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# The Treatment Experiences of Female Domestic Violence Offenders Who Have Completed Court-Mandated Counseling Programs

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Abstract

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MS, University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, 2021

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## Abstract

Domestic violence is a significant societal problem. However, aspects of domestic violence (DV) perpetrated by women are often overlooked or inadequately addressed in existing counseling and intervention programs, leaving counselor educators ill-equipped to effectively train counselors to treat this specific population. The research question addressed the treatment experiences of female DV offenders who completed court-mandated counseling programs. Given the limited current research on female domestic violence offender treatment, Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was employed to further understand the perspectives of participants, potentially identifying areas of improvement and addressing the needs of female program participants. Semistructured interviews were completed with six participants, data were iteratively analyzed using Van Manen's thematic analysis, and guided by the principles of the hermeneutic circle, to identify common themes and patterns within the narratives of participant treatment experiences. Key findings include navigating treatment barriers and initial resistance, cycles of trauma, gender dynamics in treatment, and transformation through supportive therapeutic relationships. This study contributes to DV literature, offering recommendations for tailored intervention programs for this population. Findings, revealing positive transformative change, practical skills development, healing from trauma, and the fostering of healthier relationships, provide insights for better equipping counselors. This qualitative research contributes to social change by informing treatment outcomes, policies, and interventions at individual and societal levels.

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# Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Kaleb; my mother, Susan; my sister, Brooke; my late father, Roy; and my late stepfather, Michael. You all have supported me without question throughout all my academic and career endeavors. I am forever grateful for all your guidance and listening to me vent about balancing school, work and life whenever I felt I was becoming overwhelmed. All your understanding and ability to lift me up when I had fallen has kept me moving forward, and I am honored to have you all in my life. I must also add a dedication to my best fur-companions, Yama, Clutch, and Misa, who spent countless hours by my side during this process.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

## Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) is a social issue that has historically focused on the patriarchal perceptions of male control over female victims (Bijlsma et al., 2022; Widom & Osborn, 2021). Though there is research related to DV, currently, there are limited articles that explore the experiences of DV offenders who have completed court-mandated programs, especially the experiences of female offenders. This is a problem for the field of counselor education and supervision because, without this information, they may be underprepared to train counselors on how to treat and provide more tailored intervention services to female DV offenders. The social implications of this study include increased knowledge and further understanding of the needs of female DV offenders to ensure more tailored intervention programs for this specific population, which may increase professional understanding of recidivism reduction and reduction of violence in homes.

In this study, I provide an understanding of the treatment experiences of female DV offenders after completion of a court-mandated counseling program. This chapter includes the problem statement, purpose, research question, and conceptual frameworks. Additionally, essential definitions, delimitations, limitations, and a discussion of the significance of the study are provided.

## Background

Literature that is relevant to the effectiveness or recidivism reduction of court-mandated DV intervention programs is present in more significant numbers than focusing on the experiences of the participants (Munro & Sellbom, 2022; Murphy et al., 2020; Portnoy & Murphy, 2020). There is limited previous literature that focuses on the treatment experiences of participants. A study that focuses on the treatment experiences of female DV offenders creates an opportunity for an increased understanding of the needs of female program participants and their perception of treatment options.

Avnaim et al. (2022) focused on 51 women undergoing treatment for intimate partner violence (IPV) perpetration and how they perceived their abusive behavior. The connection between offender perspectives on IPV, and additional mental health difficulties, emotion dysregulation, and relationship dysfunction, were reviewed. Gender differences in outcome expectancies were also examined in immediate reactions after IPV perpetration and the correlation in motivation to change. The researchers found positive outcome expectancies correlated with positive immediate reactions after the offense and less motivation for change. Positive expectancies included feelings of exhilaration, successful communication of distress, or having their partner comply with demands. An increased likelihood of mental health issues was found in this instance, and few differences were found between genders in how the consequences of their abusive actions were viewed.

Becker et al. (2024) focused on exploring the adverse childhood experiences and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 86 women who used force in their intimate relationships to further understand the relationship between trauma and abuse. The researchers found that there was a strong relationship between trauma and the use of force by women in their intimate relationships. These findings were indicated as lasting effects from childhood experiences that influenced healthy cognition and reactivity due to disruption of healthy cognition and difficulty with emotional regulation that increased the risk of forceful behavior in intimate relationships. The researchers discussed the lack of court-mandated treatment programs for IPV for women to address underlying symptoms and trauma that impact the actions of the participants. It was noted that there was a need for further research on the needs of female participants and support for trauma and stressor interventions that consider female use of force in intimate relationships.

Bijlsma et al. (2022) focused on exploring the differences between male and female DV offenders and how different risk factors impacted treatment progress or dropout rates. The researchers found differences in criminogenic risk factors for both male and female offenders that included criminal history, substance abuse, and criminal mindset for males. The researchers described level of education, work/financial stability (including unemployment), lack of personal support, and living stability and environment as the main risk factors for dropout during treatment. Their study also provided information for improving treatment for males and females by addressing risk factors for each gender to decrease dropout during treatment.

Munro and Sellbom (2022) conducted a quantitative study to identify the relationship between borderline personality disorder (BPD) and IPV intervention program outcomes among men, including rearrest and recidivism. Results from this study showed that IPV offenders with BPD symptoms were at higher risk of failing to complete treatment and were more likely to engage in violence in a 1-year follow-up period. The researchers also found that offenders with BPD were more likely to have higher recidivism rates within a 1-year follow-up period as well. Considering this condition when assessing and treating offenders was identified as part of future research for the effectiveness of intervention programs. Gender differences were noted to be part of the implication for future research for the exploration of treatment outcomes related to female offenders with a history of BPD.

Murphy et al. (2020) focused on the effectiveness of group versus individual cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) program interventions with DV offenders in 46 males. After a 12-month follow-up period, researchers examined self and partner-reported violence and legal records, which showed that individual CBT appeared to be more effective than group CBT in preventing rearrest or legal issues involving DV. Future research implications included cultural adaptations to test effectiveness, exploration of different theoretical approaches, and the impact of recidivism reduction in participants. The article related to the current study because the experiences of participants in a group versus an individual setting directly related to the offender's experience and how those settings impacted their personal experiences in intervention

programs. The researchers highlighted the need for further research with more diverse populations and culturally sensitive interventions because the sample's primary composition consisted of Non-Hispanic White (45.2%) and African American (42.9%) individuals.

Portnoy and Murphy (2020) conducted a qualitative study of the experiences of male DV reoffenders in treatment to gain insight into treatment program effectiveness. The authors interviewed 11 male participants who had a history of IPV perpetration and reoffense posttreatment. Individual interviews were completed with participants who had reoffended after completing the Alternative to Incarceration Program with a focus on the reoffending situations, program experiences, and personal beliefs on improvement to the program. Flexible treatment approaches were suggested by offenders, along with afterprogram support, skills training, and increased individualized needs for participants (e.g., cultural sensitivity, mental health concerns, substance abuse.) Future research implications also included the need for more diverse samples to increase generalizability and exploration of first-time offenders.

Satyen et al. (2022) described the need for culturally inclusive intervention programs to reduce recidivism in male violent offenders through a systematic review, which included a total of 1,950 participants. The researchers examined how intervention programs impacted participants' behavioral changes and mental health to explore whether more culturally tailored programs yielded more positive results than general programs. They found that there were positive outcomes in the reduction of violent behaviors

related to more culturally tailored programs in male offenders, and further research was suggested to explore other culturally specific areas for DV offenders.

Wexler (2020) examined the issue of female perpetration of IPV against male victims. The researcher examined traditional assumptions of IPV and challenged these views by focusing on the prevalence and dynamics of women who used force against male partners. Wexler identified that legal and societal systems are often unprepared for addressing female perpetration of violence, perhaps due to the traditional societal view of IPV. The study showed that motivations for male versus female perpetration differed in the need for control, self-defense, and retaliation, and the needs of females are considered more diverse.

The current study was needed to provide insight and understanding of the treatment experiences of female DV offenders. The current literature focuses more on program effectiveness for male offenders and not on the limited amount of research focused on the treatment experiences of females (Bijlsma et al., 2022; Wexler, 2020). This study was needed because there is a lack of current literature that specifically focuses on the experiences of female DV offenders. I conducted this study to gain more information in this area by exploring the experiences of female offenders. By gaining insight into the experiences of this population, the results of the study can increase the understanding of the needs and challenges of female offenders during treatment. I expected the results of this study to provide opportunities for more informed and tailored treatment programs and rehabilitation for this population.

## Problem Statement

DV is an issue that negatively impacts many individuals and homes (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2019). The impact of DV in society includes long-term social consequences, such as physical impact, psychological consequences, and financial burdens on families and households. The cost of incarceration, victim treatment, property loss/damage, and legal costs were estimated at $1.3 trillion (Peterson et al., 2018).

