

**Why do they keep going back? Exploring women's discursive experiences of intimate partner abuse**

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## **Why do they keep going back? Exploring women's discursive experiences of intimate partner abuse**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores how different discourses of intimate partner abuse (IPA) may impact women's decisions to stay or leave their partners. More specifically, we ask: 1) what narratives are available to and used by heterosexual and non-heterosexual female survivors of IPA to make sense of their experiences? 2) How might these narratives impact women's ability, or lack thereof, to disengage from their male and female abusive partners? Prior literature suggests that there are four possible discourses on which women may draw including psychological (victim and offender), gendered political, and the narrative of romantic love. Analysis of discussion forums from online social networking sites revealed that while each of these discourses are utilised by women, scripts of romantic love may provide the strongest motivation for accepting and maintaining an abusive relationship. In contrast, understanding the psychological motivations of their abusers may empower female survivors to extricate themselves from the violence.

### **Key Words**

Intimate partner abuse, heterosexual, lesbian/bisexual/transgender, discourses

### **Introduction**

Intimate partner abuse (IPA) is not only a problem for women in heterosexual relationships. Prior research demonstrates that female victimisation 'at the hands of' intimate partners occurs across the spectrum of sexualities (e.g. see Ball & Hayes, 2010; Johnson et al., 2008; Mouzos & Makkai, 2004; Pitts et al., 2006). IPA has negative and long-lasting costs to female survivors including: physical ill health, increased levels of anxiety, depression, fear, feelings of incompetence, eating and sleeping disorders, increased misuse of drugs and alcohol, loss of self esteem, elevated feelings of insecurity, general loss of quality of life and damaged life opportunities (Laing & Bobic, 2002: 27-31; Johnson et al., 2008). However, despite these negative impacts many women stay with or find it difficult to leave their abusive partners (Anderson, et al., 2003; Patzel, 2006).

The current paper is concerned with further exploring the question of why it is that female survivors of IPA struggle to disentangle themselves from their abusers. More specifically, we are interested in how different discourses pertaining to IPA may impact women's decisions to stay or leave their partners. We thus ask: 1) what discourses are available to and used by heterosexual and non-heterosexual (which we refer to as lesbian/bisexual/transgender: LBT) female survivors of IPA to make sense of their experiences? 2) How might these discourses impact women's ability, or lack thereof, to disengage from their male and female abusive partners? To answer these questions we begin by providing a review of the dominant discourses about IPA that are currently available to women. Then, utilising written threads from publicly available on-line discussion forums, we

undertake an exploratory analysis of women's discursive experiences and understandings of IPA.

### **Dominant discourses on IPA**

A common theme in the scholarly literature is that for survivors of IPA, the ability to name, consequently position and gain an understanding of their experiences can be emancipatory (Davis & Taylor, 2002; Donovan & Hester, 2010: 279; Flinck et al., 2005; Olson, 2010: 24). Whether, how and in what ways survivors come to recognise their experiences and then make decisions with regard to their relationships is likely dependant on the accessibility of particular discourses of knowledge about IPA. We identified four key discourses that could be used by women to make sense of their abusive relationships and accordingly inform their decision about disengagement from their abusive partners. These four discourses are discussed in detail below and we have labelled them as follows: 1) the psychological victim discourse, 2) the gendered political discourse, 3) the psychological offender discourse, 4) the discourse of romantic love. We argue that while each discourse may have some impact on how IPA is viewed and addressed, they may not be equally accessible and/or relevant to all women.

#### ***The psychological victim discourse***

Psychological discourses of IPA either focus on the offender (discussed shortly) or the victim. This discourse constructs the victim as being trapped in the relationship, as a result of the psychological trauma she has experienced at the hands of her abusive partner. The emotional impacts of abuse including, for example, fear, lack of self-esteem and anxiety are regarded as indicative of some form of psychological paralysis that ensnares victims in the abusive relationship. Within this discourse there is little hope of escape unless the emotional damage can be counteracted through some form of 'victim' centred psychological intervention. This discourse is seen most starkly in the psychological theories of learned helplessness, traumatic bonding theory (e.g. co-dependency and Stockholm syndromes, both of which are forms of trauma bonding), battered women's syndrome and post-traumatic stress disorder (Campbell & Rose, 1996; Craven, 2003; Dutton & Painter, 1993; Houskamp & Foy, 1991; Kemp, et al., 1991; Launius & Lindquist, 1988; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998; van der Kolk, 1989; Walker, 1977; Wallace, 2007).

The psychological victim discourse is one that can be drawn on by both heterosexual and LBT women to make sense of their experiences of IPA. Specifically, the framework of victim trauma and subsequent entrapment is a discourse that appears to cross the bounds of sexual orientation. All women could potentially be positioned and locate themselves within a narrative of psychological anguish and demobilisation, thus making sense of why they remain/ed with abusive partners. This discourse may in one sense be critiqued as disempowering because it positions women as victims disabled by emotional trauma who need to be 'helped' by psychological/psychiatric experts via some sort of therapeutic intervention. Yet in another sense this discourse is potentially powerful because it provides a path via which re-empowerment is made possible. Therapy allows women to obtain knowledge regarding how the abuse impacted them, as well as tools for healing that may restore their emotional strength. Indeed, the psychological research literature shows that women who access professional therapy are more successful in staying out of abusive relationships (Coleman, 1994). This discourse does not, however, answer the question of why the abuser did what they did and as such, there is the potential for victim self-blame.

### *The gendered political discourse*

Government and service provider constructions of IPA draw predominately on what is best described as the feminist theory of gendered power, namely, the exertion of power and control by men over women (Ball & Hayes, 2010; Donovan & Hester, 2011). In these discourses, IPA is positioned within the second wave feminist notion of patriarchal power relationships – the social structural privileging of men over women. Within this framework, IPA is conceptualised as a patriarchal weapon of control wielded by men to maintain their dominant position within the broader gender hierarchy. Patriarchy dictates that men should dominate and control women and IPA is the individual level expression of this broader social structural expectation (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006: 102). Consequently, and unlike the psychological victim discourse discussed above, this discourse provides an explanation for the behaviour of male perpetrators of IPA.

