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LGBT+ Perpetrators: Visibility, Recognition and Interventions

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Introduction

In the last twenty years, as most European countries have gradually legislated to recognise the intimate relationships of LGBT+ people in rights to civil partnership or same-sex marriage so has there been a parallel recognition that domestic abuse might occur in those relationships. However, the European Parliament and the Istanbul Convention, unsurprisingly, draw attention to the structural heteronormative inequalities implicit in patriarchal societies that create the conditions in which violence against women or gender-based violence are baked in as central to maintaining male power. Consequently, domestic and sexual violence targeting LGBT+ people is presented as an 'add-on' to definitions. The European Parliament, for example, on its webpage setting out what the Parliament is doing about gender-based violence states 'Although women and girls are the main victims of gender-based violence, but it can also affect men. LGBTIQ+ people are also often targeted.' There is nothing else on this webpage that speaks specifically to the experiences or needs of LGBT+ victim/survivors or perpetrators. The Istanbul Convention is addressed to Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence and whilst there are references to nation states addressing discrimination against LGBT+ people they are not identified as potential victim/survivors of domestic abuse.

Twenty years ago, whilst the UK Home Office definition of domestic abuse (as it was called then) referred to behaviour that could be enacted 'regardless of gender or sexuality', there was very little research on domestic abuse in, what we called then, 'same-sex relationships'. At that time, the COHSAR project was set up to compare love and violence in, same-sex and heterosexual relationships (Donovan and Hester, 2015). This was the first time such a study had been done. We used a mixed methods approach with a survey, focus groups and interviews and we asked participants to consider 'what happens when things go wrong' in their relationships. The COHSAR methodology (Hester and Donovan, 2009; Hester, Donovan and Fahmy, 2009) addressed what we saw as the limitations of survey questionnaires exploring intimate relationships by asking about the context of the relationship, the motives for the use of abusive behaviours and the impacts of them. In the interviews we asked both what participants had experienced and what they had done in a best and a worst relationship experience.

The COHSAR Power and Control Wheel

Our key findings are encapsulated in the COHSAR Power and Control Wheel which amended Duluth's original version to be inclusive of all intimate partner relationships regardless of the gender or sexuality of victim/survivors and perpetrators. We also removed physical and sexual violence from the centre of the Duluth wheel and included them as spokes. Power and control became a concentric inner circle around what was at the centre of the COHSAR power and control wheel: two, core relationship rules that, we argue, underpins each abusive relationship regardless of the gender and sexuality of each intimate partner.

