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**Exploring the belief systems of domestic abuse victims: An  
exploratory study**

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Support service provisions for domestic abuse victims has typically focused on the immediate risk and etiological factors associated with abuse. Consequently, there is limited research exploring more persistent and pervasive factors involved in this cycle of abuse, such as subjective experiences and beliefs held by victims of domestic abuse. The current study is a preliminary exploration of the individual experience of domestic abuse including the belief systems of participants. Increasing our understanding of key factors and beliefs in the experience of domestic abuse could enable support services to create more long-term sustainable support for victims.

**Methodology:** Twelve women with a history of domestic abuse participated in an exploratory interview about their general beliefs and thoughts surrounding their domestic abuse experience. Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Findings:** The thematic analysis identified four belief themes: (1) personal responsibility, (2) antisocial attitudes, (3) environmental factors, and (4) negative attitudes toward police.

### Practical Implications:

- Highlights the value of understanding subjective, personalized experiences and beliefs of domestic abuse victims.
- Identifies the importance of belief systems as potential treatment targets for domestic abuse victims.
- Acknowledges an avenue for more effective support provision for victims of domestic abuse.

**Originality:** This preliminary study offers new insights into the role of belief systems amongst a sample of domestically abused women. Understanding the significance of personalized, subjective experiences of domestic abuse victims is a step towards designing and implementing effective interventions. The findings further emphasize the need for more empirical research and theory development within the area of beliefs and domestic abuse victims.

### Exploring the belief systems of domestic abuse victims: An exploratory study

Over two million women are victims of domestic abuse every year in the UK, with one in four experiencing some form of abuse in their lifetime (Office for National Statistics, 2013). Domestic abuse is defined by the Home Office (2013) as violence of any description that occurs between partners who are, or were, in an intimate relationship. The definition of abuse can include (but is not limited to) physical, sexual, emotional, and verbal abuse. Domestic abuse also comes at a high financial price to the criminal justice system, health and community services. In particular, the UK spends an estimated £3.1 billion every year addressing domestic abuse, with a further loss of £2.7 billion to the economy due to women's inability to work whilst recovering from injuries (Walby, 2004). In addition to the economic costs, the personal cost to victims can be extensive given the impact domestic abuse can have on victims' psychological, emotional and interpersonal welfare (Cohen, Miller, & Rossman, 1994). Thus, it is clear that the overarching impact of domestic abuse has considerable implications for victims, the wider community, and the economy.

Currently, support service provisions for domestic abuse victims have focused on providing immediate emotional, practical and professional assistance (Spruin, Alleyne, & Papadaki, 2015). However, these services are often generalized and short term, lacking a more specialist tailored approach (Coy & Kelly, 2009) to provide victims with individualized help that responds to long-term outcomes. Therefore, there is a need for support services to offer greater longstanding, person-centred care (Hester & Westmorland, 2005).

One pathway for developing these effective long-term strategies is to identify key beliefs and elements implicated in the experience of domestic abuse victims as potential targets for interventions. Belief systems are important to address given they form the foundation for the way a person perceives and views the world (Schwitzgebel, 2001). For

1  
2  
3 example, negative beliefs play a fundamental role in the maintenance of longstanding  
4  
5 problems, whilst other beliefs are thought to alleviate the sequelae of such, oftentimes,  
6  
7 unavoidable problems (Beck et al., 1990). Research has further found that some of the most  
8  
9 effective treatment outcomes are a result of changing maladaptive beliefs, and building more  
10  
11 adaptive ones (Padesky, 1994). Accordingly, if the belief patterns common to domestic abuse  
12  
13 victims could be identified, support services can then develop treatment strategies to address  
14  
15 maladaptive beliefs, which have often been implicated in maintaining the cycle of abuse. So  
16  
17 the aim of this exploratory study was to qualitatively evaluate these beliefs in a sample of  
18  
19 women with prior experiences of domestic abuse.  
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### 25 **Current Support Service Provisions**

