Article

IRV International Review of Victimology

International Review of Victimology
2024, Vol. 30(2) 282–297

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/02697580231196165
journals.sagepub.com/home/irv
Sage

Less than ideal victims: Understanding barriers to Queer men's recognition of male-perpetrated intimate partner violence through Christie's 'Ideal Victim' framework

Joseph Patrick McAulay
University of Oxford, UK

Abstract

Queer men who experience Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) from male romantic partners have long struggled to recognise that they are being abused or to identify themselves as victims. I argue that Nils Christie's framework of the Ideal Victim can help us to understand the cultural and social dynamics which work to prevent these men from identifying their experiences as forms of victimisation. This paper uses data gathered from interviews with Queer male victims of male-perpetrated IPV to investigate this potential relationship, attempting to find out how the men understood their experiences of violence and abuse in relation to wider cultural norms and images of victimisation. This analysis reveals two key themes. First, within the men's accounts, the images of the Ideal Victim and Offender are heavily gendered and because of this, the men struggled to relate their own experiences of victimisation to what they perceive to be the heavily feminised figure of the Ideal Victim. Second, within the men's account, there was a 'Public Story' of IPV in which relationship abuse had to be physical, frequent, and all-consuming to be taken seriously. This 'Public Story' constrained the men's ability to understand their partner's actions as IPV and made them doubt the validity and legitimacy of their own experiences in which emotional manipulation and psychological abuse were often more frequent and devastating than physical assault. From these findings, I argue that there is an urgent need to confront the Public Story of IPV and its related Ideal Victim to craft more inclusive public narratives of relationship abuse in which Queer male victims can find legitimacy and support for their experiences.

Keywords

Victims, intimate partner violence, Queer criminology, Ideal Victim, stigma, masculinity, victimology

Corresponding author:
Joseph Patrick McAulay, Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Faculty of Law, University of Oxford, Manor Road Building, Manor Road, Oxford OX1 3UQ, UK.
Email: joseph.mcaulay@csls.ox.ac.uk

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is an endemic social problem within the Queer male community. Research from multiple jurisdictions suggests that Queer people experience IPV at equivalent rates to heterosexual women (Finneran and Stephenson, 2013; McClennen et al., 2002; Messinger, 2011; Rollè et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2013), with studies conducted in the United Kingdom validating these initial findings (Guasp, 2013). Furthermore, Queer men as a specific segment of the wider Queer community face unique challenges when they encounter abuse in their relationships, specifically that they often struggle to recognise that they are in a violent and abusive relationship and consequently do not label themselves as victims of IPV (Cruz, 2003; Donovan and Hester, 2010; Merrill and Wolfe, 2000). This difficulty with identifying as a victim appears to have an impact on the reporting and help-seeking behaviour of this population, as Queer men are less likely to utilise formal support services or contact the criminal justice system (Donovan and Hester, 2015; McClennen et al., 2002; SafeLives, 2018). Furthermore, even if Queer male victims do attempt to report their experiences, they are at risk of experiencing stigmatising responses that minimise their harm and reject their status as true victims. This rejection can occur when service providers or criminal justice practitioners suggest that their victimisation is less serious because they are men or that IPV is a crime that can only truly impact women (Donovan and Barnes, 2019; Hine et al., 2022b; Huntley et al., 2019). Despite this evidence, there is a lack of understanding as to why Queer men are unable to recognise experiences of IPV. This is a significant blind spot in current IPV scholarship given that scholars have argued that the recognition of a victim identity in cases of IPV is a necessary step for victims before they can begin the process of leaving an abusive partner (Dunn, 2010; Ferraro and Johnson, 1983; Loseke, 2001; Mills, 1985). Therefore, it is of critical importance that we develop a better understanding of why Queer men struggle to identify abuse in their romantic relationships as IPV, and themselves as victims.

I argue that Nils Christie's (1986) concept of 'The Ideal Victim' provides a useful framework for better understanding Queer men's reluctance to identify as victims of IPV and the barriers that they face in identifying abuse in their relationships. While other scholars have attempted to understand the role that the image of the Ideal Victim plays in the experiences of several different victim groups (Davies, 2018; Van Wijk, 2013; Wilson and O'Brien, 2016), none have applied this framework to specifically examine the challenges faced by Queer male victims of IPV. In this article, I argue that by applying Christie's framework to these men's accounts, we can begin to understand why they struggle to label themselves as victims of IPV. I begin by outlining Christie's Ideal Victim framework, before showing how this framework can help us understand why male victims, and Queer male victims specifically, often struggle to accept victim identities or recognise that have been harmed. I then present original empirical data that demonstrate how Queer male victims of IPV struggle to understand their experiences against the dominant 'Public Story' (Jamieson, 1998) of IPV. Finally, I conclude by arguing that only by challenging both this Public Story and the Ideal Victim image that sits behind it, can we allow Queer victims to fully understand their experiences and recognise their victimisation.

