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**The Hong Kong Polytechnic University**

**The Department of Applied Social Sciences**

**A Grounded Theory Study on Leave-Stay Decision Making of  
Abused Women in Abusive Relationship**

**Kong, Sui Ting**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements**

**For the Degree of Master of Philosophy**

**December 2009**

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

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\_\_\_\_Kong, Sui Ting\_\_\_\_\_ (Name of Student)

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At the moment, I offer my regards and blessings to all of those who supported me in any respect during the completion of this research.

Kong, Sui Ting

## **Abstract**

This research aims at building a theory to explain ‘staying of abused women in Hong Kong’ through the use of grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It contrasts traditional verification research which places data analysis after data collection; whereas grounded theory methodology requires the researcher to collect and analyze data simultaneously, in order to guide the next data collection. Therefore, data collected from participating in sharing sessions and in-depth interviews with abused women were coded and conceptualized after each time of field work for guiding next round data collection. Gradually, concepts generated from data became saturated; meanwhile, relationships among concepts were developed and integrated into a theory, ‘reorienting conjugal relationship with the abuser’. The grounded theory generated in this research sheds light on the evaluating processes engaged by abused women to reappraise their conjugal relationships with the abusers, hence, making their leave-stay decision. The evaluating processes are found mediated by three different decision-making mechanisms, threshold-ing, dichotomy and checklist-ing, and are correspondent to abused women’s understandings of the conjugal relationships. The deficiencies of current housing policy, financial assistance and social work

practice are discussed with reference to the grounded theory, and both policy and practice implications are drawn. More importantly, through this grounded theory research, I would like to advocate a research practice, which no longer works for verifying grant theories, but to generate new knowledge and integrate existing perspectives to help making sense of the phenomenon, staying of abused women.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Background**

Violence against an intimate partner (or battered spouse) is prevalent worldwide and gives rise to devastating long-term consequences for victims, their children, and the whole society. The percentage of domestic violence ranges from 3% in Australia, Canada, and United States, to 38% in the Republic of Korea, and 52% among married Palestinian women (World Health Organization, 2002). In Hong Kong, according to the statistics of the Central Information System on Battered Spouse Cases and Sexual Violence, 1,009 cases were recorded in 1998 and there has been a worrying upward trend in the past six years (see table below). The number of battered spouse cases in 2008 has almost doubled in six years and has multiplied six-fold in a decade. Meanwhile, female victims consistently comprise more than 80% of the total number of victims. The percentage is comparable to that of the US (84%) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005) and the UK (77%) (Home Office, 2009).

Table 1

*Reported Battered Spouse Cases from 2003 to 2008*

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
No. of newly reported battered spouse cases	3,298	3,371	3,598	4,424	6,404	6,843
No. of female victims	2,902	2,990	3,153	3,749	5,169	5,575
Percentage of victims who are female	88%	88.7%	87.6%	84.7%	80.7%	81.5%

Source: Social Welfare Department (2009)

Based on the findings of the World Report by the World Health Organization (2002), incidents of intimate partner violence have detrimental effects not only on the victims, but on their children and the entire society. On the personal level of the victims, the harms include death, physical injuries, ill health, risks of depression, suicidal attempts, psychosomatic disorder, unwanted pregnancy, miscarriage, and sexually transmitted infections; on victims' children, the effects include emotional and behavioural problems, such as aggression, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and poor school performance; the impacts on the society include the loss of productivity and increased demand of social and

health services. For instance, 'abused women in Nicaragua earned 46% less' and are more likely to receive welfare assistance than women without a history of partner violence (World Health Organization, 2002, p.103). The Home Office (1 Dec, 2009) of the UK states on its official website that domestic violence costs more than £23 billion GBP per year; additionally, in the US the cost of intimate partner violence exceeded an estimated \$5.8 billion USD per year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). Besides the prevalence of domestic violence and the nontrivial detrimental effects brought by domestic violence on individuals, children and the society, it is also found that the majority of abused women tend to stay in their marriage. According to Bowlus and Sietz (1998), 77% of abused women aged 25-55 without schooling remain in their first marriage. According to Chan (2000), a local academician, 50.5% of abused women tolerate the abusive relationships for at least six years. Therefore, the fact is obvious: abused women staying in the abusive relationships is a common phenomenon, not merely accidental single cases.

In Hong Kong, the staying of abused women has not yet been extensively and empirically studied, and it is worth investigation and understanding in order

to inform professionals—including those in the judicial, legal, law enforcement, medical, economic, social, and psychological fields—to assist women to live a new life violence-free as they respond to family violence cases. Due to the lack of research and the prevalence of staying of abused women, this grounded theory research is aimed at attaining the following objectives:

1. To develop a theory to explain staying of abused women in Hong Kong, through the use of classic grounded theory methodology
2. To have a dialogue between the grounded theory generated in this research and existing literature that attempts to explain staying of abused women
3. To examine the policy and practice implications drawn from the grounded theory generated in this research
4. To explore possibilities of future research on staying of abused women in Hong Kong

### **Methodology**

In this research, grounded theory methodology (GT) is employed to study ‘why abused women stay in the abusive relationships’. This is a research

methodology founded in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss, who suggested a research package to generate theory from data systematically to explain social phenomena. This methodology is characterized by originality because it requires grounded theorists to skip reading extant literature of the research area before their grounded theories are properly generated. This principle helps to free theorists' creativity in theory generation and helps them to avoid being obsessed with a particular grant theory in analyzing the data and to screen out data relevant to the field but irrelevant to the theory. Making use of extant theory to understand data may give rise to the tendency to force data into the theory; whereas, the consequences of forcing are inhibiting originality and emergence of new knowledge, restraining creativity of researchers, and losing relevance to the field. In this light, Glaser and Strauss developed GT to facilitate emergence of concepts from data, systematic theory generation by constant comparative analysis, and release of researchers' creativity.

In addition, GT research is different from traditional research methodologies that serve the goal of theory verification. In doing theory generation, the main purpose is to produce new theoretical knowledge from the

cross-effort of human creativity and systematic analysis of field data; thereby, any worries that stop systematic production of new conceptual and theoretical knowledge are not encouraged in GT methodology. This includes the worry about accuracy and formality in field-note writing. It could be said, the worry about accuracy is not the work of theory generation but theory verification; in theory generation, this worry could trap theorists to think on a data level and disable them from conceptualizing data. Therefore, plausibility is the aim of theory generation, while, accuracy and probability are those of theory verification.

Details of grounded theory methodology and its application in this research will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

### **The Grounded Theory of Reorienting the Conjugal Relationship with the Abuser**

‘Re-orienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser’ (過自己個關) is the core concept obtained from analyzing data with GT in this research study. It captures the social psychological process of abused women in evaluating their original understanding of the abusive relationship and the conditions under which abused women redefine their understanding and make the decision to leave the

abusers. This theory enriches our understanding on the leave-stay decision making of abused women, and highlights the significance of religion, love, social and cultural expectations, and resources availability in that decision making. The overview of the grounded theory of ‘reorienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser’ will be given in Chapter 3; meanwhile, details of significant theoretical concepts will be discussed in the following chapters. In Chapter 4, four types of understanding found in abused women when they engage the abusers will be detailed with the discussion of how abused women’s behaviours are shaped according to their understanding of their conjugal relationship with the abusers; in Chapter 5, three evaluating mechanisms are delineated to show how abused women evaluate, redefine, and quit the abusive relationships with the aid of the mechanisms; in Chapter 6, combinations of understandings discovered from data will be examined.

### **A Dialogue with Existing Literature: The Theoretical Implications**

Several theories are selected from existing literature for the purpose of dialoguing with the grounded theory generated in this research. All the selected theories are attempts to explain the leave-stay decisions or the leaving-staying

processes of abused women. They are hence compared and contrasted with ‘reorienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser, in Chapter 7, for drawing on the theoretical implications of the theory of ‘reorienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser’.

### **Practical Implications**

In Chapter 8, the implications of this grounded theory study will be examined. An application of grounded theory methodology in social work practice will first be discussed, and a few practice directions drawn from the generated grounded theory will also be suggested. The practice directions are ‘talk into cultural and social expectations’, ‘talk into religion’, and ‘talk into love’. They could help taking social work practice with abused women beyond the pure calculations on practical terms.

### **Application, Limitations, and Future Research**

In the concluding chapter, I will highlight the modifiability of the generated grounded theory and delimit the explanatory power of it. Finally, future research that enhances the theory or develops it from a substantive theory



to a formal theory will be suggested.

### **Summary**

There are a few local pieces of literature that touch on the topic ‘staying of abused women’ (Tang, 1999; Review Panel on Family Services in Tin Shui Wai, 2004; Yuen-Tsang and Sung-Chan, 2005), and they attribute this phenomenon to Confucian teaching to keep women ‘submissive to men’, the grand Chinese culture to save ‘face’, and the lack of sensitivity and resources in the society to assist abused women to leave. However, how abused women perceive their staying, respond to the abusers in the abusive relationships, and experience their leave-stay decision are not yet clearly articulated. In this thesis, ‘staying of abused women’ will be examined from the perspective of the women themselves, and the data collected from women’s experiences are eventually built into a theory to explain their staying.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology: Classic Grounded Theory in Practice**

‘Why grounded theory?’ is the question most frequently asked when I shared my research experiences with my fellow postgraduate students. My answer to this question consists of responses on two levels: the first is personal and the second is academic.

I had experienced a chaotic period before writing up my research proposal for confirmation of my research student status. I was required to review the work done by others and discuss the possible contributions of my research in the area of wife abuse. I discovered my inability to tell what contribution I could make to this study since I was not sure about what results would be obtained. Therefore, I could not know the contribution of my study to the study of wife abuse until the moment it is completed. I struggled with two questions at that moment: How could a person know the result and the contribution of the research before getting it done? Or, was it just me who was not able to tell what would be obtained? These two questions baffled my mind, and I once doubted my capability in working as a researcher since my preliminary ideas appeared to be too premature

and rough to put forth into research. At that moment I was nearly to give up. Then I found a book named *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This book started with an introduction arguing the importance of theory-building as opposed to theory testing, calling researchers to commit themselves to producing fresh and new knowledge, instead of being the proletariat for academic capitalists. Moreover, they critiqued the practice of setting a hypothesis before field work because doing so distorts and forces data into their predetermined ideas. Glaser and Strauss encourage researchers to build theory from data, respect what emerges in the field, and do the field work before engaging in any discipline of explaining the phenomenon. As grounded theory provides a convincing justification for developing a research interest without the necessity to form an early boundary to the research substances, confirm its contributions beforehand, and it provided a working package for researchers to build a fit, relevant working theory, I regained the confidence in getting my research on 'staying of abused women' started.

The academic reason for using grounded theory methodology is that it offers a systematic working package for theory-building in a world dominated by

theory testing. In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), the differences between theory generation and theory verification are delineated. Theory verification requires the researcher to develop hypothesis before data collection and analysis, so that it risks the loss of relevance to the field when the hypothesis is not proven to be relevant to the research setting and the participants involved. On the contrary, the grounded theory methodology suggests that researchers remain open to what emerges from data; as a result, by constantly comparing data, concepts, and provisional relationships, concepts could be generated and their relevance to the field maintained. As all the building blocks of the theory are generated from data collected from the field, such theory generation must be relevant to the research setting and participants involved. More importantly, theory verification works to refine existing knowledge, but does not work to generate new knowledge. As the world keeps changing with time and space, new knowledge must be generated to help people make sense of new phenomena, and the practice of theory generation is worth encouraging to serve the purpose of knowledge building.

Glaser (1967; 1978) always emphasizes in his publications and seminars that the best way of learning grounded theory is just doing it. Grounded theory, as a research methodology, is an ongoing and developing process for the researchers to systematically generate knowledge from their everyday life, in order to help expand the macro knowledge map in human science. Glaser even claimed that no one should expect perfect grounded theory to be generated in the first practice of grounded theory research. It is better to treat every grounded theory research as a stepping stone for the researchers to equip themselves with greater theoretical sensitivity, better techniques, and more maturity for grounded theory generation. Therefore, it is worth a chapter detailing my first attempt at grounded theory research, in order to acknowledge the experiences and knowledge gained in the process of theory generation by using classic grounded theory.

### **Basic Components of Classic Grounded Theory**

In order to introduce how classic grounded theory works in practice, an outline of grounded theory will first be made with reference to the list of

characteristics of grounded theory (GT) identified by Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006).

### **Theoretical Sensitivity**

Theoretical sensitivity refers to the capability of the GT researcher to conceptualise and capture the theoretical substances from data. It requires the researcher to be open to 'let the data speak'. It is insisted in GT that theoretical preoccupations are obstacles for the researcher to gain theoretical sensitivity and generate new things from data. In order to build up the theoretical sensitivity, GT researchers need to engage themselves in doing ongoing conceptualization. Whenever they analyze data, they should try to do conceptualization. Reading literature of other areas of study is helpful in improving the researcher's theoretical sensitivity since it could sensitize the researcher to how concepts could be theoretically related to each other. More importantly, GT researchers must be sensitive to how relationships among concepts emerge instead of forcing theoretical relationships on the concepts generated from data. Sensitivity to phase change and processes that occur in the phenomena is also highlighted in the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967).

### **Theoretical Sampling**

Theoretical sampling in GT cannot be planned ahead as required in the common practice of research proposals because GT does not sample for representativeness; hence there is no definite sample size or planned sampling strategy to resolve worries of bias. In GT, theoretical sampling is guided by the concepts, categories, and theoretical relationships found in the previous analysis of data, for the purpose of enriching the theoretical understanding on the studied area. Therefore, sampling in GT is emergent and contingent on meeting the needs of theory generation.

### **Constant Comparative Method**

The constant comparative method helps the researcher generate concepts from data by identifying their conceptual similarities and differences by constantly comparing concepts and categories. This method also helps to achieve saturation because it keeps the researcher's eye on raising data to concepts, hence, making the concepts richer and fuller. Moreover, by constantly comparing concepts and categories, the researcher would be more sensitive to pattern or phrasal changes, and categorical differences would be attended to.

## **Coding**

Coding is a process of conceptualizing data, so as to produce basic building blocks for a grounded theory. There are at least three levels of coding: (a) 'from data to concepts', (b) 'from concepts to categories' and (c) 'from categories to a theory'. The first two levels work in the same manner as a 'concept-indicator' model (explained in section 2.2.1), whereas the last one, theoretical coding, is to map out the relationships among concepts and categories so as to suggest a way that concepts may link to each other to explain the phenomenon.

## **Identifying the core category**

After generating a number of concepts and categories, GT requires its researchers to identify a core category which is more able to link concepts and categories together. This core category should be able to represent the main concern of the participants and explain how they act to solve their concern.



## **Memoing**

In order to help developing the ideas on how concepts and categories are linked together, memo writing is a technique to help the researcher get the ideas off his or her chest. After every field work session, the researcher is advised to do coding and memoing. As time goes by, the researcher's insights on how concepts link together to explain the phenomenon will be piled up in memos, preventing ideas from slipping away. Therefore, memoing is to save the insights, ideas, and creativity of the researchers as they make the effort to generate a theory from data to explain the phenomenon.

## **Treatment of the Literature**

A nontraditional use of literature of the studied area is proposed in GT, whereby relevant literature is not used to guide the research, but to be used as one kind of data for conceptualization. Furthermore, ideas from literature are treated as subjects for dialogues because they help the grounded theory researchers to position their grounded theory by comparing the theory to existing literature. However, reading literature of other areas of study is strongly recommended by

Glaser and Strauss (1967) because it facilitates the researchers to learn how people do conceptualization and organize their theories.

### **The Measure of Rigor**

The credibility of grounded theory is supported by the degree of saturation of concepts and categories generated in the research. The concept, category, and theory must work, be fit, and relevant to explain the phenomenon. More importantly, it is crucial to show that the grounded theory has emerged out of the data and has not been forced upon them.

### **Coding in Grounded Theory: Open Coding and Theoretical Coding**

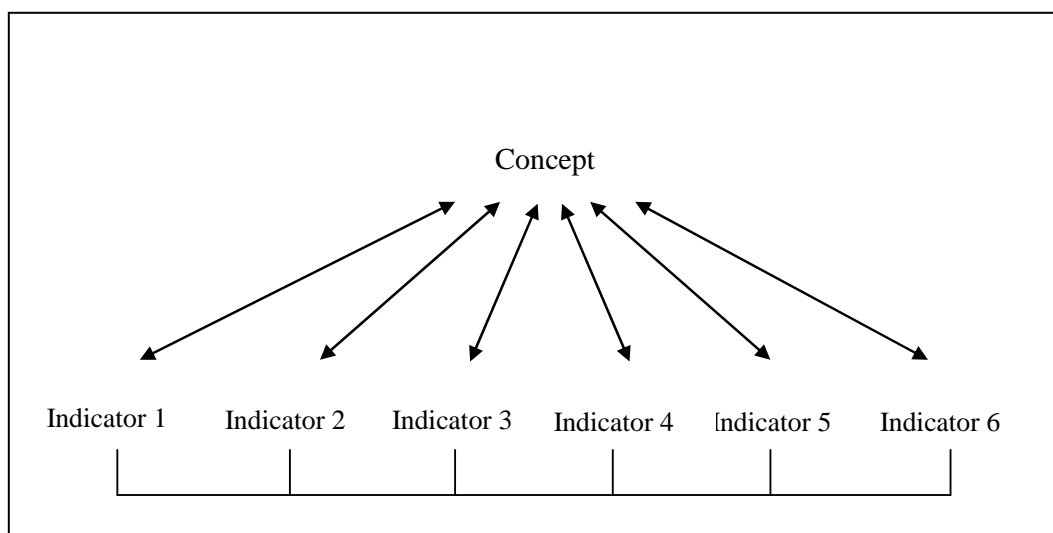
Below is an elaboration of the operational techniques of GT to show how data is processed and analyzed in practice, and, where appropriate, how it is done in the context of this study.

### **Open Coding**

#### **From data to concepts.**

Grounded theory is based on a concept-indicator model which is shown in

Figure 1 (LaRossa, 2005). This model works by comparing indicators one by one with each other, on their conceptual similarities and differences to categorise them with the greatest fitness.



*Figure 1. Concept-Indicator Model.*

Source : Adapted from LaRossa (2005), p. 842.

However, at the beginning phase of coding, the analyst should code the data in every possible way so as to run 'the data open'. In Figure 2 on the following page, I will present a section of my field notes to illustrate what open coding could be like in my study.



Figure 2. Illustration of ‘open coding’ in this study.

From time to time, the analyst has to compare indicators to select the fittest concept. As shown in the above section of the transcript, a number of indicators are found in the interview with KY to understand the relationship with the abuser, including, '*Ming* (destiny)', '*Yin Guo Bao Ying* (Causality Principle)', 'retribution', 'paying the debts for the mistakes made in the previous life', and 'love'. These indicators are compared and it was found that '*Min*', '*Yin Guo Bao Ying*', 'retribution' and 'paying the debts for the mistakes made in the previous life' belong to the same concept because they reveal the property of 'predestinating the relationship with the abuser' (Figure 3). Meanwhile, 'love' should be conceptualized separately by further comparisons with indicators found in women's understandings of the relationships with the abusers because it does not reveal the concept of 'predestination'.

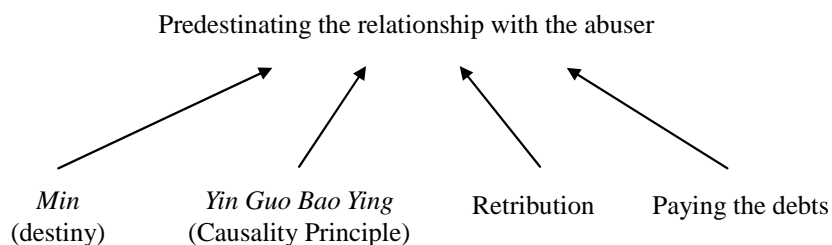


Figure 3. Illustration of Concept-Indicator Relationship.

‘From the comparisons of indicator to indicator the analyst is forced to confronting similarities, differences and degree of consistency of meaning between indicators which generate the underlying uniformity which results in coded category and the beginning of properties of it’ (Glaser, 1978, p. 62)

By comparing indicators one to one constantly, the properties and dimensions of a concept emerge from the data. Different from traditional logical derivations, properties and dimensions that emerge from constantly comparing indicators could prevent the analyst from excess elaboration of a concept. Therefore, the constant comparative method, in contrast to logical derivation, could facilitate ‘the true use and relevance of earned distinctions that have derived their meaning only from the data and then from the grounded, systematic connections with other discovered categories’ (Glaser, 1978, p. 64). Therefore, when data are constantly compared, indicators with the same conceptual similarity will be provisionally grouped together and conceptualized according to their similarity; those which are conceptually different are constantly compared with

other indicators to check if other conceptual similarities could be revealed.

After I discovered the concept of ‘predestination’, I found seven more indicators in abused women’s talks about their perceptions of relationships with the abusers: (a) ‘I should take care of his health’, (b) ‘I do care about his happiness’, (c) ‘I loved him, and I think love should mean lasting’, (d) ‘you know, I do care about his face, I just put all the money I had into his wallet’, (e) ‘I don’t have the reason to drop out that easily’, (f) ‘once you marry him, you should be prepared for taking these (sadness and pains)’ and (g) ‘you should be ready to put up with him’. These indicators were compared to those under the concept of ‘predestination’, and no inference to ‘predestination’ could be obtained from these indicators. Then, these indicators with no conceptual similarity to the concept of ‘predestination’ were compared to each other for conceptual similarities and differences. Eventually, they could be conceptualized as ‘care’ [(a), (b) and (d)], ‘persistence in the relationship’ [(c) and (e)] and ‘readiness for sacrifice’ [(f) and (g)]. Furthermore, three responses—‘I should take care of his health’, ‘I do care about his happiness’ and ‘you know, I do care about his face, I just put all money I had into his wallet’—were further compared to each other. As a result, three dimensions of the concept of ‘care’, ‘physical’, ‘psychological’ and ‘social’

dimensions, evolved. After I worked with the data continuously, four distinctive concepts—‘predestination’, ‘love’, ‘social and cultural conformity’ and ‘pragmatic functions’— were generated and gradually developed their richness to capture women’s understandings of their relationships with the abusers.

**Categories.** ‘[A category is] a type of concept. Usually used for higher level of abstraction’ (Glaser, 1992, p. 38).

A category is a type of concept that helps in conceptualizing a cluster of concepts with analytical meaning in order to connect indicators, concepts and variables to the emergent theory. I will take the above four concepts of ‘predestination’, ‘love’, ‘social and cultural conformity’ and ‘pragmatic functions’ as examples to illustrate what a category is.

After comparing indicator to indicator, I came up with the concepts of ‘predestination’, ‘love’, ‘social and cultural conformity’ and ‘pragmatic functions’. Meanwhile, by comparing these four concepts, all of them reveal ‘women’s understandings of the conjugal relationships with the abusers’. Therefore, ‘women’s understandings of the conjugal relationships with the abusers’ becomes a category that embraces four understandings adopted by abused women in



making sense of the relationships with the abusers. Figures 4 and 5 (LaRossa, 2005) below show how indicators are conceptualized into concepts and how concepts are conceptualized into categories.

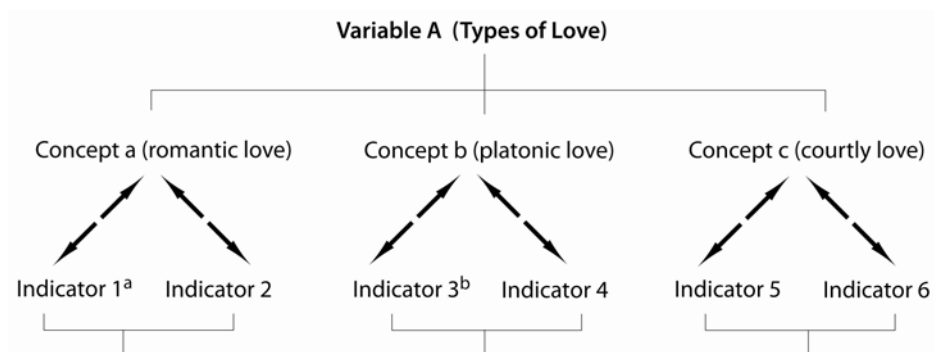


Figure 4. Concept-Indicator Model.

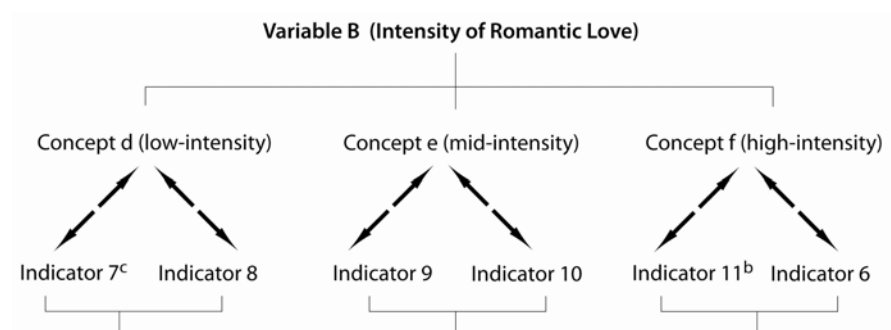


Figure 5. Concept-Indicator Model

Source : Adapted from LaRossa (2005), p. 845

Figure 6 presents how ‘predestination’, ‘love’, ‘social and cultural conformity’ and ‘pragmatic functions’ are categorized under ‘women’s understandings of their relationships with the abusers’. It shows the types of

understandings abused women hold to make sense of their relationships with the abusers. In this grounded theory research, relations between this category and other variables are explored to help develop a theory to explain how abused women make their stay/leave decisions and why they remain in the abusive relationships. The development of the theory will be detailed in the part of this paper on ‘theoretical sampling’.

