# CMM and the co-construction of domestic violence

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### ABSTRACT

Millions of women experience the horrors of domestic violence every year. Rarely, however, is abuse between intimate partners looked at as a co-constructed communication activity. This article examines domestic violence from the perspective of the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory, thus highlighting CMM's central thesis that social events are made and re-created through processes of human communication. Paralleling the evolution of CMM from an interpretive to a practical theory, domestic violence is described in terms of how it is created, sustained, and terminated over the course of an abusive relationship. The article then focuses on the practical application of this analysis in terms of "reframing," an intervention technique that empowers relational participants to interpret and change patterns of communication in which violence and abuse are made. The shift from theoretical description to intervention is an evolutionary progression that requires translating CMM terms and concepts into actions that lead to transformation and contextual reconstruction. To that end, the article describes domestic violence using CMM concepts, including hierarchy of contexts, resources and practices, and logical force, and demonstrates how these can be (and were) used by theorists/practitioners to intervene in the lives of those impacted by domestic violence. One such episode involving one of the authors (Nalla Sundarajan) and a female abuse victim is utilized as a case study illustration.

The Theory of the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) has undergone significant transformation since it was first introduced in 1976. One of the more important developments was the move from an interpretive/descriptive theory of human communication to a practical/prescriptive theory of communication action (Cronen, 1995; W. B. Pearce, 1989; W. B. Pearce & Cronen, 1980; W.B. Pearce & Pearce, 2000b). Like all theoretical transformations, this move from one approach to another did not entail abandoning what had come before. Thus, the earlier interpretive focus of CMM has now been integrated into a larger and more robust practical orientation. The implications here are profound when we consider the role of communication theorists and what they hope to accomplish as practitioners who seek not only to describe patterns of communication, but to change them as well.

This article delineates the transformation of CMM from a descriptive to a practical theory using domestic violence as a case study. The purpose is twofold. The first is to provide a descriptive account of how domestic violence is communicatively co-constructed by participants in abusive relationships. Typically, domestic violence research has focused on the reasons why men abuse their intimate partners and why women continue to stay in abusive relationships (Gondolf, 1999). Within this approach there is a concerted attempt to establish causal relationships between variables, such as acculturation, alcohol, and substance abuse. Given that the focus is on the causes of domestic violence, extant research is naturally geared toward finding *the real* solutions (Gondolf, 1999). CMM offers a different perspective; one that treats abuse as a developmental

pattern of social interaction that is achieved in and through processes of communication. Rather than asking why abuse happens or seeking to discover its causes, CMM asks *how* relationships become abusive. In this way, CMM establishes a framework for treating domestic violence as an emergent property that is co-constructed in conversations between the participants in abusive relationships.

The second purpose of the article, which parallels CMM's move to a practical theory, is to describe an intervention technique—reframing—that practitioners, counselors, and action researchers can use to change predictable abuse patterns and ultimately prevent domestic violence from occurring. If abuse is something that is made in and through patterns of communication, then an intervention approach based on this perspective is an appropriate context for investigation. We are unaware, however, of any intervention models or programs that adopt a distinctly social, communicative perspective like CMM. In fact, almost all domestic violence intervention models focus on the individual characteristics of the man in the relationship, and are geared towards changing his abusive behavior towards his partner (Breines & Gordon, 1983; Pence & Paymer, 1993). As such, they do not fully recognize the co-constructed nature of domestic violence and the need for intervention strategies that are focused on changing patterns of communication rather than individual behaviors and attitudes. This might help explain why existing intervention models have had only limited success. For example, approximately 30% of men who complete a state certified batterer programs in the United States ended up committing abuse again (Gondolf, 1999). Other longitudinal studies show that long-term success rates in men to be quite low, and that other forms of abuse, such as verbal and emotional aggression, increase as a means to compensate for the suspension of physical abuse (Gondolf, 1999). We believe that a CMM-based approach to domestic violence can lead to the development of alternative, and perhaps more effective, intervention strategies and techniques.

