

**Title**

**What does violence tell us about gay male couple relationships?**

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## Contents

	<i>Page</i>
<b>Title</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Contents</b>	<b>3-4</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>5-6</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7-10</b>
<b>Chapter 1:</b>	
<b>Literature Review</b>	
.1 Defining intimate partner abuse	<b>11-23</b>
.2 Prevalence of violence and abuse in same-sex relationships	<b>24-30</b>
.3 Explaining same-sex partner abuse	<b>31-55</b>
.4 Comparing same-sex and heterosexual abuse	<b>56-59</b>
.5 Help seeking behaviour	<b>60-62</b>
.6 Responding to domestic violence and abuse	<b>63-69</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>70-71</b>
<b>Chapter 2:</b>	
<b>Rational for undertaking the study</b>	<b>72-73</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	
2.1 Introduction	<b>74-77</b>
2.2 The grounded theory method	<b>78-81</b>
2.3 Grounded theory analysis	<b>82-86</b>
2.4 Recruitment	<b>87-91</b>

2.5	Procedure	<b>92-94</b>
2.6	Ethical considerations	<b>95-97</b>
2.7	Focus Group	<b>98-100</b>
2.8	Self reflexivity	<b>101-105</b>

***Chapter 3:***

<b>Participant Profiles</b>	<b>106-120</b>
<b>Results</b>	<b>121-167</b>
<b>Focus Group Results</b>	<b>168-177</b>

***Chapter 4:***

<b>Discussion</b>	<b>178-201</b>
<b>Future Directions</b>	<b>202</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>203-204</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>205-231</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>232-294</b>

## **Abstract**

Research on intimate partner violence and abuse in same-sex couple's relationships is still a relatively new area of interest. Given the silence surrounding this form of abuse within the field, there is much to be learned by research focusing on its meaning. This research study examined violence and abuse in the couple's relationships of gay men from a British perspective. The study is located within a phenomenological approach, designed to capture the essence of the individual's experience. The choice of a grounded theory approach for the analysis of the data rested on it being particularly helpful in generating theory in areas where this is lacking. However, the challenge of recruiting participants to the study limited the utility of the method, highlighting the ongoing difficulty of gaining access to sexual minority participants for studies involving sensitive issues. Eight participants, all gay men, were recruited and semi-structured interviews administered as a basis for generating data. A focus group discussion also formed part of the study and considered the question of whether same-sex partner abuse is the same or different from that seen in heterosexual couple's relationships. Findings suggest that love for one's partner, hope for change and quality of sex, accounted for the ongoing investment made by these men in their violent and abusive relationships. The emphasis on physical abuse diminished the importance of other forms of abuse, i.e. emotional, psychological and financial abuse. The direction of the abuse was in contrast to that seen in heterosexual relationships, i.e. the partner with most instrumental power, was the one most at risk of abuse. There was little

recognition of the impact of homophobia or internalized homophobia as possible contributory factors in the development of violence and abuse. Participants tended to rely on their own resources rather than seeking outside help and the clinical implications of this were considered.

## **Introduction**

Domestic violence as a phenomenon was transformed from a private trouble into a public issue in the 1970's, primarily as a result of feminist thinking and practice (Harne & Radford, 2008). Since that time, the focus has largely been on heterosexual couples and families; with particular emphasis on the need to expose such abuse and to protect women and children from their male abusers.

Over the past few decades, studies relating to violence and abuse within same-sex couple's relationships have begun to emerge and Burke & Follingstad (1999) remind us that, although not a new phenomenon, research on intimate partner violence in same-sex relationships is a relatively new area of interest and one that is still largely understudied. This is of concern, since same-sex partner violence is regarded by some as the third largest health problem facing gay males following AIDS and substance misuse (Island & Letellier, 1991). Moreover, despite clear advances generally within society towards homosexuality, manifested in legislation protecting the rights of sexual minorities, greater exposure of lesbians and gay men within mainstream culture and developments regarding civil partnerships, it is worth noting that in an up-to-date report from Stonewall Housing that one in three of its callers were found to be approaching the organisation with domestic violence issues as the main cause of their concern (LVSC Report, 2010). This constitutes an increase in domestic violence referrals to this organisation than in previous years and, although it is not clear whether this signals an actual increase in the prevalence

of domestic violence, or, whether it relates to greater openness and confidence about reporting, it, nevertheless, provides further testimony to the importance and necessity of keeping same-sex partner abuse firmly on the agenda. That said, a number of factors have conspired to keep same-sex partner abuse out of view.

Firstly, although male-to-female partner abuse having the limelight is fully justified in terms of frequency and validity of its cause, it must, to some extent, constitute yet another example of the kind of heterosexism that operates within mainstream culture to silence, exclude and disenfranchise sexual minority interests. Secondly, the secrecy surrounding gay and lesbian relationships, itself a symptom of the lack of acceptance within society (Shelly, 1998), creates a context that provides a major blind-spot in terms of recognition and endorsement of violence within same-sex pairings. Thirdly, the lesbian and gay community itself shares some responsibility for keeping same-sex partner abuse in the 'closet'. Elliott (1996) believes that the shame associated with same-sex abuse accounts in part for the silence but, perhaps, more importantly, the existence of homophobia has created justifiable concern that exposure of same-sex partner abuse provides yet further ammunition to those who seek to pathologise and attack an already discriminated and oppressed group.

At the same time, there is a recognition that same-sex partner abuse challenges existing beliefs and practice. For instance, Ristock & Timbang (2005) are critical of feminist thinking which has largely been responsible for exposing the nature and extent of abuse within intimate relationships, since this gender exclusive



framework, relying as it does on sexism and patriarchy, has largely ignored or misunderstood violence and abuse in the lives of sexual minorities; a point that is further underscored by Almeida et al, (1994) who suggest that feminist theory in focusing primarily on the private oppression of white women has tended to ignore the more public forms of abuse that contribute to domestic violence in the racially and sexually different. For that reason, those researching domestic violence within same-sex relationships have begun to challenge the limits of thinking within the field. Quite apart from putting same-sex partner abuse on the map, they are also endeavouring to capture features which heteronormative models have failed to account, and they embrace Elliott's (1996) belief that new theories of violence and models of intervention must be developed if same-sex domestic violence is to be confronted. However, the development of new theories and models relies to a large extent on clarity concerning the definition of such abuse, as well as giving voice to the experiences of those who have for so long remained outside the dominant discourse.

My own interest in studying this topic has arisen out of a need to develop a greater understanding of the meaning of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men, partly because it remains an understudied topic and also because, as a systemic psychotherapist working with gay male couples, I have an investment in considering the implications of same-sex partner abuse within clinical practice, both in terms of its identification and in terms of developing an effective therapeutic response. Given the silence surrounding same-sex partner abuse generally within the field, it seems likely that there is much to be learned by research focusing specifically on the nature, meaning

and impact of same-sex partner violence and abuse, particularly when the implications of the findings for clinicians will also form part of the discussion.

What follows is an overview of the existing research undertaken in relation to same-sex partner violence and abuse and comparisons of that work with research relating to heterosexual couple's relationships in which there is violence and abuse. Particular attention will be given to definitional considerations, since, to understand the meaning of violence and abuse in the couple's relationships of gay men, it is necessary to understand the definition of violence and abuse that is being applied. The literature review will also consider explanations advanced for same-sex partner violence and abuse, and this will be followed by a consideration of help seeking behaviour and of an examination of therapeutic interventions, with particular reference to the vexed question of couple's therapy as a valid and effective intervention.

The rationale for undertaking the study will be explored and methodological considerations will also be outlined. The study itself, consisting of individual interviews, as well as a focus group discussion designed to push the limits of thinking particularly around the question of difference in relation to same sex and heterosexual couple relationships in which there is violence and abuse, will also be considered. A discussion of the key themes emerging from the study, together with the implications for practice, will be provided towards the end of the thesis.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Literature Review**

#### **1.1 Defining intimate partner abuse**

How intimate partner violence and abuse is defined, influences how it is measured and, therefore, has relevance in regard to establishing its prevalence irrespective of whether it is same-sex or heterosexual couple's relationships. In addition, definitions of abuse within same-sex relationships opens up a debate about the nature and possible meaning of such abuse and the extent to which it is the same or different from intimate partner abuse within heterosexual couple's relationships. Indeed, Harne & Radford (2008, p.16) highlight the fact that although,

*"....domestic violence can occur in some relationships between women, there exists, a profound lack of knowledge about its extent and a lack of understanding about differences between violence in intimate lesbian relationships and violence in heterosexual relationships."*

Additionally, (Hester, 2004) draws attention to the fact that definitions have changed over time, particularly in regard to differences in context, although she points out that there is general acceptance that domestic violence involves a range of abusive behaviours, including; physical, emotional, sexual, financial, and so on.

The point is also made that those whose experiences fall outside the public story of violence and abuse, are often prevented from recognising their experiences as abusive (Ristock, 2002; Barnes, 2008; Donovan et al., 2006). Yet, the rationale for naming and simultaneously understanding the implications of that naming is that it is literally life-saving for many (Donovan & Hester, 2010). Pushing the point still further, DuBois (1983) says “*that which has no name, that for which we have no words or concepts is rendered mute and invisible*” (cited in Lempert, 1996a, p.16). Building on this point, Barnes (2008) suggests that without names, certain forms of violence and abuse lie outside of public existence and thus escape recognition.

Furthermore, the distinction between, for example, physical and emotional abuse brings to the fore questions about the boundaries of the category of abuse. For instance, not until there were visible injuries did the female respondents of Kelly and Radford’s study (1990) define the act as an attack, or their partner’s behaviour as violent. Yet, previous work in this area has shown that physical and psychological abuse are closely linked and that psychological abuse can be just as harmful and hurtful and in many cases more so (Follingstad et al., 1990). Moreover, research suggests that in relationships characterised by violence, different forms of abuse often occur simultaneously (Martin, 1976; Walker, 1979; Pagelow, 1981). Although, clearly of importance, this is more about defining what counts as violence rather than defining domestic violence and abuse itself.

#### *Approaches to defining domestic violence and abuse*

There are essentially two approaches to defining intimate partner violence and abuse. The first of these relies on actual incidents of violence and the other speaks to a pattern of power and coercive control perpetrated by one of the partners towards the other within the relationship over time.

Take, for example, the following definition adopted by the Association of Police Officers (2008) which defines domestic violence as;

*“Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults, aged eighteen or over, who are or have been intimate partners....”*

The key point here is the reference to *any incidents of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse*, which makes some sense if one is approaching the definition from a criminal justice systems perspective that requires the potential for investigation and evidence. Researchers (usually those drawn from the field of family violence research) adopting this approach have also tended to rely on measurements such as the Conflict Tactics Scale which they utilise in a range of surveys to capture the incidence of violence and abuse within the couple relationship. However, the Conflict Tactics Scale relies heavily on specific acts of violence, usually physical acts of violence, without reference to the context or the anticipated effect of the particular act of violence towards a victim (Straus, 1999; Greenwood et al., 2002). In other words, it does not connect acts of physical violence with the consequences of those acts (Dobash et al., 1992).

Furthermore, when used on random populations it consistently shows that violence is extremely common within heterosexual couple's relationships and that it is a resource used almost equally by women and men; thereby ignoring the differential impact of violence on heterosexual women by men and confounding the notion of a victim and perpetrator divide. Yet, evidence shows that the experience and impact of violence and abuse towards women by men is far more severe and longer lasting than violence by women to men. Furthermore, the under-representation of violence by men (who are known to deny and minimise) and the over-representation by women of their own violence in the Conflict Tactics Scale, masks the context, intent, and indeed, experience of such action so that retaliation, self-defence, or, protection of self remain unaccounted for.

To further underline the point, a key qualitative study which examined incidents of violence between 100 United Kingdom heterosexual couples, found that when they were asked only about these incidents, rates of violence between the women and men appeared to be remarkably similar. However, when each of the partners of the couple were asked about the context and impact of the violence, it was found that women's use of violence (with the exception of 3 cases) consisted of one-off acts, such as a slap or the throwing of an object, which usually occurred in self-defence, in contrast to the men, all of whom used 'threatening violence' based on a combination of repeated physical attacks, intimidation and humiliation of their partners, which was intended to inflict both physical and psychological harm (Nazroo, 1995). Furthermore, a victim of such abuse is not simply affected by individual incidents of violence or abuse, as

presumed by the criminal justice system; on the contrary, the impact of an incident is shaped by previous incidents and the fear of future ones (Harne & Radford, 2008).

For this reason, a number of researchers prefer to define intimate partner abuse in terms of a pattern of violence and abuse within a relationship incorporating aspects of power and control. As mentioned above, this is because studies confirm that domestic violence is rarely a 'one-off' incident and that it usually increases in frequency and severity over time (Kelly, 1988; Hanmer et al., 1999; Kelly, 1999). For instance, in a recent study conducted by Henderson (2003), she found that of the 22% of her lesbian victims of abuse (19%) had suffered recurrent abuse and of the 29% of gay male victims (24%) had suffered some recurrent abuse.

Others have characterised this pattern in terms of a cycle of violence (Walker, 1979) consisting of a number of phases, i.e. the tension building phase, the acute battering phase and the tranquil loving or non-violent phase that follows serious acts of abuse. In Margolies & Leeder's (1995) study, they found that violence occurred immediately after a lover's contact with the outside world and as the violence became part of the relationship, the lover tended to distance, presumably to avoid further abuse, although this seemed to create even more dependence in the abuser who feared being abandoned. A cycle was therefore set in motion whereby dependency was said to lead to violence, violence often lead to withdrawal and withdrawal ultimately lead to increased dependence and yet more violence. Although this kind of symmetrical pattern of relating was

evident in Margolies & Leeder's (1995) study, and they were careful to draw attention to the perpetrator's role in the creation of the abuse, it seems to me, that there is still a danger of confusing the very obvious power and control dynamics at work by perpetrators within such a relationship, since both partners appear to be contributing to the violence or abuse; reinforcing the view held by Donovan et al., (2006) that perceptions of victimhood (including beliefs about shared responsibility) can actually preclude recognition of domestic violence.

For that reason, feminist approaches, have been very clear in defining domestic violence as a pattern of behaviour that results in the exertion of power and control by one intimate partner over the other. In fact, Ristock (2002) believes that the constellation of power and control remains the foundational discourse for understanding all forms of abuse; in other words, that the abusive behaviour is both intentional and is calculated to exercise power and control within the relationship. Underscoring this point it is worth noting that the majority of gay male respondents in Cruz & Firestone's (1998) study focused on power and control as the major organizing factor in their definition of intimate partner violence.

Hart (1986) proposed the following definition in relation to lesbian partner violence and abuse, describing it as;

*"...a pattern of violence (or) coercive behaviour, whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs (or) conduct of an intimate partner, or, to punish the intimate for resisting the perpetrator's control".*



The thrust of Hart's definition is to suggest that if the assaulted partner becomes fearful of the violator or modifies her behaviour to avoid further abuse then "she is battered". However, Potoczniak et al., (2001) are critical of Hart's definition feeling that it is too general and that it fails to draw distinctions between different patterns and the severity of violence within same-sex relationships and, for that reason, they look to the work of Johnson and colleagues who draw particular distinctions between patterns and forms of violence and abuse within intimate relationships. Despite this development, others have continued to define and emphasise same-sex domestic violence and abuse in terms of conscious manipulation and control by one person towards another (Vickers, 1996; Island & Letellier, 1991), and Stark (2007) suggests that the focus, in terms of definition, should be on that of identifying the specific features of coercive control.

As researchers began to explore the pattern of abuse within couple relationships, distinctions within and between abusive couples started to emerge. For instance, a distinction is drawn between relationships with systematic controlling behaviour and relationships in which violence and abuse may be evident but where one partner does not control the other. In other words, it is not a context where one partner lives in fear of the other and so the intentionality and impact may be quite different from a relationship where a partner uses a range of coercive and controlling strategies, i.e. physical and sexual violence, with the intention of reinforcing their control over their partner.

Leeder (1988), for instance, in her analysis of lesbian battering, distinguished three types of domestic violence, e.g. *situational* – where violence occurs perhaps only once or twice as a result of some event that throws the couple into crisis; *chronic battering* – where physical abuse occurs more often and escalates over time; and *emotional battering* – where the abuse is psychological or verbal rather than physical. Renzetti (1992) however, was critical of this model believing it to have certain limitations. For instance, in her own study she found *situational battering* to be rare and, although the majority of the participants fell into what Leeder refers to as *chronic battering* and *emotional battering*, Renzetti (1992) also found couples whose violence did not escalate but remained constant throughout the life of the couple relationship.

Johnson and colleagues have further developed these categories and it would seem that their intention has been to bridge the two schools of thought, incorporating incidents of violence with the pattern of coercive control and violence within the relationship over time. In a recent version of their work, (Kelly & Johnson, 2008) suggest that it is no longer considered scientific or ethically acceptable to speak of domestic violence without specifying the type of partner violence to which one refers. Furthermore, they argue that the value of differentiating any type of domestic violence is that appropriate screening instruments and processes can be developed that more accurately describe the central dynamic of the partner violence, the differing content, and indeed, the different consequences of the violence. Although Kelly & Johnson appear to concentrate almost exclusively on heterosexual couples when outlining their definitions of violence and abuse, I would argue that the four categories they

use also have utility when thinking about same-sex intimate partner abuse. However, it is worth noting that in developing the model, Johnson suggested that all violence and abuse within same-sex relationships would fall into what was referred to as common couple violence and which is now labelled situational couple violence, a point which Renzetti (1996), based on her own research findings, challenged.

Kelly & Johnson (2008) outline four types of intimate partner violence consisting of *coercive controlling violence*; *violent resistance*; *situational couple violence*; and *separation instigated violence*.

*Coercive controlling violence* (previously labelled patriarchal terrorism or intimate terrorism) - involves frequent and escalating incidents of violence including emotional abuse, intimidation, coercion and control, coupled with physical violence against partners.

*Violent resistance* - recognises that both men and women, in attempting to get the violence to stop or to stand up for oneself, may react violently towards their partners who are using a range of coercive controlling techniques.

Situational Couple Violence - is used to identify the type of partner violence that does not have its basis in the dynamic of power and control (Johnson & Leone, 2005; Johnson, 1995). It essentially involves bi-directional, minor and infrequent conflict which is not physically injurious and is believed to be the most common form of violence, although one must carefully map the dynamics, particularly in

same-sex partnerships where the power dynamics may be more difficult to determine. A recent study by Stanley et al., (2006) gives weight to this definition, since the majority of the gay male participants reported bi-directional violence or mutual acts of violence, such as pushing or punching, but did not describe the violence in terms of control. For instance, the concept of control and domination accounted for only 6% of the responses, whilst intimate terrorism was described by only 2 of the 69 participants and violent resistance by only 3 of the participants. Quite apart from questioning the suggestion that violence is used to establish and maintain power and control over a partner, Stanley and colleagues also ask whether the victim and perpetrator divide in heterosexual relationships has blinded researchers to the complexities generally within same-sex relationships and has confounded attempts to define same-sex partner abuse in ways that are different and which challenge strongly held beliefs within the field. At the same time, the outcome of this research raises questions concerning potential differences between same-sex and heterosexual relationships, especially since the latter have tended to rely on a victim and perpetrator divide and with issues of power and control, something that will be addressed later in the review when I look in more depth at the Donovan et al., (2006) study.

*Separation Instigated Violence* is used to describe violence that first occurs in the relationship at the point of separation, although Kelly & Johnson (2008) also emphasise the need to distinguish between this kind of violence and that of ongoing coercive controlling violence which may continue or even escalate to

homicidal levels when the perpetrator feels that his or her control is threatened by separation.

*Further definitional considerations in regard to violence and abuse within same-sex relationships*

Renzetti (1992) believes that determining the context in which the violence occurs, the motivations underlying the use of violence in a specific situation and the consequences of that abuse for both victims and perpetrators is what really matters. No doubt Renzetti advocates this because she believes that it is helpful to identify the pattern of violence and abuse and, as a result, this should be factored in when defining same-sex domestic violence and abuse. However, the complexities of defining violence and abuse within same-sex couple's relationships is particularly evident if one takes, for example, Island & Letellier's (1991) assertion that gay men's domestic violence is not a relational problem, but rather a deliberate, violent and criminal act by one man towards another. Yet, research has shown that within same-sex couple's relationships one needs to take account of certain distinctions in power dynamics, i.e. equal physical size and shared gender status, which could make fighting back more of a possibility than in heterosexual relationships although, research concerning this point, would seem to suggest that the majority of victims do not fight back for fear that it will only make matters worse.

To that extent, power within same-sex relationships is understood more as contextual and relational rather than as an absolute, or, indeed fixed in one

person or place. Moreover, Lamb (1996) suggests that the problem with wanting to see victims as absolutely pure and perpetrators as absolutely evil is that few, if any, from either group, actually live up (or down) to this belief. It is therefore important to understand power as something other than a fixed quotient; a point that is further underlined by one of Barnes' (2008) participants, who suggests that female-to-female relationships have more complex power relations and, that by simply dividing the partners into victim and perpetrator, one misses the complexities of the relational dynamics. In fact, Marriujo & Kreeger (1996) recommend broadening the victim and perpetrator divide to include, what they refer to as a "participant position", to take account of situations where the victim fights back with the intention not just to protect herself but also to retaliate.

Given the complexities and issues involved in defining violence and abuse, particularly within same-sex relationships, I would like to make the reader aware of the definition I will be adopting throughout this thesis. Although, incident based approaches have some merit in terms of isolating and marking acts of violence, my own clinical exposure to violent and abusive relationships suggests something closer to a pattern, whereby one partner attempts to exert power and control over the other by whatever means available to them. At the same time, I hold with Kelly and Johnson's typology, since it draws distinctions within and between violent and abusive relationships based on intentionality and the use of power and control. I, therefore, hold with the victim and perpetrator divide when one is talking about relationships involving coercive control, but, I also hold with the definition of situational couple violence, especially since I have worked with such couples in my clinical practice and the

dynamics of these relationships are fundamentally different from those involving deliberate attempts by one person to exert power and control over the other.

## **1.2 Prevalence of violence and abuse in same-sex relationships.**

Given the need to establish the existence of same-sex partner abuse, particular attention has been paid to the question of prevalence of such abuse within gay and lesbian relationships. However, estimating the prevalence of such abuse within same-sex relationships is a complex business, not least because it is a sensitive topic and one that has only very recently been identified as an issue within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer communities in Britain (Mc Carry et al., 2008). It is also the case that the secrecy surrounding gay and lesbian relationships generally, makes for difficulties in recruitment and of finding representative samples, as well as challenges relating specifically to the reporting of such violence and abuse within intimate partner relationships across the board. Renzetti (1992) suggests that as long as stigma attached to homosexual relationships exists, it is doubtful whether a true prevalence study of lesbian and gay partner abuse is ever possible.

Tully (1999) also makes the point that many incidents of same-sex domestic violence are never reported, since the victims of such violence believe that the police will not take the matter seriously. In fact Donovan & Hester (2011) highlight the fact that historically the police have targeted gay men as potential criminals and as deviants to be socially controlled and regulated and this legacy may also account for the failure of gay male victims of abuse to call on the police for help. Moreover, for some, the act of reporting is an act of 'coming out' and, for many, this feels a step too far. Another factor which may work against reporting is the belief that gay men often feel uncomfortable being



labelled as a victim of abuse, since it is felt to be both shameful and doesn't quite fit with a male identity. According to Lamb (1999), victims often feel as if they have been weak and weakness is a "shameful" experience in our culture. Furthermore, Stanley et al., (2006) make the point that a man experiencing a single incident of low-level violence involving bi-directional emotional abuse is unlikely to welcome a label which locates him as the victim in an abusive relationship.

Other constructions of violence focus only upon some of the most severe and visible aspects of such abuse, thereby marginalizing forms of domestic violence which fall below this particular threshold (Barnes, 2008). Indeed, in Barnes' study, the most frequently reported sense of dissonance between women's experience and their understanding of what could legitimately be termed domestic violence or abuse concerned non-physical forms of abuse. For instance, one of the participants said;

*"I think the first real, if you could call it abuse, was when I would be paying for everything and she wasn't paying for anything and she wasn't really paying anything at all".*

It is worth noting that the elements of financial exploitation in this particular participant's relationship were believed to be extremely damaging, both materially and emotionally.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Burke & Follingstad (1999) suggest that a notable problem inherent in studies of abuse is the lack of a clear definition concerning what actually constitutes abuse. For example, in a review conducted by Carden (1994) the terms violence, battering, abuse and assault were used interchangeably to refer to any form of behaviour that was intended to cause pain. Furthermore, definitional considerations compound an already complex picture, since studies have not always been clear in the distinctions drawn between, for example, physical and/or emotional and psychological abuse, so that the rates of abuse are not always consistent. Furthermore, Burke & Follingstad (1999) also make the point that most studies have failed to control for violence that is inflicted in self-defence.