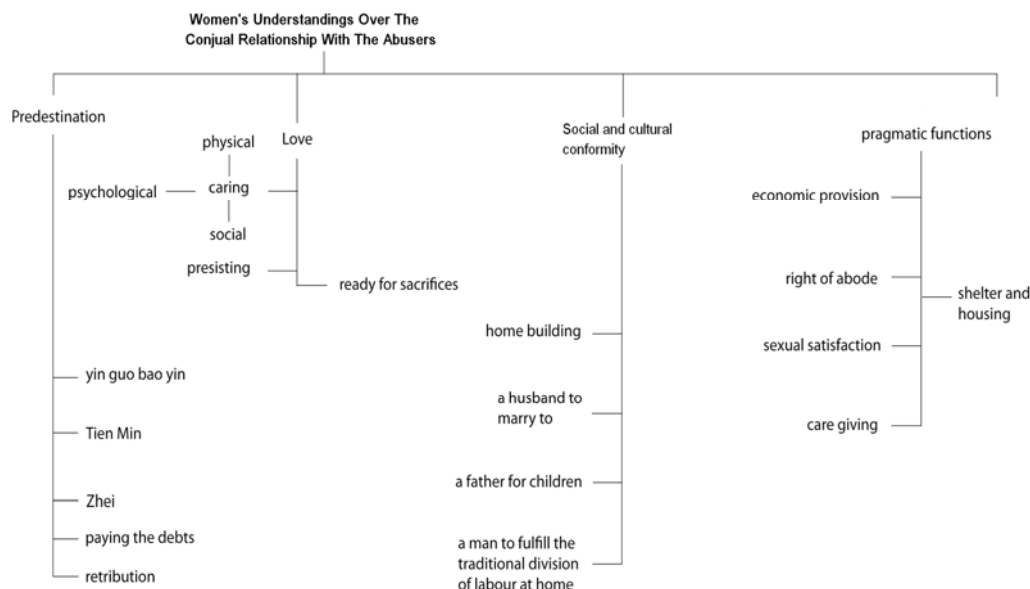


Figure 6. Illustration of Concept-Indicator Relationship in this Study

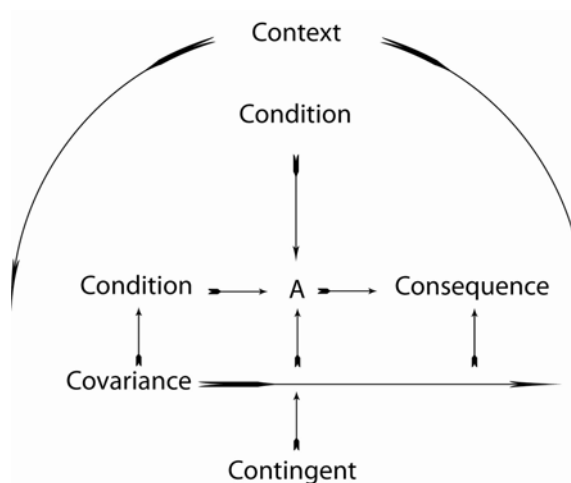
**Theoretical Coding**

‘Theoretical codes conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory’ (Glaser,

1978, p. 72).

An important task in grounded theory methodology is theoretical coding, which helps to build up ways to understand how concepts link and work together (Glaser, 2005). Glaser (1978) discussed 18 theoretical codes that help in sensitizing researchers who are engaged in doing grounded theory to conceptualize how variables could relate to each other.

**The six Cs.** The six Cs are causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariance, and conditions. This is a basic theoretical code of sociology. Most studies fit in causes, consequences, or conditions. Within causes there is a subfamily composed of sources, reasons, explanations, accountings, or anticipated consequences; and within consequences there is a subfamily called outcomes, efforts, functions, and unanticipated consequences. This causal model (or causal-consequence model) is like the dependent-independent variable model, which implies an ordering which is usually temporal. In the diagram below, **A** represents the cause and other variables are linked in the form of 6Cs with **A**



*Figure 7. The six Cs and the Causal Model.*

Source : Adapted from Glaser (1978), p.74

**Process.** A process must be composed of at least two stages. It is a way of grouping together two sequential parts of a phenomenon. Stages, staging, phases, phasings, progressions, passages, gradations, transitions, steps, ranks, careers, orderings, trajectories, chains, sequencings, temporaling, shaping and cycling can all be categorised as processes. A causal-consequence model is a process too because it is composed of at least two units with sequence.

**The Degree family.** Glaser (1978) reminded us that in theory generation, variables vary, and everything we say implies a matter of degree. Therefore, we should assume a full range of degree, even though it appears that we are merely

discussing one point of it. Limit, range, intensity, extent, amount, polarity can all be categorised as a degree family which shows the full range of outcomes or causes. It is useful to have a combination of the six C's and degree families.

**Dimension family.** It is product of fracturing the concept from a whole into its parts. Glaser (1978) suggested that 'it is best to specify concepts with the relevant operational dimensions rather than define them holistically or logically elaborate several possible dimensions of no relevance, which is over fracturing the concept' (p. 75). A dimension family includes dimensions, elements, divisions, pieces of, properties of, facets, slices, sectors, portions, segments, parts, aspects, sections. For example, the concept of 'care' generated in this grounded theory research, emerges to have three dimensions of care; these are 'care for physical well being', 'care for psychological well being' and 'care for social well being'. Dimensioning helps to saturate the concept of care, while suggesting how indicators like 'if I left, who would take him to see the doctor?', 'leaving him would hurt him very badly' and 'putting all my money in his wallet, despite having no money for food' link together.

**Type family.** '[A type family] indicates a variation in the whole, based on

a combination of categories' (Glaser, 1978: 75). It could be done by reduction or subtraction. A typology must possess at least two dimensions of the whole. The cross tabulation of the two dimension would produce types, and each type of the whole should distinctively relate to another variable.

**Strategy family.** A strategy family refers generally to how people develop strategies to manipulate people and how mechanisms and arrangements manipulate people from the point of view of social organization. However, it is challenging for theorists to know if the subject or organization consciously acts to manipulate people. If not, theorists could only claim that the acts and behaviours are the consequence of another behaviour but not the strategy of certain people or organizations. This family includes strategies, tactics, mechanisms, managed, way, manipulation, maneuverings, dominating, and positioning.

**Interactive family.** This is an effort to capture the interacting pattern of two or more variables when the analyst cannot say which comes first, such as mutual effects, reciprocity, mutual trajectory, mutual dependency, interdependence, interaction of effects, covariance, etc.

**Identity-self family.** This family helps to theoretically order the properties

or dimensions of a concept. For instance, properties of the concept of *self* may include self-mage, self-concept, self-worth, self-evaluation, identity, social worth, self-realization, transformation of self, conversion of identities, etc. Grounded in the emergence from data, this family could be used in combination with process family, interactive family, type family and so forth to facilitate theory generation. In doing grounded theory, the theorists had better state clearly what identity and self mean in their theory as the meanings of these words are rather vague in the literature, particularly in the field of psychology.

**Cutting-point family.** This is a variation of the degree family. While degree focuses on the full range of the spectrum, cutting-point focus on significant breaks or cutting edges on the range. Cutting points are very important in theory generation, since they indicate where the difference occurs.

**Means-goal family.** End, purpose, goal, anticipated consequence, products, etc., are the words used to describe this family. This family is also a subfamily of the six Cs and the process model, by which the intention or goals of the actors are achieved and consequences result.

**Cultural family.** This family is based on the assumption that personal

characteristics are shared to a sufficient degree in the society. Hence, social norms are aggregates of rules, values aggregates of wishes or goals, beliefs aggregates of cognitions, and sentiments aggregates of attitudes. Hence, all ideational norms belong to the cultural family of the theoretical code.

**Consensus family.** It is best to keep in mind that the implications of this family for its antithesis are a matter of degree, as in modern societies there has been a higher degree of tolerated difference and little pressure to conform, and thus consensus varies in degree from complete agreement to complete discensus.

**Mainline family.** Examples of words associated with mainline family include social control, socialization, recruitment, stratification, status passage, social organization, social order, social interaction, etc. These are all concerned with matters involving a large number of people in process.

**Theoretical family.** It is important to critique and judge the theory one reads and uses. Some of the criteria used for this purpose are scope, integration, theory, clarity, fit, relevance, relationship to data, etc.

**Ordering or elaboration family.** This family consists of the principles of



ordering data, which are structural, temporal, and generalized.

**Unit family.** Terms associated with the unit family are collective, group, nation, organization, aggregate, etc. For the grounded theorists, units are clusters of possibly relevant variables. They are in process themselves, and they are where the action, behavioural pattern, and process of our theory takes place (or is grounded) for a time. At the same time, our theories escape from time and place with their level of generality.

**Reading family.** The reading family consists of concepts, problems and hypotheses.

**Models.** A linear model or a property space.

### **Memoing**

Memoing is a technique to build up connections between categories based on data. Memoing, as an ideational development, should accomplish at least the following five important goals in generating theory:

1. Raise the data to a conceptualization level

2. Develop properties of each category which begin to define it operationally
3. Present hypotheses about connections among categories and/or properties
4. Begin to integrate these connections with clusters of categories to generate the theory
5. Begin to locate the emerging theory in relation to other theories with potentially more or less relevance

One memo could do more than one of the above, but only one of the above is required for a memo. However, it should always be remembered that memoing is not detailed description but the analyst's conceptualization of the relations among categories and properties, and hence generating theory explicitly in memos. Figure 8 below shows a sample of a memo written after two interviews with KY to illustrate how memoing could help theory development in this study.

The process how she responded to the abusive relationship is so crucial to understand the 'stay→ leave' process. However, it is not yet well conceptualized what's going on before and after the discovery of the fatal disease.	L1 L2 L3 L4	
It is just known that, before the discovery of the disease, there is an 'either leave or death' solution formed in response to the abusive relationship. Base on this, 'dead-ending leaving' makes the woman not to choose leave as a solution, but death; meanwhile, 'feeling guilty for committing suicide' makes the woman keep waiting for natural death or accident to happen on her, and remain in the relationship.	L5 L6 L7 L8 L9 L10 L11	
When threat of death really came, the woman felt happy (taking fatal disease as a relief from the abusive relationship) with it JUST AT THE BEGINNING. Death makes her focus back on herself (what do I really want?), so she gradually re-prioritize her self interest and leave the choice of 'either leave or death' to god. If she doesn't die in the disease, she has to leave. Therefore, surviving from the disease makes her so determined to leave if violence happens to her again.	L12 L13 L14 L15 L16 L17 L18 L19	<i>from L1 to L19 the memo remains on the talk of the data</i>
It is probable that 'Predestinating the abusive relationship' is the core variable influencing how women react to violence against them. Those who 'predestinate the abusive relationship' would think that there is no way for human being to change their fate, everything is predestinated, including the violence against them and their engagement in the abusive relationships. Therefore, they would not proactively do things to break or modify the abusive relationship, but merely react to what comes to them. Therefore, leaving is always not considered as a solution to the abusive relationship without hints from god (e.g. surviving from fatal disease: either leave or death, if not death, then leave). Daring not to breakthrough the 'predestinated relationship' could be seen throughout the process of 'stay→ leave' –	L20 L21 L22 L23 L24 L25 L26 L27 L28 L29 L30 L31 L32	<i>from L20 onward, the memo is able to raise the data to conceptualization level, 'predestinating' is used to capture the 'letting god to decide' attitude of abused women, moreover, it explains the inertia to change of abused women</i>

Figure 8 . Illustration of Memoing in this Study.

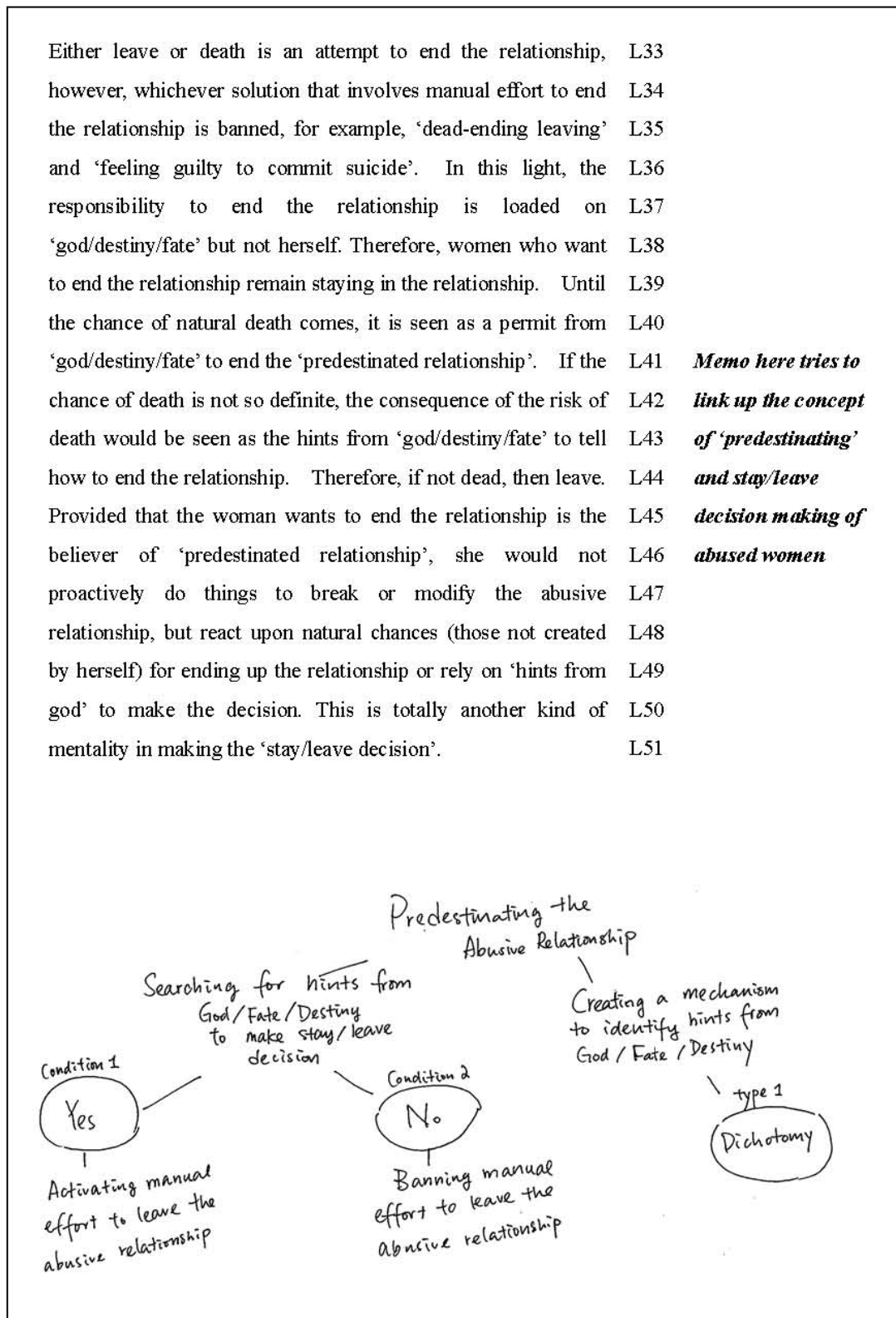


Figure 8 : Illustration of Memoing in this study (Continued)

Diagramming is a technique commonly used in memoing. It helps the analyst to work out the relationships among concepts and properties of concepts, and make the theoretical ideas and hypothesis handy to be referred to. The diagram shown above captures the relationships between ‘predestinating the abusive relationship’ and the stay/leave decision making, showing that women who hold a predestinated view of the abusive relationships will create a mechanism to identify hints from God/Fate,/Destiny that they should leave the relationship. Failing in such a search would lead to rejecting any effort to leave the abusers; on the contrary, success in such search would activate abused women’s efforts to leave the abusers.

As memos pile up and the theory becomes denser and denser, memo writing focuses more on integrating the connections with clusters of categories to generate a theory and on locating the emerging theory in relation to other theories with potentially more or less relevance. Beside, memoing is different from general theory writing as it does not constrain the analyst’s writing. Traditional theory writing requires the analyst to write correctly, but in writing memos, the analyst could write freely as memoing is just to record the ideas and hunches of

the analyst about the connections between categories and properties. Therefore, all the theoretical ideas gained from field work and data analysis could be all retained through free writing, not being hindered by worries about accuracy and correctness.

### **Theoretical Sampling**

This is a sampling method suggested in GT. Accordingly, sampling is conducted for the purpose of saturating the concepts and the theory but not for representativeness. It differs from traditional research sampling that requires the sample to be unbiased and representative of the population under research. Without the concern for representativeness, ending the sampling process depends not on number, but on saturation of the concepts and the theory. Saturation is reached when there is no marginal gain in enriching the concepts and the theory. In this light, sampling cannot be planned in advance, but guided by contingent hypotheses formed each time when data are collected and analyzed. In the following, I would like to delineate my data collection process and the development of my theory for the illustration of theoretical sampling.

In Hong Kong, access to cases of wife abuse is gate-kept by either

governmental welfare units called Family and Child Protective Service Units (FCPSUs) or Integrated Family Service Centers. Sampling for abused women through the FCPSUs or the IFSCs is not feasible without a previously established relationship of good trust. Therefore, local survivor groups were targeted to sample for cases of wife abuse in my research. In the search for survivor groups, Kwan Fook was found to be the only one in Hong Kong. Hence, in late January 2008, I directly approached Kwan Fook through their hotline service to recruit appropriate interviewees for my study about 'staying of abused women'. All abused women in Kwan Fook had experience of living in the shelters. Most of them had decided to leave the abusive partners and a few of them were still struggling with the stay/leave decision. There were abused women joining Kwan Fook continuously throughout the years. Due to confidentiality, Kwan Fook could not disclose to me case details of their members. I had to identify appropriate interviewees and request their agreement for interviews in person. Therefore, I began my data collection in Kwan Fook's regular meetings in which I openly declared my purpose of participation and briefed the participants about my study on 'staying of abused women'. Open recruitment for members who agreed to be interviewed on their experiences of staying and stay/leave decision making

was done in regular meetings, and the first interview started in early April 2008.

KY was the first interviewee. With this first interview with KY, data analysis and conceptualization began. In the first interview, KY was asked to tell how she lived with her abusive ex-husband and to detail her experience of staying. By constantly comparing data collected during the first interview, concepts like ‘naturalizing the abuse’, ‘pathologizing the abuse’ and ‘virtue-ing staying’ were found as justification for KY’s stay. Based on these concepts found in the first interview, the second interview with KY was intended to explore reasons/justifications for her stay with the abuser. For such a purpose, the general question, ‘why did you stay in the abusive relationship for so many years?’ was asked; and data were simultaneously conceptualized. After comparing the justifications/reasons for KY staying in the abusive relationship, as revealed in two separate interviews, justifications/reasons were found to consist of two dimensions, ‘pre-existing to the conjugal relationship’ and ‘emergent’. The justifications found in the first interviews belong to the dimension of ‘emergent’ because they did not exist before KY engaged in the relationship with the abuser, but emerge during the relationship to justify unexpected behaviours of the abuser;



on contrary, the justification found in the second interview, tentatively named 'predestinating the abusive relationship', belong to the dimension of 'pre-existing to the conjugal relationship' because it reflected how KY understood the conjugal relationship with the abuser. Beside KY's perception of the relationship with the abusive husband, was found, it was also discovered that KY's staying behaviours were organized according to her perception of the abusive relationship, hence resulting in 'refusing to use manual effort to make changes in the abusive relationships', 'virtue-ing staying', 'naturalizing the abuse', etc. Since then, how abused women perceive/understand their relationships with the abusive partners was purposefully sampled in the following interviews with other abused women, by asking questions like 'why did you engage with or marry him?' or 'how do you perceive your relationship with your husband?' Certainly, I also inquired about details of how the interviewed abused women lived their lives during their stay. Over time, more and more types of understanding of the abusive relationships emerge from data (e.g., love, predestination, social and cultural conformity, and pragmatic function). All interviewed women were found to have behaved in a way that corresponded to their understanding of the conjugal relationships; hence, patterns of staying of abused women with different relationship understandings

were discovered. However, with only the relationship between ‘understandings of the abusive relationships’ and ‘behavioural patterns of stay’, it was not possible to answer the question of ‘why abused women stay in the abusive relationship’. Therefore, I needed to continue looking for any data that could indicate why abused women stay.

In a regular group meeting, a concept known as ‘reorienting conjugal relationship with the abuser’ was found. This was a process commonly experienced by all abused women in the group meeting, and it sensitized me to the possibility that this concept could have the power to capture the staying process and explain why women move from staying to leaving, and sometimes from leaving to staying. ‘Reorienting conjugal relationship with the abuser’ was a *vivo* code, which means terms commonly used by women themselves to conceptualize how they evaluate the situations they find themselves in versus their original expectations and how they eventually find the expectations no longer fit their current circumstances, hence making the decision to leave. Once this concept was raised by a woman in the meeting, almost every participant responded to it and enriched this concept with their experiences. Some women

shared how they found that their love was dead in the relationship, thus making up their mind to leave the abusers; meanwhile, some of them shared how they came to the conclusion that their husbands could never attain the roles assigned to them, hence finding their husbands unbearable. Provided with the concept of 'reorienting conjugal relationship with the abuser', the analyst read again the collected data and checked to see if there were generated concepts related to it, particularly focusing on the stay/leave decision-making moments of the interviewed abused women. Then, after the discovery of varied types of understandings of the conjugal relationships, the corresponding types of decision-making mechanisms were also found. In such a light, more interviews were done to sample for decision-making mechanisms of abused women, and interviews done for this purpose usually started with the question 'Can you tell me more about the moment you decided to leave your husband?' or 'Do you have any measures for you to make the decision to leave?'. These two questions helped to focus on women's experiences of decision making and helped to enrich the concept of 'reorienting conjugal relationship with the abuser' found in the previous data collection. Theoretical sampling stopped when no more new properties of the concepts and categories could be found through data collection.

### **Issues Concerning Literature Review in Doing Grounded Theory Research**

From the perspective of grounded theory, a literature review on the concerned substantive area is unnecessary, or should even be avoided before the researcher enters the field (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This is because reading existing literature in the substantive area would contaminate the research by introducing a preconceived conceptualizations of received data. Therefore, researchers must be sensitive to what they have read and employed in conceptualizing the data by analyzing the involvement of the researcher in the field as one of the variables when this involvement is found to be influential. However, literature review becomes important during the latter stage of doing grounded theory.

GT is designed to facilitate dialogues between the emergent grounded theory and existing theories while encouraging the creativity of the researcher in theory-building as the highest priority. Therefore, Glaser always emphasizes that the pacing of a literature review should be able to encourage creative theory-building in doing grounded theory, so that reading in the substantive area of the research should be scheduled only when the emergent theory is discovered.

In talking about ‘mainline coding’ in his book *Theoretical Sensitivity*, Glaser (1978) states that ‘every study, including a grounded theory study, is “of” one of these codes (which represent mainline and traditional established sociology), and [it is important] to know which one clearly infuse[s] the study theoretically while broadening its perspective’ (p.77). From this point of view, literature could be used to help map the position of a study and broaden its scope on the studied phenomenon. This stance on the use of literature is different from traditional verification research which requires the researcher to review literature before data collection in order to search for theoretical gaps in extant theories, thus generating a research framework to fill the theoretical gaps. In this study, literature about abused women staying with their abusers will be discussed in relation to the grounded theory generated from the data collected through interviews and participant observation. This approach will facilitate a dialogue between this grounded theory and the bigger knowledge map of staying of abused women.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the classic grounded theory methodology and its application in my research are detailed. In the discussion, the differences

between classic grounded theory methodology and traditional verification research have been highlighted, particularly in the areas of research purpose, sampling method, and the use of existing literature.

In the next chapter, the grounded theory generated in this research will be depicted to show how concepts relate and work with each other, thereby producing a theory that could capture the behavioural patterns of abused women who stay with their abusers and explain why they stay.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Reorienting the Conjugal Relationship with the Abuser: The Grounded Theory That Explains Staying of Abused Women**

#### **Reorienting Conjugal Relationship with the Abuser**

‘Reorienting conjugal relationship with the abuser’ is the core concept of the grounded theory generated in this research to explain why abused women stay or leave. In this research, subsumed under this core concept are two concepts, namely, ‘the original understandings of conjugal relationships with the abusers’ and ‘evaluating conjugal relationships with the abusers against the original understanding’. In this study, these two concepts are found to work in relation to each other to result in the stay/leave decision of abused women. The former concept tells that ‘the original understandings of conjugal relationships with the abusers’ provide justifications for women to stay in the abusive conjugal relationship, while shaping their behaviours during their stay. The latter concept tells how abused women collect signs and evidence in the relationships to evaluate conjugal relationships with the abusers against their original understanding, by using the ‘understanding-correspondent’ evaluating

mechanisms. The outcome of ‘evaluating conjugal relationships with the abusers against the original understanding’, as it emerged from data, affects abused women’s original understanding of the abusive relationship by either reinforcing it or redefining it. Here below, I would like to discuss further the ways in which the outcome of ‘evaluating conjugal relationships with the abusers against the original understanding’ affects ‘the original understandings of conjugal relationships with the abusers’.

### **Evaluating the Conjugal Relationship with the Abusers Against the Original Understandings’: The Process, Outcomes and Influences**

There are four types of understanding conceptualized in this research to explain why abused women engaged with their abusive partners. These are ‘love’, ‘predestination’, ‘social and cultural conformity’, and ‘pragmatic functions’. These understandings do not only stand for the reasons for staying, but also the frameworks that guide the behaviours of the abused women. Therefore, once abused women conclude that their original understanding of the relationship with the abusers does not fit their current circumstances, through undergoing a series of evaluations with the aid of the corresponding evaluating mechanism(s), they will



reorient the abusive relationships based on their ongoing observations, either reinforcing the original understanding or redefining it. At the same time, these changes in women's understandings will result in changes in behavioural patterns of abused women in response to the abusers and the abusive relationships.

