secondary schools. The program was based on the dyadic slippery-slope model of chronic partner abuse. It aimed to build participants’ skills in recognising and responding assertively to early warning sign behaviours (WSBs) by a partner. Five modules were delivered over one day: Choosing, Noticing, Responding, Ending, and Bouncing Back. This paper reports on the results of a non-controlled pre- to post-test evaluation, with a three-month follow-up period. Seventy-five girls ($M = 14.7$ years) contributed pre- and post-program data. After the program, they demonstrated heightened awareness of the risks associated with WSBs, increased self-confidence, decreased victim blaming, and more assertive intentions. Participants’ assertiveness was related to their risk awareness, but only following the program. The program’s focus on skill-building is believed to have been crucial to its success. Although skills-based empowerment is a promising approach to preventing chronic partner abuse, more rigorous and extensive evaluation of this approach is needed.

Introduction
A plethora of studies confirm the unacceptable prevalence of partner abuse and its damaging impacts (e.g., Coker et al., 2002; Crime Research Centre, 2001; O’Leary, 1999). The prevention of chronic partner abuse was the aim of the psycho-educational program piloted in this study. The program aimed to enhance adolescent girls’ capacity to resist the development of abusive relationship dynamics, and represents a skills-based empowerment approach in an area that is currently dominated by attitude-focused interventions (see Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009).

Partner abuse in this study is defined as any pattern of harm-causing interaction between partners. It includes a range of actions and reactions which might occur in a non-abusive relationship, but these behaviours constitute partner abuse if they form a pattern or trend likely to result in emotional, social, and/or physical harm. Social harm, in this context, is a negated sense of connectedness with others outside of the relationship or a restricted sense of social autonomy. Emotional harm is a compromised sense of self-worth or self-confidence. Physical harm is defined as fear, pain, or injury resulting from an act of physical aggression.
Harm can be caused by the behaviours of males and females in heterosexual and same-sex relationships (e.g., Bunker Rohrbough, 2006). Abusive behaviour in most cases of partner abuse is bidirectional, fuelled by interpersonal hostility (e.g., Crime Research Centre, 2001; Temple, Weston, & Marshall, 2005). In its various forms, partner abuse is common and it affects the wellbeing of children who grow up in the stressful environments it creates (Davies & Sturje-Apple, 2007; O’Leary & Jouriles, 1993; Osofsky, 1999). The prevention of partner abuse was seen as a more appropriate target than the prevention of partner violence for two reasons: (a) partner abuse includes the full range of harmful dynamics possible in couple relationships and (b) non-violent forms of partner abuse are longitudinal risk factors for partner violence (see Murphy & Smith, 2010a).

Why Pilot this Program with Girls?

The program piloted in this study aimed to reduce adolescent girls’ vulnerability to partner abuse. The decision to focus on girls was made partly because young women tend to report experiencing more harm in abusive relationships than do young men (e.g., Crime Research Centre, 2001; Harned, 2001). However, gender-inclusive research in developed nations shows that young women initiate and reciprocate potentially harm-causing behaviour in their relationships, including physical aggression, at similar rates to young men (e.g., Harned, 2002; Kaura & Allen, 2004; O’Leary & Smith Slep, 2003; Straus, 2008), and reciprocated aggression is associated with more frequent and severe violence than non-reciprocated aggression (Gray & Foshee, 1997; Temple, Weston, & Marshall, 2005; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). While smaller percentages of boys and men report experiencing fear and physical injury compared with girls and women, boys and men nonetheless suffer abuse (Fontes, 2007; Frieze, 2005). Although this type of program is therefore not exclusively relevant to girls, it was thought appropriate to test the efficacy of this approach by piloting it with self-nominating girls initially, with a view to extending its evaluation to universal (i.e., mixed-gender) settings in the future.

Though many programs have been developed to prevent partner abuse (for examples, see Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009), impact evaluations are rarely completed. What evaluation does occur rarely addresses behavioural objectives (Murray & Graybeal, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006). Programs that have been behaviourally evaluated (Foshee et al., 2005; Wolfe et al., 2009) focus on discrete physical acts (e.g., pushing, hitting) rather than the dyadic interactions that give rise to these acts (for an adult-program exception see Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993). The current study tested the efficacy of a holistic approach to partner abuse prevention, assessed against context-specific
behavioural objectives. The next section summarises the theoretical model upon which the program was based.

**Dyadic Slippery-Slope Model**

How much damage is caused in an unhealthy relationship depends on the behaviours of both partners. For example, in cases of social abuse, at least one of the partners needs to behave in a jealous or manipulative manner, but not all partners are equally likely to succumb to a partner’s control tactics (e.g., Few & Rosen, 2005). That is, one partner must accommodate the socially restrictive behaviours of the other partner in order for socially abusive dynamics to become entrenched. In cases of emotional abuse, more harm is likely if the initial target responds aggressively than if they respond assertively. As mentioned above, bi-directionally aggressive relationships are prone to more frequent and severe aggression. The ‘dyadic slippery-slope’ model captures this complexity.

In brief, the dyadic slippery-slope model (see Figure 3.1) delineates possible mechanisms by which abusive dynamics develop in intimate relationships and ultimately result in harm. According to this model, partner abuse sets in when warning-sign behaviours (WSBs) by either or both partners are accommodated or, alternatively, responded to aggressively by the other partner. WSBs fall into five domains: Dominance-Seeking, Possessiveness, Denigration, Conflict-Control tactics, and Retaliatory responding (see Table 4.1). WSB can exacerbate a partner’s existing vulnerabilities such that assertive (non-accommodating, non-aggressive) responses to further WSB become less likely over time. Thus, where vulnerabilities already exist, WSBs tend to increase in intensity or frequency as the other partner’s responses become more accommodating or aggressive. As abusive dynamics characterised by secrecy/silence, overdependence, anger and/or power-imbalance develop, assertive responses may become less efficacious even if they do occur. Complicating matters, different WSBs can be initiated at different points in the relationship.

In summary, the dyadic slippery-slope model maps out how abusive relationships develop. One or more types of WSB by one or both partners become more frequent or severe as the other’s responses become more accepting or aggressive. Clearly, keeping a grip on the slippery-slope is much easier at the top of the slope than once the downward slide has begun. The aim of the program piloted in this study was to help participants ‘keep a grip’ in potential slippery slope situations.

**Program Aim and Objectives**

The ultimate aim of the program was to minimise emotional, social, and physical harms by increasing participants’ capacity to resist slippery-slope dynamics—interactions characterised by secrecy, overdependence, anger, and power imbalance—from when the earliest WSBs
appear. Based on the dyadic slippery-slope model, it was assumed that increasing participants’ tendency to non-aggressively assert their rights and needs in response to WSBs would help them to avoid or curb the development of abusive dynamics such that serious harms might be averted. The critical objective of the program, therefore, was to increase participants’ assertive tendency or their Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD).

In addition to this critical objective, three change-targets constituted secondary objectives, as they were hypothesized to facilitate gains in the critical objective. These objectives were to (a) increase participants’ sensitivity to WSB risk; (b) strengthen participants’ belief in the importance of monitoring their relationships; and (c) increase their self-confidence to influence the course of their relationships. A further objective was to decrease participants’ victim-blaming beliefs.

**Method**

**Program Philosophy, Content, and Process**

The design of the program was heavily influenced by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory is concerned with the centrality of feeling competent, autonomous and related for psychological wellbeing. Meeting one’s needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness is associated with a sense of personal wellbeing and also relationship quality (e.g., Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006; Ducat & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). The program aimed to equip participants with the awareness and skills to assert and protect their needs for self-determination. The program also aimed to prepare participants to provide helpful support to others facing challenges to self-determination.

The program consisted of five sequential modules: Choosing, Noticing, Responding, Ending, and Bouncing Back. These modules were conducted intensively over one school day (approximately five hours). The philosophy of self-determination was reflected in the content and process of each of the five modules. The needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness were referred to as ‘human needs for happiness’. However, youth-friendlier terms were used in the program: confidence in place of competence, choice in place of autonomy, and connectedness in place of relatedness. It was stressed that all people have these needs, regardless of age, gender, culture, etc. Throughout the program, participants’ needs for happiness were considered no more and no less important than their current/potential partners’ needs. While wants may conflict, each partner’s needs to feel capable and worthwhile, to feel free from pressure and intimidation, and to feel connected to others are equally vital and never require compromise.
The Choosing module provided opportunities for participants to consider reasons why couple-relationships are important to many people (especially young women), focusing on ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Participants then assessed the risks associated with each reason for entering or staying in a relationship. At the beginning of the Noticing module, a simple definition of love was proposed: Love means wanting who we love to be happy. Relationship abuse was defined as behaviour which makes it hard for a partner to meet their needs for happiness, and results in social, emotional or physical harm. These definitions do not assume that love and abuse are mutually exclusive; they often co-occur (e.g., Fraser, 2008; Frieze, 2005). These definitions also do not assume that harm is always maliciously caused. For example, social restriction can result from feelings of insecurity in the absence of a deliberate attempt to cause harm.

Participants were exposed to a range of real-life outcomes of relationship abuse, representing combinations of social, emotional, and/or physical harm. They identified what ‘needs for happiness’ were not being met in each scenario. Participants then thought through how four slippery-slope dynamics (secrecy, overdependence, anger, and power-imbalance; S.O.A.P.) could lead to social, emotional, and physical harms. They then considered ways in which the five types of WSB could contribute to these dynamics and, ultimately, harm.

In the Responding module, participants considered the upsides and downsides associated with aggressive, accommodative (called ‘accepting’), and assertive responses to each type of WSB. Opportunities were provided for participants to script, practise, and observe assertive responses to specific WSBs, and to assess the potential ‘slipperiness’ of these responses compared with aggressive and accommodative alternatives. In their scripted responses, participants were encouraged to (a) identify why the particular WSB was a problem and (b) clearly state their needs.

The Ending module focused on safety-conscious strategies for ending a slippery-slope relationship if one’s partner cannot meet one’s needs for confidence, choice, and connectedness. This module also provided tips for, and telephone role-play practice in, supporting a friend in a slippery-slope relationship. Finally, the Bouncing Back module explored ways to meet one’s needs for happiness in the future, if these needs have not been met in the past.

The program was facilitated in a way which recognised participants’ pre-existing knowledge and insights, and celebrated the strengths they demonstrated. This was seen as important for maximising participants’ self-confidence. Participants were also given opportunities to explore options and make their own judgements in a pressure-free, supportive environment. The aim was to foster a sense of respected choice. The program was also
facilitated in a way which created a sense of connectedness within the group. For example, participants worked in pairs and small groups and, periodically, brief team-based games were played.

**Recruitment**

The program was piloted with 13 groups of self-nominating girls in ten secondary schools in Victoria, with ethics approval (RMIT HREC Project #06/08), and principal and parental consent. The results of only ten of these groups are presented in this chapter (as explained below). The ten schools were situated in low- to middle-range socioeconomic areas in semi-rural and metropolitan regions, and included six government and four Catholic secondary schools. Meetings were held with each school’s Principal/Assistant Principal and one or more members of the school’s Wellbeing team in order to communicate the ethical and administrative requirements of the trial. Each school nominated a year level from which girls would be invited to participate: Two schools nominated Year 8, five nominated Year 9, and three nominated Year 10. Program group sizes ranged from 8 to 15 participants.

Participants nominated to participate in the pilot-evaluation after being informed of the study’s aims and participation requirements, and assured of standard ethical practices (e.g., their right to withdraw at any time). These requirements and assurances were presented at brief information sessions held for girls at each host-school. Information was also sent home to parents via each school’s newsletter. Girls were informed that the pilot program would be conducted during class-time, but that they would be required to complete a 30-minute questionnaire package during a lunch-time before the program, and again three months after the program, to evaluate the program’s impact.

**Participants**

Three of the ten schools saw interest from enough girls to run the program for two groups. (In fact, there was interest from a much larger number of girls, overall, than the number that returned consent forms and attended the lunch-time questionnaire session.) It was initially intended that the second group in each of these schools would, together, comprise a waitlist control group for the purpose of the evaluation. However, these girls ($n = 39$) comprised a control group that was considerably smaller than the intervention group ($n = 108$) at Time 1, and as a result of attrition over the three-month period of this study, the number of girls in the control group who submitted Time 2 data was even lower ($n = 29$). Due to missing data, the control group sample size was reduced in some repeated-measures analyses to $n = 9$.

Unfortunately, this meant that a number of assumptions that underlie the use of intended analyses (e.g., mixed plot ANOVA) were violated. No significant within-group changes were observed on any measure for the control group; however, this may have been due to the small
sample size. In the current report, only Time 1 and Time 2 data obtained from the intervention group participants are reported.

The number of intervention group girls who returned a signed consent form, and who attended a lunchtime session and completed the Time 1 questionnaire booklet, was 108 (M = 14.8 years); 96 girls attended the program; and 75 girls (M = 14.7 years) attended a further lunchtime session to contribute Time 2 data three months after completing the program. One girl was illiterate and struggled to complete any of the Time 1 booklet. Four girls submitted booklets which were partially complete (i.e., items towards the end were missed). At Time 1, 51 of the 108 (47%) participants reported romantic relationship involvement in the past three months. Of these girls, 21 (41%) reported being in a relationship for the whole three months. Nearly three quarters (74%) of the same 51 girls reported that they had recently talked with someone about a relationship problem; over a quarter (26%) reported discussing a relationship problem on eight or more occasions.

**Measures**

The Time 1 and Time 2 questionnaire booklets were virtually identical and included multiple- and single-item scales. Participants recorded the same codename on each booklet. Names on consent forms were never matched with the questionnaire codenames. In addition to the measures explained below, the questionnaires included questions regarding the participant’s age, recent romantic relationship involvement (no reference was made to sexual activity), and recent discussions about relationship issues.

