Stories of Love, Shame, and Transformation: Understanding how Queer Men Experience Victimhood through Intimate Partner Violence.

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Abstract

Despite an increase in the attention paid to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) which occurs within Queer relationships, men who encounter relationship violence from their male romantic partners remain an under-research minority in wider victimological scholarship. My thesis aims to address this dearth in extant scholarship through a qualitative investigation of the experiences of Queer male victims of IPV violence within the United Kingdom. More specifically, my work examines how these men make sense of their experiences of victimhood and forge new social identities in the aftermath of their victimisation. In this way, my work aims to address the gap in existing victimological scholarship which has so far failed to address Queer male IPV victimisation from a phenomenological perspective and to consider the role that narrative may play in their experiences of victimisation. In exploring this topic, my thesis draws on the findings of a large-scale online qualitative survey and in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with Queer men who have experienced IPV from their current and former romantic partners. My findings suggest that these men initially understood their experiences of victimisation through a narrative of committed intimate romance and that this narrative eventually broke down as the men grappled with the stigma of victimisation which calls both their masculinity and their ability to find romantic companionship into question. This eventually resulted in an assault on their sense of self which shattered their understanding of their world and created a sense of narrative collapse, which required the men to generate new narratives of incorporation which integrated the victimising event into a newly forged sense of self. In this way, my thesis addresses a clear gap in current victimological scholarship and provides a much-needed contribution to the growing field of narrative victimology.

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Prelude

Collapsed Worlds

On Thursday the 15th of October 2020, a man told me how his world ended.

I had been conducting fieldwork for two months. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, this meant running an online qualitative survey asking Queer men who had been subject to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) to share their experiences. By this point in the study, the survey had largely become a recruitment tool, giving men who had answered the survey questions the option of participating in a follow-up interview. I had initially thought that I would struggle to find anyone willing to fill in the survey and even fewer who would be willing to take hours out of their day to open up to a stranger about what may have been the worst times of their lives. Instead, I had been surprised to receive many responses and soon had a full schedule of interviews. The frequently changing public health restrictions meant I was conducting these interviews from the so-called *"comfort"* of my bedroom, listening to men I had not met before, nor would likely ever meet again, reveal their thoughts, feelings, and traumas to me. Their stories revealed reoccurring narratives which ran through all their testimonies like a thread, allowing me to follow them through a labyrinth of sometimes-chaotic experiences. I found myself pulling on that thread yet again that Thursday morning as I spoke to Kai[1].

Kai was the ninth man I had interviewed for my research, and I was already starting to recognise this same narrative thread in his story. Kai was a foreign national who fell in love with a British man whilst studying in the United Kingdom. After a long-distance courtship, during which his partner had showered him with love and affection, the two married and Kai returned to Britain on a spousal visa. However, this romantic dream soon became a nightmare. Kai's partner became increasingly controlling over his life: determining who Kai could or could not see, dictating his movements, and forcing him to take on the responsibility of caring for the household on top of working full time. He began to verbally degrade and abuse Kai, calling his accomplishments into question and telling him his parents would be ashamed of him. When the pandemic hit the abuse escalated even further. His partner would hurl insults and scream at him for hours on end, and eventually even go as far as to starve him by refusing to let him eat, sometimes for days at a time. Kai repeatedly tried to get psychological help for his abusive husband, but nothing seemed to work, and he eventually tried multiple times to leave the relationship, only managing to succeed after a particularly harrowing incident where his husband destroyed his passport and other identifying documents. This prompted Kai to call the police who arrested his partner. In the aftermath, Kai took refuge in a friend's spare room - the same room from which he was talking to me.

Kai had been separated from his abuser for just under three months when I spoke to him. His story bore many of the hallmarks that I was beginning to identify as common within the narratives of my other participants. These were narratives where Queer men searched for a perfect romance story of their own and then fell in love with apparently charming men who swept them off their feet with passion and intimacy. However, these initial impressions of romance soon gave way to stories of shame and victimisation, where the men grappled both with living with a violent and abusive partner, and with the stigma of becoming a victim. Kai's narrative was thus paradigmatic of the type of stories which would form the basis of this thesis, a narrative which would sadly seem increasingly routine as the months of fieldwork wore on.

And yet, something about this interview stood out to me. Kai's testimony had a rawness to it that had been missing from my previous conversations. He frequently spoke through choked sobs and our interview stopped and started so he could compose himself amidst bouts of tears. I felt his pain

[1] All my participants received a unique pseudonym as part of the anonymisation process of data-analysis.

keenly, but I was gripped by a terrible sense of distant powerlessness. I was unable to do anything other than give brief murmuring words of assurance and compassion over an internet connection.

At one point in the interview, he shared how he had come to realise that he had been in an abusive relationship. A friend had insisted that his partner had been abusing him and Kai had pushed back. *"What do you mean I'm in an abusive relationship?"* he had asked *"Because, in my understanding, I thought abuse is more like violent…so I didn't think it was an abusive relationship."* However, at his friend's insistence, he had Googled *"Signs of an abusive relationship"* and to his shock, he had discovered that his own experiences matched the warning signs for coercive control almost exactly. This realisation that he had been abused, that the romance he thought he had lived had not been real, that the man he had loved was in reality someone willing to hurt and degrade him, the stigma and shame he would have to bear and manage as a victim, the reality, the sheer weight of this event – this all came together to feel much heavier than the experiences shared in other interviews. In a moment where he paused to take a breath, I asked:

"And how did that make you feel? When you had that realisation?"

He stopped, his eyes blinking back his tears as he pondered the question. After a moment he turned to look at me through the computer screen, and in one faltering breath he answered:

"It's like the whole world collapsed."

I would soon discover Kai's story was not unusual in the context of my research, but it was the first time I grasped the significance of these narratives. These were stories of love, of shame, of despair, and potentially of hope. Kai's story belongs to a genre that has long been ignored within wider society. It represents a glimpse into the social world of a population of victims that has historically been hidden, marginalised, and silenced: the world of Queer men abused by the men they love.

Chapter One

Introduction

Queer Male Intimate Partner Violence

Queer[2] men's experiences with IPV have long been confined to the edges of larger discussions of relationship violence and domestic abuse within research and activist circles. Compared to the much larger and more established body of research which has examined the experiences of heterosexual women abused by their male partners, research which looks at the experiences of Queer men (or even the Queer community in general) is sparse (Rolle et al 2018, Harden et al 2022). Indeed, even within the Queer community itself, there was for some time a longstanding and deeply ingrained unwillingness to confront the issue of violence that occurred within Queer relationships (Knauer 1999). As Island and Letellier (1991) argued, for much of the Queer liberation movement's history the focus remained on the injustices done to the Queer community from a heterosexist and homophobic society such as hate crime, massive systematic neglect during the AIDS crisis, or discrimination in the domestic and employment spheres. To admit that Queer people could abuse each other in vicious, demeaning, and fatal ways was seen as a distraction from the wider goal of Queer liberation (ibid). Moreover, highlighting these issues risked playing into homophobic stereotypes which posed Queer relationships as inherently dysfunctional and volatile (Letellier 1994). As such, these men's stories remained unheard, only given voice in private spaces. However, the silence that has long surrounded these stories has begun to lift, and the voices of this group of victims are finally being heard.

Since the 2000s academics and researchers have begun to turn their attention to the issue of IPV in Queer couples, and several studies have begun to shine a light on the scale and scope of the problem (see for example Tjaden et al 1999, Messinger 2011, Raghavan et al 2019). In one of the first studies conducted in the United Kingdom, Catherine Donovan and her colleagues performed research with both heterosexual and Queer individuals to compare their experiences of IPV (Donovan et al 2006). They found that their Queer respondents reported experiencing similar if not higher rates of IPV when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (ibid p.7-8). This finding has also been supported by several other quantitative studies completed in the United States, which have further demonstrated that the rates of same-sex IPV are roughly the same, if not higher in some areas than when compared to heterosexual couples (Messinger 2011, Carvalho et al 2011, Stiles-Shields and Carroll 2015, Longobardi and Badenes-Ribera 2017). Moreover, this growth in academic research which has examined the experiences of Queer victims was also soon matched by commitments from third-sector organisations to take the issue more seriously, and as a consequence, Queer victims are becoming more visible in both public spaces and wider discourses on IPV. Domestic violence support organisations such as Women's Aid and RISE now offer information and support for Queer victims of IPV (Women's Aid 2022). There is also now a specialised Queer domestic violence support service in the form of Galop, a charity dedicated to helping Queer victims of hate crime, sexual assault, and

[2] 'Queer' here is used to describe any sexual orientation that sits outside the boundaries of heterosexuality, and thus acts as an umbrella term to describe men who identify as Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, or simply not straight. It must also be noted that I am using Queer here purely as an identity term. That is, that I am using Queer as an umbrella to refer to any men who sit outside the boundaries of cis-heteronormativity (Farrow 2018) and thus it encompasses men who identify as Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, or otherwise simply not straight. In doing this, I am not using the word Queer in its political sense which arises out of the broader field of Queer theory. In this usage, Queerness is not purely an identity label, instead it is orientation towards power in which the individual attempts to break down and subvert narrow binaries and identity labels by exposing their socially contingent nature and deconstructing them in the process (Seidman 1994, Dilley 1999, Hall 2003). Whilst there is a wealth of literature within the field of Queer theory, I do not draw from it within this study, and thus my use of the term Queer is a purely technical one that does not stretch to a commitment to political Queerness on my or my participants part. For examples of IPV studies that do draw on Queer theory in this way see Carline (2006) and Cannon et al (2015).

domestic violence by providing advice, counselling, and material support (Galop 2022). These organisations would go on to perform their research into Queer male IPV as a means of highlighting the scope and scale of the problem. For example, a 2012 Stonewall study found that one-third of over 6000 Gay male respondents had experienced at least one incident of IPV in their lifetime (Guasp 2012), whilst a study conducted by Galop found that of the 723 individuals who had accessed their services between 2013-2015, the majority (65%) were Queer men (Magic and Kelly 2018). Even government bodies have begun to take the issue more seriously. The UK government now has a dedicated webpage that outlines its strategy for supporting male victims of IPV, and this includes a commitment to support Queer men as a unique population with distinctive needs (Home Office 2022). Moreover, the Crime Survey of England of Wales has begun to monitor the levels of Queer male IPV victimisation, and in examining data provided for the end of the year 2020 we can see that 13.8% of men experienced IPV compared to 27.6% of women (Office for National Statistics 2020a). Of this group, Queer men were around twice as likely to experience domestic abuse as heterosexual men, with 6% of gay men and 7.3% of bisexual men experiencing IPV compared to only 3.5% of heterosexual men (ibid). This research demonstrates that men not only experience IPV but experience it at relatively high rates.

Moreover, our understanding of Queer IPV as a distinctive social issue has grown in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the worldwide lockdowns, it was widely reported that rates of IPV skyrocketed, as public health restrictions forced victims to remain with their abusers and the psychological impacts of lockdown put pressure on relationships (Moore 2020). Within the United Kingdom, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) analysis found an 18% increase in domestic-assault related offences recorded by police compared to 2018 numbers (Office for National Statistics 2020b). This was no different for Queer victims, and several charities that provide support for Queer people seeking shelter from abusive households reported a massive increase in demand for their services due, in part, to an upsurge in victims fleeing their abusers (Consortium 2020). Indeed, Galop and a coalition of other Queer charities and support services released a statement recognising the scale of the challenge facing their services and outlining a joint response to ensure victims could continue to access support (Galop 2020). This increase in the number of victims translated into some of the first real public reporting on the issue of Queer IPV in the United Kingdom. Patrick Strudwick, writing for Buzzfeed News, wrote an article which highlighted the adverse impact that lockdown restrictions were having on Britain's Queer community (Strudwick 2020). This included increases in domestic violence which pushed many vulnerable Queer people into resorting to sex work to escape their abusers and earn a living by themselves (Strudwick 2020). Perhaps the most high-profile story to emerge from the pandemic was found in a BBC News article by their LGBT+ correspondent Ben Hunte with the headline *"LGBT lockdown abuse: 'My boyfriend held me under hot water.'"* In the article, Hunte highlights the story of Zach, a young Queer man whose boyfriend began to abuse him, physically and mentally, during the pandemic (Hunte 2020). This story is one of the first detailed journalistic accounts of Queer male victimhood to emerge in the United Kingdom, and its publication on the BBC, the nation's public service broadcaster and an important institution that shapes and moderates public discourse, suggests that, finally, there is a willingness to hear the stories of Queer men who have survived IPV.

Despite these changes, stories like Kai's, with all their pain, complexity, and ambiguity, rarely get a public hearing. When we look for the experiences of Queer men who have been abused by their partners, we typically only see them expressed in abstracted quantitative data or small isolated journalistic snapshots. We lack nuanced, empathic and phenomenologically rich accounts of these victims' experiences, presented in their own words. Sociological studies into what it is like for Queer men to experience IPV, or how victims manage in its aftermath, are lacking in the literature. In essence, we have not fully heard the stories of these victims, and this thesis is an attempt to do just that. I aim to provide a phenomenological understanding of how IPV is subjectively experienced by Queer men who are abused by their male romantic and intimate partners. In so doing, I seek to

understand why they entered these relationships, how abuse is understood and managed when it begins to occur, and how they make meaning out of their experiences both during and following their relationship. This research contributes to wider victimological scholarship which has examined the experiences of victimisation as a fundamentally social event which has implications for the victim's social identity (see for example Holstein and Miller 1990, Kenney 2002, Rock 2002). In particular, I examine how victimhood as a stigmatised identity impacts men's sense of self and what strategies they use to manage this stigma in the context of changing norms of masculinity and romance in Late-Modern British society. To begin this discussion, I first define my understanding of IPV as a concept and situate the study of Queer male IPV within the wider body of domestic violence scholarship.

Intimate Partner Violence: Discovery and Theory

It is helpful to reflect on what I mean by IPV and indeed why I use this term specifically, rather than other commonly used descriptors such as *'domestic violence'* or *'domestic abuse.'* The term *'IPV'* highlights that my research is specifically concerned with examining violence and abuse which is perpetrated by an intimate romantic partner that thus occurs within the context of an intimate and romantic relationship. I argue that this is an important distinction as within the wider family violence literature and particularly within literature which has examined the experiences of Queer victims, terms like *'domestic violence'* and *'domestic abuse'* are sometimes used to describe any violence that occurs within the boundaries of a familial unit (see for example Guasp 2012). Thus, the relationship between perpetrator and victim can be that of a romantic partnership, but also a parent and child, siblings, or cohabitants in a shared living situation. My research however aims to look *specifically* at the experiences of abuse within a romantic relationship, and thus, IPV as a descriptor makes the specificity of my research much more readily apparent. Moreover, by using the term *'IPV'* over *'domestic violence'* or *'domestic abuse'*, I wish to avoid the connotations that sometimes attach to these more common descriptors that sometimes suggest that such abuse only occurs within traditionally *"domestic"* living situations. That is, domestic abuse can only occur between a married heterosexual couple who live together. However, as research has shown, relationship violence is not confined to these restrictive stereotypes (Johnson 1995, Rohrbaugh 2006, Catlett and Artis 2004), and thus I use the term IPV to highlight the more varied nature of the relationships I study and the violence that occurs within them. With this set-out, I can turn to define more fully what I mean by IPV and to do so, we must consider the history of relationship violence scholarship.

For much of European history, relationship violence was a taken-for-granted and commonly accepted part of family life and civil society (Wallace 1996). *"Wife-beating"* (as it was often called) was a social practice that was supported both culturally and legally for much of Early Modern British history and was seen as part of a man's right to control his family through physical force (Schneider 2000). Indeed, it was only in the 18th and 19th centuries that legal limits began to be placed on the ability of husbands to physically *"chastise"* their wives (Gordon 1998). In essence, IPV was permitted so long as it was moderate and done in private (ibid). Moreover, even as IPV began to slowly be condemned as a moral or social problem that required public intervention, victimised women were still often blamed for their situations and seen as partly culpable for the abuse their husbands inflicted upon them (Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate 2018). These limitations thus coincided with a wider societal reinforcement of the private sphere, IPV was seen to still be a domestic dispute and thus not a concern for the wider public or law enforcement (Wallace 1996). This was the period in which the criminal justice system failed to take IPV seriously. Police were dismissive of the concerns of victims, and, attempting to maintain the family unit, frequently tried to ensure the victims returned to their abusive partners, regardless of the pain it caused the women in question (Pleck 1987). However, this sorry state of affairs was challenged by the Second-Wave feminist movement, which highlighted the devastating and wider-ranging impacts IPV had on female victims, and pushed for legal, policy, and cultural changes which would recognise the serious nature of IPV as a social problem (Hoyle 2007). Whilst an account of this entire history is well beyond the scope of this thesis,

what is important for my purposes is the larger conceptual change that occurred within this period, during which scholars began to reconceptualise the nature of IPV.

Traditional views of relationship violence had framed the crime as essentially a form of assault which could be conceptualised and understood through examining discrete instances of physical or verbal violence (Stark 2007). However, later scholars began to challenge this view, highlighting that to truly understand the experiences of victims, researchers had to move past these individual events and look at the context of the wider relationship as a whole (Candela 2016). Once this more holistic view was taken, we could better understand that IPV is not confined to individual incidents, but instead is a process in which the entire relationship becomes a means for one partner to dominate, abuse, and, crucially, control the other. We can see this change embodied in Michael Johnson's and Kathleen Ferraro's concept of "*patriarchal terrorism"* (Johnson 1995) or later *"intimate terrorism"* (Johnson and Ferraro 2000). Johnson and Ferraro argued that it was important to distinguish between two different forms of relationship violence. The first, *"common couple violence",* occurred between couples because of individual instances of conflict and was often bi-directional - i.e., committed by both partners against each other (ibid, p.949). The second, however, what they eventually called *"intimate terrorism"* was very different (ibid, p.949). In this form, one partner used violence (be it physical, sexual, or emotional) to dominate, abuse, and control the other partner, forcing them into submission and taking control of their lives. Thus conceived, violence took on a different context depending on the partner in question: for the abuser, it is a tool of control, whilst the victim uses it as a form of defence and resistance (Johnson 1995). What is important in Johnson and Ferraro's conceptualisation of IPV as intimate terrorism is that it represents a shift away from this incident-based model to an understanding of IPV as a process that occurs within a wider relationship structure.

We can see a similar development towards what we might call a process model in Evan Stark's concept of coercive control (Stark 2007). Stark argued that IPV should properly be understood as a crime of control and domination rather than a crime of physical violence, more akin to kidnapping and false imprisonment than to battery or assault (ibid, p. 198). In arguing this, Stark took pains to emphasise that physical violence was only one tool amongst many that could achieve this domination, and indeed it was entirely possible for an abuser to maintain this coercive control using non-physical techniques such as verbal abuse or the control of an individual's finances (ibid p.228). Stark's conceptualisation of coercive control allows us to get to the heart of the harm of IPV and what distinguished IPV from other forms of relationship or family violence. Thus, for my research, I define IPV using Stark's terms: that IPV is the entrapment of a victim into a web of domination in which they are coerced to follow the demands of a manipulative abuser. In this way, coercive control acts as what Myhill and Hohl call a *"golden thread" (*Myhill and Hohl 2019) in our analysis of relationship abuse, as it allows us to understand how a series of discrete activities (e.g., slapping, name-calling, gaslighting, sexual assault, stalking, the withdrawal of affection, the monitoring of personal communications, and even a simple look) can come together to form a pattern of behaviours that work towards the common goal of coercive control (ibid).

However, despite the work done by scholars such as Johnson, Ferraro, and Stark in shifting the definition of IPV into a more expansive framework, which has allowed more victims to identify themselves as such, this early IPV scholarship had its limitations in who exactly was conceptualised as a victim in the first place. Indeed, an early criticism of domestic violence scholarship was that the research and policy it produced created a particularly narrow image of the *"ideal victim"* (Christie 1986) of IPV. This victim was understood to be passive, weak, and entirely dominated by their (nearly always) male partner, and thus in need of saving by outside *"experts"* (Loseke and Cahill 1984). Indeed, Randall (2004) argued that decades of legal and psychological research into the experiences of female victims of IPV had inadvertently created the impression that the women who experienced this type of violence had no agency of their own and were thus unable to effectively advocate on their behalf or to resist their partners. This stood in contrast with the women's descriptions of their own

experiences, which while highlighting their partner's coercive control, showed that the women had agency in resisting their partners' abuse and negotiating their own and loved ones' safety during the process of leaving the relationship (ibid). In this way, Randall highlighted an emerging gap between legal and psychological discourses of IPV, and the lived realities of how IPV was experienced and negotiated by victims themselves (ibid p.108-109). This concern was mirrored in research conducted by Jennifer Dunn (2002) who noted that prosecutors and law enforcement often had a stereotypical image of IPV victims which emphasised their weak, passive, and yielding nature. This created a cognitive dissonance when they encountered real victims who were often active in advocating for their interests and in pushing for police and legal resources to protect themselves from their abusers (ibid). Indeed, Donovan and Hester (2010) went so far as to argue that decades of policy, activism and scholarship had created a *"public story" (*Jamieson 1998) of IPV in which the social problem of relationship abuse was understood to only impact small, passive, and traditionally feminine women who were severely physically abused by their larger, aggressive, and more traditionally masculine partners. The authors went on to argue that this public story worked to frame these heterosexual women as the only legitimate victims of IPV. As a consequence, this larger cultural narrative made it more difficult for individuals who failed to meet this image to be believed or to receive support should they experience IPV (Donovan and Hester 2010, p. 282). Moreover, Helen Baker (2008) has argued that these dominant constructions of victimisation in the context of IPV, which posit female victims as inherently weak and passive, work to undermine female survivors' sense of self. In her empirical research, she found that the victims of IPV she interviewed felt that they should adhere to conventional norms of femininity and present themselves as being passive and weak. In contrast, being seen as strong or having agency was believed to be shameful derogations that had to be disavowed and explained away to return to a state of conventional femininity. This state of conventional femininity was thus seen as essential if they were to be accepted as a true victim (ibid, p. 139). Furthermore, as Marian Duggan has argued, female victims of IPV are often held up against a hypothetical ideal victim and can be judged as being insufficiently sympathetic if they are seen to not take enough steps to protect themselves and to leave their abusive partners (Duggan 2018a). As she points out however, such demands ignore the ways abuse functions to lower the ability of victims to have agency in their lives, or the very real dangers of fatal violence women face when they try to leave abusive relationships with men (Duggan 2018b).

However, as useful and insightful as these critiques are, they still operate within the boundaries of the gender binary inherent within the *"public story"* (Jamieson 1998) that Donovan and Hester (2010) critique: one in which men are the perpetrators and women are the victims. Indeed, for much of early IPV scholarship, men were not seen as legitimate victims of relationship violence in any way. The feminist-inspired methodology and ethics of much family violence literature rightly centred the patriarchy as a central structural and causal mechanism of IPV (Hoyle 2007). The coercive control of women in their private lives by their male partners was, as Dobash and Dobash (1979) argued, simply: *'one of the most brutal and explicit expressions of patriarchal domination' (ibid p. ix).* Indeed, in his original conceptualisation of coercive control, Stark went out of his way to argue that the concept could only apply to female victims abused by male partners (Stark 2007). He argued that it was the wider system of patriarchy, which structurally gave men more power, which allowed them to maintain their coercive control and their patriarchal sense of entitlement to the control of female bodies, and which motivated them to enact their abuse in the first place (ibid, p. 172). However, despite this initial disbelief or dismissal of male victimisation through IPV, later research would begin to shine a light on the largely hidden world of male victimisation.

Hidden Victims

Several studies of male IPV victims documented that men were indeed capable of being dominated and controlled by female partners in a manner very similar to the patterns of intimate terrorism and coercive control long recognised to afflict women (Hines and Douglas 2010, Carmo et al 2011,

Machado et al 2016). Melissa Corbally, for example, in a study conducted with male victims of IPV in Ireland, noted that her participants described how their female partners worked to undermine their autonomy and agency through an array of psychological and emotional techniques of control, often punctuated by acts of physical violence (Corbally 2015). Moreover, though female victimisation by male partners remains by far the most prevalent form of IPV, larger quantitative studies have demonstrated that IPV victimisation is an issue that afflicts many men (see for example Huntley et al 2018). For example, recent Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows that of all men in the United Kingdom in 2020, 3.8% of them (786,000 in total) experienced domestic abuse within the last year (Office for National Statistics 2020a). This finding was mirrored in the annual crime survey for England and Wales which found that a quarter of all domestic abuse crimes in 2018/19 were committed against a male victim (Office for National Statistics 2020a). In the same period, 16 men died at the hands of their partner or ex-partner compared with 80 women, according to ONS data (Office for National Statistics 2020a). From this vein of research, we can observe that men experience IPV like female victims and in sizeable if smaller, numbers. This contradicts the formerly dominant public story by revealing the stories of a set of victims often marginalised within the wider research sphere. However, even these stories do not reveal the full picture, in that they typically tend to focus on the experiences of heterosexual men abused by their female partners. Their stories do not reveal the experiences of Queer men.

This in and of itself is not surprising. As I have already noted, Queer men have historically been largely ignored by IPV research and activism. Paul Letellier notes that many of the early attempts to engage with the experiences of Queer men who encountered IPV from their romantic partners often either minimised their experiences of abuse or attempted to fit them into dominant feminist understandings of IPV (Letellier 1994). This frequently lacked theoretical nuance, and, as Letellier highlights, it often took the form of arguing that IPV only occurred when Queer men mirrored heterosexual masculine and feminine roles in the relationship, with the abuser becoming the *"male"* partner and the victim the *"female"* partner (ibid p.97). This reductive view of same-sex IPV was first challenged by a strain of research conducted in the early nineties which began to take Queer IPV more seriously. This can be seen in ground-breaking books such as Renzetti's examination of violence in Lesbian relationships: "*Violent Betrayal"* (Renzetti 1992) and Island and Letellier's examination of the same dynamic amongst Queer men: "*Men who beat the men who love them"* (Island and Letellier 1992). Both works highlighted that same-sex couples could experience the types of intense and all-consuming coercive control that had, up to that point, largely been understood as a unique outgrowth of the patriarchal nature of heterosexual intimacy. Later studies that followed in their footsteps conducted in the 2000s and 2010s would go on to replicate and expand on these initial findings, further demonstrating that Queer couples were equally susceptible to IPV and its damaging consequences (Merrill and Wolfe 2000, McClennen et al 2002, West 2002, Kuehnle, and Sullivan 2003, Kay and Jeffries 2010).

Moreover, this strain of research highlighted that not only did these victims experience similar types of violence and coercion, but that their position as sexual and gender minorities meant that they faced unique challenges that made their experiences distinct from their heterosexual counterparts. For example, several studies demonstrated that Queer victims were apt to experience a unique type of coercive control which has often been dubbed *"identity abuse"* (Woulfe and Goodman 2021). This is where an abuser uses the sexual or gender identity of their victim as a means to harm and abuse them (Rogers 2019, Scheer and Baams 2021, Woulfe and Goodman 2021). This can take the form of diminishing or demeaning their identity to ridicule them, attempting to legitimise their abuse by arguing Queer relationships are inherently abusive or violent, or threatening to reveal–to *'out'*–their Queer status to family members or other loved ones (Donovan and Barnes 2020). Moreover, these studies further found that Queer victims often struggled to gain access to services or sources of support. This was due to both the general lack of Queer-inclusive or specialist domestic violence services (Donovan and Barnes 2020, Hine et al 2020), and to (often well-founded) fears from Queer

victims that they will experience prejudice from service providers and the criminal justice system (Parry and O'Neil 2015, Sylaska and Edwards 2015, Calton et al 2016). Indeed, several studies that have utilised comparative methodologies have noted that Queer victims prefer to rely on more informal sources of support (such as friends and family, or private councillors) rather than formal ones (such as police or specialist domestic violence charities), when seeking help or leaving their abuser (Merill and Wolfe 2000, Turell and Cornnell-Swanson 2005, Donovan and Hester 2015, Freeland et al 2018).

Perhaps the most comprehensive research done with Queer victims of IPV in the United Kingdom is the work of Catherine Donovan, Marianne Hester, and Rebecca Barnes. Across multiple articles and books, these researchers, both in collaboration and independently, have interviewed and surveyed hundreds of different survivors of Queer IPV to better understand their experiences. Their findings largely match the summary I have laid out above; Queer individuals experience IPV at a rate similar to, if not higher than, heterosexual couples, and in similar dynamics of coercive control. Furthermore, Queer victims still prefer to utilise informal sources of support over formal alternatives such as the criminal justice system due to a fear of discrimination (Donovan et al 2006, Barnes 2008, Donovan and Hester 2010, Barnes 2011, Barnes 2013 Donovan and Hester 2015, Donovan and Barnes 2020). However, perhaps their most novel findings relate to how Queer victims' experiences of abuse are informed by their perceived place within larger cultural narratives of intimacy.

In their book *Domestic Violence and Sexuality: What's love got to do with it?* Donovan and Hester (2015) note that when interviewed, Queer victims of IPV disclosed that their abusers used common norms of intimacy, romance, and love to justify and legitimise their control and domination of the relationship, and by extension the victim themselves. The authors dubbed these techniques *"practices of love"* and noted that commonly taken-for-granted assumptions of intimacy, (e.g., that partners should care for each other, listen to each other's problems, be sympathetic to their plights), were weaponised by abusers as a tool of coercive control (ibid). This led to the emergence of what they characterised as *"relationship rules";* informal practices within the relationship that cemented the abuser's dominance over their partner whilst veiling them in the language of love, care and intimacy (ibid). Examples of a similar yet distinctive relationship with wider norms of intimacy can be found in Barnes' work examining the experiences of Queer female victims of same-sex IPV. From her research, Barnes (2011) argued that Queer women often struggled to identify their experiences of relationship violence *as IPV*, because they were influenced by pervasive norms within the Lesbian community that portray Queer female romance as inherently more egalitarian than patriarchal heterosexual relationships. Consequently, Queer women struggled to understand what was happening to them when their partners began to abuse and coercively control them, and some even felt ashamed that their relationship had failed to meet this expectation of female Queer utopian romance (ibid p.234). Thus, the positive vision of Queer female intimacy fostered within the Queer community could perversely act as a barrier to recognising and reporting abuse, and thus further contribute to the ongoing silence around same-sex female IPV victimisation (ibid p.237).

We can thus see that a great deal of work has been done to expand our understanding of both same-sex IPV and how Queer victims understand and experience this type of violence. However, we can still detect blind spots within this field of scholarship where certain issues have yet to be considered in detail, and where particular stories remain unheard. Firstly, much of this research remains quantitative, in that it focuses largely on the prevalence, dynamics, and risk factors of IPV (Donovan and Barnes 2020). Indeed, within the still small field of Queer IPV scholarship, this trend has already been subjected to criticism, and Donovan and Hester (2015) note that such research often ignores more contextual or holistic approaches which would provide a more nuanced understanding of Queer relationship violence (ibid). Furthermore, within this strand of scholarship, the experiences of Queer men specifically have remained undertheorized and understudied. Most studies focus on the larger Queer community as a whole or have looked at the experiences of Queer women. This is a bias in

current scholarship that has already been commented on by other researchers (Letellier 1994, Merill 1996). Part of the focus on Queer women over Queer men can be explained through the easier access researchers have had to Queer women. Queer female victims often would utilise pre-existing domestic violence organisations tailored for women (Renzetti 1992), whereas Queer male victims, until recently, lacked obvious specialist services and were thus harder to find. Whilst this gap is therefore understandable, it is still unfortunate, as there is evidence that Queer men may face particularly unique experiences of IPV in comparison to the wider Queer community. For example, the few researchers that have compared the experiences of relationship abuse between different segments of the Queer community have noted that Queer men often report experiencing particularly high levels of sexual violence from their abusive partners, compared to both Queer and heterosexual women. (Donovan et al 2006, Donovan and Hester 2015, Magic and Kelly 2018). Furthermore, Queer men, being *men*, have significantly less access to specialist services for IPV victims, as these are primarily designed for women, and many are specifically reserved for women only (Rolle et al 2018). This can make it more difficult for them to access help and support, and thus they are yet more likely to rely on informal means of support when attempting to cope with their experiences (Tsui et al 2010).

Clearly, research on the experiences of both male victims and Queer victims of IPV has almost universally lacked an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1991). Intentionally or not, the literature thus far has ignored or marginalised the experiences of victims who belong to both social groups. Studies have taken their chosen trait, be it maleness or Queerness, and treated them as distinct separate categories, with little consideration of how they may interact in the same person. This is unfortunate, given that, as Barnes' (2011) research with Queer women has shown, sexuality and gender can interact to produce types of experiences that are unique to groups who sit at these intersections. Moreover, no work has so far considered how Queer men's experiences may be influenced by the larger narratives of intimacy that Donovan, Hester, and Barnes identified in their research. Again, this is significant given that research conducted with *female* victims of IPV has demonstrated that victims often utilise common cultural narratives of romance, intimacy, and love to give meaning to and make sense of their experiences of abuse (Wood, 2001, Chung 2005). Finally, we also lack a qualitative understanding of how Queer men manage in the aftermath of experiencing IPV, and what the long-term impacts of this type of relationship abuse are on their sense of self or identity. This is problematic given that we have strong evidence from higher-level statistical studies that IPV can have long-term impacts on Queer male victims, leading to substance-abuse, mental health problems, lower self-esteem, and risky sexual behaviours in its aftermath (Gerhing and Vaske 2015, Stiles-Shields et al 2015, Bacchus et al 2017, Safelives 2018). However, these studies, whilst useful in informing us of the scale of the problem, also reduce the complexities of the experience of victimisation into abstracted quantified statistics. What is needed is research that engages in the messy lived realities of victimhood from a qualitative perspective.

This lack of appreciation for the phenomenology of Queer male victimhood is notable, given that we have a good deal of research from within both the wider social sciences and the victimological tradition that has highlighted how victimisation is a deeply personally affecting experience (Brison 2002, Strobl 2010). Victimhood is associated with a range of negative outcomes (Koss et al 1991, Dube et al 2005, Buchanan and Whitty 2014) that can take years to manage and recover from (if recovery occurs at all). This includes the fact that victimhood is a deeply stigmatised social identity that, as I will develop in much greater detail in Chapter Two, carries social consequences for individuals who are labelled as such (Jeffrey and Candea 2006, Fohring 2018, Krystalli 2021). Indeed, wider victimological scholarship has demonstrated that victims of a wide variety of crimes experience stigmatising responses from both informal and formal sources of support when they seek help (Finkelhor et al 2001, Ashley and Foshee 2005, Weiss 2010, Stemple and Meyer 2014), and may struggle with shame and self-blame due to the fact they have been victimised (Symonds 2010, Bhuptani and Messman-Moore 2019, Alix et al 2020). This includes research conducted with female victims of IPV, who have been shown to, like other victims, experience shame and stigmatisation due

to their victim status (Overstreet and Quinn 2013, McCleary-Sills et al 2016, Meyer 2016). Moreover, this stigmatisation can often take on a particularly gendered component, with women being judged for a perceived inability to, for example, take care of their children, maintain standards of gendered conduct, or failing to match the societal expectation of a traditionally passive, vulnerable, and feminine victim (Loseke and Cahill 1984, Randall 2004, Meyer 2016). Further, these same victims have been shown to struggle with managing the stigma and shame of their victimisation even in the aftermath of escaping their abusers (Evans and Lindsay 2008) demonstrating the long after-life that victimhood can have on an individual. However, again, these insights have yet to be applied to the experiences of Queer men as we do not yet know whether they experience IPV victimisation as stigmatising nor whether this potential stigma has a similarly gendered component.

It is important here to note that there is not a complete absence of qualitative research conducted with Queer Male victims of IPV, as a handful of studies have been conducted across the years (see for example Tellez-Santaya and Walters 2011). Cruz's study of the dynamics of abuse (Cruz and Firestone 1993, Cruz 2003) and Oliffee and his colleagues' research in Canada (Oliffe et al 2014) are perhaps two of the best examples of studies that have attempted to engage with the experiences of Queer male victims from a qualitative perspective. In their findings, both researchers demonstrated that Queer men often struggled to recognise themselves as victims of IPV due to the larger gendered frameworks of IPV which present it as an issue solely concerning women (Cruz 2003 p.315-316, Oliffe et al 2014 p.568). Moreover, both works highlight that wider norms of gender made it easier for them to normalise the abuse they experienced by drawing on stereotypes of male stoicism and strength to suggest that violence between men was common and that they should simply *"man up"* and learn to take it rather than complain (Cruz and Firestone 1998, Cruz 2000, Oliffe et al 2014 p.370). In this way, these works give us an insight into the social worlds of male victims of IPV, often missing from other research in the field, and highlight the norms and wider narratives of gender and sexuality which can work to complicate their experiences. However, despite their utility and obvious scholarly value, neither of these studies is the last word on the experiences of Queer male victims, and both are limited in what they can tell us about the victimisation of this population. Firstly, they do not engage with the larger narratives of intimacy and romance that Donovan, Hester, and Barnes identified as playing an important role in the experiences of Queer Victims nor do they consider the role that victimhood as a stigmatised social identity plays in the men's experiences. Secondly, the work of Oliffe and Cruz is a decade and nearly two decades old respectively - so their contemporary relevance is limited when we consider the wide-scale changes in the social position of the Queer community over the past few decades.

The 2010s saw a wave of social, legal, and cultural changes sweep across Western Europe and North America in which the Queer community went from a marginal sexual minority to a legally protected and often culturally celebrated part of society (Pietrus 2021). Whilst these progressive changes are neither universal nor comprehensive, and often work to reinforce broader structures of oppression (a point I will develop in Chapter Three), they have resulted in Queer men becoming significantly more included in traditionally heterosexual society and institutions of intimacy. One example of this integration is the growing acceptance and social support for gay marriage (Kerrigan 2021). This point becomes more prescient when we turn to examine the third gap in this qualitative research: that there remains no extant research which has examined how Queer men navigate abuse within the United Kingdom, which has, in a short period, experienced a significant shift in how Queer men are positioned within its society.

Queer Men in Late-Modern Britain

Indeed, if we compare the current position of Queer men in the United Kingdom to their historical antecedents, we can observe a world of difference. For much of British history, homosexuality was explicitly illegal. The Buggery Act of 1533 made sodomy a crime punishable by death, and this stance

was only changed in 1861 when the Offences Against The Person Act repealed the death penalty and replaced it with a comparably lighter sentence of up to 10 years in prison. Homosexual behaviour would only be decriminalised with the passage of the Sexual Offences Act (1967), which, following the recommendations of the 1957 Wolfenden report, made homosexuality legal only when conducted by two consenting partners in private. Thus, for much of the late 20th century, homosexuality became a stigmatised social identity that was marginalised and policed by the state as a private deviance akin to sex work and drug addiction, rather than a legitimate sexual identity worthy of inclusion or citizenship (Gleeson 2007). However, this situation would begin to change at the turn of the 21st century, where British society would begin to both culturally and legally recognise, and, to an extent, legitimise same-sex relationships. 2003 saw the repeal of Section 28, which had previously prohibited the discussion of homosexuality in schools, and 2004 saw the passage of the Civil Partnership Act which gave legal recognition to same-sex relationships for the first time. This was then followed by the 2010 Equalities Act, which granted full legal protection for sexual minorities from discrimination in the public and private spheres. However, perhaps the most significant changes that occurred during this period was the passage of three inter-linked pieces of legislation: the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013 (England and Wales); the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014, and the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019. Together these acts legalised same-sex marriage across the four nations of the United Kingdom, and thus radically altered the social and legal positions of Queer couples in relationships to formerly exclusively heterosexual institutions of intimacy like marriage. However, despite these changes and the (now well-documented) fact that wider narratives of intimacy have been shown to influence other victims' experiences of IPV (Wood 2001, Chung 2005), we still lack an examination of how these structures may impact the experiences of Queer men who encounter violence from their partners.

From the research review set out above, we can thus say that there is a lack of scholarly understanding of how Queer men in 21st Century Britain subjectively understand and give meaning to their experiences of IPV. We do not know how they understand their relationships, or if larger narratives of intimacy influence this process at all. We do not know how they manage their experiences in the aftermath of abuse, or if this process is stigmatising or shameful in any way. In essence, we lack a truly phenomenological analysis of the experiences of this subset of victims. We have not considered their narratives and allowed them to speak about their experiences in all of their complexity and subjectivity. We have, in effect, not yet truly heard their stories.

Research Questions

My thesis aims to change this by analysing the experiences of Queer Male Victims of IPV from a phenomenological and narrative victimological perspective. My primary goal is to understand how Queer men understand and experience IPV from male romantic partners. This will involve attempting to understand what the consequences of victimhood are for these men's sense of self and identity through a framework of stigma and shame. I am also interested in how narratives of romance, gender, and sexuality may impact, restrict, or structure this process. In this way, my work seeks to build on interactionist victimological research in the fields of both IPV (Mills 1981, Ferraro and Johnson 1983, Dunn 2002, Meyer 2016) and the study of male victims more broadly (Dunn 2012, Ralston 2012, Hlavka 2017, Javaid 2017). My work departs from previous Queer IPV scholars such as Donovan, Hester, and Barnes by focusing specifically on Queer men and their unique positionality as victims, and by directing my attention to the subjective impacts of abuse rather than focusing explicitly on the dynamics of coercive control. As such, my research is primarily concerned with answering the following question:

How is victimhood experienced by Queer men who encounter IPV from male romantic partners?

My investigation of this question is informed by a series of sub-questions:

a.) How do Queer men understand and respond to the label of "victimhood" in the context of IPV?

b.) Is victimhood in the context of Queer male IPV stigmatising? If so, how does this stigma manifest?

c.) Do narratives of romance impact Queer men's experiences of abuse?

d.) And how do Queer men make sense of their experiences of IPV in the aftermath of abusive relationships?

To answer these questions, I will present my thesis in the following structure:

Thesis Outline

In my second chapter, I examine existing victimological research which has considered the relationship between victimization, shame, and masculinity. I draw heavily on Goffman's (1963) and Nussbaum's (2004) theories of stigma and shame and demonstrate their continuing relevance in understanding victimhood as an inherently stigmatised social identity. Moreover, I highlight how insights from narrative theory and narrative victimology can allow a better understanding of how victims attempt to manage stigma in the aftermath of abuse by utilizing narratives which attempt to integrate these stigmatized traits into their pre-existing social identities. I conclude the chapter by arguing that these insights have not yet been applied to the experiences of Queer male victims of IPV.

Building on this finding, my third chapter argues that an insight into how Queer men understand and construct narratives of romance and intimacy is necessary to fully understand how they experience the stigma of victimization in the context of IPV. In making this case, I outline a sociological theory of romantic love and highlight how previous research has used the romance narratives of heterosexual victims of IPV to contextualize their experiences of gendered shame in the aftermath of abuse. From this, I argue that Queer men may have similar yet distinct experiences which occur in the context of their changing social status in late-modern British society, particularly, their inclusion and assimilation into formerly exclusively heterosexual institutions of intimacy such as marriage.

With the stage set for my empirical findings, Chapter Four outlines my research methodology. I begin by highlighting the underlying epistemological framework that guided the type of knowledge I sought to gain from the research, the methodologies I utilised to ground this search, and the specific methods I chose to find and capture data. This will include a discussion of how the Covid-19 pandemic significantly altered my initial research plans, the role that digital recruitment and data-collection strategies played in the final research design, and both the ethical and epistemological challenges I faced during this process.

This will then lead into Chapter Five, the first of my empirical chapters. In it, I begin to analyse the accounts of Queer men who were victims of IPV perpetrated by male romantic partners. From their testimonies, I identify a persistent narrative of committed intimate romance, which is utilised to structure and give meaning to their relationship with their abusive partner. An examination of this narrative is then used to contextualize the men's understanding of norms of romance and intimacy, particularly, their privileging of the security of monogamous coupledom over the perceived chaos and insecurity of the Queer Scene. These narratives and the norms they contain within them constitute the social world from which the social status of victimhood derogates and thus causes stigma and shame.

Following this, in Chapter Six, I turn to consider how the men in my study understood the social label of *'victim'* in the context of IPV. I note that their experiences of victimhood are deeply stigmatising, in that victimisation represents a failure to live up to norms of agency, invulnerability, and control which are integral to their understanding of themselves as men. Moreover, within the context of IPV, victimization violates norms of compulsory coupledom (Wilkinson 2013) which stigmatises the victim as a romantic failure and re-enforce negative stereotypes of Queer men as unfit sexual citizens.

Building on this, in Chapter Seven I argue that this stigma and shame is wielded by abusers as part of a wider assault on the victim's sense of self. Using Arthur Frank's (1995) concept of the *"chaos narrative"* I show how my participants' narratives reflect an increasing sense of confusion and isolation as their abuser undermines their confidence and independence through techniques of coercive control. This eventually destroys the self, as the victim loses both their social identity outside of their relationship and their sense of agency and control over their lives. This leads to a sense of *"narrative wreckage*" (Frank 1995) where the men's original conceptions of their self and social identity are destroyed, and they develop a feeling that they have *"outlived themselves"* (Brison 2002).

This destruction of their old identities provides the basis for the next step in their journey, and in my final empirical chapter, Chapter Eight, I consider how the men undergo the process of rebuilding themselves. I highlight the fact that many of my participants viewed victimisation as a transitionary process that, while painful, could allow growth and the creation of a new social identity. However, I caution against optimism, highlighting that even these positive accounts often act to privatize the harm of abuse into a personal struggle divorced from wider oppressive social structures and thus may perpetuate an ongoing silence around Queer IPV.

From all of this, in my concluding chapter, Chapter Nine, I outline what empirical and theoretical contributions my research has made to the extant scholarship in the field of victimology by highlighting the unique experiences Queer male victims of IPV have in managing a complex web of stigma and shame brought on by victimisation. Moreover, I further argue that my research has demonstrated the changing social position of certain Queer male subjects in Late-Modern British society, showing the increasing role that concepts of homonormativity (Duggan 2002) and compulsory coupledom (Wilkinson 2013) play in regulating and influencing their behaviour in the private sphere. I will then discuss the limitations of my research, and finish by pointing out potential future directions for research that builds on my work. With this introduction now set out, I turn to consider the research literature which has examined how victimhood is subjectively experienced.

Chapter Two

Shame, Stigma and Victimization

Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline several of the core theoretical concepts and ideas which will form the basis of my analytical framework. I will first outline the specific framework of stigma and shame which I am interested in investigating, that of Erving Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma and Martha Nussbaum's (2004) theory of shame. Next, I outline the interactionist approach to victimhood, which emphasises its socially constructed nature and its operation as a stigmatised social label. I then highlight how victimhood intersects with social constructions of hegemonic masculinity, and note that for men, including Queer men, victimhood acts as a threat to their sense of a masculine self through the imputation of weakness and vulnerability. Finally, I highlight how insights from narrative theory can allow a better understanding of how victims attempt to manage stigma in the aftermath of abuse through utilizing narratives which attempt to integrate these stigmatised traits into their pre-existing social identities.

Understanding Stigma

In my view the most authoritative formulation of a sociological theory of stigma can be found in the work of Erving Goffman, specifically his essay *"Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identities"* (Goffman 1963). Goffman argued that stigma is best conceptualized as a social process that works to mark a specific characteristic, attribute, or behaviour as abnormal, immoral, or simply deviant from traditional norms and values. As a consequence, individuals or groups who are identified with this trait are discredited and devalued within wider society. Goffman argued this stigma was often attached to three categories of characteristics: physical deformities or blemishes (i.e., blindness, missing limbs) character flaws (i.e., alcoholism, drug addiction, homosexuality), or tribal affiliations (i.e., membership to an oppressed ethnic minority) (ibid p.4). This stigmatised trait is then used as the basis for constructing a *"stigma-theory",* an explanation for the supposed inferiority of the stigmatised individual, which is then used to justify their poor treatment and oppression by the rest of society (ibid p.5). In this way, stigma goes to the centre of an individual's identity, and their stigmatised attribute can become what Hughes calls a *"master status"* (Hughes 1945), the central label that defines their position within their society and which comes to shape all interactions they have with other people. Goffman's conceptualization of stigma has been immensely influential in shaping all subsequent considerations and understandings of the concept. However, it is also now over half a century old, and, unsurprisingly, the theory has been subjected to a great deal of criticism and development.

The first of these critiques is that Goffman's formulation of stigma ignores how the process is utilized as a political tool. That is, the process of stigmatisation is a tool used by powerful groups to label certain categories of people as deviant, and this acts as a justification for the use of oppressive policies against them (Tyler and Slater 2018). These scholars have thus adapted and expanded Goffman's analysis to look at the ways that stigma can be used as a tool of power to advance their political agenda (Greener and Moth 2020). The second critique is that Goffman focuses too much on the one-on-one interactions between individuals which can generate stigma, rather than the wider social processes which work to manifest and maintain stigma for huge swaths of the population (Tyler 2018). This deficiency was however addressed through the pioneering work of Link and Phelan (2001). These two authors expanded extensively on Goffman's original formulation of stigma by re-framing it as a wider social process used to stratify and divide society into different sections, stigmatized and non-stigmatised. For them, stigma is explicitly linked to social power as it can only be effectively used by those in socially dominant positions to enforce their norms and values on the

rest of the population (ibid p.375-377). To demonstrate this, they developed a process model for charting the process by which groups are stigmatised. This begins by separating the group from the rest of society, attaching discrediting stereotypes to them, and then enforcing a loss of status upon the now stigmatised group (ibid p.367-375). This stratification has more than just social consequences, as the authors noted in later research stigmatised groups, such as African American men or working single mothers, have significantly higher stress-related health problems, which they argue arise in part due to their need to navigate stigma in their daily lives (Link and Phelan 2006). This more expanded and structural development of Goffman's theory has been subsequently used by scholars to better understand how stigma operates on a material and societal level (Slater 2018).

In addition to these well-thought-out and insightful critiques and developments of Goffman's original theory, I would add my own appraisal of the original formulation of stigma. Indeed, I argue that this original conception does not fully highlight a key element of the stigmatising process, its relational quality. What I mean by this, is that stigma is always applied to characteristics which deviate in some way from a related norm. The stigmatization of deviant characteristics acts to legitimatize and strengthen these root norms through punishing expressions and attributes which go against or oppose them. Goffman does hint at this relational quality in his original account of stigma by highlighting how stigmatised populations are held in constant tension with what he dubs *"normals*" (Goffman 1963, p.7). These *"normals"* are not synonymous with the wider population, but instead are an idealized group which is held up as the most normatively ideal and legitimate section of the populace (ibid). However, the relational nature of stigma and its legitimizing function are not emphasized in Goffman's work and thus his conception of stigma is lacking in its ability to fully understand the wider social function of stigma within society. I argue that this partly explains Goffman's lack of macro-focus in his original work, as such a relational analysis reveals how stigma is deployed against those who deviate from societally enforced norms of conduct and appearance, which typically have a political component to them, and are enforced not just through everyday interactions but larger structural forces. To better understand this component, I argue that we can turn to a related yet distinct theoretical concept that was developed by another accomplished author: Martha Nussbaum's theory of shame.

Nussbaum, a philosopher of emotion, argues that shame serves a distinct and important social function at both an intra-psychic and a societal level (Nussbaum 2004). Shame, she argued, is an emotion that derives from an individual's perceived failure to live up to an idealized norm of conduct, behaviour, or being. Unlike guilt, which Nussbaum argues only adheres to regret at an individual or specific action, shame pervades a person's entire sense of self. This results in them feeling like their identity has been discredited and that they have failed to live up to core expectations placed upon them by society (ibid p.183). The consequence of this is that shame exerts a deeply degrading and harmful effect on an individual's sense of self (ibid p.177). Thus, Nussbaum's concept of shame is inherently relational, as shame only exists in response to a perceived failure to achieve a higher cultural norm. It is this interaction which generates the degrading sense of total personal failure which Nussbaum argues is key to her conception of shame (ibid). Within her analysis, Nussbaum references Goffman's concept of stigma and links it explicitly to her formulation of shame, in effect creating a bridge from her more personal account to the larger sociological theory articulated by Goffman and, by extension, to the authors who have taken the baton from him. She argues that stigma, as Goffman defines it, is a physical and social manifestation of shame and the externalization of an internal emotional response (ibid p.186). Developing this notion, I argue that Nussbaum's framework of shame is an important addition to Goffman's original theory of stigma, and as a consequence, the two can be used together to more fruitfully understand both the operation of stigma within society and in how this process is understood and experienced by those individuals subjected to it. Indeed, to clarify how I intend to utilize both concepts within my research, shame will be taken to indicate the internal emotional reaction an individual experiences in the face of a perceived failure to meet the standards of a larger cultural norm of conduct, behaviour, or appearance. Meanwhile, stigma will refer to the wider

social process, both at an interactional and a structural level, in which certain social traits are devalued by being labelled with a discrediting stigma. It is through this process of labelling that shame is generated and promulgated. With a greater understanding of how both stigma and shame operate, we can turn to examine why these concepts hold such relevance for my study.

Becoming a Victim and Being a Victim

The first question that I will address is why the framework of stigma and shame that I have just outlined is relevant to the study of victims and victimhood. To answer this, I wish to turn to a broad field of scholarship which I dub interactionist victimology. This field draws heavily from the sociological school known as symbolic interactionism, a school of sociology which is principally concerned with how meaning is generated and maintained through the interaction between individuals and society (Blumer 1969). A key component of the symbolic interactionist perspective is that there is no intrinsic meaning or value inherent in objects, activities, or environments; rather, any such meaning is constructed, maintained, altered, and interpreted through social interactions (Carter and Fuller 2016). In essence, the key to understanding human behaviour in any setting is to understand both how actors in that setting attach meaning and value to their activities and environments, and through what interactional processes those meanings and values are constructed, maintained, and then subsequently interpreted. Interactionism has long been associated with the study of deviance and criminality (see for example Becker 1963) but eventually scholars would take the core insights of interactionism and apply them to the study of victims and victimhood itself.

This interactionist victimological tradition argued that victimhood was not a natural or objective state, instead, it was better understood as a social identity or label which is constructed interactionally through the social interactions of individuals and wider societal institutions (Rock 2002). Victimhood is thus a social process as no one is born a victim, nor do they instantly become them when they are subjected to a crime. Instead, an individual must become a victim through a series of interactional processes that occur at both an internal and external level (Dunn 2010). Whilst this is an important insight that helps us to understand the socially constructed nature of victimhood, it still does not tell us about what victimhood as a label means, or what meanings or norms are encoded within the social construct of victimhood. In analysing this, interactionist victimologists have argued that to be a victim is, at its core, to be the subject of harm or violation (Kenney 2002). To be labelled a victim is to recognize that an individual has been harmed or injured by an outside force and to externalize the blame and responsibility for this harm to another social actor. This judgment has a moral character to it, as it attaches culpability to the purported victimizer and removes it from the victim. Victimhood can thus serve an important function in resolving interpersonal or societal conflicts by positioning one party at fault and the other as innocent (Holstein and Miller 1990). The victim in this case is constructed as entirely innocent whilst the offender is given the entirety of blame and moral responsibility. It would seem from this analysis that victimhood is a socially valuable and indeed privileged position that affords the individual so labelled a unique and powerful moral status with other social actors. Indeed, several authors have argued that this veneration of victimhood has led to a wider problem of too many people unjustly taking on the label of victimhood for social capital's sake (see for example Best 1997, Furedi 2004). However, despite this apparent utility and veneration, victimhood remains a social identity which many avoid and work to protect themselves from, indeed as a social status victimhood has several negative connotations attached to it. It is in examining these connotations and expanding upon their origins that we can return our discussion to the framework of stigma.