Ristock & Timbang (2005) indicate that it is virtually impossible to accurately predict prevalence rates since studies rely on individuals who self-select and self-report on violence. Moreover, almost all of the research remains focused on white, gay men and lesbians in their mid twenties or thirties, who are college educated and who are 'out' (Kanuha, 1990; Butler, 1999; Mahoney et al., 2001). To underline the point of how researchers may not be capturing representative samples, several studies have suggested that sexual minority people in small rural communities may be particularly vulnerable to violence because of increased isolation, lack of services and supports (ACON, 2004; Mahoney et al., 2001) yet they will rarely, if ever, be included in the research. However, two recent studies have gone to enormous lengths to recruit more broad-based samples. Donovan et al (2006), for instance, in their study made efforts to obtain a more representative sample, i.e. by using a large United Kingdom wide

community survey, and Stanley et al., (2006) in their Canadian study used a random digit dialing procedure to obtain 300 gay male participants and of these 69 were subsequently interviewed. Using these methods, the researchers in both studies managed to capture a much larger age range of participants than previous studies, e.g. 25-69 years, as well as a wider range of ethnic backgrounds.

To a large extent, the challenges inherent in recruiting participants account for the widely varying rates which studies have found, thereby confirming the methodological challenges in capturing a true prevalence of violence and abuse within same-sex relationships. At the same time, variation in rates across studies may also be accounted for by researchers using different methodologies, i.e. studies based on small self selected samples (i.e. Cruz & Firestone, 1998; Landolt & Dutton, 1997) and those which used much larger surveys (e.g. Donovan et al., 2006; Stanley et al., 2006). In the Donovan et al., (2006) study, they found that more than a third of respondents 38.4% (40.1% of women and 35.2% of men) said that they had experienced domestic abuse at some time in a same-sex relationship. Although these figures are not a true reflection of the prevalence of such abuse, given the methodological challenges, nevertheless, Donovan et al., (2006) suggest that they indicate that domestic violence and abuse is an issue for a considerable number of people in same-sex relationships within the United Kingdom. Indeed others, go so far as to suggest that the rates for same-sex relationships are comparable to those where men abuse women in heterosexual relationships (Renzetti, 1992: Turell,

2000). However, as previously stated, given the methodological challenges in establishing a true prevalence rate, this proposition is clearly open to debate.

Despite the obvious limitations of studies seeking to estimate the prevalence of violence and abuse within same-sex relationships, those which do exist, testify to the range and seriousness of the attacks. For instance, Ristock (2002) found that over half of the lesbian participants in her study suffered serious physical violence directed at them, in which they received; broken bones, head injuries, knife wounds or bruising and some even thought that they were going to die. Furthermore, in Merrill and Wolfe's (2000) study, focusing specifically on gay male couples, they found that 79% of the 52 gay male participants had sustained at least one injury and most reported multiple. In fact, 62% reported that they had been threatened or assaulted with weapons, i.e. household objects, knives, blades, hot objects, clubs, sticks, bats and guns. And, for those who had suffered emotional abuse, rates were well over 50% (Lie et al., 1991; Bologna et al., 1987; Turell, 2000). It is also worth noting that Renzetti (1992) found that 78% of her (101) respondents who completed her questionnaire said that they had reacted in self-defence, i.e. pushing their partners away, holding their arms or wrists to prevent physical attack, whilst, 58% of Merrill & Wolfe's (52) self-selecting gay male participants agreed that they had physically defended themselves. However, in Renzetti's study the respondents indicated that their attempts to defend themselves were futile since it resulted in greater violence being inflicted on them. This also further highlights the complexities in distinguishing self-defence from fighting back with the intention of retaliating and, distinguishing this, from the questionable concept of mutual abuse.

In terms of sexual abuse, Elliott (1996, p.4) believes it is *“the most understudied topic in same-sex domestic violence”*. Yet, of the 101 participants in Renzetti’s (1992) study, 48% of the women stated that they had been forced to have sex at some point in their abusive relationship, whilst Merrill & Wolfe (2000) found that 39% had sometimes, or frequently, been forced to have sex against their will. Heintz & Melendez (2006) highlight the importance of research in the area of contracting HIV/sexually transmitted disease in an abusive relationship, believing that trauma can occur directly through unprotected sex with a partner or, indirectly, by impairing a victim’s ability to negotiate safe-sex. For instance, they suggest that those experiencing intimate partner violence *“live in a context where the abusive partner controls multiple aspects of their lives and may find it difficult to assert their needs or wants.”* (p.194). Results of research in this area (Greenwood et al., 2002; Stall et al., 2003) highlight the fact that sexual assault is a major concern for sexual minority victims who are in an abusive relationship where those experiencing interpersonal partner violence are often forced to appease their abusers at the expense of their own needs, wants and safety (Renzetti & Miley, 1996).

In conclusion, it is clear that methodological constraints stymie efforts to establish true prevalence rates of violence and abuse within same-sex couple’s relationships. As a result, research relating to intimate partner violence and abuse within same-sex relationships has tended to rely on small-scale, convenience based samples, although more recent research efforts have tended towards larger-scale surveys from which participants are then recruited

for interview. Although this has, to some extent expanded the opportunities for developing a clearer understanding of the nature and impact of such abuse on same-sex couples, nevertheless, because of methodological constraints, one still needs to be cautious as to the conclusions drawn from such research.

### **1.3 Explaining same-sex partner abuse**

Understanding the causes of abuse within same-sex relationships is another area which has received attention. From the work undertaken in this area, a number of theories have been advanced to explain same-sex partner violence and abuse, i.e. a *social psychological model* that includes attention to personality characteristics, *feminist socio-political analysis*, which examines the contexts of sexism, racism and homophobia that encourage and support acts of violence, and a *social learning theory*, based on modeling and reinforcement.

From the outset, it seems that tensions exist between, on the one hand, individual based theories, and, on the other, societal based explanations. At the heart of this debate is an anxiety that perpetrators of violence, or indeed victims themselves, may excuse abusive behaviour by, for example, blaming alcohol or past abuse, for their partner's behaviour or as the cause of the abuse, when really they are nothing but excuses or attempts to let the perpetrator off the hook and avoid taking responsibility. In view of this, it seems vitally important to examine the evidence for factors believed to give rise to abusive behaviours within same-sex couples, since these inform beliefs, policy and indeed practice in this challenging area of work.

Renzetti (1992) reminds us that it is not the form that the abuse takes that is significant when understanding abusive relationships, but rather the facts that give rise to the abuse and the consequences of such abuse for the perpetrator and the victim. From her research she identified seven factors which she

believed were strongly correlated with the occurrence of lesbian partner abuse and which appear to hold in regard to exploring gay male partner abuse. These incorporate a mixture of individual and societal based explanations and include; power imbalances, dependency and jealousy, intergenerational transmission of violence, substance misuse, internalized homophobia and personality disorder.

Before exploring each of these factors in turn, Coleman (1994) reminds us that intimate violence, regardless of the sexual orientation of the couple concerned, is best understood in terms of a multi-dimensional perspective incorporating socio-cultural variables with individual psychological factors. Extending this further, a framework of intersectionality expands a gender-based analysis of violence to one that considers the connection of relationship violence to all systems of oppression, and which takes a both/and stance (Russo, 2001). To some extent, this is consistent with Renzetti's belief that it is important to examine how people are differently located and the ways in which race, class, sexism and heterosexism affect the causes and consequences of violence (Renzetti, 1998).

Yet, despite efforts to address specific contextual factors that allow for a clearer understanding of the causes and consequences of same-sex partner abuse, Ristock (2002) believes that what often remains is a shared and unchallenged assumption that it is possible to find one universalising explanation or "grand narrative" to account for relationship violence no matter what the social context. I would endorse this view as well as her thinking about current theorising which fails to recognise or honour difference. For instance, the overarching



conceptualisation of lesbian abuse has emphasised its comparability to gay men's partner violence and hence to assert the gender blended category of same-sex domestic violence (Ristock, 2002). However, we already know that differences exist between the forms and expression of violence and abuse within lesbian and gay relationships based on gender and power differentials and indeed differences also exist between same-sex and heterosexual couple's relationships, issues which will be further explored in this review.

I will now draw on Renzetti's seven factors as a basis for exploring possible explanations for violence and abuse within same-sex relationships.

### **Power Imbalances**

Studies of violence in intimate partnerships suggest that some forms of power, particularly those connected to one's relative status within the relationship are related to frequency and severity of abuse (Bryne, 1996; Coleman, 1994; Smith, 1990). For example, high self-esteem has been positively associated with feelings of competency, whereas feelings of incompetency are believed to involve the need to control others (Dutton, 1998; Renzetti, 1992). In fact, Renzetti (2002) found a clear imbalance of power between her study participants (all lesbian victims of abuse) and their abusers. For instance, when focusing on decision making within the relationship, it was the abusive partner who, on the face of it, appeared to be more powerful, since respondents described their abusers as more decisive, less yielding and taking more from the relationship than they gave.

In fact, within Renzetti's (1992) study it seems that it was the participants who were well educated, who held good jobs and who were financially secure within the relationship that were most at risk of abuse, a pattern which is the exact opposite to that seen in many heterosexual relationships and something that will be further explored in the discussion. Renzetti (1992), for example, found, that compared with other measures of power, economic inequality within the lesbian relationships she studied, was strongly associated with a higher frequency of abuse. Renzetti believes that one explanation for this phenomenon is that abusers are attempting to rebalance the distribution of power. However, another reading is that the abusers were resentful and jealous of their partner's status and that their own dependency within the relationship placed them in a vulnerable position, which they then expressed through physical or emotionally abusive means.

Given that differences between couples within same-sex relationships along a variety of axis, can result in violence or abuse, it is suggested that when addressing violence in same-sex couple's relationships it is necessary to explore the subtle imbalances of power that exist, including the careful mapping of privilege based upon, for example, race, economic clout, physical strength and gender-role assumptions that may be operating within the relationship. In fact, it seems that in all relationships differences pose a particular challenge and can operate as a risk or a resilience factor. For instance, it was noticeable in Ristock's (2002) study that 61% of her lesbian respondents described their first relationship as abusive. These participants would often be teamed up with

women who were “out” for a longer period of time and who were older, suggesting that the abusers, rather than offering protection, used their experience and the power it afforded them to hurt their more vulnerable partners. This particular finding is also endorsed by Donovan et al., (2006), who suggest that first same-sex relationships in affirming a lesbian or gay identity can also result in a confusion for the individual between feelings of exhilaration associated with having ‘come out’ and falling in love, so that abusive behaviours are then overlooked or minimized. Moreover, the lack of knowledge about what to expect in same-sex relationships, coupled with a lack of being embedded in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer communities and/or friendship networks, made these individuals vulnerable to isolation and abuse. In addition, given the lack of resources, whereby help and support could be sought, these relationships often escape detection and the abuse is never recognised or named.

In terms of male-male relationships, Tunnell & Greenan (2004) put forward the idea that these relationships are so often about power, suggesting that the power dynamics are more frequently to the fore. Their reading of this is that this represents the flip-side of the difficulty men have generally in maintaining emotional connection and especially acknowledging dependency needs, although they also believe that the power-play seen in gay male couple relationships has more to do with being male than with being gay. Further developing this idea, Gelles (1999) wonders about the part played by gender-role socialisation, since those with higher masculinity scores may be more inclined to use aggression as a means of resolving relational problems. And,

Goldner (1999) suggests that the prohibition against feminised feelings, the man's private sense of himself, is psychologically tasked to deny vulnerability, and it is this that explains why intimacy for these men is so dangerous. To some extent this is confirmed by research with heterosexual men, where men claim to use violence as a means to resolve arguments, to defend personal territory, to cajole compliance and to enhance their status (Stanko, 1990). One reading of this is that dependency on another is posed most starkly in direct contradiction to the notions of self-sufficiency and independence, which are believed to be central to hegemonic masculinity, suggesting that it is as if to succeed in love one has to fail as a man. Attention is also drawn by Donovan & Hester (2010) to the ways in which abusers engage in emotional work only in so far as it achieves their ends. Hence, only at particular points, i.e. when they are threatened with the relationship ending, are they able to make limited, but often convincing declarations of love.

In conclusion, given the salience of power and control as an organising factor in most, if not all, abusive couple relationships, it seems likely that the management of difference along the axis of power is an important factor in accounting for violence and abuse within same-sex relationships. Indeed, half of the abused women in Renzetti's study (1992) cited power imbalances as the reason they suffered violence and abuse.

### **Personality Disorder**

The idea that perpetrators of abuse exhibit a recognisable mental illness was something that a number of researchers advanced in the course of their work. Both, Island & Letellier (1991) and Dutton (1994), for instance, believe that individual factors, such as personality disorder, account for same-sex partner abuse. Island & Letellier (1991) believe that abusers suffer from a diagnosable and progressive mental disorder and that their partner becomes the target of their partner's unhealthy condition, manifested most clearly just before, during and after one of their violent attacks. Landolt & Dutton (1997) in their study involving 52 couples recruited through adverts placed in local gay and lesbian newspapers, found that the "abusive personality" was present in a number of these relationships and, in their view, accounted for the perpetration of abuse. Lending further weight to this line of thinking, Farley (1996) conducted psychological assessments of 119 gay men in treatment for perpetration of intimate partner abuse and found that 87% had high levels of previous mental health and psychiatric difficulties. However, Gondolf & White's (2001) study, involving 840 male participants in battering programs in the US, found little evidence for psychopathic disorder, particularly in repeat assaults, where 60% showed no serious dysfunction or psychopathology.

This notwithstanding, Merrill (1998) believes that the personality of abusers in same-sex relationships, in common with straight male abusers, leads them to externalise blame, and Merrill characterises them in terms of narcissistic personality traits; *"having little ability or willingness to control their violent and aggressive impulses and going to extremes to get their own way"* (p.133). In fact, Donovan & Hester (2010) suggest that perpetrators of abuse use

relationships as a vehicle through which they can achieve their own needs or goals regardless of the cost to victims, a finding echoed by participants in Renzetti's (1992) study. To a large extent, men exhibiting these characteristics have a propensity to take little or no responsibility for their actions and nor do they seek or indeed easily comply with treatment protocols. The question of culpability is clearly of issue here, since Merrill appears to confuse and indeed fuse two quite separate strands relating to "ability" to change with "motivation" for change, a confusion that plays out in the accounts of abusers as they attempt to put some meaning to their actions whilst taking little or no responsibility for their behaviour.

At the same time, it is striking, in terms of personality difficulties, how little attention is given to the personality traits of victims of abuse, despite some recognition by clinicians of the struggle they have in getting victims to assume responsibility for their own safety and enduring complaints from their abusers of how they often feel provoked by their victims (Goldner, et al., 1990). To that end, it is worth acknowledging the part that a state of learned helplessness plays towards victims gradually accepting and even tolerating their abusive situation. At the same time, although some victims of abuse adopt a passive stance, they may do so as a strategy for coping with the abuse as well as attempting to avoid even more serious attacks by their partners on them. In addition, Donovan & Hester (2010) draw attention to the way in which victims of abuse stay within the abusive relationship because they care about their partner and also want to see if things can improve. Moreover, as has already been mentioned,

perpetrators may pull their victims back into the relationship by declarations of love executed at key moments to weaken the victim's resolve.

Although evidence clearly exists to suggest that some abusers have personality difficulties (Farley, 1996), a factor that could dispose them towards violent and abusive behaviour, it is unlikely that personality disorder by itself accounts for the bulk of violent acts within intimate partner relationships. Furthermore, pitting personality disorder against power and control as separate explanations for abuse, recasts the mad and bad debate that ultimately confuses issues of responsibility for out of control behaviour. The danger, therefore, in applying the label of personality disorder to a perpetrator of abuse is that it could obfuscate the power that such individuals hold within violent and abusive relationships, a factor which could be used by them to displace responsibility for their actions. At the same time, personality factors, such as 'pathological jealousy' if left undiagnosed and untreated, can ultimately lead to extreme acts of violence or even death, and therefore cannot be left out of the equation. However, the value it holds as an explanation for same-sex partner abuse remains open to debate.

### **Alcohol & Substance Misuse**

Although the relationship between alcohol and substance misuse and physical abuse is not a causal one, i.e. 'inebriation' or a 'drug intoxication' does not cause violence (Gelles, 1993), it has, nevertheless, been firmly established that alcohol and substance misuse create increased risk factors for violence of all kinds (Gondolf & Foster, 1991; Tolman & Bennett, 1990). For instance, Van

Wormer (1998, p.374) asserts that *“persons who are violent or abusive are likely to misuse drugs, especially alcohol, and those who abuse alcohol, are prone to assault”*. Merrill & Wolfe (2000) also suggest that the higher rate of substance misuse in the gay male population as a whole, often serves as a confounding co-factor exacerbating violence.

In its contemporary form, there is an idea that consumption of alcohol or drugs cause violence because these substances lower inhibition, they impair judgement and they increase recklessness and risk-taking behaviour. Coleman (1990) noted that almost 71% of the lesbian couples she deemed violent reported using alcohol or drugs, compared with only 29% of the lesbian couples considered non-violent. Also, in a third of all incidents of domestic assault, the abuser was found to be using drugs and/or alcohol (British Crime Survey, 1996).

It also seems important to explore substance misuse and alcohol abuse, since as many as 25-35% of lesbians engage in heavy drinking, have drinking problems, or, are alcoholic (Nicholoff & Stiglitz, 1987; Gruskin & Gordon (2006). This finding is linked to the centrality of bars in lesbian social life, but is also felt to be linked to societal homophobia and oppression, since these forces generate feelings of alienation, isolation, depression and loss, which, in turn, lead to increased alcohol consumption. Indeed, Kus (1990) believes that alcohol and substance misuse is of importance in accounting for violence in same-sex relationships. It is also worth noting that nearly half of Ristock's (2002) participants mentioned drug and alcohol abuse as part of the relational



dynamics within the abusive couple relationships, although in other studies drug and alcohol misuse did not figure as a significant factor (Kaufman et al., 1987).

However, the association between substance abuse and domestic violence is considerably more complex than a simple cause and effect relationship. This is because consideration needs to be given to, for example, the amount and type of substance consumed, the background and personality of the user and any particular cultural and personal beliefs about the effects of the specific substance (Buikhuisen et al, 1988). Furthermore, Gelles (2000) highlights the role that low self-esteem plays in regard to an increased risk of alcohol and drug usage, so that, although drug and alcohol misuse may play a part, the part it plays may be more about accentuating feelings of power and self importance, especially when feeling disempowered. It would therefore seem that alcohol and substance misuse needs to be assessed in regard to other variables since, for example, Renzetti (1992) found that dependency of the abuser on her partner was highly correlated with alcohol abuse.

In conclusion, it seems that the presence of drug and alcohol within a number of abusive relationships makes it a factor that is hard to ignore, even if it does raise uncomfortable questions about the ways in which abusers make use of it to account for their abuse. After all, as previously stated, substances such as alcohol and drugs increase acting out behaviour and, given the salience of alcohol as part of a lesbian and gay lifestyle, it seems likely that it does have a powerful indirect relationship to violence and abuse within same-sex couple's relationships.

### **Intergenerational Transmission of Violence**

Renzetti (1992) points out that another widely held belief about the genesis of domestic violence is what is often referred to as the cyclical hypothesis or the intergenerational transmission hypothesis. Corvo (2006, p.117) reiterates this point by suggesting that;

*“the intergenerational transmission of domestic violence has been one of the most commonly reported influences in domestic violence in adulthood”.*

The theory of intergenerational transmission is based on the belief that individuals, who, as children, witness their parents behaving violently towards one another, and/or who, themselves have experienced violence at the hands of their parents are more likely, as adults, to think and behave in violent ways towards their own partners. The reasons behind this rather linear (cause and effect) theory is that witnessing or experiencing such violence as a child provides an aggressive template, a coping mechanism for resolving interpersonal conflict. Therefore, in an attempt to maintain control in later intimate adult relationships, individuals may resort to violence as their most readily understood and accessible coping strategy for dealing with loss of power (Coleman, 1990; Renzetti, 1992). To a large extent, this theory is based on the principles of social learning, namely that modeling behaviour in childhood provides the blue-print for all future patterns of intimate relating; a view supported by Dutton (1995), who confirms that exposure to role-models in

family of origin is an important factor in the learning of violent behaviour patterns. In fact, 52% of the participants in the study by Toro Alfonso et al., (2004), concerned with sexual coercion of Puerto Rican gay males, reported witnessing violence in their families of origin, including emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

However, research to date in this area is far from consistent in confirming this causal theory of violence. On the one hand, Straus et al., (1980), relying on the questionable conflict tactics scale to measure incidents of abuse, found that men and women who witnessed their parents physically attack one another were three times more likely to have been violent towards their own partner than men and women who grew up in non-violent households; and the probability of being violent towards one's own partner increased five-fold if the individual had both witnessed and were themselves victimized. Also, in terms of same-sex partner abuse, Lie et al., (1991), in their study examining the relationship between exposure to violence in one's family of origin and violence in later relationships, found that lesbians who had been victimised in the home as a child were significantly more likely as an adult to become a victim of intimate partner abuse, be abusive themselves, or both, in comparison to lesbians who were raised in non-violent families. Covo (2006), on the other hand, points out that although certain studies are consistent in their findings, the effect size of a social learning-derived intergenerational transmission variable is relatively small. For instance, Holtwoth-Munroe et al., (1997) observed in their review of the research in this area, that the correlates found between family of origin violence and current partner abuse were not strong. As a consequence,

they suggest that the findings may be mediated by other variables, since social learning theory is likely to account for only a portion of violent and abusive actions. In fact, Corvo (2006) believes that studies of domestic violence based on social learning theory have most often examined how specific violent behaviours in the family of origin may be related to the enactment of its many contributions, yet, he believes that this theoretical focus has constrained inquiry into a broader range of psychosocial variables, i.e. those derived from attachment theory. The reasons for this are that attachment theory covers not just acts of violence but also the pattern of the relationship over time and therefore attends to issues of, for example, neglect or erratic care-giving, as well as separation from caregivers all of which act as triggers for abusive behaviour in later life.

Concentrating further on same-sex relationships and the findings regarding intergenerational transmission, neither Coleman (1990) nor Kelly & Warshafsky (1987) in their studies on partner abuse in gay and lesbian relationships found significant association between violence in one's family of origin and current episodes of violence, a finding also supported by Renzetti (1992) in her groundbreaking study. Merrill (1998) advances an explanation for this, suggesting that many gay and bisexual men who were abused as children, either at home or at school, or both, have been conditioned to tolerate abuse, although it is not clear whether they go on to become victims or perpetrators of abuse. Certainly the lesbian perpetrators in Margolies & Leeder's (1995) study (based entirely on a clinical population) reported a family history of violence, in that, 70% were survivors of childhood sexual abuse and 65% were physically and/or verbally

abused and all had witnessed their mothers being abused by their fathers or step-fathers.

To some extent, the inconclusive findings of studies relating to intergenerational transmission of violence testify to the complexity of establishing a clear root of transmission and, at the same time, lend weight to the argument that a variety of factors may be at work, including exposure to violence in one's family of origin. To me, this is a deeply frustrating body of evidence with all sorts of implicit assumptions at work. For instance, even where the links have been made there is little or no attempt to explain how such early experiences render one a victim or a perpetrator within an abusive relationship. Another concern about the intergenerational transmission theory of violence is that it provides the perfect alibi for those who perpetrate such acts, since they can lay claim to having been abused or having grown-up in a violent household to excuse their behaviour. Jenkins (1994) believes fundamentally in the need for perpetrators to accept full responsibility for their abusive actions and feels that developmental explanations act as a justification or excuse for such behaviour. Furthermore, Jenkins also argues that whilst identifying oneself as a victim of past abuse it is possible that the individual will have even less empathy for the victims of their current abuse (1990). At the same time, research with victims of child abuse, throws further light on the notion that a number of variables intervene with exposure of abuse to influence later behavioural outcomes. For instance, these include; the age at which the individual was abused, the duration and severity of the abuse, the nature of the emotional relationship between the victim and the

abuser and whether or not those from whom help was sought were supportive of the victim (Plantrra et al., 1989).

The intergenerational transmission of violence, therefore, appears to hold some weight as an explanation for violence and abuse within couple relationships but is mired by the complexity of factors at play. Perhaps Corvo (2006) is right to highlight the important advances made by studies relating to attachment theory, as a way of understanding the subtiles of relational factors over time that may give rise to violence and abuse within same-sex and heterosexual couple's relationships (please see section 6, Attachment – including Dependency and Jealousy for a fuller description).

