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Kimberly Rodrigues  
*Providence College*

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Effects of a Witnessing History on the Female Ability to Negotiate Romantic Relationships:  
A Retrospective Analysis

Kimberly Rodrigues

Providence College

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

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### Abstract

Research suggests that witnessing domestic violence (DV) in childhood may have long-term negative effects as a person enters adulthood. This exposure may hinder the ability for adults to build healthy romantic relationships. In an effort to better understand how a witnessing history affects adult romantic relationships, this study focused on the retrospective stories of women who were in recent domestically violent relationships and who also reveal witnessing DV as children. Participant's narratives were analyzed for themes relating to their witnessing history, such as type of violence witnessed, frequency of violence witnessed, and whether or not participants felt their witnessing history has affected their ability to negotiate romantic relationships.

## Effects of a Witnessing History on the Female Ability to Negotiate Romantic Relationships: A Retrospective Analysis

Domestic violence is a major issue in that it subjects children to abuse and/or neglect. Children often express an array of reactions as the result of witnessing domestic violence, which can include anything from behavioral to social/emotional reactions. Furthermore, research suggests that witnessing domestic violence in childhood may have negative long-term effects. Some studies have even found that being exposed to domestic violence during childhood may hinder the ability of adults to build healthy, romantic relationships. The long-term effects of witnessing abuse are especially profound for women who, despite advances since the 1960s, are still oppressed, and whose oppressed state is only exacerbated by the violence of physical and mental abuse. This study aims to learn more about how witnessing domestic violence in childhood can affect women in adulthood. More specifically, what are the effects, if any, of witnessing domestic violence in childhood on a woman's ability to negotiate romantic relationships in adulthood?

The significance of this study is multi-faceted. First, social workers, especially those employed by state departments who encounter many cases reporting domestic violence, need to be knowledgeable of the possible long term effects of witnessing in order to work with women in domestically violent relationships. This knowledge equips social workers with a better understanding of how childhood exposure to domestic violence can potentially affect a client's adult romantic relationship. Through the stories shared by these women, social workers and other helping professionals will be allowed insight into the effects of witnessing domestic violence in childhood on the ability to negotiate romantic relationships in adulthood. Second, while there has been extensive research on the effects of witnessing domestic violence in childhood, few researchers have taken a retrospective approach, tracing the roots of abusive

tendencies, and/or the willingness to endure abuse, from adulthood *back* to childhood. This approach, unlike a longitudinal study, is practical in that it does not require following individuals from childhood into adulthood. This retrospective approach allows subjects to reflect on their experiences and share their thoughts/opinions on whether or not their witnessing histories have affected their present situation. Furthermore, the methodology for this study provides social workers with a framework for further research. Social workers, working with women in domestically violent relationships, can use the questions and the means of interpretation used in this study as a guide for future research to better understand the implications of domestically violent relationships.

As a means of understanding the potential effects of witnessing on a women's ability to negotiate romantic relationships, this study will use narratives of women currently or recently in domestically violent relationships. The narratives will be used to determine whether domestic violence existed during childhood and whether or not this affected their ability to negotiate relationships in adulthood. If these women reveal that they were witness to domestic violence between their caretakers during childhood, then it is important to understand what type of domestic violence they were witness to (i.e. sexual, physical, emotional, etc.), the frequency of the violence, and whether or not they participated in any form of treatment services as a child or adult to address the impact of domestic violence in order to understand the potential long term effects. While much general information regarding domestic violence exists, very little information is available regarding stories or personal experiences of women to understand how they perceive their witnessing history and whether or not it affects their ability to negotiate romantic relationships.

### **Review of the Literature**

Domestic violence, violence that occurs between adult care givers in the home, seems to be the most toxic form of exposure to violence for children (Groves, 2001, p. 183). In 1997, Von Steen, through a review of the available literature regarding domestic violence, reported that an “estimated 3.3 million children and adolescents per year...witness severe acts of emotional and physical abuse directed at parents by their intimate partners” (p. 478). In 1999, the Commonwealth Fund (a survey of women’s health) reported that upward of 3 million women are abused physically by a spouse or intimate partner annually (as cited in Payne, Carmody, Plichta, & Vandecar-Burdin, 2007, p. 292). While this data may be outdated, it provides a framework to understanding just how many women and children are exposed to domestic violence.

Although Von Steen (1997) reports a very high statistic, she also reports that “experiences of adults who witnessed or were exposed to family violence during childhood is still not widely recognized or empirically researched” (p. 478). However, some years later, a study by Groves (2001) found that nearly one hundred studies of the effects of exposure to domestic violence... have been published since 1990, most focusing on children between the ages of 6 and 17” (Groves, 2001, p. 188). Unfortunately, there is a lack of research that studies the effects of exposure to domestic violence for individuals after the age of seventeen.

