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Bytheway, S. & Stephens-Lewis, D. (2024). Heteronormative discourse: Therapist social constructions of intimate partner violence in queer relationships. *Feminism & Psychology,* doi: 10.1177/09593535241235462

Article

Heteronormative discourse: Therapist social constructions of intimate partner violence in queer relationships

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Abstract

Researchers have suggested the victim/perpetrator paradigm for understanding intimate partner violence (IPV) is limited when considering queer relationships. Instead, some propose a post-structural feminist approach as better suited for understanding the complexities involved. However, in the UK this approach is rarely adopted. We therefore put a post-structural feminist approach to research into practice. Despite IPV occurring in queer relationships at similar or higher levels compared to heterosexual relationships, queer individuals rarely use mainstream IPV services, owing to real and perceived barriers, and access local therapy services instead. However, outside of queer-specific services in city-centre areas there is little knowledge of the approaches used, or outcomes achieved by these therapeutic services. Our research contributes to addressing this knowledge gap. We investigate how therapists make sense of IPV in queer relationships, conducting five semi-

structured interviews with therapists working in a small-town/rural settings in Southwest England. Despite claims of inclusivity and liberal humanist values, our Foucauldian discourse analysis highlights the dominance of a heteronormative discourse in the therapists' accounts, and shows how heterosexual privilege is embedded in a range of discourses deployed. In light of these findings, we explore implications for practice and areas for future research in this under-researched area.

Key Words

Intimate partner violence, queer relationships, therapy, discourse, United Kingdom

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Whilst intimate partner violence (IPV) occurs in queer relationships with similar or higher prevalence as compared with heterosexual relationships in the United Kingdom (UK), it remains largely unacknowledged by public and professionals (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). This oversight is reflected in a paucity of queer-specific services (Donovan et al., 2021) and the inaccessibility of mainstream IPV services for queer individuals (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). Consequently, queer survivors and perpetrators make wide use of local non-specialist therapeutic services (Carlisle & Withers Green, 2023; Magic & Kelley, 2020). However, almost nothing is known about these services in terms of their approaches or outcomes. Our study therefore explores how therapists working in small-town/rural settings make sense of IPV in queer relationships, focusing on Southwest England, an area with no queer-specific IPV services (Donovan et al., 2021). In doing so we explore the collective mechanisms that

allow for and enable IPV (Bowman et al., 2015), and shine light on the mechanisms by which IPV beyond the heterosexual frame remains unaddressed in small-town/rural UK.

Grounded in post-structural feminism (Baxter, 2003), our research explores the question "What discourses do therapists draw on to construct IPV in queer relationships?". While researchers have suggested a post-structural feminist approach as well-suited to capturing the complexities of IPV in queer relationships (Cannon & Buttell, 2016), this framework is rarely employed in UK research. Looking to Canada, Ristock (2002) effectively used a post-structural feminist approach to explore IPV in lesbian relationships, demonstrating how therapist over-reliance on heteronormative discourse and feminist categories could hamper understanding of IPV in lesbian relationships. However, these insights cannot simply be transferred to our study unexamined. We reason this in terms of the inevitably wider range of sexual and gendered power relations implicated. Our study therefore contributes locally-specific insights to the critical feminist scholarship on support services for queer survivors of IPV in under-serviced areas.

Background

There has been a discursive shift in the construction of IPV in UK public policy and professional practice in recent years, specifically, a move from psychodynamic discourse evident in a co-dependence model, towards feminist discourse evident in the now-dominant victim/perpetrator paradigm. Whilst there are a myriad of approaches to working with IPV, we situate our study specifically in the context of UK public policy and professional practice, understanding that it is these that determine to a large extent who can be a victim/perpetrator, as well as what from (Donovan & Barnes, 2020; Nicolson, 2019). Historically, mainstream IPV services were based on a *co-dependence model* (Dear & Roberts, 2002), which attributes

IPV to women's reliance on others, poor choice of partners, and tendency to fulfil caretaking roles. A co-dependency approach aims to support women to address these behaviours (Beattie, 2016). For example, through the provision of "Mr Right/Mr Wrong" workshops to support women in making better future choices of partners. The co-dependence model was developed from the recovery industry (Ebben, 1995), and draws on psychodynamic discourse (Jacobs, 2012) to explore how childhood experiences can lead to self-defeating relational patterns in adulthood (Beattie, 2016; Ebben, 1995).

Although some (heterosexual) women have benefitted from this approach, it has limited effectiveness in preventing re-victimisation (Rivas et al., 2015). Additionally, practices rooted in a co-dependence approach constitute practice both patriarchal and heteronormative. Such an approach is shown in the "Mr Right/Mr Wrong" workshop mentioned above, which situates responsibility for future violence with women (Ebben, 1995) and assumes heterosexuality. Feminists have critiqued this model, arguing that it is patriarchy that socialises women into care-giving roles for which the co-dependence model then pathologises them (Dear & Roberts, 2002; Ebben, 1995).