It should be noted that much progress has been made in the scholarly literature in the feminist position on violence, which has contributed greatly to the development of theory around IPA. Current feminist theory provides a more nuanced understanding of women's experience of IPA that has been particularly instrumental in the transformation of IPA from an individual/private problem to a public/social issue. Nevertheless, at present in Westernised societies the earlier feminist discourse enjoys privilege over other discourses and is particularly evident in much of the media coverage of IPA, as well as in government policies addressing the issue. Dutton and Corvo (2006: 458), for example, argue that, "for over thirty years, the public policy response to the problem of [IPA] has been defined by activists as the socially sanctioned dominance of women by men. This view of patriarchy as the sole cause of [IPA] is the underpinning for a policy/practice paradigm that has dominated regulatory, legal, and policy discourse of the United States, Canada and other countries".

At the level of therapeutic intervention, this discourse is evident in domestic violence service provision. As discussed by Seeley and Plunkett (2002: 11), "Feminist counselling is broadly advocated as the most appropriate orientation for working with victims/survivors" because it stresses the importance of female empowerment by enabling women to make their own decisions, pointing out the power and control tactics used by men to control them. For example, the "Power and Control Wheel" (aka cycle of violence) is frequently utilised to illustrate the various tactics of abuse that men will use to maintain control over their female victims (see Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs Home of the Duluth Model <http://www.theduluthmodel.org/training/wheels.html>). This approach to the problem of IPA places responsibility solely with the male perpetrator and promotes change in the broader social/political context that currently allows the perpetuation of abuse by men against women. In other words, women are exonerated of all responsibility for the abusive relationship and the 'blame' is shouldered by their abusers, the agents of patriarchy.

As with the psychological victim discourse described above, the gendered political discourse of violence in intimate partnerships positions women as 'victims' or 'survivors'. In this case, however, the source of disempowerment is social structural, i.e. power relations as expressed through the abuse perpetrated against them by their male intimates, rather than at the level of individual victim psychology (Seeley & Plunkett, 2002: 11). For heterosexual women at least, 'breaking free' by leaving their abusers thus presents as a somewhat insurmountable task because their individual predicament is rooted in gendered power imbalances at the broader societal level. Moreover, the problem is exacerbated by the inability of the government institutions and service providers to protect women from further abuse. Most notable in this regard is the frequently reported ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system to respond appropriately to female victims of male perpetrated IPA (e.g. Crime and Misconduct Commission, 2005; Douglas, 2008; Douglas & Stark, 2010; Epstein, 1999; Mugford, 1989; Ptacek, 1999). Thus, while the gendered political discourse advocates female

empowerment, escaping the male abuser presents as being somewhat overwhelming. How can an individual woman escape patriarchy? The therapeutic models utilised within this discourse cannot answer this question because the ‘empowerment’ approach is “a process of enabling [women] rather than taking a position of power by determining decisions” for them (Seeley & Plunkett, 2002: 11).

For women experiencing abuse from female intimates the gendered political discourse offers little. In spite of the recent feminist research focus on IPA in same sex relationships, which has important implications for improving policy and service provision for these women (See, eg. Ristock, 2002 and Renzetti, 1992), in practice the heteronormative discourse dominates, thus failing not only to communicate directly with women in abusive relationships with other women, but also implying that abuse is not possible within this relational context (Ball & Hayes, 2010: 10; Hotten, 2009: 13; Hunter, 2006: 744; Mason, 1997). For example Merrill (1996: 11) argues that second wave feminist discourses “cannot effectively explain why domestic violence occurs in lesbian relationships because it focuses too much on socio-political aspects such as patriarchy.... by observing domestic violence through gender-based analyses the existence of lesbian domestic violence is disregarded.” Historically, second wave feminism held up female same-sex intimate partnerships as the “ultimate subversion of patriarchal power and control” and by extension utopian like, free of the power struggles and associated violence that plague heterosexual relationships (Ball & Hayes, 2010:8; Hotten, 2009: 13).

Drawing on the gendered political narrative may therefore lead to a lack of understanding and acknowledgement of abuse in LBT relationships both for those directly involved and society more generally. For example, it perhaps is not surprising, given the dominance of this discourse, to find that female same-sex IPA is frequently misunderstood by the criminal justice system and domestic violence service providers and is therefore inadequately responded to (Giorgio, 2002; Hotten, 2009; Leonard et al., 2008). This suggests that attempts to engage with this discourse are likely to obstruct relationship disentanglement.

### ***The psychological discourse of the perpetrator***

Research focussing on the psychological characteristics of abusers is prolific in the scholarly literature. This body of research offers various psychological perspectives to consider why some individuals (and not others) act abusively in their intimate relationships as a function of certain psychological characteristics (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006: 102-104). Most significant is research suggesting that personality disorders including narcissistic and borderline personality disorders commonly characterise perpetrators of heterosexual and same sex IPA (Brown, 201; Coleman, 1994; Craig, 2001; Hokenberry, 1995; Johnson, et.al., 2006; Ryan et al., 2008). Both types of personality disorder appear rooted in childhood problems regarding parental attachment/separation carried through into adulthood. IPA is argued to be an expression of attachment needs that individuals with these personality disorders perceive are not being met by their intimate partners (Brown, 2011: 41).

As Coleman (1994: 145-147) describes, individuals with borderline personality disorder generally have a fear of abandonment, lack a clear sense of self, have poor impulse control, experience a disjunction with reality under situations of stress, lack tolerance to frustration, need immediate gratification, lack the ability to self soothe, and have poor self esteem. People with this disorder need to completely ‘merge’ with their intimate partners as a way of bolstering their own depleted sense of self. Thus, any attempt at separation or independence by the partner can initiate an aggressive and/or abusive response. Aggression and abuse are used as methods of control to reduce the threat of abandonment and by extension, further fragmentation of the person’s unstable self-identity.