### The nature of domestic violence

The seriousness and horror of domestic violence is well documented. According to surveys by the U. S. Department of Justice (March 1998), just over 1,800 murders in 1996 were attributable to intimates. Over 75% of the victims were female. The same survey also indicated that women were the victims of 840,000 incidents of rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault at the hands of an intimate. Battering is the single most common cause of emergency room treatment for women, and accounts for 25% of female suicide attempts and 4,000 homicides each year (Holtz & Furniss, 1993, p.47). Negative consequences to women include physical injury, increased risk for homicide, various psychological problems such as fear, terror, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, helplessness, shame, feelings of inferiority, increased risk for suicide, and psycho-physiological complaints such as fatigue, backache, headache, and insomnia (Arias, 1999). In addition to these symptoms, Walker (1984) suggests that abused women show many of the same symptoms that are shown to comprise a type of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) frequently associated with soldiers who have participated in combat. The symptoms of PTSD include intense fear and anxiety that is borne from the uncertainty of being alive from one

ment to the next. Since abuse is extensive, and physically and emotionally affects thousands of women each year, the process by which abuse becomes a normal part of some relationships is important to understand.

## Theorizing domestic violence

CMM posits that the events and objects of our social worlds are the products of social actions whose continued existence depends on their reconstruction in patterns of communication (Cronen, 1995; W. B. Pearce, 1989; W. B. Pearce & Cronen, 1980). This perspective considers all forms of human activity as a recurring reflexive process in which resources are expressed in practices and in which practices (re)construct resources. The term "resources" refers to a person's experiences, images, memories, and stories (W. B. Pearce, 1989). "Practices" are actions, referring to any situated collaborative accomplishment of an event, such as a conversation, a family picnic, an abusive or a violent act (W. B. Pearce, 1989). The existing resources guide the present conversation or action, and the memory of this conversation becomes a part of future resources that will guide future events and conversations.

In the case of domestic violence, it makes sense to assume that couples bring resources into their relationships that initially sanctions relational abuse. For instance, most men in intimate relationships would not abuse, either emotionally or physically, the woman they love, and most women would not tolerate or excuse the abuse. So how does violence become a "normal" part of some relationships? Resources that a person possesses lead a person to interpret an event in a certain way, to observe certain things and overlook others, and this necessitates certain conclusions because within one's resources the event may seem unequivocal. W. B. Pearce (1989) defines this as the logical force that shapes and directs everyday events and conversations. The actions that the actors engage in are based upon their "interlocking sets of perceived moral obligations" (p. 26) of what they should do in a particular situation. "Perceived moral obligations" revolve around a "logic of meaning and action" where the conversant feels that some actions are mandatory, optional, or prohibited.

Resources implicitly define a logic of meaning and action that provides the framework for understanding what is legitimate, obligatory, prohibited, and so on. This idea is particularly significant in understanding domestic violence. For example, Infante, et al. (1989) concluded that verbal aggression was used when more constructive skills (resources) for dealing with conflict, such as the ability to argue and verbalize feelings of frustration and anger, were lacking. Zillman (1984) found that when predisposing conditions exist, such as unexpressed anger from previous situations, verbal aggression can lead to physical violence. In CMM language, this would be a progression of abuse when past memories of abuse or familiar scripts and patterns are again expressed, or when they become (re) constructed practices of already existing resources. By examining the resources of the perpetrator and of the victim, we can begin to understand the logical force that shapes and directs the speech acts and the ensuing episodes of abuse that are repeated in the relationship.

W. B. Pearce (1989) concludes that one common structure of resources is a stable hierarchy. Persons "layer" interpretations of self, other, relationship, and episodes with the perceptions that they bring with them into the situation. According to this notion, the contextual force, which is the sense of obligation that derives from the definitions of self, other, relationship, episode, etc., that is present in a given situation supersedes all other forces in the logic of meaning and action. This is when a person feels compelled to do or say something because he or she feels that it is the only option for that particular situation. By exploring the layers in the stable hierarchy, and the logical force of the persons involved in domestic violence, we can understand how their resources and practices work together to create patterns of relational abuse.