Instead, feminist approaches adopt a *victim/perpetrator paradigm* (Cannon & Buttell, 2016; Paymar & Pence, 1990) in which a male perpetrator is understood as exercising patriarchal power to abuse and control a female victim. The aim of this feminist perspective is to shift the blame from women, increase their safety, and hold male perpetrators accountable. For instance, the Duluth Model (Pence & Paymar, 1993) provides re-education to men alongside measures to make women safe and remains widely implemented worldwide (Bohall et al., 2016). The victim/perpetrator paradigm dominates professional practice and public policy in the UK, as illustrated in the Government's recent "Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls" policy (2021).

The shift toward the feminist victim/perpetrator model has allowed heterosexual men's violence towards their partners to be made more visible, allowing for important legislation and services that keep heterosexual women safe (Cannon & Buttell, 2016). However, this model fails to account for the complexities of IPV in queer relationships (West, 2012), suggesting the need for a more nuanced approach. As Sedgwick (1991) noted, feminist analyses developed solely around gender-based hierarchies, whilst remaining important, become less incisive when applied to a wider range of sexual and gender identities. Accordingly, some researchers have suggested widening the scope beyond this victim/perpetrator paradigm (Cannon & Buttell, 2016). In this regard, a post-structural feminist stance is well suited for capturing a more nuanced understanding of how IPV operates in queer relationships (Cannon & Buttell, 2016). Post-structural feminist research (Baxter, 2003) acknowledges the importance of gendered power relations, while also recognising the importance of and interaction with other societal power relations such as those relating to heteronormativity.

It is important to note that scholarship on IPV in queer relationships brings queer subjects into being in different ways, as existing research explores different sections of the community, including lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women (Magic, 2015), lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships (Rollè et al., 2018), lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans relationships (Donovan & Barnes, 2020), and even, curiously, "non-heterosexual" relationships (Hellemans et al., 2015). Regardless of the categorisations/definitions used research demonstrates that IPV occurs in queer relationships with comparable or higher prevalence as compared with heterosexual relationships, despite remaining largely unrecognised by public and professionals (Donovan & Barnes, 2020).

In the UK, this high prevalence rate is reflected in data collated from queer-specific IPV services located in city-centre areas, which identifies high levels of IPV across the

community including in the relationships of gay/trans men, lesbians, and nonbinary individuals, but with trans and bisexual women identified as most at risk (Magic & Kelley, 2020). These figures are incomplete as the services where data are collected are not always accessible to those living outside of service catchment areas. They also present a complicated picture, both demonstrating the limitations in solely applying a gendered victim/perpetrator paradigm, *and* highlighting how gender remains important, with trans and/or bi-sexual women most at risk of serious physical and sexual violence from heterosexual men (Magic & Kelley, 2020).

Despite the limitations of using a victim/perpetrator paradigm to make sense of IPV in queer relationships, many UK IPV practitioners nevertheless believe that queer relationships can still be theorised and understood through the use of a power and control model alone (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). Essentially these beliefs are informed by feminist discourse around power and control (Paymar & Pence, 1990), and a "discourse of sameness" (Donovan & Barnes, 2019) that constructs IPV in queer relationships as indistinguishable from IPV in heterosexual relationships. In turn these beliefs have led to an incongruity between IPV practitioner perspectives and queer individuals' reports. Whereas IPV practitioners claim to offer inclusive services and practice (Donovan & Barnes, 2019, 2020), queer individuals report barriers accessing IPV services and low satisfaction rates when they do (Magic & Kelley, 2020; Rogers, 2016).

These dissatisfactions with IPV services, and their relative inaccessibility for queer individuals, are further exacerbated by widespread heteronormative professional practice. For instance, queer relationships are underrepresented at Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC), a non-statutory framework in the UK where professionals from involved agencies meet to collaborate in managing the risks associated with serious IPV. Access to MARAC is regulated through the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour Based

Violence Checklist (DASH), a risk assessment tool developed solely through research into heterosexual relationships (Nicolson, 2019). As such, DASH remains an inherently heteronormative measure with no evidence to support its efficacy in assessing the risks of IPV in queer relationships (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). We argue that the use of such heteronormative measures to gatekeep access to MARAC can only be seen as exacerbating the relative invisibility of IPV in queer relationships, resulting year on year in only 1% of cases heard at MARAC involving a queer subject (ONS, 2021).