Conceptualising the Ideal Victim

The concept of the Ideal Victim was developed by Nils Christie (1986) who argued that victimhood was a socially constructed identity. That is, who is labelled as a victim will vary from one situation to another and such labelling is dependent on the wider social circumstances of the individual and the victimising event (Christie, 1986: 18). Christie argued that the social construction of victim identity exists at two levels. The first is the interpersonal level, where individuals must decide if they would label themselves as victims in a given situation. The second is at a wider cultural or social level, where entire societies or cultural groups will have their ideas about who can be a victim and in what circumstances that label can be applied. Christie's framework has two important implications for research into IPV among Queer men. First, victimhood exists as an individual social identity, and thus, an individual may reject a victim identity even if their external circumstances suggest that they fit the expected social criteria of victimisation. Second, how society constructs the wider social image of victimhood will have a significant impact on who is labelled as a legitimate or real victim (Christie, 1986: 20). It is this second implication to which Christie dedicates much of his article, and it is here that the contours of his wider theoretical framework begin to emerge. In articulating how societies decide who is given the social label of victimhood, Christie argues that there is an idea of an 'Ideal Victim', an image that guides how victimisation is understood and constructed at a wider sociological level. This framework is then utilised as a means of determining who can be legitimately classed as a victim, and any potential victim will have their conduct and circumstances judged against this image. In explicating what constitutes this Ideal Victim, Christie (1986) highlights that this category contains at least five core values or attributes. That the victim must be:

- Weak.
- Carrying out a respectable project.
- Unblamed for their victimisation.
- Weaker and less powerful than their offender.
- Unrelated and previously unknown to their offender.

Christie emphasised that the legitimacy granted to the victim is heavily dependent on the concurrent social construction of the offender. That is, there exists a related ideal offender that is necessary for the Ideal Victim to exist. If we look back at the characteristics Christie attributes to the Ideal Victim, two exist in direct relationship to the offender. The offender must be both 'big and bad' (Christie, 1986: 19), that is, larger and stronger than their victim, and they must have no personal relationship with the victim. In short, Christie argued that the Ideal Victim was exemplified in the image of

> the little old lady on her way home in the middle of the day after having cared for her sick sister . . . hit on the head by a big man who thereafter grabs her bag and uses the money for liquor or drugs. (Christie, 1986: 18–19)

While Christie's framework has been highly influential across victimological scholarship, what is of particular relevance to this present study is how the Ideal Victim framework has been applied to the study of victims of IPV, and indeed the notion of the Ideal Victim has contributed to keen and important theoretical insights in this field. Scholars of IPV have long recognised the socially constructed nature of IPV victimisation, indeed a major project of early feminist research in the field of IPV was the critique of dominant understandings of victimisation which excluded abused women from being considered legitimate victims (Hoyle, 2007). Previous public and expert opinion had often seen domestic abuse as excusable or normal, and the women who experienced it as in some way consenting to or provoking the violence they received from their husbands and boyfriends (see, e.g. Loseke and Cahill, 1984; Randall, 2004; Schechter, 1982). Moreover, this same vein of scholarship was keen to highlight that female victims often struggled to accurately label their experiences as IPV and thus themselves as victims (Ferraro and Johnson, 1983; Loseke, 2001; Mills, 1985; Polletta, 2009). For example, Meyer (2016) drew on Christie's framework to argue that female victims of IPV typically fail to meet the image of the Ideal Victim and she noted that her participants faced recurrent stigma from family and friends who drew on this image to dispute their innocence and legitimacy and blamed them for their victimisation (Meyer, 2016). In essence, researchers have demonstrated that the image of the Ideal Victim has an impact on whether and how individuals within domestically abusive relationships label themselves as victims, and the responses that outside actors have towards a purported victim's claims of legitimacy and support. Thus, Christie's framework has had a hand in helping scholars better understand the experiences of female victims of IPV. However, this framework can also help us to understand the experiences of another group who have similarly struggled to grapple with victimisation, men.

Men as victims

Male victimisation presents a problem both for men and for wider society when it is compared to the idea of the Ideal Victim. This arises from the fact that the social identity of victimhood is heavily stigmatised (Rock, 2002). Victims are traditionally seen as passive, weak, vulnerable, and powerless, all values that are generally derogated and looked down upon within wider society (Dunn, 2008; Pemberton, 2012; Van Dijk, 2009). However, it is important to recognise that this stigma is not experienced uniformly. Christie's framework of the Ideal Victim presents a very specific image of who can be a legitimate victim which is heavily gendered. Recall that his example of Ideal victimisation is an old woman, not a man, and indeed victimisation has often been seen traditionally as a feminine trait or experience (Cunniff Gilson, 2016). After all, victimhood is a social identity that is traditionally understood as implying passivity, weakness, and vulnerability, all traits which fit within traditional patriarchal constructions of femininity that position women as weak and passive dependents (Enander, 2010). This construction of femininity is then typically contrasted with a parallel construction of masculinity as strong, purposeful, and powerful, and it is this very form of masculinity which is embodied in Connell's (1995) concept of 'hegemonic masculinity'.

Connell argues that masculinity does not have an objective social meaning; instead, masculinity is a socially constructed concept which is maintained through social interactions and wider social structures (Connell, 1995). Consequently, there exist multiple different masculinities that co-exist among different social groups at different times and in different places. However, among these differing forms of masculinity, one construction has achieved what Connell calls a 'hegemonic' status (Connell, 1995: 77) in that it acts as the dominant and most socially powerful form of masculinity within society. Consequently, this form of masculinity dominates all others and comes to be regarded as the most valuable and culturally lionised form of masculinity to which all men are pushed to aspire. This form of masculinity pushed men to be violent, aggressive, and dominant, while traits such as vulnerability, weakness, and emotional sensitivity are constructed in opposition as feminine and thus shameful for men to aspire towards (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). However, given the overlap between victimisation and femininity as embodied in Christie's image of the Ideal Victim, we can begin to understand that men, pressured as they are by the constraints of hegemonic masculinity, may struggle to manage or accept the social identity of victimhood. Victimhood, associated as it is with femininity, weakness and passivity, is threatening to a man's ability to live up to the norms and expectations of hegemonic masculinity.