DV is also a problem for the field of counselor education and supervision because, without this information on the needs and treatment experiences of offenders, it may be more difficult to fully train counselors on how to effectively treat and provide more tailored intervention services to female DV offenders. The understanding of participant narratives in this study may shed light on what professional skills may be required for the successful recovery of female DV offenders and professional requirements for mental health providers and offender management personnel. This study was essential as foundational research for the mental health community to build upon to provide tailored treatment options to the diverse population of female DV offenders.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, hermeneutic, phenomenological study was to increase understanding of the treatment experiences of female DV offenders who have completed court-mandated counseling programs. This study was suited for a qualitative approach because an interview process and observations were the most effective approaches to obtain stories and themes from the participants to further understand their

personal experiences. The target group was focused on female DV offenders. I conducted this study to further equip mental health professionals and management teams to treat these individuals and enhance treatment outcomes.

## Research Question

What are the treatment experiences of female DV offenders who have completed court-mandated counseling programs?

## Conceptual Framework for the Study

This study was suited for a qualitative approach because an interview process and observations most effectively allowed me to obtain stories and themes from the participants to understand their personal experiences further. The target group was focused on females who are DV offenders. Through their responses to individual interview questions, I developed a further understanding of the treatment experiences of female DV offender treatment. Van Manen's (1991) lens of analyzing data by the identification of themes from the narratives and transcripts from participant interviews provided me with an increased understanding of the phenomenon of the treatment experiences of female DV offenders. Further information on the conceptual framework and key elements of the framework of the study are discussed in Chapter 2. I conducted this study to provide additional insight into the treatment experiences of female DV offenders who completed court-mandated counseling programs to equip mental health professionals further to treat these individuals and enhance treatment outcomes.

## Nature of the Study

I employed Heidegger's (1962) hermeneutic, phenomenological methodology for this study on the treatment experiences of female DV offenders who had completed court-mandated counseling programs. Heidegger's work has been used extensively in qualitative studies focusing on participants' lived experiences (Van Manen, 1997). I interviewed participants on an individual basis to identify themes from the gathered narratives. Semistructured interview questions were created for six participants and focused on their treatment experiences after completing a court-mandated counseling program. The data were gathered via audio recording, transcribed, and analyzed by hand-coding and identifying themes. I used the cyclical methodology of hermeneutics to analyze the data for the identification of themes and to refine those parts for a richer understanding of the themes as a whole (see Heidegger, 1962). Application of this framework provided a deeper understanding and meaning through gathering and analyzing participant narratives and identifying themes within participant experiences. I identified meaning units to further make sense of social phenomena from data collection

## Definitions

*DV perpetrator/offender*: Any individual who has committed the act of DV towards in an intimate partner or familial relationship as defined by state law (Barocas et al., 2016).

*Evidence-based practice*: This practice involves the inclusion of research evidence and clinical findings and observation to identify best practices and improve

outcomes or clinically significant change (Blatch et al., 2020; Corvo et al., 2008; Hatchett, 2021).

*Low risk/low need offenders*: Risk is defined through the risk-need responsivity model as the likelihood of recidivism based on previous treatment attempts, mental health conditions and substance abuse history. Need is defined as criminogenic or dynamic factors, including stability of living situations, adaptive functioning skills, comorbidities in mental health, or substance use disorders that impact recidivism. Low risk/low need offenders require less intensive interventions and supervision and focus more on clinical treatment (Mikolajewski et al., 2021).

## Assumptions

Assumptions made in this study included that there were identifiable differences in the treatment needs of male versus female DV offenders, the presence of consistent themes in the data, and participant truthfulness during data collection. These assumptions of identifiable differences in male versus female offenders and identifiable themes were important to the context of the study due to the limited research available that is specific to treatment experiences for female DV offenders who have completed mandated programs. The assumption that female offenders would be truthful during the interview process about their experiences was a main contributing factor to inform this study on the treatment experiences of this population.

## Scope and Delimitations

There is limited research available on female DV offenders as a population regarding their perceptions of treatment experiences. DV treatment has traditionally focused on patriarchal views of male control over female victims. Societal norms of these traditional views also influenced legal systems in arrests, legal consequences, and punishment. Further information must be explored regarding the needs of female DV offenders for increased knowledge of how treatment programs impact participants.

I used purposive sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants for the study. The participants were female individuals, 18 years or older, who were charged with DV, had completed a court-mandated counseling program, and were fully adjudicated from any legal involvement. One exclusion to participant recruitment was the level of offense, which did not exceed a misdemeanor charge.

## Limitations

Challenges in conducting this study included access to female participants who had completed court-mandated counseling programs. This challenge limited the number of participants willing to become involved in the study regarding their court-mandated experiences. Respondent and reflexivity bias were other potential barriers to credible data collection; the following measures were taken to limit these potential obstacles. Respondent bias, also described as social desirability bias, was addressed using straightforward and non-leading interview questions and assurance of the confidentiality of the participants in the beginning and throughout the data collection process (see Vogel,

2018). I addressed reflexivity bias by keeping a researcher's journaling and continuing to consider background, personal interpretations, and use of confirmability to keep participant data grounded and reduce the influence of any researcher bias (see Cairns-Lee et al., 2021).

## Significance

This study is significant because it addresses positive social change regarding the treatment of a stigmatized population. This study may assist counselor educators and supervisors in the training of counselors to become aware as well as meet the needs of female DV offenders in court-mandated counseling programs more effectively, based on the data from their experiences. Based on the data from offender experiences, additional training in this area may also impact recidivism reduction or positive treatment outcomes, which, in turn, may also affect society positively by impacting violence witnessed in homes. Additionally, female DV offenders may be better served by more informed treatment as a result of this study.

## Summary

In Chapter 1, I described current literature relating to the area of DV offender programs and focused on the experiences of offenders as participants in those programs. The literature included also focused on the reduction of recidivism and further research focusing on characteristics of offenders, including substance use and exposure to violence in childhood and adolescence. The gap in research was identified as the lack of current information on the experiences of female DV offenders who had completed mandated

programs. In the Problem Statement, I identified the need for further understanding of the needs of female DV offenders for effective training for mental health professionals moving forward. Using a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach allowed participants to provide details of their treatment experience to identify common themes. Audio-recorded, semistructured interviews were completed with individual participants and transcribed for hand-coding of identifiable themes. The scope and delimitations were identified as diverse sampling and transferability concerns regarding the small population size and how I intended to limit respondent and reflexivity bias during the data collection process.

In Chapter 2, I will continue to focus on the need for the study and the gap in the literature regarding DV offenders, strategies for literature searches, and a review of the conceptual framework to be used in the study. The current literature reviewed includes the following concepts: DV, history of DV, female perpetration of DV, treatment program history for DV, current treatment program outlines for DV offenders, impacts of DV intervention completion for offenders, characteristics of DV offenders, and history of DV offenders before treatment.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

The impact of DV in society includes long-term social consequences, such as physical impact, psychological consequences, and financial burdens on families and households (Huff et al., 2023). The number of individuals in the United States impacted by DV exceeds 10 million, and globally, millions more are also affected (Huecker et al., 2022). The U.S. lifetime per-victim cost and economic burden related to DV includes cost of incarceration, victim treatment, property loss/damage, and legal costs and is estimated at $1.3 trillion (Peterson et al., 2018). The current study provided information from the viewpoint of the female DV offenders as opposed to the experiences of DV victims on which the current literature focuses. There is also extant research focused explicitly on male DV offender treatment approaches and recidivism reduction (e.g., Murphy et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2021); however, there are limited articles that evaluate the treatment experiences of female DV offenders who have completed court-mandated programs (Portnoy & Murphy, 2020).

The purpose of this qualitative, hermeneutic study was to increase understanding of the treatment experiences of female DV offenders who had completed court-mandated counseling programs. I intended this study to provide additional insight into the lives of female DV offenders who have completed programs and their experiences of the process.

## Literature Search Strategy

The Walden University Library was a primary resource used to search for academic and peer-reviewed journals published from 2019 to the present year for the most current studies related to this research. I completed this process using keywords relating to the current study to search the following databases: ERIC, ProQuest, PsychInfo, PsychArticle, and SAGE. Keyword search terms included: *female DV, offenders, DV treatment, court-mandated DV, court-mandated counseling intervention programs, women's mandated mental health programs,* and *DV program experiences.*

I also used Google Scholar to find the exact keywords used in the Walden Library search. To further expand my search to related articles, the following additional keywords were used in Google Scholar: *female DV offenders, female intimate partner violence offenders, court-mandated counseling,* and *female batterer intervention programs.*

## Conceptual Framework

Heidegger's (1962) hermeneutic phenomenological methodology for data collection and theme analysis is focused on the interpretation of experiences that help to increase understanding of the world. Using this method, I focused on understanding the treatment experiences of participants and interpreting the meaning they attributed to those experiences. I identified meaning units of social phenomena from data collection (see Papakitsou, 2020). Phenomenological research studies focus on participant experiences through their narratives, which aids in identification of themes within the phenomena (Heidegger, 1962).

