

Understanding hidden cohorts in large institutions

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Introduction

- In Australia one quarter of women and one sixth of men experience some form of domestic violence (control tactics from an intimate partner- such as social, emotional, physical and/or financial abuse)¹. Leaving a violent relationship is complex, however rebuilding life and flourishing in the aftermath is possible². Little attention, however, has been devoted to understanding the experiences and trajectories of such women who embark upon university study as part of their rebuilding.
- My doctoral research sought to fill this gap, however, this was not an easy population to find as research points to a tendency for those impacted by DV to remain silent³. This hidden population within a large institution, is like scenarios found within healthcare. For example, Rose (2020) identified dementia family care givers as a hidden population not unlike patients with a diagnosis of HIV or severe mental illness due to confusion over diagnosis, stigma and shame⁴. To find participants for my study, I took a snowball approach. This poster will present this strategy as part of the methodology.
- Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of capital, field and habitus provides an insight into the development of their dispositions and capital during these three periods, with their entry and exit of a violent relationship signalling shifts in capital and dispositions⁵. This thesis is about women who successfully engaged with higher education and persisted throughout their studies. It demonstrates how their capital and dispositions changed during and after the experience of domestic violence.

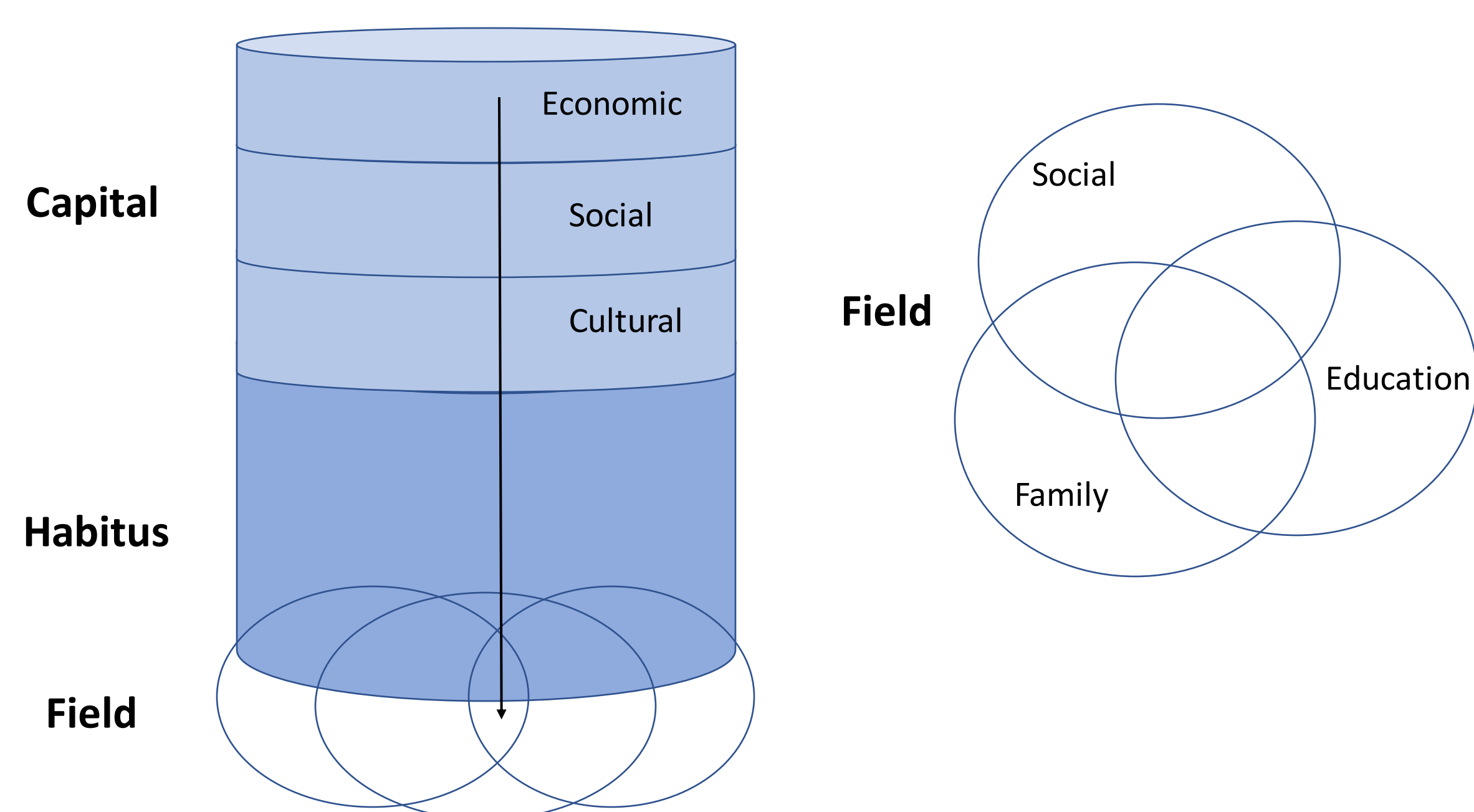


Figure 1. Using a Bourdesian lens to understand rebuilding post domestic violence (Lewer, 2021)

Methodology