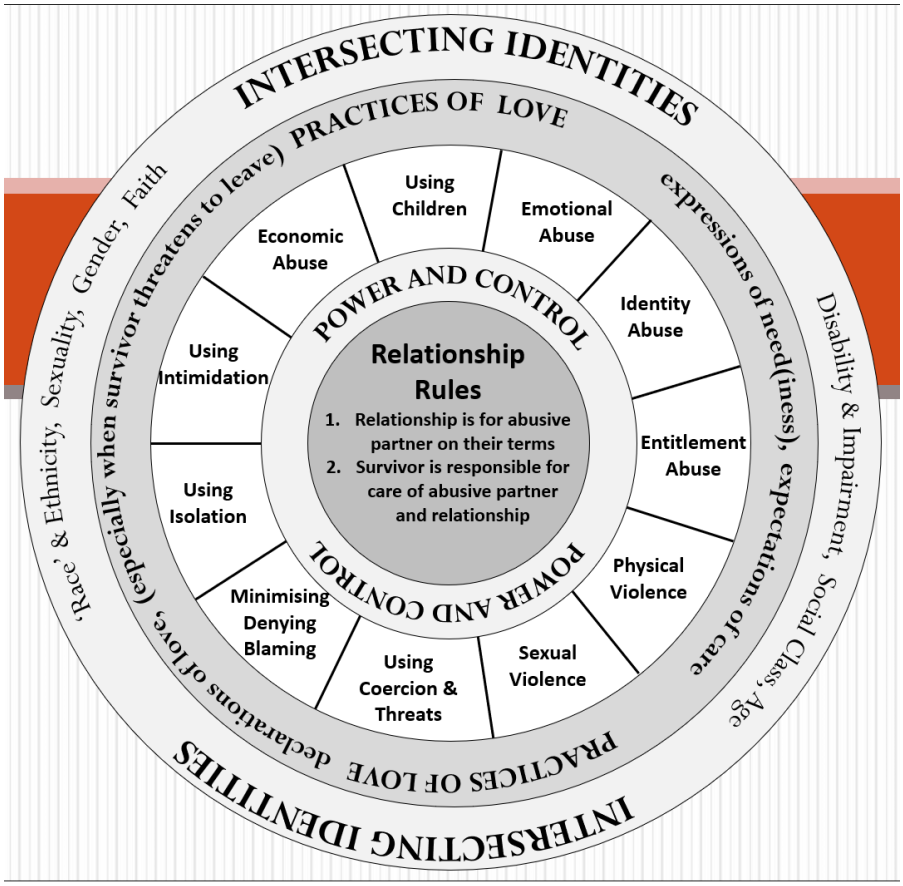

Figure 1: COHSAR Power and Control Wheel

The first relationship rule positions the abusive partner as the key decision-maker in the relationship: the relationship is on their terms. This includes those relationships in which the perpetrator is apparently unwilling to take responsibility or make decisions: it is the impact of the abusive partners behaviours that sets the terms for how the relationship will be expected to run. The relationship is all about them, their needs, their wants. No matter that what they want might change unpredictably and no matter if their decision-making is counter-productive for their own interests. The second relationship rule positions the victim/survivor as responsible: for the abusive partner, for their abusive behaviours, for the relationship, for the home if they share one and the children if they parent. Being able to identify these rules and how they operate in any individual relationship can help practitioners and clients/service users - whether victim/survivors or perpetrators - understand how power and control is operating in an abusive relationship. The abusive behaviours act to establish and maintain the rules and/or to punish the victim/survivor for apparent, perceived or actual non-conformity to and/or breaking of the rules – including their wish/decision to leave the relationship. Abusive partners can and will use any or all of the abusive behaviours outlined in the COHSAH Power and Control Wheel to establish and maintain the relationship rules.

However, knowledge, understanding and practice responses to domestic abuse in the relationships of LGBT+ people is still underdeveloped. We have argued that the public story of domestic abuse is a reason why this is the case.

The Public Story of Domestic Abuse

The public story of domestic abuse is an unintended consequence of the success of feminist activism, scholarship and lobbying in transforming domestic abuse from being a personal problem to being a serious social problem (Donovan and Hester, 2010). Such has been this success that domestic abuse is understood and constructed as a problem *of* cisgender, heterosexual men *for* cisgender, heterosexual women, a problem, primarily of physical violence, and a problem of a particular presentation of gender – the big, 'strong' cisgender, heterosexual man being physically violent towards the small, 'weak' cisgender heterosexual woman.

With Barnes (Donovan and Barnes, 2020) we further considered the way in which the public story encourages particular kinds of binaries that reflect assumptions about the 'ideal' victim (Christie, 1986) who is constructed as both blameless and defenceless but, crucially, also as feminised (Donovan and Barnes, 2018). Thus, the overlapping binaries of woman/man, feminine/masculine, victim/perpetrator, weak/strong, passive/agentic cumulatively create 'truths' about domestic abuse which render domestic abuse in the relationships of LGBT+ people as invisible, less serious, less risky, less harmful. This not only makes it difficult for those who do not see themselves in this public story to tell their *own* story, but also makes it difficult for others, including practitioners, to *hear* their story. Many cis heterosexual women and men will not see themselves in the public story of domestic abuse but research on help-seeking for domestic abuse seems to suggest that those who are LGBT+ seem to be the least likely groups to formally report domestic abuse unless something happens, typically involving physical violence, to escalate their fear or perceived risk (Donovan and Hester, 2011; Donovan and Barnes, 2020).

