THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GAY MALE PARTNER ABUSE:
POWER, DISCOURSE AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

by

Maurice Kwong-Lai Poon

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Maurice Kwong-Lai Poon (2010)
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GAY MALE PARTNER ABUSE:
POWER, DISCOURSE AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

Maurice Kwong-Lai Poon
Doctor of Philosophy
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
2010

Abstract
Recent research has found high rates of abuse in gay male relationships; however, little
is known about their lived experience. This study aims to explore (1) the social
construction of abuse in gay male relationships, (2) its discursive effects on clinical
practice and (3) the lived experience of gay men involved in abusive relationships. This
study included three sets of data. Using a discourse analysis, articles published in
popular queer media and academic literature were analyzed to understand the social
construction of partner abuse. Three focus groups, with 16 service providers, were
conducted to examine the discursive effects of partner abuse on clinical practice. In-
depth interviews with 21 gay men involved in partner abuse were conducted to
understand their lived experience. Transcripts of the focus groups and interviews were
reviewed in detail to highlight themes and concepts. Analysis revealed that gay male
partner abuse is not a self-evident or natural category but, rather, socially constructed.
Current discourse created two opposite categories (the victim who is powerless and
helpless; the perpetrator powerful and evil) that both informed and limited the way in
which service providers saw and, thus, worked with gay men involved in partner abuse. Yet, as shown in the analysis, the lived experience of partner abuse does not always fit neatly into the rigid victim and perpetrator roles. Instead, the roles are frequently unclear and contradictory. We social workers need to be aware of the discursive effects of gay male partner abuse and critically examine how they impose certain assumptions on us. Instead of seeking a “true” experience of partner abuse, we need to help these men search for meaning within the events that are relevant to them, regardless of how they fit into the normative discourse of gay male partner abuse.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people lent their support to this dissertation. Without them, this project would not have been completed. First, my thanks to the participants and service providers for sharing their stories and experiences. They taught me so much about the lived experience of gay men involved in partner abuse.

My supervisor, Dr. Usha George, provided unfailing support and skilled guidance in completing my dissertation. My committee members, Dr. Ken Moffatt and Dr. Ka Tat Tsang, offered suggestions and encouragement and pushed me to think critically. Dr David Brennan, Dr. Brian O’Neill, and Dr. Wes Shera provided guidance on my defence committee.

Kim Brittain and Joanna Crandell from Library and Archives Canada, and Harold Averill, Gerry King, Paul Leatherdale, Tony Lem, Don McLeod and Alan Miller at the Canadian Gay and Lesbian Archives were invaluable in helping with my archival research. Countless agencies and businesses within the Toronto gay community supported my efforts to recruit participants.

I would also like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the Ontario Graduate Scholarship programme and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Many friends supported me during my doctoral journey: Joseph Berkovits, Ken Brailsford, Claman Chu, Thelca Damianakis, Hazal Galati, Peter Ho, Maggie Ho, Linus Ip, Susan Kerr, Rick Sin, Bernard Wong, Josephine Wong, and Rob Wood. I was fortunate to have the constant support of family, and extended family, both in Hong Kong and in Canada. My partner Scott gave me constant love and encouragement and untiringly
read the many drafts. Finally, I am especially grateful to my parents, Lai Yung Ho and Mong Wai Poon, for their love and care which is with me always.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ........................................ iv
Table Of Contents ......................................... vi

1. Introduction ............................................. 1
   Background ............................................. 1
   Prevalence ............................................ 1
   Associated Factors ..................................... 9
   Victims' Experiences .................................. 16
   Rationale and Overview Of The Thesis ............. 19

2. Methodology ........................................... 23
   Discourse And Experience ......................... 23
   Methodological Framework .......................... 26
   Method And Procedure ................................ 29
      Discourse Analysis Of The Queer Press ........ 29
      Focus Groups ...................................... 32
      Individual Interviews ............................. 35
      Data Analysis ...................................... 38
   Demographics ........................................ 39

3. The Making Of Gay Male Partner Abuse .......... 42
   Normalization ........................................ 43
   Totalization .......................................... 50
   Individualization: Classification And Categorization ........ 55
   The Codification Of Victims And Perpetrators .... 59
      The Profile Of A Victim ......................... 59
         The Discourse Of Innocence ................ 59
         The Discourse Of Personal Deviance ....... 61
         The Discourse Of Low-Esteem .............. 63
         The Discourse Of Denial .................... 64
         The Discourse Of Learned Helplessness ... 64
      The Profile Of A Perpetrator .................. 67
         The Discourse Of Power And Control ...... 67
         The Discourse Of History Of Family Violence .... 69
         The Discourse Of Manipulation ............. 70
         The Discourse Of Internalized Homophobia And Heterosexism .... 71
         The Discourse Of No Remorse ............... 73
         The Discourse Of Personal Disorders ....... 74
      Critiquing The Pathological Discourse Of Victims And Perpetrators .... 77
   Summary .............................................. 83
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The rates of partner abuse in gay relationships appear to be high but little is known about their experience. My study aims at filling this gap by understanding gay men’s experience in abusive relationships. In this introduction chapter, I provide an overview of the current research on gay male partner abuse and frame my study within it. In particular, my review focuses on three areas: (1) the prevalence of partner abuse in gay relationships, including the rates of physical, psychological/emotional, sexual and financial abuse; (2) factors associated with gay male partner abuse; and (3) victims’ experiences. It must be noted that the focus of my review is gay men; however, there are only a small number of studies dealing exclusively with gay men and partner abuse. Thus, I have included research studies on this topic that contained both gay and lesbian participants but did not separate the two groups in their analysis. The last pages of this chapter contain a brief description of each remaining chapter in the thesis.

BACKGROUND

PREVALENCE

According to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, in 2008 alone there were 1,477 reported cases of male same-sex domestic violence (2008, 11). However, this number does not reflect the full picture of gay male partner abuse, as some scholars argue that it includes only reported cases from organizations affiliated with the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (Murray et al. 2006/2007). David Island and Patrick Letellier estimate that approximately 500,000 gay men experience partner abuse each year in the United States. They claim: “There is no reason at all to believe
that the incidence of gay men’s domestic violence is less than that in the heterosexual community” (1991, 13-4).

The primary focus of current research in this area has been on prevalence. As Janice Ristock points out, “Determining the incidence rate of lesbian [and gay] partner violence is an important way to legitimize the issue, secure funding for social services, and begin to provide an overall picture of who and how many are affected” (2002, 10). Of the studies reviewed, the incident rates vary considerably (i.e., from 17% to 89%). For example, in his study, Sotirios Sarantakos reported that 17% of 164 gay and lesbian respondents “had inflicted or suffered violence in their present or previous homosexual relationships. Of these reporting violence, 87% referred to physical violence, 63% to emotional abuse, 69% to sexual violence, 78% to verbal abuse and 17% to social abuse” (1996, 158). In their study, Steven Bryant and Demian found that, of 1,266 gay and lesbian couples, 31% said “their relationship suffered from at least one kind of abuse” (1994, 112). More recently, Susan Turell and La Vonne Cornell-Swanson documented this number to be even higher: of 760 gay, lesbian and bisexual respondents, 89% “reported experiencing at least one behavior indicative of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse” in their present or past same-sex relationships (2005, 78).

However, these studies provide little information on the nature of abusive behaviours involved. They simply ask their respondents whether they have experienced abuse or been victimized by their partners. To address this limitation, Turell conducted a study specifically exploring the nature of the abusive behaviours experienced by gay men, lesbians and transgenders. In this study, 50% of the 499 respondents reported physical abuse and 32% had been “slapped, kicked, hit, pushed [and/or] shoved” in a
past relationship. In addition, 83% reported emotional abuse and 12% endured sexual abuse with 9% selecting the item “force me into sexual activity” (1999, 41).

Stephen Owen and Tod Burke further explored the frequency of specific abusive tactics experienced by gay men and lesbians. In their study, 56.1% of the 66 respondents “had experienced one or more of the forms of domestic violence” in their current or previous relationships; 33.3% had been “hit, slapped, kicked or otherwise physically harmed” with 21.2% saying 1-2 times, 9.1% 3-4 times and 3% 5 times or more; 42.4% had been “humiliated, degraded, insulted or otherwise verbally harassed” with 10.6% saying 1-2 times, 13.6% 3-4 times and 18.2% 5 times or more; 12.1% had been “pressured into sexual activities” with 7.6% saying 1-2 times, 3% 3-4 times and 1.5% 5 times or more; and 25.7% had “property vandalized or destroyed” with 19.7% saying 1-2 times, 3% 3-4 times and 3% 5 times or more (2004, 130). In another study, Burke and his colleagues reported similar findings: of the 72 respondents, 30.56% had been “been hit, slapped, kicked or otherwise physically harmed” by their partners with 16.67% saying 1-2 times, 5.56% 3-4 times and 8.33% 5 times or more; 40.28% had been “humiliated, degraded, insulted or otherwise verbally harassed” with 18.06% saying 1-2 times, 9.72% 3-4 times and 12.5% 5 times or more; 15.28% had been “pressured into sexual activities” with 8.33% saying 1-2 times, 5.56% 3-4 times and 1.39% 5 times or more; and 22.22% had “property vandalized or destroyed” with 9.72% saying 1-2 times, 4.17% 3-4 times and 8.33% 5 times or more (2002, 243-4).

Although these studies provide further information regarding the nature and frequency of the abusive tactics used, they do not analyze gay and lesbian respondents separately. As result, it is difficult to determine the prevalence of partner abuse in gay
male relationships. To address this issue, some researchers explore incident rates of partner abuse solely on this population. Edward Chan and Chris Cavacuiti surveyed 32 gay men and found that 31% of them had experienced some forms of “physical, emotional or sexual abuse” in their current relationship, with 13% physical abuse, 28% emotional abuse, and 3% sexual abuse (2008, 429). Adam Heintz and Rita Melendez explored sexual coercion in gay male relationships and documented that, of their 42 MSM (men who have sex with men) respondents, 41% had been forced by their partners to have sex. Many of them also “experienced sexual (19%), physical (21%), and/or verbal abuse (32%) as a direct consequence of asking their partner to use safer sex protection” (2006, 193).

Turell asked 213 gay men whether they had experienced abuse in their present or past relationships; 44% of them reported physical abuse, 41% coercion, 83% emotional abuse, 45% being threatened, 17% being stalked, 13% sexual abuse and 37% financial abuse (2000, 287). José Toro-Alfonso and Sheilla Rodríguez-Madera recruited 302 Puerto Rican gay men living in Puerto Rico and New York to complete a self-administrated questionnaire and recorded that 26% of them had experienced physical violence in their relationships. In addition, 48% reported emotional violence and 27% sexual violence (2004b, 47). Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera further analyzed their Puerto Rico data and found that, of 199 respondents, many admitted they had been physically (24%), emotionally (40%) and sexually (14%) abusive to their partners as well (2004a, 645).

Other researchers explored the nature of the abusive tactics used. Joan McClennen and her colleagues surveyed 63 self-identified gay male victims and found
that 42.2% had been punched, hit, struck with hands or fists, 25% hit with an object, 17.2% choked or suffocated, 48.4% pushed or shoved, 39% had objects thrown at them, 67.2% verbally threatened, 61% verbally demeaned in front of strangers, and 28.1% forced to have sex. Moreover, 60.3% indicated “the abuse grew worse over time” and 53.1% said “the abuse occurred more than 10 times during the relationship before they decided to leave” (2002, 32).

Similarly, Gregory Merrill and Valerie Wolfe surveyed 52 gay male “domestic violence victims,” of whom 64% had been punched, hit or stuck with hands or fists, 54% slapped, 46% kicked, 79% pushed, shoved or grabbed, 42% had objects thrown at them, 65% verbally threatened, and 39% physically forced to have sex. Many (62%) of them “reported experiencing more than five incidents of physical abuse with 37% reporting between 11 and 100 such incidents.” As a result, 79% “had suffered at least one injury” and “most reported multiple” injuries with 65% reporting muscle soreness and stiffness, 60% bruises on the body, 52% scratches or small cuts, 35% blackened eyes, 23% head injuries or concussions, 19% lacerations, larger cuts, or stab wounds, 15% bite marks, 12% broken bones, 12% back injuries and 10% burns (2000, 11).

Kristen Kuehnle and Anne Sullivan’s results further corroborate with 63.1% of their 74 self-identified gay male victims reporting “assaults with or without weapons,” many (30.2%) requiring medical attention or hospitalization (2003, 92).

Yet, research has showed that few gay men saw themselves as victims of domestic violence particularly when it came to psychological/emotional abuse. Luis Nieves-Rosa and his colleagues recruited 273 Latin American MSM living in the New York metropolitan area to compete a self-administered questionnaire. Only “26% of
them considered themselves to be victims of domestic violence” even though 51% indicated they had experienced some form of domestic abuse – 33% psychological abuse, 35% physical abuse and 12% sexual abuse (2000, 85). Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera observed the same phenomenon in their study. They write that approximately 40% of the 199 respondents reported having been emotionally abused by their partners but only a “few of them perceived this experience as constituting domestic violence” (2004a, 648).

Although these studies provide useful information on gay male partner abuse, some researchers caution us to interpret the results carefully. They argue that most of these studies use broader terms to define abuse and therefore tend to report a higher prevalence. The use of different definitions of abuse also makes it difficult to compare their results (Burke and Follingstad 1999; McClennen 2005; Murray and Mobley 2009). For this reason, other researchers have explored the validity of an abusiveness scale and the development of a screening protocol for physicians to identify the abuse in same-sex relationships (Chan and Cavacuiti 2008; Clift, Thomas, and Dutton 2005; Dutton et al. 2001; Regan et al. 2002).

Indeed, to determine the incident rates, some researchers use a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale, “a quantitative instrument that lists items describing physical and non-physical conflict and ask respondents how many times they have engaged in a tactic and how many times they have been on the receiving end of the tactic” (Ristock 2002, 11). For example, Caroline Waterman and her colleagues found that, of 34 gay male respondents, 12.1% reported being victims of forced sex while 5.9% said they had been perpetrators of forced sex in their current or most
recent relationship (1989, 120). Using a probability-based sample through telephone interviews, Gregory Greenwood and his colleagues recruited 2,881 MSM and found that 22% had experienced “physical battering,” 5% “sexual battering” and 35% “psychological/symbolic battering,” from a boyfriend or same gender partner during the past five years (2002, 1964).

Lisa Waldner-Haugrud, Linda Gratch and Brian Magruder documented a higher rate in their study. Of 165 gay male respondents, “29.7% reported being or having been the victim of relationship violence” with 19.4% receiving threats, 18.1% being pushed, 17.6% being slapped, 15.1% being punched and 6.7% being struck with an object. In addition, 21.8% had used violence against their partners with 12.9% slapping, 11.7% making threats, 11.7% pushing, 9.2% punching and 3.1% striking a partner with an object (1997, 178). Waldner-Haugrud and Gratch furthered their analysis to explore incident rates of sexual abuse. They found that, of 162 gay male respondents, 57% had experienced at least one incident of unwanted sexual behaviour from their partners. In total, there were “260 incidents of unwanted sexual behaviour (1.6 incidents per person)” with 55% penetration, 33% fondling and 11% kissing (1997, 92).

More recently, Carolyn Halpern and her colleagues recorded that, of 52 gay male adolescents in same-sex relationships, 18.3% (9.5% psychological only and 8.8% physical only or both) “reported some type of partner violence in the previous 18 months” (2004, 129). Shonda Craft and Julianne Serovich recorded higher rates of partner abuse in their study. Of 51 gay men who are HIV positive, 45.1% had experienced physical assault, 72.5% psychological aggression, 33.3% sexual coercion and 25.5% physical injury within the past year. Also, 78.4% had engaged in
psychological aggression, 39.2% in physical assault and 27.5% in sexual coercion while 23.5% had physically injured their partners (2005, 785). In another study, Craft and her colleagues found that, of 46 gay male respondents, 65.2% indicated they had participated in “physical aggression” (93.5% “psychological aggression” and 54.3% “sexual coercion) toward their partners at least one time in the past year (2008, 65).

However, the sample sizes of these studies tend to be small employing non-probability techniques. Even those with larger sample sizes tend to recruit their respondents in major urban cities or via gay publications, organizations and events. Thus, their findings may reflect only a subset of the gay population (Burke and Diane 1999). Moreover, few studies considered the frequency and severity of abuse in their analysis. As a result, we must interpret the results cautiously. Nevertheless, partner abuse appears to be prevalent in gay male relationships. In fact, the rates of gay male partner abuse have been noted to be higher than that of opposite-sex partner abuse in some studies. Using the National Criminal Victimization Survey for 1993 to 1999, Paul Cameron compared the rate of abuse in gay male relationships with that in heterosexual relationships. He found that “0.24% of married women and 0.035% of married men were victims of domestic violence annually versus 4.6% of the men” reporting same-sex partnerships. Cameron concluded: “Domestic violence appears to be more frequently reported in same-sex partnerships than among the married” (2003, 410).

To compare the rates, Patricia Tjaden and her colleagues used data from a nationally representative telephone survey conducted between November 1995 and May 1996. They documented that 23.1% of same-sex cohabiting men had been raped
and/or physically assaulted by a spouse or cohabiting partner at some time in their lives, compared with 7.7% of opposite-sex cohabiting men and 20.3% of opposite-sex cohabiting women. This finding led to their conclusion: “Intimate partner violence is more prevalent among gay male couples than heterosexual couples” (1999, 413).

Krystal Mize and Todd Shackelford observed similar results, using the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation Supplementary Homicide Reports for the years 1976 through 2001. They concluded that “the homicide rate in gay partners is higher than the heterosexual rate” – 63.72 per million per annum compared with 21.25 per million per annum for heterosexual couples (2008, 109).

Again, we must interpret these results carefully. As some researchers remind us, it is difficult to obtain a representative sample of the gay population as its actual size is still unknown (Burke and Diane 1999). These studies also do not provide the context in which the violence occurs. Nor do they capture the dynamics of interpersonal conflict in intimate relationships (Ristock 2002).

**ASSOCIATED FACTORS**

The most commonly accepted explanation for domestic violence is contingent on gender-based theory, which considers it a result of patriarchy, sexism and gender socialization that prepare men to expect control over their partners while normalizing violence against women. However, scholars of same-sex partner abuse argue that the theory does not acknowledge or explain domestic violence between two men or two women (see Erbaugh 2007; Island and Letellier 1991; Letellier 1994; Merrill 1998). To fill this void, Island and Letellier propose a gender-neutral theory that focuses on the personal and behavioural characteristics of perpetrators. They write:
We think that batterers are not mentally healthy. Further, we believe that most batterers suffer from some kind of diagnosable, progressive, psychological disorder or mental condition. They are not insane or psychotic, but they have some type of disturbed state of mind. (1991, 58)

For Island and Letellier, domestic violence is clearly a psychological problem and is caused by personal abnormalities (such as inadequate self-control) and/or mental illness (such as psychotic and impulse disorders).

Other scholars propose an integrative model that includes both personal characteristics of the perpetrator and the social contexts (heterosexism and homophobia) in which same-sex violence occurs. It conceptualizes domestic violence as learned behaviour that originates from the family. Accordingly, perpetrators learn to use violence through witnessing or being victims of domestic violence in their family of origin (Letellier 1994; McClennen 1999b; Merrill 1996, 1998). For Letellier, the integrative model is “inclusive of same-sex battering;” it accounts “for victims and batterers of either gender” and allows “for the inclusion of the social context of homophobia and heterosexism in which same-sex battering occurs” (1994, 98).

Consequently, researchers have attempted to isolate and explore personal and social factors associated with domestic violence in gay male relationships. Factors that have been explored in past research include insecure attachment, anger, dependency, jealousy, substance use, violence in family of origin, demographic variables, HIV status, public outness, internalized homophobia and self-esteem. For example, Jessica Stanley and her colleagues recruited 69 gay and bisexual men (who reported an experience of violence in a romantic relationship) to investigate the motives that led to a violent episode. They found not “desire to control,” a factor commonly believed to be the main motivator, but feelings of a lack of control as well as feelings of anger and frustration
that led gay men to perpetrate violence. They concluded that “participants who perpetuated violence often expressed feeling a lack of control in their relationships, as well as feelings of anger and frustration stemming from the current condition of their relationships.” The unmet or threatened emotional needs were found to be the most consistent themes in participants’ stories of same-sex partner abuse: “incompatible needs for closeness versus autonomy, frustrated desires for commitment and monogamy, and loss of the relationships” (2006, 39).

Similarly, Craft and her colleagues recruited 46 gay men and 41 lesbians (who had perpetrated at least one act of violence within the past year) to examine the impact of stress and attachment on the perpetration of violence among same-sex partners. They argue:

In times of distress, the main function of attachment behaviours is to maintain proximity to the primary attachment figure. Resultant behaviours may include functional anger or angry behaviour that is used to communicate to a primary attachment figure that attachment needs are not currently being met. (2008, 60)

Gay men who batter their partners may use physical violence when they perceive that their attachment need is not being met by their partners. Their results confirm this hypothesis: “Perceived stress and insecure attachment are positively associated with the perpetration of partner violence … insecure individuals would be more emotionally reactive to stress and … they would also be more likely to use violence to resolve relationship problems” (2008, 69). Consistently, this factor has been observed to be correlated with gay male partner abuse in past research (Bartholomew et al 2008; McKenry et al. 2006; Monica Landolt and Dutton 1997).
In addition to anxiety attachment, Monica Landolt and Donald Dutton surveyed 52 gay male couples to explore other factors that might be potentially associated with gay male partner abuse. In particular, they looked at the Abusive Personality, the constituent elements of which include: Borderline Personality Organization (a form of personality disorder), “anger, fearful and preoccupied attachment, and recollection of poor child/parent relationships” (1997, 354). Landolt and Dutton observed an association between partner abuse and the Abusive personality, and concluded that “this personality profile seemed to characterize both members of abusive dyads” (1997, 335).

Other studies supported these results. For example, in a sample of 63 self-identified gay male victims, McClennen and her colleagues identified “dependency, jealousy, power imbalance and substance abuse” as modest predictors “of severity of abuse” (2002, 23). Ned Farley surveyed 119 gay men being referred for perpetrator treatment and documented that many had been diagnosed with psychological disorders: 33% impulse disorders, 20% adjustment disorders, 20% psychotic disorders, 13% affective disorders and 7% personality disorders (1996, 39).

Consistently, previous research has found drug and alcohol abuse to be associated with gay male partner abuse (Cruz and Peralta 2001; Farley 1996; Hellmuth et al. 2008; Toro-Alfonso 1999). In some studies, the effects of specific drugs in relation to partner abuse were noted. To specifically explore the implications of ecstasy, Robert Klitzman and his colleagues surveyed 733 MSM in New York City, and found that those who had used this drug in the past six months were “more likely to be victims of domestic violence” (2002, 121). In a sample of 273 Latin American MSM, Nieves-Rosa
and his colleagues observed “a strong association between the use of marihuana and cocaine/crack and being a victim of domestic violence.” According to this study, “having ever used other drugs like heroin, downers, uppers or poppers was [also] significantly associated with having experienced domestic abuse” (2002, 85-6).

Still past research has supported the hypothesis that partner abuse is a learned behaviour originating from family, and has shown a strong link between abuse and family-of-origin violence (Craft and Serovich 2005; Rodríguez-Madera and Toro-Alfonso 2005; Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera 2004a, 2004b). Other researchers also identified a relationship between childhood sexual abuse and abuse in adulthood (Nieves-Rosa et al. 2002). Indeed, in a sample of 119 gay men referred for perpetrator treatment, Farley revealed high rates of childhood abuse among perpetrators: 100% for childhood “psychological abuse,” 93% for childhood “physical abuse” and 67% for “childhood sexual abuse” (1996, 39).

More recently, in a qualitative study, Anthony Distefano (2009) identified several factors that might contribute to same-sex partner abuse. These include: (suspected) cheating, economic imbalance between partners, break-ups and senior-junior relationships. Kim Bartholomew and her colleagues investigated correlates of partner abuse in a sample of 186 gay men. They include 7 factors (demographic variables, violence in family of origin, substance use, attachment measures, HIV status, public outness and internalized homophobia) in their analysis. Internalized homophobia was found only to be associated with abuse perpetration while violence in family of origin and substance use were uniquely associated with victimization. Except for age, all others factors (lower income and education levels, high levels of attachment
anxiety, HIV positive status and public outness) were associated with bidirectional partner abuse.

Bartholomew and her colleagues explained: “The challenges of one or both partners living with HIV may increase relational stress and conflict, thereby indirectly contributing to partner abuse” (2008, 356). Other studies concurred with this hypothesis and observed similar results (Greenwood et al. 2002; Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera 2004b). Indeed, Craft and Serovich found that many (28%) of the 51 HIV positive gay respondents had been “forced to have sex without a condom” with 23% admitting that they had also forced “their partners to have sex without using a condom” (2005, 787). On the other hand, some studies found that partner abuse increased HIV risk behaviours among gay men. For example, Michael Relf and his colleagues telephone interviewed 2,124 MSM in four cities and identified battering victimization as a factor that significantly influenced “engaging in high-risk sexual behaviours” (2004, 21). In another study, Heintz and Melendez noted that “individuals who reported that they had been forced to have sex with their partner were 10.3 times more likely to report not using protection because they feared their partner’s response to safer sex” (2006, 203).

To explain the association between public outness and partner abuse as well as internalized homophobia and abuse perpetration, Bartholomew and her colleagues said that “out men may have had more same-sex relationship experience and, therefore, more opportunity for partner abuse to take place.” They continued: “Given lack of societal acceptance of homosexuality, comfort with one’s sexual orientation may be an important component of self-image for gay men ... some gay men may project their own
discomfort with being gay onto their intimate partners, contributing to abusive behaviour” (2008, 356; see also Cruz 2000; Cruz and Firestone 1998).

However, several studies challenged some of these results. For example, in a sample of 464 gay men, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered people, Turell found that, instead of lower income, “higher income is significantly associated with increased frequency of sexual and physical abuses, threats, stalking and financial abuse” (2000, 291). Greenwood and his colleagues surveyed 2,881 MSM and observed that not income but being aged 40 or younger was associated with all forms of battering (2002, 1964). In a sample of 40 gay men and 37 lesbians, Patrick McKenry and his colleagues also found no association between violence in family of origin and partner abuse or childhood abuse and abuse in adulthood. Nor did their study support the observation that there was an association between psychological symptoms and partner abuse or internalized homophobia and abuse in gay male relationships. No correlation was documented between partner abuse and relationship satisfaction and power differential. Instead, they found that lower self-esteem, education and socioeconomic status, higher masculinity, and relationship stress all “contributed to propensity of perpetrator violence” (2006, 240). Their findings regarding self-esteem, education and masculinity have been consistent with previous research (Cruz 2000; Distefano 2009; Greenwood et al. 2002; Nieves-Rosa et al. 2002).

Though there are some inconsistencies, the results of these studies help us further understand gay male partner abuse, particularly its relationship with certain personal and social factors. Yet, we must interpret the results with caution. The studies tend to use non-probability techniques with small sample sizes, recruiting their
respondents in major urban cities or via gay publications, organizations and events. Consequently, their results may represent only a subset of the gay population.

Moreover, even though they may have looked at the same personal and social factors, they use different scales and instruments to measure them and test their relationships with partner abuse, which makes it difficult to compare their results. Furthermore, the results only show that certain personal and social factors may relate to gay male partner abuse. They provide only limited information regarding the context in which the violence occurs. Nor do they explain its dynamics.

**Victims' Experiences**

Only few studies have ever been conducted to explore gay men's experiences of partner abuse. There are even fewer studies that use qualitative methods to look at their experience. Only five published articles in referred journals have been found, four of which were based on one study. Michael Cruz's research explores the lived experiences of gay men involved in partner abuse. He asked 25 gay men who have experienced or perpetrated partner abuse to describe their experience and/or identify reasons for the abuse. According to Cruz, his participants used the concepts of violence and abuse interchangeably, and their experience of abuse was remarkably similar to that in heterosexual relationships. They experienced physical, verbal, emotional and mental abuse and attributed it to control issues, jealousy and insecurity, money, drugs and alcohol, family of origin and internalized homophobia (Cruz 2000; Cruz and Firestone 1998). In turn, the effects of the abuse led to their increased use of drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms (Cruz and Peralta 2001).
Cruz further analyzed his data to explore why gay men stayed in abusive relationships. He found that they stayed frequently because they were emotionally and financially dependent; did not recognize what their partner did as a form of abuse; felt they should not leave but instead help their partner as part of the relationship; were in love and hoped that their partner would change and stop the abuse; were afraid of being alone; felt they were somehow responsible for the abuse and thus tried to make the relationship work; and feared that it would lead to escalated violence or death if they left (Cruz 2003, 315-20; see also Merrill and Wolfe 2000).

More recently, Distenfano used qualitative interviews (n=39) and participant observation (n=54) to explore same-sex partner abuse in Japan. Like Cruz, Distenfano found that his participants’ experience of partner abuse was strikingly similar to that in heterosexual relationships. They experienced physical, psychological and sexual abuse and found it difficult to seek help. Due to homophobia and heterosexism, this issue was often seen as non-existent or not a serious issue in Japan. There was a pervasive and persistent stigma attached to seeking mental healthcare. Participants feared that reporting or seeking care would lead to their being “out” and that “reporting other members of small sexual minority communities, where perpetrators and survivors often have the same friends, [would] lead to ostracism.” They were also concerned that police would not take action or that they would be further victimized by authorities. They thought that partner abuse was a private matter and that it was the couple’s responsibility to resolve it privately. They felt uncomfortable discussing matters related to sexual identity with service providers, or felt that their injuries were not serious
enough to seek medical care. As a result, they “very rarely either report their abuse to authorities or seek medical or mental care” (Distenfano 2009, 135-6).

Past research has concurred with some of these results, noting that it is difficult for victims to seek assistance. However, when they do, friends and counsellors were often found as the first and second choice for assistance respectively (McClennen, Summers, and Vaughan 2002; Merrill and Wolfe 2000; Turell 1999; Turell and Cornell-Swanson 2005). Other studies showed that, because of prejudice against homosexuality, many gays and lesbians remain sceptical of law enforcement and do not feel comfortable reporting domestic violence to the police. Burke and his colleagues asked their 72 gay and lesbian respondents “whether distrust of law enforcement would prevent them from reporting an incident of same-sex domestic violence to the police” (2002, 249). Only approximately 29% of them said no. In a sample of 499 gay, lesbian and transgendered persons, Turell noted that only 9% of the respondents sought help from police (1999, 42). Although McClennen and his colleagues noted a higher rate (48% of 63 self-identified gay male victims) the majority (83%) of them did not find the police helpful (2002, 35; see also Kuehnle and Sullivan 2003; Peel 1999).

Because of the gender role stereotypes, “domestic abuse cases involving male victims or female perpetrators may not receive equitable treatment within the criminal justice system” (Seelau, Seelau, and Poorman, 2003, 199). Paula Poorman and her colleagues noted that same-sex abuse was generally considered by the public to be less serious than male against female abuse; that same-sex victims were considered less believable than heterosexual victims; and that the victim in same-sex abuse was less likely to be recommended for criminal justice system interventions than in male against
female abuse (Poorman, Seelau, and Seelau 2003; Seelau and Seelau 2005). In fact, some studies showed that both partners in same-sex domestic violence were often seen as victims or perpetrators and considered to be responsible for the violence (Blasko, Winek, and Bieschke 2007; Taylor and Sorenson 2005). A police sergeant said:

Police officers ... are often confused when it comes to identifying who the perpetrator is and who the victim is, and they may be uncomfortable in these situations as a result of their own attitudes toward or feelings about same-sex relationships. (Buntin, Lechtman, and Laumann 2004, 227)

It should be noted that violence in same-sex relationships was not considered acceptable or evaluated differently than violence in heterosexual relationships (Sorenson and Kristie 2009; Yunglove, Kerr, and Vitello 2002). However, “it appears that the commission of a serious offense is needed to make some police officers treat an incident involving a male same-sex couple as a serious criminal matter” (Pattavina et al. 2007, 388).

As shown, little is known about the experience of gay men involved in partner abuse. Only two studies use qualitative methods to explore their lived experience. One of them is relatively old, conducted approximately 20 years ago. Additionally, none of these studies was conducted in Canada. Nor is there any research looking at service providers’ experiences with these men. This study aims at filling these gaps.

**RATIONALE AND OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS**

Little research has been done outside of the U.S to understand gay men’s experience of violence in relationships. Most have used a survey method. Very little research has focused on gay men’s experience of violence through their own narratives (Cruz 2000, 2003; Cruz and Firestone 1998; Cruz and Peralta 2001; Distefano 2009). However, as Kersti Yllö points out:
The true nature of material rape cannot be captured in statistics; the experience of violent victimization at the hands of a loved one in an act grotesquely similar to and totally different from an act of love cannot be conveyed in traditional questionnaire or survey format. (1988, 38)

In other words, the survey method cannot capture the complexity of violence in intimate relationships. Using a qualitative method, this thesis attempts to fill the gap. I aim to better understand gay men’s experiences of partner abuse through their own words while demonstrating the complexity of their experiences.

The methodology of this study is outlined in chapter 2. Guided by post-modernist and post-structuralist frameworks, this study explores the cultural construction of gay male partner abuse and, within it, how gay men negotiate their experience through discourse. Data includes: (1) archival research at The Gay and Lesbian Archives and The Library and Archives of Canada; (2) three focus groups with 16 service providers; and (3) 21 individual interviews with gay men who are or have been involved in abusive relationships.

In chapter 3, I explore the social construction of gay male partner abuse using data collected from The Gay and Lesbian Archives and The Library and Archives of Canada. In particular, I show how the discourse of abuse in relationships is produced through the process of normalization. I argue that the discourse is both totalizing and individualizing. On one hand, it targets the entire gay population: everyone is at risk. On the other hand, it individualizes gay male partner abuse: it isolates and codifies characteristics of partner abuse against which individuals are examined, judged, measured and compared.

In chapter 4, using data collected from focus groups, I show the discursive effects of gay male partner abuse on clinical practice. Specifically, I demonstrate how the
discourse of partner abuse both informs and constrains service providers’ clinical work with gay men involved in abusive relationships. I trace their assumptions of gay male partner abuse and, in so doing, come to understand their clinical practice with victims and perpetrators. Moreover, I show how service providers resist the dominant discourse of partner abuse and continually struggle for new language to articulate it.

Beginning with chapter 5, I focus my analysis on narratives from individual interviews. In chapter 5, I deconstruct the experience of gay male partner abuse. Rather than biological or fixed, it is multiple and negotiated, constantly under revision and reinvention. It can therefore only be a contingent representation of their lived experiences. I also show that the abuse itself has no meaning outside the act of naming it. As a result, our understanding of abuse reflects not the essential truth of abuse, but our own cultural assumptions of it. Thus, gay men’s experience of partner abuse is inherently both personal and social.

Chapter 6 explores what the participants describe as abuse/physical violence in relationships and how they describe it. The narratives reveal the cultural values behind what can and cannot be named as abuse/physical violence. I show that gay men’s experiences of partner abuse do not always fit neatly into the roles of victim and perpetrator. I illuminate the complexity of gay male partner abuse and challenge the essentialized notion of victims and perpetrators of violence in relationships.

In chapter 7, I look at how the participants explain their experience of partner abuse through discourse – what “stories” they use to explain their experiences and what purpose that serves. I reveal that their narratives are only contingent.
representations of their lived experience, rather than reflections of the “true” nature of partner abuse.

In chapter 8, using a post-structuralist and post-modernist framework, I explore power in abusive relationships. I show how gay men use different strategies to resist their partner’s abuse and gain control over their lives. I challenge the familiar “power and control” story that dichotomizes the roles of victim and perpetrator whereby one partner is completely powerless and the other completely powerful.

In chapter 9, I demonstrate how gay men involved in partner abuse negotiate their identities regarding their experience of partner abuse. I show that the meanings of victimhood and trauma are constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated.

Chapter 10 illustrates how gay men deal with the prospect of leaving abusive relationships. I show that leaving is a process of negotiation that is never finalized. For many, leaving does not present a better option and may lead to an even bleaker future. It is within this context I discuss how gay men negotiate leaving.

In the final chapter, I discuss the major contributions of this thesis to the field of domestic abuse in general, and specifically to gay male partner abuse. I discuss the limitations of this research study, and its implications for future research. Lastly, I talk about the implications for clinical practice in acknowledging the fluidity of gay men’s roles in partner abuse.
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I outline the conceptualization and methodology of this study. Using a post-structuralist and post-modernist framework, I show the conceptualization that underpins this study, treating narratives of personal experience as constitutive through discourse. Following that, I describe the methodological framework that guides this study (namely, discourse analysis supplemented with grounded theory). I then detail the data collection method and procedure that include three data sets: archival data, focus groups, and interviews. Lastly, I discuss data analysis and trustworthiness of this study, as well as the demographics of the participants.

DISCOURSE AND EXPERIENCE

In her article “The reconfiguring self,” Jeannette Mageo (1995) reminds us that experience is an interactive process between the personal and the social. Joan Scott elaborates:

Subjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it doesn’t happen outside established meanings) but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience is a subject’s history. (1992, 34)

In other words, experience is neither purely subjective nor is created by the internal process of human beings alone. It is as much personal as social.

Human behaviour, as William Lachicotte argues, is mediated through signs and language as tools of human communication. Language gives meaning to our social world and thus structures the way in which we understand ourselves – our inner self. We come to understand who we are as a person through social interaction mediated by language. It is this process, Lachicotte says, “by which persons as self aware beings – as
socialized beings – are created” (2002, 53). In other words, “language is not a vehicle for expressing the autonomous ‘self’; instead, the self is mediated by a variety of community languages” (Shearer-Creeman and Winkelmann 2004, 5).

We are not passive agents simply receiving information; instead, we interpret information and identify what is relevant to us. As Shelley Sclater put it, we “draw on cultural resources to tell our stories but it’s we who choose what to use, what to include and what to exclude” (2003, 236). Yet, our inner voice is not “free-flow,” but bounded by what is discursively available. Judith Bulter writes:

[The] very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our “singular” stories are told. (2005, 21)

Thus, “what is spoken in consciousness,” Lachicotte says, inevitably “derives from others’ speech.” It “provides direction and commentary – proaction and reflection – for actions” (2002, 53).

Of course, there is no single discourse. Instead, Jeannette Mageo and Bruce Knauft remind us that there is “always a multitude of discordant, contradictory ‘voices’ within society and within the self” (2002, 6). Inner speech is mediated by multiple voices or discourses that, Lachicotte states, are “infused and differentiated by social values, rank, prestige and position” (2002, 54). Thus, we do not simply transcribe dialogue in our head but, rather, reconstruct it with the precedent organization of inner speech:

The self is literally made in the deployment of performances, pulled into shape by the force of its constituent discourses ... [But] some vocations in this force field are already personal, the recognized places of precedent organization: history in person. (Lachicotte 2002, 61)
In other words, “the voice of inner speech, which [seems] to be mine, are created from an ‘orchestration’” – “the balance struck among socially identified voices that comprise inner speech” (Lachicotte 2002, 54). Our inner voice is comprised of multiple discourses that we draw from when we think, or narrate our stories.

Since each discourse carries different weight, some are more dominant than others. As a result, we do not register them equally, nor does each discourse represent evenly in the configuration of the self. Thus, self-consciousness is by-and-large configured by the relative strength of discourse. As Lachicotte asserts, the possible states of coordination for “this self are a question of authority, the relative strengths of the voices in the ‘self’ configuration. We do not address, nor are we addressed by, equal partners. Their words carry different weight and we orchestrate unequal forces even in thought” (2002, 55). The dominance of a voice or discourse is directly related to the social arrangements (including institutional, habitual, interpersonal and psychological) of a particularly historical moment in time.

In this sense the self is open and changes as discourse and its social contexts vary. Lachicotte writes: “The suasion of voice alters as the social position of its speaker changes relative to the other member voices in the ensemble and relative to the social field of activity” (2002, 56). The self then “is public, social, dialogic process, created and re-created in different forums, communities, and subcultures” (Shearer-Cremean and Winkelmann 2004, 5). Constituted through discourse, narratives of one’s experience are fragmented, multiple and can only be a contingent representation of the self (Elliott 2001; Ewing 1990; Mageo 1995).
As a result, we cannot simply treat gay men’s narratives of partner abuse as “personal” experiences that come from their inner self. Instead, we need to think how their narratives of violence are mediated by discourses, particularly the dominant discourse of domestic violence or abuse. We need to ask how these men come to articulate their stories and negotiate their experience through the available discourses.

METHODODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by discourse analysis. According to Ian Parker, discourse analysis is predicated on the assumption that discourses “do not simply describe the social world, but categorize it, they bring phenomena into sight” (1990, 191). It sees that people do not create discourses or “repertoires” anew when they speak but they “borrow and refashion” these repertoires “for our own purposes” (Burman and Parker 1993, 4). Paul Stenner writes, people “draw upon numerous, often contradictory and competing stories, within which they position themselves and one another” (1993, 131; see also Davies and Harré 2001). As a result, there “is not ‘one’ self waiting to be discovered or uncovered but a multitude of selves found in the different kinds of linguistic practices articulated now, in the past, historically and cross-culturally” (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 102). Thus, discourse analysis “does not use people’s language as a means of gaining access to their psychological and social worlds;” instead, it “focuses on this ‘public and collective reality’ as constructed through language use” (Coyle 2000, 253). Erica Burman writes: “In its various forms, discourse analysis offers a social account of subjectivity by attending to the linguistic resources by which the socio-political realm is produced and reproduced” (1991, 327). Accordingly, it is well suited to the conceptualization and objective of this study.
Discourse analysis, it must be noted, is not a systemic approach that one simply follows. Nor, say Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, is it “theory-driven” or “method driven” (1995, 83). Rather, continue Potter and Wetherell, “there is a broad theoretical framework, which focuses attention on the constructive and functional dimensions of discourse, coupled with the reader’s skill in identifying significant patterns of consistency and variation” (1987, 169). Instead of using “a priori coding categories or interpretative schemas,” discourse analysis examines “the details of texts as found” and ties “analytic claims closely to those details” (Colombo and Senatore 2005, 53). It requires the researcher to suspend belief that treats linguistic practices “as simply reflecting underling psychological and social realities” (Coyle 2000, 257). The researcher must also resist, as Stenner reminds us, “the urge to ask whether or not a given story is ‘true’” (1993, 115). The focus of data analysis is “on how talk is constructed and what it achieves” (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 164). “It examines how people use language to construct versions of their worlds and what they gain from these constructions” (Coyle 2000, 253). The task is, says Potter, to “highlight things that have become implicit and taken-for-granted” and to search for recurrent discursive patterns (2003b, 786).

In discourse analysis, data can include interviews and texts such as newspaper and journal articles (Potter 2003a). For discourse analysts, Potter and Wetherell say, “the success of a study is not in the least dependent on sample size. It is not the case that a larger sample necessarily indicates a more painstaking or worthwhile piece of research.” Instead, it is judged against whether “a clear and detailed description of the nature of the material one is analyzing and its origins” are given (1987, 161-2; authors’
emphasis). To enhance rigor in discourse analysis, Stephanie Taylor suggests “member checking” and “triangulation.” Its validation is defined in terms of its “usefulness,” “coherence” and “persuasiveness” of the argument being presented (2001, 320-24).

As Janice Ristock reminds us, to fully understand the experience of violence in relationships, we must look at both the “physical pain and material consequences” as well as “those things compounded by social context and experienced through various discourses about sexuality, about violence and about gender” (2002, 29). Though useful in identifying discursive patterns in talk or texts, discourse analysis does not address issues regarding material conditions or social contexts.

As a result, I also used grounded theory to guide my analysis – an approach that is useful in exploring social processes and revealing how people anticipate and respond to various life circumstances. Grounded theory, like discourse analysis, does not begin with a pre-established theory but, rather, Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin say, aims to construct “from data an explanatory scheme that systematically integrates various concepts through statements of relationships” (1998, 25). “In looking for phenomena,” continue Strauss and Corbin, “we are looking for repeated patterns of happenings, events or actions/interactions that represent what people do or say, alone or together, in response to the problems and situations in which they find themselves” (1998, 130).

Using a combination of these two methodological frameworks in this study enables the exploration of different aspects of gay male partner abuse – both the meanings that gay men give to their experience of abuse through discourse and the circumstances in which they found themselves. As a result, it provides a fuller picture of gay male partner abuse than using either discourse analysis or grounded theory alone.
(for further discussion regarding the similarities and differences of these two frameworks, please see Starks and Trinidad 2007).

