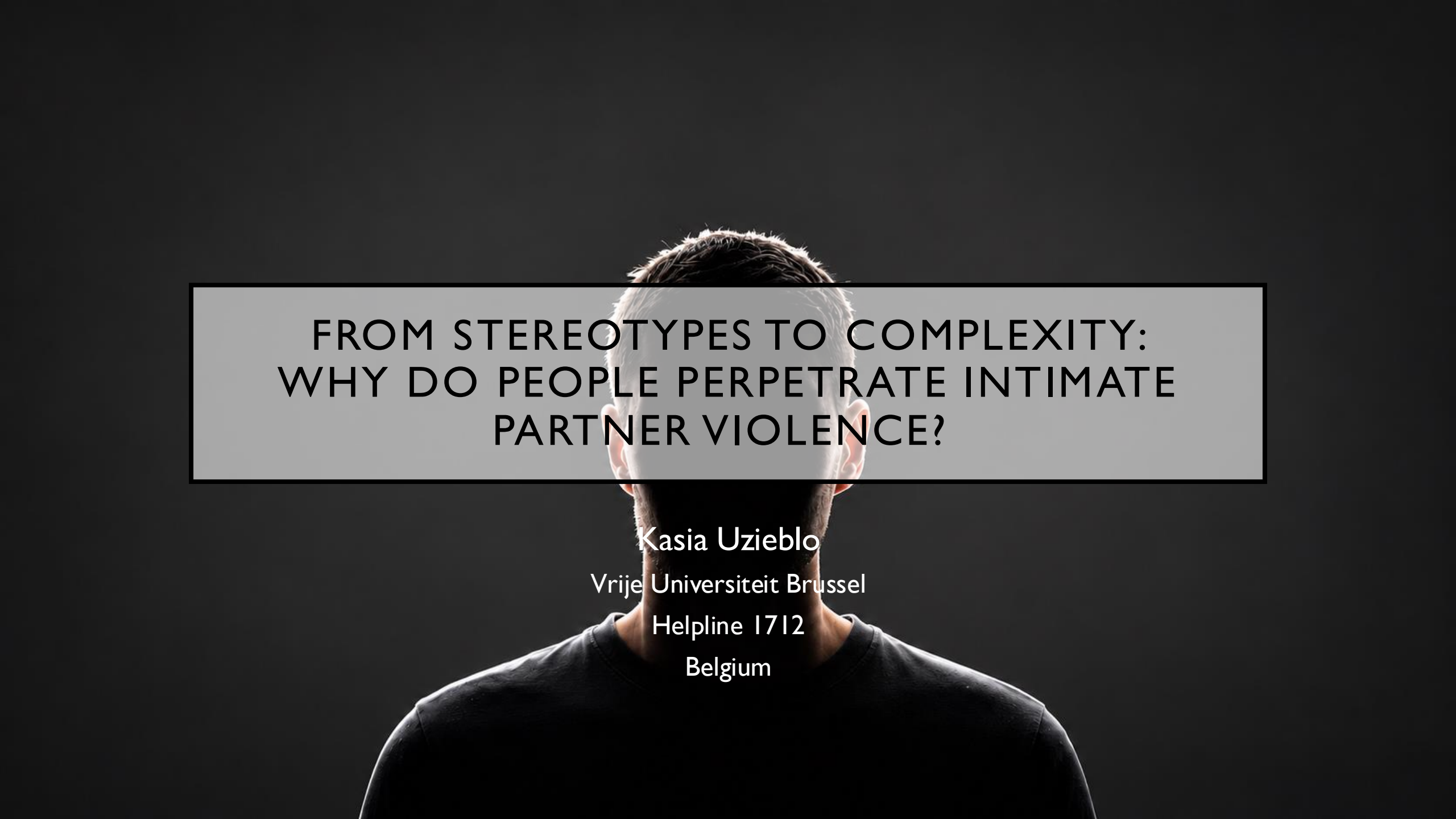


FROM STEREOTYPES TO COMPLEXITY: WHY DO PEOPLE PERPETRATE INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE?

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OVERVIEW

(1) Part I: A complex reality

(2) Part II: Why do people abuse their partner?

(3) Part III: Putting theory into clinical practice

(4) Part IV: Q&A



Seeking to understand and add nuance does not mean minimizing the impact of violence.

Recognizing this complexity is essential so we can accurately assess risks and determine the best course of action.



PART I:
A COMPLEX REALITY

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY A 'RISK FACTOR'?

- 'Risk factors' = common term, loosely used

"A risk factor is a characteristic, experience or circumstance associated with an increased likelihood of a specific adverse outcome."

- Risk factor ≠ a causal factor

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY A 'RISK FACTOR'?

Outcome	Risk of …
Perpetration	Engaging in violence. Onset refers specifically to its first occurrence
Persistence	Continuing and existing pattern of violence over time
Escalation	Violence becoming more frequent or more severe
Recurrence/recidivism	Committing violence again after previous violence, often assessed following an intervention or sanction

WHAT TYPE OF OUTCOME ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

- The same factor may have different associations across forms of IPV

- For example: is narcissim related to IPV?

Group	Effect size
Overall	.15
Cyber IPV	.22
Physical IPV (incl. sexual IPV)	.06
Psychological IPV	.18

(Oliver et al., 2024)

WHAT TYPE OF DYNAMIC ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Bidirectional violence

Intimate terrorism	Situational couple violence	Violent resistance	Mutual violent control
• Coercive controlling violence • A pattern of severe, ongoing abuse and coercive control used by one intimate partner to dominate and control the other. • Frequent, severe, and escalating over time	• At least one partner uses physical violence • Violence arising from specific conflicts • Coercive control is not present	• Violence used by victims • As a protective, reaction, in anticipation of violence, or as retaliation	• Bi-directional use of physical violence and coercive control

(Johnson et al., 1995, 1999, 2012; Machado et al., 2026)

HOW TO DISTINGUISH?

- There is a clearer distinction between the perpetrator and the victim.
- There is unidirectional (severe) physical violence.
- There is sexual violence and sexual coercion.
- The perpetrator displays antisocial personality traits (see next section).
- There is possession of weapons.
- The victim is afraid of the perpetrator.
- The perpetrator engages in controlling behaviour that restricts the other partner's autonomy.
- The practitioner has no direct contact with the victim.
- There are substantial discrepancies between the partners' accounts of the violence, particularly regarding its severity and frequency.
- ???

(Schepers & Slotboom, 2026)

Bidirectional violence: lower offender risk, less harm to victims, and greater victim responsibility?