The "hierarchy of contexts" within CMM provides a framework for examining how logical force develops in conjunction with resources and practices to create and sustain domestic violence (W. B. Pearce, 1994). *Speech acts* are defined as "actions that we perform by speaking" and include promises, threats, and insults (p. 104). *Episodes* "function as frames that define some things as 'inside and during' the episode and others as 'outside and before or after' the episode" (p.154). *Relationships* may be described "as the cluster of conversations that are punctuated as in it," and that "the meaning of a particular relationship is determined by just those conversations that occur in it" (p. 208). From the communication perspective, the self is produced in patterns of conversations with siblings, parents, etc. first, and later shaped by the way people act "to become the *self* that they want to be" (p.252). *Culture,* the dominating context that persons bring into a relationship, is defined as "the context of the contexts in which we find ourselves and into which we act; it is the usually taken-for-granted background, or *frame,* of our actions" (p.302). The key point here is the extent to which the hierarchical relationships among the different contextual levels (speech acts, episodes, etc.) are compatible or incompatible based on performance demands. For example, we intend to show how women in abusive relationships often position the relationship as the context for their self concept. As a result, women deny their own personal wishes, demands, and needs in order to ensure the supremacy of the relationship.

## Researching domestic violence

In order to describe how domestic violence is created, sustained, and terminated in patterns of communication, the lead author of this article (Nalla) conducted in-depth interviews with three women and two men who either had been or were currently involved in an abusive relationship. These interviews were undertaken as part of her Master's of Arts research project, which was directed and supervised by the second author (Shawn).

The research participants were recruited via a purposive and convenience sample from a domestic violence shelter, a local church, and Nalla's personal contacts. In addition to having direct experience with domestic violence, participants were also selected based on their willingness (i.e. voluntary consent) to openly discuss abuse in past and present relationships. Moreover, a deliberate decision was made to avoid recruiting participants who routinely spoke in public about their experiences; for example, on behalf of domestic violence shelters. As visible spokespeople, who both inform the public and solicit financial support for violence prevention

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shelters, their accounts might be scripted, and perhaps even exaggerated. Overall, participants were selected based on their willingness and ability to describe their experiences in spontaneous, thoughtful, and honest ways.

In line with qualitative research methods (Jorgenson, 1995; Lanigan, 1988), these in-depth interviews were conducted to elicit descriptions and accounts of the participant's lived experiences with domestic violence. The interview questions were open-ended so that the participants had the opportunity to give descriptive answers in their own words and from their own perspectives. For example, one of the initial questions was, "How did the very first conflict in your relationship come about?" In addition to prepared questions, other questions and follow-up probes evolved through the course of the interview. This open-ended approach enabled participants to expand or clarify something that was mentioned. Interviews took place in locations where the subjects (particularly the victims) felt safe, such as private homes and coffee shops. The participants were assured of confidentiality and given background information about the nature of the study. All of the interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Brief field notes describing the setting, as well as the participant's attitude and demeanor, were compiled for each interview.

### Data analysis

The analysis of the interview data was conducted in an ongoing and iterative process. The process involved five steps. First, data were labeled by the categories drawn from existing CMM concepts, such as "resources," "co-construction," and "logical force." After labeling the data, the second step was established based on the "hierarchy of contexts" (culture, self, relationship, etc.). In this step, particular speech acts were labeled to indicate the dominating contexts for the participants, and the match or fit between contexts. After labeling the contexts, the third step involved categorizing the data into three broad phases to indicate the process through which abuse emerged. Once the broad categories were set, the fourth step involved reducing the data to include only those descriptions that depicted one of the three stages. Finally, in step five, themes were identified within each of the three phases. These themes were developed inductively during the analysis (*emic* categories), and "taken from the conceptual structure of the people studied" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 79). Validation of data was achieved, in part, by systematically soliciting feedback from the participants themselves. This involved, first, offering them the opportunity to read the actual transcriptions (before the analysis), and second, verifying utterances in order to preserve the integrity of the context, and ruling out the possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning of what they said.