### **Internalized Homophobia**

It is generally recognised by those researching same-sex partner abuse, that the societal context in which these relationships are formed and maintained, contributes at some level to the violence and abuse experienced by lesbians and gay men. To embrace the argument one has to comprehend the pernicious affects of heterosexism and homophobia, since all gays and lesbians are brought up within a society that promotes heterosexuality and which eschews homosexuality, although it is important to recognise that many find the resources to transcend this reality. For those who do not, however, they will struggle with heterosexism – defined as *“an ideological system that denies and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship or community”* (Herek, 1990, p.316). Secondly, they will encounter homophobia –

defined by Weinberg (1972, p.145) “*as the irrational, emotional reaction of fear, disgust, anger, discomfort and aversion to homosexuals*”. Ristock (2002) suggests that these social contexts create isolation and invisibility, a point endorsed by Eaton (1994) who sees the enforced invisibility of lesbianism as a factor that must be considered when accounting for abuse.

In Ristock’s study (2002) the power of homophobia kept over half of her lesbian participants in the closet. The importance of this is that remaining closeted can be a source of stress and conflict for couples where one partner is fearful of ‘coming out’ and the other is not and there is pressure on the closeted partner to ‘come out’ (Patterson & Schwartz, 1994). It is also the case that fear of ‘coming out’ was used by abusive partners to control the other’s behaviour, contacts and relations with the lesbian and gay community’s (Donovan et al., 2006). Another direction which a couple can take to manage the hostile environment is to unite together against heteronormative forces for fear that they may, as a couple, be torn apart (Greene et al., 1999). However, this kind of merging and isolation in the long-term is believed to create its own particular pressures which may also find its way into couple conflict and cause abuse.

The combination of external and internalized sources of prejudice creates what Meyer (2003) refers to as “minority stress” for all lesbians and gay people at various points in their lives. Brook (1981) defines minority stress as “*the cultural ascription of inferior status to particular groups*” and it can leave gays and lesbians with all sorts of negative feelings, i.e. shame, unworthiness, depression, etc. It is also suggested that when a partner’s internalized

homophobia is triggered in these ways, it can lead to inexplicable arguments involving frustration or self-hatred which may then be directed towards one's partner (Green & Mitchell, 2008). Extrapolating further from their clinical work with such couples, they also suggest that minority stress can cause sexual desire or performance difficulties as well as depression, which may manifest in withdrawing or ambivalent behaviour within the relationship and this too can cause stress and conflict. Those who abuse may also reinforce feelings that some gays and lesbians hold, namely, that they are acceptable targets for abuse and violence (Herek, 1990). Moreover, Merrill (1998) believes that ignorance about same-sex abuse historically within the gay community has allowed the gay abuser to get away with it, since no-one intervenes or holds him accountable, although, as was mentioned earlier, speaking out about same-sex domestic violence may invite homophobic responses.

Another form in which homophobia and internalized homophobia may affect gay men is in relation to the linking together of gender and sexuality. For instance Kokepeli & Lakey (1990) believe that violence is the accepted masculine form of conflict resolution. They argue that men are conditioned by life experiences of masculinity to distrust settings in which personal exposure is likely, especially if other men are involved. Homosexuality, which links men along intimate and sexual lines is seen as a particular threat to masculinity and manliness, to the extent that the more this conflict is experienced internally the greater the need to guard against it. For some, this will include attacking certain mannerisms of lifestyle which are felt to undermine masculinity and manliness and, given that gay men in the public arena have often been portrayed in 'camp' and effeminate



ways, some gay men may be both attracted to and at the same time abhor such behaviour, resolving the conflict concretely by directing violence or abuse towards their gay partner.

However, given the variety of routes in which heterosexism, homophobia and internalized homophobia play out within gay male couple relationships where violence and abuse exist, it seems important to acknowledge the complex ways in which these factors interact with others which are known to cause tensions and difficulties within the couple relationships of gay men. For instance, dependency on one's partner, together with gender-role socialization and excessive consumption of alcohol, may connect to create a set of conditions which trigger controlling and aggressive behaviour. Indeed, Stanko (1990) believes that some men use violence as a mechanism for negotiating the hierarchy of power. However, although some of this behaviour is inevitably rooted in minority stress, the absence of research in this area leaves a number of key questions concerning the role that minority stress plays in relation to other factors which are believed to contribute to violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men.

### **Attachment (Including Dependency & Jealousy)**

The reason patterns of attachment in abusive relationships are regarded with such importance, is that there is a large body of evidence suggesting that abusive men and women tend to be insecure in their attachments; overly dependent on their partners and often fearful of losing them (Renzetti, 1992;

Estroff & Zimmer, 1994). This degree of separation anxiety, often manifested in jealous and controlling behaviour - a fear of one's partner actually having a life of his or her own can - does, according to Dutton (1995), form common triggers for abusive behaviour. Furthermore, frustrated attachment needs often lead to an upsurge of interpersonal anger towards one's partner when he/she withdraws, hence the well-documented incidence of victims being more at risk of violent attack or even death when they attempt to distance or leave an abusive relationship.

Sonkin & Dutton (2003) believe that the most promising theory regarding explanations for domestic violence is attachment theory, since they believe that male abusers are overly dependent on their intimate partner, but, at the same time, are incapable of initiating and maintaining an emotionally supportive relationship. In fact, many of Renzetti's (1992) lesbian participants frequently felt responsible for their abusive partner's wellbeing. Perhaps, not surprisingly, therefore, the greater the respondent's desire to be independent and the greater their partner's dependence, the more likely they were to suffer abuse. This is a finding consistent with Jenkin's (1994) observations that many men abuse at times when they feel frightened, threatened and powerless.

However, an alternative view of this is that the main lever for violent outbursts may come from these men feeling thwarted, so that the abuse is designed to punish and at the same time control the victim. Indeed, disempowerment theory speaks to this phenomenon. According to this theory, individual characteristics, i.e. self esteem and degree of attachment and dependence, place persons at

risk of perpetrating abuse. It also emphasises that those who feel inadequate or lack self-sufficiency are at risk of using unconventional means of power assertiveness, including violence (Archer, 1994). These individuals tend to over-compensate by controlling persons they perceive as threatening since they expose them to their own insecurity (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988).

Bartholomew and colleagues (2001) using multiple attachment interviews, have come to the conclusion that particular forms of insecurity appear to put individuals at risk of perpetrating as well as being the recipient of violence and abuse within couple relationships. Attachment theory is, in essence, a spatial theory, i.e. when I am close to my loved ones I feel good and when I am far away I am anxious, sad and lonely (Holmes, 1993). It is an overall term which refers to the state and quality of an individual's attachment and, by and large, patterns of attachment fall into two categories, namely, secure and insecure attachment. It is believed that individuals who are securely attached are unlikely to be in an abusive relationship since they would not tolerate such behaviour and would have the strength to leave. Indeed, individuals who are securely attached show striking consistency across studies in terms of low levels of relationship abuse, both in terms of perpetration or as a victim (Bartholomew et al., 2001).

Insecurely attached individuals, on the other hand, often have a mixture of feelings towards their attachment figures, e.g. intense love and dependence, fear and rejection, irritability and vigilance and, as a consequence, their lack of security will arouse a simultaneous wish to be close with an angry determination

to punish the attachment figure for the smallest sign of abandonment. Holmes (1993) points out that where no secure base exists, the individual may manipulate support at the expense of a truly reciprocal relationship. In other words, it will lead to an enhancement of attachment behaviour even though the source of that stress is the attachment figure itself, a factor that accounts for both victimisation and perpetration in regard to violent and abusive behaviour. After all, attachment behaviour, particularly the underlying dimension of anxiety over abandonment, has been consistently associated with intimate partner violence, and Robert & Noller (1998) found that intimate partner violence was particularly likely when a person high in anxiety over abandonment partners with someone who avoids closeness.

Bartholomew and colleagues (2001) suggest that individuals who are preoccupied and fearful of attachment, because of past unreliability of attachment figures, have a tendency to rely on others to validate their own self worth and are therefore often dependent and fearful of separation, hence their tendency to remain within a relationship despite the presence of violence and abuse. For instance, they often believe that violence perpetrated against them is justified. In addition, they may have low expectations of receiving any better treatment in other relationships and are often very responsive to their abusive partner's expression of sorry and remorse following an attack. In contrast, those who perpetrate abuse are chronically anxious about rejection and abandonment, so that jealousy and fear form common triggers of abusive episodes (Dutton, 1995). In fact, the power dynamics of such relationships can easily become pathologically unbalanced, especially when the victim feels that

he or she is unworthy of the abuser and the abuser seizes the advantage to live out the illusion of his or her own power (Dutton & Painter, 1993). It is worth noting that preoccupied and fearful attachment, as a predictor of abusive behaviour, was borne out in a study of male same-sex relationships (Landolt & Dutton, 1998).

The fact that Renzetti (1992) found a high correlation between a lesbian partner's dependency needs and controlling and abusive behaviour, could well speak to the salience of insecure attachment as a factor that gives rise to abusive behaviour within same-sex relationships. Furthermore, the fact that a number of her participants, all victims of abuse, exhibited a high degree of commitment to the relationship and indeed to their abusive partners, may also shed light on the victim's dependency needs within the relationship based on insecure attachments. However, an alternative explanation can be offered in relation to the shared experiences of many gays and lesbians growing up in a hostile society, including rejecting family environments, suggesting that these negative experiences alone may destabilise the base and result in abusive behaviours. Therefore, without specific research to support the notion of insecure attachments in same-sex relationships, it is unlikely that attachment theory alone can account for violence and abuse within same-sex couple's relationships. I would argue, therefore, that further research is indicated to understand the precise role that attachment theory may play in the couple relationships of gay men in which there is violence and abuse.

### **Summary**

It has been suggested that to properly understand the causes of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men, it is necessary to adopt a multidimensional perspective incorporating socio-cultural variables with individual psychological factors. This is because a range of influences appear to be at work in creating the necessary conditions for the emergence of violence and abuse within these relationships. For instance, power imbalances, gender role socialisation, personality difficulties, alcohol and substance misuse, the intergenerational transmission of violence and abuse, stress relating to internalized homophobia and the impact of secure and insecure attachments have all been considered as having a possible role to play in the development of violence and abuse.

To some extent, Merrill (1996), in accounting for intimate partner violence and abuse, provides a useful framework incorporating at least some of the above mentioned factors. His model has three distinct elements; a *social learning theory*, used to explain the causes of abuse, since one learns by reinforcement based on modeling of the pattern of relationship experienced in one's family of origin; *having the opportunity to abuse*, given the socio-political context that creates the realities of, sexism, racism and homophobia, which supports acts of violence without consequence; *choosing to abuse*, which places responsibility for the abuse on the abuser himself, and questions his psychological wellbeing. However, although Mc Cleenen (1999) endorses Merrill's model as the one most likely to account for same-sex partner abuse, I feel that it stops short of attending to factors specific to same-sex partner abuse, i.e. homophobia and

internalized homophobia. Furthermore, it also fails to capture what Vetere & Cooper (2001) refer to as the dilemmas and binds within the relationship where violence, coercion and abuse of power, intersect with attachment and dependence; thereby reminding us of the complexities involved in making sense generally of violence and abuse within couple relationships.

#### **1.4 Comparing same-sex partner and heterosexual partner abuse**

Although I have throughout this literature review been touching on differences between same-sex and heterosexual partner abuse, it seems appropriate to look in greater depth at studies which have specifically addressed comparisons between the two groups. That said Ristock (2002) points to the paucity of research to date, suggesting that it has not closely examined areas of difference.

At the point that researchers were attempting to get same-sex partner abuse recognised and placed on the map, prevalence studies did ask the question as to whether the incidence of same-sex partner abuse was at similar levels to that seen in heterosexual relationships, although, as has already been stated, it has not been possible to obtain representative samples within the lesbian and gay populations. Nevertheless, Gardner's (1989) sample consisting of intact couples, i.e. heterosexual (n = 43) lesbian (n = 43) and gay male (n = 39), found that lesbian couples had the highest rate of physical violence although the differences were not greatly significant. Other studies, such as The National US Violence Against Women (NVAW) survey (Tjaden, 1999; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) included a small sub-sample of individuals who identified as gay or lesbian, and Tunnell's (2000) survey, which included 499 gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans respondents, is one of the few to compare experiences of domestic violence across LGBT sexualities. It is worth noting that the NVAW survey found that in same-sex relationships, male respondents were more likely than female respondents to report violence from intimate partners, whereas in heterosexual



relationships it was women who were more likely to report violence (Tjaden, 1999). However, most of the existing studies relating to same-sex partner violence and abuse have tended to concentrate on either gay men or lesbians only and have used the results to extrapolate on perceived differences between their particular cohort and that of others.

However, a recent study conducted by Donovan et al., (2006) is one of the first and most detailed United Kingdom research studies on same-sex domestic abuse and the first study in the United Kingdom to directly compare domestic abuse in same-sex relationships and heterosexual relationships. In terms of its aim, the researchers were seeking to increase knowledge of domestic abuse within same-sex relationships and experiences of help-seeking via the criminal justice system and other agencies. In addition, they also sought to examine similarities and differences regarding domestic abuse across same-sex and heterosexual relationships. Following a successful recruitment drive using a United Kingdom wide survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 67 individuals including lesbians (n = 19), gay men (n = 14), heterosexuals (n = 14 women; n = 9 men), bisexuals (n = 3) and queer (n = 3). A key finding was that most abuse was experienced by those less than 25 years of age, similar to findings for individuals in heterosexual relationships (Walby & Allen, 2004).

In terms of differences, the researchers note that in general, the women had longer relationships than the men, although some men were in relationships lasting 2-5 years or more. The team also found that within gay male couple relationships, men were likely to have their spending controlled, whereas

lesbians were more likely to have their sexuality used against them, being blamed for their partners self-harm, or having their children threatened or used against them in some way. Gay men were also more likely to be physically threatened or prevented from getting help, although sexual abuse was the site where the greatest difference occurred. For instance, male respondents were significantly more likely than women to be forced into sexual activity against their will, be hurt during sex, have 'safe' words or boundaries disrespected, have requests for safer sex refused and be threatened with sexual assault. Moreover, gay men and bisexuals also reported experiencing considerably more sexually abusive behaviour than did lesbians. However, the authors conclude that the findings regarding differences in abusive experiences by male and female respondents appear to reflect wider processes of gendering and gendered norms.

When asked whether they thought domestic abuse is different in same-sex relationships than in heterosexual relationships, the vast majority (69%) did not think that there were any differences. Those who qualified their response and those who argued that there is a difference, believe that same-sex relationships are more hidden and not so well recognised within society. They also believe that support mechanisms and services are less available for same-sex relationships than for those in heterosexual relationships.

A surprising finding was that relating to an abusive partner's own issues with being gay and being 'out' and the way in which this played out within the couple relationship. For instance, Donovan et al., (2006) found that an abusive

partner's own level of discomfort with being 'out' resulted in them restricting their partner's access to the outside world. This also removed the fear for the abuser of their partner meeting someone else and leaving the relationship, although some of the controlling behaviour in regard to the partner having limited access to the gay scene can also be understood as an attempt by the abuser to cover up their own infidelities.

In addition, the fact that so few of those who had experienced post-separation abuse ever reported their experience, highlights the way in which same-sex relationships are more privatised than heterosexual relationships. In fact, differences which appear to exist between same-sex and heterosexual relationships, seem to be related more to issues of cultural sensitivity and the intersection of gender and sexuality than anything specific to the violence itself. However, it is worth bearing in mind that the whole area of similarities and differences within and between lesbian and gay and heterosexual relationships, although of interest, remains an area which is under researched.

## **1.5 Help-seeking behaviour**

Ristock & Timbang (2005) remind us that the experience of homophobia for sexual minorities creates difficulties in addressing violence and abuse within same-sex relationships and that those affected often do not get the support that is needed. For instance, it has been reported that battered lesbians will sometimes avoid seeking help because of the guilt they feel from having fought back or defended themselves against their partner (Irvine, 1990). Others may not seek help because they do not recognise that they have been abused. For instance, as many as 41% of the respondents in Turell's (1999) study failed to seek help because they did not recognise the significance of the abuse. Ristock (2002) also makes the point that many service providers, including counsellors, simply do not have the appropriate knowledge about same-sex partner abuse and highlights the significance of this, given that all too often women themselves struggle with whether to call a relationship abusive. As a result, a number of victims of intimate partner violence and abuse may well present with symptoms of depression or anxiety. It is noteworthy that Ehrensaft & Vivian (1996) discovered that 60% of couples seeking therapy had experienced physical violence, yet only 10% spontaneously reported that violence, whilst 22% of the participants in Donovan et al., (2006) study who said that they had experienced domestic abuse did not actually seek help of any kind.

At the same time, studies relating to sexual minorities show that those affected by violence and abuse call for help from a variety of sources. For example, Merrill & Wolfe (2000) & Donovan et al., (2006) found that of their respondents

who did seek help, many turned to informal supports, such as friends and family, rather than the statutory sector, and only one in ten of the Donovan et al., (2006) study actually contacted the police. In fact, very few victims of same-sex violence ever contacted the police for fear that they would not receive the help they needed. Ristock (2002) also reports that well over half of her respondents spoke to friends, and it seems that family members also played an important role in making comments to the women about the inappropriateness of their abusive partner's behaviour and some even named the relationship as abusive. It is also worth noting that 17% of men and 12% of women in the Donovan et al., (2006) study turned to their GP for help.

In terms of therapeutic input, it seems that a substantial proportion of Ristock's participants did seek help from counsellors and a third of the participants in the Donovan et al., (2006) study sought help from counsellors/therapists. Turell (1999), however, questions the appropriateness of counselling as a response for relationship violence, since she believes that there is a danger that it might reinforce the belief that the victim is at fault and that something in the victim's intra-psyche needs attention. Moreover, whilst surveying sources of support for lesbians and gay men, Turell (1999) also discovered that 82% of those who identified as victims had actually modified their own behaviour in the relationship in some way to try to avoid the abuse. As a consequence, she was therefore critical of counselling, since its focus on solving the problem at a personal or relational level fails to take account of the need to intervene at a macro systems level, tackling societal beliefs that both permit and even encourage such abuse.

Furthermore, both Ristock (2002) and Renzetti (1996) highlight the fact that many service providers simply do not have the training to respond sensitively or appropriately to same-sex partner abuse. Too often, they rely on models and responses more relevant to heterosexual domestic violence and abuse and they also rely too heavily on the victim / perpetrator divide. It would seem, therefore, that the low take-up of services among sexual minorities reflects both the difficulty of reaching a population that has a long history of defending itself, together with a belief amongst many gays and lesbians themselves that services are not relevant to their particular needs. In addition, Sloan & Edmond (1996) confirm that the majority of respondents in their study were simply not aware of available resources, particularly those relating to specialist domestic violence services for gay men. Sears (1997, p.16) suggests, that for those experiencing same-sex domestic abuse;

*“heterosexism may limit or even prevent their access to services. Thus, individuals or agencies act in a manner that excludes, by omission or design, anyone who is not heterosexual”.*

## **1.6 Responding to domestic violence and abuse**

### **The contribution of systemic practice**

A useful starting point for exploring systemic thinking and practice with regard to domestic violence and abuse is to acknowledge that systemic family therapists, influenced by feminist thinking in the 1980s, broadened its scope by bringing social problems, like battering into the consulting room, so that the violent aspects of intimate life became more visible (Goldner et al., 1990). That said developments in practice with those experiencing domestic violence have largely, if not exclusively, been with individuals and couples who are heterosexual. This inevitably raises questions concerning the applicability of the models of practice offered in regard to same-sex partner abuse, particularly as many of the service providers in Ristock's (2002) study spoke of seeing more muddled or confused power dynamics than they had often seen in heterosexual relationships. In other words, without a gender determined lens, it may be more difficult to capture the nature of the abusive dynamics if one is relying on a strict victim and perpetrator divide.

The field of systemic therapy has therefore been strongly influenced by feminist principles, which places particular emphasis on the relationship between gender and power within the context of intimate partner relationships, particularly those involving violence and abuse. For instance, Goldner et al., (1990) argue that abusive relationships exemplify 'in extremis' the stereotypical gender arrangements that structure intimacy between men and women. Feminists also

see intimate partner violence as a criminal act, where the perpetrator (usually men) are appropriately punished within the criminal justice system. However, Goldner (2001) believes that those holding a feminist position have tended to minimize the emotional complexity of abusive relationships and suggests that the field of domestic violence generally has been burdened by ideological divisions which have kept ideas in separate camps. She believes that;

*An immersion in domestic violence brings us inexorably into the volatile domain of trauma, a site and state in which the pure categories of victim and perpetrator blend and smudge. What the feminist perspective brings to the table is a fundamental ethical and political framework with which to view abuse and victimization. But having established the moral bottom line, a zero tolerance for violence and a commitment to safety, accountability and equity, there should be room for many voices and approaches to this grave and complex problem (Goldner, 2001, p, 96).*

Goldner's confidence in embracing a multi-positional perspective grew out of the work she and colleagues undertook with couples seen at the Gender & Violence Project based at the Ackerman Institute, New York. In fact, this cutting edge project bucked the trend for the use of battering groups for men and support groups for women as the most appropriate treatment strategy for intimate partner violence, and instead offered conjoint therapy to couples who wanted to stay together and to work through their difficulties. That said the project team had to grapple with the risks involved in undertaking such work, namely, the accusation that by seeing couples together they were implying



mutual responsibility for the violence and abuse within the relationship and, furthermore, by working with them together, they were potentially placing women at further risk of abuse. However, at the heart of this work was a commitment by the project team to unpack what Golder et al., (1990) regarded as the unworkable premises about gender and power that underlay these dangerous relationships in the hope that they could interrupt the cycle of violence.

However, in the United Kingdom, voluntary and national standards for organisations using domestic violence interventions state that 'couple work' and 'mediation' are not an 'appropriate' response to men's abusive behaviour towards women (Respect, 2004). The basis of this thinking is that the victims of abuse need protection and that their abusers must accept responsibility for their actions, hence the need for them to enter approved perpetrator treatment programmes (Rivett & Rees, 2004). That said the lived experience of many of these couples, including the extraordinarily intense mutual reactivity, mean that partners are so absorbed by the relationship that they cannot or will not consider parting or working separately and will stay engaged despite the risk, the shame and the destruction (Goldner, 1999). Indeed, it was for this reason that Goldner and colleagues took on the challenge of finding ways of working with couples whilst attending to the relationship between violence, therapy and social control.

By combining the principles of social learning (i.e. the ways in which individuals are socialised into their gendered positions) with the sociopolitical (which

attends to external power dynamics) together with systemic and psychodynamic theory and practice (i.e. more deeply internalized representations of self and others with transactional sequences involving double binds, positive feedback loops leading to escalating dynamics), and by keeping the work within a social justice framework emphasising safety for the victim and a requirement on the perpetrator to accept responsibility for their abusive actions, it was possible to create a safe enough environment from which to deconstruct the psychological interior of the violent episode for both partners whilst positively describing and then unpacking the attachment the couple felt for each other despite the violence. After all, for many of the couples seen at the Ackerman, abuse and coercion co-existed with understanding and friendship in a unique and painful way. Indeed, for Goldner and colleagues, the alliance came to be seen as a powerful reference point, since it acted to sustain and reconnect the couple after a violent rupture. Therefore, unpacking its constituent elements became an important focus in their work with couples. Furthermore, on the face of it, Goldner and colleagues seemed to be working with the more extreme end of Kelly & Johnson's (2008) typology, namely the coercive controlling end of the spectrum and were clearly having to attend to considerable risk factors in working with such couples.

In terms of same-sex relationships, Fox (1999) argues that couple's therapy provides an alternative to the isolation many gay couples feel who decide to stay together, and for these couples it may be the difference between ongoing violence or not. Istar (1996) also holds with the view that in thinking about lesbian couples, keeping the couple together for at least the assessment phase

of treatment and possibly for intermittent sessions later on, allows for the realistic assessment of the actual dynamics of the relationship and helps the therapist see more clearly who is doing the abusing. Furthermore, in some cases, according to Fox (1999), couples therapy may actually provide a springboard to other treatment modalities, and for others it may be a viable long-term treatment or a necessary support for couples who decide to separate.

However, any or all of these options rely on a thorough assessment. Although the couple will be seen together in the first instance, the therapist will be attending to the ongoing risk within the relationship, as well as looking for particular strengths that can be used to support the couple when the going gets tough. Indeed those in favour of working conjointly (Goldner, 1999; Jory & Anderson, 2000; Fox, 1999) all offer what they call an extended assessment or evaluation with a view to clarifying whether therapy is considered appropriate or not. Extended assessments give therapists the opportunity to carefully explore the nature and extent of the abusive relationship, particularly important with same-sex couples where the complex power dynamics mean that it can take time to establish which of the partners is a victim or a perpetrator, especially in situations where both partners are involved in the violence and abuse. Furthermore, Milner & Singleton (2008) also make the point that emotional abuse is difficult to detect in the early stages of therapy and that as it takes time to determine, so that extended assessments may also be helpful in that regard.