**METHOD AND PROCEDURE**

**DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE QUEER PRESS**

To explore how gay male partner abuse is constructed socially, this study examined the dominant discourse published in both popular queer magazines and scholarly literature. The popular press is written for the larger gay community. It has a strong influence on our culture and often reflects the dominant views on the issue. The articles look to raise awareness within the gay community, demystify some misconceptions, and discuss the social and cultural contexts that silence gay men who have been involved in partner abuse. Stories often focus on the personal experience of victims and perpetrators, using expert opinions, including clinical practitioners and scholars, as well as research reports. The articles also provide information about related services for gay men.

The scholarly literature is written by clinical practitioners, researchers and scholars and is produced for academic circulation rather than the general public. Some articles provide research findings based on qualitative and quantitative studies that primarily look at the prevalence of gay male partner abuse, factors that contribute to it, and the experiences of those involved (see Chapter 1). Other articles are based on clinical experience and discuss treatment issues specific to gay male perpetrators and victims. They discuss the cultural and social aspects that silence gay men involved in partner abuse. They also attempt to define different forms of abuse and develop
screening tools. To combat gay male partner abuse, they call for multi-level strategies that include policy, legal, clinical, community, and advocacy considerations.

Both types of literature produce a dominant discourse on gay male partner abuse. Though they may appear to be different, they are not produced separately. Rather, each discourse informs and reinforces the other. As discussed above, the popular press often cites experts and research reports while the scholarly press is often written by clinical practitioners, researchers and scholars who are inevitably influenced by the culture. In my study, I have utilized both discourses to illuminate how the dominant culture produces and reinforces our views on gay male partner abuse.

To locate related articles published in academic journals, I searched the PsycInfo database using key words such as gay, same-sex, violence and abuse. To further identify articles that might not be included in PsycInfo, I looked at the references of each article that I found. In total, there were 96 articles published in academic journals and 6 books or monographs found to address issues related to gay male or same-sex partner abuse. These books or monographs include Closeted Screams: A Service-Provider Handbook for Same-Sex Domestic Violence Issues written by Sharon Daugherty (1992); Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them written by Island and Letellier (1991); Abuse in Gay Male Relationships: A Discussion Paper written by Kevin Kirkland (2004); Same-Sex Domestic Violence: Strategies for Change edited by Beth Leventhal and Sandra Lundy (1999); A Professional’s Guide to Understanding Gay and Lesbian Domestic Violence: Understanding Practice Interventions edited by Joan McClennen and John Gunther (1999); and Violence in Gay and Lesbian Domestic Partnerships edited by Claire Renzetti and Charles Miley (1996).

Using the above sources, I explored the salient discourse of gay male partner abuse in our culture. More specifically, I sought to identify how domestic violence in gay male relationships is constructed, what is considered as abuse, and solutions to it. Rosalind Gill says: “The [discourse] analyst’s task ... is to try to identify the problem and how what is said constitutes a solution” (1996, 146). It must be noted that my research focus is gay men. However, I have included texts that use the term “same-sex.” Thus, the terms “same-sex” and “gay” are used interchangeably at times in this thesis, particularly when referencing secondary sources. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the
points raised in this thesis do not necessarily apply in full to the lesbian communities that are commonly included in the term “same-sex.”

**FOCUS GROUPS**

To explore the discursive effects of gay male partner abuse on clinical and community work, I conducted three focus groups with 16 service providers in May 2006 (5 to 6 participants per group). I specifically chose the focus group as a data collection method here because narratives obtained from it represent a form of collective testimony that generally reflects the cultural assumption of gay male partner abuse. Through mutual sharing, the focus group also helps facilitate the articulation of the participants’ clinical practice with gay men who experience violence in relationships.

I chose to interview those who have experience working with gay men. Study participants had to be over 18 years old and be either: (1) a social worker working currently or previously with gay men, or (2) a mental health worker currently or previously providing mental health or counselling services for gay men, or (3) a member or volunteer with a community agency providing mental health or social services to the gay male population, or (4) a person formally affiliated with an organization that provides mental health or community services to gay men.

To recruit service providers, I posted flyers in community agencies, after obtaining permission (see Appendix C). These agencies included 2-Spirited People of the First Nations; AIDS Community of Toronto; Asian Community AIDS Services; Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention; Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention; Centre for Spanish Speaking peoples; Chinese Family Services of Ontario; Counselling of Chinese LGBT Communities; David Kelley Services, Family Services Association of
Toronto; Hassle Free Clinic; Lesbian & Gay Bi Trans Youth Line; Rainbow Services, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health; Sherbourne Health Centre, LGBTT Primary Health Care Program; and Anti-Violence Programme at the 519 Community Centre. I also contacted individual counsellors listed in 2005 Pink Pages (a local directory of gay and gay-positive businesses) who provide private counselling services to gay men, to determine if there was interest in the study. As well, I asked my social work colleagues to help distribute the flyer.

In the initial contact, I further explained to potential participants (in person or by telephone) the nature of the study, and answered any questions. If they wished to participate in the study, a letter acknowledging their interest was mailed, hand delivered or e-mailed to them along with additional information about the study (see Appendix D). Prior to the start of each focus group, I carefully went over the consent and explained the study, its goals and methodology. I also reviewed the following: (1) all information discussed in the focus group would remain confidential; (2) names would not be used in the published materials such as the thesis; (3) the focus group session would be audio-taped and transcribed for analysis; (4) they would be free to withdraw at any time during the focus group; (5) in the case of a withdrawal, what the participant discussed in the focus group would be deleted; and (6) withdrawal would not affect access to any program or any organization that I work for, or any role that I have within that organization. Each participant signed an informed consent and completed a demographic information sheet before the focus group sessions began (see Appendix F & G).
I was the facilitator for all the focus groups, each of which contained 5 to 6 participants. To increase the participants’ comfort and thus encourage dialogue, the focus groups were conducted in a local queer community agency. In each focus group, I posted the following questions on a flip chart and asked the service providers to reflect their “clinical” experience in relation to them:

- In your opinion, what does violence in intimate gay relationships look like and what are the specific challenges gay men in intimate relationship involving violence face?
- How do you think gay men in an intimate relationship involving violence cope with the violence?
- As a community, what can we do in response to violence in intimate gay relationships?

During the discussion, the service providers not only shared their thoughts about gay male partner abuse, but also often asked each other questions and discussed issues relating to it. I ensured that each service provider was given an opportunity to share their views and asked further questions to clarify ideas that were being discussed in the focus groups. The discussion continued until the service providers felt that the topic was exhausted.

After these questions, I presented preliminary findings from the individual interviews (outlined in next section). I asked the service providers to provide feedback and discuss whether they found the analysis relevant, useful, persuasive, and convincing, the purpose of which was to enhance the trustworthiness of this study and to guide the overall understanding of gay male partner abuse. Each focus group lasted for approximately 2 to 3 hours. All participation was voluntary. In this thesis, all participants’ names (for both focus groups and individual interviews) are pseudonyms;
to protect confidentiality, some personal information with the potential to expose their identities has also been changed.

**INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

To explore how gay men articulated and negotiated their experiences of violence in intimate relationships, I interviewed 21 men between September 2005 and May 2006. I specifically chose individual interviews for data collection because it allowed the participants to tell their stories in their own words and, in so doing, show how they came to understand their experiences of partner abuse. It also helped to contextualize their experience without emphasizing the cause or origin of the experience. Moreover, domestic violence is a very sensitive issue. This method provided a sense of anonymity, which enabled participants to discuss their experience more freely.

This study aimed at understanding the way in which participants identified, understood and talked about their experience of violence in relationships, rather than “what was their experience of partner abuse.” Moreover, as Adam, a service provider, reminded us, “Intimacy means something totally different in a gay community than in many other communities.” Cameron raised similar issues in his study:

> Many of those with whom homosexuals have sex, particularly for men, are physically engaged at public restrooms or rest areas. Are these considered ‘partners’ when they respond to questionnaires? (2003, 415)

As a result, rather than defining what a relationship or an abuse was, I asked the participants to define these terms for me. Study participants had to be a gay male over 18 and identified as currently and/or formerly being in an intimate same sex relationship(s) that involved abuse. I also included men who were interested in talking
about arguments, conflicts and fights (both physical and verbal) that occurred in their current or former relationships.

It was recognized that no consensus-based sampling frame or any other reliable source was available to design and randomly sample this population. As a result, a purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met the inclusion criteria – a method that was well-suited for this type of exploratory study. For the recruitment, I specifically used two strategies: social networks and flyers. It was important to use social networks for recruitment because many gay men who are involved in violent relationships do not report the violence or seek professional help; instead, they turn to their friends for help (see for example Merrill and Wolfe 2000; Sloan and Edmond 1996; Turell 1999). Using my professional and social networks, I asked my former colleagues and friends to help enlist participants for this study. I also posted flyers in community agencies, on their websites and in places frequented by gay men such as cafés, video stores, bars and bathhouses (see Appendix A and the list of agencies on page 29).

In the initial contact, I further explained to potential participants (in person or by telephone) the nature of the study, and answered any questions. If they wished to participate in the study, a letter acknowledging their interest was mailed, hand delivered or e-mailed to them along with additional information about the study (see Appendix B). To ensure participants’ safety, they were allowed to choose the delivery method for this letter. Prior to the start of each interview, I carefully reviewed the consent form and explained the study, its goals and methodology. I also reviewed the following: (1) all information discussed in the interview would remain confidential; (2)
names would not be used in the published materials such as the thesis; (3) the potential for the interview discussion to remind them of their experiences about violence in their intimate relationships, and to cause them some emotional and/or psychological distress. If they needed counselling services or help in dealing with such distress, they would be referred to appropriate services; (4) the interview would be audio-taped and transcribed for analysis; (5) they would be free to withdraw at any time during the interview; (6) in the case of a withdrawal, what the participant discussed in the interview would be deleted; and (7) there would be no negative consequences with their service providers. Each participant signed an informed consent and completed a demographic information sheet before the interview began (see Appendix E & G). A list of community resources was also given to each of the participants prior to the interview (see Appendix J).

I personally conducted all of the interviews either at the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto or in a local community centre. The interviews were semi-structured with an interviewing guide that sought to understand their experience of partner abuse – particularly how they came to articulate their experience as that of partner abuse, how they resisted it and how they negotiated their experience through discourse (see Appendix H). During the interviews, I also asked questions to clarify and probe for further information. Each interview lasted for approximately 2 to 4 hours. All participation was voluntary, and no gift or honorarium was offered for participation; however, public transit tokens were provided to reimburse traveling fees when required.
**DATA ANALYSIS**

First I carefully read each transcript several times and conducted line-by-line open coding to highlight key phrases that represented themes. I then examined the implication of these phrases (including their similarities and differences) and how they related to the current literature. By grouping similar coded phrases together, I developed a list of emerging themes. To further reduce themes and create clusters, I grouped similar themes together. After this process, I compared themes against one another and looked at their inter-relationships to develop categories. Lastly, I examined characteristics and dimensions of each category to form an overall understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The validity and reliability of this study is based on four criteria: credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability (Creswell 1998; Lincoln 1995; Trochim 2001). In this study, credibility was accomplished through *triangulation* of data collection methods (individual interviews and focus groups) and *member checking*, in which a copy of the transcript was provided to the participants to obtain feedback and ensure accuracy. Credibility was further enhanced by *debriefing* whereby I met monthly with a volunteer peer to help clarify the basis of my interpretations and ask questions regarding my working hypotheses.

Transferability was accomplished by *thick description*: that is, having heavily used participants’ verbatim comments in this report to illustrate my observations, which “enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 316). Both transferability and confirmability were further enhanced through the
“community-consultation” process with service providers to verify and expand my understanding of participants’ experiences of partner abuse as developed from the data analysis of the interviews. Lastly, confirmability and dependability were also accomplished by an audit trail: that is, having members of the thesis committee act as auditors to judge whether the findings were grounded in the data and whether inferences based on the data were logical, appropriate and exhaustive.

Two systems were used to provide audit trails – one for raw data, the other for analysis and interpretation (Rogers and Cowles 1993; Wolf 2003). For the raw data, two folders were created – one for the interviews and the other for the focus groups. Interviews and focus groups were all identified by a number. The date and location of each interview and focus group were stated clearly on the first page of the transcripts. This system provided for easy retrieval of the raw data. For the analysis and interpretation, a tree system was developed for each category. Themes and sub-themes under each category were systematically organized in alphabetical order. There were multiple drafts of the analysis, each of which identified by date. This system provides a straightforward method for following and tracing the logic of my analysis.

It must be noted that this study is qualitative with a small number of participants, which may limit transferability and generalizability of the findings. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Boards of the University of Toronto.

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

Table 1 presents socio-demographic characteristics of the service providers. In total, 16 service providers with experience working with gay men were recruited. The majority (n=14) described themselves as gay or queer. The mean age was 37.4 and the range
from 23 to 50. The participants came from diverse communities. Only six were born in Canada; the remaining participants were born in Guyana, Hong Kong, Jamaica, Peru, The Philippines, Portugal, Sri Lanka, Trinidad and Vietnam. Most (n=10) of the service providers identified themselves as members of an ethic-racial minority. The majority (n=15) had lived in Canada for more than ten years (mean: 29.5). Half of the service providers (n=8) said they were single while the remaining seven reported they were either dating, in a relationship or coupled. (One did not answer this question.) Not surprisingly, the service providers were highly educated; the majority (n=13) having attained an undergraduate or graduate degree. Many (n=8) were earning over $40,001 per year. The majority (n=12) had worked in the field for over 2 years with some service providers (n=5) having over ten-year experience (mean: 7.7).

Table 1 Characteristic of Service Providers (n=16)

| Sexual identification: gay = 12; lesbian = 1; bisexual = 1; queer = 2 |
| Age: 20-29 = 4; 30-39 = 5; 40-49 = 5; 50-59 = 2; mean = 37.4 |
| Place of birth: Canada = 6; Guyana = 1; Hong Kong = 1; Jamaica = 1; Peru = 1; Philippines = 1; Portugal = 1; Sri Lanka = 1; Trinidad = 1; Vietnam = 2 |
| Years of living in Canada: 0-10 years = 1; 11-20 years = 3; 21-30 years = 6; 31-40 years = 1; 41-50 years = 5; mean = 29.5 |
| Ethnic identification: Black/Jamaican = 1; Canadian = 3; Chinese = 3; Filipino-Canadian = 1; French-Canadian = 1; Indo-Caribbean = 1; Jewish = 1; Latino = 1; Portuguese-Canadian = 1; South Asian = 1; South Asian/Caribbean descent = 1; Vietnamese = 1 |
| Current relationship status: single = 8; dating multiple partners = 1; in a relationship = 1; in a polygamist relationship = 1; coupled = 3; common-law = 1; did not answer this question = 1 |
| Education: college diploma = 2; some university = 1; university undergraduate degree = 7; university post graduate degree = 6 |
| Yearly income: below $10,000 = 1; $10,001-20,000 = 0; $20,001-30,000 = 2; $30,001-40,000 = 5; $40,001-50,000 = 3; $50,001-60,000 = 3; $60,001-70,000 = 1; over $70,000 = 1 |
| Years in the field: below 2 years = 4; 3-6 years = 3; 7-9 years = 4; over 10 years = 5; mean = 7.7 |

Table 2 presents socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. A total of 21 men involved in partner abuse were recruited. The majority (n=18) identified themselves as gay or homosexual. The youngest participant was 21 years old while the oldest participant was 73 years old (mean age: 42.8). The participants were born in
eight different countries (mode: Canada). Many (n=8) identified themselves as members of ethnic-racial minority, three of whom had lived in Canada less than five years. Fourteen said they were single and the remaining seven reported they were in some forms of relationships. The participants were highly educated with the majority (n=20) having some level of post-secondary education. Many (n=13) were working full-time; however, 81% (n=17) of the participants were earning less than $40,000 per year.

**Table 2 Characteristic of Participants (n=21)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual identification:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gay = 17; homosexual male = 1; mostly gay = 1; bisexual to gay = 1; queer = 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29 = 3; 30-39 = 5; 40-49 = 7; 50-59 = 4; 60-69 = 0; over 70 = 2; mean = 42.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of birth:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antigua &amp; Barbuda = 1; Canada = 13; China = 1; Hong Kong = 1; Indonesia = 1; Mexico = 1; Philippines = 1; United States = 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of living in Canada:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10 years = 4; 11-20 years = 2; 21-30 years = 1; 31-40 years = 5; 41-50 years = 6; over 51 years = 3; mean = 33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic identification:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo including Scottish, Welsh and Irish = 3; Asian or Chinese = 3; Black = 3; Canadian = 5; Caucasian = 4; Latino = 1; Mixed = 1; not identified = 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current relationship status:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single = 14; single with partnerships = 1; in a relationship = 1; coupled = 2; common-law = 2; engaged = 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some high school = 1; some college = 3; college diploma = 3; some university = 2; university undergraduate degree = 7; university post graduate degree = 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>working = 13; not working = 1; student = 1; retired = 2; social assistance = 3; unemployed/refugee clamant = 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yearly income:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>below $10,000 = 5; $10,001-20,000 = 4; $20,001-30,000 = 5; $30,001-40,000 = 3; $40,001-50,000 = 1; $50,001-60,000 = 0; $60,001-70,000 = 1; over $70,001 = 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3: THE MAKING OF GAY MALE PARTNER ABUSE

In this chapter, using articles published in the popular queer magazines and scholarly literature, I explore how the dominant discourse of gay male partner abuse is produced in our culture. I use Michel Foucault's concepts of “normalization” to understand how normal, healthy relationships and abnormal, unhealthy ones are produced (1995, 184). I then explain how the discourse constructs that the entire gay population is at risk for partner abuse. Further, I show how the discourse identifies the characteristics of certain gay men who are at risk.

In the past few decades, we have witnessed a proliferation of articles on gay male partner abuse both in popular media and academic literature. As early as 1985, *The Advocate* published an article entitled “Gay Domestic Violence: A Hidden Problem.” It asks its readers:

> [If] someone can answer ‘yes’ to any of the following questions, that person is probably a victim of domestic violence: Does your lover try to control you through violence or the threat of violence? When you are with your lover, are you afraid for your safety? Does your lover destroy your personal property? Are you sexually abused or coerced in your relationship? (Freiberg, 1985, 12)

These texts (including 6 books and over 150 articles) have not only raised awareness of gay male partner abuse, but also have helped construct and define what an abusive relationship is. They tell us what a relationship should be or can be and set boundaries, though often contested, for what a healthy, normal relationship is, as well as an unhealthy, abnormal one.

The discourse of healthy, normal relationships sets itself as the standard against which behaviours are assessed, measured, judged and labelled. To put it more simply, healthy, normal relationships are continuously established as the norm for
relationships “through normalization techniques – that is, through discourses that convey messages not only about what is the established norm but also what is not. In effect, these discourses construct the norm” (Carabine 2004, 37; author’s emphasis). Accordingly, normalization produces not only the discourse of healthy, normal relationships but also that of unhealthy, abnormal and abusive relationships.

However, what makes the discourse of gay male partner abuse persuasive and powerful is that it is both totalizing and individualizing. On the one hand, gay male partner abuse is constructed as an issue that affects the entire gay population; everyone is potentially at risk for partner abuse. On the other hand, the discourse individualizes gay male partner abuse. It isolates and codifies characteristics of partner abuse against which we are examined, judged, measured and compared. Gay men with these qualities are considered as a “risk” for partner abuse and, therefore, in need of social intervention. Thus, the discourse of gay male partner abuse not only permeates the entire society but also, says Foucault, transforms “human beings into subjects” (1983, 208).

**Normalization**

Normalization refers to establishing the normal as a standard for judgement and against which to distinguish the pathological. Normalization implies the development of forms of knowledge that set standards and ideals for human thought and human conduct and against which individuals are assessed, measured, and judged. It implies processes by which society (specifically, the human sciences and the helping professions) acts upon individuals and groups to regulate, shape, or make them conform to a norm. (Chambon and Wang, 1999, 276)

In a popular Canadian queer magazine article “Hard-Hitting Facts,” journalist Terence Stone asks his readers a simple question: “Do you want a relationship based on love and respect or fear and obligation?” The answer for him is obvious. “We need hardly

This construction not only produces the idea of a healthy, normal relationship but more importantly, defines unhealthy, abnormal ones. It sets the standard of judgement for relationships. Healthy relationships are the self-evident ideal. In contrast, unhealthy relationships are characterized as the opposite and seen as a failure; they are in need of being brought back to normal. Men who are in relationships that involve disrespectful, controlling, damaging, mean or abusive behaviour all require therapeutic assistance. As Garnet Woloschuk writes in “Men Bashing Men”:

Both individuals in abusive relationships, somewhere in the socialization process, learned an inaccurate method of fostering and maintaining love. Abusive people have to learn constructive methods of interrelating that do not involve dominating and force. Survivors have to learn how to identify people who engage in healthy interrelating skills. (1997, 8)

In a sense, unhealthy relationships are produced through normalization or, more specifically, through the discourse of a healthy, normal relationship that legitimizes therapeutic intervention in unhealthy ones.

Through normalization healthy relationships are defined in terms of harmony, mutuality and compatibility. They are established as the norm, according to which all
relationships are assessed, measured, judged, compared and differentiated. Characterized as the deviant, unhealthy behaviour in relationships is described as either not assertive enough or too aggressive, as either not sensitive enough or overly compassionate. The “clinical criteria for candidacy in the abnormal,” write Catherine Foote and Arthur Frank, “are expanded until the normal is defined out of existence or at least regulated to the margins” (1999, 164). Healthy relationships become almost impossible to attain and men who possess “abnormal” qualities are seen as vulnerable to partner abuse and in need of correction.

The production of the discourse of a healthy relationship does not, it must be noted, lie on individuals’ ill intentions or institutional conspiracies but, rather, is a system of knowledge that seeks “universal” truth. Truth reflects neutrality and objectivity. It is “eternal,” “disinterested” or, as Foote and Frank put it, “simply is” (1999, 159; original emphasis). Healthy relationships are deemed “normal” and thus desirable; we all are expected to strive for and seek to achieve them. As Jean Carabine writes:

Through normalization individuals are compared and differentiated according to norms. Normalizing judgement is not simply about comparing individuals in a binary way – as in heterosexual/homosexual, good/bad, mad/sane or healthy/ill. It is also a “norm” all individuals are expected to aim for, work towards and seek to achieve, and against which all are evaluated – “good” and “bad,” “healthy” and “sick,” “sane” and “mad,” heterosexual and homosexual. (2004, 37)

Healthy relationships are simply, in Foucault's words, “accepted by both sides as absolutely self-evident” – therapists and patients, abusers and non-abusers, perpetrators and victims (1988a, 97).
It is not to say that unhealthy relationships do not exist. Nor does it mean that they are not problematic. It, rather, underscores the discourse of a healthy relationship in our culture that defines what behaviour is deemed acceptable (normal) and not acceptable (abnormal) in a relationship. Canadian journalist Jennifer Davis, in “Domestic Violence in the LGBTT Community,” states: “We cannot control the behaviours of others, but we can make it clear what is acceptable and make it clear what is not” (2000, 4).

Unhealthy behaviour is categorized in terms of physical, psychological, sexual, economic and spiritual abuse. Physical abuse is variously defined as beating, kicking, biting, hitting, punching, burning, choking and using a knife or gun. However, as counsellor Angela Fucci points out in “Gay Domestic Violence,” “People think physical abuse means having a broken rib, a broken nose. They don’t see it as getting pushed around or getting slapped. They think you have to be treated in the emergency room for it to be abuse” (Freiberg 1985, 12). To address this gap, physical abuse is further defined as throwing objects, grabbing, slapping, spitting, restraining, shoving, pushing, scratching, threatening, breaking possessions and damaging furniture or walls. This discourse of physical abuse calls for attention that these behaviours are no longer deemed acceptable in a relationship between two men (see, for example, Bimbi et al. 2007; Hellquist 2002; Kennedy 1999).

Unhealthy behaviour in a relationship is described not just in terms of physical abuse, but in terms of psychological abuse, which is also referred to as emotional abuse. Chartered psychologist Jane Oxenbury argues: “Physical violence is not the most common form of abuse in a gay male relationship. Rather, verbal and emotional abuse is
far more common” and appears to pose “no real danger” (Smith 2003, 14). It is argued that men do not generally take this type of behaviour seriously; it is thus much harder to consider it as abuse and more difficult to identify it than physical abuse. However, as Nicky Jackson points out, psychological abuse “may not leave physical scars, yet its effects are just as damaging as physical abuse” (2007, 453). In fact, writes Christina Starr, “not hurting someone physically can be part of an abusive dynamic” (2003a, 10). In this way, abuse, which does not necessarily involve physical violence but is equally, if not more damaging, is constructed as ubiquitous. “Violence, in its many manifestations, is [just] part of our daily lives,” claim Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera (2004a, 639).

Abuse in relationships is no longer simply defined by physical acts, but by power and control. It, writes John Kennedy, “isn’t restricted to kicking and punching. It is any behaviour that is used to dominate, coerce, or isolate. It is any use of power to maintain control of the relationship” (1999, 52). The goal is, as Jackson claims, “to keep the victim in a passive, frightened position leaving the batterer in control” (2007, 454). Thus, any behaviour perceived to be used to dominate and control in a relationship can be described as abuse or, in lawyer Warren Singer’s words, as “a crime” (Craig 1995c, 19).

This conceptualization produces a more inclusive category of abuse rendering far more behaviours to be considered as so. Behaviour that may not have been previously seen as abuse can now be easily categorized as psychological abuse. For example, in “Substance Use and Domestic Violence among Gays, Lesbians and Bisexuals,” David Bimbi and associates call “lies” and “neglect” a form of emotional abuse, on top of other acts such as threats and intimidation (2007, 2). Starr, in “The Charm of Abusers,” considers “unpredictable mood swings” and “pickiness” emotionally
abusive, along with “name-calling, insults, reprimands, constant criticism and second-guessing” (2003a, 10). In “Same-Sex Domestic Violence,” Jackson describes emotional abuse “as any form of mistreatment,” which includes “screaming,” “staying away from” the partner “for unanticipated time” and “withholding love and affection” (2007, 454).

For Gens Hellquist, psychological abuse comprises not only acts such as publicly humiliating the partner and threatening disclosure of orientation and HIV status, but also “swearing,” “controlling household money,” “blaming the partner for everything that goes wrong,” “threatening to leave the relationship” and “refusing to allow the partner to leave the relationship” (2002, 4). Calling a partner “stupid” or ridiculing them is also considered an inappropriate behaviour that can break down one’s confidence and independence. Others name manipulation and restriction of freedom (such as controlling what the partner does, where he does it, who he can see or what he can read or know about) as psychological abuse, along with stalking and harassment (see Burrell 2008; Kirkland 2004; Partner Abuse 1999; Snow 1992).

Likewise, sexual abuse in relationships is no longer simply defined as forcing unwanted sex on a partner, such as rape. For example, Bimbi and associates regard both “forcing” and “withholding sex” as unacceptable behaviours in a relationship and thus a form of sexual abuse (2007, 2). On the other hand, Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera found the “use of verbal persuasion and seductive words in intimate relations” highly problematic. It, write Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera, “is so common that generally people do not consider them to be coercion. However, lying and nagging in order to make a partner have sex is the tip of the iceberg for incidents of domestic violence and sexual aggression” (2004b, 50). On top of refusing safe sex, criticizing the
partner’s sexual performance, body image, clothing style or physical appearance is also deemed unacceptable and sexually abusive because it can lower one’s self-esteem (Davis 2000; Kirkland 2004; Jackson 2007).

Abuse is also thought of in economic terms. For example, Kirkland refers to “denying one’s partner access to monetary and property resources to keep him economically dependent” as a form of economic abuse (2004, 3). It can include sabotaging the partner’s job, preventing him from working, stealing money, and withholding food, clothes, shelter, money or credit cards. Overspending and amassing debt are also described as economically abusive particularly if they cause hardship for the partner. Demanding a partner account for his spending is no longer seen as appropriate and can be deemed economic abuse (see Bimbi et al. 2007; Kennedy 1999; Kirkland 2004).

Moreover, unhealthy behaviour in relationships is spoken of in terms of spiritual abuse. For example, both forcing a partner to follow specific spiritual practices against their will, and disallowing or inhibiting their own practices is considered detrimental to one’s well-being and thus abusive. Ridiculing and demeaning a partner’s religious or spiritual beliefs is thought of as a form of spiritual abuse as it can lower one’s self-esteem. Using a partner’s religious, spiritual or moral values to manipulate him into staying in the relationship is also seen as spiritually abusive (Davis 2000; Kirkland 2004).

These texts produce not only a discourse of “unhealthy” behaviour, but also a discourse of “healthy” behaviour. Though contested, they set boundaries for what is deemed acceptable and not acceptable in a relationship. This assumption reflects not
the “real nature” of a healthy or unhealthy relationship but, rather, our cultural conceptualization of it, predicated on white middle-class values. It regulates, shapes, and makes us conform to the norm. As Jon Simons puts it, we “must suppress that part of ourselves that identifies with these excluded others in order to remain normal” (1995, 32). Likewise Deborah Brock writes:

“Good” behaviour reminds us of what is “bad” and “bad” behaviour reminds us of what is “good.” The definition and regulation of so-called bad behaviour helps to keep socially desired rules in place by setting boundaries, successfully regulating the conformists even more than the non-conformists. (2003, xi)

The discourse of a healthy relationship is a modern technology that disciplines our souls and produces, to use Foucault’s words, “docile bodies” (1995, 135).

**Totalization**

It is portrayed that abuse in relationships is an issue affecting not only individual gay man but the entire population. In “Gender, Marriage, and Diverse Possibilities for Cross-Sex and Same-Sex Pairs,” Virginia Rutter and Pepper Schwartz claim that bonding is human nature supported by cultural and social institutions. They write:

[The] urge to bond with another person is strong, and the majority of gays and lesbians do so. Lesbians and gays, like heterosexuals, are socialized into the two-by-two world, and their requirements for bonding come from early socialization and a social structure that relies on pairing off. (2000, 65)

In this sense, sooner or later, most – if not all of us – will get into a relationship that can potentially put us at risk for partner abuse. Intimate relationships, once constructed as loving and romantic, can no longer be deemed as always “safe” and can even be a “dangerous” place. As Cantwell remarks:

We’re used to thinking of domestic violence in terms of male violence against women. It can’t happen in our relationships! Women aren’t
violent and men can’t be victims of domestic abuse. So we’re safe – right? Unfortunately, abuse can and does occur in intimate same-sex relationships. (2004, 17)

In fact, being queer-bashed at home, writes Victoria Brownworth, “is just as deadly as – and perhaps more terrible than – being assaulted by strangers” (1993, 96). It “can have a much stronger impact on a person than comparable violence perpetrated by a stranger,” Richard Dudley claims (2002, 59).

It is argued that abuse is not about sexual preference or gender inequality, but about power and control; thus, any of us can be in a violent relationship. For example, Anda Pember, a police sergeant, remarks: The “dynamic of power and control in abusive relationships are genderless” and it can happen to anyone (Abuse Victim Resources 1998, 28). “This issue is one of law, power and human rights,” Donna MacAulay, a psychotherapist, says, “and there should be no surprise that everyone in the culture, no matter what his or her sexual preference, is affected by violent behaviour” (Smith 1993, A11). “Domestic violence is not a product of sexual orientation and preference: it is,” Terry Belleville claims, “a universal problem and we all have the same propensity to inflict it” (1999, 12).

Not only can we be in abusive relationships, but any of us can become a victim or a perpetrator. In fact, warns Alisa Craig, “each and every one of us is capable of violence” (1995b, 23). It cuts across multiple communities and relationship types and, in its course, does not discriminate as to one’s age, socio-economic background, ethnic-racial origin, religion, occupation or educational level. Nor is being a perpetrator or a victim determined by a person’s size, strength or masculinity (Burke and Owen 2006; Erbaugh 2007; Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera 2004a). It simply can happen to
anyone, even to a normal, happy couple or, as Landolt and Dutton say, “in relatively egalitarian relationships” (1997, 335). Kennedy demonstrates this in “Breaking the Silence”:

Scott and David (not their real names) have been a couple for almost three years, living together for the last 18 months. Both are 20-something, educated, employed, and out at work and to their families. By all indications they are a normal, happy, loving couple. (1999, 51)

“Violence knows no boundaries,” Jackson says (2007, 455). “Unfortunately, no one is immune from the effects of intimate partner violence” (Senseman 2002, 28).

It is, depicts Sally Papso, “a very pervasive, serious and painful reality” in our community (2004, 14). Kennedy calls it “one of the leading health problems plaguing gay men today” and warns that it “is on the rise” (1999, 50). Its rates are believed to be just as high as – if not higher than – those in heterosexual relationships (Burrell 2008; Friess 1997). For example, a recent brief article “Making Abuse a Bigger Issue” published in The Advocate indicates: “One in three people in same-sex relationships likely experience some form of domestic violence” (2004, 20). In “Safety in Numbers,” Collin Semenoff observes: An “average of twenty-five to thirty-five per cent of same-sex couples report being affected by or a party to domestic violence” (2005, 43). To put this figure into perspective, Oxenbury states:

Just to get a rough idea, let’s start with the ten percent of the adult population that is gay or lesbian. Let’s say half are in relationships. If only twenty five percent of those relationships are abusive, that’s well over 10,000 people in Calgary alone and over a quarter of a million people in Canada who are trapped in abusive same-sex relationships. (Belleville 1999, 12)

However, Mubarak Dahir remarks, “experts caution that the reported figures [between 25% and 33%] are a mere fraction of actual abuse cases” (1999, 26).
“Domestic violence,” Brownworth purports, “is one of the dirtiest secrets in the queer community. It is so dirty, in fact, that many of us would prefer that it remains a secret” (1993, 96). “People just don’t want to talk about it. Gay people feel immune to domestic violence,” adds Gregory Merrill, Director of Client Services at San Francisco’s Community United Against Violence (Friess 1997, 51). On top of it, Davis says: “Violence is used as entertainment so we’re encouraged to think that things are normal and we’re trained to accept abusive behaviour” (2000, 4). Men are socialized to think, remarks David Wertheimer, Executive Director of the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, “violence is a natural part of life” and “they should be able to deal with it” (Califia 1986, 43). As a result, they “are unable to project themselves mentally into the gendered stereotypes commonly associated with victim and perpetrator roles” and do not often “take seriously the possibility that they are experiencing intimate partner violence,” Elizabeth Erbaugh states (2007, 455).

In fact, “gay males are at high risk for domestic violence because,” writes Heidi Kulkin and associates, “both partners are biologically male and conditioned to assert dominance and control” (2007, 76). They “often engage in power struggles that revolve around competition” especially related to money and career (Rutter and Schwartz 1996, 219). They, says Davis Patterson and Pepper Schwartz, are “more interested in ‘winning’ conflicts than resolving them” and do not “wish to give in.” Consequently, they “have difficulty agreeing or even listening to each other” (1994, 17). “Couples consisting of two partners of the same-sex,” as Mize and Shackelford simply call it, “are partnered to an inherent competitor” (2008, 101). On top of it, they have poor communication
skills and, say Rutter and Schwartz, “are more likely to challenge their partners without listening to them.” They continue:

[Gay] men, like heterosexual men, engage in a low level of disclosure. When the relationship is troubled, this may become “stonewalling” during which no communication occurs. Gay couples may fail to create opportunities to address important relationship issues. Small arguments are avoided, while angry feelings accumulate over time. By the time a problem is addressed, a heated, explosive argument may erupt, and the accumulation of issues and resentment may mean that resolution is much more difficult. (2000, 68)

Besides, Carrie Brown asserts, “a heterosexist society places [same-sex couples] in an oppressed and less valued status.” “According to Disempowerment Theory,” Brown continues, “individuals who feel inadequate and/or lack self-efficiency are at a greater risk of using unconventional means of power assertion, including substance abuse and violence.” Hence, unsurprisingly, “instances of same-sex intimate partner violence would have higher incidences of lethal violence compared to their heterosexual counterparts” (2008, 458).

The idea is that we are “biologically” at high risk for partner abuse and, if any of us can become a victim or perpetrator, then every one of us should learn to improve ourselves in order to make and maintain a healthy, long-term relationship. This conceptualization privatizes violence as an individual problem that supports a whole series of interventions focusing on personal modification or what Foucault calls “technologies of the self.” He writes:

Technologies of the self... permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (1988c, 18)
These interventions include increasingly popular, but often market-driven counselling services and self-help books that help gay men (or gay couples) transform and work on themselves as well as their relationships – for example, *Gay Relationships for Men and Women: How to Find them, How to Improve Them, How to Make Them Last* by Tina Tessina (1989); *The Power of a Partner: Creating and Maintaining Healthy Gay and Lesbian Relationships* by Richard Pimental-Habib (2002); *Get Closer: A Gay Men’s Guide to Intimacy* by Jeffrey Chernin (2006); and *Dynamic Duos: The Alpha/Beta Key to Unlocking Success in Gay Relationships* by Keith Swain (2008). Moreover, these texts, by constructing that violence is a universal problem and each one of us has the same propensity to inflict it, re-center gay, middle-class, able-bodied, white men’s experience of partner abuse as the norm. They ignore the effects of various forms of oppression (such as racism, colonialism, classism and ableism) that are produced to position gay men unequally and lead to different levels of vulnerability to partner abuse (see Holmes and Ristock 2004; Méndez 1996; Poon 2000).

**Individualization: Classification and Categorization**

In the following I outline the individual characteristics commonly understood as risk factors for partner abuse among gay men. These characteristics are culturally constructed and used to examine, judge, and determine who is at risk. However prior to outlining the characteristics, I first explore the cultural context that created the need for codification.

Abuse in relationships is individualized through scientific classification and categorization that highlights the characteristics of perpetrators and victims. It is indeed particularly important in this field, says Craig, to codify and know “which
partner is the perpetrator.” Abuse is usually assumed to be “gender based – most often, the man is abusing the woman” (1995b, 23). As a result, this cultural assumption renders same-sex partner abuse invisible leading to a common perception that abuse takes place only in heterosexual relationships (Bograd 1999; Carlson and Maciol 1997; Letellier 1994).

Violence against men is often downplayed in our culture where they are commonly thought of as being powerful, dominant and in control. “It’s seen,” writes Hellquiest, “as a sign of weakness for a man to admit that he’s the victim of domestic abuse” (2002, 7). Mike Lew purports:

Our culture provides no room for a man as a victim. Men are simply not supposed to be victimized. A ‘real man’ is expected to be able to protect himself in any situation. He is supposed to be able to solve any problem and recover from any setback. (Cited in Letellier 1994, 98)

In fact, says G. Bailey, “some gay men may need to be seriously physically hurt before they are able to associate their experience with being victimized” (1996, 2). The heterosexist assumption of violence and gender makes it difficult for gay men to project themselves in abusive relationships (Cruz 2000; Istar Lev and Lev 1999; Smith and Mancoske 1999; Vickers 1996).

Because of the cultural assumption of gender, there is also a common misconception that violence in gay relationships is a mutual abuse or combat. Without “the division of gender,” purports Starr, “the victim/aggressor roles can be hard to sort out” (2003b, 11). It is not uncommon “for both people in a battering situation to accuse each other,” claiming to be aggrieved (Snow 1992, 62). In fact, says Craig, “many abusers claim to be victims” (1995b, 23). They “aggressively blame survivors for any ‘problems’... while denying their culpability” (Walber 1988, 254). Sandra Lundy writes:
In a variation on the myth of mutual abuse, the lesbian or gay batterer often claims to be the actual victim of abuse, thus seeking to exploit the fact that in same-sex relationships identifying the batterer is often more difficult than in heterosexual situations, particularly if the couple is about the same age, size, etc. (1993, 284)

Consequently, gay men’s own perception of their experience of abuse is seen as an unreliable source and cannot be used to determine which one is the victim and which the perpetrator. As Emily Pitt and Diane Dolan-Soto write in “Clinical Considerations in Working with Victims of Same-Sex Domestic Violence”:

The practitioner cannot necessarily assume that the patient is the partner who is the victim. If a patient identifies as a victim or abuser, it is important to recognize that her or his representation may not necessarily be accurate. This is not because of an intent to deceive, but because roles in same-sex relationships usually do not follow the same gender role behavior as heterosexual relationships. (2001, 166)

In this light, service providers and police often find violence in gay relationships confusing, unable to differentiate the victim from the perpetrator or, Denise Bricker claims, “to identify intimate violence in gay or lesbian relationships” (1993, 1397). As Island and Letellier observe:

With two men in a relationship … the roles of victim and batterer may appear blurry to an outsider. This apparent blurriness can make it difficult for counsellors, therapists, medical personnel, police, or friends of the couple to determine which man is the victim and which the batterer. (1991, 87)

Consequently, say Michael Potoczniak and associates, they “may perceive both parties participating equally in the violence,” treating them as both victim and perpetrator (2003, 255; see also Blasko et al. 2007).

The problem is that very often, purports Connie Burk, “officers can't figure out who is the abuser, so survivors are arrested instead because they're bigger or more butch” (Friess 1997, 51). Or, they arrest the victim “on a charge of ‘mutual’ combat and”
place him “in a cell with the abuser” (McClellan 1999, 252). Moreover, both the victim and perpetrator can “simultaneously seek services from the same shelter or agency” that may further put the victim’s life in danger (Gelles 1997, 121). Mize and Shackelford observe:

> The abusive partner can pretend to be the victim and access their partner’s records by phone. In the cases of group counseling and sheltering, services often provided by domestic violence centers ... a perpetrator of abuse can obtain access to victims by attending the same group sessions or seeking the same sheltering services as his or her victim. (2008, 102)

This confusion has consequently prevented many victims from seeking assistance thereby perpetuating the violence.

It is thus argued that it is important for service providers (including medical professionals and the police) to educate themselves about same-sex partner abuse and to develop a screening tool that can accurately identify the perpetrator. As Lisa Fox asserts, “the therapist must distinguish who the batterer actually is” in order to stop further marginalization of the victim (1999, 112). In “Screening for Intimate Partner Violence among Gay and Lesbian Patients in Primary Care,” Rachel Senseman proposes a “universal screening for intimate partner violence in the primary care setting” (2002, 27). Bailey calls such screening as “necessary to prevent victims from being further victimized by their partners. Without screening, the partner would have access to [the victim services or] the shelter, unlike those services provided for heterosexual women where the man is ‘usually’ the batterer and easily identified” (1996, 5). Unsurprisingly, one of the major tasks in this field is to codify the characteristics of victims and perpetrators in order to develop a screening tool that can accurately identify the “true” identity of these men. Erbaugh writes:
The victim and perpetrator categories are far from useless. On the contrary, the theoretical formulation and practical implementation of these categories has enabled the wide dissemination of an analysis of power and control in relationships. They constitute a clear conceptual framework based on which many survivors of violence are able to access the support of service agencies and criminal justice systems. (2007, 455)

**THE CODIFICATION OF VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS**

Most scholars and researchers of partner abuse in gay relationships acknowledge that characteristics of victims and perpetrators vary from one person to the next. Yet they find some common characteristics in each of these two groups. For example, Daugherty, in *Closeted Screams: A Service-Provider Handbook for Same-Sex Domestic Violence Issues*, identifies ten behaviours commonly exhibited in the perpetrator, which she argues can be used “to spot an abusive partner” (1992, 50-51). Similarly, in *Love between Men: Enhancing Intimacy and Keeping Your Relationship Alive*, Rik Isensee outlines ten characteristics to depict the victim and the perpetrator respectively (1990, 186-7). To help service providers differentiate the victim from the perpetrator, Josephine Sullivan and Lauren Laughlin provide a profile that contains eight personal traits frequently found in the victim and six in the perpetrator (1999, 96-97). Often produced through “scientific” research with the use of statistic analysis and clinical observations, these profiles highlight factors that characterize victims and perpetrators. Gay men who possess these qualities are in need of intervention.

**THE PROFILE OF A VICTIM**

*The Discourse of Innocence.* The victim is commonly portrayed as naïve and innocent. Violence is seen as a problem that lies in the perpetrator, who is fully responsible for the violence in which he engages. “If you are being abused in an intimate relationship,” states Cantwell, “remember that you are not responsible for the abuse”
(2004, 17). You “can no longer be blamed for the violence ... Batterers/abusers must be accountable for their behavior and its impact on survivors and on the community,”

The victim is “fundamentally normal” and, writes Island and Letellier, shows “no greater incidence of mental disorders, character flaws, organic dysfunction, or personality deviance than any other group of males” (1991, 105). What gets him into an abusive relationship, claims Cruz, is his “naïveté about violence” and his trusting personality that make him an easy target for manipulation (2003, 315). Merrill writes:

Some victims may have partnered with a batterer because they have difficulty detecting and responding appropriately to intrusive and controlling behavior. This may be... because they are simply very trusting and naïve or because they are desperate to be loved. Many other victims, however, have had healthy interpersonal relationships in the past and have become involved with a batterer because he skillfully emotionally manipulated them. (1998, 135)

Victims’ fighting back, regardless of their intentions, is described as self-defence – a safety precaution. “It is not,” Jackson says, “equivalent to ‘mutual battering,’” retaliating against their partner or initiating violence. “For the victim to be safe,” Jackson continues, he “may have to use force to defend” himself (2007, 455). It, Linda Peterman and Charlotte Dixon add, “is usually a result of built-up rage from past abuse [and when] victims fight back, they usually feel guilty for their own behavior or are told they are also abusive” (2003, 44).