Victimhood has long been seen as an identity that is deeply, perhaps even inherently, stigmatised (Van Dijk 2009). Many scholars have argued that this stigmatisation arises from the fact that victimhood has strong cultural connotations of weakness, vulnerability, and passivity (Dunn 2010, Pemberton 2012, Pemberton et al 2018). This sense of weakness is almost inherent in the very idea of

victimhood. For example, in Christie's famous framework of the ideal victim, he specifically argues that for a would-be victim to gain sympathy from society they must be seen as weaker and more vulnerable than their offender (Christie 1986). While this might explain why an individual would reject the label of victimhood, few of us want to be seen as weak or vulnerable after all, it still does not answer the question of why wider society would stigmatise and discredits victims, or why unaffected individuals find the mere existence of victims so distressing. To make sense of this, we need to understand how victimhood challenges core assumptions about the world and our place in it, and Janoff-Bulman's (1992) concept of *"shattered assumptions"* is an incredibly useful framework for achieving this goal. Janoff-Bulman (1992) argued that most individuals hold a core set of assumptions about how the world operates, namely that the world is 1.) meaningful and able to be understood 2.) fundamentally just and good, and 3.) that they are in turn good and moral people (ibid p.19). These assumptions act as the basis of human cognition, and our internalization of them allows us to operate in the world without the crippling fear that we will suffer from misfortune, creating a passive sense of invulnerability (ibid p.24-26). Trauma, be it from illness, natural disaster, or an act of violence, shatters these assumptions by showing us that the world does not fundamentally make sense, that there is no natural justice, and that we are very much vulnerable to harm (ibid p.53). Janoff-Bulman's (1992) theory can find parallels in the work of other scholars such as Thomas Attig (1996) and Robert Neimeyer (1999). Both of these scholars have argued that traumatic events, in their research principally the death of loved ones, can disrupt our fundamental assumptions about the world in which we presume, incorrectly, that our lives will follow a stable and predictable narrative path in which we and our loved ones are sheltered from violence, injustice, and pain (Attig 1996, Neimeyer 1999, 2000, Neimeyer et al 2002). Indeed, victimologists have taken this framework of shattered assumptions and applied it specifically to the experiences of victims of crime. Stephanie Fohring (2018) for example has argued that the framework of shattered assumptions can help us to explain why victimhood is so distressing not just for those who are directly victimized, but for others who simply witness the victimization:

When another person, particularly someone who is similar to oneself, is victimized for no apparent reason, this challenges the belief that the world is just and safe, thereby threatening our belief systems. It is this same logic that results in blaming the victim for their suffering, as this allows the safeguarding of belief systems.

(Fohring, 2018, p.153)

Developing on Fohring's ideas here, I argue that the stigmatisation of victims can be understood as a reaction to the way they violate our belief in the assumptive world that Janoff-Bulman (1992), Attig (1996), and Neimeyer (1999) described. In effect, they violate beliefs about reality which we take for granted and as a consequence, are stigmatised to legitimize these beliefs in turn. A similar idea can be found if we turn to the work of Melvin Lerner (1980) and his theory of the just world delusion. Lerner argued that most individuals had a delusional belief that the world was a fundamentally just place where good actions are rewarded, and bad actions are punished (Lerner 1980). This belief creates problems, as people are regularly exposed to situations where seemingly innocent individuals suffer whilst seemingly immoral individuals prosper. Lerner argues that this cognitive dissonance needs to be resolved and that individuals develop several strategies to explain away or rationalize these discrepancies (ibid). Like Janoff-Bulman before him, victimologists have taken Lerner's ideas and applied them to the experiences of victims. In this case, we can look at the work of Anthony Pemberton to see the utility of the just world framework for understanding why victims are stigmatised. Pemberton (2012) argued that much of the hostility that is levelled against victims can be understood by the ways victims often violate our belief in the just world. If we believe that the world is fundamentally just and that people get what they deserve, then innocent people should not be hurt for no reason. Victims pose a problem for this belief especially if their victimization appears random or without cause. Consequently, an individual or group may deploy strategies to manage this

dissonance by re-appraising the situation to bring it in line with their pre-existing belief in the just world. One of the ways to do this, Pemberton argues, is to blame the victim for their suffering. If the victim somehow provoked what happened to them, or was careless, or was a person who deserved to suffer, then the cognitive dissonance between reality and delusion is resolved, and the viewer can continue to invest in their belief in the just world (ibid). In essence, it allows the individual to retain a belief that such harm could never occur to them as they are, in some way good, moral, or competent and consequently the victim must lack these same traits. Though Pemberton does not use the terms explicitly, I argue that his analysis can be further understood through a framework of stigma and shame. In this case, the belief in the just world acts as a cultural ideal to which individuals are expected to strive towards, and the perceived failure of victims to meet these standards is met with a stigma that characterizes them as immoral, passive, or lacking in strength or conviction. This in turn can be seen as a prompt that inflicts a debilitating sense of shame onto victims, who are left to struggle between their belief in a just world and the bare fact of their victimization. Moreover, due to the relational quality of stigma, the stigmatisation of those who are seen, rightly or wrongly, to deviate from these norms works to strengthen the underlying belief in a just world by punishing deviations from it. Other victimologists have been more explicit than Pemberton in linking our societal distaste for victims to a larger project of stigma and shame. For example, Sharon Lamb argues that within western society victimhood is inherently shameful because weakness, an inherent part of victimization, is so shameful to us (Lamb 1999 p.119-120). To be a victim then is to be weak, and within a western culture that lionizes individualism, strength, and agency, to be weak is to have failed at the very basic tenants of citizenship (ibid p.121). The victimologist Erinn Gilson cites Lamb's analysis approvingly in her research into the relationship between victimhood and vulnerability and why this relationship can help us understand victim blaming (Gilson 2016). In explaining her position, Gilson notes:

In this way, victim blaming often relies on the valorisation of invulnerability and the presumption that we simply are, or should be, invulnerable, autonomous, rational, and in control. The conclusion is either that victims are failures because they have allowed themselves to be victimized or that they are actually together, rational agents who are misrepresenting themselves as victims because they calculate that it will benefit them in some way.

(Gilson 2016, p.83).

Lamb and Gilson's analysis, I argue, has a good deal of support in the literature that has documented how individuals respond to victimization, as numerous studies have highlighted that victims both experience stigmatising responses from outside actors and struggle with their own internalized sense of shame. For example, in Lora Lempert's study of the help-seeking behaviours of female IPV victims, she noted that her participants described experiencing stigmatising and belittling responses from the sources of support they turned to when attempting to leave their abusive relationships (Lempert 1997). Rather than offering uncritical support and providing the women with resources, these outside helpers often attempted to impose their version of reality onto the women's situation, viewing them as weak, passive, and vulnerable victims who did not know what was best for them (ibid p.302). This worked to not only stigmatise the women as failures but also to remove their agency and in the process dehumanized and humiliated them at an incredibly vulnerable moment in their lives (ibid p.304). Other authors who have researched IPV victims have made similar conclusions, arguing that women who flee their abusive partners are often stereotyped and belittled as weak, which functions to justify their autonomy being taken away by support agencies (Gillis et al 2006, Gracia et al 2014, Meyer 2016). The stigmatisation of weakness and vulnerability can also be seen in the testimony of victims themselves, as several studies have highlighted that victims struggle with feelings of shame and self-hatred in the aftermath of the crime, as they struggle to understand how they could have *"let"* themselves be victimized (Ferraro and Johnson 1983, Mills 1985, Enander 2010). Thus, we have seen that victimhood can be understood as a stigmatised social identity and that

this stigma arises from how victimhood violates our shared norms of the *"assumptive world"* (Janoff-Bulman 1992) and thus, implicitly, through its association with the weakness, vulnerability and passivity these norms are meant to stand against.

Yet, as I have alluded to in my introduction, victimhood and the shame it generates are not experienced uniformly by all victims and indeed different aspects of one's identity will impact how victimhood and the shame it carries are experienced. This is notable when we turn to look at how gender and sexuality can influence the experience of victimization as there is a good deal of scholarship which suggests that victimhood retains certain gendered connotations which complicate the experience of certain sets of victims. This is because victimhood is a social identity that is frequently associated with femininity or is simply seen as an inherently female trait (Lamb 1999, Alcoff 2009). This association is linked to the fact that a core component of our current social understanding of victimhood is a sense of vulnerability and weakness (Holstein and Miller 1990, Kenney 2002). However, these same traits also sit at the core of misogynist constructions of femininity, as in traditional patriarchal understandings of gender, women are seen to be weak, passive, and in need of protection by men (Dworkin 1974). This point has not gone unnoticed by scholars, who have noted the often-problematic association between femininity and victimhood which assumes that women are inherently prone to victimization (Lamb 1999, Alcoff 2009, Gilson 2016). Nils Christie for example in setting out his framework of the ideal victim noted that our typical image of the innocent and deserving victim was of an injured woman and he argued that this connection was linked to a misogynistic understanding of women as being inherently weaker than the assumed male offender (Christie 1986). None of this is to say that women do not experience shame or stigma from being victimized, what is the case, however, is that given the inherently stigmatising nature of victimhood and its long association with femininity, it is not surprising that the label can create problems for a specific group which, has for some time, been ignored within victimological scholarship: male victims.

Victimhood and Masculinity

Historically male victims had long been ignored within the sociological canon of victimology which, informed as it was by feminist and critical criminological traditions, originally focused its inquiry into the experiences of female victims and other oppressed groups (Newburn and Stanko 1994). However, this began to change at the turn of the new millennium, coinciding with a broader sociological interest in the study of masculinity as a discrete social phenomenon. One of the most enduring concepts to emerge from this strain of scholarship was Raewyn Connell's theory of "*hegemonic masculinity"* (Connell 1995). Connell argues that masculinity did not have an objective social meaning, there was no inherent essence of masculinity, instead masculinity, like all forms of identity, was a socially constructed concept which was maintained through social interactions and wider social structures (ibid). Consequently, there existed multiple different masculinities that co-exist amongst different social groups at different times and different places. However, amongst these differing forms of masculinity, one particular construction achieved what Connell, borrowing a concept from Antonio Gramsci (1971), calls a *"hegemonic"* status (Connell 1995 p.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 lionized form of masculinity to which all men are pushed to aspire. The exact nature of the type of masculinity which has achieved hegemonic status has and remains up for debate, but Mike Donaldson provides an insightful summation of the general characteristics associated with the concept:

[Hegemonic masculinity] is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal, and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich, and socially sustained. While centrally connected with the institutions of male dominance, not all men practice it, though most benefit from it.

(Donaldson 1993 p.645).

Thus, hegemonic masculinity can be understood as a norm which pressures men to be violent, aggressive, and dominant, whilst 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). This concept of hegemonic masculinity has proven to be incredibly influential in the study of men and masculinity in general (see for example Beasley 2008, Duncanson 2015). However, it has found particular utility in the study of male victims, as several scholars have used Connell's framework to better understand the potential difficulties men have when confronted with the experience of victimhood and victimization.

These difficulties arise from the fact that victimhood is a social status that is associated with weakness, passivity, vulnerability, and femininity, and this social label, I argue, clashes with the norms of hegemonic masculinity which embody contrasting traits of strength, dominance, and agency. For male victims then, the prospect of victimization can be experienced as a direct assault on their sense of masculinity as constructed through prevailing cultural norms of hegemonic masculinity (see for example Goodey 1997, Kay and Jeffries 2010, Javaid 2017.) Victimhood thus can act as a social label which exists in direct opposition to another core aspect of a man's identity, and indeed there is much evidence to support this across several extant studies. For example, Burcar and Akerstrom (2009) conducted research amongst young men who had experienced criminal assault which examined and attempted to theoretically contextualize 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 minimize the seriousness of the assault or to account for their inability to protect themselves (ibid p.42). This was typically done by highlighting external factors, such as the unfairness of the attack or how outnumbered they were as a way to diminish either the seriousness of the attack or to explain and justify why they were not able to effectively fight back and prevent themselves from being harmed (ibid p.42-45). The authors argued that these young men had to find a way to integrate their experiences of victimhood into their wider understanding of self in a manner that did not interfere with or challenge their masculinity (ibid p.51-52). The fact that victimization threatened masculinity in the first place suggested that their understanding of masculinity was intimately tied to their ability to represent themselves as strong, powerful, and immune to harm. Moreover, a bevy of studies have highlighted that male victims are unlikely to report their victim status to authorities or other organizations, principally due to a fear of being shamed and stigmatised (see for example Tsui et al 2010, Weiss 2010, Hlavka 2017, Machado et al 2017). I argue from this, that male victims experience a unique form of stigma due to their violation of gender norms associated with hegemonic masculinity, the consequence of which is an intense gendered shame which works to attack their sense of self as men. Male victims are thus separated from *"real"* men, seen as weak, vulnerable, and passive, and thus devalued and moved to a lower social status. Stigma and shame are thus central components of the male experience of victimization, yet, despite this, it is worth noting that men do not experience victimization and thus stigma in a uniform manner either. Indeed, other aspects of an individual's identity will act to structure and shape how shame manifests during the process of their victimization. An understanding of these points allows us to re-orientate our discussion back to the experiences of our population of interest, that of Queer male victims.

This is a significant point, as Queer men have an experience of masculinity that has always been deeply fraught and contested. Scholars have long highlighted the fact that for much of modern history that homosexuality and Queerness were seen as antithetical to the very concept of masculinity (Donaldson 1993, Theodore and Basow 2000, Bridges 2013). This was the case due to homosexuality's association with femininity, as to be gay was to deviate from traditional constructions of masculinity which emphasized men's sexual domination of women by raising the possibility that other men might become the subject of male desire (Kimmel 1997). As a consequence,

the denigration and marginalization of homosexuality became a key process in the construction of hegemonic masculinity, to be a real man was to not be gay, and thus the stigmatisation of Queer men worked to re-affirm and legitimize this affirmation of heterosexual masculinity (Diefendorf and Bridges 2020). Homosexuality and Queerness, in general, were thus deeply stigmatised and Queer men were held up as exemplars of failed or spoiled masculinities that were to be avoided at all costs if a man wanted to gain social acceptance (Martino 2000). Indeed, Connell herself noted that:

Oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men. Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity.

(Connell 1995 p.78)

However, despite this legacy of shame and stigmatisation, Queer men do not completely cut themselves off from a sense of masculinity. As Connell noted in earlier work, Queer men are still raised within a society that assumes their heterosexual masculinity until they come out of the closet (Connell 1992). They are thus exposed to and often internalize the norms and standards of traditional hegemonic masculinity for much of their lives, and are still able to reproduce or perform conduct and behaviour that are socially recognized as traditionally masculine by hegemonic standards (ibid). Evidence to support this can be found within research that has concluded that Queer men can perform hegemonic forms of masculinity for instrumental purposes, such as to hide their sexuality from others, or to gain social approval and acceptance from other heterosexual men (Fee, 2000, Anderson 2002). Moreover, a burgeoning field of literature has examined how Queer men have worked to produce unique forms of masculinity which play with and deviate from these traditional hegemonic norms in new and innovative ways (see for example Fejes 2002, Manley et al 2007, Peters 2010). It is clear then that Queer men do experience masculinity, even if this experience is filtered through the lens of their sexuality to such a degree that it produces a new and differing form of masculinity. This allows us to return to our original point: if male victims experience victimhood as deeply shameful and stigmatising in part due to its perceived incompatibility with their masculinity, then is this process impacted at all for Queer men due to their sexuality? There is indeed some evidence to support this conclusion.

For example, in Peter Dunn's research with Queer male victims of hate crime, Dunn noted that his participants experienced intense feelings of shame, believing that their victimization brought their masculinity into question (Dunn 2012). However, Dunn goes on to suggest that this sense of shame and emasculation seems to be intensified for his Queer participants due to how their sexuality interacts with their masculinity (ibid). Dunn argues that Queer men have already had to struggle with their masculinity, as their stigmatised sexuality had brought their legitimacy as men into question even before they had been victimized (ibid). This victimization then opened old wounds regarding their sense of identity and their insecurities around their masculinity (ibid p.3460). His participants argued that the fact they had been victimized seemed to confirm older feelings that they were not *"real men"* and in effect worked to reinforce the shame and stigma they had experienced due to their sexuality for much of their lives (ibid). In this case, the men's sexuality created a unique sense of shame where previous stigma experienced due to their status as sexual minorities seemed to layer on top of the stigmatisation of victimhood. These different forms of stigma interacted in such a way to create a crisis in their sense of masculinity that was unique even when compared to the experiences of other male victims (ibid). We can see more evidence of this process if we turn to the work of Alireza Javaid (2017), who examined the experiences of gay male victims of sexual assault and rape. Javaid argued that gay male rape victims had to navigate the consequences that the assault had on their sense of self, and he noted the ways that their sexual victimization seemed to imperil or threaten their sense of masculinity (Javaid 2017). The deep shame that many of them felt at their experiences pushed the men to remain silent about their assault to outwardly protect their masculinity from what they

assumed would be ridicule and stigmatisation should anyone discover they had been victimized (ibid). Moreover, Javaid went on to argue that because certain aspects of Queer culture are already stigmatised in wider society that Queer victims of sexual assault and rape may struggle to find acceptance and legitimacy in the wake of victimization. He uses the example of the culture of casual and anonymous sex within the Queer Scene which often promotes promiscuity and sexual encounters with multiple partners, all forms of intimacy that have historically been stigmatised for falling outside the norms of acceptable sexual conduct. The stigmatisation of this environment allows abusers to choose victims they may feel confident will be unwilling to report their experience due to a fear of being stigmatised for their involvement in deviant sexual practices (ibid p.289). It is thus clear that Queer men do experience shame and stigmatisation in the aftermath of victimization, and that this shame is then filtered not just through the framework of their identities as men, but also through the lens of their sexuality and their status as a sexual minority.

So far then, we have been able to see how victimhood is a generally stigmatised social identity, but one that is experienced as particularly shameful for men due to the way it clashes with dominant social constructions of masculinity to which all men, even Queer men, are judged. We thus have a better understanding of how victimhood is potentially understood by Queer male victims of IPV, but this understanding is not yet complete. We still do not know how the stigma of victimhood is managed by those who are labelled with it, nor do we know what the broader consequences of victimhood are for an individual's sense of self. To understand this, we need to turn to a field of inquiry which has provided fertile ground for understanding these exact processes: narrative theory.

Narrative, Trauma, and the Self

Narrative theory holds that social life is ordered, understood, and effectively given meaning through narrative (Reisman 1993). Narrative in this sense means an understanding of the world that structures reality into a series of events that are ordered into beginning, middle, and end parts (Yorke 2014). Narrative theorists propose that people understand the world through telling stories. Stories about themselves, their families, their work environment, and even society as a whole (McAdams 2001). Moreover, some narrative theorists have argued that identity itself can be understood through a narrative framework. In that, our fundamental understandings of ourselves are represented through a narrative which gives meaning and context to an otherwise random assortment of events (Frank 1995, Plummer 1995, Holstein and Gubrieum 2000, Loseke 2007). As Loseke, states:

Making sense of the buzzing confusion of practical experience requires constructing coherent connections among life events, and this is what narratives of the self can do. Rather than seeing a life as simply "one damned thing after another," personal narratives allow the creation of coherence (K. Gergen 1994:187), the possibility of "linking diverse life events into unified and meaningful wholes" (Polkinghorne 1991:136), the ability to integrate a "reconstructed past, perceived present and anticipated futures in terms of beginnings, middles, and endings" (McAdams 1996:298)

(Loseke 2007, p.672).

Narratives are thus what Arthur Frank calls *"maps"* (Frank 1995 p.53) frameworks which allow us to order past events into a coherent structure which explains our current present circumstances and then create an imagined end in the future. However, the question remains as to why narrative theory can help us understand the experience of victimization. To answer this question, we need to understand how victimhood radically challenges the individual's ability to make narrative sense of their experiences. This is because victimhood represents a serious challenge to an individual's life narrative, victimhood is not an expected or planned part of their life path, and thus the experience of victimization often represents a radical departure from what came before it. The experience of victimhood shatters old assumptions about how the world is supposed to operate and as a consequence generates confusion and uncertainty about the future (Janoff-Bulman 1992.) As Susan Brison (2002)

has argued, violent victimization is often experienced as an *"unmaking of the self",* a process by which the individual loses contact with their life before they were harmed. This harm fundamentally changes their relationship with the world. In describing her own experience in the aftermath of rape, Brison notes that victimization was experienced as a form of *"unreality"* (ibid p.9) in which she struggled to make sense of the world around her:

When the inconceivable happens one starts to doubt even the most mundane, realistic perceptions. Perhaps I'm not really here, I thought, perhaps I did die in that ravine. The line between life and death, once so clear and sustaining, now seemed carelessly drawn and easily erased. For the first several months after my attack, I led a spectral existence, not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive but in a totally alien world…I felt as though I'd somehow outlived myself.

(Brison 2002, p.8-9)

To use the idea of narrative again, Brison, and other victims like her, become unable to account for the past, make sense of the present and plan for the future. Victimization acts to separate them from the stable sense of continuity and identity which had previously sustained them. To further understand the role of narrative here, I wish to turn to the work of Arthur Frank. Frank's work concerned itself with the study of how individuals responded to serious illness, and he argued the experience of such a diagnosis worked to destroy a person's ability to make sense of their own experiences, at least for a time (Frank 1995). The shock and debilitating effects of the illness itself all worked to destroy or at least severely weaken the previous foundational assumptions which once supported their life narratives. With this destroyed, Frank notes that they often flounder in a sea of chaos. Indeed, Frank likens the experience of managing a serious illness to being a sailor who has become shipwrecked in the open sea. Without a titular *"map"* (ibid p.53) left to guide them, the patient is thus left at the mercy of the elements. Frank argues that illness creates a situation that he dubs *"narrative wreckage"* (ibid p.65) in which the patients' previous narrative understandings of themselves and the world are no longer sufficient to help them navigate the new reality of their illness. Therefore, these individuals must create new narratives from the wreckage of the old. We will return to this second point later in the chapter, and instead continue to focus on the concept of narrative wreckage for I argue that we can fruitfully utilize this concept to better understand how victims respond and understand their experiences of abuse.

Though Frank's analysis is focused on the experiences of patients grappling with serious illnesses, his description of how these individuals grapple with their pain and suffering has remarkable similarities to the experience of victims. Whilst narratives of illness often lack an element of ascribing blame and responsibility to an outside offender figure as is the case in typical victimization narratives (Holstein and Miller 1990, Pemberton et al 2019) there are still several similarities. Like the narratives of illness identified in Frank's work, victims often experience the destruction of a previously held sense of stability and coherence in the aftermath of their victimization (Mills 1985, Janoff-Bulman 1992, Brison 2002, Fohring 2018). Moreover, I argue that similar ideas to Frank's framework can be found in the work of victimological scholars who have attempted to understand and theorize how victims respond in the aftermath of victimization. For example, Pemberton, Mulder and Aarten have argued that narrative can be fruitfully applied to the experiences of victims. Developing on insights created in the field of narrative criminology, they argue explicitly for a *"narrative victimology"* which aims to investigate how victims use narrative to understand and manage the trauma and harm caused by victimization (Pemberton et al 2019). In doing so, they argue that victimization constitutes an event which often destroys the narratives that individuals previously would have used to understand and make sense of their life (ibid). The victim is no longer able to rely on the taken-for-granted assumptions about their life and in a way feel that they have been fundamentally destroyed by their experiences (ibid).

Even more relevant for our purposes, however, is the fact that this idea that victimisation is a destruction of the self can be found in the literature on IPV victims. Indeed, the tactics used by abusers often deliberately work to undermine the victims' self-esteem, their ability to make decisions for themselves, their self-image, and even their very sense of reality itself, as the weakening of these traits allows an abuser to control and dominate them more easily (Kearney 2001, Evans and Lindsay 2008, Williamson 2010). For example, Evan Stark argued that the abuser's assault on a victim's sense of self was a key part of the process by which an individual's will is broken and the abuser can coercively dominate and control them (Stark 2007). We can further see this process play out in more concrete terms in the work of Kathleen Ferraro and John Johnson (1983). In a study conducted with female survivors of IPV from male partners, Ferraro and Johnson note that their participants described situations in which their abusers would frequently undermine their confidence and esteem through regular sessions of humiliation and abuse. The authors argued that these tactics worked to generate a feeling within the women that they had somehow failed their partners by inadequately performing their roles as wives and mothers. The consequence of this was to destroy their character and sense of self, making them unsure of their identity and thus increasingly reliant on their abuser for validation and an external sense of worth. This in turn made them less willing both to question their partner or take steps to separate from them, as what remains of their sense of self and identity is bound up in the relationship (Ferraro and Johnson 1983 p.334-345). It is clear, therefore, that abuse leaves deep wounds in an individual's sense of self and identity, and I argue that this can partly be explained by the challenges that IPV poses for the victim's *"assumptive worldview"* (Janoff-Bulman 1992). In this way, I argue all of these authors hint at what Frank would dub narrative wreckage within the accounts of these victims. Like the narratives of illness that Frank examined, the narratives of these victims show that victimization broke down previously established narratives of self by calling their base premises into question which then left them in a state of confusion and disorientation that was often experienced as a loss of self. This experience is deeply shameful and works to further reinforce the stigmatising impact of victimization. Thus, I have demonstrated the connection between shame and victimization and noted that victimization can be understood as a form of narrative wreckage which often undermines an individual's previously taken-for-granted narratives of themselves and the world. The next question that arises from this conclusion is, what happens to the victim after this point, how do they attempt to repair the destruction of their very sense of self? Indeed, it is to this specific point I now wish to turn my analysis to consider.

Transforming Spoiled Identities

How do victims, faced with the unmaking of their sense of self and combined with the stigmatisation of their new social status, recover from their experiences? How do they escape the narrative wreckage that they have found themselves in and return to the world of normality? For scholars who have focused on the reactions that individuals have to traumatic or painful experiences, the answer to the destruction of the self is simple, a new sense of self must be crafted. Scholars of the sociology of trauma have noted that in the aftermath of these experiences, victims must undergo a process by which they come to terms with what has happened to them, and in doing so generate a sense of meaning out of their experiences which allows them to begin to repair the destruction caused by victimization. Janoff-Bulman (1992) for example argued that though trauma shatters the assumptive worldviews previously held by victims, the road to recovery requires that the victim eventually re-learns and internalises these same assumptions to return to a normal state of functioning. In a similar vein, Thomas Attig (1996) in his study of the sociology of bereavement found that individuals who had lost loved ones in violent or traumatic ways often initially perceived the world as a hostile and meaningless place in which they were alienated from others and struggled to find meaning. The only way to recover from this experience required, in his words *"relearning the self and the world"* (Attig 1996 p.239), by which he meant that the mourner must come to accept their loss and learn how to continue on in life without their loved one. It is important to note that none of these authors argued that the victim must completely forget their traumatic experience or treat it like it never happened.

Instead, they must integrate their victimization into their sense of self, honouring and accepting what happened to them, and constructing a new identity in which that part of them can co-exist with other aspects of their identity. Brison (2002) for example described how in the aftermath of her near-fatal rape, she found her path to recovery not in denying what happened to her or in downplaying the devastating impact it had, but instead in accepting that her life had been irrevocably changed and making a commitment to live despite this fact. She described this process as *"remaking oneself"* (Brison 2002). Robert Neimeyer, in discussing how mourners recover from grief, argued that this process aims to re-establish a coherent life narrative that was disrupted by the initial trauma, as the victim seeks to find coherence between the person they were before their trauma and the person they are in its aftermath, to explain why they are harmed and what they can expect in the future (Neimeyer 2000). The synthesis of these two positions generates meaning by establishing a continuity between past and present and thus re-establish a stable sense of self as embodied in the newly re-forged life narrative (Neimeyer et al 2002). Though not all of these authors specifically target the experiences of victims of crime, I argue that their frameworks are immensely useful in helping us understand how victims respond to victimization and seek to rebuild their sense of self in the aftermath of harm. In particular, I argue that the process of remaking or rebuilding the self Brison (2002) identified in her work can be a useful framework for understanding how victims of IPV manage the trauma and stigma of their experiences. Indeed, from reviewing the extant literature I argue we can observe similar frameworks that have been developed and applied to this exact population, specifically, in the work of Evans and Lindsay.

These authors conducted research with female victims of IPV, and based on their findings they criticised the notion of recovery within the broader IPV literature (Evans and Lindsay 2008). They argued that the belief that women could ever truly recover from IPV was misleading and potentially stigmatising. Even for women who were able to completely separate themselves from their partners, the impacts of their abuse, be they physical, psychological, or financial, could last for years after the relationship ended (ibid p.356). In this way, recovery was often not possible, and to insist on a recovery framework risked stigmatising women who continued to struggle even after becoming free of their abusers (ibid p.357). Instead, Evans and Lindsay proposed a different framework to understand women's post-abuse journeys, that of incorporation. In this framework, abuse and victimhood are not recovered from, instead, these parts of their lives are incorporated into their wider sense of self. Thus, the woman recognises that the abuse has had a profound and life-changing impact on their sense of self, but slowly over time, the experience is moved to the edges of their self-perception (ibid p.360). I argue that Evans and Lindsay's framework fits with the frameworks of authors such as Janoff-Bulman (1992), Attig (1996), Neimeyer (1999) and Brison (2002). It shares with them the same basic contention, that trauma and harm cannot ever fully be erased, and that instead they must be integrated into a new sense of self. In this way, these frameworks give us a better insight into the messy realities of victimization, and how trauma and harm can continue to linger even years after the initial victimizing event has receded into the past. However, these frameworks can often be vague in their application. Though they specify that the individual must incorporate or remake or re-learn the trauma, the self, and the world, they do not specify how exactly this process is conducted or what these newly re-forged senses of self or narratives of identity look like. However, there is a framework that can attend to this critique and offer a more specific and fleshed-out account of this process of integration. This can be found by once again returning to the work of Arthur Frank.

Frank (1995) did not simply argue that individuals who were exposed to serious illness experienced the trauma of narrative wreckage, he then went further in arguing that in the aftermath of this narrative collapse, the patient had to construct a new narrative to give meaning to their experiences and guide them out of the storm. From his analysis of the accounts of individuals grappling with serious illness, Frank identified three types of narratives that commonly emerged from the experience. He crucially argued that these narratives were not mutually exclusive and that it was common for a single individual to deploy different narratives at different points in their journey for different

purposes (ibid). The first of these narratives was the chaos narrative which Frank paradoxically described as a type of "*anti-narrative*" (ibid p.98) where the patient is unable to understand or make sense of their own experience of illness, and instead is left confused and unable to imagine a future outside of their role as a sick patient. Then there is the restitution narrative (ibid p.75) where the patient constructs an account where they are made whole and fully recover from their illness. The patient is thus returned to a state of completeness where they can resume their lives as if nothing has happened. Finally, in the quest narrative (ibid p.115), the individual recognizes that they have been fundamentally transformed and changed by their experience of illness. Rather than attempt to pretend they can return to their lives the same as before, they instead begin to re-frame these changes as a form of positive transformation, and their experiences of hardship and illness as an important lesson that they can learn from and then benefit from in the future (ibid p.115). Again, though Frank's framework was originally formulated to apply to the experiences of illness, I believe that his framework of narrative accounting in the aftermath of trauma can be incredibly useful in helping researchers understand the experiences of victims, and victims of IPV specifically.

This can partly be explained by the fact that, despite many obvious differences, the experiences of IPV and serious illness share several core characteristics. First of all, the experience of serious illness has been documented to have a severe impact on an individual's sense of self and identity, not to mention their sense of control and autonomy. This can be explained by the fact that illness challenges and disrupts commonly held assumptions about bodily integrity and health that most of us hold, in that we assume, often incorrectly, that we are generally healthy and that our bodies are unlikely to experience significant difficulty or pain (McGonagle and Barnes-Farrell 2013). Furthermore, illness itself can disrupt the imagines trajectories of an individual's life narratives by threatening their ability to conceive of or imagine an endpoint after their illness which can often come to dominate their sense of self and take on the position of a master status (Mathieson and Stam 1995, Chatoo and Amad 2004, Careless 208). Though different in many ways, IPV shares this unique capacity to seriously challenge an individual's sense of self with illness. Given the overlap I have demonstrated between Frank's framework and the experiences of IPV victims, it is not surprising that his theories have been directly applied to this population of victims in the past.

To give an example, Donileen Loseke has argued that the concept of both narrative wreckage and the chaos narratives that follow in its wake could be used to better understand how female victims of IPV experience and respond to abuse (Loseke 2001). In performing research with a support group for battered women, Loseke noted that in their narratives of abuse, the victims described a constant barrage of verbal and physical violence and control which left them confused and disoriented (ibid p.108). They struggled to form a coherent account of their experiences, oscillating between love and hate for their partners and were left constantly on edge as they never knew how their partner would respond to their actions. This state of confusion rendered them unable to properly generate meaning within the relationship or understand what was happening to them. Indeed, it was only after they had left their partner that they could begin to properly process their experiences and generate narratives in which they recognised their victimisation. Loseke argued that these accounts constituted chaos narratives in Frank's understanding, as they reflected an anti-narrative where the women were unable to make effective sense of their situation in a way similar to how Frank's patients struggled to make sense of their illness (ibid p.109). Developing from Loseke's ideas, Rebecca Barnes used Frank's framework to conduct a study with Queer women who had experienced IPV from their female partners (Barnes 2013). Barnes found that her participants attempted to understand and make sense of their experiences of abuse and identified all three of Frank's narratives in their accounts. However, in her analysis, Barnes argued that this process of accounting and developing new narratives were not performed in a vacuum. She noted that several of her participants felt under pressure to recover or move on from their traumatic experiences before they were ready to do so. They did this by presenting positive restitution or quest narratives which consigned their traumatic experiences to the past, whilst ignoring or downplaying the ongoing issues and problems that their abuse had caused

them that they were often still battling day to day. In contrast, chaos narratives that emphasised the confusion and trauma many of them still felt were seen to be unacceptable, and they instead had to be moved past to be considered a legitimate victim (ibid p.394). Barnes argued that these accounts demonstrate a subtle socially embedded stigmatisation of victimhood, one that pushed her participants to present more positive narratives of abuse that did not linger on their past experiences of harm or on the continuing impacts it had on their day-to-day lives. In concluding, she noted that the danger of this type of process is that it:

"potentially privatizes experiences of abuse and burdens survivors with the fear of a 'failed' recovery, alongside the existing shame and stigma resulting from abuse." (Ibid p.394)

Though Barnes' work was conducted with Queer women other scholars have made similar findings with heterosexual women, noting that they too feel under pressure to present sanitised narratives of recovery that hide the messy lived realities of grappling with the aftermath of IPV (Evans and Lindsay 2008, Meyer 2016). In this way, Barnes' work shows us that narrative, even at the person level, is structured and impacted by wider social norms and values, and by linking the discomfort with chaos narratives to society's discomfort with victimisation and vulnerability, she returns us to the start of this discussion, and with that done, we can turn to bring this chapter to a close and highlight what we have learned.

Conclusion: Breaking and Re-making the Self

In this chapter, I have outlined the central role that the concept of stigma has in understanding the experiences of crime victims. Victimisation is a profoundly stigmatised social identity which disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions of a just world and can lead to deeply distressing feelings of shame and inadequacy which shatter their previous social identities. These feelings of shame can in turn be linked to wider constructions of masculinity, as male victims may further feel that their victimisation represents a failure to maintain standards of hegemonic masculinity. This experience of victimisation creates within the victim a need to account for their experiences and to develop means to integrate this experience into a new narrative of self. For victims of IPV, this is all the more pressing given the nature of their victimisation where their abusers often deliberately undermined and attacked their sense of self as a means to coercively control them. With this all set-out, the question remains of how exactly this all relates to the experiences of Queer male victims of IPV? To answer this, I argue that we need to understand the wider structural and social factors within which Queer male intimacy exists and to which normal and stigmatised subjects exist and relate. It is only by understanding the context in which Queer men come together to form romantic relationships that we can begin to understand how IPV is experienced when it occurs within these relationships. With this in mind, in Chapter Three, I will argue that victims of IPV experience a unique form of stigma that directly relates to gendered expectations embedded in wider cultural narratives of romance.

Chapter Three

Narratives of Love in Late-Modernity

Introduction

In this chapter I will develop the major themes I identified in the previous chapter, moving to examine how stigma and shame operate specifically in the context of IPV. To do this I will first outline the framework I will use to understand and discuss the concept of romantic love throughout the rest of my thesis. I will then move to highlight previous research which has examined the role that stigma has played in the experiences of both female and male victims of IPV, noting specifically that both sets of victims experienced unique forms of shame that arise from their perceived failure to live up to cultural norms of gender and sexuality. I will then argue that Queer men may suffer from a unique form of stigma when they experience IPV, which arises from their subject positions within society as a stigmatised sexual minority. To demonstrate this, I set out to establish a sociological understanding of Queer male intimacy in the United Kingdom, noting that Queer men have broadly moved away from a position of sexual experimentation and fluidity and towards an assimilationist position of mirroring traditional heterosexual forms of intimacy. I argue that this shift can be explained through the twin process of homonormativity (Duggan 2002) and compulsory coupledom (Wilkinson 2013) which accompanied a broader neo-liberal turn in Queer politics and activism at the turn of the century. I then conclude by arguing that there is a dearth of research examining either how Queer men navigate stigma in the aftermath of IPV or whether this process is impacted by norms of gender and sexuality, as has been noted by research with other victim populations.

What is Love?

To begin our discussion, it is once again worthwhile to provide a more robust definition of a key concept: that of love and romantic love specifically. Defining love has been a fraught enterprise within the sociological tradition particularly since earlier sociological literature treated the study of love, or any other emotions, with a certain reservation or dismissal. (Thoits, 1989, Shilling 2002). However, subsequent researchers in the school of social constructivism challenged this view; they argued that emotions were indeed sociological phenomena that were created and maintained, in large part, through social and cultural processes (Lupton 1989). Within this particular strain of research, I want to focus on the work of Ian Burkitt, whose communicative theory of emotions I will draw on heavily. Burkitt set out to correct what he saw as a lack of clarity or precision in much of the previous sociological consideration of emotions (Burkitt 1997). He attempted to remedy this problem by putting forward his relational theory of emotions. For Burkitt, emotions could never truly occur within a vacuum; instead, they could only exist in relation to other people, social and cultural ideas, narratives, or institutions (ibid p. 46-47). Consequently, rather than viewing emotions as inherent biological processes, Burkitt argued that we should instead see them as socially constructed phenomena that only occur within specific sets of social relationships. The concept of love, for example, makes no sense unless you situate it within a particular relationship, in a particular society, or at a particular point in time. However, in making this argument, Burkitt did not deny that emotions had any biological components to them. Indeed, he rejected the very notion that emotions had to be either purely biological or purely social. Instead, he argued that emotions were multi-dimensional *"complexes"* (ibid p.48), that is, phenomena composed of multiple different aspects simultaneously. These included social aspects, such as cultural habits or social scripts, but also biological processes and physical sensations, such as an increased heart rate or physical arousal. As Burkitt stated:

"Emotions exist only in the context of relationships and are to be conceptualised as complexes - that is, as irreducible to social structures, discourses or physiology. All these elements are constitutive of emotions which are felt by active, embodied beings who are locked into networks of interdependence."

(Ibid p.52)

Burkitt went further in incorporating an element of structural analysis into his understanding of emotions. He argued that because emotions were the product of relationships, they would inevitably be embedded within particular power structures. Thus, emotions would play a role in both expressing and constituting the structures of power within a given society (ibid p.53). In this sense, Burkitt's view of emotions is fundamentally holistic; he argues that emotions cannot be reduced to either the product of social structures or the end point of biological processes, but instead have to be seen as a messy mixture of both.

I argue that by using Burkitt's theory, we can gain the most comprehensive understanding of what we mean when we talk about emotions like romantic love. However, I would extend Burkitt's framework to argue that love is not reducible to one emotional complex, but instead, that love is a cultural idea or narrative that is projected onto a series of linked emotional complexes. I argue that we can understand love as a form of narrative. That is, romantic love is a personal narrative that exists to give context and meaning to an individual's subjective experience. These personal narratives help an individual articulate who they are, both by contextualizing their past and by outlining an imagined future. In this way, there is no single story or narrative of romantic love. However, at the same time, there exist larger cultural narratives of romance, which sit at different social levels and produce different forms of narrative identity (Loseke 2007). Per this framework, this study understands romantic love as a form of narrative with varied meanings depending on historical and social circumstances. These narratives can be expressed at a cultural, institutional, and personal level. Moreover, these narratives give context and meaning to emotional complexes such as intimacy, passion and commitment, which in turn help the individual create a solid sense of identity and guide future actions. This framework helps elucidate what romantic love means for our analysis, but still does not fully answer the question of what romantic love is. What narratives of love exist, and which are relevant to our study? To answer this question, it is useful now to turn to the work of feminist theorists who, over many decades, have set out a robust framework for understanding how romantic love has been constructed and understood within western European society.

Gendered Love

Feminist scholarship views the dominant paradigm of heterosexual romantic love as a major contributor to the subordination of women within the wider patriarchal culture (Duncombe and Marsden 1993). This paradigm presents a narrative that proceeds as follows: two people meet, court each other, develop an intensely romantic and sexual attraction, and settle down in a dyadic monogamous couple, often coinciding with a formalised recognition of their intimacy through marriage (Jackson 2001, Schafer 2008, Korobov and Thorne 2009). This narrative of dyadic, monogamous romance pushes women to seek out romantic relationships with men in secure heterosexual marriages (Rich 1980, Forbes 1995). These marriages then entrap them into lives of domesticity and childrearing, ensuring their continual control by their husbands, who would use the women's emotional and physical labour to benefit themselves (Comer 1974, Kirkman et al 1998, Firestone 2000, Chung 2005). Though many different theorists have articulated different formulations of this same basic premise, a good distillation of the general orientation of feminist research in this area can be found in Adriene Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980). Rich argued that heterosexuality is not, purely, a biological reality, but instead was a political institution that by promoting the idea that women only sexually and romantically desired men, helped ensure women's subordination to them. In this system, women were expected and compelled to invest all of their erotic and emotional energies into men, a subordination typically effected through the institution of marriage (ibid p.645-646). The necessity of marriage was enforced by various social, economic, and political forces, which all worked to make women believe that marriage and the pleasure of a male partner was a core—or perhaps the defining—feature of their existence as women. Rich argued that this narrative

colonised the romantic imagination of women, creating an oppressive template in which women could imagine only relationships with men as worthwhile. Moreover, these relationships had to take precedent over any other relationships in their lives, and, crucially for Rich, precluded the idea that women could invest their erotic, romantic, or otherwise social energies in relationships with other women. Rich's theory demonstrates how dominant cultural understandings of romantic love, at least historically, have constructed gender norms that subordinate women to men by imposing the institution of heterosexuality onto their social relationships.

To further understand the role that heterosexuality plays in structuring romance narratives, it's useful to turn to another feminist theorist, this time the work of Queer feminist Gayle Rubin. Rubin agreed with Rich that heterosexuality maintained a hegemonic status as the dominant sexual and romantic paradigm in society. However, she went further than Rich, arguing that it was only a specific type of heterosexuality that was protected, privileged, and enforced onto others (Rubin 2011). Rubin argued that within society there existed a *"charmed circle"* (ibid p.152) of sexual conduct that was accepted and held up as hegemonic. This, as she argued, is typically sex conducted between heterosexual couples in monogamous relationships with the end goal of procreation in mind. Any conduct which fell outside of this charmed circle was constructed as deviant, and anyone found participating in it is stigmatised as a result. Rubin argued that the stigmatisation of these alternative forms of intimacy worked to reinforce the dominant and hegemonic forms of sex found within the charmed circle; consequently, the stigma reinforced the oppressive and constricting standards of sexuality placed on the rest of society (ibid p.154). However, Rubin differed with Rich on a key point: she recognised that the borders of this charmed circle were elastic to a degree. They could and would change to accept or reject different forms of sexual conduct at different times. Rubin, writing in the early 1980s, noted that certain forms of Queer sexuality were slowly moving towards respectability and potential inclusion within the charmed circle. Crucially, it was only the forms of Queer sexuality that most closely mirrored the heterosexual, reproductive, monogamous, and private forms of sex already privileged within the circle that was slowly becoming respectable (ibid p.151). We can see here that in both Rich and Rubin's work, the typical narrative of heterosexual romance and intimacy is presented in its appropriate socio-cultural context. Our dominant understanding of romantic intimacy has historically been confined to relationships between men and women where emotions of passion, eroticism and intimacy occur within the charmed circle of heterosexuality, always tempered by expectations of marriage and childrearing. Per Rich, this narrative establishes vastly different roles and responsibilities for the men and women operating within it.

Feminist theory also offers an understanding of the ways that traditional narratives of romance have shaped the presentation and operation of gender within our society. As has been noted by feminist sociologists such as Stevi Jackson, women are often instructed from a young age to view romantic relationships as a primary avenue available to them to achieve appropriate standards of femininity and womanhood (Jackson 1993). Moreover, numerous studies have highlighted the fact that at every stage of their lives, women are bombarded with myriad narratives that stress the importance of following traditional romance narratives of finding a male partner and settling down with him (see, for example, Holm 1997, Wilding 2003, Martin and Kazyak 2009). However, beyond just constituting specific gender scripts, these narratives of romance also serve another important sociological function: they form the basis for imposing stigma on men and women who encounter IPV in their romantic relationships.

To understand this link, we need to examine the existing literature which considered the relationships between IPV, victimization, and shame in more detail, including the numerous studies examining how stigma is intimately tied to the experience of IPV. Victims of IPV, like the victims we examined in the second chapter, have reported experiencing intense feelings of shame and stigmatisation both during and in the aftermath of abusive relationships (see, for example, Baker 2008, Evans and Lindsay 2008). Silke Meyer's (2016) work provides a good example. Meyer conducted research with female

survivors of male-perpetrated IPV and found that many of her participants disclosed experiencing stigma from family members, help organisations, and government agencies both during and after their victimisation (ibid). In attempting to understand the source of this stigma, Meyer noted a similarity between the experiences of these victims and the experiences of former offenders who were attempting to desist from careers of crime and anti-social behaviour (ibid p.78). Meyer argued that like former offenders, female victims of IPV were unfairly perceived by the general public to be weak-willed and unable to take responsibility for themselves. This was often exemplified by the fact that many of the women she interviewed had, at one point, returned to their abuser and reported experiencing stigmatising responses from their family as a result (ibid p.83-84). These stigmatising, stereotypical views were often expressed within both informal and formal support networks and were used as a justification to deny these women support or to shame them if they struggled with the practical and emotional difficulties of trying to navigate the often very dangerous process of leaving an abusive partner (ibid p.84). In a bitter twist of irony, these stigmatising responses often made the women's attempts at seeking help or leaving their partner more difficult and dangerous (ibid p.84-85) We can thus see the clear role that stigma plays in the experience of female victims of IPV and the debilitating effect it can have on their ability to access support.

I would argue that the stigma at play goes even further than the characterisation of these women as weak-willed or unable to care for themselves. It can, and often does, implicate their status *as women* as well. To understand this further, it is worth turning to the work of Viveka Enander. Enander, like Meyer, conducted research with women who had experienced male-perpetrated IPV and, like Meyer, was also interested in the way that these women were impacted by shame (Enander 2010). Enander reported that her participants disclosed recurrent feelings of shame, which principally arose from their decision to remain with their abusive partner despite the abuse that their partner subjected them to. The women came to believe that this decision was a sign of their weak characters and frequently described themselves as *"stupid"* or *"foolish"* whilst also expressing a belief that others would judge them negatively for their decision to stay (ibid p.13-16). These findings resemble those found by Meyer (2016), but Enander went further in her analysis and argued that these expressions of individualised shame could be linked to wider structures of stigma which work to denigrate and oppress women as a social class (ibid p.19). The shame they experience as a consequence of male-perpetrated IPV is thus simply an expression of the wider structure of stigma that they experience daily due to their status as women:

Women in violent heterosexual relationships are subjected to gendered violence, and their shame may be interpreted as gendered shame. They are made acutely aware of their underdog position as women, through being degraded and abused by the men to whom they live the closest. It may be that stupidity should be read as battered shame.

(Enander 2010, p.20)

We can thus see that what may appear to be an individual experience of shame can be linked to wider structures of stigma within society, and in turn, these structures can reinforce specific constructions of gender. This idea is also present in the work of another IPV researcher, Julia Wood (2001).

Wood (2001) conducted research with female victims of male-perpetrated IPV and noted that her participants' accounts were filled with references to particular types of romance narratives. The women she spoke with seemed to initially understand their experiences through a narrative of what she dubbed *"fairy tale romances"* (Wood 2001 p.249). This romance narrative was dominant in their lives and crucially contained certain understandings of appropriate romantic and intimate conduct that shaped the women's understandings of appropriate feminine and masculine behaviour. Within this narrative, women were expected to make the search for a male romantic partner one of the most important goals in their lives. When they finally were able to do this through beginning relationships with their abusers, Wood's participants found the realisation of their romantic dreams an exhilarating

experience. They described the intense emotions of joy, passion and intimacy that their partners gave them, often likening them to a mythical *"prince charming"* figure (ibid p.249). In this way, Wood noted that her participants seemed to attempt to link their experience back to these larger socio-cultural narratives of romance and expressed a desire to live out these cultural narratives in their own lives (ibid p.248). Wood argued that one of the consequences of this desire was that the women began to feel an intense sense of shame and self-blame when they began to recognise and experience abuse within their relationships. The women, initially incorrectly viewed their partners' aggressive and controlling behaviour as a failure on *their* part to maintain the idealised fairy tale narrative of romance, a narrative once integrated into their identity and important in achieving socially valued forms of femininity (ibid p.252). I argue that Wood's findings can be further understood through Goffman's (1963) framework of stigma. The fairy tale romance Wood describes can be seen as an idealised cultural narrative or norm that the women aspire to meet. In meeting this norm, they then can embody certain socially valued characteristics which they associated with a successful performance of femininity. Their encounter with IPV is thus experienced as a failure to live up to this norm and this generates a sense of shame and self-blame. They have effectively failed to live out their fairy tale romance and cultivate a successful relationship with their prince charming. Thus, their identities as *"good"* women are imperilled and potentially spoiled as a result. In developing this line of reasoning, I would argue that Wood's findings reflect a form of "*gendered shame*" in Enander's (2010) wording; the fairy tale narrative they sought to achieve is a heavily gendered one which constructs specific roles for men and women, reinforcing the patriarchal positioning of women as subservient to men's interests.

These findings are not limited to Enander's (2010) and Wood's (2001) work, as there is a great deal of research into the role that gender and narratives of romance play in the experience of IPV victimisation. Indeed, several researchers have noted that female victims of IPV often suggest that they were motivated to enter into romantic relationships with their abuser, in part, to experience these cultural narratives of romantic love and that these same narratives of love gave them a means of understanding abuse when it occurred (Wood 2001, Ching 2005, Hayes and Jefferies 2013). Moreover, these same romance narratives can become a powerful source of stigma and shame when the relationship becomes abusive. Research has shown that women can come to, falsely, believe the abuse they experience is the result of their failure to be good partners to their husbands (Baker 2008, Enander and Holmberg 2008, Enander 2010) whilst the centrality that romance plays in their life narratives means that many women fear the social illegitimacy that could occur should their relationship end and they become single once again (Seuffert 1999, Cavanagh 2003, Dziegielewski et al 2005). This literature makes clear then that there is an explicit link between cultural narratives of romance and the experiences of heterosexual women who encounter IPV. When encountering abuse in their relationships, women draw on their understandings of love and romance to make sense of their situation, and these same understandings shape and influence how they react. As a result, there are clear overlaps between the construction of appropriate standards of gender and sexuality and the prevailing cultural narratives of romance. These overlaps are significant for understanding how stigma is experienced by female victims of male-perpetrated IPV as a form of gendered shame.

Notably, there is also evidence that the experience of what we might call *"romance stigma"* is not limited to female victims but is also experienced by male victims of female-perpetrated IPV. Our evidence for this lies in the growing body of literature which has examined the experiences of heterosexual male victims of IPV. These studies have highlighted certain gendered aspects of shame experienced by male victims that are distinct from the experiences of their female counterparts (Tsui et al 2010, McCleary-Sills et al 2014, Hine et al 2020, Joseph-Edwards and Wallace 2020, Park et al 2021). For example, Kevin Hogan and his colleagues conducted a study with male victims of female-perpetrated IPV and they noted that their participants disclosed intense feelings of shame as a result of their experiences (Hogan et al 2021). The authors theorised that this shame arose because the men felt that they had failed to live up to expected standards of hegemonic masculinity within their

relationships by *allowing*, in their perception, their female partners to abuse, dominate and control them (ibid p.10). Moreover, this same strain of literature has also produced evidence that male victims of female-perpetrated IPV also utilise narratives of romance to understand and structure their experiences of abuse. For example, Melissa Corbally conducted a study with male victims of female-perpetrated IPV and found that her participants drew on typical gendered romance narratives to make sense of what was happening to them (Corbally 2014). Here however, rather than the idealised feminine fairy tale romances of Wood's participants, the men in Corbally's research drew on a different set of gendered romance narratives that emphasised traditionally masculine gender roles—e.g., the breadwinning husband and the doting father (ibid p.3120). These narratives called on the men to remain strong and stoic in the face of abuse for the sake of the family, and to re-frame their partner's control as a problem they would manage rather than an unjustified attack (ibid p.3123). Corbally also noted that her participants had to account for a disconnect between their masculine identities and their experiences of victimisation, which called this sense of masculinity into question (ibid p.3126). In this way, the men experienced the shame and stigma of failing to meet masculine norms of invulnerability and strength while at the same time, they were failing to meet these other gendered norms of romance. On this basis, Corbally argued that abuse, and IPV specifically, constituted a "*forbidden*" narrative (Allen-Collinson, 2009, as cited in Corbally 2014 p.3127) that clashed with the men's self-image of themselves and thus was difficult to internalise or accept. She contrasts this with the experiences of female victims, noting that, despite all the problems we identified in the last chapter with the association between femininity and victimhood, women are at least often allowed to accept a victim identity in cases of IPV while men are not (ibid).

From our above discussion, I argue that both male and female victims of IPV experience particular types of *"gendered shame"* (Enander 2010) as a result of their victimisation and that this experience of shame is accounted for through reliance on pre-existing cultural narratives of romance. It is thus clear that culturally valorised narratives of romance play a key role in structuring the experience of IPV for both male and female victims, and these narratives can be used as a means to account for the dissonance that victimisation causes to their wider senses of self. This line of inquiry leads to another question: if heterosexual victims of IPV experience gendered shame in this way, what of the experiences of Queer male victims? We have already established in the previous chapter that Queer men experience a type of gendered shame when confronted with the identity threat of victimisation, but we have not yet examined if or how narratives of romaine play a role in their understandings and experiences of abuse. This is an important gap in our scholarship, as it hides a potentially key practice used by victims to understand and make sense of their experiences of abuse. To begin to fill this gap, we need to first gain an understanding of the complex ways in which Queer men interact with romance and intimacy.

Queer Love in Late-Modernity

The study of Queer male intimacy is an area that has long been fraught with conflict and stigmatisation. The earliest works which examined Queer male sexuality often emphasised its deviant or stigmatised quality, highlighting how it is different from the traditional picture of heterosexual coupled monogamy and drawing negative conclusions about it as a result (Berger 1990). This was not helped by the fact that homosexuality had been explicitly illegal in much of the western world for most of modern history, and even after the waves of decriminalization that began in the 1960s, homosexuality was still pathologized as a mental illness that had to be cured, rather than as a social behaviour that had to be understood (Weeks 2016). Even when sociological research began to move past the frame of illness and pathology, much of the early work on gay men and their romantic relationships left a great deal to be desired. As Berger (1990) argues, much of this work looked at the individual characteristic of Queer men, rather than attempting to qualitatively understand their relationships with other men. Even when research began to consider these relationships, it placed undue emphasis on the sexual aspects of men's behaviour over other more romantic or intimate concerns (ibid p.32). This helped to create the impression that gay men did not or could not have

committed monogamous romantic relationships, and instead focused purely on short-term and fleeting sexual encounters with multiple men (Stychin 2003). Indeed, the view that Queer men were unable or unwilling to form committed monogamous relationships was often a key part of the *"stigma-theory*" (Goffman 1963) that was constructed to justify the continuing stigmatization and oppression of this sexual minority (Stychin 2003). Queer men were thus stigmatised for their apparent failure to meet these cultural and social norms, and their relationships were devalued and considered shameful as a result. This arrangement was the dominant state of affairs for much of the 20th century and would only begin to change with the advent of a seismic shift in social relationships and society at the turn of the century which heralded the beginning of the period of *"Late-Modernity"* (Young 2007).