Van Manen (1997) found that data collected through interview processes could be analyzed through dialogue, writing, and reflection to uncover themes and meaning. I used the reduction method of collecting data through interviews with participants, reflective writing, and review of transcriptions to uncover common themes and further meaning from the collected data.

## Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

The review of literature for this study involved examining existing research related to the key variables and concepts of this study. Key variables for this study include DV, history of DV intervention programs, female perpetration of DV, treatment history for DV offenders, the impacts of DV completion for offenders, characteristics of DV offenders, and history of DV offenders before treatment.

### DV

DV is a pattern of abusive behaviors used by one person to gain and maintain power and control over another within a family or intimate relationship. (Huntley et al., 2020; Wieczorek et al., 2024). This abuse violates the rights of individuals, causing harm and suffering. DV affects people of all races, ages, and genders, regardless of cultural, socioeconomic, educational, religious, or geographic background. It encompasses a pattern of controlling behaviors, including physical assaults, sexual coercion, emotional manipulation, and economic restrictions, all designed to instill fear and maintain power over the victim (Kurt & Akin, 2023). DV is also described as physical and psychological

abuse, controlling behavior, and sexual/reproductive coercion in the form of impacting pregnancy or birth control sabotage impacting both men and women (Modi et al., 2014).

There are a multitude of circumstances regarding how DV appears in various settings. According to Badea (2020), there are multiple variables involving DV, including mentalities, history, upbringing, and legislation of how and why violence occurs. Researchers continue to identify how the harmful effects of violence have adverse effects on the individual rights and integrity of the victim, as well as family environments. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic that impacted the whole world, police departments from multiple cities within the United States reported increases in DV arrests, potentially due to stay-at-home orders implemented at the time (Boserup et al., 2020).

**History of DV**

DV and IPV are terms that have been used interchangeably. This type of violence includes both physical and abstract forms of intimidation, humiliation, domination, or power or control over another, occurring between current or former intimate partners or family members (McKeown, 2014). Social and cultural changes have occurred throughout history, directly impacting laws and protection involving violent acts. While DV dates back centuries in history, a focus on a specific time during which increased female arrests occurred was essential for the purpose of this study. Hamilton and Worthen (2010) described societal norms of DV (e.g., males as primary perpetrators and domestic issues as private matters) as issues that traditionally shaped arrest patterns that had mainly favored females as victims and men as perpetrators. DV situations were

historically seen as “matters between spouses” until laws were passed in 1994 when the U.S. Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act, which recognized DV officially as a national crime, along with additions to this act in 1996 (Modi et al., 2014). Before this, “wife-beating” was considered a crime in the United States but was historically handled with “underenforcement” by police departments when responding to calls, which began to change in the 1970s during the women’s movement of demanding DV to be seen as a significant issue (Feder & Henning, 2005). Since the implementation of “mandatory arrest” laws in 2000, an increase in female arrests was identified (Henning et al., 2003).

**Female Perpetration of DV**

Female perpetration of DV has been described as a growing area of research that requires further understanding of why perpetration occurs and appropriate treatment pathways (McKeown, 2014). According to DeLeon-Granados et al. (2006), female arrest rates increased significantly, resulting in women only composing 5% of DV arrests in 1987 to a total of 18% in 2000. This significant shift was essentially due to changes in laws and the implementation of mandatory arrest laws, which introduced unintended consequences in arrests. While these arrest laws intended to create accountability for perpetrators, they also highlighted the complex nature of violence, which could have involved uninvestigated mutual abuse or alternate causes for violence. Dual arrest increases also played an essential role in the rise in female arrests for DV calls; dual arrest is noted as a situation where both parties involved in a DV incident are arrested as

opposed to one party (Roark, 2016). The researchers also noted in their study that women were more likely to be dually arrested than men, and women contacting the police played a role in increasing the likelihood that they would be arrested along with their male partners.

**Treatment Program History for DV**

Treatment programs for DV offenders, also called Batterer Intervention Programs, began in the 1970s as there became increased awareness of the growing issue of DV, especially with the women's rights movement of the time (Radatz et al., 2021). As the perception of DV changed from a private matter standpoint to a more open societal concern, treatment programs were developed and implemented across the United States. The origins of these programs were grassroots efforts described as male, pro-feminist advocate groups, and they developed more national growth by increasing court-sentencing of offenders into community-based treatment programs (Radatz et al., 2021). Early treatment programs for offenders focused on the use of feminist psychoeducational approaches and utilized methods, such as the Duluth model, which focuses on a patriarchal ideology of male control or power over females to reduce violence (Babcock et al., 2007). It is essential to recognize that treatment plans for DV offenders are historically based on the needs of male offenders. The experiences of female offenders and the circumstances related to their socioeconomic experiences and mental health issues can shape pathways to offending (Widom & Osborn, 2021).

**Current Treatment Program Outlines for DV Offenders**

There are a different treatment approaches for DV offenders, which also depend on the criminogenic needs in offenders (Hilton & Radatz, 2018). The treatment program for DV offenders that were reviewed in this study focused on a 16-week plan that followed the Pfeiffer and Moss Anger Management and the "Potter-Efron DV Offender Treatment Curriculum. Twelve chapters of this curriculum provide psychoeducation, based in solution-focused workbooks describing anger awareness, calming techniques, and coping skills related to anger episodes (Pfeiffer & Moss, 2019). Four sessions of the current treatment focus on cognitive behavioral approaches to participants identification of responsibility, self-reflection of behaviors, and behavioral change (Potter-Efron & Potter-Efron, 2017).

The participants of the current study included female DV offenders who had completed a 16-week court-mandated counseling program. The participants met the criteria of low-risk/low-need offender. Low risk/low need is defined in research as an individual with a lower likelihood of recidivism, based on age, gender, prior convictions and mental health as well as lower criminogenic needs, which are described as substance abuse, major psychiatric disorders, or instability in income or housing, that require intervention (Basanta et al., 2017; Marlowe et al., 2011). At this level through the court system, the offense level of these individuals was a misdemeanor, which does not meet felony offense levels. A misdemeanor DV charge is defined as Class A-C, involving assault, either purposefully, recklessly, or negligently that creates substantial risk of

certain injury to family member or household member (AR Const. Art. V § 5-26-305 to 309; MO Const. Art. V § 565.076). Other state laws also define levels of misdemeanors from A-B, which focus on threat of bodily harm to repeat acts of DV that entail harsher punishments (TN Const. § 36-3-601; 39-13-101 to 111). Additionally, other states also view misdemeanor charges with their own specific sentencing, typically involving imprisonment and fines, and are considered lesser offense levels than felony-level charges (OK Const. § 21-10; 21-644v1 A-C; LA Const. RS 14:35.3).

**Impacts of DV Intervention Completion for Offenders**

Treatment programs that have focused on recidivism reduction for DV offenders have been at the forefront of DV research over the last several years due to the impact on public and victim safety, as well as the reduction of the financial burden for the incarceration of offenders (Satyen et al., 2022). DV creates severe and long-lasting consequences; the enrollment and completion of intervention programs seek to treat the harmful effects of violence through the use of psychoeducation and various program designs for the reduction of violent acts (Campbell et al., 2024). Studies on the effectiveness of treatment programs for offender recidivism reduction have identified limited success in this area and addressed the need for evidence-based practices and individualized approaches tailored to participants' needs (Baptista & Tagliamento, 2021; Radatz et al., 2021).

**Characteristics of DV Offenders**

There are different characteristics that studies have shown to be similar when attempting to understand DV offenders. Common factors include exposure to violence in childhood, neglect, and stability in the home, as well as dysfunctional family dynamics, substance abuse, and mental health issues (Costa et al., 2015). Specific to women, there are common characteristics that are shared among offenders, including a history of trauma or violence, which could lead to behavioral patterns of violence as defense mechanisms, dynamics of relationships, mental health disorders, such as PTSD, personality disorders, or depression (Foy et al., 2020; Seamans et al., 2007.) Also, females who witnessed their mothers in violent acts as sole perpetrators of violence relationships had increased risks of victimization and perpetration themselves (Forke et al., 2018). Studies have also focused on "cycles of violence," which can negatively impact the likelihood of children exposed to violence becoming involved in criminal activity in adolescence and adulthood. Additionally, childhood neglect and trauma, socioeconomic disadvantage, and mental health issues are also characteristics that can impact the likelihood of future violence (Widom & Osborn, 2021). Studies have shown some differences in criminogenic risk factors between male and female perpetrators. Those factors include criminal history, substance abuse, and relationships with criminals for men and education/work, living environment instability and finances for women, underscoring the need for alternative treatment options (Bijlsma et al., 2021). While these can be common characteristics, it is essential to note that not all female offenders who are

violent would fit this profile, and these should be seen as potential contributing factors for female DV perpetration.

