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'I Hate the Word "Victim"': An Exploration of Recognition of Domestic Violence in Same Sex Relationships[1]

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In this article, drawing on interviews with women and men in same sex relationships who have experienced domestic violence, we explore the ways in which recognition of domestic violence can be hampered by public stories about the phenomenon and practices of love. Public stories construct domestic violence as a gendered, heterosexual phenomenon that is predominantly physical in nature. Victims of domestic violence are also constructed as 'other', weak and passive. In addition, we argue that practices of love obfuscate practices of violence; and can also result in victim/survivors constructing themselves as stronger than the perpetrator who needs their care.

Introduction

Discussions about defining domestic violence cannot be separated from methods for measuring its prevalence and incidence across communities, populations, societies. Such discussions take place within research and practitioner communities with some ferocity, because core distinctions reflect profoundly different understandings about causation, prevention and strategies for recognising and responding to victim/survivors (including their children). These concerns are also reflected in the accounts of victim/survivors after they have ended, or once they have begun the process of leaving, a domestically violent relationship. Victim/survivors have described how they had not originally recognised their experiences as domestic violence, or how they had only recognised it as such after the end of the relationship. Recognition, the ability to name domestic violence and simultaneously understand the implications of that naming, is crucial – literally life-saving for too many – and consequently emancipatory (Kelly and Radford, 1990). In this paper, we discuss the ways that recognition is hampered by public stories of domestic violence and practices of love, drawing on accounts from those who have experienced domestic violence in same sex relationships.

First, we outline key debates in the domestic violence field pertaining to definition, measurement and understanding, and argue in favour of a feminist approach which defines domestic violence as a pattern of behaviours that result in the exertion of power and control by one intimate partner over the other. We also point out what and who gets excluded from the public story about domestic violence. Second, we outline our argument about the role of practices of love in creating circumstances within which domestic violence can occur and the relationship rules that are established in domestically violent

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relationships. Third, we explain our research comparing love and violence in same sex and heterosexual relationships, and the focus here is on the qualitative interviews. Fourth, we explore two explanations for non-recognition of domestic violence that emerge from these accounts: public stories about domestic violence that characterise it as a heterosexual, gendered phenomenon, primarily physical in nature; and practices of love that result in victim/survivors constructing themselves as the stronger person in the relationship who is responsible for the perpetrator and the relationship. Finally, we draw some conclusions about some of the implications of these findings for policy and practice.

Defining, measuring and understanding domestic violence

In the UK in recent decades, domestic violence as part of a recognised raft of violence against women has been taken more seriously both as a social problem and as a crime than ever before. Feminist activism and scholarship which began in earnest in the 1970s can begin to see the fruits of their endeavours to break the social and cultural taboos of silence surrounding this phenomenon; call for the experiences of victim/survivors to be taken seriously; make perpetrators accountable; and, in many arenas, create consensus about its gendered nature (see, for example, Home Office, 2009a). As knowledge about domestic violence has developed, so has its definition and the terminology used to describe it. 'Wife battering' is no longer used, in recognition that cohabiting and/or dating heterosexual women can be subject to domestic violence. It is recognised that domestic violence can be experienced in same sex relationships, by men, both within and beyond the lifetime of a relationship and with the active collusion and violence of extended family members. There is broad agreement that the definition of domestic violence should expand to accommodate this new knowledge, yet there is a key area which remains contested. This is illustrated by the following definitions, first from the Home Office and the second from Women's Aid:

> Domestic violence is any threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between adults who are or have been in a relationship, or between family members. It can affect anybody, regardless of their gender or sexuality. The violence can be psychological, physical, sexual or emotional. It can include 'honour-based violence', female genital mutilation, and forced marriage. (Home Office, 2009b)

> Domestic violence is physical, sexual, psychological or financial violence that takes place within an intimate or family-type relationship and that forms a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour. This can include forced marriage and so-called 'honour crimes'. Domestic violence may include a range of abusive behaviours, not all of which are in themselves inherently 'violent'. (Women's Aid, 2009)

