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“Living in the Darkness”: Technology Facilitated Coercive Control,
Disenfranchised Grief, and Institutional Betrayal

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Abstract

This article draws on interviews with 20 Australian women subjected to technology facilitated coercive control (TFCC), foregrounding their accounts of grief and institutional betrayal. Findings show that while the harms of TFCC were significant, survivors' experiences were often minimized and dismissed by justice institutions. Women experienced grief due to abuse and separation from partners who had betrayed them. This loss was compounded when seeking help. We propose that disenfranchised grief is an underexplored response to domestic violence and institutional betrayal as well as a potential intervention site, particularly in relation to technology facilitated abuse.

Keywords

technology, coercive control, domestic violence, grief, institutional betrayal

Introduction

The use of technology in domestic violence is characterized by patterns of controlling and frightening behavior wherein perpetrators draw on a range of technological tools and systems to harm and entrap victims in abusive relationships (Dimond et al., 2011; Douglas et al., 2019; Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Freed et al., 2018, 2019; Hand et al., 2009; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Southworth et al., 2007). This constellation of tactics has been described as technology-facilitated coercive control (TFCC), recognizing the prominent role that technology has come to play in domestic violence (Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021). Domestic violence perpetrators have expanded opportunities to coerce, monitor, and abuse partners and ex-partners via technology in ways that defy easy explanation or redress through criminal justice systems (Douglas et al., 2019; Dragiewicz et al., 2019).

There is a burgeoning scholarly literature on the intersections of gendered violence with technology and controlling behavior which has focused on identifying perpetrator behaviors, technological opportunities for abuse prevention, and potential avenues for law reform and industry regulation (DeKeseredy, 2021; Dragiewicz et al., 2018; McGlynn et al., 2020; Powell & Henry, 2018). There has been less focus on the legacies of TFCC for survivors' emotional well-being.

This article focuses on the loss, grief, and betrayal associated with TFCC. We draw on interviews with 20 Australian women who are survivors of TFCC perpetrated by men in heterosexual relationships. We explore how their experiences were shaped by the indecipherability of technology-facilitated abuse as nonphysical injury. We argue that the unintelligibility of TFCC renders women vulnerable to institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2013), wherein police and courts trivialize and exacerbate the harms of this type of abuse. While institutional betrayal has been found to exacerbate trauma (Smith & Freyd, 2013), we draw on the concept of "disenfranchised grief" (Doka, 1989) to further decode the dimensions of loss articulated in women's stories. While expressions of grief vary across cultures and between individuals, it is widely understood as a range of emotions that, if expressed fully, are healthy, healing, and ultimately transformative (Schneider, 2000). However, disenfranchised grief is experienced when the loss experienced is not socially sanctioned, resulting in limited opportunities for social support and rituals to facilitate

mourning (Doka, 1989). In our study, women were disenfranchised from the grief and loss they experienced in the aftermath of abusive relationships when the harms of persistent technology-facilitated abuse were unrecognizable to and invalidated by social institutions. TFCC was experienced by survivors as pervasive and psychologically corrosive but also invisible. As a result, one interviewee, Jessica (a pseudonym), described her son and herself as literally and metaphorically “living in darkness.”

In the sections below, we first review the research on TFCC. Then, we discuss the interplay of grief and institutional betrayal. We next describe the methodology for the study from which the data for this article are drawn. After that, we use examples from the interviews to illustrate key themes from the interviews with survivors including grief and betrayal of trust, deprivation and loss of safety, and institutional betrayal. The article closes with reflections on the limitations of the study, a discussion of the practice implications of recognizing disenfranchised grief as a dimension of institutional betrayal in the context of TFCC, and directions for future research.

