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Queering Narratives of Domestic Violence and Abuse

Catherine Donovan · Rebecca Barnes

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Victims and/or Perpetrators?

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Praise for *Queering Narratives of Domestic Violence and Abuse*

“Drawing on an innovative methodology, Donovan and Barnes make an important contribution to the field with a discussion of relevance to practitioners, policymakers and researchers alike, critiquing assumptions and binaries that have real world consequences, not least the misapplied label of ‘mutual abuse’. The significance of this book is that Donovan and Barnes both advance the LGB and T literature while challenging us all to rethink some of the assumptions that underpin the wider domestic abuse field.”

—James Rowlands, *LGBT domestic abuse campaigner and independent consultant, and former commissioner*

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1

Introduction

Abstract Chapter 1 sets out the central concerns of this book and introduces the key conceptual tools on which our sociological analysis draws. We briefly review existing research on intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA) in LGB and/or T+ people’s relationships and explain why we do not dismiss feminist theorising in making sense of this. Our central argument, informed by Michael Johnson’s typology, is that there are different kinds of IPVA and that it is essential in research and practice to distinguish between them. We unpack how the impact of the public story of domestic violence and abuse means that IPVA in LGB and/or T+ people’s relationships is often perceived to be mutual abuse. We extend this public story to include how a binary of ideal victim/perpetrator inhibits those who are being victimised and who enact what we call ‘space for reaction’—the range of violent and non-violent behaviours which victimised partners might use in response to coercively controlling partners—from recognising their victimisation. We outline how our analysis is both intersectional and ecological, accounting for not only the multiple identities inhabited by participants, but also the wider social and cultural context through which structural inequalities are reproduced.

Keywords Cisnormativity • Coercive control • Domestic violence and abuse • Ecological analysis • Feminist theory • Heteronormativity • Intimate partner violence and abuse • Lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender • Intersectionality • Minority stress • Mutual abuse • Perpetrators • Public story of domestic violence and abuse • Typologies of domestic violence and abuse

1.1 Introduction

This book explores the use of physical violence and other behaviours that could be perceived to be abusive in the relationships of lesbians, gay men, bisexual women and men, and/or transgender women and men and non-binary gender and/or genderqueer people (LGB and/or T+). The Coral Project is a mixed-methods research project carried out in the United Kingdom (UK) to find out ‘what you do when things go wrong in your relationship’, involving a national community survey of LGB and/or T+ people and follow-up interviews with volunteers from the survey. Interviews also took place with providers of both mandatory and voluntary perpetrator interventions for heterosexual, ostensibly cisgender men, and focus groups with a range of practitioner groups providing what we broadly call ‘relationships services’ (Donovan et al. 2014). This book focusses on key findings from the survey and interviews with LGB and/or T+ participants. We believe that our work is a reminder about the instability of research about intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA) that relies on a narrow incident- or act-based approach, rather than research that attempts to provide a more holistic exploration of the relationships within which IPVA occurs. We are concerned with the different stories that can be told about IPVA depending on the data collected and the analysis undertaken.

Before we outline the structure and key themes of the book, a note about terminology is required. Whilst we use the term LGB and/or T+ to include the diversity of sexuality and gender identities that exist and to recognise that not all trans+ people identify as LGB, when discussing other authors’ work we use their chosen terminology, such as ‘same-sex

relationships'. The phrase 'violence and other behaviours that could be perceived to be abusive' indicates our view that context, meanings, motives and impacts are crucial to making sense of these behaviours in an intimate relationship. Having made this point, and for brevity, throughout the rest of the book we sometimes refer to violence and 'abusive' behaviours, placing 'abusive' in scare quotes to remind the reader that the judgement of whether the behaviours are abusive is contingent. We use the acronym IPVA to refer to all violent and 'abusive' behaviours that might be experienced or enacted in adult intimate relationships. Throughout this book we also refer to domestic violence and abuse (DVA) as the most impactful and serious form of IPVA: what Johnson (2008) would call coercively controlling violence (CCV) and Stark (2007) coercive control. We use this term because it is the most often used in the UK context and because it aligns with the England and Wales Home Office definition (Home Office 2013). However, whilst the Home Office definition includes an incident-based approach to defining DVA, we focus on that part of the definition that depicts a 'pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse' (Home Office 2013, p. 2) and restrict our concern to adult intimate relationships.

A core argument underpinning this book is that safe and best practice responses are best informed by recognising that there are different kinds of IPVA. Below, we outline the typology of IPVA that we have used as the basis of our analysis. The field of IPVA has been dominated by a focus on the IPVA perpetrated by ostensibly heterosexual, cisgender men against ostensibly heterosexual, cisgender women. By cisgender we mean individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex to which they were assigned at birth. We say 'ostensibly' because, typically, in the mainstream research on IPVA, neither the gender identity nor indeed even the sexuality of either the person reporting victimisation or their partner is asked about (e.g. Walby et al. 2017); thus assumptions are made that data refers to heterosexual IPVA (Donovan and Barnes 2019). This book therefore queers mainstream research about IPVA by exposing its widespread heteronormativity and cisnormativity and by being clear about when participants' sexuality and/or gender identity are known or assumed.

Hereafter, we use 'HC women' to mean heterosexual, cisgender women and 'HC men' to refer to heterosexual, cisgender men.