**Risk Sensitivity.** The Sensitivity to Risk in Romantic Relationships (SRRR) scale was developed by the author of this paper to measure participants’ sensitivity to the risks associated with WSBs. In relation to the 23 WSBs discussed in previous chapters, participants were asked “How risky do you think this behaviour would be if it kept happening?” The response options ranged from 1 (Absolutely no risk of harm) to 7 (Very high risk of harm). Means were calculated for each WSB domain separately, and total mean Risk Sensitivity scores were calculated using these domain scores. Good test-retest reliability of this scale has been established using the total mean scores of first year Psychology students with a test-retest period of one week (r = .84, p < .01, n = 39).

**Importance of Monitoring.** The level of importance that participants attributed to monitoring their relationships was assessed by a single item: “How important do you think it is to keep watching how you are treated by a partner?” where possible responses ranged from 1 (Not at all important) to 7 (Extremely important).

**Self-Confidence.** Participants’ confidence in their own agency to influence the course of their relationships was measured by a single item: “How confident are you in your ability to
positively influence how you are treated by a partner?” where possible responses ranged from 1 (Not at all confident) to 7 (Extremely confident).

**Victim Blaming.** Victim blaming was measured by a further single item: “If you are treated badly by a partner, how much are you to blame for your partner’s behaviour?” Possible response options ranged from 1 (I am not at all to blame) to 7 (I am fully to blame).

**Assertive Tendency.** Assertive tendency was measured using the Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD) scale (see Chapter 4). This scale has good construct- and criterion-validity and high inter-rater reliability, and comprises three inter-related subscales: Conflict-Retaliation TREAD, Denigration TREAD, and Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD. Higher mean scores on each subscale are associated with lower exposure to one or more domains of WSB (see Chapter 5).

**Exposure to WSB.** To measure participants’ recent exposure to WSB, participants were asked, for all 23 WSBs, “In the past few months, has a partner behaved this way with you?” Response options included no (scored as a 0), once (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), and very often (5). Mean Recent Exposure scores were calculated for each WSB domain, and Total WSB Exposure scores were calculated by averaging these scores. A Total WSB Exposure score of 1 meant that in the last few months, on average, all WSBs had been experienced once, or where one WSB had not been experienced, another had been experienced more than once.

**Procedure**

The program was delivered by the author of this thesis, an experienced secondary school teacher, parent educator, family violence case worker, and youth counsellor. She was supported by a school nurse, counsellor, student wellbeing coordinator, or psychologist employed at the host school. Time 1 questionnaire booklets were completed during the week before the program was delivered. Time 2 booklets were completed three to four months after participants received the program. After the Time 2 questionnaire booklet was completed, follow-up focus groups were conducted by the author to gather further information which might assist in improving the program.

Due to concerns regarding the possible effects on some girls of completing the questionnaires, steps were taken to ensure that no girl felt under pressure to complete the questionnaires. Questionnaires were therefore completed separately to the program per se, only if the girl chose to attend an out-of-class-time questionnaire session. In other words, only girls who elected to give-up free time contributed data to the evaluation.

**Testing.** Each questionnaire booklet took less than 30 minutes to complete and was completed during a lunch-time under the supervision of a school staff member. Participants
ate their own lunch while they completed their questionnaire. Participants were not financially compensated for their time; however, lollies were offered during the testing as a token of appreciation. A list of support services regarding family violence and relationship abuse were distributed to participants at the end of both questionnaire sessions. No participant indicated any adverse effect due to either completing a questionnaire booklet or participating in the program.

**Data analysis.** PASW Statistics Version 18 was used for all analyses. Analyses included repeated-measures $t$ tests to test for pre- to post-program changes against the program’s objectives, independent-groups $t$ tests to compare subgroups, Pearson’s $r$ correlations to test the strength of relationships between the attitudinal variables (perceived risk, self-confidence, importance of monitoring, and victim-blaming) and TREAD, and regression analyses to assess the strength of attitudinal changes as predictors of TREAD-change. Cases with missing data were deleted pair-wise. Missing item scores were not substituted or imputed; missed items rendered the relevant subscale unusable.

**Results**

**Risk Sensitivity**

As can be seen in Table 6.1, risk sensitivity ratings for all WSB domains increased significantly between Time 1 and Time 2. The domain with the highest risk rating at Time 1 was Retaliatory responding. The domains with the greatest risk rating increases were Possessiveness and Denigration. The change in Total Risk Sensitivity, $t(69) = 4.01, p < .001$, was large according to the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988), with an eta squared value of .19. At Time 1, Total Risk Sensitivity scores did not correlate with Total TREAD scores, $r = .12, p = .26, n = 102$. At Time 2, however, a moderate to strong relationship emerged, $r = .46, p < .001, n = 71$. Time 1 to Time 2 change in Total Risk Sensitivity significantly predicted TREAD-change (beta = .25, $p < .05$), but accounted for only 6% of the variance in TREAD-change scores, $F = (1, 68) = 4.37, p < .05$.

**Importance of Monitoring**

Table 6.2 shows the Time 1 to Time 2 change in participants’ perceived importance of monitoring their relationships. This change was not significant, $t (69) = 0.97, p = .33$. At Time 1, Importance of Monitoring was not associated with TREAD, $r = .16, p = .10, n = 102$. However, at Time 2 these variables were moderately related, $r = .42, p < .001, n = 71$. Time 1 to Time 2 change on this measure was not a significant predictor of TREAD-change.
Table 6.1

Changes in Risk Sensitivity by Domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Sensitivity</th>
<th>T1 Mean</th>
<th>(SD)</th>
<th>T1-T2 Mean Change Scores</th>
<th>(95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denigration</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>(1.64)</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>(.20 to 1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance-Seeking</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>(1.24)</td>
<td>.61***</td>
<td>(.32 to .90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessiveness</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>(1.23)</td>
<td>.65***</td>
<td>(.37 to .93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-Control</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>(1.41)</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>(.13 to .75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaliation</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>(1.43)</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>(.01 to .64 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>(1.17)</td>
<td>.50***</td>
<td>(.25 to .75)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 6.2

Changes in the Single-Item Attitudinal Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudinal Variable</th>
<th>T1 Mean</th>
<th>(SD)</th>
<th>T1-T2 Mean Change Scores</th>
<th>(95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Monitoring</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>(1.46)</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>(-.18 to .52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Confidence</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>(1.46)</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>(.20 to .89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim Blaming</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>(1.68)</td>
<td>-.50*</td>
<td>(-.04 to -.96)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01

Self-Confidence

Table 6.2 shows that Self-Confidence increased between Time 1 and Time 2. This shift represents a large increase, $M = .54$, $t (69) = 3.15$, $p < .005$, eta square $= .13$. At Time 1, Self-Confidence was not associated with TREAD, $r = .13$, $p = .21$, $n = 102$. At Time 2, the relationship between Self-Confidence and assertive tendency still failed to reach statistical significance, $r = .20$, $p = .09$, $n = 71$. Time 1 to Time 2 change in Self-Confidence was not a significant predictor of TREAD change.
**Victim Blaming**

At Time 1, participants tended away from outright victim blaming ($M = 3.4; SD = 1.7$); however, the modal response on the Victim Blaming scale was 4 (mid-scale). In other words, the most frequent response was to blame oneself as much as one’s partner for bad treatment by that partner. Table 6.2 shows that Victim Blaming decreased after participation in the program. This decrease represented a moderate effect, $t(69) = 2.15, p < .05$, eta squared = .06. Victim Blaming was unrelated to TREAD at both Time 1 ($r = .07, p = .46, n = 102$) and Time 2 ($r = .06, p = .63, n = 71$).

Time 1 to Time 2 change on this measure was not a significant predictor of TREAD change. Time 1 to Time 2 decreases in Victim Blaming were, however, weakly associated with increases in Self-Confidence, $r = -.23, p < .05, n = 70$. Counting only those girls who reported recent exposure to WSB at Time 1, this relationship was stronger, $r = -.38, p < .05, n = 34$.

**TREAD**

Across all participants, the increase in Total TREAD was very large, $t(73) = 5.64, p < .001$, eta square = .30. To ascertain whether prior exposure to WSB impacted on TRED-change scores, finer grained analyses were conducted. Table 6.3 shows Time 1 to Time 2 changes in TREAD for participants with and without recent WSB Exposure at Time 1. For the girls who reported no recent exposure to WSB at Time 1, the increase in Conflict-Retaliation TREAD was much larger, $t(35) = 3.98, p < .001$, eta squared = .31, than for the girls who did report recent WSB exposure, $t(33) = .70, p = .49$, eta squared = .01.

**Exposure to Warning-Sign Behaviours**

Of the 103 girls who submitted complete WSB Exposure data at Time 1, approximately half (51) reported some level of recent exposure to WSB at Time 1. Of the 70 girls who submitted complete Time 1 and Time 2 WSB Exposure data, again approximately half (34) had reported WSB Exposure at Time 1. Nearly two-thirds (22) of those 34 girls reported WSB exposure at both Time 1 ($M = .77$) and Time 2 ($M = .70$), and just over one-third (12) reported WSB exposure at only Time 1 ($M = .42$). Three girls reported WSB exposure only at Time 2 ($M = .24$). Across all girls, WSB exposure did not change significantly from Time 1 ($M = 0.31$) to Time 2 ($M = 0.23$), $t(69) = 1.72, p = .09$. However, restricting the analysis to include only those 34 girls who reported exposure to WSB at Time 1, a significant decrease was observed, representing a moderate to large effect size, $t(33) = 2.01, p < .05$, eta squared = .11.
### Table 6.3

*Changes in TREAD*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TREAD</th>
<th>T1 Mean (SD)</th>
<th>T1-T2 Mean Change Scores (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants reporting No WSB Exposure at Time 1 (n = 36)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-Retaliation</td>
<td>2.66 (.83)</td>
<td>.64*** (.31 to .96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration</td>
<td>2.22 (.80)</td>
<td>.27* (.04 to .58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance-Poss’veness</td>
<td>2.25 (.41)</td>
<td>.46*** (.28 to .64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.38 (.48)</td>
<td>.46*** (.24 to .67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants reporting WSB Exposure at Time 1 (n = 34)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-Retaliation</td>
<td>2.65 (.96)</td>
<td>.13 (-.26 to .53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration</td>
<td>1.89 (.63)</td>
<td>.31* (.08 to .54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance-Poss’veness</td>
<td>2.08 (.45)</td>
<td>.38*** (.19 to .57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.23 (.52)</td>
<td>.27** (.08 to .46)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01 ***p < .001

No linear relationships were found between Time 1 to Time 2 TREAD change and changed frequency of WSB Exposure. However, *categorical* TREAD change was related to changes in WSB Exposure. Across all girls who increased in TREAD, the reduction in WSB exposure was significant, *t*(52) = 2.31, *p* < .05, and represented a moderate to large effect (eta squared = .09). On the other hand, those who decreased in TREAD reported a statistically insignificant increase in WSB exposure, *t*(16) = 1.03, *p* = .32, eta squared = .06. Table 6.4 shows the changes in WSB exposure for only those participants who reported recent exposure to WSB at Time 1. For those who increased in TREAD, the reduction in WSB exposure was very substantial, *t*(24) = 2.46, *p* < .05, eta squared = .20. For those who decreased in TREAD, no change was observed, *t*(8) = .53, *p* = .61, eta squared = .03.
Table 6.4

Changes in WSB Exposure associated with Increased versus Decreased TREAD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WSB Domain</th>
<th>T1 Mean Exposure</th>
<th>(SD)</th>
<th>Mean T1 to T2 Change</th>
<th>(95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Girls who Increased in TREAD (n = 25, Time 1 Mean TREAD = 2.11)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>(1.06)</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>(-.80 to .18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessiveness</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>(1.13)</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>(-.62 to .06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>-.33*</td>
<td>(-.65 to -.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-Control</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>(1.10)</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>(-.61 to .07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaliation</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>(.98)</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>(-.57 to .04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>(.91)</td>
<td>-.29*</td>
<td>(-.52 to -.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Girls who Decreased in TREAD (n = 9, Time 1 Mean TREAD = 2.56)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>(.71)</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>(-.62 to .73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessiveness</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>(.30)</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>(-.24 to .51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>(.23)</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>(-.31 to .29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict-Control</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>(.47)</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>(-.57 to .48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaliation</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>(.24)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>(-.24 to .38)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Only participants reporting WSB Exposure at Time 1

*p < .05.

For the 22 girls who reported WSB exposure at both Time 1 and Time 2, the decrease in exposure frequency ($M = .77$ to $M = .70$) was negligible, $t(21) = .60, p = .55, \text{eta squared} = .02$. Finer-grained analyses were conducted to determine whether TREAD-change impacted on these girls’ exposure to WSB. Most (17) of these girls demonstrated increased TREAD. While the decrease in WSB exposure for these girls was statistically non-significant, it represented a moderate to large effect, $t(16) = 1.18, p = .26, \text{eta squared} = .08$. However, the five of these girls who decreased in TREAD reported an increase in WSB exposure. Though
this increase was statistically non-significant, \(t(4) = .88, p = .43\), it represented a large effect size (eta squared = .16).

**Discussion**

This pilot evaluation assessed the efficacy of a skills-based empowerment-oriented partner abuse prevention program with adolescent girls. The program appeared to be effective in relation to all but one of its objectives. While belief in the importance of monitoring did not increase, participants reported a greater appreciation of the risks associated with WSBs, greater self-confidence as instrumental participants in their own relationships, and a clearer sense of personal accountability for harm-causing behaviour. Participants also recorded more assertive responses to hypothetical WSBs (stronger TREAD) at Time 2 than they had at Time 1. Perhaps belief in the importance of monitoring partner treatment did not increase significantly because this variable was initially high.