⇳

Severe consequences,

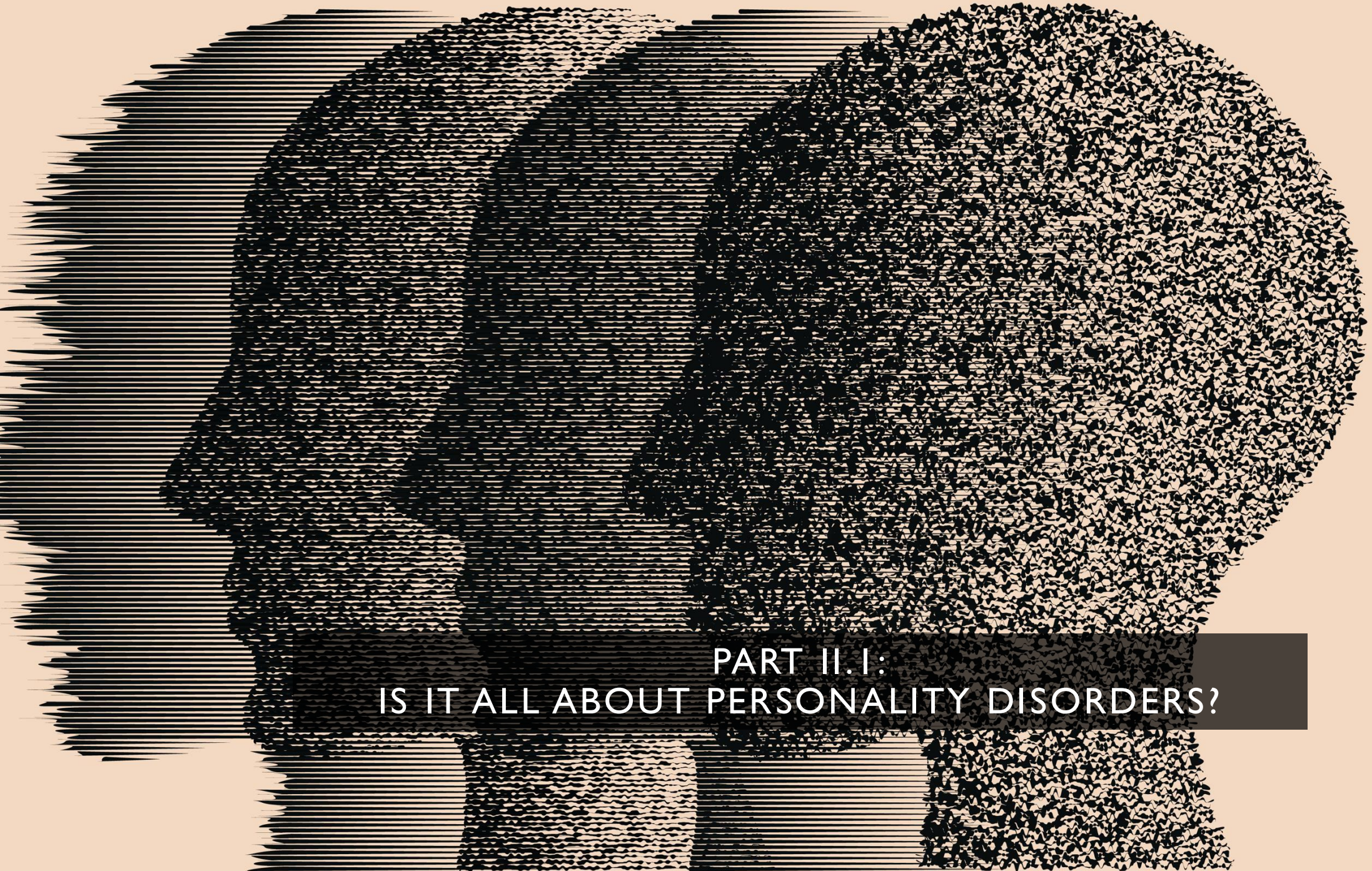
including heightened psychological and physical harm



(Ahmed et al., 2024; Behnken et al., 2018; Hellmuth, Jaquier, Swan, & Sullivan, 2014; Palmetto et al., 2013; Ulloa & Hammett, 2016)



PART II
WHY DO PEOPLE ABUSE THEIR PARTNER?



PART II.1:
IS IT ALL ABOUT PERSONALITY DISORDERS?

WHAT IS A PERSONALITY DISORDER?

"A persistent, inflexibel pattern of psychological experience and behaviour that differs substantially from cultural expectations and causes clinically significant distress or impairment in functioning."

- The pattern manifests in at least 2 domains of the following domains:
  - Cognition: interpreting oneself, other people and events
  - Affectivity: the intensity, variability, and appropriateness of emotional responses
  - Interpersonal functioning: forming and maintaining relationships
  - Impulse control: regulating impulses and behaviour

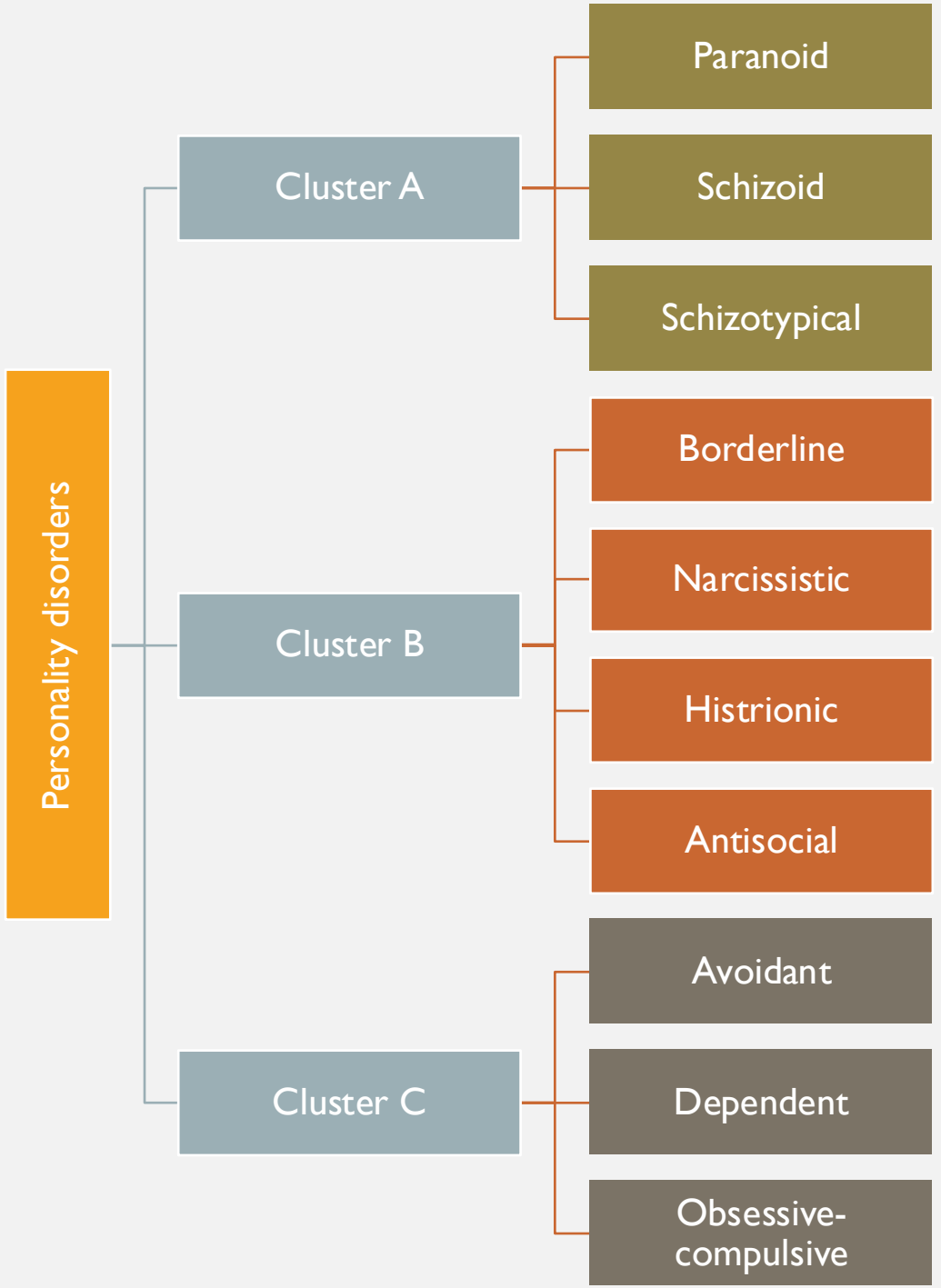
- The pattern is:
  - Present across a broad range of personal and social situations
  - Long-standing and stable, with features traceable to adolescence or early adulthood
  - Not better explained by another mental disorder, or attributable to substances, medication or another medical condition

(DSM-5; APA, 2013)

Psychopathy?