The UK wide lack of awareness of IPV in queer relationships (Donovan & Barnes, 2020) cannot be explained in terms of heteronormative services and practice alone. The pervasive idealised image of a "perfect" gay relationship (Magic, 2015, p. 153), brought about by the successes of the gay rights movement and the introduction of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act in the UK in 2013 also obscures IPV in queer relationships from view. Moreover, fearing that they may further stigmatise an already stigmatised group, researchers have been slow to investigate IPV in queer relationships (Rollè et al., 2018). Thankfully this reluctance to research IPV in queer relationships has changed, and there now exists a body of scholarship providing insights in this important area.

For example, one of the more enduring theories seeking to make sense of IPV in queer relationships identified experiences of internalised homophobia and minority-stress as predictors of both victimisation and perpetration (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Edwards & Sylaska, 2013). Other UK-specific work builds on feminist thinking around power and control, locating queer relationships in their societal context and accounting for homophobia and other societal pressures. For instance, the Comparing Heterosexual and Same-Sex Abuse in Relationships Wheel (Donovan & Hester, 2014) is a tool for working with lesbian, gay and bisexual survivors and perpetrators, and is an attributed development from the Duluth Model Power and Control Wheel (Paymar & Pence, 1990). This tool incorporates an understanding

of how intersecting identities and practices of love specific to lesbian, gay and bisexual relationships can complicate IPV. Elsewhere, Donovan and Barnes (2020) in their review of IPV in lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender relationships refute minority-stress based theorisations, and instead build their work upon Johnson's typologies of IPV (Johnson, 2008). This has resulted in a thoughtful body of theory and model for practice which maintains a strong feminist stance.

The impact of this scholarship can be seen in queer-specific services in the UK such as Galop, the UK's largest organisation supporting queer survivors. Galop outline its approach in recent service reports (Magic & Kelley, 2020), positioning lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals as survivors of patriarchal and homophobic oppression, in the same way the victim/perpetrator paradigm positions women and girls as victims of patriarchal oppression, and make use of adaptions of the power and control wheel in their practice. Outside of queer-specific services, however, there is little evidence of this impacting on mainstream practice, and no evidence related to small-town/rural areas.

Beyond the catchment areas of these queer-specific services, largely in city-centre areas, many queer survivors and perpetrators of IPV instead access non-specialist therapeutic support (Carlisle & Withers Green, 2023; Magic & Kelley, 2020). Although there is some evidence that humanistic counselling is supportive of queer survivors' mental health (Ard & Makadon, 2011), there is no UK data relating to longer-term outcomes such as revictimisation rates. So, while we know that queer survivors and perpetrators go for therapy, we know almost nothing about what happens when they get through the door. This is the research gap explored by our study.

Methodology

This study takes a post-structural feminist epistemology to provide a nuanced account of gendered power relations (Gavey, 1989). From this perspective, gender and sexuality are viewed as inherently unstable facets of subjectivity constructed in and through discourse (Henwood et al., 1998). As Foucault (1978) noted, sexuality and the emergence of the homosexual as a 'species' (p.43) was in many ways a product of scientifc/psychological discourse in the 1800s. Accordingly, we use Foucauldian discourse analysis to identify the broader discursive structures that are reflected within the local use of language (Baxter, 2003), as explained further below. Extending this view, we draw on queer theory, in which patriacrchal oppression can be understood as an effect of hetereosexuality (Wittig, 1992). Patriarchy is therefore theorised as a political regime that is intrinsically maintained by heterosexuality (Sedgewick, 1990; Wittig 1992). In particular, we draw on the theoretical notion of heterosexual privilege, which is created by the hierarchical valuing of heterosexuality as the norm and devaluing of homosexuality as "other" (Sedgewick, 1990).

Data collection and Analytical Strategy

Participants were recruited using a purposeful approach through professional networks, with the aim of including as wide a range of experience as possible in a small sample. This sample was used to reflect the kinds of non-specialist therapist that queer survivors/perpetrators might reasonably approach for support (Carlisle & Withers Green, 2023), and was comprised of four heterosexual women and one gay man. All worked as therapists in small-town/rural Southwest England, across mental health, private practice, addiction, domestic abuse, children's services, and in supervisory and educational roles. Participants ranged in levels of experience and educational attainment, from a counsellor qualified to a Level Four Diploma with ten years' experience working in a drug and alcohol

service, through to a counselling psychologist two years post qualification. All participants maintained at least one professional registration or license to practice. They were all aware that they were being interviewed by another therapist, and three of the participants were known professionally to Siouxsie prior to the interviews. Two of the participants had never knowingly worked with queer survivors or perpetrators of IPV, and the three that had acknowledged limited experience in the area, but interestingly did not draw on those experiences in the interviews.

The intention had been to collect data using focus groups, deeming these most appropriate for capturing co-constructions of meaning, in keeping with the study's post-structural feminist underpinnings (Wilkinson, 1998). However, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 these were cancelled for safety reasons, and online interviews arranged in their place. At that point in the pandemic there was considerable upheaval and none of the participants were able or willing to take part in online focus groups. Prior to data collection University Ethics approval was obtained.

