

1 How does the academic literature describe subtle or covert abuse within heterosexual or
2 same sex intimate partner relationships? A scoping review protocol.

3 Authors

4 Rosemary Parkinson⁽¹⁾ Neil James⁽²⁾ Sarah Hanson⁽³⁾

5 1. University of East Anglia

6 2. University of East Anglia

7 3. University of East Anglia

8 Corresponding author contact details: rosemary.parkinson@uea.ac.uk

9 Abstract

10 **Objective:** To understand how academic literature on domestic violence has described or
11 defined subtle, non-physical abuse in intimate heterosexual or same-sex relationships.

12 **Introduction:** Academic literature frequently refers to subtle or covert abuse in intimate
13 relationships. However, how this kind of abuse is recognized by therapists who work with
14 victims has not yet been researched. Without understanding how clients experiencing
15 subtle abuse present in therapy, therapists may misunderstand the causes of their distress
16 and do more harm than good. The scoping review aims to understand how the current
17 literature such as Marshall,¹ Loring,² Lammers et al. ³ and Burnett ⁴ describes or defines
18 subtle or covert abuse to inform future research to enable therapists to recognize subtle
19 abuse in their clients.

20 **Inclusion criteria:** Academic work that describes or defines subtle or covert abuse in
21 intimate partner relationships based on primary research or discussion papers published in
22 English. Work will be excluded if it only describes abuse which is overt non-physical or
23 physical.

24 **Methods:** Domestic violence literature MeSH terms and keywords found in preliminary
25 searches were used to design initial search strategies. Final terms based on these were
26 chosen in discussion with a librarian, and cover population, concept and context. These
27 terms will be used in the following databases: PsychINFO (EBSCO), Medline Complete

28 (EBSCO), CINAHL (EBSCO), PsychARTICLES (EBSCO) and Scopus. Searches will be conducted
29 between 1950 and 2021 (see explanation below).

30 **Keywords:** Domestic violence; Intimate Partner Violence; Covert abuse; Non-physical abuse;
31 Subtle abuse

32 Introduction

33

34 The field of domestic violence (DV) or intimate partner violence (IPV) has been extensively
35 researched over the last half century. However, much of this research focuses on physical
36 violence or overt non-physical abuse within intimate relationships. After an initial historical
37 focus on physical abuse, IPV research has expanded over the last 30 years to other types of
38 abuse, including psychological,^{5,6} emotional,^{7,8} economic^{9,10} and coercive control.¹¹

39 However, whilst much of this literature mentions the existence of subtle forms of abuse, the
40 examples given invariably focus on overt abuse such as shouting, threatening or name-
41 calling, overt isolation such as restricting or preventing someone from seeing their family or
42 friends, or explicit financial control such as denying access to the family finances.

43

44 The first author's clinical experience indicates a gap between the experiences of participants
45 in primary research exploring non-physical abuse and the relationship experiences of
46 women who present in the therapy room. This gap has led to a void in current academic
47 literature which includes minimal descriptions of experiences of subtle abuse and none of
48 how therapists' recognize clients who are subtly abused. This lack of research knowledge in
49 turn leads to a difficulty for both therapists and victims in recognizing that abuse is taking
50 place in a relationship. There are damaging consequences of therapists failing to recognize
51 their clients are being abused. When therapists miss signs of abuse, they can work with
52 clients on the wrong targets, thus allowing abuse and its negative health effects such as
53 depression, anxiety, confusion and low self-esteem to continue.¹² Marsden¹³ describes
54 women feeling misunderstood or attacked by psychologists who did not focus on the
55 complexity of their experience. 8 out of Burnett's⁴ 10 participants approached official
56 sources of help only to find them more harmful than helpful. It is likely that clients
57 experiencing subtle abuse will suffer some of the mental and physical damage that results
58 from all types of abuse such as PTSD, depressive and anxiety disorders and increased

59 physical health problems.^{14,15} The lack of literature on subtle abuse, which leads to a lower
 60 level of therapist recognition, risks these effects lasting longer in those who experience
 61 more subtle forms of abuse.