A study, which included 1,127 participants, was completed where it was found that 81% of offenders were male, with 56% being White; they averaged approximately 33 years old with no noted substance use at the time of arrest, 71% of offenders were living with their partner at the time of arrest with only 40% living with their partner when discharged from treatment (Gover et al., 2011). The researchers found that offender characteristics, risk factors, and treatment-relevant factors were directly related to offenders completing court-ordered treatment programs and described how specific characteristics related to completion of treatment programs, which included employment status, substance use, gender, living situation, and prior arrests.

**History of DV Offenders Before Treatment**

The victim-offender overlap has been documented as a relationship between crime victims and offenders where, most notably, most offenders have been victims of crime in their pasts (Delong & Reichert, 2019). Some studies have incorporated Bandura's social learning theory, which suggests that children who witness violence or are abused themselves learn destructive communication and conflict resolution patterns, which could lead to aggressive behaviors (Murrell et al., 2007; Steketee et al., 2021). Research has also included information on the theory of intergenerational transmission of violence and found that men who witnessed violence as children were more likely to commit violence as adults (Bernardi & Steyn, 2019; Henning et al., 2003). Henning et al.

(2003) also described a correlation between both male and female DV offenders committing violent acts and witnessing violence in childhood through parental interpersonal violence, parents or caregivers using corporal punishment, or being physically abused by a caregiver or parent. Offender history also related to adolescence, early adulthood, and adulthood. As offenders engaged in intimate relationships, learned behaviors and responses to conflict with their partners, based on their upbringing, came into play. Past abuse experiences, as well as commonalities in engaging in risky behaviors in adolescence, have also been linked to the increased likelihood of both perpetrating and experiencing DV in adulthood (Costa et al., 2015). Long-term consequences, such as self-defense and retaliation to abuse, may occur later in life, increased aggressive behavior, and increased risk for mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Doroudchi et al., 2023; Seamans et al., 2007).

## Summary and Conclusions

It is important to note that DV is a global concern that impacts millions of individuals and families. While existing literature provides valuable insights into the social consequences of DV and the importance of offender treatment programs, there remains a significant gap in understanding the experiences of female offenders within these programs. Further research is crucial to explore the challenges and needs of this population for more effective and tailored interventions. Social change regarding DV offender treatment is ongoing. This study was conducted to shed light on several key aspects of this process. First, I acknowledged the changing societal attitudes that now

recognize DV as a serious public concern rather than a private family matter. Second, the current study was informed through identified adjustments within the criminal justice system, particularly the move towards mandatory arrest laws and court-ordered treatment programs. Finally, I strove to comprehend the rehabilitation experiences of female offenders and aimed to highlight their distinct characteristics and needs. By understanding these experiences, I sought to contribute to the development of more tailored interventions for this population.

# Chapter 3: Research Method

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female DV offenders. In this qualitative study, I sought to increase understanding of participant narratives from individual interviews to gather themes of their personal experiences. For individuals who completed court-mandated counseling programs, exploring their experiences led to additional insight into the treatment and treatment outcomes and further equip mental health professionals to treat this population effectively.

In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale as well as the role of the researcher. The methodology, which includes participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, and data analysis, is also reviewed. Issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures are discussed to ensure the safety of the participants involved.

## Research Design and Rationale

### Research Question

What are the treatment experiences of female DV offenders who have completed court-mandated counseling programs?

### Research Tradition

The research tradition used in this study is grounded in qualitative, hermeneutic, phenomenological research. This focus allowed me to gather data on the core phenomenon, which was the treatment experiences of female DV offenders. Treatment experiences are defined as court-mandated programs that are provided as an alternative to

jail time (Gover et al., 2021). A qualitative, phenomenological approach allowed me to focus on understanding the experiences of female DV offenders who completed treatment through their personal narratives. Data were collected from participants through an interview process that allowed for the identification of themes related to the experiences of female DV offenders. Hermeneutics allowed for interpretation of the data and further understanding of the meaning within participant narratives (see Suddick et al., 2020).

### Research Rationale

A hermeneutic, phenomenological research approach was the most appropriate for this study, and the aim was further to understand the treatment experiences of female DV offenders. To understand and find meaning in individual narratives, it is important to focus on the personal experiences of the participants and interpret the data and find themes within the phenomenon (Suddick et al., 2020). A hermeneutic approach was better suited than other designs because this approach aimed to prioritize the interpretation and meaning of the complex data involved in human experiences.

## Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher in this study was to observe and collect data from participants on the treatment experiences of female DV offenders and identify themes within the data to increase understanding of those experiences. The role of a researcher can be described as a primary instrument that shapes the research based on the methodology and processes of collecting data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As a researcher, I kept a journal to reflect on any biases or assumptions that may have hindered the quality

of the data collection process and identified any subjective researcher bias that may have impacted the validity of the data (see Suddick et al., 2020). There was no noted supervisory or instructor relationship between the researcher and participants, which may have involved one holding power over the other. In the case of me being perceived as an authority figure over participants, measures, such as explicitly reviewing consent and the reason and nature for the study, were discussed during the data collection process for increased clarity for the participants.

## Methodology

In this section, I detail the research design and procedures used to gain information about the lived experiences of female DV offenders who had completed court-mandated counseling programs. The participant selection process is reviewed, and I explain the use of purposive sampling and snowballing techniques as well as the inclusion criteria for the study. The section also includes descriptions of the instrumentation that was used for data collection, specifically audio-recorded, semistructured interviews and demographic questionnaires. The procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection, including the informed consent and debriefing processes, are also reviewed. Finally, I discuss the data analysis plan and describe the use of the hermeneutic, phenomenological approach that was used to interpret and understand the collected data.

**Participant Selection Logic**

The population of interest in this study was female DV offenders, 18 years or older, who completed court-mandated counseling programs and were adjudicated of any current legal involvement. I used snowball and purposive sampling to recruit participants for the study. Snowball sampling allows for identifying potential study participants in similar networks (Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling began by potential participants being identified by the inclusion criteria of the study (i.e., age, gender, completion of a program, and legal standing). The identified participants had the opportunity to recruit additional potential participants who also met the inclusion criteria through word-of-mouth for invitation to participate in the study. Purposive and snowball sampling were appropriately suited for participant selection because the study focused on a specific population that allowed for in-depth understanding of their specific experience. The inclusion of purposive sampling was important because specific identifying factors allowed participants to meet the requirements for the study to be statistically representative of the population (see Patton, 2015).

The relationship between data saturation and sample size was identified as complex and ongoing as the data were analyzed and no new themes or insights were identifiable (see Saunders et al., 2017). Participants were known to meet the criteria by previously being admitted into the court system and approved by their requirements to be able to choose to complete a court-mandated program in place of jail time. Participants were females who had been previously charged as DV offenders and who had completed

court-mandated counseling programs within the last 12 months. The study included six participants. I identified participants by their inclusion in the court-system DV program and who had completed those programs. At graduation, program-completing female DV offenders received an invitation from the court clerk (i.e., program staff or program facilitator) that detailed the study and participation opportunities. My contact information was provided on the invitation flyer to allow participants to contact me for further information or to express their interest in participating in the study.

**Instrumentation**

Data collection instruments included audio recordings of the participant interviews. By using audio recordings, the interviews were easily transcribed for the identification of themes within the participant narratives. I used demographic questions to provide context and background information about participants for the study. I took notes on participant para- and nonverbal cues throughout the data collection process because they may have revealed a more profound meaning and understanding of participant experiences. Data were gathered through individual, semistructured interviews with participants, which were approximately 35 minutes in length (see Appendix A). A semistructured process allowed research-focused questions to be provided to participants for the exploration of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a court-mandated counseling program. Semistructured and open-ended questions allowed for increased exploration during the interview process, which afforded deeper understanding of participant experiences (see Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

**Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Participants were recruited from the court system based on their inclusion in the DV offense program. I provided the recruitment flyer to the court system, which contained information on the study and my contact information for participants. The court clerk (i.e., program staff or program facilitator) provided potential participants with the invitation flyer upon completion of the graduation. The court clerk also included previous participants who had graduated from the program within the past 12 months with the invitation flyer.

Data were collected from female participants, 18 years or older, who completed violence court-mandated counseling programs and were fully legally adjudicated, through a 45- to 60-minute semistructured interview process. I collected the data from each participant through this interview process. The data were recorded through Zoom, using audio-only recording. To recruit a sufficient number of participants, I used the snowball sampling method, which included participant referral of additional participants. The informed consent process started before the interview process began. The consent form was reviewed with participants to ensure that they all understood the study and how the information would be used. A debriefing process at the end of the interview session, which included a reminder to participants of how the information and collected data would be used, was employed, and I answered any final questions the participants had regarding the research process. Follow-up procedures included the opportunity for participants to return for a member-checking interview to ensure my findings of the

participants' experiences were accurate. This included providing participants with the transcription and a summary of findings to gain participant feedback on the identified interpretations. Two of the participants responded to my email to follow up for member checking. Following transcript review, one participant responded to me via email and confirmed that the transcript accurately reflected their experiences. I incorporated this feedback into the data analysis process to refine the collected data and enhance research credibility.