Deviant emotional processing; Manipulative, dominant interpersonal behavior; Reckless, impulsive lifestyle; Antisocial/criminal behavior

(psychopathy & relationships: Marijn et al., 2025; Uzieblo et al., 2022)



(emotionally) Keeping one's distance from others; often described as "strange" or "eccentric"

Often impulsive and difficulties with managing their emotions

Anxious, tense, and a high degree of control

ES:
+/- 0,10 = small
+/- 0,30 = moderate
+/- 0,50 = large

SONALITY DISORDERS AS PREDICT OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: A META-ANALYSIS

Gender ≠ moderator

Personality disorder	Weighted Average Effect Sizes
Antisocial	0.35 ***
Borderline	0,30 ***
Paranoid	0,30 ***
Schizotypical	0,29 ***
Psychopathy	0,24 ***
Schizoid / Avoidant	0,19 ***
Dependent	0,17 **
Narcissistic	0,16 ***
OCD	0,11
Histrionic	0,10

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

(Collison & Lynam, 2021)



TAKE HOME

- Personality pathology is associated with IPV perpetration, particularly antisocial and borderline features. *But* associations are generally small to moderate.
- A diagnosis does not determine who *will* perpetrate violence.
- Intimate partner violence does not imply a personality disorder.
- Specific processes and their interactions matter: which features are relevant? Which features increase risks? What can be changed?



PART II.2:
IS IT ALL ABOUT ATTACHMENT?

WHAT IS ATTACHMENT?

Attachment is a lifelong interpersonal strategy in response to threat or danger, which reflects an intrapersonal strategy for information processing.

More than just cuddling

Attachment is a survival strategy. It arises from the question: who will help me when things get tough?

Lifelong

Bonding does not stop at 3-4 years. It continues to develop throughout life, including in romantic relationships.

Cognition & affect

How a person processes information – what they think, what they feel, and which source they use as a guide – is the crux of the matter.

(Crittenden, 2008; Goossens & Uzieblo, 2026)



Secure attachment

- Core pattern: **connection & independence**
- Comfortable with closeness & independence
- Trust others, communicates needs, respects boundaries, stays connected during conflict
- Support is valued, but not required, for feeling secure



Anxious attachment

- Core pattern: **uncertainty and need for greater connection or reassurance**
- Sensitive to signs of rejection, distance, or changes in connection
- Seeks more reassurance, communication or closeness to feel sure



Avoidant attachment

- Core pattern: **emotional pressure and need for greater distance or independence**
- Uncomfortable with emotional dependence, vulnerability, or intense closeness.
- When overwhelmed, relies on independence, withdraws, or creates distance.



Disorganized / fearful-avoidant attachment

- Core pattern: **desire for connection & fear or discomfort around connection**
- Desires closeness but also feels fear, discomfort, or uncertainty when intimacy increased.
- May shift between seeking connection and pulling away, especially when feeling vulnerable or uncertain

(Lukin, 2026)

IS ATTACHMENT RELEVANT IN IPV?

Perpetration

Meta-analysis, 52 studies, 13,653 participants: attachment anxiety is consistently associated with all forms of intimate partner violence; avoidance is particularly associated with sexual violence.

Victimisation

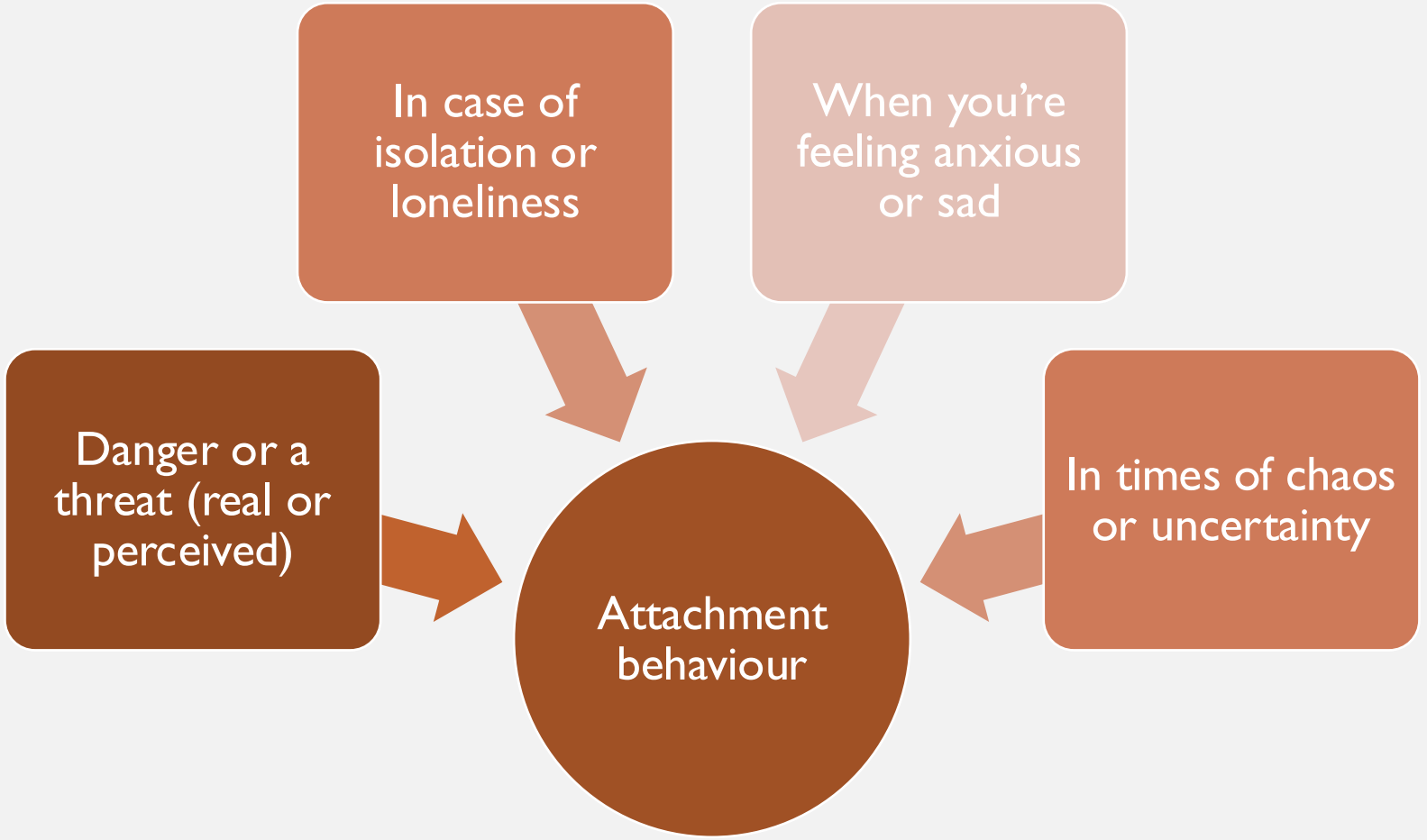
Meta-analysis, 34 studies: both attachment anxiety and avoidance are moderately associated with victimisation.

In males & females

Meta-analysis, 33 studies: anxious, avoidant and disorganised attachment are associated with both perpetrating and experiencing physical intimate partner violence; secure attachment as a protective factor.