Coleman (1994: 146) argues that the problems caused within relationships where an individual has a borderline personality disorder are likely heightened for women in same sex intimate partnerships because there is a broader tendency towards relational merging as a result of: a) gender role socialisation, where girls learn to define themselves in relation to others, and b) the small size and minority status of the LBT community causing it to become something of a closed community. Furthermore, “internalised homophobia and misogyny” can increase feelings of shame and self hatred, impacting further on perceptions of self and psychological esteem (Coleman, 1994: 146).

The narcissistic individual, on the other hand, possess a grandiose perception of self, which is claimed to be a defence mechanism against chronic low self esteem and a poorly developed sense of self. Narcissists are hypersensitive to criticism, lack empathy for, and are overly envious of others, externalise blame, and have a heightened sense of entitlement. For people with this personality disorder, maintenance of the self is dependent on external admiration and/or the need to control others as objects or extensions of themselves (e.g. intimate partners). Loss of control over, rejection or insult from an intimate partner is therefore likely to cause feelings of shame (Brown, 2011; Coleman, 1994; Hokenberry, 1995; Ryan et al., 2008). This can result in what is described as an “intense narcissistic rage” in which the person will “use any means to right” the wrong, “undo the hurt” and/or “obtain revenge” (Coleman, 1994: 148). IPA is thus used in an attempt to raise the narcissist’s self esteem (Brown, 2011; Coleman, 1994; Hokenberry, 1995; Ryan et al., 2008). As with borderline personality disorder, in intimate female same sex relationships, viewing others as an extension of self may be exacerbated by gender role socialisation and the insular nature of the LBT community (Coleman, 1994: 148). Indeed, in “the relatively closed system of the [LBT] community, friends are not implicitly distinct from lovers. Consequently, a woman may feel jealous if she perceives that another woman is becoming close with her lover... moreover, she may be envious because of potential competition with her partner for the sexual attentions of others” (Coleman, 1994: 148).

This discourse provides an understanding of perpetrator psychology and may offer valuable insights to women attempting to make sense of their experiences of IPA, including their decisions to leave or stay. The psychological discourse of the perpetrator could be evoked equally by both heterosexual and LBT women in abusive intimate relationships, yet it appears to be excluded for the most part from mainstream/public/governmental discourse. Instead it is debated within the realms of academe and offered as therapy in the offices of privately practicing psychologists and psychiatrists (Dutton & Corvo, 2006). It is therefore likely that many women experiencing IPA will not have access to this discourse, due to financial or social reasons. For LBT women in particular this is especially problematic because, unless they are specifically aimed at LBT women (and few are), service providers generally do not cater to their special needs (Hotten, 2009).

### ***The discourse of romantic love***

Some of the most frequent reasons cited in the literature for women staying in or returning to abusive intimate partnerships are love, hope and feelings of commitment and loyalty to their partner and relationship (Anderson, et al., 2003; Donovan & Hester, 2010; Herbert, et al., 1991; Karan & Keating, 2007; Olson, 2010; Strube & Barbour, 2007). This may appear somewhat contradictory because people tend to “set love in opposition to abuse” (Fraser, 2005: 10-11). However, the discourse of romantic love is particularly powerful in western society, especially for women, and within it, love and abuse may become blurred.

The discourse of romantic love permeates our society and is reiterated in popular culture through film, music, television, literature, art and popular magazines (Evans, 2002: 2;

Power, et al., 2006: 177). The social construction of romantic love suggests that there is a fine line between love and hate. Indeed, discursive constructions of tragic love have dominated popular culture and literature for centuries, from Shakespeare and Bronte's works, through to modern literature and culture, for example films such as *Fatal Attraction* and Stephen King's novel, *Rose Madder*. These cultural sources depict the places where love becomes enmeshed with the need to control, and demonstrate how love sometimes becomes distorted to the point where lack of ability to control love or the loved one leads to violence and abuse (Hayes & Jeffries, 2011).

Although popular media scripts are overwhelmingly heteronormative, the ideal of romantic love is not specific to sexual orientation. However, the romantic script is highly gendered, being described as, "one of the most powerful discourses" informing "our understandings of femininity" (Power, et al., 2006: 177). According to the romance script the need to be in an intimate relationship and to then maintain this relationship once it has been achieved is felt most acutely by women.

The fantasy of romantic love is that it is all powerful, all consuming and will last forever (Evans, 2002: 2). Consequently, scripts of romantic love idealise the fusing of identities as something fated, where love is "written in the stars", so to speak. These scripts are also informed by notions of tragedy and fate. Love can easily turn into tragedy where it is unrequited or damaged by infidelity, but also because it requires erotic transformation, a surrender of the self. Love is meant to be transformative. In Western romantic love scripts, the individual surrenders the self and is transformed, becoming "us" or "the couple". Love is therefore associated with discontinuity, disruption, and disintegration of the self (Hayes & Jeffries, 2011).

It is easy to see how love may become distorted, leading to a struggle for domination and control. Popular culture and literature throughout the ages (and up to the present), demonstrate a clear awareness of this struggle, and the pain of love. Indeed, people expect it and are resigned to it. On some level it is recognized and rejected as bad, but on another level it is regarded as just part of 'being in love' – the exquisite pain of Cupid's arrow, Beyonce's "beautiful nightmare", Bronte's Heathcliff and Cathy of "Wuthering Heights", Eminem and Rhianna's "Love the way you lie". In some respects the pain is almost welcomed because it indicates the authenticity of love – because the pain of true love *is* inevitable. These discourses clearly map out the parameters of romantic love, the expectation of pain, and the justification for pursuing the abusive relationship in spite of all the apparent negative consequences (Hayes & Jeffries, 2011).