**Data Analysis Plan**

The data were analyzed using a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach to increase understanding of the themes within the narratives of participants (see Suddick et al., 2020).). The data were collected from the perspectives of female DV offenders who had completed court-mandated programs. I began by reflecting on any biases or prejudgments about the experiences of female DV offenders. I conducted the interviews and listened to the audio while checking the transcriptions for accuracy before identifying themes and categories within the narratives. The recordings were transcribed through the Rev Application service. I reviewed the transcriptions of the interviews to identify themes and categories, find meaning, and further understand the experiences of the participants during court-mandated programs for DV offenders because this related to the research question. As part of discrepant case analysis, I identified any observer bias or data quality issues that could have resulted from errors in data collection and warranted further analysis of the participant narratives.

## Issues of Trustworthiness

In this section, I address the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the study. Strategies to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings are also reviewed. Additionally, this section includes descriptions of the ethical procedures, which include informed consent, data storage, and participant confidentiality for the study.

### Credibility

Credibility involves using a systematic approach to provide an honest description of the data for believable and convincing research claims (Shufutinsky, 2020). This is an important part of research because the information of the study should be accurately represented. I used member checking, where participants had the opportunity to provide feedback on the transcription of their interview and data collection (see Shufutinsky, 2020).

### Transferability

Transferability is defined as the degree to which findings can be applied to other situations. (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The participants were located in rural areas, which may have impacted transferability to larger areas or more diverse populations with the participant parameters. Data saturation occurs when new interviews or information no longer provide significantly new insights or information, and themes and perspectives are repeated (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Thick descriptions of participants were included to ensure rich and detailed data that included participant interpretations, behaviors, and

motivations within their own experiences related to completing court-mandating counseling programs.

### Dependability

Dependability includes the consistency and stability of the data over time and focus on answering the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Identification of how the research question was chosen and methods that mapped out the research process were essential to the dependability of the study. I used field notes throughout the data collection process to audit steps taken and observations noted during data collection.

### Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research identifies how findings are collected from the participant's experiences and the degree of influence of researcher bias on the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researcher bias was challenged by longitudinal self-reflection over the course of the study. I reflected on biases that may have been present and could have influenced data. The process of bracketing to suspend any preconceived notions on behalf of the researcher ensured a more objective analysis of the data would be used (see Habibullah et al., 2023). To further ensure confirmability, participants had the opportunity for member checking to ensure the experiences of participants were not solely reliant on my perspective.

## Ethical Procedures

The Institutional Review Board at Walden University (approval #02-19-25-1165483) provided a template consent form for researcher use (see Appendix B). This

consent form was provided to all participants before the start of the study. Participants were treated with respect and provided a clear outline of the purpose of the study, procedures for data collection, risks and benefits, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the consent process for participation. Ethical concerns related to recruitment included potential emotional distress in discussing past experiences with court-mandated programs, power imbalance between the researcher and participant, and confidentiality concerns regarding data collection. These concerns were addressed by ensuring participants would have ample time to open up and discuss vulnerable experiences without pressure from the researcher. I used research transparency to address any power imbalances between me and the participants, this included discerning this study from court involvement. Confidentiality concerns were also met by advising participants that identifiable information, such as names, were removed and replaced with code names. Data were stored in an encrypted storage device with only researcher-authorized access. After reviewing their consent and information about the study, participants provided their consent by replying “I consent” to the email of the informed consent. Data were collected via Zoom audio-only recording on a password-encrypted laptop belonging to me, and all field notes were electronic. Data were stored in a password-encrypted USB device and stored in a locked filing cabinet belonging to me. I will keep data for 5 years, per university standards, and ultimately destroy the data by wiping the USB storage device clean of all collected data.

## Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the research design of the study, which was identified as a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach. The rationale for this research was identified as qualitative because the aim of the study was to gain an understanding of the treatment experiences of female DV offenders. A review of the role of the researcher and methodology, including participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, trustworthiness issues, and ethical procedures, was also provided. In Chapter 4, I will provide an overview of the data results.

# Chapter 4: Results

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of female DV offenders who completed court-mandated counseling programs. It is essential for the field of counselor education and supervision to obtain information for populations that are required to participate in court-mandated counseling programs for DV to meet needs and challenges related to their treatment. There is currently limited information surrounding the experiences of female offenders in this area (Bijlsma et al., 2022; Widom & Osborn, 2021). Addressing this gap in the literature by providing additional information was needed to inform treatment practices, create more informed training opportunities for professionals, and foster positive social change for this population.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the findings and methodology of the study. This includes discussions about the recruitment of participants, demographic information, data collection methods, and the data analysis process. I also address trustworthiness and present the results of the study.

## Setting

There were no noted personal or organizational conditions that negatively impacted or influenced participants or their experience at the time of the study. All interviews were completed using Zoom from my office location. Participant recruitment and data collection followed the Walden University Institutional Review Board-approved application for the study.

## Demographics

The six participants in this study consisted of all female individuals (see Table 1). Of these participants, four identified as White, one as Latin American/Hispanic, and one as Black. Education included five participants who received a high school diploma, and one who obtained a college degree. In addition, four participants identified as working full-time, and two identified as holding part-time positions. Two participants identified as married, two reported being in a relationship, and two reported being single. Additionally, three participants had children, while three reported having no children.

**Table 1**

*Demographics: Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Education, Work, Relationship Status, and Parental Status*

| Name | Age | Gender | Race/ethnicity | Education | Work | Relationship status | Parental status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ashley | 34 | Female | White | High school diploma | Full-time | Married | Children |
| Bailey | 20 | Female | White | High school diploma | Part-time | In a relationship | No children |
| Clara | 27 | Female | White | High school diploma | Part-time | In a relationship | No children |
| Daphne | 24 | Female | Hispanic | High school diploma | Full-time | Single | Children |
| Erica | 51 | Female | Black | High school diploma | Full-time | Married | Children |
| Felicia | 33 | Female | White | College graduate | Full-time | Single | No children |

## Data Collection

I gathered information from participants from my office through a Zoom audio-recording process, with each interview lasting approximately 35 minutes and 1 hour of allotted time in place for each individual interview. Participants were asked interview and demographic questions and were allowed the opportunity for clarification of the interview questions for an increased understanding of what was being asked. Data were recorded through Zoom audio recording, which was then transcribed using Rev Software. All participant interviews and audio recordings were saved to an encrypted hard drive with password protection. I immediately changed all participant information to pseudonyms for continued confidentiality and to organize research data. The audio-only files from Zoom were uploaded to Rev for the transcription process. The transcripts were uploaded under each participant's pseudonym. There were no variations in the data collection plan presented in Chapter 3 of the study. No unusual circumstances were presented during the data collection process.

## Data Analysis

Information was derived from the transcripts by identifying common words and phrases connected with key concepts related to Chapter 2 of the study. Van Manen's (1997) analytical approach guided the process with a continued focus on the lived experiences of participants and the identification of themes and their relationship to the overall phenomenon. Each participant's transcript was read a minimum of five times to develop a deep familiarity with the data as well as ensure correct transcription and

identification of potential themes. Holistic reading of each individual transcript was done to gain a sense of participant experiences. Selective reading was then completed, which included highlighting and identifying statements and phrases within the data that were revealing of the phenomenon. Line-by-line reading was performed to explore additional details and nuances that continued emerging within participant transcripts. To anchor the participant quotes and meaning, I created notes from each transcript that allowed for interpretive reflection that remained close to the lived experience of the participants to provide a foundation for deeper engagement with the data. The notes were also created to document observations and interpretations to audit the process of identifying this information.

Cross-examination and continued thematic reflection of the data began by moving between the parts that included highlighted statements from individual transcripts to the whole concerning the overall phenomenon. Adaptable themes were written down and revised through continued reflective writing to stay true to the lived experience of participants and highlight the areas that presented as common themes among all the data. From this process, potential themes that emerged included barriers, treatment resistance, treatment expectations, fear of treatment, history of violence, co-ed facilitation, group facilitation, individual facilitation, perspective about treatment (prior and after), facilitation of coping skills, application of skills, facilitator influence, and impact of curriculum on daily functioning. These broad themes identified a larger representation of the data. During the data analysis process, I identified several phrases, words, and

potential themes as similar and could be consolidated into more specific themes within the data. The following specific themes were derived from the data: navigating barriers and initial resistance to treatment entry, victimization to offending behaviors, gender dynamics in treatment settings, facilitating transformation and empowerment through skills-based treatment, and supportive therapeutic relationships. No discrepant cases were identified during the data analysis process.