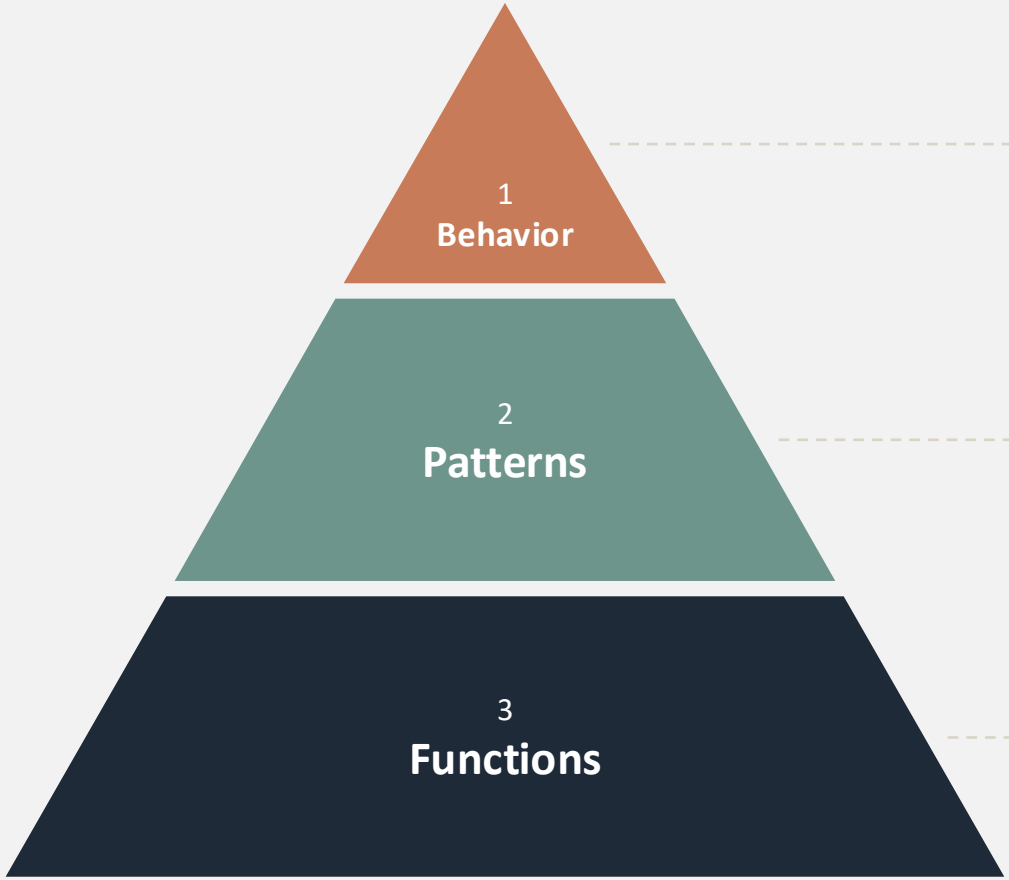
(Cataudella et al.,, 2023; Knox et al., 2024; Spencer, Keilholtz & Stith, 2021; Velotti et al., 2022; Goossens & Uzieblo, 2026)

STRESS TRIGGERS ATTACHMENT BEHAVIOUR: FOUR BASIC NEEDS



(Crittenden, 2008; Goossens & Uzieblo, 2026)

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF THIS BEHAVIOUR?



What do you see?
Observe as neutral as possible (camera perspective)

When? To whom? In which situations?
Concrete information about the context

What has this behaviour ever achieved? What need lies behind it?
Reinforcements; Security, comfort, closeness, predictability

(Clark Baim, 2011, 2022, 2023; Goossens, 2026; Goossens & Uzieblo, 2026)



TAKE HOME

- Attachment insecurity is one vulnerability factor: associations are small to moderate, vary across studies and forms of violence
- Fear of abandonment and discomfort with closeness may shape how people interpret and respond to relationship threats.
- Context and psychological processes matter: stress can strengthen associations; jealousy, emotion dysregulation, and dominance or control are potential processes linking attachment insecurity to IPV.
- Clinical implication: explore attachment alongside other risk and protective factors



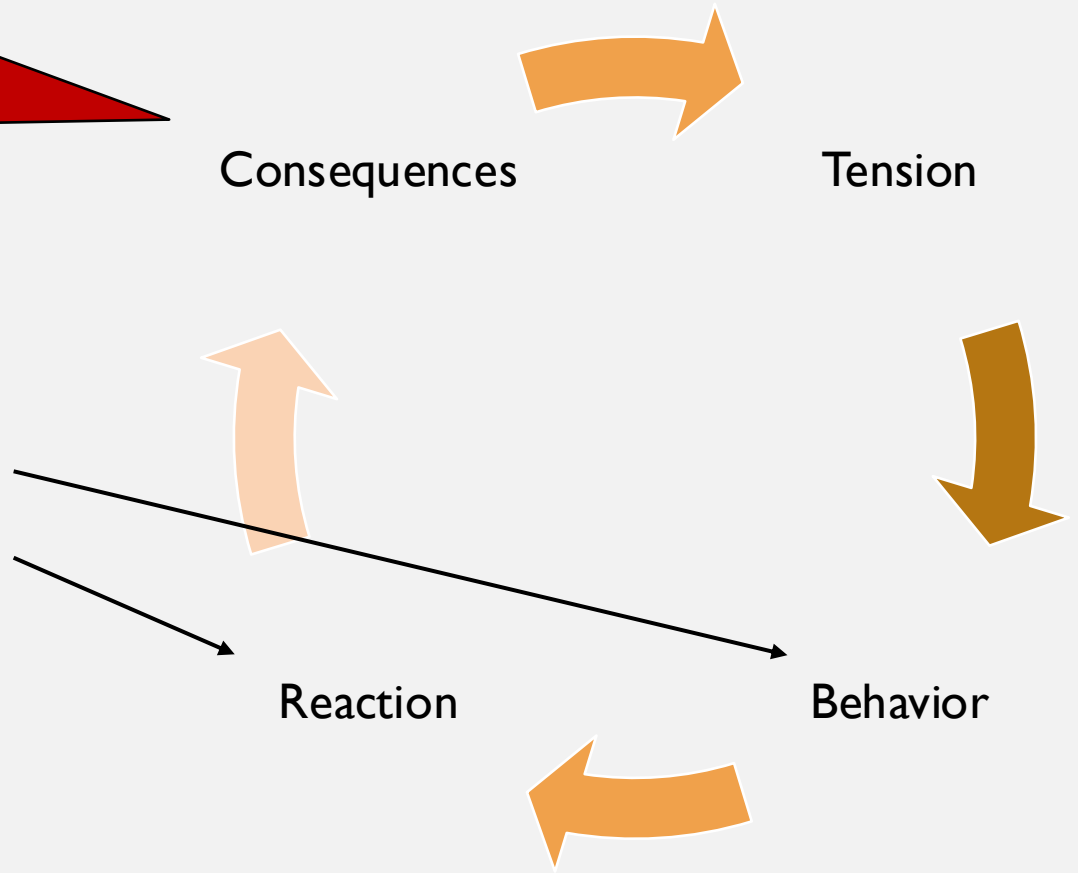
PART II.3:
WHAT ABOUT SITUATIONAL VIOLENCE?



(Groen & Van Lawick, 2020; Goossens & Uzieblo, 2026)

SITUATIONAL IPV: A SELF-PERPETUATING CYCLE

"How does cycle this sustain itself?"

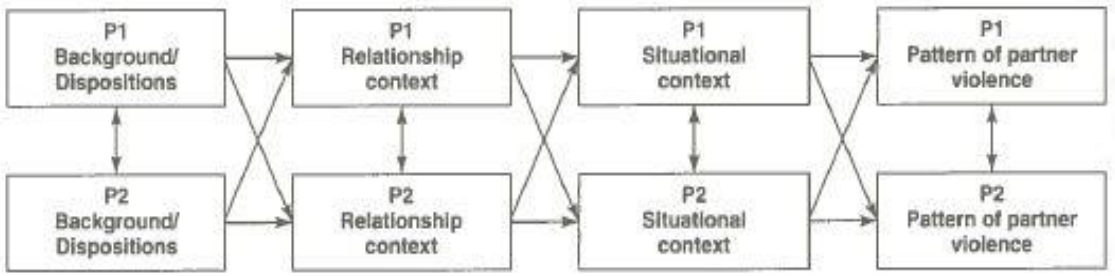


Underlying dynamics often:
one clings on, the other withdraws

Determined by what you have learnt, what your personality is like, your past experiences, …

(Goossens & Uzieblo, 2026)