The incoherence of these two identities means that even though men statistically make up a large proportion of recognised victims, men as a social class have historically struggled to accept a victim identity (Newburn and Stanko, 1994). Indeed, several different studies have demonstrated that men often experience intense shame after victimisation, partly through a perception that the victimising event has in effect questioned their masculinity and threatened their identity as men (see, e.g. Dorahy and Clearwater, 2012; Tsui et al., 2010; Weiss, 2010). Burcar and Åkerström (2009), for example, conducted research among young men who had experienced criminal assault which examined and attempted to theoretically contextualise their responses to this form of harm. In reporting their findings, they noted that their participants made strong efforts to distance themselves from victim identities, often by trying to minimise the seriousness of the assault or to account for their inability to protect themselves. Such findings suggest that male victims can attempt to offset the stigmatising impact of victimisation by distancing themselves from the label of victimhood and by excusing or accounting for their perceived failures in performing masculinity. However, failure to do this can have disastrous consequences for their self-image as they feel emasculated and humiliated in the process (Javaid, 2018). While much of this work has been conducted with heterosexual men, there is a growing body of evidence that this process also applies to the experiences of Queer men.

Public stories and Queer victims

We can begin to see evidence of this if we turn to the work of Catherine Donovan and Marianne Hester, who conducted ground-breaking research into the experiences of Queer victims of IPV in the United Kingdom (Donovan et al., 2006; Donovan and Hester, 2010, 2015). They noted that their participants struggled to identify their experiences as abuse and to label themselves as victims. In theorising why this was the case, they concluded that there was a 'Public Story' (Jamieson, 1998) of domestic violence, which constructed relationship abuse as a problem that was experienced exclusively by heterosexual women. Within this Public Story, the victims of IPV were presented as weak, traditionally feminine women, who were physically assaulted by larger, violent, aggressive, and traditionally masculine men. Although this Public Story of domestic violence was useful in marshalling public support for victims and making IPV victimisation an issue of social concern, they argued that its construction of the problem of IPV was inherently constraining and did not account for the diversity of victims' experiences. Chief among these excluded experiences was IPV in Queer relationships. Here the authors noted that in their research Queer victims often struggled to recognise themselves as having experienced IPV or to even label what they were experiencing as abuse because they understood IPV through the lens of this Public Story (Donovan and Hester, 2010).

I argue that Donovan and Hester's work has uncovered the influence of a framework of an Ideal Victim of IPV even if they do not explicitly draw on Christie's terms in their research. The Public Story is essentially a narrative account of an Ideal Victim, small, weak, powerless, and entirely innocent, brutalised by their 'big and bad' (Christie, 1986) ideal offender. This Ideal Victim is then used as an image against which the experiences of Queer victims are understood and, typically, found wanting. While this research is useful in spotlighting how Christie's framework can be fruitfully applied to the experiences of Queer victims of IPV, Donovan and Hester's work leaves gaps for further empirical enquiry into the subject. These gaps arise first because their work primarily consists of a general consideration of the Queer community, and thus, there is little space for them to fully discuss how gender and sexuality can interact to problematise the ability of an individual to navigate or account for victimisation. This is significant given that previous research has shown that this relationship can be crucial in shaping the experiences of victims of IPV. For example, Rebecca Barnes' (2011) study with female victims of same-sex IPV found that her participants' struggle to identify abuse in their relationships was influenced by a prevalent belief that Queer female relationships were inherently more egalitarian and fairer than heterosexual relationships. The inherent absence of men in these relationships meant that they were in effect supposedly free from the patriarchal controls which caused IPV in the first place (Barnes, 2011). These factors made it more difficult for them to see their partner as an abuser since they inherently did not fit the image of the larger traditionally masculine male abuser embodied in the Public Story of IPV. On this basis, I argue that the impact that gender has on how sexual minorities understand victimisation can potentially be extended to Queer men as well. Yet, so far, no research has attempted to understand whether the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and Queerness may influence how Queer male victims of IPV understand and react to these Public Stories and Ideal Victim images when attempting to make sense of their abusive relationships. In the rest of this article, I will now attempt to fill this gap and analyse how this relationship may impact Queer men when they are confronted by IPV.

Methodology

The data that form the basis for this study were collected through two primary sources: An online anonymous qualitative survey and a series of semi-structured interviews, both conducted with self-identified Queer men who had experienced IPV from a male romantic partner in either a previous or current relationship. Data collection took place between June 2020 and August 2021. Participants were primarily recruited online through social media as the online anonymous qualitative survey was advertised on Queer male and LGBTQ + Facebook pages of which I was a member. This survey allowed the participants to leave contact details if they wished to participate in a follow-up interview. Those who did were contacted via email or text asking if they were still interested in participating. Upon receiving confirmation, the participant and I arranged a date and time to meet, and a semi-structured interview was conducted. These interviews were carried out remotely through video-conferencing software, telephone calls, and in a small number of cases email exchange and instant messaging. The interviews were semi-structured but followed a rough interview schedule. All participants were asked to give their thoughts about (1) how they reacted to the term victim, (2) whether they viewed themselves as victims of IPV, and (3) whether they ever understood their relationship as abusive while in the relationship. Upon completion, I manually transcribed all the interviews. These digitised transcripts were then coded and organised into emergent themes using the NVivo 12 software. The final sample size was 114 survey participants and 40 interview participants. All participants' names have been pseudonymized.