26  
27 Research to date has identified specific risk factors that increase the likelihood of an  
28  
29 individual experiencing an abusive relationship. These include: individual risk factors (e.g.  
30  
31 low academic achievement, unemployment and economic stress; Center for Disease Control  
32  
33 and Prevention, 2015), and developmental risk factors (e.g. experiencing childhood abuse,  
34  
35 growing up in a household where domestic violence occurred and previous experiences of  
36  
37 other forms of violence; Garcia-Moreno et al, 2006). To explain the process of how such risk  
38  
39 factors mediate the on-going cycle of domestic abuse, Walker (1979) developed a model  
40  
41 containing three phases: (1) *tension building*, (2) *acute battering*, and (3) the *honeymoon*  
42  
43 *phase*. The *tension-building* phase refers to the build of strain in the relationship over  
44  
45 common domestic issues (e.g. money, children, employment). This build-up of strain then  
46  
47 ‘boils over’, resulting in the *acute battering* phase. This is then followed by the *honeymoon*  
48  
49 *phase*, whereby the abuser apologizes for their behavior and convinces their partner it will  
50  
51 not happen again, strengthening the bond between them. This cycle continues over and over,  
52  
53 each time reinforcing the victim’s false beliefs about the relationship (Engel, 2005).  
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3 The cycle of abuse and its associated risk factors are widely used as the basis for the  
4  
5 current services offered by support agencies. This is exemplified by the immediacy and  
6  
7 urgency in the timeline of support offered, for example, when exiting the relationship and  
8  
9 breaking the cycle of abuse (Spruin et al., 2015). Currently in the UK, support services for  
10  
11 victims of domestic abuse tend to focus on immediate and professional support (Spruin et al.,  
12  
13 2015). Immediate support encompasses a number of instrumental services such as emergency  
14  
15 helplines, refuges, temporary accommodation and support workers (Refuge, 2015), alongside  
16  
17 professional and pastoral support, such as legal and counselling services (Henning & Klesges,  
18  
19 2002). Whilst these factors are important for victims, they might not be sufficient in breaking  
20  
21 the cycle of abuse long-term. In particular, short term support might not effectively address  
22  
23 long-standing factors known to play a key part in domestic violence and abuse (e.g., negative  
24  
25 beliefs; Russell, Chapleau & Kraus, 2015; Martin et al., 2000), as it fails to address the belief  
26  
27 systems and personal experiences of the victim that reinforce the domestic abuse relationship,  
28  
29 and ultimately results in the victim staying with the perpetrator (Dutton & Golant, 1997).  
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### 36 **The Role of Beliefs in Perpetuating the Risk of Abuse**