A DYADIC PRO-CESS



Family background
Family of origin violence
Quality parenting

Personality
Negative emotionality, attachment anxiety, self-esteem
Aggressiveness, proneness to anger

Psychopathology
PDs, depression
Conduct problems

Interpersonal characteristics
Communication abilities
Hostile attributions

Individual variables
Trust, jealousy
Attachment security
Attributions for partner behavior

Dyadic variables
Marital discord
Power imbalance
Communication/ conflict processes;

Conflict of interest
Frustrated interpersonal goals

Precipitating factors
Partner provocation
Relationship threats: jealousy, abandonment, rejection
Attributions of partner hostile intent

Dyadic interaction
Negative reciprocity
Attributions for partner behavior

Inhibition of aggression
Internalized prohibitions
Expected consequences
Emotional state, self-control
Alcohol

Severity

Mutuality

Responses to partner violence

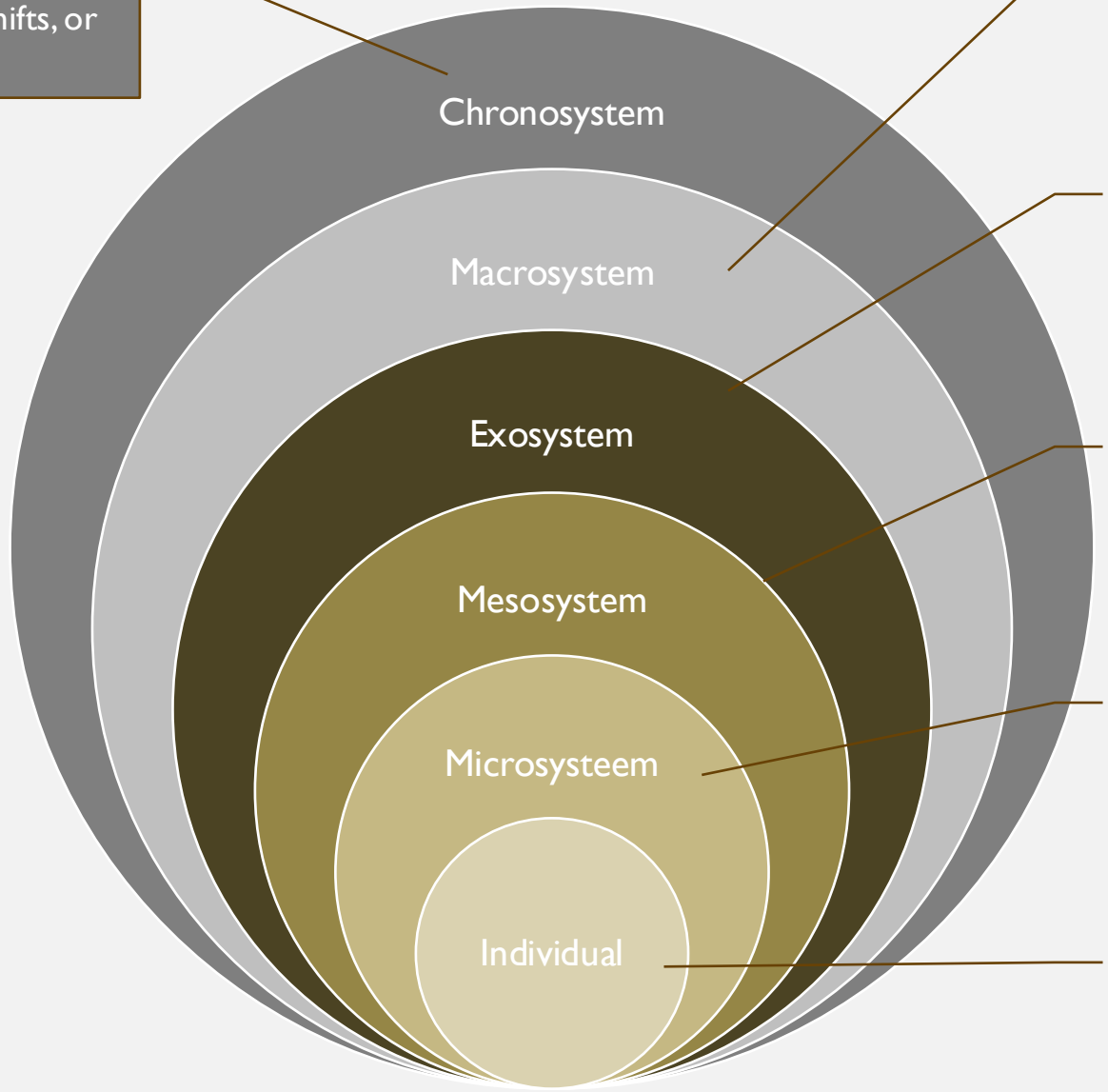
Consequences of partner violence

(Bartholomew & Cobb, 2011)



PART I 11.4:
IT'S ALL IN THE MIX

The influence of time, life transitions, and historical events, such as moving houses, divorce, technological shifts, or a pandemic.



The broader cultural values, norms, laws, economy, and political systems of a society.

Settings that do not directly involve the individual, yet still affect them indirectly
(e.g., parent's workplace, local policies, or community services).

The interactions and relationships between different microsystems, such as communication between parents and teachers.

The immediate, daily environments in which a person actively participates (e.g. family, romantic relationship, peer groups)

Personal history, traits, and vulnerabilities
(e.g. childhood exposure to abuse or neglect, mental health struggles, substance abuse, limited income)

Ecologisch System's Model - Bronfenbrenner (1977)

Pergamon

Aggression and Violent Behavior
10 (2004) 65–98

AGGRESSION AND VIOLENT BEHAVIOR

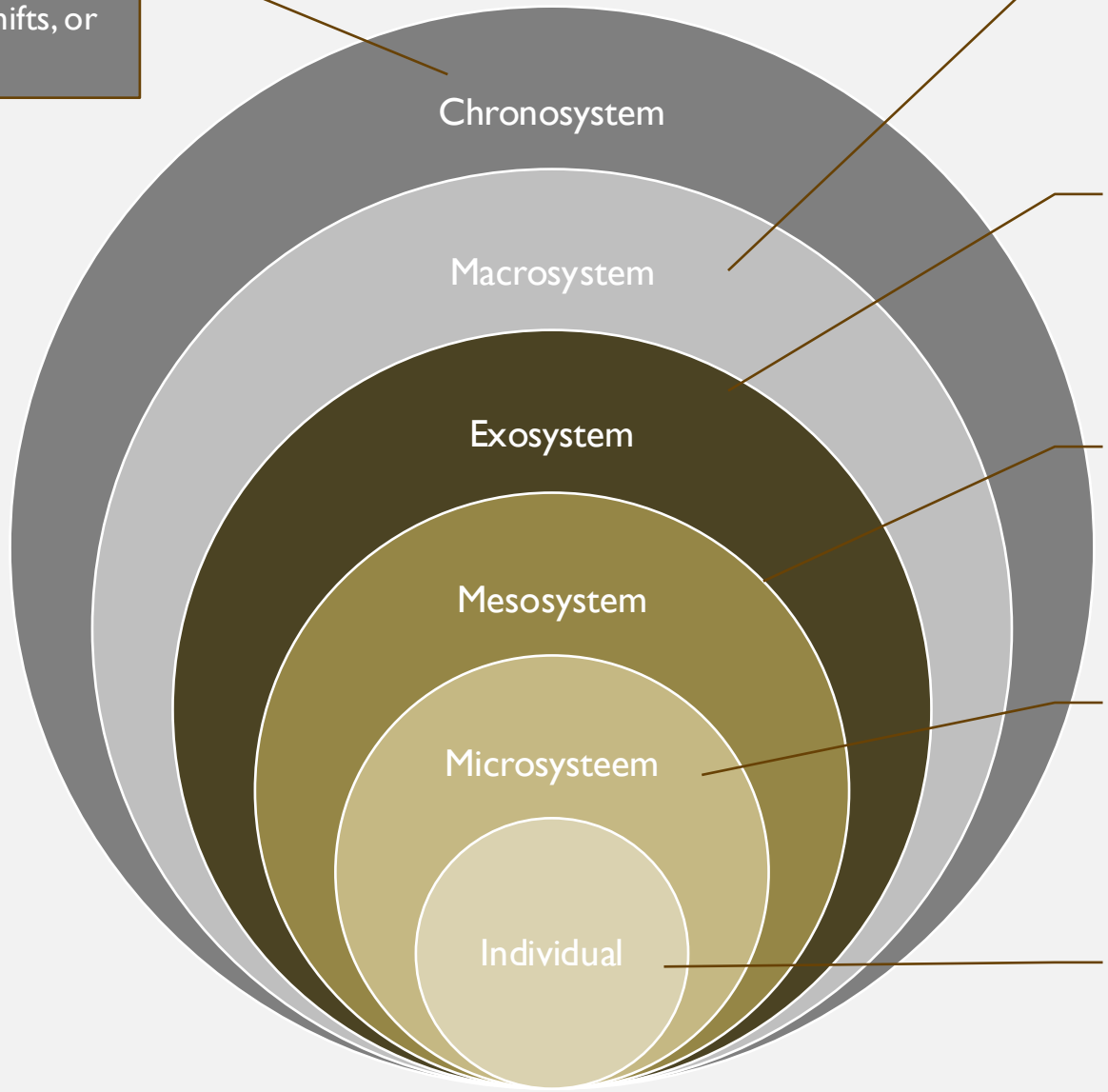
Intimate partner physical abuse perpetration and victimization risk factors: A meta-analytic review ☆