Below is a description of the understanding-correspondent evaluating mechanisms, how they lead to different evaluation outcomes, and how the outcomes affect 'the original understandings of conjugal relationship with the abusers.'

**Original understandings of the relationship, the evaluating mechanisms, and women's behaviours.** In order to decide whether the abusive relationships still fit their understanding(s), abused women employ various evaluating mechanisms which are correspondent to their original understanding(s) of the abusive relationships. Original understandings here mean the understandings which were held by abused women when they first engaged in the relationship with the abusive husbands. In this research, it was found that the 'Love' relationship matches the 'Threshold-ing' mechanism, the 'Predestination' relationship matches the 'Dichotomy' mechanism, the 'Social and Cultural Conformity' relationship matches the 'Checklist-ing' mechanism, and the 'Pragmatic Function' relationship matches the 'Checklist-ing' mechanism. This means that abused women who originally understood their relationship with the

abusers to be a love relationship will conclude that love no longer exists when 'signs of no love' are observed to an amount beyond their tolerance (threshold). Those who perceived the abusive relationship as one of 'predestination' will conclude that the abusive relationship is no longer predestined when signs from God/Fate/Destiny are identified through the dichotomy(s) created by them. The last two groups of women, who understood the abusive relationship as one of 'social and cultural conformity', or one of 'pragmatic function', will create a checklist of preferences to check how far and how possible items on their checklists could be fulfilled by staying in the abusive relationships, and they will make a decision to leave if their preferences are not fulfilled in the abusive relationships.

As different evaluation mechanisms entail different evaluation processes, abused women's behaviours during their stay will be affected accordingly. For example, 'threshold-ing' gives rise to a fluctuating evaluation process due to the cancel-off effect of 'signs of love' and 'signs of no love'; 'dichotomy' appears to result in a passive evaluation process in which abused women need not actively observe and collect evidence in the relationships, but wait for the answer from God/Fate/Destiny, whereas for 'checklist-ing', abused women tend to rationally calculate the possibility of their checklists being fulfilled, hence behaviourally they are very calculating.

**When the original understanding does not hold.** When the evaluating mechanisms show abused women that their original understanding does not hold, abused women will start to redefine their relationship with the abusers according to their latest knowledge about the abusers and the relationships. From the interview data, it is found that abused women with any type of understanding redefined their relationship with the abusers as an instrumental one after concluding that the original understanding does not hold. In an instrumental relationship, abused women expect to draw resources for maintaining their life, and so they will leave the abusers when they find that more resources were available outside the abusive relationships. However, for abused women who hold more than one type of understanding of the conjugal relationship, they will not immediately redefine their relationships with the abusers when only one type of understanding is proven invalid; instead, they will shift to behaving in accordance with other types of understandings they hold on to, and will remain in the abusive relationship until the rest of the understandings are proven not working. Therefore, ‘number of types of understanding’ held by abused women becomes a variable to influence whether ‘redefinition of the relationship with the abuser’ takes place. The more types of understanding are revealed to be the

reason for engaging in the abusive relationships, the more evaluations are needed to lead to redefinition of the conjugal relationship with the abusers; thus, more types of understanding make it more difficult for these abused women to leave the abusive relationship.

**When the original understanding still holds.** Evaluation of the abusive relationship through the use of evaluating mechanisms takes place continuously. Abused women with love understanding observe and collect ‘signs of love’ and ‘signs of no love’ in the abusive relationship to evaluate the validity of their ‘love understanding’. However, ‘signs of love’ have cancel-off effect over ‘signs of no love’ and usually lead to the conclusion that ‘love still exists in the relationship’. This conclusion justifies the abused women in staying and supports them to develop coping strategies to work out the relationship with the abusers. For abused women with other types of understanding, it was found that the conclusion of ‘the original understanding(s) still holds’ has the effect of justifying women’s stay. Abused women who understand the abusive relationships as predestination will try to evaluate whether the relationships remain predestined by the use of dichotomies, such as die/leave. Women who understand the abusive relationship

as 'social and cultural conformity' will check whether the relationship is still able to conform to the social and cultural expectations; therefore, those who find their abusive partners performing 'proper' roles as father, breadwinner of the home, care giver to children, etc., will conclude their original understanding remains valid and believe that their stay is worth it as a trade-off. Regarding abused women who understand the abusive relationships as a means for fulfilling 'pragmatic functions', they will continuously check out whether the relationship is able to grant them desirable resources; if their desirable resources are granted nowhere else and they find them provided by the relationship with the abusers, they will conclude the 'pragmatic functions understanding' of the conjugal relationship holds and find it worthwhile to stay in the relationships. Therefore, abused women, with any type of understanding of the conjugal relationship with the abuser, will remain in the abusive relationship if they conclude through the use of the corresponding evaluation mechanism that their original understanding still holds.

### **What Next ?**

In the following chapters, conceptual details of 'understandings of the

conjugal relationships with the abusers', 'behavioural patterns of abused women' and 'the evaluating mechanisms' will be delineated. The composition of the various types of understanding and behavioural patterns of abused women will be elaborated in Chapter 4; meanwhile, the corresponding evaluating mechanisms employed by abused women to evaluate their relationships with the abusers will be illustrated in Chapter 5; in Chapter 6, how different types of understanding appear in combinations in women will be discussed, and it is emphasized that abused women should not be categorised by types of understanding but are better understood as able to shuttle among different understandings and even hold on to a combination of understandings sometimes.

## Chapter 4

### Four Types of Original Understanding Held by Abused Women

This chapter discusses the theory generated in this study through the application of grounded theory methodology. Derived from the data collected in a process, where 12 interviewees are involved and half year's participant observation in the weekly meetings of the survivors' group is done, the core concept generated is 're-orienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser' (過自己個關) which captures the decision-making processes of abused women. As aforementioned, the original understanding of the conjugal relationship sets the framework for abused women to act and evaluate the relationship with the abusers; hence, this understanding is an influential variable in abused women's leave-stay decision making. Therefore, in this chapter, the four types of original understanding of the conjugal relationship will be discussed first.

### **A Relationship of Love**

Women entering into a relationship hope to love and be loved, and expect something to nurture such a relationship. These expectations include their ‘passion for the partner’ and ‘signs of love shown by the partner’. From what they said, it can be seen that these two elements serve a lot to nurture their love expectation, which instills hope and gives them a reason to justify their stay in the abusive relationships. I will first delineate and illustrate these two elements. Then I will go on to discuss the concept of love held by the women interviewed in this study, in order to discuss how the behavioural pattern of women who see their relationships with the abusers as ones of love is shaped accordingly.

#### **Passion for the Partner**

‘I fell in love with him at first sight’ (KY); ‘I married him because I thought love could change him’ (WW); ‘I quite liked him’ (SM); ‘I know I love him’ (DN); and so on. Such remarks are often made by abused women who see their relationships with the abusers as relationships of love, to express their passion for the abusers. Passion is something that cannot be reasoned with, and it does not easily vary with changes in the external circumstances of the abuser,



such as his behaviours, status and economic situation. It stands on its own as a factor facilitating women to stay with the abusers, and as a tentative attitude and expectation towards the relationships with the abusers.

### **Signs of Love Shown by the Partner**

Almost all women in this study had dated the abusers before marriage. In the dating period, they would evaluate whether the abusers loved them in return by observing signs of love. From the collected data, these 'signs of love' include perseverance in wooing, care for the women, care for the women's families, effort in creating romance, etc. These signs are necessary for women's passion for the abusers to be developed into a long-term engagement or even a formal marital relationship.

### **Behavioural Pattern of Women Seeing Their Relationship as One of Love**

**Preparedness for sacrifice.** Women who take on the 'love' orientation in understanding their relationships with the abusers are prepared, in varying degrees, for sacrifice. The women likely give their own interest a lower priority than that of the love object (the abuser) and of the relationship with him. Therefore,

when abuse happens to these women, they consider more the abusers' needs than their own.

'He was so stressful... so he did that (abuse) to me' (WW)

'He is a mental patient. He could not help it (violence)' (KY)

'If I go away, he is so pitiful' (KY)

Sayings like these are found in the data collected from women who predominantly cherish a love relationship with the abusers. This 'preparedness for sacrifice' is found similar to Giddens' (1992, p. 38) argument on passionate love, which 'has a quality of enchantment which can be religious in its fervour... yet perhaps at the same time fails to capture the individual's interest, which is so strongly bound up with the love object... it uproots the individual from the mundane and generates a preparedness to consider radical options as well as sacrifices'. 'Preparedness for sacrifices' explains why DN held her gold bracelets and necklaces in pledge to pay the gambling debts for the abusive partner, and thought this was done for love, though she had to suffer from financial hardship after giving away all the valuables. A similar subconcept of

love is also discussed in Kearney's work (2001). This subconcept is called 'self-sacrificing', meaning shrinking of self to submerge the interest of oneself in favour of the other in a relationship. As claimed in Kearney's article, 'it was considered a normal part of love to make sacrifices and accept disappointments' (2001, p. 276). The term 'preparedness for sacrifices' is used because it highlights the psychological state of abused women who are ready to give away their interest in order to sustain the love relationship, even before engaging in a relationship with a love object. The word 'preparedness' also implies that the self-sacrificing property of love is not developed in the interactions with the partners, but exists as a cultural and social default, which holds that everyone in a love relationship must be ready to sacrifice and accept disappointments for sustaining 'love'.

Due to such preparedness for sacrifice, women with an orientation toward a love relationship tend to see their staying in the relationship as a virtue of love. Therefore, for these women, leaving the relationship is not simply a 'realistic' consideration of their safety, but a moral violation. As long as the stay/leave decision is not a rational calculation based on personal interest, it is not rare to

hear women claiming that 'it is not good to leave him' even though they are beaten up frequently and severely. This 'preparedness to sacrifice' helps us to understand why some women who are seriously battered still express a lot of concern for their husbands' feelings and well-being over their own.

**Persistence.** Giddens' concept of passionate love, though it can offer insights into understanding abused women's 'preparedness for sacrifice', does not perfectly fit the concept of love generated from data. This is because interviewees who had strong passion for their abusive partners did not consider lust to be an integral part of love. Instead, abused women interviewed in this research perceived the passion for the abusive partners as a quest to build relatively permanent relationships with them. The property of 'persistence' of the concept of love discovered from data makes the love concept generated in this research more like the Giddens' theorization of the modern romantic love complex. As stated in Giddens' work, a person's passion is taken as a drive to engage the loved object with the expectation of a relatively permanent relationship; this is one of the components of modern romantic love. However, women engaged in a modern romantic love complex, as argued by Giddens, will also expect (a) a

future trajectory of the relationship, holding their (b) shared history as unique, and therefore so is their relationship built upon it, and these women will believe in the concept of (c) 'Mr. Right' thinking the loved person should be the one who completes their lives. However, the concept of love generated from data in this research does not contain these three features of the modern romantic love complex. On the contrary, 'persistence' as a property of love is more adherent to the concept of 'commitment' in Kearney's theorization of enduring love because both commitment and persistence highlight the notion that 'love should be forever'.

Due to the 'love should be forever' notion, the interviewees saw their tolerance of abuse as a sign that they loved the abusers. They do not think that leaving the abusers is a way to handle the abusive relationships or to end the hurts, dangers, and threats in the relationships. Instead, these women would employ a lot of strategies to resolve problems in the abusive relationships in order make themselves better lives and hence increasing their probability of staying with the abusers. KY employed a lot of pacifying strategies to avoid irritating the abuser so as to make it easier for her to stay in the abusive relationship; WW

‘caprices’-ed that the abuser would change to a better man to maintain a hope in herself; CF struggled a lot to maintain the family, providing tangible and emotional support to family members, keeping the routines and managing housework as usual in the fluctuating relationship with the abuser in order to create a sense of stability and security for staying with the abuser.

**Care.** From the data collected, love also implies care; love with the element of persistence implies care over time. Therefore, some abused women would persistently care for the abusers, and this seems like a default for women who see the abusive relationships as love relationships. Sometimes, abused women would struggle to express their care to the abusers when hatred for the abusers took over them in the conjugal relationships. It means that abused women who care for their spouses don’t necessarily do it because they want to care, but because they feel responsible to care for the ‘love object’ despite their bad feelings about the conjugal relationships. Hence, fluctuating feelings and actions towards the abusers, a bipolar swing between love and hate, are commonly found among these abused women. KY hated her husband for abusing the eldest daughter, meanwhile caring a lot for his mental illness; QS hated her husband for

isolating her from the family, but at the same time took care of her husband with her greatest effort; CF hated her husband for having extramarital affair in mainland China, meanwhile worrying about him being homeless due to his bankruptcy; WW hated her husband for cutting off her connections with her family, meanwhile working very hard to reduce the economic pressure of her husband.

The property of ‘care’ discussed here refers to ‘caring for emotional well being’, ‘caring for physical well being’ and ‘caring for social well being’ of the partner in a love relationship, as referred to in the data. This ‘caring’ property of love was once discussed by Kearney (2001) in connection with the term ‘care-giving role’, which highlights the social and cultural expectations inherited by the concept of love. As these expectations are accepted by women, they stay to take care of their abusive husbands in spite of the fact that the hurt resulting from the relationship is beyond repair. Regarding the discussion of care, it is sometimes understood as gendered in the sociology of emotions (Seidler, 2005; Wilcox, 2006). It means that women are more prompt to express care in an intimate relationship because the identity of women is constructed to be kind,

caring, emotional, submissive, and helpful; on the other hand, the identity of men is constructed to be the opposite, being rational, independent, tough and dominant. Therefore, unless abused women give up the gender ground of being a woman, they can never stop being so caring to the abusers in intimate relationships.

To understand staying behaviours of abused women, it is rare to have studies that investigate the hearts of abused women. In the 1950s, a number of studies suggested that the staying of abused women should be attributed to women's addiction to violence against them, and this view saw battered women who stay in the abusive relationships as masochists who love being abused and enjoy abusive relationships. This argument led to vigorous responses from the feminists (Bograd, Stanko, etc.) who rearticulated domestic violence against women as a form of male domination manifested behind the door. In this view, the staying of abused women is only the consequence of male domination in a society in which no or few policies are favourable to abused women who want to leave the abusers (Mama, 1996). In this sense, abused women are understood as the victims of domestic violence and their staying is just an evidence of further victimization by the society. Both of these attempts to explain the staying of



abused women lack the lens to understand women's 'lingering' from their hearts, which consists of a hot desire to actualise their beliefs about what love is. Surely, the question of 'why this form of love?' is worthy of exploration and discussion in more detail. Here below, is another form of love that was discovered from the data and that highlights how could women can engage in a love concept that does not lead to staying in abusive relationships.

### **Form of Love Which Does Not Lead to Staying**

By comparing women's concepts of love, it is found that love is a flexible concept which varies with personal history, generation, and social and cultural background; hence, the love concept found in women's justification of their stay is not a universal one. In the data collection and analysis process, there emerged one form of love, based on data collected from HW, which does not lead to staying with the abuser for the reason of love. HW perceives love as mutual enjoyment that depends on how much effort the partner has paid to maintain the relationship. Once the enjoyment is no longer found in the relationship, the end of it is soon coming. Therefore, even though she claimed in the interview that she loved her first boyfriend very much, she abandoned him when he was not able

to make a fortune in his business and lost a bet on the beauty salon given to her. Hence, to women who hold this conception of love, sexual pleasure is a significant consideration in evaluating the relationship with the partner. SL once talked to me on the phone about why she did not want to stay in the relationship with the abuser. She said, 'He asked to blow his banana (doing oral sex for him), and of course I asked him to do the same for me, right? He refused to do it! It's totally ... unbearable.'

This form of love contrasts with the one found in women who stay in the abusive relationships due to love. This form of love is built upon the foundation of mutuality and reciprocity, while, the one found in abused women who stay is maintained by the women's own persistence in loving the abusers, passion for the abusers, and their definition of the relationships. Regarding the form of love shown by HW, it involves continuous evaluation of the partner and the relationship, and a quest for mutual effort in maintaining the 'feeling' of love in the relationship. When the relationship fails the evaluation to her satisfaction, or the feeling of love is gone, or both, women holding this perception of love will leave the relationship. From HW's case, it was found that the love concept held

by women could be affected by the growing-up process, while in this case, HW had to learn to be tough, decisive, and independent to make a living, so that she maintained her toughness and independence in the love relationship. Moreover, the concept of love held by HW was also shaped by her experiences of living in a city environment where she learned fair exchange, competition, and self-protection as the basics for survival; therefore, she expected, at least, mutuality and reciprocity in love relationships and, at most, maximum benefit. Differences in generation also marks differences in the concept love that women hold. HW usually claimed that, in her years, premarital sex was not a big deal and women were no longer asked to marry one man for life. Based on this variety of conditions, the concept of love held by HW is different from that held by KY, CF, SM, QS, DN and WW.

### **A Relationship of Predestination**

Clark (2004) acknowledged the power of religion to make religious abused women stay in abusive relationships, particularly for women having a religion with 'discourse on the salience of family for women's lives and thus undesirability of marriage dissolution, and the tendency to "spiritualise" social problems by

religious ideologies and leaders' (p. 306). Though her discussion originally focused on Christianity, it could be extended to pose a question on whether other religions in the world have features that victimise religious abused women. In this grounded theory research, the concept of 'predestination interpretation' seems to enrich the knowledge of how traditional Chinese religious discourses keep abused women in the abusive relationships. Despite the absence of the discourse on the salience of family, the beliefs in 'Karma (業)' and '*Tian Ming*' tend to spiritualize abuse against women as something the women must take. 'Karma' spiritualises abuse against women by terming it fair treatment because what abused women are now suffering is the result of what they have done (the bad deeds) before or even in the previous life; hence, it is moral for women themselves to take the suffering. Therefore, abused women who strongly believe in 'Karma' tend to commit themselves to putting up with the suffering as it is a virtue of life. Abused women believe in '*Tian Ming*' (天命), which is a concept, partially religious and partially cultural, for Chinese to understand why they have to suffer. According to Yang (2008), '*Tian*' (天) is a concept which originated in the Zhou Dynasty, meaning 'nature'. Hence, '*Tian Ming*' (天命) means the law of nature which can never be violated. As argued by Yang, 'Tian in the

Confucian tradition is anthropomorphic and has the power to reward and punish at will' (p.562); therefore, abused women who interpret the abusive relationships as predestination with the concept of *Tian* tend to perceive abuse against them as punishment from *Tian* which 'penetrates deep in every detail of ...the moral order of man, in particular'. Abused women with this type of interpretation are scared to act against the abuse as to do so is perceived as equal to acting against the moral order of man or the ruler of the world.

The word 'predestination' used here apparently means something that is beyond human control; no human being could change it. However, the meaning of 'predestination' in the context of Chinese culture is better understood with the concepts of *Tian* and *Ming*. Whereas, *Tian* (天) means God/Fate/Destiny, which determines the life of a person, what happens in life is the command of *Tian*, and is called *Ming*(命). Therefore, the word 'predestination' should be understood with a Chinese sense of God/Fate/Destiny, which is *Tian Ming*. Then what additional meaning has *Tian Ming* given the word 'predestination'? That is a moral dimension of predestination. As *Tian* is the Almighty which has the final decision for judging earthly people, any attempts to challenge the *Ming*, the

command of *Tian* over a person's life, is guilt or an offence. The interpretation of relationship as one of predestination is characterised by the 'commitment to the worldview of predestination' and a 'sense of helplessness in the relationship'. There are two sources of the worldview of predestination found in the data. They are the religious source, the concept of Yin Guo Bao Ying; and the cultural source, the concepts of Tian and Ming mentioned above.

### **The Worldview of Predestination**

Based on the data collected from this study, there are two sources of commitment to the worldview of predetermination, namely, the 'religious source' and the 'cultural source'. The religious source of the worldview of predestination comes from religions or religious ideas; the cultural source of this worldview comes from the culture in which the person is brought up.

**Buddhism as a religious source.** Buddhist ideas about life are frequently found in women, even if they are not really the believers in Buddhism, though the degree of commitment to these ideas varies. As Buddhism has a long history in Chinese culture, Chinese people are sometimes seriously influenced by its religious ideas about life, such as *Yin Guo Bao Ying* (因果報應, Causality

Principle) and *Lun Hui* (輪迴, Samsara), without awareness of it.

From the data collected, some vivo codes are under the concept of *Yin Guo Bao Ying*. These include ‘retribution-ing the abuse’, ‘compulsive doing good to others’, and ‘feeling unable to do bad to others’. This is a prevalent concept widely held in Indian religions to address incidents that happen in one’s life with another concept named ‘Karma’. Karma means actions or deeds will initiate the cycle of cause and effect. Through the law of karma, the effects of all deeds actively create past, present, and future experiences, thus making one responsible for one’s own life, and the pain and joy it brings to him or her and to others (Wikipedia, visited on 12 Dec 2009). That is what is always on the lip of Chinese people: performing good deeds will result in good effects and performing bad deeds will bring bad effects (種善因得善果; 惡人有惡報). Therefore, people who do not have good fruits in this life, must have committed bad deeds and the law of Karma leads them to the consequences of this life. Women who are committed to such a religious worldview incline to understand their abusive situation as the result of their Karma, which by reasons of the bad deeds they made in the past or in the previous life, they deserve all these abuses as a way to

pay for their previous bad deeds. KY once said, 'I don't know why I still stayed with him. I used to think that I might have owed him something in my previous life and I had to pay him back in this life.' According to law of Karma, if people want to get rid of the bad effects, they must perform good deeds in order to plant good seeds (causes) to result in good effects. Therefore, abused women who are deeply influenced by the concepts of *Yin Guo Bao Ying* and Karma persuade themselves to do more good to the abusers as a way to pay for their bad deeds in the previous life and to cultivate a better life after this one. This is a reason why they did not end the relationships by seeking help from others.

The concept of 'Karma' is not only apparent in Buddhism, it also characterises Jainism, Hinduism and Sikhism. However, Buddhism has the greatest influence on China among these Indian religions because it has the longest history, having been in China since the period of Warring States. Therefore, understanding Buddhist philosophy is relatively important in understanding behaviours of Chinese who believe in Buddhism, and for understanding Chinese abused women who are committed to Buddhist ideas about life.



As the cycle of cause and effect started by Karma links the past, present and future, it has the effect on people's Samsara (i.e., the cycle of reincarnation). If the deeds done in the present life are not paid or rewarded in the present life, they will be paid and rewarded in the next life through Samsara. Therefore, people's karmic "account balance" at the time of death is carried forward to their next life. During the course of each worldly life, actions committed (for good or ill) determine the future destiny of each being in the process of becoming. In this case, the ill current worldly life or awful experiences are treated as the result of their negative karmic account balance which is calculated at the end of the previous life.

#### KY's Story about her Karmic Account Balance —

When I was little, I was asked to take some mushrooms to my aunt's house. I put the mushrooms in the basket, and tried to cross the small stream to get to my aunt. On my way there, I met a snake! I was extremely scared, and I could hardly control myself. I just took a stone that was near me and hit the head of the snake until it was breathless. I killed it! When I tried to

figure why I was treated by *Tian* in this way (being abused), I got a hunch from my memory about the snake. You know, my ex-husband was born in the year of snake, and I believed that the snake had reincarnated as my ex-husband and wanted to take its debts from me. It was me who did the wrong first. I should not kill the snake. This is retribution.

Having the concept of *Yin Guo Bao Ying*, women will try to account for their misfortune and unsatisfactory life with something that they have done wrongly in the past. If they cannot find any hint from their past experiences for doing something really bad or wrong, they will claim that their bad deeds or wrongs must have been committed in the previous life or the previous life of the source of misfortune. In abused women's life, the source of misfortune is usually the abusers; therefore, some vivo codes that are usually found in interviewing abused women include 'having owed him in the previous life' and 'having done something wrong in the previous life'.

**Cultural source – *Tian, Ming, and Jie.*** *Tian* is a general concept of God or an overarching power controlling the earthly world and happenings in one's life.

He is the final judgment of the secular world because it would take action to reward and punish human beings who have violated the morality of man (人倫). The belief in *Tian* was cultivated in the informants of this study by the context in which they were raised, and its exact meaning may vary with the provinces they come from. However, no matter how the contents of the concept of *Tian* vary, the main idea about it persists: *Tian* is an overarching power controlling people's lives, and he has the right of the final judgment. This means it is immoral for people to live against him. Due to such an understanding, abused women who believe in *Tian* will express a sense of fear to make changes in their current lives because these changes would be treated as actions against the judgment of *Tian*. Such actions are totally unacceptable for the believers. Therefore, abused women who make sense of their abusive relationships with the concept of *Tian* are encountered, inertia to stay in the abusive relationships is also encountered.

*Ming* is more or less equivalent to fate and destiny. *Ming* means the pathway that people must go through during their worldly life, and all people they meet and happenings are predestinated before they are born. At the same time, *Ming*, the human life, is also understood as doomed to suffer. As KY said, 'I told

myself, I'm just a normal human being, I was born to suffer from troubles'. Therefore, those abused women who believe in *Ming* feel more helpless in conquering an unsatisfactory life, including the conflicts in marital relationships, abuse, poverty, etc. They tend to be passive toward changing the situations they are in. Furthermore, abused women who believe in *Ming* will employ strategies of 'normalizing the abuse', namely, 'pathologizing the abuse', 'personalizing the abuse' and 'gendering the abuse'. The former means normalizing the abuse by attributing it to the mental illness of the abusers; the second one means normalizing the abuser by attributing abuse to the personality of the abusers; and the last one means normalizing the abuse by attributing it to gender difference. These concepts are used by abused women to tell that they are doomed to suffer the abuse that happened to them; they believe that the abuse is understandable and acceptable; hence, they have 'no way to change it'.