Technology-Facilitated Coercive Control

There is burgeoning literature on the role of technology in coercive control (Douglas et al., 2019; Dragiewicz et al., 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Henry et al., 2021; Woodlock, 2017). Coercive control includes coercive tactics such as the use of threats or force to elicit action and response, while control refers to gendered “structural forms of deprivation, exploitation, and command that compel obedience indirectly” (Stark, 2007, p. 229). When these tactics occur together, the result is a deprivation of liberty, or state of “unfreedom” reflecting heterosexual women’s disproportionate risk of being entrapped in abusive relationships (Stark, 2007, p. 205). Nonphysical forms of abuse are engendered by the sexual politics of coercive control, in which perpetrators leverage structural gender inequality “to undermine female identity, agency, autonomy, and power” (Moulding et al., 2020, p. 17).

Survivors often report that nonphysical forms of abuse, such as insults and humiliation, are more harmful than the physical abuse they experience (Stern et al., 2019). Research

underscores the seriousness of emotionally controlling behaviors, which are a significant predictor of intimate partner homicide (Stark, 2007). Abusive and obsessive contact, controlling behaviors, and stalking via technology have been identified as emerging trends across domestic homicide cases (Dwyer & Miller, 2014). Digital technologies have both extended existing forms of nonphysical abuse and made novel types possible (Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Dimond et al., 2011; Freed et al., 2018, 2019; Hand et al., 2009; Markwick et al., 2019). These technologies include smartphones as well as digital platforms such as Facebook. Technology can extend coercive control, with perpetrators able to surveil and control survivors at a distance using GPS, text messaging, unauthorized account access, and video to create a sense of omnipresence in survivors' lives (Woodlock, 2017). The concept of TFCC has been proposed to capture the technological and relational aspects of abuse in the context of domestic violence against current or former intimate partners (Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021).

While the literature on the outcomes of TFCC is still developing, the available research highlights implications for survivor's mental health and feelings of safety and freedom. In Woodlock's (2013) study of 46 survivors of TFCC, 84% reported a detrimental impact on their mental health. Women experienced nightmares, panic attacks, anxiety, and depression (Woodlock, 2013) with 74% stating they felt they had to be careful about where they went and what they did as a result of the abuse (Woodlock, 2013). Similarly, victim-survivors in George and Harris (2014) study also described anxiety and trauma-related symptoms after being subjected to technology-facilitated violence.

Related research has documented links between domestic violence, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), and its effects on women's health and well-being. Bates (2017) study on IBSA did not frame the abuse as domestic violence. However, 17 of the 18 women interviewed in Bates' study reported that their ex-partner was the one who had posted images online without consent. The women reported significant detrimental effects on their mental health including posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. McGlynn et al.'s (2020) study of 25 survivors' experiences of IBSA describes the effect of IBSA on survivors as a "social rupture." The abuse was a devastating harm that changed the women's lives, creating a demarcation in

survivors' sense of self before and after, with implications for their personal, professional, and social worlds. McGlynn et al. (2020) argue that understanding these harms can contribute to the design of more effective legal and policy responses to technology-facilitated abuse. Such a focus on phenomenological experiences as part of the effects of technology-facilitated abuse is valuable. The emotional and nonphysical dimensions of domestic violence, such as TFCC, are frequently dismissed and downplayed by institutions that are expected to protect victims. This can be conceptualized as a form of institutional betrayal.

Institutional Betrayal and Grief

Platt et al. (2009) argue that the very act of disclosing domestic violence to a public institution is a form of bravery and courage. When these acts of courage are responded to with minimization and disbelief, it can amplify victims' feelings of loss and helplessness. This process has been conceptualized as institutional betrayal, in which survivors are further traumatized by the institutions they reach out to for help (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Institutions are defined by Smith and Freyd (2014) as being places such as workplaces and schools as well as systems such as governments and the law. Such betrayals from institutions may take the form of a failure to protect, disbelief, blame, as well as refusal to help. When women are abused by partners, they experience betrayal from someone they love. This betrayal can be mirrored by the institutions survivors turn to for help when they cannot access the types of support required. The betrayal is escalated when survivors are disbelieved (Platt et al., 2009).