37  
38 Powell and Smith (2011) argue that understanding and addressing an individual's  
39  
40 experience of domestic abuse is vital due to the differences in victim experiences. In  
41  
42 addition, research by Henning and Klesges (2002) found that out of a sample of 1,756 women  
43  
44 who identified as being a victim of domestic abuse, only 14.9% of these women reported  
45  
46 using available support services. A barrier to accessing such support services was described  
47  
48 by these women, as the belief that services lacked the provision for personalized support, and  
49  
50 instead provided a rather generic 'one-size-fits-all' approach. This further illustrates the need  
51  
52 for support services to understand the subjective experience of victims to address them  
53  
54 through individually tailored help.  
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3 With maladaptive beliefs having been identified as some of the most pervasive risk  
4 factors, the most effective response to creating long-term change in domestic abuse victims  
5 may well be an ability to address these beliefs directly (Padesky, 1994). Stalans and Finn  
6 (2006) highlight that many domestic abuse victims express negative attitudes towards police  
7 officers, often viewing them as unsympathetic or lacking empathy (Stalans & Finn, 2006).  
8 Similarly, research has found that victims hold negative beliefs about themselves, believing  
9 that they are helpless (Tan, Basta, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995) or to blame for their  
10 victimization (Street & Arias, 2001).  
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21 In line with the above, some studies have started to investigate the specific thoughts  
22 and beliefs that facilitate the traumatic cycle of domestic abuse. Hyde-Nolan and Juliao  
23 (2012) found a relationship between remaining in and/or returning to an abusive relationship,  
24 and the theory of learned helplessness (i.e., attempts to escape/avoid future instances of abuse  
25 are learned to be no longer effective after having past experiences of abuse). These findings  
26 may possibly be a consequence of the domestic abuse victim having experienced repeated  
27 acts of abuse, becoming passive and believing there is nothing they can do to avoid the abuse.  
28 With such beliefs argued to be entrenched in a victim's schemas, they influence the victim to  
29 stay in (or return to) an abusive relationship (McPherson Halket, Gormley, Mello, Rosenthal  
30 & Mirkin, 2014).  
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43 In addition to beliefs about control in relationships, beliefs about opportunities can  
44 also impact a victim's decision to stay in an abusive relationship. Spruin and colleagues  
45 (2015) identified three themes that were important in the sense-making process of their  
46 participants, all of whom were victims of domestic abuse: (1) the quality of their first intimate  
47 relationship (2) their perceptions of their quality of life prior to the domestic abuse, and (3)  
48 their perception of the support services available during and/or post- abusive experiences.  
49 One particular factor that emerged in this study was the need for more support that focused  
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3 on education and occupational issues. These findings suggest that the likelihood of leaving  
4 and/or returning to an abusive relationship is inter-twined with perceived opportunities. It  
5 could also be argued that the beliefs which abuse victims have about future opportunities,  
6 compounded by negative belief systems about themselves, may have a considerable impact  
7 on their willingness to leave a domestic abuse relationship.  
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14 Overall, there is clear evidence showing the importance of increasing our  
15 understanding into the specific role that beliefs play in the cycle of domestic abuse as well as  
16 the individual experience of women who have experienced domestic abuse. Developing from  
17 this understanding could enable support services to create more long-term individualized  
18 support strategies for victims (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004). This, in turn, could  
19 provide opportunities for the victim to develop from, and rebuild towards more positive and  
20 adaptive belief systems.  
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### 32 **The Current Study**

33  
34 The current study aims to provide a preliminary investigation into the personal  
35 experiences, and key beliefs of domestic abuse victims (Oliveira, Viegas, Santos, Silveira, &  
36 Elias, 2015). The results will therefore complement existing research by providing a starting  
37 point into a greater understanding of the beliefs of these women. This insight could help  
38 support services to identify new provisions of support for domestically abused women and to  
39 allow them to recover and rebuild their lives in a more sustainable way (Murray et al., 2015).  
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### 51 **Methods**

#### 52 **Participants**

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54 Twelve women with a history of domestic abuse were recruited via a local abuse  
55 support centre ( $n = 12$ ) in South East England. At the time of data collection, participants  
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3 were attending a support group for their past abuse. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 55  
4  
5 ( $M = 28.95$ ,  $SD = 10.67$ ), with ethnicities including: White British ( $n = 9$ ) and Black British  
6  
7 ( $n = 3$ ). The majority of participants ( $n = 8$ ) indicated they were unemployed, whilst the  
8  
9 remaining participants stated they were currently in part-time ( $n = 2$ ) or full-time ( $n = 2$ )  
10  
11 employment. Half of the participants ( $n = 6$ ) indicated completion of secondary school or  
12  
13 equivalent, whilst half stated that they had obtained a university qualification ( $n = 6$ ). The  
14  
15 majority of participants reported being single ( $n = 8$ ) with an equal number of participants  
16  
17 stating they were in a relationship ( $n = 2$ ) or married ( $n = 2$ ).  
18  
19