The victim chooses to stay in the relationship not because he is a masochist or enjoys the abuse. Rather, it is love and the hope that his partner will change that keeps him in the relationship (see Cruz 2003; Merrill and Wolfe 2000; Walsh 1996). He deserves social support and sympathy of his experience. Craig writes: “I watch men and
women pick up the pieces and grow strong again, and I am astounded by their courage. Survivors deserve a pat on the back, not a pat on the head” (1995c, 19).

However, warns Cantwell, the “violence/abuse is not likely to stop on its own – episodes of violence usually become more frequent and more severe” (2004, 17). It occurs at a personal level, though to some extent affected by socio-economic and cultural factors. Thus, it “is always,” argue Island and Letellier, “up to the victim to exit such a relationship.” “Unless a victim is saving money, plotting, planning, or in some other way actively working on a way to get out,” they continue, “he is failing to accept the responsibility” (1991, 40 & 90). In other words, our culture deems that the victim remains innocent only if he leaves or prepares to leave his partner.

The Discourse of Personal Deviance. According to Island and Letellier, though considered “fundamentally normal,” victims also “have tendencies or leanings and combinations of factors which may show some inclination toward victimization.” They tend to overestimate their capability of handling life problems, blame themselves for most interpersonal problems, mistrust their own judgment about people, “have unease with disagreement,” “be pleasing to others,” “submit to control and influence by others” and have the following characters:

- Taking responsibility for others; a strong sense of independence; low self-worth or easily deflated self-esteem; a fatalistic world-view; tapping easily a considerable reservoir of guilt; liking people; trust and lack of suspicion; insecurity, such as a need or desire to trust in the ‘comfort of control’ by others; high ego strength; and trivializing or denying the negative or unpleasant. (1991, 105-6)

In “Same-Sex Domestic Violence,” Farley notes similar traits in victims through his clinical observation, stating that they exhibit “inability to set limits, passive-aggressiveness, compulsivity, and utilization of emotional and psychological abuse as
coping mechanisms within their relationships” (1992, 239). By the same token, Sullivan and Laughlin find through their clinical experience that victims “are not intrusive and do not assert boundaries,” “internalize feelings” such as depression, “are overly focused on others,” “assume too much responsibility for themselves and others,” and “often feel inadequate within the relationship” as well (1999, 97).

There also “appears to be a co-dependent relationship among abusers and intimate violence victims” says Jackson. Gay couples are separated from society as a result of heterosexism and homophobia, which leads to resentment and anger “directed toward the cause of their isolation.” “This isolation creates,” Jackson continues, “greater dependency among one’s partner, resulting in a potentially dangerous situation” (2007, 458). Moreover, Daugherty observes: “There is an addictive element in most significant relationships. Victims of batterings and emotional abuse tend to remain in unhealthy relationships due to this addiction” (1992, 82). In other words, it is considered that internally, they enjoy being abused and seek out violent relationships. This observation points to the pathological nature of victims.

Still others find that victims tend to have substance abuse issues. They, notes Merrill, “frequently use substances to reduce anxiety and to induce emotional numbing” (1998, 139). It, remarks Michael Cruz and Robert Peralta, provides the victim with “an escape from a dysfunctional relationship” (2001, 167). Yet “heavy substance use” is considered as a risk factor for victimization in partner abuse (Greenwood et al. 2002, 1964). The use of marihuana and cocaine/crack has been statistically found to have a strong association with “being a victim of domestic violence” (Nieves-Rosa et al. 2000, 86).
**The Discourse of Low Self-Esteem.** “Victims,” claim Burke and Owen, “tend to share certain characteristics.” “These may include self-blame, conflict avoidance, low trust in others, low self-esteem, depression, fear of abandonment, among others” (2006, 7). Bailey observes similar sentiments in victims through his clinical practice, noting that they “exhibit low self-esteem, guilt ... helplessness, self-blame and chronic progressive isolation” (1996, 1).

Low self-esteem is depicted as a contributing factor to the violence. Gay men with low self-esteem are prone to being victimized by their partner. “Does living in the closet for so long set people up to be victimized?” Belleville asks. “Some counselors feel it does.” Gay men “forced to repress their true emotions can be more vulnerable” to partner abuse (1999, 13). Island and Letellier note that “prospective victims” tend to have “low self-worth or easily deflated self-esteem” (1991, 106). They have difficulty in asserting “their needs and wants,” trying to appease their partner (Heintz and Melendez 2006, 194). Yet, Kirkland observes, they often feel that they “can never do enough to please” their partner or that they are “not good enough for him.” They are afraid of conflict and disagreement (2004, 9).

As a result, victims blame themselves for the abuse rather than challenging their partner. Speaking of his own experience, Woloschuk writes: “I became the judge and jury, engaging in self-blaming behaviour, turning my hatred towards myself and everyone else except my abuser” (1997, 8). “They believe that they deserve to be punished; if,” Jackson claims, “they had some value then there would be no reason for bad things to happen to them” (2007, 461). “I didn’t realize it at the time,” admits Andrew Pensak, “although later I learned that people who knew me saw signs of it. I
have low self-esteem” (1996, 8). Rather than leaving their partner, argues Farley, they are afraid that they “could not find a better one” (1992, 239). Abuse further erodes their self-esteem and confidence that keeps them in the relationship. As McKenry and associates assert: “Low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness may make individuals more susceptible to violence” (2006, 240). In other words, it is viewed that they facilitate violence and lead to victims’ own victimization.

The Discourse of Denial. According to Pitt and Dolan-Soto, victims often deny and downplay the abuse they experience in relationships:

[Victims] frequently tend to minimize the abuse or injuries they sustain and often second-guess their own feelings and perceptions ... [They] will likely not identify abuse as the presenting problem, and in fact may not think of themselves as victims of abuse. (2001, 167)

“For a man to admit he’s a victim of abuse,” Mario Lopez says, “means you are not a man any more” and you “put yourself in a lesser position.” Gay men also “tend to idealize their relationships” (Smith 1993, A11). Moreover, says Letellier, the cultural denial of same-sex partner abuse that leads to the “inability or unwillingness of other people to accept their victimization as legitimate” makes it difficult for gay men to see themselves as being in abusive relationships (1996, 74). Thus, the victim, Isensee notes, tend “to deny that he has been abused” and to minimize “the abuse he has experienced” (1990, 187). Many will even “defend their abuser,” Kirkland purports (2004, 10). As a result, it is considered that the victim’s view of his own victimization cannot be trusted or fully reflect the seriousness of the violence.

The Discourse of Learned Helplessness. Victims are commonly described as exhibiting learned helplessness, a condition they develop when they lose their hope, feeling that they cannot escape from the violence. Coined by Lenore Walker, learned
helplessness includes symptoms such as guilt, fear, anger, shame and feelings of losing control – features that are usually used to characterize the victim (see, for example, Bailey 1996; Daugherty 1992; Hanson and Maroney 1999; Island and Letellier 1991; Potoczniak et al. 2003; Sullivan and Laughlin 1999; Walsh 1996).

For example, Jackson notes that victims often “feel a sense of powerlessness” and “believe they have no control over their lives” (2007, 461). They “live in fear of their partners,” always “walking on eggshells” (Craig 1995a, 25). As Pitt and Dolan-Soto say, they “seem uncomfortable or anxious about the relationships” (2001, 166). They frequently “blame themselves and express remorse for responsive and self-defensive behaviors” (Merrill 1998, 132). They feel responsible for their own victimization and, observes Claire Renzetti, “express intense shame, particularly if they have defended themselves or fought back, but also because they are embarrassed by their victimization” (1997a, 76). They are always afraid to set their partner off, Daugherty notes, feeling that they are “unable to protect themselves from irrational and often unpredictable outbursts” (1992, 56). As a result, they numb their emotions and endure the violence. Their feeling of learned helplessness is further exacerbated by our community denial of same-sex partner abuse that, Brownworth purports, “leaves them ashamed and alone, unsure of where to turn for help” (1993, 96).

Invariably, such experiences are seen as having dramatic effects that lead to lifelong suffering. “Once we have been violated,” claims Randy Bowers, “it is impossible to turn back the knowledge that rests in our minds, hearts and souls” (1998, 6). “Physical and psychological injury lasts for years, often a lifetime. The long-term effects can be devastating,” says Jackson (2007, 462). It “can result in chronic fear, anxiety and
depression," making "the victim feel incompetent, emotionally numb, helpless, and even suicidal" (Kirkland 2004, 4). It can cause headaches, uncontrollable crying, increased agitation and sleep disturbances (Relf 2001; Relf and Glass 2006). For example, Merrill describes victims' experience with Battered Woman’s Syndrome:

Like women who have endured prolonged abuse, it is not uncommon for battered gay and bisexual men to exhibit battered woman’s syndrome. This syndrome includes a cluster of anxiety-related symptoms, such as intrusive night-mares and flashbacks, depression, irritability, exaggerated startle response (being ‘jumpy’), hypervigilance (never letting their guard down), emotional numbing, and difficulty sleeping, concentrating, and functioning normally. (1998, 135)

“People enduring abusive relationships," claims James Burrell, “have been found to be more likely to report suffering from serious health problems such as heart disease, hypertension, depression and anxiety and engage in behaviour such as substance abuse and unprotected sex” (2008, 14). Victims of same-sex domestic violence,” observes Lundy, “like other victims of domestic violence, often suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a condition common to people who have been involuntarily held captive and subjected to systematic, random violence” (1999, 49). It is claimed that its symptoms include nightmares, sleep disturbances, avoidance of others, intrusive negative thoughts and images, dissociative states, depression, panic attacks, not comprehending the situation, always monitoring their environment, flashbacks, mistrust and easily being startled (Craig 1995b; Kirkland 2004). It, says Rochelle Klinger, “may occur immediately following the incident or much later” (1995, 121).
THE PROFILE OF A PERPETRATOR

The Discourse of Power and Control. “Abuse is about power and control,” Davis says (2000, 4). “Whether the injurious act is physical, emotional/verbal, sexual or material, its roots are the same – power” (Jackson 2007, 454). “What is marked about abusive relationships is the abusive partner’s need to maintain control” (Pitt and Dolan-Soto 2001, 166). The “motivation to control one’s partner,” claims Stanley and associates, “determines who is the perpetrator (or batterer) rather simply who initiates the violence” (2006, 32). Domestic violence is “related to the use of illegitimate power and coercive control by one partner over the other,” Carol Tully asserts (2001, 85).

Perpetrators, Pam Elliott notes, “hunger for control over some part of their lives, lives over which they feel they have no control” (1996, 3). They have issues with power, domination and control, feelings of inadequacy and lack of control over their life. To fill this void, they seek control over their partner, projecting their inner anger and frustration outward. Violence is used as “an attempt to assert power and control” especially in a stressful situation (Craft and Serovich 2005, 780). As Michael de Vidas depicts: “Batterers feel they have no control over any parts of their lives and therefore, seek control and power over their partners through physical abuse, economic control, sexual abuse, threats and intimidation, isolation and property destruction” (1999, 62).

Perpetrators have an “impulse control” issue, Merrill purports (1996, 18). Often they “tailor the abuse to the specific vulnerabilities of the partner” (Relf et al. 2004, 21). They, claims Richard Ferri, “choose to batter and plan on keeping their partner off balance. This permits the abuser greater control and power in the relationship” (1998, 34). Their abuse is targeted. They “are violent with those persons in relation to whom
they feel they have ‘power,’ ‘superiority,’ ‘more experience,’ ‘more capacity,’ ‘more possibilities of manipulation’ – and from whom they can expect little reprisal” (Toro-Alfonso 1999, 72). Underneath “the control issues are fear, lack of knowledge, the absence of compassion, and likely forms of guilt and shame,” Bowers says (1998, 6).

Accordingly, violence is intentional. Abusive behaviour, assert Rodríguez-Madera and Toro-Alfonso, “should not be seen as a ‘loss of control’ from the part of aggressor, but rather as in intentional and deliberate act to gain or maintain control.” Perpetrators take “advantage of it, using extreme tactics that make up the myriad of violent behaviors with the intention of controlling the other person” (2005, 158). As McClennen remarks, they “intentionally instigate coercive acts blaming their victims for their actions and feeling exhilarated after the incidences” (2005, 151). It does not just happen. It “is a systematic and deliberate pattern of abuse used to gain control over one's partner” (Letellier 1996, 71).

Violence is not only intentional. Perpetrators are also biologically predisposed to abusive behaviour. As a result, they cannot or find it difficult to control it. “There is,” purports Island and Letellier, “a pre-existing tendency in the abuser to desire and attempt to manipulate, control, and dominate others, especially the partner – and to succeed” (1991, 76). They “tend to have little ability and willingness to control their violent and aggressive impulses and will go to extremes to get their way” (Merrill 1998, 133).

Invariably, perpetrators are seen as having most – if not all – of the power and control. As Pitt describes: “In an abusive relationship, one person has most of the power and control” (2000, 195). It involves “an individual who is violent against someone
perceived to be less powerful, less experienced, less capable, and without reprisal” (Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera 2004a, 642). “The perpetrator ordinarily adopts the powerful role, whereas the victim ordinarily adopts the powerless role,” say Island and Letellier (1991, 41). In other words, it is perceived that the perpetrator has power and the victim hasn’t.

The Discourse of History of Family Violence. Quite often it is described that perpetrators come from violent homes and themselves are victims of child abuse. Their actions are influenced by this childhood experience of role models and vicarious learning (Farley 1996; McClennen 1999a; Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera 2004a; West 1998). McClennen claims: “Causation [of partner abuse] is most often based on social learning occurring in the family of origin” (1999b, 6). “Individuals who witnessed or who were victims of family violence as children are more likely as adults to be violent toward partners or children,” Rochelle Klinger and Terry Stein state (1996, 811).

Violence is deemed as a learned behaviour. “For men who are abusive, witnessing violence in their families of origin” or experiencing abuse themselves as children provide “a model of how to deal with relationship problems” (Craft and Serovich 2005, 781). It teaches them it is acceptable to express anger, resolve interpersonal conflicts through violence and, Jackson says, “for the dominant members of the household to utilize physical and emotional sanctions in order to gain compliance” (2007, 461). “In an attempt to maintain control over later intimate adult relationships,” these men may “resort to violence because it is their most readily
understood and accessible coping strategy in dealing with loss of power” (McKenry et al. 2006, 234). As Farley explains:

Batterers come from homes where battering occurred. Such family histories are a major factor in domestic violence. Behaviors that are abusive become reinforced throughout childhood as an effective way of dealing with any confrontive situation. When parents act out their anger in violent ways, children are taught that anger and violence are synonymous. Fear is also a natural part of family dynamics, and it is automatically assumed that in order not to be abused, you cannot be angry. Another prevalent factor in these family histories is the lack of ability to express feelings of almost any kind (other than anger). (1992, 233)

“The family may actually serve as a breeding ground for violent behaviour,” Jackson simply says (2007, 456).

Childhood abuse has “adverse mental health consequences including depression, anxiety, and suicide,” Relf and associates claim. They, “whether compounded by low self-esteem, ineffective conflict resolution, inadequate communication skills, or low self-efficacy, increased the risk of battering victimization” (2004, 15 & 23). What makes one become a perpetrator instead of a victim is largely determined by the type of abuse he experiences in childhood. As Farley points out: “Victims most often come from families that were psychologically abusive, whereas perpetrators usually come from families that were physically abusive” (1992, 238).

The Discourse of Manipulation. Perpetrators are usually portrayed as being very manipulative. They, says Cantwell, “use affection as well as violence to control their partners” (2004, 17). They appear to be fun, generous, charming, loving, attentive and amiable to the outside world. Yet, they are very insidious and use these public images to disguise their violent behaviour and to manipulate others into believing that they are innocent. As Peterman and Dixon describe:
To those outside the relationship, abusers usually appear to be decent human beings, attentive partners/lovers, and law-abiding citizens. Nevertheless, they usually have a dualistic personality referred to as a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde personality and are manipulative, unpredictable, possessive, jealous, unrealistic, and controlling. (2003, 43)

“When the relationship first begins,” observes Merrill, “the victim is often charmed by his partner’s attentive courting behaviours” (1998, 135). “Abuse usually begins gradually, so unless we know a great deal about the signs of abuse, we often won’t notice it happening,” Davis says (2000, 4). The batterer tries “to destroy the sense of self and self-worth of” his partner. In so doing, the battered partner will “be more inclined to accept whatever the batterer does to” him and “will be less likely to feel” he can or deserves “to leave the batterer” (Allen and Leventhal 1999, 78).

Perpetrators are seen as scheming and not trustworthy. They are so manipulative that Ellen Meyers warns:

Even in controlled presentations to service providers and so on, do not assume that everyone there wishes to address the issue of domestic violence. It may be that an abuser ‘among us’ wishes to enhance his or her skills by attending the closed or targeted meeting for personal gain. (1999, 246)

“Perpetrators with AIDS,” obverses Letellier, “will use their diagnosis, and their sickly appearance, to manipulate the police and the criminal justice system to their advantage” (1996, 75). They are “generally no less domineering and manipulative in the counseling and mediation sessions than [they are] at home,” Lundy purports (1999, 44).

_The Discourse of Internalized Homophobia and Heterosexism_. Same-sex “violence stems from internalized and institutionalized misogyny, homophobia and heterosexism,” according to Roy Gillis and Shaindl Diamond (2006, 135). Societal oppression causes gay men to internalize feelings of homophobia and self-hate that lead
to lowered self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, obsessive closeting of sexual orientation and self-destructive behaviour such as substance abuse (Cruz and Firestone 1998; Murray et al. 2006/2007; Renzetti 1997b; Smith and Dale 1999). It also leads, claim John Gunther and Mary Ann Jennings, “many same-gender couples into depreciating themselves and their partners” (1999, 30). Consequently, they “project their own discomfort with being gay onto their intimate partners, contributing to abusive behavior” (Bartholomew et al. 2008, 356).

Moreover, due to heterosexism and homophobia, perpetrators are often confused about their own masculinity. As Dan Byrne observes, they “have manifested a negative self-concept related to being homosexual, as well as negative feelings about who they are as a person” (1996, 110). They are “confused about masculinity” and “lack healthy role models for intimate relationships in a context in which being gay is perceived as unmasculine” (Carlson and Maciol 1997, 108). To resolve such confusion, “perpetrators equate masculinity with aggression and “seek to bolster up” their negative self-image “by having, and exerting, power over their partner” (Walsh 1996, 193). As Christopher Kendall writes:

Gay men who batter and abuse their partners have specific ideas about masculinity and what it means to be “male.” This is, in part, a reaction to a complete lack of positive gay role models, a homophobic environment in which being gay means being “nonmasculine,” and the internalization of social rejection and self-hate. Gay men, growing up in a world with little or no positive reinforcement, are inundated with a value system that equates masculinity (as the determinant of appropriate male behavior) with aggression, control, and frequently violence. (2006, 125;)

In other words, it is seen that violence is used to fill this void and increases their sense of masculinity and self-esteem.
In addition, homophobia and heterosexism lead to social isolation that, in turn, leads to stress and high dependency needs between couples. This stress and dependency increase pressure on the relationship and the risk of violence particularly when one of the partners seeks relative autonomy and independence. As Christopher Alexander writes: “If a gay or lesbian couple feels isolated, or if they do not have emotional support outside their relationships, it appears there is a risk for acting this out on one another” (2002, 97).

*The Discourse of No Remorse.* “Abusers,” Fran Walsh claims, “will often deny responsibility, blaming their partner or the situation for the abuse.” They rarely express remorse of their actions and sometimes “will deny point-blank that their behavior is, in fact, abusive” (1996, 192). As Renzetti describes:

Batterers ... are quite vocal in legitimating their behavior. They are typically self-righteous and assert a claim to the label “victim.” With indignation and undisguised anger, they will recite a litany of partner “transgressions” that justified their violence. They rarely express shame or even remorse, and while they may be willing to accept partial responsibility for the relationships, the abuse is never entirely their fault. (1997a, 76)

There “seems to be no holding back when the violence starts,” Monica states (Abuse Victim Resources 1998, 28). It gives perpetrators a sense of power, control and satisfaction; thus, they will not likely change. As Island and Letellier describe: “Violence is a self-reinforcing act for the perpetrator. Its cessation [the end of an episode] is a release, a satisfier, a reinforcer” (1991, 43). Consequently, notes Sullivan and Laughlin:

Aggressors have no reason to change. They are in a relationship where they are able to vent their frustration and anger any way and at any time they want. There are no consequences to their actions. In fact, after they vent their feelings, in whatever violent manner they choose, they feel better. Ultimately, they are rewarded for abusing their partner. (1999, 99)
Nor will perpetrators voluntarily seek help as they often ignore their abusive behaviour. Regrettably, observes Tully, many gay “perpetrators of violence simply disregard any kind of social services, disengage from the current relationship, and move on to new relationships where the violence continues” (1999, 25-26). They "typically ignore or deny their actions," Walber claims (1988, 254). Thus, it is important for clinicians to hold the perpetrator fully responsible and, says Ferri, “not to provide a rationale for” his actions. “This may empower [him] to be more abusive” (1998, 31).

The Discourse of Personal Disorders. “We need to stop analyzing battering as a socio-political problem and face the fact that it’s a psychological problem,” Island says in an interview (Snow, 1992, 63). In fact, diagnosable psychopathology in perpetrators is constructed as the primary factor that causes partner abuse in gay relationships. As Island and Letellier assert:

Abusers intend to harm their lovers. Therefore, domestic violence is an enormous mental health problem in America. A batterer cannot possibly be seen as a mentally healthy, well-functioning member of a domestic couple. In fact in this book we show batterers suffer from a diagnosable, progressive mental disorder in their domestic setting, with their partners as the targets of their unhealthy condition, manifested most clearly just before, during, and after one of their violent attacks. (1991, 2-3; authors’ emphasis)

"The most common psychiatric diagnoses” among gay men who batter, according to Klinger, “include personality disorder (e.g., borderline, narcissistic, antisocial), substance abuse, organic mental disorders, intermittent explosive disorder, anxiety and affective disorders" (1995, 124).

Farley finds in his clinical practice: “Addictive behaviors such as substance use, eating disorders, and sexual compulsivity are common in perpetrators of domestic
violence” (1992, 233). They “often abuse alcohol to accentuate feelings of power and self-importance when disempowered” even though ironically it “has the effect of diminishing a sense of security” (McKenry et al. 2006, 234). The frequency and severity of the violence is seen as being largely determined by the severity of perpetrators’ psychopathology. The more frequent and severe the violence is, the more severe the perpetrator’s psychopathology is.

Others find that perpetrators are pathological and frequently have difficulty managing their own anger, frustration and impulses toward their partners. For example, Island and Letellier observe:

Gay men’s domestic violence involves at least one angry man, or, as more likely the case, one very angry man ... With domestic violence, however, anger and intent to harm are typically present and are used by one man to coerce, control, manipulate, or injure the other. (1991, 25)

Farley adds: “feelings of anger (sometimes repressed and/or denied) often are the catalyst for rage and violence” (2003, 234). Yet, perpetrators lack “conflict-resolution skills that makes” them “choose violence to manage a given difficult situation” (Rodríguez-Madera and Toro-Alfonso 2005, 159).

“Notoriously,” note McClennen and associates, “perpetrators are excessively jealous and possessive of their partners” (2002, 27). Marnie Woodrow calls them “a jealous maniac” (1999, 26). “A narcissist, the abuser craves full attention from his” partner (Jackson 2007, 460). Over-dependent and extremely jealous, they often pressure “the victim to be more and more isolated from other contacts” (Klinger and Stein 1996, 811) and “present unpredictable mood swings regarding their attitude toward the victim” (Pitt and Dolan-Soto 2001, 167). “Jealousy and the wish of one
partner to ‘possess’ the other are the most common causes of violence,” Sarantakos purports (1996, 159).

Still others find perpetrators extremely self-centred. They, Pitt and Dolan-Soto note in their clinical practice, “generally are concerned about their own rather than their partners’ needs, and they tend to focus on getting these needs met” (2001, 167; authors’ emphasis). Merrill claims:

[Perpetrators] tend to be narcissistic and entitled in the sense that they expect all of their needs and demands to be complied with immediately, but they do tend to have a double standard because they can be callous to their partners’ needs. Developmentally, they are like the 2-year-old who has fierce tantrums when his needs are not satisfied to his liking – except they are far more sophisticated, manipulative, and dangerous. (1998, 133)

Yet, they are highly insecure and have fears of abandonment. “This anxiety,” state Bartholomew and associates, “exacerbates normative fears of separation and loss involved in ending attachment relationships” (2008, 346). They “would logically feel that their possession and control of an intimate would be more tenuous” (McKenry et al. 2006, 239). As a result, they “would be more emotionally reactive to stress” and “would also be more likely to use violence to resolve relationship problems,” Craft and associates observe (2008, 69).

It is also found that perpetrators frequently lie and hold exceedingly high expectations of themselves, their partner and the relationship. Usually very suspicious and highly critical and judgmental of others, they are extremely insecure about themselves and unable to trust others. They are fascinated with martial arts, weapons, injury, torture and violence of all kinds (see Island and Letellier 1991, 79). “They are uncivilized, they are primitive, they are undersocialized. They need help,” Katrin Snow
simply says (1992, 63). “Unfortunately,” Pat Califia adds, “some people – male and female, gay and straight – are violent because they enjoy hurting and terrorizing others. They feel entitled to do so – especially if they have an intimate relationship with that person, and especially if they imagine they can get away with it” (1986, 46).

**CRITICIZING THE PATHOLOGICAL DISCOURSE OF VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS**

These texts produce a risk discourse isolating characters (variables in scientific language) pertaining to partner abuse in gay relationships against which gay men are examined, judged, measured and compared. Those who possess these qualities are deemed as a “risk” for partner abuse and thus in need of help. To make changes, they require individual treatments and self modification. As a result, they, to use Foote and Frank’s words, “become the object of its normalizing discourses” (1999, 168).

Interestingly, even based on the scientific discourse of evidence, there is little – if any – evidence that support the claim that perpetrators’ pathological personality characteristics are the primary factors that cause violence and that victims’ personality characteristics facilitate their own victimization that leads to long-term effects. For example, in “Patterns and Correlates of Interpersonal Violence,” Susan Miller and Charles Wellford write:

> Individual-level explanations focus primarily on personality disorders and traits, mental illness, self-image problems with drugs or alcohol. Violence is seen as resulting from various psychological abnormalities, such as inadequate self-control, sadism, and psychopathology ... To date, however, the available scientific evidence provides little, if any, support for these assertions. In addition, these theories are also unable to explain which abnormal personality traits are directly associated with violence, especially since only a very small proportion of mentally ill persons are violent. (1997, 22)
Renzetti adds: “Some of the most methodologically sound research has indicated that personality disorders are apparent in only a small percentage of heterosexual male batterers” (1997a, 88).

The existing evidence also does not entirely support the hypothesis that violence is a learned behaviour and originates from the family. No doubt, some studies found an association between history of family violence and partner abuse. But other studies fail to show such links (see Makepeace 1997; Miller and Wellford 1997; Renzetti 1997a). This theory also fails to explain why some perpetrators “do not come from violent homes or why there are so many nonviolent persons coming from violent homes,” James Makepeace points out (1997, 40). Additionally, most of these studies are retrospective research. They show only the percentage of perpetrators who have a history of abuse or who witnessed violence in their family, but do not address the percentage of people who experienced abuse in childhood or who witnessed family violence and grew up to become perpetrators themselves (see Lamb 1996). This contradictory evidence is not unknown to many scholars of same-sex partner abuse. Yet it does not stop them from making such claims. For example, Toro-Alfonso and Rodríguez-Madera write:

> Despite contradictory evidence of the degree to which an abusive partner is influenced by violence in his/her own childhood household, we believe that the most important aspect of the transmission of intergenerational patterns of violence is the role models provided by parents. (2004b, 50; references omitted)

Moreover, some researchers challenge the claim that people who experience traumatic events such as rape and partner abuse must or will have life-long suffering, leading to a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For example, in The Trouble with
Blame: Victims, Perpetrators and Responsibility, Sharon Lamb observes: “Although many survivors have some of the symptoms, the rate of PTSD among survivors is not so high as to claim it as an inevitable reaction to abuse” (1996, 48). “Often,” Lamb continues, “the mental illness-like qualities of women who have been beaten disappear in the years shortly after leaving the abusive man. And sexual abuse researchers have documented recently that the majority of sexual abuse victims do not show severe symptomatology” (1999, 111).

The question then is: Why do scholars and clinicians of violence in intimate gay relationships so “obsessively” focus on individual characteristics (particularly psychopathology) of the victim and perpetrator? To give a simple answer, it is about discipline and social control (as Foucault would have told you). No doubt. Yet this pathologizing discourse of victims and perpetrators is not simply produced through normalization but also driven by the cultural and material condition of our time or what Gary Kinsmen calls “capitalist social relations” (2003, 123).

To some extent, violence in intimate gay relationships is not a new area but, rather, an extended area of study in interpersonal violence that is heavily imbedded in positivist, modernist notions of science. Largely stemmed from the eighteen-century enlightenment philosophy, modernity is “characterized by the pursuit of a truth that has the character of absolute certainty” (John 1994, 51). It emphasizes rationality and external objectivity, and embraces, Jane Gorman writes, “a belief in the lawful nature of the universe and a desire to explain and control nature” (1993, 248). It is thought that, through science, we will find knowledge that represents “truth” and, in turn, provides rational explanations about our social world and solutions of social problems. In “The
Colonial State and Statistical Knowledge,” U. Kalpagam argues that modern science “seeks to provide ‘explanations’ in terms of deriving law-like generalizations about phenomena and of the cause-effect relationships that govern them” (2000, 45). It is thus believed that modernity can lead to progress and freedom while liberating human beings from irrationality as well as immorality (see Chambon and Irving 1994; Damianakis 2001).

This modernist, deterministic view has driven the researchers and scholars to center their research primarily on finding a cause of, and solution to, violence. The “experts” in this area (including researchers, theoreticians, scholars, clinicians and social workers) draw relationships between different forms of violence (such as child abuse and family violence) and, writes Gillian Walker, “articulate them together to form generalized and universal theories” (1986, 19). As part of this process, individual variables such as anger and low self-esteem are identified and separated to determine their causal relationships to violence. Researchers and scholars of partner abuse in gay relationships have adopted this tradition – heavily focusing on identifying variables as well as finding the cause of such violence (Renzetti 1997b).

On top of it all, there is an economy supporting the pathologization of victims and perpetrators. Commonly assumed to be the cause of partner abuse and suggestive of learned behaviours, the pathological personality characteristics of the perpetrator are seen as correctable, capable of being unlearned through treatment (such as counselling and anger management). For example, “Hamberger and Coleman advocated for counseling with the batterer to manage or correct pathological personality characteristics” (Turell, 1999, 38). Island and Letellier purport: “Batterers have learned
to be violent, evidencing both a disorder which is correctable through treatment and behavior which is punishable by law” (1991, 3). Neil Kaminsky warns: “Violence does not get better without outside intervention. There is no way around this” (1999, 57). Behaviour “will not likely change ‘by itself,’ simply with the passage of time or without significant external intervention or some form of an externally imposed change,” Kirkland says (2004, 9).

Therapy is seen as the most important course of treatment both for the victim to end his victimization as well as for the perpetrator to correct his pathological personality characteristics. For example, in Gay Male Intimate Violence Requires Coordinated Efforts on Multiple Levels,” Kevin Hamberger writes: “Individual interventions are the first step in protecting and offering help to the victim and attempting to change the behavior of the batterer” (1996, 90). Likewise, Island and Letellier assert:

One of the most helpful steps a victim of gay men’s domestic violence can take for himself is to get into therapy. Whether or not he is currently being battered, has just left a violent partner (and may be ambivalent about staying away), or has been away from his abusive lover for quite some time, therapy is an appropriate and necessary tool for ending the victimization of a domestic violence survivor. Therapy can provide insight and understanding, education and support, all of which are invaluable to gay male victims. (1991, 201-2)

“Without proper intervention to diffuse the effect of those ‘buttons/triggers,’ the vulnerability experienced by survivors will continue to affect the healthiness of their present relationships, both friendly and romantic” (Woloschuk 1997, 8). Bowers believes that healing “takes place when the healing process is deeply understood and utilized in therapy” (1998, 6). On the other hand, Island and Letellier warn: “Batterers have a learned, progressive mental disorder and will continue to act out their illness
until they obtain help for curing it and follow the treatment prescriptions ... If untreated, the violence may progress such that the perpetrator may permanently injure or kill his partner” (1991, 45 & 77).

The advocacy for classifying the perpetrator to be mentally ill with symptoms of pathological personality characteristics is not surprising. If that is the case, then “partner abuse” should be included in the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) and, in so doing, is legitimated as a mental illness. This in turn justifies the perpetrator’s need for mental health treatment services. Similarly, by treating the victim’s reactions to the stress of violence as symptoms of PTSD, clinicians can legitimize such reactions as mental illness. In so doing, Lamb argues, “victims can garner more support,” though only from mainstream institutions. There is a great deal of money for mental healthcare services that are “tied into psychiatry (hospitals, research, medication, insurance) rather than, for example, neighborhood women’s clinics” (1996, 49 & 46).

Unsurprisingly, many scholars and clinicians in this area strongly advocate for the inclusion of “partner abuse” in the DSM and label the victim’s reactions to the stress of abuse as PTSD symptoms. Island and Letellier write:

Since so few batterers receive any treatment today, the psychological and psychiatric communities are petitioned ... to develop new pathology nomenclature for abusive personality disorders for all batterers, in order to encourage entreprenouring clinicians to treat more batterers, and get paid for it, and to increase the availability of treatment in general for batterers. (1991, 3-4)

“Mental health and hospital personnel will become more accepting of the problem of abuse and more perpetrators and victims will be treated by private practitioners
because the DSM is used by insurers to determine diagnoses eligible for treatment reimbursement,” Renzetti adds (1997a, 88).

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have analyzed articles published in popular queer magazines and academic journals and demonstrated how the discourse of unhealthy, abusive relationships is produced through normalization or, more specifically, through the discourse of healthy, normal relationships. As shown, this discourse of unhealthy, abusive relationships is both totalizing and individualizing. It creates a “risk” discourse that targets both the entire gay male population and the individual gay man. It transforms gay men into objects of scientific knowledge and subjects of “risk” for partner abuse that are thus in need of social intervention (Foucault 1983). As demonstrated in the analysis, it reflects not the “truth” of gay men’s experience of partner abuse but, rather, a particular construction of it, which is supported by the political economy of mental health services (Muehlenhard and Kimes 1999).
CHAPTER 4: THE EFFECT OF THE DISCOURSE ON CLINICAL PRACTICE

In the last chapter, I outlined the dominant discourse of gay male partner abuse both in popular gay media and queer literature. I treat discourse (knowledge) as what Foucault calls “a regime of truth.” For Foucault, “Indeed, truth is no doubt a form of power” (1988a, 107). To further elaborate Foucault’s thought, Stuart Hall explains:

Discourse ... defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. Just as a discourse “rules in” certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it “rules out,” limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it. (2001a, 72)

In other words, contemporary gay male partner abuse literature does not simply construct the way in which we understand this issue. It also determines and limits, writes Janice Ristock, “what can be seen, heard, thought, known and done” about it (2002, 19).

In this chapter, using the focus group data from service providers, I further my analysis to explore how the discourse of gay male partner abuse structures the way in which we understand this issue particularly in clinical settings. In particular, I trace service providers’ assumptions of gay male partner abuse and come to understand their clinical practice with victims and perpetrators. I show that the discourse of gay male partner abuse not only gives service providers a language to speak about this issue, but also limits the way they act, think and talk about it. Yet, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, within this constraint, service providers continually struggle for new language to articulate gay male partner abuse.
CONSTRUCTING PARTNER ABUSE: POWER AND CONTROL

“Nobody can figure out the dynamics of their relationships,” Bobby, a social worker, exclaimed. This sentiment spoke of the challenge that service providers commonly face in same-sex partner abuse. Calvin further explained:

Because in heterosexual relationships, the automatic assumption is it's going to be the man. But in same-sex relationships, a lot of people find it hard to find out who the abuser is and who isn't because there are a lot of people not telling the truth.

The service providers said that gender stereotypes made it difficult for many men to project themselves in abusive relationships or as victims particularly when there was no physical violence. Adam described this trend: “I heard from friends who would say, I'm in a very good relationship because he's not hitting me.” Calvin added, “I mean it is easier to say, ‘This guy hits you, why is that not ok?’ than ‘This guy calls you stupid, why is that not ok?’ People tend to be less clear in their mind about why that is not ok.” As told by the service providers, many people were confused about same-sex partner abuse and were unable to identify the perpetrator. Bobby described this problem using the police as a case example:

When you are dealing with two men, often what we get is dual charging. You got the aggressor in that particular situation being charged as well as the victim in that particular situation being charged as well, which is an incredibly horrific experience for a gay man who already has a very healthy suspicion of the police to begin with and then to be victimized by his partner and to face going to court as an aggressor is an incredibly devastating emotional experience. It just re-victimizes him again.

To make sense of partner abuse in gay male relationships, the service providers adopted a framework that focused on power and control rather than gender. One thing for sure we know, Colin said, is that power imbalance is “universal” in violent relationships. It is the foundation of partner abuse that Andre described “comes from a
place of fear, a place of insecurity." “There is a desire for control,” Alex remarked. “I mean if there is a commonality,” he continued, “it is the fact that they all want to control [and] for this particular issue it is very clear.” Thus, Bruce stated, partner abuse is “all about feeling insecure and needing to grasp for power ... It’s like him looking for power; it brings out his insecurities about a lot of stuff, [like] him making up for huge insecurities.”

No doubt, this understanding of partner abuse had given the service providers a language not only to explain the relationship, but also to demystify the misconception of mutual battering – a misconception that they felt was commonly held in gay male partner abuse. Alex said, “I think for me at least I try to delineate [the perpetrator] by asking a lot about the intent, figuring out what is the intent of their action.” To identify the perpetrator, Bobby looked for the person who “tries to control or impose his will” onto his partner. Using this framework, Calvin gave an example of how he differentiated the perpetrator from the victim:

*I do find that power stuff and thinking about the power stuff helps give you clues about who would be much more in a position to do damage to you in a relationship. So a lot of the times when the situation is not clear, I step back from it and say, “OK, Who is actually controlling the drugs? Who is actually controlling the money? Who is actually controlling the person’s ability to stay in Canada?” I need to ask myself these questions, and then I keep that in the back of my mind in terms of trying to figure out the abuse picture, what is really going on or what it's happening here.*

However, in this way, the perpetrator was seen as having no other intention of his use of violence than control. Partner abuse was defined as being premeditated and malicious.

*The conceptualization of partner abuse, based on power and control, provided a language that enabled the service providers to speak of partner abuse without relying*
on physical violence. Anthony, for example, said, “Anything that scars you is violence. Anything that alters your behaviour is a form of abuse.” Or, Alastair added, anything that “prevents you from being able to be yourself.” As a result, the service providers could articulate and define partner abuse variously. For example, Alex thought that persuading your partner from not using condoms during anal sex was a form of abuse:

If you really love me, don’t use condoms or whatever or if you really love me, you’d prove it to me by not using it. For all intents and purposes is a threat which is a form of control and I think the intention is to then control the other person.

For Alastair, “Taking away something that is personal or something that your partner treasures can be a form of violence and the impact can be devastating on the individual.” He specifically named it mental abuse. Andre considered withholding money from your partner as a form of abuse. Calvin added:

It can be somebody just simply stealing the other person’s food and throwing it away and making sure they don’t have food; the abuse can be stealing all their TTC tokens; the abuse can be taking their money; the abuse can be grabbing their OSAP or checks before it arrives.

Chris described “outing” as a form of abuse: “Like the partner say, if you don’t follow what I ask you to do, I will tell your family and your friends that you are gay.” Brandon told a similar story about partner abuse:

For example, a youth person who might not be able to come out to the family, then this person gets into a relationship with a guy who is totally out, you know, who is out to anyone, and if there is any disagreement in the relationship, anything that could be a threat to this person, I am going to tell your parents, stuff like this.

Guided by the power and control framework commonly assumed in the field of family violence, the service providers came to identify the victim and the perpetrator as the following.
**Assumptions about the Victim**

As shown in the narratives, quite often the victims were described as passive agents who were powerless, waiting for assistance. The service providers in part explained partner abuse in terms of the victim’s own personal characteristics, particularly low self-esteem. For example, Bruce stated, “I suspected that certainly if some people have dealt with their self-esteem issues, it would change the dynamic of the relationship they’re in for the better or they wouldn’t need the relationship.” Alex agreed saying:

> What are some of the risk factors that predispose people to get into relationships like this? I mean there are some people that will go into a relationship, discover it is abusive and it’s like ok I’m getting out it. And then there are others are thinking well, maybe it supposed to be this way, maybe I deserve it or whatever the case may be and predispose them to stay longer.

Alastair claimed that, with low self-esteem, victims blame themselves for the abuse instead of challenging their partner: “I find most of them, the ones that I deal with, blame themselves all the time. What if I didn't do this? Or, I shouldn't have gone out to that party and I shouldn’t allow him to drink or shouldn’t buy drink, we shouldn’t go out drinking so he wouldn’t do this.” In some cases, as Anthony pointed out, victims seek out abusive relationships especially if they are abused in childhood:

> There is some research done with kids and their behaviour, and they found that kids in an abusive relationship tend to seek out unconsciously abusive relationships ‘cause that is normal for them and that is what’s known to them.

Consequently, abuse becomes normalized. “In their minds,” Anthony continued, “it’s normal because that’s how they were accustomed.”

In addition, and because of gender stereotypes, Bobby remarked, victims tend to deny or minimize the abuse:
It’s just boys. Boys will be boys. Violence is a normal part of male relationships, men are supposed to be violent, it’s our way of expressing our emotions. We have no way of expressing our emotions so we tend to get physical. He didn’t mean it. So, I think there is a bunch of ways that we deny or minimize what’s happening.

Yet, Alex claimed, they are often naïve about the relationship hoping that their partner will change: “When we speak to someone that has been victimized and, you know, it is interesting because they’re like, I’m trying to give him a second chance.” Others such as Clint and Anthony pointed out that victims are usually ashamed and embarrassed of the abuse because they feel they are unable to protect themselves as men do. As Clint remarked, “I think there is an element of shame around being abused or being in such a relationship.” Anthony added, in our culture, a man is “ostracized for even stating that” he is being victimized by another man; as a result, they find it difficult to speak about it or report it to the police. Adam agreed saying, “It might be seen as less masculine to report that I’m being abused. So they won’t.”

Invariably, the service providers assumed that partner abuse had traumatic effects on the victim. Bruce said, “I think it’s bound to have an impact” and there is “certainly mental health suffering.” Bobby added, “I think the effects of the violence in relationships, whether they are psychological or emotional or physical, have been fairly well-documented.” It certainly, Bobby continued, has “some kind of impact emotionally, physically, on the person who is receiving the violence in terms of self-esteem, depression, substance abuse issues, health-related issues.” Brian thought that partner abuse caused depression that in turn led to social isolation and other health problems: “Depression in the sense in that they don’t want to do anything, they don’t feel like doing anything, they have no reason to live, they’re in this relationship for whatever
reasons ... They can also face depression in ways that can affect their health, stop eating, things like that.” Andre echoed Brian’s assertion: “I find that it’s often times very lonely and isolating for the individual who’s experiencing the violence.” “Anxiety, fear and panic,” according to Adam, are some of the common consequences of partner abuse and, to deal with the stress, the victim often uses “alcohol or other types of drugs.”

**Assumptions about the Perpetrator**

Perpetrators were seen as the opposite of victims. They were described as highly manipulative and pathological, having innate tendency towards violence and issues with power and control. Alastair, for example, claimed, “All of them, for me, there are certain needs they have, the need to feel superior.” Brian agreed saying that the perpetrator wants to be “dominant, like he’s a master, like master-slave. He wants to have more of a say, to be the boss, telling his partner what to do, you know, making decisions on behalf of the other person without consulting him.” Andre also stated that they have “problems with communication and problems with managing or controlling their anger.” “A lot of times,” Andre continued, “the anger that the perpetrator has, came from his inability to communicate.”