In a period that saw the end of the Cold War, staggering social and political change sweeping across the world, and the seeming ascendancy of the neo-liberal political order as a new global hegemony (ibid), many scholars began to turn to consider how such chaotic changes were impacting the intimate and romantic lives of the people who had to navigate them. They developed a body of literature concerned with highlighting the role that an ongoing process of individualization played in re-making the standards of the traditional heterosexual romantic relationship (Giddens 1993, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Bauman 2003). These authors argued that this process was taking place in the context of the Late-Modern capitalist societies of the global north, where larger communitarian kin-ship networks were beginning to break down in favour of more atomized and individualistic ways of living. Individuals were no longer embedded in larger networks of meaning forged through familial relationships or nation-states and embodied in cultural narratives. Instead, they were increasingly being asked to see themselves as individual consumers who had to forge their own identity in a self-reflexive process (Giddens 2008). This trend intersected with another important development that was noted during this period: the continual growth of gender equality, where women were, supposedly, now finally gaining equality with their male counterparts, and existed on an equal footing both in the workplace and in the family home (Giddens 1993). Considering the impact of these two trends, these authors began to argue that we were witnessing a fundamental change in the nature of intimate and romantic relationships. The decline of large kinship networks, increased labour mobility, greater access to education and contraception, and the relaxation of norms around sex and sexuality removed the social pressures to marry early and maintain romantic relationships for life (Bauman 2003). Meanwhile, the social, economic, and political gains made by women meant that, in theory, they no longer had to depend on male partners for security and status, which gave them significantly more power and choice in choosing romantic partners (Giddens 1993). This resulted in a fundamental shift in the way romantic relationships were carried out. Before these relationships were often rooted in community traditions and laden with obligations of lifelong care and commitment, responsibility and duty. Now, relationships were increasingly seen as merely another extension of the Late-Modern project of crafting an individual sense of self (Giddens 2008).

The scholars who identified these trends were, however, divided on the consequences of this change for the wider society. On the more pessimistic end, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim expressed reservations, arguing that there was a central irony in a society that was obsessed with freedom, choice, and self-determination seeking that same self-realization through relationships with other people, which inevitably involve compromise and sublimation of individual desires (1995). They further predicted that this focus on individualized identity over communal obligation would lead to romantic relationships becoming an increasingly important social bond, as it would represent one of the few solid and secure sources of social support in an increasingly chaotic and atomized world (ibid). However, at the more optimistic end was Anthony Giddens. In contrast, he argued that these changes heralded a new form of democratic intimacy, liberated from the constraints of traditional and communal obligation, individuals were now free to pursue relationships as a form of private pleasure, where they could find mutually beneficial romantic relationships on an equal playing field (Giddens 1993). Giddens argued these *"pure"* relationships would be based on *"confluent love",* which meant, in essence, that they would exist only to benefit the couple as individuals, would be flexible and

capable of recognition to suit their needs and be able to be dissolved when they no longer provided pleasure or joy (ibid). Moreover, these relationships would embody a *"plastic sexuality"* where sex increasingly becomes focused entirely on self-expression and pleasure and divorced from reproduction (ibid). He even went so far as to argue that this shift would end the traditional unequal romantic relationships of the past, that so often disadvantaged women. In this case, we see that Giddens argues that this new form of love would, in effect, replace the old form of romantic love that feminist theorists had long raged against (ibid). Removed from the constraints of patriarchal obligation, women would now be free to finally pursue their interests as citizens of an intimate democracy.

Whilst these theorists put forward their analysis more than 20 years ago at the time of writing, I argue that their theories have only become more relevant in the intervening years, particularly with the rise of technologically facilitated courtship practices such as dating websites, dating apps, and social media. Indeed, scholars have argued the increasing reliance on digital technology to facilitate has accelerated the processes of individualisation and liquidity that theorists like Bauman, Beck and Giddens discussed (see for example, Munar 2010). Digital technologies allow users to contact and choose from a vast array of different potential partners, but these digital networks are based on shallow and often superficial forms of intimate connection where potential intimates can be used and discarded as a form of recreational play rather than as an investment in a serious relationship (Ellison et al 2006, Hobbs et al 2017, Goldenberg 2019). As the socialist theorist Sherry Turkle describes in her book *"Alone Together,"* digital technologies have succeeded in making us more connected with others, but this interconnectivity breeds a form of insecurity and anxiety as real-world connections become sacrificed at the expense of easier digital relationships where the individual can exert much more control over the levels of intimacy they adopt (Turkle 2017). The consequence of this is a population who in theory is more connected than any other in human history, but is increasingly isolated and lonely, bereft of real community and connections, and individualized. We have become atoms forced to reflexively seek connection in a vast and confusing digital landscape. Thus, we can see that Giddens, Bauman, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's theories continue to have relevance in helping us understand the modern landscape of intimacy in the 21st century, and this doubly applies to the population I am most interested in, that of Queer men.

Indeed, it is through the work of Giddens (1993) that we first see how sexual minorities, including Queer men, fit into this wider social change. Giddens argued that sexual minorities had been the forerunners of these changes long before they had begun to impact the heterosexual population (ibid). Freed from the shackles of patriarchal gender roles and romantic traditions, homosexuals were able to create relationships that maximized the pleasure of the individual and were designed to fit the needs of the couple, not society. A key part of this process was a notion of reflexivity, a willingness to innovate, negotiate, and change the parameters of a relationship to maximize the pleasure of the couple and keep pace with their changing preferences (ibid). We thus see that in the changing tides of individualization, sexual minorities, particularly gay men, were held up as innovators and relationship rebels who bucked traditional notions of romance and intimacy to create novel relationship forms. At the same time, they also embraced techniques such as non-monogamy agreements and polyamory to maximize pleasure and live outside the boundaries of acceptability. It was not just Giddens who endorsed this view. Jeffery Weeks, for example, argued that the Late-Modern period saw the rise of a *"radical humanism"* that offered validation for different sexual and relationship practices and provided the space for sexual minorities to develop new ways of living (Weeks 1995). In a study conducted by Weeks and his colleagues, this idea was more fully considered in light of empirical data (Weeks et al 2001). Conducting ethnographic research and interviews with members of the LGBTQ+ community, they found that in the absence of well-established relationships norms and access to institutions such as marriage, sexual and gender minorities could innovate and construct novel relationship formations and practices that acted to meet the needs of the couple as individuals (ibid). They dubbed these practices *"everyday life experiments"* and argued that, particularly in the domain

of romantic and intimate relationships, gay couples could develop and devise new and more flexible models of intimacy beyond the heterosexual norm (ibid).

From this body of scholarship, a clear divide can be observed between the way sociological scholars conceptualize the relationships of sexual minorities and the relationships of heterosexuals. The latter is shown to be trapped in stifling romantic traditions that emphasize female obedience and devotion to distant male partners, while the former, when they are considered at all, are shown to be radical free-thinking trailblazers, constructing new and innovative relationship patterns outside of the conformity of traditional romance. Moreover, there is a great deal of empirical evidence that suggests that Queer men engage in more fluid and innovative forms of intimacy that go against the traditions of coupled heterosexual monogamy. For example, there has been extensive scholarship examining the fact that Queer men frequently engage in sex and sexual intimacy outside the boundaries of committed coupled relationships, and that this type of behaviour is heavily encouraged within the Queer Scene (Adam 2006, van Eeden-Moorefield et al 2016, Meunier and Sauermilch 2021, Mowlabacus 2021). Studies of Queer male culture have noted that Queer men are often expected to engage in periods of promiscuity where they have sex with multiple partners with no expectation of commitment (Slavin 2009, Duncan et al 2015b). Indeed, this often is presented as a rite of passage into the Queer community, where young and inexperienced Queer men can finally begin to explore a sexuality that they have often had to hide and repress in the wider hetero-sexist society in which they were raised (Ridge et al 2006).

This is not to say that Queer men do not do romantic relationships, far from it, and indeed from the 1980s onwards, Queer scholarship has sought to rebut negative stereotypes which characterised Queer men as unable to commit to a single romantic partner (see, for example, Worth et al 2002). These scholars have documented those Queer men frequently and often enter long-term romantic relationships without the need for legal inclusion into institutions of kinship (Green 2006, Bricker and Horne 2007). However, it is worth noting that within these relationships Queer men still display a capacity for sexual innovation and an ability to operate outside the boundaries of traditional heterosexual forms of sexual monogamy. Indeed, research into Queer male couples has noted that many engage in sexual acts with men outside of the couple (Adam 2006, Shernoff 2006, Bonello and Cross 2010). These actions are typically not seen as cheating or infidelity but instead are negotiated parts of the couple's sex lives, where the men choose to emphasise their romantic commitment to each other but believe that both men should be free to indulge their sexual desires with other men. This is what Michael LaSala called *"monogamy of the heart"* (LaSala 2004) where sex is separated from romantic intimacy, with the former allowed to be experienced with other men whilst the latter is reserved entirely for the couple. The overwhelming majority of studies have noted that this form of relationship innovation can provide a strong base for Queer intimacy where both men feel valued and supported (Shernoff 2006, Coelho 2012, Parsons et al 2012). All of this would seem to suggest that Queer men embody Giddens' (1993) vision of love in Late-Modernity. Their propensity for sexual encounters that are removed from the context of reproduction and romantic commitment links to his concept of plastic sexuality, whilst their ability to sexually innovate even within the confines of the committed romantic couple seems to indicate a realisation of Giddens' ideal of confluent love. This is a beautiful vision, but it is an incomplete and optimistic one, for as more recent research and critique have shown, the intimate lives of Queer men are not nearly as utopian as Gidden's theories would suggest.

Towards Queer Assimilation - Homonormativity and Compulsory Coupledom

Many sociologists of intimacy have argued that pertinent flaws existed in Gidden's conceptualisation of love in Late-Modernity. Firstly, many scholars have questioned to what extent these changes are as radical or new as proponents like Giddens and Weeks suggest (Smart 2007). Jackson in particular highlights considerable research that suggests that relationships have been motivated by individual desires for love and self-realization for longer than the individualization thesis would suggest

(Jackson 1993). Others have questioned the extent to which relationships in the modern era can truly be said to be free of the traditional pressures and inequalities that were said to have characterized earlier modes of relationships (Jamieson 1998, Chung 2005).

These critiques would not remain confined purely to the study of heterosexual relationships; as other researchers began to document the existence of inequalities and problems within the sphere of Queer male intimacy. Many of these issues were even hinted at in the earlier more utopic studies of the Queer Scene. Ridge and his colleagues, for example, noted that though many young Queer men initially experienced the Scene as an exciting place where they could validate their new identity through experimenting with other men, this eventually gave way to a sense of alienation and tiredness when they realised that the Scene lacked substance and could not provide anything more concrete than mere sex (Ridge et al 2006). Meanwhile, even Weeks and his colleagues noted that though their participants declared a desire to live up to the egalitarian ideal they identified as central to Queer intimacy, it was much more difficult to meet this standard in practice (Weeks et al 2001). Couples struggled to ensure a fully equitable division of labour and to negotiate the parameters of the relationships when issues such as sexual monogamy came into question. Indeed, the ideal of equality was most difficult when obvious inequalities existed in the relationship, such as disparate incomes, ages, or educational qualifications, all of which complicated the ability of the couples to negotiate issues and come to equitable agreements (ibid). These findings would only be expanded and more fully developed in later work from the 2000s and the 2010s which took a much more critical look at the experiences of Queer male intimacy.

These scholars began to identify trends in Queer intimacy that suggested a move away from the sexual liberation and relationship innovation found in previous work as they noted that Queer men now expressed a preference for both romantic *and* sexual monogamy from their partners (Worth et al 2002). For these men, monogamy was presented as a means by which relationship stability and fidelity could be maintained (van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2015). Monogamy took on significant symbolic meaning as a way to ensure the commitment of their partner and to stave off the potential for sexual infidelity from other men (Worth et al 2002, Duncan et al 2015b). Moreover, within these accounts many explicitly argued that they wanted to model their relationships after traditional heterosexual narratives of intimacy and coupledom, holding up romantic and sexual monogamy that leads to marriage and even child-rearing as the aspirational end goal of their romantic careers (Smart 2007, Nash 2013, Robinson 2013). The work that Duane Duncan and his colleges conducted with young Australian gay men typifies this research. They found that their participants uniformly held up sexual and romantic monogamy as the desired end point of their sexual and romantic careers (Duncan et al 2015a). The image of the mature and settled-down gay couple was an ideal they aspired towards; while alternative modes of intimacy that embraced sexual or romantic non-monogamy were not considered or held up to similar esteem. Moreover, Duncan and his fellows found that many of these young men were particularly disparaging about other Queer men and the wider Queer Scene (ibid). For them, the Scene represented a sex-obsessed and shallow social environment that denigrated sexual intimacy in favour of sexual variety. Whilst many of the young men reported engaging in and even enjoying the Scene for a time, it was presented more as a rite of passage that, whilst important in their development, needed to be moved past to mature. Indeed, they all reported growing increasingly bored and dissatisfied with it (ibid p.804). Some went even further, arguing that the sexual promiscuity on display was inherently degrading for the men who participated in it, and instead exhibiting significantly more conservative views on sexuality, arguing that sexual intimacy should be confined within a monogamous relationship (ibid p.812).

This vein of research intersects nicely with work that has been conducted on Queer men's experiences with the changing nature of the Scene, in particular the move away from a reliance on physical social spaces towards digital platforms such as *Grindr* and *Scruff*. These digital platforms can be used to facilitate sexual encounters and on occasion dating and relationships, and whilst some have noted the benefit such digital innovations can bring (Jaspal 2017), more often scholars have highlighted the

deleterious impacts they have on the Queer men who use them (Conner 2019). David Goldenberg (2019), for example, has argued that dating and hookup apps like *Grindr* hold the potential to allow men to connect and engage in enjoyable and potentially fulfilling sexual encounters. However, he notes that these apps nevertheless display high levels of user dissatisfaction, and their use is often associated with loneliness and depression (Goldenberg 2019). In explaining this, he argues that the design of these products leads to a commodification of the Queer body, where men are turned into commodities for which other men browse and attempt to *"purchase"* not unlike buying products in an online shop (ibid p.361). Whilst this framework can facilitate sex easily, it struggles to create genuine intimacy, as such a bond is disincentivized by the anonymous and often superficial forms of communication encouraged by the app (ibid p.362-363). This, so he argues, has the potential to generate depression, loneliness and even a sense of shame at having failed to find a partner (ibid p.365). Goldenberg's analysis has been supported in other studies which have noted the dissatisfaction Queer men express when using these online platforms, as frequent use makes them feel demoralized, unattractive, and often ashamed of their bodies and sexual performance (Lauckner et al 2019, Zervoulis et al 2019, Obarska et al 2020).

Thus, from reviewing the literature on Queer male sexuality we appear to find two competing trends. On the one hand, there is a trend of research which shows that Queer men can and often do engage in innovation and *"life experiments"* (Weeks et al 2001*)* to imagine new, different, and more egalitarian modes of intimacy outside the boundaries of the traditional mode of heterosexual intimacy we discussed at the beginning of the chapter. However, on the other hand, there exists a competing trend which highlights the capacity and desire of many Queer men to re-create modes of intimacy that often explicitly mirror narratives of traditional heterosexual coupled monogamy. In this strain of research, the Scene is not perceived as a place of experimentation, plastic sexuality, and confluent love, but instead as an environment in which Queer men are subjected to degrading and meaningless sexual encounters that lack emotional intimacy. How are we to explain and reconcile these divergent strains of research, and what are we to make of the fact that newer work such as that of Duncan and his colleagues (2015a) seems to suggest a shift in a new generation of Queer men away from innovation and experimentation and towards conformity? I argue we can understand these trends through the use of two important conceptual frameworks: homonormativity and compulsory-coupledom.

The concept of homonormativity originates within the work of Lisa Duggan. Writing in the early 2000s, Duggan argued that the Queer liberation movement was experiencing a fundamental shift in strategy and end goals (Duggan 2002). Originally this movement had focused on critiquing existing institutions of gender and intimacy as heterosexist and discriminatory. The end goal of this work was to dismantle and supplant these institutions and replace them with something new, more egalitarian, and more liberatory for *both* Queer and heterosexual communities (ibid p.181). However, starting in the 1990s and gaining momentum in the 2000s, an alternative trend emerged which began to push for assimilation rather than liberation. For these activists and academics, the Queer rights struggle needed to focus on inclusion into formerly heterosexual institutions such as marriage rather than fundamentally changing or abolishing them (ibid p.182-188). The aim became to enter into the *"charmed circle"* (Rubin 2011) of acceptable sexual conduct along the lines that had already been set by heterosexual standards and in doing so, make Queer people as close to heterosexuals as possible. Duggan (2002) dubbed this trend *"the new homonormativity"* and was deeply critical of it. She argued that it would depoliticize Queer politics, effectively neutralizing it by making sexuality a private matter that could be contained to the home, rather than a public part of identity that would encourage further debate and contest (ibid 189). This form of activism was inherently self-limiting, as it would only benefit those Queer subjects who could effectively mirror the conventions and norms of pre-existing models of heterosexual intimacy—that is, middle-class white gay men. The effect of this would be to cleft the community in two, bifurcating acceptable and non-acceptable forms of homosexuality or Queerness, allowing a small minority to gain acceptance and support whilst consigning the rest to stigmatisation for failing to meet these new standards. Moreover, Duggan went

on to argue that homonormativity would work to reinforce the dominant political economy of neo-liberalism. By privatizing homosexuality within the boundaries of monogamous coupled intimacy, the Queer community would be reduced to passive private consumers, rendered into rational self-interested agents of neo-liberal orthodoxy rather than a public community who could advocate for their interests against heterosexism (ibid p.178). She summarized her concerns memorably by quipping that within homonormativity:

"There is no vision of a collective, democratic public culture or an ongoing engagement with contentious, cantankerous Queer politics. Instead, we have been administered a kind of political sedative—we get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever."

(Ibid p.189).

Duggan's critique was rather prescient; the following two decades have only reinforced her analysis. Whilst the 2000s and the 2010s saw a surge of support for Queer rights across Europe and North America, accompanied by legal and cultural changes that, to a large extent, normalized homosexuality (Angelo and Bocci 2022) these gains have had an assimilationist bent. For example, a focus on Queer advocacy for the past twenty years has been vital in achieving access to same-sex marriage or marriage equality for Queer couples, a campaign that has achieved much success in normalizing Queer relationships and enshrining legal state recognition of same-sex unions into law across numerous states and nations (See for example Rothblum 2005, Platero 2007, Heaphy et al 2013). However, as critics within the Queer community have long noted, however worthy this goal was, its main beneficiaries have been the wealthiest and most privileged members of the community. Such a push towards assimilation into the institution of marriage has obscured or diverted attention away from both a critique of institutional forms of monogamy, and other issues that impact much wider swathes of the Queer community such as youth homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health concerns (Phelan 2001, Josephson 2005, Dreher 2017). Though Duggan's concept of homonormativity has been critiqued for being overtly deterministic and for ignoring how Queer communities can and do resist assimilation into existing heterosexual and neo-liberal forms of intimacy (Brown 2012) homonormativity continues to play a significant role in shaping Queer politics in the 21st century—arguably, the single greatest role in developing those politics.

This leads us to discuss the second major concept I highlighted earlier, that of compulsory coupledom. This concept traces its origin to the work of Eleanor Wilkinson who performed an analysis of the British state policy towards families and examined the way the state constructed norms around intimacy and relationships (Wilkinson 2013). In describing her findings, Wilkinson noted that in a marked change from earlier works on the topic, British state policy no longer explicitly advocated for the creation of heterosexual family units or held these up as the pinnacle or normative ideal of intimacy (ibid p.207-208). Instead, under the umbrella of recognizing diversity within family formulations, the State recognized and promoted same-sex couples as valuable contributors to social stability. However, far from being an entirely benign decision, Wilkinson argued this inclusion was partial. It only extended to Queer couples who mirrored the conventions of heterosexual coupledom, with a focus on romantic and sexual monogamy, life-long vows of commitment and often with an expectation of child-rearing attached. This had the added effected of ignoring or outright stigmatising other forms of intimacy or kin-relationships that did not fit within this normative standard (ibid p.209). She notes that State policy often implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, suggested those not in coupled relationships were in some sense a failure or not upholding their responsibility of citizenship. Uncoupled people were thus a social problem that had to be fixed through government intervention and social pressure. This left the Queer community to choose between assimilation into the new norm of coupledom or exclusion as an unacceptable and immoral subject (ibid p.210). In analysing these changes, Wilkinson argues that, at least when it came to British State policy, Rich's (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality could no longer be said to apply. Instead, a new norm of *compulsory coupledom* had come into effect. However, despite being more inclusive than its ideological

predecessor, this norm was just as stigmatising and coercive. It acted to hold up coupledom as the idealised end point of a citizen's romantic and sexual career and imbued the institutions with positive social traits such as maturity, stability, and even moral worthiness. In contrast, failure to adhere to these norms would imply a failure in morality and stigmatise those who are unable or unwilling to find a partner as deviants that require correction (ibid p.212).

I argue that using Goffman's theory of stigma, we can see that what Wilkinson is describing is the creation of a stigma theory, the explanation and justification for the stigmatisation of a perceived deviant group through imputing immoral or socially undesirable traits to them. Here, uncoupled individuals are constructed as immature, uncommitted, and lacking in purpose, and, as I have explained at length in the preceding chapter, this stigmatisation works to legitimise the parent norm of compulsory coupledom. I argue that both Duggan's (2002) and Wilkinson's (2013) concepts allow us to better understand this shift in the romantic ambitions and ideals of intimacy displayed by Queer men. Queer men no longer exist entirely on the side-lines of society as a uniformly despised and stigmatised class; within the United Kingdom, they are imbued with several important legal rights and are included in formal institutions of intimacy such as marriage and civil partnership. As such, they are no longer required to engage in the everyday life experiments of a sexual minority excluded entirely from the charmed circle of acceptable conduct. Whilst it is clear that relationship innovation and Queer non-monogamies continue to exist and flourish (see for example Meuiner and Sauermilch 2021), Queer men can now opt into more socially approved and conventional modes of intimacy. However, as both Duggan (2002) and Wilkinson (2013) argue, these norms of intimacy are not neutral but exert coercive pressure towards conformity that may push Queer men to seek specific types of relationships over others. Thus, returning to our core question, in examining the normative context for Queer romance, we can see that Queer intimacy is contested between sexual fluidity or confluent love and the opposing forces of homonormativity and compulsory coupledom. With this set-out, the next question that remains is, what impact does this have, if any, on the experiences of Queer male victims of IPV.

Conclusion – Queer Intimacies and IPV

In answering this question, we must reckon with the fact that there has been extraordinarily little work conducted in this vein. Whilst, as I discussed in Chapter One, Donovan and Hester (2015) provide a robust discussion of the potential overlap between IPV, sexuality, and love, their research has its limits—it considers the Queer community in general rather than any particular sub-group. Thus, their analysis lacks a full understanding of how sexuality may interact with other important areas of identity such as gender. This is not a conscious omission or a deliberate flaw in their work, merely a limitation of their study design; Catherine Donovan has highlighted these limitations in her later work and argued that future research should seek to investigate these intersections (Donovan and Barnes 2020 p.170). For our purposes, therefore, it becomes clear that the understanding of love presented by Donovan and Hester will not completely capture how the emotion is experienced by Queer men, as such an understanding does not fully account for the intersection of masculinity and Queer sexuality as a key variable through which love and romance are experienced. Indeed, through Burkitt's (1997) relational model of emotions, it is already clear that how an emotion such as love is experienced will be context specific. Thus, by considering the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, the authors risk missing the specific nuances of how Queer men experience and understand love within their relationships. This is significant, as I have already shown that previous research has demonstrated that Queer men experience love and romance in a way that is distinct from the rest of the Queer population. Not least, men may struggle between a desire for heteronormative forms of intimacy and the easy access to sex the Queer Scene provides (Duncan et al 2015a). Thus, I argue that we have not yet gained a full picture of the relationship between the emotion of romantic love and the experiences of abuse that Queer men encounter in their relationships with other men, and specific consideration of

this relationship is required. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest the utility of an approach that singles out Queer men from the rest of the LGBTQ+ population.

First, research into LGBTQ+ domestic violence has already highlighted that Queer men experience IPV violence in unique ways distinct from the rest of the LGBT+ population. Donovan and Hester's work has demonstrated that Queer men are statistically more likely to report sexual violence from their partners than Queer women for example (Donovan and Hester 2015, Donovan and Barnes 2020). Meanwhile, the work of other authors has highlighted that Queer men's perpetrations and experiences of abuse are influenced by cultural constructions of masculinity (Cruz and Firestone 1998, Oliffe et al 2014) which push men to display aggression and resolve conflicts through violence, all the while discouraging disclosure that may make them seem weak and emasculated. Second, as I have already demonstrated research on Queer women has already shone a light on how gender and sexuality influence how this population understands both love and abuse within their relationships (Ristock 2002, Barnes 2010). I argue that both of these bodies of research demonstrate that it is possible, and quite likely, that for men who experience domestic abuse from a male partner, both their sexuality and gender will play key roles in shaping their expectations, understandings, and experiences of romantic love, which in turn will shape how they experience abuse from an intimate partner. Yet this has not been fully investigated within the previous literature. Given the role that interactions between romance narratives and abuse play in the experiences of IPV victims, this absence is significant and represents a major conceptual gap in the literature, particularly in the relationship between these norms and narratives and how these victims experience shame. With all of this set-out, there is a pressing need to understand how Queer men experience and understand romantic love in the context of IPV and how this experience is structured narratively. This is precisely what my research sets out to do, and thus I will now turn to outline the methods I used to understand and document these issues.

Chapter Four

Epistemology, Methodology, and Methods of Research

Introduction

In this chapter, I will establish how I conceptualised and conducted my research. I will begin by outlining the epistemology and methodology that guided my study, then move on to explain how I chose and then designed the specific methods I utilised, noting the challenges I faced along the way. I will then outline key aspects of my research design, such as recruitment, data collection, and data analysis, describing their implementation, the successes and failures that occurred during my time in the field, and how the online nature of my research both helped and hindered my ability to reach my specific research population. This will flow into an outline of how I handled ethical issues including consent, participant confidentiality, anonymity, and even my safety and well-being, before finally considering the limitations inherent in my research design.

Epistemology and Methodology

All research has an underlying set of epistemological assumptions that guide the type of knowledge that it generates (Carter and Little 2007), and mine is no different. Rather than allow these assumptions to remain implicit and un-examined, I believe it is important to explicate what theory or theories of knowledge guided my work, as epistemology exerts a great influence on the research process (Becker 1996). These theories guide the types of methods used by orientating the researcher to examine different facets of social reality for different purposes. By understanding the epistemology of a given piece of research we can better evaluate its claims and make assessments about the knowledge that it purports to contribute to the scholarly field. Epistemology in this context does not simply mean the philosophical study of knowledge, but rather, also represents an understanding of how knowledge is generated, and how it can be accessed or understood through the research process (Carter and Little 2007). The previous literature review chapters of my thesis point to the general epistemological orientation of my work, located primarily in symbolic interactionism and narrative theory (see Chapters Two and Three). More specifically, my research is fundamentally phenomenological. In philosophy, phenomenology is the study of personal experience and attempts to understand how individuals subjectively understand their *"lifeworld"* (Husserl 1970) and what meanings they generate as a result (Engelland 2020). Epistemologically it is thus concerned with subjective knowledge rather than a positivist attempt to generate objective or empirically replicable results (Howarth 1998). Within social research, phenomenological methods aim to understand how participants subjectively experience and understand the world and in effect to identify social phenomena as experienced by another individual (Priya 2017). Phenomenological research aims to achieve what the sociologist Max Weber called *"Verstehen"* or, in a rough English translation, understanding (Weber 1947), which is the process by which a researcher attempts to step into the shoes of a research participant and gain an understanding of how they see and understand the social world they inhabit (Tucker 1965). Thus, the type of knowledge I seek is an understanding of lived subjective social experience expressed in the narratives of the individuals I research.

Yet, an understanding of the epistemological assumptions of my research does not, in and of itself, provide sufficient context to explain and justify my later research choices. To make this next step, we must turn to the concept of methodologies. Whilst epistemology concerns understanding what counts as knowledge within a research process, methodology establishes what processes must be used to best generate this knowledge and how exactly a researcher should orient themselves to their research process (Carter and Little 2007). Whilst epistemology tells us broadly what type of knowledge a researcher wants to find, methodology tells us how they aim to gather and access this knowledge. With my understanding of methodology set out, I can turn to examine the specific methodology I used in my work, that of grounded theory.

Grounded theory is a systemic but flexible methodology designed to develop an explanatory theory that aids in understanding new or understudied social activities (Charmaz 2014). Established by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the theory aims to provide a systematic means of engaging in research that involves constant iterative and inductive analysis of data. Unlike traditional positivist research methods where hypotheses are established before data collection and then tested through research, grounded theory starts from the premise that theory and hypothesis should be grounded in emerging empirical data (Glaser and Straus 1967). Thus, theory emerges from the data rather than preceding it. This is justified in that grounded theory is a methodology typically applied to qualitative research and, in particular, qualitative research in areas where there is little previous study or theory (Urquhart 2012). In this way, grounded theory allows for the phenomena in question to be more fully explored than would be possible with a rigid adherence to positivist hypothesis testing. Instead, the researcher allows themself to follow the data and indeed a key principle of grounded theory is that data analysis should occur concurrently with data collection (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Through this iterative process, the identification of codes, themes, and categories within the emergent data should then guide further research decisions such as sampling (ibid). These disparate elements are then linked together to form a larger narrative that presents a full understanding of the topic at hand, and from which a new hypothesis can be generated for future research (ibid p.23). My approach mixes Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original vision of the methodology with Charmaz's development in the concept of constructed grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). In Charmaz's conception, research utilising grounded theory should not aim to create explanatory theories, but instead, borrowing from constructivist tradition, it should aim to generate a framework in which the phenomena can be better understood (ibid p.13). Crucially, this framework is itself a construct, a creation of the interactions between the research participants and the researcher themselves. In doing this, Charmaz draws attention to the role of the researcher in co-constructing and creating knowledge, and highlights that their positionality and reflexivity will inevitably impact the type of knowledge created (ibid p.14). Moreover, her view that the researcher cannot separate themselves from the framework they produce, makes her more willing to accept that it is not possible to investigate a topic from a completely blank slate. As such, an understanding of surrounding research literature is not only acceptable but necessary to construct a framework that best reflects the experiences of the individuals who participate in the research (ibid p.14-18).

I chose this particular methodological framework as I felt it best suited both the aim and subject of my study. I was always interested in understanding the meaning that men attached to their experiences of IPV, and thus had known that the project was going to be qualitative. Grounded theory, as a methodology developed within qualitative research and which has a long history of bringing rigour and structure to interpretative attempts to understand and explain how meaning is experienced and generated (Urquhart 2012), thus seemed well suited to the task at hand. Moreover, the iterative exploratory nature of grounded theory fits well with my chosen research subject. How Queer men experience IPV is a topic that has received little attention from academics and thus lacks a large amount of theory or literature to draw on in attempting to understand it. However, I could not reasonably say I was approaching the project from a blank slate either. I had been researching this topic for at least a year and a half before I discovered the concept of grounded theory, and I had become deeply immersed in interactionist and constructionist accounts of victimisation whilst I planned applications to both my M.Sc. and DPhil programmes. Subconsciously or not, I knew that these accounts would inform my analysis and the types of conclusions I would draw when I began to analyse the data I gathered. Thus, constructed grounded theory provided a methodology that could design an iterative and reflexive research plan which sought to ground a framework in emergent empirical data, yet also recognised the role of the researcher in shaping and imparting an analytical framework. As such, I have highlighted in the preceding chapters both the literature I have drawn on throughout the research process, and the literature I seek to speak to. Both have inevitably shaped my framework, and later in this chapter, I will consider how my positionality may impact and shape both how I gathered the data and how it was interpreted.

One of the benefits of grounded theory, particularly Charmaz's (2014) constructionist version of it, is its flexibility in adopting other methodologies into its larger framework, particularly when it comes to

analysing the data collected (ibid p.14). Several scholars have argued that utilising alternative methodologies during the analysis of empirical data can supplement and improve the larger picture grounded theory analysis paints of a new phenomenon, highlighting alternative dimensions and demonstrating the varied ways in which participants attach meanings to their experiences (Burck 2005, Floersh et al 2010). In this vein, I utilised narrative analysis as an additional methodology to draw from when conducting my research. I have already discussed the theoretical basis for narrative analysis in previous chapters, but as a methodology, narrative analysis seeks to examine how participants understand their experiences as part of a wider life narrative, seeking to create a coherence between their past and future experiences (Burck 2005, Sandberg 2022). As Floersh and colleagues highlighted, narrative analysis can be integrated into a grounded theory methodology without disrupting the approach's commitment to constructing theories and frameworks iteratively from emergent data (Floersh et al 2010). Indeed, integrating narrative analysis and grounded theory allows for a more robust explanation of the phenomena studied as narrative analysis offers an appreciation of how participants give their experiences meaning holistically, as part of their wider life experiences and sense of self (Franzosi 1998). Whilst grounded theory gives us a snapshot insight into the participants' immediate understandings of a problem, narrative analysis allows us to contextualise these experiences within their entire life history, which is embedded in a larger cultural and social context that the phenomena can be attached to (Andrews et al 2013). Given the relevance that narrative theory has in understanding both the experiences of romantic relationships and victimisation, as I demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three, it thus seemed appropriate that I would utilise narrative analysis as an additional methodological tool when performing research with this specific research population.

Now armed with both an epistemological framework and two methodological schools from which to draw, I could turn to the third and arguably most important part of the research design, the research methods themselves. If epistemology tells us what type of knowledge we are interested in, and methodology informs us of the best way to gain access to and understand this knowledge, then research methods are the series of discrete and practical steps taken to gather, collate, and analyse the information that forms the basis of this knowledge (Carter and Little 2007). Whilst the choice of methodology is often an intellectual task, the choice of methods is often guided and shaped by more practical considerations. This was certainly the case for this research project, as my choice of research methods was deeply impacted by twos separate factors: my choice to study a group of *"hard to reach"* (Ellard-Grey et al 2015) victims and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Research Methods and Research Design

In deciding what research methods were going to be used, the first major issue I had to consider was the status of my prospective research participants, namely, that they were *"hard to reach"* (Ellard-Grey et al 2015). There is no established definition of what exactly is meant by the term hard to reach but it traditionally refers to the populations that are difficult for researchers to access, sample, or gather data from utilising traditional methods, due to either ethical or practical reasons (ibid). The label has frequently been used to describe a diverse collection of research populations, from political elites (Walgrave and Joly 2018) to homeless drug addicts (Faugier and Sargeant 2008), to indigenous populations living in the remote wilderness (Nagel et al 2009). A more rigorous definition of the term can be found in the work of Ellard-Grey and colleagues who attempted to provide a unified set of characteristics that can bring these disparate groups into a shared conceptual framework (Ellard-Grey et al 2015). They argue that the term hard to reach is essentially a proxy for describing research populations who carry one or more of three core characteristics:

1.) Remoteness: The population is separated from the researcher by physical or social barriers. This would encompass both populations that live in remote difficult-to-access geographical spaces, but also those who inhabit social worlds or environments that a researcher may struggle to easily access.
2.) Vulnerability: The population is in some way marginalised or stigmatised, and thus the research would expose them to the potential for harm, creating ethical concerns that add additional burdens to an individual's research design.

3.) Hiddenness: Members of the population or not easily identifiable as distinct from the rest of the population, which makes sampling or accessing them a much more difficult prospect (ibid p.1).

These three factors are not exclusive, and indeed they frequently concurrently exist within research populations labelled hard to reach. This is particularly so within the field of criminology, where many of the populations commonly studied, such as victims, offenders, prisoners and criminal justice staff, all stand apart from researchers in significant ways. This requires researchers to think carefully and often innovatively about how their research can move past these divides to connect with their participants in a way that avoids stigmatisation and the potential for harm to the research subjects and the researcher. Unfortunately, my study was no exception, as the population I chose to research was one that certainly fits the above definition of hard to reach.

Queer victims of IPV, as I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters, remain stigmatised. Moreover, they are sexual minorities in a society that, despite considerable and impressive gains in terms of social acceptance and legal protection of the Queer community, still struggles with eradicating remnants of homophobia and transphobia (Bachmann and Gooch 2017). In addition, my participants are victims and must grapple with the stigma of victimisation (Dunn 2008), which gains an added dimension considering my participants are both male and part of a sexual minority. Male victims, in general, are subjected to considerable social stigma both from the wider public and within the criminal justice system (Tsui et al 2010), whilst members of the Queer community have consistently demonstrated low levels of trust in the criminal justice system due to a persistent perception of police homophobia and conservatism (Burke 1993, Nadal et al 2015). Adding to this, my research population is quite clearly hidden. IPV is a classic example of a hidden or private crime, generally committed behind closed doors away from public view (Douglas et al 2021). Additionally, as I have previously demonstrated, victims of IPV often struggle to identify what has occurred to them as abuse for significant periods (Mills 1985), and even in the cases where they can identify their situation and seek help, they are frequently exposed to stigmatising responses and dismissal from both internal and external sources of support (Enander and Holmberg 2008). All of this adds up to make IPV victims a group that is generally not easy to identify within the larger population. Thus, I already had many potential issues I had to consider when designing my research and choosing my methods; how was I to reach a population of stigmatised men who did not often disclose their status as abuse survivors? It was as I was considering these questions that the world would change dramatically, and forever alter the direction of my study.

The Covid-19 virus reached a pandemic status in the early months of 2020, and by March of that year the United Kingdom, following the lead of many other countries, entered an indefinite *'lockdown'* during which almost all non-essential physical contact was prohibited (Institute for Government 2021). This government action would essentially end all in-person data collection for the entirety of that year, and continual uneven enforcement and adherence to public health requirements would make any attempts to conduct face-to-face research in the following year almost impossible (Aspinall 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic and the dramatic change in social reality that it caused fundamentally shifted the parameters that all qualitative researchers, myself included, had to operate within. In-person research strategies such as interviewing, participant observations, or focus groups became all but impossible due to restrictions on travel and meetings. In addition, the legitimate concerns that such activities could expose both participants and researchers to the virus meant even when restrictions began to be lifted many were, justifiably, unwilling to resume research until conditions improved. Moreover, the pandemic also had a hugely negative impact on many potential research populations, particularly, IPV victims. The added economic and social strains caused by the virus and the lockdowns led to a large spike in IPV victimisation, made even worse by the increased time offenders and victims had to spend together due to restrictions on movement and work (Dodd et al 2020, Townsend 2020). The extreme upsurge in victimisation inevitably led to added pressure being placed on IPV support services, who repeatedly reported being overwhelmed (Moore 2020). This pressure was especially felt by the small number of services that offered explicit support to Queer victims, as the strain of the pandemic hit the Queer community particularly hard. Vulnerable members of the community experienced high levels of abuse and violence directed at them by family members,

housemates, and their partners (Strudwick 2020, Hunte 2020). All of this meant that the few IPV services that operated specifically to benefit Queer victims became overwhelmed, struggling to offer accommodation, counselling, or support to some of the most vulnerable victims of abuse (Cumiskey 2020). All this unprecedented turmoil had a significant impact on my nascent research design.

Originally, I had planned to carry out my research in person and intended for the primary method of data collection to be semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with Queer men who had experienced IPV from a male romantic partner. I believed that the best way to contact these men was through IPV organisations that worked with male and sexual minority survivors. I had hoped to contact staff at these organisations, and then negotiate access with their clients once I had established a rapport. Given that these interviews were intended to be conducted in person I elected to largely focus on support services that were located close to my student residence in the south of England, and identified organisations in London, Oxford, and Birmingham that I intended to reach out to. In addition, as I had concerns about my ability to gain access to a large cohort of victims, I intended to conduct supplemental interviews with service workers and staff at these organisations. However, the pandemic made these plans untenable.

Firstly, both the initial lockdown and the subsequent public health restrictions on movement meant that my original plan to conduct interviews in person was simply no longer appropriate or feasible in the short term. This change in circumstances quickly led me to decide to move my research into a digital space; however, at this point, I kept much of my original recruitment strategy. I decided that while all interviews would be conducted online via *Skype*, I would merely broaden the scope of the organisations that I wanted to recruit from. Instead of confining myself to the south of England, I would contact organisations across the entire United Kingdom. However, I soon realised that this minor alteration was not sufficient to deal with the current IPV crisis sweeping the country. My initial attempts to reach out to these organisations were largely either ignored or politely declined. Though I was able to interview several service providers, I was unable to negotiate access to their clients or even advertise my research through them. This was a result of the fact many of these organisations had strict confidentiality policies regarding their clients. These were designed to protect vulnerable victims from being bombarded with advertisements for research where they would have to relive traumatic experiences. Adding to this was the simple fact that during the pandemic most services simply lacked the time and resources to assist an unknown doctoral student's research. Once this realisation set in, I was faced with a new hurdle that needed to be addressed - if I could not rely on institutional gatekeepers, how was I to contact the population I wanted to study? In answering this question, I decided to fully commit to an online study that embraced the use of digital recruitment strategies and focus entirely on victims rather than attempting to include support staff.

In making this online pivot, I was following in the tradition of several researchers who have previously identified the utility of these methods in the recruitment of hard to reach populations (Ayling and Mewse 2009). This potential rests in three primary benefits that digital methods provide both researchers and participants. The first is that digital methods allow researchers and participants to transcend physical space (Murthy 2008). A defining feature of online technologies is that they allow for instantaneous connections across geographical boundaries, creating communities that exist purely in digital space unmoored by spatial limitations (Seymore 2009). Secondly, digital methods allow participants to maintain a greater degree of anonymity than many in-person research methods. Digital technologies and the online communities that utilise them can allow users to interact with researchers and each other completely anonymously, only granting as much information about themselves as they are willing to contribute (Kaufmann and Tzanetakis 2020). They also allow them to engage with like-minded individuals in a way that does not expose them to stigma and marginalisation (Bouchard 2016). Both factors lead to the third benefit, increased access to hard to reach populations generated by digital communities. The non-geographical nature of digital space combined with a greater propensity for anonymous communication means that physically remote, vulnerable and/or hidden populations frequently utilise digital space to form communities where they can socialise, share resources, or plan community actions (Barratt et al 2014). As such, research that utilises these methodologies has a potentially higher chance of recruiting hard to reach participants through these

digital spaces. Vulnerable or hidden populations are much more likely to engage with researchers when they are being contacted in an environment where they feel they will not be exposed to stigma or marginalisation, even if the researcher is an outsider (Wilkerson et al 2014). Therefore, from reviewing the proposed utility of digital methods for reaching marginalised populations, I quickly concluded that they would be ideal for recruiting my intended research population.

Researchers have long utilised digital recruitment strategies to reach sexual minority men as the large presence of online Queer spaces and the anonymous nature of many of these platforms made it easier to both gain access to and then establish rapport with potential participants (Ayling and Mewse 2009, Grove et al 2014). A good example of this type of work is Max Morris' study of young sexual minority men's incidental sex work, where Morris utilised the gay sexual networking app *Grindr* to recruit participants for his study (Morris 2021). This innovative digital recruitment strategy allowed him to reach an often-hidden population of men by accessing a community space they frequented and in which they felt comfortable that they would not experience stigma (ibid p.859). It was precisely this type of engagement I wanted to mirror with my research population. Queer male victims of IPV are a largely hidden population that is geographically disparate and frequently exposed to stigma and marginalisation. By using a digital recruitment strategy, I hoped to reach Queer online communities where I could advertise, hoping that through sufficient advertisement in these populations, I would reach men who had encountered IPV from a male partner. I believed that the anonymous nature of the space would provide sufficient safety and protection to those men willing to engage with the research with little fear of stigma and marginalisation. With this decision made, I began to formulate a recruitment strategy, though, as will become clear, my early attempts to utilise digital technologies would fall at the first hurdle.

I initially decided to utilise the social networking application (app) *Grindr* as a means of recruiting potential participants for my study. *Grindr* is a social media app utilised largely by sexual minority men for dating and networking but has become synonymous with a culture of casual and anonymous sex between users (Jaspal 2017). I reasoned that given that the app's users are almost exclusively sexual minority men or otherwise members of the Queer community, it would provide the ideal recruitment base for the study. Indeed, other researchers have successfully used *Grindr* in the past to recruit participants for qualitative research (Jaspal 2017, Bonner-Thompson 2017, Morris 2021). Furthermore, given my status as a member of this community, I felt I would be able to leverage my own experience with the application to navigate any potential issues and to appropriately advertise my research to other sexual minority men. I set up a profile that displayed a neutral picture of myself fully clothed and listed my username as *"Researcher."* I then explained in my profile description that I was looking to speak to men who had experienced IPV in their relationships with other men and that I was not interested in any other form of networking or relationships. I then asked any men who were interested in participating to message me, where I would then provide them with more details regarding the study and eventually arrange to interview them on another platform. I had hoped, following the footsteps of other researchers, that by establishing these boundaries, I would be able to use the app purely as a recruitment tool. Unfortunately, this was not the case, and *Grindr* was not an effective means of reaching participants. This was for several reasons.

Firstly, despite my best efforts, I was unable to prevent the overtly sexual nature of the app from colouring the responses I received from other users. Most of the men I spoke to were not interested in participating in the research and instead wished to develop relationships, sometimes platonic or romantic but typically sexual. As Bonner-Thompson (2017) noted regarding his own experiences of using *Grindr*, even attempts to establish boundaries can themselves become eroticised by the sexual politics of the app. To give an example, my profile did not display any skin aside from the lower part of my face, and I was completely clothed. Despite my attempts to maintain boundaries in this way by policing my appearance, I was still frequently sexualised. One user contacted me initially aping the appearance of an interested participant, however, he then revealed he really wanted sex and tried to compliment me by remarking on my *"beautiful lips."* The fact that the only exposed part of my body was sexualised demonstrates how the sexual aesthetic of the app colours all interactions I had within it. This pattern would continue several more times throughout the recruitment process, demonstrating

that despite my best efforts, it was not possible to separate my research from the inherently sexual nature of the platform. Adding to this, I quickly realised that specific technical features of the app were limiting my efforts at recruitment. Namely, *Grindr* is a geo-locked app, which notes its users' location and only allows other users located nearby to view their profile (Jaspal 2017). This severely limited the pool of potential participants I was advertising to, and unlike other studies which utilised the application as a recruitment tool, I was attempting to find a minority within a minority, whose experiences may not be shared by most users. Moreover, given these initial attempts at recruitment occurred during the lockdown phase of the pandemic, I was unable to travel to different cities or locations to broaden my potential recruitment pool as other researchers who have utilised the app have done in previous studies (see Morris 2021). Both of these factors significantly hampered the usefulness of *Grindr* for finding the appropriate participants for my research and after four months of utilising the application, I would only recruit three men into the study. This largely fruitless dalliance with *Grindr* would end when my profile was abruptly deleted from the platform, with no reason given by the administrative team despite multiple attempts at contact.

This initial failure made me fundamentally rethink my recruitment strategy. On reflection, I realised that aside from the geographical limitations the app placed upon my participant pool and the inherently sexual nature of the application, a contributing factor to this setback was my presentation on the application. In my research profile, I had obscured my face, not advertised my real name, nor given appropriate context to who I was, what institution I was affiliated with and what was the full context of my study. I had been concerned about not revealing my real identity to men I had contacted or met on the application before the research project began, as I did not want to risk my personal life overlapping in any way with my research. However, it is possible this decision merely made potential participants less likely to view me with trust or in some ways played into the aesthetic of anonymous sexuality within the app that made certain men more likely to attempt to message me. Regardless, with *Grindr* no longer a viable option for recruitment, I had to find a new digital venue to advertise my research. I required an application that was not bound to a specific geographical space or location, whose aesthetic would not create an environment that prejudiced potential participants against contacting me in the spirit of research, and in which I felt confident and comfortable in being open in advertising my identity and affiliation. I scrambled to find some way to salvage what seemed to have been a failed strategy and stumbled onto *Facebook*.

Facebook is one of the largest social media platforms that currently exist in the modern digital eco-system with, at the time of writing, more than 2.6 billion users (Statistica 2021). The platform allows individuals to create a profile, connect to (or *'friend'*) other users, share text posts, pictures, and videos, and follow organisational pages. In this way, it mirrors other platforms that I had considered, especially *Twitter*, but I soon realised that *Facebook* had one major advantage over these other platforms, the *"groups"* function. *Facebook* allows users to create, manage, and join large digital communities called groups. These groups are typically centred around a shared topic, identity, hobby, or place which binds all of the users together, and within the confines of these groups, users can advertise and share information. I realised that utilising these groups could allow me to reach the participants that I had failed to contact through *Grindr*. Initial searches of the websites allowed me to identify hundreds of groups based in the UK dedicated to either the Queer community in general or Queer men specifically. I decided that *Facebook* would be the primary digital platform I would use to recruit participants for my study. In making this decision I soon realised that I was following in the footsteps of other scholars who had similarly discovered the potential utility this platform provides researchers. Several studies have noted that Facebook provides a means to bridge the gap that often separates researchers from potential participants, both directly, as a tool for data collection or merely as a means for recruitment and advertisement. Willis (2019) in her ethnographic study of conflict resolution in a post-industrial town used *Facebook* as part of her immersion, documenting the web of interpersonal relationships, comments, posts, and conflicts she observed among users in the community she was studying. Taking a different approach, Pszczółkowska (2020) used merely as a step to identify members of a geographically dispersed population that would be difficult to access in the physical world, namely, Polish migrants living across Western Europe. Rather than use *Facebook* as a data-collection tool, she instead used the *"groups"* functions to join Polish migrant groups that

catered to migrants in cities across Western Europe and advertised participation in the study to their members. Data collection itself was then carried out via a follow-up interview with those who expressed interest by commenting on her post. These previous studies show the viability of the use of *Facebook* as a research tool for recruitment.

I then turned to the task of designing my *Facebook* recruitment strategy. Firstly, to avoid the issues I encountered on *Grindr*, I created an entirely new *Facebook* profile specifically for this research project. I used a photo of myself smiling as my Profile picture and a neutral photograph of scenery as my cover picture. I made it clear in my profile information that I was a researcher from the University of Oxford and that I was interested in speaking to men about their experiences of abuse. I then *'privated'* my former personal account, changing my name to something unrecognisable and altering my settings so only pre-existing friends could view my posts or information. Armed with this new account I then compiled a list of active groups on the platform that:

A.) Catered to the Queer community or Queer men.
And
B.) Were based in the U.K.

I then proceeded to systematically join as many of these groups as I could. This was an ongoing process throughout the entirety of my fieldwork, as new groups were constantly being created and old groups became inactive and were deleted. From September 2020 to August 2021, I joined over 100 groups. Once I had joined a group, I would then contact the group's administrators, explain who I was, and what I was researching, explain the aims and methods of the study, and then politely ask to advertise the project in the group. I was fortunate that in the vast majority of cases, the administrators both responded to my messages and were enthusiastic about the project, permitting me to post and often commenting in support of the project when I finally advertised it. Once permission had been gained, I would then make a text post on the groups' discussion page asking for participants, attaching two photos, one of a formal research advertisement which contained more specific details about the study along with the Oxford University logo, and a secondary black and white photo of my face. After I made an initial advertisement, I would subsequently make two more reminder posts re-advertising the study in the same group at intervals of at least two months. I have included copies of these recruitment instruments in Appendix One of my thesis. As these recruitment documents show I initially advertised this study as being for gay and bisexual men, and within the survey I merely refer to men who have experienced abuse from a current or ex male romantic or sexual partner. My decision to refer to these men within this thesis as "Queer" is thus a post-hoc categorisation rather than an identity I deliberately sought out in my recruitment. My reasoning for this is that as I have already discussed in Chapter One, I am using Queer as an umbrella identifier to refer to any man who falls outside the boundaries of cis-heteronormativity (i.e. who is not cis or straight). In this way the use of Queer as a category here is actually more expansive and inclusive than my original advertisement which only included gay and bisexual men. Indeed as can be seen in Appendix Four, within my survey responses, a number of men in my study identified outside of the boundaries of homosexuality and bisexuality, identifying as pansexual, homo-flexible, or even explicitly as Queer. Thus, my decision to use the term Queer to describe the men in their entirety was intended to include all of these different identities into an umbrella category with which I could easily include all of the men within my study, thereby not excluding anyone. There is potentially an ethical issue in this decision, as I am in effect replacing many of the men's self-descriptions as gay, homosexual, or bisexual with another label they may not identify with. However, I would argue against this view. Within the boundaries of my study I am using Queer explicitly as a neutral umbrella label that is meant to act as a catch-all for the men's pre-existing identities. It is not meant to replace their chosen identified sexualities, but merely to categorise them within a wider framework that can represent an important social trait they share with the men other men in the study, namely their exclusion from the boundaries of cis-heteronormativity (Farrow 2018). In this spirit I have included the original break-down of how my participants identified their sexualities within the participant overview contained within Appendix Four of the thesis so that readers can see the terms the men used to described themselves, whilst continuing to use the term Queer to collectively refer to their sexual position

within British society for the rest of the thesis. Readers will also note that I use the term domestic abuse within my recruitment documents rather than IPV. This was done purely due to the fact that domestic abuse is a more commonly recognised term amongst lay-persons than IPV and I did not wish to confuse or put off potential participants with unfamiliar language. With my recruitment strategy finally taking shape, I could turn to properly conceptualise how I was going to actively collect data from my participants and what instruments I would utilise for this process.

By this point, my plan for data collection had changed significantly from my original conceptualisation. Originally, I had decided to utilise in-person semi-structured qualitative interviews as my sole means of data collection. Interviewing has a long pedigree within qualitative research and interviews, semi-structured interviews, in particular, are seen as an appropriate and useful means to allow participants to elucidate and explain their understanding of their actions and to allow the interview to gain a deeper subjective appreciation of the meaning they attach to their experiences (Edwards 2013). Moreover, the use of interviews would fit into my emphasis on the role of narrative in the participants' experience. Interviews provide an ideal venue for unearthing and contextualising participants' life narratives, by allowing them to reconstruct past events into a coherent whole to present to the interviewer, who through questions can then draw out narrative techniques such as accounts, techniques of neutralisation, or ambivalence (Brannen 2013). Hence, even after the research moved online, I decided to retain interviews as the primary means of data collection, and instead conduct them remotely through a digital platform. Remote qualitative interviewing, whether in its older form of telephone interviews or over newer platforms such as video-conferencing software, has been somewhat contentious within research circles (Łątkowski 2021). Some concerns have been raised that the lack of shared physical space leads to a diminished capacity for researchers to build the rapport necessary for in-depth disclosure, and increased difficulty in reading non-verbal cues that may reveal hidden meaning (Groves 1990, Lo Iacono et al 2016). However, other researchers have, successfully in my view, challenged sceptics, arguing that with appropriate attention to the unique nature of remote interviews and dedicated attempts to maintain rapport, remote interviews can generate in-depth data to match their in-person counterparts (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004, Novick 2008, Deakin and Wakefield 2013, Gray et al 2020). Given my extensive use of and familiarity with video-conferencing applications such as *Skype* and *Discord*, I felt confident I could successfully conduct research interviews with participants remotely.

In addition to the move to remote interviewing, during my initial failed attempts at recruitment, I decided to add additional means of data collection to my study, an online anonymous qualitative survey. These surveys vary from their more conventional quantitative relatives in that they allow participants to give longer, more detailed answers which aim to produce rich, meaningful, and subjective accounts of the participants' experiences. Some researchers have highlighted the usefulness of online surveys as a means of gathering qualitative data and argued that they can generate rich and nuanced accounts (Braun et al 2020). I decided to utilise this instrument as I theorised that one of the potential barriers to participants engaging with my initial attempts at recruitment on platforms like *Grindr*, was that the onus was on them to reach out and contact me to be interviewed, which then would involve a protracted period of negotiation. I thought that if I included a survey, their ability to engage with research became much more straightforward, allowing them to simply click on a link and fill in responses at their own pace. Moreover, I realised that the survey could function as a recruitment tool for the interviews I intended to carry out. I could solicit participants who were interested in further participation to leave their contact details, allowing me to take on the onus for further contact and decrease the effort I required from these men to participate. With these decisions made, I set out to design my research instruments.