Based on the results of the data analysis, we found that abuse evolved in unique ways and was sustained differently by the research participants. This should not be surprising given that no two lived experiences are ever the same. At the same time, we were able to identify similarities among the participants in their descriptions of how abuse developed over time. We also detected a number of overlapping themes that were woven throughout the various stories that were told. In assigning "meaning" to the interview data, we thus sought to preserve the integrity and the uniqueness of each lived experience, while also acknowledging commonalities.

among the experiences. Chen and Pearce (1995) note that "case studies are not to predict and control but to enlighten and illuminate while acknowledging the complexity and contingency of communication…(it) should also be judged by how probable and plausible the interpretations are within the context of inquiry" (p. 149).

### Describing the phases and themes of domestic abuse

We categorized the development of abuse into three broad phases. Within each of these phases a number of common themes were identified. In what follows we provide a broad summary of the three phases and the various themes that comprise them. A more detailed description, including extensive quotes from the research participants and comprehensive explanations of CMM concepts, can be obtained by contacting either one of the authors.

In the first phase, *creating abuse in the relationship,* two common themes were identified: (1) women positioned the "relationship" over their "self" in the hierarchy of contexts, and (2) women came to fear their male partner. In the second phase, *sustaining abuse in the relationship*, three common themes were identified: (1) co-construction of confusion, (2) denial and minimization of the abuse, and (3) hope of restoration. In the final phase, *terminating abuse in the relationship,* the two common themes were: (1) intense fear and (2) intense anger.

#### *Creating abuse in the relationship*

The process of domestic violence is initiated very early in the relationship. The critical juncture occurs when the woman places the "relationship" as the dominant context, whereas the man has the "self" as the dominating context. As a consequence of how they organize their dominating contexts, the couple enact speech acts that serve to devalue the woman's "self" while placing the man's "self" in a position of great importance. Consequently, the woman is "forced" to oblige in certain situations at the expense of her well being to sustain the relationship. In these episodes the woman gradually abdicates her power as an autonomous agent to the man's benefit. For example, one of the female participants recalled an episode early in her marriage in which she gave up going to flute lessons at the request of her husband, in spite of the fact that she found the lessons to be personally satisfying and enriching. Within her logic of meaning and acting, she felt compelled to choose the relationship (spending time with her husband) over her self (taking flute lessons).

Every episode that lessens the importance of the woman's self while enhancing the self of her male partner helps in the co-construction of subsequent episodes that set a pattern where the man becomes more powerful than the woman. In subsequent speech acts, his powerful position in the relationship allows him to show his anger while denying her to do so for fear of jeopardizing the relationship, her dominant context. She is therefore compelled to tolerate his abusive actions, and instead of retaliating begins to fear his angry outbursts. Typically, these episodes fortify the previously established pattern of the woman giving in to the man's demands. In one episode, for example, one of the female research participants became aware of her husband's "temper" when he threw her jewelry on the floor because she went out to dinner with friends. Instead of reacting

with anger or some other form of resistance, she responded by trying to "placate" him so he would not "have to lose his temper" again.

Episodes such as the one described above often conclude with the man verbally calling the woman abusive names, or accusing her of something that she did or did not do. A pattern of verbal abuse thus becomes established in the relationship, and with each occurrence the tendency towards greater intensity and escalation (Berry, 2000). By now the relationship has evolved to where their speech acts almost "demand" her submission to him, and she finds herself with few options except to concede to his demands, which further undermines her position in the relationship. From this point it is just a small step away from actual physical abuse, which generally happens within a few months after the first instance of verbal abuse. When the incident occurs, the woman typically feels that she "deserved" the treatment because the couple is still acting out of the context that legitimizes the abuse.

## Sustaining abuse in the relationship

As the relationship continues into the sustaining phase, the woman's "self" is moved down further in her hierarchy of contexts, both by herself and by her partner. She is typically isolated from her family and friends at this stage and relies solely on her partner for affirmations of self and for her perceptions of reality. When her partner denies confirmation of her perceptions, she begins to doubt her very sanity, and is forced to acknowledge her partner's conception of reality at the expense of her own. One of the female participants described the situation this way:

"One of the things about it is there's this confusion that would come when he would start with these accusations against me for whatever.  This confusion would come to my mind – it was like 'wait a minute, wait a minute, is that, is that right…. Is that what I said'….I would just get to where I didn't know what was true – I would be so confused, just mentally confused.  I can see how someone could just really go crazy…..absolutely, totally doubt myself.  I would get to where I would believe what he was saying was true. 'Yeah you're right, it's all my fault. I see, I'm doing that, I'm doing this, it's got to be all me.' That confusion was very, very real."