Moreover, said Bobby, “there’s certainly a cycle of violence.” “It is,” Bobby continued, “a learned behaviour, so chances are you are looking at trauma in the history of the aggressor as well and substance abuse issues and all the other multiple issues that lead one to perpetrate violence against his intimate partner.” Brandon agreed saying:

When we look at comparisons of rapists, for example, there has been some sort of study to show that in childhood, they were abused or raped before. That’s why they have that kind of tendency to re-occur and
become a rapist. So for a domestic abuser or aggressor, there may have been some kind of abuse that they have gone through before.

In addition Alex said, “A lot of them, I would say, 60% of them and that’s just a rough estimate in my mind of the ones that have been identified, they got through the criminal justice system and have some types of alcohol or drug issues that are related.”

Others found the perpetrator highly manipulative and insidious who expresses little remorse for their abusive behaviours. According to Alex:

Once they know the system and, you know, well, they know the language that I used. And they’re just as sophisticated, you know, in terms of perpetuated abuse. In fact, I would probably be positive that they’re probably even more abusive simply because they know their way around the system. And so that’s really scary. I find that scary.

Alastair agreed, “The perpetrator seems to be very outgoing, very supportive of his partner and very welcoming but he also has his own hidden agenda.” “Once they get into a relationship,” Alastair continued, “then things begin to turn, for example, give me some money and then when we go out to do things, we have to do things in his ways. That’s how he slowly moves it in that direction.” They, Ben said, often deny the abuse and take on the victim role blaming their partner for causing the violence:

First of all, they deny and say, they don’t remember. I am amused when they are charged, they don’t talk. When they talk, they say they don’t recognize it as abuse. When we ask, “Do you abuse your partner?” and they say no.

Brandon added, “The abuser would never admit to, okay I abuse this ‘person.’” Colin echoed saying, “Typically I would say that someone who is abusing, they tend to minimize that.”

For example, Brian said, “The person being violent probably says, ‘Well, it’s because I care so much.’ They’re trying to come up with an excuse that because I care so
much that I couldn’t control what I did or what happened or I didn’t mean it.” “Instead of seeing it as abuse,” Bo argued, “we see it as something that’s proof of something, like even being a control freak, that possessiveness, that jealousy again, that’s a marker of that somebody loves you.” Others make excuses for their actions by blaming on alcohol and drugs, stated Alex: “I think alcohol and drugs also allow the person that’s doing a lot of the abusing to actually minimize, blame their actions on that, you know, say, ‘Baby, it was just the booze talking’ or it was just you know or drugs that I was on.” Or, Anthony said, “I just lost control of my temper.”

The problem is, according to the participants, perpetrators do not take any responsibility for their actions; nor do they see the need to get help. “They externalize to somebody else. The issues are so outside of themselves. It is not them, not their accountability,” stated Alastair. Alex added, “For the most part, we know that or at least I know that, it is through probation and parole that a lot of these men end up seeking services anyway.” Adam responded:

The other side to that is sort of come in for services and help and support and going back into the relationship and just continue. Or, being more violent now because you outing me and since I have a record, I’m going to be more violent to you. Or, I’m going to be more sophisticated in the way I enact that violence.

Unfortunately, Alex went on to say, the “perpetrator will continue to perpetuate and the victim will continue to be the victim and then they just take it on to the next relationship.”

**PROBLEMATIZING CLINICAL PRACTICE WITH VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS**

What the service providers said was not incorrect. The problem is when they polarize the categories in order to seek the certainty of the rigid role of victims and perpetrators
(Berlin 1990; Kent 2002). As shown in the narratives, they dichotomized these roles and created two opposite categories: one that is powerless and innocent; the other, powerful and evil. For example, Alex made this comment when I told Quentin’s story where he was physically assaulted once at the end of the relationship but insisted that his partner was a great guy, never emotionally or physically abusive prior to the assault:

If we were to probe and probe a little bit more, I wondered if we would find, “Oh you know, sometimes he would say mean things to me and, you know, sometimes he would do these little things to me or tell me that he couldn’t,” you know, like some other types of emotionally controlling behaviour.

“I mean,” Alex continued, “either he really doesn’t see it as violence or somewhere along the way he thinks that it’s something not healthy and is minimizing it.” Adam echoed saying, “Or he thinks it is justifiable violence.” Clint was in disbelief stating, “It goes back into acceptance of what’s happening.” Colin remarked, “I will challenge [Quentin’s perception of the relationship].” He questioned “the quality of the relationship” and continued to say, “There’s some whole history that leads up to feeling like that, that rage that kind of comes out.” Somehow, Quentin’s own perception of the relationship was deemed untrustworthy. The service providers could not imagine the perpetrator other than this manipulative, unremorseful, heartless, “sick” person.

These responses reflect what story the dominant discourse of partner abuse permits to be told and spoken of: the victim is absolutely pure, and the perpetrator completely evil with no redeeming qualities. Yet, in practice few victims and perpetrators strictly follow these roles. To make the presumed storyline work, Lamb writes, they “would need to transform themselves into our view of them. And if they
cannot change themselves to fit into our moulds of purity and monstrosity, then we tend” to fit them into the roles (1996, 89). As shown, when the service providers were confronted with a narrative that did not follow our common understanding of violence in relationships, they justified it by saying that the victim denies or minimizes the abuse. In her work with women who experience abuse by their male partner, Donileen Loseke makes a similar observation. She writes, when battered women’s narratives fail to conform to the “wife abuse story,” social workers and shelter workers often ask: “what is wrong with women who do not want to understand themselves as a character in the wife abuse story” (2001, 122; author’s emphasis)?

Similarly, when the service providers found the perpetrator behaving in way that was not abusive or violent, they dismissed this behaviour, describing it as a form of manipulation. Or, they used Walker’s popular theory “Cycle of Violence” to explain it as a honeymoon phase. Perpetrators, warned Anthony, “could be perfect outside but once you close the door, they are totally different.” Alastair called the perpetrator “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” He then exclaimed, “Scary!” To explain the perpetrator’s “change” of behaviour, Bobby stated:

Walker talked about violence and the patterns that happened in relationships and she addresses the change between the very violent, manipulating, behaviour and how it coalesces into an apologetic stage and then we get the escalation stage.

Rather than seeing the perpetrator’s displays of “kindness” as one feature with a multiple aspect of his personality, they constructed this “kindness” as manipulative and somehow not sincere.

I do not dispute that, in many ways, perpetrators are manipulative. But I wonder: Can they be loving and caring as well? In recent years, some social scientist
scholars have acknowledged this tension and contradiction, though often ignored in gay male partner abuse. For example, Carol Ronai, in relating her own experience as a victim of child abuse, writes: “In one moment of reflection I thought of my mother as ‘vile,’ while in others I thought she was the best mom a kid could have. She abused me physically and sexually, yet she often protected me from my father, who was far worse” (1999, 156). Likewise, Ristock writes when describing one of her lesbian participants’ experiences: “She sees many sides to [the abuser] including being caring and fun, being depressed and in emotional pain, and being manipulative” (2002, 176). It is precisely these mixed emotions that make it difficult for the victim to leave the perpetrator, and the situation becomes complicated. Loseke describes this complexity of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships:

> The lived experience of women can be one where love and hate, caring and violence are perceived as coexisting simultaneously, where the violence is difficult to classify given folks’ understanding of “normal” violence, where designating pure victims and pure villains ignores perceived relational cores of trouble. (2001, 120)

By the same token, when the service providers found that the couple’s roles could not be easily defined according to the cultural assumption of a victim and a perpetrator, they labelled the couple as having co-dependence issues. “To me,” Chris stated, “when in a relationship, both people are victim and both perpetrator, I can see there is a dependency issue. That’s why it is difficult to see who is the victim and who is the perpetrator.” Carson agreed saying, “There’s an issue of the level of co-dependence within the relationship [and] the dependence can be played upon greatly in that situation.”
These narratives reflect our cultural discourse of partner abuse that makes certain stories intelligible and others not. As shown, it does not allow other explanations except for those that see victims as helpless, passive subjects who are waiting to be treated and perpetrators as unremorseful, heartless, “sick” persons whose motive for using violence is control. It assumes a homogeneous experience of partner abuse and ignores the multiple spaces that gay men can occupy, limiting us from critically examining “the way someone can both be a victim and abuse systemic power” at the same time (Ristock 2002, 127). In this way, victims and perpetrators are slotted into fixed, stable and autonomous categories. Nancy Hirschmann writes, using violence against women as her frame of reference: “When someone is labelled ‘battered woman,’ the social images the label conjures up, and the discourse that frames those images, transform the heterogeneity of lived experience into the homogeneity of social types” (2003, 125).

Clearly, not all violence is the same. Meanings and motives underlying violence in gay male relationships vary among both victims and perpetrators. Their experience of partner abuse is inevitably mediated through different forms of oppression such as racism and classism within the relationships. Thus, there is no monolithic experience of partner abuse (Bograd 1999; McNair and Neville 1996; Renzetti 1997b, 1999). As Ristock says, not all victims are passive subjects, waiting to be treated. Not all abusers are “exercising power and control and causing fear and isolation in the victim.” But, Ristock continues, “in a context dominated by power and control discourse it is the only story allowed” (2002, 177-8).
This cultural assumption of victimhood made it difficult for the service providers to see victims other than helpless persons who lack self-confidence waiting to be helped. For example, Brian stated, “If I’m not comfortable with me, then I cannot expect other people to become comfortable with me. I think that’s what we need to educate people on and help them to be comfortable with themselves first and gain that respect.” Bruce added, “I think that it’s a self-esteem issue that can be worked on.” Bobby believed that partner abuse is bound to have a life-long, negative impact on the victim: “I can’t imagine that not being the case. In my experience, that has been the case.” As a result, the victim was defined by their victimization – something that needed to be treated and worked on.

But, only those who conformed to the expectations were the “true” victims and deserved sympathy and support. Colin stated, “If there’s somebody who’s kind of minimizing how they’ve been victimized, you might be supporting them around that.”

To differentiate the victim from the perpetrator, Bobby looked at:

- Who is isolated? Who is dependent?
- What is the locus of power in the relationship?
- Who is financially dependent, emotionally dependent in the relationship?
- Who’s showing the lack of self-esteem?
- Who is presenting as being much more confident, articulate and out there?
- And who seems to carry a huge weight on their shoulder?

Calvin felt reluctant to call someone a victim if he retaliated against his partner: “What are they not telling me is also a great concern to me. Did they retaliate? What have they done to the other person?” The problem is that those who retaliated or fought back, or those who felt in control, or those who did not feel powerless or helpless were somehow seen as not “real” victims or commonly labelled as being “in denial.” In “Strengthening Domestic Violence Theories,” Michele Bograd makes a similar
observation regarding domestic violence against women: “Women who fight back are often judged as undeserving of protection because they violate social definitions of the helpless or passive victim” (1999, 280). Likewise Lamb observes: “When a victim says she is ‘over it’ or that it was ‘a long time ago,’ she becomes suspect” (1999, 115).

It is clear that service providers expect the victim to be forever a victim. They did not see that the victim could move beyond a violent experience that did not necessarily affect him so lastingly. There was no agency, resiliency, strength or perhaps positive meaning that the victim could possibly create out of his abusive experience. In “Survivor Discourse,” Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray challenge this notion of victimhood. They write as survivors of sexual violence:

All survivors face debilitating trauma, and no ‘cure’ exists that can take the pain away or remove all the effects of sexual violence, but we are not objects with ‘attributes,’ ‘syndromes’ or ‘disorders.’ We are fluid, constantly changing beings who can achieve great clarity and emotional insight even from within the depths of pain. (1993, 282)

Similarly, Bograd says when referring to women who experience family violence: “Even as there is a range of batterers, victims are coerced to varying degrees and have had varied opportunities to take action” (1999, 284).

Other scholars also challenge the discourse of victimhood as life long-suffering. For example, Lamb writes using women’s experience of violence as her frame of reference:

Although rape, child sexual abuse, and wife battering are terrible experiences to have gone through, many people have ‘survived’ and moved beyond them, feeling as if their victimization is not something that has defined them or continues to affect them. (1996, 46)

Heather Dunbar and associates show that even people who face terminal illness such as AIDS can create positive meanings about their illness: “Some women have used the
stress of HIV to transform their lives in positive and productive ways ... These personal accounts often depict the women actively using their HIV diagnosis as a stimulus to healthier and fuller lives” (1998, 145). Instead of being passive subjects, these authors show us, victims of abuse in relationships, even in extremely difficult situations, can posse agency, strength and resiliency that enable them to actively resist while negotiating meanings for their experience.

On the other hand, the cultural assumption of perpetrators as unremorseful, heartless, evil men made it difficult for the service providers to see them beyond this disposition. The service providers characterized them as difficult clients; some even considered them as undeserving clients who could not be helped. Alastair said, “I don’t know how to deal with the perpetrator.” Ben agreed saying, “It’s too hard. It’s hard to work with the perpetrator.” This attitude has been commonly found among service providers. For example, Ristock observes:

Service providers are struggling with how best to offer services for lesbian victims, yet they are often unwilling to work with lesbian perpetrators. Some felt they were incapable of working with women who were abusive and others simply do not want to work with women who are abusive, seeing them as undeserving of services. (2002, 126)

Like Ristock, Jeanne Marecek notes:

Men involved in abuse were branded as predators, scary, evil. Indeed, the ubiquitous term abuser shrinks a man’s identity to a single dimension ... Even though many respondents had no actual experience treating abusers, they believed that such clients could not be helped and did not want to change. (1999, 174; author’s emphasis)

Because of this perception, the service providers also felt that it was important to hold the perpetrator responsible for the abuse. Bobby stated, “It’s recognizing that it is a choice and you have to be held accountable for that violence.” Like Bobby, Alastair
remarked, "I think we need to hold these individuals to be accountable for their action." They emphasized on teaching the perpetrator to address his personal denial while accepting responsibility for his abusive behaviour. Colin said, "If there seems to be someone denying their violence, you're going to be challenging them to take responsibility for that." This sentiment structured how the service providers approached their clinical practice with the perpetrator.

In his ethnographic study of treatment groups for male perpetrators of family violence in heterosexual relationships, John McKendy has demonstrated the effect of such practice. The discourse of full responsibility, McKendy observes, has limited what can or cannot be said in the groups. The men “were only allowed to tell what happened by magnifying their own agency, reconstructing events as outcomes of decisions they had made” (1997, 148). It is thought that such discussions can help these men accept their responsibility while identifying the cause of their violent behaviour. In contrast, they were not allowed to talk about their partner or to give any context to the violence since this type of discussion was usually considered as the men's attempt to blame the victim removing their responsibility for the abuse:

The men thought that certain things needed to be told for listeners to understand why they had acted as they did. The struggle to include information about the context was particularly contentious when this consisted of descriptions of the part their wives play in abusive incidents. Responding to such stories, the counselor worked conscientiously to discount the men’s feelings of constraint and lack of full responsibility. (1992, 73)

In so doing, McKendy notes, the counselor silenced these men. Unsurprisingly, the men felt “puzzled, bored, shamed and angered; rarely were they engaged in the process of rebuilding their lives and transforming their selves” (1997, 148). Ironically,
these men were seldom “pleased with themselves or ... justified in what they had done. More often, they acknowledged that they had behaved badly” (1992, 73; see also Nurnberger and Robichaud-Smith 2004). Hans, one of my participants who went through partner abuse treatment programs, had a similar experience:

Whenever we talked about a violent situation we weren’t allowed to talk about our partner or use his name in anyway. I was only allowed to talk about my abuse. So it was really hard. Because a lot of the times I wasn’t the abuser, I was just fighting back [but] we had to take the whole blame and it hurt me that I had to sit there and take the whole blame because it wasn’t all me [and] you can’t even look at the other side. It’s totally you’re the perpetrator. We’re going to talk about you and your behaviour, what you’re doing.

CONTENDING THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE OF VIOLENCE

No doubt, the dominant discourse of partner abuse has structured the way in which the service providers come to understand the issue and thus interact with gay men who are involved in violent relationships. However, as shown, through their clinical work, they also participate in the production of it. In other words, they are not just informed by the discourse but also actively, though unwittingly, construct it through their clinical practice. Yet they at times resist and challenge it.

MULTIPLE LAYERS OF VIOLENCE

More specifically, the service providers (particularly those who primarily work with ethno-racial communities) problematized the contemporary conceptualization of violence in same-sex partner abuse that was focused primarily on a personal level. They worked to address cultural and structural forms of violence (such as whiteness, racism and classism) and how they intersected and played out in partner abuse. As Clint said, “There are different layers of power dynamics in terms of how these things play out [in violent relationships].” Alastair, a gay man of colour, was highly critical of the impact of
cultural imperialism and whiteness on racialized gay men. He depicted how this form of violence could be implicated in Asian/Caucasian relationships:

In the gay community in general, white men are the norm and Asian men are sort of marginalized. They are not considered beautiful. Therefore he felt that his partner, who's white and who he thinks is very good looking, can get any Asian man out there if he wants to. He feels so insecure and he's always concerned about the relationship and he's always kind of overly protective of the relationship because his partner might go out and get other partners easier than he does. Therefore he has to work harder in the relationship because he does not want to lose him.

“I felt,” continued Alastair, “there is violence in terms of how society gives him that notion and how it impacts on him in the relationship where he doesn’t feel that he can be equal. So to me that’s a form of violence.” Bo agreed adding, “It’s just interesting how racist dynamics happen in different kinds of couplings [and] it makes me think how much more a young Asian male would be willing to accept from a white man.”

Brandon and Ben raised issues regarding other forms of social marginalization that further complicates partner abuse in the lives of racialized immigrants. Brandon described how immigration issues could potentially play out in violent relationships:

“One person in the relationship is actually coming to Canada by sponsorship. They have to be in the relationship to get the status to stay in the country, and there is some emotional abuse and violence. But he couldn’t get out until the sponsorship is done.”

Ben told a similar story about one of the people he was working with: “I have one example. There is a couple. One sponsors the other guy to come to Canada. He is abused by his partner but he couldn’t leave because his partner threatens to stop the sponsorship.”

Others such as Adam were concerned with issues regarding employment and social isolation faced by racialized immigrants that affect the power dynamics in
intimate relationships. He asked, "In terms of people coming from other countries or rural areas into the city, what dynamics [and social norms] are they coming into? They come into different social networks and maybe feeling isolated and a sense of marginalization so what are they negotiating to give up to get a relationship?" Brian discussed how cultural values intersect with heterosexism and homophobia that makes partner abuse a lot more complicated for racialized gay men:

> Whether be they gay or straight relationships, in our culture I will say, once you are with someone, you are expected to be with that person for life. Gay relationships are not that accepted, at least not openly accepted in South Asian cultures. Growing up in a South Asian family, you are taught that I am going to get married and be with that person for life. And no matter what we go through, we should be able to talk to each other and figure it out on our own. They may think, you know what, “I’m in a relationship with this guy, my family doesn’t like it, I don’t want to get professionally involved because someone else will know I am gay, my family will really not accept it so I’m going to deal with this guy on my own.

Bo thus insisted, “I think bringing race into the picture is really important thing to bring into our conversation [of same-sex partner abuse].”

Still some pointed to the need to account for health conditions and other social categories such as age and class when examining issues about partner abuse. For example, Brandon discussed how HIV status could change the power dynamics in relationships:

> I have seen relationships that one is negative and one is positive. The person who is positive experiences violence and, you know, emotional or psychological abuse in the relationship. He is afraid if he gets out of this relationship, he may not be able to find another relationship. That also affects his ability to seek help.

Anthony spoke of the privileging of youthfulness in gay communities and how it could potentially make one vulnerable to partner abuse: "We talked about the imbalance
between racial but even age. I would say that we need to look at what is considered beautiful within the gay community. That gives people privilege and power to take advantage of the situation.” Ultimately, said Alex, we “are all located in different parts of the matrix, right! All of us in this room I think have been oppressed in different ways, we also have privileges in a lot of other ways and we can use that against our partners.”

As shown, the service providers do not see partner abuse merely as a personal form of violence. It also intersects with privilege and other forms of violence (such as racism and classism) that mediate the experience of those involved in abusive relationships. In this way, they conceptualize violence in relationships both at personal and societal levels. Bo stated, “We have to recognize that all of our clients living in this society are experiencing violence. This is a violent society, and there’s a war being waged every day.” Alastair agreed saying, “I’m thinking maybe our society is a form of violence in gay relationships.” This thinking disrupts the cultural hegemony of whiteness that primarily centers same-sex partner abuse on the experience of middle-upper class, able-bodied, white men and women (Poon 2000; Ristock 2002).

Moreover, it enabled them in some cases to articulate partner abuse that is beyond the dichotomous notion of power and control. “I mean,” explained Alex, “I may be controlling in that aspect but, you know, the other person may actually be controlling in a number of different ways and is doing a lot more of the controlling in the relationship.” Adam added:

I think in intimate relationships, control and power are a fluid dance. Sometimes they change hands at different points in time and bubble up and ... even the person who is being abused in a perpetual violent relationship would have some sense of power to a certain degree and how they negotiate.
In so doing, they saw violence as a continuum expressed in multiple forms. Bo said, “When we talked about control freak, like how my boyfriend is a control freak, that kind of thing, it really reminds me that we are talking about a continuing violence.” Likewise Colin stated:

I think that it is important to remember that as in any community, we are also talking about the whole continuum. So we are talking about from the sort of the most mild form of abuse in a relationship where it seems like one of the guys does not really treat his partner very well and his friends might all think that and they gossips about it and says something about it. But nobody is actually in any kind of danger to the other extreme where you are actually dealing with people who you feel like your partner could kill you.

**Complexity of Violence**

Other service providers acknowledged the muddiness of abuse that does not always neatly fit into the dominant discourse of victims and perpetrators. They raised questions regarding the boundary of what is and is not abuse. Can we call it rape or sexual abuse, Adam asked, “if someone goes to a party and comes home drunk and he is horny and wants to get it on” but his partner, who obviously shows disinterest and unwillingness, does not explicitly say no? What about in an S&M relationship where “I consented to being whipped but half an hour later I change my mind? So now it’s become possibly abuse because I’ve said no and it hasn’t stopped,” Adam continued.

Brandon asked similar questions: How can we describe this experience when one of his clients complained that his partner “is a control freak and controls everything” but admitted, “Sometimes I do like it because it makes me feel security. Someone is doing everything for me. I don’t have to do anything?” Using an inter-racial couple as a case example where the Caucasian man left his Asian partner for another
man immediately after obtaining his Canadian visa, which had been sponsored by the Asian partner, Brandon further illustrated the complexity of violence in relationships:

This Caucasian person is actually cheating on him, taking advantage of this person because now he has a visa and he can work anywhere. A couple of months later, the Asian man tried to withdraw the sponsorship and the Caucasian man applied for alimony, and then this Asian guy has actually got a whole file of paperwork from a lawyer, stating a whole list of all the violent and bad things that he had done while they were in a relationship.

“Sometimes,” Brandon remarked, “it’s kind of strange to figure out who’s right and who’s wrong.”

Moreover, as Brian pointed out, “abuse and violence and all those things are seen in different ways by different cultures.” Bo stated, “Like, sure I spanked my kids. That’s not violence, that’s discipline.” Calvin added, “In some cultures, people are swearing every second word. You would be offended and say they’re being abusive even if they’re not swearing at you. They’re swearing and angry. Rather than in some cultural context, it’s like yeah OK you’re swearing. It is not a big deal.” “In this scenario of the intercultural couple,” asked Bobby, “is there abuse? I don’t know.” Yet Bobby warned:

This is just a huge philosophical issue in terms of cultural relativism too when you start talking about the importance of culture in defining relationships and what’s normal and healthy for relationships, you can only go so far when you fall into cultural relativism, which is anything goes because the cultural context dictates it’s okay, and I think that’s very murky, murky terrain to get into.

In response Bo asked, “So, those of us as service providers, what do we do with that? Disconnect culturally in the way that people are interpreting each other’s behaviour?”

To further complicate the matter, Brandon added, for some cultures, certain words such as abuse and mental health are “taboo. It is like no way I’m not related to this.”
Though not fully articulated, these narratives challenge the dominant discourse of partner abuse that tends to gloss over the complexity of lived experience in favour of, Loseke writes, “lurid accounts of heinous behavior, depraved perpetrators and helpless victims” (2001, 107). The narratives acknowledge that the lived experience of partner abuse cannot be easily named and does not always neatly fit into the cultural assumption of violence in relationships. It is always messy, indeterminate and inevitably interpretative and culturally bounded. Calvin said, “The experience of abuse is very much negotiated.” “It is sort of,” Calvin continued, “in your own mind with yourself, like you know, it is sort of constructive and it is very strange how it goes, changes all the time.” Clint agreed saying, “I think people create their own realities. What would an abusive relationship be like for me? I’m gonna create my own stuff around that. So I have been stabbed a couple of times but that is ok. For some people it’s not.”

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the service providers adopt a “power and control” paradigm in clinical practice with gay men who experience violence in relationships. As shown, this paradigm, though affording the service providers a way of understanding issues relating to gay male partner abuse, creates two opposite categories (victims and perpetrators) that do not account for the multiple and often contradictory positions that gay men involved in abusive relationships can hold. As a result, it disqualifies other possible stories about gay male partner abuse (Augusta-Scott 2007). It is not, as shown in the analysis, that the services providers do not see the complexity of partner abuse. Indeed, at times, they attempt to conceptualize violence as
a continuum expressed in multiple forms that do not always fit into our common understanding of victims and perpetrators. They struggle and continuously search for new language to describe it, trying to come to terms with its contradictions. However, this new language is not yet fully articulated and at times is difficult to sustain within the dominant discourse of the power and control story that oversimplifies partner abuse – an issue that it is otherwise difficult to make sense of (Ristock 2002).
CHAPTER 5: RETHINKING THE EXPERIENCE OF PARTNER ABUSE

In the last chapter, I explored how the discourse of partner abuse structures service providers’ clinical practice with gay men involved in abusive relationships. Beginning from this chapter, I look at the lived experience of these men, using data from the individual interviews. Specifically, in this chapter, I attempt to deconstruct the experience of gay male partner abuse and, rather than seeing it as biological or fixed, show that it is multiple and negotiated. It is constantly under reconstruction and revision. As a result, it can only be a contingent representation of our lives. Yet, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, abuse does not define their experience nor has it any meaning by itself; rather, people give meanings to their experience through the available discourse. But what is or is not named as abuse reflects not the essential truth of abuse but our own cultural assumptions of it.

EXPERIENCE OF PARTNER ABUSE: FLUIDITY AND MULTIPLICITY

Giving an account of one’s experience is never solely individual. Butler reminds us, “the ‘I’ has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms” (2005, 8). In other words, we come to understand our experience through language or, some may call it, discourse that is prior to our existence. Experience of domestic violence is always and inevitably personal as well as social.

For example, when assaulted by his partner, Graham had no language to speak about his experience. It was something that was both indescribable and unspeakable: “In Mexico, if you are men, you don’t have rights to talk about violence against you. This is important because you are men, you are strong. If you talk about it, you are not a
man.” Through a brochure about same-sex violence that he accidentally found in a local community centre, he became aware that he was in an abusive relationship:

I went to the 519 Community Centre and when I saw a brochure about violence in intimate relationships, I took it and started reading it. Wow, this is my life, you know, if your partner yells, if your partner abuses you, economical abuse, sexual abuse, you know, psychological abuse. I read the brochure and I said to myself, “Well, this is my life.”

It is this reading that changed Graham’s perception about the relationship and materialized his experience as partner abuse.

Likewise, Hans’ life was full of violence. He was physically abused by his father and, growing up gay, was often teased, harassed and sometimes even got badly beaten up in school and at work. For him, violence was just simply part of life. He never considered that he was involved in abusive relationships. Nor did he find it problematic: “I thought that was natural. My parents did that, always. So like, I thought relationships were like that ... it was sex, drugs, rock and roll, and whatever happens.”

However, Hans’ perception changed once acquired the language of same-sex partner abuse in a workshop that he attended: “That’s when I realized how damaging I had been to people and how damaging other people had been to me ... relationships were supposed to be so much different.” This language of same-sex partner abuse enabled Hans not only to re-interpret his experience, but also to re-articulate it. In a sense, Hans’ experience of violence in relationships was both personal and social – a co-construction of the two.

The language of same-sex partner abuse, it must be noted, though shaping the way in which Hans understood his experience, did not determine its meanings: “I still never thought there was anything wrong, like I just always thought that’s just the way
life is.” His articulation reflects that experience of partner abuse is not only fluid, but also always ambiguous. Hans was not in denial. Nor did he try to downplay his experience but, rather, continuously searched for meanings associated with it: “I don’t even know if I still do identify like that ... I know in my head it is. But in my heart, it’s hard to say ... because if I say that, then I have to accept that it’s totally over too. Yeah. Well, it is totally over, totally!”

It is precisely because meanings are always and inevitably relational that the experience of partner abuse can never be singular, fixed or stable. Irwin originally came to talk about the emotional and psychological abuse that he experienced in his relationship. He described:

We started having arguments about ... like, I think the first argument was about him picking on me and treating me like I’m stupid and stuff like that. At first, I didn’t really consider it abusive. I just considered it annoying, pestering and stuff like that. But then after a few months, I just got to the point where I was like, this is really messed up, we argue every time we're seeing each other yet we continue to see each other and we want to see each other. It’s really dysfunctional.

This “problem” (signified by constant fights and arguments in the relationship) was recognized by both Irwin and his partner, but only Irwin considered it abuse – a perception that he knew was not shared by his partner or necessarily by others:

We’re always fighting, we’re constantly fighting, there’s a really high-conflict relationship and, I don’t know, if you use the term ‘abuse’ loosely, then we’re both abusing each other ... I know a lot of people don’t consider that abuse. They consider abuse something more serious like, you can’t get out of the relationship and you’re stuck there. People seem to think that if you’re living in different houses, you have your income, that’s not abuse because you can walk away any time.

He insisted that his relationship was fundamentally different: “I’m not comfortable just calling it a dysfunctional or a bad relationship because I think that there’s something
hurtful about it. I think that it’s not just dysfunctional or it’s not just bad communication skills. It’s really intentional hurting.” Intentional hurting was what Irwin defined as abuse: “I just think abuse is one very broad term and it encompasses things like being very hurtful to someone constantly and really degrading them and stuff like that.”

However, Irwin did not find that this definition spoke fully about his experience: “I wish abuse didn’t have such connotations that it does or there was another word to describe it.” He continued to search for new words to articulate his experience. But this search often gave him new meanings about the events:

It’s only 45 minutes [during the interview] and I’ve already changed the definition of our relationship. Talking about it makes me realize how stupid and immature the whole argument is ... it makes me feel less like the innocent victim and even less like an equal contributor to this conflict. It makes me feel more like I’m insensitive and I’m over-reacting, I’m the one not causing, but perpetuating most of the conflict ... I think, like after talking about it, I feel really guilty about all the things I’ve done and I just realized it.

In a sense, Irwin’s experience changed once his perception and thus his articulation changed, even though the substance of the events remained the same. The former description is much more negative, charged with language of abuse and victimhood; the latter, much more ambiguous.

What both Hans and Irwin’s narratives show is that the experience of domestic violence is never permanent or final. It is always partial and is constantly undergoing re-construction and revision. Walter reminded us when asked to describe his experience of violence in intimate relationships:

Had you asked me that 30 years ago I would have given you a different answer. Had you asked me that 15 years ago, now you are asking me, I hope in 10 years I would give you a different answer because it is an evolving understanding.
Like Walter, Lewis stated: “Sometimes you realize it right away. Sometimes you just think it is not right. Sometimes ... You don’t come to a sudden realization that this is a wrong lane, make a right hand turn and just get out of it. You can’t do that.” “As performance contexts change, as we discover new audiences, and as we renegotiate our sense of self,” writes Katherine Borland, “our narratives will also change” (1991, 63).

**Naming the Violence**

In “*Understanding Human Communication,*” Ronald Adler and George Rodman remind us: “Language does far more than describe the world. On a more fundamental level, the labels we use shape the way we look at the world and, in so doing, influence the way we behave” (1991, 65). Likewise Adrienne Chambon writes: “Things do not exist outside our naming them. It is the act of naming that creates things” (1999, 57). Then an act is not an assault without the name that calls it so. To put it more simply, assaults (or abusive behaviours) themselves do not have any meaning on their own. Nor do they define the experience. It is the act of naming that signifies and gives meanings to the experience of partner abuse.

For example, Sheldon and Quentin’s situations were very similar but the articulations of their experience were very different. They were both assaulted by their partner and, soon after the assault, left the relationships. To retaliate for his partner’s infidelity, one night Sheldon went out with his partner to a club and, in front of his partner, picked up a stranger and went to his place. Later after Sheldon returned home, his partner was angry and beat him. It was this experience that made Sheldon realize he was in an abusive relationship. Sheldon said, “It didn’t really occur to me there’s something wrong until he beat me up.”
This incident changed his view of the relationship and, through reading materials about same-sex violence in relationships, Sheldon re-interpreted his experience: “Actually, I read something about abuse and realizing that abuse wasn’t just a fist, you know, there are other forms of abuse and I made a connection that, you know, not only was I physically abused, but I was sexually, financially, emotionally abused as well.” Things that were previously not deemed as abuse were re-thought and re-constructed as such. Sheldon, for example, accused his partner of sexual abuse, even though he had never been raped or forced to have sex with his partner:

I didn’t like people to cum in my mouth, you know, and when I performed oral sex on him, I would always say, “Please tell me when you are going to cum,” and then when he did, he would hold my head so I couldn’t move, you know, cum in my mouth and he thought that was a joke. I didn’t want that. I didn’t like that. Forcing someone to do something they don’t want to do sexually is abuse and I never realized until like, well certainly after the relationship ended, you know, I just put up with it.

He continued:

If we had anal sex, I was a willing participant and he was more of a bottom so he was more interested in, obviously in me having sex with him, fucking him so I wasn’t forced when I had sex with him. I was a willing participant, you know, it’s not like he said, “We are going to have sex now,” you know. It was my decision as well as his together.

He called his partner controlling as he felt that his partner made “most of their decisions about what [they] were going to do and how [they] were going to do [it].” This controlling behaviour, in Sheldon’s newly found understanding of partner abuse, was a form of emotional abuse. He also labelled some other behaviours as abuse:

I would be in the spare room working ... I came into the living room and he wanted me to fill his glass with rye and ginger, you know, because he doesn’t want to get off the couch. He’s busy watching TV, just like, to me, that’s just abusive in a way. It’s not a simple request. It happened constantly, I am constantly mixing drinks for him in between, you know, getting myself a soda or something.
He said that he “was being used financially” as his partner “constantly borrowed money from” him even though it was returned when they broke up. In Sheldon’s mind, no doubt, he was a victim and was traumatized by the whole thing: “I mean there was no two ways about it. All the things that have been discussed here, all the things that I went through, all the bullshit that happened, you know, in the relationship, I was totally a victim … [and] it did traumatize me for a while.”

Quentin was also assaulted by his partner, who he had been with for three years. Closeted, his partner decided to break up with him to be “straight” (which happened once before). They agreed to exchange their belongings at his partner’s apartment but, when Quentin arrived, his partner was not at the apartment. After several attempts to contact him by phone, Quentin went to his partner’s office and believed his partner was aware of his presence, but was pretending not to be. Deciding to wait for him at the entrance of his building, Quentin later saw his partner and, without a word, was hit and punched after they got to the apartment.

Interestingly, unlike Sheldon, Quentin did not, after this incident, begin to define the relationship as abusive or call his partner controlling. Quentin found his partner’s attempt to date both Quentin and another woman at the same time, somewhat manipulative. He did not however call this manipulation a form of emotional abuse or consider it traumatizing: “If you force me to pick between yes and no to being a victim, then yes. But if you want me to further define it, I really didn’t feel that I was a victim … this event didn’t affect my confidence in other relationships or other people. The bruises went away after a week. There wasn’t any permanent damage. I don’t think it has affected me emotionally.”
His articulation of the experience may seem strange. Quentin was well aware that the beating was a form of violence, but he also understood that his partner had difficulty accepting his sexuality. He acknowledged that his partner was angry at him for not understanding his needs and for accepting the proposition of seeing Quentin and another woman at the same time. Quentin further speculated that his visit to the office might have triggered the assault due to his partner’s fear of being “outed” (even though it was not Quentin’s intention). Quentin felt that his partner was hitting him with controlled force even though his “face was covered in bruises.” To Quentin the hitting was an expression of his partner’s inability to come to terms with his own sexuality, rather than anger towards him.

By constructing his understanding this way, Quentin did not see himself, but rather his partner, as the victim – the victim of homophobia and heterosexism, whose impact were much stronger and more damaging than what Quentin suffered from the physical assault:

On the surface it may be violent. Under further scrutiny, I don’t think it is. If the act of hitting someone is violence, then yes. Since he didn’t strike at full force or lose control when he was hitting me, I don’t really classify it as so. I think I may opt to look at it a bit deeper. I think his not accepting himself is more damaging than what I have suffered. If I was a victim ... maybe it was himself, maybe it was the society or his own family that made him so uncomfortable with his own sexual orientation, which ended our relationship. I think I am more of a victim of the conditions surrounding our relationship than a victim of the physical violence.

What helped Quentin understand and materialize his experience is not the language of domestic violence, but the language of heterosexism. Consequently, he did not speak or re-interpret his experience as partner abuse and, in a sense, had never experienced it. This event, however unpleasant, was only a thing that happened in the relationship.
Interestingly though, Quentin would have re-interpreted it as domestic violence had his partner leave him for another man instead of another woman because the assault, he rationalized, would have been “for his own purpose of ending [their] relationship but not because of his frustration towards his own future.” He continued:

There is a big difference. The difference between dumping me in order to meet another man and trying to construct a bi or straight lifestyle is huge ... if he ended up dating another man, then he was just trying to find an excuse to end his relationship with me. That means everything was lie. Isn't it? Since he had tried to be with that woman afterwards, it enables me to understand that his hitting me was not due to his anger towards me.

Quentin's narrative shows not only that experience is fluid, but more importantly, that physical assault on its own does not define the experience; rather, we define it and choose how to name it and remember it. Michael Dear writes:

Memories are recollected for a myriad reasons: we recall only good times we spent with lost loved ones, turning our thoughts away from painful images of their death or departure; or we reconstruct meaning in our lives by constantly reordering past experiences into a narrative of coherence; and we seek to atone for past wrongs, struggling for redemption and reconciliation. (1997, 230)

In other words, our articulations do not reflect essential “truths” but, rather, representations of our experiences.

This naming or not naming is always strategic and positional. Subjects, Batya Weinbaum writes, “continually re-invent histories to serve their own contemporary psychological and political aims” (2004, 84). For example, though being beaten up severely on many occasions by his partner, Jack thought that the relationship “was a dream.” He did not realize that there was anything wrong, Jack said. “I didn’t realize that he was really like that ... When you’re in an abusive relationship you don’t see for some
reason.” It was not that Jack did not see or know but, rather, decided not to know or label it:

There’s a part of you that knows what’s going on and you should put an end to it ... I didn’t want to lose what I thought was love. I didn’t want to lose this relationship that I had invested so much in. I didn’t want to be proven wrong. I didn’t want to be alone. I was so frightened of being alone.

In so doing, Jack convinced himself that the relationship was a dream rather than an abusive relationship whose image is often bleak and implies personal failure. For someone like Jack who was independent and successful, it was difficult to accept. More importantly, Jack did not need to “act” or confront his partner, which enabled him to continuously stay in the relationship that at least provided him with some level of security.

Like Jack, Ted had never labelled the relationship as abuse until his partner of five years, left him for another man. Devastated and deeply hurt, Ted felt that his partner was “deceptive” and taking “advantage of his strong affection toward him.” Though he never found his partner physically abusive or controlling, and described him as “a wonderful guy” with “a lot of good qualities,” Ted believed that he was being emotionally abused because of the infidelity:

Actually after this incident, after this break up, I realized I was being emotionally abused because he was cheating all along ... Every time when I found out he was having an affair with other people, he would say, “I am sorry I made a mistake. Don’t worry about it. It’s a casual thing. It’s not on-going. Don’t worry. I love you. You have so many wonderful qualities and all that.” Basically he was saying that and I believed him. Then he did it again and again and again. So to me, it was emotional abuse because he knew I really loved him and I would forgive him if he apologized.

Indeed, Ted knew that his partner was unfaithful to him all along. When they first met, his partner was seeing another man and left him for Ted. After the first couple
of months together, he found out his partner was having sex with other men. His partner, according to Ted, had “numerous affairs” during the relationship and one time, broke up with him to be with another man. But Ted’s partner soon wanted to reconcile after the other person decided not to get involved. Ted clearly knew but chose not to label it until now:

Well, before I kind of vaguely thought about it because again we got back together quickly and all that, so I didn’t really spend a lot of time thinking about it. This time is a major ... basically a break up so I spent a lot of time talking to people and thinking about it, doing my own thinking.

By transforming his partner’s infidelity into the language of abuse, Ted made it not a private or moral issue, but a social justice issue. This gave Ted language to speak about the unfair and unjust treatment he received so that he deserved public sympathy:

“Actually I am not myself, I am really overwhelmed by the depth of the pain and the experience ... It’s really hard. I hope no one is going through what I am going through because it’s too much.”

What these narratives show is that experiences of partner abuse cannot simply be recorded as they occur. They are inevitably reflective. We think and re-think about them in order to make sense of them and choose to emphasize some aspects and de-emphasize others when narrating the stories. Over time, they are constructed and reconstructed for particular purposes. For example, writing made Kenny’s experience of abuse clearer for him: “I find when you write things, it sharpens your mind. It’s something that when you’re all alone in your office and when you’re writing and rewriting your stuff, it makes you so much sharper. You start to see things with a much greater clarity.” It was the writing, re-writing and re-reading that helped Kenny to
reconstruct and concretize his experience. Thus, narratives of one’s experience of abuse are inexorably fictitious. Weinbaum writes:

[A] story told is neither true nor unmediated, but only adulterated retrospection; once a story can be communicated, the narrator has already selected facts and converted them for presentation in a particular symbolic order, therefore creating a story resonating with pre-selected emphasis. The subject chooses what to disclose; those choices forge, tarnish, and otherwise spin the narrative. (2004, 67)

**Western Construction of Partner Abuse**

If we can only come to understand our experience through language, then the experience of domestic violence is not universal but, rather, culturally as well as historically specific. For example, Neil comes from a culture where terms of emotional and psychological abuse do not exist. After moving to Canada, Neil discovered that he had been in an abusive relationship through a therapist who helped him deal with his depression:

My therapist suggested that, “Maybe you were abused.” So that’s when I started digging more. Maybe I was and there are stories that are similar to mine. I started realizing that, “Yeah actually!!”

It is through his therapist’s clinical language of domestic violence that his experience of partner abuse came together and materialized: “My recollection of the relationship was vague after I got out of it. Because of that, my therapist helped me recall things that happened.” In a sense, Neil’s experience of abuse is not completely his but, rather, filtered through his therapist’s voice, a voice that reflects the larger social discourse of domestic violence.

Neil’s partner had never assaulted him even though, on some occasions, he slammed the door, threw things (such as his shirt and their engagement ring) at him and punched walls when he felt bad about upsetting Neil. They constantly fought and
“were shouting at each other.” His partner always lied, called him “stupid” and made him feel guilty, Neil said. “He tried to tell me that he did everything for me, he loved me and I should feel guilty for treating him badly. He made me feel guilty so many times for making him feel insecure, for meeting up with my friends, for looking at other guys.”

These lies and remarks may be seen as annoying, hurtful or even cruel, but are hardly defined as abuse in Neil’s culture:

In my culture, there is no such thing as psychological abuse. There is only physical abuse. I’m still trying to overcome that. It’s giving me the impression that I’m stupid - psychological abuse. I asked my therapist, “Should I be hurt over a comment? How should I react if it’s only a comment that is hurtful?”

By naming the lies and hurtful remarks, his therapist brought abuse into being, something that Neil did not consider previously. This understanding of abuse, which makes Neil aware of his partner’s “wrong-doing,” reflects not the “true” nature of their relationship, but our own cultural assumption of what is considered acceptable or not acceptable in relationships.