### 20 21 **Data Collection**

22  
23 As the study was exploratory, women were interviewed using a semi-structured  
24  
25 design, whereby participants were asked about their general beliefs and thoughts surrounding  
26  
27 their experiences of domestic abuse and follow up questions were asked for further  
28  
29 elaboration/clarification. This enabled the collection of rich and detailed qualitative data for  
30  
31 the analysis. This method of interview was utilized as it is particularly valuable during early  
32  
33 stages of research to identify key themes within certain groups of people (Streatfield &  
34  
35 Markless, 2012). Bryman (2012) argues that using approaches that focus on the perspective  
36  
37 of the participants allows for more in depth data to emerge and for participants to be able to  
38  
39 express their opinions more freely. Interviews varied in length from 15 to 30 minutes,  
40  
41 depending on the amount of detail that each participant was comfortable to provide during the  
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43 interview process.  
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### 49 50 **Procedure**

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52 The University Research Ethics Committee approved the study, following which data  
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54 were collected from a local domestic abuse support center. To be eligible to participate in the  
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56 study, women had to be aged 18 years or older, emotionally stable, fluent in English and  
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3 willing to answer questions about an episode of domestic abuse (in the past or currently).

4  
5 Participants were advised that an 'episode of domestic abuse' was defined as any violence  
6  
7 perpetrated by an intimate partner including, physical, verbal and sexual violence  
8  
9 (Shrivastava & Shrivastava, 2013). Emotional stability of participants referred to their ability  
10  
11 to remain calm and settled when discussing personal incidents of domestic abuse to ensure all  
12  
13 participants felt able and comfortable to disclose details of their abusive experiences. If any  
14  
15 participant felt that disclosing these details would cause them distress, they were thanked for  
16  
17 meeting with the researchers and advised they would not be required to participate further in  
18  
19 the study.  
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22  
23 Participants who met the inclusion criteria were provided with a full verbal briefing  
24  
25 regarding the purpose of the research and provided with an information sheet regarding the  
26  
27 purpose of the study. If participants agreed to take part in the study, they were asked to read  
28  
29 and sign a consent form, and were given a participant number to ensure confidentiality. In  
30  
31 addition to the information sheet provided, the researcher also verbally explained to all  
32  
33 participants that their responses were confidential and only the researchers involved with the  
34  
35 study would be aware of their identities. The interview commenced once a participant signed  
36  
37 the consent form. Upon completion of the interview, all participants were debriefed and  
38  
39 thanked for their assistance with the research.  
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#### 45 46 **Data Analysis**

47  
48 Thematic analysis was used to identify themes within the interviews. This method of  
49  
50 analysis was utilized as it goes beyond the basic premise of counting phrases or words within  
51  
52 data, and instead identifies implicit and explicit themes, thereby capturing the intricacies of  
53  
54 meaning within data (Guest, Macqueen, & Namey, 2012; Wilkinson, 2000). This particular  
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3 method has been shown to be useful during preliminary and exploratory research (Braun &  
4  
5 Clarke, 2006).

6  
7 Two researchers independently analyzed all 12 interviews using Luborsky's (1994)  
8  
9 technique, which is suitable for analyzing qualitative data obtained from various interview  
10  
11 methods. The analysis of the interview transcripts involved identifying comment themes  
12  
13 expressed by the participants. If both researchers were in agreement about an identified  
14  
15 theme, the theme was viewed as valid. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved, or  
16  
17 accommodated through further refinement of the coding framework.  
18  
19

## 20 21 22 23 **Results**

24  
25 Results from the thematic analysis indicated four belief system themes: (1) *personal*  
26  
27 *responsibility*, (2) *antisocial attitude*, (3) *environmental factors* and (4) *negative attitudes*  
28  
29 *towards the police*. Each of the four themes are presented in more detail below, supported by  
30  
31 excerpts from the interviews.  
32  
33