We adopted a broad, inclusive focus on *queer* relationships, owing to the variability of terminology and foci in the literature on IPV among sexual and gender minority persons alluded to earlier. "Queer describes gestures or analytical models that show up incoherencies in the presumed stable relations between sex, gender and sexual desire" (Jagose, 1996, p. 3). We therefore asked therapists about their understandings of IPV in queer relationships, in which one or more of the partners describe themselves as anywhere on the spectrum of queer gender and sexual identities. Siouxsie conducted five semi-structured online interviews in the spring of 2020 producing four and a half hours of data. Participants were asked to describe their therapeutic practice, their experience working with IPV in heterosexual relationships, their experience working with queer clients more generally, and how they made sense of IPV in queer relationships. The interviews were recorded electronically, transcribed verbatim

using Parker's (1992) transcription conventions to capture a level of detail without overcomplication, and amalgamated into a single data corpus for analysis. Siouxsie also conducted a Foucauldian discourse analysis using Parker's (1992) twenty steps for discovering discourses. Foucauldian discourse analysis focuses on what the discourses do and how they shape subjectivity rather than on individual participants intentions. We therefore do not individually identify the participants in our analysis, save where necessary for context, so as to allow the discourses to speak more clearly. As part of the interpretive process we also drew on queer theorists Wittig (1992) and Sedgwick (1990) in our analysis, as described above. Danielle provided several hours of research supervision and support with writing up this report. As researchers we acknowledge disciplinary reflexivity in our work (Wilkinson,1988), and note that in unpacking the discourses in our participants' talk our post-structural feminist analysis inevitably fosters new discourse that we hope may yet inform fruitful changes in professional practice.

Analysis

Our analysis is organised into three sections. We first explore the conflicting ways in which psychodynamic and humanistic therapeutic discourses construct IPV in queer relationships. Subsequently, we explore the pervasive use of liberal humanist discourse, noting how hegemonic discourse is supported through a rhetoric of inclusion. Finally, we explore the incoherence produced by competing discourses in an extended sequence. In bringing together this web of professional subjectivity, IPV and therapeutic practice our analysis demonstrates how heteronormative ideology (van der Toorn et al., 2020) operates as a consistent thread throughout the data, and is embedded within the therapeutic, liberal, and feminist discourses drawn on. This suggests complex relationships between shifting

discourses and the subjectivities they generate, in line with Sedgwick's (1990) claim that heterosexual privilege remains embedded in a range of discourse, and unpacks some of the complicated ways in which heteronormativity contributes to IPV in queer relationships remaining unaddressed.

Therapeutic discourses that stigmatise and shame

Much of the discourse drawn on was therapeutic, reflecting the participants' awareness that they were in conversation with another therapist. Speedy (2008) describes therapeutic discourses as the "regimes of truth" (p. xvi) through which therapists construct their practice and professional identities. In this section, we demonstrate the inadequacy of therapeutic discourses to account for IPV in queer relationships. First, a psychodynamic therapeutic discourse, which focuses on the subject's internal world, situates shame within the queer subject, in effect shaming them. Similarly, a humanistic therapeutic discourse, recognises the phenomenological experiences of stigmatisation, but renders its causes invisible, effectively stigmatising them. We show how both discourses support heteronormativity, by privileging heterosexuality and normalising traditional gender roles.

The *psychodynamic therapeutic discourse*— most associated with Freud's work— presupposes emotional life as both conscious and unconscious (Jacobs, 2012). In therapy these competing conscious/unconscious needs are laid bare through exploration of earlier life experiences, resulting in a better understanding of feelings and motivations in the present. Psychodynamic discourse was evident in the talk of two participants, for instance, in reference to the "murky world of their sexuality", constructing the queer client's sexuality as a part of an unknown or opaque internal world. Another participant maintained, "There's a

shame around umm I suppose around the questioning of sexual identity" attributing shame to the queer subject, linked to a need to question their sexuality.

A psychodynamic discourse is evident in the co-dependence model, which proposes that a woman is re-enacting problematic early relational experiences when choosing to have a relationship with an abusive man (Beattie, 2016). From a psychodynamic perspective, the work of therapy is for a woman to identify these self-defeating patterns and change them. A link between co-dependency and psychodynamic therapeutic discourse is made explicit in the following quote where the participant describes how "transference" plays out in relationships and feeds "toxic co-dependency".

> **Extract 1:** Transference doesn't just happen in the therapy room. Transference happens all the time, any form of transactions going to happen within a relationship you know and (.) and there's this great word you know the divided-ness (1) the internalised divisions that are going to play out in relationship (.) and then you're opening the doors perhaps not so much to violence but perhaps more to a deep toxic co-dependency.