In the Home Office definition, the focus is on an incident-based understanding of domestic violence. This makes sense from a criminal justice system perspective that requires the potential for investigation and evidence. However, such a focus means that the inclusion of behaviours other than physical and sexual violence is more difficult. An incident-based approach also underpins what is characterised as family violence by those researchers who rely on the Conflict Tactics Scale survey instrument (CTS). Use of this scale on random populations consistently shows that violence is extremely common within heterosexual couples and a resource used almost equally by women and men.

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Others have taken issue with this approach (e.g. Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Nazroo, 1995; Ristock, 2002) and point out what it omits: that is, the CTS, by focussing on strategies for resolving conflict in couples, ignores the differential impact on heterosexual women and men. As evidence demonstrates: women experience more severe and more long-lasting impacts at the hands of men than vice versa; there is underreporting of violence by men and over-reporting by women of their own violence; and the context and intent of violence are missing, so that retaliation, self-defence and protection of self, children and property are not accounted for. Johnson (2006) argues that there are, in fact, two groups researching different phenomena, with those using the CTS identifying common couple violence and others identifying what he calls intimate terrorism. Stark (2007), on the other hand, echoing the Women's Aid definition and drawing on earlier feminist work, argues that a focus on physical violence is a red herring, since the determining characteristic of domestic violence is a pattern of behaviours on the part of the perpetrator, the aim of which is to exert power and control over the victim/survivor. The type of behaviour should not be the focus of investigation, since this may never, or rarely, be physical. The focus instead should be on identifying the relationship-specific features of coercive control (Stark, 2007).

Definitions such as intimate terrorism and coercive control are extremely useful for charting a course through debates about defining and understanding domestic violence and they reinforce feminist arguments that have identified power and control rather than physical violence as being the defining features of domestic violence. They also facilitate an understanding of domestic violence that focuses not on separate incidents, but on a cumulative pattern of behaviours by perpetrators and impacts that may also transcend boundaries drawn by sexuality and gender. Other debates have called for the phenomenon to be called domestic abuse both to de-emphasise physical violence and to include the possibilities of other kinds of violence, such as emotional, financial and sexual. We prefer the term domestic violence, as it emphasises the impact of the experiences and keeps in mind the extremity of fear and risk that many victim/survivors live with. However, domestic violence and domestic abuse are the terms most popularly used and were, for that reason, adopted in our research to explore participants' experiences. Nevertheless, it became clear that, in the popular imagination, domestic violence conjures up a particular public story. Jamieson (1998:11) has argued that it is important to understand who are the tellers of public stories and their pervasive nature:

> Cumulatively, pervasive stories are inevitably consequential for both private and public life. They become representations that people cannot avoid working with at both a deep and surface level. Pervasive stories are a stock of narratives that anyone can draw on or distance themselves from when telling their own story . . . Stories also feed into both public and private lives when they coalesce into official views shaping public policies, laws and the distribution of resources.

Typically, argues Jamieson, pervasive public stories originate with people in powerful positions within powerful institutions. However, in relation to the public story about domestic violence, its origin has not been from within any powerful institutions, but the result of feminist activism and scholarship over several decades and, more recently, the coincidence of this with a generation of feminists and/or sympathisers within government. The outcomes have been both a story of success and a story of exclusion. The public story about domestic violence locates the phenomenon inside heterosexual relationships

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within a gendered victim/perpetrator dynamic (the stronger/bigger man controlling the weaker/smaller woman), and forefronts the physical nature of the violence. Ristock (2002) has argued that such dichotomous understandings of domestic violence prevent both discussions about those experiences that lie outside the defining binaries and also recognition of and support for those living with those experiences. Certainly, among those in same sex relationships, the pervasive public story has prevented many from recognising their experiences of domestic violence (e.g. Ristock, 2002; Donovan *et al*., 2006; Barnes, 2008).