While there are limited studies on institutional responses to TFCC, such as by police and courts, the available research suggests that institutional betrayal is encountered by a range of survivors. Woodlock's study (2013) with victims of TFCC showed that responses from police were often dismissive. In a study of cyberstalking and policing, Millman et al. (2019) found that when the perpetrators were ex-partners, law enforcement officers were more likely to minimize the abuse and blame victims. Examples of institutional betrayal evident in this study included police focusing on victims' behavior rather than perpetrators' criminal activities, including scrutiny and comments on the information women had shared online and women's reluctance to close online accounts. A key finding was that police believed that many women were

unwilling to help themselves by changing their online behaviors. A study on institutional betrayal and domestic violence found that women's perceptions of betrayal by institutions after reporting domestic violence had detrimental mental health consequences, including depressive symptoms, posttraumatic stress, and anxiety (Lee et al., 2019).

While attention to trauma is an important part of acknowledging the harms of domestic violence, Donovan and Hester (2010) argue that the emotional dimensions of abuse have often been overlooked. They assert that relationships are most often entered into on the basis of love, noting that care for perpetrators and hope they will change are among the most common reasons for survivors returning to relationships. Similarly, the mourning that survivors experience when exiting a violent relationship is not widely acknowledged in research or practice (Messing et al., 2012).

The grief women feel at separation has significant mental health implications, requiring close attention to provide a holistic response to survivors of domestic violence (Messing et al., 2012). However, women may feel shame about their grief in the aftermath of abusive relationships (Scott & Weisz, 2002). Such emotions may be perceived by others as pathological (Campbell, 1989). Thus, women's loss in the context of domestic violence often takes the form of "disenfranchised grief"—grief that is not socially acknowledged nor publicly supported through rituals and mourning practices (Doka, 1989). Disenfranchised grief can be often mistaken for mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Mitchell, 2017). Social support is limited, which can extend and complicate the grieving process (Bordere, 2017). Scott and Weisz (2002) noted that many domestic violence survivors experience disenfranchised grief and the failure to acknowledge this grief restricts survivors' healing.

Recent research on violence against women and disenfranchised grief has centered on sexual assault. In her work with sexual assault survivors, Bordere (2017) extends the concept of disenfranchised grief to include the loss of independence, freedom, and a sense of safety that victims may experience following assault. Grief in this sense is a form of deprivation, where aspects of victims' lives have been stripped away against their will. The outcomes of this are shaped by victims' personal, social and cultural histories, with many

survivors having to adjust to the loss of belief in a safe or just world. Studies on sexual abuse, such as with incest victims and their mothers (Dwyer & Miller, 1996) and partners of child sex offenders (Bailey, 2018), have utilized the concept of disenfranchised grief to make sense of the complicated emotional effects on survivors and secondary victims. These include the mixture of love and betrayal, the lack of closure in the relationship, and rejection and disapproval of survivors' grief from those around them.

The concept of disenfranchised grief warrants further theoretical attention because it foregrounds the neglected emotional dimensions of love and loss in the aftermath of domestic violence. These are often entangled in a variety of institutional responses and betrayals. Indeed, Bordere (2017) argues that women's grief after sexual victimization is not only disenfranchised but also suffocated since it occurs in a cultural context that stigmatizes and penalizes survivors for feeling bereaved. Discriminatory actions against survivors can ensue, and survivors may subsequently self-blame when they disclose abuse, which can further compound loss and grief.

Drawing on the theories of disenfranchised grief and institutional betrayal, we emphasize the complexity of women's emotions associated with navigating and leaving domestic violence in the context of TFCC. Participants in our study shared that their reasonable fears about TFCC are routinely discredited, their grief disenfranchised, and they were exposed to processes of institutional betrayal. As a result, women's mourning and loss were disenfranchised in the process of enduring TFCC. They were likely to be told that their accounts did not constitute real abuse. The following sections examine the intersections of disenfranchised grief and institutional betrayal as specific features of TFCC, arguing that the lack of recognition of TFCC among frontline responders compounds its harms.