62

63 A preliminary search of PsychInfo (EBSCO), JBI Evidence Synthesis and PROSPERO confirmed
 64 that no previous scoping or systematic reviews had been conducted on subtle abuse within
 65 the IPV literature. Additional preliminary searches in PsychInfo (EBSCO) and Google Scholar
 66 did find works within the non-physical IPV literature which described subtle or covert abuse.
 67 For example, Lammers et al.³ explain how subtle abuse led to women ‘feeling inadequate
 68 about themselves. This goal was accomplished by expressing disappointment in them or
 69 saying that despite their potential they had not yet reached men’s standards, while
 70 simultaneously being kind and caring towards them.’ p.40, while Lian¹⁶ describes how as
 71 subtle behaviours ‘are not perceived as coercive or overt, they may be normalized, thus
 72 enabling a partner to continue perpetrating these behaviours without consequence.’ p.9.
 73 Lykhina’s¹⁷ research talks of specific subtle behaviours such as one woman’s husband who
 74 ‘when they would be getting ready to go out and “he’d fall sick”’ p.87 while another
 75 participant described backhanded comments which sounded like compliments.

76

77 The aims of this scoping review are to establish how IPV literature such as those above
 78 describes and defines subtle abuse, following the JBI methodology. Scoping reviews are an
 79 ideal way to explore ill-defined concepts in advance of further research. This review will
 80 allow the authors to understand how the concept of subtle abuse is currently described
 81 within the IPV literature. This will help inform the design of future research into subtle and
 82 covert IPV and therapist recognition of subtle or covert IPV. Such future research will aim to
 83 fill the gap in the literature, leading to greater understanding of the concept in the hope of
 84 lessening victims’ suffering.

85 Review question

86

87 The aim of this review is to answer the question: How does the academic literature describe
 88 subtle or covert abuse within heterosexual or same sex intimate partner relationships?

89 Inclusion criteria

90 Participants

91 The participants included in the review will be adults over 18 in intimate relationships
92 (heterosexual or same sex) included in primary research due to their having experienced
93 subtle or covert abuse. The focus of the review is on how all literature in the IPV field
94 describes or defines the concept of subtlety therefore no other stipulation for participants is
95 made.

96 Concept

97 The concept of interest is subtle or covert non-physical abuse in intimate relationships
98 whether described through the perspective of the victim, perpetrator or a therapist and
99 including behaviours, motivations, manifestations and effects. This concept is ill-defined
100 despite its inclusion in overviews of IPV. In addition, there is a diversity of potential terms
101 used to articulate the concept that creates further complications. This scoping review aims
102 to describe the current similarities and differences in how the literature defines subtlety.
103 This background will then inform research design into subtle abuse. Such research will aim
104 to fill the gap in the literature in order to enable real change for therapists and victims in
105 clinical work.

106 Context

107 The aim of the scoping review is to establish how literature describes and defines subtle or
108 covert abuse. Therefore, the final literature selected for the review will need to describe or
109 define these terms rather than simply mention them. Work cited above indicates sufficient
110 evidence such literature exists.

111 Literature will be included which presents findings from primary research with victims or
112 perpetrators of IPV or that presents a discussion of the field. Work with participants of any
113 country, economic status, age, ability or disability, sexuality, education or gender will be
114 relevant. The only limitation will be that all work will be written in English (see below).

115 Types of Sources

116 This scoping review will include all work in the IPV field which pertain to the inclusion
117 criteria. That is, academic work which contains within it a description or definition of subtle
118 or covert abuse in intimate relationships in any population, written in English. These works
119 may be quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods studies along with discussion and
120 opinion papers. The research can have adopted any methodology and any models of
121 analysis. The only criterion which needs to be met is that the literature is academic. This will
122 include unpublished but passed doctoral theses, peer reviewed papers, and books based on
123 primary research, whether by that research's authors or discussing such work. Currently no
124 previous scoping or systematic reviews have been found but should they be, these will also
125 be included.