### **Studies on Children**

Studies which have examined the effects of domestic violence generally focus on behavioral, emotional, and psychological implications for child development. According to Von Steen’s (1997) review of the literature, “many children witnessing violence in their homes have been known to experience depression and anxiety, lowered self-concept, aggression, cognitive distortions, impaired social competence, school-related problems, somatic problems, and even

posttraumatic symptoms such as dissociation” (p. 478). In a more recent study, Meltzer, Doos, Vostanis, Ford, & Goodman (2009) found that children who witnessed severe domestic violence were three times more likely to have a conduct disorder (p. 487). In this study by Meltzer et al. (2009), researchers included biographic, socio-demographic, and socio-economic variables in order to investigate the independent correlates of conduct disorder; but in the end, witnessing domestic violence was found to be more significantly correlated with increased odds of having conduct disorder than other correlates (p. 497). A study by Schultz, Remich-Barlow, & Robbins (2007) also discovered that children who witness domestic violence are at greater risk of behavioral problems and mental health disorders, including anxiety, anger, depression and suicidal ideations, withdrawal, low self-esteem, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (p. 265). These three studies identified the more immediate childhood and adolescent repercussions of witnessing domestic violence; however, none of the studies focused on the later stages of life.

Groves (2001) supports the previously mentioned studies, but uses a longitudinal approach to address the long-term effects of witnessing domestic violence, as well as the effects it has on future relationships. She states that witnessing domestic violence “is associated with greater rates of juvenile delinquency, anti-social behavior, substance abuse, and mental illness” (Groves, 2001, p. 188); furthermore, witnessing domestic violence affects a child’s “emotional development,... social functioning,...ability to learn and focus in school,...moral development, and... ability to negotiate intimate relationships as adolescents and adults” (p. 188). The majority of this study is focused on the child’s reactions to witnessing domestic violence while still in childhood, with only some mention of the affected ability to negotiate intimate relationships as adolescents and adults.

While Groves (2001) states that violence which occurs within the home is worse for children because of the intense affects, she also states that the consequences are more long lasting” (p. 184). Von Steen’s article is one of a few articles that seeks to summarize the findings of other researchers to reveal long-term effects of domestic violence in adults with witnessing histories (Von Steen, 1997). Von Steen (1997) reports that “the most frequently cited long-term effects of having witnessed domestic violence as children [based on her review of the literature] is a tendency toward violence in adult relationships” (p. 479).

Further analyzing adult relationships, Von Steen (1997) reports that as these children and adolescents eventually enter adulthood and form relationships, it is not uncommon for their adult relationships to be characterized by mistrust, low self-esteem, fear of abandonment, and especially anger; “hence, they struggle with establishing and maintaining intimate relationships” (p. 479). Furthermore, while some adults with witnessing histories “report a tendency to be passive in relationships in order to assure their psychological safety,” others report reacting aggressively, but in a nonviolent manner, when faced with frustrations in intimate relationships (Von Steen, 1997, p. 480).

### **Studies on Adults**

While some researchers have studied children to understand the effects of witnessing domestic violence, others have studied abusive adult romantic relationships to understand the causes of this behavior. Research by Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz (1980), which surveyed adult women, found that “individuals who witness or experience violence in their family of origin learn physically aggressive behaviors through modeling and subsequently become victims or perpetrators of partner violence” (as cited in Linder and Collins, 2005, p. 253). Similarly, Andrews, Foster, Capaldi, & Hops (2000), along with Magdol, Moffit, Caspi, & Silva (1998),



found that dating and marital violence in adulthood is linked back to conflict, hostility, and negative interactions in family interactions in childhood.

A study by Stith, Rosen, & Middleton (2001), which focuses on relationships of adults with witnessing histories, also supports the idea that violence in adult romantic relationships develops from violent experiences during childhood. These researchers found that “adults who report childhood exposure to partner violence experience greater difficulty in interpersonal relationships and more emotional problems than those who report no such exposure” (as cited in McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006, p. 137). Furthermore, research by Linder and Collins (2005) explored the various developmental precursors of physical aggression in romantic relationships, two of which include the social learning of aggression from parents’ behavior and the effects of conflict, hostility, and negative interactions between parents and offspring (Linder & Collins, 2005, p. 253). These findings suggest that the causes of aggression in romantic relationships in later years stem from events that take place while children are living with their primary caretakers.