Three other findings are noteworthy. First, following the program, participants who reported exposure to WSB at Time 1 reported a considerable decrease in exposure to WSB. This effect was restricted to participants who increased in TREAD. However, because the current study was not a randomised controlled trial it is impossible to conclude whether changed TREAD caused changed WSB exposure frequency. It is possible that WSB exposure impacts causally on TREAD. The finding that WSB-exposed girls did not increase in Conflict-Retaliation TREAD like non-exposed girls did begs further research but suggests that TREAD-focused programs delivered before WSB exposure occurs may be more effective than interventions delivered at later stages. While the overall reduction in WSB exposure was pleasing to see, the program appeared to fail five girls who reported high levels of WSB at Time 1, decreased in TREAD between Time 1 and Time 2, and reported increased WSB exposure over that time. Careful research must be undertaken to ensure that programs in this area are well-timed and do not create backlash effects. Qualitative research may be required to determine when, why, and for whom, the approach trialed in this study might be counter-effective.

Second, at Time 2 participants’ perceptions regarding WSB risk and the importance of monitoring their relationships were related to their TREAD, but at Time 1 no such relationships were observed. It may be that the assertiveness-skills training in the program tended to be most effective (i.e., resulted in greater increases in TREAD) for those girls who appreciated the seriousness of WSBs; but prior to the program, girls who viewed WSBs to be risky may have lacked skills in formulating assertive responses to WSBs. Promoting risk awareness in conjunction with skills training may be required to increase TREAD, but promoting risk awareness alone may have little effect. Partner abuse prevention programs
probably ought to include situation-focused skills training as a core element. At present, while skills training is seen as ideal by program developers and practitioners, it is rare in practice (Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009; Whitaker et al., 2006).

Third, the finding that increased self-confidence was associated with decreased victim-blaming should help to allay concerns that encouraging girls to see themselves as potentially powerful co-directors of their relationships will promote victim-blaming attitudes. Girls previously exposed to WSB who showed the greatest increase in self-confidence tended to show the greatest decrease in victim blaming. The emphasis in the program on personal accountability only for one’s own responses, and never for a partner’s responses, may have buffered against a victim-blaming discourse. One partner can influence the course of a relationship, but is never responsible for the other partner’s behaviour.

While the results of this study appear to be positive, a number of methodological limitations are inherent in program evaluations where participation is elective. A major limitation is the possibility of selective withdrawal from the study. Participants for whom a program is experienced as ineffective or counter-effective might withdraw and not submit post-program data, such that observed positive within-subject changes might be inflated or spurious. A further limitation is that, in the absence of a randomised control group, it is impossible to rule-out the possibility that observed changes were due to natural maturation, experiential learning unrelated to the program, or the effects of testing. Yet another limitation is that, when enrolment in a program trial is elective, conclusions regarding its effectiveness are of limited generalisability. That is, individuals for whom the program’s objectives are most relevant may not volunteer to participate in the trial; therefore, the program’s effectiveness with those most in need cannot be ascertained.

These methodological issues can only be resolved by evaluating the program as part of students’ regular programs (e.g., as part of their compulsory Health Education curriculum). If all students were required to attend program sessions (like other classes) and to complete pre- and post-program tests within class-time, firmer conclusions regarding the program’s effectiveness would be possible. Problems relating to sample size, sampling bias, and selective attrition would be minimised. Further, if half of the classes or groups in a program trial were randomly designated as waitlist control groups, much stronger conclusions would be possible because potential confounds would be controlled for.

Indeed, to measure the fullest potential of the approach trialed in this pilot study, it must be tried and evaluated in universal delivery formats. Selective delivery of a partner abuse prevention program to those who most need it may prove more effective than universal delivery (see Vezina & Hebert, 2007; Wolfe, Crooks, Chiodo, & Jaffe, 2009). It is certainly
unlikely that the high level of positive engagement achieved in the special ‘girls group’ format piloted in this study would be achieved in a regular classroom. However, selective delivery typically depends on voluntary participation. It may not be realistic to assume that girls, or boys, who most need assertiveness skills-training will volunteer themselves to receiving such help (see Chapter 5). Universal prevention programming is defensible given that the risk of abusive dynamics is present in all relationships (Harway et al., 2001). Moreover, universal delivery is less potentially stigmatizing than targeting higher-risk individuals. Our current government’s support for universal ‘Respectful Relationships’ education (e.g., Commonwealth of Australia, 2010; Victorian Government, 2009) is appropriate. Ideally, this will be accompanied by a commensurate commitment to evaluation. For now, questions regarding the cost-effectiveness of universal versus selective program delivery remain unanswered (O’Leary, Woodin, & Fritz, 2006).

While investment in partner abuse prevention in schools is worthwhile, given the multitude of worthy topics vying for time in school timetables, time-efficient programs are important. Considering the brevity of the program, the results of this pilot study are hopeful, assuming that the changes observed were in fact due to the program. However, in follow-up focus groups some girls expressed the view that spending more time practising assertive responses to WSBs would have made the program more effective. In future evaluations, more time should be spent (more than one hour) rehearsing and observing assertive responses to WSBs. Future evaluations should also assess the impact of staggering the program over a number of weeks (i.e., the typical format of a class-room program). Ways to revisit and build upon slippery-slope themes and assertiveness skills across year levels are also worth exploring and evaluating. For example, Year 5 and 6 students could learn to identify slippery-slope warning signs and practise assertive (versus accepting and aggressive) responses in non-romantic relationship scenarios; in subsequent years, students could evaluate and practice techniques for reducing risk in romantic relationships.

The promising results of this pilot study probably stem from the close alignment of the program’s content and activities with its stated objectives. In particular, focusing on the benefits of assertiveness and providing opportunities to prepare and practise assertive responses likely facilitated the observed increases in assertive intentions. However, partner abuse prevention is a young field of study and the results of this pilot study are very preliminary. Controlled evaluations of alternative educational approaches are needed, like have occurred in other areas of Health Education (e.g., Tobler, 2000). Given the promising results of the skills-based empowerment approach trialled in this study, larger scale waitlist-controlled studies with representative single- and mixed-gender groups are warranted. Such
evaluations could occur as part of girls-only or boys-only programs already running in schools or mixed-gender Health Education courses.

In the current study, concern regarding possible reactions to completing the questionnaires was high. It was believed that seeking girls’ thoughts and experiences regarding WSBs might distress girls who had witnessed or experienced partner abuse. However, no girl became upset. Instead of showing distress, some girls approached Student Wellbeing staff to discuss their observations and experiences (a few girls had witnessed and experienced a great deal of WSB). In hindsight, the risk of distress was probably overestimated. Student Wellbeing staff in the host-schools raised the point that treating partner abuse as ‘too sensitive’ fails to address ignorance and can exacerbate secrecy. In fact, tests on this topic can be introduced and debriefed appropriately, and schools are able to accommodate and offer support to a student in the unlikely event that they show signs of distress before, during, or after testing. Ultimately, if partner abuse prevention is seen as a worthy goal, research to ensure and enhance the effectiveness of partner abuse prevention programs must be viewed as equally worthy.

Providing young people with opportunities to plan and rehearse assertive ways to respond to WSBs may render their future relationships safer for themselves, their partners, and their children. The girls who participated in the current trial responded amenably to the program’s gender-inclusive messages. A similar approach with boys may prove similarly well received. The current pilot study is encouraging, but more rigorous evaluation is required with representative samples. Program evaluation in this area is imperative, not only for determining whether programs are effective but for setting benchmarks for improvement and for uncovering clues for how to improve. Research to maximise the effectiveness of partner abuse prevention programs is worth investing in. The psychological and intergenerational costs of abusive relationships are too high. If some harmful relationship outcomes can be prevented by educational programming, they really should be.

The next chapter mounts a case for including partner abuse prevention education as a compulsory element within young people’s secondary schooling curricula, and proposes a possible program structure for delivering such education with mixed-gender groups.
Paper Seven:
A Proposal for Empowerment-Oriented Partner Abuse Prevention Education in Mixed-Gender Classrooms

Abstract

The relationship education program introduced in this paper, ‘Navigating Relating’, grew from the program piloted with adolescent girls. The program has been revised for universal delivery with regular mixed-gender classes at Year 8 to 10. Based on the ‘dyadic slippery-slope’ model of relationship abuse, the program aims to minimise social, emotional, and physical harms by equipping boys and girls with the skills to assertively resist slippery-slope dynamics from the earliest stages of their romantic relationships. Deliberately gender-inclusive, the program is relevant to the needs of boys and girls regardless of their level of relationship experience. This paper outlines the program’s rationale, session content, and future development possibilities.

Introduction

The ‘Navigating Relating’ program introduced in this chapter adopts a skills-based empowerment approach to minimising harmful relationship outcomes. Specifically, the program aims to reduce the risk of abusive dynamics forming in adolescents’ current and/or future couple relationships by promoting personal responsibility and positive self-agency. Few programs in this area are based on clearly articulated, empirically supported theory (Murray & Graybeal, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006), and programs notable for their strong theoretical framework and promising evaluation results (see Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004) are typically very demanding in terms of the class-time, community involvement, and co-ordination effort they require. ‘Navigating Relating’ is unique in that it is both research-driven and designed to facilitate widespread and sustained implementation in schools. This chapter summarises the theoretical and empirical foundations upon which ‘Navigating Relating’ was developed, outlines its key features and components, and heralds plans for the program’s future development.

The Problem of Abuse in Relationships

Harm-causing behaviour within romantic/intimate relationships is typically referred to as partner or relationship abuse, suggesting an unshifting power differential between the ‘perpetrator’ and the ‘victim’. This connotation, while accurate in some cases, can be misleading. In developed western nations (see Archer, 2006), abusive relationships tend to evolve dynamically with the target of the abuse shifting between partners (Dutton & Nichols,
In addition, harm-causing behaviour in relationships is not always enacted with malicious intent. For example, an emotionally needy partner can cause social harm without deliberately trying to cause harm. While abuse resulting in serious harm is easy to identify, identifying the precise point at which a relationship becomes “abusive” is often difficult.

Despite these problems, the terms “abuse” and “abusive” are used in this paper to refer to behaviours by one or both partners that have the potential to cause harm. Physical abuse (or violence) is defined as aggression by a partner that could result in physical pain, injury, or fear. A number of physical and psychological problems are associated with young men’s and women’s experience of physical partner abuse (Fletcher, 2009). On the other hand, psychological partner abuse is an equally worthy target for prevention, often affecting physical and mental health in males and females more profoundly than physical abuse (e.g., Coker et al., 2002). Psychological abuse is defined as behaviour between partners likely to result in social or emotional harm. Social harm, in this context, is a negated sense of connectedness with others outside of the relationship or a restricted sense of social autonomy. Emotional harm is defined as a compromised sense of self-esteem or self-confidence.

Abusive relationships are so common in Australia that it is surprising that the issue has not attracted more concerted attention in schools as a health education topic. A nation-wide study conducted by the Crime Research Centre (2001) is the most comprehensive prevalence study on this topic published in Australia to date. This study found that almost one-in-three young Australians have witnessed violence between their parents/step-parents, and one-in-ten young Australians have been exposed to such violence on three or more occasions. More young Australians reported witnessing violence by both parents (14%) than by only the male partner (9%) or by only the female partner (8%). Over half of young Australians reported observing psychological abuse between their parents/step-parents, with over 25% reporting being exposed to such abuse on three or more occasions.

Relationship abuse is not confined to adult couples. In most samples, 30-40% of young people with relationship experience report being directly affected by abuse in one or more of their relationships (e.g., Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009; O'Leary, Smith Slep, Avery-Leaf, & Cascardi, 2008). The Australian study cited above found that over half of all boys and girls aged 12-14 years have had relationship experience, and over 20% of these adolescents reported that they had experienced violence by a partner. Of the 80% of 18 year olds who reported relationship experience, over 40% reported experiencing partner violence. About half of relationship-experienced boys and girls reported being psychologically abused by a partner: 12% reported being repeatedly yelled at, and 9-13% reported being repeatedly
put-down or humiliated. Preventative education efforts with young people are clearly warranted.

Studies on this topic, including the Australian study just mentioned, tend to find that the prevalence of perpetration and victimisation in relationships is similar for young men and young women (e.g., Harned, 2001; Kaura & Allen, 2004; O’Leary & Smith Slep, 2003; Straus, 2008; Temple et al., 2005; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). Indeed, studies focusing on partner violence tend to find that more girls are aggressive in their relationships than are boys (e.g., Chapple, 2003; Hird, 2000; McCloskey & Lichter, 2003; O’Leary & Smith Slep, 2003; Ozer, Tschann, Pasch, & Flores, 2004; Windle & Mrug, 2009). However, while some males are severely victimised by female partners (Fontes, 2007; Frieze, 2005), girls are more likely than boys to report being hurt or frightened by their partner’s aggression (55% versus 22%; Crime Research Centre, 2001).

**How Relationships Become Abusive**

Given that abusive patterns can become established early in young people’s relationships and can carry through into their later relationships (Feiring & Furman, 2000; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999), preventing the development of unhealthy dynamics in adolescent relationships is an imperative challenge for health educators. Adolescence is a “sensitive period” for learning about relationships and, therefore, provides an important window of opportunity for prevention education (Fraley, Brumbaugh, & Marks, 2005). Effective relationship education for young people is not just important for optimising young people’s present and future wellbeing, but also for protecting the wellbeing of children they go on to raise (Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007; O’Leary & Jouriles, 1993; Osofski, 1999).

While statistics are plentiful on the prevalence of abusive acts in adolescent relationships, only recently has research attention begun to shift towards the processes that lead to chronic partner abuse (e.g., Bell & Nagle, 2008; Winstok, 2007). Of importance is what these processes mean for how health educators can best help young people to avoid harmful relationship outcomes.