In addition to confusion, abuse is also sustained in the relationship when the man consistently denies and minimizes his violent and threatening actions. For example, one of the male research participants recalled a conflict episode with his wife where he tried to stop her from leaving the house.

"I parked my car behind her car and she still managed to get out. That pissed me off even more . . . So, I chased her in my car. She stopped at a light and rolled up the window. I got out of my car and started telling her to open the door. She wouldn't open the door. There was a green light and she left."

When asked in the interview if he thought his wife was afraid of him during this incident, he responded, "No, she was not fearful of me," thus denying the possibility that his actions could be interpreted as abusive or threatening. Not only did he minimize his impact on her, he went on in the interview to blame her for his outbursts, saying that she "would be one person at one time, and a different person the next. She has the Jekyll and Hyde personality. She continues to

be that way."

It has become commonly understood that abusive and violent acts in intimate relationships are followed by what is called the "honeymoon" period (Walker, 1979). Here the male partner apologizes for his actions, and the female partner eagerly forgives him and continues to hope that he will change and that the relationship will become "normal." Within the honeymoon phase, restoration becomes a common theme for both women and men. For example, when asked why she continued to stay in an abusive relationship, one of the female participants said that she "so believed he was the man God had chosen (for her) that it would work out . . . He's going to change and probably part of me thought that I'd be the one to help—I have a purpose here." One of the male participants expressed hope in restoring the relationship as well, claiming that he wanted his wife to change "to become more like his mother." "If she got to that level of mental maturity there would be no problem in the house at all." This recurring theme of hope and restoration, no matter how misplaced or misguided, is a powerful force in maintaining abusive relationships.

### Terminating abuse in the relationship

Once abuse has been "sanctioned" by the participants as an ongoing feature of their relationship, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to break the cycle unless the hierarchical order of contexts changes in some fundamental way. This change typically occurs in the terminating abuse phase, which is brought about when the woman becomes intensely fearful for her life or for the lives of her children, or becomes intensely angry at her abject predicament. The presence of intense fear or anger creates a logical force that obligates the woman to change the hierarchical contexts by attempting to terminate either the abuse or the relationship. This is achieved when the woman is able to successfully block, reframe, or exit from episodes with the undesirable abusive consequences. Two of the three females who participated in the interviews ended the abuse by terminating the relationship with their partner. One of these participants ended the relationship when faced with the prospect of having to return to an abusive husband after recovering in the hospital from a suicide attempt, which itself was brought about because of the abusive relationship. The other woman left her husband when she perceived it was necessary to protect her son. In both cases, the relationships with their abusive partners ceased to hold the dominant position. Another woman managed to reframe her context and is in the process of "recovering her self," which includes contradicting her partner and not being intimidated into conceding to his demands, particularly when they come at her expense. This process is made possible only when the woman transforms the hierarchy so that the abusive relationship ceases to occupy the dominant position.

CMM concepts provide unique insights into the process of domestic violence. It describes how domestic violence is co-constructed, sustained, and terminated in speech acts that are enacted within the context of an intimate relationship. The results of the qualitative interview research described above demonstrate that abuse is initiated in the communication patterns of the couple, and not simply *caused* by the male-dominated culture. Culture and the family background of the participants do matter, but not as a linear causal force of abuse but rather as resources that

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### From theoretical mapping to practical intervention

The descriptive accounts (phases and themes) that show how domestic abuse evolves over time are examples of the "mapping" function of CMM as a practical theory. According to Barge (2001), "practical theory as mapping requires theorists to assume a third-person perspective toward communication through which they map and describe the unfolding communication process" (p. 7). To fully realize the benefits of CMM as a practical theory, however, requires that theorists go beyond mapping by engaging with research participants with the goal of initiating change and transformation in their communicative actions and social practices. Not content to simply describe the unfolding process of domestic abuse, CMM thus provides a platform that enables theorists to move into the role of practitioner as they intervene into the lives of those who experience domestic violence. Barge (2001) refers to this aspect of practical theory as "transformative practice" (p. 7).