This constructs survivors and perpetrators as indistinguishable from one another:

> **Extract 2:** I don't think you can separate the two off and say well this person is a victim and this person is a perpetrator yeah I think you know there is a duality in the roles they play, otherwise it wouldn't feed (1) I think we've all got (.) got an erm inner perpetrator (.) got an inner victim

Above, queer survivors and perpetrators are constructed as one and the same through psychodynamic therapeutic discourse, with speculations about their internal, or "inner", emotional life. In our data, shame was attributed to the subject, situated internally, and related to their need to question their sexuality. Survivors and perpetrators of IPV were therefore

constructed as indistinguishable from each other, enmeshed in a "toxic co-dependency" fed by a sense of shame around having to question their sexuality.

While research links internalised homophobia (associated with experiences of shame) to victimisation and perpetration (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Edwards & Sylaska, 2013), these constructions remain problematic. Drawing a parallel with the feminist critique of a co-dependence model (Ebben, 1995), deployment of a psychodynamic therapeutic discourse positions the queer survivor as architect of their own misfortune. While there is a construction of a queer perpetrator, this discourse positions them on an equal footing with the survivor, leaving little room for accountability, one of the cornerstones of feminist practice (Pence & Paymar, 1993).

As such, the psychodynamic therapeutic discourse is shown 'shaming' the queer subject. The co-dependence model was shown in the introduction positioning female survivors as "blameworthy"; here a psychodynamic approach is shown positioning queer subjects as both "blameworthy", *and* "shame-worthy". Wittig (1992), critiquing a psychodynamic approach, argued that they had no doubt that Lacan found all the structures of the mind they proposed, suggesting that it was them that had placed them there in the first place. This raises the question as to what degree experiences of shame are intrinsic to queer subjects or placed there by psychodynamic therapeutic practice. The heterosexual subject, having no need to question their sexuality, does not have shame attributed to them in the same way and is therefore privileged. This exposes a heteronormative discourse at work within psychodynamic practice.

Humanistic therapeutic discourse was deployed in the talk of two other participants. Humanistic therapeutic discourse, associated with Carl Rogers (1967), draws on the wider

discourse of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1948). This discourse privileges the individual's subjective phenomenological experiences, presupposing an authentic self which can be brought to awareness in therapy (Cooper, 2007). This approach has also been critiqued, arguing that privileging the individual's subjective experiences fails to account of how power operates in therapeutic relationships and ignores wider societal inequalities (Stedmon & Dallos, 2009).

In our data, humanistic therapeutic discourse constructs the queer subject in terms of presumed phenomenological experiences, shown below to include "experiencing" discrimination and stigmatisation alongside the pressures IPV brings:

> **Extract 3**: They would already be experiencing a lot of (.) discrimination (.) then they might be experiencing even (1) you know hate crimes (.) or violence from er (.) other people in society and the public (.) or it could be you know from family relationships school bullying perhaps (.) so I just feel like maybe er (.) that group of people is more vulnerable to experiencing those things (.) so having that going on on top of (.) intimate (.) violence in a relationship (2) yeah I just feel like that feels like a lot

Above, humanistic therapeutic discourse places focus on the phenomenological experiences of being stigmatised, illustrated by the focus on the impact of imagined "discrimination" or "hate crimes". In doing so, the discourse makes survivors visible, but takes the focus away from societal inequalities and renders perpetrators all but invisible. This is reflected in only a single construction of a queer perpetrator being identified using this discourse:

> **Extract 4:** I think that maybe like the same reasons that I mentioned above (.) you know about stigma and (.) other areas of their life where they might be finding

difficulties in (1) I mean it might be difficult even for a perpetrator of the abuse to ask for help (.) wanting to change (.) maybe

This quote emphasises the subjective experiences of the perpetrator, imagining how "difficult even for a perpetrator" it may be for them to seek support, but turns our attention away from the harm caused.

When considered in context, positioning the queer subject as victim, the perpetrator rendered invisible and the absence of a convincing account of how power operates at a societal level, wide areas are left open where damaging practice can flourish unseen. This is shown below:

Extract 5: There's even less understanding and there's even less recognition, and there's also this kind of attitude that because you're promiscuous then no wonder you were raped you know (.) you're asking for it come on you go to a gang-bang, and then that happens what do you bloody expect (.) but actually that person can be a victim of sexual abuse, they might have no other way of feeling love (.) and that's why they do it's not necessarily that they want it (.) and I think there is a lack of understanding about why people do the things they do, you have to understand the reasons

Drawing on humanistic therapeutic discourse and focusing on the imagined phenomenological experience of the client, the participant is positioned opposing inequality. However, without an adequate awareness of the wider societal power relations at work, the participant inadvertently draws on the moral discourse of acceptable heteronormative family life, imagining the subject's sexual behaviour as a result of trauma rather than choice, or "it's not necessarily that they want it".