Cultural assumptions are governed by the concept of normal, healthy relationships that make the experience of partner abuse intelligible. Only through the norm can we recognize such experiences. In a sense, it is the norm that (re)produces deviant, abnormal relationships and thus the experience of partner abuse. For example, Kenny, through a comparison with others’ experiences, came to believe that he was being abused: “I look at how my friends get along with their wives and how I get along with my partner … I’m getting to know a little more about what’s normal and what is abnormal.” What he described as abuse (or “abnormal”) in the relationship is his partner secretly stashing money; making all the family decisions alone; not properly
disciplining their children (such as swearing at them when they were being disrespectful); treating him poorly, forcing him to move to the basement when they were waiting for their divorce to be finalized, where Kenny experienced pneumonia and asthma because of the poor insulation.

Like Kenny, Irwin’s understanding of abuse is predicated on and defined by the norm: “In a normal relationship, it wouldn’t be constant and it wouldn’t be, like some of the things we say to each other are things you wouldn’t say to anyone.” It is this deviation from the norm or, more accurately, the existence of norm itself that made both Kenny and Irwin’s experiences intelligible. Their experiences of abuse were governed by the norm (the discourse of normal relationships).

If the norm, as Foucault argues, is inevitably a form of power, then its governing is never value-neutral. Butler writes:

In Foucault’s account of self-constitution ... a regime of truth offers the terms that make self-recognition possible. These terms are outside the subject to some degree, but they are also presented as the available norms through which self-recognition can take place, so that what I can “be” quite literally, is constrained in advance by a regime of truth that decides what will and will not be a recognizable form of being. (2005, 22)

In other words, the discourse of partner abuse (which works against the norm) not only shapes, but also dictates and limits the way in which we can hear, think, understand and speak about the experience.

For example, Neil, having acquired the language of partner abuse, began to speak about his experiences of victimhood. Only through this self-acceptance and truthfulness could he begin his healing process. Neil said, “Actually now I have a label for it and after I accepted that, the healing process started. That’s when I started to be truthful to myself. I was being hurt.” He is no longer just aware of his experience but also, with his
therapist's help, eager to transform himself, work on his self-esteem and assertiveness skills to attain self-confidence and happiness: “I have to help myself, to pick myself up so that the healing process begins. ... I don't want myself to be a victim. I like to be proactive” (see Foucault, 1988c). Speaking about his experience this way, Neil becomes a familiar and recognizable subject, one that is not only innocent, but also deserves sympathy as well as help. But, only those who conform to this discourse of partner abuse do (see Bograd, 1999; Lamb, 1999).

Dean was well aware of this issue. He was never assaulted by his partner or afraid of him. But one night, Dean's partner wanted to have sex and, despite Dean's obvious disinterest, proceeded anyway. For Dean, this event was ambiguous. It was not terrifying as Dean would have imagined as sexual assault:

It didn't feel like what I imagined sexual assault would feel like. Like I imagined sexual assault being terrifying, and I guess the reason I didn't react was because I wasn't scared. What was I scared of? I wasn't scared he was going to hurt me. I don't think I was scared he was going to hurt me.

Nor did Dean think that his partner would continue if he resisted: “I could have said no. I could have pushed him off me. He wouldn't like ... I don't think he would tie me up and force himself on me.” For Dean, coupling also implied at least some level of sexual consent: “Maybe partly why I didn't think of myself as a victim was that he was my partner. You don't want to think of it like, your partner's having sex with you, you don't think it is a kind of assault because you're a partner. Isn't it part of the consent?” Thus Dean recounted:

To say, I was sexually assaulted. I guess I don't really believe that ... I remember asking myself: Was that rape? Was I sexually assaulted? I remember asking myself that. I couldn't figure it out. I wasn't sure. Do I
think that I was assaulted? It is hard for me to understand it. It is hard for me to figure it out. To be honest, I am not sure.

However, as a clinical therapist himself, Dean clearly knew that in theory, this event was sexual abuse and, to speak otherwise, would subject him to criticism and possibly accusation of being in denial:

If I sat down in front of a therapist and said, “Oh my partner, you know, I didn’t want to have sex with him and he went ahead and had it anyway and I kinda just laid there and held my eyes closed for a little while.” They would say, “That’s abuse.” They wouldn’t question that ... I was afraid to say it to you because I think you’re going to see me as blaming myself ... If you’re judging me in the sense that, if you’re judging the situation and saying, “Oh here’s the classic case of someone who doesn’t want to really appreciate the depth of what they went through or something.”

To make his story intelligible and be a “convincing” victim, Dean is required to speak his experience in a certain way, a way that conforms to the discourse of partner abuse.

Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack write:

Where experience does not “fit” dominant meanings, alternative concepts may not readily be available. Hence, inadvertently, [people] often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions. (1991, 11)

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter, I showed that experience of partner abuse is neither static nor fixed; rather, it is constantly under reconstruction. It is through language (discourse) that these men come to articulate their experience as abuse. Language by definition is shared; thus, experience of partner abuse is not only personal, but social. As shown, it is not the act itself, but the act of naming that gives meanings to their experience. This naming is both strategic and positional; therefore, the experience of partner abuse is always negotiated. Lastly, I showed that our common understanding of partner abuse is
neither value-neutral nor universal. A social construct, it is culturally and historically specific, which constrains what gay men can and cannot describe as abuse.

It should be noted that I do not argue that their experiences are fabricated. Nor do I think we can pare their experiences down entirely into language or discourse. Of course, there are punches, beatings, bruises, black eyes, broken bones and, certainly, these men often felt scared, confused, lost and helpless. Even though they may not have had language to describe their experience, their bodies felt it nonetheless. Phil described, “There were little tiny things but I wasn’t... like, he acted sort of strangely a little bit but it wasn’t... I didn’t know whether it was just me being paranoid or it’s the fact that there was something wrong.” Like Phil, Dean recounted:

I don’t know it was kind of more just being so unhappy for so long, like just being so exhausted physically and emotionally and just realizing like there’s something really wrong here ... It was so subtle and so complete that I just think I couldn’t keep up with this, just to sort of identify it as abuse ... I couldn’t ... I just, I don’t know.

What I argue here is that gay male partner abuse is not just a bodily experience. It also works against the discourse of domestic violence through which people come to understand their experiences. As Natalie Wilson writes: Neither cultural construction nor bodily materiality alone, but both, “shape corporeal identity” (2001, 120). In a sense, gay male partner abuse is also a linguistic event (which, of course, as shown above, is imbedded in power relations and thus inevitably social). It must be seen as negotiated, fluid, multiple and constantly changing.
CHAPTER 6: SEARCHING FOR THE MEANING OF ABUSE AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

The previous chapter dealt with the experience of partner abuse as negotiated rather than static, and that the act of naming it gives it meaning. In this chapter, I further my discussion to examine what gay men describe as abuse/violence and how they describe it. I demonstrate what can and cannot be named as such in our culture. In this context, I see gay men’s experience of partner abuse as inherently both personal and social. Lastly, using the participants’ narratives, I show how gay men’s experience of partner abuse does not always fit neatly into the rigid roles of victims and perpetrators; instead, each party takes multiple positions. In such a way, I demonstrate the complexity of gay male partner abuse and challenge the essentialized notions of victims and perpetrators of violence in relationships.

NARRATIVES OF ABUSE

“In lived experience,” Loseke writes, “troubles do not come to us with labels describing their names, meanings [or] seriousness” (2001, 108). Robert Emerson and Sheldon Messenger add, “The perception of ‘something wrong’ is often vague at the onset” (1977, 121). Many participants (particularly those in relationships where there was no physical violence) were unsure what was happening in their relationship and found it difficult to comprehend the situation. They struggled for words to describe their experiences of being troubled and feelings of unease. According to Edward, his partner had never attacked him physically or verbally, but instead attacked his values and insulted him by, “implying that I had poor choice in my friends and things like this.” Similarly, Dean’s partner had never assaulted him physically or verbally. But Dean said, “Everything that was important to me or I valued, he attacked and criticized and sort of
over time kind of whittled away my confidence. He attacked me by attacking how I lived
my life, how I think of my life, and what I believed but it wasn’t sort of directed at me.”

Often subtly, told by the participants, their partner insulted and belittled them
by using jokes. Lewis’ partner tried to convince him that he was crazy, something that
his partner found funny. Jack’s partner put him down by teasing him in front of their
friends: “He would constantly do little things like, I asked him for a pair of shoes to
bring back for me while he was in San Francisco and he brought me back a bottle of
scotch and presented it to me in front a couple of friends and he said this was better
suited for me because of my alcohol problem.” Like Jack, Umberto’s partner made fun of
him using derogatory remarks: “I had a Tumi bag as my computer bag for a laptop. He
would call it my purse. He was always dropping derogatory statements about like sort
of my sexuality, like my masculinity.”

To get their way, participants said, their partners often smoothly changed topics
or twisted their words. Phil recalled, “He knew how to manipulate the conversation to
get you to say something in response. And then he would say, ‘Oh that’s what you
mean.’ I would be like: ‘That’s not what I said.’ ‘But this is what you said, that’s what you
mean.’ He always turned the conversation around.” Rufus described similar
experiences: “He has this mind control over me for some reason because he thought he
could use this reverse psychology on me. Like I would say, I heard that you did this or
you went out with this or that person or you went to this place’ and he would say, ‘Oh
did you go out with your friends last night?’ He tried to reverse it back and make me
feel bad.”
Other participants felt somewhat restricted in their movement, though not by force. According to Phil, his partner always monitored where he was and where he went: “When I went to work, when I got home, he would call me. He knew approximately the time that would take me to get home. He would call and when I wasn’t home, then where was I? What was I doing? Why didn’t I go home?” They found that their partners attempted to control their relationship. Sheldon said, “It’s hard to describe, just controlling, controlling, try to control me, control where we go, what we do, you know.” Max described:

Gradually, [after he moved in with me] I had a sense that he was taking over, that he was the one who was controlling everything. He had to be the top, the person who was really making the decisions, the person who was running the house, making decisions about this and that.

Max continued, “He would gradually push and push [to get his way. But] if he didn’t get his way one way, he found other ways of getting around it.”

In some cases, insults intersect with racism. His white partner, Neil said, ridiculed his culture and made racist comments that had affected him greatly. He gave an example to demonstrate:

He doesn’t say that Filipino is not intelligent but we talked about Filipino doctor, for example. “If you’re a Filipino doctor, you can’t be a doctor in North America. It’s difficult to be a doctor in North American so you can’t be doctors in North America,” once he told me. He gave me the impression that Filipinos couldn’t be doctors or nurses. I am like what? They could be lab technicians but not doctor.

Like Neil, Ted’s partner who is white harshly criticized his mannerism as being “un-Canadian.” Ted found this criticism extremely offensive: “If I have some behaviour that is not culturally appropriate, he would say very bluntly, ‘Oh it is rude. It is considered very rude in my culture.’ That is very, very rude because I grew up in China and I didn't
grow up here. Little cultural things like this really hurt me. It made me feel like an inferior person coming from a different culture.” Internalizing these comments, Ted tried to change himself: “This is a mainstream culture, white culture. Of course, you try to make yourself fit into it.”

Because they felt that their partners’ behaviour was subtle or insidious, the participants often found it ambivalent. It was difficult for them to name or articulate their experiences. Dean said, “Maybe that’s why I didn’t think it was abuse, you know, I think abuse is more like, you are a piece of shit.”

Yet, the insults were not always subtle or indirect. Graham’s partner called him “stupid” and yelled at him. Edward’s partner purposely broke something valuable to him: “He used to throw things, break things, something that’s very special to me. I think he purposely broke it because he knew it meant a lot to me.” Like Edward, Hans described, “He took all my sentimental stuff that my other lovers bought me. And he left anything that they didn’t buy. But anything that a lover bought me and he knew about it, he stole those things.”

For the participants, their partners’ behaviour was not just a simple nuisance; it was malicious and intentional. It was intended to hurt, demean and control them or to attack their self-esteem. Otis said, “He would say really vicious things. He knew what my sensitive areas were. He knew how to hurt me and he would choose those areas and hurt me.” It is constant, persistent and pervasive that leads to strange but often uncomfortable or mild irritated feelings. Dean depicted:

I think part of what’s important to understand was also the persistence of it. It wasn’t like he said it once. It was constant, like it really was a daily experience where he was constantly saying things that would be undermining and questioning people in my life and their values and who
they are as people, whether I could trust them and how they treat me, you know, whether I should hang out with them. It was all the time for a long time and it just became hard to resist that. I got lost in it.

Dean continued to describe: “I was depressed. I was confused. I was upset. I was anxious, you know, I was losing touch with friends and family, I was losing touch of what is important to me. All those things were happening. I was having trouble functioning in my job. I couldn’t concentrate. I was just exhausted, depressed.” Francis related similar experiences:

My partner started to verbally manipulate me and demean me, constant demeaning coming from him. I kinda joked about it, kinda laughed about it but it hurt. And each time he would do it, the wound would get bigger. It was an ever-increasing wound. It was like he would throw bad bacteria onto an open sore. Each time it would grow, and grow, and grow.

It was within this context where the participants described their experiences and saw themselves as being abused or taken advantage of.

Interestingly, though troubled by their partners’ physical assaults, what they found even more troubling was that they were emotionally outmanoeuvred. Edward explained, “I mean I’m not comfortable with physical violence certainly but I feel this allowing myself to be manipulated and controlled bothers me more than the pushing and shoving. [Maurice: Why?] I don’t know why. I think I don’t like people getting the intellectual upper hand on me (laugh).” Similarly, Francis found being emotionally manipulated by someone he loved very hurtful: “I could have been stabbed with a knife but that wouldn’t have hurt as much as his emotional abuse.” These narratives reflected our cultural expectations of being a man: men should be in control, emotionally mature and able to handle psychologically, as well as mentally, though not necessarily physically, just about anything (Cruz 2000).
Even as they struggled with the subtle nature of the emotional abuse some participants experienced, they seemed unaware that their own behaviour might also be a form of abuse. Umberto thought that “being mouthy and bitching” at his partner were acceptable as long as there was no physical violence: “I mean I might have got mouthy and bitching about stuff, but it was never to strike or anything like.” Umberto indeed saw it as his right to “be on” his partner as they were coupled: “I was taking care of him and everything so I had a right to say something about him just doing as he pleased and what have you.” Similarly, rather than charming, Francis found his partner’s theatrical personality “repulsive” and annoying. He called his partner pretentious, “fake” and insincere and, when Francis perceived his partner acting this way, he became so angry and lashed out at him: “I do tend to overreact right now. I don’t want to take it anymore. I become frustrated. Eventually, I would become so annoyed. I would lash out.”

**Narratives of Physical Violence**

Most participants said that they had experienced some forms of physical violence in their relationships. They were grabbed, shoved, pushed, kicked and punched. Lewis depicted one such incident when they were on a business trip:

> When I came home, he was angry, drunk, was on drugs. I don’t know what he was angry about. It wasn’t about anything. He grabbed me and threw me down and banged my head on the cement floor again and again. I thought my head was going to pop open. I begged him to stop and I tried to calm him down. He grabbed me and threw me down and banged me. I ended up on the floor. He tried to kill me. I just talked to him quietly, “don’t” and begged him and pleaded. He finally backed off a bit so I left the building and ran away.

Graham described, “The violence started maybe two weeks, very, very shortly after I arrived here, yelling, fighting, pushing, throwing things. He knocked me.” Some men were badly assaulted by their partner and required immediately medical attention. Phil
recounted, "I had to go to the hospital. I couldn’t lie down. I couldn’t move because my ribs were sore, they were cracked, hairline fracture. I couldn’t breathe and plus having the asthma, I couldn’t take deep breath and I couldn’t sleep. I was in so much pain." Jack related similar stories:

When he got angry, he started becoming violent. I mean he would pick up anything, furniture, knives, his fist, rocks, metal and it didn’t matter if he hurt you or not. He would throw furniture at me, smash me against the side of the counter until there was blood everywhere, pounding me in the head. The next day I was a mess. My eye was black and blue. Lips were swollen and my ear was swollen.

Yet, in some cases, the physical violence did not continue; their partners felt bad of what they did. For example, according to Vincent, his partner might have thrown a punch once or twice during the relationship but it stopped:

There has been a few times when we would have little disagreements and he would get mad with me and sometimes I would do something that he didn’t like and he would get mad and he would punch me, like once or twice or something like that.

He never found his partner threatening, even though his partner was abusive at times:

“Even though he was bigger and stronger than I was, I wasn’t afraid of him. He’s not a mean, violent person.” Like Vincent, Dean’s partner had never threatened him with physical violence. He punched Dean once in the middle of a heated argument, which caught Dean’s chin. But his partner “realized right away this was not right behavior,” Dean said. Otis admitted to hitting his boyfriend but he felt badly about it afterward. “I realized that I didn’t like it,” Otis said. “Because when it happened, when I hit him,” Otis continued, “I knew it had gotten out of control and I hated myself for it. I hated doing it. I was embarrassed and disgusted.” After this relationship, Otis vowed that he “would never go down that road anymore” and indeed, according to Otis, he never has.
Although the actual violence might have stopped, some participants said, the fear of potential violence was always there. Lewis recalled, “I tried to get out of it. He said, ‘I’ll meet you at a back alley, and I’ll kill you.’ I believed it. It’s probably his exaggeration but I believed it. I was afraid of him. So, I lived with fear for 3 years because you don’t know how to handle it.” To instil such fear, it must be perceived as real and imminent, even if it never ends up being enforced. Otherwise it was just seen as an empty threat.

Yet, the perception of threat was mediated by a number of factors such as physical stature, race and past experience. For example, Umberto admitted that he “was terrified” of his partner, who was bigger, “a lot stronger [and] in really good physical shape.” As a result, Umberto took his partner’s threats very seriously: “There was a fellow in my building and he was walking by me with a really bad black eye. [My partner] said something like, you better watch yourself or whatever, that would be you. It always stuck in my mind that he made that threat.” By the same token, Max felt threatened by his partner’s words even though there had been no physical assault between them. “He broke one of the glasses in the stairway, he hit it with his fist in front of me saying, ‘This could be you’ and that’s when the fear started.” Max described his partner as taller than him, weighting over 200 lbs, and knowing martial arts. He was also a dark racialized man. Max’s perception of the threat was affected by his partner’s physical traits. As black feminist bell hooks writes, the cultural image of dark racialized men “as rapists, as dangerous menaces to society, have been sensational cultural currency for some time” (1990, 61).
To contrast, in another abusive relationship, even though Max’s partner hit him and pulled a knife on him, Max never took the threats seriously. “One time when I told him to stop something, he started hitting me with his fists but he wasn’t that strong ... to be a serious threat.” In fact, Max was never scared of him and could physically control him when he became violent: “I actually physically threw him off my porch at one point.” Max described his partner as half his size and of Chinese decent. In the West, gay Asian men are commonly portrayed as passive, submissive and effeminate (see Han 2008; Poon and Ho 2008). Accordingly, Max never felt seriously threatened by his Chinese partner.

Xavier also never took his partner’s threat seriously, even though his partner was quite physically abusive. Xavier experienced multiple forms of racial discrimination and prejudice as a black man living in Canada. He was physically abused by his parents and was living on the street when he was younger, involved in street gangs and fights. Physical violence was thus not foreign but, indeed, a survival instinct for him. As a result, Xavier would not put up with any form of violence or nonsense from his partner: “I am aggressive. Period! I am just not violent. But I can become violent with anybody who becomes violent with me. I will make you think twice [before you throw a punch] because I will disfigure you. I really will.” Nor was he scared of his partner, who was over 6 feet and 280 lbs:

I took those threats as gospel. I wasn’t afraid of him because he was big or strong, because I am strong too. I just might not be of his height, size and body, but I mean the bigger they are, the harder they fall. So I am not afraid because you are big, to open my mouth and say, “Well that displease me” or “I don’t like that.” I am not afraid to do that and I do that.
Interestingly, only few participants considered behaviours such as pushing and physical restraint as forms of physical violence. Edward did not see his partner’s pushing and shoving as assaults: “Beyond the pushing and shoving, there were no blows-thrown or anything.” Calling them “slam dancing,” Edward jokingly said, “He wasn’t that much bigger than me. I’m a little more athletic than him, like I have more moves than him.” Like Edward, Francis did not think that physical restraint was a form of violence: “That was the only one assault that I can honestly say was an assault. After that point, it was restraint. He would restrain me against the wall. He would hold me in such tight grip that I couldn’t move, and stuff like that.” “A restraint,” Francis continued, “I could handle.” Xavier, though not liking it, would accept a punch or a slap from his partner: “A punch isn’t a big deal. It wasn’t harmful to me. You might slap me and I might accept it. I might even let you do it but you will never get beyond that.”

Moreover, not all forms of violence are condemned equally. Particularly when something is perceived as “wrong-doing” or violating social mores, the use of violence is at least understandable if not acceptable. Max was punched by one of his partners on several occasions. Rather than problematizing this behaviour, Max accepted it:

When we broke up, he was very angry at me for choosing to go back with my old relationship instead of rejecting my wife and staying with him and he expressed his anger physically on two or three different times. But I accepted it because he was angry, he was hurt and it wasn’t hurtful to me physically, although he was punching me with his fist almost in that kind of semi-rage kind of physical behaviour.

For Max, his partner’s violence was entirely justifiable. Max felt guilty about his decision of getting back together with his former wife. His leaving, Max felt, caused a lot of emotional distress to his partner, who loved him unconditionally and was fully committed to their relationship. It was thus quite clear to Max that the whole thing was
his own fault. Indeed, Max thought hurting his partner this way was problematic, rather than his partner's violent behaviour: “One of the things that bothered me the most was having hurt [my partner] in the relationship. He’s the one that was very supportive and very committed.”

Similarly, after learning that his partner was leaving him for another guy, Ted suddenly hit his partner. He recalled, “I was so unprepared. I thought it was the end of the world. It was terrible. I exploded right away. It was too much for me to handle. I was so angry. I slapped him in the face.” Ted did not apologize. Nor did he find his behaviour problematic. He loved his partner dearly and unconditionally, and was so dedicated to the relationship but his partner returned with infidelity, betrayal and abandonment. For Ted, his partner deserved the hitting. This sentiment is, in fact, shared by his partner, who apologized for causing him emotional suffering, rather than calling him on the violence. Ted said, “He did not say anything. He didn’t do anything because he knew he was not behaving in an honest way. He cheated on me and all that, you know. He apologized but it didn’t change the fact.”

These narratives reflect the boundaries of what can and cannot be named as physical violence in gay male relationships. They are based on cultural values that allow some forms of physical violence to be perceived as such, while others are not.

**Multiple Positions**

The participants presented a different picture from the literature about abuse in gay male relationships. Told by the participants, they were not simply helpless victims who were beaten by their partner. They argued and fought back. Irwin and his partner never used violence against each other. But Irwin would not hesitate to verbally attack his
partner when he found his partner’s comments hurtful: “Whenever he says something, then I just say something five times worse back to him. So if he’s abusing me and I’m doing the exact same thing back to him then it has to be abuse both ways.” Irwin admitted that his verbal attack was not always innocent: “I’m trying to hurt him because he hurt me and I’m trying to hurt him back twice what he did to me.”

Xavier hit his partner with a hammer when his partner tried to force sex. “He began to playfully get aggressive. Then his playful aggression turned into seriousness. He tried to plop me down on the bed and take advantage of me and I just wasn’t going to take it. There happened to have been a hammer on the nightstand so that was my immediate weapon. I took it and I clubbed him. I just go with it without hesitation.” He left the scene immediately, knowing that his partner would never call the police as he was closeted. For Xavier, it was self-defence: “I am not a violent person but I will protect myself.” Like Xavier, Umberto did not just let his partner hit him. He fought back and caused his partner a few broken ribs: “One night, he was biting at me. He just fought very nasty. He wasn’t just throwing punches. He was biting and just it got very messy, and I was beating him over the head with a can because he was strangling me and I threw it. I broke a few of his ribs because I was essentially kicking him off.”

Francis who practised Judo and Jujitsu did not fight back when his partner assaulted him. But he made sure that his partner would not dare to do it again. In one of the verbal fights with his partner, Francis was so angry to a point he “actually punched the wall so hard” and “put a hole on the wall.” “I knew that this would never happen again. Never!! He knew damn well he would not survive it and I mean that literally, I would have killed him. I would have personally killed him if that ever happened again.”
So he knew that he best never fool around with me again.” Francis intentionally left the damage as a warning for his partner: “He wouldn’t fix it, and I was not going to fix it. So I left it visible. He put a painting on top of the hole. He couldn’t look at it but he knew damn well why it’s there and why I left it there because I could have easily fixed it.” “I guess,” said Jack, “because being male, the ego plays, and when there’s a threat, you have a tendency to fight back.”

Participants did not only fight back, but also instigated abuse. Edward acknowledged that not all of the fights were initiated by his partner: “I am not saying I never started anything. A couple times I am sure I did.” Vincent recognized his own abusive behaviours: “I wouldn’t deny that I did something that was abusive. There might be times I might have said things or done things that he might have thought that were abusive. Yes I have to admit to those. I am not going to say I’m a perfect angel in the relationship either.”

In fact, some even confessed that they were just as abusive as their partner. They intentionally used violence to hurt and retaliate. Rufus who admitted to having a short temper recalled, “I have pulled a knife on him. I would throw glass at him. I would wet his bed (laugh). I have done some bad things myself.” He warned his partner what he would do if his partner continued to be unfaithful:

I always said to him, “You know what? I would give you a chop right in your forehead, in the middle of forehead. When you look in the mirror, you will know I am the one who put it there, and you will remember me. I will burn you up with hot water, when I burn you up with hot water, I will nurse you back to health. They are not going to want you when you are all scolded up and your skin is coming off. But I will want you and take care of you because I am the one who did it to you.”
Rufus continued, "Most of the times were getting revenge. Most of it was, if you can do it, I can do it too. If you cause me pain, I am going to cause you pain too." Hans also admitted that he was equally as abusive as his partner:

I also realized that I do some things and a lot of it is verbal – stupid, hurtful stuff, like I would lash out at him with words a lot of times. Because he was a hustler most his life, I would call him like a cheap trick and stuff like that. And he'd hurt me back and say you're just a trick. You know, that would start up major commotions. Stuff like that. Definitely we knew how to hurt each other. We knew the exact words to say to hurt each other.

Agitated by the feeling of hurt caused by his partner, Hans retaliated: “He hurts me so bad. I think that’s what the violence stems from, the hurt he causes. I’ve probably done more damage than I should have at times, like to hold him, restrain him.”

In some cases, violence became so intense and mutual. Feeling cornered by his partner’s verbal attack, Otis initiated the physical violence in the relationship. However, it quickly became mutual: “We were boxers, and we just kind of matched each other up, went at it together. There were some crazy, crazy punching matches. I had like black eyes, bloody noises." His partner, as time went, “became better at hitting," whereas he “became better at the verbal (laugh).” Otis admitted that his use of violence was not just to defend himself, but also to retaliate and control:

We’d destroy parts of the apartment. Things would get thrown and, you know, I’d rip up his textbook and do things like that, just to get to him because he liked his textbooks. He’d break stuff of mine. There was that torturing aspect too. I am going to hurt you in all these different ways. If I had been hurt or rejected, there would be kind of this impulse to hurt him back.

The relationship became so intense that fights became more frequent. Otis recalled, “Sometimes we were going through really, really difficult point where we would be
fighting every two weeks, every week. It wasn’t like every day but it was frequent, like some of them were big brawls.” Otis described one such incident:

I can’t remember what started it but something probably related to, like some person said something cold or mean or something like that, it got interpreted and a fight escalated. But it got to the point that we weren’t talking to each other, and another way that we’d kind of control each other was ... we were living together, we kind of bought our things together, you know, to live together, like kitchen stuff, furniture and stuff like that. We would kind of repossess what we own so I wasn’t allowed to watch his TV, and he wasn’t allowed to use my dishes. It’s a way to control the other person. It was a way to punish. I remember one day he was watching TV and I was in my room and I went in the kitchen. He was just so cold, so cold, and he was sitting there watching TV, using a bowl of mine (laugh). It sounds crazy. I was sucked into it. It’s almost like, the way I saw it and this is exactly what I remember, it was like, he was just flagrant. He was just like saying, “Fuck you. I know I am not supposed to use your bowl but I don’t care,” in your face kind of way, “You can’t tell me what to do, I do whatever I want to do, I don’t care if it pisses you off because I want to piss you off” kind of attitudes. That’s the kind of attitudes he has, pushing buttons always ... I saw him and I kind of became incensed, I was just angry beyond belief, and I was drinking a glass of water. I just went up to him and I said, “What the fuck are you doing using my bowl” and he just looked at me and just, “Fuck you. I do whatever I want.” I took my glass of water and threw it in his face, and then when I did that, I thought “Uh-oh” (laugh). I knew that was going to be an initiating thing. I was running down the hall back to my bedroom. I just turned back and turned around. I saw him coming after me. I took my glass and kind of threw it at him just to stop him. He caught me just as we were getting to my bedroom ... He grabbed me by the hair and he pulled me back and started punching me and pulling me into his room. We ended up on the floor. He was hitting me and punching me, all that kind of stuff, rolling around on the floor. He had this metal framed desk. I remember we rolled into it. He got up and he picked it up and held it up above his head and was going to smash me. I remember just looking at him. This could be the end here. But I didn’t care in a sense ... He was even bigger than me and when we were rolling around the floor, it was like, I was kind of like giving it all I had. It’s like, I couldn’t be scared anymore. I couldn’t have him just go with it and then when I looked up at him, I was kind of this little helpless animal, lying on the floor and I knew I couldn’t protect myself. He just looked at me and I looked at him. He put down the desk, and then the next, we were crying and holding each other. Thinking what the fuck had happened. (long pause) That’s how fights generally went. They would get to this big, kind of corruptive thing that is
destructive to each other. “I dunno why am I doing this to you? I love you.” (long pause)

These narratives reflect the complexity of partner abuse in gay male relationships. As shown, their role is often blurry that cannot be easily explained by the simple logic of victim and perpetrator roles. No doubt, they are emotionally abused and, in some cases, brutally beaten by their partner. But they also fight back and retaliate against their partner. They feel hurt by their partner, yet find love and care in him. As Walter said, “Abuse wasn’t the primary purpose of them or primary function but unfortunately that was a component of them. I mean they were very loving relationships. I mean there was a lot of love there but it got twisted and corrupted somehow.” Like Walter, Vincent described:

Even though I was in an abusive relationship, there was love and care coming from him. He was a caring person. He was a loving person. I felt like if I was in some sort of the situation where I needed his help or something was wrong, like I remember one time I was in a bicycle accident, he was very, very, very caring.

In a way it is the mixed emotions (between love and hate, caring and violence) existent in these relationships that make them complicated and hard to sort out. Kenny reminded us, “What would help your thesis really would be everyone running around with baseball bats or chopsticks with sharp ends. It doesn’t work that way.”

**Summary**

In this chapter, I described what the participants consider as abuse and violence in relationships. They found it difficult to name or articulate their experience of abuse because it is often subtle or insidious. Yet, it is always in some way hurtful or controlling, and undermines their self-esteem. Interestingly, as shown, physical violence does not necessarily continue or escalate as commonly suggested. In some
cases, it stopped and their partners regretted what they did. In other cases, it stopped but the threat of violence persisted. However, not all of the participants feared their partners or their partners’ threats. Their sense of safety was mediated by both their and their partners’ social locations. Moreover, the analysis showed that not all forms of physical violence are condemned equally; some are seen as more acceptable or justifiable than the others. This view reveals our cultural logic of violence that is always value-laden. Lastly, I showed that gay men involved in abusive relationships do not always fit neatly into the role of victim or perpetrator. Their role constantly changes; they can simultaneously be both victim and perpetrator.
CHAPTER 7: EXPLAINING THE CAUSES OF PARTNER ABUSE

In the last chapter, my analysis focussed on what the participants described as abuse/violence in relationships. In this chapter, I further my analysis to explore their explanation of what causes the abuse. Violence “in people’s lived realities is not always so easy to name as the violence of abuse” (Loseke 2001, 109). The participants said they were often perplexed about their experience and, for those who were confident and self-assured, it was even more confusing. They found it difficult to comprehend the situation and to accept that they were being abused or were involved in violent relationships. They were often in search of an answer, trying to figure out what went wrong and why this happened to them. For example, Jack remarked, “I never thought in a million years something like this would happen to me ‘cause I was in charge. I was always the one who was in control, solving problems. I was always helping people. But where the violence came from I still don’t understand, and I’m trying to figure out.” Like Jack, Graham recounted his story in tears: “I don’t understand what happened, maybe never will. Maybe I will never know what happened with this guy (very soft voice). I don’t have (sigh) any idea about how to deal with this. It’s hard to describe, you know. It’s difficult to describe what this is about.”

In the following, I examine how the participants explain their experience of partner abuse through the available discourse. In particular, I look at what “story” they choose to explain their experience and what purpose that particular story serves. These stories focus on different aspects of the relationships, which I explore in detail in this chapter. What becomes clear is that their narratives are only contingent
representations of their experience rather than reflections of the “true” cause of partner abuse.

**Originating from The Family**

Many participants adopted the discourse of history of family violence to explain their own personal experience of abuse in relationships since it is one of the most popular explanations for partner abuse. Rufus described, “Because he lost his dad and mom when he was young, he grew up with his aunt, and his aunt was very mean to him. I just think that because his aunt was so mean to him, he’s now taking his frustration out on me.”

Like other discourses, this discourse is neither fixed nor static but, rather, taken up, manipulated, appropriated and used to serve different means. To explain his partner’s abusive behaviour, Umberto said:

> I know from experience that most of this stuff is sort of like passed down. So I can’t say it’s a genetic thing, but it’s a learned behaviour, like witnessing it is something that uh... I’m not a scientist or psychologist or anything else but from just what I see, I’d say it’s much more prone... I’m sure if you grew up around it, you would end up being the abuser. The other party would come from a life most stable because you fall into it.

Interestingly, however, Umberto had never mentioned that his partner came from a broken home or a home that was full of violence or abuse. Instead, his partner’s family, according to Umberto, was very “well-educated” and “well-to-do” even though the father “was very rough with him” when he was young. In contrast, Umberto had witnessed family violence as a child: “A few times, my father got a little drunk and got a little rough with my mother, but it wasn’t an ongoing thing, it was just a few incidents.”

Though he argues against himself, what is important here is that the common discourse gave Umberto language to discuss and make sense of his experiences in a coherent way.
If family violence is a learned behaviour, then logically it can be unlearned and fixed. This understanding is important. It gives these men hope while in the abusive relationship rather than leaving their partner. For example, to explain the abuse, Max explained that his partner “learned some of the traits and behaviours from his father, and started imitating him.” But what is interesting is that his father, according to Max, was never dominating or violent; instead, “his mother was dominating his father” and controlling the family. The logic clearly does not stand, but constructing his partner’s violent behaviour this way made Max believe that he could fix the problem, and thus he stayed in the relationship: “I was continually looking at how to fix the problem, what could I do to fix it.”

For Edward, if domestic violence developed from family history, a learned behaviour from the parents, it meant that his partner was himself a victim. It was beyond his partner’s control and, in a sense therefore, not completely his fault. This understanding allowed Edward to look beyond his partner’s abusive behaviour, feel sympathy, and stay in the relationship: “This guy has a rough upbringing. He doesn’t know any better [and] I would defend him to a degree through his upbringing. He came from a broken family. Mother left. His father was really overbearing. He’s turning into his father.”

To describe their experiences, Xavier, Hans, Phil and Francis all used the discourse of history of family violence but in a completely different way. Growing up, Xavier experienced physical abuse and witnessed a lot of violence in his family. It is this experience that Xavier said, made him not tolerate abuse and leave his partner: “I have seen [violence] in my own family, and I wasn’t wanting it or gonna let it happen with me
because it wasn’t a good thing from what I remember seeing. So I just wasn’t gonna tolerate it.” Like Xavier, Hans was physically abused by his father and witnessed a lot of violence at home as a kid: “My mother and father was always arguing and fighting, shouting at each other, major pain and heartache.” However, for Hans, violence was just part of his world; thus, he did not find violence in relationships problematic. Hans explained, “Because you’re just naïve until somebody tells you differently. You’re just naïve to it. You just think it’s perfectly natural.”

Phil said that his partner came from an abusive family. However, interestingly, Phil perceived that people who had experiences of abuse would have a greater understanding of its traumatic effects; as a result, they would not be abusive and should be even more caring. Phil thus did not think of his partner’s behaviour as a form of abuse. He explained:

He would talk about his mom and the situation she is in. I am thinking, you don’t want your mom to be in that situation, you are not going to put me in that situation, you know what I mean. I know that my father was abusive and alcoholic. I would never do that to my kids. I would never drink and want to hit my kids, you know, that’s what I went in thinking. This can’t be but I was really wrong (laugh).

Similarly, Francis said that he could not recognize his partner’s behaviour as a form of abuse. Unlike his partner, whose parents were extremely abusive and violent, Francis came from a loving, caring and respectful family. Abuse was common for his partner, but not for him. This upbringing made it not easier, but more difficult for Francis to identify abuse. He explained:

I couldn’t even imagine, you know, for me, having come from a home where there was only love served at the table, to have to deal with people who abuse their children, who steal from their children, who steal from each other, like it was totally foreign to me. It was absolutely and totally
foreign to me. So when it starts happening in my relationship, I didn’t recognize it.

All three participants (Hans, Phil and Francis) articulated their experience of partner abuse very differently, though using the same discourse. But there is common thread tying them together: their claim of not being fully aware of the situation at the time. In our culture, people who do not leave or decide not to leave their abusive relationships are frequently subject to social criticism or, writes Elizabeth Comack, seen as social “deviants” (2002, 280). By constructing their experience this way, these men avoided such criticism. More importantly, they did not need to confront their partners or deal with the abuse, which made it easier for them to stay in the relationships. They became innocent and blameless and, in so doing, deserved sympathy. As Jennifer Dunn writes, “One crucial determinant of sympathy ... is blamelessness. Potential sympathizers need to know if people needing sympathy deserve it, based on the extent to which they can be deemed responsible for their troubles” (2004, 238).

In contrast, both Otis and Walter adopted this discourse to explain their own violent behaviour. For example, Otis explained, “It’s what I grew up with ‘cause my father was abusive to my mother. That’s how I learned to respond when I was angry because that’s what I saw. I didn’t know any other way.” By constructing it as a learned behaviour from parents, something that was out of their control, both Otis and Walter constructed themselves as somewhat innocent – not as innately violent – thereby deserving sympathy and forgiveness. It enabled them to resolve the inner conflict regarding their violent behaviour, which was socially condemned and considered morally wrong. More importantly, they convinced themselves that they could unlearn their behavior or at least learn a better way to deal with their anger. Otis stated:
I’ve tried to learn better ways of communicating when I’m upset, I’m hurt and I’m angry. It’s something I have to be aware of, I think, continuously, it would be very easy to fall back to my early pattern of behaviour when I am learning how to express myself. I feel, not proud, but I feel like I have accomplished something to be able to connect and move beyond that because it was something I didn’t like.

Similarly, feeling terrible “sorrow over it,” Walter said, “I am getting better. I am getting better. Maybe with time, I would be competent.” By admitting their mistakes, by showing remorse, by making an effort to change, they presented themselves as changed from the person they were before, thus deserving of forgiveness (see Preseer 2004).

In an unusual twist on the theme, Vincent attributed his partner’s abusive behaviour to the fact that his partner’s parents were too nice and spoiled their children.

For Vincent, the spoiling and lack of discipline are what led to his partner’s abuse:

He was abusive because he was not into reality. He wanted everything to go his way. He just got all bent out of shape when everything didn’t go his way ... He had difficulty dealing with reality, that’s why he was abusive because he was somewhat a spoiled kid. His mom is a very nice person but I think his mom should have made a bigger effort to introduce him to reality in a bigger kind of way.

This narrative reflects our cultural logic. It is no longer just violent homes, but also homes where rules are too lax, that produce children who become abusive adults. Only the loving, caring, properly disciplined family can produce “normal” children.

**Constructing their Partners**

To explain their partner’s abusive behaviour, many participants pointed to personal character. They felt there was something innately “wrong” with their partner. As Lewis points out, “People don’t do that, just hit people.” Those who do are assumed to be deviant and this deviance is what participants sought explanation for.
Edward depicted his partner as a loner and a downer, who was judgemental and emotionally troubled: “Sad. It really is. He has a lot of baggage, wreckage of ah... train wreck of upbringing, you know, years of violence, alcoholic father, with a classic abusive relationship with his mother and father, and he's estranged from his brother, his only sibling, not a lot of friends.” Hans described that his partner was very “cunning,” mean-spirited and a drug “addict” who no one liked: “Because of the way he is, even some brothers and sisters don't want anything to do with him.” Phil described his partner as being very insecure which he believed, was the reason for his partner’s abuse: “I know a lot of his problem is that he's very insecure about himself and the fact that people have a lot of respect for me. He wants to feel better about himself and the only way he can feel better about himself is like putting other people down.”

All three of them thought that their partners had a strong tendency toward violence that they suggested, was innate. Edward stated, “From what I understand it is a pattern of his, being controlling and verbally abusive.” Like Edward, Hans explained that his partner had a long history of violence. He “was deported here for his violence in the States” and assaulted his former partners and other people including a storeowner. Hans said, “The storeowner ripped him off so he picked up something off the shelf and hit him with it. So he was abusive before me. Nobody assaults a storeowner, especially a small corner store. What did they ever do to you, you know?” Phil remarked, “I basically found out in his previous relationship, this had gone on too. He had assaulted his first partner, and in fact he got arrested for it.”
Often abusive partners were portrayed as very manipulative, often presenting themselves as kind, nice and sincere in public. Francis called his partner an “extremely cruel” person whom Francis found highly manipulative:

My partner was a master manipulator. He could manipulate the pope. I swear to God, he could. You’d believe anything he said but behind closed doors, he was a totally different person, a completely different person ... If you met him on the street, you’d think he was the kindest, nicest person in the world. But I tell you very few people are able to deal with him for about a month behind closed doors. He is a horrendous person behind closed doors.

Neil described, “During the time that we weren't fighting, he’s actually a very sweet person. But when he’s mad, he’s a totally, totally different person. You have no idea. Like Jekyll and Hyde.” Jack used terms such as “Satan,” “devil” and “evil” to describe his partner, who Jack felt was slimy, self-destructive, irresponsible, “psychologically fucked-up,” “a sex addict” and a prostitute:

He's weak, dishonest, cheap, cruel. He was a detrimental human being ... I would not put him as a respectable, loving, honest person. That’s how he represented himself, but that’s not who he was. From everything I’ve read and the knowledge I’ve gained from this, apparently, in abusive relationships, that’s how they present themselves. There are two different personalities. I think he’s this frightened, lonely, immature, incapable, probably more stuff like that. One time I looked at him and all I could see was Satan.

Often, the language of mental illness was used. Taking language from a popular magazine, Umberto used a psychiatric term to depict his partner, even though he was unsure if his partner’s mother was alcoholic:

I’m almost thinking he might have been Alcohol Infant Syndrome maybe ’cause I remember I read a list one time. I went, “Oh my God! It sounds like his issue.” Well, the children of women that drink have certain characteristics and a lot of his behaviour was that.
On top of this, Umberto said that his partner, who was a drug “addict” with numerous criminal records, was lazy, immoral, unemployed and financially dependent: “He had assaulted a police officer, assaulting other people, theft, weapons charges and major theft.” Similarly, Dean believed that his partner has a personality disorder: “I wonder, I don’t know, I wonder at times if he didn’t almost have a personality disorder that was kind of narcissism because he just had no capacity to see things through other people’s eyes. It’s always just him.” Graham simply said, “Maybe there is something wrong in his head. Maybe there is something wrong with him. Otherwise, why this guy fights?”

Others mentioned their partners’ drug use and prostitution. Max said that his Chinese partner, who was financially dependent and a “crack addict,” “was selling himself at the tubs [gay bathhouses].” Like Max, Sheldon told that his partner was a former heroin user and a “prostitute” even though he did not think that his partner was using heroin or selling himself for money when they were together:

He had a very colourful past (laugh). Maybe I shouldn’t pass judgement but, you know, someone who is injecting drugs on a daily basis into his body with a needle and is cruising parks and other places to find men to have sex with for money to support his habit. It’s a thing that changes the person, you know. When I found out and he told me, I guess I understood more why he was the way he was.

“Add to the story,” Sheldon continued, “he was an alcoholic. There’s just no two ways about it. He drank and drank and drank. Maybe that was his way of dealing with the pain of his past life, you know. Maybe he’d been emotionally hurt through that experience. I don’t know, but that just adds to the story (laugh).”