The concept of *Jie* means something that must occur in someone's life, and these happenings may bring misfortune to the person. So, if people can get through the *Jie*, they will be safe, and on contrary, if people cannot get through the *Jie*, they will be badly hurt. Therefore, those women who perceive

the abusive incidents in their lives as *Jie* tend to take the abuse as part of their life.

### **The Behavioural Pattern of Women Seeing Couple Relationship as Predestination**

**Self blaming.** The concepts that emerged from data collected from women who see the abusive relationships as predestination show that the victims tend to blame themselves for causing the abuse or the abusive relationships, either directly or indirectly. According to *Yin Guo Bao Ying* (Karmic Cycle), today's misfortune (abusive relationship) is caused by bad deeds of the people themselves. Hence, any misfortune that happens to the people is their own fault. This type of abused women tend to have guilty feeling toward the abusers (sometimes the feeling of owing the abuser) as they are dedicated to the belief that they are the reason for the abuse. Even though some women could not find what they have done to the abusers to the extent that they deserved punishment by violence, they would try to fall back on the concept of a previous life (to all people's ignorance) to attribute current abuse to something they did in the past, thus fulfilling the prophecy of the Karmic Cycle. 'I think I must have owed him in the previous life (我諗我一定係前世欠咗佢)' is thus commonly heard in abused women who

hold the predestination interpretation. As women interpret the abusive relationship as the result of their own faults committed in the present life or previous life, they usually believe that their decision to stay is a way to pay the debts for their faults and hence a way to take them away from further punishment by God/Fate/Destiny.

**Self-magnifying sense of helplessness.** It is common for abused women to develop a sense of helplessness when they stay in the abusive relationships because such helplessness is easily generated and accumulates after efforts to fight against the abusers' control and violence against them fail. Fighting against the control and violence includes not only physical fighting back, but also efforts to avoid the abuse, to convince the abusers to stop the abuse, or to seek help from others to stop the abuse, etc. The stronger the sense of helplessness accumulated, the less initiative and confidence abused women will have in getting out of the abusive situation. However, the sense of helplessness so developed is not restricted to what happened in their relationships with the abuser, but is generalised to other aspects of the abused women's life. This in turn makes these women feel more helpless in the abusive relationships. Therefore, the sense of

helpless in these abused women is self-magnifying.

The self-magnifying property of the sense of helplessness is often generated by failure in fighting against the abusers' control and violence at first. Their repeated experience of failure to stop the violence gives rise to the sense of helplessness in the face of God/Fate/Destiny, which the women believe to be the cause of their predestinated abusive relationships. This dimension of sense of helplessness towards God/Fate/Destiny then accumulates and magnifies the overall sense of helplessness in the abusive relationship. Here an example, in the words of KY:

'One day, I was upset by him, and I did really want to commit suicide. I lay on the bed and gradually fell asleep. I dreamt of a lot of gods and Buddhists. They all came and stared at me, and I was very scared. They did not allow me to bring the children away; no matter how hard I had tried in the dream, I failed. When I was awake, I thought this is normal human being. We are born to suffer.'

The magnifying property could lead to a sense of helplessness towards

help-seeking, and it helps us to make sense of these women's reluctance to seek services and assistance from social service centers, and the inertia they exhibit in taking actions when the situation appears to be safe enough for them to leave. Here is an illustration from my first encounter with abused women when I worked as a volunteer in an integrated family service center.

YL did not want to see Mr. Ho, her social worker, and so the social worker asked me to visit YL to check out what had happened. I came to YL's home and started our chat. She said,

I know no one could help...it is all because of my fault. I had an abortion for the second baby as I had no confidence to take care of it while my first boy had such problems (autism and hyperactivity). He (the abuser) didn't want me to get abortion; in fact, I did it in secret. I offended God, I sinned. Therefore, all my problems (health problem and abuse) are the consequence of my own fault.

I won't see Mr. Ho anymore, he could not help, no one could.

**Fear of ending the abusive relationship with manual effort.** Abused women seeing the abusive relationships as predestination are found to be scared of



making effort to end the abusive relationships. They believe that there should be some reasons for God/Fate/Destiny (or *Tian/Ming/Jie*) to make them suffer in abusive relationships, and it represents an ultimate moral judgment of the secular world. In such a belief, whoever tries to act against the judgment of that overwhelming power is immoral and will be further punished by it. Therefore, women who believe in predestinated abusive relationships are scared of making the decision to end the abusive relationships; they would rather search for the hints showing the wills of God/Fate/Destiny regarding their relationships with the abusive partners, including creating a dichotomous mechanism to identify hints from God/Fate/Destiny and praying, than end the abusive relationships immediately. KY shared a typical idea about identifying hints from God/Fate/Destiny,

I talked to *Tian*, 'For this time I have this tumor, I think I would probably die. If I die, then sufferings on the earth would also be ended, and that's good. If I don't die in the end, it means that you (*Tian*) are going to free me from the predestination (the abusive relationship). Either I die, or I go (out of the abusive

relationship)’. Therefore, when I survived the tumor, I packed the things with my kids and went to the shelter.

Regarding how the mechanism is formed, how it works, and its influences on the length of time women stay in the abusive relationships, all will be further explored and discussed in the next chapter. At this point, it is worth mentioning that it is not only Chinese abused women influenced by the Buddhism who dare not end the abusive relationships without ‘permission’ of God/Fate/Destiny; the same is true of Western Christian women who are abused (Joyce, 2009). A lady wrote online that she dared not end the abusive relationship, because she took her ‘marriage vows before God and witnesses very seriously...never imagined that... marriage would become as it did. [She] was born and raised third-generation of this particular “faith”, wherein the only acceptable grounds for divorce was that of adultery that could be proved by “two or more witnesses”, according to church teaching. To get a divorce without clear proof of adultery, according to church teachings, required complete and total celibacy and no hope of ever remarrying. To remarry after a divorce with no clear proof of adultery, would invariably and abruptly lead you to being excommunicated from the church

entirely, wherein even your own family and close friends would have nothing to do with you.’ (Joyce, 2009)

The importance of this case is that it shows that interpreting the abusive relationships as predestination and being scared of ending the abusive relationships without hints from the supernatural or divine power is not culturally specific. Though the mechanism varies with the individual and the particular religion, such as the quest for feedback mechanism (pray for something to happen to show the approval of God) and miracle manifestations of God, it is common in culturally different cases that the fear of ending the abusive relationship fades only after the women have ‘evidence’ that the judgment of God/fate/Destiny is over.

### **A Relationship of Pragmatic Functions**

There are women who see their relationship with the abuser as a pragmatic way to satisfy certain specific functions, such as gaining economic support, emotional safety, sexual satisfaction, the right of abode in Hong Kong. With this orientation, the women would assume that the man they married could meet certain pragmatic expectations of theirs. Then the behaviours and conduct of the

man are constantly evaluated against the list of pragmatic functions which the women assumed the man could fulfil. Below is an elaboration on the features of this type of relationship.

## **Pragmatic Expectation of the Abusers and the Abusive Relationships**

### **Pragmatic Function Checklisting**

It emerged from the data that the concept of 'pragmatic function checklisting' is relevant and applicable to women holding the expectation that the men or the relationships they engage will satisfy their desires and certain pragmatic functions. Based on this concept, women will list what they expect from the abusers and abusive relationships, hence formulating a pragmatic function checklist to check out whether items on the list are fulfilled, going to be fulfilled or not probably fulfilled as they stay in the abusive relationships. The probability for abused women's pragmatic expectations to be achieved also causes variation in women's satisfaction in the relationships with the abusers. Therefore, 'pragmatic function checklisting' is a major mechanism used by this type of abused woman to make the stay/leave decision.

The formulation of this 'Pragmatic Function Checklist' is a compromise

between the expectations of abused women and the perceived opportunity for their expectations to be satisfied in the relationship with the abusers. This could be illustrated with the story of how HW engaged in the relationship with the abuser and why she stayed. HW told me that, before engaging in the relationship, she knew very well what she wanted from men, including sufficient financial provision, care, excitement, romance and sexual pleasure. After a period of assessment, HW found that the abuser was not romantic at all; however, he was able to satisfy her in nearly every other desire she had. Therefore, she chose to remain in a relationship with her ex-husband. From this example, we could also know that the 'Pragmatic Function Checklist' is actually a list of preferences, with which, if necessary, women could decide what they could abandon and what they could not when they have to make up their mind to engage in a relationship. At the moment HW was engaged in the relationship, romance was at the bottom of her checklist. HW's case illustrates that whether the prioritised expectation in the pragmatic function checklist is achieved becomes very crucial for women in making their stay/leave decision.

HW told me in the interview what she loved about the man was the

challenge accompanied by -- seizing the heart of a married man; therefore, HW said in the second interview, 'I suddenly felt uninterested in the relationship anymore when he divorced his wife. There's no more challenge and excitement in the relationship.' However, HW did not leave the relationship at the moment she felt uninterested, but stayed with the abuser, partly because of an unplanned pregnancy and partly because of her not-yet-fulfilled prioritised expectations — the right of abode in Hong Kong, better education for the baby boy, and opportunities to earn more money. Therefore, HW stayed and took no action against the abuser until her right of abode was confirmed. After having the right of abode, she began to verbally fight back against the abuser and take actions against the abuse, like escaping from home. Of course, her mind had already been made up to leave this relationship.

### **Likelihood of Satisfying the Pragmatic Functions**

This is the women's evaluation of current conditions regarding the abusers and the abusive relationships (or the relationship with their husband before it becomes abusive), including objective consideration of the abusers, reciprocity between the abusers and the women, and subjective evaluations of the abusers.

Three examples are given below to illustrate these three conditions of the abusive relationships.

**Objective consideration.** ‘He is a hotel manager, having a stable income...he has once married, hence he should know how to take care of women...’ said HW.

**Reciprocal consideration.** ‘He always asked me to have a blow job for him; however, whenever I asked back for his service, he refused. Damn, why should I satisfy him then?’ asked SL.

**Subjective consideration.** ‘He is really insane. How could I live with him?’ questioned HW.

These three types of conditions are used by women to calculate the chance for their expectations to be fulfilled in the relationships, hence giving them a hint as to whether the relationships with the abusers are worth keeping. These conditions have no specific order of importance, while the calculation of them depends mainly on which condition is related to the prioritised expectation in the pragmatic function checklist. In SL’s case, reciprocity takes its importance from

her strong expectations for care, sexual pleasure, and a share in the work of child care. All these expectations could only be fulfilled with mutuality between the couple, hence assessment over reciprocity becomes SL's focus.

4.4.3 Behavioural pattern of women seeing the couple relationship as one of pragmatic functions.

**Overwhelmed by anger with the abusers.** Abused women of this type are concerned mostly with how many things on their 'pragmatic function checklist' are achieved, and they perceive their stay in the abusive relationships as short-term tolerance of the abusers; meanwhile, they are thinking of plans to end the relationships when the checklist has been achieved or appears to have no chance to be achieved. By thinking in this way, these abused women rarely use words like, 'sad', 'upset', or 'feel hurt', to describe the feelings associated with their stay in the abusive relationship. Instead, they always said, 'he drove me mad', 'I was extremely angry', 'he was damn shit', etc., to express their feelings for the abusers and the abusive relationships. This use of words tells the women's anger toward the abusers; and the absence of 'sad', 'upset' or 'feel hurt' in their descriptions also tells that this type of women are more resistant to



disappointment over the abusers and the abusive relationships. This could be understood because they are not prepared to devote themselves to the relationships with the abusers, neither are they ready to spend time in making the relationships work. They would rather spend time to make their expectations come true than waste time on the useless relationships with the abusers. Women in these pragmatic relationships tend to have less fear, fewer tears, and less sorrow in their stay with the abusive relationships compared to those seeing their relationship with abusers as one of love or of predestination. On the contrary, they are more likely to show anger with the abusers, as they do not expect the cost for obtaining items on their checklists are so high that they have to be abused psychologically and/or physically. Therefore, the abusive relationships in the eye of this type of women are no longer good deals, which totally fails their expectation of exchanges before engaging in the relationships.

**Cost-and-reward analysis.** To achieve the pragmatic function checklist, this type of woman has to be calculative in her pursuit in order to waste less effort in doing things that do not lead to the achievement of the pragmatic function checklist. Compared with women who interpret their relationships with the

abusers as love, who would continuously input effort to serve their husbands despite violence, women with pragmatic functioning interpretation would calculate how much they can get from putting forth effort to serve their husbands and maintain the families and households.

‘I hate kissing him indeed. His mouth was smelly...surely I resisted making love with him! Of course... sometimes he looked very angry, and the relationship was tense...I made love with him once... at that time, I had not had my right of abode confirmed yet,’ recalled HW.

Moreover, women, in the relationship of pragmatic functions with the abusers, seldom waste effort in doing things that do not lead to their desired goals. For example, HW said that she refused to make an effort to please her ex-husband when she was still in the abusive relationship because there was no use for pleasing him. However, before her ex-husband divorced his wife, HW had been trying very hard to please him and she had a regular sex life with him. These contrasting behavioural patterns are mostly due to the loss of motivation to make an effort in maintaining the relationship with the abuser. As the relationship is a tool to achieve the pragmatic function checklist of the women, when the

relationship is no longer useful (either it has already finished its functions or it is not helpful to achieve those functions), women lose their interest in the relationships and tend to ignore or even end the relationships. This could be reflected in the women's numbness and repulsion to the abusers' emotions and effort to make the relationships work.

'He would blow off steam suddenly and scold me with dirty words...he said fucking my mother and all other fucking words...he threw all my clothes out of the door, and he was really mad. I simply ignored him. When he wanted to throw them, I just let him throw them. When he saw me not responding to his actions, he would despondently bring my things back into the house,' said HW.

**Strong sense of control.** Abused women who saw their relationship with the abusers as one of pragmatic functions are more confident in themselves. They believe in their decisions and have a relatively strong sense of control over their situations. Therefore, these abused women show nearly no sign of helplessness in talking about their stay in the abusive relationships. Instead, they

will tell more about how they would fight back the abusers when they were not treated properly. HW always emphasised in the interviews that she never bowed down in front of the violence against her, and she had all the plans and resources to win the battle between her ex-husband and herself. For example, she described to me a violent incident in which she the abuser beat her up at the knees and made her kneel down on the floor. She immediately went and reported this to the police, moved to her friend's home, and went to the hospital for a medical report on her wounds before the wounds were gone. Moreover, HW was confident that she could leave the abuser at anytime she wanted, even though conditions which many other women perceived as obstacles for leaving were present in the abusive relationship. Therefore, she said in the interviews, 'He did think that he could bind me in the relationship by making me pregnant. It was chimerical!' and 'Money is totally not my concern. If you want your life saved, money is not that important comparatively. So, I dared to leave even though I had no money in my pocket.' .

**Autonomy.** Autonomy is a property of the behavioural pattern of abused women seeing the abusive relationships as one of pragmatic functions. This

property enables the women to act in the abusive relationships. As these women usually consider the cost of their actions in the abusive relationships, they do not waste their time to please the abusers without proper return; neither do they waste money and effort in maintaining the relationships. Therefore, they are more free to act in the abusive relationships as they are less bound by being occupied with serving the abusers, taking care of housework, and caring for the parents-in-law, etc. This also means more time, money, and energy is left for this type of woman for social networking, engaging in the community, and familiarizing herself with social resources. It tells why HW could immediately move to her friend's home for temporary shelter when she was beaten by the abuser, while many other abused women who had lived in Hong Kong for a longer period of time do not find any friend to shelter them when needed. Most abused women even found their social network and connections with the community shrinking with time spent in the abusive relationships. For example,

'He kept me busy all the day. I had to take care of my family, keep my three children, and serve my parents-in-law. I had no time left for myself. I cannot go anywhere,' said KY.

‘He did not allow me to phone my parents. Whenever I did so, he scolded me,’ QS Said.

‘He didn’t give me money; instead, he took money from me. If I was lucky, I could gain a hundred from selling umbrellas sometimes. It depended on the weather. But all I gained was merely enough for my traveling fares and feeding the kids,’ SC told me in an interview.

In contrast, this type of woman refused to be occupied with home affairs; hence, they could maintain their autonomy in various aspects, physical autonomy, social autonomy, and economic autonomy. This means that they could go anywhere they wanted, socialise with people, and spend money on what they liked. Of course, autonomy is always the battleground for women of this type and their abusers since the abusers always want to constrain women in various aspects of autonomy and women always want to resist the constraints and maintain their freedom to act.

‘He is crazy! He did not want me to contact any man, even though

the guy was my colleague. He checked my phone calls and lost his temper because he found a male name in my phone list. I won't be influenced by him surely!' said HW.

The degree of autonomy of this type of woman is very different from that of women who interpret the relationships with the abusers as love and predestination. Therefore, when the behavioural patterns of women of the three types of interpretation are compared, it is found that the low degree of commitment to the relationships with the abusers has been very crucial for determining the degree of autonomy. As women this type engaged and maintained relationships with the abusers for pragmatic reasons, they did not devote themselves to the relationships as women in a love relationship did; neither did they sacrifice their freedom. Compared to women who stay in relationships because of their belief in predestination, where the commitment to the abusive relationships is reinforced by the belief in God/Fate/Destiny, pragmatic women do not have such a belief to reinforce their stay and commitment to the relationships with the abusers. Hence, they would not be fearful of offending the abusers in their bargain for autonomy. By discovering this difference, abused women who

interpret the abusive relationships as relationships for pragmatic functions are relatively tougher in the battle for autonomy, and usually have a good bargain of autonomy in the abusive relationships.

### **A Relationship of Social and Cultural Conformity**

This type of relationship is culturally specific, meaning that women engage in the relationships with their husbands ( who later become abusers) solely due to their conformity with the life path of women and men—that of dating, marriage, and family. Therefore, passion for their husbands, the possibility of fulfilling their personal expectations, and beliefs in predestination are not meaningful to these women as they engage themselves in the relationship with the abuser. Instead, how far the man and the relationship appear to be conforming to the social and cultural expectations of women and men—dating, marriage and family—is more crucial to their engagement and to their stay and leave decisions. Therefore, ‘conformity to social expectation’ is the necessary condition for this understanding to be formulated, but not sufficient; ‘congruence with social expectation’ is the sufficient condition for the formulation and maintenance of a relationship of social conformity.



### **Conformity to Social Expectations**

This concept is conceptualised from the strong belief and determination to live in the way ‘everybody does’ in the communities in which the abused women lived. ‘Every man earns money to support the family, and every woman takes care of the children at home’, ‘all women must marry’, ‘the man whom a woman could marry should be caring of the family’, etc. are indicators of the concept of ‘conformity to social expectations’. This conformity is shown in women’s reasoning on the ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’ of their husbands, the relationships, and their families. Women conforming to social expectations will draw conclusions about their situations in the abusive relationships by how far they are different from social expectations, and would keep making an effort to restore the situations back to social expectations. SC told me about her criteria for choosing a husband: ‘The guy must have piety and care for the family. Men must be able to support the economics of their homes. Men could be penniless at the moment they meet you, but they must be hard-working. If they are hard-working, they will be rich one day; if they are rich but lazy, they will be poor at last.’ It is the way a woman who sees her relationship with the abuser as one of social conformity evaluates her husband and the relationship with her husband. All

these criteria taken by SC for evaluating a good man to marry are in fact typical in her community, Feng Shun of the Fukien Province in South China (風順—福建).

### **Fitting with Social Expectations**

‘And I observed my ex-husband very closely before marrying him.... He loved his mother very much, so he was supposed to be a person who cared about his family, right? Though he was penniless, it didn’t really matter. What mattered was that he was hard-working. Then, I married him,’ said SC in the first interview, telling why she married her ex-husband. This is conceptualised as ‘congruence with social expectations’ because SC’s decision to engage in a relationship is made solely on the extent to which the man fits the social expectations. The more the man fits the social expectations, the more likely the woman will continue to engage herself in the relationship with the man. Of course, there is a temporal factor that causes variations in the above hypothesis. As women of this type consider how much they fit the life path of social expectations, they consider whether the timing is appropriate to engage a man. For example, if SC saw that women in her community normally marry before 28, she would be more eager to marry a man when she was approaching this age. In

short, 'congruence with social expectations' is found to have two dimensions: 'stereotypical life path' and 'stereotypical good man'. The more pro-marriage conditions, such as the stereotypical timing for marriage and the stereotypical type of man worth marrying, are met in the relationship, the more likely the woman will commit to the relationship with the man.

### **Behavioural Pattern of Women who Understand the Couple Relationship as One of Conformity to Social and Cultural Expectations**

Women seeing the relationships with the abusers as fulfilling social expectations usually have a typical form of family in their community. The typical form of family found in the data is a family with children, wife as the principle carer, husband as the principle breadwinner, husband as the decision maker, and wife as the follower. If there is any member in the family trying to step out of the boundary of the social expectations, abused women of this type will try their very best to bring the members and the family back to the 'right form'. For example, when SC's husband refused to pay the rent for the apartment where SC and her children lived, she scolded her husband for being irresponsible as a father and a husband, inflicting pressure on him to restore his

roles as a man, a husband, and a father in the family by threatening him with divorce. Striving to keep the abuser within the stereotypes could be seen in the data collected in interviews with SC:

‘I had a big quarrel with him because he cared for his own brother more than caring about his own family. We had no money for food and clothes, and he could give away \$100000 to his brother for expanding his business.’

‘I always quarreled with him, and money was always the topic.... In Feng Shun (her native place), men work hard to provide for the family, and women work in the field and take care of the children at home. This is the way it should be.’

SC never quarreled with her ex-husband over his lack of care to the children because she thought child care was her responsibility; likewise, the main responsibility of a husband and a father in the family is to earn money and provide for the family. This division of roles tells why economic problems sparked off quarrels between SC and her ex-husband.

Besides keeping the partners within the bounds of social expectations, abused women of this type also strive to live according to the social expectations of a wife and a mother. For example, SC identified that a wife should work to assist in providing for the family and dealing with housework. Despite violence against her, she insisted her position was to do all the wash-up, cleaning, and cooking at home while selling umbrellas at the bridge to help earn the family living. On top of this, SC thought that a mother must be able to take care of the children, so she sought no help from any service or relatives in taking care of the children. Moreover, women of this type will also try to structure the family according to the social expectations. This is seen in SC, who bore four children without considering her ability to take care of them and her ex-husband's willingness to assist in child care; instead, she cared about the stereotypical structure of a family— a father, a mother, and some children. She explained why she gave birth to so many children in the interview, 'I don't really know why I gave birth to four children. I just thought that we should have children after marriage. And...yeah...it was eventually four. I had never considered whether I was able to take care of them at that moment.'

Women seeing their relationship as one of conformity to social and cultural expectations must have a strong commitment to social conformity; therefore, they tend to stay in the abusive relationships rather than leave. This is especially understandable in light of the fact that their social environment reinforces the two-parent family stereotype. Therefore, abused women who (partly to totally) interpret the abusive relationships as a fulfilment of social expectations explain their stays by saying, ‘I dare not divorce him because he would let my parents know and then neighbours around would look down on my family, and my village is very conservative—they do not accept divorce.’ When an abused woman of this type is compared to HW, who sees the abusive relationship as one of satisfying pragmatic functions, it is found that HW never stayed because of maintaining a of stereotypical family. Instead, in a chat with her, discussing other members’ reasons of staying, she said, ‘That’s foolish! I would never stay [in the abusive relationship] because of not wanting to lose a father. If my son could not enter a school without a father, it matters; if I have nothing to eat without a father, it matters...if not, why does a father matter so much to make me stay?’ Hence, it could be claimed that, in a social environment which enshrines the two-parent family stereotype, abused women who interpret

the abusive relationships as a fulfilment of stereotypes will tend to stay in the abusive relationships.

### **Summary**

In summary, this chapter discusses into the four types of understanding abused women hold regarding their relationships with the abusive partners: ‘a relationship of love’, ‘a relationship of predestination’, ‘a relationship of social and cultural conformity’, and ‘a relationship of pragmatic functions’. These types of understanding were obtained by theoretical sampling, and no more types of understanding could be found in further data collection. Therefore, the concept of ‘understandings of the conjugal relationship’ is claimed to be saturated. In this chapter, what the behaviours of abused women are, and how those behaviours are shaped by corresponding types of understanding, were delineated. In the following chapter, three types of decision-making mechanisms will be discussed in relation to the types of understanding of the conjugal relationships examined in this chapter, so that how and why women make the decision to stay or leave can be articulated in greater depth.

## Chapter 5

### Three Evaluating Mechanisms of the Leave-Stay Decision

The previous chapter delineated the four types of understanding abused women have about their relationship with their spouse and describes how abused women's behaviours are shaped by each type of understanding. This chapter will present findings, based on the data of this study, on the three corresponding evaluating mechanisms that help these women make leave-stay decisions. The three evaluating mechanisms are (a) dichotomy, (b) threshold-ing, and (c) checklist-ing. 'Checklist-ing' is commonly employed by abused women with either the understanding of the couple relationship as a means to achieve pragmatic functions or to fulfil social and cultural expectations. Based on the data, though sharing the same evaluating mechanism of 'checklist-ing', women with 'pragmatic functions' understanding and those with 'social and cultural conformity' understanding will use the 'checklist-ing' mechanism differently. This will be further discussed.