A range of factors render individuals more at-risk than others of perpetrating or experiencing chronic partner abuse (e.g., Kane, Staiger, & Ricciardelli, 2000; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Vezina & Hebert, 2007); however, no one factor is a reliable predictor. Indeed, it is misguided to believe that partner abuse is a phenomenon predicted by variables relating only to victims or perpetrators. The extent of harm caused depends on the characteristics of the dyad (i.e., both partners). For example, in cases of social abuse, at least one partner needs to behave in a manipulative manner, but not all partners are equally likely to succumb to a partner’s control tactics (e.g., Few & Rosen, 2006). In cases of physical
abuse, bi-directional aggression is associated with more frequent and severe violence than uni-directional aggression (Crime Research Centre, 2001; Gray & Foshee, 1997; Temple et al., 2005; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). Far from suggesting that both partners are always equally “to blame” (see Hamel, 2007), chronic partner abuse of any type is the result of both partners’ tendencies and vulnerabilities.

The dyadic slippery-slope model captures this complexity, highlighting the role of each partner’s actions (referred to in this thesis as warning-sign behaviours or WSBs) but also each partner’s reactions in contributing to abusive dynamics. According to this model, relationship dynamics that lead to harm—characterised by secrecy, overdependence, hostility, and/or power imbalance—develop when one or more warning-sign behaviours by either or both partners are accommodated or responded to aggressively by the other partner. Warning-sign behaviours include dominance-seeking, possessive, denigrating, conflict-controlling, and retaliatory behaviours; and are engaged in by both young men and young women (e.g., Crime Research Centre, 2001; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Harned, 2001; Miller & White, 2003; see also Chapter 2) in heterosexual and same-sex relationships (e.g., Bunker Rohrbaugh, 2006).

WSBs are often not viewed by young people as forms of abuse per se (Crime Research Centre, 2001; see also Chapter 2). However, they can exacerbate a partner’s existing vulnerabilities such that assertive responses to future warning-sign behaviours become less likely over time. Assertive responses, here, are defined as clear, non-aggressive expressions of one’s needs, rights, or wishes; that is, responses that are neither accommodative nor aggressive. Thus, WSBs can increase in intensity or frequency as the recipient partner’s responses become more accommodative or aggressive. As abusive dynamics develop, and behaviours evolve which are clearly abusive, assertive responses may become ineffective even if they are tried. To complicate matters further, WSBs in unhealthy relationships are often initiated by both partners at different times, not just by one partner. Clearly, ‘keeping a grip’ on the relationship slippery slope is much easier for partners at the top of the slope than once the downward slide has begun.

The Need for Skills-Based Empowerment

Disturbingly, significant minorities of young women view domineering, possessive, denigrating, conflict-controlling, and retaliatory behaviours by a partner to be acceptable (Chapter 2). Even when such behaviours are perceived to be problematic, many girls report a propensity to respond accommodatingly or aggressively (Murphy & Smith, 2010a; see also Chapter 5). Such interactions can prove pivotal in setting the trajectory of girls’ relationship careers and future wellbeing. Despite this, most girls embark on their couple-relationship
careers with little formal preparation in terms of strategies for steering clear of the metaphorical slippery-slope; that is, for ‘keeping a grip’ should they encounter warning-sign behaviours by a partner.

The instrumentality of girls’ responses in setting the course of their relationship pathways is typically overlooked or downplayed in existing partner abuse prevention programs, especially those guided by structural feminist theories of partner abuse (for examples, see Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009). Rather than building relationship skills, these programs attempt to change gender-related attitudes and norms (see Chapter 1). Gender-focused programs teach girls that any abuse they suffer is unacceptable and that they should seek help if they are being abused. While this constitutes sound and important advice, girls might be better served by education programs which also equip them with the insights and skills required to consciously resist the partner abuse slippery-slope when warning-sign behaviours first begin to occur. Without opportunities to learn and practice assertive scripts for responding to warning-sign behaviours, it is difficult to see how general ‘expect respect’ messages might empower girls to have greater control over the course of their relationships. That is, such messages are unlikely to help girls to become more conscious participants in their own relationships.

Likewise, relationship abuse prevention programs which presume males are more powerful and abusive in relationships than females (see Pease, 2008) are unlikely to be perceived by boys as empowering. Messages delivered in gender-focused programs may be dismissed by some boys as unrealistic and unfair. This may explain why boys have been found to respond disappointingly to overtly gender-focused programs (e.g., Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992; Jones, 1998; Weisz & Black, 2009). Such messages may unwittingly reinforce problematic gender-norms or spur undesirable backlashes (increased aggressiveness) among some young women. Because WSBs are displayed by both boys and girls, young people may respond more positively to relationship education programs which, instead of focussing on gender-stereotypes, help them to acquire skills for ‘keeping a grip’ when faced with potential slippery-slope situations, irrespective of their gender.

**A Girls-Only Pilot Study**

The ‘Navigating Relating’ program is based on the content of the special girls-group ‘Safe at Heart’ program described in Paper Three. This program consisted of five modules delivered over one school day: Choosing, Noticing, Responding, Ending, and Bouncing Back. The Noticing and Responding modules were longest, each running for approximately 90 minutes. Participants in the intervention group demonstrated significant increases in assertive tendency from just prior to the program to three months after its completion (see Paper 6). Prior to the
program, participants’ TREAD scores were negatively associated with their recent exposure to WSB (see Paper 4). Pleasingly, though, pre- to post-program increases in TREAD were associated with decreases in recent exposure to WSB (see Paper 6).

Participants in the ‘Safe at Heart’ pilot responded amenably to the program’s empowerment-oriented approach, and reported finding their participation in the program to be worthwhile and enjoyable. It is hoped a similar approach with girls and boys in universal classroom settings, in the form of the ‘Navigating Relating’ program, might prove similarly well received.

**The ‘Navigating Relating’ Program**

Boosted by the heartening results of the girls-only pilot study, ‘Navigating Relating’ takes a similar skills-based empowerment approach. It is designed for universal delivery as part of Year 8 to 10 students’ compulsory health education program, but requires evaluation in this context to determine its efficacy as a universal/non-elective program.

Like the ‘Safe at Heart’ pilot program, ‘Navigating Relating’ incorporates characteristics associated with effective health education programming in other areas (Tobler, 2000), including student-centred and interactive teaching techniques. However, the activities in this program are more suited to classroom teaching than are the activities involved in the ‘Safe at Heart’ program. In ‘Navigating Relating’, students complete a few individual tasks, but primarily participate in guided small-group activities. A number of worksheets are included because many teachers and students appreciate the structure they provide; however, these serve mainly as prompts for discussion and hands-on activity, and require minimal reading and writing.

Programs need to be actually implemented, and done so faithfully, in order to achieve their demonstrated potential (Tobler, 2000). The ‘Navigating Relating’ program has been developed with an acute awareness of the qualities likely to promote widespread and sustained uptake of the program in Australian schools: teacher-friendliness in terms of planning and preparation requirements; budget-friendliness in terms of teacher leave/training requirements; student-friendliness in terms of the accessibility of the program’s ideas and activities; and curriculum-friendliness in terms of time-effectiveness. While investment in, and evaluation of, preventative relationship education in schools is well warranted, efficiency in implementation is important given the multitude of competing and equally worthy curricular agendas vying for attention in schools.

The following outlines the content covered in each 50- to 70-minute session of the ‘Navigating Relating’ program. Further information, including facilitator instructions and
details regarding possible future training opportunities, is available by contacting the author at safe-relationships@rmit.edu.au.

**Session 1: Good Relationships**

In this session, students describe how partners might feel, think and act in a ‘good relationship’. They are introduced to three important needs for happiness: feeling **confident**, having **choice**, and feeling **connected** to others. Students recognise and explain signs by which an outsider might be able to tell that both partners in a relationship have their needs for confidence, choice, and connectedness met.

**Session 2: Bad Relationships**

In this session, students are introduced to four types of harm that can occur when a partner’s needs for happiness are not met in a relationship: Physical, Emotional, Social, And Threatened (P.E.S.T.) harms. Students identify types of harm in ‘bad relationship’ scenarios. Students briefly discuss which of the three types of harm (if any) is worst, and what factors might affect how serious each type of harm is. They then sort through a range of given reasons why a relationship might turn ‘bad’, assigning each reason to one or more of the following categories: a bad reason for starting the relationship, a personality thing, bad past experiences, a bad attitude, and/or outside stressors. Finally, students consider whether any of these reasons excuse bad behaviour or render the harms less serious: Do any of these reasons make a good *excuse* for causing harm? Does having a reason for causing harm make it less harmful?

**Session 3: Relationship Slippery Slopes**

Students are introduced to the notion of relationship ‘slippery-slopes’; that is, the idea that relationships do not normally start out harmful but can gradually become harmful, starting with small ‘warning-sign behaviours’ (these become the focus of Session 4). The focus in this session is on the four ways that relationships can slide downhill and lead to harmful outcomes: Secrecy, Overdependence, Anger, and Power Imbalance (S.O.A.P.). Students consider how each of these four slippery-slope dynamics can lead to harm (physical, emotional, social, or threatened), and why each is hard to reverse once it starts.

**Session 4: Slippery Slope Warning Signs**

In this session, students are introduced to five types of warning-sign behaviour—Bossiness, Ownership, Meanness, Unfair Arguing, and Revenge behaviours—including specific examples. Students (a) classify each WSB into one of the five categories, (b) identify what slippery-slope dynamic(s) each WSB could contribute to, and (c) identify what types of harm could result in each case if the slippery-slope is not stopped early enough.
Session 5: Keeping a Grip

To help students make more conscious choices about how they respond to early warning-situation, it is necessary (a) to help them understand the potential effects of their responses on the long-term course of their relationships and (b) to provide opportunities to plan and rehearse well-considered ways of responding. This session aims to do both, providing time for students (a) to consider the potential consequences of accepting versus aggressing versus asserting themselves in warning-sign situations and (b) to actively experiment with different ways of being assertive in response to a range of realistic warning-sign behaviours.

Elective Adjunct: Good Relationships Advocate & Support Person (GRASP) Training

Based on the content of the Ending and Bouncing-Back modules of the ‘Safe at Heart’ pilot program, this optional two-hour adjunct would be delivered to smaller groups of interested students as a special out-of-class training program. Following this training, students would receive a certificate acknowledging their commitment to being a Good Relationships Advocate & Support Person. The GRASP training covers ways to encourage healthy, respectful relationships in one’s peer group; ways to constructively challenge unhealthy beliefs and behaviours; and ways to support a friend in a slippery-slope relationship. Topics include how to help a friend safely end an unsafe relationship, and how to help a friend bounce-back after experiencing a harmful relationship. It is envisaged that specially trained welfare and/or teaching staff will deliver this module to interested groups of students, including higher-risk students.

Future Planning

At the time of writing, the ‘Navigating Relating’ program is being piloted and is still in development. Suggestions by experienced educators and student wellbeing staff for maximising the effectiveness of the program are welcome. In the future, pending funding availability and ethics approvals, schools will be invited to participate in a wide-scale trial of the program. In order to determine what difference the program makes beyond the effects of normal adolescent maturation and life experience, schools will be asked to run the program with approximately half of the students/classes at one year level (Year 8 to Year 10), and then deliver the program to the remaining students at least six months later. All students will be asked to complete an anonymous online survey (or a paper-and-pencil version, if preferred) before and then, again, six months after the first cohort of students participate in the program (before the second cohort begins the program). Process-focused feedback will also be sought from teachers involved in the trial. A detailed plain language statement will be made available to schools interested in participating in the ‘Navigating Relating’ trial, outlining the risks,
requirements, and benefits of contributing to the program’s evaluation. Interested schools are encouraged to contact the author at safe-relationships@rmit.edu.au to register their interest.

The next and final paper draws together the ideas and findings presented in this thesis by arguing for the adoption of the dyadic slippery-slope model as a framework for developing and evaluating programs aimed at increasing romantic relationship assertiveness in young people.
Paper Eight:
A Holistic Approach to Developing and Evaluating Partner Abuse Prevention Education Programs

Abstract
Evidence linking emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural factors to partner abuse suggests that relationship education programs targeting these risk factors in youth might minimise harmful outcomes. In this paper it is argued that such programs are important but need to be evaluated for their effect on both the hypothesised risk factors and the critical interactional tendencies of individuals that can feed high-risk relationship dynamics. The dyadic slippery-slope model is proposed as a theoretical framework to guide educators and researchers in developing and evaluating partner abuse prevention education (PAPE) programs for specific groups of young people. The approach described takes a broader view of the aims of PAPE than approaches aimed at reducing particular physical acts. This approach, if adopted, has the potential to produce more constructive findings for advancing PAPE than traditional risk factor and evaluation research is capable of.

Introduction
Abusive intimate relationships are common (Crime Research Centre, 2001; Harway et al., 2001) and damaging (Coker et al., 2002; Fletcher, 2010; McFarlane, Groff, O'Brien, & Watson, 2003). Programs for partner-abusive adults have proliferated since the 1980s, but there is little evidence to support their efficacy (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004). Consequently, attention has turned to the prevention of partner abuse before harm is done (e.g., Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; VicHealth, 2007). Many youth-targeted partner abuse prevention education (PAPE) programs are now conducted in schools, mostly by women’s services practitioners (for examples, see Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009). Despite an abundance of research on risk factors for partner abuse, however, prevention education efforts with young people remain largely disconnected from this literature.

The tendency of program-provider agencies to view partner abuse as a form of ‘violence against women’ with the same root causes as ‘sexual assault’ (e.g., Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009) might partially explain why risk factors specific to partner abuse are rarely targeted. It is understandable that sexual assault is often bundled together with partner abuse (e.g., Commonwealth of Australia, 2011) because both issues can impact severely on women’s safety and wellbeing (see also Murphy & Smith, 2010a). However,
these issues are characterised by largely distinct contexts and dynamics (e.g., ABS, 1996; Forke, Myers, Catallozzi, & Schwarz, 2008). Alternatively, the weak link between partner abuse research and partner abuse prevention education might owe to practitioner perceptions that published research on partner abuse is difficult to access and understand (Mouradian, Mechanic, & Williams, 2001). Whatever the reason, critical reviews of PAPE have called for programs that are based on clearly articulated theory and that are rigorously evaluated (Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Hickman, Jaycoff, & Aranoff, 2004; Murray & Graybeal, 2007; Weisz & Black, 2009; Whitaker et al., 2006). However, given the complexity of the partner abuse research literature, as well as inherent difficulties in applying conventional measures of ‘partner abuse’ with adolescents, responding to this call is no small task.