126 Methods

127

128 Search strategy

129

130 The proposed scoping review will be conducted in accordance with the JBI methodology for
131 scoping reviews.¹⁸ This consists of three stages:

- 132 1. A search of at least two online databases with relevance to the topic. This identifies
133 keywords to use in the subsequent search.
- 134 2. A search of all included databases using the identified keywords.
- 135 3. The references of identified texts are also searched for further literature.

136 The details of this methodology as they pertain to this review are shown below in the flow
137 diagram and then explained in detail.

138 [Insert: Flow diagram to illustrate search strategy here](#)

139 The proposed search strategy will aim to locate both published and unpublished studies.
140 Search terms will be discarded if they focus on physical or overt non-physical IPV or the
141 term is used in a context outside the IPV field. A final list of search terms and combinations
142 will be agreed amongst the review team. Three reviewers will be involved throughout the
143 process for independence.

144 Further criteria for inclusion:

145 Only work in the English language will be included. Most database literature in this field is in
146 English even when examining experiences in non-English speaking countries ¹⁹. Preliminary
147 database searches without this inclusion criteria have not revealed work in other languages.
148 The limitation to English is therefore unlikely to limit the work included and will mean all
149 literature can be read by the reviewers.

150 Most IPV literature dates from the latter half of the 20th century. Preliminary searches
151 revealed little work before 1970, however, to ensure any seminal earlier work was included
152 1950 was selected as the start date for literature searches with an end date of the end of
153 2021.

154 The following databases will be included: PsychINFO (EBSCO), Medline Complete (EBSCO),
155 CINAHL (EBSCO), PsychARTICLES (EBSCO) and Scopus. ProQuest and EThOS databases will be
156 searched for doctoral theses. A specialist librarian will be consulted to aid development of
157 the search strategy. Example of search in ([Appendix I: Search strategy](#))

158

159 Once final literature has been selected for the review, text references and forward citations
160 of these will be checked for additional literature.

161 Study/Source of Evidence selection

162 Results from the initial search in conjunction with discussions with the specialist librarian,
163 will yield the keywords to be used in the next stage. Part 2 of the methodology will then be
164 broken down into five stages. First, titles and abstracts from the keyword database searches
165 will be screened for relevance. Second, full texts of potentially relevant work will be
166 uploaded to Mendeley Reference Manager 2.73.0 (Mendeley Ltd., Elsevier, Netherlands)
167 and duplicates removed. Third, abstracts whose full text includes the terms subtle or covert
168 will be screened by two reviewers against the review question and inclusion criteria. The
169 aim will be to identify work which has a focus on subtle or covert IPV, or work which defines
170 these terms. A table will be kept ([Appendix II – Table 1](#)) which will indicate why work has

171 been excluded from the next stage. Random abstracts from this table will then be checked
172 by the 3rd reviewer for compliance with the inclusion criteria of the review.

173 Fourth, full texts will be searched using the terms subtle and covert to determine their use
174 in each work. Where the terms occur only in literature reviews or are used in a different
175 context from that specified by the inclusion criteria, literature will be excluded. Examples
176 may be where the abuse occurs in a different setting such as a workplace or to a different
177 group such as between siblings, or where the terms have been used when describing
178 methodological issues. Results will be recorded including the reason for inclusion or
179 exclusion from the final literature list. These will be tabulated (Appendix II – Table 2) along
180 with reasons for decisions made. This stage will be conducted by the first reviewer with the
181 2nd performing random checks.

182 In Part 3 of the methodology, references for the final literature selection will be checked for
183 relevance and inclusion, and forward citations will be checked using Google Scholar. The
184 breakdown of part 2 above will then be used to evaluate all new texts found.

185 Throughout, differences of opinion between the two reviewers will be discussed and, if
186 necessary, referred to the third reviewer.