Less than Ideal Victims

The principal finding from my study is that the image of the Ideal Victim was a recurrent theme throughout my participants' accounts. This image was utilised as the primary means of understanding what IPV was supposed to look like and accorded with what Donovan and Hester (2015) characterise as the 'Public Story' (Jamieson, 1998) of IPV. Because of this internalised image, the men in my study struggled to accept themselves as victims of IPV. Furthermore, these men demonstrated not simply an inability to label themselves as victims, but an outright aversion to the label itself, viewing it as disempowering, stigmatising, and even emasculating. I argue that this aversion arises from the fact that my participants did not see their experiences as fitting within the narrative of the Ideal Victim. Indeed, they demonstrated a strong awareness of this Ideal Victim narrative, deploying it frequently in their accounts as a reference point for their own experiences and the distance that exists between them. This view can be summarised in an excerpt from one of my interviews. Here, Saul explains why he would not label himself as a victim of IPV despite being physically and verbally abused by his partner:

> I'm not saying I'm a victim because I hate that word, I genuinely hate that word, victim . . . I wouldn't be classed [as a victim] because I'm not a five-foot woman who's black and blue. Because I'm six foot one. I'm a six-foot-one male. (Saul, 25–30)

Here Saul deploys what he sees as the traditional understanding of what a victim of IPV is supposed to look like and contrasts it with how he views himself. Furthermore, he outlines two different but linked responses to the notion of victimhood: He states that he hates the word and denies that he would accept the label on that basis, yet simultaneously argues that regardless of his feelings towards the term, he still would not be classed as a victim due to his lack of fit with the image of IPV victimisation. Thus, the men's accounts contain the image of the Ideal Victim, while their responses centred around both an understanding that they did not meet the criteria for this image and that this social identity is not valued or desirable. In understanding this dynamic, I have identified two major themes in my participants' responses as they relate to the image of the Ideal Victim:

1. The gendered construction of the Ideal Victim and offender and
2. The construction of Ideal Victims as individuals who have experienced intense and recurrent physical violence.

Feminine victims and masculine offenders

The first aspect of the narrative of relationship abuse that was emphasised in my participants' accounts was the gendered construction of victimisation and, to a lesser extent, offending. By this, I mean that within their narratives of victimisation, the typical victim of IPV was constructed as female, while the typical offender was constructed as male, and both images embodied certain idealised characteristics of masculinity and femininity. The typical female victims of IPV were presented by participants as timid and fragile wives and girlfriends, cowering in constant fear at the abuse inflicted upon them by their aggressive masculine husbands and boyfriends. In this way, my participants constructed an image of victimisation within their narratives in which femininity and vulnerability were fused and IPV became a social problem that was primarily, if not exclusively, experienced by heterosexual women. We can see this gendered understanding of victimisation in the narrative presented by Fred. Here he discusses why he struggled to understand his experiences as IPV, noting that his experiences were unlike the traditional depictions of IPV he had seen in television and films, particularly given that he was both older and physically much larger than his younger abusive partner:

> People think well, two men, how can one abuse the other? You know, you're not a little lady being abused by a big nasty man. It's . . . this is somebody smaller than me. And I'm, I'm quite a big chap you know. (Fred, 30–40)

This was echoed in Alexi's account where he described how he felt there was a pervasive sense that men could not be abused in their relationships and that this crime was simply confined to women:

> I think a norm in life [is that] in a relationship between a woman and a man, if the woman was being abused, then I [think] people are more likely to acknowledge that. Whereas being a man [in a relationship with another] man. You know [the] media doesn't really focus on domestic abuse against males. It's always females that are getting abused and society has this perception that a man just needs to be a man. He doesn't talk about his feelings. He doesn't . . . You know, [it basically] doesn't happen to men and that's the type of feeling that's out there at the moment. (Alexi, 30–40)

Here we can see that both Fred and Alexi emphasise particular constructions of gender in their narratives of IPV victimisation. Fred highlights the assumption that the victim of IPV must be physically smaller and therefore more vulnerable than their larger masculine abuser, while Alexi highlights that society is more likely to take victimisation against women seriously whereas men are simply expected to bear the violence and 'be a man'. These constructions of victim and offender fit into wider understandings of gender in the Public Story of domestic violence, presenting the legitimate victims of this type of abuse as embodying traditional feminine traits such as passivity, vulnerability, and physical frailness (Donovan and Hester, 2010). The idea that the traditional Ideal Victim promoted in the wider Public Story of domestic violence presents a narrow and inaccurate understanding of relationship violence is hardly new. Other scholars have already argued that even for heterosexual female victims this narrow construction of feminine victimhood in traditional IPV narratives is harmful (Leisenring, 2006). Yet here, for my participants, this narrative had the effect of robbing them of the ability to recognise what was happening to them when abuse did occur. We can see an example of this in Jim's account, where he describes his difficulty in recognising his experiences as IPV due to the lack of representations of male victimhood:

> I think that there was just no discussion anywhere of domestic violence where men are the victims, whether that's in heterosexual or gay relationships. I don't remember ever seeing anything like that on television or in the media, it was just not something that is spoken about. So, I also had a sense, as it was happening, of this is only happening to me, it doesn't actually happen to anyone else. (Jim, 50–60)

Jim here suggests an understanding of IPV victimisation as a gendered form of harm in which only certain victim subjects are constructed as being worthy of legitimacy and acted as a barrier to their recognition of the abuse they were experiencing. Jim's account suggests that these are not purely individualised narratives that are unique to each person but instead the narratives that the men present are built from and respond to wider cultural narratives of IPV embodied in the Ideal Victim and the Public Story that are promulgated across society. Indeed, many of the men in my study made direct reference to how their understandings of IPV were shaped by pre-existing representations of relationship abuse. Nate, for example, described his frustration at the wider public discourse around IPV:

> I just found the whole domestic violence thing very, very, very aimed at women, you know, so that, you know . . . So I found it frustrating and still do have frustrations that when people talk about domestic violence, they talk about men beating their female partners . . . As soon as we talk about domestic violence, people think, 'man onto a woman!' For [women] getting support there are big signs, women's aid, women's refuge, women's support. (Nate, 50–60)

Kieran echoed this view further highlighting that the lack of public debate or acknowledgement of the existence of Queer male victims of relationship abuse made him feel less willing to come forward with his experiences:

> All the support services out there are for straight women. So why would anyone want to listen to me? Because it obviously isn't a problem. Because if it was a problem, there'd be a lot more stuff around about it. I mean, even the in-depth [course] on interpersonal violence that I was doing, it was all about heterosexual women being beaten by heterosexual men. If you're not one or the other of those two, then you're not part of any of the stats. You're not part of the visibility of it. (Kieran, 30–40)

Kieran's reference to the lack of visibility of Queer male victims highlights part of the source of the gendered nature of these narratives. For the men in my study, their understandings of IPV have been shaped by public narratives that, unintentionally or not, have reinforced a gendered construction of victimhood that presents fragile feminine victims as the only subjects who deserve support. Armed with this narrative reinforced by a culture that does not adequately acknowledge Queer male victimisation, they struggle to interpret their experiences to see themselves as possible victims when their relationships turn abusive.

Furthermore, within this gendered narrative of victimisation, a less prominent theme emerged; men struggled to relate to their internalised narrative of relationship abuse because they felt their partner did not match the stereotype of what they assumed a typical domestic abuser should look like. This typical offender was large, imposing, traditionally masculine, and sadistic in their abuse of their partner. We can see a reference to this in Fred's early testimony, where he highlights that he struggled to see himself as a victim due to the fact he was far larger and more traditionally masculine than his younger and physically weaker partner ('this is somebody smaller than me'). Moreover, further reference to the gap between how my participants saw their partners and how they understood the typical IPV offender can be seen in Stefan's account where he struggled to see his partner as an abuser:

> He was a teacher. And he had a good reputation with sports. And like, he wasn't someone you would conventionally say is a violent person . . . And that's what made it worse. Because it was if it were someone who I think was more conventionally kind of evil, I think it would have been easier for me to go to the police. (Stefan, 25–30)

Stefan's characterisation of his partner as not being 'conventionally kind of evil' or not typically someone who would be labelled 'a violent person' highlights that within his narrative the figure of the abuser was a monstrous one which clashed with his characterisation of his partner as a teacher with a good reputation. Meanwhile, for other participants, it was their partner's seeming fragility and weakness that appeared to disqualify them from being cast as an abuser. Niall, for example, highlighted that he struggled to label his emotionally and physically abusive partner as an abuser due to his chronic health condition:

> [People with this condition] don't currently live past kind of 40 . . . And yeah, and that was . . . that really added to the because I kind of . . . kind of thought I can't be being abused by someone who is so like, physically weak if you know what I mean? (Niall, 18–25)

From these examples, we can see that the feminised Ideal Victim was complemented by the aggressive masculine figure of the ideal offender in my participants' accounts. The presence of both offender and victim in this narrative is not surprising; as Christie (1986) argued decades ago, the construction of a victim identity requires the construction of the opposed offender identity. Here, the aggressive brutish and sadistic masculinity embodied in the figure of the abuser acts to emphasise and highlight the vulnerable, injured, femininity of his victim. In such a way, this image reinforces certain constructions of gender even as it seems to condemn expressions of patriarchal violence. Moreover, these findings highlight that for Queer male victims of IPV, these gendered images of Ideal Victimhood within the context of IPV act to create an interpretive framework within which they may struggle to label their experiences as IPV and themselves as victims. However, as potent as these gendered stock characters are, they are not the only aspect of the Ideal victim image that creates dissonance within the men's experiences of abuse.

Black and Blue

The second theme emphasised in my participants' accounts is the belief that only the most extreme and physically violent forms of IPV constituted grounds for legitimate victimisation. For the men in my study, the criminal and immoral nature of IPV was inherently bound up in the physical violence they believed constituted its core. Within the Public Story of IPV, the abuser was seen to continuously unleash a stream of unrelenting physical violence against their partner in an escalating cycle of assault and battery, yet most of my participants struggled to link their experiences to these narratives of extreme physical violence. This cognitive dissonance led to my participants often attempting to distance their experiences from what they perceived to be 'real' or 'serious' cases of IPV, and this distancing took two forms within their accounts depending on the exact nature of the abuse they experienced.