Methodology

This article is based on findings from interviews with 20 female survivors from New South Wales and Queensland, Australia, that were conducted as part of a larger qualitative study on TFCC between late 2018 and early 2019. Focus groups were also held with domestic violence practitioners who work in rural,

regional and remote areas, but these findings are not included in this analysis. Women's interviews were re-coded after the initial coding round in order to answer the research question: what is the impact of TFCC on survivors?

Sampling and Recruitment

Women's health and legal support programs assisted with survivor recruitment. We used this approach so that we could minimize the risk of direct contact with survivors who had been subjected to TFCC. Those who experience TFCC may elect or feel pressured to disengage from technology and may not be able to be contacted safely using online and telephone communication. In our method, services identified potential participants, shared the recruitment documents, and provided information about the study. The services then organized the interviews which were conducted either via phone or at the services' offices. The connection to services ensured women could receive assistance and support from workers pre and post-interview. A convenience sample was used. We use pseudonyms to identify survivor participants in this article. Ethical approval was via Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) Office of Research Ethics and Integrity (Approval numbers 1900000218 and 1800000562). A secondary External Ethics Approval was granted by Western Sydney University (Approval number H12987).

Interviews

Ten interviews were conducted with survivors of TFCC in Queensland and 10 in New South Wales, Australia. The questions asked ranged from demographics, experiences of TFCC, and help-seeking strategies to recommendations for improving responses to TFCC. The average length of the interviews was one hour. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Women were given a \$50 gift card as a token of appreciation for their contribution as well as to compensate for time spent in the interview.

Participants

The participants in the research ranged from 21 to 65 years old, with an average age of 39 years. When asked about their backgrounds, half of the women identified as Australian (9

women) or Aboriginal (1 woman) and half were born overseas, including in Canada, China (2 women), India (2 women), Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, and South Africa.

Data Analysis

The initial coding of the transcripts was conducted by the research team using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo. In order to analyze the effects of TFCC on women, we re-coded the transcripts using a template style of coding. Template coding is a method ideally suited for coding where some themes have been previously identified and where researchers wish to address specific theoretical concerns such as examining the impacts of TFCC (King & Horrocks, 2010).

In our initial coding round, we found that TFCC was often minimized, dismissed, and not recognized as real abuse by police and legal systems. However, participants described effects that were significant in their lives. The contrast between the lack of recognition of TFCC by legal systems and the serious trauma and harm described by survivors revealed a sense of disenfranchised grief and institutional betrayal throughout the women's stories. This is a particularly gendered experience, with women's grief due to TFCC often being stigmatized not only is the abuse seen as not real, but also the context in which it arises trivializes survivors' pain and loss.

With these concepts in mind, we re-coded the transcripts using template analysis. Template analysis facilitates the revision of existing themes as well as applying new ones (King & Horrocks, 2010). Therefore, we reviewed the transcripts for feelings of loss and grief, changes to self-following abuse (recognizing that for many women, especially those who have children with perpetrators, there is no clear demarcation of abuse ending), changes in relationships, and mental health effects. We coded for expressions and incidents where women's abuse was minimized, dismissed, and silenced by institutions (such as the legal system).

The major themes we generated were:

1. Women experience a series of losses after TFCC—which range from the loss of the relationship with the perpetrator, the

person they were before the abuse, and a loss of trust in technology;

2. Women experience dislocation and alienation from their lives due to TFCC—the abuse and perpetrators stripped them of their sense of safety and deprived them of their freedom; and

3. Women’s experiences of abuse and loss due to TFCC are minimized and dismissed by the institutions they turn to when seeking help and responding to violence.

The aforementioned themes enabled a thorough exploration of women’s grief, which included dimensions of personal loss as well as broader social deprivations of safety and freedom. These losses were compounded by the dismissal and minimization of TFCC by institutions such as police and courts.