Whilst there is modest evidence that humanistic therapeutic practice supports the mental health of queer survivors (Ard & Makadon, 2011), there is none specific to the UK or

regarding longer term outcomes like revictimisation rates. However, there is a body of literature that uses a discourse analytic perspective to explore how therapeutic discourse supports hegemonic discourse. This work draws parallels with our post-structural feminist analysis and explores how therapists, naïve to the social processes through which gendered subjectivities are produced, can become inadvertently complicit in hegemonic power relations (Hare-Mustin, 1994; Sutherland et al., 2017).

Rhetoric of inclusion

Distinct from humanistic therapeutic discourse, *liberal humanist discourse* emphasises the autonomy, value, and agency of a universal subject. The liberal humanist discourse is the discourse that is most explicit across the data corpus. Gavey (1989) asserts that a liberal humanist tradition has become a "rarely questioned fundamental faith" (p. 461) in psychology. Gavey also argues that this tradition lacks an analysis of power and can therefore become complicit in hegemonic power relations. Our analysis shows how this dominant discourse supports existing heteronormative institutions through claims of inclusivity that constitute a rhetoric of inclusion.

Drawing on this discourse all participants acknowledged inequalities and were positioned in opposition to them through a rhetoric of inclusion. For example:

> **Extract 6:** Whereas for me as a practitioner (.) there's no you don't need to compare because whatever a person experiences as violence is violence to them regardless of the situation (.) someone's sexual orientation doesn't necessarily mean that they respond differently to violence or (.) to abuse, they're still going to have the they're still human beings, it's just their sexual orientation that's different

In the quote above, a liberal humanist discourse is deployed, making claims of a universal valuing of the subject, and bringing all subjects into being equal without "need to compare". However, such rhetoric does not always equate with actual inclusion.

The quotes below explore how these contradictions occur. One participant, who identified that they had never knowingly worked with queer individuals who had experienced IPV, was asked how they would approach such work. In response the participant suggested asking their client to explain to them the differences between how IPV operates in queer relationships, as compared with heterosexual relationships:

> **Extract 7:** I would ask them [*laughing*] (1) what the differences were (.) between heterosexual (2) actually and the LGBT group were (.) Yes, I would ask them to tell me what the differences are

The participant highlights above how, if working with a queer IPV case, they would seek guidance from the client in learning how to support them. In doing so, they demonstrate respect for the client's agency rather than taking the position of an expert. However, research highlights how queer survivors often struggle to recognise they are in abusive relationships (Donovan & Barnes, 2020) which questions the wisdom of asking for this kind of advice. It is worth noting the power dynamic at work here, where the burden of education is passed to the client expecting them to educate the therapist.

The participant was then asked whether they felt they would recognise IPV in future therapeutic work with queer individuals:

> **Extract 8:** Yes (.) definitely (.) I'm sorry so yeah [*laughing*] of course, obviously, sorry (.) on so many levels it is exactly the same thing what they are doing to the individual (.) Yes you can (.) there are red flags (.) you do (.) words behaviour (.) certain things they start saying (.) doing (.) you go why are they doing that? You

know sort of there's (.) ye:a::h you can't really miss it, really. You dig down into it and, you know, asking about friendship groups or the lack of, because they don't go out; they're not allowed to go out.

In this quote, the 'discourse of sameness' (Donovan & Barnes, 2019) is drawn on, which assumes IPV operates indistinguishably within queer and heterosexual relationships, as well as feminist discourse around the signs of power and control (Pence & Paymar, 1993). It is argued here that in the deployment of a liberal humanist discourse queer subjects are brought into being as indistinguishable from heterosexual subjects. Therefore, while sincere claims of inclusivity are made the most pervasive discourse at work here is one of heteronormativity.

Thus, a liberal humanist discourse remains insufficient for providing an adequate account of IPV in queer relationships. Gavey's (1989) concern that liberal humanist discourse's failure to address "metatheoretical concerns of power" (p. 461) therefore appear to be borne out, and the discourse's claims to inclusivity empty. This analysis suggests that liberal humanist discourse, having no language of power itself, functions as a cover for the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity, rendering it prettified, safe and palatable within the "fundamental faith" (Gavey, 1989, p. 461) of the liberal humanist tradition, and providing an "alibi for our aggressions" (Satre, 1961, p. 21).

