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Domestic violence and abuse in lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGB and/or T) relationships

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Sexualities

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We have come a long way since the pioneering voices from within North America and the UK raised awareness about, and explored through research, the existence of domestic violence and abuse in, originally, lesbian and gay relationships. These included the first edited collection of work about ‘lesbian battering’, collating the voices of US grass-roots activists and practitioners (Lobel, 1986); the landmark US survey of violence in lesbian relationships by Renzetti (1992); the pivotal work, again from the USA, of Island and Letellier (1991) on violence in gay male relationships; and the ground-breaking edition in the ‘Lesbians Talk’ series by Taylor and Chandler (1995) in the UK on lesbians’ violent relationships. Since then the field has expanded and can be made sense of in terms of the methodologies used and the disciplinary stances of scholars in this field. In the main the approach has been psychological and quantitative, exploring correlations between demographic variables and experiences of violence and abuse as victims/survivors or perpetrators. There has been very little work conducted from a sociological perspective, albeit with some notable exceptions (Barnes, 2008, 2013a, 2013b; Donovan and Hester, 2011a, 2011b, 2014; Ristock, 2002). Notably though, this sociological body of work is gradually growing, along with research which adopts more nuanced, qualitative approaches. In addition, our understanding of the complexities involved in defining the scope of the field has improved, in parallel with similar developments in research on abusive heterosexual, cisgender relationships. This has included the problematisation of what domestic violence is and how it can be

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identified and ‘measured’ (e.g. Hester and Donovan, 2009; Hester et al., 2010; Johnson, 2006); and the methodological challenges of ensuring that questionnaires and recruitment literature stay as open as possible to the experiences of those who do not necessarily identify with dominant community identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans but also who might not necessarily recognise their relationship experience as violent or abusive (e.g. McCarry et al., 2008). Moreover, from beginnings which focused almost exclusively on lesbian, and to a much lesser extent, gay male, relationships, an increasing diversity of voices have been heard and included in this growing literature and this is reflected in this special issue. This has included documentation and analysis of the experiences of bisexual, Black and/or trans victims/survivors, as well as the development of bodies of research outside of western contexts (e.g. Bornstein et al., 2006; Lehavot et al., 2010; Turell and Herrmann, 2008). Despite these promising directions, the development of an inclusive and wholly intersectional analysis of violence and abuse as experienced or perpetrated by partners in relationships which can be considered non-normative with regard to gender and/or sexuality remains in its infancy, and many others voices – those of non-binary individuals, those from within indigenous populations, those who are socio-economically marginalised – remain silenced and under-theorised.

Yet, this literature has not sufficiently reflected the parallel growth of more complex, fluid and subjective ways of theorising and claiming (or indeed rejecting) gender identities, sexualities and intimacies. Consequently, domestic violence and abuse in LGB and/or T relationships is often problematically regarded as synonymous with ‘same-sex’ domestic violence; survey instruments almost exclusively assume monogamous relationships; and studies are described as narrowly focusing on ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’ or even ‘homosexual’ populations, or conversely through applying catch-all terms such as ‘gender and sexually diverse’. The editors acknowledge that the attempts to be as inclusive as possible in research methodologies have led to academic terms such as ‘gender and sexually diverse communities’ to describe those who have taken part in research. Yet, we would argue that such terms are not (yet) in common usage in ‘real life’ settings and that politically it is also important to retain the language most often used within those real life settings, admittedly which are nationally and ethnically boundaried, which is why we adopt LGB and/or T for this issue even whilst we recognise that this might feel exclusive of those who identify as queer, Two-Spirited, pansexual and so on. We also recognise that the language of identities is an ever-changing state of being and that these terms might well be replaced over time. Thus, we are not using them to ‘fix’ or reify any identities but rather to reflect the dominant usage at this point in time.

Each article in this edition provides an early discussion about the terms used, and most adopt what has become the traditional LGB and/or T umbrella – as we do in this introduction and in our own article – as the most easily recognisable ‘tag’ whilst acknowledging that these terms are not necessarily easily aligned with by the multitude of individuals who do not conform to heteronormative, cisnormative models of gender and/or sexuality. There is also a consensus amongst the authors

of this special issue that domestic violence is an issue of power and control and that this provides a framework for understanding that domestic violence involves more than only an isolated incident of physical violence but rather should be understood as a pattern of behaviours that can be physical, emotional, financial or sexual in nature – including behaviours that constitute identity abuse, such as threatening to out a partner or, in the case of trans survivors, deliberately misgendering.