Another aspect of the public story about domestic violence constructs the victim in particular ways that, we argue, also act to prevent recognition of domestic violence, particularly in same sex relationships. Others have pointed out how problematic the term 'victim' is in relation to heterosexual women who have experienced domestic violence, and the work of Campbell and colleagues (1998), and Campbell and Soeken (1999) has provided accounts of how many heterosexual women act with agency to address, resist, prevent and otherwise cope with the violence of their partners. Baker (2008) argues that the construction of victim as weak and resonant with femininity has an impact on heterosexual women who have experienced domestic violence to the extent that it influences their sense of self. Certainly, the respondent from whose account we drew this article's title, felt strongly that the term victim held negative connotations for him (a gay man) and we suggest that the term 'victim' is held by many – both women and men — to be a label that jars with their self perception. They resist the notion that they have been weak or passive. Elsewhere we have used the term 'victimised' to convey the sense that the person experiencing domestic violence is subject to the power and control of their partner but is able and does exert agency within the relationship (Hester, 2006). Here we use the term 'victim/survivor' to convey a similar notion, whilst mindful that the term 'victim' has tended to be linked to a criminal justice context and discourse.

Practices of love as emotional violence in domestically violent relationships

We argue that an essential aspect of domestic violence that occurs in the context of relationships, ostensibly entered into on the basis of consent and notions of love/emotion, has been ignored. Love for a partner and hope for the future of the relationship are amongst key reasons given by people in heterosexual and same sex relationships for staying in or returning to domestically violent relationships (e.g. Renzetti, 1992; Merrill and Wolfe, 2000; Donovan *et al*., 2006). It is our contention that practices of love and care are often embedded in these relationships such that victim/survivors receive contradictory messages from the perpetrator that nevertheless result in them being emotionally invested in the relationship and the perpetrator.

We have argued elsewhere (Donovan and Hester, 2009) that, regardless of sexuality and gender, domestically violent relationships share similar practices of love, including strategic declarations of love by the perpetrator, especially at crisis moments when the victim/survivor threatens to leave. There is also a disjuncture between the relationship model each partner is practising, wherein the perpetrator's model insists that the relationship is for them and has to be on their terms, whilst the victim/survivor's model is that of a relationship as a joint project with mutual care and support. These different models lead to different consequences for the perpetrator and victim/survivor. For example, intimate disclosure by a perpetrator results in the victim often acting to

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protect, defend and take care of them. Yet when intimate disclosure by the victim/survivor occurs, the information is used to control them further. Practices of love often result in victim/survivors staying in violent relationships because of a sense of loyalty to and responsibility for the care of the perpetrator and the relationship. Because of this, we would argue that practices of love are another aspect to the emotional violence experienced by victim/survivors, but difficult to recognise as such because they are not necessarily experienced negatively.

We have also argued that domestically violent relationships have two core rules: that the relationship is for the perpetrator and on their terms; and that the victim/survivor is responsible for the emotional care of the perpetrator and the relationship[2] and that these rules are established through whatever means the perpetrator is prepared to use (Donovan and Hester, 2009). Practices of love result in victim/survivors feeling able to explain and defend their partner's behaviour and construct themselves as 'stronger' than, and responsible for, their partner. Practices of love in this context are especially confounding for those in first same sex relationships, which are at particular risk for domestic violence (Ristock, 2002; Donovan *et al.*, 2006; Donovan and Hester, 2008).