### 34 35 36 **Personal responsibility**

37  
38 This theme seems rooted in the participants' belief system that they were responsible  
39  
40 for their abusive experience(s), resulting in the individual believing they had instigated, or  
41  
42 somehow facilitated their abuse. Participants viewed themselves as *not prepared* in life or  
43  
44 able to find adequate employment, due to believing they are *not clever* enough, or as  
45  
46 knowledgeable as everyone else. For example, one participant stated: "*I left school a month*  
47  
48 *before my baby was born, I hated it! I couldn't keep up and was always left behind, so I left*"  
49  
50 (P3). The participant went on to blame herself for leaving school and staying with her abuser  
51  
52 because she "*...couldn't find a job after that, no one wants to hire a thick kid with a kid*"  
53  
54 (P3).  
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3 Maladaptive thoughts such as this one led to feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy.

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5 For example, one participant stated: *"I used to blame myself because I used to be told it's my*  
6  
7 *fault... My dad would tell me I did something during the day or I bullied my sister so... that*  
8  
9 *was my punishment..." (P1).* Another participant explained how she began to blame herself  
10  
11 for other events in her life. For example, when her child was born she was deeply concerned  
12  
13 about her own ability to keep her baby well and happy, stating that *"...if he comes out with*  
14  
15 *something wrong with him, it's my fault" (P10).* She also discussed how these self-blaming  
16  
17 thoughts led her to wonder *"...is he ok, is he all right? Is he this? Is he that? And wasn't like*  
18  
19 *that I needed to hold him but that had to make sure that he's ok" (P10).*  
20  
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23  
24 This theme provides an example illustration of the importance of understanding the  
25  
26 negative beliefs implicated in domestic abuse experiences, but also how these beliefs have  
27  
28 developed.  
29

### 30 31 **Antisocial attitudes**

32  
33 This theme appears to be embedded within participants' beliefs with regard to  
34  
35 breaking the law and towards compliance with prevailing rules and moral standards, e.g. the  
36  
37 belief that *stealing* or *breaking the law* is understandable within certain circumstances. In  
38  
39 particular, women with these beliefs tended to feel let down by the institutional authority, and  
40  
41 as a result, refused to follow conventional standards, replacing them with personal authority.  
42  
43 These types of beliefs were highlighted when one participant was asked about life leading up  
44  
45 to their domestic victimization. She recalled how tough it was at the time *"having recently*  
46  
47 *getting done for fraud" (P8),* and went on to explain how the authorities made things difficult  
48  
49 for her and her partner:  
50  
51

52  
53 *"I didn't inform the council that my partner was doing agency work, so every time he*  
54  
55 *only worked one or two days, if I had told the council they would have taken away my*  
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3 *benefits and it's just a long process, they don't think that he was only getting stupid*  
4  
5 *money. It's wrong that I got done for a crime" (P8).*  
6

7 In the context of domestic abuse, participants felt that societal and conventional  
8 norms had failed them, and forced circumstances upon them. As a result, they were more  
9 likely to exhibit antisocial and illegitimate thoughts and behaviors. This becomes clear in the  
10 following quote:  
11

12  
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14  
15  
16 *"I got expelled from school at the age of 12 and then I never went into education*  
17 *afterwards. No school would let me in for what I was expelled for, and from then, I*  
18 *started getting into trouble all the time... I got a prison sentence at 15 and then left*  
19 *home at 16" (P12).*  
20  
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24 Similarly, when talking about the circumstances leading up to her abuse, another participant  
25 explained:  
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28  
29 *"I got in with the wrong crowd and met these boys and I was seeing one of them and*  
30 *there was another and they were into like...bad things really, like criminal activity,*  
31 *drugs and stuff like that and I got myself into that and that's how I ended up in prison*  
32 *and yeah..." (P5).*  
33  
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37