What are the conditions that help create positive changes in abusive relationships? Previous studies indicate that abusive patterns will continue to escalate until the couple seeks outside help, are forced to call authorities to intervene, or one of them is killed by the other (Walker, 1984; Hofeller, 1982). Our focus here is on the first condition, seeking outside help, especially when that assistance comes in the form of a theorist/practitioner who is operating out of the framework of CMM. Accordingly, Pearce (1994) suggests that to break a destructive pattern, participants must either (1) refuse to participate in an episode, (2) block the episode from occurring, or (3) reframe the context. While accomplishing any one of these is a deliberate choice, it is often difficult for participants immersed in the pattern of abuse to become aware of the embedded contexts and the communication processes through which the abuse is created and sustained. Thus there is a need for someone outside of the relationship to help one or both of the participants to break the undesirable patterns.

#### *Reframing embedded contexts*

The following case study example illustrates how reframing can be used as an interventionist technique by CMM theorists/practitioners to create change and transformation in abusive patterns of communication. One of the research participants, Yvonne (not her real name), was previously involved in two marriages that were characterized by physical abuse. Her third husband, Adam (not his real name), was not physically abusive although he was verbally and emotionally abusive and treated her children from the previous marriages with contempt.

A descriptive account of Yvonne's interview data revealed that culture, particularly in terms of religion, was the dominate context in the way she organized her social worlds. Since the first two marriages involved physical battery, and endangerment to her children, she decided after a couple of years that "this cannot be God's will for her," which then justified her decision to

end the marriages. Since Adam did not physically abuse her she could not confidently convince herself that divorcing him would be acceptable in "God's sight." She did, however, separate from him. While the separation was to protect the children, and is thus consistent with the fear and anger that often triggers termination, the dominant cultural context was not strong enough for her to completely end the relationship in divorce. In fact, throughout the five-year separation period she repeatedly declined to initiate divorce proceedings, leaving that decision to her husband. During this time, Adam refused counseling and harassed Yvonne by portraying her to her church pastors as the "disobedient wife who abandoned him." Since there was no physical battery, she had no way of convincing the pastors that the marriage was unbearable. This was an unresolvable issue. Not being able to terminate the relationship left Yvonne feeling "helpless, powerless, and in a state of limbo."

An on-going pattern of interaction during the five-year separation period consisted of Adam giving Yvonne an ultimatum under the threat of divorce. For example, in one incident he sent her cards and flowers for Valentine's Day with a note that read "I still love you. If you don't respond in two weeks that you'd return to me, I'm filing for divorce." Yvonne typically ignored these ultimatums, hoping he would go through with the divorce. He never did. This only exacerbated her feeling of being "totally powerless."

Yvonne continued to stay in contact with Nalla following her research interview. Indeed, the relationship developed to the point where Yvonne came to trust Nalla and to rely on her to "speak the truth." While they had many conversations, the following excerpt describes one particularly significant episode in helping Yvonne to reframe the hierarchical order of her contexts.

Yvonne:    I wish he would just go through with it (the divorce) this time, so I don't have this bondage, this thing hanging over my head all the time.

Nalla:     Were you safer and happier with Adam than you were with your other two husbands because Adam didn't physically abuse you?

Yvonne:    No. In fact it was worse, the games he would play were awful.

Nalla:     You lived with him for 6 years and you know how abusive he can be. He is still the same person as far as you can tell, right? So why don't you divorce him?

Yvonne:    But that would be breaking the covenant I made before God, then He (God) cannot use my life for anything. I only want to please God.

Nalla:     You've been separated for five years now because life with Adam was unbearable. But you've willingly given Adam all the power to decide when and if to divorce you. Do you think you're fulfilling God's purpose in this powerless state? Do you think God is glad that you're in this state without any peace or joy that He promised because you desire to please Him?