Moreover, those in favour of couples therapy advocate using the first session to establish a structure for thinking with couples about their difficulties, which they

do with both partners present, after which they then see each of them individually before making a recommendation. The point of the individual meetings is to assess the level of risk. For instance, has the victim in the couple's session, out of fear, left out or minimized important information about the level of violence? Also, the individual session with the abuser helps the therapist see more clearly the position the abuser is taking in regard to the violence, i.e. whether the abuser is blaming the victim and avoiding responsibility issues, especially since the point of the therapy is to get the abuser to think about how his/her actions and attitudes affect the partner. Furthermore, Goldner (1998) suggests that seeing the abuser alone demonstrates that the definition of treatment is not just restricted to being the victim's advocate. Both Goldner (1998) and Vetere & Cooper (2001) draw particular attention to the use of language within the field, and caution against using language that stigmatises and disrespects both partners as they struggle to manage the problematic dynamics and find a way forward. Inherent in this thinking is the need for a strategic stance in order to get alongside individuals and couples who may show little motivation for change and who may not be open to admitting the depth of their feelings to themselves and especially to others when their relationship has been so uniformly stigmatised (Goldner, 1998). Essentially, therapists are trying to create a transitional space where partners can begin the painful process of telling their stories, rather than pushing perpetrators underground (Milner & Singleton, 2008). Fox (1999) helpfully spells out the contra-indications for couples therapy, suggesting that one is looking for whether the victim has a sense of control and power in other parts of her/his life and that the actual violence is neither "pervasive or severe",

i.e. involving weapons, or life-threatening. Moreover, it is also important to obtain a history of the pattern of violence not only in the relationship under review but also in other contexts, since the more contexts in which the violence occurs the greater the level of risk and danger (Goldner, 1998). Fox (1999) also points out that she will not undertake couples therapy where there is an excessive drug or alcohol component since, if left untreated, this will work against the effective use of the model and so the couple's therapy will either be delayed or stopped until that aspect of the presentation is properly addressed.

Clearly, therapeutic work of any kind in regard to domestic violence and abuse is undertaken carefully and with clear conditions attached to it. Consistent with this, there is often an active, relational and a somewhat directive therapeutic stance, which offers containment but is also sufficiently robust to challenge when necessary and to terminate when appropriate. Although couples therapy will often not be the only option or, as things stand at present in terms of current practice, a first option, it should be clear from this review that it does have a place, albeit, highly contested within the field of systemic thinking and practice.

## **Conclusion**

Donovan and Hester (2011) make the point that there is no longer any question about whether domestic violence occurs in same-sex relationships and, as a consequence, they suggest that the key question that remains is how to understand and respond to it. This literature review has highlighted developments in thinking relating to violence and abuse within same-sex relationships and, despite the methodological challenges, research shows that same-sex partner violence and abuse remains a serious issue for many and poses particular challenges for those wishing to intervene. At the same time there is still much to learn by research focusing specifically on the nature, meaning and impact of violence and abuse on same-sex couples, especially if, as stated earlier, we are to meet the challenge posed by Elliott (1996) who believes that new theories of violence and models of intervention must be developed if same-sex partner abuse is to be confronted.

Despite the advances, Harne & Radford (2008) suggest that there is still a profound lack of knowledge regarding same-sex relationships in which there is violence and abuse and so there is a need to bring into focus those whose experiences fall outside of the public story of violence and abuse which, to date, has largely concentrated on heterosexual relationships and particularly the plight of female victims at the hands of their male abusers. In addition, there is also a need to understand the ways in which cultural sensitivity and the intersection of gender and sexuality play out in the couple relationships of gay men in which there is violence and abuse, since comparison studies have

shown this to be the site of greatest difference when comparing same-sex and heterosexual couples. Furthermore, the extent to which these factors account for the confused and muddled power dynamics that seem to permeate violent and abusive same-sex couple's relationships, is something which also warrants further exploration.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Rational for undertaking the study**

The main rational for undertaking a study of same-sex partner abuse and particularly one relating to abuse within gay male couple relationships, is that, given the paucity of studies within the field, there is still much to be learned about the experiences of intimate partner violence and abuse in gay male relationships. Mc Kenry et al., (2006, p.233) suggest that *“in spite of a plethora of research on interpersonal violence among heterosexual intimate partners, very little is known about intimate partner violence in gay and lesbian relationships”*. Stanley et al (2006) also believe that violence in same-sex relationship’s is a poorly understood phenomenon; a point endorsed by Merrill & Wolfe (2000) who draw particular attention to the lack of investigation regarding gay male couples.

In addition, it has been suggested that in the absence of a thorough understanding, theoretical speculation about the causes of intimate violence in male same-sex relationships as well as therapeutic efforts to assist those in the grip of such abuse, may be misguided. Ristock (2002) believes that research to date has not closely examined areas of difference and nor has it properly reflected different kinds of abusive relationships. Moreover, Scherzer (1998) suggests that qualitative research is needed to study power dynamics and move us beyond basic incidence reporting of abusive behaviour. One of the



principles of qualitative research in this area, therefore, is to bring forth the subjective experiences of those who have suffered abuse and whose voices have yet to be heard. Also, in keeping with Renzetti's (1998) thinking, the goal is not to fit "others" into the dominant mould, but rather to come to a better understanding of diversity and the meaning that violence has in the lives of those who are different, i.e. learning about the meanings gay male victims of abuse attach to their experiences.

It is also worth noting that to date, the vast majority of studies which exist come from research conducted in North America and, apart from a few important United Kingdom studies (i.e. Henderson, 2003; Donovan et al., 2006), there is very little research to draw on to help us understand the experiences of British gay men who are in violent or abusive couple relationships. Furthermore, having established the existence of such abuse, qualitative studies are now attempting to theorize why such abuse occurs and to understand the experiences of the men within these relationships. To that end, my own research is concerned with understanding the meaning of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men. In addition, I am also attempting to explore the factors that exist within these relationships that give rise to the violence and abuse and, the extent to which these factors are the same or different from those seen in lesbian and straight couple relationships. A further aim of my study is to examine therapeutic implications.

## **Methodology**

### **2.1 Introduction**

I locate my research study within the naturalistic paradigm rather than a positivist or experimental method. This is because, the focus of my research is upon explanation rather than description; where the representation of reality is through the eyes of the participants and where meaning and behaviour is understood in context (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). According to Willig (2001), research questions concerned with the nature of experience are more suitably addressed using phenomenological research methods, that is, methods which attempt to capture an individual's experience within an interpretative framework. To that end, more attention is paid to the context of discovery than to the context of verification (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996), and emphasis is also placed upon the socially constructed nature of reality and upon the intimate relationship between the researcher and that which is studied.

Within this post-modernist approach, the researcher's own subjectivity and its influence on the research endeavour itself is also incorporated into the research process as a whole. The essential point here is that both the researcher and the participants seek to give meaning to beliefs and behaviour within a given context, whilst accepting and incorporating situational constraints that both shape and influence the inquiry itself, e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, social class, as well as participants' sexual orientation. In other words, in keeping with Gergen's (1999) argument, we are actively and purposefully constructing and interpreting our own reality from the meanings that are available to us. At the

same time, however, we are also striving for rich and thick descriptions of experience in order to develop and expand thinking about the concept under investigation, particularly in situations where theory is limited and yet might be helpful to participants.

Moreover, we are also attempting to generate theory from collected data and Willig (2001) suggests that the type of data we collect for a qualitative study needs to allow for participant generated meanings to be heard and, so, data must not be coded, summarised, categorised or otherwise reduced at the point of collection. In qualitative research, the objective of data collection is to create a comprehensive record of participant's words and actions, in order to develop theories which are both relevant to the participants and which are grounded in the data obtained. It has also been suggested that interviews are the most commonly used methodological tool in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) although, there is recognition that the interview itself is a relational and interactional act, where the interviewer and interviewee are treated as conversational partners (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In fact, Mc Clennen (2005) suggests that participatory qualitative research has been found effective in uniting both the researcher and the population being researched into a collaborative effort whilst conducting studies.

Given that my own research question is concerned with understanding the meaning of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men, and that there is limited theory available from which to draw meaning, I decided to use a grounded theory method to analyse the data obtained from a number of

interviews conducted with participants who had first-hand experience of the phenomenon of violence and abuse within their own couple relationships. The reason that I chose this method over others, i.e. discourse analysis, narrative analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis, is that the grounded theory method has particular utility for generating theory in areas where there is an absence of such theory. In addition, I was less concerned with understanding the role of language itself in the construction of the reality of violence and abuse which a discourse analysis would have offered. At the same time, although I felt that an interpretative phenomenological analysis could have been helpful in suggesting particular themes, I felt that I needed the scope that the grounded theory method offered in terms of theoretical sampling and for one interview to inform the other, which is not so possible with an interpretative phenomenological analysis, since the analysis only happens when all the data has been collected. Similarly, the decision to discount a narrative analysis was also based on the idea of it being too restrictive to my ends, since it is mainly concerned with understanding the narratives that people tell about their lives, and although there were aspects of this in my interviews, I was more concerned with eliciting meaning from the participants as the interview occurred and being more active in this process than a narrative analysis would allow.

Following the individual interviews, I decided to conduct a focus group discussion, the aim being to further develop some of the themes emerging from the individual interviews, particularly around the question of differences between same-sex and heterosexual couple relationships in which there is violence and abuse. The data from the focus group discussion was analysed using a

thematic analysis and this is explained in more detail in section 2.7 Focus Group.

I would now like to explore the relationship between these two sets of data, i.e. the individual interviews and the focus group discussion. Firstly, they were both conducted with the aim of providing meaning to the question of understanding violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men. Secondly, they tackled the question from different perspectives. For instance, the participants of the individual interviews were providing first-hand accounts of their personal experiences of violence and abuse, whilst the focus group discussion involved therapists speaking primarily from their professional positions and, as such, their contributions were more theoretical. Thirdly, in comparing the individual interviews with the focus group discussion, although I worked hard at not being too directive, there was still more of a purpose or focus relating to the group discussion (in that, they were asked to consider what may be different in the relationships of gay men to lesbian and heterosexual couple relationships involving violence and abuse) in contrast to the individual interviews where the participants were provided with a space and opportunity to speak to their unique experiences, with a view to learning more about the meaning gay men themselves attached to these experiences. That said, the combination of both sets of data provided rich insight into the question of the meaning of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men and the focus group discussion helped to develop and elaborate areas of difference within and between same-sex and heterosexual couple relationships.

## **2.2 The Grounded Theory Method**

The term grounded theory refers to the idea that theory generation is grounded in the participant's own account of the topic being studied. Grounded theory itself was developed by two sociologists, Glaser & Strauss (1967), with the aim of producing theory that is truly grounded in the data. In the spirit of generating theory, the researcher is discouraged from entering the investigation with a list of preconceived concepts or a guiding theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Instead, concepts and design must be allowed to emerge from the data. In addition, great emphasis is placed on attention to participants' own accounts of social and psychological events.

Glaser & Strauss (1967) chose the term grounded theory in order to express the idea of theory that is generated or grounded in an iterative process involving the continual sampling and analysis of qualitative data. In other words, one of the building blocks of this method is the simultaneous involvement in data collection and the analysis phase of the research. Essentially, the researcher is trying to get at a range of meanings from within the data with the aim of gaining a greater understanding of the topic under examination. To assist this process, the researcher is encouraged to make constant comparisons between interviewees' accounts whilst asking questions of the data itself and employing a theoretical sampling selection method based on the evolving theoretical concepts, designed to push and develop the emerging theory. Pidgeon (1996) suggests that *"the method of constant comparison and theoretical sampling are advocated primarily as a means of generating theory, as well as of building*

*conceptual and theoretical depth of analysis”, adding that both “are more than mere procedures for selecting and processing data” (p. 78).*

However, approaching research with an open mind, so to speak, can pose difficulties for qualitative researchers since they are then inevitably faced with the problem of making sense of vast amounts of unstructured data (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). For that reason, the grounded theory method offers the researcher a strategy for sifting and analysing the research material. For instance, Glaser & Strauss (1967) advocate that researchers need to begin by allowing an array of concepts and categories to emerge from the systematic inspection of a data corpus. Indeed, in the early stages of a grounded theory analysis, the researcher is endowed with maximum flexibility in generating new categories from the data. Then, as the analysis proceeds, the researcher is engaged in building up a set of categories based on patterns emerging from within the data. As categories are linked together, the creation of new overarching categories at higher levels of abstraction begin to take shape. This also informs the decision to seek new data to elucidate aspects of the emerging theory, a process that is referred to as theoretical sampling.

At the heart of the grounded theory method, however, is a question regarding the nature of the research endeavour, since there is a concern that the existence of a method which utilises categories also runs the risk of shaping and indeed forcing the data. In fact Glaser (1978) cautioned researchers from forcing interview data into preconceived categories, thereby highlighting the tension between being flexible enough to respond to the data whilst working

with prescriptive procedures and coding frames which could encourage analytic rigidity. Indeed, Charmaz (1990), drawing on a constructivist version of grounded theory, argues that categories and theories do not simply emerge from the data but rather that they come about through the researcher's interaction and engagement with the data, a position that I hold with in regard to my own analysis of the data I obtained. Rennie et al., (1988) believe that the researcher's role is to use his/her skill to represent in a systematic and accessible fashion, a clear picture of what is going on in the slice of social reality they have chosen to study. The best that can be said about a coding paradigm is that it sensitises the researcher to particular ways in which categories may be linked with one another and to represent them in a meaningful and hierarchical manner, with some categories constituting the 'core' and others the 'periphery' (Willig, 2001). It has been suggested that what matters is what we bring to the data in a systematic and aware way, since this makes us sensitive to meaning without forcing our explanations on the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The means through which I attended to the challenges outlined above, was in the writing of memos, since these allowed me to reflect on the ideas that were emerging, my relationship to these ideas as part of the self reflective method, as well as remaining curious to the ways in which categories took shape and were merged.

Although, as stated above, it was very much my intention to use a grounded theory method, the problems I encountered in recruiting participants to the study restricted my ability to apply and develop the method as the study progressed. For instance, the goal of continual sampling, as a means of



generating and comparing data from one interview to the next and across the data set as a whole, was limited by the fact that so few participants elected to be part of the study. As a consequence, I also struggled to saturate the codes as required by the method. That said, I did adhere to the process of using the analysis from one interview to inform the next, although it was only after the fourth interview, when there was greater clarity about the emerging categories, that I saw more clearly areas that needed developing in future interviews and as a result the interview schedule was amended (please see Appendix 7 for the adjusted interview schedule). In view of the above, tensions therefore exist in regard to the extent to which my study could be described as being influenced by grounded theory approaches and the extent to which I was able to demonstrate the application of a solid grounded theory approach.

### **2.3 Grounded Theory Analysis**

In keeping with the grounded theory method involving three distinct stages of analysis, i.e. *open coding*, *focused coding* and the development of *core categories*, my own analysis of the transcribed material - derived from semi-structured interviews - began with a micro-analysis consistent with open coding and progressed through focused coding to more theoretical categories. An example from my own analysis will be provided after a fuller explanation of the process.

#### **Stage 1: Open Coding**

Open coding involves a close reading of the transcripts, and, in my own analysis, took the form of line-by-line coding with particular attention to the words or statements made by the participants. At this stage in the process, a researcher is attempting to code categories whilst asking questions of the data itself, e.g. what process is at issue here and what does it mean, so that initial codes range widely across a variety of themes and topics. Strauss & Corbin (1998) believe that this actively takes the researcher beyond descriptions and puts him or her into a conceptual mode of analysis.

#### **Stage 2: Focused Coding**

According to Glaser (1978), focused codes are more directed, selective and conceptual than word-of-mouth, line-by-line, or incident-by-incident coding. The

purpose of focused coding is to synthesize and explain larger segments of data. Charmaz (2006) believes that focused coding *“requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely”* (p. 87/88). Through the process of coding, a researcher begins to define what is happening in the data and to grapple with the question of what it actually means. To assist this process, the data is broken down into discrete incidents, ideas, events and actions and names are given which bring out the meaning in the data. Strauss & Corbin (1998) remind us that it is important that the labels used to describe what is happening are grounded in the data. To that end, in vivo coding, i.e. using the actual words of the participants, is a useful method of demonstrating the link between a named category and the data itself. Charmaz (2006) believes that it is a way of fully grounding the abstract analysis.

### Stage 3: Core Categories

The first step towards integration is the decision regarding the central or core categories, also known as theoretical coding, since these represent the main themes from the data which pull all the other categories together to form an explanatory whole (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Charmaz (2006, p. 63) suggests that these codes *“may help you tell an analytic story that has coherence. Hence, these codes not only conceptualize how your substantive codes are related, but also move your analytic story in a theoretical direction.”* Drawing further on this thinking, one can begin to see the development of theoretical codes arising from earlier substantive analysis, where the researcher is using

and building ideas through the different stages to capture the essence of potential meanings within the data.

To aid this process, researchers are encouraged in the early stages of the process to stop and analyse ideas about the codes. One of the recommended ways of doing this is to undertake the writing of memos. Charmaz (2006) believes that writing memos throughout the process of analysis helps to keep the researcher involved in the analysis and helps towards increasing the level of abstraction about the emerging ideas. Through writing memos, the researcher is constructing analytic notes to explicate and fill out the categories. (The reader is referred to Appendix 8 & 9, which contains examples of my own memo writing undertaken during the process of data analysis.)

I will now use examples from my own analysis of five of the interviews to illustrate the emergence of a core category encompassing the reasons for why the men in my study remained within their abusive relationships.

<u>Text</u>	<u>Focused Coding</u>	<u>Theoretical Coding</u>
(Section 1. The wish for Change)		
<i>I was certainly staying with him for the sex and for the misguided idea that I could change him and that by leaving him I would be letting him down.</i>	Leaving equals giving up and even letting partner down	Investing in change
<i>I thought I would tolerate it for a while, hoping it would stop, hoping it might get</i>	Waiting and hoping for change	Holding onto the possibility of change

*better and hopefully I may be able to change it.*

*I was thinking a nice side is going to come out one day and, eh, it would be a shame to sacrifice it now.*

Tomorrow is another day - don't give up

Continued investment in change

*And I knew why I was staying with him, I was secretly hoping that things would get better.*

Secret wish for change

*Yeah, I guess I just carried on for all the reasons, I loved him you know, it won't happen again and also, you know, you would fool yourself into believing it's not going to happen again of course until the next time.*

Investing in relationship against the odds

(Section 2. The relationship had much to offer)

*He used to make me laugh.*

Importance of humour

*He could be very sweet, very loving. He was really bright. He could be very witty. We shared a lot of similar interests. It wasn't all bad, otherwise I wouldn't have stayed with him and tried to make it work.*

Common interests

"It wasn't all bad"

*It was a really warm and loving relationship. We'd spend all our time together. We grew up together. We gave each other a lot of confidence.*

A nurturing relationship  
Importance of sharing

*Out of it all I still loved him*

The binding power of love

(Section 3. The importance of sex)

*The sex was wild and passionate and fantastic,*

The importance of good sex

*which is what I always wanted.*

*I was certainly staying with him for the sex.*

Sex as a reason for staying

The continued allure of good sex

*The problem had always been that the sex was really good and that was really hard for me to let go of.*

Not wanting to let go of something good

The *Core Category* I came up with that linked these different elements and provided an overarching description was '*Commitment to staying put*'. I chose this category because I felt that it testified to the ongoing investment in the relationship that a number of the men had and it also allowed for a fuller exploration of the various factors involved in making the decision to stay.

(Please see Appendix 10 for further examples of coding)

## **2.4 Recruitment**

Mc Clennen (2003) suggests that both non-affiliated and affiliated members of oppressed populations continue to search for strategies that will help them to overcome barriers to producing meaningful research. Quite apart from the particular challenges of finding representative samples, it is also the case that recruiting participants to talk about sensitive issues, such as violence within intimate relationships, poses additional obstacles, many of which I also encountered.

In common with others who have undertaken research in this area, I too struggled to recruit participants to my study. Like Roberts (2007), who was appointed by the organisation 'Standing Together - against domestic violence' to consult with sexual minority survivors of domestic abuse in regard to their experiences of the criminal justice system, my own efforts also yielded but a handful of participants. This would suggest that those experiencing same-sex violence and abuse remain a hard to reach group; for despite efforts to target organisations specialising in same-sex partner abuse, advertising in the gay media and circulating information about the study through numerous networks, the response rate was disappointingly low.

An obvious explanation which may explain the poor response rate is the existence of homophobia within society which has pushed same-sex relationships into the private sphere, mainly as a way of avoiding negativity from others; a problem that may be further compounded by the admission of same-

sex partner violence and abuse. Indeed, 50% of Robert's respondents spoke of a fear of homophobia and a lack of confidence in the police or the courts, as reasons for remaining silent.

However, the challenge of recruitment may stretch beyond matters of mere visibility, suggesting that even when researchers reach potential participants there may still be a reluctance to speak. To some extent, this has already been explained, in terms of the recognition of same-sex partner abuse being a sensitive area of investigation, but it could also be that potential participants may have moved on in their lives and do not wish to go back over painful material. It may also be the case that others may be too traumatized by their experiences to speak and some may even fear the consequences of speaking out, much as they would do in their violent and abusive relationships. Moreover, as with the participants in the Donovan et al., (2006) study, domestic violence may still be viewed largely as a problem affecting heterosexual women, suggesting that many lesbians and gay men may not actually label their experiences as abusive and, so, for that reason, would not come forward for research. Furthermore, one of the consistent themes running through research in this area is that of victims harbouring a sense of shame and embarrassment, a point that is particularly pertinent to gay male survivors of abuse, so these feelings may also work against them taking part in studies like my own.

Given the constraints, and, to overcome some of the technical difficulties of recruitment, researchers have chosen convenience samples, i.e. using bar samples, whilst others, for instance, have used purposive samples such as



contacting a range of agencies known to be involved with sexual minorities around issues of abuse. Another method which appears to have some utility within lesbian and gay communities is that of snowball samples. Here the researcher, having identified one or more individuals from the population, then uses them (post-interview) to identify other members of the population, who themselves are then used as informants, and so on (Robson, 1993).

My own research strategy included an initial mail-shot to a number of organisations working with individuals from sexual minorities who had or were currently experiencing partner violence or abuse (see Appendix 1 for the wording of the letter). I also presented my research to a LGBT Domestic Violence Forum, as well as placing a small advert in one of the more popular gay magazines. Sadly, none of these avenues proved fruitful in regard to identifying prospective participants to the study, and for a period of time it seemed impossible to gain access to this particular population. For me this confirmed that the combination of gay men and intimate partner violence remains a challenging area for research. That said I am aware that Donovan et al., (2006) successfully recruited gay men experiencing intimate partner violence to their study by framing the research question, not in terms of violence or abuse, but rather as general difficulties within couple relationships. For instance, participants were invited to take part in research exploring “*what happens when things go wrong in relationships*” and in the interviews participants were asked about their best and worst relationship experiences.

The above notwithstanding, I was successful in recruiting a smaller than anticipated sample, principally through word-of-mouth and using individual professional contacts who either knew of someone themselves or who were willing to ask others on my behalf. Through this means, I was able to recruit six of the eight participants and the remaining two were recruited, one through a mail-shot to a large social organisation, and the other approached me following a lecture I gave to a professional group during which I made reference to my research study.

Given the challenges inherent in recruitment, it seems important, therefore, to reflect on the particular characteristics of those who did actually come forward for my study. Without exception, all of the participants wanted to inform research in this area and by speaking out felt that they could reach others, like themselves, who had been struggling to leave a violent and abusive relationship. For instance, a number of the participants wished to let others in their position know that it is possible to get out of such relationships and, from this somewhat liberated position, to also let them know that there is life beyond an abusive relationship. Indeed, a number of the men in my study had gone on to have fulfilling and mutually satisfying and enduring relationships which were free of violence and abuse. Some also wanted to challenge the limits of thinking, i.e. in terms of what actually constitutes violence, as well as challenge the limits of the victim and perpetrator divide. However, it is possible that having left what, for most, were highly abusive relationships, the respondents had the confidence to speak out whereas, those who were still in such relationships,

may well not have felt ready or have been able to speak about their experiences.