I created an online survey using the digital survey platform *Jisc*. I created a survey schedule of 28 questions which aimed to broadly examine how the participants experienced abuse from their previous male partner. The survey began by providing the potential participants with extensive information about the project including what my aims were, what would be expected of them as participants, and outlining what rights they would have as research participants. It then asked them both if they gave their informed consent to participate in the survey and asked if they were ages 18 or

over. Only after they answered yes to both questions were they allowed to participate and continue on to the survey proper. The rest of the survey was divided into six sections which each contained questions that were structured around the following themes:

- Their demographic details (i.e. age-range, ethnicity, highest level of education.)
- Their early relationship with their abuser (i.e. how they met their abuser, when did they first recognise signs of abuse).
- The end of their relationship (i.e. when did they leave the relationship, why did they do so, and did they receive help during this process?).
- Experiences with the criminal justice system (i.e. did they contact they police and the courts, why/why not?)
- Victimhood (i.e. did they feel like victims at the time and do they still feel like victims now?).
- Final thoughts (i.e. is anything else they want they wanted to tell me).

After these questions the participants were then asked if they were interested in participating in a follow-up interview and if so, providing them with a space to leave contact details, (an email address and/or a phone number). If they did ask to participate, I would contact them and provide them with an information sheet which gave more information about what the research would involve, explain their rights as a participant, and ask them when would be a good time to talk. At this point the survey would end and the participants would be presented with a conclusion page where they would be thanked for their participation and given links to resources and support services which could provide assistance should they feel they needed it. I have included a full copy of the survey schedule in Appendix Two of the thesis.

For those participants that did respond, a date/time would be arranged and then the interview would be conducted. I intended for these interviews to be conducted over online video-conferencing platforms, such as *Skype*, and I developed an interview schedule that I would use as a general structure to guide the conversation and ensure that certain topics would be covered, but with a willingness to consider and discuss topics that arose naturally during our conversations. I created six primary questions that I intended to ask in every interview and these remained consistent throughout the research process, these were:

- Was this your first relationship? If not, what were the relationships like before you met this man?
- Can you tell me about when you began to notice problems in your relationship?
- Did you tell anyone about these problems?
- When did the relationship begin to break down?
- Do you still feel like a victim? Why/why not?
- Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important for me to know/ understand about your experiences with intimate partner violence

However, as I will discuss below, I would also ask specific personalised questions to certain interview participants on the basis of their survey responses. I have included a full copy of my original semi-structured interview schedule in Appendix Three of my thesis.

By the end of my fieldwork, 116 individuals had responded to my online survey, two of which were removed due to a lack of fit with the study, bringing the final total to 114. Of the men who responded to the survey, 68 indicated they wished to be contacted for a follow-up interview; of this group, 35 would eventually be interviewed. In addition, five participants were interviewed without completing the survey. Of this group, three interview participants were recruited through my initial advertising attempts on *Grindr* before the survey was created. Two other participants asked to be interviewed without completing the survey. Of these two, the first was referred into the study through another participant who I had already interviewed and with whom I had developed a rapport. The second disclosed their status as an IPV victim over a conversation on *Facebook* when I attempted to advertise my study in a group for which he was the administrator. After inquiring about whether he would be interested in the study, he agreed to be interviewed. In the end, 40 men were interviewed, with 38

remote semi-structured interviews carried out over *Skype*, *Microsoft Teams*, or via mobile phone. These were all audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymised. Two men declined to participate in an audio/video interview and instead consented to answer my questions in writing. One did so via *Grindr*'s message function, and the other I corresponded with over email. These text responses were then also anonymised. A full overview of both my survey and interview participants can be found in Appendix Four of my thesis.

Research Evaluation and Analysis

I now want to briefly evaluate both my data-collection instruments as they were used within the project itself. Let us first examine the qualitative survey. One of the one hand the actual data I gathered using the survey was rather limited. In general, many of the participants' responses were short, to the point, and lacking detail, sometimes even being a single word. Many lacked the rich subjective, and personal context that makes qualitative analysis so useful. Whilst some researchers have argued that qualitative surveys can generate rich data on their own and even form the basis of an entire study (Braun et al 2020), this certainly was not my experience, and had I not maintained my interviews as the primary means to gather qualitative data I would not have much thick descriptive data to analyse. As a result, the vast majority of my analysis drew from the data collected from my interviews, and all of the data I present in the following four chapters come from the interview portion of my research. In retrospect, I believe my survey design might be responsible for these short responses. In reviewing the survey, both its length and the number of questions it poses mirror a more conventional quantitative survey, which may, in turn, have made participants more likely to provide shorter quantifiable responses, rather than the richer, more nuanced answers I wanted. Similarly, the length of the survey may have made them more likely to favour short responses to finish quicker. In future, I believe that focusing on only a few qualitative questions, along with a specific instruction to be as detailed as possible, may make it more likely that participants would leave longer and more detailed responses. However, on the other hand the survey had a very large and important impact on the type of data I gathered and in how I actually conducted my follow up interviews.

Firstly the survey was the primary tool I utilised to recruit participants for the interview process, as can be seen in Appendix Four, 35 of the 40 men I interviewed were recruited through the survey. This means that without the survey I potentially would not have the quantity of interview data which forms the basis of my findings. Secondly, the survey played a very large role in how I approached my qualitative interviews and thus the data I actually gathered from them. The survey ran concurrently with interviews which meant I was able to identify broad trends in the responses I was receiving and then test the ideas and themes that were emerging in the survey data in the interviews I was conducting with participants. For example I began to notice that a number of survey respondents made references to feeling like that they had *"failed"* in their romantic relationships after leaving their abusive partners. This survey finding made me begin to wonder at what significance romantic failure might play in the experiences of IPV victims and so I began to ask men about this during their interviews. This led to many conversations about the relationship between shame and love, and following this thread in the interviews led me to discover the significance that fears of romantic failure played in the men's experiences of IPV victimisation (a point I develop in much greater detail in Chapter Seven). Without the survey, this insight might not have come to mind and I would not have been able to consider it as part of the interview process.

However more than just enabling me to track general trends and ideas within my participants accounts, the survey allowed me make specific preparations for talking to the specific men I was interviewing. During recruitment men who wanted to participate would leave their contact details at the end of their survey responses, which meant I could link these responses to the men who I would eventually interview. As such I was able to read these responses prior to our interview and to prepare specific questions for these men based on what they had told me in the survey. I found this incredibly useful for building rapport with my participants as it meant I would go into the conversation with at least a slight degree of familiarity with their stories and an idea of what exactly we would be talking about. Moreover, having access to their survey responses meant I could, to a degree, tailor the

questions I asked to the specific men I spoke to in a given interview. Though as I said I had an interview schedule with a core set of questions I made sure was covered in each interview, I would also write down specific questions that came up from reading the men's responses. These could be things that that were unclear from their survey responses and which I wanted clarity on, or they could be interesting topics or pieces of information I wanted to ensure we could discuss in more depth. This led to several unexpected conversations. For example, one of my participants, Owen, made a very strong point in answering the section on ethnicity to identify as: *White "Scottish-Welsh (NOT British)."* I thought this was interesting and made a point to ask him about it in our interview. This led to an extended discussion about his complex feelings about British colonialism and eventually tied into a very theoretical discussion about how he linked his own experiences of IPV at secondary school to the wider forces of both colonialism and climate change (this point is considered in depth in Chapter Eight). Thus, though the entirety of the data I will present in analysis in the following four chapters come from the interviews, the survey clearly played a major role in recruiting for those interviews and in shaping my engagement with the interview participants through the types of questions I was asking. In this way the qualitative survey was an invaluable tool for crafting specific and responsive interview questions and in developing a rapport with my participants which created the environment in which in-depth and emotionally rich conversations could take place. With this set out, we can turn to consider the efficacy of the interviews themselves.

In approaching the interviews, I adopted a modified narrative interviewing approach (Kaźmierska 2004), attempting to allow participants to elucidate a life history before abuse to then place their experiences of IPV within a wider narrative context. In doing this, however, I remained flexible, allowing my participants to guide the conversation, and following their lead when they wanted to focus on or highlight a particular aspect of their experiences. Indeed, I found this was one of the most important benefits that my interview approach gave me, as it enabled my participants to highlight what they thought was important, which was significantly different from what I had originally thought would be discussed. Indeed, before beginning fieldwork, I had not considered the role that romance narratives could play in men's experiences of abuse, but I soon realised as I began interviewing that my participants wanted very much to discuss their romantic feelings and understanding of love with me. Narratives of love, and how they interact with abuse, played a large role in their experiences and it was only through the more fluid nature of the interviewing process that these experiences became such a central part of my analysis. This, I argue, is a strong validation of qualitative interviewing, and stands as an example of how my analysis is grounded and emergent from the data rather than preceding it. Moreover, I found the remote nature of the interviews did not provide any significant barrier or challenge in terms of developing or maintaining rapport with my participants. All participants showed a remarkable degree of technical literacy in terms of their use of video-conferencing platforms. Indeed, I argue the utilisation of remote technologies had a significant benefit for my research in terms of developing rapport and putting participants at ease. Rather than requiring us to meet in person at a neutral or public location, the remote nature of the interview allowed participants to conduct interviews from their own home or work environment, which seemed to put many of them at ease as they were in a place of comfort and security. It is of course possible to conduct in-person interviews with participants in their home spaces, but this raises a host of ethical and safety questions for both researcher and participant (Borbasi et al 2002). In my case, these concerns were mitigated by the remote nature of the interviews. The fluid nature of digital spaces allowed my participants and I to remain in our own physical space yet simultaneously share a blurry digital *"liminal space"* (Szakolczai 2022) in which we could interact. Indeed, the blurry nature of this liminal space was magnified by the technologies used for the interview. Most of the interviews were conducted using video-conferencing software, which enabled both myself and the participants to see small slivers of our environments, simultaneously existing in both spaces for a brief time. This frequently allowed opportunities for developing rapport, as we each could comment upon the other's home space as a bridge for conversation. Indeed, allowing participants to conduct interviews in their home environments created the conditions for them to better manage moments of distress that arose during our conversations. Participants could get up and walk around, go outside to take breaks for fresh air, or simply have access to home comforts such as a cup of tea or a blanket. In many cases, participants spent large sections of the interview stroking or petting their cats or dogs. Taken together,

this demonstrates that contrary to earlier concerns (Groves 1990, Lo Iacono et al 2016), remote interviewing through digital technologies may act to enhance and deepen rapport with participants, particularly when discussing sensitive or difficult topics.

Once I had collected and transcribed all of my data, I then uploaded it into the qualitative data analysis software *NVivo*. It was then subjected to a rigorous regime of coding, based on the modified constructivist grounded theory paradigm I identified earlier (Charmaz 2014). Initial coding identified several emergent codes, in subsequent readings, these codes were then developed into broader categories and sub-categories, that eventually collated into an overarching theme that encompassed my emergent framework. During this period, I kept a codebook that noted emergent codes and provided me with a space to sketch out the larger themes I was identifying. In addition, I utilised theoretical memos to discuss my thoughts regarding each emerging code, category or theme. As per the traditions of grounded theory, this analysis was completed simultaneously with data collection (Glaser and Strauss 1967), with discoveries in coding and analysis used to guide my sampling and the type of data I looked for. In this regard, the segmented nature of my research was very useful. The limited amount of data collected from the participants I recruited from *Grindr* was analysed and then coded before the launch of the survey and was used to help guide the questions I asked on the survey itself. Specifically, I utilised a form of thematic narrative analysis (Sandberg 2022) which aims to identify thematic norms within a sample that can be used to understand how the participants' narratives are linked to the wider symbolic and cultural worlds they exist within. Moreover, the survey responses were coded as they were submitted, and the analysis of these responses was used to design my initial interview schedule, which I would consistently revise as the interviews went on, as with new interviews I discovered new themes and ideas I wanted to test through exposure to more data. This process continued for 16 months until January 2022 when I achieved data saturation across all of my identified themes. By the time I had completed my coding, I had identified 4 primary themes which I have highlighted below:

- *Narratives of Romance and Abuse*
- *Stigma and Victimisation*
- *The Loss of the Self*
- *The Construction of a New Identity*

With these themes identified and my description of my research process at an end, I now wish to turn to reflect on the methodological process of my research, beginning with the ethical implications of my work.

Research Reflections: Ethics, Limits, and Reflexivity

From the moment I conceptualised this project, I knew that it would attract a host of ethical issues that would require quite a bit of forethought in navigating. Therefore, I was lucky in that my project was heavily scrutinised over how these ethical issues would be handled. Indeed, during my fieldwork, I had to submit my project to two separate reviews by my University's Ethical Review Committee. The first was my initial research proposal which was designed before the Covid-19 pandemic, while the second was an amended proposal which included the details and justifications for my use of the anonymous online qualitative survey. Both reviews made me think very carefully about how I would ensure the safety, anonymity and confidentiality of my research participants, particularly given the nature of my research. I would be asking participants to describe experiences of violence, abuse, and victimisation, all of which can be deeply traumatic to discuss and re-live. To avoid re-traumatising a potentially vulnerable group of participants, I added several ethical safeguards throughout the entirety of the research process. Firstly, all my participants were provided with an information sheet that set out their rights as research participants and which provided the necessary context and background so that they were able to make an informed decision as to whether they wished to participate. For those who participated in the online survey, this information was provided at the start of the online survey platform before they could progress to the rest of the questions, whilst for interview participants, information sheets were either emailed or texted to them before the agreement to be interviewed. Similarly, all participants were required to read and accept a consent form before participation in the

study. This form gave extensive information about the nature of the research and made them aware of the rights they had within the process, including that they only needed to answer questions that they were comfortable with and that they could cease participation in the study at any time for any reason. Moreover, once participation in the study ended, all participants were provided with a resource sheet that listed several relevant support and help services in the IPV and Queer health and wellbeing sectors. This ensured that they had information and support if they decided they wanted it after re-experiencing some of the issues we discussed in our interviews or the survey. I believe that these measures taken together, ensured that participants were able to make fully informed decisions about their participation, with a knowledge of what to expect, and the information necessary to rescind their consent if they felt uncomfortable at any point.

Yet, even with formal safeguards to ensure the safety of participants, it is always possible that when researching sensitive topics such as this, issues will arise. In my case, this occurred during interviews, where participants began to experience distress at recalling or discussing painful memories even if they had not thought that this would impact them at the beginning of our conversation. Consequently, I made sure that during the interview process, I monitored participants for signs of distress and would temporarily stop the discussion and offer them the opportunity to take a break or even stop the interview if the topic was too difficult for them to discuss. However, in doing this I did not infantilise my participants or make decisions on their behalf. Whilst many of them were upset at points when discussing their experiences, all were adamant that they wanted to be interviewed and rebuffed my suggestions that we could wrap up our discussions early. Instead, more commonly they would accept a break to compose themselves before continuing. In this way, I sought to respect my participant's autonomy and went with their appraisals of their ability to handle the material we were covering, rather than attempting to substitute their feelings for my own.

After data collection was finished, steps were then taken to ensure that the data was suitably anonymised. This was of particular importance in this study given that participants are victims of IPV, and any disclosure of identifying information could expose them not only to stigma but also to potential re-victimisation from an abusive partner. All participants were given pseudonyms and all personal details gathered during data collected were destroyed during data analysis. This ethos of confidentiality extended to the recruitment process itself. The use of *Facebook* groups to advertise the study meant that participants could fill in the survey or contact me through my profile without having to identify themselves as victims in any way. Data was also securely stored throughout the research process on a password-protected file that was kept on a hard drive in a locked room. Similarly, all participants were given guarantees of confidentiality in their information sheets. There was one exception to this general declaration, where I noted that:
"I am required to report any disclosure you make that you have committed, aided in, or intend to carry out a serious offence, (which includes murder, terrorism, rape, or child sexual exploitation). In which case I am obligated to disclose the information to the relevant authority."

Finally, throughout the research process, I adhered strictly to the Economic and Social Research Council and British Society of Criminology guidelines on ethics in research.

Though much of this chapter has focused on what went well in my research, particularly in my use of digital methods, it is worth noting what was missed through my use of digital technology and what limitations it imposed on my research design and thus the data I generated. Perhaps the biggest issue is that my reliance on digital technologies and social media for both recruitment and data collection introduced a sampling bias to my recruitment. Only those individuals who used the platforms and technology I utilised in the study could access it. Only men who used *Facebook* could hear about the study, and then only those who had easy or reliable access to a phone, laptop, or the internet could participate in interviews. This is a key limitation of all research that utilises digital technologies, and it cannot be assumed that access to these technologies is necessarily universal (Kennedy et al 2021). Indeed, much has been written about the modern digital divide, that is, the persistent inequality in access to reliable, safe, and affordable internet connections across the globe (Muller and Aguiar, 2022). Even within a relatively affluent and developed country such as the United Kingdom, internet

access is often unequal, and the most disadvantaged and marginalised members of our society often struggle to access digital resources reliably if at all (Office for National Statistics 2020c, Watts 2020). This I believe is reflected in the composition of my eventual sample, most of which were recruited directly from *Facebook* or other digital platforms. The vast majority of my sample are white, older, and relatively well educated, all of which suggest the digital divide may have had an impact on the type of men I recruited into my study. This is disappointing, as in the early stages of my research I had intended to try to interview a more diverse sample of men, particularly focusing on the experiences of racial and ethnoreligious minority participants who have largely been ignored in the wider literature on same-sex IPV. Future studies that wish to utilise digital technologies in their recruitment and data collection must therefore think carefully about potential avenues to broaden the scope for participation and to mitigate the persistent digital divide.

Before I turn to fully conclude this chapter on methods, I want to briefly consider my role in the generation of the data and how my own identity and status as a researcher may have influenced both my experiences of the research and the research itself. In doing this I am engaging in what Giddens (1992) refers to as *"reflexivity",* which is the process by which an individual becomes self-aware of their position within society and begins to reflect on how they are impacted by, and in turn impact, their environments. Within social science research, reflexivity has come to mean the process by which a researcher becomes aware of how they are impacting the data they are collecting and interpreting, which inevitably creates a consideration of how their background and subjectivity can shape or fundamentally change their research (May 1999). And indeed, throughout the process of conceiving, designing, and then implementing this research project, I became increasingly aware of how my status as an openly gay man may have impacted the design of the research itself. As a Queer man studying other Queer men, I could be considered an insider to the social group I was investigating. Indeed, on reflection, I did reap many benefits due to a shared social status with the men I studied. Firstly, I shared and could relate to many of the experiences my participants described. Stories of men struggling to recognise their attraction to other men, the perils of coming out, and navigating an often vapid or alienating Queer Scene, were all familiar narratives in my own life story which I could empathise with. Moreover, my immersion within gay cultural spaces meant I understood Queer terminology and slang without having to ask for clarification. All of which went some way toward developing a quick rapport with the men I was talking to. Secondly, my status as a member of the Queer community allowed me easy access to the Queer spaces I predominantly recruited from. Most of the *Facebook* groups I advertised in only allowed Queer individuals to join, and my status as a sexual minority allowed me to slip in and out of these spaces with an ease a heterosexual researcher simply could not. Yet, despite this, my ability to engage in the sympathy and understanding that insider status is meant to grant me was limited, as my status as a gay man did nothing to remove the impact of aspects of my identity. For example, attempting to find racial and ethnoreligious minority men for the study proved challenging. I lacked any social contacts I could rely upon to negotiate access to spaces designed and maintained for Queer individuals of colour. Moreover, those few spaces I could find were designed only for Queer men of colour and therefore could only be accessed through negotiation with institutional gatekeepers, a process I was unable to perform in time within my fieldwork. It is also possible that my status as a white middle-class researcher and therefore an outsider, made certain demographics of potential participants less willing to engage with the research, which combined with the methodological digital divide I identified above, may have contributed to the homogeneity of the sample. It also serves as a reminder that insider status can be misleading, as it privileges certain aspects of a researcher's identity over others, which may be just as, if not more, important. Like any other researcher, I had to be aware of these differences and mindfully note them during my analysis.

Conclusion – Researching Hidden Victims

In this chapter, I have set out the epistemology, methodology and research methods I have used to investigate my chosen research topic. I demonstrated that my research draws from the

phenomenological research tradition that is interested in understanding how their subjects directly experience and give meaning to their wider social world, and that this fed into my decision to utilise a grounded theory methodology which focused on iteratively drawing conclusions from my emerging research data. I then showed how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced my decision to move my research into the digital field and to adopt an online recruitment strategy using *Facebook*, which worked well in enabling me to enter the social spaces where my male participant gathered to socialise. I then discussed how I navigated the ethical issues raised by the research and considered my positionality as both an insider and an outsider to my research population, and how this may have impacted the type of data I was able to gather. With all this set-out, I can now turn to present the findings of my research.

Chapter Five

Romance Lost: Stories of Loneliness, Love, and Hope

Introduction

To begin the discussion of the empirical findings of my study I will present my analysis of the narrative accounts my participants gave of their romantic relationships with their abusive partners. What immediately stood out within these accounts was the fact that the men specifically framed their experiences of IPV through a narrative of romance. Though this narrative was not the same for all my participants the vast majority of men in my study used this narrative as a template for making sense of what happened to them. Even after the men had exited their abusive relationships and sought to rebuild their lives, which typically involved recognising and often condemning their former partner's actions, they still described the time they spent in the relationship in what were undeniably romantic terms. When they described their relationships to me, they highlighted periods of intimacy and passion and drew on narrative tropes of love and commitment, as if their accounts were haunted by the phantom love stories of their former relationships. They did not believe in these stories anymore, that belief had long since been killed by their partners' coercive control, but the presence of these stories was still distinctly felt in the overall structure and content of their narratives. My participants discussed how desires for romance and love pushed them into the arms of their abusers, how initial periods of passionate bliss gave way to violent control, and how they maintained faith that the redemptive power of love would bring them to a promised land where their abuser would once again become the charming man they had fallen for.

To fully understand why this narrative became so dominant in these victims' accounts, we need to examine it more closely. My aim with this chapter is thus to understand how Queer men, faced with IPV, understand, and give meaning to their experiences through culturally informed narratives of romance, and how these narratives act to construct an ideal of romantic intimacy. From reviewing these accounts, I have identified what I argue is a coherent romance narrative that underlies their experiences of abuse. For the men in my study, this narrative emphasises their relationship with their abuser as a socially valuable one, a key component of their ability to integrate and be accepted into wider society and culture, and which requires dedication and commitment to sustain in times of trouble. I have dubbed this narrative, *the narrative of committed intimate romance*. This is to highlight the fact that this narrative describes not simply any romantic or sexual relationship the men may have had, but specifically, the types of committed romantic relationships that are premised on close intimacy between partners and are often characterised by cohabitation, civil partnerships, or marriage.

From analysing this narrative, I argue that it contains three sub-narratives that each correspond to a different stage of the relationship, these are:

- *The narrative of the romantic quest.*
- *The narrative of sweeping romance.*
- *The narrative of troubled romance.*

In this chapter, I will describe the function that these romance narratives play in the meaning the men attach to their experiences. I will note that my participants' adherence to them allowed the men to participate in traditional romantic conventions and life events that Queer men have historically been excluded from. Moreover, I further argue that these narratives are central to understanding the experiences of shame and stigmatisation the men report later in my study. If, as I have argued, stigma is the devaluation of social traits which deviate from a culturally authorised norm, then these narratives help us understand what these men considered to be *"normal"* and thus better understand why they report experiencing such acute shame when they fail to meet this ideal of normality. It is in

the social world of romance and intimacy that these men experience IPV and as such, it is the norms of this social world that the men will judge this experience against. Thus, to understand the men's experiences of IPV, we need to take a deeper look at how these men understand intimate relationships themselves. However, before we begin, it is worth noting that the form of data-collection utilised here, that of the semi-structured interview, may be accused of only producing certain types of information from participants. In this case, interviews in which participants are questioned and asked to account for or explain their behaviour could, in effect, create accounts that only act as post hoc explanations of the participants' behaviour to the interviewer. The risk then, is that these accounts do not genuinely describe the thought processes or feelings which led to the behaviour that is being asked about in the first place but instead create an account which only exists within the confines of the interview itself. However, I argue that the nature of my analysis relies on examining the norms and ideas contained within the narratives rather than determining any causal power they may have on the participant's actions or on how accurately they represent a *"true"* picture of their mental state (if that is ever possible to ascertain). Indeed, as has been an established principle of narrative research for some time now, the exact truth value contained within a narrative is secondary to what it tells us about how the storyteller thinks or perceives the world and what norms, ideas, and stories they feel are important (Sandberg and Ugelvik 2016, Sandberg 2022). With this set-out, I can now turn to analyse the narrative of committed intimate romance by looking at each of its sub-narratives in greater detail.

The Narrative of the Romantic Quest

This is the first sub-narrative that appeared in my participants' accounts of their romantic relationships, and it describes the period before they met their abuser. For some, this takes the form of narrating previous romantic or sexual relationships, while for others, where the abuser was their first partner, the men instead described how they conceptualised and understood what their future romantic relationships would look like.

A key theme that emerged across all my participants' accounts was their experiences with what is often colloquially referred to as the *"Scene."*[3] It is within the men's description of their relationship with the Scene that I observed the first major divergence in the accounts of my participants. The majority of men in my study characterised their experiences of attempting to date, find a romantic partner, or settle down within the Scene as frustrated by what they perceived to be a vapid and superficial culture that prioritised anonymous sex over genuine romantic connections. For this group, the Scene was understood not as a place to explore or celebrate sexual desire, instead, it was constructed as a hostile environment in which their quest for romantic connection was denigrated and treated with a lack of respect. We can see this in Saul's description of why he avoided the Scene:

Participant:

It's just degrading, and they essentially get on like robots, do you know what I mean? Like, it's hard to explain them. I just find it repulsive because they sort of dehumanize you. It's very dehumanizing.

Interviewer:

That kind of, you know, being with someone just quite flippantly. It's kind of degrading in that sense?

Participant:

Yeah. Because essentially…those who do that, it's very…they don't see you as an individual, see you as a person, they sort of just see you as an object, to be disposed of afterwards.

[3] *"The Scene"* refers to the cultural and social environments in which Queer men meet for platonic, sexual, and romantic encounters. This exists in physical spaces such as bars and nightclubs, but also in digital spaces such as through hook up apps like *Grindr* and *Scruff*.

(Saul, 25-30)

This notion that the Scene was an inherently degrading social space was apparent in many of the men's narrative accounts of their early forays into romantic and sexual relationships. For some, like Saul, this arose from the fact that they found that the often anonymous and commitment-free nature of Queer male sex did not allow for the degree of intimacy and personal connection they sought. For others, however, the Scene was actively hostile to their presence, and they were made to feel unwelcome by other Queer men. This sense of hostility was often explained through experiences which made my participants feel that they were unattractive or undesirable, and this sense of exclusion based on appearance appeared to often exist on racial and ethnoreligious lines. For example, several of the men that I interviewed from ethnic minority backgrounds spoke of experiencing racism and discrimination within the Gay Scene. Kai for example candidly recounted experiences of rejection whilst using dating apps like *Grindr* and he noted how he felt that his Chinese heritage meant he was frequently blocked or ignored:

When I send them the photo and straightaway, I mean, when I tell them, I'm Asian, I'm Chinese, and then…once they see my photo, they block or ignore me straight away. And…it hurts, it really hurts.

(Kai, 30-40)

Meanwhile, Adnan a Muslim of South Asian descent, described an experience of discrimination whilst attempting to talk to other men at a local gay club.

"I was in London, and I turned up at a gay bar. And two of the guys turned around and said, "Look, we don't do Paki's here. "

(Adnan, 30-40)

Within his narrative, Adnan used this instance to characterize the Queer Scene as inherently hostile to Muslims and thus not a place he felt comfortable or even safe. The experiences of men like Kai and Adnan reflect and affirm the findings of researchers such as Robinson (2015) and Daroya (2018), who have highlighted the presence of ongoing and continued racial discrimination within the Queer male community. Here minority men are either exoticized or, more commonly, denigrated as lacking sufficient *"erotic capital"* (Hakim 2010) by failing to meet white standards of Queer male beauty (Stacey and Forbes 2022). The oppressive nature of these same beauty standards also pervades the experiences of other men. Fred for example, recounted his experiences of attempting to date after a long-term relationship ended:

The gay Scene's not a very pleasant place if you're not slim, young, or into clubbing and stuff. And if you, especially if you're not camp, you don't sort of conform to the homosexual stereotypes, it's, it can be quite a daunting place to try and find a partner.

(Fred, 30-40)

Fred's description of the gay Scene reflects several previous studies which highlight how Queer men enact and enforce certain standards of male appearance which privilege a small set of acceptable bodies, typically young, athletic, muscular, and white, whilst implicitly and even explicitly denigrating those who fail to conform (Wood 2004, Joy and Numer 2018). From these accounts, we can see that for a substantial number of men in my study, the Scene was frequently constructed as a social environment that was at best shallow and frivolous and at worst dehumanizing and actively discriminatory.

However, in contrast to the experiences of the majority, there was a minority of participants who described the Scene in either neutral or positive terms. The former category was largely composed of individuals who had little experience with the Scene before meeting their abuser, who often was their

first romantic or intimate partner. The latter category, however, which represented the smallest group, demonstrated a radically distinct experience of Queer intimacy when compared to their counterparts. For them, the Scene was constructed positively as an environment where sexual autonomy and experimentation were valued and celebrated. For these men, the Scene presented unparalleled access to novel sexual experiences, a means to engage in a type of sexual adventurism where they could live out their desires freely and without judgment. Alexander's account is a good example of exactly this type of experience. In our interview, Alexander described how he initially found the Scene to be thrilling. In explaining his view, he highlighted that he had been married to a woman for several years and consequently had hidden his true sexual orientation for most of his life. It was only after becoming divorced in middle age that he was able to explore his sexuality, and in doing so, he found that the Scene was an invaluable resource:

I found the experience, I think the word I'd use is exhilarating, exciting! Something I've not experienced before, this kind of sense of having no emotional connections, the lack of monogamy, that kind of thing.

(Alexander, 50-60)

We can see another example of this in Carson's account. Carson describes initially feeling unsure of his sexuality, and it was only after discovering the Scene and engaging in regular cruising[4] sessions, that he began to feel confident and comfortable in identifying as a Queer man:

I still took a couple of years to come out because…I found quite a lot of homophobia in my peer group, as well. Not everybody by any stretch, but…there was a fair few homophobic people in that group as well. And so that kind of pushed me back [into the closet] a little bit…So yeah, I was a bit disappointed and still a bit withdrawn. But then I discovered cruising, in [my university's city] and I did that a lot!

(Carson, 40-50)

He continued these activities during his year abroad and considered his discovery of the sexual freedom available through the Scene as a turning point in his development:

I went away to [a foreign country] for a year…. [and] that's when everything blossomed when I was out [there]. I, yeah, I just kind of sort of reinvented myself in a way. So, I was with lots of people, new people. And I began to come out to people! And, yeah, cruised like mad when I was out there. It was great. I had a great time!

(Carson, 40-50)

Here Carson argues that the anonymous nature of Queer sexual practices such as cruising allowed him to invent a new self-image *(I just kind of sort of reinvented myself in a way)* that was affirming of his Queer sexuality. Where previously, homophobia amongst his peer group had acted to motivate him to keep his sexuality closeted, in the more liberating and freer environment of the Scene he could fully come out and embrace his Queerness. In this way, we see that in contrast to the experiences of the majority, these participants were able to use the Scene as a resource to affirm their sexual identities and explore previously hidden and stigmatised sexual desires. These accounts accord strongly with Gidden's (1992) notion of "*plastic sexuality"* (ibid p.145) where sexual intimacy, divorced from notions of reproduction and romantic commitment, can be utilised as a form of self-development and expression. Indeed, the emphasis on anonymous sex in both men's accounts reflects and affirms a great deal of previous research which documents the now well-noted propensity for Queer men to

[4] Cruising refers to a sexual activity where Queer men met in public spaces (such as parks) to engage in anonymous sex.

engage in sexual activity outside the boundaries of committed romantic monogamy (Adams 2006, Coelho 2012, Meunier and Sauermilch 2021). Yet, even for the few men who described positive experiences within the Scene, there was still a recognition that finding something more than this plastic sexuality was difficult. Returning to Alexander's narrative, after describing his initial thrills and excitement at the sexual freedom on offer, he noted that his enjoyment began to fade, giving way to boredom and a persistent feeling that the Scene lacked any real substance. He began to describe a desire for more intimate and emotionally fulfilling relationships:

I think at the time I probably, I was, I was a bit jet-lagged, to use an expression, I was kind of getting to the stage of being kind of like "Oh these one-night stands are tons of fun, but they're quite shallow, all sort of start to tail off as well." I was starting to become more choosy.

(Alexander, 50-60)

Later in the interview he further reflected that:

I started to feel that I wanted to put more roots down and actually have a partner and build some kind of future rather than mucking about forever and a day.

(Alexander, 50-60)

We can see a similar pattern emerge in Carson's account, where he stated that despite enjoying cruising and the anonymous satisfaction of his sexual needs that it provided, he eventually began to yearn for a solid relationship. Thus, whilst in his own words cruising enabled him to:

Meet that sort of need…to get off.

(Carson, 40-50)

He eventually stated that:

Really…yes, I had thought about [a serious relationship] And it had played on my mind quite a lot that I still never had a boyfriend at the age of 22.

(Carson, 40-50)

Here we can see that even for men like Alexander and Carson, both of whom argued that the Scene played a key role in allowing them to express and explore their formerly repressed sexuality, they eventually admitted to a persistent feeling that something was missing. Moreover, both men said that finding a committed relationship was a necessary part of their future *(I wanted to put more roots down and actually have a partner and build some kind of future)* or at the very least, something that the absence of which was notable (*I still never had a boyfriend at the age of 22).*

Indeed, what unified both sets of men regardless of their positive or negative experiences of the Scene, was a persistent feeling that it could not facilitate the emotionally fulfilling intimate and romantic relationships they came to desire. When men moved beyond describing sexual encounters to attempts at finding romantic partners through dating, frequent themes of disappointment and dissatisfaction emerged. Key to this was the construction of the wider Scene as being non-conducive to commitment and intimacy. We can see this in Ali's account, who described his initial frustrations at trying to date within the Scene:

I started venturing out, but it was quite disappointing most of the time and the primary reason for it is…that most men…. are not really looking forward to a relationship. It's rather just like, you want to meet for a date and [they] just want to just fuck you [and] leave….it was quite disappointing most of the times when this happened, but that was the harsh reality.

(Ali, 30-40)

Indeed, some of the men in my study presented themselves as being unique or rare within the community due to their desire for commitment and monogamy over easy sex and freedom. In doing so, they constructed most gay men as sex-obsessed or afraid of relationships, whereas, in contrast, they were a commitment-focused minority looking for something more elevated. Oliver for example noted that:

It was not my intention to fuck around and everything…I first really wanted to find a guy that I could settle with. I know that I'm going to sound like a psychological monster, but I was looking for that kind of companionship, that sense of…even family type of dynamic with a guy, you know?

(Oliver, 30-40)

The fact Oliver equates his desire for a *"family type of dynamic with a guy"* to sounding like a *"psychological monster"* highlights the degree to which he perceived this desire as being so out of step with the wider community as to be pathological. Indeed, we can see the strength of this conviction in Stefan's account of his dating life before meeting his abuser where he stated:

I'm very much a…in it for keeps kind of guy like, I don't really do the whole casual dating thing. It tends to always be…like obviously, you have to casually date to meet a partner. But it's more of the outlook of looking for something more long-term…I don't know, I think I get put off by people who are kind of blasé about relationships, which kind of limits me because it's really hard to find other people who are as likeminded.

(Stefan, 25-30)

What is interesting in this account is that we can observe tension in Stefan's narrative. He initially distances himself from the frivolity of casual dating *(I don't really do the whole casual dating thing*) yet has to clarify his participation in the Scene *(like obviously, you have to casually date to meet a partner)* before re-affirming his distinctiveness from the Scene through a purported different internal orientation to commitment *(It's more of the outlook)* and concluding be re-asserting his status as a rare minority within the community *(it's really hard to find other people who are as likeminded).* This tension of both decrying the Scene and other Queer men as frivolous and opposed to romantic commitment and yet continuing to participate in it anyway to meet other men was a recurrent theme amongst many of my participants' accounts. We can see an example in Jim's interview where he contrasts the romantic ideals he had about his future relationships with having to navigate the realities of the Scene:

I think I had a very romantic idea of how that should be…I had a very romantic idea of [what it would be like] And, yeah, I was looking for a long-term relationship definitely. I wasn't really interested in a lot of nightclubs, and all of that [but] I would do that in order to meet people because it was very difficult to meet people otherwise, at the time.

(Jim, 50-60)

Here Jim contrasts his desire for a romance story of his own, embodied in a committed long-term relationship, with the realities of the Scene which required him to attend Queer social events, where this type of activity was not always supported, so he could find a potential partner. We see here that some of the men in my study saw and constructed the Scene as a social environment directly opposed to the types of intimacy they desired, but which had to be navigated to find a partner. Moreover, a minority of men in my study argued that their disenchantment with the Scene had greater and more negative consequences, as they began to feel increasingly alone and isolated, rejected and cut off from a wider Queer community that they felt did not accept them. For these men, the search for a romantic relationship became a means to quell and fix these feelings of loneliness. We can see this in Saul's account where he states:

I didn't want to be alone to be honest because…being gay in a straight world is quite lonely. So… if you [feel discriminated] by the straight people, by straight society, and then if you are rejected by other gay guys because you don't follow their narrative…it's very isolating.

(Saul, 25-30)

This was echoed by Owen who stated:

Participant

I think, I just wanted to be happy. I know, I wasn't really sure in what form that would come…Whereas what I needed to be going after was acceptance and confidence. If that makes sense?

Interviewer

Yeah. And did you think that seeking a relationship was a way of trying to get that?

Participant

Yeah…I thought that at the time.

(Owen, 30-40)

These findings accord quite strikingly to the work that Duane Duncan and his colleagues conducted with young Queer men in the Australian Gay Scene (Duncan et al 2015a). They noted that their participants frequently argued that the Scene was unsupportive of their ambitions for romantic relationships and constructed themselves as an embattled minority struggling to find a deeper and more meaningful connection in a sea of promiscuity (ibid p.812). Despite this, their participants reported having to rely on Queer institutions and social spaces to find men, often engaging in casual sex in the process. Thus, their desire for coupledom existed in constant tension with the easy access to sex the Scene provided them. The replication of similar findings in a different national context, in this case, the United Kingdom, and with a much more diverse set of men in terms of age, suggest that there is the potential that a wider social process is occurring here. Indeed, it may be that a sub-set of Queer men feel alienated from a Scene which embodies a reflexive and experimental *"plastic sexuality"* (Giddens 1992 p.145) and instead turns to seek something more. In this way, the Scene is presented like a rite of passage, a stage in their life narratives that, whether experienced as a pleasure or a pain, must be undertaken and then passed through to reach the next part of their life story.

But what is this next stage in the narrative? The ephemeral *"more"* my participants speak off? When they describe the imagined relationships that the Queer Scene is blocking their access to, what do they believe they will look like? In examining this, I found that the romantic imaginaries described by my participants were deeply rooted in traditional ideas of coupled intimate monogamy. Indeed, there is a distinct lack of any of the fluidity, relationship innovation, or reflexive negotiation that several scholars have argued are often associated with Queer forms of intimacy (Weeks 1995, Weeks et al 2001, Adams 2006, Bonello and Cross 2009). To give a simple example, most of the men in my study expressed a desire for sexual and emotional monogamy within their relationships both with their abusers and with previous and subsequent romantic partners. Indeed, the few men who described introducing elements of non-monogamy into their relationships typically presented it as an overwhelmingly negative experience. Fred for example recounted how a previous long-term relationship broke down after his ex-partner introduced elements of non-monogamy:

[It] was a nice relationship, we sort of complemented each other. It did also have its problems. Nothing abusive, or anything like that, just basically became an open relationship, which wasn't really what I wanted. And I hadn't had many experiences with guys, so I guess it was kind of exciting to do that. But it got to the point where myself and my partner weren't having that sort of romantic sex life unless somebody else was joining us and that was definitely not what I wanted.

(Fred, 30-40)

Only one participant, Padrig, described positive experiences of non-monogamy. He noted that his relationship with his current husband allows for sex with other men and he disclosed that they regularly attend sex parties together. In describing his experiences with non-monogamy and why he valued the practice he stated:

My husband is younger and hasn't got the same sexual experience. I describe myself as an ex-slag [laughs]. Like I was, I was completely that side of it. So, like, I have had a lot of sex and done a lot of stuff, but I also appreciate that my husband hasn't had that. So, I allow him to enjoy it but for me…I'm happy with the contact with people, but I'm not necessarily jumping to have sex with other people.

(Padrig, 30-40)

Whilst we can see that Padrig's account here is more in keeping with the notions of plastic sexuality and sexual freedom typically associated with Queer male intimacy, his view was decidedly in the minority. For the rest of the men in my study, coupled intimate monogamy of both the romantic and sexual types was highly valued. Moreover, these relationships were understood to be underpinned by bonds of commitment and fidelity. Particularly prominent in their accounts of these idealised relationships was the idea that entering a serious and committed relationship was an expected and normal part of their life story, one that they were often excited and impatient to experience. Indeed, this desire to enter a serious romantic relationship was presented across all age groups within my study, taking on different formulations depending on where the individual considered themselves to be in their development.

For the younger men, the prospect of an intimate relationship was presented as a rite of passage into adulthood, a mark of maturity that signalled the end of adolescence and the beginning of their real lives. Whilst this is akin to other narratives of adolescent romance (Chung 2005, Giordano et al 2010) for my participants their first romantic relationships took on an added dimension of importance, as they felt significantly behind their heterosexual peers in terms of their romantic development. This was often due either to a fear of experiencing stigma for expressing their attraction to other men or because they had not yet understood or accepted their sexuality. For these men, their first romantic relationship took on the added burden of being an important validation of their sexuality and their new social identity as Queer men. We can see this in the account Niall gives of how he felt before meeting his abusive partner:

I was quite sort of eager to get into a relationship…I'd seen all of my friends get, you know, having relationships from, you know, from the start of secondary school, really, and I obviously had not been able to, and I didn't really know any other gay people. So I was, Yeah, I guess before I even went on the date, I was kind of hoping that it would, you know, become something no matter kind of what, you know, what it was like.

(Niall, 18-25)

Here, Niall's desire for a relationship appears to be motived in part by a sense of deprivation in comparison to his heterosexual peers, embodied in the fact that he notes that he was unable to similarly explore his romantic and sexual identity as easily as they had. However, this desire to find companionship was not limited to the younger men in the study, as the same longing was present in the narratives of the older and more romantically experienced participants. Many of these men framed their quest as a search for a life partner, someone to settle down with and begin the process of creating a home. What was startling in these accounts was how much value these men placed on establishing a secure committed relationship. The need to be in a committed romantic relationship was not presented primarily as a means of individual fulfilment or pleasure but instead as a social necessity whose absence is seen as the equivalent of a character flaw in need of rectifying. We can see an example of

this in Jim's account where, in describing his previous desire to find a romantic partner, he stated that it came from:

A kind of naivety, right? Where I just so desperately wanted a kind of normal relationship and normal setup. And because…this is what society's kind of pushed on me, that I should have all these things, you know? I wasn't very "Queer" then in my thinking.

(Jim, 50-60)

When I asked him if he felt that he had tried to follow or replicate the monogamous relationship of his heterosexual peers he responded that:

Yeah, that's exactly what I was doing. And what I ended up with was the worst version of that, which is abusive, and coercive, and all of those things.

(Jim, 50-60)

We can see another example in Ernie's account where he reflects on his emotional state before meeting his abusive partner:

All my friends, you know, are…getting engaged, getting married, going on holidays with a partner and things. And there was Mr Singleton sitting, you know, sitting at home working five, six, seven days a week, just to pass the time, do you know? So yeah, that was that desire, that need to move forward in life to the next expected stage.

(Ernie, 30-40)

Once again, we see that a committed romantic relationship is framed as a necessary component of a larger life narrative, embodied in the fact Ernie phrases his quest for a partner as a desire to move onto *"the next expected stage."* The use of the word *"expected*" here suggests that Ernie understood that being in a monogamous romantic relationship was part of a cultural narrative of intimacy that represents this kind of committed intimate romantic monogamy as the end point of a man's sexual and romantic career. Indeed, what came across within the study was that this expected endpoint was often explicitly modelled after traditional heteronormative relationship structures, namely marriage and even the nuclear family. Many of the men in my study articulated a desire to settle down and establish a family unit within a traditional dyadic couple format, and within this group, many wanted to take the explicit step of entering into formal legal agreements such as civil partnerships or even marriage. We can see an example of this embodied in Nate's account of how he understood the trajectory of his romantic career:

Yeah, I've always been quite a screwed-on kind of guy. And I've always kind of been the sort of person that wants to be sort of committed. Don't get me wrong, I'll have a bit of fun when I'm single. but I kind of, I always wanted to…kind of just to find someone just to sort of settle down…I still want to do the whole marriage and kids thing and I'd rather do that if I was settled down. It's kind of all about kind of achieving my ambitions…[and] one of my sort of life ambitions is to, you know, get married, have kids, that kind of thing. If all the laws and stuff, allow me to do that.

(Nate, 50-60)

Here Nate frames his ambitions for his romantic career in terms of achieving the establishment of a stable intimate committed dyad which will then form the base for the creation of a family unit. His account is absent of any of the innovations traditionally ascribed to Queer male intimacy, instead, Nate seems comfortable with a life trajectory marked by inclusion into historically heterosexual romantic institutions and kinship structures. Another example can be found in Frank's account, where he describes his motivation for pursuing marriage with his eventual abusive partner. In this excerpt, he describes why he felt marriage represented an idealised endpoint of his imagined romantic career:

I think that we both believe in marriage. And so, it was a natural thing. I think it was happening at the time, you know, we were getting the right to get married and that was really important…We both sort of had chats really early on that we wanted a committed relationship…we'd both been messed around by people and we both sort of agreed that actually what we wanted was sort of what everyone else had at the time…it's that whole mimicking heteronormativity I suppose. So, settle down, have dogs instead of kids, you know, have a life together.

(Frank, 40-50)

Here Frank echoes many of the themes I have highlighted already. For example, he frames his desire for a committed relationship embodied within a formal societal institution, in this case, marriage, as a response to previous relationships that had failed to provide a sense of intimacy and instead hurt him *(we'd both been messed around by people).* Moreover, he explicitly frames this desire for a traditional monogamous relationship as a form of imitation of the wider societal norms of heterosexual kinship *(it's that whole mimicking heteronormativity I suppose).*

To demonstrate the change Nate and Frank represent in how Queer men position themselves against institutional forms of intimacy like marriage, it is worth comparing these findings to previous work in this field. For example, in a study conducted nearly two decades ago, Adam Green (2006) found that the institution of marriage represented an important departure point in the narratives of Queer and straight men. Whilst both groups highlighted earlier periods of sexual exploration and conquest, straight men were eventually pulled, willingly or not, into the orbit of marriage by pressures from female romantic partners, family members, and colleagues. Indeed, many of these straight men themselves eventually recognised that they needed to settle down in monogamous intimate partnerships to fulfil societal expectations and experience important milestones in their life narratives such as becoming a father (ibid p.170-173). Green argued that for straight men, marriage represented a *"master template"* (ibid p.3) to which the men's life narratives often unconsciously seemed to follow. Homosexual men, in contrast, lacked access to this template, and instead continued their sexual development. In the absence of this institutional pressure to marry, Queer men felt more comfortable pursuing non-monogamy and when they did enter more committed relationships, these were characterised by sexual experimentation, non-monogamy, and an explicit rejection of heterosexual institutions and forms of intimacy (ibid p.178-181). Green's findings stand in contrast to my work, where several of my participants demonstrated a much stronger preference for institutional forms of monogamy as an idealised form of intimacy. It is possible, I suggest, that in the wake of the widespread legalisation of same-sex marriage in Western Europe and North America that some Queer men are now able to imagine themselves as included within formerly heterosexual institutions of kinship and intimacy. This demonstrates that the inclusion of Queer men into institutional forms of intimacy may have acted to move at least some of their desires toward more heteronormative relationship forms by providing them access to their own *"master template"* (ibid p.3) of socially sanctioned intimacy realised through same-sex marriage. This may have lightened the pressure that previously forced them to perform the *"everyday life experiments"* (Weeks et al 2001 p.28) of inventing new forms of kinship outside the scope of acceptable heterosexual intimacy as they did in the past.

Yet, this assimilation into heterosexual institutions of intimacy did not mean the men lost their unique positionality as a sexual minority. Indeed, I was able to detect a recurring pattern where my participants would suggest that by entering these monogamous romantic and intimate relationships they were finally getting to experience something they had formerly been denied. In these narratives, the relationship represented a chance to finally integrate themselves into the wider heteronormative culture and to participate in socially valued and culturally revered institutions of intimacy and kinship. Nikoli for example excitedly stated that:

I was happy that somebody seemed to be interested in sort of a long-term serious relationship…I'd had like, one-night stands and things and whilst that's all I was looking for, obviously, that doesn't really give you anything. And I think once I sort of like entered into something that was more, more than that, you know, it sort of gave me a bit of a boost. Like someone actually, you know, likes me, you know, I've…maybe I'm going to be able to get what straight people get! The straight people I know had the sort of proper relationships, whereas [me] and my other Queer friends, we just had these little bitty things here and there, you know, and sort of like felt, you know, I guess like the real world almost, you know, this is what you see on telly. This is what you see in films!

(Nikoli, 30-40)

In his narrative, we can see the contrast between committed romantic relationships, which Nikoli presents as culturally valued and lionized in media, *(This is what you see in films),* and the relationships he implicitly associates with Queerness and homosexuality (*little bitty)*. Significant in this regard is his choice to characterize the prospect of being in a relationship as akin to being in "*the real world."* This highlights Nikoli's tacit admission that romantic relationships which adhere to a heterosexual norm are seen as more legitimate, more valuable, and more real than alternatives. In this way, we can see that within the narratives of many of the men in my study, the quest for a romantic relationship was invested with a great deal of symbolic meaning. It was presented as a means to live out cultural narratives that they felt had previously been denied to them, to link their personal love stories to wider cultural representations of romance, and through this find a validation they had never previously experienced. I argue that these narratives act to set the stage for what comes next. They construct the position of singledom as an inherently incomplete social identity that requires remedying; meanwhile, they present the possibility of a romantic relationship as not only a means to escape a shallow and often hostile Scene but also to experience the social validation of participating in cultural narratives of committed intimacy previously denied to Queer men.

However, the narrative of the romantic quest, in the context of the men's experiences, eventually gives way to a more potent and emotionally resonant narrative that describes and accounts for their early relationship with their partner.

The Narrative of Sweeping Romance

This sub-narrative begins when the man first encounters and begins to date their soon-to-be abuser. Its plot concerns important milestones in the wider romance narrative such as the first date, the declaration of love and the act of commitment that often seals the two men together as a couple, embodied in events such as moving in together or introducing their partner to family and friends. This is a crucially important stage of the relationship narrative as it represents a temporal transition from a lonely past to a loving present and a transformation of the social status of the narrator from being single to being coupled. However, it is the themes and the emotions embodied within this sub-narrative that are important, as they are crucial in validating their pre-existing understandings of what relationships and even love itself are supposed to feel like. Because of this, this sub-narrative is typically structured around the men's accounts of how they began to fall in love with their abusive partners, drawing on rich descriptions of their emotions in the process. It is through these emotions that the men begin to understand themselves as *being* in love and thus willing to commit to their partner. From examining these accounts, I argue that the men's descriptions of falling in love are a composite of two emotional complexes as Burkitt (1997) would describe them. The complex of passion and the complex of intimacy, I will describe these in turn.

Themes of passion, excitement, and exhilaration were prominent in many of the participants' accounts of this early honeymoon period of their relationships. In these narratives, the men described feelings of elation and transcendent bliss, as their partner showered them with affection and attention. Significant in this regard was the fact that this experience was presented in such a contrast to their

earlier lonelier experiences of singledom or the casual sexual intimacy provided within the Scene. Where once they were alone and incomplete or simply passing from one meaningless sexual encounter to another, they were now the subject of intense affection and attention from a potential romantic partner. In this environment, the relationship becomes a space that takes them above the normal mundane nature of their lives and transports them to an environment of heightened emotion. We can see an example of this passion in Victor's narrative where he vividly described the early days of his relationship with his abuser:

Like at the time, like, I look back now, and I was in an absolute bubble like I was in this…You know, like, when people say like, "Oh, like I was swept off my feet"

Like, genuinely felt like, "Wow, oh my god, I can't!"

I've never had this feeling. I felt like the most amazing person in the world. And this is something so special that I've never ever felt before.

(Victor, 25-30).

Here Victor highlights the intensity of emotion this initial period can inspire, highlighting that he was swept off his feet, and even appears to be unable to articulate his joy through words *(Wow, oh my god, I can't!).* It is also significant that Victor highlights that this experience felt very removed from the rest of his life as he likens the period to being in a bubble and stresses that he had never felt like this before. In this way, Victor's narrative embodies what Crossley (1998) characterizes as the *"magical"* (ibid p.28) quality of emotions. Crossley argued emotions are specific ways of being in the world that fundamentally shape our understanding of our environment in a way that cannot be explained through pure rationality. When we act on these emotional moods, they can produce a transcendent experience that Crossley argues *"enchants"* (ibid p.29) the world by removing us from our everyday ordinary rational thinking and placing us in a world of heightened experience that is profound and meaningful. Observing Victor's account here we can see the magical quality of his early relationship as the emotions he feels transform his experience into something profound and starkly different from his life before.

This sense of enchantment was common across many of the men's narratives, which describe intense emotions that fundamentally altered their perceptions of themselves and the world. A common motif in their accounts was to compare their experiences to representations of love and romance in popular culture. In this way, they highlighted that their own experiences of romance were able to replicate or at least resemble the synthetic reality of artistic depictions of love. Ali is a good example to consider here. He recounts meeting his abuser and takes pains to point out how different this experience was from his previous relationships with other men. In the past, he had to rely on apps such as *Grindr* to find romantic and sexual partners, but here he found himself swept up in a whirlwind romance with his attractive and charismatic neighbour. To highlight both how intense his feelings were and how out of the ordinary the experience felt he likens his early relationship to high romantic drama, using a contemporary Queer romance film as a reference point to illustrate the magical quality of their courtship:

That was the first time I think I met someone without any social media or app. It's just that there was a connection. Yeah, I mean, might sound too dreamy, but yeah, a sort of "Call me by your name" [5] *situation.*

(Ali, 25-30)

[5] Call me by your name is a 2017 Queer Romantic-Drama by director Luca Guadagnino that depicts a highly romantic and sexual affair between a young man and an older male lover who visits his family's Italian villa one summer.

Later in his narrative, Ali describes how he attended another neighbour's wedding with his partner, and he was struck by how he felt his experience was akin to a storybook romance:

So, since he was my neighbour, and another neighbour of mine was about to get married…at the same time, and they invited [me] to bring him in for the wedding. We were enjoying things. It was…it, I don't know, a fairy tale type of thing."

(Ali, 25-30)

In both examples, we again see the process of narrative love presented as a fundamentally transcendent one, an activity that is removed from ordinary experience and allows the narrator to briefly escape the rigours of everyday life. Indeed, this account accords with the previous research that has highlighted the presence of fairy tale like narratives of romance within the accounts of heterosexual female victims of IPV. Wood's (2001) study for example, explicitly highlighted that her female participants drew on common Fairy Tale tropes to describe their initial feelings for their abusers, comparing them to a *"prince charming"* (ibid p.249*)* type figure who introduced a magical quality of excitement and exhilaration into their lives. Whilst the men in my study did not describe prince charming saving his damsel in distress, explicit references to extant pop culture depictions of same-sex love, such as Ali's account above, demonstrate that Queer men are just as capable of being enchanted through the re-enactment of cultural narratives of romance as their heterosexual counterparts.