187 The results of the search and study inclusion process will be reported in the final scoping
188 review and presented in a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-
189 analyses extension for scoping review (PRISMA-ScR) flow diagram ²⁰.

190 Data Extraction

191 In the fifth part of the second stage, the final selection of full text literature meeting search
192 criteria will be searched using the key terms subtle and covert for descriptions or definitions
193 of the term. Results will be entered into a data extraction form (draft in [Appendix III](#) – Table
194 3). This will include direct quotes from the texts which describe or define the key terms. All
195 details of the samples' participants, concept, context and study methods will be recorded in
196 this form. If necessary, authors of primary sources will be contacted for further information.
197 This form differs from the JBI data extraction instrument as it was felt important to record

198 the aim of each piece of literature. The aim of the paper or thesis may impact on the uses
199 and understandings of the review terms.

200 The second reviewer will review random texts within the sample. Differences of opinion
201 between the two reviewers will be discussed and, if necessary, referred to the third
202 reviewer.

203 The data extraction form will be trialed with the first two literature selections. At this point
204 the team will discuss any shortcomings of the draft form and make adjustments. Any
205 decisions made will be described in the final review.

206 Data Analysis and Presentation

207

208 Findings from the final search will be descriptions or definitions of subtle abuse or its
209 surrogates from quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods studies or previous synthesis
210 discussion papers. Until these definitions are located it is not possible to be certain how the
211 findings are best analyzed or presented. It is anticipated that definitions will include such
212 elements as reasons for abuse, methods of abuse and consequences of abuse. Results of
213 analysis will be presented both in tabular form with quotes from the original source, and in
214 a discussion section.

215

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217

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280

281 Appendices

282

283 Appendix I: Search strategy

284

285 Inclusion criteria:

286 Primary research studies which look at subtle or covert abuse in adults (over 18) in intimate
287 partner abuse situations (rather than more general domestic abuse although the latter term

288 may be used by the paper to refer to the former experience). Published papers in peer
 289 reviewed journals and discussion papers and unpublished doctoral theses.

290 Search word choices

291 Keywords and MeSH terms for this trial search were decided based on Gregory et al. ²¹ and
 292 a previous, unpublished concept analysis conducted by the authors. The search was run
 293 using each term separately to check for relevance to the search. This showed that including
 294 the word ‘manipulate’ led to huge numbers of physiotherapy papers. It was therefore
 295 decided to omit this word. In addition, it was discovered that many papers referred to the
 296 abuse of children. When these papers were excluded this did not limit the literature
 297 relevant to the question. However, the resultant database searches still yielded too many
 298 results for the scale of this study. In collaboration with a specialist librarian and by focusing
 299 on the research question and the JBI terms population, concept and context a more
 300 targeted search strategy was devised. The following chart shows the final search string and
 301 numbers of resultant potentially relevant literature found in one database.

302 PsychInfo (EBSCO) advanced search conducted on 8.4.22

303

Search terms	Limits (filter, limits, refine)	Number of results
(subtl* or covert)	English Language	128
AND	1950-2021	
Abuse	Title/Abstract	
AND		
(partner or domestic)		

304

305 Appendix II:

306 Table 1 – review of abstracts of work whose full text contains subtle or covert.

Author & Year	Specify subtle or covert abuse?	Specify DV or IPV?	Indicate work's focus is adults?	Primary research/ summary of other research/ discussion paper/doctoral thesis	Methodology
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307

308 Table 2 – full text search of literature by key term to determine final list of review literature

Author, Year & Title	Is the work's focus on subtle or covert DV or IPV	Is subtle or covert abuse defined in full text	Reason for inclusion or exclusion	Primary research/ summary of other research/ discussion paper	Methodology
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309

310 Appendix III: Data extraction instrument

311 Table 3 – final data extraction instrument

Author, year,	Name of item	Type of literature, Country of origin, Journal or book name	Type of study, Study population, Methodology	Aim of study	Definitions or descriptions or other relevant sections on subtle or covert abuse
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312