No doubt, some perpetrators may have mental health issues and personal problems. Yet, how, say, their partner’s unemployment or stealing or prostitution relates to their partner’s abusive behaviour is unclear. What these narratives reflect is
the cultural assumption of perpetrators as immoral people who have a long list of
abnormal characteristics. The identification is produced through the moral regulation
in our culture that, Brock writes, “sets the boundaries of what comes to be considered
normal and appropriate behaviour; that which is considered to be good, not so good or
downright bad” (2003, xxvii).

By describing their partners as immoral and untrustworthy, they made their
stories convincing. Their descriptions matched the dominant cultural narratives of
partner abuse where perpetrators are seen as villains and victims as innocent. The
common discourse provided justification for their interpretation of their experience. As
a result, their stories become unquestionable and, more importantly, they themselves
are seen as innocent and therefore deserving of public sympathy. For example, Francis
said, “Because of the way I was raised, the way I feel about myself and I want to be a
good person, somehow, it has also been a sign on my forehead, saying take advantage of
me, I’m a sucker. It is incredible of how people know. They can smell me or something.”
Likewise Umberto remarked, “I’m very fair, very honest and I still can’t get it through
my head that people will be nasty and do things. So when I meet a person, I just never
think that there might be an ulterior motive on their part. So that’s a naïveté I guess.” As
Michael Warner reminds us, “It does not seem to be possible to think of oneself as
normal without thinking that some other kind of person is pathological” (1999, 60). The
existence of their innocent self is thus entirely dependent upon the construction of their
partner’s immorality.

Moreover, being victimized, threatened their own sense of masculinity they
thought of themselves as confident, assertive men who were able to defend themselves
in any type of situation. Focussing on their partner’s immorality allowed them to draw attention away from their own vulnerability or ambiguity. Furthermore, because they were not dealing with a “normal” person, but with a “deviant” whose actions could not be managed or even predicted, their rationalization provided justification for their vulnerability without threatening their own ego. They resolved their inner conflict about being victimized. Edward remarked, “I always see myself as a pretty self-assured, confident person and I didn’t realize I was ah... how vulnerable. I am thinking if it could happen to me, it could happen to anybody.” Like Edward, Rufus said, “To be in the situation yourself, to be so vulnerable and helpless, you say, this could happen to anybody.”

**EXPLAINING IT THROUGH HETEROSEXISM AND HOMOPHOBIA**

Other participants explained their partner’s abusive behaviour with gender role socialization that encouraged male aggression and domination. Graham spoke of his own culture where men were taught to be aggressive: “For Latin people, violence is normal in men, you know, the machismo. The machismo is the macho man. You are gay but you are macho men and you have the power at all time.” Likewise Otis remarked, “I think men are generally taught to be aggressive. I think we are socialized that way, and that’s a value trait among men. If you are aggressive, if you are assertive, you are supposed to be powerful, domineering. You know, submissive weak men aren’t attractive (laugh) even in the gay community.”

Otis further explained that gender role socialization (often based on heterosexism) structured the way in which people understood relationships between
men and women. As a result, there was a lack of role models for gay men who were in relationships. Otis said:

I didn’t know how to be together. We didn’t know what we were supposed to do as two men together, and you know we were taught to be with a woman. So what the hell are you supposed to do when you’re together? It’s confusing to try to work it out.

It was within cultural context where violence occurred. Rufus described, “For me domestic violence is all about power over the other person. Someone has taken on the dominant role and someone has taken on the other role.” Graham stated, “My partner thinks, I am the man. I have the power. I have the rights to yell, fight and win all the time.”

Yet, told by the participants, gender role socialization silenced them. Otis remarked, “Men are not supposed to be the victim.” Dean explained:

I think that men are expected to just tolerate abuse. Like men fight all the time and it is normal. So I think that when two guys fight, it might be harder for them not to relate to that as problematic or to think of it as something they should do something about because men do fight. They hurt each other and that’s okay, there’s nothing wrong with that and, for gay men, it’s probably as hard to identify it as such partly because they’re men.

Consequently, it was difficult for them to make sense of their experience of partner abuse. They were unable to seek support or tell people what was happening in their relationship. Graham depicted, “It is very hard. I am a man and my boyfriend abuses me. “Come on! Yes, what do you mean?” Otis related similar experiences: “So the fact that it was abusive. I felt I couldn’t talk to anyone, couldn’t go anywhere to talk about it, you know, to acknowledge it.” So they stayed in the relationship and suffered the abuse.

This talk of suffering in silence was an integral part of their narratives. Comack writes: “The normative expectation is for a woman who encounters abuse to terminate
the relationship. Therefore, if she does stay, she is deviant, and it is this deviance that is
seen to require explanation” (2002, 280). Like women who were involved in abusive
relationships, they were questioned and sometimes even criticized for not leaving their
abusive partner. Describing their experience this way, they justified their staying and
avoided such criticism.

Interestingly, both Jack and Sheldon explained their staying in the relationship
very differently, though using a similar discourse. For them, their same-sex desire was
culturally stigmatized and thus denied. It was this denial (homophobia) that made them
vulnerable to violence in relationships. Jack depicted:

I was looking for somewhere to have acceptance. I wasn’t getting it from
my family. I didn’t exist to them … I’ve seen this in gay guys. They have a
tendency to sell themselves out for acceptance. We’re not getting that
from our own core and family, it doesn’t take much for someone to say “I
love you” and then we’re there. You know what I’m saying?

To challenge the cultural stigmatization of gay men and to prove to others that they
were wrong, both Jack and Sheldon ignored their partner’s abusive behaviour, and
chose to stay in the relationship. Jack explained:

He was mentally, constantly playing on my emotions. But I had told
myself I wouldn’t let it, I would change it because everybody always said
these negative things about gay relationships and I wasn’t going to allow
these people to say, “See I told you so.”

Sheldon remarked, “I wanted to prove to my friends and my family that I could be in a
stable relationship as a gay man. That’s basically the crux of it (laugh).”

In speaking of their experience this way, both Jack and Sheldon externalized—
rather than internalized—the reason for their staying. They were able to resist the
dominant discourse that pathologized and blamed people who chose not to terminate
abusive relationships. Also importantly for them, they did not need to immediately deal
with the painful reality that they were in an abusive relationship. Jack recalled, “I fought so hard to keep it going because I didn’t want people to say, you know… I didn’t want what I believed to be unconditional love to be a fraud.”

Others such as Max and Umberto attributed their partner’s abusive behaviour to internalized homophobia. They explained that their partner was unable to accept their own sexuality and consequently suffered from low self-esteem. To make up for his gayness, their partner became overly aggressive. Max described:

He wanted to be the dominant partner. It was partly response to his homosexuality. He was ashamed of his homosexuality ... It seems to me that he has the need to dominate. He need to feel that he was in charge of what was going on and it’s almost like, he need to do that for his own protection because of his self-esteem.

Umberto said, “I think one of his issues that he had an awful time with was that he couldn’t accept that he was gay, and he was a major bottom, like a major passive bottom and he had to overcompensate and be the tough guy, so people wouldn’t know.”

Interestingly, Hans admitted to having difficulty in accepting his sexuality, which resulted in his low self-esteem. However, Hans did not feel the need to dominate or seek power over his partner. Instead, Hans sought macho guys (often with problematic personalities) to date:

He’s got tattoos all over his body. I think because when I was in Hamilton, being gay was no good, I always went out with guys who looked butch but gay, and I still have a hard time even now being with someone who’s effeminate. I don’t know. I always looked for that negative in people, like that’s the kind of people I like for some reason. Like, they need to be fixed or something (chuckle).

It was his own internalized homophobia (shame and low self-esteem) that Hans said, made him vulnerable to violence: “I just kept blaming myself for what’s happening, like I said to myself I did something wrong. I feel I deserve to be beaten. Or something’s
wrong with you. So it’s okay people beat up on you.” By constructing his experience this way, Hans demonstrated how societal oppression (heterosexism and homophobia) impacted him. He presented himself as a person who was not innately deviant or secretly enjoyed abuse but, rather, as a person who was worthy of sympathy and not to be blamed for being involved in multiple abusive relationships.

Like other participants, Quentin took up the discourse of homophobia to explain his partner’s violent behaviour. However, Quentin did not construct it as an expression of low self-esteem or self loathing but, rather, that of his partner’s anger for being unable to deal with his own sexuality. In so doing, Quentin saw his partner as a victim of heterosexism rather than a perpetrator of partner abuse. This description allowed Quentin to forgive his partner’s use of violence and to give him sympathy:

I believe he has his reason to use violence at the time. It may be his anger towards me as well as himself, or maybe his choices. Of course, this brought us to his upbringing and his relationship with his family. He also has a gay brother whose coming out has infuriated his father. This may be the reason why he chose to remain in the closet. He really doesn’t want anyone to know and attempt to live a “non-gay” lifestyle. This is something very difficult to do. To be honest, I am not that angry at him. I am not angry at the violence because that’s something I could understand.

**Because of the Dynamics**

Irwin was unsure what went wrong in the relationship: “Never like that. I don’t know why. All the other people [that I went out with before] I can’t even remember getting into arguments that were abusive.” To explain it, Irwin simply said, “I think it’s just the chemistry between us, like we push each other’s buttons.” This discourse was one of the central themes that helped organize understanding of the abusive experience.
For example, Walter did not attribute the abuse solely to his partner or himself but, rather, a condition created mutually within the relationship: “We were caught in patterns of behaviour that we had acquired unconsciously.” Walter was young (17 years old) when he met his partner. It was his first love and, within four months, they moved in together. It was difficult. “I felt overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience. I didn’t have the vocabulary, psychologically to describe what was happening and so I told him I wanted to break up with him after about a year and a half, and he was just devastated,” Walter said. After the break up, Walter “had a complete breakdown” and “started drinking and ended up in a psychiatric ward and it was dreadful.”

According to Walter, they got back together (about four months after the break up) but his partner did not commit to the renewed relationship and found it hard to trust him again. To deal with it, his partner “started having sex with other guys.” Walter recalled, “What happened after that, he began having sex with other people surreptitiously, and I would always find out and it would just enrage me, just absolutely enrage me.” In response, he became hostile and self-destructive: “No it never came to actual blow. But I mean there was so much you can express in body language and eye contact and voice tone. I made sure my manner was aggressive or hostile … I slashed myself violently with razors and bled all over the bathtub and I took knife and slashed up.” It was this condition that Walter believed, created the abusive relationship.

Like Walter, Rufus did not attribute the abuse entirely to his partner. Rufus, who moved to Canada for his partner, felt that his partner took advantage of his vulnerable situation because he was financially dependent with little family and social support here. Soon after arriving, Rufus found out that his partner was cheating on him. His
partner, according to Rufus, was constantly chatting and "cruising" on the Internet. As a result, Rufus felt ignored. Because of the age difference (about 10 years) he also felt that his partner did not treat him with respect and was very controlling. In response, Rufus became very angry and violent. Rufus believed that it was this dynamic that led to the abusive relationship:

When I get nasty, I do get nasty. I pulled a knife at him before. Like I said, it’s all in self-defence. I pulled a knife on him. I would throw glass at him. I would wet his bed (laugh). I had done some bad things myself. I believe because I was in that environment, that’s why I reacted the way I reacted. That’s what I kind of grew into ... I am a very rebellious person. I do not like people telling me what I can do and what I cannot do. When you come to talk to me with this hostile tone in your voice, I am coming back also with this hostile tone in my voice.

Similarly, Max did not think that his partner was fully responsible for the abusive relationship. Not too long after they met, according to Max, his partner began using drugs, which became completely “out of control.” People came to their home demanding money for the drugs. His partner, when needing a fix, became agitated, unreasonable and manipulative. He sold their home furniture to pay for drugs. Max felt that he was being sucked into this situation. Not knowing what to do, Max used violence to deal with his frustration:

I saw that my frustrations developed to the point where there was no question that the crazy-making led me to the violence at first. So I think of myself as much more involved as a perpetrator. I got pulled into the crazy-making to the extent that I couldn’t see any... I felt powerless. I couldn’t see any way out except just lashing out.

Though their stories are very different, again there is a common thread. They all described their violent behaviour as a response to the situation created mutually within the relationship. They portrayed themselves not as innately violent, even though they used violence. Their behaviour was clearly not acceptable but, in light of the
circumstances, to them, it was completely understandable. They made it excusable if not forgivable; they became blameless, though still responsible for their actions.

Like Walter, Rufus and Max, Dean also adopted this discourse to explain his experience of partner abuse. Insisting that family violence was a lot more complicated, Dean did not blame either his partner or himself entirely for the abuse: “I am reluctant to have this conversation to be all about how abusive he was and what a victim I was ... I think it is complicated. I could have exerted my agency. I could have gotten out of the situation. I could have fought with him. Right! I wasn’t just this passive victim in the corner. It’s not that black and white. It’s not that clear-cut.” For Dean, it was the dynamic created by both of them that led to his partner’s abusive behaviour:

What I came to believe was that what happened with myself and my partner was that we were two personalities that hit together in a very dysfunctional way. I think I’m the kind of person in the relationship that has difficulty with intimacy and so I kind of pull away a lot and keep my distance and I think he’s a very insecure person and he couldn’t tolerate my distance and so he tried to control me and so that was the dynamic that happened. I kept pulling away and he kept holding on harder and became really, really... that was the original dynamic of him controlling me and keeping me in the relationship at all cost and me, trying to keep some distance from him because it was overwhelming.

By constructing his experience this way, Dean depicted his partner’s abusive behaviour as being “unintentional.” He came to see his partner as a very nice person rather than an uncaring, violent person, so it made it easier for Dean to see past his partner’s abuse and forgive him. “I do believe that he could be in a relationship today that’s fine if he found the right kind of partner. I don’t know if I am trying to be fair to him but because he is not a bad person, like he actually is a very nice person, you know.” Importantly for Dean, it allowed him not to think of the experience as a personal failure.
He was able to move on with his life without holding a grudge against his partner or blaming himself for the abuse.

**THE DISCOURSE OF CONTEXTS**

Participants such as Graham and Francis attributed their victimization to the circumstance in which they found themselves. Graham was highly educated and self-assured. He came to Canada as a refugee claimant to be with his partner, who arrived in Canada five months prior to Graham and was granted immigration as a refugee. Unlike his partner, Graham had no legal status. He thus could not work and financially depended on his partner. He felt having no control over his life: "It is very, very different when you are living in another country, another language, no money, no work, no school. You will be depressed. In Mexico I have control. I have only little control of my life here." It was this condition that Graham said, left him little in the way of leverage to negotiate with his partner, and that made him vulnerable to abuse.

Similarly, Francis was a highly successful business executive. He was fired when his company found out he was gay. It was difficult for Francis to secure a job afterward because of the economy at the time. His partner, who Francis called his “great love,” happened to move away for school so they separated. It was this time that he met his abusive partner in Edmonton. Like his abusive partner, Francis “was basically longing to find a life partner.” For Francis who grew up in a loving, caring household, home always represented a sense of safety rather than danger. It was within this situation, Francis explained, that made him vulnerable to abuse. Francis said, “If I hadn’t had come out of the best relationship at that moment in my life and having come from parents who I actually adored and who adored me, it would have never happened. He
would have been just a trick passing along, right! But I was so desperately in need of having someone else to complete me.”

Both Graham and Francis explained their victimization by relating it to their circumstances. In so doing, they were able to avoid the situation being seen as personal failure, as commonly happens in our culture. Particularly for assertive, confident men like Graham and Francis, this explanation was important in that it did not threaten their egos. Indeed, they both claimed that they would not put up with this “nonsense” if not for the circumstances.

**THE DISCOURSE OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL USE**

Some participants utilized the discourse of drug and alcohol use to explain their experience of partner abuse. For Xavier, it was his partner’s occasional drug use that caused the abusive behaviour. Xavier said his partner was not a violent person but, when on drugs, he became sexually aggressive: “One time he was trying to be physically aggressive. I don’t want to use the word ‘rape’ but, you know, that is where he was taking himself.” Like Xavier, Edward conveyed that his partner was not abusive except when he was drinking. Edward believed his partner, who was estranged from his highly dysfunctional family, used alcohol to deal with childhood anger and social isolation. His partner, Edward said, did not drink often but when he did (often during the holidays) he became abusive: “I put it down to he’s drinking, he’s ah... abusing alcohol and he doesn’t do it that often. Nobody’s going to be calling the police over this. There is no bloodshed.”

Both Xavier and Edward constructed their partners’ abusive behaviour as an isolated events –things that only happened when drugs or alcohol were involved.
Consequently, they did not think their partner’s abuse as a preeminent issue to be dealt with immediately. For them, the drugs and alcohol caused the “problem” so, if the drug and alcohol use stopped, the abuse would stop. This belief gave both Xavier and Edward a sense of hope that their partners were not innately abusive and could change. This enabled them to look the other away – if not forgive – their partners’ (occasional) abusive behaviour and stay in their relationships. Xavier said, “I didn’t want to leave him because I liked the relationship I was in. The only thing that was wrong with it was the person didn’t have self-control. So I didn’t leave right away. I didn’t feel harmed. I didn’t feel that my life was at great risk. I was living with this person.” Edward remarked, “All of the occasions happened when he was drinking so I allowed myself to say, ok, he’s drunk, he got a lot of anger from his childhood. Oh, I don’t know. I’m just making excuses for him.”

Others such as Umberto and Hans blamed their own drug and alcohol use for their personal troubles. Umberto disclosed, “I never had a relationship where things were this way, but the last four years when I started with this drug [crack] everything went bad.” Hans said, “With my partner and me it was always about drugs.” He constructed his involvement in an abusive relationship around drug and alcohol use thereby expunging his accountability, and more importantly, justifying his own abusive behaviour. Hans related: “I think we put up with a lot of abuse stuff because a lot of times I think we were on drugs. When you’re on drugs, it’s easier to handle that situation, like abuse. If you’re on drugs, you don’t think that it’s abusive half the time. It’s just the way it happens (pause).” For them, their own abusive behaviour was unconscious, under the influence of drugs and alcohol. They were able to convince
themselves that they were not a bad people and that they could change by quitting substance use. Similarly, Umberto said, “It’s been four months from the 10th since I’ve had any drugs of any sort, alcohol or anything, and I’m just feeling better.”

Interestingly, both Quentin and Vincent also employed the discourse of drugs and alcohol use to construct their experience of partner abuse; however, they articulated it very differently. For Quentin and Vincent, partner abuse almost always involved drugs and alcohol, and they could not imagine otherwise. They claimed that because their partners were not substance or alcohol abusers, it was difficult for them to recognize their partners’ behaviour as abuse. Quentin explained, “If my partner is a drug user or an alcoholic, I would have found it more serious. Violent tendency that stems from drug or alcohol use is more serious than the violence in my case.” Vincent said, “I had boyfriends who did drugs but this guy never did any kind of drugs, he wasn’t an alcoholic. He wasn’t a substance abuser and... when there was abuse in the relationship, that part just totally went over in my head and I never saw it as abuse.” By constructing their experience this way, they saw their partners’ violence as somehow not as serious. They managed to convince themselves that they were lucky because their partners were not the worst abusers.

Summary

In this chapter, I explored how the participants adopted and appropriated different discourses to explain their experience of partner abuse. They attributed the abuse to family upbringing and their partners’ personal traits. They talked about the effects of heterosexism and homophobia on their relationships and the lack of compatibility that created the abuse. They discussed the life circumstances that trapped them in the
relationship. They brought up the issue of substance abuse. Though often contradictory, these stories were told to create a certain perception of the events to justify certain actions and excuse behaviours. As Meg Barker reminds us, “contradictory discourses are interesting aspects inherent in most speech. We all use different rhetorical devices at different times, when we are trying to create specific effects or achieve different ends” (2005, 80). Thus, these stories are only a contingent representation of the experience of abuse.
CHAPTER 8: POWER AND RESISTENCE

The previous chapter detailed the discourses that the participants adopted to explain their experience of abuse. This chapter furthers the analysis by looking at issues of power in their relationships. Below, I will first outline the conceptualization that I use to analyze power in abusive relationships. I will then discuss my analysis of the participants’ lived experiences.

In the last few decades, the concept “power and control” has been increasingly used to characterize partner abuse and family violence. Comack, for example, writes: “While they may take on a variety of forms and occur in different contexts, all abusive relationships ultimately boil down to issues of power and control” (1996, 56). This discourse assumes the victim is powerless, the perpetrator powerful. Seen in this way, power is repressive and one-dimensional.

In recent years, however, the conceptualization of power has been challenged by post-modernist scholars, who perceive power as not necessarily coercive or repressive but, rather, as potentially enabling, even productive. For example, Suzanne Spencer-Wood argues that women are not just victims of patriarchy or male dominance; instead, they are active agents who “find and create sources of power to shape their own lives” (1999, 177). Like Spencer-Wood, Foucault asserts that power “is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds on to, or allows to slip away ...” (1978, 94). Instead, in modern society, power is increasingly engendered through the effect of discourse (knowledge or common sense). It is imbedded in our body and mind, and leads us to behave in particular ways. For Foucault, knowledge (discourse) is never value-neutral. It places certain assumptions
upon the world and, in so doing, determines and limits what we can say, think, feel, know and do. In other words, it preconditions our understanding of particular events and social phenomenon, legitimatizing certain social practices while excluding others. “Therefore the power to act in particular ways, to claim resources, to control or be controlled depends upon the ‘knowledge’ currently prevailing in a society” (Burr 1995, 64).

From this view, Vivien Burr says: “We can exercise power by drawing upon discourses that allow our actions to be represented in an acceptable light” or enable us to do the things we want or to seek control over others (1995, 64). Power then is rather a strategy or tactic in which people draw upon certain discourses to define their existence or to “attack” counter discourses in order to seek control over others and their own life. It thus can be exercised through multiple means, such as persuasion and social approval. In this way, power is both relational and diffused; it is continuously (re)negotiated and transformed throughout the course of everyday life.

Likewise Kathy Davis argues: “Social interaction comes to be constituted as orderly and ‘normal’ by mean of sanctions” (2002, 215). Sanctions exercised by means of disapproval, criticism or simply absence of response, can restrict the activities of actors or induce them to do things that they would not do under other circumstances. Thus to understand power, as Davis argues, we need to understand how the actors “employ skills and resources in flexible, on-the-spot and above all, habitual ways in order to gain control over the encounter.” In other words, we need to focus “on how actors routinely construct, maintain, but also change and transform their relations of power” (2002, 216). This form of power controls us without force or authority and, as
Spencer-Wood claims, is “far more powerful than the ‘power over’ type of authority to impose on, control or command others” (1999, 179).

Treating power this way, it must be noted, does not mean that there is no unequal power relation that exists in partner abuse. It rather refuses to treat power as something that one has or has not, insisting that power circulates and is always in coexistence with agency and resistance. As Stuart Hall writes, interpreting Foucault’s concept of power:

Everyone – the powerful and the powerless – is caught up, though not on equal terms, in power’s circulation. No one – neither its apparent victims nor its agents – can stand wholly outside its field of operation. (2001b, 340; author’s emphasis)

Or, Jeffrey Isaac says, subordinate groups, though obviously at a disadvantage, “never simply respond to the behaviour of the powerful. The reproduction of the relationship always involves their agency, which can be mobilized as well as transform the relationship itself” (1992, 49). Of course, people can never freely negotiate power, and the ways in which they resist oppression are always bound by their socio-economical characters such as ethnicity, class and sexual orientation. But, within these constraints, they continuously (re)position themselves against abuse and seek control over their lives (see Davis 2002; Scott 2001).

Stewart Clegg also reminds us that resistance is not necessarily antagonistic or even confrontational: “It might be thought that, in the absence of an overt conflict, there will be no resistance to power. This would be to confuse the notion of resistance per se with a particularly dramatic expression of it” (2002, 258). Like Clegg, Steve Pile remarks: “There are tiny micro-movements of resistance, barely perceptible, even
invisible or covert – quiet stealthy masquerades resistant to categorisation and
definition” (1997, 29). He elaborates further in the article:

Resistance may take place as a reaction against unfairness and injustice, as a desire to survive intolerable conditions, but it may also involve a sense of remembering and of dreaming of something better. (1997, 30)

In other words, resistance does not necessarily involve political struggle, violence or revolution. It can “take place in a myriad of disorganized and spontaneous ways on a daily basis” (Westwood 2002, 135).

Hence, as Pile argues, resistance is never static; it is far more fragile and ambiguous, and is always subject to transformation: of course, the mode of resistance often depends on the outcome of struggles but is always bound by social conditions that make certain forms of resistance either possible or impossible. Thus, “acts of resistance have to be understood not only in terms of their locations in power relations but also through their intended and received meanings” with reference to their social conditions and rules at the time (1997, 26). But, such understanding, as Clegg argues, must be considered interpretive:

When intentions are articulated, they can only be so through whatever forms of discourse are socially available regarding what intentions can sensibly be taken to be, in the forms of language, reasoning and accounting for action. In this respect, talk about intentions that others might have is a reference less to their interior mental states as causal springs of putative action than to currently ‘fixed’ representations for making sense of what people do. (2002, 261)

To put this in context, our understanding of the ways in which gay men resist within abusive relationships is neither objective nor neutral, but inevitably interpretative and discursively constituted.
However, it must be noted, resistance is not necessarily always progressive or liberating. Our actions, largely governed by knowledge taken-for-granted, such as common sense and norms, are always bound by unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences that lie outside our self-understanding (see Davis 2002; Haugaard 2002). Thus, our own everyday actions may have contributed to the maintaining and reproducing of oppression without us even being aware of ourselves as agents of oppression. As Hirschmann writes: “Systems of power, privilege, and oppression replicate themselves through the daily and apparently innocent actions of well-intentioned people who may not be aware of the social significance of their actions” (2003, 84). Put differently, “resistance in one direction can be oppression in another” (Pile 1997, 26). In the following section, I use this framework to analyze the interplay of power and resistance in gay partner abuse. But first I will establish the context in which these men live.

**Cultural and Systemic Conditions**

**Heterosexism and Homophobia: Silencing Effects**

It is well documented that society generally holds a negative view of same-sex couples due to homophobia. Among other things, this societal view has silenced gay men and rendered partner abuse in their relationships invisible. Moreover, it is commonly assumed that men should be able to defend themselves in any type of situation. As a result, there is very little awareness of partner abuse in gay relationships. As would be expected, few services are available for gay men involved in abusive relationships. Walter said, “It’s not like we were unconscious of the behaviour that we were enacting
with each other. We were conscious of it but we had nowhere to go, we had no one to talk to, and we were powerless to stop the routine or the cycle.”

As recounted by the participants, many service providers were unfamiliar with issues about partner abuse in gay relationships and did not provide helpful assistance (see also McClennen et al. 2002). As an example, Max’s partner “went on a rampage” and “started breaking things,” and Max called the police for assistance:

I called the police and they came and said, “No you’ve been involved in relationship, you’ve been together a year; therefore, half of the stuff is his so he could do what he wants with it. If he wants to smash it, then he can smash it.” I said, “It’s my stuff.” He said, “No, no, half of it is his.” I said, “You mean half of what is his? Well we are stuck because like it wasn’t rational that he could break half of the stuff when there have been no separation of stuff, so that it wasn’t like this is my stuff and this is his stuff, this stuff you can’t touch and this stuff you can break. It just didn’t make sense.” The police said, “Well you are in a difficulty and it’s of your own making, you got to solve it.”

Jack related similar experiences with the police:

Over the 6 to 8 months, they would come and they didn’t even write up a report ... they would tell me I have to leave or they would tell me he seems to be calm and collected and you seem to be, I can’t remember, they said you’ve been drinking, and I can remember one day they’re looking at me and I’m saying, “I’ve just had the shit kicked out of me. What do you think? How can you say I seem out of it?” They would never do anything.

For people from countries where gay men were brutalized, seeking assistance from the police was particularly difficult. They felt suspicious of the police (see Burke et al. 2002; DiStefano 2009). Calling the police was also seen as an act of betrayal; bringing their private affairs to the attention of the authorities meant publicly exposing dirty laundry, which was highly undesirable in their culture. For example, Rufus, who came from a Caribbean country, was very reluctant to call the police. He felt that calling the
police would exacerbate the problem and bring trouble to his partner’s family, as well as his own family:

My friends told me, “You need to report it to the cops.” I said, “No, I don’t want to get into this whole cop situation. I don’t want to cause any problem for him because he has two kids that I love dearly.” I didn’t want any of the problems for his family or even my family. Being that I have no family here, my mom, she worries a lot ... I didn’t really want to get involved with the whole reporting and getting the cops involved.

Similarly, Graham, from South America, was unwilling to get the police involved; however, in one incident, he was assaulted severely and had no other option:

I called the police. They came, handcuffed my partner and took him to the police station. They took photographs of me and my face. They advocated for laying charges and asked me if I want to lay charge against him. I said “No” and it is my obligation to say again not to lay charge against him. I said, “No” and again “No.” It is not a question.

Graham felt extremely guilty and disloyal to his partner afterwards: “For him it is a scandal ... He thinks I don’t love him anymore. I don’t feel good about it.”

**Domestic Violence As A Private Matter**

Domestic disputes are commonly considered private matters in our culture and dealt with privately. This sentiment is vividly reflected in the participants’ narratives. Irwin stated, “I don’t like talking to people about it ... and I think I prefer to resolve it on my own.” Lewis declared, “People never talked about it. It’s your problem, deal with it. It’s none of their business. It’s my business. I felt the same way. I can deal with it. I don’t want your help.”

Other (particularly racialized) participants felt they would “lose face” if they exposed their personal matters to the public. Xavier explained:

Black people don’t jump into relationships and then let anybody know about it. They just don’t. So any frustration and that sort of thing, whatever I might be enduring, or want to get rid of, or speak to somebody
else about, technically, I couldn’t do that because supposedly no one was able to be aware of or knew about our involvement ... because you don’t want to be picked and have your life marked.

Like Xavier, Rufus, who was ashamed of being in an abusive relationship, found it very difficult to share his personal matters with others:

Being from a Caribbean country, we just have this Caribbean mentality (laugh) that you don’t like too many people up in your business. So you would just change your conversation, you wouldn’t say exactly, “Oh my partner is beating me up or whatever, whatever.” I never made it look obviously that there was something happening.

To ensure no one knew what was happening in their relationship, Rufus pretended that they were a happy couple to the outside world: “We would argue in that house. We would break things up, we would... whatever. When you see us stepping out on the street, you would never know that there’s a problem in the household. I am doing fine. I am very good. We are happy and smiling, but as soon as we get inside, it’s a whole different story.” Similarly, Francis said:

Out of shame so I never spoke about it ... Nobody knew what was happening beyond the walls of my doors. Outside, it was the happy couple pretending to be happy, you know, desperate housewives attitude, always happy and smiling, going to cocktail parties and pretend, living a totally pretentious life.

For still other participants fear of causing loved ones to worry, was reason hide the abuse. Neil remarked, “Apart from my counsellor, I haven’t talk about it to anyone. It’s something that I am still struggling. It’s not very easy ... I don’t want my family to know that. I don’t want any of my friends to know that.” Graham explained:

The only family I have in Mexico is my mother. This is too high price for me to disclose it to my mother (crying) ... My mother is 70 years old. She understands that I’m gay. You know, she knows it all the time. At least I think so (laugh) but she doesn’t understand the abuse. It’s not possible for me, now, I hope, never talk about it with my mother.
Conversely for friends and family, it is socially awkward to ask questions about private matters, particularly questions about domestic violence. Inquiring into what is a very private domain would likely be interpreted as rude or at least intrusive. Similarly, it is difficult to give advice or even point out suspected abuse because of the very real risk that your concern would backfire in some way. For example, Jack's friends were trying to “keep [them] from getting too involved in the beginning.” Instead of finding his friends’ advice insightful, Jack was upset at them and thought that they were jealous of his relationship. Hans reacted similarly when one of his close friends pointed out his partner’s abusive behavior:

He’s the one who kept telling me why are you with that trouble, why are you with that trouble? He’s very outspoken about violence. And he would do anything, he tried to get us apart, anyway he could. And I never listened. I’m sorry I never listened to him until now, because he saw it right from the beginning. He said Hans, this ain’t no good for you, and I thought he was just being jealous. That’s what I thought was happening, he was just being jealous, with my relationship. I thought that’s what happened.

Friends and family often felt reluctant to intervene or even say anything, and did not even know what to do when actually approached for assistance. Edward said, “They were not pushy because they realized that this was somebody who I thought was special going to make a life together with.” Quentin stated, “They felt that since it didn’t concern them, it was not their place to further comment on it.” Sheldon related similar experiences:

My face was a little sore looking, not terrible, like I didn’t have a black eye or anything, you know. We met our friends for breakfast. No one said anything. I am sure they can tell, they didn’t say a thing, you know ... No one ever pulled me aside and said, “Hey Sheldon, are you ok? Is this relationship ok? Are you happy?” No one ever warned me or cautioned me.
THE DIFFICULTY OF RELATING TO MEN INVOLVED IN ABUSE

Participants conveyed that there were a lot of misunderstandings about same-sex partner abuse in our culture, which made it difficult to relate their experiences to other people. For example, Dean felt that his friends were unable to understand his situation: “Honestly, I think that because it wasn’t sort of physical violence, people don’t really think this was difficult. He was controlling but he wasn’t beating the shit of me every day, so not so bad. People think of it that way.” Similarly, Otis felt he was judged when he told some of his friends that he was involved in an abusive relationship: “I can’t remember but it was like, I had this kind of ‘defect’ that… It so bothered me when he said that.”

It is also commonly assumed that people leave their partners if they encounter abuse in a relationship. Leaving was deemed necessary, and frequently presented as the only option to deal with this issue. Bowers writes: “Because of my clinical experience, I believe that it is not possible for an abused partner to heal in the presence of his/her abuser. Relationships of abuse must end for true and long lasting healing to take place” (1998, 6). Not surprisingly, participants who chose not to terminate their relationships were often highly criticized. Their decision to stay with their abusive partners was commonly seen as incomprehensible and strange or explained with the common misconception: “they must enjoy the beating.” Edward offered, “You know, people say, well, trust me, the Battered Women’s Syndrome. They would keep going back, you know. They seek out people and these kinds of relationships or they are asking for it.” Hans remarked:

You got people who love to be beaten, like sadism and masochism. Those guys are doing that in the gay community and they like it. Other guys are
doing it in the gay community, and they don’t like it and they’re being beaten by their partners and everything else. But I think we rationalize that they’re the same thing.

Consequently, participants found it very difficult to talk about their relationships if they were not ready to leave their abusive partners. They were afraid of being judged for their decision. For example, Umberto said that his psychiatrist simply told him “to get rid of” his partner, and was surprised when finding out that Umberto was considering getting back together with him: “I have cleaned up and hope to stay that way, that if I could get him to that, things would be different. But, I don’t know, my psychiatrist shakes his head and says, ‘You’re crazy.’” Similarly, Hans stated, “I’m so afraid to talk to anybody because they all told me to leave him. So nobody wanted to talk to me about the relationship. Because they say, why help you if you just go right back.”

Within this cultural and systemic context, many participants had few options and did not know what to do. They felt despair; they felt stuck. Lewis remarked, “I didn’t know how to deal with it, and the problem just got worse. I knew it was wrong but I didn’t know how to deal with it (long pause) and then I didn’t know how to get out of it.” Hans said, “I stopped seeing a lot of people when I was having all the black eyes and stuff. So nobody knew the reality. I knew my reality and it was no fantasy, believe me.” But even within this context, participants could still resist their partners’ abusive treatment and sought control over their lives.

**POWER AND RESISTANCE**

To resist their partners’ abusive behavior, many participants directly confronted their partner. They did not just accept the abuse. For example, Neil explained that he never
just took his partner’s abuse; he fought back: “Of course I would yell at him. I have yelled at him in certain situations when we were having fights.” Similarly, Dean said, “I wasn’t just a victim who was abused. For me, I was also there every day. I went home every day. I fought with him. I yelled at him. I tried to defend myself.” Vincent admitted that he was often reluctant to confront his partner directly because he was afraid that his confrontation might eventually cause a break up. Yet, he would not hesitate to stop his partner when the abuse became too much:

Emotionally, I tried to avoid having a confrontation when I knew he was being abusive. There were times when the abuse was really unreasonable, I would be very confrontational … Then he would back down. He would back down because he knew that at this point I was just fed up and I had enough.

Xavier knew that it would upset his partner when he stood up to the abuse. However, he was never afraid to do so even though his partner was very aggressive: “He didn’t like it because I spoke my mind without going around his back. He didn’t like the frankness of it or its sting.”

Participants not only confronted their partners directly, but also indirectly. Phil’s partner always made him feel worthless for being on welfare. He accused Phil of not contributing enough to the household, even though Phil paid half the bills. Phil challenged his partner’s accusation this way:

I went and found information on how much it costs to clean the apartment once a week, how much would be to have a cooker. I said to him, “Don’t tell me I don’t contribute. I paid half the rent. I paid the cable. I paid the food. You are not supporting me. I am supporting myself, and I am providing by cleaning and cooking and doing all other stuff, which would cost you this amount of money.”

To further address the abusive behaviour, Phil showed his partner pamphlets on same-sex partner abuse: “I got pamphlets and all that. I bought them to him and showed him
what abuse means. I showed him that it doesn’t just mean physical, it also means degrading somebody. I went through the whole list. I read it out to him and showed him.”

Some attempted to disengage with their partners during fights. Kenny just walked away when conflicts arose and sought advice from other people to deal with his partner’s abuse: “I was on a gay chat room talking with a straight woman who was a teacher, and she told me about all the legal things that I have to be aware of when I go to court. She gave me all the legal information.” Like Kenny, Max said, “I had to protect myself so part of it was to withdraw into my own space as a way of doing it.”

Unfortunately, disengagement did not necessarily achieve the desired effect and, indeed, in some cases, it further agitated their partners. Vincent said, “I would shut down. I wouldn’t say anything to him. I wouldn’t speak to him ... He got even more abusive. He got really mad, really furious and everything because basically I wouldn’t fight and argue with him.” Like Vincent, Lewis stated, “I withdrew into myself (pause) I didn’t fight back ... I think it probably made him angrier when I wouldn't fight back.”

Francis related similar experiences: “There were two possibilities in our fights. I would react, which would infuriate him. Or, I would back away, which would eventually infuriate him. So what is the option left? There wasn’t. Either way I was going to get the rough end of the stick.”

Others attempted to subvert their partners’ abuse by using other strategies such as humour. Max said, “There was another time I was in bed. He came in and got a hold of me with his hands on my wrists, threatening me (pause). Somehow I used humour and that turned into a laughing situation and he backed off.” Rather than confronting his
partner directly, Edward (who was professionally trained to deal with conflict) used methods that he learned from work to defuse the situation when his partner became aggressive. He would leave the apartment if it did not work: “Immediately, I went into ah... it was a work situation. I was sort of trying to defuse ah... using all the methods that we were trained to deal with conflict, conflict resolution, that sort of thing.” Phil learned to deal with his partner’s verbal assault through meditation. In fact, it worked to his advantage. Phil explained:

So through the meditation, what I learned to do was just breathe, let him say what he has to say, and I would just calm and then I would just respond, “Well, that’s what you feel. Anything else?” He said, “No.” So I did that a couple times, and then he kind of stopped because he wasn’t getting to me. He wasn’t provoking me, getting me pissed off or angry, and then it actually worked to my favour because he would apologize. “I’m sorry for what I said. I didn’t mean that. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Still others refused to fully comply with their partners’ demands. Edward asked when his partner proposed moving in together, “What is the rush?” To maintain his own autonomy, Edward ignored his partner’s demands and secretly indulged his own interests instead: “If I wanted to do something, try something new, that he didn’t want to do, I would just do it on my own and ... I was sneaking around behind his back trying to do something new.” Considering Dean’s friends as bad influences, his partner did not like him to hang out with them. To avoid potential argument, Dean tried to find ways to accommodate his partner’s demands without completely losing his social life: “If I want to see my friend, I would try to arrange to meet my friends for lunch or after work, like right after work, so I didn’t interfere my time with my partner and it then wouldn’t cause tension between us ... I still tried to have a life and didn’t want to lose all my
friendships.” To resist his partner’s control, Graham simply said, “I lied and, you know, I played the game.”

At times, they temporarily, though reluctantly, agreed with their partners’ demands, which gave them some time to reflect on the situation and gain clarity about it. Max described, “I gave in too quickly to the manipulations. I mean this stuff doesn’t make sense. I don’t agree to it but I ended up agreeing to it.” Jack said, “I know that there were times with him I agreed to do things that I would’ve never agreed to have done.”

They also resisted the abuse psychologically. For example, to deal with the “insanity,” Lewis made excuses for his partner’s violence: “I thought he was angry. I wouldn’t ever hit people. I expected an apology. I expected there were some reasons but there was no reason given. So I made up my own reason I guess. He’s in a strange country. He’s in a strange city. He’s black in a strange society.” Irwin told himself, “It’s not really that pressing. It’s important to me but it’s not really an urgent matter. Not like I’ll get beat up or anything.” By constructing their experiences this way, both Irwin and Lewis rationalized the abuse and tried to convince themselves that things were not “too bad.” In so doing, they gave their relationships a chance and stayed there without feeling completely insane or unsafe – at least for the moment.

In fact, many participants acknowledged that they did not just resist their partners’ abusive behaviour, but also attempted to gain certain control over their relationships. Nor did they feel completely powerless even though they thought that their partners in some ways controlled a lot. Sheldon explained:

I had the credit card. He couldn’t get a credit card for whatever reasons, so in a way I had financial clout. I also had a car because I worked out of
town. He didn’t have a car so he depended on me for rides to where he wanted to go to ... I think I had some power. I didn’t feel completely powerless.

Kenny and his partner lived in a farmhouse in the countryside. He was aware that his partner could not live in the house without Kenny’s knowledge (such as how to pump water from their well). Kenny maintained leverage over his partner by controlling knowledge only he had:

I mean if my partner had complete financial control and I had control of knowledge then I would try and use that. In fact, I may withhold a lot of information so that in the relationship I am indispensable because my partner does not know how to take care of something [and] couldn’t get along without me in that situation, living in that house.

Even Phil, who was badly assaulted by his partner on many occasions, did not feel he was completely powerless. Indeed, Phil said, “I could make life unbearable for him if I wanted to.” He explained:

We were in a fight one time ... He was cheating on me and I found out and we got into a fight. The next day, his mom was supposed to come over for dinner. Of course, I was the only one who cooked so I was supposed to cook her dinner. I could have made his life miserable and not made dinner for his mom, you know, just walked out, and then how’s he going to explain to his mom? But I didn’t. So I could have, you know what I mean.

Rather than embarrassing or bad-mouthing his partner, Phil made sure that the house was clean and dinner was ready, and that his partner’s mother felt “comfortable when she came in.” However, Phil also knew that he was subject to criticism if he failed to do these things: “He could use that against me, ‘See, see, look, what I have to deal with. Look, what I have to put up with.’ Well, he could never say that.” By acting the way he did, Phil not only gained power by not exposing his partner, he also avoided giving his
partner further reason for complaint and, simultaneously, earned some respect and
support from his partner’s mother:

She kind of knew we were in a fight because she was looking at me and
she went ask me. She said something like, “I never count on anybody” and
then she goes, “I don’t know how you do it. I don’t know why you are with
him. You deserve better.” You know, it makes me feel better.

In this way, Phil obtained a form of power. He became the “beloved” son-in-law to his
partner’s mother, who would perhaps be more likely to take Phil’s side during an
argument: “Right now, I don’t know what he’s telling her but in the back of her mind,
she is not going to believe the whole story, whatever he’s telling her.” As revealed here,
power in abusive relationships was never one-sided but, rather, fluid and multi-
dimensional. As Dean acknowledged, “I guess power changes, like over time as it goes.
Your sense of power, your sense of agency changes depending on what’s going on.”

**INTERSECTION WITH RACE AND CLASS**

The participants’ ability to resist and negotiate power in their abusive relationships is
also contingent upon their class, race and citizenship. Both Graham and Rufus came to
Canada to be with their partners. They were new immigrants with few friends and no
legal status; thus, they could not get work and were emotionally, as well as financially
dependent on their partners for support. Within this context, they felt that they had few
options. Graham stated, “I don’t know enough about Toronto. I don’t. Return to Mexico?
Very, very hard situation because it happened very fast.” Rufus said:

He was in control basically of everything. I had nothing and all I had was
my bag. That’s it. I didn’t want to go live on the street or shelter. I just had
to put up with what I had to put up with, you know, getting the little
shelter that I was getting at the apartment and the little support that I
was getting.
Both Neil and Quentin had also just moved to Canada. However, their economic stability made their experience of partner abuse very different from Graham and Rufus. Neil simply left his abusive partner by taking “a vacation for four months.” He then changed his phone number and moved to avoid contact with his partner: “I changed my phone numbers, I changed my cell phone. I wasn’t even checking my e-mail. So he couldn’t reach me. There was no way for him to reach me because I changed my contact numbers, my contact information.”