In this special issue there are two key themes: one concerns methodology, and the other, emergent directions in this still under-researched field. First, methodologically the articles that discuss empirical data do so using a qualitative approach. Whilst this was not planned, we make no apology for it as this allows for very different types of discussion about experiences of DVA that interrogate the complexities in experiences and in understanding abusive relationship dynamics. The second theme lies in the substantive concerns which each article centres on: from practitioners reflecting on how they might address violent/abusive partners in LGB and/or T relationships, to relationships between violence and abuse in LGB and/or T relationships and between abusive partners in those relationships and their companion animals, to experiences of trans survivors which challenge existing gender theories on domestic violence and abuse, to the relationship between migration and mobility, state violence and experiences of domestic violence and abuse of Two-Spirited LGBTQ people in Canada, to a critical interrogation of Australian Violence Against Women policy. The range of this special edition is one of its strengths with examination and integration of practice, policy, theory: a commitment evident in all of the contributions is a desire for social change and the development of policy and practice which challenge oppression, marginalisation and the invisibility of LGB and/or T survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse. In addition, each of the articles is attuned to the need for the continued academic development of this field of work through the identification of new agendas for research as well as on contributions to the better understanding of how domestic violence and abuse is conceptualised and connected to other social practices such as help-seeking, state violence, oppression, marginalisation and homo/bi/transphobia.

It is perhaps also worth briefly discussing what this special issue does not do, not so much to apologise but in order to acknowledge and reinforce its strengths whilst pointing to its limitations. Implicit throughout the articles is the assumption that there is no longer any doubt that domestic violence and abuse takes place in relationships where at least one partner identifies as LGB and/or T. None of the articles in this edition take the stance of wanting to prove its existence, nor do they deal with prevalence. For this too we make no apology. There is now a wealth of research that has achieved both of these goals (see Donovan and Hester, 2014) and we believe there is no further need to make this point.

The other agenda not explicitly addressed in this edition is exploring why some partners behave abusively in LGB and/or T relationships. This question is fundamental and leads to further questions about the utility of feminist theoretical

approaches to violence against (heterosexual) women. Within the field, most have taken the view that a feminist approach is irrelevant because of its focus on problematising masculinity within a context of patriarchy. For example, pioneers such as Island and Letellier (1991) argue that the feminist approach is itself heterosexist and that violence and abuse in gay male relationships is the result of the psychopathology of abusive gay men. Most recently, others have adopted a similar approach to problematising the broader social context of homo/bi/transphobia but researching the impact of this more psychologically on individual behaviours and relationships dynamics. Here, the stresses of living within such a context are argued by some to lead to perpetration (Carvalho et al., 2011; Edwards and Sylaska, 2013), which, as Donovan has pointed out (2015, and Donovan and Hester, 2014), is the converse impact to the feminist approach, which argues that structural oppression leads to victimisation. In addition, Donovan's work emphasises that the methodologies employed discover correlative relationships, which may then be misrepresented or misinterpreted as being causal. Further, this research has tended to use definitions of domestic violence and abuse that are vaguely defined but 'measured' by a participant indicating that they have used one from a list of potentially violent/abusive behaviours, without seeking to understand what the motive for using that behaviour was: in other words, whether it was meant to punish, control a partner or whether it was meant to defend the participant from an abusive partner (e.g. Carvalho et al., 2011; Edwards and Sylaska, 2013). Other, mostly psychological, research adopting this more positivistic, individualistic approach has explored alternative correlative factors such as alcohol and/or substance use, attachment, fusion, and other psychological factors where again distinctions between correlation and causation have not always been clear (e.g. Kelly et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2012). Given that all of these factors can be observed amongst those who are victims, perpetrators or neither, there remains a lacuna in our understanding of why some LGB and/or T partners behave abusively towards their partners, while the majority do not.

A smaller but growing approach to exploring why domestic violence and abuse occurs within LGB and/or T relationships adopts more sociological approaches that explore the influence of societal factors on social and intimate/relationship practices. Some also critique feminist approaches. Notably, Ristock (who also has an article in this issue) interrogates the usefulness of feminist approaches that can lead to a reifying of binaries – perpetrator/victim which she did not find in her ground-breaking qualitative study of lesbians' experiences of domestic violence and abuse (Ristock, 2002). Donovan and Hester's (2014) work using sociological approaches made three key points. First, they found evidence in their study comparing love and violence in heterosexual and same-sex relationships for domestic violence and abuse being similarly constituted in relationships of power and control as feminists have argued. Second, they drew attention to the ways in which practices of love were infused into (abusive) relationships organised around binary roles of care/responsibility by the survivor and decision-making/setting the terms of the relationship by the perpetrator reflecting heteronormatively gendered ideas about