First, for those men who did not experience physical abuse and whose encounters with IPV were confined to emotional, sexual, and/or economic forms of control, there was a struggle to identify themselves as victims in any way. For them, IPV was an inherently physical crime and thus there was no way for them to place themselves in the Public Story. We can see a good example of this in Ewan's account, where he articulates his struggle to accept himself as a victim of domestic abuse:

> I think domestic abuse . . . I think . . . I kind of know this isn't right . . . But domestic abuse does kind of conjure an image of someone getting punched. (Ewan, 30–40)

This is mirrored in Kai's description of the instance where a friend labelled his relationship with his ex-husband as abusive and his initial shock at the label given he had not experienced physical violence:

> I was in shock, I say 'What do you mean I was in an abusive relationship?' Because in my understanding, I thought abuse is more like violent . . . so I didn't [think I was in one], I didn't really know what I'd call an abusive relationship until I talked to [him.] And he asked me to google it, and I did, and I found out that's exactly what [my ex-partner] did to me. And I was like 'Oh my gosh!'. (Kai, 30–40)

These accounts suggest that for men whose partners never physically harmed or hurt them, the inherently physical and violent construction of IPV within the narrative of victimisation presents an interpretive barrier to their assumption of victim identity. The Ideal Victim is completely overpowered by their offender, and it appears that the more subtle psychological harm done through coercive control does not gel with this image of victimisation. Yet what is more remarkable is that this hyper-violent construction of IPV within this narrative of victimisation also had a significant impact on the second group of victims, those who *had* experienced physical abuse from their partners.

This second group shared the first's understanding of IPV as an inherently violent act, yet despite their own experiences of violence, they still struggled to label themselves as a victim. This led to men frequently describing instances of intense and repeated physical violence at the hands of boyfriends and husbands, only to quickly add that they did not consider such instances to constitute IPV and did not see themselves as victims, at least at the time. This was often done by distinguishing their own experiences from the typical images of abuse they associated with the Public Story; what happened to them might be wrong, certainly the sign of an unhealthy relationship, but not IPV. A key part of this process of differentiation was to argue that violence was not an *inherent* part of their relationship, which was achieved by emphasising its episodic or infrequent nature. We can see an example of this in Derek's accounts of how he struggled to identify his sexually and physically violent partner as an abuser:

> I was abused physically, psychologically, emotionally, and financially. At the time, I did not consider it 'proper' abuse because the physical attacks were infrequent and not pre-meditated. I think the biggest barrier for me reporting my experience was the notion that my physical abuse wasn't 'severe' or frequent enough to merit the label of domestic abuse or domestic violence. (Derek, 30–40)

Here we see that Derek did not see his partner's physical abuse as IPV because it was not 'severe' enough, implying that in his mind domestic violence was confined to only the most intense and life-threatening forms of injury. We can better understand this characterisation of abuse if we turn to a recurrent notion that appeared throughout men's descriptions of what they considered to be legitimate IPV victimisation, that of being beaten 'Black and Blue' by your partner. Within the context of the narrative, this motif was used to highlight the understood severity of IPV victimisation, as it constituted beatings so vicious that the victim was permanently marked by bruises across their body. Multiple participants used this exact phrase to describe what they thought IPV should look like and distinguished their own experiences from this narrative by highlighting the lack of severe physical victimisation. We can see an example of this in Stefan's account. Stefan's partner was frequently physically abusive to him, including one incident where he smashed Stefan's head into a wall-mounted thermometer. Despite this, Stefan struggled to recognise these instances as IPV:

> [But] violence in, in a domestic violence perspective, for me, was like, your boyfriend beating you black and blue . . . with him, it wasn't a case of like, beating me black and blue. It was like a punch in the arm or a punch in the stomach. It wasn't constant. It was like, small. It was like drip-feeding, rather than the whole thing. (Stefan, 25–30)

Stefan's distinctions between the hypothetical victim of IPV being beaten black and blue by their partner and his own experiences may seem incongruous, but they speak to the narrow construction of Ideal victimhood in the men's understanding of what relationship abuse should look like. For Stephan, the only legitimate forms of IPV victimhood involved violence that was all-consuming and constant. Consequently, his own experiences of isolated incidents of physical violence, the ones he likened to 'drip feeding', failed to meet the sensationalised drama of the narrative and thus were discounted as an illegitimate basis for victimisation. The Ideal Victim must be weak, and their ideal offender must be big and bad. Thus, the presence of severe physical violence in the Public Story works to solidify this particular dynamic by suggesting that the only legitimate victims are the ones who have been physically dominated and destroyed by their partners. However, this idea fundamentally misunderstands the dynamics of IPV where physical abuse is just one tool of many used by the abuser to coercively control their partner and sits alongside others such as emotional, sexual, or financial abuse (Stark, 2007). Yet by collapsing the complexities of victimisation into a simple binary premised on intense and all-consuming physical violence, the Public Story of IPV and its Ideal Victim work to de-legitimise experiences of abuse which fail to conform to this often-inaccurate caricature. This appears to have a serious impact on the men I spoke to, as the already mentioned gendered construction of the Ideal Victim appeared to allow them to downplay or minimise the violence they experienced as less serious than it was due to their status as men. For example, Adnan noted that he struggled to view his partners' assaults against him as particularly serious given his previous experiences of male violence:

> And to be honest, because I had been involved in violence myself, I just thought it was normal. I thought this is how men show affection. (Adnan, 30–40)

The narrowness of this construction of victimhood cannot be overstated and is even present in the accounts of men who were severely physically abused by their partners. Jim, for example, experienced multiple serious incidents of physical violence from his partner, including an attack with a trowel. Despite this fact, he struggled to identify his relationship as abusive for a long time:

> I did wonder when I first saw your survey how, how I would have responded to the chance of answering it if there hadn't been actual physical violence against me? Because it's that incident with a trowel . . .. and the slapping and punching and kicking. That makes me very, very confident that I can read my experience as having been [IPV] . . . [But] If it hadn't actually gotten to a point where there was physical violence, would I now be able to still go back and rationalize it and say, 'Yes, that was an abusive relationship'? (Jim, 50–60)

This recognition of the tenuousness of his definition of his experiences of abuse highlights the narrowness of the image of the Ideal Victim within the current Public Story of IPV that permeates our society. Moreover, it acts to highlight that for Jim and the rest of my participants, there was a consistent struggle to recognise their own experiences as IPV against these larger cultural images which are heavily gendered and focused on severe and all-consuming physical violence. We can thus see that my participants' narratives of abuse were influenced by the larger Public Story of IPV in which the image of the Ideal Victim emphasised certain constructions of gender and violence in such a way as to render them unworthy of legitimacy.