- Before commencement of this inquiry, approval was sought and obtained from the University of Wollongong human Ethics Research Committee (2015/145). The participants were considered 'vulnerable' as outlined by the World Health Organisation (2001) due to the trauma and consequences of domestic violence⁶. Guidelines from this WHO publication were used to inform their ethical approach of the research. Although caution is appropriate the WHO also suggests that researching such women is possible and beneficial 'studies show that research on domestic violence against women can be conducted with full respect of ethical and safety considerations' (p.9).
- Following engagement with community-based organization Domestic Violence New South Wales (DVNSW), research information was placed in the waiting rooms of DV support services across NSW. To expand the number of participants I then used a snowball sampling approach. Snowball sampling has been used with success^{7, 8} in similar research targeting hard to find participants. This method seeks to find participants who satisfy the selection criteria and may have the social network to recruit further participants. From there, word of mouth helps to recruit others and momentum is gained. This resulted in nine eligible participants, which provided sufficient data from the in-depth interviews and participant journals.
- The criteria for potential participants was designed to reduce the risk of harm and capture information rich participants:
 - Women must be over twenty-one years of age
 - Women will need to have been out of any relationship involving DV for over three years.
 - All women will have studied at university for at least three years⁹

Snowball Approach

- Four of the women in the study had found the research information at their local support services: two were volunteers at different regionally based services, and two were staff members of regional and urban support services. One of the regional volunteers informed me that she had told others about my research at a local domestic violence forum and posted information on her online student group. From there, a woman who had attended the regional forum made email contact with me, and another woman from the online student group and from a rural location also contacted me. Three regionally based students had heard through word of mouth at their universities, one of whom had close ties with her local campus feminist group.