The public story of domestic abuse also has impacts for how domestic abuse in relationships between women and between men is perceived. Several studies have been conducted in North America with different practitioners, such as the police, refuge workers, psychology students and potential jury members, comparing their responses to a domestic abuse scenario where the story stays the same but the gender and sexuality of the relationship partners are changed. Findings have shown how assumptions about risk, safety and escalation can be shaped by the public story of DVA, resulting in violence between two women or two men being seen as less risky, less likely to escalate, less needing of police intervention; or decisions about who the perpetrator and victim are based on the presentation of gender (Brown and Groscup, 2009; Little and Terrance, 2010; Pattavina et al., 2007; Poorman, Seelau and Seelau, 2003). In a relationship between two women heteronormative assumptions are made that women cannot be or are not aggressive, abusive, violent therefore any abuse or violence between women can be minimised; as it is 'equally gendered' it is not of concern in relation to risk and harm.

Men are believed to be prepared in their upbringing for aggression (Connell, 2002) so where there are two men in an abusive relationship this can be perceived as an 'equal fight' with men able to defend themselves; and/or a perception that violence might be common since men are understood to be competitive and to solve problems with aggression. Some concern might be raised about the level of harm that might be caused between men but not the same levels of harm or risk as a cis heterosexual man poses for a cis heterosexual woman. For those who are non-binary or gender queer there is often confusion about how to understand abuse since there are none of the

assumptions about structurally constructed cis heteronormative gender inequalities that can be drawn on. First impressions about presentation of self might be reached for to ascertain the likely perpetrator and victim/survivor with all the problems that might ensue from such a superficial assessment of risk and need.

LGBT+ perpetrators of domestic abuse can also use the existence of the public story of domestic abuse as part of their denial and minimisation of their own abusive behaviours; that their behaviour is not domestic abuse, that domestic abuse is something that happens to straight women. They can also use it to point to the futility of reporting or seeking help from organisations that, they can argue, do not recognise – and might discriminate against – LGBT+ people (Donovan and Barnes, 2020). Not asking the correct questions or understanding the relationship dynamics in LGBT+ relationships, assuming that women are caring, can lead to an abusive female partner not being recognised as such and being invited to accompany a lesbian victim/survivor when she is seen by a practitioner (Barnes,2010). LGBT+ perpetrators can also draw on apparently different kinds of abusive behaviours that make their abuse seem distinct from that which cis heterosexual women experience. Identity abuse can be seen as an umbrella name for a range of behaviours that target the victim/survivors' identities and sense of self.

Identity Abuse

In the public story of domestic abuse there are cis heteronormative assumptions made about the kind of abusive behaviours a cis heteronormative man enacts to victimise a cis heterosexual women *because* she is a woman. Abusive behaviours of this kind can be understood as aspects of identity abuse. These might include attempts to control or punish for non-conformity in her:

- presentation of self, for example, in her clothes, hairstyle, use of make-up, choice of jewellery, other body decoration, choice of media, culture;
- priorities, for example in what she is expected to do around a shared home, in relation to children, and in how she is expected to perform or respond to sex;
- social connectedness, for example, whether she socialises and who she socialises with, whether and where she might be employed.

Similarly, those victimised in LGBT relationships are also controlled with respect to their identities of gender and/or sexuality and, likewise this will include attempts to control or punish for non-conformity in:

- presentation of self, for example, their clothes, their use of make-up, their hairstyle, choice of jewellery, other body decoration, choice of media, culture;
- their priorities, for example, what they are expected to do around a shared home, in relation to children, and in how they are expected to perform or respond to sex. The latter is often shaped by assumptions about stereotypical and prejudicial assumptions about lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual sexualities such as lesbians not being interested in sex, gay men being defined by having many casual sexual partners, bisexual people being defined as greedy,

oversexed and unreliable/untrustworthy; and trans and non-binary people's bodies being fetishised or exoticised (Donovan, Butterby and Barnes, 2023);

- social connectedness for example, whether they socialise and who they socialise with, whether and where they might be employed.