Private harms and public stories

This study has demonstrated that Queer male victims of IPV often struggle to recognise and identify abuse within their intimate relationships with other men and, consequently, accept or identify themselves as victims. I argue that these difficulties can be properly explained through the framework of the Ideal Victim, specifically the victim embodied in Donovan and Hester's (2015) idea of the 'Public Story' (Jamieson, 1998) of IPV. The men I interviewed clearly described a cultural understanding of IPV in which relationship violence was constructed as a gendered phenomenon which only impacts female victims who are severely physically dominated by their larger and more traditionally masculine male partners. This gendered construction of victimhood acted as a barrier for my participants, as they struggled to identify their own experiences with this cultural narrative of victimisation. Moreover, the feminised nature of the Ideal Victim in the Public Story of IPV meant that my participants had to grapple with the threat of emasculation and the added stigma of failing to meet standards of masculinity if they were to fully adopt and accept the label of victimhood. In this way, the image of the Ideal Victim acted as a barrier to the adoption of the victim label.

My study has thus provided evidence of one potential factor which may help us to understand why Queer men struggle to contact formal sources of support such as Domestic Violence charities or the Criminal Justice System. The cultural construction of the Ideal Victim works to make the men believe that their experiences would not be taken seriously and to cultivate a fear that they will be dismissed or ridiculed should they come forward. None of this is to suggest that this is the only or primary barrier that prevents Queer victims of IPV from accessing support, many other issues such as a fear of institutional homophobia or fear of retaliatory violence from their partners work to keep these men's experiences of abuse a private rather than public concern (Cruz, 2003; Finneran and Stephenson, 2013; Merrill and Wolfe, 2000). Moreover, even if men were encouraged to come forward there exists a dearth of services that can support them in their journeys of recovery. Most services are directed at helping female victims, while men, especially Queer men, face a much sparser service landscape, with large swathes of the country having no or extremely limited specialist services (Hine et al., 2022a). However, the cultural weight that Christie's Ideal Victim and Public Story of IPV played on my participants' accounts is significant for several reasons. First, it demonstrates how the cultural construction of victimisation works to impact the experiences of male victims when in intimately abusive relationships. Although previous research has utilised Christie's framework to examine the experiences of female victims of IPV (Meyer, 2016), my research has highlighted that Queer men who encounter IPV in their intimate relationships also grapple with the spectre of the Ideal Victim when attempting to make sense of and account for their experiences. Second, I argue that this research has highlighted the need for a larger public recognition and account of the experiences of Queer male victims of IPV. The men in my study struggled to reconcile their experiences in part because of a lack of public narratives of IPV in which the experiences of Queer male victims were highlighted. The Public Story of IPV which centres and reifies the image of the Ideal victim must be publicly deconstructed in a way that recognises and validates the plurality of victim experiences. Without this, men will continue to suffer in silence, and, in a bitter twist of irony, this will simply contribute to the strengthening of the current hegemonic Public Story. If Queer men continue to struggle to recognise and accurately describe their experiences, they will privatise their suffering and rely on quiet informal methods of resolving their problems. This situation merely perpetuates the silence which surrounds IPV in Queer relationships and consequently allows the Ideal Victim to continue to reign supreme. Thus, research, policy, and activism must work to deconstruct this Public Story; otherwise, Queer men who suffer under the shadow of IPV will continue to remain less-than-Ideal Victims.

Acknowledgements

The data this article is based on were collected as part of research conducted through an ESRC funded 1 + 3 Studentship award. The author would also like to thank Professor Carolyn Hoyle and Dr Samuel Singler for their comments and feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

ORCID iD

Joseph Patrick McAulay https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3030-4377

References

Barnes R (2011) 'Suffering in a silent vacuum': Woman-to-woman partner abuse as a challenge to the lesbian feminist vision. *Feminism & Psychology* 21: 233–239.

Burcar V and Åkerström M (2009) Negotiating a victim identity: Young men as victims of violence. *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention* 10: 37–54.

Christie N (1986) The Ideal Victim. In: Fattah EA (ed.) *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*. Houndmills; Basingstoke; Hampshire: Macmillan, pp. 17–30.

Connell RW (1995) *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Connell RW and Messerschmidt JW (2005) Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society* 19: 829–859.

Cruz JM (2003) 'Why doesn't he just leave?': Gay male domestic violence and the reasons victims stay. *The Journal of Men's Studies* 11: 309–323.

Cunniff Gilson E (2016) Vulnerability and victimization: Rethinking key concepts in feminist discourses on sexual violence. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42: 71–98.

Davies P (2018) Environmental crime, victimisation, and the ideal victim. In: Duggan M (ed.) *Revisiting the 'Ideal Victim': Developments in Critical Victimology*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 176–192.

Donovan C and Barnes R (2019) Domestic violence and abuse in lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGB and/or T) relationships. *Sexualities* 22(5–6): 741–750.

Donovan C and Hester M (2010) 'I hate the word "victim"': An exploration of recognition of domestic violence in same sex relationships. *Social Policy & Society* 9: 279–289.