However, despite their prominence in the men's narratives, these accounts of passion were not the only way in which the participants constructed the process of falling in love with their abusers. Alongside these more intense emotional experiences, were more muted but still significant descriptions of a growing sense of intimacy between the parties. Here rather than the soaring heights of romantic passion, participants described how they came to feel closer to their partners through slowly but surely integrating into each other's lives. This was achieved through spending time together, and crucially, coming to feel that they profoundly knew their partner and that they were known in return. For example, Niall described this growing sense of closeness with his partner:

It was nice to have someone who was always interested in talking to me. Because I, that's, that's my main sort of issue with, with talking online is that I just…at a certain point I just feel like I'm sort of bothering the other person or whatever. So, it was always, Yeah, it was nice to have someone who always wanted to talk to me.

(Niall, 25-30)

I argue that this accords with Jamieson's (1998) notion of intimacy, which she takes to mean a subjective sense of closeness that arises between two individuals within a personal relationship. More specifically the description these men articulate of the intimacy they felt with their abusers mirrors what Jamieson called *"disclosing intimacy"* (ibid p.1). She argues this form of intimacy emphasizes: *"mutual disclosure, constantly revealing your inner thoughts and feelings to each other" (*ibid p.1*).* Jamieson's concept is crucial to understanding how the feeling of intimacy is generated between the victim and the abuser in the narrative of sweeping romance. Here the participant begins to disclose increasingly personal information about their history to the abuser. This acts to mark the relationship with the abuser as distinct and special in comparison to the victim's other relationships, and further develops an attachment to the abuser which cements a sense of closeness in which intimacy is fostered. These accounts of intimacy are less dramatic than the scenes of passion I recounted above but are no less important in their emotional significance to my participants. Dan for example places the sense of closeness he developed with his partner front and centre in his early accounts of his relationship:

I had my gripes on why the relationship with my previous partner folded and then fell apart, and obviously, I opened up and talked about those. Like, for example, lack of communication and what have you and I think that [my abuser] picked up on that and said, "Ah I'm always there to listen." and what have you, and basically just told me everything I needed to hear.

(Dan, 25-30)

Here Dan shows that at this point in his narrative, the relationship is constructed as a social space in which he is protected from outside negative influences and in which intimate disclosure is encouraged. The fact he characterizes his abuser as being *"always there to listen"* highlights the role intimate disclosure plays in creating an environment for increased closeness. The relationship becomes a place of safety and security, and the abuser becomes a confidant who can be confided in and trusted to keep the participant safe. Furthermore, this need for security, safety and intimacy can take on an added dimension for Queer men, as romantic relationships can provide an important outlet for exploring and validating a sexual identity that they may have had to hide or repress. This can be seen in Kieran's account of his relationship, where he highlights that his developing sense of intimacy with his abuser was fuelled in part by an attempt to escape a dysfunctional home life that was not supportive of his sexuality:

I mean… I feel like I should put in fairly quickly that spending more time with him, meant that I didn't have to be around my father who was quite openly, quite nasty to me…the more time I spent with people outside of the house, the less time I had to confront him…looking back at it, that's kind of what pushed me into, into this in the first place.

(Kieran, 30-40)

Another good example of this is in Ewan's narrative. Here he notes that his relationship with his abuser was one of the first times he was able to disclose to another person that he had been sexually assaulted in a previous relationship. This intimate disclosure helped to generate a sense of intimacy with his abuser that he had never previously felt with another person:

And so, I'd opened up to him about [my assault], which I've never really talked about to a partner before. So I think, although we hadn't actually been seeing each other that long, probably about four or five months at that stage, I think I already felt as if I'd disclosed quite a lot to him…it was kind of a sense that you've never been as close to someone as this before, you know, sort of they, they kind of understand you in a way that other people haven't.

(Ewan, 30-40)

Here we can see again the powerful role that a sense of intimacy played in the early narrative of sweeping romance, creating a sense of closeness premised on both the provision of security and the disclosure of personal information. It is thus clear that a developing sense of closeness and safety embodied in the concept of intimacy was a key means by which the romantic relationship became encoded as significant and special in my participants' lives. Moreover, these scenes stand in contrast to the loneliness and lack of depth the men had described in their accounts of the Scene within the narrative of the romantic quest. Therefore, it is clear that the romantic relationships they found themselves in provided access to a form of intimacy that they felt was sorely missing from their lives before.

Taken together these accounts of passion and intimacy allow us to understand how my participants constructed their narratives of falling in love and marked out their relationships with their abusers as significant and distinct from any other in their lives. It is important to underscore the power of the narrative of sweeping romance, as the twin emotional complexes of passion and intimacy act as a

recurrent reference point that appear again and again in the victims' narratives, particularly when the relationship moves to its next narrative stage.

The Narrative of Troubled Romance

This sub-narrative concerns the point at which abuse and violence begin to enter the accounts of the participants' romantic relationships, and where they begin to experience the more negative and overt aspects of coercive control which form the core of the experience of IPV. It is at this point that the wider romance narrative begins to fray, and the narrative of sweeping romance gives way in the face of a need to understand why the same partner who once was able to elicit such passion and intimacy could now hurt, humiliate, and degrade them. It is important here to again emphasise that the narratives the men present are not intended to be understood as justifications for their partners' abuse, nor am I interested in arguing that these narratives are causal i.e., work to keep the men within the relationship when they would otherwise leave. These narratives *did not* keep the men in the relationship and I do not intend to argue against the wealth of findings that highlight the way abusers keep victims trapped in cycles of violence using coercive control or the external economic and social factors that often decide to stay with an abuser a rational one for many victims (See for example Herbert et al 1991, Stark 2007, Baly 2010, Meyer 2012, Donovan and Hester 2015). Nor am I suggesting that victims are in any way responsible for justifying their abusers' actions or am downplaying the role abusers play in maintaining the conditions in which abuse is re-enacted. Instead, what I am principally interested in is examining how my participants make meaning out of their experiences and understand the abusive actions of their partner within the wider framework of the narrative of committed intimate romance. My particular interest is in noting the ways that the norms embodied within this and the other sub-narratives I have already covered act to form an ideal of intimacy to which the men's experiences of abuse deviate and thus generate stigma (a point I will consider in much greater detail in the next chapter).

To begin then, the first major theme I noted in this sub-narrative is that participants tended to understand and frame their experiences through the lens of what I term *relationship trouble.* In this framework, their partner's actions were not understood as acts of unjustified violence whose intention was to subjugate and coercively control, but instead as unfortunate and unpleasant conflicts that could and should be worked through for the sake of the wider relationship. In constructing this understanding, the men drew on common tropes about relationships that present conflict as common within committed intimate romances. We can see an example of this in the account Nikoli gives where, in describing how he initially made sense of his partner's verbal and emotional abuse, he said:

Like everybody, has rows like this! You know, I just kind of made it seem quite normal."

(Nikoli, 30-40)

We can see another example in Alexi, who notes that he did not label his partner's actions as *"abuse"* because:

I didn't see it as abuse. So, all the media, obviously, you know, television programs, are like "If you're being abused, reach out!"

But I really didn't think I was being abused, because I just thought it was part of an everyday relationship. And organizations don't deal with everyday relationships.

(Alexi, 30-40)

Alexi's description of his experience of abuse as being part of an *"everyday relationship"* and Nikoli's insistent that *"everybody has rows like this"* underscores the dynamic at play in this narrative framework, one in which violence is understood not as unjustified subjugation but instead as interpersonal conflict. At this point the types of romance narratives the men drew on shifted, instead

of accounts which emphasised complexes of intimacy and passion, new themes of commitment and dedication began to emerge which framed their romantic relationships as ongoing projects which required constant work to maintain. At this stage of their narratives, the victim typically assumed the role of what I term *the caretaker*, which in effect meant taking on the burden of salvaging the relationship as it began to flounder. Oliver for example noted that whilst he was well aware of his partner's shortcomings, which included drug addiction and frequent outbursts of verbal assault, he still felt committed to the relationship:

I think, [sigh] I had a sense of belonging. And as messed up as the guy was, I really loved him. And when you love someone, you, you take them in, even with all their faults, and all the terrible things that come with them and everything.

(Oliver, 30-40)

We can see another example of the role of the caretaker appear in Jim's account:

There was a sense in which I was responsible for him. And if I left him, he wouldn't be able to cope without me. And that was a very, very strong feeling that I had. That certainly developed [when we first met] and continued right through until the end… a sense in which if I left him, he would be in this terrible situation that he wouldn't be able to cope with and that somehow, that was my responsibility.

(Jim, 50-60)

In both excerpts, we can observe how within their narratives my participants voice a sense of responsibility to the relationship and position themselves as the managers of the relationship's health and wellbeing. Yet within the narrative of my participants, I also identified another thematic motif which seemed to give their increasingly frayed relationship meaning, that of the *Promised land*. This represented a persistent recurring theme in my participants' narratives which suggested that through enough work and sacrifice on the part of the victim, their partners' abusive behaviour will stop, and the relationship will once again revert to the earlier period of bliss embodied in the narrative of sweeping romance. I took this term from an interview with Ewan early in the research process, where he described how he thought he might be able to work through his issues with his partner and return to their earlier period of intimacy:

It kind of gave the impression that things are hard just now but there's this kind of, almost, kind of promised land [laughing].

(Ewan, 30-40)

After identifying the term in Ewan's transcript, I noticed the motif appear repeatedly in the narratives of my other participants. For example, we can see the emotional power and weight that this motif can play by turning to a particularly poetic section of Oliver's narrative. Here he described that throughout his relationship he was haunted by:

The hope that things would get back to being as good as they were at first. He was incredibly sweet to me at the beginning, and I wanted to experience that again. I would daydream that I would finish my PhD, get a really cool job, move him out of his house and away from his junkie housemate. Have a really nice flat just for the two of us and be happy.

(Oliver, 30-40)

In this section Oliver vividly described a promised land of romantic bliss where his partner is removed from the environment that he labelled the cause of their problems *(his junkie housemate)* and where they can return to their former space of intimacy and love. Moreover, Oliver was not the only one of my participants to use this motif, as it occurred in almost every account I examined. David for

example outlined a powerful desire to solve his physically abusive partner's addiction, which, at the time, he blamed for their relationship troubles:

But also, I guess, I don't know, I guess I sort of saw myself as a rescuer. That I was…I was going to reform him, I was going to help him stop his drinking, I was going to make him into the person that I knew he could be and the person that I wanted to be with.

(David, 50-60)

Meanwhile, Carson said:

When you think someone is being irrational and you love them, you want to help them, you want to try and see…you want to pull…you want to see the good in them, and you want to help them feel better.

(Carson, 50-60)

Later in the interview, he further stated:

I think that the love I felt for [my abuser] was kind of hopeful, but it was kind of like, I thought that would be enough to kind of paper over the cracks and there were a lot of cracks.

(Carson, 50-60)

Carson's description of his love as *"hopeful"* is a neat summation of the core of the motif of the promised land, a belief, a hope, that despite the evidence, love will end the relationship trouble and bring peace to their stormy partner. In all the above quotes, we can see the power that this motif had in structuring the men's understanding of their experiences. Whilst the motif of the promised land was persistent across most of the men in my study, within a particular sub-set this motif was presented alongside an explicit belief that life-long fidelity to their partner was a moral obligation. What struck me in these accounts was how closely their narratives seemed to accord to traditional ideas of marital fidelity present in heterosexual romance narratives which privilege self-sacrifice for the sake of relationship stability (Giddens 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). It is thus not surprising that all the men who made these arguments were married to or had civil partnerships with their abusers during their relationships, and they often argued that their choice to formalise their intimate relationships was bound up with a commitment to life-long fidelity. We can see this idea explicitly in Nick's description of how he viewed marriage:

Well, we were together [and] whether it's a marriage or civil partnership, you're there for life. I never thought we would separate. I never thought we would not be together. Because when I mean life, I mean life. That was my parents, you know.

(Nick, 60-70)

In another example, Frank explained the importance of his marriage vows to his wider understanding of his romantic relationship with his abuser. In this case, earlier in the interview he had stated quite forcefully that he *"believed in marriage."* When I then questioned him on what he meant by saying he *"believed"* in the institution, he responded by saying:

A lifelong commitment. In my head, I'll always be married to (my abuser). Even though we're not together Yeah, I'm still wearing the ring, it's just on the other finger and I don't think I will get that close to anyone again, I don't think I'll let myself get that close to anyone again, because (he) was in my soul.

(Frank, 40-50)

Both Nick and Frank's accounts reinforce a commitment to lifelong fidelity and reverence for institutional forms of intimacy and, consequently, they go some way to demonstrate the changing

positionality of many Queer men within the United Kingdom. Both men drew on official state-sanctioned institutions of intimacy that only a decade earlier would have explicitly barred them from formal recognition and used these institutions to construct a narrative of life-long romantic commitment that appears like a direct repudiation of Gidden's (1992) concept of *"confluent love."* From this, we can observe that my participants drew on these wider narratives of romantic commitment to understand their experiences within their abusive relationship. The narrative of troubled romance provides a means to generate meaning from their experiences, while the motif of the promised land acted as an imagined happy ending for their now troubled romance story. It is in Frank's words, a *"map"* (Frank 1995 p.54) that provided a path forward to a future where they could safely return to the romantic bliss of their lost romance.

With the narrative of committed intimate romance now fully set out, we can turn to examine the implications of these findings.

Conclusion: The Romantic Imaginary of Homonormativity

To return to the guiding question of this chapter, how do Queer male victims of IPV understand their romantic relationships with their abusers? From reviewing my findings, I argue that men in my study presented narratives that are similar in many ways to the experiences of their heterosexual female counterparts. In earlier studies with these women, researchers noted that their participants often constructed romantic relationships as an important and sometimes vital part of wider identities and sense of self that allowed them to link their individual experiences to cultural narratives of gendered romance. These narratives situated the women in a larger cultural whole and ensured a sense of communion and continuity within their communities (Sueffert 1999, Boonzaier and De la Rey 2001, Cavanagh 2003). These findings have only continued to be validated by subsequent research, for example, in a recent narrative photo-ethnographic study of domestic violence in rural West Virginia, the authors found that by focusing on the experience of a single female participant, they could track the development of her romance narrative with a physically abusive male partner (Copes et al 2021). They noted that early in the relationship she relied on a gendered notion of coupledom, emphasizing her belief that a woman should stand by her man and that fidelity to her partner was a core part of her identity as a woman, indeed she even described herself as a *"ride or die"* kind of girl (ibid p.128). It is clear then that female victims can use these romance narratives to draw meaning from their experiences in a way that often maps onto wider cultural norms, and that these narratives are a means of making sense and coping with an absurd and violent situation. As Wood noted in her study of the romance narratives of female victims of IPV, these stories are not to be understood as causative agents that trap women with their abusers but instead they are means through which the women make sense of their individual experiences within broader cultural systems of value (Wood 2001). It is through studying these narratives that we can understand the normative structures which guide how these victims make sense of the world. For feminist scholars then, an analysis of these stories reveals that women's narratives often embody and reflect structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy which privilege and encourage male domination of women through framing romantic monogamy to a man as the core goal of a woman's existence (Jackson 1993, Sueffert 1999, Hayes and Jefferies 2013, Papp et al 2017). Again, returning to Wood, she noted that many of her participants' narratives of romance contained norms of male dominance and female submissiveness hidden under the surface of otherwise innocuous fairy-tale love stories (Wood 2001 p.247-248). It is through examining these narratives that we can then understand these women's positionality in how they come to make sense of the abuse inflicted upon them by their partners and, consequently, as I demonstrated in Chapter Three, how a failure to live up to these norms can act as a serious source of shame and stigmatisation (see for example Baker 2008, Enander 2010, Meyer 2016, McCleary-Sils et al 2016, Saraswati 2020). If we accept this analysis, then what does the narrative of romance I have identified within my own participants' accounts tell us about the positionality of Queer men within Late-Modern British society,

the values they associate with romantic relationships, and how these values can then impact and shape their experiences of victimisation within the relationship?

First and foremost, my findings demonstrate that Queer men exist in a significantly different social world than they did even a decade ago. The men in my study were able to understand and situate their narratives of romance within a society in which formal legal recognition of their partnerships was a real possibility and in which they are increasingly included in public and official discourses of commitment and kinship. Whatever hardships they experience, these men are not the radically subversive sexual non-conformists profiled in the early literature (See for example Weeks 1995, Bech 1997). It is also not the case that Weeks and colleagues' description of Queer life as consisting of a series of *"Everyday life experiments"* (Weeks et al 2001 p.54) to construct alternative models of kinship in the absence of institutional acceptance is true for the men in my study either. My participants instead constituted a sexual minority that whilst still experiencing the stigma of existing within a heterosexist society, had been given the chance to assimilate into pre-existing models of heterosexual intimacy. This offered them a *"master template"* (Green 2006 p.163) of committed monogamous intimacy around which they could structure their lives. In contrast, the Scene, traditionally a major site of Queer kinship and social identity, is constructed as an environment where only sex and sexuality are valued, and in this context, committed monogamous coupledom comes to be seen as a site of stability where the security of intimacy and the enchantment of passion can be safely experienced. Yet more than just being a particular option amongst many, this form of committed intimate romance was presented by many of my participants as a core part of their wider life narratives, with their inclusion into formal institutions of intimacy, such as marriage, acting as an imagined endpoint to their romantic careers. This was reflective of a wider desire, which was presented explicitly in some of my participants' accounts, to ape heteronormativity by constructing romantic relationships that mirror heterosexual marriage. Furthermore, this also led to a belief amongst some of my participants that such forms of intimacy were in some way superior or more legitimate than other possibilities such as non-monogamy.

Within this narrative then, I argue that we can see that the values of homonormativity and compulsory coupledom reign supreme. In the case of the former, Duggan's fear that broader trends of assimilation would result in Queer subjects being absorbed into heterosexual institutions rather than challenging and critiquing them has come to pass in these accounts (Duggan 2002). Many men in my study firmly saw committed intimacy and even marriage as a natural progression of their romantic careers and did not raise any serious critique or challenge to the prominence they play within their lives. There were few other possibilities of intimacy considered, and the normative power of committed coupled stood paramount. Moreover, many men explicitly sought to embody heteronormative forms of intimacy, holding them up as the gold standard against which all romantic relationships must be judged. Indeed, the image of the Queer domesticated consumer couple Duggan sketched out in her original work as a dire warning for the future of Queer politics (ibid p.189-190), seems to re-appear in my work as an ideal that some participants aspired towards. As for the latter, Wilkinson appears vindicated in her prediction that Queer subjects would increasingly find themselves pulled into the ambit of normative structures of coupledom and intimacy (Wilkinson 2013). The men in my study seemed to believe that entering a committed intimate romantic relationship was a necessary or compulsory part of their life narratives. There was no sense that men were forced to act creatively or experiment with new forms of intimacy outside the boundaries of heterosexual coupledom, instead, it was this norm of coupledom that predominated their narratives, and it exerted an enticing and powerful pull. The structure of committed intimate romantic monogamy was firmly the norm, a natural stage in development that all of them would inevitably have to pass through.

From this analysis, I argue that the twin pillars of homonormative intimacy and the normative pull of compulsory coupledom act as key parts of the push that moved the men away from the sexual fluidity of the Scene and towards a search for a life partner with whom they could finally bring an end to their

romantic quest and thus institute the sweeping romance they had been promised. Even after their abuse had begun to blight this vision, the men drew on these narratives of romance to understand and generate meaning from their situation, constructing a new endpoint for their romantic careers, a promised land where they would finally return to the bliss of romance once again. The next question which arises from this discussion then, is in what way do the twinned values of homonormativity and compulsory coupledom act to structure these men's experience of victimisation? To understand this, we must turn away from the narratives of romance we have considered in this chapter and examine the experience of abuse more directly and in greater detail. Through this, we can begin to analyse the key theme that emerged in the men's account of their victimisation: that of shame.

Chapter Six

Becoming a Victim: Stories of Shame, Masculinity and Failure

Introduction

As I have already highlighted, victimhood is a stigmatised social identity, one that is associated with devalued traits such as weakness and passivity. This is a finding that has been replicated across numerous studies, all of which show that both the public and even victims themselves view victimhood as unappealing, deeply discrediting, and to generally be avoided at all costs (see for example Van Dijk 2009, Presser and Sandberg 2015, Fohring 2018). It is thus not surprising that the men in my study displayed an intense aversion to the term, with the vast majority of my participants directly expressing discomfort with the label at some point in their testimonies. Victor, for example, said early in his interview:

I think victim...it's one of them words that you don't want to sort of say. [You don't want to say] I am a victim

(Victor, 25-30)

He went on to say:

I think [the word] victim, makes you feel weak.

(Victor, 25-30)

The stated reason for this general hostility was the understood belief that the social identity of victimhood was a potential vector for stigmatisation, in particular the notion that victimisation is associated with weakness and passivity. For example, Nikoli said:

I think…you know, "victim" makes you sound a little bit weak. I don't know, there's just something about that, that word that I just don't like.

(Nikoli, 30-40)

Geoff expressed a similar sentiment:

I think, for me, there is a [idea] that the word victim…is negative… so the idea that being a victim is a negative thing, or being a victim is something that has been done to you, that being a victim is very passive

(Geoff, 30-40)

Indeed, the connection between victimhood and weakness was explicitly articulated by Kieran, who argued that victimhood inherently implied a lack of agency:

[Victimhood] suggests that we have no agency in it ourselves. We are done to, we are not part of doing…but to me, it feels like it's about [the abuser] doing and you [just] being the passive person in it. It feels like you can't do anything about it. Because you're just the victim.

(Kieran, 30-40)

What stood out as particularly notable in several of the men's accounts was their persistent fear that the label of victimhood would come to define them more than any other aspect of their identity. Rather than simply being an incidental part of their life history, they understood victimhood as conveying a potentially totalising picture of their self-image and worth, one that would become the primary way in which others would define them. We can see this in Saul's account:

It's a label and once you label someone you negate them; once you hear the word victim, you put them in a box.

(Saul, 25-30)

Saul's description here allows us to understand the ways that many of my participants viewed the label of victimhood as an inherently limiting and constraining social identity that would have a reductive impact on their sense of self. We can further see this reflected by Kieran:

We have a lot of external labels in the world. People will tell you what they think you are, regardless of who you think you are and what labels you think fit you. But I don't want [victimhood] to be the thing that sticks to me, as well. It's a thing that I was involved in at some point. It's not a thing that should be a label that follows me to the grave.

(Kieran, 30-40)

I argue that in both Kieran and Saul's cases, we can understand their fear about the limiting impact of victimhood on their social identity, as a fear that victimhood would come to represent their *"master status"* (Hughes 1963). The status of the victim was thus seen by my participants as embodying a certain social role that carried a set of expectations and behaviour that they felt they did not want to have placed upon them by others. This social role was not one that they thought would be valued or come with any prestige, and instead, they feared that the label of victimhood would attach negative evaluations to their conduct. Thus, the men in my study showed an aversion to using the concept of victimhood to describe their experiences, as if the acceptance of such a label would fundamentally change how they viewed themselves. To become a victim means more than simply giving a new label to yourself or recognising that you were the subject of harm. It instead represents a fundamental change to your social status and in how you view your own identity. In the same way that the narrative of committed intimate romance we looked at in the last chapter allowed the men to remake their identity from an incomplete single person to a socially valued and loved romantic partner, a positive transformation, the narrative of victimisation offers a darker change in status. Here, the men are transformed into something lesser, something discredited, something shameful and secret. To accept the identity of a victim is nothing less than to accept stigma into the very core of your identity.

We can see that within my participants' accounts, victimhood was presented as an inherently stigmatised social identity. Yet, where does this stigma come from exactly? Why is victimisation such a discrediting social identity and why did the men struggle with its label so much? To understand this, we need to dig deeper into how victimisation is experienced. From analysing the accounts of my participants, I argue that the stigma of victimisation in the context of IPV comes from its relation to three separate but interlinked aspects of their identities that the social status of victimhood risks spoiling or discrediting, namely:

- *1.) Their sense of agency and control.*
- *2.) Their sense of masculinity.*
- *3.) Their investment in norms of coupledom and romance.*

Let us look at these in turn.

Victimhood as Powerlessness

The first aspect of their identities that victimhood risked discrediting was their sense of agency and control over their lives. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, a core part of having a stable sense of self comes from feeling that you are in control of your life and that you have agency over your decisions (see for example Janoff-Bulman 1992). Victimhood, as I will argue, imperils this feeling by creating a sense of helplessness and powerlessness. Within their accounts, my participants described how their

partners systematically took control of their lives and worked to undermine and deprive them of any real feeling of agency. As part of the abuse inflicted upon them, the relationship itself became a vehicle in which their abuser could exert control. This experience of powerlessness was thus central to the men's understanding of victimisation, and this emotion then itself became key in how they attempted to make sense of or account for their experiences. In effect, they underwent a process in which they turned from a subject into an object of their abuser who could be used and often disposed of at their will. This represents coercive control as Stark (2007) would define it, and it appeared in all the accounts of my participants. We can see an example of this if we turn to David's testimony. David described how early in the relationship his partner would subtly emotionally manipulate him by ignoring him for days at a time only to re-appear at random:

More often than not he'd be going back to his parents, and he would spend sort of long days where I wouldn't see him, and he wouldn't answer the phone. It was, this was, you know, pre-mobile days. So, he wouldn't answer the phone, he wouldn't answer any messages I left with his mum. So, I guess the emotional abuse kind of started pretty early.

(David, 50-60)

As the relationship continued his partner began to exert more and more control over his behaviour, undermining his autonomy and beginning to dictate all aspects of his life.

[I'd] have my hair cut in a certain way. I had to wear the clothes that he approved of. I couldn't act in a certain way.

(David, 50-60)

This control was punctuated by instances of violence that were used to reinforce the abuser's control over the victim. In David's case, this took the form of an escalating series of physical and sexual assaults that have left him permanently scarred to this day. The result of this was to sap David of his will and allow his partner to assume dominance and coercively control him. This pattern David described was present across the sample, and my participants described relationships in which they were fundamentally subjugated to the whims of their partner; in effect, they were rendered powerless through the abuse. This sense of helplessness inspired a need to account for and explain their experiences. To find a way to make sense of their situation and to reconcile the possibility that they might be victims, with their sense of agency and control. However, this attempt at reconciliation often seemed to spawn some paradoxical or confused thinking. We can find an example of exactly this kind of thinking in Mani's account. First, like many other participants, he begins by attempting to distance himself from the stigmatised victim identity:

[The word victim] makes me feel weak…. I'd say, I never, never even considered that I'd find myself in that situation, um, and, you know, the label itself...I suppose my first instinct if I thought about it, [was that] I'd feel a little bit weak, I'd feel a little bit stupid.

(Mani, 40-50)

However, in attempting to wrestle with the implications of this label, he then goes on to blame himself for allowing his mentally and emotionally abusive partner to manipulate and belittle him:

I should have just said no. The first time [my abuser] turned up at my door, but I didn't…and [now I] remember that if you permit people to treat you in a particular way, then you deserve it. That stays in my mind.

(Mani, 40-50)

Thus, Mani seems to take on some responsibility for his victimisation, blaming himself for allowing his partner to continually treat him poorly. This, of course, is entirely paradoxical. Manni is not at

fault for his victimisation in any way and, as I have taken pains to point out, victims of IPV are trapped in their abusers' web of control through a range of outside factors (See for example Stark 2007, Myhill and Hohl 2016). Despite this, however, many of the men I spoke to, like Mani, seemed to take on some blame and responsibility for the actions of their abusers, and this was often articulated through a retrospective questioning of how they could have *"let this"* happen to them. This implied that they could have somehow stopped their abuser from hurting them if only they acted differently, and consequently, the men seemed to express embarrassment, shame, and confusion that they had *"failed"* to stop their partner's abuse. We can see this exact type of thinking in Carson's account:

I'm quite embarrassed about…the level of tolerance. I don't know if tolerance is the right word. I'm quite embarrassed about the level of letting him get away with things that I allowed. And that's just the beginning.

(Carson, 40-50)

Similarly, Samson stated:

Yeah, I kind of thought "What have I done to deserve this?" But not that I'd done anything wrong, because I knew that I hadn't done anything wrong. I knew that I hadn't flirted with somebody, [or] touched someone's knee. I hadn't done anything like that. But it was just "What have I done to deserve this?" That's all I kept on thinking about for the whole six years. Yeah. Why…what have I done that's led me to this point in my life that I'm…that I'm getting the crap beaten out of me?

(Samson, 50-60)

In both Samson's and Carson's accounts, we can see the men demonstrate a sense of shame or embarrassment over what they characterise as their culpability in their abuse. Carson wonders at his level of *"letting him get away with things"* while Samson ponders *"What have I done that's led me to this point in my life?"* For both men, we can observe an attempt to understand and make sense of their experiences of abuse through a search for intentionality and agency. Through this search, both men seem to try to resolve this tension by taking on some level of culpability for the actions of their abuser, suggesting, either explicitly like Carson, or implicitly like Samson, that they played a role in allowing the abuse they experienced to occur to them. At this point, I was able to observe a split in the exact characterisation of this process in the accounts of my participants. Some were able to recognise that their partner was indeed fundamentally at fault for what was happening, complete with an acknowledgement that even if they could not yet label their partner's behaviour as abusive, it was still wrong or harmful in some capacity. This group's quest for control was then confined to managing their partners' moods to prevent further outbursts and violence. A common theme amongst these men was to liken the experience of being with their partner to *"walking on eggshells,"* always attempting to avoid any action that would trigger abuse or violence. We can see this exact sentiment expressed by Alexander:

But it because it was just, [the abuse] was there, and it wasn't every single day, but it was a constant…I'm always kind of on eggshells, I'm always a bit stressed that something might happen because I might say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing or whatever.

(Alexander, 50-60)

For others, however, the process of adaption became much darker, as they appeared to begin to internalise their partner's constant belittlement and verbal attacks. We can observe in these accounts that this group of men seem to accept culpability in their victimisation and even begin to articulate a belief, false as it is, that they somehow deserve what has happened to them. We see this in Fred's account:

It's difficult because it was drummed into me that it was my fault, and I deserved it…I'd convinced myself it was my fault. I had aggravated him, I deserved it, all of these things that you kid yourself with, that are drummed into you.

(Fred, 30-40)

We can also see a particularly harrowing example in Ernie's interview where he described an instance of his partner's physical abuse and the ways he internalised the blame for what had happened:

He pinned me up against the wall and so I just pushed him off. He fell, he was that drunk he fell over and sprained his wrist. It was then my fault. Because I was the abusive person. I'd physically abused him…he was gonna report me to the police, he was gonna press charges. I was like "I just pushed you. You had me pinned up, against the wall by my throat. I just pushed you."

"No, you hit me."

"No, I pushed you."

"No, you hit me!"

He then…beat 10 bales of shit out of me, and I just took it because I thought I deserved it.

(Ernie, 30-40)

It must again be re-iterated that the men are in no way at fault for what happened to them and that their feelings of culpability are false and can only properly make sense within the larger context of a coercively controlling relationship where an abuser exerts overt authority over them. However, the fact that the men recurrently described themselves as being at fault or expressed a sense of shame at *"allowing themselves"* to be victimised, raises questions as to why this response was so common and what it might tell us about the experience of victimisation. I argue that from examining my participants' accounts, we can see that these expressions of responsibility arise from the victim's struggles to reconcile the realities of victimisation with their wider social norms of the just world (Lerner 1980). Samson's pondering of what he could have done to deserve this and Fred's belief that he was to blame for what happened both points to an underlying belief that good people should not suffer and that those who do are somehow at fault for the pain they experience. We can see more explicit examples of this if we return to the testimonies of more of the men I spoke to. Alexander, for example, stated:

But I think the other thing I felt was, the stupid bit was this, like, "How could this happen to me? I'm a quite strong-minded individual, in fact, no, I am a strong man…confident and all that!"

And [yet] I'm thinking "You stupid…" [sighs] "You idiot, you total idiot."

(Alexander, 50-60)

Meanwhile, Harry noted:

What did I do? Essentially what did I do to deserve this? What did I do wrong? What…how did I put myself in this position? When did I allow myself to be put in this position? That's the main point of it all, really the fact that I allowed myself to be in that situation and not recognise it. That's the main wound that never heals from it. The lack of self-recognition, that sort of stuff. And it's a case of, for the longest while I did remain very angry at myself, which probably contributed to the depression, that you allowed that to happen to you, you didn't recognise it, and you allow that to happen to you.

(Harry, 25-30)

In both Harry and Alexander's accounts, we can see them grapple with a dissonance between an implicit belief that people get what they deserve *(How could this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?)* with their view of themselves as otherwise good people in control of their lives. Alexander in particular seems to struggle to reconcile the reality of his victimisation with his self-perception as a *"strong man*," implicitly suggesting that becoming a victim is not something that should happen to this type of person. However, we can see this belief in the just world even more explicitly stated by Jules. Jules was very reflective in our interview and spoke about his journey to recognise the stigma that was unjustly attached to victims within our society. As part of this journey, he appears to draw attention to the stigma that a belief in the just world causes for victims:

I think it's a stigma in society that what happens to us is usually…[that] we usually get what we deserve, [we] feel that when we work hard, we benefit from financial success. So if…if I've been a victim of domestic abuse, then in my case, I deserved it.

(Jules, 30-40)

We can see then that the principle of the just world appeared frequently within my participants' accounts and as Jules points out, this principle acts as a base for the stigmatisation of victims. As I have demonstrated in Chapter Two, the principle of the just world is not confined to the level of individual psychology but instead has become a socially encoded norm which exerts a hegemonic status across society (See for example Vonderharr and Carmody 2010). However, like all hegemonic norms, it must punish deviance from its strictures to maintain its legitimacy, and thus stigma is levied against those not seen to meet its standards. I argue that this process is clearly at play within the accounts of my participants, and we can understand their often initially confusing attempts to take on responsibility or blame for their victimisation as a form of stigma management.

Indeed, as Anthony Pemberton has argued, Victims often undertake coping mechanisms to manage the dissonance between their own experiences and the values of society that they try to meet (Pemberton 2012). In explicating these techniques, he notes that victims may attempt to take on responsibility for their victimisation as a way of easing this cognitive dissonance and combatting their stigmatised status (ibid). I argue that the responses of both groups of men I described above can be understood as precisely this type of adaptation or coping mechanism, a means to ease the cognitive dissonance between the realities of their relationship abuse and their belief in the just world. Specifically, they are a form of what Enander and Holmberg (2008) call *"meta-adaptations"* (ibid p.211)*:* that is, ways of managing or making abuse tolerable within the confines of an intimately violent and coercively controlling relationship. These strategies may work to somewhat alleviate the immediate distress caused by the abuse within the relationship, but they do not fundamentally challenge the structure of the relationship itself and instead keep them intact by allowing the victim some limited sense of agency. As the authors state:

Space is given, within the violent relationship, for the woman's resistance. An abused woman puts up the resistance she can, within the framework of the relationship, but does not manage to break the framework itself...meta-adaptation thus means that the woman adapts to an absurd life situation created by the man and the violence to which he exposes her.

(Enander and Holmberg, 2008, p.211)

I would argue that within the confines of the relationships the men described to me, these attempts at taking responsibility or blame were attempts at this type of meta-adaption. They were techniques used to manage their abusive and *"absurd"* situations by reconciling the dissonance between their belief in the just world and the reality of their situation. However, just like the women Enander and Holmberg spoke to, these adaptations could not change or challenge the structure of the relationship, and in this case, were unable to fully mediate or resolve the contradictions in the men's social worlds. In this way, my participants still faced the full force of the stigma of failing to meet socially hegemonic

norms which endorse a belief in the just world. I argue that it is this perceived failure to live up to these impersonal norms that generated the shame my participants described. Many of the men in my study reported feeling intense shame at the possibility that they had been *"weak"* in allowing themselves to be victimised in the way they had. We can see the shame this stigmatisation causes by turning to look at the responses of my participants. For example, Barry noted:

Participant

I was too ashamed at first to admit I was being abused by a bloke.

Interviewer

Where does the shame come from? Do you think?

Participant

Weakness.

(Barry, 60-70)

Meanwhile, in discussing why he felt uncomfortable with the label of victim, Geoff stated:

I think, for me, there is an intimation in the word victim that it is a negative or that…being a victim is a negative thing or being a victim is something that has been done to you, that being a victim is very passive, and all of those things. And actually, a lot of those things may be true. I was very passive in lots of the situations that I've described to you in this call…I was very inert at times and like a doormat.

(Geoff, 25-30)

We now begin to understand the men's vehement rejection of victimhood I noted at the beginning of the chapter, as follows: to be a victim is to fail at maintaining basic standards of agency and strength that are central to their understanding of themselves. In this sense, I would argue that these men are experiencing shame as defined by Nussbaum (2004). These men have internalised norms of agency and security, and believe, rightly or wrongly, that through their victimisation they have failed to adhere to these norms. This failure then calls into question the legitimacy of their wider social identities and thus generates a destructive sense of shame. However, the negative consequences of this understanding of victimhood extend beyond the role they have in inducing an internalised sense of shame, but also in how the men believed others would react. There was a persistent belief recurrent across many of the men's accounts which hinted at a fear of being judged by others should their failures, as they saw them, become public. The men displayed intense anxiety at how others would react, often worrying that they would be seen as lesser or unworthy of support should their weakness or vulnerability become public knowledge. For example, Dan very candidly discussed the fact he felt ashamed of admitting that he had been abused by his ex-partner:

[Worries] were playing at me a little bit. Saying "No they're just going to look at you like some weak-willed person." If you will. Which is how I thought people perceived it.

(Dan, 25-30)

We can see another example of this in David's account, where he explained why he struggled to open up to people about the problems he was facing in his relationship:

I guess, I felt that I'd been quite weak in the fact that I've not changed him. I've not sorted out his drink problem that I, you know, I was trying to save him from himself kind of thing…I did feel quite weak and quite, quite helpless, really. And if I told people then it would have looked, in my mind, [like] a failure.

(David, 50-60)

In both cases, we can observe the participants articulating a fear that they will be judged and found wanting should they admit to their abuse or victimisation. Moreover, we can see that both men view being victimised as a potentially discrediting mark on their characters. Dan refers to a fear of being seen as *"weak-willed*" while David fears being looked upon as a *"failure."* Both of these characterisations speak to the notion, implicitly embedded within their accounts, that their inability to resolve the abuse themselves represents a type of social failure, an inability to live up to the norms of agency and power they implicitly aspire towards.

Indeed, it is in this fear of a negative mark on their social standing then that we can see the role of Stigma as Goffman (1963) defines it emerge in my analysis. The men displayed an acute belief that their failure to properly defend themselves or to resolve their situation constituted a discreditable social characteristic, one that separated them from what they considered to be normal society and made their status within it precarious. This anxiety could be better understood as a form of anticipatory stigma (Link 1987), a recurrent fear that to admit weakness, to admit victimhood, would invite a stigmatising response from others. As Link and their colleagues noted in their studies of other stigmatised populations, most notably, individuals with mental illness, the stigmatised group becomes increasingly aware of potential negative reactions from others should their stigmatised status become public knowledge (Link et al 2001). This then leads to attempts to manage their stigmatised status to protect themselves from further social consequences or abuse (ibid). I argue that responses like David's and Dan's above fit within this framework, as both men display anticipatory anxiety that their status as victims will lead to judgment and ridicule from others should it become apparent. However, it is not just the victims themselves that appeared to be aware of this reality. Indeed, I noticed a disturbing trend within the participants' accounts of their abusers utilising shame as a tool in their ongoing campaigns of coercive control. Several of my participants reported that their abusers would invoke this spectre of shame and stigmatisation to belittle and diminish their sense of self. Victims reported frequently being called weak, pathetic, helpless, and passive by their abusers. We can see an example in Frank's account. Here he described how his abuser would continuously mock and belittle him for being weak, and reflects on how he began to internalise this account into his sense of self:

When someone calls you a coward and calls you weak, you know, you get that for a couple of years, you start believing it. But you still have this self-perception that you are not a victim. You know, I started believing some of the stuff, maybe I am weak, maybe I do run and hide...so I started to believe the things he said. And that's why, you know, I didn't think I was a victim because I just thought, well, maybe I'm weak. Maybe I do that. And maybe that's just me.

(Frank, 40-50)

From observing this, I argue that we can already see how shame and stigmatisation are critical to the experience of victimhood in the context of IPV. Victimhood is interpreted as a shameful experience because of the sense of powerlessness and vulnerability that accompanies the onset of coercive control and IPV. These feelings deviate sharply both from the hegemonic norms of agency and strength that are lionized and valorised within our society and with deeply rooted social beliefs such as the belief in the just world. This dissonance is then interpreted as a failure to successfully live up to these norms and as such exposes the victim to an intense and often-debilitating sense of shame that poisons or spoils the very essence of their identity. The social stigma that reinforces this shame works to both keep the victim quiet for fear of stigmatising responses and allows the abuser another weapon in their arsenal of coercive control. Moreover, this process further demonstrates the legitimising function I argued both shame and stigma play in relation to the hegemonic norms that they punish deviance from. In these men's accounts, the shame they experienced due to their self-perceived failings to maintain standards of agency and strength work, intentionally or not, to reinforce the legitimacy of these norms, or at the very least demonstrate their continued hegemonic status within

the men's social worlds. However, the shame that exists in the aftermath of victimisation goes deeper than a generalised feeling of powerlessness and helplessness for male victims. Instead, victimhood is additionally experienced much more acutely and specifically as an overt attack on another important part of their identity, their masculinity.

Victimhood as Emasculation

Indeed, a key theme which emerged in the accounts of my participants was the fact that victimisation was understood to present a real and immediate danger to their sense of masculinity. Victimhood was presented as more than a generally stigmatised social role which violated norms of agency and control; instead, it was a specifically emasculated identity. This took on an added dimension of importance due to the nature of the men's victimisation. IPV was framed in my participants' accounts as a problem that traditionally only impacted heterosexual women. We can see an example of this in Saul's account:

"I wouldn't be classed as [a victim] because I'm not a five-foot woman who's black and blue. Because…I'm a six-foot-one male."

(Saul, 25-30)

Here, Saul conjures an image of the typical victim of IPV, a small physically abused woman, and contrasts that with his own identity as a larger man. In this way, Saul presents an inherent disconnect between his own identity and this imagined version of an ideal victim. The idea that he, as a man, could be subjected to IPV is then presented as inherently absurd. However, for some of my participants, this absurdity is further presented as a source of embarrassment, and even shame. Through investigating this phenomenon, I discovered that it appeared to be linked to the particularly feminine quality many of my participants attributed to the role of the IPV victim. This typical image represented victims of IPV as weak and traditionally feminine women suffering from severe physical abuse at the hands of their larger, traditionally masculine, male partners. We can see this image implicitly in Saul's account with his description of the typical victim as a *"five-foot woman who's black and blue"* but it also appeared in many other participants' accounts. Fred for example discussed how he felt disconnected from the image of the typical IPV victim:

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)

The image both Saul and Fred presented, that of the small woman victimised by the larger man was persistent across the many different accounts given by the men in the study. This demonstrates a persistent narrative of victimisation within IPV which associates victimhood with not just any type of weakness, but a particular type of feminine weakness. In this construction of victimhood, femininity and victimisation become intimately linked, and this then presented a problem for my participants, as they struggled to understand how they, as men, could be victimised in this way. The social role of the victim, particularly a victim of IPV, was a female one and this stood as incompatible with their wider understanding of self in which they were men. Patrick, for example, was subjected to years of intense physical, emotional and sexual abuse by his ex-partner. Despite this, he reflected that he struggled to see himself as a victim whilst in the relationship. He went on to explain that:

The reason behind that is mainly because of the education about what was domestic violence, it wasn't such a huge thing then, for men, being victims of domestic violence. Also, [I believed] that men can't be victims of domestic violence.

(Patrick, 40-50)

Meanwhile, Kieran described feeling left out and isolated since his experiences of abuse at the hands of his male partner were so out of step with the public image of IPV:

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 [in university], 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)

From both of these accounts, we can see that the gendered nature of victimisation in the context of the wider narrative of IPV creates a norm of female victimhood in which my male participants struggled to see themselves. However, more than just a struggle to recognise and relate their experiences to these gendered narratives of victimisation, there was a further and deeper way in which masculinity seemed to influence my participants' experiences. It seemed that the very social identity of victimhood itself was understood by my participants to violate a core aspect of their masculinity and therefore their sense of self.

To understand this further, we need to return to the concept of hegemonic masculinity I considered in the second chapter. As I outlined then, this is the dominant and culturally enforced form of masculinity within society, and typically emphasises traits such as resilience, strength, and stoicism whilst weakness, vulnerability and the display of emotions are stigmatised as deviant derogations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). When I applied this lens to my participants' accounts of gender and victimhood, it became easy to see how this type of masculinity clashed with the common understanding of victimhood my participants gave. Victimhood was understood as an inherently feminine social role, one which implied a particular type of victim, a small woman physically dominated by her larger male partner. This role is manifestly incompatible with the tenants of hegemonic masculinity which frames strength, power, and invulnerability as essential to the successful accomplishment of masculinity (Donaldson 1993). Once we have this framework in mind, we can begin to spot this construction of masculinity creeping into a number of my participants' accounts. We can observe a subtle example in Padrig's testimony, where he discusses how he felt wider society would not accept him as a victim:

Because you're two guys, like "Why the hell would one of you… Why would you have not left? You know, you're both blokes!" You know, like… people think they can understand a woman [being a victim] because they see a woman as meek. And you know…that the man does have power over them. That's how people view a heterosexual relationship. But I think because people [would] say [to me] …Why wouldn't you have been able to leave, you're a man!

(Padrig, 30-40)

Here, Padrig contrasts how he views society's acceptance of female victimisation as arising out of a belief in female weakness *("Because they see a woman as meek")* with their rejection of male victimisation due to a complementary belief in male strength and self-reliance *("Why wouldn't you have been able to leave, you're a man!").* We can see another example of this type of construction of masculinity in Dan's account. Dan described the intense feelings of shame he felt after being emotionally abused and assaulted by his partner, feeling that he had failed to live up to the masculine image he had of himself:

The first year, I say, I fell from grace, if you will, with my mental health, and was just a shadow of my former self. So, I felt absolutely defeated, I wasn't in the right place at all for anything and just felt powerless if you will. And I thought everyone thought the same. But a bit more negative because

you've got those certain gender…gender stereotypes, that a man must always be strong, which is still prevalent.

(Dan, 25-30)

We can also see this in David's account, where he stresses his desire to push through the abuse and avoid being seen as a victim.

I mean, you know, there is that thing about being a man. You know…. yeah, "I've got to see this through, I'm gonna be determined. I'm a man!"

(David, 50-60)

This sense of presenting a front of strong and invulnerable masculinity, so central to many of the men's identities, worked to frustrate their ability to accept or internalise a victim identity, particularly one associated with IPV. This appears in Patrick's account where he explains that he had a strong sense that he had to be stoic in the face of abuse to retain his masculinity:

Yeah, I remember things like, "I need to man up" because my dad would say that, [laughing] yeah, I'm a farmer's boy…So my dad would say, "You know, you need to man up, you need to toughen up!" So, I always kind of had that [in the back of my mind].

(Patrick, 40-50)

From these accounts, we can observe that these men's construction of their sense of masculinity is influenced to various degrees by wider cultural norms of hegemonic masculinity. To be a man, was to be strong, stoic, and invulnerable to harm. To fail to meet these standards, as victimisation inherently suggests, produces a disparity between norm and reality in which a debilitating sense of shame can emerge. Victimisation acts to expose the fragility of their masculinity, demonstrating that contrary to their wider life narratives in which they are strong, masculine agents in control of their lives, they are, in fact, vulnerable to abuse and harm, and thus can become victims. Indeed, the pervasive shame the men felt from being unable to meet this norm of hegemonic masculinity recurs throughout their accounts. We can see a good example of this if we return to Padrig's case. Padrig had been subjected to emotional and sexual abuse by his partner for several months, which eventually led to the relationship ending. However, after this breakup, Padrig agreed to stay over at his ex-partner's house after the two had been out late for a fundraising event. Whilst Padrig was sleeping his ex-partner raped him. In the aftermath, Padrig candidly discussed struggling with the sense of shame he felt, and he drew attention to the fact he felt disempowered to discuss his experiences due to the pervasive shame that exists around the subject of male victimisation:

But men don't necessarily talk about you know, sexual assault or…assault in any kind of way. Like you know, there is a barrier to that discussion still. And it's not as easy…even when you can talk about it…there's still, there's still a bit of a barrier you can see, that like cultural barrier or whatever it is, for masculinity.

(Padrig, 30-40)

Later in that same interview, Padrig neatly summarised the cultural weight that hegemonic masculinity had on the shame he felt:

Interviewer

Do you think that kind of attitude or those kinds of ideas like "boys don't cry? Keep it to yourself?" I mean…a stiff upper lip like, like did that play a role?

Participant

How could it not?

(Padrig, 30-40)

However, if we continue to examine these accounts, we can see that yet again the stigma and shame that the men feel towards these supposed failures in masculinity are further structured through other significant parts of their identity, in this case, their sexuality.

The men seemed to be hyper-aware of the fact that their experiences of abuse threatened a sense of masculinity that was in many ways already tenuous and fragile. Indeed, several of the men in my study disclosed previous experiences where their masculinity had been threatened or diminished due to their status as Queer men. We can see a clear example of this in Nikoli's account. Nikoli's partner would frequently ridicule his masculinity and call him effeminate. In reflecting on the impact of this abuse, Nikoli connected these experiences to earlier encounters with homophobia from his youth where his masculinity was similarly called into question:

Participant

You know, when I was a young teenager [I] was spat at in the street [and] called names…So I knew the world was set up [against] me, so I think…my version of masculinity and my Queerness you know, it's always been in jeopardy…and, you know, by going through an emotionally abusive relationship, that was under attack again, even though it was by another Queer person.

Interviewer

Your masculinity and your sense of self?

Participant

I think it was an emasculation, you know, a lot of it was emasculation. You know, that yeah, I was just under attack, every fibre of my being, you know, and my Queerness was under attack as well. And my masculinity, they were things he mocked about me.

(Nikoli, 30-40)

We can see another example in Adnan's account. As a young man, he had long struggled to reconcile his homosexuality with his Muslim faith and the role he felt he had to live up to as a man both within his family and the wider Islamic community. This conflict led him to act out as a way of both re-affirming his masculinity and as a means to hide his sexuality:

Growing up, I really struggled to reconcile my sexuality and my faith. I identify as a gay Muslim man. So for many years, you know, I just couldn't accept the fact that I was gay and Muslim…I grew up in a predominantly Asian, sort of Muslim community…it meant that you know, sexuality, sex in general wasn't discussed, but sexuality, especially being homosexual, was regarded as a big no, no…So for a long time, I basically tried to hide my sexuality. And by hiding my sexuality, what I mean is that I was trying to portray a kind of toxic masculine identity. And that led me to get into trouble with the police from a young age. I just didn't want people to find out, I was gay. So I was, I was fighting, trying to avoid any stereotype that could link me to my sexuality.

(Adnan, 30-40)

When he began to be abused by his first male partner, the intersection of his Queerness, his masculinity, and his faith acted as a potent vector for shame, stigmatisation, and self-blame:

Because at that time, I didn't really understand myself and I didn't understand…. I don't know if it was just something inside me that didn't quite…I didn't love myself. So, I kind of wanted…this is gonna sound strange, but I felt like I should be punished for being [a gay man]. [My abuser] just reinforced that being [a gay man] was wrong. That's what that relationship was telling me.

(Adnan, 30-40)

We can see thus that for some of my participants, masculinity was not a taken-for-granted part of their identity, but instead was something hard fought for against a persistent stream of dismissal and derogation from a homophobic society that had often and frequently denigrated them for their Queerness. In this context, it becomes understandable that for many of them, the sense of shame and powerlessness that accompanies victimisation, along with the feminised construction of victimhood within IPV, could potentially re-open these old wounds and once again present them with the possibility that they were not *"real"* men. In this way, I argue that we can view the type of masculinity presented by the men in my study, a Queer form of masculinity that derogates from important aspects of the taken-for-granted standard of hegemonic masculinity, as inherently unstable. That is, it is never truly fixed or accomplished, it is never settled or stable in its experience or presentation. To be Queer and masculine is to continually open your sense of masculinity to be challenged and threatened and thus to the possibility of experiencing stigma for not meeting the norms of the hegemonic standards which have been used to judge you for your entire life. These findings accord very clearly with the work of Peter Dunn (2012) which I discussed in Chapter Two. Dunn's participants experienced intense feelings of shame in the aftermath of hate crime victimisation and Dunn noted that much of this shame arose from the fact they felt their experiences of victimisation in some way imperilled their sense of masculinity. In the same way, a key component of the shame and stigmatisation my participants associated with the label of victimhood arose from the fact that their experience of victimhood, particularly in the context of IPV, was understood to be inherently emasculating. Moreover, like Dunn's own participants, this sense of emasculation and shame seemed to reflect the instability of Queer masculinity. Queer men are continually forced to account for and explain their deviations from traditional standards of hegemonic masculinity (Javaid 2017), and any potential failure invites a deeply emasculating sense of shame that exists to highlight, as has been across their life, their inability to truly be *"real"* men (Connel 1992). My work supports Dunn's findings and demonstrates that these same feelings of emasculation and stigma are also experienced by Queer male victims of IPV, whose complicated responses to victimisation are further challenged by the gendered construction of victimhood in wider narratives of relationship abuse.

However, what is of further note within these findings, is the fact that some of my participants seemed to indicate that their abusers were also aware of the inherent instability of Queer masculinity and sought to use this fact as a tool to further degrade and control them. Several of my participants described experiences of belittlement and humiliation where their partner would question or mock their masculinity to discredit their wider sense of self and thus diminish their confidence and ability to stand against them. We have already seen this in Nikoli's account where he described how his partner would attack and mock this part of his identity, but we can also see this in Owen's experiences. Owen had grown up in a working-class council estate where he had been frequently bullied for failing to conform to expected standards of masculinity. When he began to secretly date a classmate, this new partner began to duplicate these dynamics within their relationship:

And then I remember once, because my father left my mother when I was quite young… [He] didn't want to know me, he had no interest in keeping in touch, and [my abuser] actually turned to me, this first lover, turned to me once and said, "Are you surprised your father doesn't want to speak to you? Who'd want a son like you?"

And I'd find it so incredibly hurtful.

(Owen, 30-40)

Here we can see that again that shame and stigmatisation can be utilised by abusers to erode the self-esteem of my participants and their ability to maintain a coherent sense of self apart from their abuser. In Owen's account, we can see his abuser attack his masculinity *("Who'd want a son like you?")* to undermine his identity, to construct him as a failure and thus as a figure who is subject to shame. In this case, the feelings of weakness and passivity so central to victimhood are particularised into a failure of the victim to meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, these accounts go some way to again demonstrate the legitimising role of stigma I have described throughout my thesis. Here, the stigmatisation of male victims as in some way failing to uphold and meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity both within their internal sense of shame and in the active abuse perpetrated by their partners works to legitimise the norms of this very concept by punishing and stigmatising those who fail to meet its standards. However, the accounts of the men in my study also highlighted a further dimension of stigma that surprised me, one that, to my knowledge, has not been noted in other studies on Queer male victimisation and that is likely unique to their experiences as victims of IPV. The stigma, of romantic failure.

Victimhood as Romantic Failure

As I noted in the previous chapter, the men's accounts of their abuse contained within them a narrative of committed intimate romance which framed their relationship in largely conventional romantic terms, presenting their partner as a troubled lover in need of their care. This was then framed through the motif of the promised land, where it was hoped that the relationship could return to the sweeping romance of the past. As I demonstrated in that chapter, these accounts accorded with Wilkinson's (2013) theory of compulsory coupledom, which she describes as a social norm which positions coupledom as the only acceptable and expected form of intimacy towards which one should aspire, and which frames coupled monogamy as a moral and political good that should be encouraged. In that chapter, I highlighted that my participants appeared to want to meet this normative standard for what we might describe as positive motivations such as a desire for intimacy, romantic passion, and wider social acceptance. However, when my participants began to describe their experiences of abuse, this notion of compulsory coupledom appeared again, but now, it exerted a significantly darker and more coercive influence. Here, the men constructed a new narrative in which their relationship with their abuser was not presented as a way of achieving positive benefits, but simply as a means of staving off the negative social consequences they might incur by becoming single once again. In particular, the men presented accounts in which leaving their partner, or being abandoned by them, would be a deeply shameful action that would stigmatise them in the eyes of their loved ones and wider society. We can see a clear articulation of this notion in Jim's account:

I think I was very afraid of being single again, of failing in this relationship…I had a sense that I shouldn't fail at the relationship and should just do whatever it takes to keep it going.