In addition, other aspects of victim/survivors' identities might also be targeted by perpetrators. Racism, ableism, classism, can all be used by abusive partners to insult, denigrate, undermine, coercively control victim/survivors, alongside their citizenship status, their age, their education and any other identities they understand as being part of their sense of who they are.

A rationale given by abusive LGBT+ partners for such control or punishment for non-conformity can be experiential power (Donovan and Barnes, 2020). This is where the more established, out, abusive partner draws on their increased experience to insist that the victim/survivor is not being gay, or bisexual, or trans, or lesbian 'enough' if they resist conforming to gay, bisexual, lesbian, trans norms of behaviour, presentation, connectedness imposed by the abusive more experienced partner. Homo-bi-transphobia can also provide the rationale for abusive behaviours. Here, perpetrators draw on societal stereotypes and prejudicial tropes that survive within LGBT+ communities as a result of living in homo-bi-trans phobic societies. Examples include:

- playing on fears that the current gay male abusive relationship is the one chance for a relationship because of the imagined difficulties of meeting other gay men interested in long term relationships rather than just casual sexual encounters,
- denigrating bisexual partners for being greedy, untrustworthy, unreliable because of prejudiced beliefs about bisexual people not being able to 'make up their mind' about their sexuality and wanting to 'have it all'. In the UK, the Office for National Statistics analysis of the England and Wales Crime Survey, they found bisexual women 5 x more likely to report sexual abuse (1.9%) than heterosexual women (0.4%) (ONS, 2018).
- encouraging a lesbian victim/survivor not to report abuse to the police because of the homophobia the lesbian perpetrator will experience. The ONS found lesbians more likely to report partner abuse (8%) than heterosexual women (6%). Bisexual women nearly twice as likely to report partner abuse (10.9%) than heterosexual women.
- threatening to out a trans victims/survivor to their family who has already attempted to coerce them into conversion therapy. Trans people are more likely to be 'offered' conversion therapy than cis LGB people (Government Equalities Office, 2018).

Abuse that targets the identities of victims/survivors can underpin physical, sexual, emotional, financial abuse and coercive control and can also impact on victim/survivors' help-seeking decision-making.

The Impact of Practices of Love on Domestically Abusive Relationships

The argument being made is that the domestic abuse sector is set up for cis heterosexual women who have been domestically abused by cis heterosexual men; and that practice and policy responses to domestic abuse are shaped and grounded in evidence from research based on this public story of domestic abuse. It is little wonder that LGBT+ people do not consider using mainstream domestic abuse help providers. In addition, as others have also argued (Hodes and Mennicke, 2018) whilst the domestic abuse sector is set up to respond to those at most risk and in most need, the majority of those in abusive relationships are not 'in crisis' but living in a chronic condition which may or may not reach crisis. Most of those victimised by domestic abuse do not recognise or characterise their relationship as such and most do not seek help from any formal source of help. But this is especially the case with those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans and non-binary (Donovan and Barnes, 2019, 2020) who, the research tells us rarely seek out any mainstream domestic abuse service or report to the police and instead rely on informal sources of help – friends and family (in that order) and/or therapeutic sources of help as their first formal source of help. We found the same pattern of help-seeking for those enacting abusive behaviours (Donovan and Barnes, 2020). In considering why abusive relationships are endured our research considered two key reasons. First, as already argued, for those who are LGBT+ the public story of domestic abuse excludes them (Donovan and Hester 2015).

The second reason our research considered an important barrier to seeking help and/or leaving an abusive relationship is the impact of practices of love in abusive relationships. The majority of abusive relationships other than forced marriages are entered into consensually and with positive emotions and feelings about love, desire, attraction, and hope for a future together. Of course, there are material and economic reasons that make leaving a relationship difficult, especially for those, particularly the young, women, working class, trans people, who have less economic resources and potential to enable them to live financially independently. However, in our research, emotions and practices of love were also central to explaining why people stay or return to abusive relationships.