Donovan C and Hester M (2015) *Domestic Violence and Sexuality: What's Love Got to Do with It?* Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Donovan C, Hester M, Holmes J, et al. (2006) Comparing domestic abuse in same sex and heterosexual relationships. Report, University of Bristol and The University of Sunderland. Available at: https://equation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Comparing-Domestic-Abuse-in-Same-Sex-and-Heterosexual-relationships.pdf (accessed 18 August 2023).

Dorahy MJ and Clearwater K (2012) Shame and guilt in men exposed to childhood sexual abuse: A qualitative investigation. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 21: 155–175.

Dunn J (2008) Accounting for victimization: Social constructionist perspectives. *Sociology Compass* 2: 1601–1620.

Dunn J (2010) Vocabularies of victimization: Toward explaining the deviant victim. *Deviant Behavior* 31: 159–183.

Enander V (2010) 'A fool to keep staying': Battered women labeling themselves stupid as an expression of gendered shame. *Violence against Women* 16: 5–31.

Ferraro KJ and Johnson JM (1983) How women experience battering: The process of victimization. *Social Problems* 30: 325–339.

Finneran C and Stephenson R (2013) Intimate partner violence among men who have sex with men: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 14: 168–185.

Guasp A (2013) *Gay and Bisexual Men's Health Survey*. Report, Stonewall, London.

Hine B, Bates EA and Wallace S (2022a) 'I have guys call me and say "I can't be the victim of domestic abuse"': Exploring the experiences of telephone support providers for male victims of domestic violence and abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37: 5594–5625.

Hine B, Wallace S and Bates EA (2022b) Understanding the profile and needs of abused men: Exploring call data from a male domestic violence charity in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37: 16992–17022.

Hoyle C (2007) Feminism, victimology, and domestic violence. In: Walklate S (ed.) *Handbook of Victims and Victimology*. Cullompton: Willan, pp. 146–174.

Huntley AL, Potter L, Williamson E, et al. (2019) Help-seeking by male victims of domestic violence and abuse (DVA): A systematic review and qualitative evidence synthesis. *BMJ Open* 9: 1–13.

Jamieson L (1998) *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Javaid A (2018) Male rape, masculinities, and sexualities. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 52: 199–210.

Leisenring A (2006) Confronting 'victim' discourses: The identity work of battered women. *Symbolic Interaction* 29: 307–330.

Loseke DR (2001) Lived realities and formula stories of 'battered women'. In: Gubrium JF and Holstein JA (eds) *Institutional Selves: Troubled Identities in a Postmodern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 107–126.

Loseke DR and Cahill SE (1984) The social construction of deviance: Experts on battered women. *Social Problems* 31: 296–310.

McClennen JC, Summers AB and Vaughan C (2002) Gay men's domestic violence. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 14: 23–49.

Merrill GS and Wolfe VA (2000) Battered gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality* 39: 1–30.

Messinger AM (2011) Invisible victims: Same-sex IPV in the National Violence Against Women Survey. *Journal Interpersonal Violence* 26: 2228–2243.

Meyer S (2016) Still blaming the victim of intimate partner violence? Women's narratives of victim desistance and redemption when seeking support. *Theoretical Criminology* 20: 75–90.

Mills T (1985) The assault on the self: Stages in coping with battering husbands. *Qualitative Sociology* 8: 103–123.

Newburn T and Stanko EA (1994) When men are victims: The failure of victimology. In: Newburn T and Stanko E (eds) *Just Boys Doing Business? Men, Masculinities and Crime*. London: Taylor & Francis, pp. 153–165.

Pemberton A (2012) Just-world victimology: Revisiting Lerner in the study of victims of crime. In: Morosawa H, Dussich J and Kirchhoff GF (eds) *Victimology and Human Security: New Horizons*. New York: Wolf Legal Publishers, pp. 45–69.

Polletta F (2009) How to tell a new story about battering. *Violence against Women* 15: 1490–1508.

Randall M (2004) Domestic violence and the construction of 'ideal victims': Assaulted women's 'image problem' in law. *Saint Louis University Public Law Review* 23: 107–154.

Rock P (2002) On becoming a victim. In: Hoyle C and Wilson R (eds) *New Visions of Crime Victims*. Oxford: Hart Publishing, pp. 1–22.

Rollè L, Giardina G, Caldarera AM, Gerino E and Brustia P (2018) When intimate partner violence meets same sex couples: A review of same sex intimate partner violence. *Frontiers in Psychology* 9: 1506.

SafeLives (2018) Free to be safe: LGBT + people experiencing domestic abuse. Report, London. Available at: https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Free%20to%20be%20safe%20web.pdf (accessed 18 August 2023).

Schechter S (1982) *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Stark E (2007) *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tsui V, Cheung M and Leung P (2010) Help-seeking among male victims of partner abuse: Men's hard times. *Journal of Community Psychology* 38: 769–780.

Van Dijk J (2009) Free the victim: A critique of the western conception of victimhood. *International Review of Victimology* 16: 1–33.

Van Wijk J (2013) Who is the little old lady of international crimes? Nils Christie's concept of the Ideal Victim reinterpreted. *International Review of Victimology* 19: 159–179.

Weiss KG (2010) Too ashamed to report: Deconstructing the shame of sexual victimization. *Feminist Criminology* 5: 286–310.

Wilson M and O'Brien E (2016) Constructing the ideal victim in the United States of America's annual trafficking in persons reports. *Crime, Law and Social Change* 65: 29–45.

Yu Y, Xiao S and Liu KQ (2013) Dating violence among gay men in China. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 28: 2491–2504.