Given its all encompassing and star-crossed nature, it is not surprising to find that many of the behaviours associated with expressions of romantic love are also characteristic of IPA. More specifically, possessive and controlling behaviour is arguably violence or abuse, but within the romantic discourse it can become distorted as a demonstration of true love and commitment (Donovan & Hester, 2011; Fraser, 2005; Karan & Keating, 2007; Power, et al., 2006; Wood, 2001). Consequently, when one partner wants to know the whereabouts of the other every minute of the day, makes numerous phone calls to them throughout the day, exhibits jealousy or encourages the exclusion of pre-existing friendships so that every waking moment can be spent together – this may be interpreted as an endearing demonstration of love rather than a 'red flag' suggestive of IPA (Power, et al., 2006: 177). Prior research conducted with both heterosexual and LBT women suggests that it can take time for "women to figure out" that these types of behaviours are not "passionate" but "scary and disabling", yet even then the feminised discourse of romance insures that leaving the relationship is hardly a foregone conclusion (Fraser, 2005: 15).

First, this discourse associates women with acts of "undying loyalty" requiring them to "commit to" and "work on" maintaining their relationships even when they are abusive

(Fraser, 2005: 15). As noted by Power et al. (2006: 181), the discourse of romantic love prioritises relational maintenance above all else and suggests that, “love itself can overcome all obstacles”, even abuse. Thus, researchers frequently note the tendency of women to blame themselves for the abuse they experience. Women often believe that if they just ‘try harder’, ‘love more’, be a more ‘worthy person’ then the abuse will stop because they will no longer be ‘deserving’ of it (Fraser, 2005: 17; Power, et al., 2006: 181; Wood, 2001: 253). Second, leaving abusive relationships may be difficult for women because the thought of existing outside an intimate relationship is often more painful than staying within an abusive one. This is because love, via the discourse of romance, is frequently endorsed and accepted as being the central reason for women’s existence (Fraser, 2005: 17). Power (2006: 183) thus argues that exiting an abusive relationship can be difficult for women because “the desire to be loved, and to love romantically is pivotal to understandings of self as properly feminine subjects”.

Discussion of the explicit connection between romantic love and IPA is only recent, occurring primarily within the realms of academic research and scholarship. In other words, while the discourse of romantic love may be a public narrative, its connection to abuse within this space is not, and as such, women are more likely to accept distortions when they occur. Nonetheless, understanding the connection between romantic love and IPA would likely be an empowering experience for survivors because it provides unique insight into why many women feel bound to, and find it difficult to leave their abusive partners.

### **Women’s on-line narratives of IPA**

The following analysis is exploratory rather than explanatory. It marks the beginning of our exploration of women’s on-line narratives of IPA and for that reason, is necessarily limited in both application and generalizability. Analyses of five on-line, publicly available discussion forums was undertaken, three of which were populated entirely by LBT women. The other two were predominantly populated by heterosexual women. These forums provided a rich field for exploring how sexuality impacted women’s narrated experiences of IPA victimisation, how female survivors positioned themselves within dominant discourses of IPA and in turn, provided insight into the question of ‘why doesn’t she just leave’?

The data from the LBT forums were obtained from one online social networking site and two support sites, one Australian and one British. All sites were publicly available and therefore no ethical approval was required. The sample was purposive in that forums and threads were selectively chosen for their discussions about why women stay in abusive relationships. The Australian support site, which was accessed in August 2011, published eight “stories” provided by individual victims about their experiences of abuse. While the identities of the victims were anonymous, their ages ranged from 20 to 45. The social networking site was hosted in Australia but contained international participants. It offered general advice about relationships including two discussion threads pertaining to IPA, with posts from May 2006 until September 2011. There were multiple posts by some participants with a total of twelve participants across both threads. Participants in this forum were completely anonymous, although some linked to public dating profiles that contained some personal information. The site from the United Kingdom, which was accessed in July 2011, offered information about female same-sex IPA. Analysis of this site was undertaken on the information it offered to women, including many quotes from anonymous victims. The data from the heterosexual sites were derived from one North American-hosted forum focusing entirely on narcissistic abuse in relationships, where anonymous women from a variety of nations and backgrounds discuss their stories of abuse and provide advice and support to each other. The participants and threads in this forum were numerous, and historically, some of them went as far back as 2000. A random sample of some posts from two of the most popular

threads were analysed. The other site, also hosted in the United States, was an international forum for people who have experienced relationship issues regardless of gender. This forum was populated mostly by heterosexual women who had been abused. Again, there were many participants and threads, and so a random sample of posts from two of the main threads were analysed. The forum was undated, but accessed by the authors in July 2011.

The conceptual approach that underpins the following analysis is primarily informed by the work of Michel Foucault (1982; 1995; 1998). Foucault argues that, in part, our forms of subjectivity (expressed, for example, in our identities) “are constructed through the discourses with which we engage, as well as the practices of power that operate upon us, and the relationship that we establish with ourselves” (Hayes and Ball, 2010: 223 ).

*Discourses provide coherent ways in which individuals can understand the world and use this knowledge to shape their actions and subjectivity... Discourses also establish subject positions through which people can be identified, or come to know themselves – for example, discourses on gender construct male and female as subject positions, while discourses on sexuality construct heterosexual and homosexual as subject positions.* (Hayes and Ball, 2010: 223).

These discourses provide an avenue for relating to power relations that permeate social interactions, allowing people to be governed, to govern others, and to exercise some measure of resistance to these power relations – potentially leading to new subjectivities and ways of interacting. In the context of the current research, we suggest that the online discussion forums provide a rich source for identifying power relations and discourses relating to IPA. Online discussions may identify but also challenge the gendered political and victim psychological narratives informing dominant discourses about IPA. For example, the gendered political discourse ‘sets in stone’ the dominance and pervasiveness of heterosexual values and beliefs, which tend to marginalise the experience of other sexualities (Cranny-Francis et al, 2003). LBT online discussion forums provide an outlet through which the heterosexist underpinnings of the gendered political , psychological and romance discourses surrounding IPA can be challenged; they seek to subvert their dominance by introducing and celebrating subjectivities that challenge. As the below narrative analyses will demonstrate, online discussion communities are creative and empowering (or can be), allowing women to forge and practise alternative subjectivities in relation to their experience of abuse to those offered through interaction with more common discourses. As Hayes and Ball (2010: 224) suggest, “online discussion communities, while at times adopting common social (often feminist and folk psychological) discourses, “are also spaces in which new ways of relating to the self and others are produced by the participants.”