intimate, relationships. Third, whilst they critiqued the debates about minority stress they did find evidence for the impacts of heterosexism in the barriers to help-seeking for survivors of domestic violence in LGB and/or T relationships (as was also subsequently found in the work of Donovan et al., 2014 on help-seeking of those using violent/abusive relationships in LGB and/or T relationships). Along with others such as Ristock (2002), Irwin (2006) and Barnes (2013a), Donovan and Hester (2011b, 2014) found that survivors rarely seek help from formal agencies such as the police or specialist domestic violence services because of their fears of not being believed, their experiences being minimised, or because they feared experiencing homo/bi/transphobia from professionals/practitioners. Donovan and Hester write about there being a public story of domestic violence that constitutes the problem as one of heterosexual women for heterosexual men, as being one of physical violence and of being about a particular presentation of gender – the bigger, ‘stronger’, embodied man being physically violent towards the smaller, ‘weaker’, embodied woman. The public story can also be interrogated as conjuring an image of white, able-bodied heterosexual women as victims of white able-bodied heterosexual men. Such a public story makes it difficult for other accounts of domestic violence and abuse to be told and to be heard. It can make it more difficult to believe that men (and this will also depend on their sexuality, whether they are able-bodied or not, their social class and their ‘race’ and ethnic identity, as well as their age) can be victimised or that women (and this will also depend on their sexuality, whether they are able-bodied or not, their social class and their ‘race’ and ethnic identity, as well as their age) can be violent. That story can also, as Ristock has argued, act to reinforce the binary that associates survivor with heterosexual femininity and women and perpetrator with heterosexual masculinity and men. Barnes’ (2008) qualitative work on ‘woman-to-woman’ violence unpacked the implications of the public story in exploring the ways in which women struggled to find a language to describe what they had experienced. Not being able to give a name to experiences can compound the sense of isolation felt in an abusive relationship and again, can act as a barrier to help-seeking.

The core differences between these two broad approaches are that the more psychological and/or quantitative studies centre the individual intimate partner(s) and their behaviours as the focus for interrogation whilst the more sociological and/or qualitative studies centre the broader social influences as the focus for interrogation. The former tend to responsibilise the individual whilst the latter tend to responsibilise the societal contexts within which those individuals live. This issue contains articles that further flesh out the social contexts in which LGB and/or T relationships are lived out in order to provide a broader set of narratives about what it is about a society, its institutions, its economy and its dominant ideologies that lead to situations in which domestic violence and abuse can take place, apparently with impunity.

Kate Seymour’s work is the first article that begins this collection, taking as her starting point Australia’s *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children*. The critique of this policy document brings to the fore the ways in which

policy can reinforce the public story of domestic violence and abuse – albeit unintentionally – and thus reinforces barriers to recognition and help-seeking for those whose experiences are not visible in current policy. Seymour’s argument is also that whilst the Australian National Plan excludes ‘certain bodies, identities and experiences’, others’ experiences are prioritised and constituted as warranting sympathetic and urgent responses.

In their article focusing on the experiences of Indigenous Two-Spirit LGBTQ people in Canada, Janice Ristock, Art Zoccole, Lisa Passante and Jonathon Potskin continue a discussion about how the state is implicated in the violence and abuse experienced by its citizens. Primarily focusing on their experiences of migration and mobility, Ristock et al. found all too often that the young people’s accounts were infused with experiences of domestic violence resulting from structural factors such as homelessness, unemployment and poverty, but also from the lasting imprint of particular historical racist state policies upon Canadian indigenous peoples such as forced adoption. Ristock et al. conclude that in order to understand why domestic violence occurs, we have to understand the broader social structural factors that shape the life trajectories and opportunities of members of particular social groups.

In their article, Catherine Donovan and Rebecca Barnes focus not only on the impact of the public story on provision for the abusive partners in LGB and/or T relationships, but also on the impact of discourses of sameness and difference that have been successfully deployed in LGB and/or T campaigns for legal equality. Donovan and Barnes explore the perspectives of practitioners involved in the design and/or delivery of domestic violence perpetrator interventions (primarily for heterosexual men) regarding how they have or would work with perpetrators of violence and abuse in LGB and/or T relationships. Their views revealed a tension between commonly adhering to notions of equality and sameness, whilst also problematising gender and sexuality in abusive LGB and/or T relationships. As either a focus on sameness or difference exclusively would arguably inhibit effective, safe and inclusive responses to this largely hidden group of perpetrators, they argue, there is a need for a more nuanced approach.