It is argued in this chapter that risk factor research in the form of program development and evaluation is crucial to advancing PAPE. Further, general themes arising from the partner abuse risk factor literature are highlighted, focussing on factors likely malleable to youth-targeted psycho-education. These themes form the basis of the theoretical model proposed later in the chapter, intended to guide future program development and evaluation efforts. The approach described (a) conceptualises partner abuse as a dyadic process resulting in harm, rather than as de-contextualised acts perpetrated by one partner, (b) might facilitate deeper understanding of partner abuse aetiology in specific population groups, and (c) might stimulate preventative innovations in this area that prove to be worthwhile.

Defining Partner Abuse

Partner abuse can be defined broadly as aggressive interactions between non-cohabitating or cohabitating partners or ex-partners, including psychologically and physically harmful behaviours (e.g., Malley-Morrison, Hamel, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010). Psychological partner abuse can impact profoundly on physical and mental health in male and female partners (Coker et al., 2002; O’Leary, 1999) and their children (Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007; O’Leary & Jouriles, 1993). Psychological abuse includes behaviour likely to cause social or emotional harm (Murphy & Smith, 2010a). Social harm, in this context, is a negated sense of connectedness with others or a restricted sense of social autonomy. Emotional harm is a compromised sense of self-worth or self-confidence. On the other hand, physical abuse (or violence) is generally defined as physical aggression that could result in fear, pain, or injury. When sexual coercion occurs within some couple-relationships, it is rarely an isolated form of partner abuse (Catallozzi, Simon, Davidson, Breitbart, & Rickert, 2011; Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004).

From a harm-minimisation perspective, defining partner abuse in terms of its possible outcomes, rather than the intended or actual impacts, is appropriate. An important aim of
PAPE is to reduce the extent to which individuals engage in interactions with their current/future partners that could result in harm. Therefore, for prevention purposes, it makes sense to define partner abuse as including potentially harmful interactions that occur between partners, whether the potential harm is emotional, social, or physical, caused to one or both partners, or caused maliciously or not.

**Why Partner Abuse Prevention Education with Adolescents?**

Abusive behaviours are prevalent in young people’s intimate relationships (Fletcher, 2010; Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009; O’Leary, Smith Slep, Avery-Leaf, & Cascardi, 2008) and established patterns can carry through into their later relationships (O’Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). Because important risk factors for partner abuse accrue before adolescence, proactive interventions targeting earlier stages of development are needed. However, given that adolescence is a ‘sensitive period’ for learning about relationships (e.g., Fraley, Brumbaugh, & Marks, 2005), it provides an important window of opportunity for preventative education. While other prevention strategies are also worthwhile, youth-targeted PAPE is the focus of this chapter/thesis.

**Partner Abuse Risk Factors**

The body of risk factor research conducted with young people, alone, is voluminous (e.g., Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Medeiros & Straus, 2007; Vezina & Hebert, 2007). Among the multitude of factors identified, weak effect sizes and contradictory conclusions are commonplace, such that it is reasonable to question whether the mechanisms underlying partner abuse, at any life stage, will ever be fully explicated. Partner abuse might be best understood as a mere umbrella term for what are, in fact, different types of harmful dynamics that develop in different types of relationships for different types of reasons (Capaldi & Kim, 2007; Hamel & Nichols, 2007; Rosen et al., 2005).

Given the complexity of partner abuse, it is not surprising that countless risk factors have been identified, effect sizes are often small, and mixed findings occur. In risk factor studies, partner abuse is sometimes, but not always, segmented into subtypes, and these subtypes are variously operationalised. All types of abuse exist on a continuum of severity and frequency, but not all studies scale abusiveness. Some studies measure partner abuse ever perpetrated or experienced, while others measure abuse that has occurred in one’s most recent relationship. What constitutes a ‘relationship’ is often unstated. Moreover, risk factor variables themselves are not always consistently defined. In any case, different risk factors likely apply depending on the typology of the abuser (Babcock, Miller, & Siard, 2003; Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004), the population from which the abusers or victims are drawn (Cyr, McDuff & Wright, 2006; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; Tyler, Melander, & Noel, 2009), and the type
of abusive relationship being examined (e.g., Temple, Weston, & Marshall, 2005). To complicate matters further, risk factors have been identified at personal, contextual, family, peer-group, community, and societal levels (e.g., Jain, Buka, Subramanian, & Molnar, 2010) and, because partner abuse is a dyadic phenomenon, risk factors for both partners need to be considered.

When considering partner abuse risk factors, three further considerations should be borne in mind. First, vulnerability to being abusive or being abused arises due to relatively unstable factors (e.g., Whitaker, Le Phyllis, & Niolon, 2010; White, Merril, & Koss, 2001) in addition to static factors. Second, the risk of abuse exists in all relationships, even when the probability based on known risk factors is relatively low (Harway et al., 2001). Finally, risk factors can be contributors to, consequences of, or simply co-occurring outcomes with partner abuse (see Harris, Hilton, & Rice, 2011); few studies confirm causal direction.

**Developmental & Socio-Environmental Risk Factors**

This section focuses on risk factors not directly amenable to PAPE. Witnessing violence in the home is a relatively reliable predictor of partner violence in both genders (Moretti, Penney, Obsuth, & Odgers, 2007). Growing up in a home where both carers are violent is a particularly strong predictor (Crime Research Centre, 2001). Findings that socio-economic disadvantage predicts higher rates of witnessing violence in the home, higher rates of perpetration and victimisation, and more pro-violence attitudes, point to the possible role of poverty-related disadvantage in the aetiology of many cases of partner violence.

Other relatively unamenable risk factors include genetic temperament (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994); childhood psychopathology (Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2004); poor academic achievement (Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998); exposure to community violence (Schwartz, O’Leary, & Kendziora, 1997); having a history of interpersonal aggression (Connoly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000); early sexual debut (Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009); and alcohol and drug use (Gover, 2004). Subsuming many of these risk factors, childhood neglect and abuse substantially increase the risk of perpetration and victimisation in males and females (Cyr, McDuff & Wright, 2006; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Moffitt, Krueger, Caspi, & Fagan, 2000; Wolfe, Scott, Wekerle, & Pittman, 2001).

**Personal Vulnerability Risk Factors**

The following risk factors are deemed to be potentially amenable to PAPE.

**Emotional and relational factors.** Poor emotional health is associated with perpetration and victimisation in males and females (Coker et al., 2000; Lehrer, Buka, Gortmaker, & Shrier, 2006; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Vezina & Hebert, 2007), as is poor stress management (Gormley & Lopez, 2010). In terms of relational functioning, engaging in
avoidant attachment behaviours (Gormley & Lopez, 2010) or becoming over-dependent on one’s partner (Bookwala & Zdaniuk, 1998; Goldenson, Geffner, & Foster, & Clipson, 2007; Kane, Staiger, & Ricciardelli, 2000; Orcutt, Garcia, & Pickett, 2005) are risk factors for perpetration. Holding high-levels of control in the relationship (Graham-Kevan, 2007; Straus, 2008) or perceiving low levels of control in relationship conflicts (Kaura & Allen, 2004; Weston, Marshall, & Coker, 2007) are also associated with perpetration. The risk of victimisation is higher when there is over-dependence on the abusive partner (Bornstein, 2006) or perceived powerlessness in the relationship (Filson, Ulloa, Runfola, & Hokoda, 2010).

Hostile emotional states are particularly well established risk factors. Anger is a frequently reported reasons for aggressing against a partner (Foo & Margolin, 1995; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Harper, Austin, Cercone, & Arias, 2005; Hettrich & O’Leary, 2007). Constructs such as ‘angry self-concept’ (Giordano et al, 1999) and ‘negative emotionality’ (Moffit, Robins, & Caspi, 2001) are associated with perpetration in both genders. These constructs refer to emotional volatility and a propensity to suspicion and revenge-seeking.

**Attitudes and beliefs.** Holding beliefs that accept or justify the use of violence (O'Keefe, 1997) is a risk factor for partner violence. Having friends in violent relationships may feed or support such beliefs (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004). However, being aggressive oneself, or accommodating aggression by a partner, may contribute to a perception that partner violence is justifiable or forgivable. That is, one’s behaviour might influence one’s attitudes just as one’s attitudes might influence one’s behaviour (Bem, 1972).

There is evidence suggesting that attitudes might stem from observational or behavioural learning and then become self-perpetuating. For adolescents exposed to family violence, positive outcome expectations have been found to mediate the link with perpetrating partner violence (Foshee, Bauman, & Linder, 1999). Males who use violence against their partner are more likely to expect positive consequences than non-violent males (Riggs & Caulfield, 1997). Questions regarding causal directions between experiences, behaviours, and attitudes in this area remain a challenge for future research; however, it is unlikely that the associations always begin with attitudes. Adverse relational experiences may need to be prevented or curbed in order to prevent or turn-around pro-violence attitudes in the highest risk groups (Crime Research Centre, 2001).

In developed nations, attitude-behaviour associations in this area tend to be weak (e.g., Kane, Staiger, & Ricciardelli, 2000). Growing up in a violent home, for instance, is a stronger predictor of violent relationship behaviour than subscribing to traditional gender stereotypes.
(Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, Ryan, 1992) or holding pro-violence attitudes (Crime Research Centre, 2001). It remains unclear whether changes in attitudes alone result in corresponding changes in relationship behaviour (Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2002; Hickman, Jaycox, & Aranoff, 2004; Whitaker et al., 2006). Despite this, most PAPE programs in schools are limited to awareness-raising and attitudinal-change objectives (Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009).

**Behavioural repertoire and conditioning.** Behavioural repertoire refers to the socially adaptive skills which one can perform to attain a desired effect (Bandura, 1973). Behavioural repertoire deficits, such as a lack of conflict resolution and emotional regulation skills, can increase the risk of partner abuse (Bell & Naugle, 2008). Bird, Stith, and Schladale (1991) found that a coercive negotiation style and confrontational coping predicted which adolescent relationships would go on to become violent. Foshee, Bauman, and Linder (1999) found that the association between exposure to family violence and perpetrating partner violence was mediated by an aggressive conflict response style.

Behavioural conditioning also plays an important role in partner abuse aetiology. With hindsight, victims of chronic abuse believe that their responses to their partners’ early controlling behaviours may have unwittingly reinforced that behaviour (e.g., Fraser, 2008). Responses which might reinforce controlling behaviour include submitting to unreasonable or unfair demands or providing assurances to allay a partner’s insecurity. Such responses can strengthen the abusive partner’s feelings of dominance, sense of possession, etcetera. In addition, victims’ accommodative behaviours can be negatively reinforced when the unwanted behaviour seems to stop (temporarily). Indeed, negatively reinforcing consequences can strengthen both perpetration and victimisation behaviours. Consequences that can negatively reinforce aggressive and accommodative behaviours include avoiding an unwanted argument and preventing the escalation of a partner’s aggression.

**Chronic Partner Abuse Aetiology**

**Partner Abuse is Dyadic**

It is misguided to believe that partner abuse is predicted by variables relating to only victims or perpetrators. Dyadic factors account for larger proportions of partner abuse variance than factors applicable to just one partner (e.g., Doumas, Pearson, Elgin, & McKinley, 2008). It is increasingly understood that inter-partner dynamics play a critical role in the aetiology of partner abuse (Bell & Nagle, 2008; Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005; Winstok, 2007). As mentioned above, accommodating (i.e., accepting or adapting to) a partner’s controlling or hurtful behaviour can unintentionally reinforce such behaviour. On
the other hand, aggressing against a partner is one of the strongest predictors of victimisation (e.g., Harned, 2002; O’Leary and Smith-Slep, 2003).

In fact, in developed nations (see Archer, 2006), partner abuse tends to be bi-directional (Harned, 2001; Kaura & Allen, 2004; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). Acknowledging and responding to bi-directional partner abuse is imperative because reciprocated aggression is associated with more frequent violence and more severe injuries than one-sided aggression (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001; Gray & Foshee, 1996; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007; Temple, Weston, & Marshall, 2005). Clearly, PAPE programs for youth need to address situational triggers, especially how to respond in ways that defend one’s need for dignity, security, autonomy, etcetera, without increasing the risk of (further) harm.

**Partner Abuse starts with Warning Sign Behaviours**

Victims of chronic partner abuse describe ‘relatively small boundary intrusions that progress to more serious forms of psychological and physical abuse’ (Few & Rosen, p. 270). Serious harm in relationships rarely transpires in the absence of these relatively minor transgressions, but these warning-signs tend to be most obvious in hindsight (O’Leary & Maiuro, 2001). Warning-sign behaviours (WSBs) include dominance-seeking, conflict-controlling, socially restrictive, and denigrating behaviours (Few & Rosen, 2005; Fraser, 2008; Short et al., 2000). Cross-sectional and longitudinal research consistently shows a relationship between emotionally hurtful and non-violent controlling behaviours and partner violence (Catallozzi, Simon, Davidson, Breitbart, & Rickert, 2011; Graham-Kevan, 2007; Hamby, 1996; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; Murphy & Smith, 2010b; O’Leary, Malone & Tyree, 1994; O’Leary & Smith-Slep, 2003). Moreover, in developed nations, the relationship between such WSBs and partner violence is not gender specific (e.g., Harned, 2001; O’Leary, 1999; O’Leary & Smith-Slep, 2003; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1990; Straus, 2008).