Although it might be argued that online communities are relatively marginal, and that any shifts regarding understandings of IPA that occur there are unlikely to trickle through into wider social change, the popularity of the communities, the closed nature of LBT communities, and the insidious nature of IPA, means that there is enormous opportunity for a number of people to engage with these narratives of resistance in some form. Furthermore, their analysis has wide implications. For example, bringing to light the shifts that may occur in the understandings of IPA can allow for similar analyses in other, previously unconsidered, forums of social interaction. Additionally, this can point to the potential for such forms of interaction to be expanded and encouraged.

We analysed the narratives presented in the on-line forums using a thematic method to identify whether or not women drew on and positioned themselves within the dominant discourses of IPA discussed above. The results are presented under three headings: The

gendered political discourse, Psychological discourses (victim and offender), Discourses of romantic love.

### ***The gendered political discourse***

The gendered political discourse was most evident in the heterosexual and mixed forums, but was also identifiable in the LBT discussions, where it was challenged. Participants acknowledged their inability to find a context for abuse, and the inadequacy of the commonly held belief that women cannot abuse.

'Ruth', for example, tells her story of coming out as a lesbian in the United Kingdom, and falling in love with a controlling, manipulative woman who isolated her from her friends and family and resented her going to university. Eventually she started physically abusing Ruth, who explains her reasons for not seeking support thus:

*I didn't go and see any support services because I didn't think of what was happening as 'domestic violence'. I explained it away as drugs and her abusive childhood. Part of me wanted to rescue her and it seemed very anti-feminist and wrong to blame someone for their behaviour when they had come from an abusive background.*

Ruth's abusive partner had suffered at the hands of her father and brothers and Ruth felt that she could help her in some way to overcome the anguish of her childhood. Here we see Ruth accessing scripts of romantic love as well – the notion that one can 'save' one's true love from hurt and pain, indeed, that one has a duty to do so (Evans, 2002; Power et al, 2006).

While romantic love will be discussed in more detail below, it should be noted here that most participants' explanations consisted of a mixture of gendered political, psychological and romantic love discourses. Ruth's story, for example, highlighted the joy of coming out and falling in love, of the psychological affects of abuse on her partner, but it is the gendered political scripts that prohibited allocating blame to women that are most interesting in this context.

*...my feminist politics at the time meant that I shouldn't 'blame' another woman for anything because we were all oppressed by 'patriarchy'...*

Ruth described her abusive partner as of 'butch' appearance, thus accessing the gendered political discourse surrounding masculinity and power, albeit female masculinity. However, her overarching identification as lesbian and woman, regardless of gender performance, seemed to stifle any attempt to associate the abuse to which Ruth had been subjected with feminist patriarchal scripts.

Where LBT women did identify their abuse as domestic violence, however, they admitted to finding little real support from local services. In one of the LBT forums, 'TL' remarks that current feminist domestic violence support was of no help whatsoever in helping her to leave:

*I have sought help but all they tell me is "leave". Yeah, ya think? What I am after in seeking treatment is why. Like you are asking. I want to know why it is so hard to leave and stay gone. Why I put up with the verbal assaults, jealousy, stalking, checking in, pushing, screaming, etc...*

In the above quote, TL appears to be getting somewhat frustrated with the script of 'leaving'. She wants strategies, but no one seems to be able to give her any. This bears out arguments against the dominant second wave feminist counselling model,

highlighting the fact that ‘information and support’ is not enough – women need real understanding of the abuser’s motivations as well as some workable strategies for getting out. This is where the psychological narratives appear to be most helpful (Merrill, 1996).

One further particularly poignant point needs to be made about the gendered political discourse that underpins much IPA service provision. In the LBT forum, one transgender woman tells a tragic story of seeking help from a women’s domestic violence support service, only to be turned away. ‘Ms M’ is a transitioned male- to-female who found herself in an abusive lesbian relationship, which ended only when her abusive partner called the police with false charges and had her forcefully removed from their home. Ms M found her family to be most supportive, providing temporary accommodation, while her employer allowed her time off to relocate and resettle. The domestic violence support services, however, were not so helpful:

*What I did was tell some others. I had to tell work as I needed time off to get a flat and try to resettle in the town. They were very supportive and told me I should have gone to them earlier. Women’s aid were useless to me as I was trans[gender]...*

And later in the forum:

*What hurt at the time too was the so called women’s groups who dismissed me out of hand because of their own bigotry. Four years I listened to someone telling me I will never be a proper woman... only to be told by some organisations that help women escape domestic abuse I was not a woman too.*

From our reading of the on-line forums it appears that the gendered political discourse operates in a way that denies lesbian women their subjective experience of abuse. The patriarchal power and dominance narrative therefore discriminates not only against lesbians, but against transgendered individuals as well (Ball & Hayes, 2010; Giorgio, 2002; Leonard et al, 2008).