It is also telling that the majority of the men I interviewed identified and spoke from what they experienced and believed to be victimised positions. This would suggest that victims of domestic violence and abuse are more motivated, than those who abuse, to talk - perhaps reinforcing the notion that they continue at some level to perform what Donovan & Hester (2011) refer to as 'emotion work', where they do the thinking and processing of difficult and indeed upsetting experiences for the benefit of others. Perpetrators, on the other hand, according to Donovan & Hester (2011), tend to structure the relationship for their own ends and, as such, are therefore unlikely to engage in 'emotion work' unless it serves some purpose, e.g. to prevent a victim from walking out. One reading of this is that perpetrators are reluctant to admit weakness and vulnerability, but it may also be the case that they wish to continue to blame or leave the victim to account for what happened rather than assume any responsibility themselves. At the same time, the absence of perpetrators' voices in research is concerning, especially as Reimer & Thomas (1999) believe that the experiences of perpetrators need to be heard, since it can inform strategies for intervention that both eradicate the violence and at the same time preserve the relationship.

## **2.5 Procedure**

Those recruited were provided with a letter outlining the nature and scope of the study (appendix 2), an information sheet detailing the rationale and purpose of the study, together with recruitment criteria and the benefits and risks of taking part in the study (appendix 3), a screening questionnaire providing basic information about themselves considered relevant to the study (appendix 4) and a consent form, which participants were asked to sign (appendix 5).

Those agreeing to participate were interviewed for between sixty and ninety minutes. To ensure that participants kept to the remit of the study, I used a semi-structured interview format. This allowed participants to speak to the issue of violence and abuse within their couple relationships whilst, at the same time, providing scope for them to expand and talk freely about their experiences. My questions also encouraged the participants to describe and reflect upon their experiences, and in line with the grounded theory method, the interview format was changed to reflect the development of thinking as the analysis progressed after each of the interviews – this is seen as part of the iterative aspect of grounded theory. In other words, the interview schedule is designed and adapted to gather more specific data to push the emergent theory (please see Appendix 6 for the initial interview schedule and Appendix 7 for the adjusted version of the interview schedule used in later interviews).

In terms of my own position within the interviews, I felt that it was important to openly acknowledge to the participants that I am gay, as I believed that it would

help establish trust and respect. LaSala (2003, p.17) observes that *“qualitative researchers who are members of the group being studied can identify significant issues from a participant’s perspective and make observations that a heterosexual researcher may overlook”*. Martin & Knox (2000, p.51) underline this point when they say that *“indeed an emic stance may help avoid the inadvertent application of heterosexual bias”*.

All eight interviews were transcribed and checked against the interview recording and one of the transcripts was given back to the participant, who later confirmed that it was a true reflection of the interview I had conducted with him, thereby increasing my confidence in the accuracy of the transcripts. However, it is worth noting that the data as a whole is subject to the accuracy of recall by participants, since participants in my study were speaking about past relationships, some as far back as eight to ten years, which inevitably raises questions concerning memory and recall. Indeed, this was highlighted by two of the participants who spoke of difficulties in remembering specific details (1:17.6; 2:5.4/24.4).

In terms of the status of the accounts of the participants in my study, in common with Renzetti (1992) and Merrill & Wolfe (2000), I too was exploring violence and abuse within same-sex relationships from the perspective of just one of the participants. Therefore, there is an absence of corroboration; yet, it is worth noting how Coleman (1990) found little concurrence between partner’s individual reports on violence in same-sex relationships, a finding that may not be too surprising given the somewhat conflicted and contested nature of these

particular relationships. That said, however, I did find quite a bit of overlap in the separate interviews of the two men, Seb and Anton, who were a couple at the point of interview; suggesting that perhaps the fact that they had worked through their differences, so to speak, lead to a more shared understanding of the dynamics and difficulties within their couple relationship. Nevertheless, it does seem important to emphasize the fact, that with the exception of Seb and Anton, the men I interviewed were all speaking from their own perspective of past relationships and with an absence of corroboration.

## **2.6 Ethical considerations**

### **Consent**

Given the sensitive nature of the study, I ensured that participants were able to opt-in as well as opt-out of the study. All prospective participants were supplied with detailed information relating to the study and, to that extent, were making an informed decision to be part of the study; encapsulated in the signing of the consent form.

### **Confidentiality**

Those who elected to be part of the study were guaranteed complete confidentiality, in that, all names and personal details, as well as other information that could potentially identify participants, were either removed or disguised. Furthermore, in keeping with the idea of participants representing themselves (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996), I worked towards forging a collaborative relationship with the participants, one of whom was given a copy of the transcript of the interview and was therefore able to see and to comment on the ways in which I, as the researcher, had represented his views.

### **Safety**

The decision to interview individuals rather than couples was made with interests of safety in mind. As a psychotherapist with extensive experience of

working therapeutically with couples, I hold an awareness of the potential for couple's therapy to stimulate conflict in non-abusive couple relationships. In view of this, I was therefore cautious about asking couples in violent or abusive relationships to volunteer to be interviewed together for the study; since I was not offering a therapeutic space, but rather was meeting them for a one-off interview without much information and felt that I could not guarantee their safety which, to me, is an obvious ethical consideration.

### Managing distress

Another obvious concern for me in undertaking this study was that of managing distress. My working hypothesis was that the individuals I was interviewing about their painful experiences would experience distress and I therefore had to consider ways of minimising this or of addressing it as it arose in the process of the interview. To give participants control throughout the process, I made them aware that they could pause or stop the interview at any point they wished or needed to do so. As the researcher, I also checked-out with them if they were comfortable going into sensitive or painful topics in more detail and immediately after the interview, they had the opportunity to debrief. Moreover, I also made participants aware of my availability if they needed to speak to me following the interview, although I did indicate that I could direct them towards appropriate psychotherapeutic help if they or I felt that this was indicated.

It is worth noting that a number of the participants actually found the process of being interviewed helpful and indeed therapeutic. One of the participants, for



example, found the interview less upsetting than he had anticipated and commented on finding it a worthwhile experience (1:23.6). Another participant also found the interview “*quite therapeutic really*” (4:12.8), whereas another found it challenging and uncomfortable, mainly because he was re-visiting memories of abuse in more detail than he had ever done before. That said, the motivation of many for taking part in the study spoke to a wish to share the experience with the intention of helping others (1:0.1; 3:0.2) and to make a contribution to the field (3:0.2).

## **2.7 Focus Group**

My decision to conduct a focus group was primarily for the purpose of pushing the limits of the grounded theory analysis used in regard to the individual interviews. At the same time, I was also responding to the question of difference in relation to violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men in contrast to heterosexual relationships, a question that was frequently asked of me during the research process. Wilkinson (2004) suggests that focus group methodology is a way of collecting qualitative data using a small number of people in a group discussion with the express purpose of gaining insight into how respondents represent a particular issue. Focus groups also tend to be more naturalistic than interviews, meaning that they are closer to everyday conversation, since they allow respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members, leading to the production of more elaborated accounts (Wilkinson, 2004).

Focus groups can also be viewed as communicative events, in which the interplay of the personal and the social can be systematically explored. To that end, I chose a group of people who had both personal and professional knowledge of the area under discussion. The nine member group, consisting of five females and four males, identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual and at the time of interview were all practitioners specializing in therapy with gender and sexual minority clients. They were therefore speaking from the experience of offering therapeutic help and were drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives, some which included theories of development and others which

were theories of change. Members of the focus group were recruited through my own professional connection with the group and during one of their training days they agreed to the focus group interview. The topic of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men was introduced by me, saying that I was interested in hearing the group's views about this phenomenon as well as potential areas of contrast between same-sex and cross-gendered pairings.

Focus groups usually generate qualitative data in the form of transcripts produced through either audio or video tape-recordings. I used the former and transcribed the focus group material myself before undertaking a thematic analysis of the data. Braun & Clarke (2006, p.78) believe that a thematic analysis "*provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data*". It is essentially a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns and themes within a data set. In addition, a distinction is drawn between inductive and theoretical thematic analysis, since, with an inductive approach, the themes which are identified are strongly linked to the data itself (a bottom up approach – more akin to grounded theory analysis) whereas, a theoretical thematic analysis would, according to Braun & Clarke (2006) tend to be driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the area and be more explicitly analyst driven (p.84). Since, at the stage that I conducted the focus group and indeed during the analysis of the data itself I was familiar with many of the key theoretical arguments relating to same-sex partner violence and abuse, I would locate my own endeavour within a theoretical thematic analysis.

Braun & Clarke (2006) also draw attention to the distinction between semantic and latent themes, which really speak to the level of analysis. For instance, within a semantic approach, the themes are identified within the explicit or surface meaning, in other words the researcher is not looking beyond what the participants have said. In contrast, a thematic analysis at the latent level is attempting to get at underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations. From my own engagement with the data, it will be apparent that I was working more with the semantic rather than the latent level of thematic analysis.

In keeping with the process of undertaking a thematic analysis, I immersed myself in the data with repeated readings during which I would search for patterns suggesting particular meanings within the data set. Essentially, I was searching for themes within the data set and, having identified these, I was then able to organise them in a way that produced what Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to as a *candidate theme* with a host of *sub-themes* relating to the overall theme, in my own case, that of difference. In the writing-up of the focus group results, I also made use of verbatim material to ground the themes and to capture their meaning. In essence, I was attempting to communicate the overall story that the different themes revealed about the topic of difference in regard to violence within same sex couple relationships as distinct from that of heterosexual or straight couple relationships in which there is violence or abuse.

## **2.8 Self Reflexivity**

Given that in qualitative research, the researcher is part of the process, an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter (Willig, 2001), reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's own contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research endeavour. Reflexivity, therefore, urges researchers "to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research" (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 228).

To that end, I will, in regard to my own research study, concentrate on three areas that I feel were influential in shaping my own relationship to the study I conducted. The first relates to my motivation for undertaking the study and which, to some extent, focused my thinking. The second addresses particular tensions in relation to the interviews I conducted and, the third, speaks to the impact of the material on me and how this was managed in the analysis and the writing-up of the thesis.

1. My interest in undertaking the study arose out of my therapeutic engagement with same-sex couples where violence and abuse was an aspect of the work. Although I was familiar with the work of Goldner et al., (1990), I still felt that there were particular aspects in my own clinical work with gay men that warranted further exploration. For instance, I was exercised by the question of difference in regard to same-sex and heterosexual couple relationships and was also particularly interested in learning more about the intersection of

gender and sexuality. To that end, I was curious about the extent to which masculinity accounted for the problematic dynamics seen within same-sex violent and abusive relationships, the notion of two men actively trying to work something out, and the extent to which violence and abuse within these relationships was best understood in terms of gayness and the problems inherent in managing heterosexism and homophobia. These were questions that influenced me as I approached the interviews and were certainly in my mind as I conducted the focus group discussion. Although, in the spirit of qualitative research, I tried to keep an open mind to these ideas whilst I conducted the study, it is possible that they provided a particular driving force and, to that extent, could be viewed as a potential bias within the study.

2. Aware of the potential vulnerability of my participants and the sensitivity of the material I was exploring, at times I struggled to position myself. This was most apparent in regard to the question of how much pressure I brought to bear on the participants, especially when I felt that it could have been helpful to know more about a particular aspect of the violence and abuse within the relationships and the participants stopped short. To some extent, this tension can be understood as a manifestation of the shift I was making from clinician to researcher and understanding something of the limits and boundaries of the research process itself. For instance, at times I felt that the participants simply wanted to tell their story and to have me bear witness, whereas I felt that I wanted to question and challenge their accounts. Two examples from my research interviews will highlight the kinds of tensions I was experiencing. The first concerns Max's presentation of himself as a victim of abuse within

his relationship with Tom, when to my mind he was clearly describing acts of violence perpetrated by him. However, it is noticeable, in contrast to some of the victim's accounts, how I failed to challenge or even explore in greater depth the meaning Max was attaching to his behaviour, suggesting that perhaps, I was being too respectful of his position. However, when Bob, another of my participants described himself as a perpetrator of violence when he was clearly describing violent resistance, I felt moved to challenge his definition and, again, when Frank, another of my participants spoke of his abusive treatment at the hands of his partner, I too reacted by inferring that his partner was being completely unreasonable. Clearly, a number of things were happening to me which seem very relevant to the question of self reflexivity. Firstly, as someone who was himself a victim in a violent relationship, I was clearly disposed towards the victims and felt protective, whereas with the perpetrator I seemed reluctant to challenge, perhaps for fear of getting into conflict which I clearly wanted to avoid. Secondly, I was mindful that a number of the participants were speaking of experiences of not feeling heard or understood within their relationships and I, therefore, may have felt constrained in questioning their version of reality. As a consequence, I may have held back to avoid potential conflict within the interviews arising out of differences of opinion, especially as the participants were speaking of disputed territory within their couple relationships. An example of this would have been their belief in their partner's capacity for change when I was somewhat dubious about this given that they were describing ongoing patterns of abusive behaviour by their partners towards them. That said, I felt that I was able to use my openness and honesty

relating to my own sexuality to put the men at ease and as a consequence feel that I allowed them to speak freely about their experiences and, to that extent, the interviews produced very rich data. Thirdly, in terms of bearing witness, it seems to me that there are particular challenges embedded in the job of being a researcher, in that the researcher within qualitative research is not expected to “do” anything with what he/she is hearing beyond listening and exploring it further. This is in marked contrast to the role of therapist, where the therapeutic endeavour allows and even encourages a more active engagement with the client’s material in order to promote change, although therapists may also be affected by the client’s material in terms of what they allow themselves to hear and their reactions to this. That said, it is possible that there was something of a conflict going on for me in managing my role as a researcher rather than a therapist and this may also account for some of the constraints in regard to my behaviour within the interviews.

3. In seeking ethical approval for the study, the panel focused particular attention on the question of safety both for the participants and for me. This concern related to a recognition of the fact that I would be dealing with painful and unsettling material and there was a worry that things could get stirred-up as the men recalled painful and disturbing memories of violence and abuse within their relationships. Although, to some extent, I dealt with this concern by interviewing individuals rather than couples, I still found the material shared by the men I interviewed disturbing. Indeed, following my fourth interview, when I met with my supervisor, it became apparent that I had been very affected by the material and I wonder now if I managed the disturbance



by shutting down, as if it was just too much to bear. This raises particular questions concerning the impact of the interviews on me as I worked with the material and as I began to consider the meaning of what these men were telling me. In common with a number of the men I interviewed and with the findings from previous research studies, I feel that I too was in danger of over emphasising the physical aspects of violence and abuse and, for that reason, had to work hard to keep the range of abusive practices in mind, especially when the men themselves were, for example, giving less credence to emotional, financial and sexual abuse. I now feel that it would have been helpful to have been interviewed by a colleague after each of the interviews, both to debrief and to explore the impact of the interviews on me as I began to analyse the material.

**Chapter 3****Participant Profiles**

<b><u>Participant</u></b>	<b><u>Relationship</u></b>	<b><u>Partner</u></b>
<b>Andrew</b> 39 years old at interview White, British		<b>Barry</b> White, British
21 years old	1990 – 1992	25 years old
<b>Bob</b> 40 years old at interview White, British		<b>Jason</b> White, British
29 years old	1987 – 1993	39 years old
<b>Simeon</b> 29 years old at interview White, Mediterranean		<b>Gavin</b> White, British
25 years old	2004 – 2006	Age unknown
<b>Max</b> 39 years old at interview Asian		<b>Tom</b> White, European
22 years old	1991 – 1998	25 years old
<b>Henri</b> 42 years old at interview European		<b>Stuart</b> White, Irish
30 years old	1996 - 1999	Age, unknown
<b>Frank</b> 40 years old at interview White, British		<b>Mark</b> White, British
20 years old	1989 – 1992	20 years old
<b>Seb</b> 31 years old at interview White, Mediterranean		<b>Anton</b> 33 years old at interview White, European
23 years old	2001 – ongoing	25 years old

## **Andrew**

Andrew was interviewed for the study.

Andrew, a 39 year old man at the time of interview, is white, British and identifies as gay. Andrew's partner, Barry, also white and British, was Andrew's third partner. Their's was a relationship that lasted just over two years and which Andrew ended in 1990. Andrew was 21 years old when he first met Barry, who himself was 25 years old. Although they lived together, 9 months into the relationship Andrew left for a time following a violent incident but later returned, in response to Barry claiming that he had a terminal illness.

The pattern of violence within the relationship, which included physical, emotional, financial and sexual abuse, was heavily suggestive of Kelly & Johnson's (2006) definition of *coercive controlling violence*, in that Barry attempted to control Andrew by whatever means, rendering Andrew a victim and Barry a perpetrator. Andrew described Barry as being alcoholic and indicated that he was particularly violent when drunk. Andrew finally left the relationship in 1990 following a very serious incident of violence, when he feared for his life.

In terms of the experience of violence and abuse, Andrew described a relationship that was very much conducted on Barry's terms. For instance, "*it was very much up to him whether we would see each other or not, whether he wanted to see me*" (1:3.2) a position that Andrew felt he had to accept. Andrew,

also, described a pattern of drinking and being out all the time, which he suggested was also driven by Barry.

In addition to the emotional abuse and financial abuse, *“there was always the physical stuff, there was always the punching”* (1:3.6) and sexually, too, *“it was very much his kind of gratification rather than mine”* (1:3.4) and on at least two occasions Andrew was raped by Barry. Jealousy was also a feature of Barry’s abusive behaviour, in that he accused Andrew of having sex with other men, something which Andrew says *“I would never have dared to do”* (1:6.4). Nevertheless, Andrew believed that it was his fault *“because I had given him cause to get jealous and to get upset”* (1.8.2).

Yet, Andrew had a strong commitment to making the relationship work *“you know I loved him”* (1:3.2). Moreover, following a number of serious incidents of violence, where *“he beat me up pretty badly”* (1:3.8), Barry would often be contrite and this served to reinforce Andrew’s commitment to the relationship, in that he said *“I believed him”* (1:4.0).

The admission that Andrew was in an abusive relationship came, Andrew suggested, in response to the fact that *“it was something I couldn’t hide”* (1:4.8). At the same time, Andrew wanted to convince people that he was dealing with the violence and that Barry was addressing his drinking. Andrew suggested that it was only possible to consider leaving when *“it came to a head”* and he felt that he had to do it on his terms. What helped Andrew to reach this point was an increase in the seriousness of the abuse, when Barry nearly killed him,

although it took several months before Barry eventually let go and only then because Andrew found the strength to walk away.

### **Bob**

Bob was interviewed for the study.

Bob was a 40 year old man at the time of interview. He is white and British and identifies as gay. He met Jason, his third partner, when he was 29 years old and Jason, also white and British, was 10 years older than Bob. At the point when they first met, Jason was still married with two adolescent children and he was also in a gay relationship. Six months later, Jason had left his wife and his gay lover and had moved in with Bob. Although they had a 6 year relationship, which ended in 1993, they lived apart for the final three years of the relationship.

In speaking about his relationship with Jason, Bob says that it *“had every aspect of what I understand domestic violence and abuse to be, so, it wasn’t just physical violence, it was also emotional and it was also financial.... It wasn’t sexual, but it certainly had all the other components of control around abuse”* (2:0.8). It seems that the episodes of violence all occurred when one or both partners were drunk. However, Bob was very confused about whether he was a victim or a perpetrator of abuse since he would be the one who would lash out at Jason, although further exploration revealed that he did so only under extreme provocation and the counter-attack was so severe that Bob fears

that it may have left him with permanent physical damage. Furthermore, the abuse Bob suffered at other levels strongly suggests that he was indeed a victim of domestic violence and abuse and, by all accounts, would fit Kelly & Johnson's (2006) definition of violent resistance.

Bob was the donor father for a lesbian couple and when the putative mother told him that she was pregnant Jason, who, until this point had been supportive suddenly reacted by saying "... *well they have got what they want ....they have used you*" (2:3.2). Bob felt that Jason reacted this way because "*he wanted me all to himself, he didn't want anyone else to be in my life*" (2:3.2).

The realisation that Bob was actually in an abusive relationship came out of a conversation he was having with his mother. It seems that having watched a television programme on the subject she then listed the characteristics of an abusive relationship and suggested to Bob that this described his and Jason's relationship. Bob's response to this was to suggest to Jason that they could not continue and that the relationship had to end. However, although Bob physically left the home, Jason maintained contact for sometime after. Bob suggested that "*the problem had always been that the sex was really good and that it was really hard for me to let go of it*" (2:2.0). The relationship did eventually end when Bob told Jason that he had met someone else.

### **Simeon**

Simeon was interviewed for the study.

Simeon was 29 years old at the time of interview. He is white, non English and identifies as gay. He met Gavin, white and British, when he was 26 years old, and although not sure how old Gavin was at this point or whether there was any significant age difference, they had a 2 year relationship which ended about 16 months before my interview with Simeon. Gavin, a divorced man with two adolescent children who lived with their mother, was not Simeon's first partner. The couple lived together in Gavin's house and had regular contact with Gavin's two children.

Although, Simeon defined his relationship with Gavin as "difficult", suggesting that it was not physically abusive, during the course of the interview, however, Simeon spoke of emotional, financial and sexual abuse and, in that sense, was clearly a victim of domestic violence. Simeon believed that Gavin "*wanted to control and very much dominate*" (3: 6.6) adding that "*he was very controlling even in bed*" (3:7.7). It seems that Gavin also tried to possess Simeon and he cut the cord with Simeon's friends. Simeon also spoke of threats of physical violence by Gavin but did not actually believe that he would ever perpetrate such an act. When Gavin did eventually punch Simeon, it resulted in Simeon leaving the relationship. However, it took a further few months before Gavin finally gave up on his attempts to get Simeon to return.

Although there was clear post-separation abuse (Kelly & Johnson, 2006) this took the form of low-level harassment, i.e. phone-calls, and texts and pressure to meet-up and discuss what had happened. It seemed that Gavin was very

keen to show Simeon that he had changed for the better, but Simeon remained suspicious of this. Simeon felt enormous relief when the relationship actually ended, but says that it took him time *“to recover emotionally and physically – I started to put on weight, my appetite came back (concluding that) he didn’t want me to have a life”* (3:14.7).

### **Max**

Max was interviewed for the study.

Max was 39 years old at the time of interview. He is non-white and non-British and identifies as gay. Max spoke of his 7 year live-in relationship with Tom, white, non-British, which ended 10 years ago. Tom was Max’s first relationship and they met when Max was 22 years old and Tom was 25 years old. Max describes his relationship with Tom as *“really formative and amazingly good in lots of ways and deeply destructive and deeply abusive”* (4:0.6). Although the relationship started with *“love at first sight”*, within four weeks, Max says *“I realised Tom was really needy, just unbelievably needy, claustrophobically needy”* (4:1.4). This resulted in a deep frustration and resentment that eventually resulted in Max becoming physically violent towards Tom.

Although Max presented himself as being at the mercy of Tom’s frustrating and emotionally abusive and dependent behaviour, the fact that Max responded with repeated acts of escalating physical aggression towards Tom, left me in no doubt that this was indeed an abusive relationship and that Max was a



perpetrator. It is true that Max felt provoked by Tom's emotionally dependent behaviour but the extent to which Tom showed this behaviour in the context of his victimised status within the relationship, and the extent to which he was deliberately trying to provoke Max was hard to read from Max's account. That said Tom was regularly beaten by Max who talked of Tom cowering in the corner as Max rained punches on his body. This was clearly a coercive controlling violent relationship (Kelly & Johnson, 2006)

It seems that over the life of the relationship the balance of power shifted with Max subsidising Tom's entire life and Max says "*I felt so responsible financially, emotionally and physically*" (4:3.2). Max, however, felt that Tom was the one who tried to control him and the one who would provoke these feelings of rage in him, although Max would often be contrite following a violent attack and in addition to expressing sorrow he also says that "*I'd feel so guilty*" (4:2.6). That said, Max likened the bond between him and Tom as that of brotherly love and suggested that the violence was like siblings punching each other. However, this seems nothing more than a rationalisation for what was clearly abusive behaviour from Max towards Tom.

Max spoke of experiencing enormous difficulties in getting Tom out of his life, but the growing realisation that Max "*was actually stronger, much harder, more confident and had much more inner belief*" (4:9.2), allowed him to engineer Tom's move to another flat and Max even arranged for him to have a replacement boyfriend. Max expressed relief that the relationship had ended and says that it is a relationship "*I would never want to go back to again*" (4:0.6).

## **Henri**

Henri was interviewed for the study.

Henri was 42 years old at the time of interview. He is white, non-British and identifies as gay. He spoke about his 3 year relationship with Stuart, white, Scottish, and who had previously been married, although at the time that he and Henri met in 1996, he was already divorced. Henri was 30 years old at the point that he met Stuart. This was Stuart's second gay relationship and although Henri had had a number of encounters, Stuart was essentially Henri's first permanent relationship.