The study

The research was a multi-method study comparing love and violence in heterosexual and same sex relationships. A national community survey of those in same sex relationships was conducted and attracted 746 useable questionnaires. Focus groups were undertaken separately with self-identified lesbians, gay men, heterosexual women and men; and interviews were carried out with 67 respondents, 44 of whom were self-identified lesbian/gay/ bisexual or queer (LGBQ) and 23 heterosexual (see McCarry *et al.*, 2008 for a discussion of methodology). Most of the LGBQ interview respondents were recruited from the survey and it is these accounts that we analyse here. In order to address issues of recognition and design as inclusive a survey as possible, domestic violence was not named as the topic of our study. Rather we invited respondents to take part in research exploring 'what happens when things go wrong in relationships' (Hester and Donovan, 2009 for the methodological rationale for the survey; McCarry *et al.*, 2008). Interview respondents were asked about a best and a worst relationship experience, but interviewers were led by respondents in how they wanted to address our questions. Using NVivo 7, we employed thematic data analysis, exploring similarities and differences across gender and sexuality. All the accounts of worst relationships were dependent on memory and hindsight because they had taken place in the respondents' pasts. In addition, the survey had sensitised respondents to issues related to violence in relationships and this, for some, had a cathartic impact as they realised that their experience constituted domestic violence (see also Kelly, 1988; Ristock, 2002). The relationships stories told were co-constructed by the interviewer and respondent (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996). The cumulative impact of these factors mean that whilst we do not make truth claims about the accounts, we would argue that they nonetheless provide relationship stories with 'a necessary element of knowledge of gendered lives and actual power relations' (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002: 127) and thus offer authentic insights into ways of understanding relationships.

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Barriers to recognition of domestic violence: public stories

Public stories about domestic violence

Most of the LGBQ respondents did not recognise their relationship experience as domestically violent at the time of the relationship. The reasons were predominantly related to the impact of public stories about domestic violence. Audrey is a lesbian in her fifties who identified her first same sex relationship as a domestically violent one which was exclusively emotionally violent. This excerpt illustrates the way in which the heternormativity surrounding public stories of domestic violence inhibited her ability to recognise what she was experiencing as domestic violence:

> I think that's another thing that happens in same sex relationships. It's about expectation. That we think it'll be different with a woman. That women will be nicer to each other, they'll treat each other with more respect. Well of course I, I know that they don't. I know that from my work. You know I work with domestic violence and you know dealt with people in same sex relationships but I think there is that expectation and it was one that I had and I think my friends had it and then when they began to see my distress felt they had to say something . . . then I thought 'yeah, you know, you've got to wake up. You do know this really Audrey. You know, you're just choosing to ignore it.' Because I wanted this relationship to be successful. I think I invested so much more in it, of myself!

For Audrey it was not only that domestic violence was associated with heterosexuality that resulted in her resistance to recognising the abuse but that, conversely, she least expected it in a lesbian relationship because of her expectations about how women might treat each other.

Typically, the lesbians interviewed experienced primarily emotionally violent relationships which contributed to their, at least initial, inability to recognise them as domestically violent. Valerie describes this, comparing her adult experience with her childhood experience of living with the domestic violence of her father:

> There was no physical fear, none at all. It was never violent, it was never abusive in the violent sense, it was all. It was, I don't know, it was easier to say yes than it was to say no and I'm not particularly confrontational. I'm not particul – I don't like arguing. I like to have quite a chilled, laid back life. 'Cos I think I went for the easy answer every time. I mean I grew up in a household where my dad was an abuser, he was a perpetrator so it's surprising that I didn't pick up on it to be honest but you just don't when you're in it, you don't realise until later do you? . . . I think if she'd ever raised her hand to me it would have been different because that is what I equate with my dad. . . . I'd made a conscious decision when my dad left, when I was 14, that no-one was ever going to hit me again so I think if she'd done something that directly it would have been over but she didn't and . . . at the time I loved her

Valerie explained that it was only since leaving this relationship she had realised the extent to which it was domestically violent.

The public story about domestic violence also constructs the victim as 'other' and several respondents describe how they resisted the use of the term 'victim' to describe their role in the relationship. Kenneth who is HIV+ talked about his response to completing the survey and having to contemplate the idea of being a victim of domestic violence:

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> I'd never really thought of myself as a victim of domestic abuse (laughs) . . . And I still, I hate the word 'victim.' I, it's one of those words that I will not have u-, you know an AIDS victim is [breathes out] like, you know, tattoo it on me please, but, 'cos I don't feel like a victim, 'cos I think victim is a very passive, allowing it to happen, although at the time I *was*, in that relationship. So it might be the right term for that, but it almost suggests you can't do anything about it.