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to data findings that authentically represent the experiences being studied (Kahovec & Haselschwerdt, 2022). To accomplish trustworthiness in this study, I used specific strategies to meet credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability standards.

### Credibility

There is a need for a systematic approach to provide a truthful description of the data for accurate representation (Shufutinsky, 2020). The identification of meaningful participant statements and verification of the accuracy of their experiences were completed. The opportunity for member checking with participants was made available after the data collection process to provide the opportunity for data accuracy to be verified. Two of the participants responded to my email to follow up for member checking. One participant responded to the provided transcript and affirmed via email that the transcript accurately reflected their experiences.

**Transferability**

Implementation of transferability in the study was accomplished by providing detailed and in-depth insight into the experiences of female DV offenders who completed court-mandated counseling programs. I noted thick descriptions of participant interpretations and behaviors within their experiences for a comprehensive exploration.

**Dependability**

As per the description of dependability outlined in Chapter 3, I took measures during the data collection process to note observations. To ensure accuracy of the findings, the audit trail must clearly show how those findings were derived (Kahovec & Haselschwerdt, 2022). I took field notes throughout the data collection process, including observations of the participants' nonverbal and paraverbal communication to create a longitudinal record and provide information on the accuracy of the data. Observations during the interviews revealed that participants displayed no heightened arousal or distress in their paraverbal or nonverbal communication. Specifically, they spoke in relaxed tones, exhibited responsive facial expressions, and maintained normal posture. The same platform, Zoom, was used for audio recording, and Rev software was used for each interview to create reliable transcriptions for data analysis.

**Confirmability**

To ensure confirmability of the research findings, researcher bias was longitudinally challenged and noted throughout the data collection and analysis process. Researcher reflections of biases and assumptions are important to note throughout the

process due to potential influence on data interpretation (Cairns-Lee et al., 2021). I reviewed interview transcripts to ensure a more open and objective analysis. Member-checking opportunities were also provided to participants to provide feedback on the accuracy of data and results. I sent follow-up emails for member checking to participants, and two responded with interest. One participant responded to the emailed transcript and confirmed that the transcript accurately reflected her experiences.

## Results

The research question addressed in this study was: What are the treatment experiences of female DV offenders who have completed court-mandated counseling programs? I identified four essential themes from the participant interviews: navigating barriers and initial resistance to treatment entry, the cycle of trauma from childhood victimization to offending behaviors, gender dynamics in treatment settings, facilitating transformation and empowerment through treatment and supportive therapeutic relationships.

### Theme 1: Navigating Barriers and Initial Resistance to Treatment Entry

This theme provides specific insights into the research question, which focuses on understanding the treatment experiences of female DV offenders who completed court-mandated counseling programs. Five participants had similar experiences of feelings of resistance to entry into the program and with skepticism as to the effectiveness of the program, low expectations, and guarded nature. Subthemes that emerged during the data analysis process included three participant reports of financial challenges, five

participants discussed limited entry information regarding the programs, and two participants identified self-view and associated feelings. Current literature that focuses on female perpetration states that understanding why perpetration occurs is important to finding appropriate treatment pathways (McKeown, 2014). Historically, DV treatment programs have been based on male offender treatment efforts (Widom & Widom, 2021). This focus leaves a small margin for female offenders to identify program expectations or program outlines as identified by the findings of the data.

Ashley began the program with reservations, viewing it as potentially ineffective. She stated,

> My expectations were a little low. I didn't think that I was going to get anything out of it because I didn't know anything about the program. I was just thinking, oh my gosh, this is going to be a waste of time. At first, it was negative. I'm not going to lie. I had never heard of anybody going to a program. I don't have friends that had been in my situation. I was just like, why do I have to do this?

Bailey talked about being unsure what to expect and described financial challenges:

> When I first came in, I was really nervous about it and didn't really feel like I belonged here at all. I didn't know what to expect, I thought it was going to be like an AA class; you go and you're like, hey, I did this, and just kind of have to talk about your experience of what you did, and that made me feel shameful. Nobody's told me anything, they just said you have to go to these classes, and I was like, okay, what does that mean, what classes? I got unenrolled halfway

> through because I missed 3 weeks without calling because I didn't have the money to come here.

Clara discussed not knowing what to expect and felt in the dark and also described money as an additional challenge for her, she said,

> At first, I was like, this is complete bull crap. I don't want to do this. This isn't right. This isn't fair, you don't get my side of the story. So, I really didn't get to, they didn't tell me about the counseling. I had to call myself and do this. I know it's being an adult, what you got to do. But I would've liked it if she would've said, hey, this is a program. It's a 16-week program. This is what you do. So, I was just scared to even call up here, in the dark about things, and I don't like being in the dark about things. The only challenge I have is I don't make a lot of money…$25 I don't really eat because I don't have the money.

Erica's expectations were low, and she talked about feeling as though she did not belong, she shared,

> When I came here, I was like, Okay, I don't think I need to be going here due to the situation… It's not like I'm a violent person, so I don't understand why I have to take these classes. Why am I here? Why am I having to go through all of this? I felt like I didn't belong coming here. [Male friend] was saying that he had to be in a group setting with a bunch of people that was coming in drunk, coming in high…that's what I was expecting. And I was sitting here trying to figure out how am I going to get this money to pay for this every week?

Felicia began the program with low expectations and low self-view, she stated,

> I don't think I need to be going here due to the situation, what had happened. And it's not like… I'm not a violent person. When we first started, we had different exercises that we had to do, different things that we were having to do, and I was just like, I'm not even going to read most of this stuff anymore. I used to think before them that they [programs] were kind of a joke and I thought they were an easy way out for people to not get jail time and different things a lot of times, drugs or anything like that. I really didn't know a whole lot about the program. Just got told this is what you're doing, here's your paperwork, here's what you got to go do and then I was sent emails, and that's literally how it started. I didn't get a lot of information on what I was getting into. The feelings were not good. I felt like a failure.

**Theme 2: Victimization to Offending Behaviors**

This theme emerged from individual transcriptions and was relatable between several participant experiences. Six participants identified experience or witnessing DV in their childhood or being victims before perpetration or entry into a court-mandated program. Key concepts, including history of offenders before treatment, history of DV, female perpetration of DV, and characteristics of DV offenders, were identified. Subthemes that were identified during the data analysis process included participants reports of cycles of violence in their history, self-defense viewpoints, and some identity conflict of abuse versus victim. DV is identified as both physical and abstract forms of

power or control, intimidation, or humiliation between partners or family members (McKeown, 2014). Due to changes in arrest laws in the early 2000s, increased female arrests are noted (Henning et al., 2003). Due to these changes, the previous history of female offenders can be explored to identify prior exposure to violence in childhood, family stability, neglect, or dysfunctional family dynamics, which may impact violent cycles in adult years (Costa et al., 2015).

Ashley discussed witnessing violence growing up, she stated,

> I witnessed my father, he was abusive towards my mom, so it's been in my family, and my older sister has been kind of pretty abusive when she gets mad as well, so I've dealt with that. Growing up, I was abused when I was 19 by a boyfriend, and then now I guess I took it out on my husband recently.

Bailey also recounted witnessing violence and experiencing abuse as well:

> I grew up with a mom that was in several relationships, and she was beat in front of me. I've seen her with a gun to her head and I've seen a lot throughout her relationships. She physically abused me growing up, that was really it in my childhood. From 14 to 17, I was with a man that beat me, so that I think that kind of normalized it into my life that it was okay to put my hands on people.

Similarly, Clara talked about experiencing physical and verbal abuse in the past, she said:

> Oh gosh, my dad was an alcoholic, so I had dealt with a lot of abuse. From him, emotionally, physically. I was always kind of bigger, so fat dumb, b-i-t-c-h, it's always been a thing for me and the relationship I'm in now that I'm trying to get

> out, the one that's been constant back and forth, he's the one that puts hands on me first, and he's the one that's done things to me first. He's the one that's puts hands on me first... I'm not saying I'm innocent... I punched him in the face, cops were called... Even though they've all witnessed him beat the crap out of me multiple times.

Daphne discussed experiencing bullying and feelings of neglect in her past:

> It derives from me missing my father, so my mom being single, she was less able to control me. She had another kid, my sibling and she was too busy working, and we would get dropped off at my grandma's and we would bounce back and forth with my mom and my mom was just never there and I was always at school, it would start from school, like violence, people bullying me and not having my father there. It kind of felt like I was missing my dad. I guess it's why, the reason why I have such anger issues.

Erica also described experiencing abuse in her past, saying:

> My first husband was abusive, my second husband was just, I don't know what he was. [First husband] was abusive, absolutely, yeah, I stayed with him, we were married for, I want to say 10 or 11 years we were married…eventually I was like, okay this is it, I was tired, I was done.