Jamieson's (1998) work on disclosing intimacy provided us with a way into explaining why participants who have been victimised in abusive relationships are able to explain to us why their abusive partners behaved the way they did. Disclosing intimacy describes the ways in which emotional bonds might be formed between partners to a relationship; how trust is built in the sharing of personal knowledge and histories, of secrets. Secrets might be about the things that have happened to them they have not shared before or the dreams and hopes they have for themselves and their future. In abusive relationships, victim/survivors are often able to point to their abusive partners' early experiences of family abuse and/or neglect, sexual abuse, bullying, substance use, employers who did not understand them, any number of explanations, reasons, excuses why they behave so abusively to their partner. On the other hand, victim/survivors were also able to describe the ways in which what they had shared with their partner became intelligence to be used against them – a woman tells her husband she wants to go back to school and get an education, the husband prevents her from enrolling in the local college; a bisexual woman explains to her partner that the relationship is her first with another woman, the abusive partner mocks her sexually.

Practices of love are enacted by abusive partners when victim/survivors show signs of resistance to the relationships rules or that they are considering ending the relationship. The abusive partner discloses their neediness: they acknowledge that their behaviour is not acceptable, disclose their reasons for their behaviour, beg forgiveness, promise to change and point to their shared declarations of love for each other to ask for (yet) another chance. At the same time, they elicit loyalty in the victim/survivor, and protection from others' disapprobation. Very often abusive relationships are not continuously abusive but can be filled with times of happiness. At critical moments such as a threatened end to the relationship regardless that the abusive behaviour does not show love, perpetrators are able to persuade victim/survivors that their loving commitment to each other is enough to see them through abusive times. These practices of love – disclosing intimacy, declarations of neediness and declarations of love at critical moments, requests for understanding, forgiveness, loyalty, protection, support – can all be very successful in persuading the victim/survivor that the relationship is worth saving, their abusive partner is worth supporting and protecting, that their love can be enough to see them through the abusive times. Cultural beliefs about the centrality of a 'forever love' institutionalised in marriage or civil partnerships with attendant beliefs that include 'two becoming one', that a romantic partner might be the 'only one' to be found and loved in a lifetime, that 'you only hurt the one you love', can encourage victim/survivors to believe their abusive partner, that the abuse can end, that they are loved. If these practices of love stop working, abusive partners might then escalate their abusive behaviours to punish the victim/survivor for their non-conformity to the second relationship rule – that the victim/survivor is responsible for everything including the abusive partner. Perpetrators might not be able to tolerate the victim/survivor leaving and/or the victim/survivor starting a new live and/or intimate relationship.

The public story of domestic abuse can make it difficult for practitioners to make sense of the abusive relationship dynamic when LGBT+ people are involved because they feel less confident about who the perpetrator and who the victim/survivor might be, because they might make cis heteronormative assumptions about both what perpetrators and victim/survivors look like and how they might behave. Too often, we have argued, there is an assumption made that these relationships are characterised by mutual abuse.

Mutual Abuse and Space for Reaction

The public story of domestic abuse is influential in shaping practitioners' *and* LGBT+ victim/survivors and perpetrators' understandings about both *what* counts as domestic abuse and also *who* counts as domestic abuse victim/survivors (Donovan and Hester, 2010, 2015; Donovan and Barnes, 2019; 2020). In our work with practitioners working on mandatory and voluntary perpetrator programmes we also pointed to the ways in which perpetrators of abuse and their motivations are understood through a cis heteronormative lens with cis (white, able-bodied) heterosexual men, their motivations and structural position in a patriarchal society being the standard for understanding LGBT+ perpetrators. Very often in discussions with practitioners of domestic abuse perpetrator programmes, participants reflections on what might be needed for LGBT+ perpetrators fell along a continuum of them as the same as or different to heterosexual male perpetrators but always with

the public story of domestic abuse as the standard from which all other work might follow (Donovan and Barnes, 2017).