Interestingly, while participants in the heterosexual forums drew on feminist understandings of abuse as men’s domination of women, they were silent regarding the efficacy of these scripts, presumably taking them as given and conclusive. However, it is clear from the women’s narratives in these forums that they continued to feel guilty and confused about why they stay with abusive partners. As ‘JA’, a heterosexual women laments after a very lengthy discussion about her abuse and her understanding of it:

*Why is it that everytime time I think I have had enough I feel guilty about leaving. Even though my husband is emotionally abusive, I just feel terrible guilt about splitting up the family. Why can’t I get past that?*

JA knows her husband is abusing her, but that knowing fails to translate into action to stop it. She continues:

*I gotten just about to go so many times before and than the guilt and "what ifs" creep back in and I stay. We are currently in the honeymoon phase yet again and it makes it so hard because it makes me think that it isn't so bad but I know that it is only short lived and then it goes back to the same stuff. I am so tired of all of it and trying desperately not to give up but sometimes it seems hopeless.*

Clearly, JA has an understanding of the cycle of violence drawn from feminist understandings of IPA. Nonetheless, this appears to provide little respite other than helping to

identify her partner's behaviours. As a result, JA knows what is coming but feels "hopeless", powerless to do anything about it. In the same forum, 'DM' has a similar story of the inevitability and hopelessness of the abusive relationship as predicated through the cycle of violence:

*I'm currently "in" too, I'm having the ups and downs emotionally. As you are, we are in the "honeymoon" cycle. And you slide back thinking it wasn't all that bad, was it?! I'm trying to stay strong...nearly impossible. The kids are fighting. I lost my cool yesterday big time. When I do, I grab my smokes and head for the garage. In all of this, I think things are good, but what about next time....you know there will be a next time and when. Things are good so the next time will catch you off guard. You'll then kick yourself and remind yourself riiiiight, that's why I'm leaving. I hate the cycle, my H is unpredictable for the most part.*

In contrast to LBT women, then, heterosexual women are drawing on the gendered political narrative of power and control without questioning its usefulness or relevance. Instead they appear to be questioning themselves about not leaving. Tentatively, therefore, we would argue that the gendered political discourse maybe failing women, regardless of sexuality. On the one hand, they disempower LBT women by denying them their subject experience of abuse, while on the other, they deny heterosexual women an avenue for escape by leaving them feeling hopeless and 'kicking themselves' for not exiting the relationship.

### ***Psychological discourses (victim and offender)***

The psychological discourses of both victim and abuser were evident in each of the discussion forums analysed. A number of forum participants recognised the impact of personality disorders and other mental health issues on the perpetration of IPA (Brown, 2011; Coleman, 1994; Craig, 2001; Hokenbury, 1995; Johnson et.al., 2006; Ryan et al., 2008). These narratives allowed both the LBT and heterosexual women to access a depth of knowledge about their abuser that encouraged at least some of them to leave abusive relationships permanently. However, in some cases these narratives had the opposite effect of medicalising the violence and excusing the offender's abusive behaviour, thereby denying the victim any subjectivity at all. On the other hand, discourses of victim psychology generally presented as disempowering, having the opposite effect to their intended goal of helping women achieve freedom from abuse.

Indeed, many of the psychological victim scripts revolved around blaming the victim, or were, at the very least, veiled attempts to discredit women survivors for failing to leave (Craven, 2003). In the LBT forum, 'STW' comments, for example, on BB's relationship to her abuser: "[I]t seems like your [sic] labelling and condemning the person with the mental health issue.... Maybe look at your own motives for staying in a relationship that is clearly harmful/not working for you". B4U adds later in the discussion: "...so yes, look at your choices for being in the relationship." It could be argued that the belief that there must be something psychologically 'wrong' with women who stay in abusive relationships resonates throughout this thread. Interestingly we found no similar narrative in the heterosexual forums. However, this may be an artefact of the context – these forums were specifically aimed at abuse victims, while the LBT discussions were part of a larger and more general LBT support forum, which therefore attracted both victims and non-victims to discussion threads.

In terms of offender psychological narratives, and in spite of the LBT victim blaming narratives outlined above, the invoking of personality disorders still presented as a somewhat empowering script for both LBT and heterosexual women. Being able to name a condition or set of behaviours appeared to liberate survivors from self-blame. Says 'Anonymous' in the heterosexual forum:

*Before I encountered these terms ‘Narcissism’ and ‘Narcissist Personality Disorder’ (or NPD), there was only a nameless gulf that existed between her perceptions of reality and mine; and while this was very frustrating and painful and demoralising to me, even when we broke up I still held onto some hope that maybe someday there would be a way for us to find some common ground, close the gap, and perhaps even get back together. However, now that it seems very clear that she is a very good candidate for NPD, I feel like there IS no hope, there never WAS any hope, and there never WILL BE any hope, that we could ever close this bizarre gulf and really be together.*

Psychologists are united in describing abusers with personality disorders as insidious, confusing to the victim, and all but incurable without years of intensive therapy (Coleman, 1994). Accessing this knowledge appears to allow survivors to understand that which was previously incomprehensible, and with that knowledge to give up hope, and in turn walk away. Another participant in the heterosexual forum, also anonymous, states:

*This blog waked me up from my miserable 35 year marriage... I could write a book on how a narcissist behaves! Thank you for your ‘wake up call’.*

And in another forum devoted entirely to narcissistic abuse, ‘W’ from the Netherlands, whose husband subtly abused her for 8 years and then suddenly left her, remarks on the ‘revelation’ that was finally being able to identify *why*:

*I thought I would die without him. Then an older girlfriend send me some info about narcissism and I could not stop reading! I started google-ing this condition and I read and read for a whole weekend long, only stopping to get food or water. It was what had happened to me, it was like I was looking at finally the big picture of the puzzle after 8 years of obscure pieces of a vague puzzle.*

In the LBT discussion forum, however, accessing these psychological narratives of personality disorders had a much more complex impact. ‘BB’ started a thread on the forum to invite discussion about borderline personality disorder, telling a story of confusion, abuse and uncertainty surrounding a recently ended relationship. Here, the narrative fluctuates between understanding what caused the abuse and medicalising and thereby excusing the abuse:

*I know that I can’t ‘fix’ her but BPD [Borderline Personality Disorder] sounds like such a painful thing to have to go through and if I can somehow be supportive and maintain my own sanity I would like to at least try.*

‘MR’ responds by stating emphatically that BB’s partner cannot be ‘fixed’, and that walking away is the only solution:

*I spent a year with a woman with BPD, and oh what a ride that was... When you stop trying to work her out, when you try to stop understanding why she does what she does, when you are ready to completely pull the pin – you will be okay and you will heal.*