**The Dyadic Slippery-Slope Model**

To summarise, different abusive dynamics develop within different types of relationships for different reasons. Psychological factors that heighten the risk of victimisation or perpetration can be exacerbated by the very experience of victimisation or perpetration, such that abusive dynamics can quickly become difficult to reverse. The dyadic slippery-slope model (as described in Chapter 3) captures this complexity. Based on the evidence summarised above, it delineates possible mechanisms by which WSBs can intensify and evolve, leading to serious harm. Specifically, the model identifies the role of each partner’s actions (WSBs) and reactions (aggression or accommodation) in the development of high-risk (or slippery-slope) dynamics; that is, patterns or trends characterised by secrecy/silence,
overdependence, anger, and/or power imbalance. Importantly, this model emphasises psychological targets for preventative education (emotional, behavioural, and attitudinal factors) that might prove critical in achieving long-term harm-minimisation impacts.

The dyadic slippery-slope model posits five domains of WSB: dominance-seeking, possessiveness, denigration, conflict-control tactics, and retaliatory responses. These behaviours have the potential to contribute to slippery-slope dynamics (silence/secrecy, overdependence, anger or power imbalance) and lead to serious harm, but only when the target partner responds accommodatingly or aggressively (i.e., non-assertively). Individuals vary in their propensity to respond assertively to WSBs (Murphy & Smith, 2010b), presumably depending on the influence of the abovementioned emotional, behavioural, and/or attitudinal vulnerabilities.

Because exposure to WSBs can exacerbate existing personal vulnerabilities, assertive responses to these behaviours can become less likely as slippery-slope dynamics set in. Indeed, as secrecy, overdependence, anger, and/or power imbalance dynamics gain momentum, assertive responses may become decreasingly effective even if they do occur. After such dynamics are established, recognising that abuse is occurring rarely leads to simple termination of the relationship (see Chapter 1). Clearly, ‘keeping a grip’ on the relationship slippery-slope is much easier at the top of the slope than once the downward slide has begun.

Strengthening young people’s motivation and skills to ‘keep a grip’ when faced with early WSBs is important for boys and girls, whether they are at risk of perpetration, victimisation, or both. Partner-violent boys and girls often report aggressing in response to WSB by their partners (e.g., Crime Research Centre, 2001; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007).

The dyadic slippery-slope model is gender and sexuality inclusive. The model accommodates the myriad of ways and contexts in which partner abuse occurs—including in same-sex relationships (see Bunker Rohrbaugh, 2006)—and the full gamut of harmful outcomes that can eventuate. The model is not concerned with assigning blame for harm that does occur. Rather, it seeks to highlight opportunities for preventative psycho-education with youth, aimed at rendering the very notions of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ irrelevant.

Designing and Evaluating Prevention Education Programs

Designing Programs

Riggs and O’Leary (1996) argued that while background variables such as child abuse and exposure to parental partner-violence place a young person at risk of partner abuse, later situational triggers increase the probability that abusive dynamics will actually develop. While background variables are non-amenable to change through youth-targeted education,
situational triggers provide ‘potentially powerful leverage points for intervention’ because responses to such partner behaviours are not well practiced in adolescence (O’Leary & Smith-Slep, 2003, p. 316). In light of the dyadic slippery-slope model, young people’s responses to WSBs are critical; the way they first respond might determine whether or not ‘slippery-slope’ processes will ensue. Based on this logic, PAPE programs could aim to increase participants’ capacity and motivation to respond assertively to WSBs if and when they occur. From a harm minimisation perspective, this aim is more realistic than trying to prevent WSB from ever occurring. Focussing on ways to manage WSB-interactions is certainly a more positive and empowering approach than focusing on examples of extreme violence.

Guided by the dyadic slippery-slope model, PAPE programs might be designed to address attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural repertoire objectives, with the ultimate aim of increasing young people’s tendency to respond assertively to WSB. Reducing accommodative and aggressive responses to WSB would be the paramount aim. For example, a program might be developed for adolescents with a history of peer aggression, focussing on emotional awareness in a range of WSB situations, beliefs about the outcomes of aggression in response to each situation, and planning and rehearsing assertive ‘scripts’ for responding in each case. Hypothetically, addressing these emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural objectives would increase participants’ likelihood of responding assertively (non-aggressively) in warning-sign situations with their current/future partners; this would be the critical objective against which the program’s effectiveness would be assessed.

The pilot program described in this thesis serves as a further example. This program aimed to increase girls’ sensitivity to the risks associated with WSB, to increase their belief in their self-agency as co-drivers of their relationships, and to build WSB-specific assertiveness skills. Ultimately, though, the program aimed to increase the girls’ tendency to respond assertively to WSBs. The TREAD scale (see Paper 4) was developed to measure the success of the program against this critical objective. The results of the pilot evaluation in Paper Six suggest that by increasing girls’ tendency to respond assertively to WSBs, their future exposure to WSB might be reduced. The results also suggest that WSB-specific skills-rehearsal is important, in addition to risk awareness-raising, for increasing girls’ assertive tendency. Importantly, the pilot evaluation also found that, by emphasising personal accountability only for harms caused by one’s own behaviour, strengthened perceptions of self-agency can coincide with decreased victim-blaming.

At present, PAPE programs tend to be limited to awareness-raising presentations and are poorly evaluated (Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009). The effectiveness of these programs might benefit by addressing potentially key emotional, attitudinal, and
behavioural factors, but school timetabling limitations present an obstacle. Positive program evaluations might help to leverage more time in the curriculum. However, significant difficulties can impede the evaluation of PAPE programs; for example, a lack of relevant measures and under-developed data analysis skills (Weisz & Black, 2009). These issues might be overcome via collaborative efforts with researchers (Murray & Graybeal, 2007).

Collaboration of this kind rarely occurs in this field but is worth pursuing: (a) programs can be improved based on the results of well-designed evaluations, (b) better documented program effectiveness might lead to increased demand and funding for PAPE, and (c) the development of educator-researcher alliances might result in the publication of more evaluation studies for other program developers to learn from.

**Evaluating Programs**

An exceptional few PAPE programs have been found to reduce self-reported perpetration of partner violence in youth (Foshee et al., 2005; Wolfe et al., 2009). The success of these programs is commendable, but somewhat nebulous. Reductions in violence perpetration are reported against low mean base-rates or in terms of the percentage of students who reported perpetrating any of a list of acts in a specified timeframe. It is difficult to tell whether these programs helped participants learn skills to more safely manage warning-sign interactions. Foshee and her colleagues (2005) found that the slightly reduced rates of self-reported aggression coincided with reduced acceptance of violence norms but not with improved conflict-management skills. It is possible that changing the perceived acceptability of specific physical acts is easier than building skills for avoiding the development of slippery-slope dynamics.

At present, evaluations are limited by the measures they employ to indicate program effectiveness. Participants are asked to indicate if they have performed specific acts, but the circumstances which give meaning to these acts are typically overlooked (Barter, 2009; Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000). Arguably, skills for resisting the development of dynamics characterised by secrecy, overdependence, anger, and power imbalance are as important as knowing that it is not acceptable to hit a partner. Such dynamics can amount to very abusive relationships in which physical aggression is not (yet) present. If violence-focused measures remain the only tool for assessing the effectiveness of PAPE programs for adolescents, evaluation studies are likely to remain rare. Some education departments will not permit the use of measures that require disclosures of violence perpetration or victimisation (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aranoff, 2004). In any case, the bluntness of existing acts-based measures compromises their sensitivity to change, especially in the short term. The dyadic slippery-slope model points to an alternative approach to program evaluation.
A sensible way to ascertain what risk factors are worth targeting with a particular group is to (a) implement a program designed to address hypothesised emotional, attitudinal, and/or behavioural risk factors, (b) if possible, assess the impact of the program on those factors, and (c) measure the ultimate impact of the program on how assertively participants intend to respond should they be faced with WSB. The Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD) scale described in Paper Four is designed to assess the success of programs in terms of this final question. The findings of the preliminary TREAD validation study reported in Paper Four, in conjunction with the findings reported in Paper Five, support the validity of the TREAD construct as a worthy change-target in PAPE contexts.

If the hypothesised risk factors are effectively targeted in a PAPE program, but participants are not found to be less accommodative or less aggressive in response to WSBs, those risk factors might be considered insufficient change-targets with that particular group (gender, socio-economic status, age, cultural identity, etcetera). However, if participants demonstrate an increase in TREAD, those risk factors could be considered worthwhile targets in future programming with that group. Evaluation research structured in this way, if published, has the potential to advance our understanding of what helps different groups of young people to more safely navigate their intimate relationships.

Risk factor research in this area is often aimed at informing the development of prevention programs. However, for PAPE to advance in terms of evidence-based practice, it needs to be acknowledged that traditional risk factor research may have passed the point of diminishing returns. Program developers and empirical researchers need to join arms. Program development and evaluation projects, guided by a holistic framework such as the dyadic slippery-slope model, are needed if we are to better understand the psycho-educational needs of the young people our programs are intended to help.

**Conclusion**

Youth-targeted psycho-education, on its own, will not eradicate abuse in couple-relationships. However, educational programs that maximise young people’s capacity and motivation to safely negotiate their relationships are important to offer up. Individuals must learn that abusive behaviour is unacceptable and that they are accountable for their use of abusive behaviour. However, this may be insufficient on its own. High-risk youth may lack the emotional and behavioural skills to safely navigate the course of their relationships. To prevent and minimise harmful relationship outcomes, young people may need to learn how to resist ‘slippery-slope’ dynamics and to rehearse these skills well enough to be confident enough to employ them when needed.
Elucidating effective methods for promoting healthy relationship-management skills in youth is imperative. Effective PAPE could make a substantial difference to the wellbeing of many. However, the lack of integrated formative and evaluative research in this area means that we are still a long way from understanding what makes PAPE programs effective. Ideally, published evaluations of PAPE programs will become as prolific as the risk-factor studies purporting to inform them. Risk factor research needs to begin to be subsumed within program evaluation studies. The need to focus on and measure the perpetration of violent acts, however, is debatable. Partner abuse needs to be understood as a dyadic process rather than as de-contextualised acts that students admit to perpetrating or not. The dyadic slippery-slope model invites an approach to PAPE programming and evaluation that responds to these needs and, in doing so, may help to progress theory, research, and practice in this hopeful area.

The General Discussion that follows reviews the major findings of this project in relation to contemporary research, scholarly debate, and political and practical issues relevant to this field.
General Discussion

The impetus for this project was the lack of opportunity currently afforded to young Australians, especially girls, to learn skills for resisting the development of abusive relationship dynamics. As discussed in the Introduction, Australian PAPE programs tend to focus on awareness-raising and attitudinal change, especially concerning gender and violence, rather than skill development. There is a tendency in Australian programs to portray girls as (potential) victims and boys as (potential) perpetrators of partner abuse, ignoring the high rates of bi-directional abuse known to occur in adolescent and adult Australian couples. There is also a tendency for Australian programs to imply that girls cannot reduce their risk of being abused by a partner, other than by seeking help and terminating the relationship. These tendencies are underpinned by the dominant conceptualisation of partner abuse in Australia as a gender-based issue involving actions perpetrated by male partners against female partners, rather than as multifarious two-person (or dyadic) processes resulting in harm.

It was acknowledged in the Introduction that young people most vulnerable to perpetrating and experiencing severe partner abuse are unlikely to be reached effectively by school-based prevention education programs. Even if the highest-risk youth were to regularly attend school and engage in learning activities, they would likely need more than educational interventions to reduce their susceptibility, because their high-risk status derives from factors that go deeper than knowledge and skill deficits (e.g., trauma symptoms). Youth-targeted partner abuse prevention education (PAPE) is not a panacea. However, it was argued in the Introduction that this does not negate the importance of young people—including girls—learning skills that might help them to navigate safer relationships. Assertiveness skills, if used at early enough junctures in young people’s current and future relationships, might curb relationship dynamics that could otherwise place them, their partners, and their children at risk of harm.

Objectives Achieved

The overall aim of the research reported in this thesis was to promote an evidence-informed approach to PAPE in Australia that capitalises on girls’ potential for positive self-agency as co-drivers of their relationships. One objective was to develop a gender-inclusive theoretical framework that conceptualised partner abuse as a dyadic process; that is, as a process influenced by the behaviours and responses of both partners. Developing the ‘dyadic slippery-slope model’ achieved this objective. This model addresses the multitude of ways in which harmful patterns or trends can become entrenched in relationships, starting with one or more warning-sign behaviours (WSBs) by one or both partners: dominance-seeking behaviour, possessive behaviour, denigrating behaviour, conflict-control tactics, and
retaliatory responding. These types of behaviour are hypothesised to have the potential to lead to high-risk relationship dynamics; that is, patterns or trends characterised by silence/secrecy, overdependence, anger, and/or power imbalance. The dyadic slippery-slope model posits that the risk of slippery-slope dynamics, and serious harm, is heightened when early WSBs are responded to accommodatingly or aggressively. That is, it is believed that the risk of harm is minimised when WSBs are responded to assertively from when they first appear. The model highlights the potential importance of emotional and behavioural factors, in addition to attitudinal factors, in determining an individual’s propensity to respond assertively to WSBs. In the model, assertive tendency is referred to as Tendency to Resist of End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD).

This thesis has demonstrated the utility of the dyadic slippery-slope model for guiding partner abuse research. For example, guided by the model, the study reported in Paper Five found that WSBs in adolescent relationships can contribute to abusive dynamics. That is, while single incidents of WSB may not necessarily pose a threat, WSBs in a number of domains co-occurred for some girls, suggesting that underlying slippery-slope dynamics may be at play in their relationships. This study also uncovered relationships between perceived self-agency, TREAD, and WSB exposure, consistent with the dyadic slippery-slope model. Research with larger samples of girls and young women could be undertaken to probe the relationships between TREAD and a range of hypothetical vulnerability factors.

In addition to guiding partner abuse research, the utility of the dyadic slippery-slope model for guiding the development of partner abuse prevention programs was also evidenced (see Papers 3, 6, and 7). While the model acknowledges the interaction between distal (background and societal) risk factors for partner abuse and more proximal (personal vulnerability) factors, it highlights the importance of young people’s TREAD, and factors directly impacting their TREAD, as crucial change-targets for PAPE. Accordingly, it was argued in Paper Eight that risk factor research intended to inform PAPE programming needs to focus more on TREAD-relevant factors potentially amenable to educational intervention. It is hoped that the framework provided by the dyadic slippery-slope model proves constructive in furthering theory, research, and practice in this area in the future.