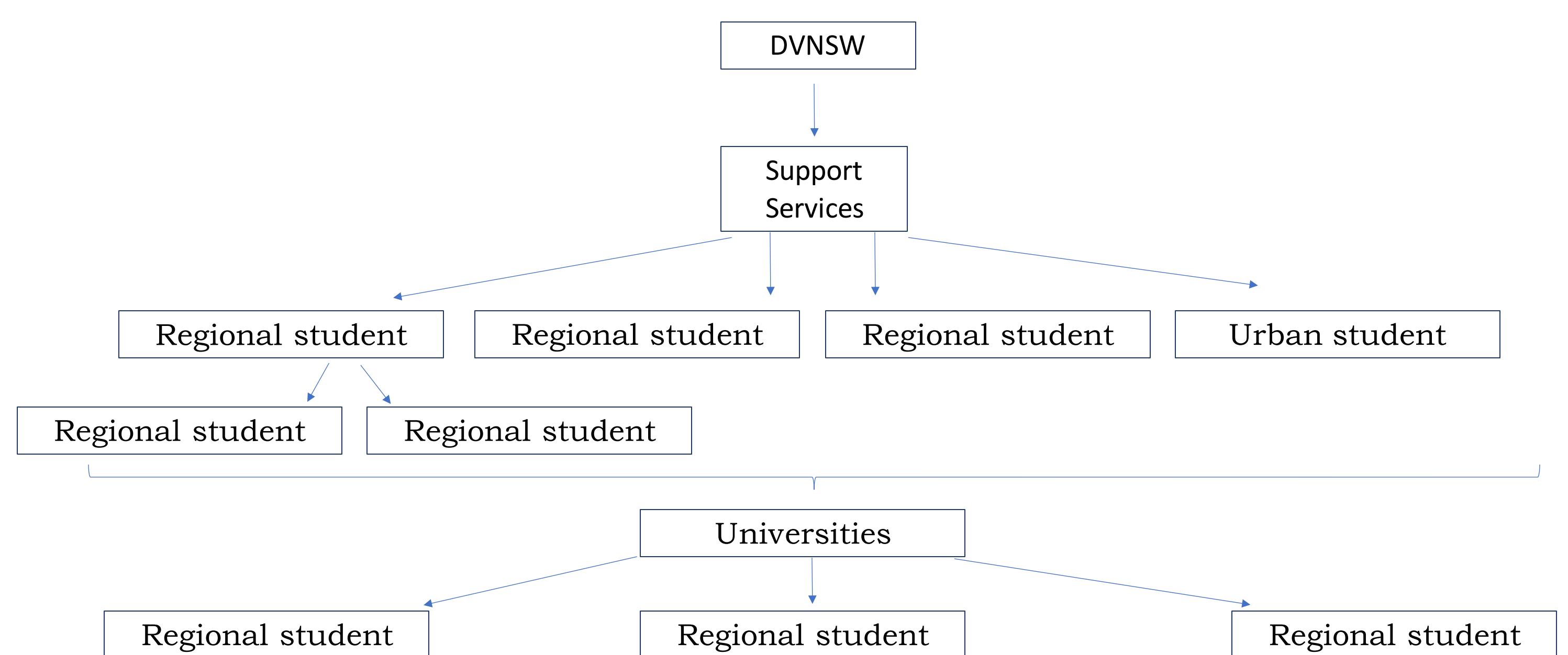


Figure 2. Participant recruitment using a snowball approach for women who have experienced domestic violence (Lewer, 2021)

University study post domestic violence

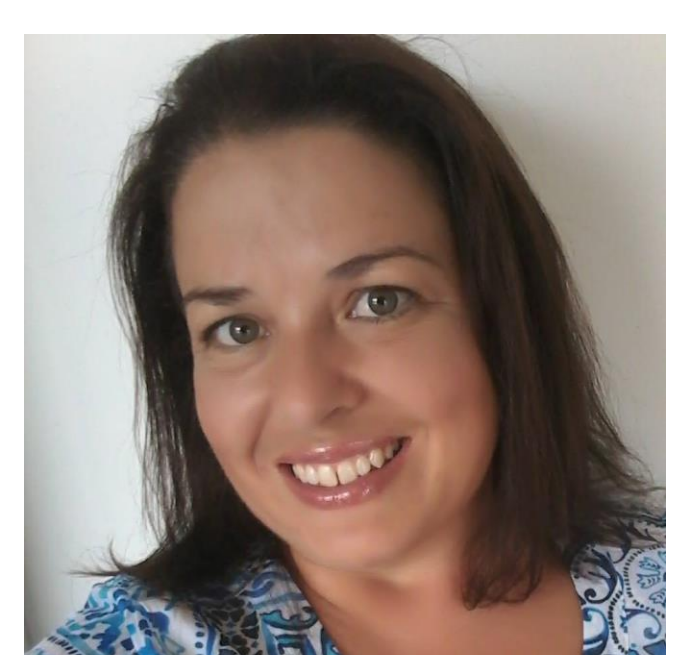
- At the time of the study most of the women were post-graduate students or actively studying their second degree. The study found that with the positive dispositions developed during their childhoods, most women felt comfortable within the university environment. It was evident from the study that changes were made to fit into the environment reflecting their new freedom, safety and capacity to choose as they rebuilt their lives. Generally, they did not view university as a place to socialise. Importantly, support from their tertiary institutions varied, with most women desiring a less generic approach to the support needed, and more understanding of domestic violence from professionals at their place of study.
- "So, it [university studies] has given me a lot more confidence, certainly it has allowed me to have the kinds of conversations regarding. "This [control] isn't for me and I am not going to do this anymore". You know like: "this is where it stops. I can see where this is going and I am not participating in it." Nancy, 44, PhD
- "I think really deep down when you have been put into this situation and your life has been controlled and you come out and you do go into higher education. I am not saying everybody will do that, I am saying that you will find that the person you are is in there." Lynda, 51, Bachelor of Psychology
- "Uni has been great for the whole confidence thing. And it has just been, it has been good to just show everyone I can do it as well." Amelia, 27, Bachelor of Social Work

References

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