Findings

Women’s accounts of TFCC communicated the pain and loss they experienced, complicated by institutional processes that minimized or dismissed the harms of TFCC as a nonphysical form of abuse. The contrast between their grief and mourning and inadequate institutional responses foregrounds the tendency to frame nonphysical abuse as illegitimate or otherwise harmless, further compounding the losses women experienced. Below, we first explore women’s responses to their partners’ betrayal, including loss of trust in their partner and themselves, mourning the time lost to the relationship, and often the personal identity they felt they lost to the abuse. Women also described the way that TFCC creates a loss of trust in technology itself. We then examine how TFCC deprived women of their wider sense of safety, stripping them of freedoms and enabling perpetrators to intrude in their lives even after physical separation. After reviewing the significant harms of TFCC, we outline the responses women received when seeking help from institutions. Women’s sense of loss, grief, and betrayal were amplified by the dismissal and minimization from police, courts, and some support services.

Grief and Betrayal of Trust

Woven throughout the women’s stories of TFCC were losses and grief they experienced due to abuse, including loss of

partners and loss of the time in the relationship. Josie grieved the man she married “not existing anymore,” who she felt had been permanently lost to substance abuse and violence. She explained that: “I was in the hope to have back the man that I married, that I was in love with, you know. I have known him for 20 years, it’s not just one day. So you know the man that I married doesn’t seem to exist anymore.” Similarly, Aiofie wondered if her 19-year relationship with her ex-partner was a waste of time and grieved the years spent with him. She said:

Really after everything that I’ve been through since we separated, nothing surprises me anymore. You know, initially, I just couldn’t believe that this is the person that I’ve been married to for 19 years, and I get absolutely no empathy or understanding. Now it’s just nothing, there’s nothing that would shock me anymore.

Several women mourned the forfeiture of their confident, carefree pre-abuse selves. Catalina said: “I’m usually a very, I don’t know, easy-going, confident person but I felt like I wasn’t in control anymore and that actually scared me.” Jessica described what had been taken from her by domestic violence and TFCC, speaking of her sense of independence and control prior to her abusive relationship and her ongoing commitment to providing a stable home for her children. She said:

I’d been so Miss Independent for most of my life, and I hadn’t been properly with anybody for 10 years, so, you know, I didn’t want I didn’t want what my mother had to go through with being a single mum, and I never wanted to bring a child into the world unless I had certain criteria for that child. That’s why, like I say, when I was in my 20s, I’d had a few boyfriends because I was like, no way am I doing that unless I know for sure I’m in a committed relationship, and that person is going to be a good partner and husband.

The effects of TFCC compounded the pervasive losses associated with domestic violence. Charlotte felt that ongoing

TFCC by her ex-partner interfered with her normal emotional responses to the end of the relationship, preventing her from properly grieving it. When asked about the effects of TFCC, Charlotte expressed:

Honestly, I think about it all the time and I probably will for a while, particularly when I'm still receiving emails and phone calls and text messages. At the moment, my anger at him is propelling me. What I'm really upset about the most is that he has taken away my ability to grieve the relationship normally.

In the context of TFCC, these losses extended to include a loss of trust in technology itself. Amahle described wariness with technology and the weight of knowing "how watched you are and every move you make." Similarly, Michelle explained that the most significant impact of TFCC on her was her growing belief that technologies were not reliable or secure. She said:

Trust is a big thing for me. Trust is a huge thing. I have real trust issues.... That first year was awful. I would cover the on my laptop, I would cover the camera. I know that sounds stupid. But I just didn't trust that somebody remotely accessed it and turned it on.

TFCC had seriously detrimental and life-changing impacts on women's sense of identity and social stability. For example, Suyin was from overseas and her Australian ex-partner had promised to support her application for Australian residency and citizenship. However, he subsequently withdrew his support for her partner visa and hacked into her immigration account to cancel her residency application. After separation, she experienced periods of homelessness, as well as inpatient stays in mental health facilities. In her interview, Suyin said she had lost her previous identity as a successful and independent person. She expressed that "Before, I was in [in another country] and ... I'm a businesswoman. All my family is in university. All professors, my parents." Suyin's account illustrates the centrality of technological practices and processes in day-to-day living and

major life transitions such as migration. In this instance, Suyin's partner committed identity fraud in order to interfere with her immigration application, but in doing so, he destabilized her identity as a whole: her status as an Australian resident, her selfimage as a successful independent woman, her sense of family pride, and her self-esteem.