### 38 **Environmental factors**

39  
40 Some women expressed feelings of powerlessness with regard to environmental  
41 factors, which ultimately led to their experience of domestic abuse. An extension of this  
42 perceived lack of power or external locus of control can be seen in women's beliefs about the  
43 *lack of opportunities and support* available to them. For example, one participant described a  
44 lack of support she had received in caring for her mum who had chronic kidney disease, "*I*  
45 *had been looking after her until last year when she died, I had a lot stress worrying about my*  
46 *mom, it was just me looking after her full-time" (P11).* Whilst another participant commented  
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3 on the lack of educational opportunities growing up, *“I got expelled from school at the age of*  
4  
5 *12 and then I never went back because no school would let me in after that” (P4).*  
6  
7

8 The presence of such experiences resulted in an overall negative outlook on their  
9  
10 environment, and contributed to a feeling of powerlessness when faced with escaping their  
11  
12 abusive situation. In particular, one participant described her life around the time of her  
13  
14 victimization:  
15

16  
17 *“I was out of work, because a lot of places don’t want to take a single parent with*  
18  
19 *school aged children. So because she is not in secondary school I am deemed not*  
20  
21 *responsible enough...they are constantly sick according to most employers” (P4).*  
22

23 Similarly, another participant went on to discuss all the problems she was experiencing:  
24

25  
26 *“Quite a lot was going on, like I said, my mom was ill and just really a lot of*  
27  
28 *problems all around, my neighbor committed suicide. She jumped of the building*  
29  
30 *where she lives, that was quite bad. Around the same time I had three close friends*  
31  
32 *die as well. So it was all quite difficult” (P11).*  
33

34  
35 Such accounts illustrate further how the subjective experience of participants can impact on  
36  
37 the development of negative thoughts around societal support. They also illustrate the  
38  
39 facilitative role feelings of powerlessness has in the maintenance of domestic abuse.  
40

41 Likewise, these negative thoughts could also heighten the negative reality of participants’  
42  
43 circumstances.  
44  
45

#### 46 47 48 **Negative attitudes towards the police** 49

50 This theme illustrates participants’ negative attitudes towards the police and other  
51  
52 agencies based on previous experiences of interactions with law enforcement agencies and/or  
53  
54 authority figures resulting in negative outcomes for the individual. Subsequently, these  
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3 experiences led to negative beliefs about such agencies. For instance, one participant  
4  
5 explained how she blamed the authorities for her hard childhood:

6  
7 *“Hmm... I had a good childhood, but then when I was around 8 the authorities took*  
8  
9 *me out of my dad and my mum’s care, only to be passed around the family and to then*  
10  
11 *be taken into foster care... It had a negative effect on the rest of my life really” (P2).*

12  
13  
14 The participant further disclosed how her interactions with the police later on in life  
15  
16 reinforced her negative perceptions of law enforcement. For example, she described having  
17  
18 contacted the police a number of times about her abuser and already had *“...a lot of things*  
19  
20 *put in place, such as injunctions, and stuff like that” (P2)*, but it did not stop the abuse.

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22  
23 Similarly, another participant stated that as a child she tried to explain to teachers that  
24  
25 she was being bullied, but the teachers seemed uninterested: *“no one understood but I was*  
26  
27 *trying to talk with them, I was just another colored book...All my life I’ve been picked on”*  
28  
29 *(P1)*. Whilst another participant described how she was unfairly targeted by the police,  
30  
31 leading to her arrest:

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33  
34 *“Yeah and then there was one day where they just picked me up on the street and said*  
35  
36 *they had me on surveillance and they had a lot of evidence against me and when I*  
37  
38 *went to court and was found guilty, that was it, I got 5 and a half years” (P9).*

39  
40  
41 Similarly, when one participant was asked about why she did not report her abuse to  
42  
43 the police, she responded by saying *“I was scared of social services and the police, making*  
44  
45 *issues about my children and taking them off me” (P12).*

46  
47  
48 This theme, in line with the previous ones, clearly illustrates the need to understand  
49  
50 subjective experiences of victims of domestic abuse to be able to address the resulting  
51  
52 negative thoughts on an individual basis and supporting long-term well-being of victims.  
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## 55 56 57 58 Discussion