In our work, LGBT+ participants rarely talk about domestic abuse victimisation. Instead, they might characterise their partner as controlling or just that it was a 'bad' relationship. Another reason they might not recognise domestic abuse in their relationship is because they describe themselves as having 'been as bad' as their partner; that they had pushed back, retaliated, 'climb[ed] on the ladder of escalation' as one bisexual cis woman explained and so on.

Often with LGBT+ relationships the question is asked 'who is the perpetrator and who is the victim/survivor'. Donovan and Barnes (2020) were particularly interested in the research suggesting that 'mutual abuse' is more likely in these relationships. Our critical approach to the research builds on the COHSAR methodology and points to how, generally, survey research is very limited – not being able to capture relationship power dynamics nor provide motives and meanings for behaviours reported. By adopting the COHSAR methodology we could establish that mutual abuse was not a significant abusive relationship type in our dataset (Donovan and Barnes, 2020). We also questioned whether asking about 'the last 12 months' or 'ever' can allow for participants being in different relationships at different points in their lives; and whether perpetrators are always or only perpetrators.

In our research which for the first time focused on abusive behaviours in LGBT+ relationships, (Donovan and Barnes 2020) we explored in more depth, the notion of 'mutual abuse'. Along with the work of Stark (2007), Johnson (2008) and Velonis (2016) with heterosexual couples, our work with LGBT+ perpetrators found that victim/survivors do not comply with the 'ideal victim' (Christie, 1986) who is depicted as defenceless, blameless and feminised (Donovan and Barnes, 2018). Instead, and in keeping with the second relationship rule, victim/survivors take responsibility for the abusive partner and the abusive relationship and attempt to (re-)establish a more equal/egalitarian relationship by (verbally or physically) resisting, fighting back and/or retaliating, against the abusive behaviours of their partner. In attempting to explain these behaviours we considered Kelly's (2003) concept of 'space for action'. Kelly offers this as a way to convey the degree of freedom victim/survivors of domestic abuse can access in making decisions about their bodily and psychic autonomy: where they go, who they speak to, how they live in their everyday lives. Domestic abuse too often results in very limited space for action for victim/survivors whose abusive partners increasingly close down their autonomy.