(Jim, 50-60)

What is interesting to note here is Jim's use of the word *"failing"* to describe the end of the relationship since Nussbaum's (2004) theory of shame requires that the individual feel they have failed in some way to meet a valued social norm. The use of this word in Jim's account thus suggests that the termination of a committed intimate relationship carries some degree of shame for him. After I noticed this phrasing, I began to investigate how my participants talked about their relationships ending, and I discovered that the framing of relationship termination as a *"failure*" appeared recurrently throughout most of my participants' accounts. Thomas for example when discussing how he felt after leaving his abusive partner said:

There is a sense of shame in it. You know, for me, it's like, I do view it as my brush with domestic violence…[and]it's kind of a failed relationship where I should have got out sooner, I should have

seen the signs. [But] what was keeping me in this relationship [was] the fact that, you know, I wanted to be so badly in a relationship that I would have put up with [it].

(Thomas, 40-50)

In another example, Alexander spoke openly about the fact that he had already felt ashamed for divorcing his wife before meeting his abuser, and this same shame at "*failing"* to maintain another committed romance plagued him as he navigated his increasingly emotionally abusive and controlling male partner:

I think the other thing [was] given the fact that I had a failed marriage, which is, looking back it should never have happened but it did…[and so in my relationship with my abuser] I was trying to get something, I was trying to make something work positively…So [when the abuse started] it's that pride context as well of "oh god I've got another failed relationship."

(Alexander, 50-60)

Here we see again the use of the terms like *"failure," "failed", and "failing"* which seem to imply that these types of committed intimate romances were viewed as accomplishments, tests which could be passed or failed like an exam or a contest. In this way, we can see that for the men, coupled intimate monogamy represented something more than a simple relationship, it acted as a test of moral value. To be coupled, to be in a *"real"* relationship, is not simply a personal preference, but a moral standard which worked to mark the men out as bearers of specific virtues and values that are socially celebrated and lauded, and which failure to meet is punished.

This pervasive fear of *"failing"* at being in a relationship was present across my participant's accounts and I argue that we can understand both the men's fear of failing at their relationships and their desire to present and meet norms of monogamous coupledom if we frame Wilkinson's concept of compulsory coupledom as a stigmatising norm in Goffman's (1963) sense. By this, I mean that compulsory coupledom has achieved a hegemonic status, it exerts a coercive force on the social world of the men in my study, colouring and shaping their romantic imaginaries. As I demonstrated in the last chapter it can be enticing, offering the potential of social acceptance and legitimacy through assimilation and inclusion into heterosexual institutions of kinship. But like all hegemonic norms, it maintains its dominant status through an implicit threat against those who go against it, a fear that failing to accord with its demands will result in social illegitimacy. As Wilkinson herself argued, the norm of coupledom exerts a coercive force on individuals' romantic and intimate imaginaries, constructing coupled intimate monogamy as the *only* legitimate form of intimacy one can aspire towards and thereby denigrating alternative possibilities as lacking value (Wilkinson 2013, p.5). In my view, this demonstrates that compulsory coupledom can be understood as a force of stigma in its own right. Indeed, one of the first pieces of evidence for this is the fact that my participants described breaking up with a partner or being abandoned as a *"failure"* in the first place. The use of this word transforms what is a simple change in relationship status into a moral evaluation of their worth where they are found to be wanting. To explicitly use the framework of stigma and shame I outlined in Chapter Two, to be in a couple is a norm of acceptable conduct to which deviance from, in this case, either through being single in the first place or terminating a previously existing relationship, is punished through the discrediting of the individual's social identity. For the individual then, this *"failure"* to live up to the norms of compulsory coupledom produces an intense feeling of shame and violation, they have once again returned to the lonely and chaotic world they had thought the relationship would provide a buffer against and have lost the social legitimacy that the valued institution of coupledom had once given them. We can see further evidence by again turning to the accounts of my participants. Carson for example very explicitly stated that whilst in the relationship:

There was a perfectionist element to it. That, as I said, about fear of failure, about me not being the one who wanted to…who would make the relationship fail in the end, and now actually…. That's what

I thought then, I don't think I see relationships in the same way now, I don't see it as a…binary of failure and success. But at the time I did.

(Carson, 50-60)

Moreover, much of the anxiety and shame around the idea of romantic failure appeared to be bound to a wider fear of being alone. When discussing the process of victimisation, my participants often described being afraid of being alone should they ever attempt to leave their partner. The termination of the relationship was not simply an act that would free them from abuse but instead would leave them without the person who, despite being the source of the coercive control that has devastated their lives, they have come to rely on as their major or perhaps their only source of intimacy and companionship. Though this dependence was certainly a direct and deliberate product of coercive tactics commonly used by abusers to isolate their partners, my participants still understood the world outside of their relationship as one that would shame them as a romantic failure, and thus condemn them to a life of loneliness and isolation. This fear of being alone must also be understood in the context of the men's wider experiences of intimacy within the Queer Scene. Remember that, as I showed in Chapter Five, many of my participants described the Scene as an isolating and incredibly hostile space where they faced frequent rejection and even discrimination from other Queer men. For these men, their relationships were meant to provide a space of safety and comfort, a sense of solidity that would protect them from the chaos and instability of the Scene. To leave the relationship then, was to return to this social space and risk once again being alone and isolated, but now with the added stigma of a romantic failure attached to them. We can see numerous examples of this appear in my participants' accounts. For example, Geoff said:

He was relying on me, and I wanted to be relied on, I was like a rescuer, so I wanted to rescue him…and yeah, the idea that I would be alone without him. Without this purpose. It was like giving me a purpose and I was, as I say, petrified…that no one would want me again…[That] I was like, damaged goods.

(Geoff, 30-40)

This sentiment was then echoed by Owen when said that one of the main things that he struggled with when navigating his abusive relationships was the:

Fear that I was going to be alone forever. Fear that no one else would be interested in me.

(Owen, 25-30)

Whilst Nikoli said:

Participant

I felt quite lonely…I didn't really feel like you know, I had that much else going on then, and that [the relationship] was better than nothing by that point.

Interviewer

Yeah, like if you left that you would have been even more isolated.

Participant

Yeah. I mean, I would have ended up just you know, back in my childhood bedroom, and, you know, I would catastrophize it a lot, you know, by that point, my anxiety was through the roof. And I think, you know, it's just like a bad-case scenario either way.

(Nikoli, 30-40)

We can see a similar sentiment expressed in Alexi's account:

I think it got to the point where it was the fear of being [alone]…I was attached, and it was definitely an attachment. So I was, there's a fear of, if I leave, I'll be on my own again, I'll have to move back into my parents' house. And I'll have to start from the beginning. And I really don't want to do that. I'd rather just put up with whatever's happening.

(Alexi, 30-40)

We can see that for these men, the end of the relationship and the return to singledom constituted a discrediting and stigmatising mark on their character, something that would render them illegitimate within wider society. Moreover, the illegitimacy the men feared would accompany them leaving their partner can be further linked to an attempt to rebut the negative stereotypes associated with homosexuality and Queer men's capacity for commitment.

As I outlined in Chapter Three, Queer men have long been stereotyped as only interested in sex and thus unable to form long-term committed monogamous relationships (Berger 1990, Stychin 2003). This negative stereotype has historically, and even still today, been used to stigmatise the Queer community and label them as sexual deviants unfit for full sexual citizenship (Duncan et al 2015a, Meunier and Sauermilch 2021). In Chapter Five, I then showed that for the men in my study, the act of finding, maintaining, and flourishing within a committed intimate and monogamous relationship with another man took on an added dimension of importance as it became a means by which the men could demonstrate both to themselves and others that they were fit sexual citizens. In effect, it became a form of stigma management, a way to push back against discrediting stereotypes which devalued their romantic aspirations. Through participation in the institution of the monogamous couple, my participants could demonstrate that they were not immature and unstable but in fact, could take on the responsibility of managing a long-term intimate relationship and in doing so, rebut the stereotypes and stigmas that had worked to discredit them. However, these same norms could become potent vectors of stigma when the relationship became abusive. Now, to admit they were victims of IPV would feel like an acceptance of the fact that as Queer men they simply were incapable of establishing the type of coupled intimate and monogamous relationships society holds up on a pedestal and which, as I demonstrated in the last chapter, they had often come to desire and idolise themselves. Moreover, it simply further reinforces the homophobic stereotype that Queer relationships are inherently dysfunctional and volatile as a consequence of their innate deviant character. Several men in my study emphasised the fear they had that if anyone discovered their abuse it would be used as a means of discrediting and attacking their Queerness as inherently deviant or problematic. We can see an example of this in Jim's account where he states:

There's a part of me that wanted to prove I suppose that a gay relationship could work, that it could happen…and certainly when family were involved, there was always this facade of that [my relationship] was all happy and lovely… So I was quite keen to maintain that because it sort of proved a bit of a political point for me if you like.

(Jim, 50-60)

Here Jim displays an understanding that presenting himself in a monogamous coupled relationship carried with it certain political implications. He even states that he attempted to hide problems with his partner *(there was always this façade)* to maintain an illusion that he, as a Queer man, could have the type of relationship society valued and held up as socially legitimate.

We can observe a similar dynamic if we turn to Oswald's account. Oswald's narrative noted that his father had been a policeman in Ireland during the 80s and 90s when homosexuality had been illegal and during his tenure in the force he had raided gay bars and arrested Queer men. This led to him developing a virulent homophobia directed at the gay community and their sexual practices. As a

consequence, Oswald kept his sexuality a secret from his parents and, when his second romantic relationship became abusive, he felt under pressure to hide this fact from his family for fear of the shame that might result:

[My abuser] was very possessive and there was a lot of coercive control, and the reason that I didn't sort of leave for want of a better word or kind of speak to any authorities or anything like that was because, I guess in my own head, I still hadn't fully come to terms with my sexuality. I had only recently came out to my parents and my Dad was in the police force… So he had kind of seen the whole sort of seediness of the gay scene. And I kind of sort of didn't want to bring things up, for the simple reason that I felt that he kind of would turn around and say, "I told you so!"

(Oswald 50-60)

Here we can see Oswald expressing fear that his own experiences of abuse would be connected to the *"seediness of the gay Scene*" that his father expressed such distaste for, his abusive relationship transforming into a stigmatised mark on his character, another failure that would discredit him. This sense of failure was compounded for the men in my study who had attempted to utilise their new relationships as a way of addressing or combating the homophobia and stigma they had received either explicitly or tacitly from their loved ones. We can see a good example of this in Oliver's account. Oliver had discussed struggling with his family's homophobia, particularly his mother's, which had led to him to long conceal his sexuality from them. He had hoped that his relationship with his abuser could be a way for him to come out to them in a positive manner by demonstrating he was able to have a *"normal"* loving and stable romantic partnership:

I grew up in a…very repressing and repressive and depressing kind of like family environment where there was a lot of rejection of anything gay and a lot of homophobia and things. I think that my hope was to really find someone that I could, as I say, settle [down] with [and have a normal relationship].

(Oliver 30-40)

Unfortunately, their relationship broke down after months of abuse and during the difficult recovery, Oliver reached out to his mother for support, coming out to her in the process. This led to the following exchange:

And that's another thing that my mother told me, and I can't believe that I had to end up coming out officially to my mother because of that guy…She did say, "Hmh, yeah, you see how these [homosexual] relationships are very passionate, they're very…." what was the word that she used… "hormonal, and they can be very explosive like that."

So, unfortunately, the relationship did not do any favours to my mother's views on what gay relationships are like.

(Oliver, 30-40)

We can see in Oliver's account that his attempt to reach out to his mother is instead used as an opportunity to stigmatise his status as a Queer man, simply reinforcing a belief that homosexuals are unstable and thus, by implication, unable to properly commit to long-term relationships. As he noted:

[The relationship] only came to cement this negative view of gay relationships being abusive, and being destructive and negative and everything. My wish was that I would come out to my family saying that I have a wonderful boyfriend, and he's head over heels for me, and we're super happy! But instead of doing that, I had to reach out to my mother for some support, because I was in tatters after our relationship. So you see, the damage [continued] even after the relationship had finished, because I do believe that I came out to my family for not the greatest of reasons.

(Oliver, 30-40).

In this way, the reaction he received acted as a means of reinforcing the very stigma his relationship was an attempt to fight against. From this, I argue that the men's fear of condemnation in the face of a potential breakup and the social discredit they attach to the identity of being single can be understood as a form of stigma which I dub *romance stigma.* This stigma works to embolden and legitimise the norm of compulsory coupledom Wilkinson (2013) identified as having attained hegemonic status within our society by stigmatising those who fail to arrange their intimate lives to match the ideal of coupled intimate monogamy. Thus, relationship breakdown acts as an extant mark of stigmatisation that the men in my study had to experience and grapple with in the process of their victimisation, and like the other two aspects of stigma they grapple with during this process, it appeared it was used by their abusers as a means of control.

My participants frequently disclosed incidents where their partners would belittle and humiliate them by questioning their capacity to be loved and to maintain romantic relationships without them. This would often take the form of highlighting their, supposed, inadequacies as a partner or suggesting they were in some way undesirable or unlovable. To give an example, Carson noted that his partner would frequently tell him:

"*This is the best you can do"*

(Carson, 40-50)

This was done both through explicit taunts and insults and implicit acts of control. For example, Carson described that his partner would frequently make fun of or insult the appearance of people Carson was attracted to in order to make him less likely to leave the relationship:

He was quite disparaging about my taste in men…he was quite disparaging about people in the street, and so on, people he thought I might fancy. And it was almost like "that's all you can get!" So he did kind of confirm or keep reinforcing that. I think it was kind of drummed into me, and it was kind of ingrained in the relationship, that I wasn't going to do better.

(Carson, 40-50)

We can see a similar dynamic appear if we look at Stefan's account. Stefan's abuser, an older man, would frequently attempt to control his appearance, eventually coercing him to remain slim and feminine despite Stefan wanting to bulk up:

So, it was kind of little things like digs about appearance, [that] was the first kind of stuff. So I just got into my new university, and it was kind of things like: "Oh, don't cut your hair that way, don't dye your hair. Oh, I like you skinnier, don't bulk too much." It becomes this conflict in yourself of…I don't want this, but they want this, and if I'm not this, they won't want me.

(Stefan, 25-30)

In explaining the impact this had on him, Stefan went on to say:

I think because I've moved away from home, and I didn't really have anyone, I kind of tried to cling on to [my abuser] as much as I could. Because it's kind of like a sense of…I don't want to say safety but kind of you create this bubble for yourself, and you're afraid of people leaving...I'd always be worried if they voiced an opinion that I didn't necessarily agree with it and if I did argue back against it, would they leave?

(Stefan, 25-30)

The impact of these incidents, at least as the participants described them to me, was to implant the idea within their minds that they would never be able to find love outside of their relationship with the abuser and that any attempt to leave would inevitably result in them being left entirely alone and

without any prospect of intimacy, romance, or simply support in the future. In this way, the social stigma attached to singledom is used as an indirect threat by the abuser, a way to enforce compliance by suggesting that any attempt to leave would risk inhabiting a socially stigmatised identity which would condemn the victim to a lifetime of not only loneliness but also of social ridicule.

The men in my study were thus faced with the unenviable prospect of having to navigate three interlocking sets of stigmas, all of which worked to undermine their sense of self, whilst being used by their abusers as a means of control. With this understanding of how shame and victimisation are linked in the experiences of Queer male victims of IPV, let us turn to examine the implications of these findings.

Conclusion: Victimised Masculinities and Stigmatised Romances

Through analysing my participants' accounts, I argue that two key findings have emerged: the first is the relationship between victimhood, shame, and masculinity, and the second is the link between relationship breakdown and stigma. Turning to the first finding, the men I interviewed initially experienced victimhood as a shameful and stigmatised social identity that was neither positive nor affirming. To be a victim was to be a social failure, a passive, weak, and vulnerable person who was rendered helpless and at the mercy of their partner. This new identity was entirely antithetical to how the men initially viewed themselves before and unsettled their understandings of self which embodied commonly held beliefs in their agency and the inherent justness of the world. In this way, my findings reflect and affirm the previous work of victimologists like Pemberton (2012) and Fohring (2018), who have taken pains to highlight the stigmatising and shameful aspects of victimisation and map out the reasons why this social identity carries such a negative impact. Indeed, as Pemberton (2012) theorised, the men in my study appeared to associate their disquiet at a victim identity with an apparent violation of their beliefs in a just world, struggling to reconcile the senselessness of the abuse they were subjected to with the notion that only the deserving are harmed. However, this experience of victimhood went much further than a general shame at a perceived weakness as this social status was itself antithetical to their identities as men.

Indeed, a key finding from my work is the fact that Queer men still experience victimhood as a form of emasculation in a way that is remarkably similar to previous research conducted with other male victims (see for example Weiss 2010). Moreover, as Dunn (2012) and Javaid (2017) have intimated, Queer men experience a particularly potent form of shame at victimisation since this experience of victimhood can act as a re-affirmation of pre-existing stigma aimed at their masculinity. These findings, I argue, can tell us a great deal about the relationship between victimhood, sexuality, and masculinity. Victimhood can be seen as antithetical to masculinity, its basic connotations clashing with the standards embodied in masculinity's hegemonic form, and this effect seems to extend even to men whose masculinity is *"subordinated"* in the sense that Connell (1995 p.78) argues. Indeed, it appears that the threat that victimhood poses to Queer men's masculinity is increased due to this subordinated status. Queer masculinity is, I argue, unstable, that is, it is never settled or secure, and is instead constantly apt to be questioned, disputed, or stigmatised. I argue that it is clear that victimised masculinities, and in this specific case Queer victimised masculinities, still exist as a subordinated form of masculinity, and the shame that my men feel at this status reflects anxiety over their potential expulsion from this otherwise dominant hegemonic masculinity. In this way, hegemonic masculinity retains its predominant cultural status even for Queer men. It exists as a cultural baseline, waiting in the wings to re-exert its authority through stigma and shame should the men fail to meet its exacting standards.

In addition, more than just developing lines of inquiry from the work of other scholars, my research has also highlighted new areas for consideration, as my research has found that my participants appeared particularly concerned about the breakdown and termination of their romantic relationships. The emergence of what I have dubbed romance stigma is a potentially new finding that, to my

knowledge, is not present in other works which have investigated the accounts of Queer victims, and indeed may be unique to the experiences of Queer IPV. The men in my study demonstrated a deep-seated fear at the prospect of having what they dubbed a *"failed"* relationship and appeared to be cognizant of the social illegitimacy of singledom. This was present alongside a worry that they would be unable to form new intimate connections should their current abusive relationship terminate. Indeed, I argue that the strength of the shame the men attached to the possibility of a failed relationship demonstrates the strength the norms of compulsory coupledom (Wilkinson 2013) exerted over their romantic subjectivities. To be single, particularly in the aftermath of once being coupled, was to fail to meet the normative standards of coupled monogamy that have become so firmly entrenched in the homonormative neo-liberal discourses of appropriate Queer sexuality that many of the men in my study were keen to embody. In this way, my research reflects other scholarship which has examined the social stigma attached to uncoupled and single individuals (Bryne and Carr 2005, McKeown 2015). Yet, much of this work has focused on the experience of single women and tied the illegitimacy of singledom to wider gender norms which emphasise the cultural and economic pressures on women to take on appropriate feminine social roles such as wife and mother. For example, Lahad's (2012) study of the sociology of singledom argues that the status of the *"single woman"* is seen as wasteful. This is because it is perceived to represent a delay in achieving necessary milestones such as marriage and motherhood, which are believed to constitute the normal life narrative all women are expected and pressured to follow. Thus, to be single is to exist in a state of waiting and as a consequence singledom is not considered to be a fulfilling social role in and of itself, but instead is a stage of life that must be passed through as quickly as possible. I have already noted how this gendered expectation of coupledom has been seen to impact the experience of female victims of IPV (see for example Wood 2001). However, my findings here build and expand on this research by demonstrating that a similar, yet distinct process occurs in the accounts of Queer men. My participants too saw singledom as an illegitimate and discreditable social identity which would function as a potential vector for shame and stigmatisation. However, for them, this identity was deeply bound up with larger historic and contemporary stigmatising stereotypes which cast Queer men as unfit sexual citizens who lack the moral will to commit themselves to the necessary hard work of maintaining the romantic ideal of monogamous coupledom. In this way, we can again see that Wilkinson's (2013) concept of compulsory coupledom emerges as a central normative force in my participants' accounts and further reinforced my argument in Chapter Five that homonormative narratives of Queer assimilation into traditionally heterosexual institutions of intimacy have worked to shape at least some Queer men's romantic imaginaries in such a way as to exert a coercive force, engendering compliance through the threat of shame and stigma.

From all of this, it thus becomes clear that the core experience of victimhood for the men in my study was that of shame and stigma. The shame of victimhood worked to invalidate core aspects of their identity such as their agency, their masculinity, and their status as sexual citizens, undermining their self-confidence and providing a tool which their abusers could use to further coerce and control them. Armed with this understanding, the next issue I wish to turn to is to ask how the men navigated this pervasive sense of shame and stigmatisation brought on by victimisation. To do this, I argue we can turn once again to Arthur Frank's (1995) framework of illness narratives, which can allow us to see how the men in my study suffered from, wrestled with, and eventually overcame the "*narrative wreckage"* (ibid) of IPV.

Chapter Seven

Collapsing Worlds: Stories of Chaos, Despair, and Narrative Wreckage

Introduction

In this chapter, we will turn to examine how abusers utilised the tools of coercive control to bring my participants to a state of such distress and trauma that it constituted an attack on their sense of self. This was a process in which the individual's social identity and subjective understanding of reality were fundamentally destroyed by their abuser, and which trapped them in a state of confusion and numbness from which, as the next chapter will demonstrate, they attempted to rebuild a new post-victim identity. Indeed, the men in my study gave testimonies and accounts which matched Frank's concept of *"narrative wreckage" (Frank 1995 p.53).* These instances of wreckage occurred when the individual's sense of self fractured due to the ongoing process of abuse by their partner. By this point, the stigma and shame of victimhood had already worn down the men's sense of worth and their belief in the romantic value of their relationship. The collapse of this narrative occurred when the individual came to realise the true extent of the abuse that they had experienced at the hands of their intimate partner. The control and violence that kept them from understanding the reality of the situation faded away and they were confronted by the true extent of the damage that had been done to them. This is the process which Kai described in the vignette presented in the first chapter; the point at which the world collapses. To understand this process in greater detail, I want to utilise Trudy Mill's (1985) concept of the *"assault on the self."*

The Assault on the Self

I take this term from Mills' 1985 article *"The Assault on the Self: Stages in Coping with Battering Husbands."* In it, Mills attempts to provide an in-depth analysis of how heterosexual women experience IPV by presenting a phenomenological analysis of their subjective experiences of harm both during and in the aftermath of their relationship. Mills argued that as part of their campaign to control and dominate the victim, the abuser would attempt to destroy their sense of self through a sustained assault. This *"assault on the self"* had two distinctive stages. The first was an assault on the women's social identities, achieved by separating them from their wider social networks and consequently destroying their ability to generate a social identity independent from the abusive relationship and thus the abuser themselves (ibid p.111). The second was an assault on what Mills called the *"observing self"* which I will define later in this chapter (ibid p.113). In reviewing my participant's narratives, I noted that they too described how their partners attempted to undermine and even destroy their senses of self and identity and that these attempts could be categorised within Mills' two-stage process. To make this argument, let us examine both stages in turn.

The Loss of Identities

I first want to examine the idea that the assault on the self begins with an attack on the men's social identities. By this, I mean that we can understand IPV as an attempt by the abuser to destroy the ability of the victim to have a meaningful existence outside the boundaries of the abusive relationship. After all, as other authors have argued, all identity is a form of social identity as our sense of self is constructed collaboratively through our interactions and embodiments in wider networks of social identification such as familial kinship networks, friendship groups, and institutional affiliations (Loseke 2007). These all work together to generate the multifaceted social identity we use to identify ourselves and are crucial to our wider well-being as social creatures (McAdams 1997). In describing her theory of the *"assault on the self",* Mills (1985) argues it is precisely these connections to wider social networks that abusers attack. They use the tools of coercive control to isolate and marginalise the victim's contact with significant social others in an attempt to control and dominate (ibid p.111-112). This undermines the individual's ability to have an independent identity separate from the abuser and the relationship. However, this process does more than simply act as a mechanism for the

abusers' control, it also has a profound and detrimental impact on the victim's sense of self and their well-being. The gradual loss of access to these social networks impacts their ability to make sense of their situations, and they become increasingly reliant on their abuser for identification and validation as their other identities as child, friend, co-worker, or parent are slowly subsumed and destroyed by this isolation. This process is now a well-documented facet of coercive control (see for example Stark 2007) and it is thus no surprise that I was also able to identify these narratives of isolation in the accounts of my participants. Indeed, my participants would describe how their partners would work to isolate them from their friends, family, and co-workers. We can see a clear example of this if we turn to examine Ewan's account. Ewan described how early in his relationship with his abusive ex-partner, his abuser would begin to pick fights with his friends, and then demand that Ewan cut contact with them, often declaring that if Ewan did not comply, he would end the relationship. Though Ewan frequently resisted these ultimatums, he noted that these attempts at resistance were met with screaming matches where his abuser would deliberately prolong their argument to prevent him from sleeping. This eventually led to Ewan spending less and less time with his friends and here he describes how his abuser isolated him from a close childhood friend:

So, there was there's always tension between [my abuser] and my friend…and I didn't never see [my friend], but I saw him much less. And he was one of my very close friends [from home] and I saw much, much less of him…and so I think I dealt with [my abuser] by yeah, I guess kind of, to a degree, kind of giving him what he wanted, which was [a] less close relationship [with my friend].

(Ewan, 30-40)

We can see another example of this sort of behaviour if we turn to David's account. Early in their relationship, David's physically and sexually abusive partner worked to separate him from his other gay friends, using fear of infidelity as justification for this isolation:

Apart from the people I worked with, I wasn't allowed to socialize with anybody else. So yeah, he very much cut me off from the gay friends that I had. He was very, very jealous. And, you know, would accuse me of having relationships with other friends who were gay. That was …his justification to himself for why I wasn't allowed to see them.

(David, 50-60)

Another example of this can be seen in Kieran's account, where he describes how his partner worked to keep him from socialising with other students at their shared university:

I didn't think about it at the time. But I was spending less and less time with like my friends and stuff. I would go and make friends with people, because I'm that person who goes and makes friends with people and is very open and sociable, so I would start making friends. And he would be like, "Oh, well, you know, that person's this, that and the other" Kind of the insidious whispering in your ear about everyone around you being awful, and that kind of stuff.

(Kieran, 30-40)

In all three examples, we can see my participants describe a progressive process of isolation in which their abusers deliberately worked to distance them from the social circles they were already embedded within and ensure they remain entirely within the abuser's sphere of control. This process is not achieved easily, however, and my participants described the sometimes-harrowing tools used by their abusers to enforce this isolation. For example, Fred described how his partner would attempt to isolate him from visiting friends and family by expressing fears of Fred's potential infidelity. One of the tools used to enforce this isolation was to make Fred submit to having his genitals inspected whenever he returned home from seeing other people:

So if I went out, and if I went to see my dad or anything like that, sometimes when they got back, I'd have to have my penis checked for post cum, and my anus for lube, I guess, which was quite...[trails off into silence]

(Fred, 30-40)

However, not all techniques used by abusers were so graphic. Victor for example described how his partner would use social media to monitor who he could contact:

I would do strange things that, I look back now, and it is laughable, but I wouldn't use my phone. And if I wanted to speak to one of my friends about something I'd ring on my work phone, or my landline, and someone would text me and I wouldn't reply for hours because I didn't want him to see that I'd been on WhatsApp just in case he thinks I was speaking to someone else.

(Victor, 25-30)

Like Fred, Victor's isolation was enforced by his partner's use of a battery of different abusive tools which appeared to be designed to attack and undermine Victor's ability to maintain effective communication with people outside of the relationship, yet these tools of abuse could be very subtle. For example, Victor noted that his partner would frequently ask him to send him selfies whilst Victor was at work. Victor initially thought this process was largely benign until a co-worker pointed out its controlling undertones:

And I remember having a conversation and saying, "He wants me to send him a selfie.

And she said, "Take it with a black background."

I was like "What, what do you mean?"

And she said, "Go into the stationary cupboard and take it with a black background. And I bet you he'll ask you where you are."

And it crushed me because I did it. And the first question back was "Where are you?!"

Cuz if I was in my office, he could see, or if I was in Tesco's, or if I was in my car, he knew where I was.

(Victor, 25-30)

These more subtle tactics could also then be reinforced by violence:

Like I honestly went under the radar because I would do anything for a quiet life...just to soothe his insecurities. Yeah, Um. In the space of 18 months, I went through five iPhones, they were all thrown against the wall, smashed up.

(Victor, 25-30)

The fact that Victor describes his retreat from social media as an attempt to have *a "quiet life"* or to soothe his abusers' *"insecurities"* highlights the twin effects this campaign of enforced isolation has on the victim. The first is to make the cost of resisting the abuser's demands so high that the victim naturally begins to back down in the face of increasing control, punctuated by acts of violence. The victim found themself following the demands of the abuser to, as Victor said, have a *"quiet life"* free from conflict.

The second impact is however perhaps more significant for our discussion here. As the abusers continued their campaign to isolate and separate the victim from their wider social circle, the victim's point of view and priorities began to shift and turn towards ensuring that the needs of the abuser were met. The abuser came to dominate the relationship, and their wants and desires became the primary

driving factor of what is or is not done. Any attempt to resist the will of the abusers' is punished through outbursts of assault and control, be it physical, sexual, or emotional. The impact of this turned the relationship into a vehicle to satisfy the needs of the abusive partner, with the victim adapting to their will or suffering the consequences. We can see an example of this process in Jim's account:

I certainly didn't recognize those at the time. But looking back, I mean, just the sense in which he was, he would completely dominate every situation…there was something about the way the relationship was that I just capitulated, anything he wanted to do, we would do, if he didn't want me to do something, I wouldn't do it. I just sort of fell into line really quickly. And that did mean, over a fairly long period of time, separating myself from my friendship group.

(Jim, 50-60)

Jim then went on to describe how his partner would make Jim feel entirely responsible for him and by extension the relationship itself:

There was a sense in which I was responsible for him and [that] if I left him, he wouldn't be able to cope without me. And that was a very, very strong feeling that I had that certainly developed…and continued right through until the end is a sense in which if I left him, he would be in this terrible situation that he wouldn't be able to cope with and that somehow that was my responsibility...it's really strange now, kind of putting it together like that because I was looking after him even though he was abusing me. But it seemed more important to me that he was okay.

(Jim, 50-60)

In both sections of this interview, we can see Jim drawing attention to the dynamic that appeared to emerge in which his abuser came to dominate the relationship. The abuser's will became sovereign and paramount over Jim's, and Jim was made responsible for ensuring that his abuser's needs were met whilst his wishes are disregarded. The fact that this process occurred alongside an attempt to isolate Jim from his wider social circle suggests that this experience of isolation is, in the accounts of my participants, directly tied to the abuser's ensuing dominance over the relationship. Indeed, we can see a similar pattern develop in Jules' account:

Life centred around him, and what he wanted, to do, where he wanted to go. He was, he's not very diplomatic. So, he would just say what was on his mind, and it wouldn't necessarily be the kindest thing, so people…I suppose he just grated on my friends. And they just eventually stopped contacting me, they stopped inviting us to go places, they knew I wouldn't go alone. [My abuser] wasn't terribly keen on me going anywhere alone…if I'm somewhere having a good time, then he was envious of that and so, he would want to come. And so it was, either both of us or neither of us went places. So, my friends stopped bothering.

(Jules, 30-40)

From Jules' account, we can see how the processes of both domination and isolation are linked. Jules' partner used his dominance over the relationship to isolate him from his friends, and this isolation in turn reinforces the abuser's dominance by giving him more power to dictate when and how Jules is allowed to socialise outside of the relationship. As Jules said, *"either both of us or neither of us went."* We can thus see how the abuser's will and needs became more important than Jules' desires, and the relationship thus morphed into a vehicle for the satisfaction of the abuser. This process of domination in which the abuser comes to take control of the relationship whilst the victim is pushed to meet their needs is remarkably similar to Donovan and Hester's (2015) findings in their research into the experiences of Queer victims of IPV, in particular, their concept of *"relationship rules."*

The authors noted that within the context of the abusive relationships they studied that a particular power dynamic emerged in which abusers would come to dominate and control all decision-making.

Developing on the concept of *"relationship practices"* (Morgan 1996), informal practices which structure the give and take of an interpersonal relationship, Donovan and Hester argue that within an abusive relationship, a set of *"relationship rules"* (Donovan and Hester p.132) emerge which govern how power is allocated and used within the relationship. In their research, they identify two such relationship rules:
1.) that the relationship is for the abusive partner and on their terms (ibid p.132)

and

2.) that the survivor is responsible for looking after their abusive partner and the relationship (ibid p.147).

These rules are used by the abuser to cement their power and control over their partner but crucially are disguised *as "practices of love"* which are common and expected within romantic committed intimate relationships. This works to normalise them despite their coercive and unequal nature, and it makes it more difficult for the victim to recognise what is happening to them as the abusive relationship progresses.

Returning to my research we can see that these relationship rules are present in the accounts of my participants. Jules' declaration that the relationship revolved around his abusive partner and David's comment about being cut off from his friends due to his partners' insecurities around infidelity both point to the fact that their relationships accorded with the first rule of being for the abuser on their terms. Whilst Jim's characterisation of feeling like he was responsible for caring for his partner or Victor's concern for soothing his abuser's insecurities can be seen to accord with the second rule that survivors are responsible for the abusive partner and the relationship's wellbeing. My findings then clearly reinforce and give further credence to Donovan and Hester's (2015) findings, however, they go deeper and in a markedly different direction when we subject them to further analysis. Donovan and Hester focused on the wider structure of abusive relationships with a particular focus on how power was structurally allocated and managed. However, in doing so they did not consider how this process of domination is subjectively experienced by the individuals who are subjected to it nor what impact it has on their identities. This is precisely what I aimed to discover as I continued to probe the accounts of the men in my study. To understand how this process of isolation and domination contributes to an assault on the social self, we need to return to Mills.

Mills (1985) argued that the social identities of victims of IPV come under attack as part of a general tactic of domination and isolation used by abusers which forced the victim to give up outside identities and invest fully and solely into the relationship as their primary social identity. However, the true destructive force of the assault does not come from merely giving up these identities, it comes from the fact that they are not given any other identities to replace them, and instead are left bereft of social connection (ibid p.112). This is then made worse when the abuser begins to undermine their remaining social identities of wife, girlfriend, or partner through insults, psychological manipulation, and assault, as their one remaining bastion of social connection is undermined, and they now have no social network to fall back on to repair these wounds (ibid p.112). Examining the accounts of my participants, I was able to identify a similar process. Isolated from the wider social networks of friends, family, and co-workers, the men were subjected to abuse which worked to undermine what little independent sense of self they had left. Kieran's account is a good example to consider on this point. Kieran met his abusive partner whilst in college and after a campaign of isolation, the two moved into a shared flat. Recounting this period, Kieran described experiencing an intense wave of emotional abuse which undermined his sense of self-worth:

So, we'd been through a year of being in halls together, rooms next door to each other, at which point a lot of like, isolating happened and then when we moved in together, it started being more about taking me down and…[sighs] and starting to erode what little self-worth I had. I'm generally fairly

confident these days, but back then I was a wreck half of the time and it would be things …like, "Why are you wearing that? You're looking like this?" And "You've got to do that, and you've got to do this, that and the other!"

(Kieran, 30-40)

Kieran's account demonstrates how the process of isolation and domination led to an attack on his sense of self-confidence and worth. After working to isolate him, Kieran's abuser then moved to not only dominate his life and control his choices *(why are you wearing that?)* but also to undermine his sense of identity within the relationship, by attacking his autonomy and ability to make decisions. Note for example how Kieran contrasts his current sense of self *(I'm generally fairly confident these days)* with how he characterises it whilst within the relationship *(back then I was a wreck half of the time).* I argue that this constitutes a clear assault on his sense of self, a means to undermine his self-worth and identity outside of the relationship. We can see another example of this exact process if we turn to Geoff's account. Geoff described how his partner would make him responsible for all the tasks of the relationship, not only domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning, but also completing his abuser's coursework and writing administrative letters on his behalf. Despite this dedication to the relationship, Geoff reported being subjected to recurrent verbal belittlement from his abuser throughout this period:

The way he behaved towards me was very, very disrespectful. very dismissive, and very, very, like affirmative to my low self-esteem. The way he treated me, like, reaffirmed constantly that I was worthless, and I wasn't you know, wasn't worth anything. And that's all I was good for was these practical tasks. So, you know, writing letters…all of that sort of stuff. He was happy for me to do that. But anything else, he just had very, very little, very little interest at all, and he was very critical and on all of that all the other side of things.

(Geoff, 30-40)

Here again, we see a process in which the victim is made responsible for meeting the needs of the abuser, all the while what is left of his independent sense of worth and identity is constantly under attack and undermined. The men in my study were thus ensnared in a web of coercive control by their abusers who, utilising a range of different abusive tools, worked to isolate their partners from the wider social networks they previously existed within. This is then combined with a progressive and destructive campaign to assume the dominant social position in the relationship in which the victim is made responsible for their well-being. Thus, as Mills (1985) argued was the case for her participants, the result of this is to produce a gradual shrinking of the victims' social identity. Over time they begin to lose their status as a son, friend, and colleague as their social world is slowly but surely pared back until all that is left is their identity as a husband, boyfriend or partner to an increasingly abusive and controlling person. Even in this diminished social identity, they are given no respite, as their abuser consistently works to challenge the victim's competence and self-worth, undermining the foundation for what little shred of social identity and autonomy remains to them. It is in this process that the victims' fundamental sense of self begins to break down, and we can observe how this occurs when we turn to the next stage of Mills' assault on the self.

Loss of the Observing Self

This second stage is what Mills (1985) called the *"loss of the observing self."* What exactly Mills meant by this term is not made explicitly clear within the original text however, I argue that we can gain a better idea by looking at the conditions she ascribes to the women who suffered from this type of assault. Mills suggested that at this stage of the assault of the self, the actions of the abusers escalate to the point that the women become unable to cope and manage the abuse. The techniques they had developed to adapt to their situation began to fall apart and they were unable to make sense

of what was happening to them through previous frameworks, which leads to a pervasive sense of numbness. Mills writes:

The numbness of the women interviewed is a response to the confusion that results from their involvement in the violent relationship. They question their judgments and perceptions of things as they try to understand the violence and their relationships.

(Ibid p.113).

From the conditions that Mills described here, I argue that the *"observing self"* is analogous to Janoff-Bulman's (1992) concept of the *"fundamental assumptions"* of human cognition. As a reminder, Janoff-Bulman argued that humans generally possess a set of standard beliefs that form an *"assumptive world"* (ibid p.11) which structures their understanding of reality. These are:

- that the world is fundamentally good

- that the world is fundamentally meaningful

and

- that the self is fundamentally good (ibid p.12).

These assumptions allow the individual to establish a further belief that the world is predictable and intelligible, and, consequently, that they are secure and largely invulnerable to harm (ibid). I argue that Mills observing self can fit into this concept of the assumptive world as both are concerned with how individuals make sense, generate meaning, and understand the world around them. Note for example that Mills argues that one of the key ways in which the observing self comes under assault is from the women's inability to make sense of their relationship. Mills (1985) argues that the women in her study displayed increasing confusion at their abusers' actions and had a growing inability to trust their judgements of the situation and their perceptions of their partner's motives (ibid p.114). Similarly, Janoff-Bulman's (1992) work highlighted that one of the consequences of shattered assumptions is that it leaves victims unable to form a coherent sense of meaning out of their experiences, and to lose trust both in their invulnerability to harm and in their ability to predict or make sense of others' actions (ibid p.62-65). In this way, I argue that we can use Janoff-Bulman's framework to better understand the process by which my participants experienced this assault on their observing selves. From reviewing my participant's accounts, I was able to see a similar progression from the isolation, domination and destruction of their social identities to a more fundamental attack on their basic assumptions about the world and their capabilities within it. The assault on the observing self I witnessed had two sub-stages which progressively work to undermine their assumptive worldviews. The first is a pervasive sense of confusion, and the second is a pervasive sense of numbness. Let us examine them in turn.

Key to both Mills' (1985) and Janoff-Bulman's (1992) frameworks is a sense of confusion and doubt which begins to seep into victims' worldviews. This confusion specifically relates to the ability of the individual to generate meaning from their experiences which can explain the relation of an event to a wider social narrative. For Janoff-Bulman (1992), this occurs in relation to the fundamental assumptions of cognition, one must be able to align their experiences to the assumptions that the self is worthy, and that the world is meaningful (i.e. that things happen for a good reason and that people are rewarded). For Mills (1985), this confusion arises from an inability to understand why the abuse is happening to them and how the man they once thought of as their permanent romantic partner could become a dangerous force in their lives. I argue that we observe both these veins of confusion in the accounts of my participants. A good example of this can be found in Fred's account. Fred's narrative of his relationship was particularly confused and erratic, he frequently bounced between expressing

love and even adoration for his partner yet was willing to recognise that he was deeply abusive and cruel to him:

I realized he [had] a problem [but] I still blamed myself. Because I was constantly told it was my fault for doing stupid things. And I guess I started to feel like he was sort of, perhaps not a nice person. But I still loved him, and it was quite a conflict. I kept thinking, well, maybe if I'm better, maybe I need to be better…I just thought, if I'm better then maybe he'll treat me better.

(Fred, 30-40)

We can see here that Fred moved between two positions, on the one hand realising that his partner was *"not a nice person"* and that he had clear emotional problems, yet on the other hand still expressing love for him and appearing to suggest that if only he worked harder, he could stop the abuse from occurring. This confusion and attack on the fundamental assumptive worldview of the victims were not only a passive outcome of the abusers' coercive control but also appeared as a deliberate and targeted tactic utilised by abusers to undermine the men's sense of agency. Within my fieldwork I heard numerous accounts given by victims in which their abusers would attempt to confuse and trick them, deceiving and manipulating the men in an apparent attempt to undermine their sense of reality or ability to control their environments. For example, Manni's partner largely used psychological and emotional abuse to control him, frequently undermining his self-confidence and verbally insulting and berating him when he failed to comply with his demands. One of the tactics Manni described being used against him was to engage in verbal abuse in private only to deny or ignore that he had said anything when in public. As a result of this consistent *'gaslighting,'* Manni began to feel distrustful and unable to understand his relationship:

You just start to become less and less like yourself… you get to a point whereby you're doubting everything, you're doubting yourself doubting your thinking, you're becoming socially anxious, you're losing trust in people, and you're always looking for sub-text. I mean, it just becomes destructive. And you find yourself as a person becoming smaller and smaller and less energetic.

(Manni, 40-50)

We can see another much more dramatic use of this tactic from a specific example Victor gave in his interview. Victor described how his abuser was angry that Victor had not checked in with him after work. Suddenly, he received a text from his partner informing him that he had been in a near-fatal car accident and was being taken into surgery. Panicked, Victor tried fruitlessly to get in contact with his partner for several hours:

I kept trying, I kept trying and then he answered his phone. And I was like, "Are you okay? Where are you?"

And he was like, "I didn't really crash my car."

And I, and I was like, "What do you mean? What, like, what are you talking about?"

He's like, "Do you think it's acceptable…do you think is acceptable not to ring me after work…I could have died on my journey home and you wouldn't have cared."

(Victor, 25-30)

Here again, we can see a clear attempt to undermine the victim's sense of reality and their ability to interpret it. Victor's abuser worked to cloud his judgement and ability to make sense of what is happening by faking a car crash, putting Victor through emotional turmoil before revealing his deception. The fundamental impact of this type of behaviour is to create a pervasive sense of confusion and exhaustion within the victim, making them unsure of what to trust and thus unable to

properly challenge the abusers' abuse itself. We can see this by returning to Victor's account. After he related this, I asked him if he had been angry at his abuser for lying to him, however, he instead said:

Honestly, at the time, I was literally like, "Oh, my God, I can't, Yeah, you're right." And I think, it's a case of like, Oh, my God, like, in my head. I was like, "Oh, my God, I should have rung. That could have really happened!"

Now like looking back now. I was like, "That is absolutely insane."

(Victor, 25-30)

We can see here that Victor struggled to properly make sense of his situation as it occurs, instead forgiving his abuser and, in effect, taking responsibility for what happened. Moreover, the fact that in our interview, which took place nearly a year after this event occurred, Victor now recognised that this response appears *"absolutely insane"* highlights how integral the structures of the relationship and the actions of the abuser are for fostering this sense confusion and inability to make sense of their situation. Again, this is not the fault of the victims themselves, but rather represents another *"meta-adaptation"* (Enander and Holmberg 2008) to the absurdity of the abuser's tactics even if it still works to undermine their fundamental assumptions about the world. Indeed, we can observe a similar response if we look at Ernie's account. Ernie's relationship with his abuser had rapidly escalated from emotional and verbal abuse to physical and sexual assault. During these violent episodes, Ernie related how his abuser would, in the aftermath, frequently blame him for provoking his violent assault. Ernie took great lengths in our interview to highlight the devastating psychological impacts this had on him, noting how he began to lose confidence in his ability to accurately understand the world and his relationship, to the point of internalising his abuser's definition of the situation:

So within six months, I was…I started to doubt myself. [Before] I was confident, I was, I was a bit of an extrovert…and that was all starting to go. But I thought it was me! I thought there was something wrong with me. I thought it was my fault. Because he was telling me, yeah, he's [got] a doctorate in psychology. It [was] always "He knows what he's on about." So I started to believe what he was saying to me.

(Ernie, 40-50)

Here again, we can observe that, like Victor, Ernie began to find himself unable to accurately make sense of his situation, he began to doubt himself and question his self-worth as a person *(I thought there was something wrong with me)* and lost faith in his ability to understand what was happening, instead deferring to the will of his abuser *(so I started to believe what he was saying to me).* Thus, we observe the way that confusion and an inability to maintain meaning constitute a core part of the abusers' attempts to undermine the men's assumptive worldviews and thus their observing self. Indeed, we must remember that one of the core assumptions of Janoff-Bulman's (1992) assumptive worldview is that the self is fundamentally good. Yet we can see in Ernie and the other men's accounts that this core belief is fundamentally undermined by the abuser who worked to make the victim believe that they are fundamentally at fault for what was happening to them. As Ernie himself noted, this produces a deep-seated feeling within them that *"something is wrong with me."*

These stories may appear confusing and difficult to follow, as the men alternate between despair at their partners' treatment of them, a yearning to return to the periods of romantic bliss they described initially, and a willingness to accept responsibility for their partners' actions, yet they can be understood once we see them through the framework of Frank's (1995) chaos narrative. Like the chaos narrative Frank described in his work, the men's stories are filled with a sense of confusion, futility, and pain. The men are unable to make sense of their experiences, to understand how they, as good moral people, could be abused and harmed by the men who professed to love and support them. This inherent contradiction puts strains on the fundamental assumptive worldview the men hold,

which is only further exacerbated by the abusers' tactics of coercive control which work to deliberately attack fundamental pillars of belief such as the assumption of the moral and worthy self. This tension creates a need to account, manage and make sense of this discordant reality, and allows the men to take on the blame for their victimisation as a form of *"meta-adaptation"* (Enander and Holmberg 2008 p.211).

This meta-adaptation is an attempt to claw their way out of the chaos narrative, but like all meta-adaptations, it fails in the face of the structure of the abusive relationship, whose coercive character fundamentally undermines all attempts at resistance and meaning within it. The victim cannot make sense of their experiences because the relationship is fundamentally senseless and chaotic, it is in the words of Enander and Holmberg *"absurd"* (ibid p.211). This finding thus accords with the work of Donileen Loseke who first applied Frank's chaos narrative to the experiences of heterosexual female victims of IPV. Loseke (2001) argued that these women's narratives of their experiences of abuse were fundamentally chaotic and difficult to listen to. The lived reality of abuse undermines attempts at coherence and reliability and leads to the stories of female victims being dismissed as illogical. In the same way, my participants' stories in this part of their narratives were also concerned with *"vulnerability, futility, and impotence"* (Loseke 2001 p.109) and also highlighted the disorientating and confusing nature of what it is like to live with abuse and coercive control. Thus, I argue, it is clear that a pervasive sense of confusion and futility are core to the assault on the self that Queer male victims of IPV experience, as both work to undermine the men's ability to hold onto the assumptive worldview which is central to their ability to make sense of the world and experience a stable sense of self. What then is the impact of this assault? To understand this question, we can turn to the next emotion the men described as central to their experiences of the loss of the observing self, that of numbness or emptiness.

As the men's ability to make sense of their situation failed to prevent their continued victimisation by their partner and core parts of their assumptive worldview continued to be assaulted by an ongoing campaign of coercive control, it appears that the men's response was to disassociate and retreat from any subjective experience of the relationship. The abusers' campaign to reduce them to mere extensions of their will becomes tantalising close to reality and as a consequence, the men begin to lose themselves in the process. Their very perception of themselves as autonomous subjects with their thoughts and desires began to fray and was put into question. This often extended very literally into how the men began to refer to themselves within their narratives. They began to describe themselves as corpses, *"dead behind the eyes"* or walking around like *"zombies."* Whilst others instead described how they felt like robots or simply empty shells of the men they used to be. We can see numerous examples of this type of language used within my participants' accounts. Victor for example described how he changed as a result of his partner's abuse:

Honestly, I went from this bubbly happy go lucky, like, chatty, lovely person to…a robot.

And I was! I was a robot. I was literally, I couldn't do my job. I was really struggling at work.

(Victor 25-30)

He later reflected that:

I felt like I was brainwashed, have you ever seen the film Stepford Wives? Honestly, I was that towards the end, I was literally, I was just essentially an inflatable doll. I agreed to everything. I did everything in my power to just make him happy. And bit by bit, I was just empty and grey.

(Victor 25-30)

We can see similar language used by Nikoli:

I think you do lose a lot of yourself through an experience like that, you know. I think, you know, that, with emotional abuse stripping away you know, your core of you…[he] just manipulated my whole mindset you know. The hardest thing about recovering from emotional abuse, and coercive control, is that you've almost been brainwashed. You know, it's brainwashing, you know, I was in a two-man cult, you know, almost!

(Nikoli, 30-40)

In both these accounts, we can observe the way my participants describe how their agency and subjectivity are damaged and marginalised by their experiences of abuse. Victor compares himself to a *"robot"* an *"inflatable doll"* and even a Stepford wife which refers to the women in the titular feminist horror novel who are turned into passive robots by their nefarious husbands. Thus, through metaphor, he highlights the way the relationship turned him into a figurative object for his abuser to use for his pleasure, and thus, like an object, he is a being with no subjective sense of self or agency of his own. We can also see this in the fact that both Victor and Nikoli describe themselves as being brainwashed by their partner. The use of this term points to the violent and external nature of the domination they faced from their abusers. They were robbed of the ability to make meaningful decisions of their own and instead are forced to follow and adopt the subjectivity of their partners. The fact that Nikoli likens this experience to being in a *"two-man cult"* highlights the coercive and controlling nature of this process, as, like in a cult, the victim must bow to the whims of the leader and adopt their understanding of the world as their own, losing themselves in the process. Indeed, many men highlighted how they felt that they lost some core important part of their self, which resulted in feelings of de-personalisation and emptiness, we can note that Victor described himself becoming *"grey"* and lifeless whilst Nikoli explicitly noted that *"you do lose a lot of yourself through an experience like that."* We can however see an even more explicit description of this process if we turn to Stefan's account:

I suffered from depersonalisation for a while. And I think it was a way of my body protecting itself. Not physically, but emotionally, I think it was a way for my mind to kind of switch off…because it was almost like I was a walking zombie for maybe six, seven months, at least…everything felt like it was almost like I was an observer of my actions.

(Stefan, 25-30)

Here we can see Stefan describe the sense of numbness which engulfed him as a result of his abuser's campaign of coercive control. Whilst he describes this process as a potential defence mechanism, this still resulted in the same loss of subjectivity and sense of self as the other men in my study described. This is the result of the assault on the observing self, the slow but progressive destructions of the men's fundamental assumptive worldviews to the point that the men's subjectivity was marginalised and they were made to feel like nothing but objects of their abusers' will and desires. This half-dead state is a confused one full of apparent contradictions and attempts to manage or adapt to the absurdity of the abuse they experience either through futile attempts at sense-making through taking on blame or through emotional numbness and depersonalisation.

Narrative Collapse

At a certain point, however, the men's adaptations to their situation fail to meaningfully mitigate the experience of abuse. It is at this point that the narrative framework which had previously been used to make sense of their experiences, the narrative of committed intimate romance, begins to truly break down and collapse. This is typically the point at which men recognise and label their situation as abusive and come to see themselves as victims, and, in the accounts that my participants gave, is almost always associated with the end of the relationship and their association with their abusers. This process, which I dub "*narrative collapse",* varied in its expression between the different accounts given by the men in my study but all of them occurred when the men's relationship reached what I

term a turning point. This is the moment at which their understanding of this relationship changed, and they were no longer able to view their abuser as a partner within a committed intimate romantic relationship. I wish to pause to clarify that this section does not attempt to suggest that these turning points are the reason the men left their relationships, nor am I seeking to argue that these turning points have any causative effects on the process by which victims leave their abusive partners. As I have taken pains to point out throughout this study, my examination is of the themes and ideas contained within the men's narrative and how they relate to the wider social worlds they inhabit. Why individuals do or do not leave abusive relationships is an incredibly complex topic with its own vein of worthwhile research (Koepsell 2006, Baly 2010, Enander and Holmberg 2010, Meyer 2012) that I do not intend to speak over. With this set-out, let us turn to examine how these turning points were presented within the men's narratives.

The exact nature and content of each of these turning points varied between the men's accounts but a few dominant themes or types emerged. For some of the men in the study, it was their partner's infidelity which acted as a turning point which heralded the collapse of their wider relationship narrative. We can see this in Roman's account where he describes how his discovery that his partner had been cheating on him with another man helped him understand that the relationship was no longer working:

[it was] my values…that you're open and honest, and you're transparent with people around you, whoever is in your life…and that's the thing that any relationship that you have, it's got to be one of trust and if that trust is broken, that's possibly the most powerful driver of collapse, if somebody breaks that trust, then that's likely to trigger something…And, and I just recall that thinking, actually, "He's done it once. He won't do it again. That's it!"

(Roman, 40-50)

For others, this turning point came through an escalation in the violence present in their relationships. Though many of the men had come to expect physical assault from their partners, certain incidents were so threatening or potentially fatal that they seemed to awaken a sense of existential threat within the men. David's account is a good example of this type of turning point, as he described how the moment which heralded the end of his relationship was a particularly violent assault from his partner where he was seriously injured:

He lifted me out and threw me across the dining table and my head went through a plate glass window…of course, I was bleeding out…my face was a mess and I think it was only then that he kind of stopped and, and saw what he'd done and saw that it was actually that he'd gone too far and that he would have some explaining to do about the broken window. Because that would obviously have to get fixed and he started, he started trying to, to clean me up with cotton wool. And I was having none of it.

(David, 50-60)

In reflecting on this moment later in the interview, David highlighted that this event helped him realise that if he had stayed with his partner that he would have been killed:

I knew that if I had gone back to him, you know, he'd nearly killed me when he beat me up and I knew if I'd gone back to him, it would have ended up with me dead.