Other participants in this thread, however, were not so supportive, and it is here that the psychological discourses switched from illuminating the perpetrator’s behaviour to blaming the survivor’s likely psychological failings. ‘GD’, for example, suggests to BB that she has been at least part of the cause of the abuse:

*Maybe instead of trying to understand the reasons behind her behaviour, you could work to understand your own behaviour and why you still want to be a part of the patterns that you two have been repeating for the last year, ie., she’s now pushed you away (again) and you’re now trying to make things ok between you (again).*

Several of the other participants concur with GD, suggesting that BB is ‘getting something’ out of being abused. Towards the end of the thread, ‘MB’ comes in with the suggestion that we should all feel sorry for the abuser with BPD, finally silencing and delegitimizing BB’s experience of abuse as well as her request for advice and assistance. Says ‘MB’:

*Geezus! The woman people are condemning here has no voice, and all of a sudden, with unsolicited abandon, people have her diagnosed, locked away and given over to a life of karmic misery. Spare a thought for people who actually ARE dealing with mental illness and psychological disorders and wouldn't dream of hurting others intentionally.*

The (lesbian) BPD abuser is regarded as not responsible for her actions because she has a ‘condition’. The survivor of the abuse, by contrast, *is* responsible, and should know better than to condemn the sick and confused. Indeed, it is suggested that she herself must have some sick reason for continually returning and taking the abuse! MB’s final statement reflects the inherent confusion in this thread, suggesting that a forum informed purely by folk psychologists and people without appropriate counselling experience does little to help women escape abuse and stay away. She states:

*And stop carrying on like a bunch of martyrs! Be glad you are no longer in those relationships but don't use them as a yardstick for everything you see and hear about another couple's problem. Of course it is difficult to live with someone who has any illness which prevents them from dealing with emotions rationally. But come on.*

In terms of the psychological discourse of the victim, another thread on the LBT forum suggests that women are all too willing to accept others’ definition of their experience and themselves. In this thread, which directly asks why women go back to abusive female partners, participants recite the usual psychological explanations such as co-dependency (a form of traumatic bonding) and Stockholm Syndrome, lack of self-esteem and so on (Craven, 2003). Several of the participants suggest that victims get a ‘buzz’ or ‘rush’ from the abuse or the relationship, though this is strongly denied by those participants who admit to having suffered abuse. There was no parallel discussion in the heterosexual forums.

Overall, the most positive experiences and advice came from those participants who had been in abusive relationships and who had consequently sought professional psychological counselling, which bears out the finding in the literature that women who access professional psychological therapy are more successful removing themselves from their abusive relationships (Coleman, 1994). Says one such participant, ‘WI’: “it will take time to heal, professional help was important to my recovery, self-help books and good friends who knew I was more than I ever imagined”.

### ***Discourses of romantic love***

Discourses of the pain of romantic love clearly dominated many of the forum discussions about IPA. There was some consensus among women participants that while love can be a glorious union between two people, the spectre of pain is always looming, is almost expected, and that is it women’s role to deal with it. This narrative speaks to love’s perversity, encompassing notions of the harm of romantic love (Hayes and Jeffries, 2011). Says WI in the LBT forum:

*Why do we stay? Because we are convinced we love this person, that things will change, that it's our fault, that it will get better and that we are nothing without them.*

‘CC’ concurs:

*I look back and ask my self...why did I stay? The answer for me was a simple one.... I never gave up hoping that things would change until the only thing worth saving was myself.*

And ‘RA’ states:

*...you always think you can make things better. People who naturally believe in fighting for a relationship will hang in there in the genuine conviction that they can change things.*

The tragedy of romantic love was also apparent in the heterosexual forums. On one thread, ‘CG’ talks about being hit, bitten and anally raped by her partner, and yet, she stayed because she loved him:

*To begin with everytime he did it he apologised and said it was not his fault and that he would not do it again and blamed something like alcohol or weed. He did not apologise for the anal rapes tho. Despite this I loved him and was devastated when he instigated our break up and went right back to him for a secret relationship when he wanted to sleep with me.*

In response, ‘AB’ is supportive and understanding of the need to fix the relationship. She replies:

*Doesn't any one think that people can change? And that with the right help, they will be able to get to the root of their problems and not do it again?*

In another thread, ‘SB’ talks about her alcoholic ex-partner in similar terms:

*Shortly after falling in love with him I learned he was an alcoholic and the lies began. I tried to be patient and forgave him many things I probably shouldn't have forgiven; always hoping he maybe would appreciate it and care enough for me to stop.*

This notion that love can be saved and that it is a woman’s role to “try harder” mirrors the discourse of romantic scripts that entreats women to take responsibility for relationship success (Wood, 2001: 253; Fraser, 2005: 17; Power, et.al., 2006: 181). In many instances there appears to be fine line between love and hate, both on the part of the abuser and the survivor of abuse. Both LBT and heterosexual women drew heavily on romantic scripts of tragedy and fate in their forum discussions, suggesting that they tend to accept their abuse as part of the destiny of true love and the need to maintain love in the face of all obstacles (Hayes & Jeffries, 2011). Ms M, from the LBT forum, is most instructive here:

*...I eventually came to believe I would never be anything with her, that I was useless without her, that everything was my fault and that I had to put it right to get it back to how good it had been. She cheated on me, with a man and a woman, she lied, she threatened, she abused me. And I stayed. I had to put it right. I had to give her her life back because I had messed it all up.... All I had was her.*

The role of woman as saviour of relationships is a clear theme across this forum as well as the heterosexual and mixed forums (Wood, 2001: 253; Fraser, 2005: 17; Power, et.al., 2006: 181). BB even admits that although she knows she does not have the strength to remain in a romantic relationship with her abuser, still she cannot let her go because she is certain she can help her:

*I know I don't have the strength to remain with her romantically but I do love her and I want her to get help. I think that if I really educate myself about the condition I would like to stay friends with her.... If I can somehow be supportive and maintain my own sanity I would like to at least try.*