While some studies have linked abusive relationships to histories of witnessing abuse, other researchers have reminded us that abusive tendencies are often mitigated by other factors. For example, research by Ehrensaft, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, Chen, & Johnson (2003) suggests that “the pathway from early family violence to later partner violence may be moderated or mediated by other experiences (as cited in Linder and Collins, 2005, p. 253). Such experiences may include the quality of the parent-child relationship, delinquent behavior, drug use, family conflict and hostility, etc. (Linder and Collins, 2005). Likewise, Von Steen (1997) states that the effects of witnessing “differ according to their [the child’s] age and gender, and whether they were witnesses only or were subjected to direct abuse themselves” (p. 478). While this study is

primarily concerned with the effects of witnessing on an adult females ability to negotiate romantic relationships, it is important to note that other factors during childhood play a role in a woman's romantic relationships.

Other research also points to frequency of the witnessed violence and whether or not arguments are resolved as mediating factors to the effects that witnessing violence has on adult romantic relationships. For example, Groves (2001) states that "children may even learn positive and pro-social lessons from seeing their parents argue and then resolve the conflict. If the argument is resolved, children can cope. If the arguments are chronic and unresolved, however, children react negatively" (p. 188). Furthermore, Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, and Lake (1991) discovered that "repeated exposure to parent arguing does not diminish children's reactions. Children react more strongly by becoming more anxious and aggressive. The notion of becoming desensitized to parental fighting was not supported by this research" (as cited in Groves, 2001, p. 187). These findings support the idea that other factors have an influence on the extent to which witnessing abuse affects adult romantic relationships.

Because much of the above research dates back some years, it is necessary to update the literature and add a new approach that will seek to further understand the effects of witnessing domestic violence in childhood on an adult's ability to negotiate intimate relationships, and not require researchers to follow children through the stages of life, which is very time consuming. In order to achieve a greater understanding of the effects of witnessing domestic violence on adult romantic relationships, it is necessary to hear them tell their own stories, explaining whether or not they think they are affected and if so, how they are affected. The few studies which involved an analysis of stories did not use them to understand the effects of witnessing abuse in childhood. For example, the study by McDonald et al. (2006) included narratives;

however, the narratives were used to “provide evidence that a considerable number of American children live in families in which physical violence between married or cohabiting partners occurs” (p. 141). Furthermore, Groves’ work discusses various narratives of women who were victims of domestic violence and their children who were witness to the domestic violence. However, the narratives were used to express the importance of seeking help for themselves and their children: counseling, shelters, etc. (Groves, 2001). While McDonald et al. (2006) and Groves (2001) both include narratives; the narratives are used to achieve a different purpose, not to understand the effects of witnessing on adult romantic relationships.

Furthermore, there is a need to focus specifically on women because various researchers support the notion that more women than men are affected by domestic violence. For example, in 2003 the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence facts sheet reported that 85% of domestic violence victims were women. More recently, in 2006, McDonald et al. observed differences in the rates of male and female partner violence, with female violence occurring more frequently. Therefore, not only is it important to use narratives to understand the violence that occurs in romantic relationships of adults with witnessing histories, it is also necessary to focus on women because they are at greater risk.

Through the use of narratives, this study will gather testimony from women who are currently or have been recently in domestically violent relationships. The narratives will allow the researcher to draw various inferences regarding adult abusive romantic relationships based on what subjects reveal during the interviews. Furthermore, the researcher will be able to identify commonalities between narratives of different subjects regarding type of abuse, frequency of abuse, and whether the subjects received any form of treatment. This study also includes interviews with adults, providing the opportunity for a retrospective analysis. In other words,

adults will be providing information on their current relationships and also looking back on their childhood to describe the relationship of their caretakers, which adds to the body of literature in which adults are the primary subjects. This retrospective analysis provides subjects with an opportunity to explain whether they believe their witnessing history has affected their ability to negotiate romantic relationships and also allows the researcher to analyze the narratives to find any relation between domestic violence in adulthood and witnessing domestic violence during childhood.

### **Methodology**

This is an exploratory qualitative study using interviews to understand the effects of witnessing domestic violence during childhood on the ability to negotiate romantic relationships in adulthood. The study explores, through the testimony of women, whether or not the subjects reveal they were witness to domestic violence between their caretakers during childhood without being prompted.

### **Subjects**

The sample of participants, gathered through convenience sample, were females selected through case files from a family visitation program at a small social service agency in Providence, R.I. Participants must have reported domestic violence in their case files to be selected for the study.

### **Data Gathering**

The researcher is aware of the recent or current domestic violence occurring in the adult relationships of the participants by either looking through case files to determine whether or not

domestic violence was reported or by being told by the participants' clinician that domestic violence was reported. Each participant will be asked to read and sign an informed consent form confirming that she understands the purpose of the interview and agrees to participate in the study (Appendix A). The interviews will be tape recorded for purposes of analyzing data.