Kenneth's association of 'victim' with ideas about passivity leaves him reluctant to identify his experience as domestic violence, because he finds it difficult to accept a construction of himself as a victim. Yet, in remembering his experiences he explains that at the time he entered the relationship, he had just lost his long-time partner to AIDs, was HIV+ himself and feeling 'vulnerable'. His domestically violent partner, also HIV+, was seventeen years younger, out of work and living a chaotic lifestyle of drug and alcohol use. Kenneth, felt 'lucky' to have such a young, attractive man apparently interested in him, and lived with physical, sexual and emotional violence over an 18 month period.

Amy's more sophisticated knowledge about domestic violence led her to be vociferous in her denial of herself as a victim of her partner's controlling behaviours:

> I: So when you say that there were issues of control . . . what aspects of the relationship were they to do with?
>
> Amy: I think the place where she'd be most vicious would be in a, in a verbal assault, really, and especially, as I say, when they'd just come completely out of the blue. Um, and she'd say such things to me as, you know, about who I was going out with, who my friends were, um, about what sort of job I should do, the amount of time I spent with family or not, um. Everything, really.
>
> I: And did that have an impact on you? Did it make you stop seeing people as often?
>
> Amy: No, it had the reverse effect, because I thought, you know, I'm, I'm very familiar with domestic violence and all the issues of power and control and the wheels and the models and all that sort of thing and I thought 'no, no, no, no. Not going there. Not doing it'. And equally she should've known a lot better because of the sort of work that she did.

Again, Amy's experience had been of predominantly emotional violence and indeed the relationship finally ended after three years when her partner committed a serious physical assault on Amy. Until this point, Amy felt that she was strong in the relationship and had a responsibility to stay and support her partner.

Practices of love

For those respondents who had experienced domestically violent first same sex relationships, their lack of knowledge about what same sex relationships could be like, what they could expect, or what love might be in a same sex relationship, were often given in explanation for their lack of recognition, at the time, of the relationship as domestically violent. Edward had his first same sex relationship, which was domestically violent, when he was sixteen years old:

> I: So did you love him?
>
> Edward: No! [laughs] No!

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> I: How did you know that?
>
> Edward: Well I didn't know at the time.
>
> I: Ok.
>
> Edward: Because if I knew that at the time then I would have stopped it. I think.
>
> I: So at the time you did love him? You believed that you loved him?
>
> Edward: We-ell, I don't know whether I did or didn't. I didn't love him and I didn't not love him. At the time I didn't think I knew what love was, so that was my excuse, I think. And I was waiting to see if it was or wasn't. I think.
>
> I: And did he love you? . . .
>
> Edward: I would most probably say that he did love me. But then again I wouldn't know. He was very protective over me, very jealous. (pause) But then again, I would have assumed that that was love at the time, but now I don't think that that is, so.

Edward remained in this relationship, on and off, for the best part of two and a half years and was only able to end it when he moved to another part of the country for university. This move did not end the violence, however, as he then suffered post separation abuse in the form of texting harassment and stalking for another six months. Edward eloquently explains how his lack of experience meant that on the one hand he could not answer a question about whether or not he loved his partner and on the other how he now questions his partner's declarations of love which at the time were evidenced by love practices that normalised behaviours explained by jealousy and protectiveness.