Sandra M. Stith[a,*], Douglas B. Smith[a], Carrie E. Penn[a], David B. Ward[a], Dari Tritt[b]

[a]*Human Development Department, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 7054 Haycock Road, Falls Church, VA 22043, USA*
[b]*United States Air Force, Family Advocacy Program, Brooks AFB, USA*

Received 25 August 2003; accepted 2 September 2003

The influence of time, life transitions, and historical events, such as moving houses, divorce, technological shifts, or a pandemic.



The broader cultural values, norms, laws, economy, and political systems of a society.

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The interactions and relationships between different microsystems, such as communication between parents and teachers.

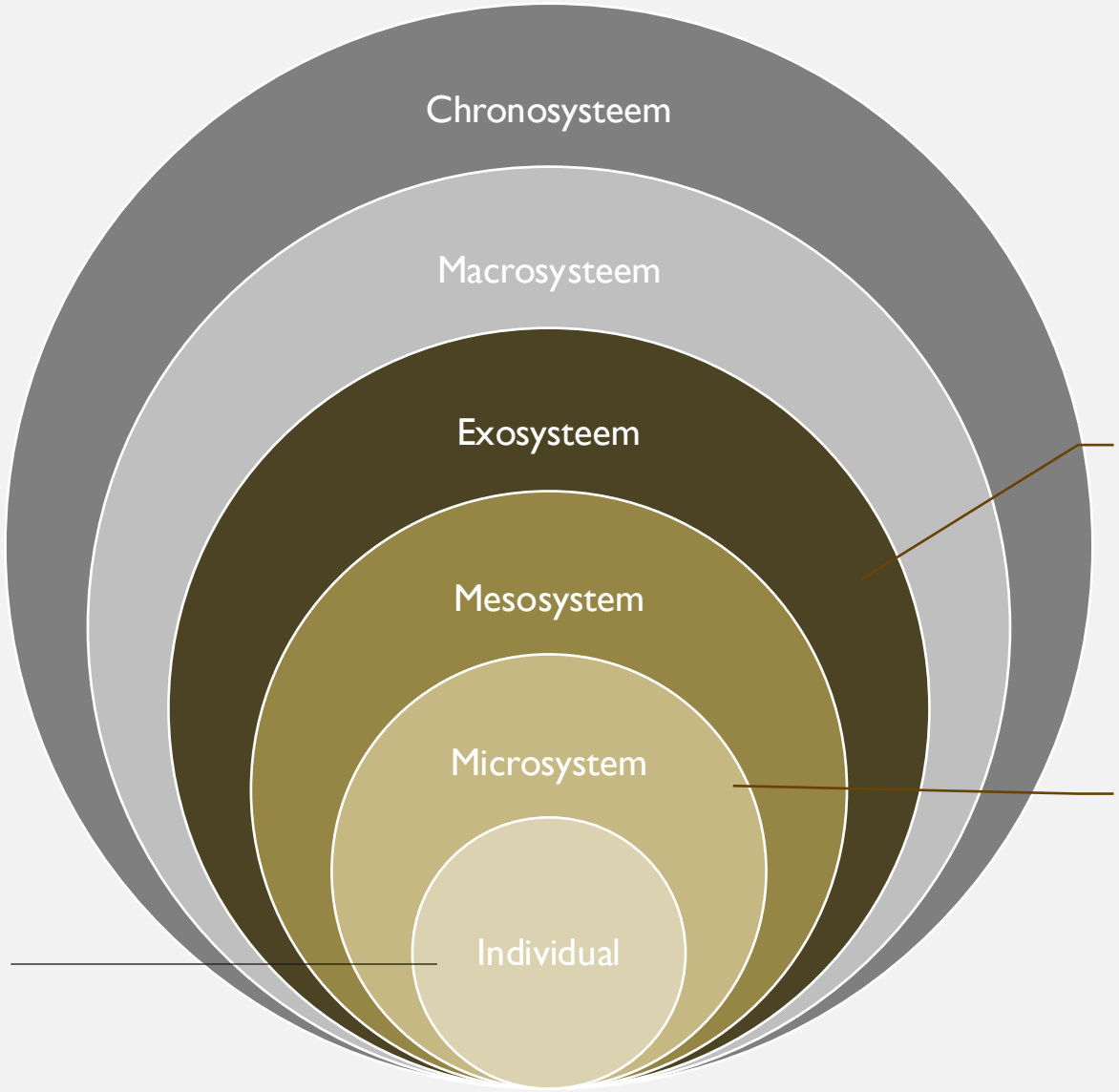
The immediate, daily environments in which a person actively participates (e.g. family, peer groups)

Personal history, traits, and vulnerabilities
(e.g. childhood exposure to abuse or neglect, mental health struggles, substance abuse, limited income)

Ecologisch System's Model - Bronfenbrenner (1977)

Drug use and attitudes towards violence;

To a lesser extent e.g., anger/hostility, alcohol consumption, depression, and traditional ideologies regarding gender roles