The interview will start by asking the participants to elaborate on their current or recent relationships. The researcher will ask the participants a series of open ended and broad questions in order to allow the subjects to mention domestic violence without being asked directly (Appendix B). If the participants do not readily reveal this information, the researcher will encourage them to be more specific by narrowing the questions; asking the participants to describe their current or most recent domestically violent relationship. Next, the researcher will ask participants to detail their childhood while living with their caretakers. Again, if the participants do not readily reveal witnessing domestic violence during childhood, the researcher will ask them whether or not domestic violence existed while they were living with their primary caretakers. The questions will eventually be more specific as participant's share information regarding the domestic violence in order to understand type, frequency, and any other aspects of the violence. Interviews will be held one-on-one in the family room of the social service agency.

### **Data Analysis**

First, the recordings of the interviews will be analyzed to determine whether or not participants reveal a witnessing history without being asked directly. Second, the testimony will be analyzed to determine the frequency of abuse witnessed during childhood, the type of abuse, the age of onset, and whether or not the participant participated in any form of treatment. Thirdly, the testimony will be analyzed to understand whether or not participants feel their

witnessing history has affected their ability to negotiate romantic relationships. Finally, themes and patterns will be gathered from the collective interviews to further appreciate and understand the possible link between past history of witnessing violence in childhood and one's ability to negotiate romantic relationships in adulthood.

### **Findings**

This study intended to explore the effects of witnessing domestic violence during childhood on the female ability to negotiate romantic relationships in adulthood. Specifically, it sought to discover whether or not participants readily reveal if witnessing during childhood has impacted their adult romantic relationships. Interviews were conducted with three female participants and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The first participant was 21 years old and identified herself as Puerto Rican and Native American. The second participant was 23 years old and identified herself as white. The third participant was 25 years old and identified herself as Caucasian/white. The first participant went into great detail regarding her romantic relationship of three years and did not require much prompting. However, the second and third participant needed much more prompting when discussing their romantic relationships which for the second participant lasted seven years and the third participant lasted on and off for ten years. During the interviews all three women revealed that their domestically violent relationships were recent relationships and not current. Also, all participants revealed that their partner was the father of their child(ren).

#### **Recent Romantic Relationship**

When asked to describe their most recent romantic relationship, all three women readily revealed domestic violence which took place in their relationship. In addition, the first two

participants revealed that their partners used substances, but did not go further than stating “he was a user” (participant two) and “he smoked and drank” (participant one). The first participant characterized her relationship as “crazy,” stating “it wasn’t always bad, but when it was, it was terrible.” The second participant characterized her relationship as “toxic and co-dependent.” The third participant, however, stated that her relationship was “different than most people” because he hit her a lot.

All of the women stated that their partners became violent after a period of time. This period of time ranged from one week to two years. However, all participants revealed that even after their partners became violent, they stayed in the relationship. When asked why they stayed in the relationship after their partners became violent, every participant stated it was because they loved their partner and the first two participants stated they had hope their partner would change. Participant one stated, “I stayed because I loved him; thinking no one would love me the way that he loves me. I had hope that he would change.” Participant two stated, “I had faith he would change. I believed that he really loved me. I felt bad for him, that if I left him something bad would happen to him and it would be my fault.” Participant three, however, stated, “I loved him...[and] I wanted it to work for my kids.”

**Type of abuse.** While the abuse began at various points in their relationships, the women revealed similar reasons for staying in their relationship and, also, similar types of abuse. All three women stated that the abuse they endured was physical, verbal, and emotional. In describing her relationship, the first participant stated:

He was disrespectful and demeaning, but then he’d turn around and be like ‘I love you.’ He would play mind games. He would punch me, kick me, bite me, stab me, choke me, whip me, slap me, pull my hair, cut my hair off, tie me up, chain me up, throw me down

the stairs, burn me, punch me in the street, throw cleaning products at me... he'd pretty much throw anything at me that was around.

The second participant revealed:

He would get aggressive and loud, he'd grab me by my hair, and he'd throw things like coat hangers, vases, toys, anything. He's shorter than me so I would use my legs to defend myself, but he would aim for my legs. I've had bags of metal swung on my back, my nose almost broken; I've had a lot happen to me.

However, in detailing her relationship, participant three revealed an interesting fact; she was unaware of what domestic violence really was until she was told by her counselors after her relationship ended ten years later. She stated:

It first started, which I didn't know, with him putting hot sauce on my lips, which I didn't know was any sign [of abuse] until everyone else told me. Then he burnt hair off my arm with a lighter and hairspray. [Another time] I had a third degree burn on my arm from hot fishing wax. He was always physical; pushing and shoving type of stuff, but that was it most of the time. Except one time... we got into a fight and he put his hands around my neck and said I'm lucky to be alive and that he doesn't kill me.