1.2 Key Concerns of This Book

Two major concerns run through this book: how knowledge and explanatory frameworks about IPVA are produced. There are obvious overlaps in that methodological approaches are informed by researchers' disciplinary origins, which provide particular epistemological and ontological approaches towards meaning-making and knowledge production about the world. Arguably, the production of knowledge about IPVA has developed as the case for a more sociological and holistic approach to understanding IPVA has been successfully made. Indeed, a pioneer of research about IPVA in lesbian relationships, Janice Ristock, evidenced the different ways in which IPVA might be enacted in her Canadian qualitative research before the idea of typologies of violence had really taken hold in the mainstream field. Her post-structuralist feminist analysis led her to critique the binaries of perpetrator/victim, male/female as irrelevant for her participants, whose accounts demonstrated how individuals might be both perpetrators and victims in the same and/or across different relationships, and that violence might be motivated for many reasons, including to control, defend, retaliate, for revenge. In a 'refusal of the social science/social service drive to create all-explanatory models', she resisted any attempt to theorise a 'new model for understanding lesbian relationship violence' (Ristock 2002, p. xi). Rather, she insisted that each case should be taken as an individual relationship experience that should not be expected to fit a pattern. We similarly resist any attempts to apply heteronormative, cisnormative theorising uncritically to the experiences of LGB and/or T+ people; however, we do intend to explore the ways in which a typology might provide a basis for operationalising the knowledge Ristock produced about the limitations of existing binaries.

In the mainstream, cisnormative, heteronormative IPVA field, quantitative methodologies have expanded from simply counting violent and/or 'abusive' acts (prevalence) and their frequencies (incidence). Identifying behavioural or social factors in the partner who has been victimised and/

or the violent or ‘abusive’ partner that correlate with their victimisation or perpetration, measuring the impacts of those acts, including a wider range of acts, and exploring the motives behind those acts (Hamby 2009) are now also considered. However, we would still argue that these methodologies are limited by a presumption in the survey design of IPVA as being constructed through incidents and essentialised categories of victim and perpetrator.

Our second concern is the explanatory frameworks that exist for IPVA, which both derive from and underpin the methodological approaches taken to produce knowledge about IPVA. Whilst this book is focussed on IPVA in the relationships of LGB and/or T+ people, our theoretical and methodological journeys originate in feminist analyses of violence against HC women. Theorising about IPVA typically comes from sociological or psychological disciplinary origins, including attempts to combine the two (e.g. Heise 1998). Feminist-informed theorising typically foregrounds sociological explanations (Johnson and Ferraro 2000), problematising gender (Johnson et al. 2014), gender orders and regimes (Walby 1990; Wilcox 2006), family, intimacy and power (Dobash and Dobash 1979). In other words, feminist sociological approaches explore the relationship contexts within which IPVA occurs, rather than only focussing on the incidents. We endeavour to bring this lens to IPVA in the relationships of LGB and/or T+ people.

1.3 Researching IPVA in the Relationships of LGB and/or T+ People: Stories of Invisibility

Whilst research on IPVA in the relationships of LGB and/or T+ people has increased, it remains marginal in the field of IPVA, and only recently have large random population samples started to make LGB respondents visible (see Donovan and Hester 2014; Messinger 2017 for overviews). This is a promising development as it opens up the possibilities of collecting more robust data (albeit only about victimisation, to date). However, often general population surveys tell a frustratingly partial story due to

heteronormative, cisnormative assumptions being made about respondents' sexuality and gender identity, while typically the gender and/or sexuality of their partner(s) are not captured (see also Duke and Davidson 2009; Head and Milton 2014). For example, recently the Office for National Statistics (ONS) analysed figures on 'partner abuse' from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). They focussed only on the women participants (cisgender identity is assumed in the survey) and analysed their responses by sexuality. Bisexual women (10.9%) and lesbians (8%) were more likely to report partner abuse than HC women (6%) (ONS 2018; mirroring Walters et al. 2013 in the USA). Not knowing the gender or sexuality of the partners who perpetrated partner abuse leaves us having to speculate about the disproportionately higher rates of partner abuse amongst LB women. It is possible that many of the perpetrators are HC men (see Ristock 2011 and Donovan and Hester 2014 for similar speculations about other, similar research). The age of the sample might also be implicated since younger people are both more likely to report IPVA (ONS 2018) and to identify as bisexual (ONS 2015).

Turning to research targeting LGB and/or T+ people, most of this has either focussed on lesbians and gay men or in other ways defined its intended target sample as people in 'same-sex' relationships, regardless of the sexuality and/or gender identity of the participants. A similar lack of attention to the sexuality and/or gender identity of the partner being reported on is found in this research (see Edwards et al. 2015). Any particularities of experience for bisexual people are rarely made visible (Head and Milton 2014). Similarly, trans+ people are rarely visible in research on IPVA; however, emerging studies indicate even higher rates of victimisation than among cisgender LGB people (Bachman and Gooch 2018; Guadalupe-Diaz and Jasinski 2017; Messinger 2017).

Similar methodological problems exist in research on IPVA in the relationships of LGB and/or T+ people as in the mainstream. Systematic reviews of the literature on IPVA in same-sex relationships (Kimmes et al. 2019), IPVA between men who have sex with men (Finneran and Stephenson 2012), psychological aggression in LGB intimate relationships (Mason et al. 2014) and IPVA amongst LGB populations (Edwards et al. 2015) all highlight inconsistencies in the definitions of violence and