(David, 50-60)

For another group of men, their turning point came not as a result of actions within the relationship, but rather by interventions from outside of it. For these men, the narrative of committed romance broke down when outside parties highlighted the abusive quality of their relationship and urged them to seek help, often offering their support in the process. We can see this clearly in Ewan's account, as

he described that the turning point which led him to break out of the narrative of committed intimate romance was a friend directly urging him to leave what she saw as an abusive relationship:

A friend, a close friend, who I've known for years and years…I think it was her kind of saying that, that kind of…I kind of knew what he was doing wasn't okay, but when someone else says it quite explicitly, a few other friends had kind of said, you know, "that doesn't feel fair" or these kinds of things. But it was her saying "That behaviour is unacceptable and not okay. And it's going to continue." Em, I think that was kind of what changed.

(Ewan, 30-40)

We can thus see that a variety of different reasons are given for these turning points. However, I argue that what linked all of them was that each represented a fundamental re-appraisal of the nature of the men's romantic relationships. Within this re-appraisal, the men came to realise that their abuser was not a troubled romantic partner who they could save but was instead a source of harm who could never truly be stopped and who would only go on hurting them. They realise, in effect, that the promised land they have been searching for will never come. This realisation was present in many of the men's accounts of their turning points. For example, Frank described that his turning point to leave the relationship came after a particularly violent incident where his partner tried to strangle him:

You know the last assault, when he put his hand around my neck was the final straw. You know his exact words were "I'll kill you before you kill me!" And I knew then that I am not dealing with someone that's rational.

(Frank, 40-50)

Note that a key part of Frank's narrative here is his realisation that his partner was not *"rational."* Implicit in this wording is the fact that Frank's understanding of his partner had shifted. Where once he was a reasonable rational romantic partner, whose trouble could be dealt with, he was now an irrational actor, someone whose violent tendencies were threatening Frank's life, and he could not safely continue to live with. We can see a similar realisation if we turn to Ernie's account of his turning point. Ernie recounted that he had been struggling with suicidal thoughts for much of his relationship with his abuser. This was compounded by the fact that his abuser would frequently blame him for causing problems and undermining his self-esteem. In this excerpt, Ernie described a revelation he had whilst struggling with suicidal thoughts:

I was just sat on the sofa. And I started, I started having suicidal tendencies. I was like, I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to be here anymore. I'm worthless, I'm…I wasn't in a good place. And then all of a sudden it was like someone just flipped the switch and I was like, "no…it's him. It's him! He's [the cause]."

(Ernie, 30-40)

He then went on to say that this realisation helped him to physically resist his abuser after he tried to assault him later that night:

He came over to me and hit me again and again and again and again, and I'd just had enough! And I fought back. Fuck knows where it came from, but I floored him.

(Ernie, 30-40)

Again, like Frank, Ernie's account highlights a shift in his understanding of his abuser, coming to see him as the source of the pain and suicidal thoughts that he had been grappling with. This realisation and shift in his understanding allowed Ernie, within his narrative, to realise he was not at fault and thus begin to challenge his partner for the first time. This shift in the meaning the men attach to their partners' actions is thus key to their ability to move past the narrative of committed intimate romance

which frames their issues through a lens of relationship trouble, and instead sees their partner as malicious, irrational, and dangerous. This process is very neatly summarised by Carson, who noted that a key part of his realisation that he was a victim of abuse, was to stop viewing his partner as someone who he needed to protect, but instead as someone who was actively and willingly hurting him:

But it also felt like things were falling into place a bit, it suddenly made sense being able to see it clearly, for what it was, because for a long time, I wasn't able to see it. Clearly, I couldn't work out what…I couldn't really, I couldn't quite work out what had happened. But to start to think of him, not just as a kind of a mentally ill person who I love, who was doing damaging things but as an abuser. That actually helped me.

(Carson, 40-50)

Carson here explicitly references the transformation in meaning that occurs during this turning point, where the victim stops viewing their partner, as a *"partner",* and starts to view them as an *"abuser."* The use of this word in Carson's account is significant, as it draws attention to how this realisation shifts the men's understanding of their partners' motives and intentions. The partner stops being someone who hurts unintentionally, but willingly, who berates them not because they are sick, but because they want to. This new understanding shattered the old framework the men used to view their relationship through, and with it, the core of the narrative of committed intimate romance, the belief in the soulmate who could sweep them off their feet into a world of passion and intimacy, died with it.

As a result of these turning points then, the narrative of committed intimate romance collapsed, and the men now had no guiding narrative *"map"* (Frank 1995) with which to structure their experience or point in the direction of future action. They were thus, adrift, living in a shattered collapsed world, their identities undermined, and little to no set plan for what comes next. Indeed, examining the men's accounts, we can observe how this process was particularly disorientating and destructive, at least initially. If we return to Frank's narrative, we can observe how he described his initial reaction to the collapse of the relationship:

Interviewer

And when you kind of had this realization, perhaps it was domestic violence. How did that make you feel? Like what was your thought process when that kind of happened?

Participant

It broke me. I'm broken. Someone said to me "If he could get the help he needed. If that made the difference. Would you go back to him?"

I said, "No because this time I'm broken."

I'm done. I can't be in this anymore. whereas previously, I've been back twice.

(Frank, 40-50)

We can see a similar reaction in how Jim describes his emotional state in the aftermath of his relationship with his abuser ending:

You know, [the relationship] left me completely devastated in, in, in a sense of I had lost myself, I lost my self-respect, I'd lost an awful lot of things that took quite a long time to get back.

(Jim, 50-60)

A particularly striking example can be seen if we turn to Oliver's account where, in the aftermath of his relationship ending, he reflected that he did not feel any sense of relief. Instead, he noted that for a

year afterwards, he indulged in heavy drinking and drug taking, all the while feeling angry that his ex-partner had not suffered any of the emotional consequences that he was currently grappling with due to his victimisation:

I was like, okay, so you got what [you] wanted. You're free. So why are you so miserable? I was so miserable. I remained miserable for well over a year, as reflected in the decisions that I was making. And…that's the thing. That's what made me angry… he has gotten over me so easily and here I am with my life in pieces in front of me.

(Oliver, 30-40)

In all of these accounts, we can observe the men struggling in the aftermath of the narrative collapse, and all refer to the impacts and scars that the abuse left them with. Frank felt *"broken"* by his experiences, Jim said he *"lost"* himself, whilst Oliver felt like his life was *"in pieces."* In all of these accounts, the men position themselves as having been diminished or fundamentally damaged by their experiences of abuse, their lives are no longer their own, the people they were before their relationships are gone and instead, they are left in a broken or ruined state, having to pick up the pieces from the shattered remnants left to them. It is in this dark moment in their narratives that we can observe a further divergence in the men's accounts. For some, this is the state in which they ended their interviews, despairing, wounded, harmed, and unsure of what their futures would look like. These men were the minority group, composed of only a handful of accounts in the larger cohort of my participants, yet their narratives were often some of the most striking and visceral. They often lacked attempts to make sense of or generate meaning from their experiences of abuse nor put them into a historical context which would confine them to the past. Instead, their abuse was presented as an ongoing trauma that they struggled to navigate or make sense of to this day. In examining these accounts, we can observe some commonalities between them. Firstly, these men were often only recently out of the abusive relationship which had been the cause of their involvement in the study and were often battling wounds that were still raw and fresh in their minds. We can see an example of this if we look at Fred's account. Fred had only recently ended his relationship with his physically and sexually abusive partner and during our conversation he did not attempt to put a positive spin on his experiences nor attempt to present his trauma as an event confined to the past, instead it was presented as an ongoing pain he grappled with every day:

Am I a victim now? Well, yeah, because I'm still suffering from the effects of the abuse, I guess…I think survivor is a more positive term to use…I think [being a] victim kind of prolongs the sort of feelings attached to the abuse of the relationship. And that's an interesting one. I would like to move on from being a victim…Do I feel like a survivor? I'm surviving. But it's still quite raw, so I guess I'm still a victim.

(Fred, 30-40)

Here Fred expresses a wish that he might one day move on from his trauma *(I would like to move on from being a victim)* but recognises that he is not there yet *(I guess I'm still a victim).* We can see another example of this extant chaos narrative if we turn to Kai's account. Kai had also only recently left his abusive husband, and he spent much of our conversation discussing the deep and lasting impacts that his partner's coercive control had on him and continued to have on him even as we spoke:

The mental abuse is like, you can't see from the outside [but]they left a scar [begins to cry], they left a scar in [my] heart, [my] mind and [my] soul. The physical one you just get a black eye and you can cure… [begins to weep.]

(Kai, 30-40)

In both Kai and Frank's accounts, we can see the ongoing trauma that arises from their experiences is presented not as past events but as ongoing parts of themselves that linger and cause them pain. Indeed, Kai directly compares the mental abuse he experienced at the hands of his partner to a form of scarring that, when compared to physical bruises, will never truly heal. This persistent impact of abuse seems an important or key factor in distinguishing those men who presented an ongoing chaos narrative versus those who relegated it to the past. This was certainly the case for the few men in the study who had continuing contact with their abusers at the time of the interview. For these men, their ongoing abuse was not the result of residual trauma but part of a continued pattern of abuse perpetrated by their ex-partners which remained part of their lives at the time of their interview. We can see a painful example of this type of ongoing chaos narrative in this section of Frank's interview where he discusses the ongoing problems he encountered trying to recover property he had left in the shared home with his abuser during his flight from the relationship:

And I'm writing a blog at the moment, and getting out about grieving and stuff, because it's, I've got no one to talk to…and I'm going through waves of grief at the moment, it feels like my heart breaking, physically. And it will be the most stupid things that set me off. I was sitting at my desk yesterday, I had to come into this room and burst into tears. Because I don't know how to deal with the fact that I've had to leave everything…because, and he's changed the locks. So, I'm banging my head against the wall with the police with mental health services trying to get…A.) him support but B.) access to my stuff. And that's been abysmal…It's a challenging situation.

(Frank, 40-50)

Here Frank draws attention to the ongoing nature of his abuse, highlighting his continued involvement with police and support services to retrieve his lost possessions and the continued frustration he feels at the inability of these services to help him. Moreover, this process is linked to a continued experience of intense emotional turmoil which he describes as *"waves of grief"* and likens to physical pain *(it feels like my heart breaking physically).* We can thus see that for Frank and other men like him, the chaos narrative remains an ongoing part of their experience of victimhood which continued to dominate their lives due to the continued involvement of their abusers.

Despite the harrowing nature of these accounts, it is worth keeping in mind that they are in the minority, with most of the men in my study placing the chaos narrative firmly in their past as an artefact of a previous state of unrest rather than a continued part of their current reality. Moreover, the fact that in all of these minority cases, the victim had either only recently left their abusive relationship or still had continued contact with their abuser is suggestive of the wider function that chaos narratives play in the experiences of Queer victims of IPV. That is, chaos narratives are a stage in the process of managing the stigma, shame, and trauma which arises in the wake of victimisation. The chaos narrative is a reflection of the uncertainty and destruction of self which occurs in the social worlds of the men exposed to IPV, and for the men who fronted their accounts with this narrative, it is possible that either due to the recentness of their abusive experiences or their ongoing contact with their abusive partner that they had not yet found a way to incorporate their new victim identity into a renewed sense of self. In essence, they had not yet managed to escape the narrative wreck of their victimisation and generate a new *"map"* (Frank 1995) which could guide them out of the chaos.

However, for the other group of men in the study, this process of narrative collapse, though often disorientating and deeply frightening, presented an opportunity to move on. Even if they were broken, or had lost part of themselves, they were in Oliver's words *"free"* from their abuser. Now outside of their relationship, they had the opportunity to rebuild their lives, and if they were no longer the person they were before the abuse, then they had a chance to discover who they were in its aftermath. We can see this cautious optimism in several men's accounts of this period of narrative collapse. Dan for example noted that though the process of leaving his partner was deeply traumatising, it allowed him to push himself back from the brink:

Weirdly, in a sense, I'm kind of glad it did happen. In that, I was able to see myself at rock bottom and build. Because I [feared that] felt rock bottom would be like, far worse, but it wasn't that bad. I know now, no matter how I feel right now, if I have a setback, even though I go to rock bottom, it's not that bad. I can get back and work on it.

(Dan, 25-30)

Dan here recognises the trauma and destruction that his relationship had on him, recognising that he was at *"rock bottom"* yet, in this pit he finds hope in a potential future outside of the narrative wreckage he finds himself in. We can find a similar sentiment if we turn to Roman's narrative. Roman, like Dan, reflected that this period of transition and chaos was incredibly painful and traumatising, but he saw within it an opportunity to move forward and to remake himself in light of his struggles into something new and better:

That is something about very difficult relationships, that good things can come from it, because it can help you become a little bit stronger, stronger, in a sense, that yes, certainly things went terribly wrong. But it gets to a point I think in human existence when you get ground down so much that you don't tolerate it anymore. There is that point in some people where that change needs to happen and when you look back on that moment, when it happens, you realize that you can never put yourself in that situation again!

(Roman, 40-50)

Again, like Dan, Roman does not dismiss the significance of the narrative collapse he lived through, noting that things went *"terribly wrong"* and that he was *"ground down"* by his relationship, yet in this wreckage, he recognises the potential for growth and the ability to move on from the trauma he encountered. It thus seems to be the case that this destruction and devastation, this assault on the self, creates the opportunity to reconstruct the self-anew.

Conclusion: Outliving Oneself

My findings here have built on the work of previous victimological scholars in demonstrating how victimhood and trauma constitute a fundamental assault on the individuals' sense of self which can severely impact their well-being and identity. This assault on the self occurred both in a social sense through the victim's isolation from their larger social networks, and the shattering of the core assumptions and beliefs of their inner world. In particular, my work has shown the continuing relevance of Mill's conceptualisation of IPV as an *"assault on the self"* and indeed my preceding discussion has significantly elaborated and expanded on her original conceptualisation of the process. I have demonstrated that the loss of the *"observing self"* that she describes can be properly understood through Janoff-Bulman's (1992) framework of the *"assumptive world"* which is shattered through trauma and victimisation, and which consequently disrupts the sense of stability, meaning, and innate moral worth that is necessary for individuals to develop a secure and coherent sense of self. The men in my study were subjected to tactics of abuse and control which worked to undermine their sense of themselves as moral subjects who had agency over their decisions, as their abusers worked to undermine their agency and turn them into objects of their will to be dominated and abused at their pleasure. This finding adheres with a great deal of other IPV scholarship which has long documented that this process is a core part of the experience of female victims of male relationship abuse (see for example Ferraro and Johnson 1983, Enander and Holmberg 2008, Williamson 2010) and my research demonstrates that these frameworks apply to the experiences of Queer male victims. The men experienced dominance and coercive control as Stark (2007) would define it, and their status as men did not appear to exert any significant mitigating impact on their ability to resist this process.

Moreover, this chapter has highlighted the relevance of Frank's (1995) framework of the chaos narrative to understand the men's experience of IPV and this assault on the self. The men's accounts

highlighted the confusion and disorientation of IPV, demonstrating that their ability to make sense of their abusers' motivations and actions was undermined by their partner's coercive control and, as a consequence, produced narratives suffused with powerlessness, ambiguity, and uncertainty. However, these narrative tensions eventually give way to a breaking point in which the larger narrative of committed intimate romance collapsed and the men are left to navigate a sea of narrative wreckage. I argue that this process is analogous to the process that Brison (2002) described as being central to the experience of coping in the aftermath of violence, that of *"outliving oneself"* (ibid p.37-38). The men in my study experienced a fundamental assault on the core of their beings, one which unmade them, unravelled their previous social identities, and shattered their assumptions about the self and the world that they inhabited. When the relationship narrative used to give this period meaning and value in their lives breaks downs and collapses, the men are forced to reckon with these shattered identities. Whilst some men struggled to find meaning in this devastation, most were able to look to the future and understand the task that lay before them; that they would need to, again using Brison's (2002) words, *"remake"* (ibid p.66) themselves and construct a new identity to make meaning out of their experiences. It is this process we will now consider in the final empirical chapter of my thesis.

Chapter Eight

Rebuilding the Self: Stories of Recovery, Triumph, and Transformation

Introduction

In the last chapter, we observed how my participants experienced abuse as an *"assault on the self"* which attacked their wider social identities, shattered their assumptive worldviews, and collapsed their narratives of committed intimate romance, leaving them adrift in a sea of narrative wreckage. I noted at the end of that chapter that whilst a minority of participants displayed a continuing chaos narrative, the majority were able to envisage a future for themselves in the aftermath of their victimisation, to imagine a life beyond their abusive relationship and through this, see the possibility of accepting an identity free of stigma. This chapter will examine this process to understand how the men began to generate a new sense of meaning out of their experiences. To do this, they attempted to reconcile the stigmatised and shameful social identity of victimhood with their self-perception as moral agents who had control over their lives. This process, I argue, can be understood through Evans and Lindsay's (2008) concept of incorporation, in which the victim does not ever truly recover from their victimisation, but instead, finds a way to incorporate the status of victimhood into a new social identity. However, as I argued in Chapter Two, Evans and Lindsay's (2008) framework is too vague, in that it does not show *how* victims concretely engage with this process of incorporation or how it may be impacted by larger cultural narratives of victimhood and recovery. To attend to this problem, I return to Arthur Frank's (1995) framework of illness narratives, to demonstrate how this framework can be fruitfully applied to the experiences of the men in my study. I argue that by applying Frank's narrative framework, we can better understand how my participants made sense of their experiences of victimhood, how they incorporated these experiences into a new sense of self, and how these incorporation narratives were influenced by wider cultural norms. From analysing my participants' accounts, I argue that two of Frank's (1995) illness narratives can be seen in the stories of incorporation the men gave as part of their interviews. These were:

- *the restitution narrative*

and

- *the quest narrative*

Both narratives represented attempts by my participants to create meaning out of their experiences of trauma, and each of them allows us to link the men's experiences to wider cultural narratives within our society and observe how they influence the symbolic worlds the men inhabit. Let us then look at these two narratives in turn.

The Restitution Narrative

The restitution narrative, as Frank (1995) described it, is the predominant narrative of illness within our society and aims to downplay the impact of the disease on the individual's life. Instead, it focuses on presenting an idealised notion of the complete and total recovery in which the patient is cured and made whole again (Frank 1995 p.77). In the restitution narrative the patient may grapple or struggle with their illness, but they always eventually overcome it and return to their original state of health without any lingering effects of their sickness (ibid). Applying this framework to the experience of crime victims, the restitution narrative occurs when the victim attempts to downplay or marginalise their experiences of abuse and present an account in which they can return completely to their old life as if their victimisation had never happened. From reviewing the accounts of my participants, I was able to detect a few uses of the restitution narrative within the larger sample even if, as I will go on to explain in greater detail, they appeared as a distinct minority.

For some of the men I spoke to, the restitution narrative appeared as an attempt to frame their experiences of abuse as a historical event, one which no longer impacted them in their current lives and which they had successfully consigned to the past. In this way, the restitution narrative was a narrative of recovery, as the men presented themselves as being made whole from the experience of abuse and fully able to return to the world free of the stigma and shame of their past experiences. However, when I probed this narrative further, it revealed itself to be less solid than its initial appearance would suggest. Though the restitution narrative appeared within several of my participants' transcripts it rarely if ever took the place of the dominant or primary narrative in each account and instead typically gave way to the quest narrative. Moreover, even when men attempted to present a restitution narrative as the sole or primary narrative during our interview, they often frequently contradicted themselves and inadvertently revealed a much more complicated and less sure narrative of recovery. We can see a good example of exactly this type of dynamic in Kieran's account. Early in our interview, Kieran took great pains to emphasise that he had recovered from his abuse and had, in effect, completely moved on from his experiences. When I asked him whether he still considered himself a victim of IPV he said:

[exasperated sigh] I think other people might say [that], but I don't think I would no. I look at it as something that happened in my life, not something that happened to me. It was a really shitty set of circumstances and that's about it.

(Kieran, 30-40)

Here Kieran symbolically consigns his experiences of abuse to the past, collapsing years of emotional and physical abuse from his partner into a *"shitty set of circumstances"* to which he had moved on from. Moreover, he takes pain to argue that his abuse was an event which did not happen to *him* but merely occurred in his life. This appears to be a strange distinction to make, but it could be taken as an attempt to minimise his experiences of abuse by separating its impact from himself and transforming it into a mere historical event in his life narrative. This, on the surface at least, appears like a proto-typical restitution narrative, Kieran has recovered from his abuse and is whole once again. I argue that this can be seen as a primitive form of stigma and shame management through rebutting the discrediting label of victimhood. Here the participants do not directly challenge the stigmatisation of victimhood as an identity but instead construct a narrative in which they are no longer attached to it. It is something that happened in the past, but which could not be used to define them now. From this, I argue that the restitution narrative performs an analogous function to the stigma management strategy of *"avoiding"* (Meisenbach 2010 p.280). In this strategy, the stigmatised individual does not attempt to challenge the existence of the stigma, but instead merely contests that it applies to them or their experiences (ibid). It is in effect an attempt to say, *"Whilst I agree that's bad, it has nothing to do with me"* (ibid p.280). The restitution narrative in effect performs this avoidance by positing victimhood as a past social identity that should no longer be attached to the individual, and thus should not attach stigma to them as a result. Applying this to Kieran, this statement can be seen as a means to distance himself from the identity of victimhood and through this avoid the stigma attached to the label. This is a tidy and simple narrative of recovery, but it is one that, as I continued to interview Kieran, began to crumble. As he opened up, Kieran disclosed that his recovery was not nearly as complete as he had initially presented. Rather than being merely *a "shitty set of circumstances"* his abuse had instead left lasting impacts which continued to haunt him years after he had left his abuser. This particularly came to the fore when he discussed his relationship with his current husband, as he noted that the shadow of his victimisation still appeared when his partner did things that reminded him of his abuser. For example, he noted that:

Even though I've been through loads of therapy about it, I've kind of dealt with most of my stuff around it, it feels like it's always going to be there a little bit because something will trigger it off. Like [my abuser] was obsessed with his bloody bicycle and he would go out cycling for hours on end

sometimes. [So] When I first got with my husband…he started cycling to the gym and back [and] it's…stupid things like that will just trigger a massive thing and I was, I started having panic attacks and all sorts and I had to get back into therapy again.

(Kieran, 30-40)

Here Kieran undercuts his previous restitution narrative by demonstrating that his abuse does not exist as a historic set of *"shitty circumstances"* but instead acts as a recurrent part of his life which can re-appear at seemingly innocuous moments to cause distress and panic. Later in the interview, he gave another example of exactly this type of reaction when he described an incident where his husband played a videogame his abuser had been fond of:

God this sounds really stupid. But I like the game Animal Crossing and [my abuser] and I used to play together quite a lot…[so] a little while back…my husband downloaded it to give it a go playing. and I had a brief moment where I was like "Ahhh!"

(Kieran, 30-40)

In both instances, we can see that when allowed to fully elaborate on his experiences of recovering from IPV, Kieran's initial restitution narratives give way to a much more complicated picture. In this more nuanced narrative, his abuse remains a decidedly present and painful part of his life; though he has discarded the social identity of victimhood, Kieran had not fully returned to who he was before he was victimised, and his experiences of abuse still clearly haunted him, to the point that even innocuous activities such as video gaming and cycling caused him sufficient distress that he sought professional help. This pattern made a recurrent appearance in the accounts of men who utilised the restitution narrative, where an initial account of strength and recovery eventually peeled back to reveal still lingering wounds. Ali for example downplayed the negative impacts of his victimisation throughout his interview and initially claimed that he had not been seriously affected by his experiences of abuse which included emotional abuse and cyber-stalking:

Yeah. But I got over it quite quickly, more, more quickly than I anticipated. Because I think I had other things to look up to in life and it's just that…Okay, this happened. It's not a big deal. It's not a big deal anymore. It's…[you] just learn to let it go. It's sort of I think, a part of maturing…I mean, what am I gonna achieve by crying?

(Ali, 30-40)

However, once the conversation progressed, he began to present a much more non-linear narrative of recovery, where he highlighted that he had struggled with bouts of depression even years after the relationship ended. He attributed this depression to feelings of isolation from his friends and family who he feared could not understand his experiences as both a Queer man and a survivor of IPV:

My parents never understood what I was going through…or even if I'm talking to my friends from the [Queer] community, they would not particularly understand my situation and I can't expect them to understand my situation, because it's very different from what everyone goes to…like…I was very suicidal. I felt like "Oh, what the fuck am I doing in life? I'm a failure. I will never do anything good."

(Ali, 30-40)

Ali, like Kieran, demonstrates the complexities of how victims manage their narratives of self in the aftermath of abusive relationships. We can see how easy and simple narratives of restitution that attempt to present a simple linear map of recovery give way to more nuanced and complex relationships with the past, under closer scrutiny. Indeed, this finding accords with Evans and Lindsay's (2008) research, as they rejected the notion that these victims ever truly recovered from their experiences of IPV. Recovery, they argued, was a far too simple and linear account of their

experiences and worked to mask the ongoing impacts that abuse played in their lives (ibid). Indeed, it was this very finding which led Evans and Lindsay to argue for the incorporation framework in the first place. Similarly, Barnes (2013) in her research with Queer female survivors found that whilst some of the survivors she spoke to attempted to present restitution narratives which downplayed their experiences of abuse, these accounts often gave way to more complicated narratives of recovery when she probed her interviewees further. My work adds to these findings by demonstrating that Queer male victims are not unique among survivors, and it may be then, that the experiences of IPV exert such a potent and lasting impact that the restitution narrative is not fully able to provide an account which properly grapples with these experiences. Instead, the men are forced to turn to a narrative which can accurately and honestly account for and represent the enormity of their suffering. With this understanding, we can now turn to look at a narrative that attempts to do just that.

The Quest Narrative

The final of Frank's (1995) narratives of illness, the quest narrative, was by far the dominant narrative of incorporation which appeared within the accounts of my participants. In Frank's original formulation, the quest narrative appeared when the individual recognised that they had been fundamentally changed by their illness and could never truly recover or return to the person they were before (Frank 1995 p.116-119). Instead, they must undertake a journey to discover how to live as this new person and manage the change illness has brought to their lives (ibid). For the men in my study, the quest narrative performed a similar function. In this case, these narratives were to recognise and honour the lasting impact that the trauma and abuse had left them. Even men who had spent decades separated from their abusers drew on this narrative structure to highlight how they had been fundamentally changed by their experiences and had, in effect, become new people due to their victimisation. If the restitution narrative is a way to deny the reality and significance of victimhood, then the quest narrative is the acceptance that victimhood, or the changes victimhood brought about, are in some form always part of the speaker's present life. This recognition of change was present in the accounts of most of my participants. Ewan, for example, discussed how his comparatively short abusive relationship had impacted him by recounting an incident where he saw his ex-partner across the bar:

[It affected me] kind of more, more than I realize …I was in a pub and so I did actually see him. He came in [and] I kind of you know, immediately kind of wasn't in the same space. And a friend was with me. And I thought…I was a bit anxious, but I thought I was kind of hiding it quite well. And he actually expressed some kind of concern too, he was like "I had no idea that's affected you so much." He kind of said you know "Like you closed down, you couldn't concentrate, you know, you weren't in the room, and you left really early that night."

(Ewan, 25-30)

Later in our interview, he described another incident where he and his then-new romantic partner got into an argument. This instantly triggered memories of his abuser which caused him to react very negatively and in his own words *"freak out."* He went on to say:

I have a much kind of shorter fuse for stuff like that now and that's something I only realized quite recently…I had no idea that that was there.

(Ewan, 25-30)

In both excerpts, Ewan draws attention to the lingering impact that his abuse has on him even months after his separation from his abuser. He highlights how his abuse has fundamentally changed him from the person he was noting that he can no longer tolerate things he once was able to and drawing attention to the significance his experience of victimisation has in his life going forward *([It affected me] kind of more than I realise).* We can see an even more dramatic example of this quest narrative in

the following excerpt from my interview with David. David had been in a relationship with an incredibly physically and sexually violent partner who, in one particularly brutal episode, raped him on the living room floor of their flat. When I spoke to David decades had passed and he was now married to another man, yet despite this, he still discussed in detail the continued impact that this incident had on him:

You know, and that is something I do get quite vivid flashbacks. Even now, even 30 years later now the sort of the smell of the carpet, the texture of the carpet against my face and in my nose the pain, the bleeding, the aftereffects, you know, that was nasty. And now I can sit here and describe it to you in detail but there are no words that can kind of…that are strong enough.

(David, 50-60)

Again, like Ewan, David presents the pain of victimhood not as a past trauma from which he has been returned to a state of peace but instead as a present companion in his life which can recur through flashbacks even decades after the event. In this way, victimhood, or at least the impacts of victimhood, are presented as a component of the speakers' life long after they have left the abusive relationship. This is the core component of the quest narrative, that their status as victims is an ongoing part of their lives that must be accepted and negotiated as a daily practice. We can see a clear articulation of this idea in this section of my interview with Alistair:

Whether it was 10 years ago, five years ago, or a year ago, or a year and a bit ago like me, if you've been through [IPV] you are [a victim]. And I think, in my opinion, it's almost naive to not consider yourself a victim if you've been through domestic violence because it is what it is. Being a victim entails being subject to trauma. You know, if…you're a car crash victim, you're always going to be a car crash victim because you were in a car crash.

(Alistair, 18-25)

Here Alistair argues that victimhood is a permanent status that can never truly be taken away from an individual. The trauma of victimhood leaves a mark that cannot be removed and must instead simply be lived with. This idea, that victimhood caused a change in a person that was to some extent permanent was a core part of the vast majority of the accounts in my study, and this places them firmly within the camp of the quest narrative. For them, to be a victim is to be changed by their experiences, to live in a new reality in a post-victimised world and be unable to fully return to the person they were before. This is an explicit rejection of the *"avoiding"* (Meisenbach 2010) strategy of stigma management found in the restitution narrative, yet this acceptance of change and the ongoing impact of abuse only tells half of the story. It recognises that victimhood has resulted in a change, but it has not told us exactly what this change is or crucially how it manifests in the lives of the men I spoke to. Moreover, this does not tell us how this narrative enables my participants to manage the stigma and shame of victimisation in the way the restitution narrative did; whilst they are not avoiding stigma, we do not know what technique of stigma management is being used in its place. This fact presented an initial stumbling block during my analysis, as though I was able to easily identify the quest narrative within the accounts of my participants, these individual narratives were incredibly different from one another, and each seemed to have its own way of managing the impacts of victimhood and negotiating the shame and stigma that were attached to the label of the victim. However, I was able to make sense of these distinctions by returning to Frank's (1995) original formulation of the quest narrative wherein he presents a further subdivision of the parent narrative into three smaller sub-narratives, each of which in their way worked to manage the change that illness brings to an individual's sense of identity.

These were:

- *the memoir*

- *the auto-myth*

and

- *the manifesto.*

When I applied these sub-narratives to the experiences of my participants, I was then able to properly understand how the men in my study navigated the changes brought on by their victimhood and how this related to their navigation of the stigma and shame attached to this new social status. Let us look at them in turn.

The Memoir

The memoir is what Frank calls the *"gentlest style of quest story"* (Frank 1995, p.120). By this, he means that the memoir makes no grandiose claims or attempts to sensationalise or dramatize the experiences of the speaker. Instead, the changes brought on by their illness are presented in a simple matter-of-fact way with the end goal of the *"incorporation…of the illness into the writers' life"* (ibid p.120). The illness is thus contextualised as part of a wider life narrative and story which continues to inform the life of the speaker but not in a way that is profound or revolutionary. For my participants, this was the single most common form of narrative in their accounts. In these memoir narratives, the men presented their experiences of IPV as significant events in their lives which still had lasting consequences, but that which they were often attempting to simply deal with and move on from. The predominant notion contained within these narratives, therefore, was a simple and often stoic idea that though the men were changed by their experiences of abuse, life must go on regardless. We can see a paradigmatic example of this type of memoir narrative from Dan when he said:

As I say I was the victim…nothing can take that away, but I've come a long way since. I mean…moving away to that point where I can say "I wasn't a victim." I could see that and that might be helpful. But I'm more of a realist in the fact that I say, well, it did happen. There's nothing I can do to erase that. But I've moved on from it.

(Dan, 25-30)

Though Dan considers the possibility of rejecting a victim identity, he instead concludes by affirming that he can never truly *"erase"* what happened to him. He is a victim of his experiences and all that remains is to attempt to move on with life regardless. We can see another example of this kind of thinking in a revealing section of Mani's interview:

To me, it is what it is…I've kept myself busy. I've moved around, I've travelled, and I felt the same. It's been on my mind in California, it's been on my mind in Asia, it's been on my mind in Europe, it's been on my mind at home, it's been on my mind at work. And it just doesn't leave. Because it kind of is what it is.

(Mani, 40-50)

Like Dan, Mani presents a rather matter-of-fact appraisal of his experiences, reflecting that his victimisation will always be part of his life no matter where he goes, and concludes by saying that his solution is to accept that this is simply reality, and he must deal with it. In both accounts, we can see these men present victimhood as a persistent part of their lives, not as something to be celebrated but simply something to be managed as they make their way through the world. In this way, the memoir departs from the restitution narrative in that it does not attempt to deny the impact of the abuse or confine it to the past, but instead attempts to place this abuse within the context of the men's lives, accept the changes it has caused, and then attempt to live despite them. The memoir acts, I argue, as a form of stigma management, taking the deeply shameful and often stigmatised identity of victimhood and attempting to move it away from the centre of the individual's identity whilst not denying its

continued presence as in the restitution narrative. In this way, the Memoir functions in a similar manner to Evans and Lindsay's (2008) concept of *"incorporation."* It recognises that the debilitating impact of IPV can never fully be erased but instead must be moved to the periphery of the individual's life, still present but no longer the dominant or sole label to define them. In this way, the memoir works to remedy many of the fears my participants had that their experiences will forever brand them with the master status of victim, forever condemning them to a life where they are identified solely with weakness, passivity, and trauma. Thus, in presenting their memoir narratives they expressed a desire to both recognise and accept their victimisation but to similarly not have it define them. We can see clear examples of this in Ali's account:

I no longer want to associate or identify myself [as a victim] Because I'm trying to move on. I'm trying to create my own identity with me and not the baggage that I'm carrying. So tomorrow, if you're going to see me, if you're going to meet me, I would not want you to look at me as if I, "oh, he was that victim?" I mean, [that] is a piece [of me]…I am not ashamed of these instances. It's just that I do not want them to become my identity.

(Ali, 25-30)

Ali here expressed that he wants to avoid the label of victimhood dominating his identity *(I no longer want you to look at me as if 'oh he was that victim'),* in effect becoming his *"master status"* (Hughes 1945) but simultaneously he recognises that victimhood has changed him and that its impacts remain with him even as he attempts to live his life free from it *(I mean that is a piece [of me]).* I argue that the memoir works to resolve or at least manage this tension, in that it allows the speaker to incorporate and honour the impact of their victimisation whilst, in their view, preventing it from becoming a dominant social status which would work to discredit them. In this way, the memoir accords with the stigma management technique of *"passive acceptance"* (Meisenbach 2010 p.278) in which the individual does not deny the applicability of the stigmatising label and merely works to find a way to manage or incorporate it into their identity. However, I argue that the memoir is only partly effective in managing the impact of the stigma and shame of victimhood because implicitly, it still holds that victimhood is shameful. Rather than rebutting the stigma of victimisation, the memoir instead attempts to minimise and privatise its impact to the periphery and avoids actively tackling the social status of victimhood. The men's victimhood becomes a private shame they are obliged to live with rather than something which is to be celebrated. Though Ali may say in this excerpt that he is not ashamed of his experiences as a victim, the vehemence by which he seeks to marginalise this part of his identity and keep it at the periphery speaks to a potential underlying fear of the consequences should he become perceived exclusively as a victim. In this way, the memoir is perhaps only slightly effective in managing the stigma and shame associated with victimisation, and this allows us to turn our attention to the next facet of the quest narrative, which does not try to marginalise victimhood but instead presents it as a vehicle for dramatic personal transformation.

The Auto-Mythology

The auto-mythology is a much less gentle form of quest narrative than the memoir. Frank argued that it comes into existence when the patient frames the changes brought on by their illness as a means of personal or even spiritual growth (Frank 1995 p.122). In essence, the speaker argues that they have been transformed by their experiences and have gained some deeper insights into the human condition as a result of their quest (ibid). In my research, I found that the auto-myth was the second most common quest narrative after the memoir, and the version I uncovered was very similar to Frank's original formulation. For the men in my study, auto-mythology narratives were used to frame the experience of victimisation as one that, though painful and often deeply traumatic, acted as a way for them to improve themselves, gain new skills or knowledge, or give them an appreciation of the virtues they used to navigate their abusive situation. In essence, the auto-mythology narrative functioned to re-frame IPV in such a way as to emphasise what the speaker saw as the positive outcomes of their

experiences. It is thus a deeply personal type of narrative, one that focuses on interpersonal development and growth to which abuse is often framed as a type of catalyst. We can see a clear-cut example of this kind of narrative in this excerpt from Nate's account:

For many, many months, I would say [my relationship] negatively shaped me. But now I don't feel it's a negative thing. I feel it's a positive thing. Because I'm able to talk about it to other people…in a way, I suppose I'm helping you do something that ultimately something good will come out of, and that's where I sit with it. That, yeah, it happened. It was bloody horrible. I'd never want it to happen to me again. And I've never let it happen to me again. But it has given me the insight and strength to be able to help other people where perhaps, I may not have done before.

(Nate, 50-60)

Here Nate explicitly frames experiences with abuse as a factor in his self-development. The pain and suffering inflicted upon him by his partner become, in this narrative framing, a vehicle for growth and development to which he previously did not have access. This narrative of growth through suffering appeared frequently in the auto-mythologies I discovered in my participants' accounts, and I was surprised that participants who spent much of their interviews describing horrific experiences of abuse were then able to express gratitude for having gone through them. We can see a good example of this if we return to David's account. Earlier in this chapter, I noted that David had experienced repeated violent sexual assaults from his partner alongside frequent beatings, however despite this trauma he presented a very clear auto-mythology when he attempted to make sense of his experience:

I was saying this…today, [my abuse] was a learning opportunity if you like to look at it in a positive way…you know, they say there's no failure, only feedback, and my God I got feedback from that! [mutual laughter] …you know, I very much, [sighs] [this] sounds really weird [but] I value what I went through because it enables me to help people…like people who come to me, who are in similar situations, and I can give them the benefit of my experience, I can talk about what helped me.

(David, 50-60)

Here David can find value in what happened to him, noting that despite the hardships he faced he found ways to use this experience to grow as a person and benefit others with his knowledge and experience. It is worth noting here that the auto-mythology does not in any way attempt to underplay or diminish the impact of the abuse itself, quite the contrary. In most of the auto-Mythologies present in my accounts, the participants instead took great pains to emphasise the negative impact their abuse has had or continues to have on their lives. I have already highlighted that David found meaning in the relationship despite continuing to suffer flashbacks to his rape. What then are we to make of the auto-mythologist claims of personal transformation in the face of these men's encounters with violence and abuse?

This phenomenon of personal growth in the aftermath of serious trauma is not unusual, and indeed there is a burgeoning body of psychological literature which has examined the phenomena of so-called *"PTSD-related growth"* (Zoellner and Maercker 2006) which seems to suggest that pro-social or beneficial changes can occur to individuals in the aftermath of serious traumatic experiences. However, this does not mean we should take the claims of these men unquestioningly given that much of this same literature has raised the possibility that such growth is an illusionary coping mechanism rather than representative of genuine personal development (Davis et al 1995). Moreover, as we will discuss later in the chapter, there may be significant social pressures on these men to present narratives which attempt to re-evaluate the outcome of their victimisation to highlight the positive and minimise the ongoing impact of trauma. Moreover, we can consider how auto-mythology operates as a means of rebutting and challenging the stigma associated with victimhood. I argue that auto-mythology represents a narrative of triumph that stands in contrast to the memoir's narrative of coping. Where in the latter, victimhood is presented as a permanent wound that must be managed to

simply get on with life, in the former victimhood becomes a crucible in which the man is transformed into something better, or at the very least, is made stronger, wiser, and more insightful by their experiences. In doing this, by presenting themselves as a phoenix rising from the ashes, those who adopt this narrative symbolically reject the stereotypical image of the victim as weak, passive, and broken. They are instead transformed into powerful and active agents who can not only thrive but even help others with their knowledge. In this way, the auto-mythology can be seen as a means of stigma management, a means to defeat the image of the weak, passive, and vulnerable victim through in effect transcending it.

Indeed, the auto-mythology explicitly accords with what Meisenbach calls the *"transcendence"* strategy of stigma management (Meisenbach 2010 p.283). In this strategy, the stigmatised individual accepts the inherent stigmatisation of their spoiled social identity but recontextualises it by arguing that it has allowed them to achieve a higher purpose (ibid). In this way, the stigmatised individual attempts to generate a new values system in which the benefits of the stigma significantly outweigh the costs (ibid). This stigma management strategy can be found in other victimological studies. Peter Dunn (2012) for example noted that the victims of hate crime who he interviewed often attempted to re-frame their experiences of violence as part of a transitory process that allowed them to grow and develop into new and better people. Moreover, Silke Meyer's (2016) research with female victims of IPV found that these victims often undertook a similar symbolic transformation in which they attempted to redefine themselves as stronger, wiser, and better than their old selves in the aftermath of escaping from their abusive relationships. In both cases, and my research, we can observe victims attempting to transcend the stigma of their victimhood by crafting a narrative in which their trauma and pain are recontextualised as simply a hard step on a path to greater things.

However, again, I wish to caution against a purely positive interpretation of these findings. Key to my reticence here is the fact that these narratives do not in and of themselves challenge the source of the stigma and shame which are attached to victimhood. They are fundamentally personal stories of transformation which typically do not link the experiences of the individual victim to the wider social processes which create victimisation and the stigma which attaches to it. To find narratives which do attempt this task, we must turn to the final sub-narrative of Frank's quest narrative.

The Manifesto

The manifesto is what Frank calls the *"least gentle"* (Frank 1995 p.120) of the quest narratives and by this, he means that it is by far the most disruptive and often conflict-ridden of the three. This arises from the fact that the manifesto is a quest narrative in which the individual's personal journey is linked to a larger social injustice and is typically accompanied by calls for social transformation (ibid p.121-122). In the accounts of my participants, the manifesto was in the minority compared to the memoir, and the auto-mythology, representing only a handful of accounts in the wider sample. Moreover, many of the manifesto narratives appeared at first glance to mirror the auto-mythology, as both often concerned moments of transformation and the acquisition of new knowledge. However, the key difference between the manifesto and auto-mythology narratives within my participants' accounts was the focus of this transformation. The auto-mythology is a fundamentally personal narrative which focuses on individual transformation and development. Even if the plight of others is mentioned, the ability to help them is framed through what this altruism represents in the context of the individual's self-development as a transformed subject rising above their victimisation. In contrast, in the manifesto, any transformation or change for the positive is directly linked to structural and social injustices which must be collectively faced and challenged. The manifesto is thus a political narrative whilst the auto-mythology is a personal one. We can see an example of this in Adnan's narrative. Adnan works for an organisation which helps and supports Queer Muslims, and he reflected in his interview that his decision to take up this job was in part spurred by his recovery from an abusive relationship whilst visiting Mecca:

I was reluctant to go [to Mecca] because I wasn't feeling very religious at all, like I was in a very dark place [after the relationship]. And it's only when I went to Mecca that I…it gave me that opportunity to be more self-aware, when you're stuck in the middle of a desert with nobody around it does give you time to reflect...and I made a promise to myself that when I would get back to the UK, I would start looking into ways to help other men not go down the toxic path that I went down. And that's when I got involved in the work, I do.

(Adnan, 30-40)

This at first appears to be a classic auto-mythological account, with the participant framing their recovery from abuse as a case of personal, and in this case deeply spiritual, transformation. However, when we look at the rest of Adnan's interview, we begin to see that this transformation is not a purely personal one. Adnan spoke about how his work is premised on tackling both the homophobia he finds within the Muslim community, but also the Islamophobia and racism he and his fellow Queer Muslims experience in the wider Queer community:

So, you know, that, some of the stuff that, you know, I've come across, people have this impression of the community being all rainbows and unicorns, but the sad reality is, people are people, people have unconscious biases. People have…can be racist, can be Islamophobic. It doesn't matter if they are Queer or not.

(Adnan, 30-40)

Here Adnan's narrative moves from purely personal to a political account in which he presents a critique of the Queer Community's latent racism and Islamophobia and links his own experiences to this wider structural oppression. In this way, we see that the manifesto links itself to wider social problems beyond the struggles of the individual victim. For the other manifesto narratives present in my sample, the larger structural issues typically concerned the experiences of Queer male victims, and we can see this in the following excerpts from my interview with Oswald:

I got quite angry…when there would sort of be things on the news about domestic violence. And you know, they would be talking about violence committed against women, I would always kind of say…men can be in abusive relationships as well! They don't seem to think that that actually happens! I think it goes under-reported because a man doesn't want to seem weak. It's, again, this whole idea of toxic masculinity and heteronormativity...I guess, you know, I kind of want to make people aware that this does happen to men in same-sex relationships.

(Oswald, 40-50)

Here Oswald brings larger structural issues of service provision, toxic masculinity, and heteronormativity into his narrative of victimisation. In these manifestos, experiences of victimisation are not separate individual stories of pain, chaos, coping, and perhaps triumph, but rather, are embedded into wider structures of oppression in which the pain of their circumstances extends beyond them and can be mirrored in the experiences of others. We can see another striking example of this if we turn to Owen's account. Owen presented perhaps the grandest manifesto narrative of the entire sample. He was the victim of an abusive relationship whilst in secondary school where his partner had raped him. In discussing the aftermath of the event and the ongoing impact of his abuse Owen said that he came to link the violence he experienced from his partner to larger social systems of oppression and violence. In particular, he came to believe that he could link his own experiences of rape with how his native Welsh culture had been colonized by the English and consequently the wider system of imperialism which he believed was responsible for climate change:

I view [attacks on the Welsh language] as a form of imperialism and I feel similarly for indigenous people in Canada, the United States, and New Zealand, Australia and that in these regimes we are

expected to play the roles of the people that have [caused] the erasure of our identities and languages and cultures, and their exploitation is resulting in global climate change! And I'm expected to respect that! So if I go into a courtroom and say "This man raped me!" And then someone says, "Well, XYZ [law]…" I can't see myself not losing my temper and being like, "Get fucked with your imperialist regime! You're allowing people to rape me, and my land, and my culture!"

(Owen, 30-40)

Owen here draws a direct link between his own experiences of sexual violence to the wider violence of colonialism and climate change. This may appear to be a grand or perhaps overtly expansive framing of his experiences, but it speaks to the core narrative thrust of the manifesto as compared to the memoir and the auto-mythology. Both of those narratives are, at their core, personal stories of privatised harm and injustice, in which IPV is experienced as a disentangled personal struggle that must be dealt with, either through coping or triumph, alone. In contrast, the manifesto forefronts the public and communal nature of harm, explicitly linking an individual experience of victimisation to a larger social injustice that must be confronted. In this way, the manifesto can be seen in the same light as the Second-Wave feminist manifestos which proclaimed that *"the personal is political"* (Hanish 1970 p.76). For these feminists, this slogan meant understanding that individual women's experiences of harm and oppression were not personal stories of struggle but instead were political issues that could and should be linked to a larger social movement which would work to combat these injustices (Schuster 2017). This was actioned through collective forms of storytelling, where women could come together and share their narratives of oppression and observe that their own stories often mirrored the stories of others, thus generating a sense of community and collective resistance to the patriarchy (Enns 2004, Richmond et al 2013). In this way, both these earlier feminist manifestos and the manifesto narratives of my participants entailed the creation of a form of solidarity in which the experiences of the individual become representative of a wider collective experience of harm that can even transcend the boundaries of the storyteller's own experience. Therefore, Owen can move from his own experiences of rape to discuss the horrors of colonialism and the existential threat of climate change, because they are all embedded in wider systems of oppression and consequently have the same causes. Thus, the manifesto then contains within it the seeds of a wider form of solidarity which hints at how these stories attempt to tackle the stigma and shame associated with victimisation. Within these narratives, the aim is not to side-line or marginalise the experience of victimhood, as in the memoir, nor to attempt to transcend it through personal transformation, as in the auto-mythology, but instead to collectively rid victimisation of its stigma at its root. For these men, the only way to challenge the stigma associated with the label is to embrace it and in doing so disrupt the notion that victimhood, weakness, or passivity are inherently discrediting traits, to begin with. We can see this clearly if we return to Alistair's account where he explains that he still identifies as a victim as a deliberate means of challenging the stigma associated with the term:

We [need to] break down those stigmas and break down those barriers. And yeah, okay, I put my hands up, it's a difficult thing to get. And that's why I support using the term victim, because it's almost breaking down that and saying, "Look, yes, okay, this is negative, but it's negative for a reason, you've been through a negative experience. And that's why it's negative! It's nothing that you've done." And I feel like [if we don't use] the word victim and [break] down those barriers, and [break] down those walls, that people think "Well, actually, I can't use this term, because it's really negative."

(Alistair, 18-25)

Here Alistair deliberately challenges the stigma associated with the word victim and highlights that it is only through embracing the term and challenging the notion that victims are in some way responsible for the shame they feel *("It's nothing that you've done")* that this stigma can be properly challenged and broken. In this way, I argue that the Manifesto narrative can be seen as a form of

tertiary deviance (Kitsuse 1980), a way in which stigmatised populations attempt to challenge their subaltern status and in doing so rebut the shame and stereotypes associated with their discredited social identities. Moreover, these narratives accord with the *"denying"* (Meisenbach 2010 p.283) strategy of stigma management, in which the individual labelled with a stigmatised social identity accepts this label but rejects the stigmatised connotations that it holds. These victims are thus challenging the notion that their experiences are something that must be minimised or simply transcended on a personal basis, and instead draw attention to both the material realities which contribute to their suffering both during their victimisation and afterwards. In this way, the men who used the manifesto narrative respond to the stigmatisation of their victimisation by constructing a narrative which challenges these very systems of stigma and shame which cause and maintain their subjugation and attempt to discredit their identities. However, this point raises a question. If the manifesto seems to offer the best chance to potentially challenge the stigmatisation of victimhood at its source, then why was it in the minority amongst my participants' accounts compared to the other quest narratives? To answer this question, we can return to the pressure that exists on victims to present certain types of narratives in the aftermath of their abuse which I alluded to earlier in the chapter.

Just Worlds and Public Stories

Indeed, from reviewing the quest narratives presented by my participants, I noted that many of them expressed that they felt under pressure from their friends, family, and even wider society to *"move on"* from their experiences of abuse and to minimise the ongoing negative impacts with which they grappled. Mani for example discussed how he struggled with friends and family who he felt tried to pressure him into downplaying the harm and trauma he suffered from his emotionally abusive ex-partner:

Well, I think, you know, I think lots of people just tried to get a positive spin on things and want you to feel better and they want to give you some confidence back…and, and I have…I struggle in convincing myself of the opposite of what I feel. You know, where it's left me if that makes sense.

(Mani, 40-50)

Mani here expresses disquiet at the prospect of trying to put a *"positive spin"* on his victimisation and notes that despite this pressure he is still unable to convince himself to view his experiences of abuse through the lens of a positive transformation in the vein of the auto-mythology. We can see this same disquiet if we look at this excerpt from Geoff's interview. Here Geoff discussed how he struggled to relate to narratives of post-traumatic growth he encountered whilst attending support groups for *"survivors"* of sexual assault and IPV:

It's a concept that you have to go through something traumatic and negative, to come through the other side to prove yourself as a survivor. And therefore, I feel that a lot of people in groups I volunteered with or in discussions that I've had, see survivalism as a sort of badge of honour... I think it's quite judgmental in some ways to call yourself a survivor because you're saying, "Well, actually, do you know what, darling? I survived!"

(Geoff, 30-40)

In this account, we can see Geoff draw attention to a pervasive narrative present in the support groups he frequents that to be a survivor requires a flourishing of post-traumatic growth. His discomfort with the idea that *"you know what darling? I survived"* speaks to the notion that abuse is something that can be transcended and turned into a positive. More than that, this narrative goes further to suggest that such a transformation is a normative goal to which all victims must aspire, implicitly suggesting that those who are unable to make this transition to flourishing survivors have failed in some way.

Geoff contested this notion, forcefully stating that he did not feel he had become better or stronger because of his abuse:

If you said to me, [Geoff] are you a better person now? I wouldn't say yes, I would say no, I'm really different. My god, I am unrecognizable to how I was 15 years ago…[but] it's not like "Oh, I'm a survivor now My life is great!"

(Geoff, 30-40)

In both Geoff and Mani's accounts, we can see both men grapple with the pressure to present a positive or resilient narrative of their post-relationship lives in which the painful or destructive aspects of their victimisation are marginalised in favour of a triumphalist narrative that either emphasises positive growth because of their experience or presents a hardened front of survival in the face of aggression. This pressure existed across numerous different accounts within my sample, a pressure to hide or marginalise the often-painful realities of victimisation in favour of stories of transformation and development. We can see this pressure expressed forcefully if we look at Barry's story. Barry had long struggled with the impact his abusive relationship had on his life as his physically, sexually, and emotionally abusive partner had left him with a series of traumatic mental health issues that he was still navigating years after the relationship ended. This included managing his status as an HIV-positive individual whilst living on welfare. In our conversation, Barry highlighted that his family would frequently pressure him to put on a front of positivity and growth which he felt was false given the many ongoing problems he faced in his life:

I have severe mental health issues…and I can't talk to [my family] about [them]. They wouldn't have a clue…They'll say "Oh stop being lazy, you've got to get up, you've got to do stuff, blah, blah, blah!" But you can't do that! So, you end up living a lie. You must tell a lie, just to cover it all up. It's exhausting. It really is exhausting. It's hard work at times. It really is…you've got to be confident, you've got to be happy, and you've got to put on a brave face all the time and yet inside you actually crumble and you actually just feel like shit.

(Barry, 50-60)

Barry here describes the acute pain he felt at having to, in his own words, *"cover up"* his ongoing trauma and illness in the face of the demands of his family to simply move on and ignore his mental health issues. The fact he notes that this pressure forces him into *"living a lie"* whilst inside he crumbles highlights the secondary trauma that this need for positivity and improvement can bring to the lives of victims struggling in the aftermath of abuse. In this way, we can observe the pressure that appears to exist which pushes victims to present narratives and accounts of their post-abuse lives in which negative or traumatic aspects of their experiences are subjugated and side-lined in favour of simplistic narratives of recovery and growth. Rather than being allowed to present the reality of their lives in all their myriad complexities, my participants were instead often felt forced to contort their experiences into narratives which conformed to these societal expectations.

Once this is understood we can better appreciate why the majority of my participants seemed to favour the privatising coping narrative of the memoir and the triumphalist and transformative narrative of the auto-mythology to the comparatively more unsettling and political manifesto. The former narratives allow the victim to present an account of their experiences in which the negativity, trauma, harm and sheer senselessness of their experiences are in some capacity overcome through its incorporation into the periphery of their lives or transformed into a positive experience which can be celebrated either as a sign of growth or as a badge of honour. In contrast, the manifesto rejects these more simple and narratively satisfying accounts by linking individual acts of trauma to ongoing suffering and injustice. This raises the uncomfortable prospect that the men's victimisation is not an exceptional break in an otherwise just natural order but a routine part of an unjust system which can

and will occur again. Even with this understanding, we still need to ask where this external pressure that produces these narratives comes from.

We can find a potential lead if we return to Frank's (1995) original framework of illness narratives., Frank (1995) noted that there existed extant social pressures on patients to present neat and clean narratives of recovery in the aftermath of their illness that accorded with the restitution narrative. This narrative of recovery however often clashed with the ongoing physical and mental difficulties patients continued to grapple with even years after their most serious symptoms had abated (ibid p.92). In attempting to explain this relationship, Frank argued the pressure on patients to present this particular type of narrative arose from a societal discomfort with the realities of illness and disease. For those who saw themselves as healthy, the presence of patients struggling with long-term often incurable health conditions or who bear the physical and mental scars of treatment acted as an unwelcome reminder of their mortality and fragility (ibid p.81-87). The presence of the sick reminded them that they could just as easily fall prey to the ravages of illness. This societal-wide pressure towards positivity and recovery was thus a defensive mechanism to protect against the disquiet caused by disease. The narrative that it is possible to easily survive, nay, thrive in the aftermath of illness ameliorates the ugly realities of post-treatment life by suggesting that any health condition can be conquered, or turned into a positive. The malicious implication that follows this, however, is that those who do not recover, who do not thrive, who bear lingering marks of their suffering on their bodies and character, have in some way failed.