In Michaela Rogers’ article the discussion and problematising of the gendered approach to domestic violence and abuse is further interrogated through exploring trans accounts of domestic violence and abuse. The point is made cogently that current theorising is biased towards cisgender experiences and are heteronormative, meaning that trans survivors sit outside of the long-running debate regarding gender symmetry and asymmetry of domestic violence. This, Rogers argues, further invisibilises trans people’s experiences. Rogers also offers important insights into how transphobia and, with reference to Serano (2007), ‘transmisogyny’, shapes the types of abuse perpetrated towards trans partners, with abusive tactics being used to undermine, ridicule and restrict trans survivors’ self-expression and understanding of their gender identity.

Finally, the article by Nik Taylor, Heather Fraser and Damien Riggs sets out a new terrain for exploration. Their work, underpinned by Critical Animal Studies

and intersectional feminism, points to the need for exploring the links between violence against companion animals and domestic violence in LGB and/or T relationships. Given that the evidence is amassing with regard to domestically violent heterosexual relationships, they make the case that this is an area for investigation within LGB and/or T relationships. Evidence is presented for why companion animals may play an even more salient role in the lives of LGB and/or T individuals, especially those who have experienced familial rejection or are socially isolated. It follows then that for LGB and/or T survivors of domestic violence and abuse who also live with companion animals, there may be further structural and affective barriers to leaving abusive relationships.

In her qualitative work on woman-to-woman abuse, Barnes (2013b) argued that amongst some communities of women having sex and/or relationships with women there are narrative legacies that derive from a branch of radical feminism that idealised relationships (sexual and non-sexual) between women as the only means of achieving love, safety and egalitarianism in a patriarchal society. In these (theoretical) relationships it was argued that there would be no inequalities of gender or oppressive power relations, and only the positive qualities associated with femininity: care, love, nurture, peace-loving, and so on. The work in this special edition provides further evidence that intimate relationships between women or men, whether they are cisgender or transgender, can be differently gendered and unequal (Rogers). Power and control as the defining features of domestically violent and abusive relationships are not conditional on the enactment of heterosexual femininity and heterosexual masculinity, though dominant ideologies about intimate love might be influenced by a heteronormative construction of relationship roles reflecting heteronormative gender binaries (Barnes, 2013b; Donovan and Hester, 2014). However, in addition to offering insights into the perceived and enacted dynamics of abusive LGB and/or T relationships, these articles highlight the role and power of the state in perpetuating inequalities that impact on LGB and/or T survivors and perpetrators. This includes how domestic violence might be both understood and shaped by the state and its policies – not just on domestic violence specifically (Seymour), but also on specifically targeted groups of people constituted as problematic because of their ‘race’ (Ristock et al.) as well as other policies shaping help-seeking such as the provision of perpetrator services (Donovan and Barnes). This issue also opens up discussion about new areas for research such as the links between violence and abuse aimed at companion animals and that experienced in LGB and/or T relationships (Taylor et al.).

Too often in the (heterosexual and LGB and/or T) domestic violence and abuse literature, the object of analysis is restricted to the intimate partners and, sometimes, their children, and the abuse which occurs is the main ‘problem’ at hand. What this special issue draws attention to, critically, is the multiple oppressions that surround the experience of violence and abuse in LGB and/or T relationships: the violence and abuse in the relationship, past and present oppression from families, peers and strangers; structural factors which render LGB and/or T oppression invisible, insignificant, or which reinforce its perpetuation – and intersecting experiences of

oppression whereby individuals' multiple identities can compound (or, whilst not documented in these articles, relieve) their isolation and marginalisation. The impacts and consequences of these multiple, intersecting experiences of oppression are multi-layered, having implications for the abusive tactics which perpetrators may deploy, survivors' perceptions and recognition of their victimisation; and the availability and accessibility of informal and formal help.

As gender identities, sexualities and intimacies continue to diversify, analysis of domestic violence and abuse at the margins – and indeed at the margins of the margins – must continue. In addition to the emergent directions showcased by this special issue, there is a need, amongst others, to examine the relationship experiences of those with non-binary gender identities, as well as building on the very small amount of literature focusing on minority ethnic LGB and/or T populations. The continued growth of research is critical so that LGB and/or T experiences cease to be silenced and can instead be more thoroughly documented and theorised. Further, the recognition of multi-layered oppressions must give rise to policy and practice responses which in turn are multi-layered and not only seek to challenge domestic violence and abuse in all relationships, but also seek to transform the wider social contexts which hide, condone and compound LGB and/or T people's experiences of domestic violence and abuse.

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