Practices of love also led respondents to believe that they were, at least, emotionally stronger than their domestically violent partner. This left them not only with a self-perception of strength, but a sense of responsibility towards both the relationship and the other partner. Barbara was eighteen years old and described a domestically violent relationship that had ended during the month before the interview. Here she describes her understanding of what is to be expected in an intimate relationship:

> I think with all relationships somebody, one person looks after the other person, I'd – there's always like one person who gets looked after and one person who does the looking after and I think I was that person. I think I like totally looked after her 'cos she was so vulnerable and like unstable, I was just, I had to sort of keep her on track all the time. No matter what was going on with me I had to sort of, be, like, the strong one for her. Keep her on track all the time.

For Barbara, practices of love that prescribe a relationship dynamic based on a dichotomy of strength/neediness enabled her to construct herself as the stronger person in the relationship which gave her a sense of responsibility to take care of the domestically violent partner.

Finally, returning to Amy's account, she too felt a sense, not only of strength but of responsibility to show loyalty and care for her domestically violent partner. Here she explains why she stayed in the relationship as long as she did:

> I: But you stayed to support her and see if things could be shifted around?
>
> Amy: Yeah.

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> I: So you sort of felt there was something worth it.
>
> Amy: Yeah ... I thought ... the, the nice side of her outweighed the ugly side of her, for want of a better word. Um. Yeah, and I felt like it wouldn't be fair for me to say, 'oh, right, I've seen this behaviour, it's really ugly, I'm going, bye,' after a couple of years or something. It wasn't fair at all. So I did feel responsible to try and help her out and try and look after her and try and support her ... But also I think I felt a greater responsibility because it was the first time in all of that time that she'd ever disclosed the alcohol use and the events which led to the alcohol use. You know, and a lot of that stuff was around abuse. So it was very difficult.

Disclosing intimacy results in victim/survivors believing they have a responsibility to protect and take care of domestically violent partners. The revelation of painful histories constructs perpetrators as victims of their past, compels victim/survivors to a sense of loyalty to protect the perceived vulnerability of the perpetrator and constructs a sense of themselves as being responsible for the care and nurture of the perpetrator. Practices of love that are embedded with beliefs and feelings about commitment, loyalty, and care for partners elicit confused and contradictory understandings about domestically violent relationships. They also make them more difficult to recognise as such, because the public story about what a victim of domestic violence looks like or how they are supposed to behave does not fit with the self-perception of the victim/survivors.

Conclusion

The accounts of those in same sex relationships suggest that not all those who experience domestic violence may recognise it at the time, because of the impact of public stories about domestic violence and practices of love. The public story about domestic violence that privileges physical violence, whilst being useful for the criminal justice system which requires evidence, can also inadvertently prevent recognition of domestic violence in relationships where physical violence is rarely or never used. We also argue that emotional violence should be understood to include practices of love that can: obscure recognition of domestic violence especially in first same sex (and possibly heterosexual) relationships; reinforce the victim/survivor as carer of the perpetrator and relationship; and construct the victim/survivor as stronger than the perpetrator. The relationship rule that the victim/survivor is responsible for the emotion work in the relationship and care of the perpetrator and relationship can result in the victim/survivor constructing themselves as emotionally stronger; and responsible for 'fixing' the relationship and perpetrator. Practices of love are most confounding in relation to recognising domestically violent practices, as they are not necessarily experienced as negative and often persuade otherwise wary victim/survivors that the perpetrator's behaviours can be forgiven or at least explained and understood.

Finally we suggest that work needs to be done in framing policy and practice to re-shape public stories about domestic violence such that those in same sex relationships who need to can recognise their own experiences; power and control is emphasised, so as to allow a range of behaviours to be identified as establishing relationship rules; the self perceptions of strength of victim/survivors are recognised; and practices of love are included as part of emotional violence.

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Notes

1 This article is based on an ESRC project comparing love and violence in same sex and heterosexual relationships RES-000-23-0650.

2 In the context where love and consent are not defining characteristics of the relationship, it is possible to think of the relationship rules being that the relationship is for the family/community/perpetrator(s) and that the victim/survivor is responsible for the care of the values and particular interpretations of cultural norms and/or faith of the family/community/perpetrator.

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