Henri's relationship started well, although problems seemed to emerge when he and Stuart began to live together. According to Henri *"we started redecorating and, em, organising the place. He was still working both jobs and I think that's when the pressure started for him and I think he was not happy with the fact that I had managed to have a place of my own"* (5:1.2). Henri was instrumentally the more secure of the two partners, i.e. he was a high earner, he owned his own home and over the three years that they were together, it seems that Stuart became increasingly dependent on Henri and this became a major source of the tension within their relationship.

Although there was no physical or sexual abuse within the relationship, Henri was subjected to ongoing emotional abuse at a number of levels, often fueled

by Stuart's alcoholic bouts, and there was also evidence of low-key financial abuse. The resentment began to manifest itself in Stuart coming home later and later and Henri reacted by giving *"him the cold shoulder when he was coming home pissed and he would just call me names and insult me in all sorts of ways"* (5:2.4). Henri became increasingly anxious about the relationship with more and more drunken and abusive scenes. This meets the criteria for the definition of a domestically violent relationship, but it doesn't quite fit the criteria for any of Kelly & Johnson's (2006) categories, highlighting the challenge of covering all possibilities within intimate partner violence, something that I will return to in the discussion.

Henri says *"I think I was somehow hoping things would change"* (5:1.4) but overtime he began to express exasperation and eventually came to the realisation that he couldn't take anymore. After about 2 years, the situation became so unbearable for Henri that he sought outside help and this eventually enabled him to ask Stuart to leave, although, given Stuart's dependence on Henri, it was perhaps not so surprising that it took Stuart some months before he was actually able to go. The relationship finally came to an end when Henri told Stuart that he had met someone new.

### **Frank**

Frank was interviewed for the study.

Frank was a 40 years old at the time of interview. He is white, British and identifies as gay. He spoke about his 3 year relationship with Mark, also white and British, which ended in 1992. This was not a first relationship for either partner and they met at university when they were both 20 years old. They lived together for the majority of their relationship.

There was serious physical and emotional abuse within their 3 year relationship and Mark would subject Frank to severe physical assaults on a regular basis, fulfilling the criteria for a coercive controlling violent relationship (Kelly & Johnson, 2006). Only when Frank finally snapped and fought back did the violence stop and over a subsequent period of months, Frank carefully extricated Mark from the flat and from the relationship. This aspect of the relational dynamic meets Kelly & Johnson's (2006) definition of violent resistance.

Frank sets the scene by suggesting that Mark wasn't violent at first but this increased the longer the couple lived together. *"It wasn't like frequent, I didn't get a beating every night when I got home type of thing, but it was the way he dealt with his frustration, he couldn't do it through an argument or discussion, it would end up in a violent attack or something like that, a rage, like hitting me with a table, crushing glass into my leg or putting his hands around my throat, or throwing coffee over me or an object at me"* (6:2.8).

In addition to the physical abuse, Frank also suffered emotional abuse, i.e. references to him being fat and unattractive. If he upset Mark, Frank also

suffered a lot of *“silent treatment”* (6:11.0). Furthermore, Mark’s lack of drive or ambition and staying in bed all day whilst Frank worked, caused tensions in the relationship. It seemed that Mark became increasingly dependent on Frank, although Frank said that *“actually I’ve got no problem playing that role at all, as long as there is some give and take”* (6:7.4). Frank went on to say *“and if we had a row about something and he felt he couldn’t win it, you know, by winning it orally, he’d resort to hitting me or throwing coffee over me ... banging my head on the wall”* (6:7.8).

At times, Frank feared for his life, but the fear turned to relief when Mark had calmed down. Frank described it as *“a flash of rage which would then be over and then there would be all the ‘oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it, I love you”* (6:8.6). Frank also did not want to believe that *“someone who says that they love you also wants to knock you around”* (6:10.4).

From Frank’s account, the violence got worse towards the end of the relationship especially when Frank started to distance himself. Furthermore, in terms of getting Mark to leave, Frank suffered resistance and he also struggled with feelings of guilt. It would appear that Frank was in touch with Mark’s vulnerability and this made it difficult for him to be clear about Mark going but Frank was eventually able to install Mark in his new flat. To some extent, this is a fairly good example of the kind of emotional work which victims perform within an abusive relationship, where they feel responsible and attempt to make things better for their abuser.

### **Seb & Anton**

Both men were interviewed (separately) for the study.

Seb and Anton were motivated to take part in the study because they felt that as their partnership did not fit the general category of an abusive couple relationship, as they put it, they were therefore keen to have their voices heard. They are both white, non-British and at the time of interview Seb was 31 years old and Anton, 33 years old. Seb identifies as bisexual and Anton as gay. They have lived together for the past eight years and have, what they describe as an “open relationship”, meaning that each of them has sex separately and together with other men.

Both men agreed that the early stages of their relationship was “*very intense*” (8:3.2), as they tried to find the balance between what Anton describes as “*two strong personalities*” (8:3.2). Seb characterised them as “*two hot blooded Leo’s, competitive and quite antagonistic*” (7:1.0). He also said that for the first couple of years they argued a lot about religion, attitudes to sexuality and the relationship generally. These early arguments were primarily focused on monogamy versus open relationships. The tensions inherent in their conflicting positions resulted in emotionally abusive exchanges and on a number of occasions this led to physical altercations. These highly charged emotional and physical exchanges were given an extra dimension when they together began to take the drug ‘crystal meth’. Realizing that this resulted in an escalating pattern of abusive behaviour within the relationship they eventually

stopped taking the drug and when Anton shifted in his position regarding monogamy, Seb also began to give up some of his demands on Anton.

At the point of interview they both described a strong and loving relationship, one with a high degree of shared respect and care for each other and, although they continue to have some feisty exchanges, they are both clear that these are not abusive. Moreover, they both saw themselves as physically matched and as equals within the relationship and so the usual power imbalances that feature prominently in violent or abusive couple relationships was not felt to be relevant in their relationship. Essentially these men were trying to work something out between them about their differences and their beliefs. Anton, for example, was clear from the beginning that he *“would not tolerate any physical violence, so I would be more like shout at me but don’t touch me, I can’t bear that”* (8:5.6). He was also keen to emphasise the fact that he never felt threatened by Seb *“it was more on an emotional level; shouting was a way of explaining feelings”* (8:5.6). There seemed to be a strong measure of control built into the relationship and often they would both be contrite after an argument.

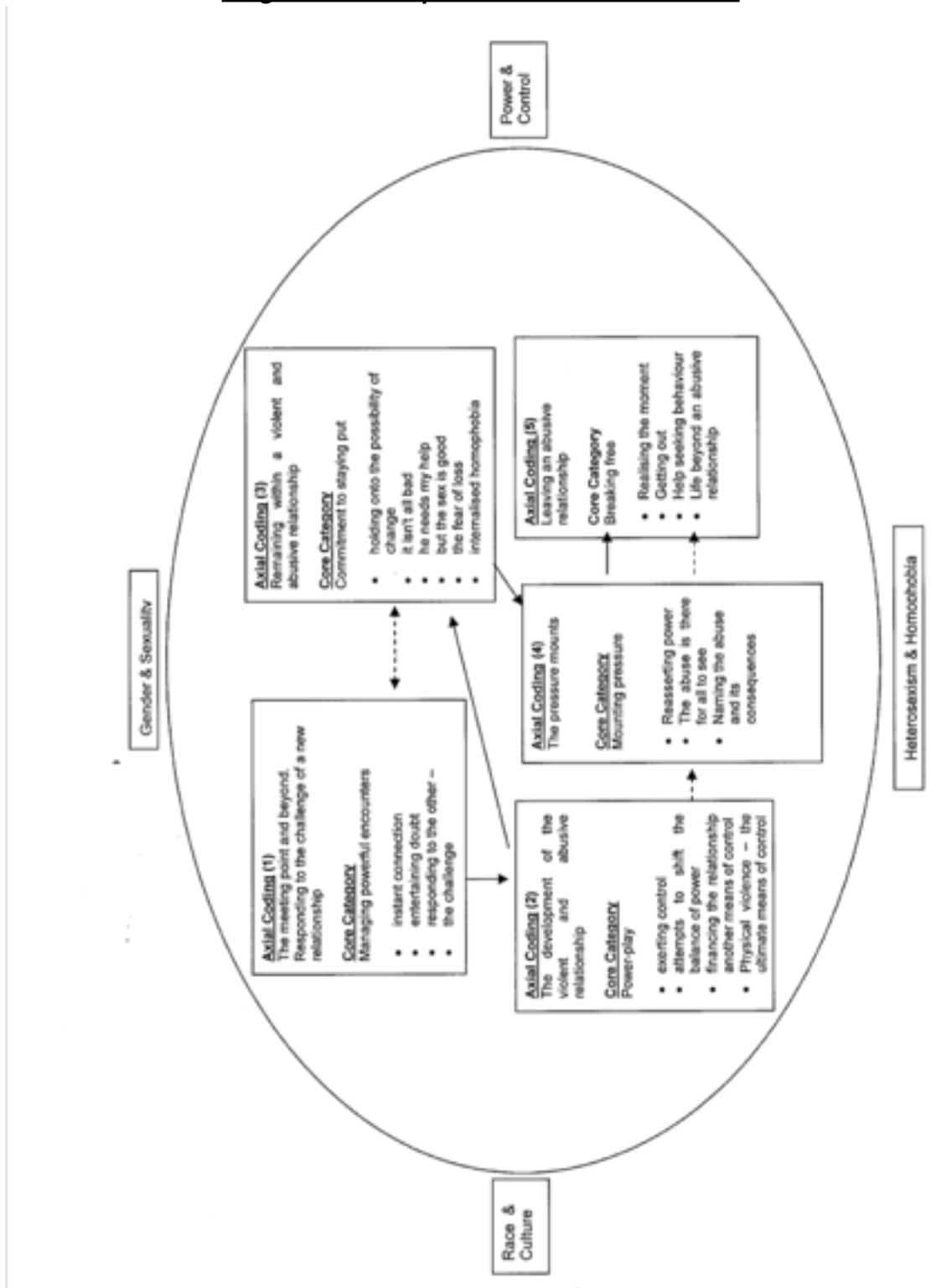
On the face of it, I would identify this relationship as falling into the category of situational couple violence (Kelly & Johnson, 2006) and given their strong commitment and success in working through their differences it seems that they indeed offer a very different perspective from the other couple relationships described within this study. Over time, this couple have developed a really strong relationship, embodied in Anton’s comment *“we love each other on the*

*physical, the mental level, we love spending time together” (8:9.6) and Seb concluded by saying that they have a “real trust and faith in each other” (7:9.2).*



## Results

### Diagrammatic Representation of the Results



### **Explanation of diagram**

The unbroken circle represents and incorporates higher level concepts, linking gender and sexuality with heteronormativity and homophobia, race and culture and the management of inequalities within the relationship linked to power and control.

The solid arrows speak to the life cycle developmental trajectory of the couple relationship over time.

The broken arrows represent the opposing forces at work within the couple relationship where love for one's partner and a commitment to working things through provide a strong and enduring connection. However, this is in parallel to the more destructive and abusive aspects relating to the dynamics of power arising from inequalities within the relationship, which, over time, erode the hope for change and replace it with despair and the growing realization of the need to get out.

## **Analysis of the Results**

### **1. The meeting point and beyond: Responding to the challenge of a new relationship.**

#### **Core Category: Managing powerful encounters**

##### **Instant connections**

For half of these men, the first encounter was a powerful and immediate experience, a lightning rod if you like. Max, in speaking of his first encounter with Tom, describes it as *"like magic"* (4:0.8) and Anton further underlines the point when talking of his first meeting with Seb saying that *"it was love at first sight"* (8:2.6). Henri also portrayed his first encounter with Stuart as an *"instant physical connection.... I just stroked his belly and he just grabbed my hand"* (5:0.8). For the others (Andrew, Bob, Simeon and Frank) their relationships developed more slowly over time.

The importance of reporting on this particular phase of the relationship is to emphasise the overwhelming quality of the emotion which appears to have wiped out any curiosity about the other, and, in that sense, the participants seem blinded by a mutually reinforcing dynamic, suggesting an important connection at a number of levels. Moreover, the speed, with which these men converted the point of first contact into a sexual encounter and then into a live-in relationship - in the case of living together, within a week for one of the

participants - raises fundamental questions concerning the emergence of violence within these apparently blissful couple encounters. Perhaps, having found such a strong connection there was a sense of wanting to seize the moment, although for the others the connection appeared to have developed gradually.

Drawing further on the data, it seems that a number of factors were at play which may have contributed to the blinding quality of the instant attraction, factors which may hold important clues (examined below) to understanding the meaning of the violence which later emerged within these relationships and which may have kept these men working hard at the relationship long after it was sensible or safe to do so.

Firstly, at least half of the participants spoke of their readiness for a relationship, consisting of; a tiredness and even despair of being on one's own, a determination to find a partner, i.e. through internet dating, and a strong desire for a powerful and meaningful connection with "Mr Right". Simeon captures the essence of this thinking when he says *"I was emotionally ready to fall in love and was, either consciously or sub-consciously, looking for a relationship with somebody that would actively, physically and emotionally and psychologically trigger something and turn me on, which he did"* (3:2.0).

Secondly, the need for and excitement of sex may have confused the meaning of the connection between these men, particularly in situations where the sex was good. This was clearly articulated by Andrew who, in explaining that his

relationship with Barry started with lust, says that it *“should have been a one night stand”* (1:15.2).

Thirdly, two of the participants, spoke of a lack of self confidence and, in common with many gay men growing up in a hostile and rejecting society, may have suffered from feelings of low self worth. For instance, when Andrew was told by a friend that Barry really fancied him, Andrew’s response was *“I couldn’t believe it”* (1:17.4) and then goes on to say *“I suppose in a way it was a self esteem thing”* (1:17.4). These feelings of low self worth may also have played into a dynamic in which the participant is looking up to the other, thereby creating the kind of imbalance that often underlies violence and abuse within couple relationships. For instance, Andrew says *“there was this really gorgeous man who could have been anybody’s and he chose me”* (1:17.4), and Max also emphasised the sense of the other being a good catch when he said that *“he was really good looking and lots of people fancied him”* (4:0.8). Max also admitted in this section of the interview that he (Max) *“didn’t really have a very good self image”* (4:0.8). The implication of these seemingly innocent statements is that both Andrew and Max experienced themselves as lucky to have such a man and at some level may even have been grateful. However, this may have left them in a position where they felt less able to negotiate a mutually satisfying relationship, a factor that may also have formed part of the problematic relational dynamics that seemed to underpin most of the relationships described in this study.

### **Entertaining doubt**

Early on in the development of these relationships, the participants began to describe patterns of connection that seemed to challenge their initial impressions and which raised questions and doubts in their minds. For instance, Simeon started to realise that there were *“other things to this guy than what I saw”* (3:2.0) and asked himself *“why has everyone left this guy”* (3:3.6). Three months into his relationship with Tom, Max questioned whether he should continue to stay saying *“it just wasn’t right”* (4:5.0). He started to feel revulsion for Tom who he began to realise was, in his words, *“pathetic”, “weak”, “needy”* and *“unable to make a decision”* (4:5.0). Andrew also spoke of Barry stamping his authority on the relationship, adding that the *“mind games”* started almost from day one (1:3.2).

To some extent, these insights could be viewed as a natural consequence of the participants beginning to appreciate differences between themselves and their partners, a stage of development in the life cycle of any couple relationship. However, the somewhat ominous flavour to the dawning realisation that something wasn’t right about their partner or the relationship raises questions as to why they chose not to do more about their concerns. One possible explanation is that their own investment in the relationship, even at this early stage, convinced them not to take the concerns too seriously, although, it is also possible that they were in denial or believed that, in time, things would change for the better. Either way, it seems that there was a high degree of acceptance and accommodation of the emergence of uncomfortable feelings

about their partners and the behaviour they were showing, the consequence of which only becomes clear as the relationship develops.

### **Responding to the other – the challenge**

The question of how the men in this study reacted to the emerging and indeed problematic dynamics within their relationships became an important consideration, especially given the absence of markers generally within society relating to intimacy between men. Max, for instance, complained that *“there was no clear guidance as to the parameters you were in, in this relationship”* (4:2.4) and this may have contributed, therefore, to the ways in which the participants positioned themselves and behaved in regard to their partners.

For example, despite Andrew’s admission that Barry dictated the terms (1:2.0) and established the rules of engagement (1:3.2), even to the extent of making it clear to Andrew that *“you are on your own”* (1:3.2) and that he mustn’t expect anything, Andrew settled for this existence, he didn’t question it and if anything he continued to pursue the relationship on Barry’s terms - a measure of how little self-agency Andrew had at this point. Similarly, when Seb let Anton know that he could not be monogamous *“That’s the way I am, I cannot change”* (8:3.8) Anton, who desired a monogamous relationship, found that he was struggling to manage his feelings. However, unlike Andrew, Anton had difficulty accepting the position he found himself in and the tensions associated with this pushed the couple towards abusive exchanges, which could be viewed as a more active attempt to sort something out between them, especially since

Seb and Anton had a commitment to working on and resolving their differences (7:1.2/3.0) and indeed they still remain a couple.

Max, on the other hand, started to resent Tom and the “*burning anger and frustration*” (4:1.6) found expression in what essentially was to become a particularly violent and abusive relationship. Bob also reacted to an emerging pattern within his relationship with Jason when, in public, Jason began to use intimate details shared by Bob in private and in these situations, Bob felt provoked and hit out at Jason as a means of trying to stop him (2:2.8).

Henri and Frank, on the other hand, had very different responses. Realising, that their partners lacked initiative and were developing a dependence on them, Henri, responded with attempts to support Stuart, i.e. by offering him a place to live, which Stuart jumped at. However, Stuart soon became resentful that the property was not his own and Henri worked even harder at trying to make Stuart “*feel at home*” (5:1.4). Frank also became actively engaged and took responsibility for trying to motivate and assist Mark who was unemployed and who “*lacked drive and ambition to do anything at all*” (6:4.6).

In making sense of the varied responses to the challenges the relationships posed for these men, it is possible that for Henri and Frank, the ethic of care provided the highest context marker and it was, therefore, both natural and necessary for them to care and be seen to be caring for their partners. During my interview with Henri, he recalled Stuart saying “*I never thought I would find anyone as nice as you* (5:1.0).



For some of these men, they found themselves reacting to particular aspects of their partner's behaviour. As mentioned above, Bob, under extreme provocation from Jason found himself hitting out at Jason in an effort to stop him. Simeon too found himself reacting to Gavin's views about him, particularly when he felt that they were unfair or incorrect. Gavin, however, insisted that Simeon was wrong and told him to "*shut up*" and not answer back. It seems that these men may have been trying to establish some limits within the relationship rather than simply being prepared to fit in with their partner's demands or controlling and abusive ways.

However, for Andrew, he felt unable to act and this begs questions about the particular meaning of his position - an all too familiar position within violent and abusive relationships. One reading of it may be that he was extremely fearful of Barry or fearful of losing the relationship if he challenged back. However, I would like to put forward an alternative explanation. Andrew, for instance, had been looking for a way out of a relationship that wasn't working for him and the pull of "*Mr Excitement*", in this case, Barry, offered him an escape (1:5.2). Andrew also admitted to being attracted to the "*dangerous edge*", the "*excitement of risk*" and the "*attraction to the wild and reckless times they had together*" (1:4.0) and this cutting edge may have been a major organising factor in his decision to commit to Barry. To some extent, the theme of risk also chimed with Simeon's experience, for although he had serious doubts about Gavin, he admitted that part of him "*wanted to take the risk and take the chance*" (3:3.6). However, it is possible that Andrew and Simeon's decision to

take the risk applied particularly to the early stages of the relationship and as the abuse developed they shifted more into survival mode, suggesting important developmental processes at work within the couple relationship over time.

It seems clear from the accounts that a number of these men attempted to accommodate and accept the challenge faced in trying to make the relationship work, a version of what Donovan & Hester (2011) refer to as 'emotion work' in which they provide the necessary conditions for the relationship to develop. Others, however, reacted to the abusive dynamics, even at the risk of making things worse. Perhaps, this is another way of actively trying to work something out, but it might also show fundamental differences in thresholds of tolerance between participants, where some of the men show a more reactive side of themselves. As for the question of risk and taking chances, it is possible that for some of these men there was an exciting edge to being with a partner who pushed to the limit, although in time, the repeated impact of the abusive behaviour took its toll.

## **2. The development of the violent and abusive relationship**

### **Core Category: Power-play**

#### **Exerting control**

The data holds important clues as to the structuring of the relationships of the participants interviewed for this study with one or either partner perceived or experienced as being 'top dog'. This appears to have set in motion a situation where the oppressed other has to find a way of surviving within the relationship. Sometimes the direction is straightforward, as in Barry asserting his will over Andrew and Andrew feeling that he has to take it perhaps out of "*fear*" or "*intimidation*" (1:6.4;6.8).

At other times, however, a more complicated and almost inverted power dynamic seems to have been operating within these relationships. For instance, Max speaks of feeling trapped and controlled by Tom's complete dependence on him and Max's sense of powerlessness within this dynamic leads him to physically lash out at Tom. Furthermore, Max also believes that Tom not only deserved these beatings but that he actually provoked Max into attacking him (4:8.4), which may have justified Max in believing that he had never been abusive towards Tom.

Although on first reading the accounts appear to highlight competitive dynamics, more akin to a struggle for equality i.e. Simeon refusing to be silenced by Gavin who says "*don't you dare question me*" (3:9.3), and Seb portraying his relationship with Anton as "*fiercely competitive*" with two hot-blooded Leo's vying for position (7:1.0/7.8), on closer examination, however, the data reveals definite attempts by one partner to assert his will and control over the other by whatever means. This distinction goes to the heart of the question

of understanding the meaning of the violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men. For, although men generally are portrayed as building relationships with other men based on competition, suggesting a mutual vying for position, much as that portrayed by Seb, the pattern of the relationships in this study were more akin to an oppressor/oppressed dynamic where power and control were clearly at work.

For instance, Andrew mostly felt at the mercy of Barry's attempts to assert his authority within the relationship and believed that it was "*all on his terms*" (1:1.4). Simeon also spoke of Gavin's wish to control him, this time through a desire to protect, i.e. "*you belong to me, you're mine and no-one else is allowed to touch you*" (3:7.3). For Simeon, this controlling regime gradually extended into almost every aspect of his life, as Gavin attempted to isolate him, "*he absolutely cut the cord for me with my friends*" (3:10.7) and reinforced this with "*silent treatment*" (1:10.9) if and when Simeon met his friends. Bob also experienced something similar, in that, Jason tried to cut him off from his friends as well as denying Bob's relationship with his parents (2:3.4/14.4).

Control was also asserted indirectly, i.e. for although having made his position regarding non monogamy clear from the beginning, Seb then had difficulty tolerating Anton's reactions to him having sex with other men (8:4.2) so that, although it was viewed by Seb as a mutual struggle, another reading of this is that Seb, who did not want to be controlled in any way (7:8.0), was really attempting to impose his will on Anton. This seems to embody some of the

complexities in unravelling issues of power and control, as participants may hold very different perspectives regarding the same event.

Another form of control was that relating to internalized homophobia. According to Andrew, *“he, (Barry) loathed himself for being gay and me being there reminded him of what he couldn’t feel himself” (1:18.0)*. For instance, Barry attempted to conceal his gay identity and tried to *“pass” (1:17.8)* as heterosexual, hence his decision to drink only in straight pubs *(1:4.0)*. Barry’s struggle seems to have been related to strongly held beliefs within his family and friendship networks, internalized by him, suggesting that his only option was to be *“straight and strong” (1:18.6)*. This heterosexist belief is obviously in conflict with Barry’s gay identity and, for him, is managed through a process of turning against all that is gay (internalized homophobia) manifested in a hatred of effeminate men. This may explain why Andrew became *“Barry’s little project” (1:11.4)* where Barry attempted to turn Andrew into *“a real man” (1:11.4)* manifested in decisions about what Barry should wear and how he should behave. As far as Andrew was concerned, it was an example of Barry taking his unresolved needs out on him *(1:11.6)* since, Andrew’s very existence reminded Barry that he was indeed gay, something that Barry could not tolerate and which was then directed towards Andrew in the form of controlling behaviour.

### **Attempts to shift the balance of power**

The accounts also contain attempts to confuse or obfuscate the distinction between the oppressor and oppressed dynamic, a feature of many abusive

relationships where victims blame themselves or where the perpetrators rarely see themselves as responsible for the abuse and from that position blame the victim.