These evaluating mechanisms are discovered at the moments when abused women made decisions on whether they will stay or leave their spouse. Therefore,



in order to saturate the concept of evaluating mechanisms, decision-making moments of abused women were sampled. Data were collected through both interviews and participant observation in group meetings of the local women's organization, and sampling on 'evaluating mechanisms' ended when there was no marginal gain to enrich the concept and its relations with other generated categories. Here below, the three evaluating mechanisms will be detailed and the decision-making process of women with 'pragmatic function' understanding and that of those with 'fulfilling social and cultural expectations' understanding will be differentiated in the discussion of 'checklist-ing'.

### **Dichotomy: Evaluating Mechanism for Women with the Conjugal Relationships Understood as 'Predestination'**

'I either die or leave (the abuser)...so, I survived the tumor surgery, and I have to leave,' KY said.

Since 'hints from God/Fate/Destiny' are vague, abused women who understand the relationships with the abusers as predestination tend to create a clear 'either-or' mechanism to identify signs which, to them, could signify the will of God/Fate/Destiny. This 'either-or' mechanism eliminates all the possibilities

that lie beyond the dichotomy, giving a sense of assurance to abused women that what they have got is exactly the decision of God/Fate/Destiny. Dichotomy is a useful evaluating mechanism because it fits the stay/leave dichotomy, so that abused women can make use of the presence/absence of any sign they find religiously suitable to help reveal God/Fate/Destiny's decision on their stay/leave. For example, linking the death/survival dichotomy to the stay/leave dichotomy allowed KY to believe that her survival of the surgery to remove her tumor signified God's will to let her leave the abusive relationship. As far as God/Fate/Destiny is believed to be the final judgment of human actions, abused women of the 'predestination' understanding would be scared to leave the abusive relationships without being sure about God/Fate/Destiny's permission for their leaving. Rebelling against God/Fate/Destiny, from their perspective, may lead to further punishment with more misfortune.

By using 'dichotomy' as the evaluating mechanism, only two conditions can happen: 'predestination prevails (PM)' or 'predestination is over (PO)'. If hints about permission to leave from God/Fate/Destiny could *not* be identified, women would perceive PM, meaning that they have to stay in the relationships to

pay the debts of their bad deeds until the debts are clear; therefore, abused women in the condition of PM will avoid making a human effort to change the situations or leave the abusive relationships. PO happens only when hints from God/Fate/Destiny are identified to signify that abused women's debts of their bad deeds are all paid; hence, leaving is allowed. After PO is perceived, women will be no longer afraid of offending God/Fate/Destiny by leaving; they will start to activate their manual effort to pursue what they want, including a life with peace, safety, children, etc. Once PO is perceived, abused women with 'predestination' understanding will no longer be afraid that God/Fate/Destiny will punish them further for leaving; hence, leaving occurs naturally when the women's personal pursuits are not met in the relationships with the abusive partners.

### **Before the Hints are Identified**

Before abused women identify hints from God/Fate/Destiny, they are reluctant to exercise human effort to make changes to their relationships with the abusers. Instead of making changes, they will make even more effort to maintain the relationships with the abusers because this means paying the debts of their bad deeds which are believed to be the ultimate cause of their misfortune. Women's

fear of offending God/Fate/Destiny obviously prevents them from leaving. This can be seen in the dream KY told in an interview.

‘I was so sad on that day; I sat on the bed, leant against the wall and eventually fell asleep. I dreamt of dining out with my children and my husband. We could not talk...it was like something muted us. There was a man sitting at the table next to us. He kept scolding me with dirty words, and I could not answer back... I wanted to take my kids away, but I failed. Some Buddha appeared and forbade me from taking my kids. When I woke up, I thought I was just a normal human being, and troubles in life are inevitable. Hence, I should take it (the abusive relationship).’

Because the appearance of Buddha in the dream forbade her to run away with the kids, KY believed that staying in the abusive relationship was predetermined. Therefore, she tried to convince herself to remain in the relationship by saying, ‘I was just a normal human being, and troubles in life are inevitable’. Sometimes, this fear even inhibits her from seeking help from others.

KY once said, 'I've got all the numbers of the shelters but I dared not call. I made my first call when I was back from the hospital.'

### **After the Hints are Identified**

Based on the dichotomy of 'either die or leave', KY bet on her tumour. People usually think having tumour is a sad thing; however, KY took this as an opportunity to test whether God/Fate/Destiny would allow her to leave. She promised herself in the ward that if she survived the surgery, she could leave the abusive relationship. Therefore, after the tumour surgery, she immediately transformed herself and her behavioural pattern. She used to have an 'altruistic self', meaning that what she did she did for others; however, after obtaining hints from God/Fate/Destiny that she could leave, KY changed and she started to calculate for herself. She started to wonder if her husband really loved her and cared about her, if he would share the responsibility of bringing up the children and providing them sufficiently for living, and if she was happy to be with a partner who suddenly threatened her with a chopper. Hence, the dichotomy created by abused women with 'predestination understanding' works just like a gateway to leave her original understanding of the conjugal relationship, and if

they could pass through this gateway, they would have the opportunity to redefine the relationships with the abusers and it may be a chance for self-transformation. Due to these changes, the effort of abused women would be activated to make changes in their situations and even leave the abusive relationships. KY told me,

‘I packed things up after coming home from the hospital. He [the abuser] was at work, we took the chance to pack our passports, clothes, can food and instant noodles. I asked my children if they were ready to leave with me, even if we had to sleep on the street. I had to get them ready. Then, I called the shelter.’

This tells us that abused women’s effort of ‘getting tangible items ready for leaving’, ‘getting children ready for leaving’ and ‘seeking help’ could be activated by concluding that the predestination understanding does not hold.

Therefore, once abused women with the ‘predestination’ understanding have found hints from God/Fate/Destiny to signify PO, they will be free from being bound by their ‘predestination understanding’ of their relationship with the

abusive partners. They are emancipated and act according to their personal pursuits. Leaving the abusers becomes the natural consequence when women's pursuit for a safe, non-violent and peaceful home is not met.

### **Threshold-ing: Evaluating Mechanism for Women with the Conjugal Relationships Understood as 'Love'**

Threshold-ing is the evaluating mechanism employed by abused women who understand the relationship with the abuser as love. These women deem it necessary to be persistent in the relationship, prepared to sacrifice for the partner, and to be caring to the partner. Inasmuch as abused women still think their relationships with the abusers is a love relationship, they will not leave the abusers. On the contrary, despite severe abuse against them, they will struggle to maintain the relationships with the abusers as a way of showing their love for their husbands. Abused women with the love interpretation would not leave the abusive relationships purely because of abuse against them; instead, 'absence of love' in the relationship would be a definite reason for them to leave. To these women, 'absence of love' is clearly indicated by their husband's involvement in an 'extra marital affair', 'forced sex', 'hatred towards children', 'not taking care

of the woman (physically and emotionally), ‘not taking care of the children’, ‘not sharing responsibility in child rearing’ and ‘not respecting the woman’. Among these ‘signs of absence of love’, an ‘extra marital affair’ is found to have more weight as women evaluate their relationships with the abusers. Sometimes, when ‘extra marital affairs’ are confirmed in the relationships, the affairs themselves are enough to take abused women over the threshold and redefine their relationships with the abusers. Besides, ‘care to children’ also counts significantly for abused women to evaluate if the abusers still love them. Abused women usually have a concept of self which is integrated with children;<sup>1</sup> therefore, they perceive ‘love to the children’ equal to ‘love to them’ and ‘hatred to children’ equal to ‘hatred to them’. While ‘extra marital affair’ and ‘hatred to children’ are significant considerations taking women towards the threshold, ‘forced sex’ also stands out among the indicators that exhibit significant influence in taking abused

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Enmeshed Children Integral’, ‘Semi-Children Integral’, ‘Non-Children Integral’ are found in data to capture to what extent abused women’s selves integrated with their children. The more integrated with children, the more likely it is that abused women will react to benefits/love and harms/hatred concerning their kids. It affects their calculation/evaluation in making a stay/leave decision because abusers may make use of children’s benefit as a strategy to make abused women stay. The influence is particularly significant when abused women are more integrated with children. The concept of ‘women as children integral’ is discussed in detail in another article, ‘Strategic Fathering’.



women towards their threshold. Both QS and SM used to love their husbands very deeply and sacrificed a lot in order to marry the men; however, both of them left the abusers for the same reason: Both abusers treated the women like a tool for their sexual satisfaction; in fact, the abusers did not love them. It could be said that sex with the abusers provides a yardstick against which women measured the extent to which their husbands respected them and treated them like lovers. Repetition of 'forced sex' could make the abused women feel the lack of love in the relationships and find themselves being 'dehumanised/objectified'. Once the conclusion of 'no love' is made, the threshold for leaving is met.

The concept of 'threshold-ing' discussed here is hard clearly and objectively define. First of all, universal numerical values of 'threshold', 'signs of love', and 'signs of no love' are not, and cannot be, revealed in this research. Therefore, the concept of 'threshold' is unable to be defined objectively, and 'threshold-ing' cannot be operationalised as an objective instrument to measure abused women's decision to stay or leave. Furthermore, according to the data, each woman had her own way to define 'threshold', to assign values on every single sign of love and no love for operationalizing the 'threshold-ing mechanism'.

Therefore, the concept of 'threshold-ing' is intentionally not to be defined objectively so as not to render the subjective elements of 'threshold-ing' invisible. Despite the lack of universality in the thresholds, the interrelationships of the concepts of 'threshold', 'signs of love', and 'signs of no love' are congruent for women of the 'love understanding'. Therefore, 'threshold-ing' is a concept to capture how abused women reason about their stay/leave decision under the influence of 'love understanding', thus highlighting the subjective dimension of 'threshold', 'signs of love', 'signs of no love' and the 'threshold-ing mechanism'.

### **Before the Threshold is Reached**

Abused women who understand the relationships with the abusers as love tend to subject the relationships to continuous re-evaluation to see if love is still perceived to be present between them and their husbands. They consider a series of behavioural signs to be 'signs of love' 'signs of absence of love'. By collecting 'signs of love' and 'signs of no love' in their daily lives, they decide whether they should leave the abusive relationships, by using their own 'threshold-ing mechanism'. Obviously, the way to the threshold is a back-and-forth journey, within which 'signs of love' take abused women away

from the threshold while, 'signs of no love' take them towards it. In this drifting journey, women are alert and sensitive to possible signs of either love or no love, having an emotional state characterised by its vulnerability and irritability. CF recalled hitting her husband with a handset in an interview:

'He slept on the sofa, hah... He hadn't come back home for a month already. He said he had to work with the problems of the business in the mainland, and now he came back and back for a nap! I discovered some receipts in his suitcase. They were receipts for women's blouses...but they were not for me. I had become so angry and couldn't stop myself hitting him with the handset...'

As revealed in CF's case, abused women who are struggling on the threshold through observing 'signs of love' and 'signs of no love', could be impulsive; and their aggression may be sometimes released in the form of violence. Moreover, unless the threshold is met, abused women's minds on the stay/leave decision vary with the signs observed in the conjugal relationships, rendering their minds unstable and unpredictable. Therefore, some social

workers might find abused women's minds difficult to catch as they change a lot in the stay/leave decision-making process. When the threshold is nearly met, women feel all right to accept the leaving plan suggested by their social workers; however, if signs of love are observed in the relationships, abused women who understand the relationships with the abusers as love will be taken away from the threshold and hence inclined to stay, turning down the leaving plan.

### **The Treshold-ing Trajectory, and After Going Beyond the Threshold**

From time to time, 'signs of no love' accumulate. To an extent, the accumulation will cancel out the effects of 'signs of love' and bring the abused women to their thresholds, at which point the conclusion of 'absence of love in the relationship' will be made. Having this conclusion for the relationships with the abusers, abused women will no longer suffer from the fluctuating emotions induced by tracing the signs of love in the abusive relationships, and they will turn from a hesitant abused woman into a decisive one. In CF's case, for instance, she considered 'relational loyalty', 'sexual loyalty', and 'passion for her' great points in the evaluation of love, so much so that she disregarded other 'irrelevant' signs found in the relationship, which may be perceived to be 'signs of no love'

from the perspectives of others. In SM's case, 'depriving' was considered to be a 'sign of no love', but this was not considered so by CF. Therefore, CF's leaving decision was not made upon the discovery of the receipts as this sign was not powerful enough to indicate the lack of loyalty; therefore, she remained in the abusive relationship to collect further signs which could help to clarify the presence or absence of love. CF was fluctuating with her stay/leave decision and emotions before she made the conclusion that there was then 'no love' between her and her husband. When the extra-marital affair was confirmed and her threshold was met, she immediately turned her head away from the relationship and petitioned for divorce. Interestingly, this decision-making trajectory is found in every interviewed woman who showed 'love understanding' in her relationship with the abuser.

After going beyond the threshold, abused women re-interpret their relationships with the abusers, and very often they start to perceive their relationship with the abusers as one for pragmatic functions. In such a new interpretation, women are no longer ready for sacrifice in the relationships; instead, they feel it necessary to calculate for their own benefits in the

relationships, hence, when they leave it is for greater benefits and lower costs.

**Checklist-ing: Evaluating Mechanism for Women with the Conjugal Relationship Understood as ‘Social and Cultural Conformity’ and ‘Pragmatic Functions’**

‘Checklist-ing’ vividly captures how abused women who understand the relationships with the abusers as a means for ‘fulfilling social and cultural expectations’ or ‘achieving pragmatic functions’ evaluate their relationships and make their stay/leave decision. Abused women with either of these two types of understanding were found having a checklist on their mind reminding them to what extent the items on their checklists are achieved in the relationship. The more items on the checklist are achieved, the more likely abused women who perceive the abusive relationships as a means for fulfilling social and cultural expectations will stay; conversely, the fewer the items on the checklist are achieved, the more likely abused women who perceive the abusive relationships as a means for achieving pragmatic functions will leave. This difference in the use of ‘checklist-ing’ would will be discussed below.

**Evaluation of the Degree and the Possibility of Fulfilment**

Abused women, who understand the relationships with the abusers as

either a means for ‘fulfilling social and cultural expectations’ or for ‘achieving pragmatic functions’, base their stay/leave decision upon the degree and perceived possibility of fulfilment of their checklists. The evaluation of the ‘degree of fulfilment’ can be easily done through checking out item by item, however, the possibility of fulfilment has to be assessed through the use of ‘comparison’.

‘Comparison’, for abused women fulfilling social and cultural expectations in the relationship, is used to probe how far the abusers are willing to perform the social/culturally preferred roles and conform to social and cultural expectations, hence making known the possibility of the fulfilment of the social and cultural expectations in the relationships. For such a purpose, ‘comparison’ is made along two directions, which are “comparing abusers’ behaviours towards nonfamily members with his behaviours towards family members” and “comparing abuser’s behaviours with the social/cultural expectations”. SC compared the abusive partner’s reaction to his brother’s request for financial support with his reaction to her request. She, then, knew that the abuser was not willing to share his wealth with her, neither was he willing to finance the family.

‘His brother called him to request \$100,000 for running his

business that day. He immediately promised him, and then transferred that sum of money into his account... on the contrary, he asked me to eat shit when I approached him for \$50 to travel to work.'

After this episode, SC concluded that her husband failed the socially and culturally preferred division of labour in the family, hence failing her expectation of the conjugal relationship. More importantly, this incident showed SC that her husband was absolutely unwilling to take up the role of breadwinner for the family despite his financial ability; therefore, she perceived a low possibility of fulfilling social and cultural expectations in the abusive relationship. This evaluation, in addition to the low degree of fulfilment of the social and cultural expectation checklist, prompted SC to leave the abuser shortly after this incident.

The other direction of comparison is made against the social/cultural expectation. SM compared the regular behaviours of her abusive partner to those of men whom she thought were socially and culturally competent fathers, in order to evaluate the possibility that her abusive partner would act as a normal father. The greater discrepancy found between the abuser and the socially and culturally



preferred images, the lower the possibility of fulfilment is perceived.

‘He was always naked at home, exposing his cock, walking around.

He was not shameful at all to show his sex organ in front of his

daughter. I tried to tell him to cover it up, but he just laughed

back in return.... I thought no daddy in any family would do this.

It was not good for the daughter,’ said SM.

It could be said that, by working along the first direction of comparison, abused women are able to evaluate the willingness of the abusers to fulfil the socially and culturally expected roles, while by working along the second direction of comparison, abused women can judge how fit or unfit the abusers are in accordance with the socially and culturally expected images. As shown in data, abused women tend to perceive little possibility of fulfilment in the relationships when they find (1) the abusers were unwilling to conform to socially and culturally expected roles, and (2) the abusers regularly behaved in a way that significantly differed from the socially and culturally expected images.

For abused women with ‘pragmatic functions understanding’, items on their checklists are usually materialistic or nonrelational. Therefore, they could be

achieved elsewhere outside the conjugal relationships. For example, if the sexual pleasure SL desired in the relationship with the abuser could be satisfied through other sex partners, she would not stay with the abuser if such pleasure is not achieved. Since the items on the checklist could be achieved elsewhere, abused women with 'pragmatic function understanding' will calculate the possibility that they could achieve the unfulfilled items outside the relationships with the abusers, and compare that against with the possibility for that those items could be fulfilled inside the relationships. If they find the relationships with the abusers are absolutely impossible to offer the unfulfilled items, they will leave the abusive relationships for a higher possibility of fulfilment outside the relationships. Therefore, if a safer home and better financial and emotional support are more easily fulfilled outside the relationships,, abused women with 'pragmatic functions interpretation' will leave the abusive partners. Moreover, the possibility for fulfilling the checklist perceived by abused women with 'pragmatic functions interpretation' is a relative concept, which is obtained by 'comparing the possibility of fulfilment in the relationships with the possibility of fulfilment outside the relationships'. When the possibility of fulfilment outside the relationship ( $P_{out}$ ) is high, the relative possibility of fulfilment in the relationship

( $P_{in}$ ) is low, so it is more probable that the abused women will leave the relationships.

It should be noted that this concept of possibility is not an objective measure of probability associated with the items on the checklist. Instead, it is a perceived probability that is affected by social networks and the women's knowledge of existing resources, accessibility to resources, and self-efficacy; however, it is still determinant to abused women's stay/leave decision.

**Social Network and Knowledge of Existing Resources.** A social network is where abused women obtain shelter, emotional support and knowledge about the possibility of fulfilling their needs outside the abusive relationships. For instance, HW was confident to leave the abuser without having to worry whether or not there was a place to sleep because she was sure that her friend in Hong Kong could accommodate her immediately after she left. Hence, after being beaten up by the abuser, HW took nothing with her and left home. She was accompanied by her friend to report the abuse to the police and go back home to pack up. This is how a social network directly increases the abused women's possibility of fulfilment (on shelter and emotional support) outside the

relationships. Furthermore, knowing more information about how to apply for community resources, such as public housing and comprehensive social security assistance, could help abused women perceive higher  $P_{out}$  too. As DN once said, 'If I had known all these resources (shelter, public housing and social assistance) at that moment, I would have left much earlier.' In this light, local abused women's organizations play an important role to deliver useful information to the abused women, increasing their knowledge of how to access community resources that could help them. Moreover, abused women's organizations could help abused women form a strong social network, within which they could communicate their problems and solutions, hence, facilitating a higher perceived possibility of fulfilment outside the abusive relationships.

Therefore, it could be said that a strong social network could work to provide the abused women more chances of fulfilment outside the abusive relationships and increase their knowledge of available chances of fulfilment. Due to these effects of social network, perceived  $P_{out}$  will increase, and it is more likely that the abused women will leave the abusive relationships.

**Accessibility to Resources.** High perceived  $P_{out}$  includes not only

‘availability of chances of fulfilment’, ‘knowledgability of chances of fulfilment’, but also the ‘estimation on the accessibility to resources for fulfilment’. Therefore, obstacles encountered in accessing community resources (chances of fulfilment) could lower the  $P_{out}$ . DN once returned to the abuser because she found accessibility to resources difficult and estimated that  $P_{out}$  is lower than  $P_{in}$ ; hence, she reckoned that staying in the abusive relationship was better than leaving it. This situation happens to many abused women who made their stay-leave decision.

‘I asked the social worker to help me apply for CSSA. However, only my son’s application was granted. My son and I live on a little amount of money, and we had to rent a room with that sum. We slept on the floor, with cockroaches running over our bodies. It was terrible. The social worker did not do me a favour to help applying for an exemption in the CSSA application, and it made it hard to bear a life like this. That’s why I returned to the abuser. I would rather be beaten to death than starved to death,’ said DN.

Though, it appears that the abused women with ‘pragmatic functions

understanding' are used to making rational choices for their lives, and are able to maximise their benefit, they are vulnerable in the help-seeking process. As far as all their hopes for a better life are bet on possibility of fulfilling their needs/desires outside the abusive relationships, once their pursuits for the fulfilment are hindered or complicated, their anger, depression and sense of helplessness are triggered. This explains why abused women experience more depressive moods when they meet difficulties in the help-seeking process.

**Self-efficacy.** In the context of this study, self-efficacy refers to the degree to which abused women believe themselves able to do what they want to do. This concept is determinant to how active the abused women are in searching for ways to fulfil their needs and desires. The higher the self-efficacy, the more likely the abused women actively look for chances of fulfilment; hence, abused women with higher self-efficacy tend to have a stronger social network and a wider scope of knowledge about chances of fulfilment, such as help from the neighbourhood, community resources, and social assistance. Without adequate self-efficacy, they find accessibility to chances of fulfilment difficult, and this lowers their perceived  $P_{out}$ . On the contrary, abused women with high

self-efficacy find accessibility to chances of fulfilment easier, and have higher perceived  $P_{out}$ . The linkage between self-efficacy and perceived accessibility to chances of fulfilment can be seen by comparing HW and QS.

HW was a tough woman who always believed in her own ability. Therefore, despite violence constraining her actions in the abusive relationship, she still thought that she could counteract those constraints whenever she wanted. Hence, she continued to connect with friends and colleagues in Hong Kong to maintain a strong support network, search information to win the custody battle, and actively resolve problems she met in the help-seeking process. On the contrary, QS was a person lacking self-confidence, hence, she thought herself to be too weak and unable to conquer the oppressing environment she came across. For example, the social worker once refused to treat her case as one of domestic violence as she had never been beaten up by the abuser, though she had been verbally abused and socially isolated by the abuser for a long period of time; QS commented on this experience in help-seeking and said in the interview,

‘I would rather go back to him (the abuser). Since I used to be treated badly by only one person in the relationship; however, I

could be treated badly by everyone when I was outside it.’

QS once thought of returning to the abusive relationship due to the problems and difficulties she met in the help-seeking process. However, in the face of the abuser’s accusation in the police station, HW acted very differently from QS.

‘He told the police that I scratched him to make him bleed with my nails! He was crazy! I scratched his forearms when I struggled to get rid of his grip on my neck! He cut himself with a knife and told the police that I had hurt him so badly! They trusted him... I went to the hospital immediately to check my wounds and obtain a medical report. I went straight to the police station next morning and showed the police how badly I had been hurt. I walked with a limp in front of the police, in order to tell them how seriously I had been injured. They seemed to have pity on me. So, I walked out of the police station more cripplingly.’

From what HW had shared, it can be seen that she took pride in how she succeeded in having the police charge the abuser. In conclusion, self-efficacy of



abused women could alter the perception of possibility of fulfilment outside the relationships, thus exerting a great impact on the women's stay/leave decision.

### 5.3.2 When possibility of fulfilment in the relationships is good

**The Checklist is all Fulfilled.** For women who see the abusive relationships as a means for fulfilling social and cultural expectations, what they expect is to get all these expectations fulfilled and maintained. Therefore, they will not leave the abusers if items on the checklist are fulfilled. The more the items on the checklist are attained in the relationships, the more the relationship is worthy of keeping; hence, the more likely they will stay. Therefore, WW, who partly saw the abusive relationship as a means for fulfilling social and cultural expectations, once decided to stay for her wish to maintain a two-parent family and keep a caring daddy for her son. Despite all the abuse against her and absence of love in the relationship, WW considered the relationship was in some sense still worth keeping because the social desirability of two-parent family could be achieved through the relationship. It could be seen that items on the checklist of abused women with strong social and cultural conformity are usually relationship-related, hence, requiring maintenance of the relationships with the

abusers to achieve; however, items on the checklist of abused women of 'pragmatic functions' are usually materialistic rather than relationship-related, so that once the items are achieved, the abusers are no longer useful for the abused women. In the eye of abused women's 'pragmatic function', the abusers themselves have no value, but the potential that they could help in attaining certain goals on abused women's checklist is treasured. HW, a typical case of 'pragmatic function', once queried,

'I could not understand why the other sisters (abused women in the same organization) stayed with their husbands just because they wanted a father in the family. I have never had such a worry! Wouldn't we have no place to live without a father? Wouldn't we have nothing to eat without a father? Wouldn't my kid have no school to go to without a father? No! So, why should I stay for a father?'

Abused women of 'pragmatic functions' value the relationships with the abusers only when their desires are pending for satisfaction and at the same time the relationships provide chances for the satisfaction. Once the checklist is all

fulfilled, the relationships with the abusers are no longer worth keeping for abused women of 'pragmatic functions'. HW is a typical case of 'pragmatic functions', so her case could be used for a good illustration. HW had calculated everything before engaging with her husband. Things that she could not achieve by herself were checked if they could be achieved through the relationship with the abuser, such as excitement, sense of control, and the right of abode in Hong Kong. Then she made a checklist, which contains her expectations for the relationship, and by staying, she expected items on the checklist to be fulfilled. The more items on the checklist are fulfilled, the less abused women with pragmatic functions understanding are interested in the conjugal relationships. For example, HW expected to achieve excitement and sense of control through the relationship; hence, she engaged in a relationship with a married man. She put all irons in the fire to seize the man from the hand of his wife. Eventually, HW succeeded. She commented on her success and said,

'When he told me that he was going to divorce his wife, I suddenly lost my interest in him. On one hand, I felt the relationship was no longer exciting; and on the other hand, he was already under my

control... so, I don't really want to see him anymore.'