A perfect storm of heteronormative discourses (patriarchal, feminist and liberal)

Discourse was seen in the corpus reflecting on its own talk, other discourses, and the multiple subjectivities these discourses presented. This is shown in an intriguing example in an extended sequence. This sequence traces heteronormative discourse from therapeutic practice back into training and academia, and demonstrates the need for a reflexive feminist

perspective on IPV and service/service-user power relations. Here we draw on Braun's (2000) reflexive engagement with the ways that she could, as a heterosexual feminist psychologist, inadvertently collude with and reproduce heteronormativity. It also illustrates the complexity of the interactions between discourses and supports our claims for the potential usefulness of using a post-structural feminist approach in this area. The participant quoted below worked across two roles, as an academic training therapists in higher education and supervising therapists in a secondary mental health setting. In the quote below they had been asked how they made sense of IPV in queer relationships:

> **Extract 9:** In the first instance I actually think (.) it is less explored (.) I think we are less aware of it so if they would ask for help I wonder whether they would get the same help (1) as heterosexual partners, so my first perception, and this is my perception is, approaching from an assumption is that, is that it is there but it's far less acknowledged, and also to a certain extent far less, I don't know, I assume far less reported (.) by people I'm assuming (.) I don't know where this idea comes from (.) to think maybe from society but also from myself we're assuming that maybe those relationships are much more about err (.) being in an equal powered relationship

Here the participant draws on feminist discourse with some reflexivity, relating IPV to patriarchal power relations (Paymar & Pence, 1990), at the same time making and challenging assumptions that queer relationships are more "equal powered".

In the quote below the participant reflects on the impact of marriage equality legislation:

> **Extract 10:** You know the images that come to my mind, that I see in the newspaper and in the news are people who are getting happily married (.) and they're finally celebrating that there are same sex marriages and you know so I am thinking we don't

actually publicly see that side that there is the same level of violence, or the same level of tension and problem as in any type of relationship

In this quote, a liberal humanist discourse is deployed and the move towards greater inclusion through marriage equality is explored. This discourse is reflected upon, and contested, as the participant explores how the promotion of a perfect gay relationship, here "happily married", obscures IPV in queer relationships from view (Magic, 2015).

Nevertheless, as the participant continues they idealise gay men with reflections of how their experiences as a woman living in a patriarchal and heteronormative society have contributed towards the construction of gay men as women's best friends. Simply stating below that they feel gay men are "the most lovely people" as they do not seek sex from them:

Extract 11: If I think about a gay man my initial response is a:h:::h they are the most lovely people, they are so lovely (.) and for a woman they are your best friend (.) because they are not interested in having sex with you

An explicitly heteronormative discourse is then deployed and simultaneously contested in the quote below, recognising, at the same time as it calls out patriarchy, the potential for the generation of new heteronormative subjectivities:

Extract 12: How do these guys (.) actually, when they are really upset and angry (.) how does it come out (1) and I'm immediately thinking well they are becoming bitchy (.) they are becoming really nasty verbally (.) so I am thinking maybe they are in a stereotypical way abuse which may be less violent (.) in both ways I am very stereotypically prejudiced

The participant is shown here holding a reflexive position (Braun, 2000), one that is alive to the possibility of new unequal power relations that might be generated. As the participant draws on the heteronormative construction of gay men as 'bitchy', they at the

same time contest this, noting how they are 'stereotypically prejudiced'. Clearly, there is no evidence to support claims of IPV in gay men's relationships being predominately verbal, or "bitchy" (Magic & Kelley, 2020).

However, there are several discourses at work and the difficulties of holding such a reflexive position become apparent. The following section marks a contrast, and the talk becomes increasingly incoherent as a liberal humanist discourse is deployed. For clarity, the participant develops the image of Saturn and its rings as a metaphor for society. In this metaphor the gravitational mass or body of the planet represents an imagined heterosexual majority and queer subjects are positioned at society's edge as the planet's rings, celebrated for their beauty, but sitting "on the edge":

> **Extract 13:** You know Saturn has got so many rings (.) you know and these rings make Saturn so beautiful but (.) they are the rings and they sit on the edge you know (2) The thing is, the rings are what makes Saturn so beautiful in itself and we admire the rings because it is diverse and it's got this amazing (.) formation and this is of course where we are thinking of course that the problem we have is (.) is actually thinking do we need to have that gravitational mass (.) or do we not? Do we need that? And I guess at the moment (.) society wants to think like that because it creates safety of feeling about otherness.

Above, a liberal humanist discourse is deployed, celebrating the diversity and value of the queer subject as "so beautiful". Yet, the deployment of liberal humanist discourse maintains status-quo, where difference is admired from afar but kept at a safe distance from the "gravitational mass" of the majority: The positioning of the queer subject at the edge of society as "the rings of Saturn" is problematic. This positioning does not create inequality in

itself, but it can allow for it, as shown in the following quote in which talk turns to a discussion between teaching staff speculating as to whether a student is queer:

> **Extract 14:** We also experience, when I say "we" it's what I have often experienced as a member of the team, is that we have a suspicion (.) the student may not come out. They may not actually know about it [*the student's sexual/gender identity*] themselves, but you just notice changes that happen, maybe their appearance, or (.) or in some of the questions they are starting to ask (1) or some of the difficulties that they are starting to talk about (.) in their current relationship or at home

The positioning of the queer subject at the edge of society shown in Extract 13 is shown here in Extract 14 allowing for that demonstration of hierarchical power, where the participant claims greater knowledge of the students sexual and gender identity, "they may not actually know about it", to go not only unrecognised but actually expressed as an act of inclusion. Whilst the participant appears to be championing the student's sexual/gender identity, it seems unlikely that any group of teaching staff would give similar "suspicion" to a student's heterosexuality. This exposes the hierarchical nature of the relationship between queer and heterosexual subjects proposed by Sedgwick (1991).