Deprivation and Loss of Safety

Throughout the interviews, women expressed grief over the loss of the life they lived before being subjected to TFCC and the sense of safety that had been taken from them. Many women felt that technology had projected and amplified the presence of perpetrators throughout all domains of their lives. Sarah explained the omnipresence of TFCC and the sensation that her life would never be free from the perpetrator:

It is that omnipresence, it's that whole that's what it's like ... I think it is a huge problem. Because I think it depends what kind of abuser they are, but if they need to have that, even if they've moved on with their life if they feel that they have that control and ownership of you ... I think that's a huge big discussion for the professionals to understand you're never free because of technology, you're not free.

Nicole felt that there was no space that was free from the perpetrator even after physical separation. She voiced that "it's that invasion of privacy – the invasion of – even when I am away from him I'm never truly away from him because he can always reach me somehow." Women spoke of the oppressive weight of this invasive contact. Josie described the confinement that TFCC effectively invoked:

So in my life I feel like I'm in a prison. Because I can't going out I'm thinking, oh "I'm not going to go there" and I think "I'm dead." Or "I'm not going to go there." You know what I mean and you I have to watch my back all the time. I feel really terrible.

Isabella felt that the emotional effects of TFCC were more harmful than the physical injuries of domestic violence. The knowledge that she could be surveilled or contacted anywhere and anytime resulted in a diminished sense of safety even in her home. She said:

I have been through domestic violence before. That was physical. This is emotional and it breaks you down. It wears you down. You just get to a point where it's just so overwhelming and you're just done. Even now [during the interview] I'm sitting out the back wondering if he's going to be turning up at my house because he'll constantly text message me saying he's out the front ... I don't sit in the house.

In these accounts, the specific affordances and capabilities of technology are overlaid with the hypervigilance and fear characteristic of domestic violence. Michelle remarked that "you just live in fear." Jessica described herself as "living in darkness." She said:

It affects my mental health as well, it was a long time before I would go out to the front veranda with my son. It was a long time before I opened up the curtains. So, I was living in the darkness most of the time with my son for the first, you know, six months of his life.

"Living in darkness" had a significant impact on women's mental well-being. Prolonged fear and the deprivation of control over their lives left many women feeling as though they were going "crazy." Jessica engaged a psychologist as she needed objective confirmation that what was happening to her was real. She recounted that:

I started seeing a psychologist because he got me so doubting my own ability to see things clearly and to tell what's fact and what's my own, you know, mind seeing it, or my past creating that, you know? But I had to go and bounce these ideas off of somebody to say, I'm not crazy. This is how I'm seeing it, isn't it? You know.

Sarah described how the long-term impact of persistent TFCC and surveillance had robbed her sense of privacy, resulting in, like Jessica stated, feeling “crazy”:

Oh, it’s every day. It’s every single day you know that you’re being watched and that you’re being monitored, and it is that feeling of gaslighting that, and when you say that people think you know they can make you look a bit crazy. As in, the impact is huge on your life.

Other women also spoke of the legacy of TFCC on their mental health. For Julia, legal assistance did not stop her ex from relentlessly calling and texting and almost drove her to suicidality. Julia said:

It made me want to commit suicide to get out of it because that’s the only way I felt because he was getting off the intervention orders; he was still harassing me, and I felt that was the only way out of this abuse ... I think [technology abuse] is worse because you’re getting scared more. If you turn your phone on and you’ve got all these missed calls and you start freaking out ... It was just yeah it was the only way out for me was to try to commit suicide a couple of times.