Felicia talked about childhood trauma from her past, she shared:

> The biggest thing was it a childhood trauma that I was experiencing? That was a big thing I was going through. The thing I remember was thinking that maybe it

> was generational trauma that I don't know, I do know that I think I have memories that I've repressed. And so, I think a lot of it stems from generational trauma, but I let it build up. [The marriage] was very two-sided. Unfortunately, I'm the one that got convicted. It was very two-sided, and I was always myself, but there are times I believe, with DV, it overshadowed me, and I blacked out and I could cause a lot more damage. We did have an incident where he actually hit me first, he hit me then I took a skillet and backhanded [him] while we were moving, I'll not lie.

**Theme 3: Gender Dynamics in Treatment Settings**

This theme emerged during individual interviews and after thorough cross-examination of each transcription it was a noted reoccurrence for five participants. Current treatment programs for DV offenders outline specific needs based on the criminogenic needs of individuals, as identified in current research (Hilton & Radatz, 2018). Treatment outlines typically do not focus more on in depth needs of DV offenders for treatment or any challenges that the gender of offenders may present. Subthemes that emerged during data analysis included three participant discussions on their own comfort versus discomfort in coed group programs, two participants talked about safety concerns, and three participants discussed female-specific approaches in their experiences. Dutton (2007) described differences in male and female DV offenders and their needs including severity of violence, personal safety, substance use, motive, and one's own needs. Bailey talked about feeling uncomfortable by the gender imbalance in the classes:

> I was mostly with men, and it freaked me out and I was also being changed a lot. I wasn't with the same people every week and it freaked me out a lot too because I like to stay the same, but I didn't really have many classes with girls at all and that bothered me a lot I would be on the verge of a panic attack because I don't like men very much. That was one of my biggest thoughts throughout the program. There was one day I came in and it was the male facilitator for a session with me and I was in just a room full of men, and I was like, this is weird, I don't like this at all. And I remember just feeling like, I need some water right now, I want leave. But I sat through it, and I ended up really liking it. It was cool getting to see guy's perspectives on things, but at the end of the day I don't really relate to them. I dunno. And I definitely heard of some guys here just kind of crap talking women and I don't want to hear that.

Clara expressed a desire for women-only classes to enhance feelings of safety, stating,

> I wish it'd be some type of class or something for just women at one point to make it where we feel more safer. It made me really uncomfortable to be in there with five guys because it's always me, one girl and five other guys, and actually I've heard their stories and they said, well shoot, so I beat the crap out of her and I'm like, that triggers me a lot. I think it shouldn't necessarily always be me and women together because naturally there's going to be issues.

Daphne shared her perspective on potential benefits and drawbacks of both male and female facilitators, saying,

> Well, I didn't care if it was a male or female, it's just that a female with a female, I felt a little bit more comfortable, but maybe that's just me. Yeah, but it doesn't matter because I can hear the diversity between men and women because men and women are not the same. So, we got to know how men think and how women think. When you have a woman [facilitator], they understand more because they know about motherhood and I don't feel like men understand much of that, they're more simple, I guess. They're too simple, they don't understand that we're very emotional, more complex, I believe.

Erica talked about her perception on the value of group support in the program, she shared,

> I had a friend that had to go through the classes too, and he was saying that he had to go through, there was a group thing, and I was like, I'm not just to be sitting in there with a bunch of people, but only the most of, I think we had in a group was maybe four. So it wasn't a really huge, big group, so that was good. Everybody has different things. Everybody went through a lot of different things. Everybody's story was different, but it was actually, it was pretty helpful with being with other people that was in the group. I think there need to be more places out there, there's not a lot of people that understand what most women are going through.

Felicia discussed the need for informed support for women in DV programs, she stated:

> I think there needs to be people that are, not some volunteer, but maybe people that can be at the court cases that are knowledgeable in the programs… even when you see domestic abuse videos, it's more men do it to women, not the other way around. And I think to help women feel more comfortable of like hey, maybe I've got an issue. Just maybe some more advertisement around the area. And like I said, definitely if the courts, if a women's going up for DV, I think it should be, maybe some counselors and who's in the program can say, "Hey this woman is going through [it], can y'all reach out or meet her?" Or something like that.

**Theme 4: Facilitating Transformation Through Skills-Based Treatment and Supportive Therapeutic Relationships**

This theme emerged during the reading of individual transcripts and was identifiable throughout six participant interviews which provided insight into the importance of supportive therapeutic settings and skills-based treatment. Several subthemes were identified during the data analysis process that included two participant reports of the importance of therapeutic support and trust, and six participants identified practical skills development, self-awareness development, and positive relationships changes. All six participants reported experiencing positive change during the process and after their experiences in the DV court-mandated program. Female DV offenders, often share common characteristics, such as a history of trauma, exposure to violence in childhood, mental health challenges, and substance abuse issues, which can lead to behavioral patterns of violence (Foy et al., 2020; Seamans et al., 2007). Furthermore,

differences in criminogenic risk factors between male and female perpetrators highlight the importance of gender-responsive interventions (Bijlsma et al., 2021). A supportive and trusting therapeutic alliance can provide a safe space for offenders to explore their experiences, challenge destructive beliefs, and develop self-awareness (Dutton, 2007). This theme explores how the combination of practical skills development and a nurturing therapeutic environment can empower female DV offenders to break free from cycles of violence, heal from past trauma, and build healthier relationships.

Ashley reported applying program modules to various life situations, she stated,

> I use a lot of the modules to refer back to certain situations in my life, like stress related or it could be anxiety related. I use it a lot in my everyday life with work with my own personal at home, even with my kids and my husband. I have used a lot of the modules for communication. It would be great if there was a way to set it up to where the same group of people meet on day one, graduate on week 16.

Bailey described developing an increased awareness of empathy, and others' feelings:

> Yeah, I think that I'm more understanding that other people just have feelings too. I guess I learned a lot from this program to just show other people have empathy for other people because really a lot of times you don't know what they're thinking, you don't know that they're going through. Like I told you, I feel abandoned really fast so if somebody doesn't want to talk to me, I will freak out. I don't like that, and I think I've come pretty far away with it. Sometimes you got to shut up, sometimes you have to stop or you're going to end up pissing yourself

> off more. Sticking with the same people every week. That would be so much more comfortable, more of a safe space.

Clara also talked about applying learned skills to de-escalate situations, saying,

> He [the Facilitator] gave me examples of how to deal with it. I took it home, took it to real life. It hasn't been a problem since. The male facilitator actually gives a crap about me and listens and wants to help me work through problems. I keep these [modules] just in case so I can go over them and think, okay, he's told me when things happen like this, calm down. So these are all thoughts in my head that I get and go home and it's helped a lot actually because he [significant other] would get physical, he'd throw things at me, he gets abusive, and then I listen to him and I let him do what he has to do…and it calms down and I'm like, oh my gosh, it actually works. So, it's helped a lot and I keep my mouth shut a lot thanks to the classes because before I would not have been that way. I would have been like, F you too, you suck, I hate you, and I'm way more calmer than I have been before or after taking these classes.

Similarly, Daphne described gaining self-awareness of her contributions to conflict and behavior modification:

> I was realizing that I was the one yelling and being loud and not controlling my feelings at home too. And it made me realize at home, I'm the one yelling and the one who causes the discussions and argument. So, it made me realize that I just stop doing that because that's not what stable people do. I think I was like, okay, I

> can't act like that that at home, I don't want to act like that at work, at school place, you can't yell you look crazy. I learned in the program that only you can control your emotions. And so, I feel like everywhere I go I feel like I don't need to be violent or sour looking and I can just feel like myself. True, calm, I feel like I've changed it to a calm point now.

Erica discussed using techniques from the program to manage her emotions and improve communication, sharing,

> I actually started doing things that we had talked about that was throughout the class and it's actually helped. I have all of my paperwork…I find myself reading those again. I don't let my feelings just take over and just my anger is just like, ah. As opposed to before, I used to just be like, I never thought I had an anger problem. I think about things as opposed to me used to not thinking about how things is because of the situation… I just choose to not deal with any confrontational stuff to where I feel like, okay, that's going to harm me. We [she and her husband] actually talk instead of yelling and screaming and cussing at each other and not wanting to actually work on anything, we actually sit, we actually talk on the phone and have a conversation. If we both get upset about something, I'll just be like, okay, I'll just talk to you later. I don't like arguing, I don't like getting into it with anybody, so I just diffuse the situation, hey, I'm just walking away.

Felicia talked about applying learned skills to manage her reactions. She stated,

Some of the notes and some of the things and the exercises I took from that and being able to navigate employee emotions have been really helpful. I still have a couple of the chapters still in my desk…because some of it I still have to pull out and kind of think through some situations. Definitely how I react to things…I can always be a little bit more emotional and explosive about things if I feel like I'm being put against a wall. But even now I realize over the practice of the course…when I'm put against the wall, I don't react, I stay really levelheaded.