While there is professional guidance exploring therapeutic work with queer subjects that acknowledges power imbalances (BPS, 2019), there was no evidence of it in the data corpus. Likewise, there was no evidence of the wider body of scholarship identified in the introduction exploring IPV in queer relationships.

There were other areas where heteronormative discourse was identified supporting hierarchical power relations whilst at the same time allowing for the participant's (dubious) claims of inclusivity, as shown below. The participant was asked whether they would

recognise IPV in queer relationships and responded without hesitation that they would, despite having never done so in over twenty years of practice:

> **Extract 15:** Because [*Service*] is so sharp on safeguarding (.) so there would be, the safeguarding team would get involved immediately should there be any sense of er:m (1) even just a slight power imbalances that someone may pick up, and any violence maybe of course definitely

On the surface it appears that a liberal humanist discourse is deployed here, espousing a universal valuing of the queer subject, stressing how the "safeguarding team" are available for all service-users, and would "pick up" even "slight power imbalances". Nonetheless, the participant's sincere claims that their service would recognise IPV in queer relationships are cast into doubt given the heteronormative nature of the DASH form, the principal tool used by organisations in the UK to assess the risk of IPV, as discussed in the introductory sections. Drawing on the heteronormative feminist discourse of power and control (Paymar & Pence, 1990), the DASH form is unlikely to capture the risks of IPV in queer relationships (Donovan, 2010; Donovan & Barnes, 2020), and the participants claims of an inclusive service are therefore cast into doubt.

In summary, this short sequence highlights the centrality of a feminist analysis of gendered power relations in making sense of IPV, alongside the need for that to be a reflexive feminism when considering queer relationships. It therefore seems to us that the sophistication of the analyses of power available within post-structural feminist research shows promise for making nuanced sense of professional practice around IPV in queer relationships.

Conclusions

While there is little here to recommend therapy to queer survivors or perpetrators, the most useful application of this study is in fostering practitioner reflexivity. Discourse analytic work has a history of being used in this way (Avdi & Georgaca, 2007), highlighting power imbalances in practitioner/service-user interactions, and informing service development. Of particular note is how this analysis demonstrates the ways in which gender and sexual inequalities can be inadvertently perpetuated despite sincere claims of inclusivity. Whilst there is a body of literature exploring the limitations of the victim/perpetrator paradigm regarding queer relationships (Cannon & Buttell, 2016; Donovan & Barnes, 2019) and power imbalances in therapeutic work with queer subjects (BPS, 2019), there was no evidence of either in the corpus. This study therefore highlights the consequences of extensive use of heteronormative discourse, drawing parallels with Ristock's (2002) earlier work, and demonstrates how heterosexual privilege remains embedded in a range of discourses. It speaks with urgency for therapeutic practice to address these shortcomings, restates the need for a reflexive feminist position (Braun, 2000), offers tentative but original therapeutic theorisations, and serves to shift psychology's gaze towards small-town/rural queer lives.

Whilst the small participant sample suggests caution in making wider inferences based on this research, this study addresses a gap in the literature. It also raises concerns relating to representation that need addressing in future research. For instance, the change to interviews in response to the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in fewer participants, all of whom were white. This was unfortunate, and we speculate that this is reflected in the lack of consideration given to colour and ethnicity in the data. However, there was also little consideration of gender diversity within the data. Whether this was despite or because of Siouxsie, who conducted the interviews, openly being a trans-woman remains unclear. Brought together, these concerns invite a more nuanced consideration of representation and the use of focus groups over interviews for data collection.

The post-structural feminist approach used in this study is currently being utilised in a wider study exploring societal constructions of IPV in queer relationships, which includes data collected from those providing inclusion training, a wider selection of frontline professionals, and the queer community itself. It is hoped that the sophistication of this approach's analysis of gendered and sexual power relations will allow for better acknowledgement of the complexities of this phenomenon. It is also hoped that the approach could then inform recommendations for practice that would add to, rather than detract from, feminisms hard won gains.

Acknowledgements

A huge thankyou to the reviewers and editor for their help with this article.

Funding Acknowledgement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

The original research was completed by Siouxsie in 2020 as a part requirement for her MSc Psychology (conversion), and was supervised by Danielle.

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