Quentin was assaulted by his partner, and decided not to report it. However, his partner went to the police station with his lawyer to report the incident and described it as a mutual fight – a scuffle. Quentin was summoned for the investigation:

When I was making my statement at the police station, I had a feeling that they might be biased against me. I was unemployed at the time while my ex-partner was working for the federal government in a pretty good position. I totally felt that the police took his side. Quentin’s report described the assault by his partner. Quentin’s face was covered with bruises; whereas, his partner did not exhibit any signs of physical injury. However Quentin was a recent immigrant, spoke with an accent, and was unemployed. All these factors played against him, and the police did not believe his story. Though unemployed, Quentin was fortunate enough to be able to hire a lawyer to represent him. Quentin’s economical leverage changed his experience (in some way, “saved” him) from an otherwise much more challenging predicament. The lawyer helped make his case believable: “When I finished making my statement, I sensed that they understood.”

Phil also felt stuck in his abusive relationship – similar to Graham and Rufus – however Phil was HIV positive and living on welfare of only $800 a month. As a result, Phil could not afford to live alone and, because of his health status, living in a shelter
was not an option. Consequently, he felt he had to endure his partner’s abuse. Yet, Phil was eligible to apply for social housing as a Canadian citizen, opening up the possibility to leave the relationship – an option that Graham and Rufus did not have: “I actually went to apply for housing, hoping it wouldn’t be a long process and then I would be able to get out and on my own.”

Like Quentin, both Max and Hans’ cases involved the police. Max had a fight with his partner. Feeling that it was getting out of control, Max called the police but was arrested for the assault when the police arrived because he’d thrown a glass of orange juice at his partner. According to Max:

They didn’t put me in handcuffs until we got to the station and then they put me in handcuffs to take me in the station. They read me my rights and all the rest of it. The cell door which was normally locked was open, so we carried on a conversation about what was going on. I thought I should just plead guilty and get the whole thing over with and they said, “No, no don’t do that. That means you would have a criminal record, etc. So fight it because you are not in the wrong. He is in the wrong but we had no way of doing anything legally about that.” They said to think up a good lie.

Even Max acknowledged that his treatment by the police was “very unusual.” Max, in his 60s, is white and has a doctoral degree. In contrast, his partner is about half of his age, of South Asian origin, weighs over 200 lb and muscularly built. He is a college dropout and unemployed. Neither of them conformed to the stereotypes of partner abuse perpetrators and victims. However, being white and middle class, Max shared an implicit understanding or, what Pierre Bourdieu calls “habitus,” with the authorities (Swartz 1997, 100). He knew how to speak in a way that would be perceived as co-operative and rational. Max’s disposition enabled him to manoeuvre into being perceived as harmless. As a result, the police did not take the allegations against him seriously.
In contrast, Hans’ experience with police was completely different. Hans was assaulted by his partner and the police were called, as Hans explained:

He was charged. That’s when he did a really good beating on my head. I testified against that. I did a video statement. Then when I went to court, I was afraid to testify against him. So it ended up ... they dropped the charges on him and charged me instead. So I did about 8 months in jail for that.

Hans did not have a formal education, was rough-looking, on welfare and had a criminal record. His profile matched the social expectations of batterers. Unlike Max, Hans did not have the knowledge or disposition to work the system to his advantage. As a result, no one offered him sympathetic advice (as happened in Max’s case); instead, they convicted him and locked him up for 8 months, for refusing to testify against his abuser.

Hans’ victimization continued. In prison, he was beaten and repeatedly raped. Upon release, he was mandated to attend anti-domestic violence workshops – at $40 a month which he could not afford as a welfare recipient. Even in the workshops, he was verbally harassed, for being gay:

I was in an anger management class. This guy was there and I told him I don’t like being called faggot and all that stuff. He stood right at the front of the class and he got me angry, he kept calling me faggot, faggot, faggot, in front of everybody. He got me so angry I stormed outta that room. I hate people calling me those names. It really hurts inside. Because I feel like I’m less than normal or something like that.

Because of his conviction, Hans was branded as a batterer, meaning that in future the police would assume he was the perpetrator even if he were once again abused. His partner in turn, exploited this with impunity:

My partner told me, “I learned something ... as long as I am the first one to call the police to say you beat me, they’re going to take you because they already have you once.” That’s why he used to beat me and call the police. He’d bang his head against the wall. He’d do crazy, crazy, crazy stuff to get
Socio-economical status created a chasm of divergence between the relative consequences of same-sex partner abuse for Hans, versus Max, even though both consider themselves victims.

Similar to the case with Max, Umberto and Kenny's economic backgrounds cushioned their experience of partner abuse. Umberto was involved in a legal battle with his partner and was charged with “attempted murder.” He claimed that he was not quite sure what happened that night because he was completely blacked out. All he remembered was that he fought back in self defence and “almost killed” his partner.

Unlike his partner, Umberto had the financial means to hire a private lawyer to represent his interest in court:

I didn’t need to take the stand which is very unusual in a self defence case. He had lied so much and fabricated so many things. It was just him being cross-examined and my lawyer destroyed him on the stand and to the point he broke down a couple of times and told the judge his whole life was a lie and I was acquitted.

Feeling that he was framed for the assault, Umberto was advised by his lawyer to sue his partner for legal expenses (“well over $10,000”) in civil court and “teach him a bit of a lesson that he shouldn’t be doing that to somebody.”

Similarly, Kenny and his long-term partner were in the process of separation. They were embroiled in a bitter dispute over the monetary settlement. His partner, according to Kenny, secretly kept a sum of money and he felt he was entitled to his fair share of it. To challenge his partner, Kenny spent $5,000 to hire a lawyer:

I found a lawyer with a big ego and he was not a puppy, he was a pit bull. The top of his profession and everyone was scared of him [and] that’s what I got, the meanest pit bull ... I won everything that I needed, which is
mine. They say, “Living well is the best revenge.” Not screaming and yelling, and jumping up and down, and hitting people with baseball bats, that type of violence, but living well, psychologically figuring out the enemy and the winning, and that was my job, and I did it.

In this case, his financial resourcefulness enabled Kenny to defeat his partner in court and redeem his dignity.

Summary

In this chapter, using a post-structuralist and post-modernist framework, I examined the power and resistance in abusive relationships. I described the cultural and social contexts that constrained how they were able to resist. However, even within these constraints, the participants found multiple ways to manage conflict and resist their partner’s abusive behaviour. They even attempted to gain control over their lives and their relationships. Their strategies were often subtle rather than overt. They were also fluid, depending on the situation. However, their racial and socio-economical backgrounds impacted the outcomes of their resistance.
CHAPTER 9: MOVING BEYOND VICTIMHOOD

Gay men involved in partner abuse are commonly portrayed as either victims who are powerless and waiting to be helped or perpetrators who are powerful and mean (see Chapter 2). In previous chapters, I have shown that men's lived experiences do not always fit neatly into categories that are too simplistic to encompass complex social realities. In this chapter, I further my analysis by demonstrating how men negotiate their identities regarding their experiences of partner abuse. I elicited how they perceived their role in the relationship and how the experience affected them. What they told me illustrates that the definitions are a process of negotiation.

NEGOTIATING MULTIPLE ROLES

Because of the negative connotation commonly associated with partner abuse, many participants found it difficult to come to terms with their experience of victimization. They were ashamed of not having stood up for themselves as men are expected to. For example, Lewis felt responsible for the abuse because he neither spoke up, left or fought back: “I am not sure what I was a victim of; of my own stupidity, or society, or a willing victim because I didn’t stand up to being beaten. A plain stupid person. A coward. I don’t know (long pause).” Graham found it difficult to accept the stigma of being victimized: “I am a victim but it is very hard to accept this for me. You know, I am a victim! Yes, I am a victim; it is obvious, the broken bone but what does that mean?”

Others refused to consider themselves as victims. Neil used the term “survivor” to describe himself instead:

I was able to overcome and pick myself up ... After the relationship, I felt that “Oh! I survived that. I survived the fear. I survived the insecurity and I gained my confidence and self-respect back, not as a victim.” I like to see myself as a survivor because if I didn’t leave, I think I’d still be in it. There
was no life, there was no way out. I was in it and I felt so trapped but I was able to overcome that. That’s why I feel I am a survivor though.

In defining his experience not by his victimhood, but by his survival, Neil felt a sense of empowerment rather than defeat, which enabled him to move on with his life. Like Neil, Edward was uncomfortable using the term “victim” to depict his experience and felt somewhat responsible for the abuse because of his inaction. In the end, though, Edward felt he defeated his partner’s abuse by leaving him. He explained:

I really hesitate to put an ultimate label on it. I think I let it perpetuate. I let it, yes! I’m leaning more to be a “perpetuator” than a “victim.” I think I could have progressed to victim if I let it persist but ah... I let it through my neglect and through my inaction. I let it persist and it was progressing.

By framing his experience this way, Edward felt “empowered” rather than dejected and humiliated.

For Francis, “In the relationship [he] was definitely the victim. There is no if, and or but about it.” However, “there’s a difference between identifying yourself as the victim and being the victim.” Victimhood was a state of mind that Francis felt, implied losing control or defeat. Wallowing in it only exacerbated one’s helplessness. By taking responsibility, Francis regained his control: “I cannot blame anybody else for allowing me to be there. I am responsible for my deeds, not him, not you, not somebody else. I allowed it to happen.” In this way, Francis was able to transcend his victimization and claim a moral victory. He indeed saw this experience as a valuable lesson that did not limit but, rather, enriched his life:

I survived it to be glorious. So how can I be the victim? Yes, during the relationship, by all means, I was definitely the victim. Three years after I left, the fact that I survived it, all may give me only greater character, strength of character ... Therefore I will never be a victim. I will never change. I will always be the good person that I am. I am probably a better person because I always learn from it.

189
Some found that the label “victim” was very limiting and did not describe their experience. Quentin refused to pin himself down as either a victim or a perpetrator, even though he was beaten by his partner. Victimhood suggested helplessness that Quentin felt did not speak to his experience:

To be a victim of violence, one has to sustain some permanent damage or suffer from a fear of relationships. Or maybe one would be afraid of the other person or other human contacts. Those would be signs of damage. This case didn’t affect my confidence in other relationships or other people. Therefore, I don’t see myself as a victim.

Dean also found the label “victim” to be disempowering: “Like if you see yourself as a victim, there is not a lot of space to do anything about it.” No doubt, Dean was victimized by his partner, but he did not see himself as a helpless victim without agency:

I wasn’t just a victim. I was a victim in some incidents but I was also an agent in other incidents. I was a participant in the relationship ... I could have left earlier than I did. I could have not moved in with him ... It is not just that I was a victim lying on the floor and he started beating me up. I came home every day after work, I argued with him. I fought with him. I was there ... I had agency in the relationship. I made choices.

Similarly, Ted found it difficult to relate to the term “victim” because he was never abused by his partner physically or verbally. Yet, Ted argued that he was a victim of his partner’s unfaithfulness (a form of emotional abuse) and referred his victimization specifically to that, and not to other aspects of their relationship: “In terms of infidelity, I think I am the victim.”

Participants such as Lewis and Phil were badly brutalized by their partners. Yet, they were not victims in all aspects of their lives. They racialized their partners creating racist stereotypes. Lewis, for example, was unable to see his own white privilege,
ignoring his partner’s concerns about racism: “He couldn’t accept his own blackness. He was determined that his blackness limited him but that’s his problem. That was an issue, his dislike of being black.” He equated blackness as dangerous and whiteness as safe: “I won’t have a relationship with a black person now. It was years before I would have sex with a black person. I still don’t like to be seen with a black person ... so I’m going back to only my own ethnicity, so I won’t get hurt.” Phil also stereotyped his partner’s abusive behaviour as “a cultural thing” saying: “You know, almost every single Latin that I know of in general is like that.” Even though he identified himself as a victim, at work, Umberto was “an aggressive boss” who was used to “ordering people around or firing them.”

Others acknowledged the multiple roles they played in their relationships. Hans thought that he was both the victim and the perpetrator at the same time. His partner physically assaulted him but Hans verbally attacked his partner: “I’m a victim when I’m the object of his hurt; when he wants to hurt me on purpose. I’m a victim whenever I never did nothing to deserve the treatment I’m receiving. That’s when I’m the victim [but] verbally I was the perpetrator, like saying things to him.” Similarly, Rufus acknowledged the damage that he caused to his partner, and his dual role in the relationship:

Sometimes I would start it off. Sometimes I would provoke him and I would hit him for no reason and he would just fight back. I’d done a lot of damage, destroyed appliances and so forth because I wanted the attention. I wanted him to know, “Hey it’s not like it was before you beat me up and I was not going to fight back. I am going to fight back, right.” I would say both. I am not going to say, “I was a victim. I was this, I was that.” I am going to come straight out and say, “I did cause some of this also.” I am not going to lay blame on one person. It was a 50/50 thing.
Otis perceived his role as victim or perpetrator as fluid – it changed according to the constantly shifting power dynamics in the relationship. He explained, “Two men together, there isn’t that necessary that natural physical imbalance in a relationship between a man and a woman ... I wasn’t a victim. I was engaging in it. I wasn’t helpless. Not that all victims are helpless but I certainly was a participant [and] he certainly was no innocent victim, not in any respect. This was a reciprocal thing certainly.” Irwin made similar observations about his relationship: “In gay relationships the power balance can change a lot more often and at one point I can be the aggressor and at another moment he can be the aggressor.”

Their role not only changed in one relationship, but also from one relationship to another. Dean was clearly victimized by his partner in one relationship but he was the abuser in another: “I said things that sort of undermined my partner’s confidence, like self-esteem. I think that was a form of abuse. Oh yeah if you think of that as abuse, I would say, yeah I was abusive ... I tried to control him. In a way, I am no different from [his abusive partner]. Maybe it was a payback. It was my karma (laugh).” Max related similar experiences:

Well I think that my South Asian partner was the aggressor even though I ended up being charged and sort of perceived as the perpetrator. In that I see myself as a victim ... With my Chinese partner, it’s not as easy in terms of perpetrator and victim. I certainly felt that I was a victim of his drug usage but I was more a victim of his manipulations and his pushing the envelope or getting further and further against my better judgement ... My frustrations developed to the point where there was no question that the crazy-making led me to the violence at first. So I think of myself as much more involved as a perpetrator.
Yet, Max acknowledged that his South Asian partner, though an aggressor in their relationship, experienced racial discrimination: “There is no question that I witnessed some discrimination against my partner because of his colour.”

**NARRATING THE EFFECTS OF ABUSE**

A common perception regarding relationship abuse is that people who have experienced it are left with some form of permanent damage. In her seminal book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman writes: “While it is clear that ordinary, healthy people may become entrapped in prolonged abusive situations, it is equally clear that after their escape they are no longer ordinary or healthy. Chronic abuse causes serious psychological harm” (1992, 116).

No doubt, most participants felt anger, despair, depression, confusion, shame and embarrassment as a result of their situations. For example, Max was angry with himself for having stayed in the relationship: “But I was also angry at myself for having got involved in the relationship in the first place, for not having seen the signs that were there, for not having reacted to them.” Phil plunged into depression, which in turn led to social isolation: “I was very depressed. I didn’t want to talk to anybody. I didn’t want to see anybody. All I was doing was going to work, coming home, and going to sleep.” Kenny found the abuse humiliating: “Degrad ing, demeaning and isolating. Because when a man is the one that feels degraded, then it has to be totally silent and secret.” He believed that the domestic strife had taken a toll on his health: “I would bleed when I go to the bathroom, from internalizing all of what was going on in the house ... and I noticed that’s all gone away, which means it’s gone away as my partner’s gone away.”
Indeed, some participants felt that the abuse completely ruined their lives leaving them emotionally distressed. Xavier said, “You feel stupid. It’s like a letdown to yourself, you know. You feel like you don’t have any personal power. You feel like you have wasted time. Sometimes you feel like you have wasted your energy being involved with that person.” This experience left Xavier with doubt in relationships: “My past situations have given me a distrust, a distrust for people who say, ‘I am not like that,’ or ‘you can trust me,’ or ‘it won’t happen here,’ or ‘I love you and I would never do that.’ I don’t buy it. It’s all words to me, really!” Jack found his future bleak. He felt that he was no longer young and had lost everything (including his business) because of his partner. He sunk into despair and hopelessness, found himself alone, paralyzed by fear and a sense of impotence:

I feel so hollow inside and I think of my life as being over at 47. I don’t see a future at all. I try but I just don’t see a future ... I don’t know how to start again. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know where to go. I don’t know who to talk to. He took away the biggest part of me and I don’t know if it’ll ever come back. I feel so confused all the time.

Yet, only few participants indicated that the abuse they experienced had long-lasting, negative impacts on their mental health. Lewis said, “I’ve had nightmares ever since, and my career has never recovered from those four years, and I would never talk about it with anyone ... I discovered that the damage is irreparable. I don’t think you can ever forget or recover. You can only incorporate it into your life so that’s my task now.” Neil described, “It’s something that would stay with you forever, actually. You remember those times where you are scared ... I was always paranoid and I was depressed. I was severely depressed to the point that I was suicidal.”
Many however said that the abuse did not have long-lasting effects, even though they found it upsetting and challenging. Albeit distressed, Quentin did not feel that his partner’s violence had caused “any permanent damage” or emotional suffering.

Similarly, Sheldon remarked, “I think right after it happened, for a couple of years after, I couldn’t get close to a man ... I think I was traumatized for a while, probably a couple of years. But I don’t think it has any long-term effect on me and I just kind of went on with my life.” Dean felt that he had quickly recovered from the abuse even though it caused great emotional distress:

I think people can recover from abuse really quickly. Especially if they have experienced it before and they have experience with it and they have worked through it before, then I think it doesn’t have to have this life-long impact. I think people have resilience and they can recover and I think I have.

Rather than focusing on their sorrow, the participants tried to make positive meanings out of the abuse. Dean described, “I would say that I learned a lot about life and about myself and about relationships that I am thankful to have. Would I go through it again to just have that? No, probably not. But now that I have, I am glad that I got that. I think it made me a much better partner now [and] I think it’s made me less likely to end up in a situation like that again. So in that sense I view it as a positive outcome. I don’t know if it’s had a negative sort of emotional impact on me.” Graham stated:

This experience shows me my human nature. I feel very, very human now, you know. I am very, very happy about this. I understand more about myself. All the things happened in these two months – the fight, the HIV, etc. I learn to change things from bad to good. I try to change all the bad things into good because I don’t want to carry any baggage ... This is the most intensive experience, yes, very, very intensive experience. All these bad things have helped me.
Often, they saw it as a learning experience that made them stronger, wiser, and better human beings. Edward said, “Definitely it was a learning experience for me. I guess I have that perspective and can understand what is like to be in that kind of situation and what’s involved, like the feelings and the motivations and the complicatedness of it all. I kind of feel wiser.” Vincent expressed similar sentiments about his experience of partner abuse: “I learned from my mistakes that I made, you know, I tried to learn from his mistakes as well. Some of the things he had said and done, I never wanted to do it to anybody else.” Like Vincent, Otis said, “It was an eye-opening experience that I was able to reflect on and keep in my mind that I didn’t want to do that again and I wasn’t going to do that again. So it was good even though those times were awful. It was positive that I was able to keep that in mind and not do it again, like a good reminder.” For Walter, this experience had made him “become a better person, to be able to express [himself] more clearly and directly and sympathetically.”

Others such as Rufus and Francis considered it as a journey of personal growth that was both liberating and enriching, rather than demoralizing. Rufus described:

I think I am a very strong person, very jovial person. I don’t think it has traumatized me. At first, it was a strange experience but it was a learning experience also and I guess this is life, not in terms of domestic violence or being violent or whatever, but this is life. It’s a learning process. Everybody goes through it. It may be domestic violence, or whatever else they are going through, but everybody goes through this process.

He continued, “This experience has made me so much stronger, so much wiser now. I have a different perspective on life now. I have a different perspective on relationships, how to deal with things.” Similarly, Francis stated, “It was a lesson I needed to learn;
otherwise, I wouldn’t have been exposed to it. Somehow I must learn that lesson. Because if I wouldn’t have learned, it would have happened to me otherwise. Some other things may have happened. To me, life is a path rather than a plan, a predetermined outcome.” For Francis, this experience had made him “stronger emotionally” and a better and happier person. His partner, Francis said, “had done [him] the greatest favour.”

Still others spoke that through their experience of partner abuse, they learned not to tolerate abuse and set boundaries in relationships. Umberto said, “I will be totally intolerant of any abuse and I know the warning signs. I’ll be much more aware of any of that sort of thing, and I'll be much more inclined to put a stop to things or end things very quickly if I see that sort of pattern again.” Similarly, Irwin remarked, “It makes me see more insight, like makes me more wanna get out of a relationship that I can see leading to the same type of problems.” Hans stated, “Nobody is worth fighting over, and now I’m going to be really cautious who I go near, who I hang around.”

They began to challenge behaviour that they found abusive. Lewis said, “I’ve learned to speak up. I’ve learned to recognize abuse when it’s happening and speak up: “Don’t do that” (pause). I’ve learned to stop blaming myself.” Neil stated, “I begin to speak out for myself when people do that [being abusive] to me or anyone I am dating does that to me. If the person I am dating now would do that to me, I would stick up for myself because I realized that it’s not something I should tolerate ... I began to speak up for myself. I feel I am somehow empowered to actually be straightforward and to protect myself.”
Some even attempted to turn their experience of partner abuse into social activism. Graham hoped that by sharing his experience publicly, he could make people more aware of the issue: “I see many people in this situation but we don’t have the tool to speak about it. It is very important to talk about this thing. Spanish people don’t have any idea that this could happen.” Likewise Jack said, “I believed that I lived through this for a reason and I wanna take this experience and utilize it, for my own self, but also because I believe I have a responsibility.”

**Summary**

In this chapter, I explored the meanings that the participants attributed to their experience of partner abuse. Though they experienced partner abuse, they found identifying with victimhood and trauma to be limiting as well as disempowering. For them, the label of victim did not account for agency and resilience. Nor did it speak of their multiple roles that could change from one relationship to another, or even within the same relationship. Although the experience of partner abuse had an impact on them, they found that it was not always entirely negative or long-lasting. In fact, in some cases, it did not limit them and, they were able to incorporate their experience as a form of personal growth.
CHAPTER 10: THE MEANING OF LEAVING

The common assumption is that people will leave their partners when they encounter abuse in their relationships. Leaving is often seen as necessary, and presented as not only a good option but the only option. Those who choose not to do so are often highly criticized (see Chapter 8). In this chapter, I present that leaving is not so clear-cut, but is instead ambiguous and a process of negotiation. Gay men in abusive relationships weigh out their options and assess the possibilities of life with or without their partners. For many, leaving does not present a better option and may lead to a bleaker future. It is within this context, I discuss how these men negotiate the prospect of leaving their partners.

TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF STAYING

For many participants, there was no logical answer for their decision to stay in their abusive relationship, nor could it be easily explained. Like many of us, they asked themselves the same question: Why did they stay with their partners? Hans, knowing that “nothing’s going to change” and, if he went back to his partner, he would “get beaten again,” did not know why he still wanted to go back: “I know better than to let somebody hit me. But why do I keep going back to get hit again and again and again? It’s crazy. That’s the part I’ll never know. Just why do I keep going back?” Dean agonized over the same question, asking himself what kept him there for two years even though there was “nothing” to prevent him from leaving:

I was financially independent and I had a full-time job. The only thing keeping me there was me ... He was never, he didn’t tie me up. He didn’t, you know, lock the door, hide the key, anything like that. I mean I could have left anytime, you know. I could have but ... I wasn’t scared he was going to hurt me. I don’t think I was scared he was going to hurt me. I
don’t understand it. I need to understand that. I wanted to understand why I stayed in that situation.

Naturally some were perplexed about their own decisions. Jack, whose partner had severely beaten him many times during their seven-year relationship, was unsure why he asked his partner to get back together: “There was a point after when we were no longer together, I went and asked him to get back together.” Umberto found it strange and did not quite understand why he and his partner were often suddenly back together, even though he knew it was not a good idea: “I ran into him one day and got back together with him. I was essentially living with him in the hotel where he was staying.”

For the participants, leaving was often seen as the last option. Lewis said, “I believe that the first time a partner is violent, you leave. But it gets complicated when you think you love him; you think you are responsible; you don’t just walk away; you stay until you work it out.” Graham expressed similar sentiments: “My best friends asked me, ‘Do you remember what you said about my boyfriend when I told you he hit me?’ Yes, I remember. Get out of the relationship! Yes, I know but…”

Often, the participants were confused and did not quite understand what was happening when they found themselves in abusive relationships. Umberto said, “I am so mixed up, you know. He’s still in my mind, often if I’m not busy, and so I’m still very confused with respect to the whole situation.” They felt that they lost control of their judgement and did not know what to do or how to deal with the situation. Walter explained, “I mean we hung on way too long. We let it go on far too long because we didn’t know what else to do.” Jack admitted, “I just felt worse and it got worse. It got to
the point where the emotional self was so convoluted, it affects every part of you and you can’t do anything.” Max recalled:

When my partner was still living in the house and using crack, he woke me every morning at 2 o’clock. That’s when he would start pushing me to give him some money so he could go out and get some crack … the interrupted sleep became a real handicap for me and my judgment was impaired. It got to the point where I felt that it was a crazy-making situation and I felt that I was becoming crazy because I would agree to something and realize afterwards, no, I didn’t want to agree to it. It was like, I was losing my ability to remain rational and understand what was going on.

More importantly, they did not know how to get out of their relationships. Lewis said, “I didn’t know how to get out of it. I knew almost right away it was wrong [when he hit me]. I tried to fix it but I don’t know how to get out of it.” Not having other alternatives, some simply accepted the situation. Otis confessed, “Well, I think I didn’t know any other way of being so this is awful but this is just the way it is … it seems like it was just a part of the relationship. It wasn’t a good part, it wasn’t a healthy part but it was part that existed and I didn’t really know [how to deal with it].” Hans related similar stories: “It was like my first relationship. He was doing the same damn thing that my first partner was doing. So like it was just… I just started accepting what he was doing after awhile.”

Others hoped that their relationships would somehow just end naturally, without having to directly confront their partners. Max declared, “I wanted to get out of it but I couldn’t. Again I wouldn’t bring that up. I left him to bring the topic up. Even though I wanted to leave him, I wouldn’t say anything.” Like Max, Neil said, “I wanted him out but I didn’t see any way of even getting him out. He talked about separating ah… periodically. He would decide that he was going to leave and go to Puerto Rico and
work there. So I thought ok, he’s going to go Puerto Rico and the problem will be solved.”

**NEGOTIATING LEAVING**

Some participants were unable to leave due to socio-economic barriers. Both Rufus and Graham moved to Canada solely to be with their partners, and did not know many people or have relatives here. They depended on their partners financially as well as emotionally, and both felt stuck in their relationships. Rufus explained, “The reason why I kept going back was because I had no support, or I didn’t know of any support that I could have gotten.” For them, living in a shelter was not an option. Rufus elaborated:

> Friends had said to me, “The only place for you to go is to go live in a shelter or live on the street.” I didn't want to go live on the street or shelter. I just had to put up with what I had to put up with, you know, getting the little shelter that I was getting at the apartment and the little support that I was getting.

Similarly, Graham found that living in a shelter was not only depressing, but for him it also meant that something must be wrong with him: “I went to the shelter and stayed for one or two nights. The shelter is good but I don’t feel that good. I called my partner because at this moment, the only person I know in Canada is my partner. I called him and went back to the house ... No normal person would live in a shelter.” In addition, and perhaps more critical, was the fact that Graham needed his partner’s help to apply for immigration to Canada, so leaving his partner was just not an option for him at that time.

Though not restricted by socio-economic factors, many participants felt immobilized and found it difficult to break up with their partners. Irwin recognized that there was “something wrong with the relationship” but did not feel emotionally
prepared, even though he was financially capable of leaving: “I’m not planning to leave him. It’s not really an urgent matter. Not like I’ll get beat up or anything but if it ever got to that point, I’d leave. I wouldn’t stand for that.” They constantly struggled with the dilemma and complexities of leaving their partners – an option that did not always represent a better future or the opportunity for a better life.

For example, Edward was 45 years old and felt a strong “need for coupling” at his age. He was eager to “to settle down with somebody, to have a home, have a dog, maybe an adopt child.” For Edward, giving up his relationship meant not only giving up his partner, but perhaps his dreams for a family and life-long happiness. He found it particularly hard when he considered he might have a hard time finding another partner in his age: “Well, I don’t want to be going through this when I’m in my late 40s and my early 50s trying to find somebody.” He was afraid to die alone and miserably:

I can’t tell you how many residences I would be called to because somebody doesn’t have any family and friends and they are sick and they are home or they die. I have gone to pronounce bodies that have been dead for days simply because these people don’t have anybody. For me you die anyway but to die alone ah... you only die once, right! You want to do it right (laugh).

For Edward, leaving his partner did not represent the better option: “I think now that I am in my middle age. I was more tolerant. I don’t’ want to use the word ‘needy’ because I don’t like to use that word, seeking stability, some relationships, you know. I am in my middle age, I guess, time is ticking, I wanted this to work.” Jack also shared similar sentiments:

My belief is because you don’t want to be alone. People don’t want to be alone. And a lot of the relationships where it’s really, really bad, they put up because ultimately it’s the biggest fear, especially when you get to my age, where you’re entering into your 50’s and so on. You think to yourself, I don’t wanna spend my golden years by myself, alienated or ostracized.
For Hans, being a 48-year-old, HIV positive gay man was “a big embarrassment” and he had “a hard time trying to go out and find somebody”. He knew there would be no guarantee that life would be better if he left his partner, and he might end up dying alone. Added to his already daunting situation was a lack of social support that could have at least provided some encouragement. Hans felt that staying with his abusive partner would at least provide some support. He explained:

I just don’t feel like life is worth living so I don’t know, sometimes in a violent relationship, having something, rather than having nothing at all. That is why I think I kept going back to him ... when you got low self-esteem and somebody gives you a little bit of caring, that little bit of caring, even thought it comes with lots of violence, it’s so important. It seems healthy, that little bit.

Francis shared Hans’ predicament as a 50 year-old, HIV positive gay man. He knew that it would not be easy for him to find another partner, and that leaving might not necessarily lead to a better life. He asked himself in fear, “Am I going to die alone if I leave my partner? What if I have nothing?” More importantly, Francis admitted that the relationship with his partner, though abusive at times, nevertheless also gave him a sense of security and love: “There was closeness between us, we had a friendship that was between us and that was far more than a partnership or a love relationship and... it was simply there, no matter how much we fought or whatever.” Francis just did not feel he had enough incentive to leave his partner: “I wasn’t ready to give up the relationship itself because that part of me was okay. I could deal with that. Right! Somehow I dealt with that. In hindsight, I have no idea why. But I did. I guess it was the home. I guess it was knowing that it was mine. I guess it was the familiarity.”
Others face similar struggles though with different social realities. Ted was an Asian man whose body was culturally stigmatized (passive, submissive, effeminate) and was commonly considered less sexually attractive by Western standards: “Because mainstream beauty is strong, muscular and all that, to the mainstream gay community, you are not a typical beauty, you are not particularly attractive. People perceive Asians are more petite, more submissive so basically you have to follow me, you know, that kind of thing.” Clearly knowing his reality and being aware that he might have a hard time finding another white partner, Ted found it hard to leave his abuser: “Except his infidelity, there are a lot of other things I really like about him. He had a lot of wonderful qualities that I really like and, even though we had issues, at the same time I enjoyed doing things with him. I love a lot of things about him. Also, I am afraid that I may not find somebody, even close to him.”

Like Ted, Xavier did not consider leaving to be the better option. Xavier was a black gay man and found the Toronto black community relatively small, where people knew each other. Due to heterosexism and homophobia in his community, Xavier did not want people to know of his sexuality: “Black people who you are involved with don’t want this information known or discovered by other people.” As a result, Xavier knew that it would not be easy for him to find another black partner and, in the process of doing so, could easily be outed and become ostracized: “Black people just don’t jump into relationships ... you just want to stay in the relationship and have it go as it would go. Why jump from one problem relationship into the next relationship with a person who is completely new? When this person here I know of already, and I understand him
and this person understands me, just that we were going through this thing here that isn’t desired.”

No doubt, for the participants, their partners were abusive in many ways. But at the same time they found love and tenderness in their relationships. Rufus depicted, “There were times when he was good, we would leave each other little notes. We would e-mail each other messages every day from the two years that we were involved. I would keep all the messages, you know. He would check in just to see how your day is going, hope all is well, I see you later. Little stuff like that I enjoy.” Sheldon found there were similar positive nuggets: “We had some good times. We had some friends and we were all younger then. We liked to party, we would go to house party, dinner party or to clubs and we danced, you know, we took some holiday together.”

Many found comfort in their partners. Umberto offered, “Over all we did get along quite well. It was very hard to find a person that you can get along, and you can stand to be around for any period of time, and we did it for extended periods ... we did have a lot in common and I admired him in a lot of ways.” Similarly, Irwin said, “He’s really nice to me. He’s a smart person and I really like talking to, hanging out with him and we just get along really, really well, which is weird because we just seem to click and we know exactly what each other’s thinking, like we don’t have to explain things and we know each other’s thoughts and things we don’t care.”

Many shared a strong emotional or sexual connection with their partners. Hans admitted, “I was obsessed with him. I don’t know, like I have a hard time having sex with people but with my partner, I don’t. That’s another reason why it’s hard to leave
too because I was being sexually satisfied. So as long as I was being sexually satisfied, I
guess the rest didn’t matter.” Likewise for Max:

My sexual experiences in the marriage were not that mind-blowing as much as any of the gay relationships I’ve had. With my partner, it was. I don’t know. I was going to say over the edge, for lack of a better description but it was certainly very powerful [and] there was a quality of mutual acceptance ... sometimes the satisfaction from sex lasts for two or three days and you sort of forget the painful times until something happens that brings you back to reality.

Otis shared similar experiences:

There was a lot of love at the same time. Like I said before, it was a very passionate relationship right until the end. At the end, I didn’t like him anymore. We were still having sex (laughs). The sex was good (laugh). We had a lot of sex. I had fun with him, like we related. It wasn’t all bad. That was the thing, it wasn’t all bad. Sometimes there were very tender moments; sometimes there were some loving moments.

For anyone, let alone someone dealing with abuse, leaving a relationship offers no guarantee that they’ll find something better and always presents the spectre of ending up alone – a stereotypical image in our culture portrayed as bleak and associated with despair, loneliness and misery. Otis expressed this fear vividly: “I had no other choice. I couldn’t tolerate being alone, you know, I can’t be alone. I felt bound to him, truly bound. Like I couldn’t survive or exist without him.” Likewise Neil said, “I am scared to be alone. I am scared to be lonely so you tolerate those things. I was scared that I wouldn’t find any other partner. I was scared to get out of it. I believed that he’s the only person who could love me that way so I didn’t have the courage to leave.”

It was within these fears and contradictions that the participants struggled with the dilemma of leaving their partners. Neil described, “There were two voices. I wanted to get out of the relationship but part of me was saying, ‘Stay, stay, stay. He loves you. You are crazy. He loves you. You shouldn’t get out of it.’” Vincent shared this sentiment:
“When you look at the good side of things, when you look at the good that had been done, the good outweighed the bad [and] I had to forget the bad side of him. So that’s why I wanted to stay in the relationship.” Irwin expressed similar struggles: “It’s so messed up. Because on one hand it’s such a perfect relationship and on the other hand it’s the worst relationship you can imagine.”

Most made some attempt to “fix the problem” particularly under certain circumstances such as when there were apologies, promises to change, some sense of responsibility for the violence, or some sympathy for the abuser. For example, Rufus explained, “My whole thing was ‘I love him, he’s going to change,’ you know, because he promised all the times, ‘Ok, I am going to change. I’m sorry for doing it and I would change.’ So I was just there waiting for that change.” Phil described his situation: “In a way, I felt it was my fault because I did get [HIV] positive. That’s why everything happened so it’s my fault; therefore, I had to fix it. I had to prove to him somehow I really loved him. I really wanted it to work, you know, I was determined, stubborn I guess, to stick it out and make it better, make it the relationship that I wanted it to be.” Dean related: “I think he had a really difficult life growing up. I think his father was very abusive, you know, I think he had a hard time accepting his sexuality, and I guess I just had a lot of empathy for him ... How can you leave this poor person who is, you know, so destroyed?”

With these narratives, the participants came to construct their own ethical self. They did not just quit their relationship or abandon their partner during hardship; they fought for something that is socially constructed as sacred and should not be easily discarded. Leaving evoked in them a sense of failure (Fraser 2008). Indeed, to find true
love and to save their relationships, they were willing to make sacrifices. Sheldon said, “I wanted a relationship really badly. Even if I was in a bad relationship, I was going to try to make it work.” Lewis shared this sentiment: “It’s not something I ever felt I ever should run away from because I felt I should take the good with the bad ... got to work it through. You got problems, I got problems but we have each other. It’s just in a sense we were in a relationship so I am your partner, you are my partner, let’s work it out ... I didn’t give up on him. That was my one virtue.” Similarly, Jack entreated:

I felt that I had to help him. I felt that I had to be there for him. It wasn’t his fault. It was like protecting a child that was in trouble with the law, I felt like I had to go through this ... Maurice, I’ve never loved anyone unconditionally in my life. I loved him unconditionally. I mean I would do anything for him.

It was their feelings of love and attachment to the relationship that sustained them through the tough times.

**Narratives of Realization**

For the participants, the process of leaving was a long struggle. They feared the uncertainty of their future without a partner; they felt guilty for leaving their relationship and, without a partner, they feared having to face a sense of failure. They saw the good and the bad. They agonized over their ambivalence. Yet most participants left their partners in the end, eventually grounding on the reality that the relationship was no longer working. Dean plunged into depression for two years during his relationship and eventually came to realize that he would be better off without his partner:

I realized that I wasn’t happy even though I did feel a lot love for this person. I was so exhausted, unhappy, emotionally tired and I think I couldn’t take it anymore. I realized that wasn’t how I wanted to feel in a relationship so I decided that I would rather be single than be in a
situation like that. I would be better off alone. I know I am happier when I am single than when I was with him.

Dean added to this: “I realized in the end of the relationship, you can love somebody and really not be able to be with him or want to be with him. Those two things are true. You can have empathy for somebody, care about somebody, and not want them in your life.”

Rufus connected with the realization that his partner was not going to change and decided to leave after watching A Diary of a Mad Black Woman, a movie regarding domestic abuse:

I just finally realized I needed to go. I had enough ... I just have to say to myself, “Hey, Rufus, you tried the past two years to change this man. That was your problem. You tried to change him. He has to change for himself.” I cannot keep running back and running back because the same thing is going to happen over and over again. It would be good for a week or two, then things will fall back into the fighting and cussing.

For Hans, “Going to jail [as a result of a domestic dispute] was a turning point.” He saw beyond the good aspects of the relationship and decided to leave his partner: “He’ll get an artist to draw a picture for me in a card and send some really nice messages. He just treated me really nice, like really nice. But the bad far outweighed the nice. That’s when I knew I was in the wrong relationship. It hurts to know you gotta leave him.”

Realization was often triggered by some external event. Max discovered his partner not only using, but selling drugs in their home. This illegal activity was the last straw and Max finally awakened to the fact that he could not change his partner: “His illegal activity was overtaking any benefit. It outweighed the benefits of the relationship ... I realized I didn’t have any ability in terms of my skills to deal with him and it had to be broken off.” Vincent caught his partner cheating on him – a watershed event that
allowed him to see that their relationship would not work: “He was cheating and doing his own thing and I didn’t want to be in the relationship anymore.”

Francis caught his partner bringing “a total stranger into his brother’s home [for] sex” during their vacation in Europe. Francis was humiliated in front of family and lost hope for their relationship:

No, I don’t mind when these things happen outside my life. I don’t care about that. After all, we didn’t have a sexual relationship between us. Why shouldn’t we? Either one of us was doing it. But to confront it in front of my brother, in front of my family, in front of me, it was a disgrace... I was being disgraced in front of my family. There is honour involved ... I could have been hurt. I could have been stabbed with a knife. That wouldn’t have hurt as much as when my partner dragged this man home who was a very nice man (right!) and had sex with him in my brother’s house while we were there as guests. To me it was unheard of.

Francis stated: “That’s when I really realized that I didn’t need him for nothing.” Edward realized his relationship was “toxic” and decided to “get rid of this malignancy” when he himself was diagnosed with cancer: “I couldn’t come out and say, you know what, this is over. I couldn’t say that until March and I think it has to do with my illness. I thought, you know what, this may kill me. I may not survive from the surgery and when I do come out from the recovery room, I don’t want to see that face.”

By constructing their stories this way, the participants could convince themselves that the ending was necessary and good for them. As a result, they saw it as both liberating and empowering. Thinking that “I could have gone the other way, I could have just clung to him,” Edward said, “Well, I think I come out the other side pretty good. I am glad I got out before it got any worse. I can certainly say when it ended last spring I thought there was a great deal of empowerment. I feel quite, pretty good about it.” Similarly, Dean remarked:
I’m glad that I chose to leave. It was my choice I left, not his choice. My decision! I think some people could end up in a relationship like that for 25 years. You know, people in my family, my aunt and my uncle, both of them are abusive and they have been in an abusive relationship for 30 years. So I am thankful that I got out of it in a year and a half, and it didn’t get worse.

Phil had similar sentiments: “I feel a lot stronger. I think my future is a lot brighter. I’m not depressed like I was before, hoping the end would come. Now I have dreams of the future, wanting to be there soon, wanting to see that [and] I feel free now that I don’t need to worry who I am talking to, what I am talking about. I can make plans. I can do things that I wanna do.”

THE AMBIGUITY OF LEAVING

For most participants, leaving their abusive partner was difficult and complicated. They did not simply end their relationship and were completely done with it. It was always a process of negotiation. Though not necessarily having the words to describe their experiences, they knew there was something not right and had thought of leaving their partners long before they actually did. Dean reflected, “I mean I clearly thought about leaving way before I actually left, probably a year before I actually left. I thought about leaving. It took a long time for me to get that, to actually make that step, actually to leave.” Likewise Neil admitted, “I knew there was something wrong, and the relationship was not suitable for me. For a year, for months, I kept doubting it. But shortly after a year, a year and a half, I started to realize that something was wrong and I wanted to get out of it.”

Many tried numerous times before they actually left. During the three years of their relationship, Otis had attempted to end it three times before he successfully left his partner: “We broke up, maybe three times. One time when we were living together
and I moved out and moved home to my mum for a couple of weeks but then, you know, we'd start talking again. Things were fine and we started talking slowly, gradually we'd go back.” Similarly, Francis had left the relationship several times and, like Otis, each time he ended up getting back together and staying with his partner for 20 years: “I walked out probably about two or three times. I actually started packing my suitcase at one point. I was going to go to the airport and take a flight back home. But somehow he would come crawling back and convince me otherwise.”

For some of the participants, leaving was never permanent and always ambiguous. Though no longer seeing each other, Umberto was unsure of the status of his relationship. He left his partner by court order: “I’m not seeing him. The relationship ended not because we decided it. It was essentially a court order, and that makes a big difference. It’s not that we broke up. It’s the court ordered it. The judge says you don’t see him. You didn’t break up. You were broken up. You’re separated.” Yet, Umberto was unsure if he could just easily give up his relationship even though he clearly knew that his partner was not good for him: “I am still very confused and I am like, thinking in my head that if he cleaned up, maybe, I don’t know. But everyone I know and everyone that I talk to says, just never have anything to do with him, but my feelings are still kind of raw and fresh. So I don’t know.” In a sense his relationship remained both over and not over.

Both Xavier and Max broke up with their partners but maintained sexual relationships with them. “After we were done and separated,” Xavier confessed, “we had some magnificent sex after that.” Likewise Max admitted, “We still had sex periodically after we broke up.” This relationship was highly ambiguous. His partner,
according to Max, “thought it wasn’t over because we had sex last night. That meant there is no issue.” But for Max, “Having sex doesn’t make a relationship.”

Ted was also not quite sure about the status of his relationship even though his partner dumped him for another man. Ted anticipated that his partner would ask him to get back together if things did not work out between his partner and his partner’s new love as had happened a couple of times previously: “I still love him. I still have a lot of feelings for him. But at the same time I feel like if we get back together again, it would happen soon or later. I think it is better for me to move on. It’s hard at this point. It’s very hard.” However, Ted found it difficult to say no to his partner: “I tried but I was never, how do you say it, never strong enough to say, I am going to get out of this. I guess it is my weakness.” For Ted, his relationship was over, but not completely over yet. By the same token, Irwin refused to define his relationship with his partner as they had broken up so many times. Irwin said that he was getting tired of it:

In the past, I've said, “I don't want to talk to you anymore, we fight too much.” And then, a few days later, one of us will e-mail the other and we’ll start seeing each other again and we’ll say no more fighting, and then it’ll happen again. I’ve learned to just decide to not say that anymore and not say I’m not going to talk to you anymore, and if I really mean it then I’ll just do it. But every time I try that, it doesn't work and I end up seeing him again.