Table 2 provides the themes and subthemes that emerged from data analysis.

**Table 2**

*Themes*

| Names | Subthemes |
|---|---|
| Navigating barriers and initial resistance to treatment entry | Financial challenges, limited entry information, self-view and associated feelings |
| Victimization to offending behaviors | Cycle of violence in past history, self-defense viewpoints, identify conflict abuser versus victim |
| Gender dynamics in treatment settings | Comfort versus discomfort in co-ed group settings, safety concerns, female-specific approaches |
| Facilitating transformation through skills-based treatment and supportive therapeutic relationships | Importance of therapeutic support and trust, practical skills development, self-awareness development, positive relationship changes |

## Summary

The treatment experiences of female DV offenders are multifaceted, complex and include challenges for those individuals. The study results provide insight into the need for accessible, supportive and trauma-informed programs that facilitate positive change and promote self-awareness for female participants to meet the needs of this specific population. In Chapter 5, I will present the interpretations of the findings and limitations of the study as well as my recommendations and the implications for future research.

# Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, hermeneutic, phenomenological study was to explore the lived treatment experiences of female DV offenders who completed court-mandated counseling programs to understand how participants made meaning of their experiences. The results offered valuable insights into how mental health professionals and management teams can potentially better support this population and improve treatment outcomes. The key findings of this study included the following themes: navigating barriers and initial resistance to treatment, cycles of trauma, gender dynamics in treatment, and facilitating transformation through support therapeutic relationships

## Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study expand upon the current literature for DV offenders, which typically focuses on the male perspective. Literature historically focuses on the cause of criminal behavior in males (Widom & Osborn, 2021). Current literature that focuses on female perpetration states that understanding why perpetration occurs is important to finding appropriate treatment pathways (McKeown, 2014). This focus leaves a small margin for female offenders to identify program expectations or program outlines as identified by the findings of the data.

I focused on the exploration of the lived experiences of female DV offenders, their perspectives, and how participants made meaning of their journey. The study aligned with existing research by highlighting the participants' use of skills-based

treatment with current literature that identified the need for psychoeducation and the need for evidence-based practices. Current literature has emphasized the need for increased focus on individualized approaches that are more tailored to the needs of participants, as limited success in this area has been identified (Baptista & Tagliamento, 2021; Radatz et al., 2021). The current study results also extend knowledge of the need for various program designs to reduce violent acts. The extant literature identified the severe and long-lasting consequences of DV, and the completion of intervention programs seeks to treat the effects of violence through different program designs and psychoeducation for participants (Campbell et al., 2024). The current study findings further the importance of supportive therapeutic relationships with program facilitators in creating positive transformative change for participants, such as creating safe spaces for engagement, increasing self-awareness, and skills development practices. The current study findings extend knowledge in current literature by focusing specifically on the treatment experiences of female DV offenders to provide insight into the specific needs of this population, including treatment expectations, past trauma and victimization, gender and power dynamics, and the importance of supportive therapeutic relationships to facilitate positive change in self-awareness and empathy. Current literature lacked a specific focus on female DV offenders and has longitudinally focused on the causes of crime or violent acts of males (Widom & Osborn, 2021). Addressing the importance of the needs of female offenders is expounded upon in the current study by highlighting the need for more tailored treatment for females. Current literature that focuses on the treatment

program history of DV offenders centers on the patriarchal ideology of male control over females, with methods, such as the Duluth model, being frequently utilized (Babcock et al., 2007). The current study provided qualitative insights into female participants' challenges, skill utilization, and transformative journey experiences in relation to past trauma or victimization and the role in offending behaviors, gender dynamics and gender roles differences in treatment, barriers to treatment, and the need for supportive or empowering therapeutic relationships to increase motivation for change. Findings also confirm the link between childhood trauma and offending behavior in adulthood. Identifying the cycle of violence was a key theme from the results, indicating how this cycle may unfold through the lived experiences of female DV offenders. Current literature has emphasized Bandura's social learning theory, highlighting the connection between children witnessing violence or experiencing abuse and the learning of destructive, violent, and aggressive behaviors, which may continue into adulthood (Murrell et al., 2007; Steketee et al., 2021).

## Limitations of the Study

There are noted limitations to the study that arose during execution. I identified limited access to participants, as discussed in Chapter 1, as a potential limitation for the number of willing participants, which may have impacted the transferability of the research. Limited diversity in the participants also impacted the transferability of the study to larger populations. Respondent bias and reflexivity bias were noted as potential limitations in Chapter 1 of the study as well. While measures were taken to mitigate these

limitations, it must be noted that participant desirability bias or bias of the data due to researcher bias should be considered.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, I have several recommendations for future research to continue to gather useful data to inform treatment for court-mandated female DV offenders. There is a need to include individuals with more diverse backgrounds to increase the transferability of research findings, including the cultural aspects of female offender treatment experiences and increased equitable access to treatment or services.

Future quantitative studies focused on the effectiveness of changes in DV treatment programs would benefit research in this area because changes over a longitudinal time could be tracked and studied to increase further treatment and professional training options specific to this population.

Systemic factors that could contribute to female perpetration of DV is another area for research to continue to inform treatment practices for this population. Future research could further investigate the role of socioeconomic status, poverty, discrimination, and other social and societal factors that impact the overall health and well-being of females who perpetrate DV to better inform treatment outcomes.

Future research could also further identify the relationship between childhood trauma or witnessing violence in childhood and female DV perpetration in adulthood. Additional exploration and understanding of the impacts of trauma on females who

perpetrate DV could further develop trauma-informed approaches to treatment and underlying causes of violent acts within this population.

## Implications

I was able to identify several positive social change implications of this study at various levels. Individual positive social change was noted in the participant narratives of the positive transformations in emotional regulation, communication, and use of skills-based treatment, such as identifying emotional triggers and patterns, developing healthy communication skills, and increasing emotional management skills. This individual positive social change also impacts the families of participants in a positive way because participants self-reported that increased understanding of others' emotions and using tools to manage conflict positively impacted family relationships.

Counselor education and supervision, from an organization viewpoint, can use the findings of this study to potentially enhance training for new counselors or facilitators of DV programs to meet the needs of female offenders and further inform treatment for this population, taking into account gender roles, trauma, or specific needs. The current study highlighted that supportive facilitator relationships significantly enhanced positive transformation and empowerment for participants. Several participants reported a lack of adequate information or choices regarding DV programs prior to attendance, which led to frustration, anxiety, and fear. By addressing this information gap, professionals could positively impact participant engagement in the program or motivation for positive change. Societally, the findings of this study can further inform approaches and policies

related to DV intervention programs, especially related to female offenders, and could impact treatment outcomes. It is important to continue to identify and address systemic factors that could contribute to DV and how this impacts treatment for female offenders. The study further contributes to the current literature by providing additional insight into the treatment experiences of female DV offenders.

## Conclusion

There is limited information regarding the lived treatment experiences of female DV offenders. The results of this study furthered the understanding of participant perceptions of treatment programs and insight into their personal and experiences including addressing trauma, self-view, gender dynamics, individual barriers to treatment entry and engagement, and positive change. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on female DV offending by providing a qualitative exploration of participants' lived experiences in treatment. By highlighting the challenges and transformative potential of these experiences, this study aids in advancing the understanding of how to effectively facilitate more meaningful and lasting change in this population. This valuable information provides the potential for more informed treatment outcomes for this population and training for professionals who work and will work in the future with these individuals.

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# Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your treatment experience in the DV offender program.
2. Tell me about any experiences you had with DV matters before your involvement in the program.
3. What are thoughts that may have come up for you during your court-mandated counseling experience? What about any feelings that may have come up for you during your court-mandated counseling experience?
4. Tell me about specific events that influenced your decision to participate in a court-mandated counseling program.
5. Are there areas where you feel you have changed because of your involvement with a court-mandated counseling program?
6. Are there ways that you believe you might have a different viewpoint on court-mandated counseling programs after your experience?
7. Tell me about any expectations that you may have had about the court-mandated counseling program before starting. Were those expectations met?
8. Are there any unique challenges that you faced when navigating the court-mandated counseling program? If so, what were those challenges?
9. Were there any outside factors in your life that impacted your engagement in the court-mandated counseling program?
10. Are there parts of the court-mandated counseling program that you felt were most impactful? What about the least impactful?

11. Do you have any suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the court-mandated counseling program for females?
12. What were your experiences with the intake process, trust-building with the counselor, and navigating the therapeutic relationship?
13. Have you observed any changes in your relationships, coping abilities, or overall well-being since completing the court-mandated counseling program?
14. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your treatment experience in a court-mandated counseling program?

# Appendix B: Demographic Questions

1. What is your age, race/ethnicity, education level and employment status?
2. What is your marital/relationship status and number of children (if applicable)?