A second objective was to develop, pilot, and evaluate a skills-based empowerment program for adolescent girls. As described in Paper Three, the development of this program was guided largely by the dyadic slippery-slope model. The program emphasised what were intended to be simple and easy-to-remember messages. One fundamental idea, based loosely on self-determination theory, was the importance of both partners in a relationship feeling Confident, having Choice, and staying Connected to others. The program promoted the idea
that, when these needs are not met, ‘slippery-slopes’ involving Secrecy, Overdependence, Anger or Power imbalance (S.O.A.P) can lead to harmful outcomes, including Physical, Emotional, Social, and Threatened (P.E.S.T.) harms. Crucially, the program facilitated exploration of the benefits of Asserting, over Aggressing and Accepting, when slippery-slope warning-signs (WSBs) appear in a relationship. In addition to raising participants’ awareness of such ideas, active WSB-focused script-writing and skills-rehearsal was facilitated, reinforced by positive peer-feedback.

The piloting and evaluation of this program was a project in itself, and generated encouraging results. As reported in Paper Six, the girls who participated in the pilot program demonstrated heightened awareness of the risks associated with WSBs, increased confidence in their self-agency, decreased victim blaming, higher TREAD scores, and reduced exposure to WSBs. Interestingly participants’ TREAD was related to their WSB-risk awareness, but only following the program. The program’s focus on assertiveness skill-building is believed to have been crucial to its effect on TREAD levels. Indeed, in the follow-up focus groups, participants reported most valuing the skill-practice components of the trial and recommended that, in future reincarnations of the program, more time should be given to these components. In addition to enjoying practicing assertive responses to WSBs, they reported enjoying categorising types of WSB and types of responses and predicting types of slippery-slopes that might result from specific WSBs. These activities all constitute skills-training. Paper Six concluded with a number of recommendations for future research, including testing similar skills-based empowerment programs with larger, more representative samples, in randomised controlled trials and with longer follow-up periods. The use of a randomised control group will help to test for a causal relationship between TREAD change and WSB-exposure change.

A third objective was to develop a tool for measuring the effectiveness of assertiveness skills-focused partner abuse prevention programming, as an alternative to measures of self-reported violence perpetration and victimisation, for use by secondary school teachers and other partner abuse prevention educators. The findings presented in Paper 2 provided the foundations for the development of this scale, confirming 23 WSBs as being potentially worthy of inclusion. The ‘TREAD scale’ was intended to measure participants’ tendency to respond assertively or protectively to WSBs. As described in Paper Four, a series of open-ended questions and a structured assessment rubric were developed to gauge each respondent’s TREAD level. When tested with adolescent girls, the final 19-item TREAD scale had acceptable internal consistency and high inter-rater reliability. Moreover, principal components analysis identified three interrelated TREAD subscales: Conflict-Retaliation TREAD, Denigration TREAD, and Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD, all of which were
negatively associated with frequency of self-reported exposure to WSB. Dominance-Possessiveness TREAD was a particularly strong correlate of WSB exposure, especially Possessiveness and Retaliation WSBs.

It is important to note that the results reported in Papers Four and Five showed that low WSB exposure was not so much associated with high TREAD (i.e., the tendency to end a relationship in response to WSB). Rather, high WSB exposure was associated with low TREAD (i.e., the tendency to respond aggressively or in a way that does not clearly and directly discourage WSB). The TREAD scale may require further refinement, and perhaps differentiation, based on future research with representative samples drawn from different populations, including adolescent boys. As discussed in Paper Four, an advantage of the TREAD scale, or modified future versions of it, is that it overcomes a number of limitations inherent in using acts-based measures for evaluating PAPE programs.

Beyond the achievement of these three objectives, in promoting the research reported in this thesis, the potential of skills-based empowerment as a universal PAPE strategy in Australia has also been promoted. At local and international conferences, the case for Australia shifting to a gender-inclusive, empowerment-oriented approach has been strongly made, and this argument has been warmly received by teachers, nurses, and psychologists working in Australian secondary schools. It is also noteworthy that in the final stages of this project, the program overviewed in Paper Seven was piloted with two Year 9 mixed-gender classes with the full support of the relevant teaching staff. This small scale pilot was not a formal study. However, the relevant teachers asked their students to provide some written feedback about the program, under a series of headings, after they had completed the five sessions. All students reported that they believed Year 9 students in other schools should undertake the program, and there was no discernable difference between girls’ versus boys’ accounts of the perceived benefits of the program, key points remembered, skills learned, or suggestions for improvement. This bodes well for trialling this approach in universal, mixed-gender education settings in the future.

Findings in Context

Some of the girls who participated in this project reported high levels of exposure to WSB. This finding is in keeping with the results of studies in Australia (Crime Research Centre, 2001) and overseas (e.g., Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000) that show that psychologically abusive acts are prevalent in adolescent relationships. The results of this project suggest, however, that a time-limited (less than 6-hours) skills-focused empowerment-oriented program might increase girls’ TREAD and reduce their exposure to WSB. That is, the girls in this project who demonstrated increased TREAD three months after participating in the
program reported reduced exposure to WSB (especially Denigration behaviours). The few girls who reported WSB-exposure both before and after the program who *decreased* in TREAD reported *increased* WSB-exposure. The latter finding points to the importance of finding effective ways to increase TREAD in girls who may already be caught-up in slippery-slope dynamics and also the need to ensure that esteem-boosting experiences, social support, and assistance with safety planning (see Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002) are available to adolescents in schools.

Although the research reported in this thesis was not concerned with the prevention of sexual assault per se, finding that targeting girls might reduce their susceptibility to being abused by a partner is consistent with findings reported in some of the sexual assault prevention education literature (e.g., Hanson & Broom, 2005; Yeater & Donohue, 1999). By shifting girls’ expectations, interventions with girls may increase the pressures on and incentives for heterosexual boys and men to adopt non-abusive behaviours (Flood, 2007). However, programs that teach girls to avoid being sexually assaulted have been criticised because they can potentially exacerbate victim-blaming and result in self-blame when some girls and women inevitably are unsuccessful in applying the skills learned (Yeater & Donohue, 1999). The same criticisms can be levelled at programs aimed at helping girls to avoid the development of abusive dynamics in their couple-relationships.

The program piloted in this project encouraged girls to ‘be in’ their relationships (Paterson, 2000), as conscious co-navigators of their relationship pathways. Reassuringly, the girls in this project appeared not to interpret messages about self-determination (i.e., the importance of meeting their own and their partners’ needs for Confidence, Choice, and Connectedness) as meaning that they are to blame for the behavioural choices made by their partners. A notable finding of this project was that encouraging girls to be conscious of their own behaviour does not necessarily promote victim-blaming beliefs. Coupling messages about personal responsibility and self-agency with the message that individuals are accountable *only for their own behaviour* may have buffered against an undesirable victim-blaming discourse in the current project. It may be important, however, that empowerment-oriented programs are not delivered exclusively to girls without the same or similar programming being conducted with boys. It is possible, otherwise, that victim-blaming messages may be construed by those not undertaking the program.

The findings reported in this thesis dove-tail with findings in the international partner abuse prevention literature. In their qualitative study with adolescents in the US, Sears, Byers, Whelan, and Saint-Pierre (2006) noted that boys are using physical abuse less often than they have in the past and that both girls and boys are using more psychological forms of abuse.
with their partners, indicating the need for a greater focus on psychological abuse in youth-targeted programs. The authors argue that the specific circumstances surrounding boys’ and girls’ use of psychologically abusive behaviours must be identified because the youths in their study indicated that ‘psychological abuse can set the stage for physical abuse’ (p. 1203). The current findings add weight to this argument. It is concerning that WSBs were so frequent in some girls’ relationships. However, in addition to determining factors associated with using WSBs, factors impacting on young people’s responses to WSBs (i.e., their TREAD) also need to be determined. It is particularly important that those factors amenable to educational intervention are identified, if risk factor research is to support the development of relevant prevention education interventions. Ideally, as argued in Chapter Eight, a greater share of risk factor research in the future should take place in the context of overarching program evaluation studies.

Sears and her colleagues (2006) found that physical abuse perpetrated by girls is seen as more acceptable than that perpetrated by boys. From the youths’ perspective, a double standard was seen to be held by adults who provide them with mixed messages about the acceptability of abusive behaviours. The authors stressed the importance of adults unequivocally stating that psychological and physical abuse by girls is no more acceptable than these forms of abuse by boys. The gender-inclusive approach espoused in this thesis is consistent with this call. Irrespective of gender, aggressive responses are never appropriate or justified; they are more likely to promote abusive dynamics, rather than prevent them.

The motives behind young people’s use of violence against their partners have been found to be largely the same for boys and girls, including anger (e.g., Peterson & Olday, 1992) and emotional overdependence (e.g., Gangne & Lavoie, 1993). However, gender-focused researchers such as Bograd (1990) have argued that research on this topic should investigate whether acts of similar form are equivalent in their consequences for females versus males. Consideration of gender in researching the subjective responses and outcomes of violence is argued to be important because it can identify what types of prevention strategies might be better targeted at boys versus girls (Barter, 2009; Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000). However, such claims require further explanation. For example, Jackson, Cram, and Seymour found that more male high school students (34%) were ‘not bothered’ by emotional abuse by their partners, compared to female high school students (14%). The authors discussed possible explanations for this ‘gender difference’, even though most boys were bothered by emotionally abusive behaviour. Unfortunately, recommendations as to how such a gender difference should impact on gender-differentiated programming were not put forward.
The gender-inclusive approach explored in this thesis shirked the assumption that gender differences should differentially influence the content and skills covered in PAPE programs for boys versus girls. Given that there is substantial variation in the motivations and consequences of partner abuse between girls and between boys (Crime Research Centre, 2001; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000; see also Chapter 2), focusing on differences between a hypothetical average girl and average boy in the design of partner abuse prevention programs may risk trivialising the unique realities of individual girls and boys. Further, focusing explicitly on assumed gender differences might inadvertently reinforce problematic gender stereotyping (Noonan & Charles, 2009).

In any case, it remains unclear how large a gender difference needs to be in order for gender-differentiated programming to be warranted. For example, Jackson and her colleagues found that more girls (36%) experienced ‘anger’ in response to their partners’ violence compared to boys (25%): Does this difference mean that addressing anger issues is more important with girls? Universal education programs that acknowledge the full range of possible motives and consequences of partner abuse, irrespective of gender, like the program piloted in this project, may prove to alienate fewer students, and serve the needs of more students, than less inclusive programs. Future research is needed to test this hypothesis.

By nominating to be involved in this project, participants indicated that they wanted to learn the skills needed to navigate safer relationships, and were keen enough to sacrifice one day of regular classes and two lunchtimes. Girls and boys in other Australian studies (e.g., Carmody & Willis, 2006) and in overseas studies (e.g., Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000; Rosen & Bezold, 1996; Sears, Byers, Whelan, & Saint-Pierre, 2006; Noonan & Charles, 2009) have expressed the same desire to learn skills for better managing relationships and handling unwanted situations. In contrast, there is no evidence that young people seek greater understanding of the socio-cultural determinants of partner abuse. Although these matters may be of interest and value to researchers and policy-makers, youth are interested in what they can do to keep their relationships safe.

While no formal evaluation was conducted, Rosen and Bezold (1996) conducted a small-group program with high-school- and college-aged women. Participants were referred to this program by school counsellors who identified them as being at risk for, or currently involved in, an abusive relationship. While the current project involved groups of 8 to 15 girls, Rosen and Bezold ran their program with much smaller groups of 3 to 5. The program covered various types of violence in dating relationships, explored the negative consequences of aggression, and aimed to develop improved interpersonal skills. The program consisted of nine one-hour sessions, one of which was skills-focused (i.e., focused on decision-making and
conflict resolution skills). In their written evaluations of the perceived usefulness of the program, participants reported high satisfaction with the discussion of their personal rights in relationships and the skill development session. Overall, they reported feeling more empowered to deal with relationship issues.

An obvious weakness of the above study, of course, is the lack of quantitative data to assess changes over time. However, participant satisfaction with (i.e., their willingness to engage in) a program is a foundational requirement for success, and subjective impressions of increased self-agency is not an outcome to be dismissed. The follow-up focus groups conducted as part of the current project uncovered similar sentiments to those expressed by Rosen and Bezold’s (1996) participants. However, in the current project, quantitative data (TREAD scores) were also collected that corroborated the girls’ view that the active skills-training was helpful. Rosen and Bezold’s study suggests that girls already involved in abusive relationships may benefit from empowerment-oriented training. This was not a conclusion drawn from the program evaluation study reported in this thesis (Paper 6). Even though primary prevention programming does not target at-risk groups, individuals in highly abusive relationships might still be ‘caught’ by primary prevention programs along with individuals with little relationship experience of any kind. Research to determine the relative effectiveness of empowerment-oriented programs for participants with different types of relationship experience would be helpful, if only to ensure that the outcomes are not counter-productive for participants with particular background experiences.

Most girls in the program pilot study reported in this thesis expressed the view that conducting the program in a girls-group format made it ‘special’ and ‘work well’. In the area of sex education, there is some evidence to suggest that small group interventions may be more effective than classroom-based programs (DiCenso, Guyatt, Willan, & Griffith, 2002; Orecchia, 2009), but program content and activities, and facilitator proficiency, may be more critical determinants. Unfortunately, too few PAPE program evaluations, with either small or large groups, have been published to be able to make comparisons and address this question. Comparative studies are needed, employing consistent outcome measures, to determine the relative effectiveness of delivering the same content and activities in small groups versus large groups. Indeed, for all partner abuse prevention programs known to be effective, comparative studies are needed to determine which aspects of the program are critical to their effectiveness (Whitaker et al., 2006).