The fusing of identities in the love relationship, and the willingness to be defined by it (Coleman, 1994), was also evident, especially in the LBT forums, Lisa's story is most illustrative of this:

*We connected in a way that I had never had with anyone else. She enchanted me and I was falling in love.... After 3 months we moved in together, it seemed the right thing to do.... I didn't talk to anyone except friends when we were out and I gave [her] 100% of my attention.... We wanted to spend all our time together so we both quit our jobs. I thought this would be a great opportunity to prove how committed I was. We spend 24/7 together, going out all night and sleeping all day!*

But this merging of two into one is the very foundation for an abusive relationship, eventually fuelling jealous and controlling behaviour in one or both partners. The creation of the romantic cocoon within which the couple is able to function as one, eventually becomes dysfunctional when inevitably exposed to the real world of work, families and other social relationships (Hayes and Jeffries, 2011; Coleman, 1994). Lisa continues:

*I'd lost contact with my friends, I wasn't working – and still the jealous rages continued. I was baffled.... Over the two years we spent together, my confidence with people disappeared, all my energy was spent on keeping her happy, and I desperately missed seeing my family. While we continued to have great nights out I was miserable and felt like I was continually walking on eggshells. She held my self-esteem in the palm of her hand. If she was happy, so was I, if she wasn't I tried to 'fix' it. Eventually she left me for someone else – I was crushed.*

Being abandoned under such circumstances results in an annihilation of the self for the victim of abuse – where one's very identity is so completely tied up and defined by another, the loss of relationship may mean a loss of what little psychological well-being victims were able to maintain (Coleman, 1994). The narrative of immersion in love, then, is possibly the most damaging discourse of all.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Surviving and extracting oneself from an abusive relationship is often contingent on women being able to name, consequently position and gain an understanding of their experiences (Davis & Taylor, 2002; Donovan & Hester, 2010: 279; Flinck et al., 2005; Olson, 2010: 24). This paper identified four dominant IPA discourses from which women could potentially draw on to leave their abusive intimates: 1) the psychological victim discourse, 2) the gendered political discourse, 3) the psychological offender discourse, and 4) the discourse of romantic love. It is suggested that while each discourse may have some impact on how women view and address IPA, they may not be equally accessible and/or relevant to all women. Subsequent exploratory analyses of women's on-line discussion forums supported this assumption.

Not surprisingly, given the feminised power of the romantic love discourse in western society both heterosexual and LBT women drew heavily on this narrative in the on-line discussion forums that we analysed. The scripts of romantic love were implicitly and explicitly evident in survivors' stories and explanations for abuse. Much was made of the

struggle and pain of love and relationships, women's role in saving their relationships, the fusing of identities in a love relationships (especially for LBT women) and the expressed inability of many to draw a line between 'making it work' and tolerating outright abuse. Of concern was the matter-of-fact way that the script of romantic love was expressed – it was accepted without critical reflection. The explicit connection between romantic love and abuse was not recognised; the insidiousness of westernised notions romantic love (i.e. that it is potentially painful, all encompassing, controlling and obsessive) was ignored. Acceptance of this discourse appeared to impede women's ability to leave their abusive intimates. Perhaps, as suggested by Wood (2001: 259), it is time to formulate a more healthy discourse of romantic love, or at least to gain some insight into its potential for distortion.

Psychological scripts of both victim and abuser abound in the on-line forums. Narratives of victim psychology generally presented as disempowering. In particular, LBT women were frequently blamed for remaining in abusive relationships through suggestions that they themselves harboured psychological deficiencies i.e. they were co-dependent and unwitting collaborators in their own abuse (Craven, 2003). In contrast, offender psychological narratives appeared empowering albeit more so for heterosexual than LBT women. Being able to label the offender as having a psychological condition or maladaptive set of behaviours seemed to elevate some women from self-blame giving them permission to give up and walk away. Tentatively, accessibility to the narrative of perpetrator psychology may be potentially beneficial to victims of intimate partner violence because it provides valuable insights that could empower women to leave abusive relationships if they so choose. However, and as was demonstrated in the LBT forums, care should be taken that the psychological perpetrator narrative is not hijacked by notions of victim psychological deficiency and distorted ideals of romantic love resulting in the table being turned back on the those who have suffered the abuse.

The gendered political script of male patriarchal power is useful for illuminating social structural reasons for men's violence against women. Not surprisingly, given the dominance of this narrative in mainstream society, both LBT and heterosexual women frequently drew on this discourse in their on-line discussions. Nonetheless, engagement with this narrative often leads to confusion. For lesbian women there was an inability to recognise what was happening to them as IPA, a sense of loyalty to the feminist sisterhood constrained their ability to blame women for their abusive behaviours and/or they constructed their partners as 'butch' to more easily locate their experiences within patriarchal ideals of masculine power. For transgendered individuals the problem may be exacerbated further by service providers who fail to acknowledge the transperson's identity as woman. Overall, there was a general sense of frustration that whilst having information about power and control tactics used by abusers may be interesting, what about workable strategies to leave?

Thus, our analyses suggest that women do draw on and position themselves within the four dominant discourses of IPA. In particular, the discourse of romantic love provided the strongest motivation for accepting and maintaining an abusive relationship, while an understanding of the psychological motivations of the abuser appeared more likely to empower women to extricate themselves from abuse. The psychological victim and gendered political narratives were also utilised by the women but presented as the least helpful narratives. Like the script of romantic love, both the psychological victim and gendered political narratives were restrictive in terms of paving the way to emancipation from violent partners. However, we do acknowledge that such a small and purposive sample cannot allow us to generalise our findings. Rather, these data are important and useful in highlighting possible foci for more in-depth empirical research into the topic. Further studies into the impact of romantic love discourses and the role of psychological counselling in the context of abusive relationships, especially LBT IPA, are urgently needed. It is hoped these theoretical

and empirical musings will inform future research in a way that will impact positively on the prevalence of repeated victimisation of women victims of IPA.

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