For instance, a number of the men in this study complained of a dynamic whereby they felt that the oppressor shifted the blame, and, although they felt moved to fight back, they resisted the pull for fear that they would escalate the conflict. An example of this dynamic was found in Simeon's account where Gavin seemed threatened by his competence (3:4.8) and reacted with a verbal attack on Simeon saying "*You want to dominate, you want to control, you want to kill my identity and you are so domineering*" (3:9.1) when, in fact, this description fitted Simeon's experience of Gavin's behaviour within their relationship. This dynamic also operated in the relationship between Henri and Stuart and between Frank and Mark. For instance, although Henri said "*I decided, why don't I buy a place and I'll move into that place and ask him to move in with me*" (5:1.2) and Stuart enthusiastically welcomed this, Stuart then expressed resentment towards Henri for owning the house and for trying to control him and this led to ongoing battles between them (5:4.3/1.6). Much of Stuart's emotionally abusive behaviour was fuelled by alcohol abuse and Henri came to fear another "*drunken angry scene*" (5:2.5) with Stuart being verbally abusive and slamming doors ever louder as a way of asserting himself and as a means of increasing Henri's anxiety (5:4.7). To some extent, this behaviour can be viewed as Stuart trying to manage his own conflict about his position within the relationship where, on the one hand, he relied on Henri's material wealth and desire to care for him, and yet, on the other, was unable to square his

dependence with a determination to do his own thing. In this instance, the conflict surrounding his own dependency needs were managed through an attack on Henri who is accused of trying to control him. Here one sees a breakdown in the notion of equality, based on the two men building something together when faced with other inequalities within the relationship.

With Frank and Mark a pattern emerged whereby Mark tried to diminish Frank at times when Mark himself was feeling down or depressed. Frank believed that Mark was motivated by a wish to “*be higher up in the pecking order*” (6:7.8), and a desire to undermine Frank’s confidence (6:7.6) and to keep him in his place (6:7.8). For instance, Mark would tell him “*you are fat*” (6:6.2) “*you are unattractive*” (6:7.6) and the silent treatment used by Mark created a “*nasty air*” which organised Frank to avoid upsetting Mark, even if it meant not returning to his parents home at a time of crisis (6:11.4).

Confusion over the structuring of the relationships was also apparent in the notion of one or either partner having an advantage and using that advantage over the other, although in the two examples that follow, violence was the end result of this particular dynamic. For instance, Bob spoke of his education giving him an advantage, in that, he was both articulate and well informed so that he could argue convincingly. Jason, on the other hand, struggled to assert himself in this way and, when he lost the argument, all that was left “*was his fist’s*” (2:20.0). However, the confusion here may be more about the way that Bob’s instrumental power made him vulnerable to attack, since it only served to highlight a weakness in Jason who then lashed out to reassert his power in the

only way he could. Max too, felt that he had the instrumental advantage over Tom, in terms of having a good job, a good home, and a good mind, in contrast to Tom who was described as weak and needy; yet, Max believed that Tom used that weakness to control him. For instance, Max spoke of Tom dangling possibilities which he later withdrew and it was this behaviour which lead Max to conclude that it was Tom who decided (4:1.6). Max also spoke of Tom subjecting him to ongoing emotional abuse and it was this that Max believed provoked his violent outbursts towards Tom.

What may be happening here is that power in one domain does not necessarily hold much of an advantage, especially when attempts to assert or defend oneself only serves to increase the likelihood of abuse and violence. This was most notable in the relationship between Andrew and Barry where Andrew's graduation and the securing of his first job threatened the balance of power and resulted in Barry's first major physically violent attack on Andrew (1:3.8).

### **Financing the relationship – another means of control**

In a number of the accounts of the men I interviewed, particular emphasis was placed on the transacting of the abusive relational dynamics through financial means. For instance, Andrew spoke of Barry controlling the finances “...he'd control my bank cards (meaning that he would pressure Andrew to use his bank cards to pay for drinks, etc.) ...everything was very much on his terms (1:9.6).



However, the main theme to emerge from this aspect of the data was the sense of the men I interviewed subsidising and even financing the relationship in a way that suggests that they were being used and abused through this means.

Andrew accepted that he was holding onto his partner by handing over his hard earned cash, the reason being *“because when the money would run out ... he would be off and I wouldn’t see him...”* (1:12.8). Simeon also found himself shouldering the financial burden of the relationship with Gavin, in that, having decided to move into Gavin’s house to ease Gavin’s debt, Simeon found himself paying the mortgage, whilst Gavin *“wasn’t spending a penny”* (3:4.8). Paradoxically, Simeon later discovered that whilst he was financing the relationship, Gavin was increasing their debts by spending huge amounts of money on internet shopping. Max also expressed feelings about Tom’s financial dependence on him saying *“I was subsidising his entire life”* (4:3.2). Henri, too, admits that he was financing and subsidising Stuart, who was not paying his way (5:2.0). In fact, Henri suggested that Stuart was actually withholding finances, as if *“he would forget on purpose”* (5:2.0) to pay his rent. This in turn, positioned Henri as the one asking for the money, thereby provoking Stuart into verbally attacking Henri. To some extent, these men may have been showing an ethic of care in shouldering the financial burden of the relationship, but what they report is that this goodwill is then used abusively to exploit the victim.

Bob’s decision to hand responsibility for the finances over to Jason *“because I am rubbish with money and he is really good”* (2:14.2), seriously backfired on two counts. Firstly, Jason, having assumed the responsibility, then used it to

control Bob “...you can’t afford to go out” (2:14.6) and secondly, Jason managed to get them into massive debt, for which Bob had to assume responsibility. Andrew also reported getting into serious debt following his attempts to hold onto Barry by financing the relationship.

From these interviews, I was struck by the difficulty these men had in sharing finances or in mutually supporting the relationship, a case of one extorting an advantage from the other and then using that advantage as a means of control. Perhaps, the historical importance of men being independent and breadwinners, creates as much difficulty within gay male relationships as it does in heterosexual relationships, or, perhaps the fact that the imbalance within gay male relationships, particularly where one lacks the resources to play an equal part, feels so unbearable that the financially resourced and more capable partner has to be taken advantage of in order to balance the books, so to speak? This dynamic, however, may have more to do with being male than being gay and may well underline a vying for position which seemed to characterise most of these relationships, so that, the man who feels he has lost the battle, settles the score by taking advantage through whatever means, including making their partner literally pay for it.

### **Physical violence – the ultimate means of control?**

Although the men I interviewed spoke of a progression from emotional to physical and, in some cases, to sexual abuse, it seems that physical abuse was given more significance than other forms of abuse, a factor that might

confuse and even undermine the extent of the abusive relationships they felt that they were actually in. For instance, Simeon described a relationship with Gavin containing financial abuse, emotional abuse and indeed sexual abuse, all of which Simeon endured. However, when Gavin mounted an unexpected physical attack to Simeon's face, it was only then that Simeon decided to leave (3:9.5), suggesting that physical abuse raises the stakes and may be experienced as the ultimate violation of the body, whilst at the same time alerting the victim to the fact that he is indeed in a violent relationship in a way that humiliation or ridicule may not.

Perhaps this may be understood in relation to the traumatic impact of a physical attack, in terms of how the victim manages the visible signs of such abuse, both in relation to self and in relation to others. Take, for example, Andrew's situation where he endured daily incidents of violence, ranging from "*slaps, punches, pushing, mental stuff, kicks, rape and sexual violence and financial stuff*" (1:9.4/6), abuse which he seemed to accommodate as part of his relationship with Barry. Yet, three or four times a year, usually fuelled by alcohol, Barry would mount, what Andrew regarded as a serious violent attack, "*like a raging bull you know, where you see all the blood spurting across the wardrobe*" and where "*he beat me up pretty badly so that I went into school the following day with a black eye and a bruised face*" (1:3.8) and here one sees a distinction being drawn regarding levels and impact of abuse. Perhaps, it is possible to tolerate forced sexual contact, as Simeon and Andrew seem to have done, simply because it is often private, invisible and easily internalized, in a way that a bloody face, a black eye or a broken limb isn't? Reinforcing this point,

Simeon, for example, described Gavin as very controlling “even in bed” and goes on to say that after having sex with Gavin he felt “*humiliated*” and rather than it being pleasurable he felt that he had been used (3:7.7). Again, it may have been possible for Simeon to tolerate humiliation more than it was to tolerate a bloody nose or a black eye, since it was only when Gavin physically attacked Simeon that he finally decided to leave.

Another aspect of physical violence that may place it at a different and perhaps more serious level than other forms of abuse is its potential to cause serious physical harm or even death. For example, Bob, who was in a consistently abusive relationship with Jason, which involved emotional, psychological and physical abuse, admits that it was the physical abuse which really affected him. He admits that under extreme provocation, he would lash out with his fists into Jason’s face and this might result in Jason sustaining a black eye. However, Jason’s response on such occasions was to “*pummel into the back of my (Bob’s) head, like over and over and over again*” (2:2.8), so that Bob now suffers from permanent tinnitus. Frank also spoke of the physical damage he sustained at the hands of Mark who threw hot black coffee over him, crushed glass into his leg and who made serious attempts to strangle him (6:8.4/6.2/9.6) so that Frank feared for his life “*...he’s going to hit me over the head ....you know like Jo Orton*” (6:9.0). The point Frank is making is that Jo Orton was killed at the hands of his partner who bludgeoned him to death with a hammer.

It is also possible that extreme physical abuse is as shocking for the abuser as it is for the abused and this may explain, what to the victim, sounds like a

confusing message when the abuser, following a serious physical attack, then expresses sorrow and declarations of love, which they rarely give in relation to emotional, sexual or indeed financial abuse. For instance, Barry would be contrite after the event *“I am really sorry”* (1:8.0) and he would endeavour to convince Andrew that *“it won’t happen again”* and that he (Barry) *“was going to change”* (1:4.0). Bob believes that the more serious physical violence within his relationship with Jason would get *“packaged and put somewhere and we moved on from it and it was like it was going to be alright”* (2:9.4). Simeon also spoke of Gavin feeling quite desperate following the physical assault on Simeon, *“desperately”* (3:10.5) wanting him back, and promising *“that he had changed”* (3:10.3) and that it wouldn’t happen again, suggesting that at key points these sentiments may act as a strategic manoeuvre to prevent the victim from leaving. This also highlights the extent of the perpetrator’s dependence on the victim, something which they are unable to acknowledge or tolerate in a straightforward way and which ultimately leads to violence of one sort or another.

For Frank, there was no pattern to the violence and abuse, in that psychological and physical abuse, were intermingled (6:10.8). Yet, he also says *“I never got sustained beatings but it would be a flash of rage followed by, Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it ... I love you”* (6:9.0), suggesting that the attacks came without warning, catching them both off guard. This is something which is echoed by Bob who described Jason as being *“like Jekyll and Hyde”* (2:2.8), a point that is further underlined by Simeon speaking of Gavin, when he talked of them kissing one minute and then five minutes later Gavin *“would be monstrous and you*

*wouldn't recognise him" (3:9.1).* Perhaps the confusion over the weight one attaches to such acts, when love is intermingled with hate, best summed up by Barry, who, according to Andrew, said *"I love you and you have the scars to prove it" (1:12.0)*, confounds these men's ability to be clear about the nature and extent of the abuse within their relationships and confusion about how to read and understand their partners remorse, i.e. as genuine sorrow, or a cruel and manipulative gesture. It might also be understood in terms of the abuser fearing that his partner will involve the police, a situation which is less likely to occur in regard to emotional, psychological or financial abuse, but which is not inconceivable in relation to physical or sexual abuse.

Another source of confusion regarding the nature and source of the violence concerns the utilization of the commonly used victim and perpetrator divide within same-sex relationships. Although, as a frame of reference, this has obvious utility within heterosexual relationships, its use within gay male relationships is complicated and requires further consideration for the following reasons.

Firstly, Bob, as the partner who would hit out first, defined his relationship with Jason, as *"common couple violence" (2:12.2)* a reference to the fact that both of them would end up fighting and the mutual feel of the violence within the relationship suggested to him that they were in it together. Yet, the extreme level of provocation which resulted in Bob hitting out in the first place, together with the response from Jason, who according to Bob *"had the physical strength to overpower me and pin me down (2:3.4/6.0/26.9)*, essentially rendered Bob a

victim within these repeated encounters. Bob's confusion, however, on this point, was also evident in the use of the word "*fight*" (2:12.0) rather than domestic violence, suggesting that the idea of mutual violence or abuse has the power to confuse and reduce an incident of domestic violence and abuse to a simple fight between two men. Bob says "*I can't say really clearly if Jason was a perpetrator and I was a victim*" (2:18.4). The confusion Bob expressed may well relate to questions concerning his own violent reactions to Jason's provocation, suggesting that he believed that he may have had other options available to him in managing Jason's emotionally abusive behaviour.

Secondly, reliance on size and physical strength further confounds the victim and perpetrator divide, especially when it fails to follow the predicted pattern. For instance, Max draws attention to the fact that as the shorter partner he would naturally be seen as the victim in an abusive encounter with Tom, yet, it was Max who meted out the violence whilst Tom "*cowered*" in the corner. Furthermore, both, Seb and Anton, also emphasized the fact that they were physically matched within their relationship and in that context felt that if one was relying on size and physical strength alone then one would be hard pushed to determine who is actually the victim or the perpetrator. Moreover, Simeon, as the taller and physically bigger partner in his relationship, was confident in confronting Gavin when he threatened to hit Simeon, yet, Simeon was the one who was physically attacked by Gavin. It seems that Simeon and Max were both trying to make sense of their positions within their respective relationships. Simeon, for example, felt that his physical strength offered him some protection against a physical attack by Gavin who, on occasions, threatened to punch him.

Whereas, for Max, he struggled to accept himself as a perpetrator given the fact that Tom was physically stronger than him. However, in both instances, physical size was not the determining factor, suggesting that other variables were certainly at work.

In the light of these factors, Bob questions the importance and utility of the *victim and perpetrator* divide as an organising framework in male-male relationships suggesting that it does not map neatly onto same-sex relationships. Because of this, Bob advocates a new *perpetrator and victim* model, somewhere between *victim and perpetrator* and *common couple violence*, since this is where he felt his own relationship resided, although he had difficulty articulating and conceptualising this new model. However, given the importance Bob afforded this idea and the distinctions drawn between victim and perpetrator and common couple violence, it seems appropriate to give further consideration to this debate in the discussion section of the thesis.

### 3. **Remaining within a violent and abusive relationship**

#### **Core Category: Commitment to staying put**

Despite the challenges posed by these relationships and the pull to “*get out*” and “*cut your losses while you can*” (1:3.2), for many, the commitment to



staying-put was high. The data yields a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon.

### **Holding onto the possibility of change**

Henri, in common with many of the men in this study, was hoping for a change in his partner and admits that this kept him invested in the relationship (5:1.4/2.7). And, even when it was clear that the relationship was over, Henri still felt that he couldn't "*give up like that, I can't give in*" (5:6.1). Frank was also hoping for change "... *you would fool yourself into believing it's not going to happen again*" (6:9.8), and Simeon too was hoping that things would change for the better between him and Gavin (3:6.2).

These men communicated this hope to self and others in a variety of ways. For instance Barry would convince Andrew that "*it won't happen again*" (1:4.0) and Andrew then began to sell Barry "*in a new*" or even "*better light*" (1:5.8) trying to convince others that Barry was committed to change. Andrew saw it as a shared project, in which he could help Barry overcome some of his difficulties (1:16.8) and within this belief system, believed that if he were to leave he would be letting Barry down (1:15.6). Barry also used his position to emotionally blackmail Andrew when Andrew's resolve weakened and there was a danger that Barry might lose him, i.e. by claiming that he had a terminal illness (1:17.0). Moreover, Barry employed a tactic (present in a number of the interviews) whereby he shifted the blame. This had the effect of making Andrew feel even

more responsibility for saving the relationship (1:1.2/8.2), hence his continued efforts to make things better.

Another means by which these men managed the conflict both within and without, was to find ways of minimising the violence and abuse; understandable since minimisation serves a useful purpose of keeping hope alive. For instance, Bob and Jason reduced a very serious incidence of violence whilst abroad into “*A drunken stupid mistake*” (2:9.8) and Simeon too disappeared episodes of abuse by “*...pretending it didn't happen*” (3:7.0). For Bob and Jason, this minimisation allowed them to close the rupture (temporally) “*We just became really close*” (2:9.4) and they could then continue as if nothing had really happened.

### ***It isn't all bad***

A number of these men during interview highlighted the positive aspects of their partners and indeed their relationships, as if to convince me, as much as themselves, of the reasons why they stayed for so long within their abusive relationships. For example, Simeon points out that Gavin was humorous and that there was a caring side to him which, over time, stimulated a wish in Simeon to actually protect him (3:7.3/7.5). Max variously portrayed his relationship with Tom as “*really formative*” and “*amazingly good*” as well as “*deeply disturbing*” (4:0.6), adding that it was both “*nurturing and destructive at the same time*” (4:9.0) a picture which may have confused his ability to leave. Max certainly admits that he stayed too long in the relationship (4:0.8).

Frank too seemed anxious for me to know that the violence (although in his case very serious indeed) was not an everyday occurrence (6:6.2/9.6) and went on to say that *“it wasn’t all bad otherwise I wouldn’t have stayed with him and tried to make it work”* (6:14.9). At the same time, however, Frank was acutely in touch with Mark’s vulnerability and described feelings of guilt when trying to break free (6:13.0). This is, perhaps, another example of what Donovan & Hester (2011) refer to as ‘emotion work’, something that I will explore in greater detail in the discussion.

### **He needs my help**

To some extent, the theme of protecting and, in Bob’s case, a motivation to *“rescue”* (2:21.6) Jason, seems to have come out of a recognition of the vulnerability of the other, a theme that ran through many of the interviews and which seemed to confound the resolve to leave. It is as if the partner who was being abused was in a stronger position than the abuser to pull things around. Perhaps part of the clue to understanding this dynamic lay in Andrew’s determination to do things *“on his own terms”* (1:5.8) which could be understood as him needing to retain a modicum of control when so much of the control within the relationship was vested in Barry. At the same time, the majority of the men I interviewed had the skills in the outside world to hold down demanding jobs, whilst the bulk of the partners either didn’t work or were in more menial positions, and this competence may have been brought to bear in their determination not only to survive but also to make a difference within the

relationship. Certainly, Simeon, when talking to Gavin about his work found that Gavin responded by trying to put him down saying *"it's nothing important what you are doing, ... I can do that, ... it's just that I don't have the qualifications"* (3:5.4). However, Simeon was able to recognize the flaw in Gavin's argument since Simeon was confident in what he was doing *"I was getting a lot of praise at work and completely the opposite at home and so I knew it wasn't true"* (3:5.6). Nevertheless, Simeon felt the stress of having to manage these kinds of encounters although, as before, he says *"I was thinking a nice side of him is going to come out one day and, eh, it would be a shame to sacrifice it now"* (3:6.2). Furthermore, Simeon also felt sorrow for Gavin *"because he was so unfortunate and rejected by people and I didn't want to do the same"* (3:3.6).

It seems that at least part of the difficulty was in deciding the tipping point, particularly when hope frequently outweighed despair. Perhaps, references to love or being loved provided a powerful re-enforcer, particularly when faced with the possibility of the relationship ending. At the same time, the frequent references to vulnerability contained in the accounts of these men, may also speak to a sense of something shared by partners, perhaps as a result of both of them being gay and growing up in a hostile world. If this is true, then it is possible that the men in my study could identify with and hold an acute sense of the other's vulnerability and suffering, a feeling, perhaps, that they were in something together.

**But the sex is good**

Although Andrew, speaking of Barry, informed me that he “... *still loved him*” (1:11.0), he also admitted that he “... *still fancied him like mad*” (1:11.0) and, for him, it was good sex that kept him connected, “*I mean the sex was wild and passionate and fantastic*” (1:12.2). Later Andrew says “*I was certainly staying for the sex and the misguided belief that I would change him*” (1:15.6). Bob too described the sex with Jason as being really good and, like Andrew, he too had to struggle to let go on this count (2:2.0). For Seb and Anton they found an obvious sexual fit and although this involved sadomasochistic sexual practices, Seb, had no doubt that it was consensual “*but we provoked it and we liked it*” (7:2.0) and in that sense he was clear that it was not abusive.

Sex, therefore, in these accounts, seems to have been an organising factor and accounted for at least one of the reasons why some of these couples continued to connect. For Simeon, however, the sex was anything but satisfying. For instance, Simeon speaks of Gavin believing that he could have sex whenever he wanted (3:7.5) and when asked if this was true, Simeon says “*he tried, yes, he didn’t succeed all the time but very often he did*” (3:7.7). Simeon also described the sex with Gavin as “*humiliating*” (3:7.7). For Andrew, despite finding the sex exciting he was twice raped by Barry and on other occasions whilst having sex, Barry “*would quite often call me by the name of the bloke he had just had the relationship with before me*” (1:13.4).

As much as sex was clearly a factor in explaining why these men stayed together or continued to meet following one or either partner moving out, it is

also the case that sex provided further opportunities for abusive acts, although whether, as with Simeon, it even registered as an abusive act is open to question.

### **The fear of loss**

Given the degree of financial dependence within many of these relationships, coupled with a strong desire to make things work, it would appear that there was a shared desire to stay-put. The fear of standing on one's own two feet (1:10.0) also seems to have played a part in the reluctance to let go. Moreover, the fact that a number of these men had built lives and homes together may also have exerted pressure on partners in thinking twice about leaving. Frank, for instance, captured the essence of this thinking when he said *"I did love him and we had a nice flat together (6:9.8)* and he was clear in his mind that he did not want *"to chuck it if there is the potential for that person to change" (6:10.0).*

Another aspect of fear was highlighted in Henri's thinking, that he wouldn't find another partner, adding that *"it's so rare to find a relationship" (5:5.5)* and this together with a fear of being on his own, a fear that was also shared by Stuart, kept them locked into an increasingly conflicted relationship. Perhaps, to some extent, the fact that there was so much resistance to ending the relationship or of letting go following a separation, testifies to the strength of the attachment, as much as it speaks to the fear of loss. Certainly, it was noticeable at key points when the relationship was felt to be in danger of ending, there was then an upsurge in activity designed to prevent this from happening, suggesting that

fear of loss was very much an organizing factor in the holding together of these relationships.

### **Internalized Homophobia**

The level of acculturation, growing up, as they did, in a rejecting and hostile environment, may also have left a number of the men in this study vulnerable to staying put. This difficulty comes from a history of accommodating increasing amounts of violence and abuse, forcefully encapsulated in Andrew's belief that *"abuse was nothing less than I deserved for being gay"* (1:15.7). It seems that Andrew had been verbally and physically bullied and abused at school and, as a consequence, came to believe that he deserved unhappiness and that he also deserved the violence and abuse he suffered at the hands of his partner. For him, this seemed to be related to shame and guilt feelings connected with being gay, although it is also possible that these feelings emanated from the physical abuse he also suffered at the hands of his father, who Andrew believed attacked him because *"I wasn't the son that he wanted me to be"*(1:19.6). The suggestion here is that one's threshold for violence and abuse may be higher than expected and that this may deter gay men from even recognising that they are in an abusive relationship or simply living with it.

Although the influence of internalized homophobia featured so clearly in Andrew's account, it was mainly absent from the accounts of the other participants. This was a surprising finding given the importance accorded to it generally within the literature as an explanation of violence and abuse within

same-sex relationships. One possible reason for its absence from my study is that internalized homophobia by its very nature is hidden and hard to access and without careful questioning and exploration it is unlikely to present itself. Another possibility is that internalized homophobia has particular theoretical utility but is not the force it was once thought to be, although it is hard to know from the accounts of the men I interviewed what part it actually played in the development of the abusive dynamics.

#### **4 The pressure mounts**

##### **Core Category: Mounting pressure**

In the fluid and changing landscape where attempts to conceal the reality of the abuse and where the burden of responsibility for securing the relationship was placed under considerable strain, visible cracks began to appear. These tensions and cracks took a variety of forms.

##### **Re-asserting Power**

There is evidence of a build-up of resentment from of a number of the men in this study towards their dependent and increasingly demanding partners. For instance, Max experienced growing resentment towards Tom, since it felt to Max that Tom expected him to take all of the responsibility for the relationship. Frank also began to feel increasing irritation towards Mark's lack of initiative or



input into the relationship, as did Henri in relation to Stuart's failure to be a co-operative partner. And, whereas before efforts were made to provide care, tensions lead to pressure being brought to bear, as in Henri questioning Stuart's lack of contribution. This was also evident in Andrew's reaction, when, during his first week of work he arrived home and found Barry in bed sleeping off a hangover. On this occasion Andrew reacted by saying that he was *"pissed off with his (Barry's) jealousy and his moods and with this and the other and his drinking and promising this and promising to give up"* (1:6.4) and in this state of mind Andrew banged around the kitchen, waking Barry from a *"drunken stupor"*, after which a more serious physical attack by Barry took place during which Andrew was thrown through a plate glass window and was rushed off to the hospital (1:6.4). For Bob, the sense of frustration and defeat came when attempts to influence Jason were met with resistance and Bob likened it to *"putting a sticking plaster on something that is much bigger"* (2:27.9).