HW eventually stayed for a longer while just because she wanted the last item, the right of abode in Hong Kong. After she had attained it, she left. When the checklist is all fulfilled, whether further satisfaction is possible does not weigh much in the decision-making of both abused women seeing relationship as a means to fulfil 'social or cultural expectations' and those seeing it as one to meet certain 'pragmatic functions'.

It could be said that if abused women perceive a high possibility of fulfilment in the abusive relationships, they tend to stay, aiming for increases in 'social and cultural expectation' with more items on the checklist fulfilled; on the contrary, the tendency to stay for abused women of 'pragmatic functions' increases when increasing items on the checklist are unfulfilled.

**When the checklist is partly fulfilled.** Both abused women seeking to meet 'social and cultural expectations' and those of 'pragmatic functions' will wait for the fulfilment of their checklist when it is merely partly fulfilled and the possibility of fulfilment is perceived to be high. In this situation, they will not leave the abusive relationships. Instead, they will try hard to keep themselves in

the relationships in order to obtain their desired items on the checklist. 'Maybe, he will change' is always heard from these women when they try to tell why they decided to stay in the relationships when they were so disappointed by the abusers. Abused women who perceive a high possibility of fulfilment in the abusive relationships will stay because of a hope that the abusers will change and turn into good fathers and good husbands, or be willing to share their wealth with the women, buying them jewellery, etc. Therefore, these women will tolerate abuse against them in the abusive relationships. They think the abuse is the just the cost for their fulfilment. They bear the abuse, hoping that their desired items on the checklist will soon be fulfilled.

### **When Possibility of Fulfilment in the Relationships is Low**

When a low or no possibility of fulfilment is perceived in the abusive relationships, it has the effect of making abused women who are aiming for meeting 'social and cultural expectations' linger in the relationships and struggle. However, for women of 'pragmatic functions', a low/no possibility of fulfilment has the effect of pushing them to leave the abusive relationships before their

checklist is all fulfilled.

**When the checklist is partly fulfilled.** Due to their ‘commitment to social and cultural expectations’, abused women value the expectations they have realised through the relationships with the abusers; hence, they experience a force to keep them in the relationships. The ‘keeping force’ of the relationships with the abusers has been well illustrated with examples of ‘keeping a two-parent family’ and ‘keeping a father for the kid’, etc., in the previous discussion. However, this force only explains why abused women linger, but not why they struggle. This must be understood with the help of those expectations not achieved in the relationships. As some social and cultural expectations these abused women considered important are not fulfilled and they perceive that it is not possible to fulfil them in the abusive relationships, they will feel that the relationships with the abusers are incomplete. Therefore, they experience a force taking them away from the relationships to seek ways to achieve those unfulfilled expectations. SC experienced a great force taking her away from the abuser because plenty of the expectations on the checklist were not fulfilled. SC could have a two-parent family by staying with the abuser; however, all other

expectations, such as socially desirable marriage, parent-child relationship, and division of labour in the family were not fulfilled, and she found there was a low or no possibility of fulfilment. Therefore, SC continuously thought about leaving the abusive husband to seek an opportunity to get her checklist fulfilled outside the relationship. Since her expectation for a 'two-parent family stereotype' was fulfilled, SC once struggled to stay despite a lot of evidence that indicated the possibility of fulfilment of other expectations was low. SC eventually left the abuser when she concluded that the expectation which she considered most important (i.e., that of socially desired division of labour in the marriage) could never be achieved in the relationship.

'In my hometown, every husband works outside to earn a living for the family; meanwhile, every wife works in the field and takes care of housework... However, he (the abuser) did not give us any money. Even though he had \$500,000 in the bank account, he gave half to his little brother, but refused to give me \$50 to travel to work. He asked me to eat shit when I asked for \$50. After this, I decided to leave him.' SC recalled this with anger.

Abused women with a 'pragmatic functions understanding' tend not to struggle to linger in the relationships if they find little or no chance of fulfilment of their expectations. Instead, due to the low chance of fulfilment, the decision to leave the abusive relationship will be catalyzed before the whole checklist is fulfilled. This is because low  $P_{in}$  would make  $P_{out}$  relatively higher; hence, abused women tend to leave in order to seek chances of fulfilment out of the relationships. If  $P_{in}$  is perceived as zero, abused women with 'pragmatic functions understanding' will leave the abusive relationships.

**Effect of Evaluation Outcome of 'The original understanding does not hold' on Women's Understanding of Conjugal Relationship**

Abused women who see the relationship as love employ 'thresholding' to determine if they are up to the point of ending their relationship with the abusive partners; women who see the relationship as 'predestination' tend to use 'dichotomy' to check if they should free themselves from the bond of predestination. As a result of their respective decision-making mechanisms, the emancipation of abused women of 'love' or of 'predestination' from the abusive relationship comes with a new understanding of their relationship with the abuser.



Usually, the relationship with the abusers would be recast as one of ‘pragmatic functions’. Hence, after being emancipated from the bond of their original understanding, abused women of ‘love’ and ‘predestination’ will start to make a checklist to measure how much they could gain from staying. Cost being less than benefit could be one of the reasons to help justify their stay in the abusive relationships. As a result of their emancipation from the bond of their original understanding of the relationship, abused women of ‘love’ and ‘predestination’ orientations will re-evaluate their relationship with the abuser. This re-evaluation is a direct result of their disappointment with their relationship not meeting expectations and of their emancipation from it

However, this emancipation is not witnessed in women aiming for ‘social and cultural expectation’ and ‘pragmatic functions’. For these women, no signs of reinterpretation of the relationships with the abusers were found in the interview data. Instead, these abused women would simply cut off the connections with the abusers, and waste no more energy to reposition the abusers in their lives by changing their understanding of their relationships.

### **Summary**

In sum, three evaluating mechanisms are conceptualised in this research, and these mechanisms make possible some conclusions about the conjugal relationship between the abused women and their abusers. If the evaluation reaches the conclusion that ‘the original understanding of the conjugal relationship still holds’, abused women will remain in the abusive relationships; when the evaluating mechanisms show abused women that their ‘original understanding of the conjugal relationship does not hold’ any longer, abused women will leave the abusive relationships, and those with ‘love understanding’ and ‘predestination understanding’ may undergo the process of redefinition of the relationships with the abusers. In both chapter 4 and chapter 5, types of understandings and behavioural patterns and evaluating mechanisms were discussed as separate units and as ideal types; however, as it emerged from data, some women are found to have combinations of understandings of the conjugal relationships. Therefore, these combinations of understanding and their influence on behaviours of abused women will be explored further in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Combinations of Understandings of Conjugal Relationship**

#### **With The Abuser**

In the previous chapters, the four types of understanding of the conjugal relationships with the abusers and their correspondent behavioural patterns and evaluating mechanisms have been discussed separately. However, these understandings are always found to exist in combination in women's recounting of their relationship with the abusers. Combinations found in data are these: love and pragmatic functions (CF, SM), love and predestination (KY), love and social and cultural conformity (QS, WW), and social and cultural conformity and predestination (YL). The presence of these heterogeneous cases implies that abused women should not be presumed to have a single type of relationship understanding; on contrary, they may hold on to combinations of understandings at the same time. Therefore, when we are trying to understand women's understanding(s) of the abusive relationships, we should not attempt to fit abused women into any single type generated in this research; instead, we should remain open to women's revelation about their perceptions of the abusive relationships

and to knowing which type(s) of understanding they are holding onto, or whether a new type of understanding is emerging. In this light, the four types of ‘original understanding of the conjugal relationship’ generated in this research are for sensitizing practitioners to the possible ways of thinking of abused women during their stay, and to suggest possible pattern(s) of behaviours of abused women, so that practitioners can get a grasp of abused women’s decision to stay.

Again, it is important to remember that what is generated here are the types of understanding of the conjugal relationship, but not the types of women; therefore, even at the application level, we have to avoid ‘forcing’ abused women and data collected from them into the generated types to look like what is articulated in this grounded theory.

In this chapter, two types of combination of understanding are going to be discussed. They are ‘harmonious combinations’ and ‘conflicting combinations’. ‘Harmonious combinations of understandings’ reinforce each other in justifying maintaining the abusive relationships. For abused women who hold harmonious combinations of understandings, even though one of those understandings is found to be no longer valid, the remaining one that has not been rebutted still

serves as the reason for staying. Therefore, abused women with harmonious combinations of understandings will experience the need for ‘second thought’, which means a lack of readiness to redefine their relationships with the abusers, even though one of their understandings has been evaluated to be invalid. On the other hand, abused women with ‘conflicting combinations of understandings’ will be frequently bothered by feelings of contradiction because whichever understanding is employed as the framework for evaluation contradicts the other. Therefore, it is not easy for abused women with ‘conflicting combinations’ to engage in evaluation of the abusive relationships. The detailed illustration and discussion about these two types of combinations will be given in this chapter. Moreover, by looking into the combinations of understandings found in this research, one understanding is usually found to be more preferred than the other for evaluating the abusive relationships. Therefore, the implications of ‘preferred understanding in a combination’ will also be examined at the end of this chapter.

### **Combinations of Understandings**

‘I used to love him very much. I tolerated everything he did to me,

including checking my phone calls, constraining my finances and keeping me out of reach of my relatives.... I gradually understood that he merely treated me as a slave for sex, and this was not love. I strived to go back home (Indonesia) on summer holidays, though he was not that happy with that.... I did not want to have a family without father. And I didn't know how to face my relatives.... I want neither divorce, nor staying with him. Therefore, I took every opportunity to go back my hometown. Sometimes, I stayed there for a few months,' said QS.

The above case helps us make sense of how understandings of the conjugal relationship work in combination to affect abused women's leave-stay decision making. As shown in the above verbatim excerpt, QS attributed her stay to two reasons: (1) her love towards the abusive partner (love understanding), and (2) wanting to maintain an intact family (understanding of social and cultural conformity). This finding implies that abused women can simultaneously engage in multiple frameworks of understanding and evaluate their relationships accordingly. In the following sessions, how understandings of the conjugal

relationship work in combination to influence the leave-stay decision making of abused women will be discussed in conjunction with the concepts of ‘harmonious combinations’ and ‘conflicting combinations’.

### **Harmonious Combinations**

‘Love and predestination’, ‘love and social and cultural conformity’ and ‘social and cultural conformity and predestination’ are harmonious combinations found in this research, meaning that both understandings in a combination do not contradict each other and sometimes even reinforce each other in justifying the decision to stay in the abusive relationship. The way ‘harmonious combinations’ reinforce each other in justifying the staying of abused women is conceptualised as ‘complementary justifying’, which is illustrated by KY’s case; in addition, how ‘harmonious combinations’ create the need for ‘second thought’ in making the leave-stay decision will be illustrated with QS’s case. The ‘second thought’ situation happens in an abused woman’s leave-stay decision making because both understandings in the ‘harmonious combination’ offer justifications for her to stay; hence, even though one of the understandings is evaluated to be invalid in making sense of the conjugal relationship, the one left remains effective in providing the

abused woman justifications for maintaining the relationship with the abuser.

**‘Complementary justifying’.** Abused women who have ‘harmonious combinations’ justify their stay in the abusive conjugal relationships by either set of justifications provided in the ‘harmonious combinations’ of understandings. For example, KY, a woman who strongly believes in predestination, once revealed that she could not abandon her husband because she thought that love meant caring for the partner; hence, she remained in the abusive relationship due to the worry over her husband not being taken care of if she left. This ‘love as caring for partner’ concept adds a reason to KY’s stay in the abusive relationships, on top of the justifications provided by ‘predestination understanding’, by which KY perceived her stay as doomed. Therefore, even if the ‘love understanding’ was challenged by the abuser’s violent behaviours against her, KY could still obtain support for her stay through justifications provided by ‘predestination understanding’. This style of justifying is, therefore, conceptualised as ‘complementary justifying’ to highlight how two understandings in a combination work hand in hand with each other to reinforce the ground for the staying of abused women.



‘Complementary justifying’ also takes place in abused women with other harmonious combinations, like ‘love and stereotypes’ and ‘stereotypes and predestination’. An illustration of how ‘complementary justifying’ takes place in other combinations will not be detailed here because no new features and dimensions of ‘complementary justifying’ are found in them.

**‘Second thought’.** This is a concept to explain why some abused women remain in the abusive relationships even when the original understandings of the conjugal relationships held by them have been evaluated to be no longer valid. Meanwhile, the presence of ‘second thought’ is determined by the presence of ‘harmonious combinations’ of understandings in abused women.

As articulated in the previous chapters, abused women engage in ‘redefining the conjugal relationship with the abuser’ after evaluating that their original understandings do not hold any longer, thus giving rise to their leaving. However, for abused women with ‘harmonious combinations’ of understandings of the conjugal relationships, disproving one of the understandings in a ‘harmonious combination’ is not enough to take them out of the relationships because staying remains justified by the other understanding. Therefore, some

abused women need to have a 'second thought' to make the decision to leave, even when their understandings of the conjugal relationships are challenged and disproved in the evaluation processes. For example, QS held on to both 'love understanding' and 'social and cultural conformity understanding'; however, from time to time, QS collected evidence from her daily life and found that she was not being loved by her husband, but merely treated as a tool for sexual pleasure. The accumulated evidence took her beyond her threshold and hence she abandoned the 'love understanding' of the conjugal relationship with the abuser. This evaluation outcome posed a twist in QS's behavioural pattern; she became no longer so dedicated in the conjugal relationship and ignored the needs of her husband; even so, QS remained in the abusive relationship. This was because the 'social and cultural conformity understanding' remained functional to keep QS looking for fulfilment of social and cultural expectations through the relationship with the abuser. Therefore, in making the decision to leave, a 'second thought' was needed. Not until QS confirmed support from her family members for divorcing the abuser and found a typical family could not be achieved in the relationship, she could not make up her mind to leave the abusive relationship.

'Second thought' could also pose a challenge to social workers who want

to help abused women exit the abusive relationships. For example, YL held on to both ‘social and cultural conformity understanding’ and ‘predestination understanding’ in her stay with the abuser, while her responsible social worker only recognised her concern over fulfilment of social expectations; therefore, the social worker focused on challenging YL’s social and cultural conformity, and eventually succeeded in convincing YL that single mothers were common and normal in the society. However, YL still refused to leave the abusive relationship, and her response deeply frustrated the social worker. In fact, YL perceived the abuse against her as the punishment from God upon her guilt for having an abortion; thus, she stayed even though she found that leaving did not violate social norms. If the social worker in YL’s case could take ‘second thought’ as a chance to explore what other understandings were working to keep YL in the abusive relationship, his intervention could be furthered. However, in reality, the social worker was extremely frustrated and even wanted to quit handling the case.

### **Conflicting Combinations**

In the collected data, the combination of ‘love and pragmatic functions’ is the only combination found to cause internal contradictions in women’s

understanding of the conjugal relationship. As other possibly conflicting combinations, such as ‘stereotypes and pragmatic functions’ and ‘predestination and pragmatic function’, are not found in data, we should not assume their existence, and hence they are not included in the discussion. Thus, the ‘love and pragmatic functions’ combination will be used as an example to illustrate how combinations of interpretations might cause contradictions in abused women, and hence increase the difficulty for abused women to engage in leave-stay decision making. For example, CF held onto the ‘love and pragmatic functions’ combination of understanding of her relationship with the abuser, and therefore, experienced a lot a contradictions in making her decision because whichever framework of evaluation she employed it contradicted the framework she held on to. Hence, she expressed continuous shifts in her evaluation mechanism and hesitated to make the leave-stay decision.

‘We engaged each other because we loved each other deeply.

He spent ten years to convince his parents to marry me...so, we should not separate that easily...however, being with him, we had no food, no money and were threatened by people from the

finance house...I drew money from the credit card to feed the family, while he was spending thousands and thousands on his mistress.... In some way, I did think that this husband was not worth keeping. Well, but love should not be that calculative...'

CF said.

From the above verbatim excerpt, the struggles between two frameworks of understanding can be seen. As love has a property of 'readiness for sacrifice', it forbids any calculation that aims at achieving personal interest over that of the partner. On the contrary, understanding the conjugal relationship with the abusers as a means for pragmatic functions is characterised by the feature of 'calculative' prioritizing personal interest over the interest of anybody in the relationship. Therefore, abused women who engage in 'conflicting combination', would find that neither one of the understandings in the combination could reasonably serve as the sole ground for evaluating the abusive relationship, and exhibit hesitation and ambivalence in making the leave-stay decision.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, by acknowledging the presence of these combinations of

understandings, readers and users of this grounded theory must be reminded that the types of understanding generated in this research are not for typing abused women because abused women could hold on to multiple understandings of the conjugal relationship with the abusers and exhibit multiple sets of correspondent behavioural patterns and engage in multiple evaluation processes. Moreover, staying behaviours of abused women, beside being affected by their original understanding at their engagement in the relationship with the abusers, are also influenced by the type of combination of understandings held by them. Those who have ‘harmonious combination of understandings’ appear to be more hesitant to make the decision to leave, even though some of their justifications for staying are proven invalid; however, those who have ‘conflicting combination of understandings’ will be more prompt to make the leave-stay decision because none of the available evaluating mechanisms could work without contradicting their understanding(s) of the abusive relationship.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Practical Implications**

This chapter focuses on the practical implications brought by this grounded theory study. As the application of grounded theory in actual practice is conceived as part of grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1967), future application of the grounded theory generated in this research will inform a new form of social work practice; additionally, the grounded theory generated in this research has highlighted that social and cultural expectations, and the concepts of love and religion held by abused women are important considerations in making the leave-stay decision on top of practical and materialistic considerations. Some practice directions are suggested as a response to these emerging practice gaps.

#### **Implications for Practice**

##### **7.2.1 Social work practice informed by grounded theory methodology**

In performing traditional theory application, practitioners are not required to be skillful and competent in theory-building, and therefore they may find themselves helpless to revise the applied theory even though discrepancies or

abnormities are found in actual practice. However, in performing grounded theory application, practitioners are required to be competent in doing grounded theory methodology as they are not supposed to directly apply the theory in making their diagnosis of the case or phenomenon, but to check out the relevance of the theory and rebuild it if contradictory data are found in practice. Therefore, when practitioners encounter discrepancies between the theory and the case or phenomenon, it is time for theory modifications by constantly comparing the concepts found in the new data and those generated in the previous research. In this sense, practitioners are no longer pure executors of theories, but researchers who have a role in theory-building. This form of practice, on one hand, contributes to social-work theory-building, and, on the other hand, keeps practitioners' eyes on the particularities and uniqueness of the practical reality. In addition, practitioners can become more responsive in meeting the needs of clients by altering their intervention according to the latest revised understanding of the problem. Last but not least, this could avoid the problem of inflexibility of theories that arises from traditional theory application.

### **Talk into Social and Cultural Expectations**



Staying in an abusive relationship to fulfil social and cultural expectations is frequently discovered in interviews with abused women. As abused women have conformed to and built their identity (e.g., woman, wife, mother, etc.) around certain social and cultural expectations (e.g., getting married by 30, home caring, having children and giving them an intact family), they find it hard to divorce themselves from the tie to these expectations unless they give away their own identities. In such light, helping abused women to let go the entrapping social and cultural expectations relies not only on challenging abused women's conformity and the legitimacy of those expectations, but also on providing alternative grounds for abused women themselves to rebuild their identity.

For challenging the legitimacy of the conformed expectations, questions like 'why do you think a woman must be married by 30? Do you think all of those women who do not marry by 30 are unhappy? Why?' and 'Why do you think the presence of father in a family is necessary? Do you think all single-parent families are unhappy? How do you arrive at such an understanding?' By asking these questions, practitioners obtain an understanding of the women's justifications for conforming to certain social and cultural expectations, and they are then given the

role of challenging the justifications with inconsistencies in the reality and thus facilitate abused women to revise their views. Besides, social work practitioners should stretch abused women's imagination to think "What if I am unable to fulfil certain social and cultural expectations, such as maintaining a dual parent family", and facilitate them to re-evaluate the current beliefs about the consequences of failing those expectations. However, challenging their justifications only marks the beginning of talking about social and cultural expectations; it must be followed with some talks to search for room to rebuild the preferred identities of the abused women so that these identities are no longer entrapping. In such cases, questions like, 'what do you think are the essential qualities for being a good woman/ mother/ wife?', could be asked to facilitate elaboration on the building blocks of the women's preferred identities. This question allows social workers a chance to check with the women whether it is a must to build their preferred identities on the ground of marriage, or whether they can rebuild these identities with the same building blocks somewhere else. This process may not necessarily bring the women to the choice of leaving, but it widens the scope of choice of abused women in building their identities by giving them more knowledge about their choice of conformity to social and cultural expectations,

thus working as a process of empowerment.

### **Talk into Love**

Holding on to the concept of love as the reason for staying is commonly found in previous research (Ferraro, 1979; Kearney, 2001). For those who engage the relationships with the abusers as an expression of love, including care, persistence, and responsibility, they may even find the relationships highly valued because such a romantic involvement fulfils their 'dream of loving and being loved' (Kearney, 2001, p. 275). Therefore, knowing the extent to which these abused women find the abusive relationships positive and romantically attractive is important for social workers to assess their attachment to the abusive relationships.

In the examination of the women's perceptions of the abusive relationships, it has been found that positivity in the relationships can buffer the negativity in the relationships and 'function to maintain love for the spouse and to facilitate hope for change in the husband's behaviours, thus retaining the women's commitment to a violent marriage' (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 1998, p.198). Hence, abused women's perception of the abusive relationships varies with the

occurrence of positive/negative behaviours of the abusive partners. From the conversations around positivity and negativity experienced by the women themselves in the relationships, the concept of love held by women could be identified and chances to talk into love with abused women are opened up.

From this research, it is found that abused women who stay usually hold on to the traditional concept of love which comprises 'care', 'preparedness for sacrifice' and 'persistence'; these qualities of love are most likely evident in women themselves but not in their husbands. Therefore, abused women who stay because of the form of love, discovered in this research, tend to put up with all kinds of abuses against them as manifestations of love. Though many abused women count reciprocal good treats from the abusers as 'signs of love' and the lack of reciprocity as 'signs of absent of love', mutuality or reciprocity is never perceived to be the foundation of a love relationship, but simply the expected responses to their commitment and sacrifices in the relationships.

As there are different conceptions of love both in the literature and in human society, alternative understandings of love should be explored to help abused women who are holding on to this traditional notion of love to re-examine

what 'love' could be like and look for a more preferable concept of love. Social workers, as argued by Fraser (2003), are 'in a good position...by working with the thickly described "data" that many service users provide. Well-positioned to hear "ordinary" women's love stories and open up space for their analysis'. Therefore, talking into love in social work intervention is significant, particularly when working with abused women who find staying is love, and love is staying'.

As to how to talk into the love stories of abused women and open them up for alternatives, Narrative Therapy (NT) founded by Michael White in the early 1980s may be a potent tool for professionals helping abused women to use. NT is a working package that focuses on the story-telling of the consulting persons; in such a process, the therapist/worker assists the person to explore his or her own story(s), to thicken them and look for alternative storylines. Since people usually bring along with them problem-saturated stories to the consulting sessions, by exploring for the alternatives, the person could live with stories which are different from the original problem-saturated one(s). For abused women who find their love keeping them in the abusive relationships, a narrative therapist would further explore this story of 'love' in the consulting sessions, in order to

assist women to thickly describe and name the problems they come across. According to Zink et al. (2006), naming is extraordinarily important as it is crucial for abused women to reappraise themselves, the abusers, and the abusive relationships. In fact, naming in NT is a technique which assists abused women to externalise the internalised problem(s), creating a distance between the problem(s) and the women themselves, allowing the women chances to objectively understand the problem(s), its causes and influences on the people around and their own lives. Naming could also work as a technique to assist abused women to understand their identities through their descriptions of actions, hence, opening up chances for discussions of women's own identities tied to what they frame as actions of love and explore the alternatives. For the purpose of thickening stories and reauthoring experiences, NT offers a number of conversation maps for us, including 'externalizing conversations', 'reauthoring conversations', 'remembering conversations', 'scaffolding conversations', 'definitional ceremonies', 'outsider witness' and 'therapeutic documents' (White & Epston, 1990).

### **Talk into Religion**

As found in this research, some popular Chinese religious values, such as *Yin Guo Bao Ying*, *Tian Ming* and *Jie*, forbid abused women to seek help, make changes and leave the abusive partners. The influence of these Chinese religious values on the staying of abused women has never been well examined in local literature; hence, social services that address the entrapping effects of religious values are not developed locally in Hong Kong. However, this relation between religions and domestic violence has already caught the eye of academicians (Ellison & Anderson, 1999, 2001; Cunardi, Caetano & Schafer, 2002; Clark, 2004; Yick, 2008) and become an emerging body of research (Ringel & Park, 2008) in western societies. The religious values of Christianity are widely discussed to tease out how religious women hold on to ‘female submissiveness to males’ and the notion of ‘forgiveness’ due to their interpretation of the Bible scriptures. Such finding has led to the development of partnerships between social work practices with religions in the battle against domestic violence. In the following section, I am going to review how the partnership between social work and religions takes place in other countries, and more importantly, to discuss the

possibilities of social service reform in Hong Kong to achieve a ‘social work-religion’ partnership to meet the needs of culturally diverse victims of domestic violence.