Perpetrators used technology, alongside other forms of abuse, to deprive women of their sense of safety and autonomy, which in turn affected their mental wellbeing. Technology-enabled perpetrators to be present in women’s lives from a distance even after separation. Their sense that the perpetrator had expansive opportunities to abuse them amplified their feelings of entrapment, and in turn extended the depth of their grief over the way abuse had stripped them of their safety and freedoms.

Institutional Betrayal

As survivors’ accounts show, TFCC complicates the aftermath of abusive relationships, disrupting women’s coping strategies and facilitating ongoing abuse. Perpetrators’ use of

technology deprived women of safety and freedom and their capacity to live without fear. However, when women courageously engaged police in efforts to interrupt TFCC, their bravery was often met with institutional betrayal. Nine of the 20 women interviewed stated that police dismissed or trivialized their reports of TFCC. On some occasions, police blamed them for the abuse. Isabella and Ajinder felt that the police did not acknowledge the effects of the TFCC and made them feel they were overreacting. Isabella said:

I do think that the police need to take it more seriously. I feel like when I showed the officer the message, for example, he was like “Why do you care what anyone thinks about you or says about you?” and just really condescending, standing over me and it makes you feel stupid and you don’t want to report it.

Similarly, police claimed that what Ajinder showed them did not constitute abuse and blamed her for giving the perpetrator her email address. She recounted:

I just called a police officer, [and told them] that I’m getting this type of email, and they said, “Why are you giving him the email, your own email? Why did you disclose it to him? It’s not an abuse” ... they just ignore, they say, “okay, you just ignore,” you know?

The failure to recognize TFCC as abuse—because it wasn’t physical violence—was a recurrent theme in the interviews. Jessica recalled:

Certain police, they [say] “oh, you’re just getting this type of communication,” “oh get over it,” sort of type thing, you know? “You’re not getting bashed around, or hit with a baseball bat, or with your life threatened.”

Josie was also told by police that they could not take action against her ex-partner for TFCC in the absence of a physical attack. She attended several police stations before she found an officer to take her seriously. Michelle said that the abusive text messages and emails that she shared with the police were

dismissed and she was told, “unless he was going to punch me in the face, they didn’t want to know about it.” Likewise, Nicole explained that the police only cared about the physical abuse and “the threats and stuff seemed to be by-the-by.”

Women’s experiences directly contradicted the assumption by some law enforcement personnel that TFCC was inconsequential. The survivors situated TFCC firmly within perpetrators’ broader patterns of control and violence, which often included histories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Jia pointed out that her ex-partner’s online release of private information about her had immediate implications for her physical safety:

I think the most terrible part of that is because people think it’s not physical, there’s no physical implication, but actually, there is. Because people can use this information. They can use what they get from your email to physically stalk you and do some bad things.

Failure to recognize the risk and consequences of TFCC jeopardized survivors’ well-being and safety. Survivors in our study recounted dismissive responses to TFCC in other institutional contexts as well. For instance, at court, Yume was told to fill in a form about domestic violence, but was not given space to provide information about TFCC. Yume explained:

I tried to fill out the DV order form, but it is so thick, so much paper and for someone who is not English first language it is too hard. On the form it mostly asks about physical violence, but it should also have on there about the phone. It is hard to explain when it is not physical what is going on. If they had it on the form, the technology abuse and the texting it would be easier to explain. That’s one thing they could change.

Sarah also experienced difficulties having her experiences recognized in court. She felt that the judges and barristers “saw the technology as like yeah, well, whatever. Like what you don’t have a broken bone, like there’s no blood flowing here.” This focus on physical assault and concomitant minimization of TFCC even extended to a domestic violence service. When Sarah told

domestic violence practitioners about the TFCC, she said “there was just nothing,” no response tailored to that type of abuse.

Overall, survivors’ accounts revealed that the serious effects of TFCC were often incomprehensible in systems focused on incidents of crisis and physical assault. TFCC systematically eroded women’s autonomy, dislocated them from their prior identities, and exposed them to the constant threat of escalating violence. This was all the more harmful due to the illegibility of TFCC to others. In the process of seeking help, the grief and loss associated with TFCC and leaving an abusive relationship were compounded by disenfranchisement and betrayal, as discussed in the following section.