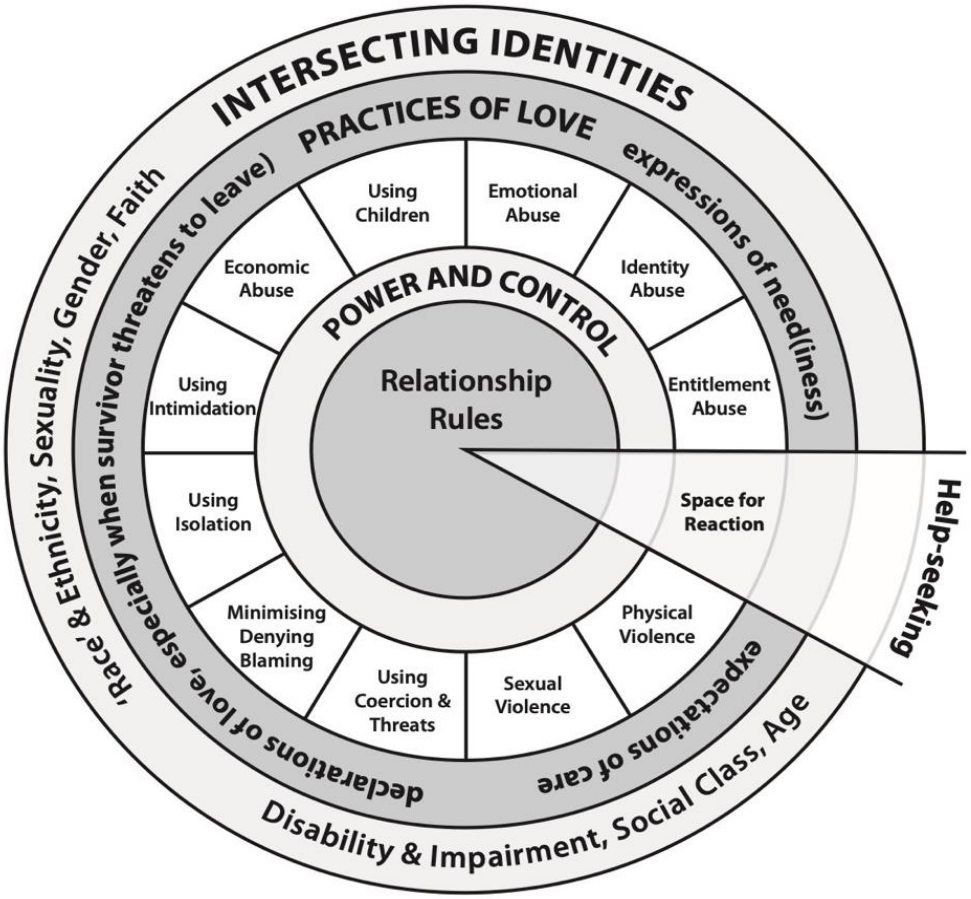

Figure 2: Coral Project Power and Control Wheel with Space for Reaction

In our work we considered that in accounts of victimisation where participants describe fighting back, they were creating and/or utilising space for *re*action against their abusive partner. Thus, our findings led us to building on the COHSAR power and control wheel to produce the Coral Project Power and Control Wheel with Space for Reaction (see figure 2). Space for reaction occurs when victim/survivors resist, fight back, retaliate against the abuse they are experiencing in attempts to (re)establish a more equal relationship. Rather than being involved with mutual abuse, the participants are being victimised by abusive relationships and attempting – typically unsuccessfully - to fight back and defend themselves. As Lempert (1997: 291) explains in her study of heterosexual women: 'As 'victims' they are not entirely passive and as 'agents' they are not entirely equals'. Because space for reaction are moments when victim/survivors feel a line has been crossed, and a provocation to action on their part, we also considered that these moments might also be an aspect of the process of help-seeking, alongside the help-seeking they engage in with speaking to friends etc.

For perpetrators, seeking to make an equivalence between their abusive behaviour and the space for reaction taken by the victim/survivor, attention needs to be drawn to motives, impacts and context. Following the power, identifying the relationship rules, identifying who takes responsibility, considering the practices of love can together, we believe, enable perpetrators, victim/survivors and practitioners make better sense of abusive relationships than assumptions unquestionably following

from the public story of domestic abuse. For the safety and wellbeing of LGBT+ victim/survivors this is profoundly important. For LGBT+ perpetrators, it is a crucial aspect of them being challenged by their behaviours and rationales underpinning those behaviours. For all perpetrators, we believe, this work offers a different way of approaching victimisation and perpetration that does not only rest on cis heteronormative assumptions about gender roles, expectations and identities.

Concluding Words

As with cis heterosexual domestic abuse, structural discrimination and inequalities produce the societal context in which domestic abuse can take place in the relationships of LGBT+ people. Identity abuse based on sexuality and gender identity in these relationships is supported by a homo/bi/transphobic society. Understanding how perpetrators exploit gender and sexuality identity abuse in intersecting ways with identities of race, class, education, citizenship status, age, ability and so on is crucial to understanding not only how victim/survivors can be undermined, coercively controlled and isolated but also how their help-seeking can be shaped, for example, by not wanting to expose themselves or their abusive partners to homo/bi/trans phobia or discrimination from help providers. LGBT+ victim/survivors are more visible than ever, especially in specialist by and for LGBT domestic abuse services. LGBT+ perpetrators are not. We need to understand why this might and how it is the result of the public story of domestic abuse and the homo/bi/transphobic society we live in and consider the role of community engagement, education, outreach with local LGBT+ networks and communities to facilitate the conversations that will raise awareness and enable more victim/survivors and more perpetrators to come forward for support to change.

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