**The social work-religion partnership.** There are approximately 700,000 Buddhists and Taoists, 320,000 Protestant Christians, 243,000 Roman Catholics, 90,000 Muslims, 40,000 Hindus, 8,000 Sikhs, 4,600 Jehovah’s Witnesses, and 4,000 practicing Jews in Hong Kong (Consulate General of The United States, 2009). Though seldom practised as a formal religion, Confucianism and its ideas and social tenets are often blended together with Taoism and Buddhism. The population that practices some form of religion in Hong Kong takes up 43% of the total population (Consulate General of The United States, 2009 Website, last visited on 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2009), implying that we have almost a 50-50 chance to encounter people with obvious religious beliefs and practices. Besides the prevalence of religious practices in Hong Kong, religion is important to so many people because, ‘it has a spiritual dimension, pertaining to models of social and individual behaviour, and to the ideas of transcendence and the supernatural...[and] is about ultimacy: it relates people to the ultimate conditions



of their existence (Haynes, 1993, p.28, cited in O'Hagan, 2001)'. Both the prevalence and importance of religion to human beings put an urgent requirement upon the social work profession to investigate the relationship between religions and social work, so that the needs of clients will not be marginalised due to the lack of cultural competence and religious sensitivity among the practitioners. As reckoned by O'Hagan (2001), 'In an increasingly secular and irreligious world, those who regard their religion as much more important than their race or their gender may have difficulty in finding professionals who can either accept or understand that' (p.135).

Though findings on the influence of Buddhist and traditional Chinese beliefs on the staying of abused women are limited to the field of domestic violence, the implications are worthy of discussion in a wider social-work practice context, in order that social work professionals are more ready to serve people with their personal, social, spiritual and religious needs. In this light, I will argue the need for social work education to include spiritual and religious content in training its practitioners; on the practice level, the partnership between religious bodies and the social work field will be examined.

**Including spiritual and religious content in social work education.** In

order to prepare social care professionals with cultural competence to understand and assist abused women with strong religious beliefs, we have to first examine how to include content of spirituality and religion in the training of social care professionals. According to the information provided by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (last visited on 28/10/2009), training of social work includes (1) human behaviours and social environment (2) social welfare and social policy (3) social work theory and practice (4) social science/general education and (4) supervised field work. Currently, social work training is not required to include any component about local religions/religious values, so that 'little or no understanding or appreciation of the meaning and value of religion in people's lives is implanted in the social care profession. O'Hagan (2001) identifies an irony about social work profession, which is that 'health and social care professionals attach great important to values, yet in an increasingly secular materialistic world, are seemingly unaware of the religious origins of most people's value systems' (p. 137).

Including content related to spirituality and religion in social work

education is not a new piece of advice. This direction of social work has been widely advocated in America for more than two decades; however, this focus on the interface of spirituality, religion, and social work is gradually lost because ‘empiricism, secular humanism and libertarian morality replaced religion and spirituality as the leading professional sources of ethics and values. Religion and spirituality were increasingly viewed, at best, as unnecessary and irrelevant, and, at worst, as illogical and pathological (Russel, 1998, p. 17). However, Graham and Shier (2009) found that understanding religion and spirituality in fact could help the social work practitioners to make sense of people’s thoughts and behaviours, hence, attaining a holistic ‘person-in-environment’ assessment of the clients. Graham and Shier studied a large amount of social work literature and found that religion has a strong influence on subjective understanding of social issues within the individual and the community; they also discovered direct implications for understanding issues of poverty, domestic violence, marriage, divorce and mental illness, which are largely unexplored. A study of religions contributes to social work education by enhancing our understanding of the impacts of religions on the personal and social development of human beings. In addition, religion, as institutional practice of spiritual beliefs, constitutes the social

environment for many clients, hence, shaping the ways they think and behave.

The need to include the religious and spiritual dimension in social work practice is best illustrated with the case of YL who, in revealing her religious consideration in the stay/leave decision, claimed that she started to believe in ancestors at an early age by learning how to worship and pray to the ancestors from her parents; this religion made her feel guilty about getting an abortion, and she identified staying in the abusive relationship as a way to pay back the debts of her guilt. From YL's case, it is seen that religion is sustained and perpetrated through the social environment in which abused women live, and it shapes the abused women's views on women's identity, mother role, marriage, and justice. From this research, it is obvious that some abused women attribute their decision to stay in the abusive relationships to their religious beliefs, while their religious values are absent in any social work curriculum in Hong Kong. As suggested by Russel (1998), social work students must understand their own spirituality in order to effectively help clients grapple with these spiritual/religious issues. Furthermore, the efficacy of spiritually derived interventions such as prayers and meditation is also found helpful in social work intervention (Byrd, 1988; Dossey,

1993; Levey & Levey, 1991; Orme-Johnson, 1987, cited in Russel, 1998).

Hence, it is suggested that local religions, religious beliefs, and people's value systems and spiritually derived interventions should be included in the training of social work professionals, in order to equip them with the needed cultural competence and sensitivity to address the influences of specific religions and religious values on their clients' lives.

**Partnership between religious bodies and social work .** In fact, despite their entrapping effects, religious beliefs are also able to give abused women power to survive in the abusive relationships, and these beliefs could, therefore, become helpful resources for abused women to rebuild their identity, confidence, and self-efficacy to combat the violence against them. Social work practitioners who aim at utilizing the personal resources of clients to the fullest potential should not miss the part of their religions and religious bodies closely linked to their lives.

According to Ringel and Park (2008), who interviewed the religion-based social service practitioners and religion leaders in their study, two main streams of thought are differentiated in Christianity: conservative and social liberal. It is

found that liberal thought in Christianity emphasises mutual commitment in couple relationships, in contrast with the conservative thought which emphasises submissiveness of women to their male husbands. They found that abused women who live with the conservative Christian thought tended to keep silent in the abusive relationships and tolerate the violence against them as sacred acts. As both types of thoughts were supported by Biblical scriptures, both of them are able to provide religious foundations for believers to live their lives accordingly. Abused women of liberal Christianity with a strong religious commitment could be helped to recognise alternatives in their lives and live a life free of violence. Ringel and Park's work explored alternative understandings in a religion and its religious text, and suggested that there should be ways to assist women with a strong religious belief to be empowered through their religious values instead of being entrapped and disempowered by them. Therefore, it is argued that religious bodies and social service organizations with religion backgrounds should work together to study their traditions and interpretations of their religions, so that they can recognise how believers' lives are influenced and shaped by these thoughts accordingly. Such an examination may suggest alternative ways of living opened to abused women who are consumed by the 'sacred silence' of their

religions and assist them to live a violence-free life, meanwhile maintaining their adherence to their religions.

In addition, as discussed before, the social service field is secular and religiously neutral. It is argued that this religiously neutral practice is marginalizing the needs of clients with religious beliefs (nearly half of the Hong Kong population) and wasting the advantage of social service organizations that are supported by religious bodies to talk into spirituality and religion with clients who need spiritual solutions. According to Loewenberg (1988), a client works out a relationship with the social worker as a whole individual. Avoidance of the part of religion will handicap the interactions and the professional relationship particular to those clients whose religion is the central part of their lives. It could be said that clients having strong commitment to their religions may have religious problems and needs which should not be reduced to 'psychological problems and defenses' (Humphrise, 1982, p. 129, cited in Loewenberg, 1988, p. 87). Therefore, I wish to highlight here the importance of addressing the religious part of the individual client by a social worker who should be trained with knowledge about religious philosophies and religious influences on

believers' lives.

To develop religious competence in social workers, local religious bodies which have engaged in a wide range of social services in Hong Kong—including youth centers, schools, elderly homes, hospitals, integrated family service centers and rehabilitation service—are able to perform this role of developing 'faith/religion-based intervention' that comprises sensitivity to and understanding of religious cultures of diverse clientele. This 'faith/religion-based intervention', in fact, has been developed in America for more than three decades. In the 1970s in the USA., a shelter named Arizona's Rainbow Retreat started to talk into the concept of Christian love with abused women who seek sheltering (Ferraro, 1979). It was found that Christian abused women usually stayed because they believed that Christian love meant forgiveness and responsibility for the problems of the partner. Rainbow began to explore with abused women the concept of Christian love by providing an alternative concept called Hard Love. According to Ferraro (1979), abused women could find a rationale to leave their alcoholic abusive husbands by loving them intensively because of holding on to the philosophy of Hard Love which suggested that leaving the alcoholic abusive



husband was the way to love Christianly. The concept of 'Hard Love' even advocated that 'problems should be turned over to God, and one basic piece of advice is to "Let Go and Let God"' (Ferraro, 1979, p. 18). Since the Hard Love philosophy reorganises the relationship between God and men and suggests respect and humbleness to God's delivery and power in men's lives, it opens up an alternative to religious Christian women to let go of the abusive relationships without the fear of offending God. This example inspires other religions to develop religious knowledge in relation to social work practice, in order to help improving the lives of their believers in a religiously acceptable way; meanwhile, the social work profession must get itself prepared to address the religious problems, needs, and concerns of their clients. Multidisciplinary case conference should include religious bodies to give opinions on the spiritual and religious dimensions of the cases, so that the welfare and intervention plan could be more well-rounded for the greatest benefit of the clients.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, a few recommendations for both policy and practice are raised. Inspired by the grounded theory generated in this research, it is

suggested that policies related to the welfare of abused women and their children must address the characteristics of abused women and their stay/leave decision-making process. In this chapter, application assessment done on a household basis is highlighted because it could marginalise the needs of abused women and their children in practice, and should be revised accordingly to assist abused women to live better lives. On top of this, two practice directions are recommended to address two important concerns of abused women; because these two concerns are usually neglected in the social work profession, it is suggested to include content about love and religions in social work education and to facilitate social work organizations to build partnerships with religious bodies in Hong Kong in order to work out religion-based interventions for religious abused women and clients with strong religious commitment.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Dialogue with Existing Literature on the Staying of Abused**

#### **Women**

In this chapter, the grounded theory of ‘Reorienting Conjugal Relationship with the Abusers’ generated in this research will be compared with existing literature that theorise about the stay-leave process of abused women. Making constant comparison with existing literature is a practice of grounded theory methodology, through which the grounded theory generated from field data can be positioned in the large map of knowledge that explains the social phenomenon under study. In the following sessions, Mills’ (1985) stage model about the leaving process of abused women, Rosen and Stith’s (1997) grounded theory about how women survive abusive dating relationships, Kirkwood’s theory (1993) about the leaving of abused women, and Stark’s (2007) coercive control theory will be constantly compared with the grounded theory generated from this study. Differences with the above selected theories will be the main source of discussion because they could enrich the theory generated in this research and build new hypotheses for future theory-building in the field. Besides the theoretical

implications, implications for methodology and practice will be drawn in the process of constant comparison.

### **A Dialogue with Mills (1985)**

Mills' model, built in 1985, focused on abused women's coping in the abusive relationship. Mills identified five stages of coping in abused women, which are 'entering a violent relationship', 'managing the violence', 'experiencing a loss of self', 're-evaluating the violent relationship' and 're-structuring the self'. Among these stages, 're-evaluating the violent relationship' is related to abused women's decision to leave; and this is very much similar to 'evaluating the conjugal relationship against the original understanding' conceptualised in this grounded theory research. Justifications for maintaining the relationship with the abuser are found in both Mills' theory and this grounded theory when the conjugal relationship with the abuser is contradictory to women's original understanding of the relationship. Therefore, the concept of 're-evaluating the violent relationship' would be constantly compared to 'evaluating the conjugal relationship against the original understanding of abused women'; additionally, justifications for maintaining the relationship with the abusers discovered by Mills

will also be constantly compared to the justifications conceptualised in this research in order to search for possibilities to enrich the grounded theory of 'reorienting conjugal relationship with the abuser' and to elicit methodological and practical insights.

'Re-evaluating their relationship with the abusers' is understood to be a process by which abused women shift from 'compliant "zombies" to reflective actors who decide to leave their husbands' (p.115). Abused women, before re-evaluation takes place, are usually numb and unable to make a sensible definition of their situation. This point marks a difference from the grounded theory generated in this research because it is found in this research that the evaluation and re-evaluation of the conjugal relationship with abusers takes place continuously from the start of the relationship. This difference obviously shows that there are two types of (re)-evaluations for abused women to assess their relationships with the abusers. They are, firstly, continuous evaluation from the start of the relationships; and, secondly, re-evaluation of the conjugal relationship triggered by critical incidents and insights. For abused women who continuously evaluate the conjugal relationship, despite their experiences of distress, depression,

and ‘zombie-like’ loss of self, they are never numb. Rather, they are reflective actors who make the leave-stay decision upon the result of evaluation. On the other hand, those abused women whose ‘re-evaluation’ process takes place upon the appearance of insights or critical incidents that challenge their old ways of thinking were actually found to have experienced self-loss and being numb before the ‘re-evaluation’ started (Mills, 1985). Therefore, we could hypothesise that experiences of ‘self-loss’ and/or ‘being numb’ in the abusive relationships may be a variable to determine which type of evaluation would be employed by abused women. Hence, abused women who have experienced ‘self-loss’ and/or being numb should be further sampled to compare their evaluation process with that of abused women without such experiences.

Apart from the above, Mills also gave attention to internal contradictions in abusers’ definitions of the situation, as ‘insights’ challenging abused women’s old ways of thinking and triggering re-evaluation of the violent relationship. In this sense, abused women’s ways of thinking are in fact influenced or even determined by the abusers’ definition of the situation, and this marks another difference between Mills’ theory and the one generated in this research. Based

on this grounded theory research, abused women's understanding of the conjugal relationship with the abusers, at the very beginning moment of engagement, is defined by abused women themselves as derived from either their worldview, or religious values, or social and cultural conformity. The abusers' definition of the situation/relationship, as a factor influencing women's understanding of the conjugal relationship, is not evident in setting the frameworks for women's evaluation of the abusive relationship. However, the abusers' definition may become significant in determining what behaviors should be counted acceptable and unacceptable under the evaluation frameworks set by abused women. For example, DN, who understood the conjugal relationships as love, once told in the interview,

'He once spent all the money, which was for paying the rent, on his bet. I knew in advance that he would do this; hence, I had already kept part of the money given to me mum from him. He scolded me that it was totally my fault because if he had known there was enough money for our living, he would never go for a bet. You know, I did find it my fault for not giving him all the

money at that moment.’

It can be seen from the above that, although the abuser deprived DN economically and humiliated her with words, DN did not consider these as ‘signs of no love’. DN’s definition of ‘signs of love’ and ‘signs of no love’ seems to be affected by her abusive partner’s definition, in which abusers’ behaviours of no love are reframed to be his reasonable responses to DN’s fault of withholding the money from him. Due to this distorted definition of ‘signs of love’ and ‘signs of no love’, deprivation and humiliation did not amount to reaching DN’s threshold of tolerance. Therefore, after this constant comparison made between Mills’ theory and this grounded theory, further examination on the influence of abusers’ definition of the situation on women’s definition of evaluating indicators is needed.

In addition to the theoretical insight generated by Mills’ discussion on ‘re-evaluating of the violent relationship’ and the influence of abusers’ definition of the situation, ‘developing justifications for maintaining the relationships’ discussed by him also enriches the concept of ‘justifications for maintaining the relationships’. For the grounded theory generated in this research, women’s



justifications for staying are the derivatives of abused women's understandings of the abusive relationships, and those understandings are strongly influenced by worldviews, values, and attitudes of life held by abused women. Therefore, 'justifications' as contingently developed strategies for assisting abused women to tolerate the violence against them brings a new dimension to the concept of 'justification for maintaining the violent relationship'. By comparing the justifications found in this grounded theory research and those delineated in Mills' work constantly, 'definitional justification' and 'coping justifications' are conceptualised. The former concept is found in this grounded theory research to tell how abused women make use of their understandings of the conjugal relationships as frameworks for justifying their stay; the latter concept is suggested by Mills' theory to show how abused women develop contingent justifications as strategies to maintain the relationship with the abusers. Provided these two dimensions of 'justifications for maintaining the violent relationship', the justification process of abused women for staying in the violent relationship would be better understood because the 'definitional justifications' that emerged in this grounded theory research explain why abused women want to maintain the relationships with the abusers, while the 'coping justifications' of

Mills explain how abused women develop strategies to serve their desire to maintain the abusive relationships. Without ‘definitional justifications’, the justifications found by Mills seem to have fallen into circular reasoning: why abused women stay is because they have developed justifications for maintaining the relationships; why they developed justifications for maintaining the relationships is because they wanted to stay.

On top of the theoretical implications drawn, there is a sampling challenge raised here: How do we sample abused women by implicit characteristics, like ‘having experienced “self-loss” and “being numb”’? As traditional research sampling screens for participants by external characteristics such as sex, age, education level, etc., sampling on implicit characteristics is seldom discussed. However, in doing grounded theory research, this is a sampling issue that frequently comes up; for example, after finding Buddhist *Yin Guo Bao Ying* to be a concept of ‘predestination’, I had to sample for abused women who also understood their relationships with the abusers as ‘predestination’ in order to saturate the concept of ‘predestination’ until there was no further marginal gain in enriching understanding of the concept. However, women having religious

practices such as worshipping the ancestors were not guaranteed to understand the abusive relationships as predestination; in fact, none of the external features and characteristics was found helpful in identifying abused women's understanding of their relationships. Under such circumstances, I tried to sit in the sharing sessions organised by the survivors' group and searched for 'data' revealing 'predestination understanding'; that is where the concept of *Jie* was discovered. The abused women who revealed the concept of *Jie* were further interviewed to collect data on properties and dimensions of *Jie*. Learning from this experience, participating in sharing sessions and discussions, which involve a large group of abused women, is found to be an effective method to sample for implicit characteristics like perception, ways of reasoning, values, attitudes, and experiential recounting. However, this method only helps to sample for implicit features which are on the cognitive level and able to be verbalised. Some feelings and emotions which the women are unable to articulate and verbalise themselves could hardly be sampled by this method. Therefore, it may not be possible to sample noncognitive experiences undergone by women simply by listening into abused women's accounts of their stories, but direct observations of abused women's reactions and responses on the scene may be needed. The

feasibility of such observations on the staying of abused women in the abusive relationships is still on doubt

### **A Dialogue with Rosen and Stith (1997) and Kirkwood (1993)**

Rosen and Stith (1997) developed a grounded theory to explain the leaving process of abused women in dating relationships. In this theory, abused women's experiences in building up the readiness to leave the abusive relationships were conceptualised. According to the grounded theory of Rosen and Stith, before abused women take the last action to leave the abusive relationships, they have to undergo a number of cycles of 'turning point-objective reflection-reappraisal-self reclaiming actions'<sup>2</sup>, until a paradigmatic shift and the last-straw event take place to give impetus to abused women to leave the abusers. Though both Rosen and Stith's theory and the one generated in this research shed light on the cognitive evaluation process of abused women, the latter is different from the former in that it is able to detail how those evaluation processes take place through providing a theoretical articulation on women's frameworks for evaluation, their information collection for the evaluation, and the evaluation mechanisms they employed.

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<sup>2</sup> This concept is elaborated in Rosen and Stith's work (1997) as 'self-empowering steps taken by the women to gain more control over their lives' (p.177).

These details propose a cognitive schema of abused women in evaluating the conjugal relationships with the abusers and suggest that reorienting abused women's understanding of the conjugal relationship with the abusers could help to shake the women's ground for staying; hence, the leaving of abused women would be facilitated. Therefore, theorization of how the evaluation/reappraisal processes take place has significant practical implications for social work practitioners in convincing abused women to leave the abusive relationships and live a life without threats and violence. Moreover, the theorization of the evaluation processes could sensitise social work practitioners to grasp how abused women reason for their stay, so to reduce the ill-matched conversations in the counseling sessions. Below is an account of an experience that happened when I worked as a volunteer in a social welfare agency to illustrate 'ill-matched conversations' and the possible consequences:

Mr. H visited YL at least once a week to discuss with her the welfare plan for her son and the safety plan for herself. However, he found YL very unwilling to get into the conversations he thought to be critically important. He

perceived YL's unwillingness as a barrier to his service for this family, and tried to employ enforcing intervention strategies to remove the kid from this 'high risk' family. Eventually, YL attempted to jump out of the window after being seized away from her only child. As revealed by YL after being saved from the window, what concerned her the most at that moment was doing a good job as a mother, so that she could pay off the guilt for having an abortion. In addition, YL even thought that the abuse against her was the punishment from God because she once killed a little life by abortion. Therefore, taking away her only son, through whose care she paid off her guilt, meant taking away her only chance to be exempted from the punishment, the violence against her. If she could only choose either living with continuous violence or death, jumping out of the window seemed understandable.

From the above case, connecting with the line of thought of abused women could mean the first step of successful intervention.

Except for the lack of theorization on the details of evaluation processes experienced by abused women, Rosen and Stith's theorization about women's cognitive evaluations of the abusive relationships is in general similar to the process found in the grounded theory built in this research; however, according to the theory generated in this study, abused women's cognitive evaluation process begins once they engage in a conjugal relationship with the abusers; whereas for that of Rosen and Stith, an abused woman must pull 'herself out of the emotional context to view, or sometimes review, her relationship and the consequences to her' (p.176) before the first cycle of cognitive evaluation occurs. Therefore, Rosen and Stith suggested that there is a variable called 'emotional context' that affects some abused women's entry into the cognitive evaluation process. Regarding the meaning of 'emotional context', it could be understood as the opposite to doubting the relationships (see 'seed of doubt', pp. 174–175) and objectively reviewing the relationships (see 'objective reflection and reappraisal', p. 176). This means that the 'emotional context' is a state in which abused women are totally immersed in the positive feelings about the relationships and hardly view anything or notice any signs that challenge the good image of the relationship with the abusive partner. This concept of 'emotional context'

illuminates the presence of variables which are noncognitive and influential (for example, gate-keeping) to the cognitive processing of abused women in dealing with the leave-stay decision. Therefore, in order to conceptualise noncognitive variables and saturate them, staying abused women who are not engaged in cognitive evaluations of the conjugal relationship with the abusers should be sampled for data collection. Since theoretical sampling requires the grounded theorists to sample on theoretical relevance and sample for developing theoretical concepts which could be highly implicit, the predication of sampling discussed at the end of the dialogue with Mills appears again: How to identify among a group of abused women those women who do not make their leave-stay decision with cognitive evaluation? In this case, sampling is even more difficult because the sampling criterion is not only implicit, but also noncognitive, implying that it could not be verbalised and shared through words. Besides this sampling issue, another methodological concern regarding data collection is also raised. In order to collect data to conceptualise the noncognitive, direct observation of abused women's behaviours, reactions and responses which consequently lead to staying or leaving could be an effective method, just like observations done by Skinner in building his theory of conditioning. However, as discussed before, entering into



the lives of abusive couples and observing their interactions poses a doubt on its feasibility.

In addition, it is claimed by Rosen and Stith that their work confirmed Kirkwood's (1993) theorization of abused women's leaving process as a spiral; hence, abused women may 'spiral in' when abusers gain control and the women lose their self-agency, and 'spiral out' when abusers lose control and the women regain self-agency. This 'back and forth' process in making the leave-stay decision is also discovered in the decision-making process of abused women with 'love understanding', 'social and cultural conformity understanding' and 'pragmatic functions understanding' in my research. Provided that arriving at the decision to leave represents abused women being sufficiently prepared (cognitively) to end the abusive relationships, both the 'spiral in and out' process and the 'back and forth' process theorised in Kirkwood's work and mine should at the same time refer to fluctuations in abused women's building up of readiness to leave the abusive relationships. Thus, variables affecting women's readiness to leave should be also understood as variables affecting women's decision to leave (the moment women are sufficiently prepared to leave). From this perspective,

“abusers’ control” and “women’s self-agency” found by Kirkwood suggest another variable to ‘leave-stay decision making of abused women’, which is different from the grounded theory generated in my research, in which reorienting the understanding of conjugal relationships is proposed to be the variable to abused women’s leave-stay decision. Besides adding in a new strand in the concept of ‘leave-stay decision making of abused women’, the theory proposed by Kirkwood also leaves a hint to relate the “abusers’ control–women’s self-agency” strand and “understanding of the conjugal relationship” strand in explaining leave-stay decision of abused women.

What is more, by comparing the grounded theory generated in this research and Kirkwood’s theory, it is found that the causal relationship between the concept of ‘readiness to leave’ and ‘self-agency’ of abused women is reversed. Kirkwood attributed abused women’s readiness to leave to their gain in self-agency; however, it is found in this research that increase in women’s readiness to leave is a result of their gain of self-agency. For example, KY used to avoid doing things against what she thought to be her predestination and, after having identified hints from God/Fate/Destiny that she was free from the abusive

predestination, she put effort into planning her leave; as another example, HW began to search for community resources that could assist her to leave the relationship after she had started to develop the idea to leave the abuser due to his inability to fulfil her desires. Therefore, Kirkwood's (1993) theorization about "women's self-agency" being a variable to women's readiness to leave, combined with the theorization made in this research about women's "readiness to leave" being a variable to women's "self-agency", is in fact suggesting a mutual reinforcing relationship between abused women's "self-agency" [SA] and their "readiness to leave" [RL]. It means  $\uparrow [SA] \rightarrow \uparrow [RL] \rightarrow \uparrow [SA]' \rightarrow \uparrow [RL]'$ ... and  $\downarrow [SA] \rightarrow \downarrow [RL] \rightarrow \downarrow [SA]' \rightarrow \downarrow [RL]'$ <sup>3</sup> ... For enriching the possible relationships between women's "self-agency" and the "readiness to leave", women who have experienced an increase of self-agency before their decision to leave should be sampled to understand in what way self-agency is related to the decision to leave and in what way the decision to leave conversely affects their self-agency. Having found that Kirkwood did elaborate conceptual details about "self-agency", i.e. self-esteem, identity solidification, hope and physical ability, it could be used to help identifying

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<sup>3</sup> Where SA stands for self-agency, and RL for readiness to leave

“self-agency” in future theoretical sampling, checking out whether it is true that when abused women’s self- esteem is increased, self-identity is strengthened, hopes are instilled in them and physical ability is kept, they will be more prepared to leave the abusive relationships, and whether such increase in preparedness to leave could lead to a further increase in women’s self-agency.