In Irwin’s mind, they were “not really with each other.” But Irwin confessed that they still saw “each other often” and did “a lot of boyfriend things together.”

Though no longer together, others admitted that their lives were still somewhat intertwined. Jack stated, “I have all of his stuff, all of his belongings, the things he inherited from his grandparents, his baby shoes, his clothes. I don’t know what to do with it.” They confessed that they still felt a strong emotional attachment, though not
necessarily love, toward their partners. Max said, “I still care. I like him to settle down and get the kind of help he needs.”

Often, they feared they might give in to their own emotions and end up back with their abusive partners. To remind himself why he should not do so, Rufus said, “What happened was that I would constantly listen to songs from the same *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. This one song that Monica sings called *Sick and Tired*, that was like my theme song (laugh). I am sick and tired, you know.” Likewise Dean stated, “After I left, I sat and I wrote down why I left the relationship. Every day when I got up, I wrote it out and reminded myself why I left the relationship because I was scared that I would go back.” Quentin and Sheldon simply ignored their partners to avoid further contacts as they found it too emotional to see them after the break-up. Quentin confessed, “All those times when I ran into him, we have pretended to not see each other.” Sheldon recalled, “If we ever saw each other in a bar or on the street, we just basically ignored each other.”

They learned to let go of their partners and move on with their lives. Jack depicted, “In a way I also have a new beginning and I need to find the best way to start again. And that’s the hardest part, is trying to find that. So I’m letting go of all the things [anger, hate and disappointment] I expressed.” To let go, Graham believed that he needed to forgive his partner: “I don’t want to feel hate. I don’t want to hate my boyfriend. That is important.” Yet even those, whose partners were long gone, admitted that the memories (both happy and sad) would always be there. Neil said, “I tried to deny to myself that he existed.” But he could never escape the memory of him: “Say, you are watching a movie. I see someone who does something to other person, I would
remember him, remember his face.” For Lewis, “Forgetting him was the best thing” and, by not talking about his partner, he thought that “it’s all over.” However, Lewis admitted: “It will never be over.”

Still others maintained contact with their partner after the separation. Vincent described, “Now we are still best friends [and] he’s the sweetest person in the world. We get along really, really well. Now that we’re friends ... a lot of abuse issues don’t surface.” Francis stated, “Twenty years are a long time. Our lives started growing together [and] we had never been apart. We may not be lovers again but he will always be my best friend.” He continued, “We do and we still care for each other. That’s the weird part. I still care for him at some level; otherwise, he wouldn’t have that hold over me that he still has. He still calls me. I have an extra bag of crackers that I don’t eat. I called him ‘hey...’ Why? I don’t know (laugh).”

And still, they kept a certain distance between them and their partners, afraid they might be coaxed into getting back together. Vincent elaborated:

For the past two to three years, he used always say to me, “Remember, you are the one who divorced me.” He would keep reminding me of that. And he put me on this guilt trip and would not let me off of it for a long time. Even now sometimes he even throws it in, you know, like I am the one who divorced him and when he wanted to start the whole thing, to have a relationship. I mean he probably still wants to be together.

Interestingly, they noticed when they got together with their former partners, their behaviour frequently fell back in to the old patterns; thus, they wanted to be in touch, but did not want to be too close to their partners. Francis said, “Twenty years is a lot of years. His kids are my kids. There are a lot of commonalities in our lives. You can’t just cut all of that out of your life. I don’t want to frankly. But I don’t socialize with him.
anymore because I find it horrible. I cannot do that. It’s horrible.” Similarly, Otis described:

We only have periodical, on again, off again kind of connection. We get together as friends. We would go out and talk and stuff like that, and hang out, and then something would happen and there would be disagreement, and then we wouldn’t talk for a long time, and then we would get reconnected again and we’d start talking. Usually when we stop talking, he gets all abusive again, like emotionally abusive, like verbally abusive, like saying nasty things, and then me saying, “I don’t need this shit. Get out of my life.”

For some participants, leaving did not guarantee that they were free from their partners’ abuse. Phil was no longer with his partner, but was continuously harassed by him nonetheless. He elaborated:

He was doing the stalking and calling, and he loved me, and he’s sorry, and, you know, he made a mistake, he never loved anybody like he loved me, you know. So it was just constant and if I went out anywhere, he would be there. It got to a point when I went out with people, people were just living in the same boarding house, we were just friends, and if we went down the Church Street and he saw, he would be making trouble for everybody else because whoever I was seen with, I was sleeping with. They didn’t want to get involved. They were getting pissed off because they were getting all those rumours going about them that I left him because I was having an affair with this person. That’s why I left. So people started kind of like distancing, try to distance themselves from me.

After leaving, Hans received numerous telephone calls from his former partner begging for forgiveness: “He calls and leaves messages on my machine. He is calling a lot.” On top of it, Hans said, “He pesters me through his friends. His friends will say, ‘How come you’re not calling [his partner’s name]?’ Right! It’s a small world out there. I run into his friends all the time. They’ll say, ‘Why aren’t you seeing him?’” Neil’s partner used similar strategies hustling Neil into getting back together through Neil’s family, who found his partner charming, “intelligent,” “cute” and very loving:
He went to my family, and he said that I was leaving him; he loved me so much, he did everything for me, he took care of me, and I was leaving him and that he was depressed. He told my mom he was depressed. So my mom called me and said, “What are you doing to this guy? What are you doing to him? You are making him suffer. Come back and be with him again.” My family actually wanted me to get back with him again or, to resume that relationship again. That’s how he tried to convince me.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I explored how the participants negotiated leaving their partners. For many reasons, leaving is not a simple decision. Many do not have the option to leave; some are not ready to leave; and some do not realize that they need to leave. They repeatedly asked themselves whether life is better with or without their partner. They continually assess and re-assess their situation and weigh out their options. They do not necessarily find that leaving is a good alternative. Often triggered by an event, they come to realize that it is good and necessary to leave. However, even taking the step of leaving does not always signal the end of the relationship. In some cases, the participants still have many ties with their partners.
CHAPTER 11: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis has illustrated the complexity of violence in gay male relationships. Using the popular and academic queer press, I traced the dominant discourse of gay male partner abuse in our culture. As shown, through normalization, the popular and academic queer press has created two distinct categories of behaviours in relationships. As opposed to healthy behaviours, unhealthy behaviours are seen as abnormal and are in need of social intervention. Men who possess these qualities are considered vulnerable to partner abuse and, thus, require therapeutic assistance. Through this construction, the popular and academic queer press produces the discourse of abuse in gay male relationships.

In addition, the popular and academic queer press constructs gay men as a “risk” population for partner abuse. It argues that men are biologically conditioned to assert control and power, and have poor communication skills; as a result, they are interested in winning rather than resolving conflict. This condition increases gay couples’ risk for partner abuse. On the other hand, the popular and academic queer press isolates specific personal characteristics that leave an individual gay man susceptible to partner abuse. In so doing, it constructs gay men to be at risk for partner abuse both as a group and as individuals. In order to avoid abuse, they (particularly those who possess these qualities) are in need of clinical intervention.

However, as shown in the analysis, this risk discourse ties closely with the political economy of mental health treatment services. It supports certain types of clinical intervention while undermining others. Thus, gay male partner abuse is not a self-evident or neutral category, but a culturally, historically, and discursively specific
This new understanding serves to destabilize the current conceptualization of gay male partner abuse and adds to the existing discussion on the social construction of domestic violence (see Muehlenhard and Kimes 1999).

Furthermore, the popular and academic queer press creates a dichotomous notion of victims and perpetrators. They are represented as mutually exclusive. Victims, for example, are innocent and have low self-esteem and personal problems. They are often in denial about the abuse and experience learned helpless. In contrast, perpetrators are described as having power and control issues, family history of violence and personal disorders. Often internalizing homophobia, they are very manipulative and seldom remorseful of the abuse.

These assumptions create an understanding of who is the victim and who is the perpetrator and, as shown in my analysis, they filter through clinical practice. When gay men’s stories do not fit into these assumptions, service providers impose their assumptions on the men’s experience. For example, one man said that his partner was a great guy but hit him from time to time. He was perceived to be in denial. In another example, when a perpetrator wished to discuss the role their partner played in the relationship, he was seen as manipulative and having no remorse. It is difficult for service providers to see these men as not always neatly fitting into established roles. The assumptions leave little room for the reality of people’s lived experience. This analysis reflects the limitation of the current discourse of partner abuse. Ristock writes: “It is not that power and control, fear, and trauma are all wrong; it is just that as a discourse they assume too much about what is going on without telling us anything” (2002, 137).
It must be noted that service providers do not simply acquire the language of partner abuse, they also reproduce it through their clinical practice. At times, however, they resist it and contest the boundaries of what is considered abuse. Recognizing the complexity of lived experiences, they attempt to re-conceptualize how partner abuse intersects with structural forms of violence (such as racism and poverty). However, it is difficult to sustain this new discourse when the dominant discourse of power and control helps to simplify and rationalize partner abuse that is otherwise difficult to explain. As Ristock writes: “Challenges to the dominant power and control constellation are often quickly shut down because of institutional forces that further support and entrench the ideology while working against the emergence of counter-discourses” (2002, 139).

I reveal in my analysis that gay men’s lived experience of partner abuse is not fixed or frozen in time. Instead, it is a complex process of internal negotiation that is constantly under reconstruction. At first, they may be troubled and uneasy about what their partner did; however, they often do not have the language to describe their experience. From time to time, they re-examine and re-interpret the event. For different purposes, they choose to construct their experience differently, giving new meaning to it. Thus, their stories can only be a contingent representation of partner abuse; their experience is inherently fluid. As Christine Shearer-Cremean and Carol Winkelmann write, “meaning-making is dialogic, unstable, and forever open to disruption, interruption, and fragmentation” (2004, 11).

As shown, the abuse itself has no meaning without the act of naming it. Since gay men come to articulate their experience through language, which by definition is
shared, the lived experience of abuse is inevitably both personal and social. Thus, their experience cannot be entirely corporeal; what can or cannot be named as abuse is culturally specific rather than universal. To be clear, I am not saying that their experiences are fabricated; rather, I am demonstrating that their experiences are shaped both by the discourse and by bodily materiality (Wilson 2001). This insight helps re-conceptualize the experience of partner abuse and thus clinical practice.

According to my findings, gay men experience different degrees of violence in their relationships. However, not all forms of violence are seen as equal. A punch or physical restraint is sometimes considered “non-violent” and acceptable. Other forms of violence are considered acceptable if not justifiable when something is perceived as “wrong doing” or “violating social mores.” Thus, violence in gay male relationships is a continuum; what is considered and not considered as such, reflects the cultural values that we place on it. Moreover, as shown in my analysis, contrary to the common understanding of partner abuse, physical violence does not always escalate or continue. Even when the violence stops, some gay men continuously experience intimidation by their partner. They are not necessarily afraid of their partner’s threat; however their fear plays against other factors such as age, race and body type. In contrast, the findings reveal that abuse is often subtle or insidious, making it difficult to articulate and substantiate. Consequently, gay men tend to use broad descriptions (such as being intentionally hurtful and controlling) to categorize their experiences (see also Cruz and Firestone 1998).

Interestingly, as noted, violence in gay male relationships does not follow the dominant script of partner abuse commonly associated with rigid gender roles and
heterosexual norms. Nor do gay men involved in abusive relationships always fit neatly into one of the categories of victim or perpetrator. They are abused by their partners but they fight back and retaliate. They were brutally assaulted by their partners but they also hit their partners. They use multiple strategies to resist, manage conflict and seek control over their relationships. Their role changes from one relationship to another, and sometimes from one moment to another within the same relationship. As a result, roles are often unclear and contradictory, and this does not mimic the normative gender performance.

This insight unsettles the dominant discourse of partner abuse that dichotomizes the roles of victims and perpetrators. It helps further re-conceptualize the fluidity and reversibility of roles in partner abuse (Lamb 1996; Ristock 2002). Moreover, it draws our attention to how power can play out in abusive relationships multi-dimensionally, which is always situational and intersects with factors such as race, class, sexuality and age. This contingent nature of what constitutes an effective strategy extends beyond our common understanding of the words “power and resistance.” It thus helps us re-think the conceptualization of power and control in abusive relationships.

In sharp contrast to the more pessimistic view that the damage of partner abuse is irreversible and life-long, my analysis shows that different outcomes are possible. Certainly for some gay men the effect of partner abuse in their lives is devastating and lasting, yet for others it has not led to permanent damage. In fact, many find positive meaning in it and some even see it as a channel for personal growth. This broadens
knowledge about the effect of partner abuse and contributes to the re-conceptualization of clinical practice.

Lastly, the findings further offer new insights into the concept of leaving an abusive relationship. As shown, it is a process of negotiation through which gay men weigh pros and cons before making a decision. This process is mediated by larger social contexts such as race, class, age and HIV phobia. The prospect of leaving does not always guarantee a better future; it may instead appear bleaker. Even after deciding to leave, gay men still have or maintain multiple threads of connection to their partners; thus, leaving is not always the final chapter in the relationship. This insight helps re-conceptualize the meaning of leaving that goes beyond the simple choice of leaving or not leaving: one creates or maintains innocence while the other is cause for blame.

**LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

**LIMITATIONS**

To trace the dominant assumption of gay partner abuse, the analysis focussed on queer popular and academic press. I did not separately explore the differing discourses in the popular queer and scholarly press. Nor did it include other sources such as video, film and internet and therefore may not cover the entire spectrum of cultural assumptions regarding gay male partner abuse. Moreover, all service providers identified themselves as either gay or queer and work in the gay community; therefore, their experiences may differ from straight service providers who also work with gay men. Although the participants represent diverse ethnic backgrounds, the majority were white and therefore may not adequately reflect the experiences of people of colour. All participants were recruited in one major city, therefore limiting the understanding of
the experience of partner abuse in other locales, especially rural areas. The small number of participants in this study may means that findings could vary with a broader study. The above factors may limit the generalizability of the findings.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study has raised new topics of interest for future research in the area of gay male partner abuse. It revealed that the meaning of leaving is more complex than previously assumed and further in-depth study of this particular aspect of gay male partner abuse may be warranted. This study began before gay marriage was legalized in Canada; therefore, it may prove interesting to conduct similar research involving same-sex married couples. Some responses from study participants indicated gaps in understanding around the law enforcement response to gay male partner abuse. A further study in this area may provide additional insights both from the perspective of law enforcement and of gay men involved in partner abuse. Substance abuse issues came up and were included in the findings of this study; however, the scope of this study did not allow me to fully explore this issue. Further exploration might yield new information related specifically to substance abuse and violence in gay relationships.

This study solely focused on gay men. There is a need for similar research among lesbians, which may support the problematization of the predominant hetero-normal thinking. A more in-depth review of the differences in the discourses of the popular queer and scholarly press may provide further insight into how they reinforce and inform each other and whether there are areas of conflict between them. Lastly, the implications of the fluidity and reversibility of roles raised in this study merit further exploration with respect to perpetrator counselling and training of service providers.
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Ristock (2002) dedicates an entire chapter in her book to develop multi-level strategies to address the issue of same-sex abuse. Elsewhere I have previously provided similar discussion (Poon 2000). Here I specifically discuss the implications of my findings for community and clinical practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: COMMUNITY

Due to homophobia and heterosexism, partner abuse is commonly assumed to exist only in heterosexual relationships. There is a need for a public awareness campaign and professional training to increase awareness of gay male partner abuse. However, in order for it to adequately educate and inform, we cannot simply follow the existing heterosexual scripts. This campaign and professional training must be conceptualized to include the different experiences of gay male partner abuse that do not neatly fit into the binary categories of perpetrators and victims.

Partner abuse is an issue in same-sex male relationships; however, there is a lack of resources available to deal with it. The issue of gay partner abuse is not as widely known or understood as heterosexual abuse; thus, the bulk of the resources are focused on heterosexual abuse. As a community, we need to address this inequality of resources to ensure there is adequate support within the gay community.

There is limited space in which to discuss same-sex partner abuse. Even more limited is the space that fosters counter-narratives or narratives against the dominant discourse of partner abuse. We need to create a social space that enables gay men to develop their own narratives that do not necessarily follow the dominant scripts of violence in relationships.
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: CLINICAL PRACTICE

I situate my discussion of clinical practice within the framework of critical self-reflection and narrative therapy by social work educators (Brown and Augusta-Scott 2007; Foote and Frank 1999; Heron 2005; Rossiter 2006, 2007). These two frameworks are particularly helpful because of their commitment to social justice and their acknowledgment of multiple subjectivities. Critical self-reflection problematizes the production of knowledge. It seeks to critically examine how knowledge is socially constructed and how that impacts clinical practice. Amy Rossiter writes, reading through Emmanuel Levinas’ work:

[Bringing] the Other into our understanding through knowledge is violent because it erases that about the Other which we cannot understand or know. Without accounting for what we cannot know, the Other becomes a mere extension of our comprehension, and this is the ground of violence ... The Other is always more than my conception the other, thus infinite. (2006, 140)

For Rossiter, to be an ethical social worker, we need to “constantly examine our own terms, our own assumptions, our own construction,” instead of searching for definite knowledge about the client/the Other (2006, 143).

Similarly, narrative therapy, highly indebted to Foucault’s work, sees knowledge as a form of power that produces social regulation. As Catrina Brown and Tod Augusta-Scott write, “culture is regulated through strategies or techniques of power that regulate or discipline its members through the construction and internalization of dominant truths or discourses” (2007, xxiv). Thus, narrative therapy’s emphasis is less pragmatic and solution focused. Instead, it emphasizes “the externalization of stories of the self and internalized cultural discourses” and, say Brown and Augusta-Scott, these “externalizing conversations subsequently [enable] a process of reconstructing or re-
authoring identities” (2007, xii). With these frameworks in mind, I further discuss implications for clinical practice below.

If experience of partner abuse is as diverse and fluid as described in this study, constantly under revision and reinvention, how can we as social workers come to understand their experience without essentializing it? As outlined, the construction of gay male partner abuse is not value-neutral or pre-discursive. Instead, it is a form of knowledge in which power is exercised (Foucault 1980). It constructs the way in which we understand gay male victims and perpetrators of partner abuse. As a result, it limits our ways of thinking about their experiences and regulates our ways of working with them. As practitioners, we must be aware of such discursive effects and critically examine how they impose assumptions on us. We need to ask, for example, how our understanding of gay male partner abuse regulates and polices the way in which we understand the issue and how we interact with these men in therapeutic settings or, how the dominant discourse of violence in intimate gay relationships becomes a self-evident truth (knowledge) that imposes a uniform story on these men's lived experiences. When we question these concepts, we are able to liberate ourselves from the self-evidence of the dominant discourse (Foucault 1988b; Foote and Frank 1999).

As shown in the analysis of this thesis, the experience of gay male partner abuse is complex; therefore, we need to resist the temptation to fit it neatly into the story of perpetrator and victim. In fact, as Foote and Frank remind us, “any idea of ever arriving at some final ‘authentic’ story must become and remain suspect.” Similarly, we must resist the tendency “to invent a new story but to give the person the fullest choice among all potential stories” (1999, 179-81). Instead of taking on an expert role to give
diagnosis, our role as a therapist is simply to help these men search for meanings within events that are relevant to them, regardless of whether they fit into the normative discourse of gay male partner abuse (see Alcoff and Gray 1993; Augusta-Scott 2007; Nurnberger and Robichaud-Smith 2004).

At a conceptual level, to change the cultural assumption of gay male victims and perpetrators in partner abuse, we also need a language that acknowledges multiple subjectivities of identity (i.e., one that can hold multiple or even contradictory positions at the same time, or different positions at different times) and, also, theorizes how such subjectivities are constituted within a social context. Or, in Ristock’s words, we need “a language of power that allows us to map the multiple and interlocking nature of identity and systems of privilege and oppression that are part of the context of relationship violence” (2002, 125).

As evidenced, power in gay male partner abuse is rarely unidimensional. It operates differently in various personal as well as social contexts. To fully understand and explain how multiple subjectivities of identity are constituted in gay male partner abuse, rather than simply assuming that the victim is powerless and the perpetrator powerful and controlling, we must examine how power operates in particular personal and social contexts. In this way, we move away from abstract, fixed roles while allowing us to see multiple and sometimes contradictory aspects of personalities. This conceptualization of power does not deny that power and control operate in violent relationships. Rather, it rejects the notion that power is fixed and simply resting with the perpetrator. Within this new framework we are allowed to examine the complexity
of these men’s lives and, writes Ristock, “to scrutinize the power dynamics in [their]
intimate relationships and in other areas of their lives” (2002, 128).

Furthermore, as shown, the experience of partner abuse has no single meaning
but, rather, multiple meanings. To challenge the normative assumption of gay male
partner abuse that often centers on the experiences of middle-upper class white men,
we need to develop language that allows for the diverse experiences of abuse (Holmes
and Ristock 2004). We must explore how the experience of violence is mediated not
only through homophobia and heterosexism, but also through privilege (such as
whiteness) and other forms of social marginalization. In addition, we need to explore
how the expressions of violence, power, control, agency, strength and resiliency,
intersect with social dimensions such as race, gender, class, disability and sexual
orientation within relationships.

Language does much more than simply describes our social world. It constructs
the way we look at the world and affects the way we act (Adler and Rodman 2991;
Chambon 1999). Changing the language, then, will inevitably change the way we
construct our social world. By changing the cultural assumption of gay male partner
abuse, we change the way we construct the issue and how we work with these men. As
Tanya Lewis puts it, “changing assumptions based on normativity … allows for a
reconception of the therapeutic process” (1999, 31). This change may better help us
understand the complexity of gay male partner abuse and prepare us to work more
effectively with these men.
REFERENCES


Barker, Meg. 2005. This is my partner, and this is my ... partner’s partner: Constructing a polyamorous identity in a monogamous world. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 18 (1): 75-88.


Fraser, Heather. 2008. *In the name of love: Women’s narratives of love and abuse*. Toronto: Women’s Press.


Papso, Sally. 2004. To counsel or not to counsel. Swerve, February.


Woodrow, Marnie. 1999. Taking this quiz could save your life: How to tell if your lover is a jealous maniac. *Extra!*, April 22.


Appendix A: Research Posting

RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE IN INTIMATE GAY MALE RELATIONSHIPS

I am currently conducting a research study to explore violence in intimate gay relationships, which will form the basis of my PhD thesis at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. I would like to hear from you if you are a gay man who self-identifies as currently and/or formerly experiencing violence in an intimate relationship or if you are interested in talking about arguments, conflicts and fights (both physical and verbal) that occur in your current or former relationships.

What are the Goals of the Study?
The goals of the study are: (1) to articulate the experience of gay men who are in intimate relationships involving violence and, (2) to understand how gay men develop different strategies to deal with violence in the relationships.

What will be done with the Information from the Study?
The information will form the basis of my PhD thesis. I will also share the research findings (my PhD thesis) with community service providers and activists to promote social action and better serve the needs of gay men who are in intimate gay relationships. All personal information will remain confidential. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Who is doing the research?
My name is Maurice Poon. I am a PhD Candidate in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. For more information, please contact:

Maurice Poon, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON  M5S 1A1

Tel: (416) 653-4626  E-mail: utoronto.research@gmail.com

This PhD thesis project has been approved by the Ethics Research Committee of University of Toronto. Throughout this study, I will be supervised by Dr. Usha George who you may contact at (416) 978-3273.
The following are possible sites currently being considered to post flyers and make community announcements:

**Community Organizations that provide social, mental and medical health for gay men:** AIDS Committee of Toronto, Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention, Asian Community AIDS Services, Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention, Casey House, Halco – HIV & AIDS Legal clinic (Ontario), Toronto people with AIDS Foundation, Centre for Addition & Mental Health: Rainbow Services, Hassle Free Clinics, Gay Partner Abuse Project in Toronto, Anti-Violence Programme at 519 Church Community Centre, 2-Spritied People of the 1st Nation, David Kelly Services (Family Service Association of Toronto), Sherbourne Health Center, University of Toronto Sex Education & Peer Counselling,

**Bathhouses:** the Barracks, the Cellar, Club Toronto, Spa Excess, Steamworks Toronto, St. Marc Spa.

**Bars & Clubs:** 5ive, Andy Poolhall, Babylon, Bar 501, the Black Eagle, Buddies, Byzantium, the Churchmouse & Firkin, Crews/Tango, George’s Play, Fly, Hair of the Dog, Le Petit Liban, Lüb, O’Grady’s, Papi’s, Pegasus on Church, PJ Mello’s, Statlers, the Village Rainbow, Woody’s/Sailor, Zelda’s, Zipperz/Cellblock,

**Community GLBT Groups:** AVANTI LGBT Italians, the Canadian Lesbian & Gay Archives, Chinese Family Services of Ontario (Counselling of Chinese LGBT Communities), G.A.L.L.E.Y. – Gay and Lesbian Living in East York, Gay Fathers of Toronto, Gay West Community Network, Long Yang Club – Toronto, Portuguese Speaking of Ontario Arco-iris L.G.B.T., Prime Timers Toronto, Bear Buddies Toronto, TNT Men,

In addition, there are many cafés (such as Second Cup) and shops (such as the Glad Day Bookstore) around the Church and Wellesley area. The researcher will contact these cafés and shops and ask permission to post a flyer on their community notice board.
Appendix B: Letter of Acknowledgement and Research Description

INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear:

Thank you for your interest in the study: “Power, Resistance and Subjectivities: Violence in Intimate Gay Relationships.” Further to our recent telephone conversation on your possible interest in participating in this study, I am enclosing a more detailed review of the background and objectives of this study. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have after reading this information.

I will call you in the next few days to confirm your interest in participating in this study and to arrange a convenient time and place for the interview.

I am looking forward to speaking with you again.

Sincerely,

Maurice Poon, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
Tel: (416) 653-4626
utoronto.research@gmail.com
Title of Study: Power, Resistance and Subjectivities: Violence in Intimate Gay Relationships

Investigator: Maurice Poon, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON M5S 1A1
(416) 653-4626

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Usha George
Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

In recent years, research has shown a high prevalence of violence in intimate gay relationships. However, little is known about this issue, particularly in relation to the experience of violence. The purpose of the proposed research is to examine the nature and dynamics of violence in intimate gay male relationships. In particular, the research study aims at achieving this goal by:

(1) Identifying how gay men who experience violence in intimate relationships come to identity, understand and talk about their experience as violence and negotiate such experience; and

(2) Identifying how gay men who experience violence in intimate relationships, cope with the violence.

WHY SHOULD I PARTICIPATE?

Your involvement in this study is important because it can help provide a better understanding of the experience of violence in intimate gay relationships, a topic about which very little is known. Your participation can help community service providers and activists to promote social action and better serve gay men experiencing violence in intimate relationships.
ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO MY PARTICIPATION?

The study may cause some discomfort as it asks you to discuss some painful experiences in your current and/or former intimate relationships. Discomfort may include psychological and emotional distress. You can withdraw at any time during the interview and there will be no negative consequences from your service provider. In cases where this incidence occurs, the audiotape and notes recorded during the interview will be destroyed.

Additionally, if you require counselling services or help in dealing with the distress that you experience during the research process, you will have the support of the Anti-Violence Programme at the 519 Church Community Centre. The Anti-Violence Programme is a well-known program in Toronto that deals with people experiencing violence in same-sex relationships. Prior to the start of the interview, a list of community resources will be also given to you so that you can seek professional help to deal with violence in your intimate relationships if you want to do so in the future.

WHO IS INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

Approximately ten men who are over 18 years old will be interviewed individually. These men include gay men who self-identify themselves as currently and/or formerly experiencing violence in intimate relationships and those who are interested in talking about arguments, conflicts and fights (both physical and verbal) that occur in their current or former relationships.

No restriction is placed on the type of violence that occurs in your own relationships. There is no restriction placed upon the demographics of the participants with respect to ethnicity, race, class and disability. However, gay men of colour, gay men with disabilities, gay men of working-class backgrounds are highly encouraged to participate in order to broaden the participant base.

HOW WILL THE STUDY BE CONDUCTED AND WHAT IS MY ROLE?

Participants will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute interview. At the beginning of the interview, participants will complete a demographic information sheet and sign a consent form. During the interviews, participants will be asked to discuss their experience of violence, conflicts, arguments, fights (both verbal and physical) in their former and/or current intimate relationships.

DO I HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?

The participation in this study is voluntary. Participants are free to refuse to answer any questions and/or to withdraw from the study at any time.
IS THE STUDY CONFIDENTIAL?

All personal information will be kept strictly confidential. The names of participants will not be used at any stage of the research. Each participant will be identified by a number code to ensure privacy and the names of persons identified in interviews will be removed from the transcriptions. All data will be kept on a secure computer at the researcher’s home and access to the computer will be secured by use of specific passwords known only to the researcher. The completed interview schedules, field notes, transcriptions and the audiotapes will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet at the researcher’s home. No information will be released or printed that would disclose any personal identity and all such research data will be destroyed after seven years. If the participant discloses any child abuse during the interview, the researcher is obliged to report this to child protection authorities.

The findings of this study will serve as Maurice Poon’s PhD dissertation at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. The findings may also be used for education and further research purposes. The findings may also be published in academic journals or other reports. In all cases, the information will be presented in a way that preserves the confidentiality of participants.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, please contact Rachel Zand, PhD, Director of the Ethics Review Office, at 416-946-3389.
Appendix C: Research Posting for Community Consultations

COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS ON VIOLENCE IN INTIMATE GAY MALE RELATIONSHIPS

I am a doctoral candidate in social work at the University of Toronto and am currently conducting a series of community consultations to present the findings derived from my analysis of interviewing data about violence in intimate gay relationships that I collected for my PhD thesis at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. I would like to invite you to participate in these community consultations, to hear my findings, to provide feedback on them and to give your insight on how to deal with violence in intimate gay relationships.

What are the Goals of the Study?
The goals of the study are: (1) to obtain feedback in regard to my findings derived from my analysis of the interviewing data and (2) to obtain community input on how to deal with violence in intimate gay relationships.

What will be done with the Information from the Study?
The information will form the basis of my PhD thesis. I will also share the research findings (my PhD thesis) with community service providers and activists to promote social action and better serve the needs of gay men who are in intimate gay relationships. All personal information will remain confidential. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Who is doing the research?
My name is Maurice Poon. I am a PhD Candidate in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. For more information, please contact:

Maurice Poon, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON M5S 1A1
Tel: (416) 653-4626
E-mail: utoronto.research@gmail.com

This PhD thesis project has been approved by the Ethics Research Committee of University of Toronto. Throughout this study, I will be supervised by Dr. Usha George who you may contact at (416) 978-3273.
Appendix D: Study Information Sheet for Community Consultations


Investigator: Maurice Poon, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON M5S 1A1
(416) 653-4626

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Usha George
Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am writing to ask for your help. I am a doctoral candidate in social work at the University of Toronto and am currently conducting a study to examine the nature and dynamics of violence in intimate gay male relationships. This study involved two stages: (1) individual interviews with gay men who experience violence in their current or former intimate relationships and (2) community consultations. I have completed all of the interviews and the data analysis. Now I would like to invite you to participate in a community consultation in which I will present my findings and get your opinions about them and violence in intimate gay relationships.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS?

The purpose of the community consultations is (1) to obtain feedback in regard to my findings derived from my analysis of the interviewing data and (2) to obtain community input on how to deal with violence in intimate gay relationships.

WHEN AND WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE?

The community consultations will be carried out between Spring 2006 and Summer 2006 in Toronto. Depending on space available, community consultations will take place in a community centre (such as 519 Community Centre on Church Street) or a community-based organization that provides social and mental health services to gay men (such as AIDS community of Toronto and Asian Community AIDS Services).
WHO IS BEING ASKED TO TAKE PART AND WHAT WILL THEY DO?

Social workers previously or currently working with gay men; mental health workers who previously or currently providing mental health and counselling services for gay men; broad members or a volunteers involved in a community agency that provide mental health and/or social services to the gay male population; and people formally affiliated with an organization that provide mental health and/or community services for gay men will be asked to give their opinion on my findings and violence in intimate gay relationships. Participants will take part in a community consultation organized in a small group setting (about 6 to 8 participants) that will last about three hours. The researcher will first present his findings derived from his analysis of the interviewing data and then ask participants to provide feedback on the findings and insight on how to deal with violence in intimate gay relationships.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THE COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS?

The community consultation part of the study has minimal risks. Participation is voluntary, participants are not required to answer any questions they do not want to and participation or non-participation will not affect access to the program, any organization that participants work for, or any role that participants have within that organization. In case where the participant withdraws during the community consultation, what he discussed in the session will be deleted. The community consultations may benefit not only participants, but also their clients and the gay community, by allowing participants to share their knowledge about violence in intimate gay male relationships and using that knowledge to help develop strategies to deal with violence in intimate gay relationships.

IS THE STUDY CONFIDENTIAL?

All personal information will be kept strictly confidential. The names of participants will not be used at any stage of the research. Each participant will be identified by a number code to ensure privacy and the names of persons identified in interviews will be removed from the transcriptions. All data will be kept on a secure computer at the researcher’s home and access to the computer will be secured by use of specific passwords known only to the researcher. The completed interview schedules, field notes, transcriptions and the audiotapes will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet at the researcher’s home. No information will be released or printed that would disclose personal identity and all such research data will be destroyed after seven years.

The findings of this study will serve as Maurice Poon’s PhD dissertation at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. The findings may also be used for education and further research purposes. The findings may also be published in academic journals or other reports. In all cases, the information will be presented in a way that preserves the confidentiality of participants.
This PhD thesis project has been approved by the Ethics Research Committee of University of Toronto. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, please contact Rachel Zand, PhD, Director of the Ethics Review Office, at 416-946-3389. Throughout this study, I will be supervised by Dr. Usha George who you may contact at (416) 978-3273.

Your opinions are important to the study. I hope you will agree to take part.

Yours sincerely

Maurice Poon
Appendix E: Consent Form for Individual Interview Participants

Title of Study: Power, Resistance and Subjectivities: Violence in Intimate Gay Relationships

Investigator: Maurice Poon, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON  M5S 1A1
(416) 653-4626

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Usha George
Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto

I, ____________________________, understand that Maurice Poon is conducting a research study to examine the nature and dynamics of violence in intimate gay relationships, which will form the basis of his Ph.D. thesis at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

I understand that I will participate in an interview that will last around 60-90 minutes and in that I will be asked to talk about my experience of violence in my current and/or former intimate relationships.

I am aware that in order to participate in this study, participants must be 18 year old or over, and I declare that I meet this criterion.

I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that my decision either to participate or not to participate will be kept completely confidential. I do not have to answer any questions I don’t want to. At any time I may stop the interview to speak off the record and still continue with the interview if I want to. I can withdraw from the interview at any time. In cases where I decide to withdraw during the interview, the audiotape and notes recorded during the interview will be destroyed. My decision to participate or not will not affect the services that I receive from my service provider. I am aware that if I disclose any child abuse during the interview, the researcher is obliged to report this to child protection authorities.

Any questions I have asked about the study have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been assured that no information will be released or printed that would disclose
my personal identity and that my responses will be completely confidential. Any risks or benefits that might arise out of my participation have also been explained to my satisfaction.

I understand that with my permission the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. I am aware that the audio-tapes and transcripts will only be used by the researcher and no other person will have access to them. The audio-tapes and transcripts will not include my name or any other identifying information. Instead, a research code number will be used. All data will be password protected and kept on a secure computer at the researcher’s home. Access to the computer will be secured by use of specific passwords known only to the researcher. The completed interview schedules, transcriptions, audiotapes and other research data will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet at the researcher’s home. No information will be released or printed that would disclose my personal identity. All research data will be destroyed after seven years.

I am aware that I may experience some degree of emotional discomfort due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, I can choose to stop or withdraw from the interview at any time, and if I need counselling services or help in dealing with such distress, I will be referred to the Anti-Violence Programme at the 519 Church Community Centre for support.

I have been informed that I may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview for additional clarification at a later time. I am also aware that any data collected in this study will be used in future publications and/or presentations and that quotes from my responses may be used in the research and subsequent publications. My name and identifying details would not be published.

I have been advised that if I have any questions and concerns about my rights as research subject, I may contact Rachel Zand, PhD, Director of the Ethics Review Office, at (416) 946-3389 and/or Dr. Usha George, PhD, at (416) 978-3273.

Participant’s Name: (Please Print):_______________________ Date:    ___________

Participant’s Signature: _______________________________
Appendix F: Consent Form for Community Consultation Participants

Title of Study: Power, Resistance and Subjectivities: Violence in Intimate Gay Relationships

Investigator: Maurice Poon, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON  M5S 1A1
(416) 653-4626

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Usha George
Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto

I, _______________________, understand that Maurice Poon is conducting a research study to examine the nature and dynamics of violence in intimate gay relationships, which will form the basis of his Ph.D. thesis at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

I understand that I will participate in a community consultation organized in a small group setting that will last for approximately 3 hours. During the consultation, the researcher will present his findings about violence in intimate gay male relationships, collected through a series of interviews for his PhD thesis. I will be asked for my feedback on his findings and my insight on how to deal with violence in intimate gay relationships. I understand that with my permission the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that my decision either to participate or not to participate will be kept completely confidential. I do not have to answer any questions I don’t want to. At any time I may stop the interview to speak off the record and still continue with the interview if I want to. I can withdraw from the interview at any time. If I decide to withdraw during the community consultation, what I discussed in the session will be deleted. I am aware that my decision to participate or not will not affect access to the program, any organization that I work for, or any role that I have within that organization.

Any questions I have asked about the study have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been assured that no information will be released or printed that would disclose
my personal identity and that my responses will be completely confidential. There are, however, certain limits to the confidentiality of the information collected in group settings (because, for example, other people may hear what I say). Any risks or benefits that might arise out of my participation have also been explained to my satisfaction.

I understand that with my permission the consultation will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. I am aware that the audio-tapes and transcripts will only be used by the researcher and no other person will have access to them. The audio-tapes and transcripts will not include my name or any other identifying information. Instead, a research code number will be used. All data will be password protected and kept on a secure computer at the researcher’s home. Access to the computer will be secured by use of specific passwords known only to the researcher. The completed interview schedules, transcriptions, audiotapes and other research data will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet at the researcher’s home. No information will be released or printed that would disclose my personal identity. All research data will be destroyed after seven years.

I understand that the information shared during the session is confidential, and is not to be repeated to anyone outside of the session.

I am aware that any data collected in this study will be used in future publications and/or presentations and that quotes from my responses may be used in the research and subsequent publications. My name and identifying details would not be published.

I have been advised that if I have any questions and concerns about my rights as research subject, I may contact Rachel Zand, PhD, Director of the Ethics Review Office, at (416) 946-3389 and/or Dr. Usha George, PhD, at (416) 978-3273.

Participant’s Name: (Please Print):_______________________ Date:    ___________

Participant’s Signature: ______________________________
Appendix G: Demographics Information

Please complete the following background information sheet.

1. Age: ______________________________________________________________________

2. How would you identify yourself ethnically?
______________________________________________________________________________

3. How do you define your sexual orientation?
______________________________________________________________________________

4. Were you born in Canada?
______________________________________________________________________________

5. If you were not born in Canada, where were you born?
______________________________________________________________________________

6. If you were not born in Canada, how many years have you been living in Canada?
______________________________________________________________________________

7. What is your annual income range (circle one)?

$0-10,000   $10-20,000   $20-30,000   $30-40,000   $40-50,000   $50-60,000

$60-70,000   >$70,000

8. What is your current occupation?
______________________________________________________________________________

9. What is the highest education level you have obtained?
______________________________________________________________________________

10. What is your relationship status?
______________________________________________________________________________

Thank you.
Appendix H: Interviewing Guide for Individual Interviews

Objective: Understanding how gay men come to identify their experience as that of violence in their intimate relationships.

(1) What made you realize that there was or is something “wrong” in the relationship?

(2) How did you come to identify and realize your partner’s behaviours were or are abusive?
   When?
   What did they say? Did you find what they said matched your experience?

(3) Have you ever talked to someone about your experience?
   What did they say about it?
   How did you talk about it?
   What words do you use?
   Do you talk about it differently in different contexts?
   How did they react to it?
   How did you feel when they reacted to your experience?

Objective: Understanding how gay men resist violence in their intimate relationship.

(4) How did you react when you realized you were or are involved in an abusive relationship?
   Emotionally and psychically?

(5) What did you do when you realized you were or are experiencing violence in an intimate relationship?
   Did you seek any help? What kind?
   Did you try to leave?

(6) How did/do you perceive yourself in the relationship?
   As a victim?
   A perpetuator? or
   Something else?

(7) Could you describe an incident where violence occurred in the relationship?
   What he did?
   What you did?

(8) Are you still in the relationship? If yes, what keeps you there?

Objective: Understanding how gay men negotiate their experience through discourse.
(9) How would you describe your former and/or current experience of violence in the relationship?

(10) How would you describe your former and/or current violent partner?

(11) How would you describe your experience, and yourself, now?

(12) How have these experiences affected your relationship, or relationships?

(13) In your opinion, is there any uniqueness about violence in gay intimate relationships?
Appendix I: Interviewing Guide for Community Consultations

The researcher will ask the following questions and facilitate discussion around these questions:

1) In your opinion, what does violence in intimate gay relationships look like and what are the specific challenges gay men in intimate relationship involving violence face?

2) How do you think gay men in an intimate relationship involving violence cope with the violence?

3) As a community, what can we do in response to violence in intimate gay relationships?

After this, the researcher will present his findings about violence in intimate gay relationships that he collected through a series of interviews. He will ask:

4) Do you find the findings relevant, useful, persuasive, and convincing?
Appendix J: A Resource List of Community Services for Individual Interview Participants

Organizations that help gay men and lesbian deal with domestic violence

- Gay Partner Abuse Project at (416) 925-9872 x 2288 or (416) 876-1803 or e-mail at info@gaypartnerabuseproject.org
- Anti-Violence Programme at 519 Church Community Centre at (416) 392-6878 x 117 or e-mail at avp@the519.org

Organizations that provide general social and mental health services for gay men

- AIDS Committee of Toronto at (416) 340-2437 or e-mail at ask@actoronto.org
- David Kelly Services (Family Service Association of Toronto) at (416) 595-9618
- University of Toronto Sex Education & Peer Counselling at (416) 978-8732

Organizations that provide general social and mental health services for gay men of colour

- 2-Spritied People of the 1st Nation at (416) 944-9300 or e-mail at info@2spirits.com
- Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention at (416) 599-2727 or e-mail at asaao@asaao.ca
- Asian Community AIDS Services at (416) 963-4300 or e-mail at info@acas.org
- Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention at (416) 977-9955 or e-mail at blackcap@black-cap.com
- Centre for Spanish-Speaking Peoples at (416) (416) 925-2800 or e-mail at aidscssp@spandishservices.org
- Chinese Family Services of Ontario (Counselling of Chinese LGBT communities) at (416) 979-8299 x 235 or e-mail at jchan@chinesefamilyso.com

Other Resources

- Centre for Addition & Mental Health (Rainbow Services) at (416) 535-8501 x 6784 or (416) 535-8501 x 7001
- Sherbourne Health Centre at (416) 324-4180
Therapists who provide private counselling services for gay men and lesbian

- Jeff Reynolds at (416) 466-2021
- Joyce Barnett at (416) 698-5183
- Stephen Westfall at (416) 827-7578 or e-mail at swestfall@change4u2.ca
- Dr. Rod Day at (416) 624-6950 or e-mail at rod.day@rogers.com
- Mary Dyson at (416) 691-1039
- Margot Snow Feferman at (416) 482-0355 or e-mail at margot@talktomargot.com
- Jodee McCaw at (416) 929-5851 or e-mail at jmccaw@aol.ca
- Nick Mule at (416) 926-9135
- Dino Paoletti at (416) 406-6227 or e-mail at dinopaoletti@hotmail.com
- Hershel Russell at (416) 694-4092 or e-mail at hershel@ca.inter.net
- Roger Spalding at (416) 323-3425 or e-mail at rogespal@enoreo.on.ca
- Jeremy Tomlinson at (416) 486-2161
- Jocelyn Urban at (416) 465-8914
- Wendy Wine at (416) 410-3800
- Karen Zarnett at (416) 822-7716