Discussion

The burden of domestic violence in women’s lives, and on society as a whole, is often measured in terms of mental and physical injury, illness, and loss of life. However, the emotional elements of abuse are less recognized and less quantifiable. Women’s love and grief are often overlooked. While the concept of disenfranchised grief has not been widely applied to domestic violence, this framework can help improve our understanding of TFCC. Disenfranchised grief is characterized by the misrecognition or denial of loss and its associated emotional effects, a lack of support, and responses characterized by disbelief, ridicule, and stigma (Gitterman & Knight, 2019).

Our findings indicate that women experienced numerous and extended bereavements in which the nonphysical and ubiquitous features of TFCC contributed to its illegibility to third parties, rendering its harms invisible. Survivors were robbed of feeling secure in their own homes and lives. Denied social recognition and validation, women’s deprivation and grief were liable to be turned inward, as women questioned the validity of their own experiences, interpretations, and understandings of the abuse and violence to which they were subjected. Their grief was amplified by institutional betrayal, in which the failure of institutions to respond adequately, proportionately, and constructively to complaints of interpersonal violence compounds the trauma of that violence, producing chronic heightened distress and negative mental health outcomes (Smith & Freyd, 2013).

The concept of institutional betrayal is important not only because it validates the betrayal that survivors experience when they seek help from institutions that are meant to protect them, but also because it gives weight to the emotional processes of courage and bravery that underlie survivors' help-seeking. Recognizing domestic violence survivors' disenfranchised grief can help improve its recognition. When survivors' grief is met with acceptance, understanding, and public acknowledgment, survivors may be more able to move through to the transformative space of healing (Herman, 1997; Scott & Weisz, 2002).

Limitations and Future Research

Our study was one of the first designed to understand women's experiences of technology-facilitated domestic violence. It included a small convenience sample of

Australian women in two states and should not be considered generalizable to all women. While our sample was diverse in terms of country of birth, there were small numbers of women born in each country. More research on specific communities, including with immigrant and refugee survivors who have arrived more and less recently, would help us to understand the cultural and structural dimensions of technology-facilitated abuse. Our convenience sample included only one Aboriginal woman. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience heightened risks of domestic and family violence as well as racist and culturally specific types of technology-facilitated abuse (see Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Rennie et al., 2018a, 2018b; Rennie et al., 2016), future research in collaboration with urban and rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is essential to build a comprehensive evidence base for responding to technology-facilitated abuse in Australia.

This study is one of few to focus on disenfranchised grief and domestic violence. As such there are limitations to our recommendations about how women may want their grief acknowledged and what processes may best assist them. Future studies could specifically explore survivors' disenfranchised grief and the ways services, institutions, and the broader community can provide support and acknowledgment. This research should include a diverse cohort of survivors, as grieving is often culturally

shaped and expressed according to survivors' gender, sexuality, and cultural backgrounds. Further examination should be given to how survivors experience betrayal, and if acceptance from institutions and organizations such as women's services, is undermined when women are subjected to institutional betrayal from other services, for example, the legal system.

In conclusion, our study has contributed to building an understanding of the impact of technology-facilitated abuse in the context of domestic violence. We have amplified 20 survivors' stories of grief and loss and foregrounded the emotional dimensions of TFCC. While it is essential to recognize the trauma resulting from domestic violence, focusing on a universal concept such as grief may provide a normalizing context for understanding women's responses to abuse. Viewing disenfranchised grief as an important but under-examined aspect of institutional trauma opens up possibilities for healing and provides sites where interventions could enhance and support survivors in moving through the grieving process. TFCC underscores the evolving nature of coercive control. Technology amplifies gendered expressions of power and control, with significant psychological implications for survivors. Systems and services need to come to terms with these emerging forms of abuse and their effects.

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