It is suggested by Kirkwood (1993, p. 66) that abusers’ control over women can be very strong. Abusers can impose their own definitions on women according to Mills (1985). In this light, in order to enrich “understanding of the conjugal relationship with the abuser”, and to saturate the relationship between the “abusers’ control–women’s self-agency” strand and the “understanding of the conjugal relationship” strand in explaining “leave-stay decision making of abused women”, data about abusers’ definitions of the conjugal relationship should be sampled and compared to their wives’ definitions to help theorizing how definitions of the two sides of the couple relate to each other to give rise to women’s understandings of the violent relationships.

### **A Dialogue with Stark's Coercive Control Theory (2007)**

Coercive control theory draws on the analogy of hostage or conjugal terrorism to capture how abused women are confined in the abusive relationships, where their decision-making, perceptions, behaviors and emotions are affected by controlling strategies deployed by the abusers. Stark (2007) argues that abused women's responses in the abusive relationship can hardly be made sense of without acknowledging this cage of entrapment. In drawing similarities from hostage-taking and terrorism, Stark also stresses the difference between domestic violence and hostage situations: assaults of the former type are typically minor but routine, whereas, the assaults of the latter type are usually concentrated in time and place to inflict fear or pain primarily, instead of 'usurping' and 'mastering' the target's subjectivity and agency to act on his or her own will. Therefore, as argued by Stark, as long as abusers' extensive control and surveillance remain diffusing in women's lives, abused women may have no chance to meet people, engage in activities, and seek help from community organizations which allow them to 'reflect on their situation, contemplate their options, and retain a sense of self' (p. 209).

In this line of thought, women's control of their lives in the abusive relationships, such as decision making and evaluation efforts, are just 'control in the context of no control' (p. 216) which is pretty unrealistic. Therefore, Stark's theory suggests that abused women's choices and exercise of control are in fact the intended consequences of abusers' coercive control. The grounded theory generated in this research proposes a similar hypothetical relationship as discussed in the dialogue with Mills: what abused women count to be significant and what to be trivial in evaluating their relationships with the abusers are controlled by abusers and are the products of the abusers' imposition of their definitions on women's definitions. Hence, abused women can only evaluate a small array of evidence to prove the abusive relationships are off the right track. Besides, Stark also argued that abused women were commonly unaware of coercive control diffused in their everyday life routine, even though they were living in liberal democratic societies because 'the core tactics in coercive control build on practices that are governed by gender norms in relationships, such as ceding major financial decisions to men or quitting work to "make home", or target devalued activities to which women are already consigned, like cooking, cleaning' (p. 210-211). Due to these inequalities present in gender norms, abusers are

provided a lot more chances to control their female partners by blaming them for not meeting the 'standards'. Therefore, we could also hypothesise that the leave-stay decision making of abused women who are more conforming to social and cultural expectations would be more likely to be influenced by the abusers' coercive control tactics mediated by gender norms. Certainly, further sampling of abusive conjugal relationships within which the female victims exhibit social and cultural conformity and male abusers deploy 'gender-norm mediated control tactics' is needed, in order to conceptualise the relationship between 'gender-norm mediated control tactics' deployed by the abusers and 'leave-stay decision making' of abused women who strongly 'conform to social and cultural expectations'.

Generally speaking, abusers' 'coercive control' adds a variable to the leave-stay decision making of abused women by way of its influence in defining what should be counted acceptable and unacceptable in women's evaluation of the conjugal relationships. In particular, based on the 'normalcy of coercive control' conceptualised by Stark, the grounded theory generated in this research suggests that abused women who understand their conjugal relationships as social and

cultural conformity should be more likely to be controlled by the abusers who deploy 'gender norm mediated control tactics'.

For methodological implications, as women sampled in this research are recruited in survivors' group and they are those who have already left the abusive relationships and plan not to return (as required by the survivors' group), they are supposed to be the group of abused women who have won the tug-of-war in the power struggles in the abusive relationships, according to Stark's theory. Therefore, the leave-stay decision-making processes recounted by them usually touch on their own self-agency, self-control, and critical choices made. In order to sample for abused women who suffer more from coercive control of abusers to the extent that they feel total loss of identity, very low self-esteem, and find their own lives diffused by constraints set by the abusers, abused women who are still staying should be included in the study. Since staying is the manifestation of the influence of coercive control, collecting data from abused women who are still staying (or not able to leave) may reveal more information about women's predicament. However, sampling for staying abused women in Hong Kong is difficult. At the beginning of this research, abused women remaining in the



abusive relationships were targeted. Since domestic violence is the violence behind the door and it is not easy to gain access to staying abused women without the aid of a formal agency, responsible formal social service agencies, such as the Integrated Family Service Centers and women's shelters, were approached for recruiting abused women who stay. Anyhow, these organizations rejected taking part in the study by providing staying abused women because they thought staying abused women were too vulnerable to be interviewed, and they did not have extra manpower to support screening cases for the research. As cases of staying abused women were gate-kept by these formal social organizations, local survivors' groups were approached to look for chances to collect data on abused women's experiences during their stay. Eventually Kwan Fook, which was the only survivors' group for abused women in Hong Kong, indicated their willingness to assist in the research and provide cases for in-depth interviews. As membership in Kwan Fook is mostly confined to abused women who have left the abusers and plan not to return, staying abused women could hardly be located in the course of this study to reveal the lives being tightly constrained by the abusers' coercive control. This methodological problem appears to obscure development of research on the staying of abused women.

Apart from the theoretical and methodological implications drawn from the constant comparisons between the grounded theory generated in this research and Stark's coercive control theory, some practical implications will also be discussed here. As Stark's theory sheds light on the influences of 'coercive control' on abused women's understandings of the conjugal relationships and the schema held by women to look for signs and evidence for evaluations, it is suggested that interventions should be responsible for breaking these coercive controls over abused women's perceptions. This is a practical direction contrasting to the one suggested by the theorization that recognises abused women's staying as their exercise of choice, rationality, and agency, and it implies that choosing to stay is just a product of victimization by coercive controls; hence interventions should work to free abused women from these thinking traps, instead of fostering their old ways of understanding, reasoning, and evaluating.

### **The Reformulated Grounded Theory to Explain the Staying of Abused Women**

After constantly comparing three existing theories built to explain the leave-stay of abused women, a number of hypothetical relationships are built in

relation to the grounded theory generated in this research to enrich our understanding on the staying of abused women. The improvised reformulated grounded theory is depicted in a diagram shown below (Figure 9):

\_\_\_\_\_ Relationships found in the grounded theory generated in this research  
 - - - - - Hypothetical relationships that emerged from constant comparison between the grounded theory and existing theories

*Relationship between concepts*

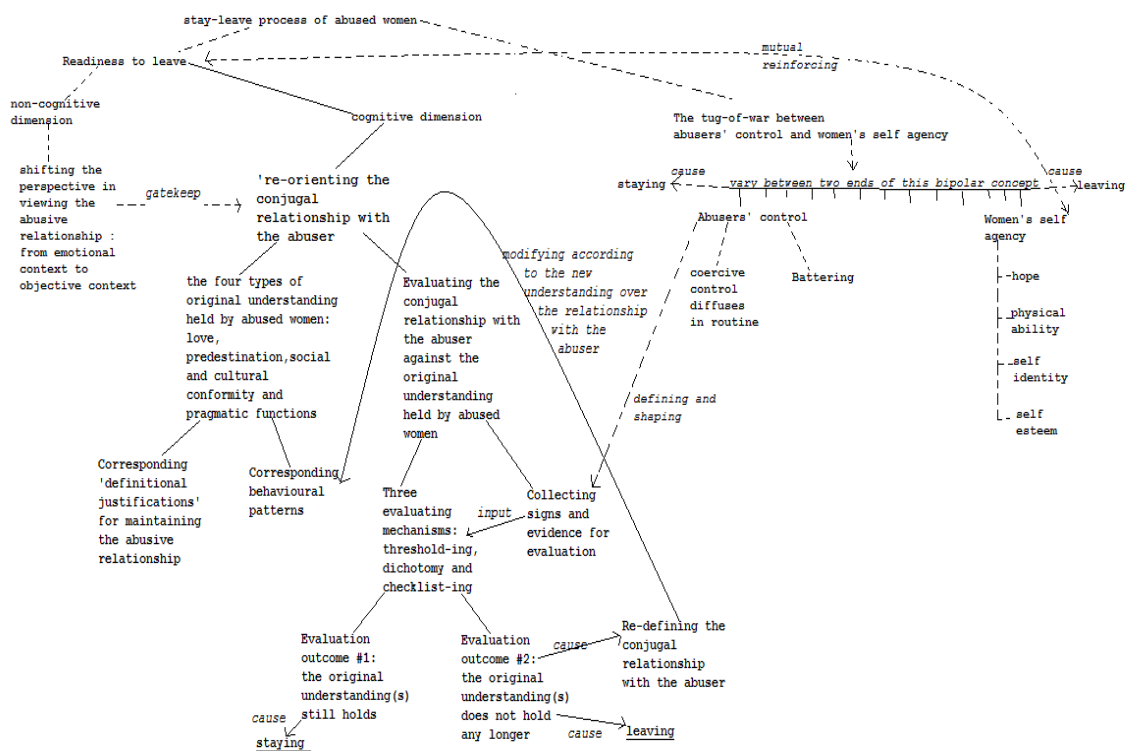


Fig. 9. The reformulated grounded theory after the dialogues with existing literature.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Contributions**

Constant comparison is an ongoing process in doing the grounded theory methodology. It is basic for grounded theory generation and reformulation. This process leaves the theories generated from grounded theory methodology open for modifications and grants grounded theory the ability to accommodate itself to different times, places, and contexts to explain the phenomena. It is always emphasised by Glaser and Strauss (1967) that having found a new piece of data that is not coherent with the generated grounded theory does not disprove the theory because the theory was generated from data which once existed in the field; however, the discovery of incoherent data becomes a chance to reformulate the grounded theory to search for the variable(s) which create such differences. This process is called maximizing, meaning that by comparing contradictory concepts and theories, the grounded theory could be reformulated to incorporate the uncovered variables and extend its scope of explanation. Therefore, dialogues with existing literature are necessary in doing grounded theory to serve the goal of theory generation. This practice is dramatically different from traditional literature review, through which researchers develop the credibility and significance of their research by challenging and pointing out the insufficiency of

existing literature. Constant comparison, as a way to dialogue with existing literature, is able to connect theories generated from a variety of field data from which may emerge the influence of various political views, social and cultural backgrounds, and history on the phenomenon under study; thus giving a more comprehensive map of the knowledge of the study problem.

Through the dialogues with four selected theories that explain the stay-leave process of abused women, it can be seen that the grounded theory generated in this research contributes to making the cognitive evaluation process undergone by abusive women visible and helps by inserting a new area of concern in understanding the staying of abused women. Traditionally, the staying of abused women is attributed either to psychological barriers, such as learned helplessness (Walker, 1979) and Fear (Hyden, 1999), or to the consequence of external constraints, such as social and cultural oppression (Bograd, 1988; Tang, 1999) against women and unfavourable social policies (Mama, 1996) that stop abused women from leaving. However, women's treasured worldview, religious values, and attitudes of life are not articulated to make sense of abused women's understandings of the abusive relationships and hence of their staying or leaving.

This theorization highlights the cognitive dimension of abused women in the stay-leave process apart from their being the victims of internal constraints or external oppression. This is not to argue that the discovery of the exercise of choices and evaluation effort in the stay-leave process of abused women could disprove theories about women's victimization; on the contrary, it manifests the intertwined effects of victimization and women's self-agency, hence leading to further investigation on such intertwined relationships in the future.

This theory of 'reorienting conjugal relationship with the abuser', highlights the agency of abused women who continuously collect signs and evidence to evaluate their relationships with the abusers against their original understanding(s) of the conjugal relationships; moreover, the constant comparisons of this theory with existing literature suggest emotional readiness to leave and coercive controls deployed by the abusers could be influential variables in facilitating and inhibiting the leave-stay decision making. In such a light, more research should be conducted to explore the relationships between victimization and self-agency in abused women's stay-leave process.

Methodologically and sampling difficulties in doing grounded theory methodology are discussed in this chapter, including the access to staying abused women (those who are still living with the abusers) in Hong Kong and sampling for noncognitive characteristics in abused women for theory generation on abused women's noncognitive processes that take place during the stay-leave process. At the same time, two diverse practical directions, in face of the understandings of the conjugal relationships and evaluation method employed by abused women, are suggested after comparing the grounded theory to Stark's coercive control theory: Going along the way they are going, and challenging their old ways of thinking. Which practice works better to assist abused women to end the abusive relationship and under what conditions is not explored yet in this research. Therefore, in order to improve social work interventions with staying abused women, these two directions should be put into practice and compared, so that their effects can be seen and evaluated accordingly.

Finally, through writing up this chapter, I have attempted to show how dialogues could work to yield theory-building and hence advocating the use of

constant comparative analysis as a way to run existing theories open and modifiable, so that the work of knowledge-building can be kept on.



## Chapter 9

### **Application, Strengths and Weaknesses and Future Research**

Domestic violence is a worldwide social problem, and cases of domestic violence are increasing in a drastic manner in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, women consistently accounted for more than 80% of total reported cases of domestic violence and more than 50% abused women put up with violence against them for more than 6 years. Therefore, a fact is hard to deny: domestic violence against women is prevalent in Hong Kong and a majority of abused women stay in the abusive relationships. Thus, there is definitely an urge for new knowledge and solutions to tackle this social problem. As local literature related to staying of abused women (Tang, 1999; Review Panel on Family Services in Tin Shui Wai, 2004; Yuen-Tsang and Sung-Chan, 2005) seldom investigated abused women's articulation of their staying and how they make the leave-stay decision in the abusive relationships, this research becomes an initial attempt to examine the problem through the eyes of women themselves and to build a theory to explain the staying of abused women in Hong Kong.

To build a theory from the data collected from abused women's self-articulation of their staying, classic grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was employed in doing this research. In the research process, coding, conceptualization, memo writing, and theoretical sampling were the methods deployed for collecting and analysing data; and at last, the grounded theory of 'Reorienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser' was generated to explain leave-stay decisions of abused women.

'Reorienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser' is primarily composed of two categories: 'the original understanding(s) of the conjugal relationship with the abuser' and 'evaluating the conjugal relationship against the original understanding(s)'. The former concept gives rise to two subconcepts, 'corresponding justifications for maintaining the conjugal relationship with the abuser' and 'corresponding behavioral patterns'; the latter concept gives rise to 'collecting signs and evidence for evaluating the abusive relationship' and 'the three evaluating mechanisms'. According to the grounded theory generated in this research, abused women stay because their original understandings of the conjugal relationship with the abusers are evaluated and found still valid, so that

they find their stays are well justified. On the contrary, if the original understandings held by abused women are evaluated and found not valid any longer, abused women find themselves unable to justify their stay in the abusive relationships and hence they leave. Therefore, 'reorienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser' in fact signifies the breaking of abused women's original understanding(s) of the conjugal relationship with the abusers, thus making it one of the causes of leaving. In this detailed delineation of the 'reorienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser' grounded theory in chapters 3–6, the 'back and forth' nature of abused women's leave-stay decision-making processes is highlighted for the discussion on the implications for current welfare policies which are related to abused women. At the same time, the significance of incorporating the studies of religion and love in social work education and social work practice is also explored, and cooperation between religious bodies and social work agencies is suggested.

After all, dialogues between the grounded theory generated in this research and four other theories which explain the stay-leave process of abused women are opened up in chapter 8, in which 'reorienting the conjugal relationship with the

abuser' grounded theory is found to serve as a process to build up abused women's cognitive readiness to leave; without such readiness, abused women are very likely to stay in the abusive relationships even though they are emotionally prepared and tangible resources are well prepared for them to leave. Moreover, by comparing the selected theories with 'reorienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser' grounded theory, a number of hypothetical relationships are found to inform further research on the staying of abused women. Furthermore, in the dialogues the difficulty in theoretical sampling for concepts indicated by implicit and noncognitive characteristics of abused women is also discussed.

In this chapter, application of grounded theories, the strengths and weaknesses of this research, and future research directions for studying the staying of abused women will be discussed and explored.

### **Theory Application**

The cognitive-behavioural approach used in batterer intervention programmes (Harmony House, 2005) and the feminist approach in educating abused women about gender inequality observed in the local survivors' group are examples to illustrate how theories are commonly treated as universally applicable.

Regardless of the change in time, place, social and cultural context, theories are usually directly applied to inform local social work practices, without looking at their relevance to the situation and modifications to fit the particularities of the problem in Hong Kong. This form of theory application, however, is not encouraged in applying the grounded theory, 'reorienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser', generated in this research. From the perspective of grounded theory methodology, applying a grounded theory always opens a chance for theory modifications because data collected in the application process may differ from the generated theory, so that by constantly comparing new data and concepts with the old ones, variables that account for such differences will be found and the explanatory power of the grounded theory generated in the previous research could be increased. Therefore, whoever intends to apply the grounded theory generated in this research is responsible for (1) examining whether the concepts and the theory earn their relevance in explaining the staying of abused women in particular situations encountered by them and (2) reformulating the grounded theory when data that do not fit the theory are found.

To ensure the earned relevance of the theory, users are required to collect and analyze data in the field and rigorously examine whether the field data indicate the same concepts as the grounded theory (interchangeability of grounded theory). Users are also required to see whether the concepts discovered in the field emerge to relate to each other the same as those in the grounded theory. If both interchangeability of data and the same relationships among concepts are attained through the application of the grounded theory, the earned relevance of the grounded theory can be claimed. However, for the purpose of theory-building, the concepts and the theory that earned their relevance at application could merely serve to reconfirm the original theory, thus, bringing no new knowledge to understanding the phenomenon. Therefore, both grounded theorists and users of grounded theories should be more excited to come across abnormalities in the field of the staying of abused women than earning relevance because abnormalities could be used to compare and contrast with the existing theory and introduce more variables into the theory, increasing the theory's explanatory power over the substantive area.

In addition, theory-building is not confined to the substantive level, but also includes the formal level. In order to reformulate the substantive theory generated in this research into a formal theory, the core concept of this grounded theory, 'reorienting the relationship', should be applied across substantive areas where it can earn relevance. The 'reorienting the relationship' processes takes place in other substantive areas, for example, staying of employees with adverse relationships with the employers and the staying of members with adverse relationships with other members of the group, should be constantly compared to discover new variables that influence the process of 'reorienting the relationship'. Such application of the substantive grounded theory in other substantive areas could increase the variety of 'reorienting the relationship' processes included in the formal theory of 'reorienting the relationship' and gradually saturate this core concept.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of This Research**

#### **On Methodology**

**Strengths.** As stated in the introduction, the number of wife abuse cases keeps increasing from year to year, and the majority of abused women tend to

tolerate the abusive relationships. New knowledge and solutions are needed to respond to these challenges and tackle the increasing prevalence of domestic violence. By employing grounded theory methodology (GT) in studying the staying of abused women, this research is able to meet the need for new localised knowledge and suggest new solutions to assist abused women to leave the abusive relationships.

GT research is different from traditional research methodology that serves the goal of theory verification, behind which, it is assumed that the grand theories generated by the big names, such as Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx, are already enough to explain all the phenomenon of the world (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This assumption inhibits theory generation and knowledge development, hence employing GT to study the staying of abused women in Hong Kong not only contributes to generate new knowledge, but to advocate for the importance of theory generation in the field. Apart from verifying the dominant theoretical models, such as feminist articulation of male domination (Bograd, 1988; Dobash and Dobash, 1992), Walker's learned helplessness (1979), and the cycle of violence, Hong Kong academicians should also work to develop theories which



encapsulate local factors in explaining the staying of abused women and contribute to enriching knowledge about the staying of abused women in general.

In addition to the above, GT offers suggestions to initiate dialogues between the grounded theory generated from field data and existing theories and literature, thus the grounded theory can be integrated into the larger map of knowledge that explains the substantive area under study. This is already shown in chapter 7, in which the grounded theory generated in this research is compared to four selected theories, and some apparently different concepts could be connected by their conceptual similarities. For example, ‘distancing from the emotional context to view the abusive relationship’ and ‘reorienting the conjugal relationship with the abuser’ are in fact indicating the same concept of ‘readiness to leave’. The former represents the emotional dimension and the latter represents the cognitive dimension of such readiness. Instead of simply stating the differences between findings of the research and existing theories, theoretical dialogues are encouraged in GT to connect theories by conceptual similarities and generate hypotheses to explain the differences. By doing so, the grounded

theory could be continuously modified and could increase in its scope of explanation and degree of saturation.

**Weaknesses.** There is an operational, methodological weakness in this research in studying staying of abused women. That is the lack of staying abused women in the sample due to difficult access. As discussed in the previous chapters, cases of wife abuse, in Hong Kong, are handled by formal social service agencies which dare not take risks to hand over 'high-risk' cases for research interviews. Therefore, formal social service agencies become the gatekeepers to restrict access to cases of wife abuse; hence, planned access to abused women could only be made possible through recruiting research participants in local survivors' groups where all abused women are required to have left the abusive relationships and properly do not plan to return. Under these circumstances, data about the staying of abused women are limited to women's recounting of their stay-leave process while observations of women's immediate or relatively immediate responses to behaviours and controls of the abusers are not possible. As long as data collection is limited to the cognitive recounting of abused women, data about noncognitive processes of these women

in relation to their stay-leave process are missing. This also poses a doubt on the feasibility of developing grounded theories for processes which influence the ‘noncognitive readiness for leaving’ in the stay-leave process of abused women.

### **On the Grounded Theory Generated in this Research**

**Strengths.** This grounded theory sheds light on the cognitive dimension of abused women’s stay-leave process. Whereas the stay-leave process of abused women is predominantly understood to be either an emotional process, for example, attachment and sense of helplessness, or a process of structural oppression, for example, the entrapment caused by male dominance and women-insensitive social policies. By reasserting the significance of cognitive evaluation process, this research contributes a variable that affects the leave-stay decision making of abused women, in spite of their sufficient provision of resources and high self-image.

**Weaknesses.** The explanatory power of this grounded theory is not able to capture how abused women’s noncognitive dimension works to influence the stay-leave process, and data about abusers’ coercive control over abused women are not included in the theorization. Therefore, this theory is unable to articulate

how abusers' control affects the leave-stay decision making of abused women or to explain other dimensions of women's stay-leave process. These weaknesses of the grounded theory generated in this research render unanswered the question, 'why do abused women stay despite having made the decision to leave?'. Therefore, in order to explain the staying of abused women more comprehensively, a theoretical model that exhausts the dimensions of the stay-leave process of abused women is needed. Hence, this leads to further research directions in developing the grounded theory generated in this research and in the field.

### **Future Research Directions**

The staying of abused women is a complex problem which could hardly be explained from a single perspective. Therefore, integrating the effort of different perspectives in understanding the staying of abused women is needed. However, traditional literature review in a research study tends to differentiate one theory from another, instead of integrating theories and literature to generate a more comprehensive theoretical model. Therefore, from the experiences of doing grounded theory methodology, I advocate making constant comparisons between theories to build a more comprehensive theoretical model to explain staying of abused women. Through this practice, more research energy could be spent on generating theoretical explanations, instead of getting into the fights between dichotomies, such as victim/survivor and entrapment/agency. From the perspective of grounded theory methodology, two sides of the dichotomy may indicate two polarities of a spectrum, with abused women lying at any point along the range; or the two sides of the dichotomy may indicate two dimensions of abused women during the stay-leave process, hence, resulting in two variables affecting staying or leaving. The integrating power of grounded theory

methodology reserves researchers' energy to look for possibilities of new knowledge, but not to look for evidence that reconfirms the old ones or fritters away the contributions of existing literature in making sense of the social phenomenon.

Moreover, the grounded theory generated in this research merely marks a beginning of theory generation on the staying of abused women, whereas theory generation is a continuous process that must be carried on in future research. As for the dialogues with existing literature, several hypothetical relationships among concepts are developed and pending further analysis. First of all, the sampling difficulty of gaining access to staying abused women in Hong Kong must be resolved, in order to allow immediate or relatively immediate observations of abused women's responses to the behaviours and controls of their abusive partners. Provided opportunities of observations during the staying process of abused women, data about the noncognitive dimension of women's stay-leave process could be collected, and hence theorization of the noncognitive stay-leave process could be achieved. Secondly, data of abusers' behaviours and control of their female partners should be collected and analyzed to saturate the 'entrapping

variables' influential to stay-leave process of abused women. More importantly, the relationships among the 'noncognitive dimension of stay-leave process', 'cognitive dimension of stay-leave process' and the 'entrapping variables' should be found in future research to integrate the theory generation effort into a comprehensive grounded theory that explains the staying of abused women in Hong Kong.

In conclusion, this grounded theory research on the staying of abused women is not only an attempt to generate a local theory to explain the phenomenon, but also an attempt to advocate theory-building in the field of domestic violence and the joint effort to integrate different theoretical perspectives to enhance our scope of view to answer the question, 'why abused women stay in the abusive relationships?'

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## Profiles of Respondents

	Approximate age	Place of birth	No. of children
HW	Early 30	The Mainland China	1 son
CF	Mid 50	The Mainland China	1 daughter, 2 sons
SL	Mid 20	Vietnam	2 daughters
YL	Late 20	The Mainland China	1 son
WW	Early 30	The Mainland China	1 son
DN	Late 20	The Mainland China	1 son
SC	Mid 30	The Mainland China	1 daughter, 2 sons
QS	Early 30	Vietnam	1 daughter
SM	Late 30	The Mainland China	1 daughter
KY	Late 30	The Mainland China	1 daughter, 2 sons
ZY	Late 20	The Mainland China	1 son
MW	Mid 30	The Mainland China	1 daughter