In each description, participants reveal the extreme situations which they endured; however, what is most interesting is that participant three readily admitted not recognizing her partner as being abusive and not considering her relationship as domestically violent until after her relationship ended. It is possible that the other two participants did not recognize their abuse or label their relationship as domestically violent while in their relationships, but did not reveal that during the interview.

**Cause of anger.** In describing the abuse which took place in their relationship, participants revealed triggers to their partner's anger. For example, participant two stated, "he would know what to do to start an argument so he could be abusive." She stated that she started dating him when she was 17 and she was very insecure about herself, so when he would take too long at the store, she would question his whereabouts (participant two). She stated he was always



defensive and “knew what to do and what to say that would trigger me to confront him on something which would start an argument” and lead to his violence. Participant one stated that when she first engaged in this relationship the only thing that triggered him was hearing things about her from other people. When asked what “things” people would tell him, she stated “just anything.” She stated, “He would get angry and hit me, or I would say something he didn’t like and he would hit me. When I lied about something, he would hit me, but the reason I lied was because if I told the truth he’d hit me. Didn’t matter if I was pregnant or not, I got beat up” (participant 1). Participant three stated, he’d get angry “if I didn’t do something right or if I had an attitude.”

While all participants were able to identify a trigger to their partner’s abusive tendencies during the interviews, it is interesting that participants could not anticipate the trigger while in their relationships. Perhaps this inability to anticipate a trigger is related to the unpredictability of the abuser, who maintains dominance by remaining enigmatic.

**Emotions associated with abuse.** Participants also revealed feeling ashamed, overwhelmed, isolated, guilty, and trapped when detailing their abusive relationship. For example, participant one revealed, “I felt so ashamed, especially when he cut my hair off. I had to hide. I had to quit my job because I couldn’t hide all my bruises. He made me do things that were shameful, like eat off the floor. I felt guilty, like I deserved it.” Participant two revealed, “I felt trapped, like I’m in a tunnel with no way out. I wanted a way out but I was so co-dependent, so emotionally dependent. I used to literally be on my knees asking god to help me.” She also stated she felt as though she couldn’t live without him, she “needed him to survive” (participant two). Participant three stated, she always felt guilty as though she should have done something different every time he got mad. Participant three also revealed feeling isolated stating, “I lost all

my friends when I was with him. Nobody in my family liked him because they all seen who he was, so we were always with his family.”

Participant three revealed a sense of emotional pain when detailing one particular incident:

I got pregnant with my last [child], but I ended up losing it because I fell down some stairs. He wanted me to get rid of it anyway. According to a lot of people I know, he was really happy about it when I miscarried. He told them he was extremely excited that I lost it because he didn't want another baby by me. He wanted me to...get an abortion, but I wouldn't have done it.

As participant three shared this story, it was obvious that she was still emotionally dealing with the loss of her child and knowing her partners reaction to her miscarriage only worsened the pain.

Another aspect of the abusive relationship, revealed by participants one and two, was defending their partner and making excuses for their partner's abuse. Participant one stated she walked around being scared but still loved him at the same time. He didn't get along with her family, so she was always in the middle attempting to separate fights. “I had to make excuses for him, the way he acted, the bruises and the scratches” (participant one). She stated, “I isolated myself because I was ashamed” and eventually lost most friends (participant one). Participant two stated, “I made a lot of excuses for the marks on my body. It got to the point where I couldn't make excuses anymore; my family knew what was going on. It's a feeling of entrapment. I couldn't talk to anyone because I was scared.”

As participants one and two continued to detail their relationships and feelings, they also revealed, without prompting, that at one time or another they tried to fight back. Participant three, however, did not reveal attempts to fight back. Participant one and two stated that people

would ask them why they didn't fight back, but each responded that "fighting back made it worse" (participant one, participant two). "At first I would defend myself, but after a while I stopped because the more I fought back, the worse it got" (participant two). Eventually both participants gave up trying to fight back. "I figured if I didn't hit back and [I] kept quiet, he would stop and eventually he did" (participant two).

## **Childhood**

After coming to an understanding of the nature of each participant's abusive relationship, the focus of the interview shifted to the participant's childhood. The first two participants originally identified living with their "mom and dad." However, after clarification was made, it became clear that participant one's mom and dad were, in fact, her aunt and uncle and participant two's mom and dad were really her mom and stepfather. Participant three revealed that she grew up with her mom and her mother's various boyfriends who came in and out of her life. In short, all participants came from broken homes. Interestingly, the first two participants also revealed that their caretakers struggled with addiction throughout their lives, and participant three revealed that some of her mother's boyfriends were addicts as well.