In this way, Frank's argument mirrors Lerner's (1980) concept of the just world delusion. Lerner, like Frank, noted that individuals were quick to blame people who suffered from tragedy as somehow culpable or deserving of their pain as a defence mechanism against the possibility that such tragedies can occur randomly and thus that they too may be harmed in the same way (ibid). I argue that understanding this link is key to making sense of the way that my participants felt under pressure to present particular narratives of recovery that minimized their ongoing harm and indeed we can see this dynamic has already been partly recognised in the existing research literature. Anthony Pemberton (2012) for example has argued that victimhood presents a serious challenge to the common belief in the just world, and a form of cognitive accounting is often used to resolve and manage the tension between the belief in the just world and the realities of victimisation. One of these strategies is to alter the outcome of the victimising event, in effect to argue that either the victimising event is not as serious or as impactful as it could be, or to re-frame the event in such a way as to emphasise the positive outcomes over the negative (ibid). In this way, the challenges posed by victimhood are diminished as the event is no longer as harmful and consequently no longer threatening to the outside observer.

Moreover, I was able to discover that the discomfort the men felt about telling their stories was not simply confined to a generalised prejudice against victimisation or weakness. Indeed, the men noted that part of the reason they felt, and often still feel, uncomfortable about telling their stories is because they feel their experiences are so far removed from what Donovan and Hester (2010) call the *"public story"* (Jamieson 1998) of IPV. Within this public story, IPV is a crime that is experienced exclusively by feminine women who are physically assaulted by their larger, aggressive, male partners. This public narrative left little space for recognition or acceptance of their own experiences of abuse and presented a framework in which male victimisation was improbable. We can see this if we turn to Frank's account as he struggled to reconcile his own experiences of abuse with older beliefs that domestic violence was an inherently female problem:

Until very recently, I didn't realize I was a victim of domestic abuse. I…you know, I'm a big hairy man. And I'm not, you know, a [typical victim], "men don't get abused" that sort of thing. It's all bollocks. But that's how I felt.

(Frank, 40-50)

The fact that Frank highlights that he is a *"big hairy man"* demonstrates the disconnect between how he understands himself and how he understood the public narrative of IPV itself. IPV is a crime whose victims are women who conform to a particular type of wounded fragile femininity, victimised by their larger more masculine partners. My participants seemed to demonstrate a disquiet with the fact that their narratives could not fit into this tidy gendered public story, and many expressed a fear that their status as men would disqualify them from support should they come forward. Victor for example noted that one of the reasons he did not come forward to seek help both during and in the aftermath of his abusive relationship was the fact that he was afraid that he would not be taken seriously as a male victim:

I think it was slightly different because it was two men as well, I think, and it's still now you know like if there's a domestic violence case and it's a man and a woman, they'll take the woman's side. How can a man not defend himself? And I think that's probably what I thought, and I still think it now. [That] they would have come in and seen [me] and thought…I don't know like, "what did you do to deserve that" Do you know what I mean?

(Victor, 25-30)

We can see a similar dynamic in this excerpt from Padrig's account. Padrig had been raped by his abusive partner after their relationship had formally ended, and he struggled with managing the stigma and shame that event brought up for years after it occurred. He noted that he particularly struggled to accept that he had been raped due to a belief that rape was a female problem that he, as a man, should not be able to claim for himself:

Gender, gender plays a role, gender plays a role with how…so I'm the youngest of four boys and even to tell my brothers that I had been [raped]…for a long time I couldn't use the word rape, for a long time I couldn't use the word sexual assault. I had to be like…I can't remember, some lesser form and it was only through moving to [another city] and going to counselling that I could even use the word rape because I just didn't think I deserved to have that word…it took me time to say like, "Is it okay to use the word rape? Is that what happened to me?"

(Padrig, 30-40)

Here we see Padrig link his anxieties around gender to his inability to properly discuss his rape. It was only with time and the support of a professional therapist that he was able to properly articulate what had happened to him and formulate a narrative which could act to explain and give meaning to experiences. As we saw in Chapter Six, the experience of victimhood is inherently emasculating as it violates the tenants of conventional norms of hegemonic masculinity, here again, we see that these same stigmatising norms can work to constrain the ability of male victims to conceptualise and narrate their experiences of abuse. This is because these experiences are marginalised and missing from wider narratives or public stories of IPV which focus on an essentialist and often stereotyped dialectic of gender in which men are inherently abusive and thus cannot be victimised. Indeed, many men that I spoke to were critical of the lack of representation and support that Queer male victims had within society. Alexi noted that:

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, they don't really, media doesn't really focus on domestic abuse against males. It's always against 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)

This frustration at a lack of representation was also noted by Kieran, who told me that he avoided seeking help in the aftermath of his abusive relationship due to his perception that, as a Queer male victim, he simply would not receive adequate support:

Did I consider [talking to people about the abuse]? Yes…[but]my attitude towards it, having read a lot of the stats around it at the time, was there's no fucking point. And I did try and look into what support I could get, rather than going down the criminal route, just looking at what support there was, but it was very much "No, you don't fit our template." Probably, all the support services out there for straight women. So why would anyone want to listen to me because it obviously isn't a problem?

(Kieran, 30-40)

Here Kieran explicitly highlights that he felt excluded from the larger public debate around IPV, noting that the absence of any specific Queer male narratives of victimisation made him feel that not only was there no support for him but also that, consequently, his experiences must not have been that serious. Indeed, several men highlighted the painful and often debilitating isolation they felt due to this lack of public recognition of the harm they were experiencing. They were left to navigate the painful process of rebuilding their lives without any larger narrative map or public story to guide them. There was no path or established process to which they could cling to give their experience meaning or link their own stories of pain and loss to larger cultural narratives and thus gain a sense of social solidarity and embeddedness. We can see this expressed painfully in Jim's account. Jim noted that both during and in the aftermath of his abusive relationship he struggled with a sense of loneliness and isolation, feeling that his experiences were unique and not being able to make sense of what had happened to him:

And on top of that, 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 spoke 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. So that's why it just wasn't an option to call the police… it can't be true to say that I wasn't aware that there's a thing called domestic violence [but] I just thought that that's something that happens between straight couples and that wasn't what was happening to me.

(Jim, 50-60)

Here, Jim highlights the fundamental problem that many of the men in my study faced when they attempted to make sense of their experiences, the fact that there is a dearth of public narratives of IPV which include or highlight the experiences of Queer male victims. The public story remains stubbornly restrictive with its almost caricatured gendered depictions of victim and abuser, both of which are far removed from the actual lived realities of victims. As I have noted, other scholars have already highlighted that this restrictive public narrative makes it difficult for victims of all backgrounds to understand their experiences (Donovan and Hester 2010, Barnes 2011), but for my research, it seems that Queer men can particularly struggle to see themselves represented within the image of the largely feminine victim, and consequently can have difficulty in articulating their narratives of victimisation or feel comfortable with the label of victimhood itself. Even after they have passed through the crucible, swam through the narrative wreckage, and worked to rebuild a sense of self that can manage and incorporate these deeply painful and stigmatising experiences into a new functional identity, their stories still must be filtered through these larger cultural lenses of gender, sexuality, and agency, all of which seem to influence how their stories are told, and who the men think are willing to listen. With this in mind, let us turn to examine the full implications of this chapter's findings.

Conclusion: Private Injuries and Personal Injustices

The men in my study used narratives to account for and understand their experiences of abuse in a way that worked to incorporate their victimisation into newly formed social identities that could give meaning to their life history and provide a path to guide future development. Such was the seriousness of the trauma they experienced that the restitution narrative (Frank 1995) appeared only sparingly within their accounts, and when it did come into view it was often undercut by a recognition that the men's experiences of abuse continued to impact on their lives and prevent them from returning to their life before victimisation. The quest narrative (Frank 1995) therefore, stood out as the primary narrative of incorporation in the accounts of the men I interviewed. Within this narrative, the men came to recognise that they would never be able to properly separate themselves from the impact of their victimisation and instead sought to find a way to integrate this new identity into their lives as an ongoing project of self. In this way, we can understand the quest narrative as a form of incorporation as described by Evans and Lindsay (2008), a framework in which victims of IPV find a way to reconcile their past traumas with their present lives and through this generate a path for the future. However, these narratives do not exist in a vacuum away from the wider culture and norms of society, and my findings here have highlighted how these norms work to produce a preference for specific types of narratives of incorporation. Wider social norms which reinforce the just world delusion and discomfort with victimisation appeared to create pressure on my participants to forefront memoir narratives in which abuse is minimised and managed as a private and small part of their identity, or auto-mythologies in which their experiences acted as a vehicle for positive transformation and self-development. In both cases, these narratives work to ameliorate and distract from the ongoing struggles that the men face because of their victimisation and stand in contrast to the much more infrequently utilised manifesto narrative which often directly drew attention to both these struggles and to the wider systems of oppression which produce then. In this way, my work has highlighted the individual process by which victims manage and attempt to incorporate experiences of victimhood and the stigma and shame which come with it, along with the wider cultural and political pressures which work to structure and produce these accounts. These norms work to create pressure to reframe abuse as either a privatised harm or a personal triumph. Both may doubtless work to allow the men to incorporate their experiences of abuse into either a manageable or even a positive understanding of self that allows them to live their lives free from the narrative wreckage of the chaos narrative and to even use their experiences to help others, yet they also can side-line more structural explanations for abuse.

These findings have two particular points of interest when we compare them to the previous literature. Firstly, they accord with previous victimological work which has demonstrated men's discomfort with the label of victimhood, and my work expands on these findings by demonstrating that Queer male victims of IPV struggle with this identification just as readily as Queer male victims of hate crime (Dunn 2012) or sexual assault (Javid 2018). Secondly, they build on the work of authors such as Evans and Lindsay (2008), Barnes (2013), and Meyer (2016) in demonstrating the complicated ways in which IPV victims must construct new victimisation-free identities in the aftermath of abuse. Like Meyer (2016) my participants also demonstrated a pressure to *"redeem"* themselves for their perceived failures in *"allowing"* themselves to be victimised and often worked to minimise the ongoing impacts their abuse had on their day-to-day life and to symbolically separate themselves from their past trauma by creating new victimization-free identities. Moreover, like Meyer (2016), my findings highlighted the important role that social outsiders like family and friends can play in shaping these recovery narratives, creating pressure for conformity whilst subtly punishing narratives which hint at a messier more complicated reality. More significantly my work re-affirms Barnes' (2013) findings from her application of Frank's (1995) illness narrative framework to the experiences of Queer female victims of IPV. Like my own participants, the women she interviewed preferred the positive and affirming quest narrative whilst marginalising the messier and often more complicated chaos narratives (ibid 393-394). My findings also accord with Barnes' conclusion that we should not

take these triumphalist narratives at face value, as she also noted that many of her participants felt under pressure from the wider Queer community to present positive narratives of recovery which side-lined their ongoing trauma (ibid 388-389). However, my findings have developed and expanded on this literature by highlighting the uniquely gendered experiences of Queer male victims as their status as men present additional challenges in constructing or understanding their experiences of abuse. Given the incredibly gendered nature of victimisation within the public story of IPV, my participants struggled to see themselves represented in pre-existing narratives of victimisation, and highlighted fears that their experiences would not be taken seriously or honoured should they present them to outside listeners. It is clear then, that norms of masculinity and the public story of IPV create a rigid narrative that essentializes victimisation as inherently feminine, and that this essentialization may create barriers for Queer men when they attempt to construct new victimisation-free identities in the aftermath of abuse. It could be, therefore, that our culture is still not comfortable with victimhood and Queer male victimhood in particular. After all, victimhood violates our assumptions of the stable, safe, and just world, while male victimisation upsets the boundaries of acceptable hegemonic masculinity. This means that for Queer men who are attempting to create new narratives for themselves in the aftermath of victimisation, there are both significant cultural pressures to present an acceptable narrative of recovery in which their abuse is either minimised or transcended and do this largely on their own, with little access to institutional or cultural structures who could help them construct a narrative identity which links their experiences to a larger symbolic whole. In this way, Queer Male IPV remains a private harm to be managed or conquered rather than a public injustice to be combatted and eradicated. With this finally understood, I will turn to bring my discussion to a close.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

Introduction

With my argument now fully outlined, I turn to consider the implications of my findings and discuss where my research sits within the wider canon of victimological literature and in the wider public discourse around Queer IPV. Indeed, as I write this chapter, I cannot help but reflect on what this project's very existence says about the changes that have occurred in our understanding of Queer relationship violence. My thesis comes at a time when there is renewed and growing interest in combating IPV, and a commitment to expand the scope of that term to encompass groups, like the Queer community, who have often traditionally been excluded from within its *"public story"* (Jamieson 1998). In the United Kingdom, 2021 saw the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act, which formally codified coercive control into a statutory offence and created the post of Domestic Abuse Commissioner, whilst more and more service providers are beginning to recognise the problem of Queer male IPV victimisation and have taken steps to expand their services to cater to the unique needs of these victims (End the fear 2022, Home Office 2022, Thrive Women's Aid 2022). These are all welcome and necessary changes that suggest that Queer male victims are being heard and that their concerns are beginning to be taken seriously. However, despite this progress, outside of activist and policy circles, the wider public and even the Queer community itself remain largely unaware of the problem. I have lost count of the number of times during the research and writing of this thesis that I would be asked about my topic of study, only for the interested party to exclaim that they had no idea there was a problem of IPV within the Queer community; as one person responded, *"Wait, but that doesn't really happen, does it?"*

This disbelief and silence are borne out in the research. Survivors still struggle to be believed or to have their stories taken seriously by both formal and informal sources of support (Donovan and Barnes 2020, Hine et al 2021). Moreover, this unwillingness to take seriously the experiences of survivors is matched by a similar unwillingness to invest in specialist services to support their needs in the aftermath of abuse. Galop noted that as of 2019 they remained the only specialist Queer domestic violence organisation in the country and that only six other organisations provided voluntary LGBT+-focused support for Queer victims of IPV (Magic and Kelley 2020). Moreover, in a rather damning statistic, out of the 900 Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAS) operating in the country, only four were hosted within specialist LGBT+ domestic violence services (ibid). Furthermore, there are almost no facilities specifically for Queer men. Shelter provision and support for male victims of IPV are limited, and Queer men specifically face unique barriers in utilising these scant services due to their status as a stigmatised minority with a fear of homophobic abuse from staff (Donovan et al 2006, Finneran and Stephenson 2013, Donovan and Hester 2015, Donovan and Barnes 2020). It is thus clear that despite progress, there is still work that needs to be done and that we have not yet fully heard the stories of Queer male survivors or taken their lessons to heart.

As I have shown in my introduction and throughout the rest of this thesis, there has been a general lack of consideration of Queer men's experiences of IPV as a unique group of victims. Indeed, previous research has failed to properly examine how these men manage and make sense of abuse within their romantic relationships, or examined how wider cultural narratives of gender, sexuality, and intimacy may impact this process. Moreover, there has been little attempt to link the experiences of Queer male victims of IPV to the broader literature on male victimisation which has shown the role that gendered norms of masculinity can play to produce stigma and shame for this group of victims. My thesis has been an attempt to break this silence, by highlighting and bringing forward these men's stories and examining them in all their nuance and complexity, to hear how they make meaning out of these traumatic experiences, and the narratives they construct to explain this process in their own words. In this way, my thesis remains a necessary means of closing the gap in the research literature

which has ignored the experiences of Queer male victims for too long, and in this concluding chapter, I will bring all the different threads of my argument together to precisely do that. In making this concluding argument, I will reflect on my research's findings and will outline exactly how I have contributed to the wider victimological literature.

Overview of Findings

To summarise my arguments, we need to return to the key research question of my thesis, namely:

"How is victimhood experienced by Queer men who encounter IPV from male romantic partners?"

To answer this question, I had to first consider the current lack of research into the experiences of Queer male victims of IPV. As my introduction (Chapter One) demonstrated, there is a clear conceptual and empirical gap in the extant IPV literature, and I highlighted that despite a growing interest in the experiences of Queer victims of IPV in general, Queer men as a specific category have typically been ignored and marginalised within wider scholarship. I then went on to demonstrate that there is a lack of research into how these men navigate the experience of victimhood as a phenomenological process.

To address this gap, in Chapter Two, I drew on the conceptual framework of stigma and shame derived from the works of Goffman (1963) and Nusbaum (2004) to demonstrate that victimhood is an inherently stigmatised and shameful social identity which derogates from social norms of agency and strength. Furthermore, victimhood can be understood as an assault on the *"assumptive worldview"* (Janoff-Bulman 1992) of the individual which shatters their belief in a just and secure world. This then requires the victim to begin to *"rebuild"* (Brison 2002) their identity and *"re-learn the world"* (Attig 1996) through incorporating the victimising event into a new social identity which gives meaning and context to their experiences. This then moved into a discussion of the role that narratives of intimacy and romance play in constructing the assumptive world of the IPV victims (Chapter Three). To demonstrate this, I highlighted that previous research on female IPV victims has shown that they often structure their understanding of partner abuse through a framework of heterosexual romance narratives and that these narratives can act as potent vectors of stigma and shame when the women felt they have failed to meet gendered cultural norms of intimacy. I then turned to ask what dominant narratives of intimacy Queer men have grappled with in their relationships in modern British society? In answering this question, I highlighted that Queer men have moved from a marginalised sexual minority forced to engage in *"everyday life experiments"* (Weeks et al 2001) to a *"homonormative"* (Duggan 2002) social class which has been assimilated into larger and traditionally heterosexual institutions of intimacy and kinship such as marriage. I suggested that this may play a role in influencing their experiences of IPV, drawing on Elanor Wilkinson's concept of *"compulsory coupledom"* (Wilkson 2013) to highlight the potentially coercive and stigmatising nature of these changes.

With this theoretical base firmly established, I then outlined the epistemologies, methodologies, and practical methods I used to conceptualise, capture, and then analyse my research data (Chapter Four). I decided to utilise a phenomenological qualitative epistemology which aimed to understand the subjective meanings the men attached to their experiences and to gain an understanding of their inner social worlds. I followed a modified grounded theory (Charmaz 2014) approach, which aimed to generate theory from the data whilst still recognising my own pre-existing research biases and previous knowledge of the field. Whilst I had originally intended to perform in-person interviews, the Covid-19 pandemic rapidly altered these research plans and forced a radical re-appraisal of my research methods. I eventually turned to digital research methods by utilising social media platforms such as *Facebook* to advertise my research and recruit participants and then conducted remote interviews using video-conferencing technology. Despite some initial difficulties with recruitment, I discovered that digital methods are uniquely useful in accessing *"hard to reach"* (Ellard-Gray et al

2015) populations such as Queer male IPV victims. This resulted in an online qualitative survey which contacted 116 respondents, and a follow-up series of semi-structured interviews conducted with 40 Queer male victims of IPV. With these technical aspects of research articulated, I turned to answer my research question through full consideration of the findings of my empirical data.

The primary finding of my study is that Queer men experience IPV as a stigmatising and shameful process in which fundamental aspects of their selfhood, including their social identities and assumptive worldviews, are attacked, belittled, and undermined to the point of destruction (Chapter Seven). Victimhood is thus, in the words of Janoff-Bulman, experienced as an *"ontological assault"* (Janoff-Bulman 1992) on the very tenants of the victim's reality. This process is difficult and traumatic to experience and requires the victim to repair and rebuild their shattered sense of self. I found that the men's experiences of both the destruction and rebuilding of their identities was influenced by larger narratives of gender, sexuality and intimacy. In particular, my participants found the experience of victimhood to be deeply emasculating, as the social position of victimhood, with its connotations of weakness, passivity and vulnerability was understood as inherently feminine, and thus antithetical to current standards of *"hegemonic masculinity"* (Connell 1995). To be a victim then, called their masculinity into question. This was particularly difficult for my participants to bear because as Queer men, their masculinity had often already been diminished or dismissed due to historic homophobia which constructed Queerness as antithetical to their masculinity (Chapter Six). My participants, therefore, described a form of Queer masculinity that was inherently unstable, always in flux and always capable of being called into question due to their Queerness, and victimhood represented a clear threat to this vulnerable status. However, even beyond gender, the men also saw victimhood, particularly in the context of IPV, as a threat to their ability to live out cultural narratives of homonormative committed intimate romance.

The narrative of committed intimate romance predominated the men's narratives and acted as the primary framework through which the relationship was understood and given meaning (Chapter Five). This narrative allowed the men to move past the insecurity and shallowness of the Queer Scene and to experience the passion and intimacy of a sweeping romance in a way that accorded to wider norms of intimate monogamous coupledom. This allowed the men to link their own experiences to a larger narrative of intimacy and kinship embodied in institutions such as marriage. This was of course very significant for these men, given that Queer men have long been excluded from accessing this form of legitimacy for their intimate relationships for most of modern British history (Weeks 1995). However, these same norms and narratives of intimacy and romance took on a much darker quality when the men's relationships began to move in an abusive direction. Whilst the men initially tried to understand their experiences through a narrative of troubled romance, this eventually gave way to a sense of shame at failing to meet the standards of *"compulsory coupledom"* (Wilkinson 2013) and a fear of being stigmatised should they be labelled as having *"failed"* to maintain a romantic partner. These fears are then weaponised by the abuser to further isolate and attack their fragile sense of self, leveraging their fear of romance stigma as a tool of coercion and control. In this way, we observe that the values of compulsory coupledom and homonormativity reign supreme in their accounts, which represents a radical break from earlier studies of Queer men which highlighted their experimental and fluid approach to intimate relationships.

The shame the men felt at their victimisation combined with the overt tactics of coercive control utilised by the abuser to dominate both them and the relationship eventually led to a breaking point in which the men's assumptive world shatters and the narrative of committed intimate romance collapses into itself (Chapter Seven). The men are left, often deeply traumatised, to begin the process of slowly rebuilding their sense of self and forging a new identity which incorporates their victimisation. I argued that this process can be best understood through Arthur Frank's (1995*) "quest narrative",* which highlights how men recognise that they are fundamentally different due to their experiences of abuse yet must try to find meaning within this new changed identity (Chapter Eight). In these

narratives, the men's experiences of abuse are either marginalised into the peripheries of their identities as a historical event *(the memoir),* turned into fuel for a personal transformation in which they emerge stronger and more resilient (*the auto-mythology),* or act as the basis for a larger critique of the structures that produce victimisation in the first place *(the manifesto).* However, this process does not occur within a social vacuum; instead, the narratives that the men constructed were informed by larger cultural narratives of victimisation which prioritise stories of recovery and triumph and do not wish to linger on the messy realities of victimisation. The men then often felt pressured to present a pristine narrative of *"recovery"* that focused only on the positives and avoided both their continued suffering and the suffering of others. Only a small minority deliberately rebelled against these norms, creating a narrative which recognised both their ongoing personal trauma but also the wider systems which perpetuate abuse for others. I ended this section by questioning whether wider society is ready to hear the stories of these victims given that Queer male victimisation challenges norms of masculinity and the just world. Moreover, these narratives stand well outside the *"public story"* (Jamieson 1998) of IPV which constructs a narrow idealised vision of IPV in which only traditionally feminine women are legitimate victims. I then concluded by arguing that more needs to be done to legitimise and accept these less conventional and more challenging victimisation narratives. With my argument re-established in full, let us turn to consider the implications of my findings for the wider literature.

Queer Love, Unstable Masculinity, and Narrative Victimology

My work has demonstrably advanced victimological scholarship by presenting an analysis of the experiences of a marginalised group of victims who have been under-theorised in victimological literature. In particular, I have demonstrated that, like other male victims, Queer men who experience IPV are particularly apt to experience victimisation as a stigmatising and shameful process which is understood as an affront to their masculinity. In this way, my work has developed the findings of scholars such as Dunn (2012) and Javaid (2018) in showing that Queer men experience the same coercive pull of hegemonic masculinity that heterosexual men do, but that this is mediated through their status as an already marginalised and stigmatised sexual minority. Whilst at the same time, my research has advanced knowledge within relationship violence scholarship and demonstrated that Queer men, like their female counterparts, are impacted by wider cultural narratives of intimacy and romance when they encounter and then subsequently make meaning out of their experiences of IPV. Indeed, from examining my findings we can observe a large change in the positionality of Queer men within Late-Modern British society. The men I spoke to did not demonstrate an adherence to the confluent love that Giddens (1992) suggested was so integral to the fluid nature of Queer sexuality, nor did they engage in the *"everyday life experiments" (*Weeks et al 2001) necessary to live outside of the boundaries of traditional monogamous heterosexual society. Instead, many of my participants demonstrated a romantic imaginary that sought to explicitly ape or copy the heterosexual model of intimacy and reproduce a coupled monogamy that could be incorporated into wider cultural narratives of romance. Moreover, these same norms then acted as a basis of stigma and shame for the men when their relationships failed to meet this idealised standard of romance. It is thus clear that the men I spoke to present radically different accounts of intimacy than the more fluid and politically Queer narratives of earlier research. This then suggests that, at least for some Queer British men, larger trends in legal, cultural, and political assimilation have contributed to their romantic imaginaries becoming shaped by larger norms of compulsory coupledom that forestall the possibility of radically altering intimacy and instead push acceptance towards assimilation.

However, given the qualitative and non-representative sample I drew on for my research, I am not able to make any larger claims about the scope of this change in Queer men's narratives of intimacy. Whilst research conducted in other jurisdictions has come to similar conclusions (Worth et al 2002, Prestage et al 2009, Slavin 2009, Duncan et al 2015b), I am unable to extrapolate these findings to the wider British Queer community. Whilst it is certainly possible that this represents a larger shift in the

romance narratives of Queer British Men, it is equally likely that my findings are a result of a sampling bias. That is, Queer men who hold these traditional romantic beliefs are simply more likely to experience IPV than other Queer men who reject these beliefs. Indeed, there is some evidence from quantitative studies to suggest that this could be the case, with research conducted both with heterosexual and Queer victims finding a correlation between holding traditional beliefs about romantic relationships, and experiences of relationship violence (Papp et al 2017, Moskowitz et al., 2020). However, this is a supposition, and more research is needed to study this connection further. What can be said, is that my findings have contributed to the scholarship of both Queer IPV and the study of Queer intimacy.

Finally, my research has expanded the field of narrative victimology, demonstrating that the experience of victimisation can be fruitfully understood through a narrative framework. This narrative framework can allow scholars to link the micro-subjective experiences of individual victims of crime to significantly larger cultural narratives. This perspective allows us to understand how social value and meaning are generated at a personal level through the individual narrative crafting of a singular person or group of persons. At the same time however, it also allows us to see how these personal narratives must be constructed within the structure of much larger cultural norms which can exert a coercive and stigmatising influence if they are not met. We can see this dynamic in my findings on how my participants interacted with larger cultural narratives of intimacy and victimisation. My participants had their personal narratives all of which were in their own way unique to them and derived from their particular experiences. However, these individual narratives were built in response to existing cultural trends which worked to shape their subjective understanding of their social lives. The men's narratives of romance were suffused with the norms of homonormativity (Duggan 2002) and appeared to accord with Wilkinson's (2013) theory of compulsory coupledom, whilst their narratives of *"incorporation"* (Evans and Lindsay 2008) were influenced by cultural narratives of victimisation which stress recovery and forgiveness over trauma and political action. Thus, whilst the men were able to exert agency and craft their own stories, these stories were in no small part constrained by the larger cultural narratives that structured this individual process. I argue that these findings give further evidence for the case in favour of incorporating narrative analysis into victimological research on a larger scale, as it is clear that we can better understand how victims make meaning from their experiences through narratives, and through these narratives, observe how victimisation is intimately personal, and yet clearly publicly social.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are, however, clear limitations to my findings. The first is the homogenous nature of my sample. Though I had intended to interview a diverse group of men, the final sample was largely white, highly educated, and skewed to an older demographic. In consequence, my findings may only represent the experiences of a particular set of Queer men. This is problematic given that there is clear evidence that Queer men from ethnic or religious minority backgrounds may experience unique challenges which make their experiences of IPV distinct (Yip 2002, McKeown et al 2010, Jaspal 2012.) Moreover, none of my interviewees were transgender, and this means that my findings are limited in their application to this group. Whilst there is precious little research conducted on trans men's experiences of IPV, we do know trans people are particularly vulnerable to relationship violence and suffer discrimination from help and support services due to their gender minority status (Greenberg 2012, Seelman 2015, Corey et al 2022). Future research would do well to examine trans men as a distinctive research population and to attempt to map out the similarities and differences in their experiences of IPV as compared to cis-gendered[6] men. Such research would enable us to get a better understanding of the way transness interacts with masculinity and other norms of sexuality and intimacy to impact trans victims. Moreover, even amongst cis Queer men, my sample was

[6] Cisgendered here refers to an individual who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth.

homogeneous in terms of sexuality. The vast majority of my participants identified as gay (i.e. exclusively attracted to other men) with only a small handful identifying as bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise Queer. This is problematic given I was unable to fully examine if these different orientations had any impact on the men's experiences of abuse. This could be significant given other research has demonstrated that bisexual individuals of both sexes may be uniquely vulnerable to experiencing IPV from their romantic partners when compared to exclusively gay and lesbian men and women (Finneran and Stephenson 2014, Turell et al 2018, Friedman et al 2019), however, despite this the role that bisexuality or bi-phobia may plan in bisexuals experiences of IPV remains understudied (Corey et al 2022). Future research should examine the accounts of bisexual men abused by their male partners to understand in what ways a bisexual identity may play into their experiences when compared to other Queer men.

The second limitation is the qualitative nature of my research. Though I have, proudly, extolled the virtues of qualitative research in this thesis, the findings I have presented are limited in their wider applicability and generalizability beyond the pages of this study. Though I have identified narratives and themes within my participants' accounts, I am unable to verify how these compare to the wider population of Queer men who encounter IPV across the United Kingdom. In future, more quantitative research may be needed to apply the theories and ideas I have developed here to larger and more randomised samples to test their applicability. We could for example see to what extent the fears of stigma I identified in my participants' accounts are represented across a larger cohort of victims, or test if my observation that most men favoured privatising memoirs or triumphalist auto-mythologies over political manifestos is replicated in another wider sample.

Indeed, I argue that there are various avenues for future research that my findings hint at. Whilst my research has focused on the subjective phenomenological experience of victimisation, other work could aim to examine how Queer men concretely seek help and support from support services, as there is some evidence to suggest that this process could be frustrated by fears of homophobia and dismissal due to gendered stereotypes of victimisation (see for example Kay and Jeffries 2010). In this vein, further research needs to examine how Queer men interact with the justice system during their experiences of IPV. Whilst only a small minority of my participants disclosed interacting with the police or the wider criminal justice system, these men's experiences could be important in identifying barriers in current criminal justice practices which keep more men from using them when they encounter IPV. There is already a large corpus of research which has extensively documented how female victims of IPV have struggled to get the justice system to take their plight seriously (Hart 1993, Jordan 2004, Meyer 2011), but it remains an open question whether Queer men experience the same type of challenges.

Concluding remarks

Regardless of what limitations my work has, and where it might point for future studies, my thesis has provided insight into how IPV is experienced by the Queer Men who encounter it. To highlight their stories and present their experiences as best I can, demonstrating how even in the depths of violence, abuse, and coercion, these men still try to find meaning in their lives and strive, however difficult it is, to build themselves anew. To that end, my work has necessarily been often dark and harrowing, lingering on the traumatic and the painful to highlight the reality of living through an abusive relationship. Indeed, even at the end of my work, where my participants had, mostly, been able to rebuild themselves and learn to live full and fruitful lives despite their victimisation, I took pains to highlight the social forces which still constrained the men to modify their stories and pressured them to present certain narratives which collapse the complexities of their experiences into simplistic moral parables. Before I conclude, therefore, I wish to give the final section of my thesis to two of my participants whose narratives suggest a more optimistic end.

Epilogue

Re-Built Worlds

I started this work by describing an interaction I had with Kai, a participant who had only just left his abusive husband and who was struggling to manage his feelings and grief for the relationship he had lost whilst coming to terms with the trauma his marriage had caused him. However, as harrowing as that opening scene may have been, it bears re-considering as there was another character in Kai's story I have not yet properly revealed. For Kai was the only man in the entire sample who was recruited through snowball sampling, that is, who I found through the help of another participant. That participant was a man named David.

David was an early participant in my work, he was the eighth person I interviewed, and we developed a very quick and easy rapport. He noticed a picture of David Bowie hovering behind me as we talked on Skype and proudly moved his back to show his own framed album of *"Ziggy Stardust*" hanging behind him. This created an instant bond between us. David was in his 50s, and his story concerned an abusive relationship he had escaped from in his 20s with an extremely physically and sexually violent partner. His testimony was one of the most distressing that I listened to. Whilst he spoke with a calm almost relaxed tone, I frequently had to hold back tears as he described what had happened to him. There was no doubt that what he experienced was deeply traumatic. Even to this day, decades later, David told me, he would occasionally have flashbacks to certain moments in the relationship, the smell of blood, the feeling of carpet on his face as he was pushed to the ground, the fear and terror at what was going to come next. Yet, despite this, David's story was the opposite of Kai's; his narrative was full of love and hope. He had, in his own words, moved on from the experiences that had once broken him, he had found a job that gave him meaning and purpose, he had fallen in love again, married a man who respects and cares for him, and had children who he loved dearly. When I asked him whether he still felt like a victim, he said without hesitation:

No, Because I'm in a, you know, a loving, strong, stable, equal relationship. And, um, you know, we're married, we've got all that kind of stuff, we got the kids. And I, you know, I don't perceive myself as a victim anymore. I was for that, sort of two years or so. Because of the relationship, the nature of the relationship. [But] you know I'm in a mutually loving supportive relationship now.

(David, 50-60)

However, more than just a personal transformation, he framed his recovery from his experiences through his service to others. David was an active member and volunteer for charities in his community, and a big supporter of the local Queer Scene. As part of this, he discovered he could help others who had experienced violence, pain, and trauma in their own lives, that he could help lift them up and show them that it was possible to recover from what, at the time, seemed unrecoverable. He noted that:

And, you know, I very much, [sighs] sounds really weird, I value what I went through because it enables me to help people now like, Kai, but like people who come to me, who are in similar situations, and I can give them the benefit of my experience, I can talk about what helped me.

(David, 50-60)

It was in this capacity as a volunteer that he met Kai, fresh out of his relationship and in need of support. David did his best to help him, and, after he had more fully had a chance to settle into his new accommodation, put him in touch with me for an interview. In describing his interactions with Kai, he noted:

I had to remind him, you know, he's gone through [a lot], I can say this with the benefit of my experience. He's gone through a really traumatic experience where he's had a relationship with

somebody pretending to be one thing, but actually, he was another. And you know, I said to him, you, you went into this relationship with your eyes wide open and, you know, I'm saying stuff to him that I wish I'd heard at the time. And you know, and I'd gone through, sort of 20 odd years of stuff…so I'm hoping that [he] is, is getting something out of what we're talking about. If I if only that he learns to be kind to himself.

(David, 50-60)

Indeed, when I spoke to Kai, he had nothing but praise for David, as he noted that the older man had helped him through the trauma of his abuse and allowed him, slowly, to see the potential for a future outside of the chaos he was currently immersed in. Indeed, whilst in Chapter Seven, I argued that Kai's account represented an ongoing chaos narrative, in talking about his interactions with David, I saw a glimmer of a future attempt to rebuild himself, a hope, however small, that one day he could use what had happened to him to help others:

Yeah, I feel like, we should encourage people to seek help from those charity LGBT Centres, like David he really [made] me feel good. Yeah, you think since the gay community is really small, we should like help each other, like, you know, support each other. I feel like a yeah. I mean, I'm getting the help from them now, and I hope one day I can do the return, you know, help others. That's why I say, I'm ready to share the story. And then let people know. And if someone you know, just try to help people and especially those people from foreign countries, who couldn't even speak English.

(Kai, 30-40)

This quote strikes me every time I read it. Even for Kai, a man fresh out of a relationship which had nearly destroyed him, who had experienced unimaginable trauma and harm, there remained a drive within him, a need, a hope, to find meaning in what had happened, and, like David, this drive for meaning was made manifest in a desire to help others who had suffered as he had. To find them when they are lost and confused, trapped in the narrative wreckage and chaos and tell them, it's alright, it's okay, there is a path out of this, follow me, I'll show you, I have walked it before.

My primary finding is that victimhood can be understood as the destruction of the self, but it is also the case that men come to build a new self from the ashes of the old. A new story that works as a map for others to find their way. This story, like all stories, is battered and bruised by the myriad social hegemonies and pressures that exist in the world, each seeking to shape and silence it, turning it into an acceptable consumable form that does not upset or offend the dominant hierarchies of the day. But even in this process, these stories, these maps, can still show others the way forward.

As I finish drafting this thesis, I am reminded of a passage from Susan Brison's (2002) account of her recovery from a near-fatal rape. At the end of Chapter Three, she notes that she will never be the same person she was before she was attacked, and instead, she has had to come to terms with her life as it is now and accept that she is, in effect, someone else. She must live with the fear and trauma but can build a new story with them. Yet even within this melancholy note, there is a seed of hope, reflecting that it was through her service to other people, specifically to her newly born son, that she found a way to make meaning in the aftermath of what seemed like unbearable trauma:

How does one go on with a shattered self, with no guarantee of recovery, believing that one will always "stay tortured" and never "feel at home in the world"? One hopes for a bearable future, in spite of all the inductive evidence to the contrary. After all, the loss of faith in induction following an unpredictable trauma also has a reassuring side: since inferences from the past can no longer be relied upon to predict the future, there's no more reason to think that tomorrow will bring agony than to think that it won't. So, one makes a wager, in which nothing is certain and the odds change daily, and sets about willing to believe that life, for all its unfathomable horror, still holds some undiscovered pleasures. And one remakes oneself by finding meaning in a life of caring for and being

sustained by others. While I used to have to will myself out of bed each day, I now wake gladly to feed my son whose birth, four years after the assault, gives me reason not to have died. He is the embodiment of my life's new narrative, and I am more autonomous by virtue of being so intermingled with him. Having him has also enabled me to rebuild my trust in the world around us.

(Brison, 2002, p.66)

Reading this passage, I cannot help but think of David and Kai, of David finding new hope in the possibility of building a narrative out of the chaos that, maybe in time, will allow him to help others, and Kai hearing this story and taking his first steps out of his own narrative wreckage and towards a new future. I think of both telling their stories of love, shame, and transformation with all the complex messiness they deserve and finding a way to rebuild their collapsed world into something new.

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Appendices

Appendix One. Text and images used to advertise survey on both Facebook and Grindr

Facebook Recruitment Text

CW: Domestic Violence and Abuse.

Hello all! Thanks for inviting me into the group and I hope you are all well. I made sure this was appropriate before posting by getting the consent of the admins, (thank you [insert admin's name here]), and I really hope some of you find it useful.

My name is Joseph Patrick McAulay, I am a PhD student at the University of Oxford and I'm currently researching the experiences of Gay and Bisexual men who have unfortunately experienced Domestic Violence or Abuse.

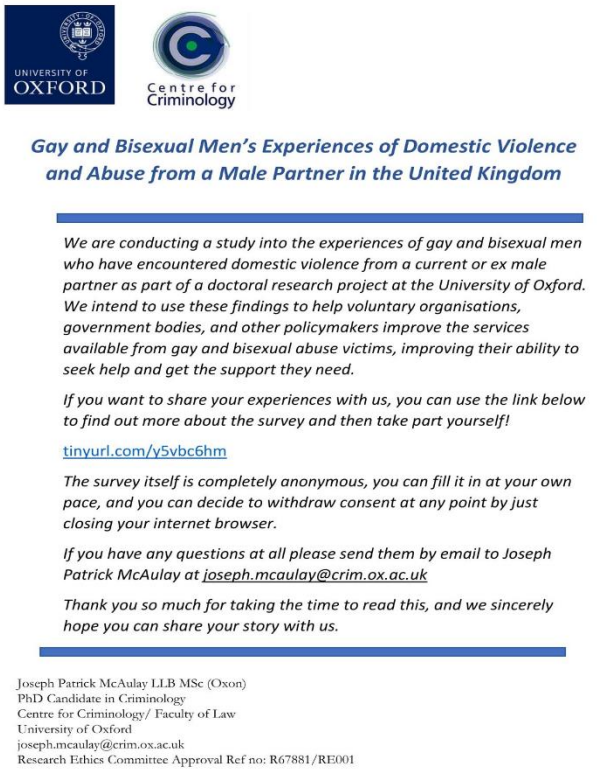
If you have encountered this in the past from a romantic or sexual partner or are currently suffering from it now I would to love to hear about your experiences. You can fill in an anonymous online survey here: [insert survey link]

By doing this you help us to learn more about this problem and design better services to help more men in the future.

If you have any questions or want more information, please email me at joseph.mcaulay@crim.ox.ac.uk

Thanks for reading, you all are the best!

Recruitment Images



(^ Images accompanying Facebook posts).

Grindr recruitment text

Dear all

I am a researcher examining how men experience domestic abuse from male romantic and sexual partners. If you have experienced this in the past I would love to talk to you. Please feel free to message me as I would love to chat about your experiences.

Appendix Two. Online qualitative survey schedule

Exploring the Experiences of Male Victims of Domestic Abuse from a Male Partner

Page 1: Introduction

Hello and thank you for taking the time to have a look at our study. We are researchers at the Centre for Criminology at the University of Oxford and are conducting a PhD project which aims to explore the experiences of men who have experienced domestic abuse from a current or ex male partner. With this research, we hope to identify the challenges these men face when attempting to leave such a relationship, and what influences their decision making during this process.

We appreciate your interest in participating in this online survey. You have been invited to participate as you identify as a man and have experienced domestic abuse from an ex or current male partner. Please note that you may only participate in this survey if you are 18 years of age or over.

You will be given a variety of questions to answer about your experiences of navigating abuse during your relationship. It should take about 30 minutes of your time depending on the length of your responses. All questions have the option to click 'prefer not to say' or to leave blank if you wish not to answer them.

We understand that you may find it distressing to think about and reveal personal experiences of domestic abuse and we appreciate you taking the time to share these with us. Whilst we are not able to provide direct support, we have listed information about sources of support that you can access in order to get more information, counselling, and advice at the end of the survey should you feel you need to access them.

Please read through these terms before agreeing to participate by ticking the two 'yes' boxes below. You may ask any questions before taking part by contacting the lead researcher – Joseph McAulay at joseph.mcaulay@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk.

Do I have to take part?

Absolutely not. Your participation is voluntary. You may withdraw at any point during the questionnaire for any reason, before submitting your answers on the final page, by closing the browser.

Will the information I provide be kept confidential and anonymous?

Yes, there is a general guarantee of both anonymity and confidentially for all the information you provide in your answers to the survey, however, there is one exception to this. That is

that I am required to report any disclosure you make that you have committed, aided in, or intend to carry out a serious offence, (which include murder, terrorism, or child sexual exploitation.) In which case I am obligated to disclose the information to the relevant authority.

How will my data be used?

Your answers will be completely anonymised, and we will do everything possible to keep them confidential. Your data will be stored in a password-protected file and your IP address will not be stored. Research data will be under protective storage for a minimum of three years after publication or public release, before being destroyed.

The anonymised data will be used in a doctoral thesis and may also be used in future academic publications by the researcher. All such data used in this way will be completely anonymised – we will not use the names of people or places in any publication or report.

Who will have access to my data?

Jisc Surveys and the University of Oxford are the data controllers with respect to your personal data and, as such, will determine how your personal data is used. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of only the research outlined above. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from:

http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/compliance/gdpr/individualrights/

Any personal information that could identify you will be removed or changed before results are made public. Responsible members of the University of Oxford may be given access to data for monitoring and/or audit of the study to ensure we are complying with guidelines, or as otherwise required by law.

This questionnaire is for a PhD project, where the principal researcher is Joseph Patrick McAulay, a member of the Centre for Criminology at the University of Oxford, under the supervision of Prof. Carolyn Hoyle. This project has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (ref no: R67881/RE001)

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this project, please speak to the lead researcher, Joseph Patrick McAulay (joseph.mcaulay@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk), or his supervisor, Professor Carolyn Hoyle (carolyn.hoyle@crim.ox.ac.uk), one of whom who will acknowledge your concern and respond within 10 working days.

If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the relevant Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford. Their details are as follows:

Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee. Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk. Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD.

The Chair will seek to resolve the matter in a reasonably expeditious manner.

Many thanks for your time and we hope that you are willing to take part.

Q.1) If you have read the information above and agree to participate with the understanding that the data (including any personal data) you submit will be processed accordingly, please check the relevant box below to get started. ***Required**
Yes, I agree to take part

Q.2). Please note that you may only participate in this survey if you are 18 years of age or over ***Required**
Yes, I certify that I am 18 years of age or over

Page 2.) Demographic Details

In this section we would like to find out some more details about your demographic background, to see if these factors may have influenced your experiences of abuse and help-seeking in any way. Any identifiable information will be anonymised for your privacy and protection.

However, if you do not feel comfortable sharing this information, please click 'prefer not to say' or leave the text box blank.

Q.3) What is your age?
(Age ranges)

- 18-25
- 25-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- 50-60
- 60-70
- 70-80
- 80+
- Prefer not to Say

Q.4) In which region of the United Kingdom do you live?
[Open Question]

Q.5) Which sexual orientation would you identify with?

- Gay
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Questioning
- Other (Please Specify)
- Prefer not to say

Q.6) What is your highest level of education?
(Education Ranges)

- Primary School

- Secondary School
- Technical Degree
- Professional Diploma
- Undergraduate Degree
- Post-Graduate Degree
- Doctorate
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Q.7) What ethnicity do you identify as?
[Open Question]

Q.8) What is your religious identity?
[Open Question]

Page 3: Your Early Relationship

Q.9) How old were you when you met your abusive partner?
[Open Question]

Q.10) How did you meet this partner and how did the relationship begin?
[Open Question]

Q.11) When did you begin to recognise that the relationship was abusive?
[Open Question]

Q.12) What forms did this abuse take?
[Open Question]

Q.13) Did you ever tell anyone about this abuse? If so, who and what was their reaction? If not, why not?
[Open Question]

Page 4: The End of the Relationship

Q.14) When did you decide to leave the relationship and what made you come to this decision?
[Open Question]

Q.15) When leaving the relationship did you ask or receive help from friends, loved ones or your family? If so, was it helpful or positive? If not, why not?
[Open Question]

Q.16) When attempting to leave this relationship, did you contact any domestic violence charities, such as shelters, helplines, or walk-in clinics? If so, what were your experiences with them? If not, why not?
[Open Question]

Q.17) In your opinion, what were the biggest challenges you faced in leaving the relationship?
[Open Question]

Q.18) If you are still in the relationship, what made you decide to stay?
[Open Question]

Page 4.) Experiences with the Criminal Justice System

Q.19) At any point in the relationship did you contact the Police? If so, what were your experiences with them? If not, why did you decide to avoid contact?
[Open Question]

Q.20) At any point did you have to go to court in a matter related to your partner i.e. a criminal trial? If so, how did you find this experience?
[Open Question]

Q.21) If you were in contact with the criminal justice system, did you feel like you got a sense of 'justice' from the criminal justice proceedings? If not, why didn't you feel this way?
[Open Question]

Page 5.) Victimhood

Q.22) Looking back on your experiences? Do you feel that you were a victim of domestic violence?
- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- Prefer not to say

Q.23) What is it that makes you feel that way?
[Open Question]

Q.24) Thinking about your life today, do you still feel like you are still a victim of the abuse that you experienced?
-Yes
-No
-Not sure
- Prefer not to say

Q.25) What is it that makes you feel that way?
[Open Question]

Page 6.) Final Thoughts

Q.26)
Is there anything else that you think is important for us to know or understand about your experiences?
[Open Question]

Page 7.) Conclusion

Thank you so much for participating in this study, we appreciate you taking the time to answer our questions and sharing your experiences with us, this will go a long way to helping us understand how to better help men like yourself who encounter domestic violence from their male partners.

However, if you are interested, we are planning on conducting some follow-up interviews remotely, via telephone or online through applications like Skype with some of the men who answered this survey. Our intention with these interviews is to delve deeper into their experiences and get a better understanding of the answers they gave in this initial online survey. This interview would be recorded and then transcribed, but as with your answer to the survey, all of the data gathered will be anonymised and scrubbed of any identifiable information. If you would be interested in talking more about your experiences and contributing to helping us get a better understanding of the problem of domestic abuse so we can help other men, we would love to hear from you.

If you leave your contact details below, (an email address or phone number), we can get in touch to share an information sheet with you that contains all of the relevant details of how the interviews will be conducted, and begin to organise a date and time to speak.

Q.27) Would you like to assist this project by participating in an anonymous online interview? ***Required**
- Yes, I would like to participate in an interview.
- No, I would not like to participate in an interview

Q.28) If you answered yes to the above, please leave us your contact details (email address or telephone number) below so we can get in touch to provide you with more information regarding the upcoming interview.
[Open Question]

Page 7.) Thank you for your time.

Thank you so much for taking part in this study. If you have any additional questions please get in touch with the lead researcher, Joseph Patrick McAulay, at joseph.mcaulay@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this research project. In the course of completing this survey, you may have had to reconsider memories or experiences that may have been painful to write about and have brought up unpleasant or difficult memories. If you feel you need more support in dealing with any of the issues we have discussed, you can find support, advice, and direct help from any of the organizations I have listed below.

Immediate advice and support:
The National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline
T: 0800 999 5428
E: help@galop.org.uk

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender + (LGBT+) Domestic Abuse Casework Services
E: referrals@galop.org.uk
Online self-referral form
This service collaborates with many LGBT+ agencies who each provide different services for LGBT victims/survivors of domestic abuse. By contacting Galop once, you can be linked in with Galop, Stonewall Housing, LGBT Switchboard, and London Friend, and many more organizations.

MindOut LGBT+ Mental Health Help-Line
T:01273 234839
E:info@mindout.org.uk

Useful Websites and Resources

•***Gallop:*** A LGBT+ Focused Charity that provides advice and support for Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Non-Binary individuals who have experienced Hate Crimes or Domestic Violence. They have a Domestic Violence helpline and an online referral form which is available from: http://www.galop.org.uk/how-we-can-help/

•***Stone-Wall Housing***: A housing charity that provides emergency accommodation for LGBT+ individuals seeking help or shelter from Domestic Violence and abuse: http://stonewallhousing.org/project/beyond-abuse/

•**Respect Men's Advice Line:** A help-line specifically operated for men who are experiencing Domestic Violence which provides non-judgmental support and practical advice: https://mensadviceline.org.uk/

•**LGBT Foundation**: A helpline specifically designed for the LGBT community which offers support and advice for all issues impacting gay and trans people: https://lgbt.foundation/helpline

•**Switchboard LGBT+ Helpline**: A support service that operates over the phone, email, and instant messenger, offering a place for gay and trans people to speak to a non-judgmental source of support on any issue that is worrying them: https://switchboard.lgbt/about-us/

•**London Friend:** A Charity that offers support and counselling for LGBT+ individuals dealing with substance abuse issues: https://londonfriend.org.uk/

•**The Terrence Higgins Trust:** A charity that offers support and advice on sexual health, S.T.I.'s, and healthy relationships for the LGBT community: https://www.tht.org.uk/

General Information and Fact Sheets:

•Domestic Violence and Abuse: http://www.galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/DV-A-LGBT.pdf

•Staying Safe Online When Contacting Support Services: http://www.galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Staying-Safe-Online.pdf

•Emergency Accommodation Support for People Leaving Violent or Abusive Relationships: http://www.galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Staying-Safe-Online.pdf

•Well-Being and Self Care: http://www.galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Wellbeing-And-Self-Care.pdf

•Chemsex: http://www.galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Consent-and-Chemsex-series-1-Key-Fact-V.3.pdf

Appendix Three. Interview schedule

Semi-Structured Interview schedule

Each numbered question represents a primary question or topic I would attempt to ask or cover with every participant during our interview. Each bullet point represents a potential prompt related to the question that I could ask if the conversation was not progressing naturally.

1. Before recording:
    - Thanks for taking the time / agreeing to be interviewed
    - Discuss the audio-recording of informed consent
    - Informed consent
    - Details of the study and answer any remaining questions
    - Confirm they know that they can skip any question they do not feel like answering (i.e. all questions are optional).

2. Was this your first relationship? If not, what were the relationships like before you met this man?
- Were you out to your family and friends?
- What were you looking for when you met your ex-partner? What expectations did you have of the relationship?
- Can you tell me how you met your met your ex-partner/s?
- Can you tell me what the start of the relationship was like?

3. Can you tell me about when you began to notice problems in your relationship?
    - What were these problems like?
    - At the time what did you think about these incidents?
    - Did you think they were justified?
    - Did you ever talk to your partner about these problems?
    - When/did you ever believe these incidents were unjustified/wrong/criminal?
    - Did these incidents change how you viewed the relationship/your ex-partner? If so, in what ways?

4. Did you tell anyone about these problems?
        - If so, who were they (friends/family/formal service providers)?
        - Why did you choose this person/organisation specifically?
        - How did they react to this? How did their reaction make you feel?

5. When did the relationship begin to break down.
    - What was your thought process during this period?
    - Did you have any problems coming to this decision?
    - Did you seek any help during this period?

6. Do you still feel like a victim? Why/why not?
    - Did you feel like what happened to you would be considered a crime
    - If yes, did you ever consider contacting the police? If you had contacted the police? Did any criminal prosecution come from it? If not, why do you think that was the case?
    - If no, what makes you think that way?
    - Has this experience changed your perspective on the relationship as a whole?
    - Have you told anyone else about these experiences?

7. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important for me to know/ understand about your experiences with intimate partner violence?

- Do you feel you experienced other forms of discrimination or harassment during this process that weren't related to your sexuality (I.e. racism, sectarianism, religious discrimination)?
- If so, how did this make you feel?
- Do you think these experiences are different from what other gay men might experience in the same circumstance? If so, why?

8. Thank them for their time
    - Remind about anonymity
    - Ask if they have any follow-up questions now
    - Go over contact details of researchers if they have questions in the future

Appendix Four. Overview of interview and survey participants

Interview Participants Overview

Age	Sexual Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Highest Level of Education	Method of Recruitment	Method of Interview
18-25: 3	Gay/Homosexual: 34	White: 32	Primary/ Secondary Education: 4	Recruited from survey: 35	Video-Conference Call: 36
25-30: 6	Queer: 3	Asian: 5	Professional Diploma/Technical Degree: 4	Recruited from Grindr: 3	Phone call: 2
30-40: 14	Bisexual: 2	Mixed Race: 3	Undergraduate degree: 22	Recruited through email: 1	Email: 1
40-50: 9	Pansexual: 1	Total: 40	Post-Graduate Degree: 6	Recruited through snowball sampling: 1	Online Instant Message (Grindr): 1
50-60: 5	Total: 40		Doctorate/PhD: 4	Total: 40	Total: 40
60-70: 3			Total: 40		
Total: 40					

Survey Participants Overview

Not all descriptive statistics have been used. The categories of both what religion a participant identified as and what region of the United Kingdom they resided in were too varied in response to construct meaningful categories and thus were not record for the purposes of inclusion.

Age	Sexuality	Highest Level of Education	Race/Ethnicity
18-25: 14	Homosexual/Gay: 103	Primary School: 1	White: 107
25-30: 11	Queer: 4	Secondary School: 23	Asian: 2
30-40: 38	Bisexual: 3	Professional Diploma/Technical Degree: 27	Latino: 2
40-50: 27	Pansexual: 5	Undergraduate Degree: 32	Mixed: 5
50-60: 21	Homoflexible: 1	Postgraduate Degree: 23	Total: 116
60-70: 5	Total: 116	Doctorate/PhD: 9	
70-80: 0		Other: 1	
80+ : 0		Total: 116	
Total:116			