1  
2  
3 The purpose of this study was to conduct an exploratory investigation into the  
4 experiences and belief systems of women who have experienced domestic abuse. It was  
5 proposed that this new insight could aid in the future development of personalized support for  
6 domestic abuse victims. The results from this study centred around four key belief themes:  
7 (1) *personal responsibility*, (2) *antisocial attitude*, (3) *environmental factors* and (4) *negative*  
8 *attitudes towards police*. These themes are in line with previous research, which has  
9 identified similar beliefs in domestic abuse victims, and highlights the interplay between such  
10 beliefs and participants' individual experiences prior to and during the abuse.  
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21 In particular, previous research has indicated that many domestic abuse victims  
22 believe they are personally responsible for the abuse they endure (Gangoli, Razak, &  
23 McCarry, 2006), and this expression of self-blame was also highlighted in the current study.  
24 Whilst support services (e.g., Women's Aid, 2015) continually remind victims they are never  
25 to blame for their abuse, this might not be sufficient to counter pervasive personal  
26 experiences, which support women's subjective interpretations of their situations. Little  
27 emphasis is placed on supporting victims in developing the psychological tools to help them  
28 understand why they feel personally responsible, and more importantly, how they can change  
29 and reinterpret their personal experiences and feelings of self-blame (Gracia & Tomas, 2014).  
30 The current study suggests that victims of domestic abuse might benefit from more  
31 psychological assistance to help them counteract the misattribution of self-blame. A program  
32 facilitating such attitudinal change could ultimately contribute to abuse victims developing  
33 more long-lasting positive attitudes and self-appraisals.  
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50 The current study further highlights the potential link between long-standing  
51 antisocial attitudes related to experiences of domestic abuse. For example, the National  
52 Institute for Core and Excellence (NICE) review (2013) found evidence to suggest a higher  
53 than average prevalence of antisocial attitudes in domestic abuse victims. These attitudes are  
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3 often transmitted during childhood, when children are exposed to criminogenic attitudes,  
4 values and beliefs (Guy, Feinstein & Griffiths, 2014). Similarly, Geffner and colleagues  
5 (2003) found that children who witnessed domestic violence on a regular basis, developed  
6 greater antisocial attitudes and behaviours in adulthood, when compared to children from  
7 non-violent homes. The current study offers a starting point in unraveling what appears to be  
8 a complex mix of disillusionment, lost opportunities and alternative choices.  
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16 Many victims of domestic abuse also struggle with feelings of helplessness within  
17 their environment. It has been proposed that such feelings are often learnt as a result of  
18 repeated incidents of abuse, and the level of control exerted by the abuser (Hyde-Nolan &  
19 Juliao, 2012). However, the current study suggests that this might well have been developed  
20 prior to the abuse starting. Many participants reported feelings of helplessness and loneliness  
21 from a young age onwards. This is a significant finding. If it is the case that helplessness is  
22 developed prior to experiencing domestic abuse, it is important that support services tackle  
23 the individual situations that have led participants to develop such feelings in addition to the  
24 characteristics of the abuse itself.  
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36 In addition, support services often emphasize the importance of social support  
37 networks, and how they are fundamental in a victim's ability to recover from intimate partner  
38 abuse (Tan et al., 1995). Social support has been found to improve the mental health of  
39 domestically abused women (Kocot & Goodman, 2003) and increase an individual's level of  
40 self-esteem as well as their ability to overcome feelings of helplessness (Mitchell & Hodson,  
41 1983), whilst, without the presence of social support, the likelihood of a victim returning to  
42 their abusive relationship is high (Walby & Allen, 2004). Ultimately, negative experiences as  
43 a result of a lack of support could result in a victim further feeling helpless and lacking  
44 control (Spruin et al., 2015).  
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3 The last theme that emerged in the current study relates to the beliefs and attitudes  
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5 abuse victims hold towards police officers' involved in their domestic abuse case. In  
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7 particular, this theme identified victims holding negative attitudes towards the police and  
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9 other agencies due to disappointing, or frustrating experiences, resulting in some victims  
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11 stating they are now less likely to seek help from the police or other authorities. This is in line  
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13 with previous research which found that victims are often skeptical of police (Lonsway,  
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15 Archambault, & Lisak, 2009) and fear that they will be shamed, disbelieved, coerced,  
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17 retraumatized, or dismissed (Ahrens, Campbell, Ternice-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007;  
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19 Patterson, Greeson, & Campbell, 2009). Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC,  
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21 2014) conducted a study of over 500 victims of domestic abuse. Whilst 79% of victims who  