Yvonne:    No, of course not. You're right, I just never thought of it this way.

The conversation went on for two hours, and towards the end Yvonne was laughing and

thanking Nalla for "opening her eyes." She exclaimed, "I feel as if walls that kept me locked in all these years are just coming down! I feel so free." Yvonne decided to initiate the divorce.

As this example illustrates, reframing is a powerful tool that helps participants to step out of their set patterns, interpret their situation differently, and ultimately act on that interpretation in order to change the hierarchical order of their social worlds. Yvonne believed that if she divorced Adam for emotional abuse God would be displeased with her. So in the initial part of the conversation with Nalla, she had to accept the premise that emotional abuse is as destructive as physical abuse. After this step, she had to agree that living in her present powerless state was keeping her from fulfilling God's purposes in her life, which to her was the strongest motive to make any changes. Since Nalla was able to identify her highest context, and relate to her resultant logical force that was keeping her from initiating the divorce, the conversation enabled Yvonne to reframe it so as to interpret her situation differently. That is, Yvonne reconstructed the context so that culture took precedence over her abusive relationship with Adam to such an extent that it created the conditions for Yvonne to act on this new interpretation by initiating the divorce.

In addition to logical force and its connection to the hierarchy of contexts described above, the interaction between Yvonne and Nalla illustrates two additional factors that are essential to reframing. First, the theorist/practitioner must be in a position to "challenge" the participant's hierarchical structure, ideally through some form of game mastery that involves the intentional violation of relational rules (Pearce, 1994). For example, Nalla is clearly challenging Yvonne's interpretations in the conversational excerpt included earlier, even going so far as to ask, "So why don't you divorce him?" This type of challenge can only work, of course, if the theorist/practitioner and participant have constructed a mutually supportive and trusting relationship, as Yvonne and Nalla did.

The second factor addresses the abilities and skills of the theorist/practitioner to create and maintain a three-leveled charmed loop between the self, relationship, and episode. As W. B. Pearce and Pearce (2000a) note, maintaining the tension between self and relationship, in which each operates as the context for the other, is a necessary but insufficient condition in cases when an outside practitioner, or facilitator, is seeking to introduce social change. In these situations recognition must also be given to the episode; that is, as a context for and in response to the self and relationship contexts. In the case of Yvonne and Nalla, for example, it was critical that Nalla attended closely to the particular episode she was enacting with Yvonne and how this context unfolded in relation to her self, Yvonne's self, and the relationship between them. Among other things, this focus on the episode enables the theorist/practitioner to introduce speech acts that challenge the participant's hierarchical structure. By co-constructing something akin to a "helping" episode, and placing that context at the highest point, Nalla was able to call Yvonne's hierarchical structure into question and suggest avenues for new action without undermining her self or the trusting relationship the two of them had created. Indeed, consistent with the charmed loop concept, the self and relationship contexts were supported by the episode, and conversely enabled the "helping" episode to emerge.

## Conclusion

One of the woman participants interviewed for this study used the following analogy to describe her state of fear in the relationship with her husband: "When an elephant is young, they train it with a chain; by the time he's old they can just put a string around it. Even though the string is not strong enough to hold it, the elephant is trained." Patterns of communication that are constructed in abusive relationships ensnare the participants in horrible and dehumanizing forms of life. The understanding of this complex phenomenon from the perspective of CMM offers a description of how relational abuse emerges and is maintained, and a set of practical techniques for changing, altering, and transforming the patterns in which relational abuse is made. Thus, CMM provides a theoretical vocabulary and mode of inquiry for both describing (i.e. mapping) and resolving (i.e. reframing) domestic abuse. Our highest aspiration is to use CMM as a means of providing hope to those who suffer the pain and degradation of domestic violence. Women who are abused do not have to be bound up in patterns of communication that enable relational abuse to thrive. Through CMM descriptions and interventions, they can come to see how they can break free of the patterns that bind them to domestic violence because unlike the elephant, women in abusive relationships can act on the knowledge that they are bound by strings, not chains.

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