Career & life events

Presence of psychological abuse, sexual abuse, relationship dissatisfaction

Risk factors of **physical** IPV



TAKE HOME

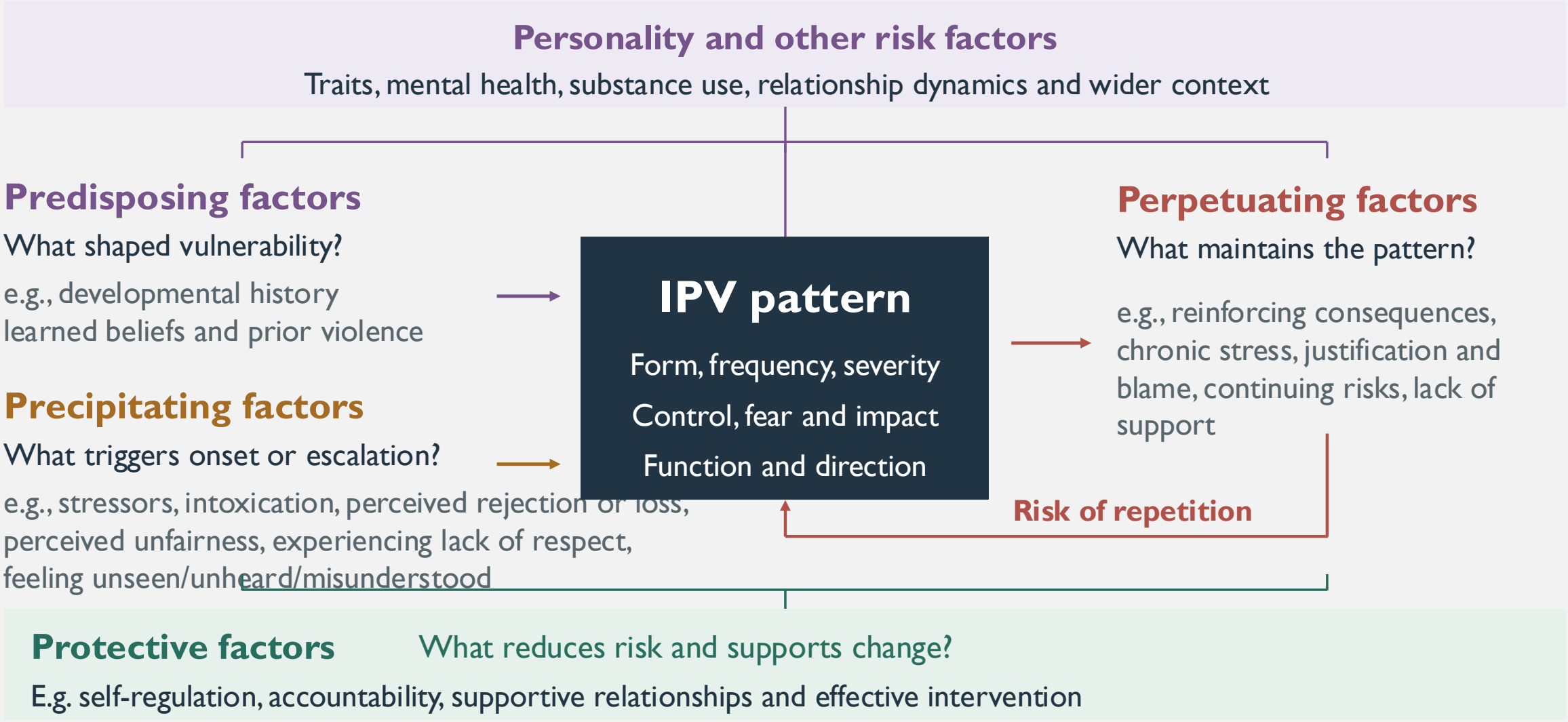
- Violence has no single explanation
- Risk factors interact across the person, relationship, and wider context
- A thorough individual formation addresses both how violence begins and what keeps it going



PART III:
PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Understanding IPV perpetration

An integrated formulation of risk: the 4P's



Factors interact across time. Their relevance varies between people and patterns of violence.

A case study: a provisional 4P formulation

Presenting problem: repeated pushing and an episode of repeated, forceful hitting, and drinking behaviour when going out with colleagues – but not particularly at home.

Predisposing

What made violence more likely?

Earlier history remains unclear.
Explore e.g. drinking onset, personality, previous aggression and beliefs about family responsibilities...

Precipitating

What happened just before the violence?

Arguments precede the assaults.
Check for patterns in e.g., intoxication, fatigue and perceived, criticism immediately before each incident…

Perpetuating

What may keep the pattern going?

Heavy drinking, no concern about it and coworkers' praise may sustain alcohol use.
Strain at work and at home continues. …

Protective

What could reduce the risk?

No clear protective factors established.
Explore e.g., accountability, readiness to change and support for non-violent coping, social support, .

DOES TREATMENT AFFECT REOFFENDING?

- Recidivism rates ranged from 5% to 72.5%
- Diversity in programs: 33% studies a mix of therapeutic models, 80% group format, community vs. residential programs, …
- Diversity in samples, outcome measures, measurement of recidivism, different follow-up periods (3 months to 9 years), … …



(Vall et al., 2024)


ONE SIZE
DOESN'T FIT ALL

Review

The effectiveness of interventions to prevent recidivism in perpetrators of intimate partner violence: A systematic review and meta-analysis

Áine Travers [a,*], Tracey McDonagh [a], Twylla Cunningham [b], Cherie Armour [c], Maj Hansen [a]

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[b] Probation Board of Northern Ireland, 80-90 North St, Belfast BT1 1LD, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom
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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
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Domestic violence
Partner abuse
Batterer intervention
Gender-based violence
Violent recidivism

ABSTRACT

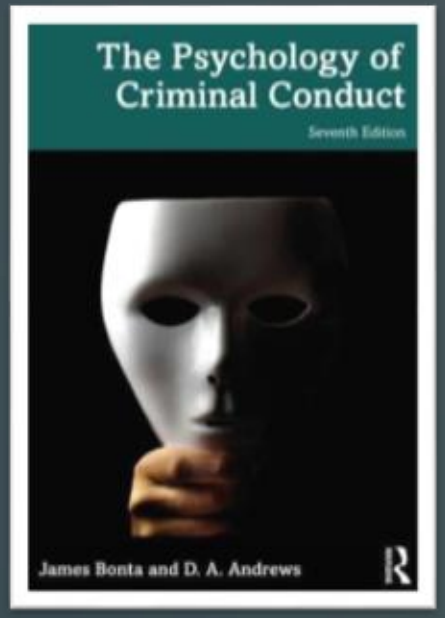
Background: Previous reviews of interventions to prevent recidivistic intimate partner violence (IPV) have cited minimal benefits and have been critical of interventions adopting a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to a heterogenous category of offenders. The present systematic review and meta-analysis assesses evidence for interventions situated in a risk-need-responsivity framework, in comparison with the more traditional 'one-size-fits-all' intervention approach.

Method: Six databases (PsycINFO, Web of Science, PubMed, EMBASE, SCOPUS, PILOTS) were searched for studies examining effectiveness of IPV interventions.

Results: Thirty-one studies met the inclusion criteria. Studies were analysed separately depending on whether they compared two treatments ($n = 17$) or used a no-treatment control group ($n = 14$). In the meta-analysis, overall effect sizes were $OR = 0.52$, 95% CI [0.35–0.78] for interventions with follow-up of $\leq$ one year ($p < 0.001$) and OR = 0.60, 95% CI [0.46–0.78] for interventions with follow-up between one and two years ($p < 0.001$). The pooled effects from the studies using follow-up of greater than two years did not reach statistical significance. Subgroup analyses suggested that effect sizes differed across treatment types, with risk-need-responsivity treatments performing well against other modalities.

Conclusions: Risk-need-responsivity treatments showed promise in the short-to-medium term, but the challenge of sustaining effects into the longer term remains.

RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY MODEL



- Theoretical framework (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Bonta & Andrews, 2023)
- What works?
  - 15 principles
  - 3 main principles
- Risk assessment and risk management (i.e., treatment, supervision, monitoring and victim protection)

RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY PRINCIPLES

(1) Risk principle: WHO?