Participant one detailed her childhood as only living with her real parents for a year because they were both drug addicts. She stated she was removed from their care and placed with her paternal grandmother, but after living with her grandmother for a year she was placed with her aunt and uncle. Participant one lived with her aunt and uncle until she was 18 years old. Participant two stated that her mom and biological father divorced when she was five years old; she grew up with her mom and stepfather, living with them for 17 years, until she moved out to live with her boyfriend. Participant three revealed that she didn't remember her mom and her

biological father being together; she remembers living with her mom, her mother's various boyfriends, and her sister all of her life. She stated that she lived with her mom "on and off for a long time. I went back and forth between her house and living with my children's father."

Upon reflecting on their caretakers relationship, participant two quickly revealed witnessing domestic violence, participant one detailed her upbringing prior to mentioning domestic violence, and participant three did not reveal witnessing domestic violence between her caretakers at all. Participants one and two, both, revealed witnessing physical and verbal abuse, however, participant two also revealed witnessing emotional abuse in her caretaker's relationship.

In detailing her childhood, participant one revealed that she was sexually abused. She stated "my uncle 'touched' my cousins and when I got older, he started to 'touch' me too. That's when I started to develop problems. I had a tough childhood." Without delving further into her history of sexual abuse, participant one began detailing her aunt and uncle's relationship. Without prompting, she revealed witnessing domestic violence in her caretaker's relationship, stating "they argued a lot; he would hit her. It [hitting] didn't happen a lot, but when it happened, it was bad." Similarly, participant two revealed witnessing domestic violence in her caretaker's "unstable and violent" relationship "at least once every three months, but sometimes more frequent than that." She stated: "My mom was emotionally and physically abusive to my step father. I saw her smash windows and smash cars. She even ran over my biological father with a car. So, I witnessed it from her." Detailing one incident in particular, participant two stated: "one time, my mom had pulled a knife on him [stepfather]. It came this close to my chest because I jumped in front of him. I was like 'no mom no!' She realized I was there and so she didn't do it."

While participant three did not reveal witnessing domestic violence in her caretaker's relationship, she did reveal that she was abused by her mother's boyfriends. "Some would treat me different than my sister because she has a thin, nice body and I had that chunky figure. One of them pulled me by my hair. Another one punched me and hit me. Another one always called me names and made fun of me" (participant three). She also stated that her childhood was "tough; single mom, raising two kids, working part-time, sometimes full-time. Not easy."

**Perception of witnessing and its affects.** Even though only two participants revealed witnessing domestic violence in their caretaker's romantic relationships, all three participants stated, without any prompting and in different ways, that their childhood impacted their adult romantic relationships. In regards to all three participants, they stated they learned from the roles their caretaker's played. For example, participant three stated, "I ended up in my relationship because I didn't want to be like my mom. I didn't want to be by myself, with two kids, single, in my forty's. I did not want to be a single mom."

In regards to participants one and two, they stated that they learned from the violence they witnessed as children. Participant two stated, "I think I learned from my mom and step dad to be co-dependent. I think that's one of the main reasons why I chose who I chose to be in a relationship with. I also learned that there were reasons to be insecure; I had insecurities, my mom had a lot of insecurities." Participant one stated, "My childhood really messed with me. I was always scared because things could change at any moment. That's what I grew up seeing." She also stated "my uncle was a disgusting man. I felt like I always needed a man, and then when I was with him I'd have sex with him and that was it. I thought that was all I was for."

Participants one and two also discussed other effects of their witnessing history that impacted who they are and who they chose to be in a relationship with. For example, both participants one and two stated that as children they learned their opinions didn't matter. Participant two revealed, "my opinion growing up didn't really matter in my home, so as I grew up that's what I was used to." She followed her parent's rules and didn't go against them; she "learned to stay quiet." Participant one stated "I couldn't stand up for myself [in her domestically violent relationship] because when I stood up for myself as a kid, I'd get in trouble, so I just learned not to."

Another affect, only revealed by participant two, was a sense of normalcy in being controlled. She stated "I was used to being controlled." Thus she never saw her violent and controlling partner as a bad man because being controlled was normal to her. She stated, "I realized it was wrong when I got clean and my mind was clear."

**Counseling.** Participants were asked if they participated in any type of treatment in childhood in an attempt to better understand how their adult romantic relationships were impacted by their childhood. All three participants stated that they participated in counseling as a child. However, after further discussion it became clear that participants initially entered counseling for various reasons other than witnessing domestic violence. For example, participant three stated, "I've always been in counseling since I was really young. First, it was because my dad left, [and] then because I had ADHD. [Now] I'm in a domestic violence support group."