Until the number of rigorous program evaluations reaches a level sufficient to enable meta-analysis, it is appropriate to take guidance from findings in other areas of preventative education. For example, some characteristics are known to maximise the effectiveness of
pregnancy and substance abuse prevention programs (Dusenbury & Falco, 1995; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Kirby, 2002). These include (a) modelling and practicing relevant skills, including role-play activities pertaining to high-pressure situations; (b) targeting known risk-factors; (c) emphasising and repeating key messages; (d) providing basic, accurate information about the risks associated with the focal behaviours; (e) employing a variety of teaching methods designed to involve participants; (f) incorporating content appropriate to the age, experience, and culture of the students; (g) allowing sufficient time to complete important activities adequately; and (h) selecting teachers who believe in the program and providing training. In order to know whether these conclusions apply to partner abuse prevention, more program evaluations in this area are needed. Thoughtfully designed evaluations that test the role of hypothesised risk factors are important, not only to find out whether a program works, but to understand why and how it works (Whitaker et al., 2006).

In reviewing 20 years of development in partner abuse research, Rhatigan, Moore, and Street (2005) summarised research that has contributed to current conceptual definitions that have shaped the field’s broadened perspective. They focussed particularly on measurement innovations that have contributed to more accurate assessments of the prevalence of partner abuse. However, they also note persisting weaknesses in the field. They argue that to reduce abuse between partners, there is an overwhelming need for future researchers to develop improved theories and apply those ideas to prevention. Furthermore, they argued that it is imperative for current and future programs to be extensively tested for their effectiveness. This thesis constitutes some initial steps in the direction of meeting this call.

Potential Implications for Policy and Practice

Due to the preliminary nature of the findings, it is premature to make specific policy and practice recommendations on the basis of the results reported in this thesis. However, because of the critical policy and practice questions that it may help to answer, further research on this topic is certainly warranted. This project tested the potential efficacy of a skills-based empowerment approach to universal PAPE. This approach aimed to send a positive message to girls: that they can influence the course of their relationships. That is, along with their partner, they have a say over how their relationships develop. The results reported in this thesis are promising, if not conclusive. Further evaluation and refinement of this approach is critical, if for one reason only: Where multiple risk-factors are stacked in the direction of a young person perpetrating partner abuse, PAPE for that individual may not be able to have a significant impact, but empowerment-oriented education for their future partners might help to minimise the overall harm suffered.
However, an empowerment approach to the prevention of partner abuse, if adopted, must promote harm-minimising options for potential victims beyond simply terminating the relationship. This is because vulnerable individuals are uninclined to ‘give up on’ a relationship before harm has been experienced (Signal & Taylor, 2008). The empowerment approach trialled in this project covered response options (i.e., assertive scripts) relevant to points in a relationship earlier than when relationship termination might realistically be considered. Assertive (i.e., non-aggressive) response options are also potentially helpful to those who are experiencing some level of abuse but who do not wish to end the relationship. This approach has parallels, in this sense, with the hierarchical harm-minimisation approach that is well established in other areas of preventative health, such as substance abuse prevention (see Rhodes & Hedrich, 2010). The goals and choices of girls and women need to be respected if the aim is to protect and promote their right to self-determination (Mills, 2006), and recognising autonomy while building self-efficacy is key to facilitating successful behaviour change (Montgomery, 2006).

It is important, too, that the possible co-existence of perpetration with victimisation experiences is acknowledged in programs aimed at empowering potential ‘victims’. The approach trialled in this project was gender and sexuality-inclusive. That is, an effort was made to be responsive to the needs of girls who do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes (i.e., submissive and heterosexual). Universal partner abuse prevention programming should aim to help all young people reduce the risk of all types of harm in their relationships, including the most commonly encountered forms of harm (e.g., emotional harms caused by bi-directional abuse between partners). Education programs that focus on extreme forms of harm that apply to a very small proportion of the population (e.g., physical injuries caused by unidirectional abuse perpetrated by males against females) are difficult to justify in universal primary prevention programs compared to programs that are based on a more inclusive conceptualisation of partner abuse.

**Project Limitations**

In addition to the specific limitations discussed in the respective chapters of this thesis, there are three general limitations that apply to this thesis overall that must be stressed. First, the focus of this project was limited to the potential efficacy of an empowerment-oriented approach to PAPE with young English-speaking Australians. An approach which could be employed in universal (i.e., regular classroom) settings with boys and girls was evaluated, but the evaluation employed only a non-representative sample of girls. Moreover, while the results of the pilot study were promising, and the girls in the project (and boys in the later informal pilot) responded positively to the gender-inclusive, empowerment-oriented
approach, this approach was not tested in the context of a randomised controlled trial. Therefore it remains unknown whether this approach is effective as increasing TREAD and reducing exposure to WSB. More wide-scale and rigorous research with representative samples is needed.

Second, it is important to stress that this project was not concerned with secondary or tertiary prevention of partner abuse (i.e., with particularly at-risk or previously abused/abusive individuals). The findings discussed in this thesis are relevant only to primary/universal prevention education with youth. Caution should be exercised in generalising the arguments expressed in this thesis to other contexts. For example, the findings of this project are not relevant to clinical treatment decisions, judicial responses, or policy-making in relation to known perpetrators or victims of partner violence. It would also be inappropriate to generalise the findings of this project to the prevention of sexual assault. The results of this project suggest only that it may be possible to increase the TREAD of adolescent girls who are not exhibiting trauma symptoms, with possible beneficial impacts and with no obvious adverse consequences.

Finally, a pragmatic constraint inherent in research with youth on this topic is that information collected about participants’ behaviours, experiences, and intentions must be self-reported and cannot readily be verified by independent observation (Whitaker et al., 2006). At some point in the future, research with adolescent couples might enable collection of both self-reported and partner-reported data for verification purposes. At the present time, however, self-report measures are the only practical way of seeking information about the effectiveness of prevention programs on this topic.

**Future Questions and Issues**

The findings presented in this thesis are encouraging because they show that, under certain circumstances at least, girls can be skilled-up and motivated to reduce their risk of chronic victimisation. However, the results of this project raise more questions than answers. For example, can the results reported here be replicated by other researchers employing other facilitators? Can the evaluation results be replicated with more representative, or more ethnically diverse, samples of girls, and boys? Can the TREAD scale be validated for use across different populations of girls, and boys? Can a skills-based empowerment approach reduce exposure to and perpetration of WSB in a randomised controlled trial? Are other researchers prepared to invest the time required to score TREAD test responses? Is skills-based empowerment viable and sustainable; that is, would Health and Physical Education teachers faithfully adopt and persist with this approach, year after year?
Wolfe and his colleagues (2009) note that embedding programs into curriculum that meets mandatory education department guidelines provides a vehicle for widespread dissemination and sustainability. However, especially given that few Australian schools currently run any program on this topic (Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009), there is no guarantee that education departments in Australia will ‘buy in’ to PAPE. Genuine adoption of a program’s philosophy at a leadership level is a critical element in the success of any prevention program (Nation et al., 2003). It is not yet known what topics will be included in the Health and Physical Education stream of the new Australian Curriculum, which is due to be finalised in 2013 (ACARA, 2010). Indeed it is unknown what impact the new national curriculum will have on the capacity and inclination of schools to provide relationship education at all.

Even with leadership support, the competence of the teacher or facilitator is critical to a prevention program’s success (Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2002), as is their commitment to delivering the full program. Dusenbury, Brannigan, Falco, and Hansen (2003) found that, in substance abuse prevention, most teachers do not cover everything in a curriculum and they are likely to teach less over time. They also found that poor implementation is likely to result in a loss of program effectiveness and that teacher-training alone is not sufficient to ensure fidelity of implementation. In partner abuse prevention, few clues exist as to what factors impact on a classroom teacher’s ability and motivation to faithfully implement skills-focused education. A program manual may be sufficient, or experiential training with regular boosters may be required. In substance abuse prevention, teachers with one and a half days of training have been found to implement evidence-based prevention programs with sufficient fidelity and effectiveness to achieve significant improvements over status quo classroom methods (Rohrbach, Dent, Skara, Sun, & Sussman, 2007). However, it is difficult to estimate what type and intensity of training might be required to achieve teacher competence and fidelity in partner abuse prevention.

It is possible that the only conditions under which girls will show increased TREAD is when a motivated expert from outside of the school facilitates a ‘girls-group’ program with self-electing (i.e., somewhat motivated) participants, as occurred in this project. As mentioned earlier, studies comparing small group- versus large group-delivery formats, special guest versus school-employed facilitators, and single- versus mixed-gender groupings are required.

Other questions yet to be addressed in this area concern timing. PAPE delivered too early may lose any positive effects before participants start to engage in romantic relationships; however, if programs are delivered too late, problems might become entrenched (Munoz, Mrazek, & Haggerty, 1996; Nation et al., 2003). In the US, developmental trajectories for partner abuse usually begin at 13 years of age and peak by age 16 to 17 years for physical
abuse (Wolfe et al., 2009) and psychological abuse continues to increase throughout adolescence (Foshee et al., 2004). This is consistent with the available data in Australia (Crime Research Centre, 2001). Early secondary school year levels (Years 8 and 9) therefore seem suitable for beginning universal PAPE. In Chapter Six it was suggested, however, that the best policy may involve introducing skills-based relationship education at even lower year levels, and shifting the focus to intimate relationship contexts in subsequent years.

Longitudinal evaluation studies (i.e., beginning at the time when the programming is first introduced) with long-term follow-up periods (i.e., at least one-year after the final year of programming), assessing the relative impacts of programs beginning at different developmental stages, would be highly informative.

Half a decade ago, a number of writers (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2006; Hamby, 2006; O’Leary, Woodin, & Fritz, 2006; Whitaker et al., 2006) pointed to a range of other unanswered questions concerning the optimal scope, content, format, audience, timing, setting, and mechanics of partner abuse prevention. For instance, should universal partner abuse prevention be included in general curricula that address several problem behaviours or be taught in specialised programs? Unfortunately, little more about these questions is known today than was known then. As argued in Paper Eight, more applied research on this topic is needed in order to make more informed programming and policy decisions. This should include systematic cost-benefit studies that compare different approaches to universal education, attending in particular to questions about program content, length, and timing. Use of consistent measures in comparative studies is imperative.

It will take significant investment to see the above questions through. National research centres are funded to undertake research in other areas of preventative health education (e.g., Australia’s Drug and Alcohol Research Centre). Similar levels of funding and research activity may be required to establish a strong evidence-base in PAPE. Promisingly, $6.9 million has been committed by the Federal Government over the next three years to establish a National Centre of Excellence to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies to reduce VAW (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) advocated a specific funding stream to address prevention education policy. Given the adverse impacts of partner abuse on the health of Australians, and the Government’s purported commitment to evidence-based policies and practice, the next few years may prove fruitful in terms of support for research in PAPE. However, it remains to be seen whether the issue of partner abuse will be treated separately to sexual assault prevention and more broadly than as a form of VAW. This thesis
has argued the case that a gender-inclusive empowerment-oriented approach to PAPE is worth pursuing further.

**Final Reflections**

This research project was undertaken within the context of robust and sometimes bitter debate about the importance of gender in studying and responding to partner abuse, not just in Australia but internationally (e.g., Archer, 2001; Frieze, 2000; O’Leary, 2000; Reed, 2008; Whitaker, Swahn, Hall, & Haileyesus, 2008; White, Smith, Koss, & Figueredeti, 2000). The assumption that the only form of partner abuse worth addressing is that against women has been evident in the over-representation of studies employing only victimised females as subjects. Unfortunately, the assumption that gender-inclusive partner abuse scholarship is aimed at trivialising the seriousness of female victimisation lives on (e.g., DeKeseredy, 2011). It can be difficult to resist being distracted by this debate, to resist the impulse to ‘take a side’ and contribute to the polarisation. However, for partner abuse research to advance—particularly partner abuse *prevention*—researchers in this area must resist that impulse and, instead, keep on with the work of empirically testing hypotheses, refining theories, and developing and evaluating innovative approaches, always cognisant of the limitations that apply to the methodologies they employ.

Reed (2008) identified the lack of a framework for understanding partner abuse by females as a reason to persist with the framework that recognises partner violence as a form of gender-based violence. In this thesis, a broad gender-inclusive framework has been proposed that may serve to assist our understanding of both unidirectional and bidirectional partner abuse by both males and females in both cohabitating and non-cohabitating relationships. This generic model highlights possibly worthwhile strategic targets for preventative education, beyond gender norms and attitudes to violence. It is hoped that this model will spur further empirical research aimed at identifying relationships between different TREAD sub-constructs and different types of WSB for different youth populations, identifying targetable risk factors for low TREAD, and ultimately, testing and comparing the effectiveness of different interventions aimed at increasing TREAD. The aim, of course, is not to win a particular debate, but to learn what makes partner abuse prevention education programs as effective as possible for the young people they are intended to help.

Partner abuse is a complex issue that may never be eradicated; so, small successes need to be noticed and celebrated. These words in an email from a strong-minded girl months after her participation in this project is one example of a small success:

“the program was great, it helped me a lot, and i just got out of a bad relationship. I think you should make the program for boys too, because they can be really stubborn and don't
care about anything. My ex boyfriend treated me like shit, and he would always call me names and yell at me and put me down and i started telling him to stop but he wouldn't listen, and I would always walk away from it because i didn't want it to get any worse but it didn't help, he just kept going. he didn’t care about my needs. i'm glad i learned the things you taught me because I'm the type of person that normally fights back, and if i had of pushed him over the top then maybe things would have got worse, and maybe i would have got really hurt. So thank you for everything :) i will always remember it”

Anecdotal evidence like this is far from enough to prove that a particular approach is worth investing in. However, if anecdotal stories can sustain our motivation to keep working to address major but difficult issues, they are worth holding dear.
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