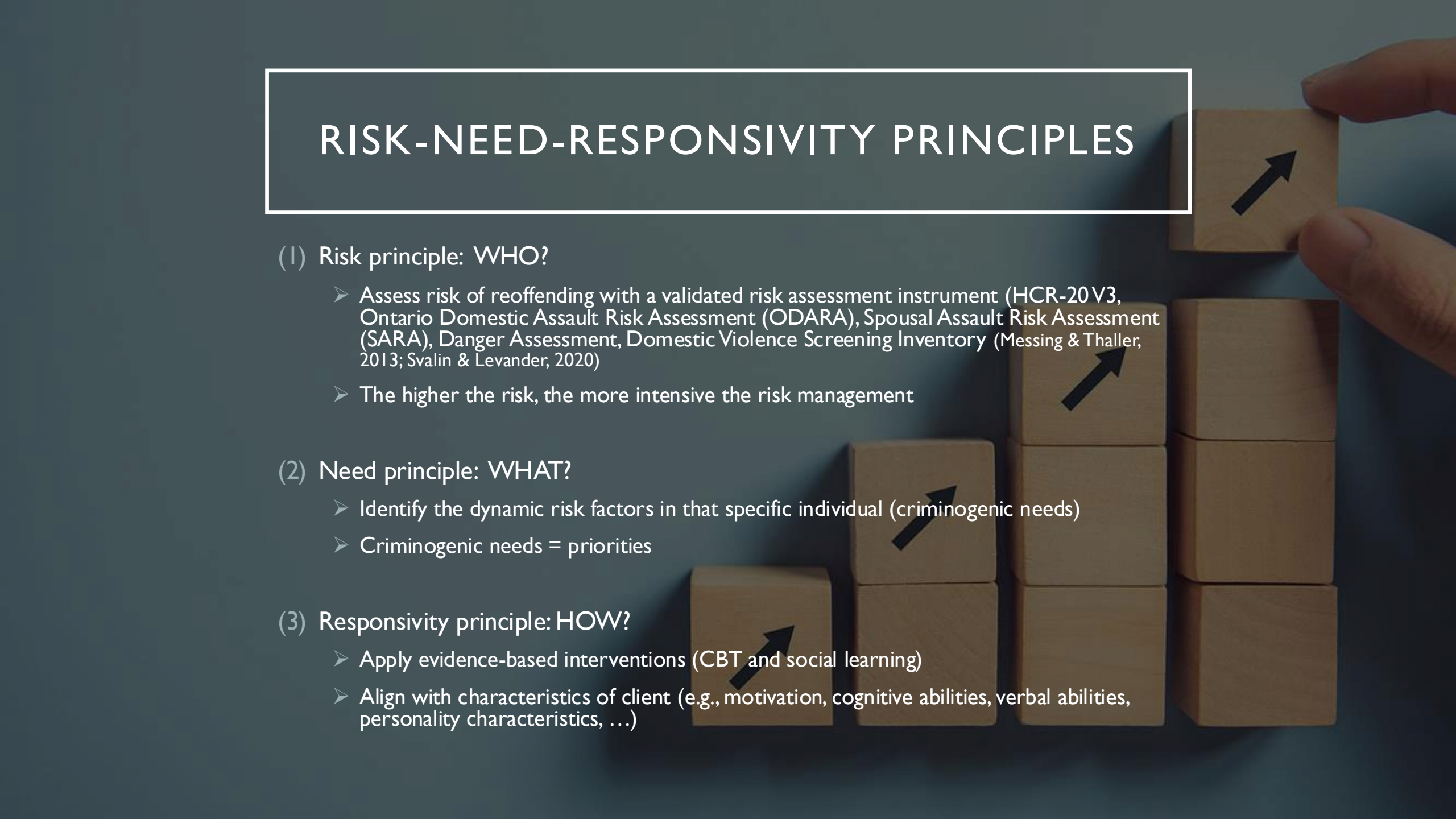
- Assess risk of reoffending with a validated risk assessment instrument (HCR-20 V3, Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA), Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA), Danger Assessment, Domestic Violence Screening Inventory (Messing & Thaller, 2013; Svalin & Levander, 2020)
- The higher the risk, the more intensive the risk management

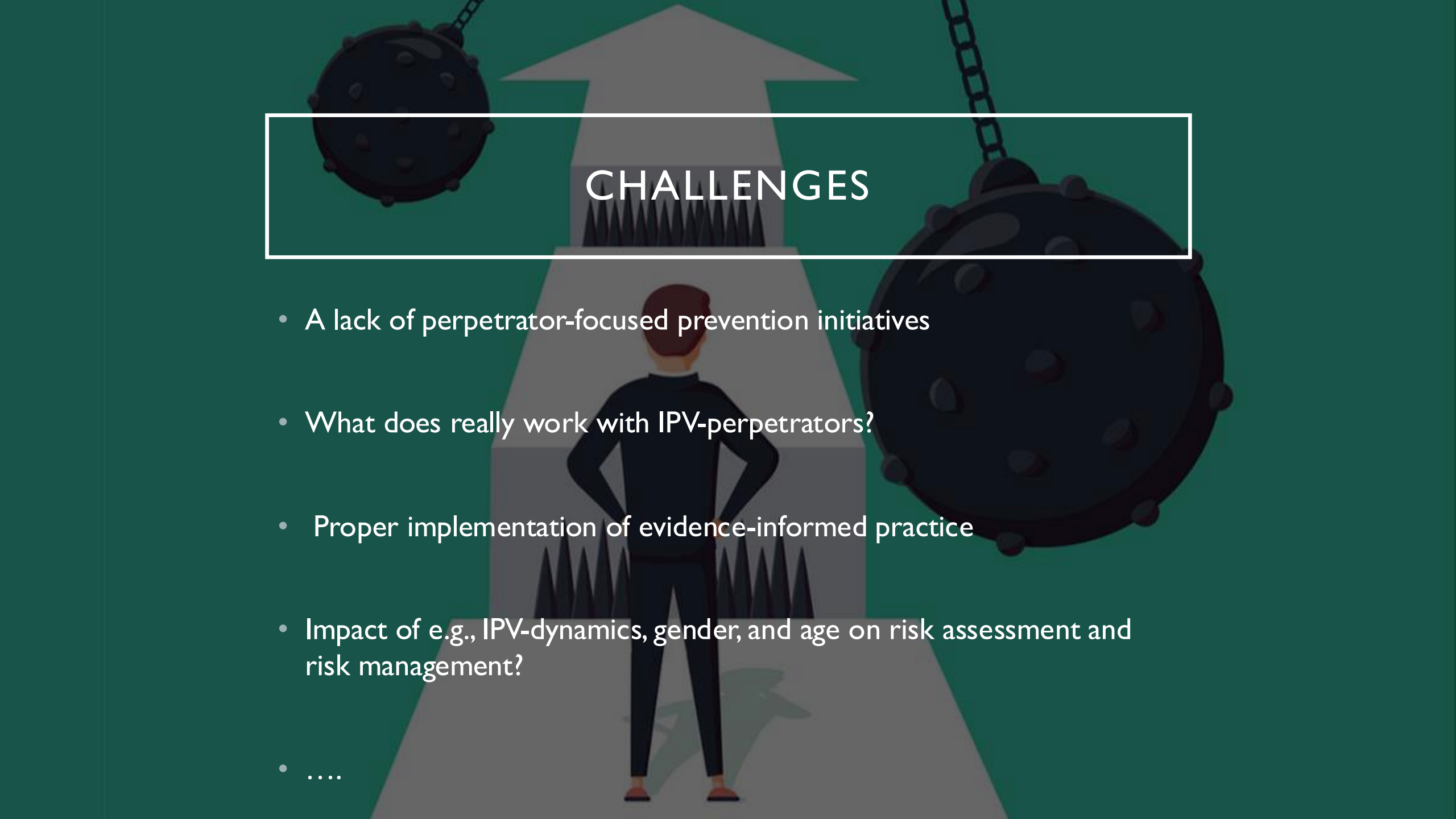
(2) Need principle: WHAT?

- Identify the dynamic risk factors in that specific individual (criminogenic needs)
- Criminogenic needs = priorities

(3) Responsivity principle: HOW?

- Apply evidence-based interventions (CBT and social learning)
- Align with characteristics of client (e.g., motivation, cognitive abilities, verbal abilities, personality characteristics, …)





CHALLENGES

- A lack of perpetrator-focused prevention initiatives
- What does really work with IPV-perpetrators?
- Proper implementation of evidence-informed practice
- Impact of e.g., IPV-dynamics, gender, and age on risk assessment and risk management?
- ….

PART IV:
Q&A & THANK YOU!



A special thank you to Emily Goossens.

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