In regards to participants one and two though, the violence they witnessed as children was vaguely addressed in their counseling. Participant two initially stated she began counseling around the age of 15 or 16 because she felt as though she were to blame for her parents constant

arguing, she stated, after all, “that’s what my mom told me [that it was her fault]. After further discussion, participant two stated her mother put her in counseling because she “became very angry.” Thus, counseling initially began to address her anger; however, she often discussed her home life. Participant one stated she was in counseling for much of her childhood, starting in elementary school. Even though some of her home life was discussed in counseling, she initially participated because she had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Participant one stated “I told people once about what was happening, but they never found anything because my aunt covered it so well, so I got in trouble for that. After that I was scared to tell them what was going on because it would mess up things at my house.”

None of the participants felt as though they really benefited from participating in the form of counseling they received; or in the case of participant three, is currently receiving. Participant one stated “It [counseling] only half way worked because I couldn’t really say anything that was wrong with me. I was only getting partial treatment.” On the other hand, participant two stated “It [counseling] didn’t help at the time. I didn’t know anything different, so it was kind of normal.” Participant three, when asked if anything from counseling or her support group had helped her she stated, “Not really, because I’m still in counseling. I think the meds are just getting stronger. But the counselors do make me more aware of things” such as recognizing domestic violence.

**Future of their children.** After participants discussed their childhood, without any prompting, all three participants raised concern for the future of their own children. “It’s a cycle” were the words spoken by all three participants when referring to their situation in comparison to that of their parents and the future of their children. Participants recognized that they were putting their children at risk by staying in their domestically violent relationships. Participant one

stated “I’m doing exactly what my mom did. She lost custody of us [and] my dad was in and out of jail.” Participant two admitted “domestic violence has affected my child. My son acts out the way his father acted out. It’s a direct consequence from being in a violent relationship.”

Participant one later stated “I look at my son and don’t want him to be like his father and now I look at my daughter and don’t want her to be like me.” Similarly, participant three stated, “I’m afraid my daughter is going to end up dating what I dated and finding love in the wrong spot, especially if she saw some of the things her father did to me, which I think she did. She is probably going to need counseling.” She also stated, “My son will not be like his father.” In short, all three participants were able to recognize how their actions may affect their children’s future relationships.

Participants revealed that they had to make better decisions to prevent their children from having the lives they had. Participant one stated “I don’t want to be with someone who has issues...I knew my kids would grow up scared and I can’t have that...I can’t let my kids be around that. I have to break the cycle!” Similarly, participant two stated “I had to be real with myself and say if there is a one percent chance that this man is going to put his hands on me and be violent to me in front of my child ever again, I can’t take that chance. And with an abuser, with the domestic violence situation, there is more than a one percent chance that it’s going to reoccur and I just couldn’t take that.”

### **Summary and Implications**

This study intended to explore whether or not women who were in current or recent domestically violent relationships also witnessed domestic violence as children, and whether or not they readily revealed that their witnessing history impacted their adult romantic relationships.



The interviews revealed that while only two of the three participants witnessed domestic violence during their childhood, all three participants stated their childhood impacted their ability to negotiate adult romantic relationships.

In detailing their romantic relationships, all of the participants shared similar stories of abuse, which supported previous literature. For example, Von Steen (1997) stated that it is not uncommon for their adult relationships to be characterized by mistrust, low self-esteem, fear of abandonment, and especially anger. All of the participants revealed similar characteristics when detailing their romantic relationships stating “I didn’t want to be alone, raising my kids” (participants three) and “he never trusted what I told him” (participant one).

Even though participants revealed similar types of abuse (physical, verbal, and emotional), only some aspects of their childhood held true for all participants. For example, all three participants came from broken families, living with either one caregiver who had multiple partners or a caregiver who endured and perpetrated abuse. What makes each participants childhood unique is that they revealed various incidents or experiences which impacted their adult romantic relationships. For participant three, her reasoning for staying in her relationship was not wanting to end up like her mother who was single, raising two children. For participant two, it was learning from her mother to be co-dependent and insecure that influenced her choice in romantic partners. However, participant one not only witnessed domestic violence in her caretakers relationship, but she was also sexually abused by her uncle. Each participant stated, in her own way, that these various incidents and experiences affected their ability to negotiate romantic relationships in adulthood, thus, supporting previous literature which states that witnessing domestic violence affects a person’s emotional development and ability to negotiate intimate relationships as adults (Groves, 2001).