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23 had reported an incident to the police were satisfied with the initial police response, one third  
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25 of victims stated that they did not feel safer, and in fact some felt less safe after the initial  
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27 response. The majority of victims who felt less safe, attributed these feelings to poor police  
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29 attitudes to victims, feeling judged and a lack of empathy and understanding.  
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34 Recently, the City of London's Police (2014) report on domestic violence stated that  
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36 the response to domestic abuse was not up to standard. The report stated that one of the key  
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38 contributing factors in the poor response to domestic abuse, were police officers lack of skill  
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40 and knowledge in engaging competently with victims of domestic abuse (HMIC, 2014).  
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42 Subsequently, HMIC developed a set of recommendations for the Police Service to help in  
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44 making long-term differences in the way the service prioritizes and responds to domestic  
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46 abuse. One of these recommendations included police to work with partnering organizations  
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48 to help support victims through the criminal justice process. If this were to occur, the  
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50 negative attitudes police may have towards abuse victims could be transformed into more  
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52 positive attitudes. However, this might not be sufficient as participants in the current study  
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54 reported deep-rooted distrust of outside agencies often based on previous experiences that  
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3 occurred before the domestic abuse incidents. This may suggest that some women who  
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5 experience domestic abuse might not seek help from such agencies. To break the cycle of  
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7 abuse, participants might need individualized help to address and re-evaluate such beliefs to  
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9 allow them to seek help in the future if needed.  
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11 Although this current research sets the groundwork to further understand the different  
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13 beliefs domestically abused women may hold, there are still a number of considerations that  
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15 need to be addressed. Firstly, this study is an exploratory, qualitative investigation. As such,  
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17 it offers personal insights into the subjective experience of victims of domestic abuse.  
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19 However, while the sample size is appropriate for the current methodology, future research  
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21 should be carried out with larger and more diverse samples (e.g., including males,  
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23 comparison groups, wider geographical area) to test for the applicability of the findings. With  
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25 that, the length of the interviews within the study were brief (15 – 30 minutes) when  
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27 compared to the average research interview, which takes between 30 minutes to several hours  
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29 to complete (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Subsequent research therefore needs to be  
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31 conducted using different interview approaches and methodologies (e.g., quantitative  
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33 methods) before any generalizations can be determined. Secondly, the current study was an  
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35 exploratory design with a view to identifying the gaps in the literature, and describing the  
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37 need for further research. Accordingly, the current findings should be viewed as the first step  
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39 towards understanding the beliefs held by abuse victims, and how these beliefs may impact  
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41 on current and future abuse experiences. Furthermore, research in this area could also begin  
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43 to develop an evidence-based model that domestic abuse services can draw upon, to help  
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45 inform individualized and long-lasting psychological provisions.  
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51 Given the exploratory nature of this study, this study provides preliminary insights  
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53 into the thinking styles of domestic abuse victims. The study highlights the importance of  
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55 considering the long-standing and personalized beliefs and experiences of abuse victims.  
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3 However, the results of the study need to be viewed with caution, and further research is  
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5 needed in the area before any definitive conclusions can be made.  
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