Not only were these women able to identify what childhood experiences influenced their adult romantic relationships, but they were also able to recognize the impact their relationships could have on their own children. The interviews revealed that all three participants feared for the futures of their children because of their domestically violent relationships. These women demonstrated a concern for their children and who they would “turn out to be like” because they were witness to domestic violence. All three participants stated that they had to “break the cycle.”

### **Limitations**

While the findings of this study are significant and powerful, there are some limitations to this study; the first being sample size. With only three participants, the findings cannot be generalized to the larger population of women in domestically violent relationships. It cannot be assumed that women in domestically violent relationships are able to identify childhood experiences which impacted their adult romantic relationships, and in turn, demonstrate concern for the future of their own children. The second limitation of this study is the subject matter. It was difficult to contact women to participate in this study, as many were reluctant to share their stories of domestic violence. Not all women are comfortable sharing their stories as many emotions may arise, thus influencing the sample size as well.

Another limitation to this study was the rather strict focus on *witnessing* domestic violence as affecting a women’s ability to negotiate adult romantic relationships. As the findings revealed, more than just witnessing domestic violence as a child impacted the participant’s ability to negotiate romantic relationships. Thus, future studies could expand the scope of the study to include any childhood experiences that impact the female ability to negotiate romantic

relationships because, as Linder and Collins (2005) suggests the pathway from early family violence to later partner violence may be moderated or mediated by other experiences such as drug use, family conflict, parent-child relationship, etc.

This study provided a new approach to understanding how childhood experiences, mainly witnessing domestic violence, impact an adult females ability to negotiate romantic relationships; giving women the opportunity to look back on their childhood and identify themselves what they felt impacted their recent violent relationships. Based on the findings of this study, individuals working with women in domestically violent relationships can better understand the role that childhood plays on their given situation. Understanding that domestic violence may be something that individuals grew up witnessing can help those working with this population to provide services that will address everything from childhood to their current relationship, rather than focusing so much on their present situation. It is necessary to look at the bigger picture and understand the factors that influence domestically violent relationships in order to help these individuals overcome their situations. More research to understand the varying factors which take place during childhood that influence adult romantic relationships will not only assist individuals who work with women in domestically violent relationships, but it will better inform society of the severity and complexity of domestic violence and the need to create better policies to protect women.

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## Appendix A

### Consent Form

Dear Potential Participant:

I am a student at Providence College, inviting you to participate in a study on domestic violence and the female ability to negotiate romantic relationships. Knowledge of variables that mitigate a female's ability to negotiate romantic relationships can be useful to those in helping professions such as social work. Data gathered in this study will be reported in a thesis paper for Providence College, and no identifying information will be reported.

Participation will involve answering questions related to current or recent domestically violent romantic relationships and life while living with primary caretakers. The interviews will be recorded using an audio recorder and the tapes will be destroyed once the data is transcribed. Interviews will last up to one hour.

There are no anticipated significant risks associated with involvement in this research. There is always the possibility that uncomfortable or stressful memories or emotions may arise while talking about present or past experiences of domestic violence. Participants are free to decline participation in this study at any time.

Benefits of participating in this study also include contributing to the generation of knowledge that may aid in work with others in the future who experience domestically violent relationships.

Confidentiality will be protected by storing signed consent forms separately from data obtained in the study. Once the data is obtained, all identifying information linking the participant to her response will be destroyed so that responses can no longer be identified with individuals. Data will be reported by making generalizations of all of the data that has been gathered. Brief excerpts of individual responses may be quoted without any personal identifying information.

Participation in this study is voluntary. A decision to decline to participate will not have any negative effects for you or influence your relationship with the state department of children, youth, and families; or the family visitation program. You may withdraw from the study at any time up until Thursday, March 22<sup>nd</sup> when the researcher will finalize the data.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Thank you for participating in this study.

Kimberly Rodrigues, Social Work Student, 401-699-7891, krodrig5@friars.providence.edu

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Name

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Date

PLEASE KEEP A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

Age:

Ethnicity:

1. Can you describe your current or most recent romantic relationship? And state whether it is a current relationship or recent relationship.
  - a. Can you elaborate on the domestic violence which existed in this relationship?
    - Your partner in this relationship, is he the father of your child?
2. What was your childhood like while living with your caretakers?
  - a. Can you describe your caretaker's romantic relationship?
    - i. (if subject reveals domestic violence in her caretaker's romantic relationship...)
      - Can you describe the violence which you were witness to? (ex. Type, frequency, etc.)
      - Age of witnessing
    - ii. Did you participate in any type of treatment to understand or cope with the domestic violence which you were witness to?
      - What was valuable about the treatment?
      - What did you learn?
      - Has it been helpful currently?