However, this build up of resentment from the men I interviewed, resulted in further incidents of abuse, since (with the exception of Max) the pressures that they brought to bear on their partners was responded to with aggression that seemed to be in the service of the abuser re-asserting his authority and control within the relationship. For instance, Frank's attempts to motivate Mark to get a job produced some of the most extreme forms of violence within that relationship. Henri, too, suffered increasing incidents of emotional abuse from Stuart the more pressure that he brought to bear within their relationship.

### **The abuse is there for all to see**

Another source of pressure that was brought to bear was that relating to the visibility of the injuries and abuse. Andrew admitted that *“it took a while for me to kind of own-up and say to people, you know this is what is happening”* (1:5.2). However, the visibility of the abuse in the form of black eyes and bruises (1:3.8) meant that he could no longer hide his injuries. However, his efforts to minimise the extent of the abuse *“a fight, that is all it was”* (1:6.8), meant that he was not yet ready to face or name the abuse for what it was. This was also echoed by Simeon, who, despite his friends commenting on his unhappiness indicated that the *“growing realisation that my partner wants to control and dominate me”* (3:6.6) dawned gradually, whereas his friends could see the effect that this was having on him. Frank captured the wish to just cover up the evidence and deal with it on his own (6:9.2) but when the bruising became obvious to colleagues and they questioned him about it, they expressed outrage towards Mark for doing this to Frank. However, this failed to change very much for Frank and the abuse continued unabated. Perhaps, Frank, in common with a number of these men, was traumatized by the experience to the extent that he was unable to think in the way others could or wanted him to. The evidence from the interviews with Andrew, Frank, Simeon and Henri, suggests that they took considerable time to realize that they were in an abusive relationship, summed up by Andrew’s surprise at learning that others knew for some time that he was the victim of abuse (1:5.2). However, it is also possible that the reactions of others went some way towards helping these men realise that they were actually in an abusive relationship.

### **Naming the abuse and its consequences**

It seems important to document that the naming of the abuse in a number of these men's accounts, was left to others. Perhaps in the gap between the occurrence of and attempts to conceal the violence and abuse, others were more able to see and to put into words what was happening. For instance, Simeon's mother raised questions about Gavin, pointing out that he had issues and that he was unhappy (3:14.3). At the same time, she also expressed concern about her son's own unhappiness (3:13.7) but it seems that Simeon did not feel able to open up a conversation with her about what was happening, mainly because he felt protective towards his mother and felt that it was for him to address the issues with Gavin. Bob's mother was also instrumental in bringing the abusive relationship to his attention. It seems that after watching a television programme tackling abusive relationships, that she was then able to recognise and tell her son that his and Jason's relationship was abusive (2.2.8). This had a profound effect on Bob's decision to leave Jason, and for Simeon, his mother's observations and feelings about his relationship with Gavin forced him to look at and attend to what was going on. For instance, it facilitated Simeon putting into words his own unhappiness within the relationship, although this provoked further controlling behaviour from Gavin and may ultimately have led to the physical attack that prompted Simeon to leave.

For Andrew and Frank, because of the difficulty of hiding their injuries, work colleagues became concerned about what had happened and subsequently reacted with dismay and outrage. For instance, they put pressure on the men to

leave their abusive partners, pressure which both men, at that time, did not welcome. Henri was also shocked by his friend's reaction when he told her of the difficulties he was experiencing with Stuart. Apparently, she said, "*dump him, leave him, let him go, don't stay with him*" (5:6.1). However, it seemed that until the men themselves were ready to face up to and to deal with the consequences of the abuse, the relationship continued uninterrupted, although, it is fair to say that aspects of reality testing appeared to have perturbed the victim's unquestioned investment in their relationships.

## **5 Leaving an abusive relationship and beyond**

### **Core Category: Breaking free**

#### **Realizing the moment**

The struggle to break-free, and it was indeed a struggle for the majority of the men in this study, took the form of a staged departure involving a number of twists and turns, rather than a clean break. Of importance in these accounts, is the re-positioning of self which took place following the realization, the putting into words, the admission if you like, that one was actually in an abusive relationship and that it could not continue.

For some, i.e. Simeon, Frank and Andrew, this followed a violent attack. Frank, for instance, described the moment that he finally snapped "*and the last time he*

*ever attacked me (and) it wasn't like he was a big bloke or anything like that (but) he got me and he was banging my head against the wall (coughs) so I sort of pushed him off and went through to the kitchen, picked up a knife and held it to his throat and said, you ever touch me again and I'll kill you" (6:11.2). Frank went on to say that Mark "had never seen me fight back and I don't think he expected the level of response I gave. That made him a little bit fearful of me and that's where it had always left me, slightly fearful of him (6:11.2). For Andrew the moment of realizing he had to leave came when it was "just getting really badly beaten-up, really seriously, almost killed" (1:6.0).*

For others, Bob, Max and Henri, there was a gradual but important developmental shift in thinking, away from a reliance on hope towards a growing realisation that the relationship was actually over. For Henri, it was a gradual process bringing him to the realisation "*that there was no escaping*" (5:2.5/5) a reference to the fact that Stuart was never going to be responsive to Henri's wish for change. And faced with the dissatisfaction, the anxiety and stress, the emotional hurt, the arguments, and so on, Henri finally lets Stuart know "*you have to go*" (5:2.7) although it was a further four months before Stuart actually left the home. Although for many this critical moment did not actually spell the immediate end of the relationship, it was, nevertheless, an important marker along the way to the eventual demise of the union.

At the same time, the act of putting these feelings into words was a powerful intervention which systemically impacted the other, raising fundamental questions concerning issues of personal safety and risk. For instance, the

growing realisation that Mark could actually kill Frank, was enough to convince Frank that he needed to pull back and although in his words he *“eventually got the balls to do something about it”* (6:18.3) and that *“the psychological hold had gone”* (6:14.0), nevertheless, Frank was subsequently extremely careful in his dealings with Mark; particularly since Mark actually intensified his abusive behaviour the more Frank began to distance (6:10.8). Frank went on to describe the struggle to get Mark to leave likening it to *“getting a winkle out of a shell”* (6:14.2). For, indeed, putting into words the fact that something cannot continue exposes a new reality which perturbs the couple dynamics, which may explain the need for the abuser to cut-off important escape routes at points like this in order to remove the threat of the partner actually leaving.

For instance, up to this point, the abuser had attempted to cut-off escape routes by isolating the victim and concealing visible signs of the abuse. Participants spoke of their partners targeting parts of their body that would conceal evidence of the abuse. Andrew, for example, says *“there was always the physical stuff, there was always the punching and whatever in places where it wouldn’t show”* (1:3.6). Yet, we see the silenced and isolated victim, who hitherto may have felt *“too embarrassed to speak: (6:19.9)*, beginning to find the strength to speak out and to connect with important sources of support and feedback. As a result, the abuser’s stranglehold on the relationship is fundamentally weakened and there is a resetting of the boundaries in terms of what is acceptable or unacceptable in terms of the abuser’s behaviour within the relationship.

### **Getting out**

Before considering the ending, it is worth noting that without exception the men in this study were the ones who actually ended the relationship, suggesting that they were the ones who seemed to have found the courage to face into the challenge of recognising that the relationship was abusive and that they had to do something about it. At the same time, it is also worth noting that the point at which one physically leaves a relationship is not necessarily the point at which the relationship actually ends, although it does seem that gaining some distance, whether emotional, psychological or physical, is an important precondition towards the actual ending of the couple relationship.

Bob was able to make a physical separation, helped by his mother who offered a home and financial support (2:26.1), but it then took a further three years for him and Jason to actually part (2:2.8). Because of the pull of sex, Jason communicated a strong need for the relationship and Bob described a time, following his departure, where Jason “*used to come up all the time*” (2:26.1) and even when Bob moved some two hundred miles away, Jason still maintained contact.

Although Simeon left on the night of the violent attack mounted by Gavin (3:10.3) he weakened in his resolve to sever all contact with Gavin, mainly because of Gavin’s extreme desperation to keep the relationship going. For instance, Simeon talked of Gavin coming three times and pleading with him to return, promising that he had changed (3:10.3) and Simeon admitted that he

decided *“to give Gavin a chance”* (3:10.5) still hoping that he would indeed change. However, perhaps by virtue of Simeon getting out, Gavin had less of a hold on Simeon who could also see more clearly *“that it was all acting, pretending to be calm and nice, but there was still this burst of anger lurking”* (3:10.5). Simeon’s only way out was to be *“disciplined in breaking all contact”* (3:15.9) with Gavin and only then was Gavin finally able to let go.

Andrew found himself leaving in the dark of the night, more akin to an escape, behind Barry’s back, adding *“there was no other way of doing it”* (1:10.0). Andrew took refuge with a colleague from work but the physical removal did not actually spell the end of his relationship with Barry. In fact, Barry and Andrew continued to talk and meet up *“purely for sex”* (1:13.8) but during, what was to be their last encounter, when Barry began to argue, Andrew for the first time in their relationship felt able to walk away (1:13.8) and it was only then that Barry finally gave up the fight and let go.

However, for a number of the men in this study who had been trying to break free for some considerable time, the actual ending of the relationship came when they disclosed that they had a new partner, although it is fair to say that this also occurred in the context of them having already become more distant. For instance, Bob’s contact with Jason ended when Bob disclosed that he was in a new relationship (2:2.0), the same with Max (4:10.8) and with Henri (5:3.5). This seems an interesting development, given that the discovery of a new relationship within heterosexual relationships, particularly when straight men discover that their female partners are in a new relationship often results in



post-separation violence or abuse, and yet, within these gay couples a new relationship appears to act as a catalyst for second order change.

Perhaps one way of understanding this phenomenon is that for gay men who control and abuse, it is a confirmation that they have lost the ultimate battle of holding onto their partner, or, alternatively, the contempt for their partner at this point is so great that it actually frees them and allows them to move on. After all, a number of these dependent men relied on their victimised and abused partners to hold things together and in the context of the repositioning which had already taken place, perhaps they were waiting for the partner to finally make it clear where they stood. Either way, it is interesting that the discovery of a new relationship was not responded to with further episodes of violence or abuse, suggesting that it may be one of the most effective ways of leaving a gay male relationship, although without first getting out from under the abusive partner, so to speak, it could well be a potentially dangerous move.

It is also interesting that none of the men in this study saw or experienced the desperate attempts by their partners to hold onto them as evidence of further abuse. For instance, there was no mention of harassment or of stalking and, yet, some of the behaviour of men like Jason, Barry and Gavin, when their partners were trying to break free, could well have fallen into that definition of abuse. Perhaps this confirms a prevailing idea regarding a lack of awareness or lack of sensitivity to abusive experiences, particularly when a partner is reluctant to confront aspects of another's behaviour which is not welcome or which does not feel comfortable, preferring instead to label it as the partner

simply wanting to see them. On the other hand, it is also possible that fear was at work, and that a staged ending, however stressful, was preferable to confronting the abuse. Another possibility is that these men were desensitised to the violence and abuse and, to that degree, harassment or stalking did not seem particularly abusive given what they had already been through. A further consideration is that the victims were continuing to look after their partner's vulnerability by not breaking all connection.

### **Help Seeking Behaviour**

It is also noteworthy how few of these men ever considered calling the police or turning to outside agencies for help. For instance, during his hospitalisation following the attack by Barry, Andrew refused the offer of help to speak to someone (1:6.8) and later confirmed that he did not have any faith in the law as a protective mechanism (1:7.4). Henri, on the other hand did seek help from a counsellor, whom he saw over an eight month period, and this seemed to have helped him sort out where he stood in relation to Stuart (5:2.7). Bob also sought help from his GP, which he too found helpful, although it invited disdain from Gavin (2:25.3). Perhaps gay men, in common with others in abusive relationships, feel that it is a private matter and that they are on their own, or perhaps as male victims of abuse it is more difficult to admit the need for help? In other words, the shame these men felt may have shut down the possibility of them speaking to others. These are matters that I will consider in more detail in the discussion.

### **Life beyond an abusive relationship**

Despite the time that it took some of these men to leave their abusive relationships and the impact of the abuse on them (mainly stress related symptoms and poor self esteem), participants spoke of “*good things which followed*” (1:0.4) their departure.

For instance, Andrew expressed relief at being out of the relationship with Barry (1:14.0) and, in common with many, talked of finding love with a supportive and understanding partner (1:14.0). Bob too felt that he was able to move on to “*a happier place in his life*” (2:29.6) and Simeon recovered his level of functioning and talked of being socially more relaxed (3:10.5). Henri also found a more compatible partner after leaving Stuart “*someone who was so peaceful*” and who he described as “*kind, giving and so much fun*” (5:3.3). Frank too found a partner who restored his confidence and who was instrumental in helping him leave Mark (6:11.2). Frank’s ability to re-write the abusive script may have been aided by a belief that his exposure to violence and abuse actually helped him to appreciate the man who came after (6:16.7).

The exception to the rule was Max, who took years to find his balance (4:0.6), although in time, he did find a completely different relationship and, although he and his new partner are described as “*fighters*” (4:7.4), it seems that the conflict is resolved quickly and without either party resorting to physical abuse.

Only Andrew expressed a desire for revenge, when he talked about a wish to show off his new partner and *“to rub his (Barry’s) nose in it”* and to show Barry that he (Andrew) could *“be a success” (1:18.0)*.

Clearly these accounts testify to the fact that the violence and abuse dug deep into the being of these men, although it says something about their resilience that they were able not only to recover after they left but to find very positive relationships which were also sustainable. No wonder then, one of the participants was keen to impart the message that *“if you are in an abusive relationship that you can get out of it and that things can improve (1:0.4)*. It is also possible that because they had transcended the violent and abusive relationships that they had been in and had moved on, that they were keen to speak and impart this positive message.

### **Summary**

The analysis of the data has yielded a number of important findings that could throw light on the question concerning the meaning of violence and abuse in the couple relationships of gay men.

- Love for one’s partner appears to have provided an active and enduring force in the forming and maintaining of these relationships. For example, victims of abuse continued to invest in their relationships based on love, and their abusive partners also made declarations of love, usually at

moments following serious episodes of abuse when there was a real or immediate threat of their partner leaving.

- Another key ingredient that spoke to the attachment for these men was a strong and enduring hope for change, coupled with promises from their abusive partners that the violence and abuse would not recur.
- The quality of the sex within the relationship also formed part of the glue that kept some of these men hooked into their relationship even after they were living apart; which raises questions about the meaning of sex for gay men within the context of abusive relationships.
- At the same time, there were repeated examples of a breakdown in the notion of a working couple committed to the development of the relationship. Instead, what we see is a host of violent and abusive practices from abusers designed to control, attack, demean, seek advantage and ultimately diminish their partners; often in the context of the abuser's own reliance on the victim. This raises questions about gay men's ability to share intimacy and to work together, when so much of male socialisation is about competition and eschewing vulnerability.
- Great emphasis was placed on physical abuse over other forms of abuse, raising particular concerns about the status and meaning of emotional abuse within male same-sex pairings.
- The high incidence of financial abuse suggests that money and the status and power it holds for men, represents a particular flashpoint. Over-and-over, those who had money were literally made to pay as their abusers attempted to rebalance the books, so to speak.

- Also, the direction which the violence and abuse took within these gay male relationships was, to some extent, in opposition to that seen in heterosexual pairings, since the partner with the instrumental power in gay male relationships i.e. the one with the home, the job, the success in the outside world, was the one most at risk of abuse.
- Tensions also existed for the men, in terms of the degree to which they accepted and accommodated to the violence and abuse, and, the extent to which they reacted, fought back, or argued their position in the face of injustice and abuse. The struggle to find a position which fitted for these men spoke to the complicated power dynamics within their relationships, and, at times, resulted in confusion over the victim and perpetrator divide.
- Victims occupied something of a paradoxical position within their relationships, in that, they were the ones who believed that they had the strength to pull things around and, yet, at the same time, they were also at the mercy of their abusive partner's power and control. It is testament to the victim's strength that they were the ones who made the decision to leave their abusive relationships, even in the face of powerful resistance from their partners.
- The sense of victims being in touch with their abuser's vulnerability could link with a shared history of oppression and hostility in the face of homophobia, but it was telling that homophobia and internalized homophobia barely featured in the accounts of the men I interviewed.
- In terms of help seeking behaviour, few sought outside help, and those who did mainly turned to friends. Despite the seriousness of the abuse,

none of these men brought prosecutions or involved the police. It is also of note that there was little, or no, recognition of post-separation abuse which occurred when a number of the men actually left their relationships.

Further consideration of these factors will be given in the discussion.

## **Focus Group Results**

### **Introduction**

The focus group was conducted for the purpose of expanding the themes emerging from my interview data. At the same time, I was also interested in using the focus group to explore areas of difference between gay male, lesbian and straight couple relationships in which there is violence and abuse, since I wanted to know more about the specific aspects of gay male violence that distinguish it from lesbian and straight couples in which there is violence.

Members of the focus group, nine in all - five females and four males - identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. I chose this group because they were all professionals specialising in therapeutic work with gender and sexual minority clients, and, given their experience, felt that they would be in a good position to help elucidate and extend the thinking about the specificities of gay male couple violence and abuse.

The data from the focus group has been analysed using a *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a method which is outlined in more detail in the section on methodology. For the purposes of reporting on the results from the focus group, a *thematic map* is provided showing a *candidate theme* and a number of *sub themes*.



### **Sameness or difference**

In analysing the data from the focus group, I was struck by the struggle a number of the participants had in trying to locate and make sense of what is the same or different in the relationships of gay men compared with those of lesbians and heterosexual couples. Difference in its many guises, therefore, emerged as the central theme through which the data has been analyzed.

### **Thematic Map**

#### **Candidate Theme**

*Difference*

#### **SubThemes**

*Homophobia*

*Internalized homophobia*

*Influence of past abusive experiences*

*The importance of gender role socialization*

*Togetherness and resilience*

*Protecting same-sex relationships*

## **Candidate Theme: Difference**

### **Sub themes: Homophobia**

Early in the focus group discussion, participants introduced the concept of homophobia, i.e. a hatred of other or, in the case of internalized homophobia, hatred of oneself; suggesting that this *“kind of abusive destructive energy is around in the relationship”* and may well have a negative impact on a gay couple relationship. This point was further developed by one of the participants suggesting that *“the general impact of homophobia on a gay couple, adds to the stress and tension and anger control”* and she likened it to a *“kind of pressure cooker experience”*.

The attention homophobia received generally within the focus group, suggests that most of the participants felt that it was a key factor implicated in the relationships of gay men where there is violence or abuse and, at the same time, is one of the distinguishing features of same-sex relationships in comparison to cross-gendered relationships. However, the weight one attaches to the influence and impact of homophobia on violence or abuse within same-sex relationships was not entirely clear from the focus group discussion, although a number of the participants reflected on the ways in which it gets played out so that violence or abuse may be the inevitable end result.

### **Sub theme: Internalized Homophobia**

A number of the participants spoke of internalized homophobia, a negative force carried by homophobia towards and into an individual who is gay, where issues of self doubt, shame and, in some cases, self-hatred, prevail. The importance of this for same-sex couple's relationships, in which there is violence or abuse, was felt to reside in the wish to hide or to remain 'closeted'. In other words, the pressure and dynamics within the couple relationship, both at the level of isolation and in terms of internalizing negative societal attitudes, results in an increase in tension and stress which is then released within and between the couple. A variation of this theme was felt to occur when the imbalance created by a partner who is 'out' and the other who isn't, acts as a destabilising force for the couple so that violence or abuse maybe the end result. This was also felt to come about because of the frustration that a partner who is 'out' feels towards his 'closeted' partner, especially when there is a wish for them both to be 'out' in various contexts.

**Sub theme: Influence of Past Abusive Experiences**

One of the participants asks the question *"What do you do to queers"* and answers *"You beat them up in the playground, you get bullied, you get punched"* and he goes on to suggest that these *"sorts of things can even, when you are mature, lead to violence and abuse"*.

Here we see the beginning of a theme about possible routes of transmission from early abusive experiences leading to violence and abuse in later life within

the couple's relationships of gay men. Although this may have some merit, it was frustrating that the discussion was kept at the more general level and it was therefore difficult to be clear about the exact mechanisms through which this transmission is believed to occur, although a number of the participants offered some possible explanations. For instance, one of the participants felt that it comes about through a process of desensitisation to violence and abuse with gay males having a long experience of being bullied. He suggested that *"because we are used to being bullied, it occurring in a relationship isn't so wrong or bad or unusual and we have to kind of accept that it is our lot in life and ....that we have become acclimatised"*. Clearly this participant was speaking of the way in which early abusive experiences sets-up a dynamic within the couple relationship so that one's level of accommodation is such that it is not even experienced as abuse, and that violence or abuse becomes the default position for managing tensions and conflict within the relationship.

Another participant put forward the idea of a past negative or conflicted relationship with either or both of one's parents having a detrimental impact. For instance, it was suggested that when two partners having had past negative relationships *"are matched-up"* then they will play out the hatred of the parent or parents on each other adding, that in *"most of my experience of working with domestic violence of any kind, there is always a bad parent"*. This was further elucidated when another of the participants spoke of the importance of attachment theory and, in particular, insecure attachments in childhood producing *"a fragile sense of self"* where two people create, through a mutual process of idealization, what this participant refers to as *"the perfect*

*relationship*". However, when the fantasy breaks down then the partners are confronted with the original intergenerational trauma so that this is felt to "*work itself out and get enacted over and over again*" between the couple.

Although these explanations may have some merit in explaining the genesis of violence and abuse within couple relationships generally and possibly even specifically in gay male couple relationships, unfortunately they say very little about the development of a victim or perpetrator identity (a feature of most couple relationships in which there is violence or abuse) and, in that sense, I feel that in understanding the specificities of violence or abuse within gay male couple relationships and its development over time, these explanations have somewhat limited utility.

### **Sub theme: The Importance of Gender Role Socialisation**

A great deal of emphasis within the focus group discussion related to gender role socialisation in which violence is viewed as a male phenomenon. For instance, one of the participants suggested that violence "*is a male thing to do because that is how you express yourself as a man, particularly if you are challenged or threatened*". And, although this cuts across straight and gay male relationships, it was felt to have a particular meaning within male-male relationships embodied in another of the participants suggestion that if "*you have got two men together in a relationship, you have more of a possibility of those men being raised to use their fists*" and she went on to emphasise that with two men it doubles the possibility of violence. To some extent, this, together

with the argument advanced by another of the participants concerning the notion of physical matching (so that within a gay male couple relationship there is a greater likelihood of the partner fighting back), provides what a number of the participants' felt to be another of the determining factors that distinguishes male-male relationships from male-female relationships.

Developing the argument still further, the men in the focus group also suggested that male violence is primarily about bolstering masculinity "*your sense of masculine self*". However, some of the participants felt that if this masculine sense of self is directed towards gayness itself, the version that eschews effeminacy within gay men, then this could become the focus of attack, particularly if one or either partner exhibits effeminate behaviour.

Another consideration relating to men's expression of anger and one that was also apparent in the interviews I conducted, was the primacy of physical violence over other forms of abuse within male-male relationships. The spirit of this thinking was summed up by one of the participants admitting that when thinking about abuse "*I was mostly thinking about physical violence in gay relationships, it's just what came into my head and it's interesting that I was thinking less about interpersonal kind of emotional and psychological violence, with gay men as a first thought*".

In light of the above, participants of the focus group clearly felt that gender role socialisation, coupled with homophobia and internalized homophobia, constitute

the specific elements that distinguish same-sex from heterosexual abusive relationships and gay male from lesbian relationships.

### **Sub theme – Togetherness and Resilience**

One of the participants drew particular attention to the strengths that a male-male relationship offers because *“two gay men actually have the potential, because they are of the same gender...for empathy, sympathy and identification”* and *“this finely attuned pair”* offers synergy rather than opposition. And whilst all same-sex relationships are constructed in the shadow of heteronormativity this participant was drawing attention to the particular strengths within a gay male coupling, strengths which can help them *“face the world together”*. This sense of togetherness seems to provide a kind of antidote to the more negative tension ridden, conflict driven relationships which has occupied the main focus of this study and, as such, clearly warrants further thinking and research as a basis for developing a clearer understanding about resilience and protective factors within gay male couple’s relationships.

### **Sub theme – Protecting Same-sex Relationships**

It was noticeable within the focus group discussion how the women took on the role of protecting same-sex relationships, i.e. *“...most gays and lesbians are healthy and do not have violence as part of them”* and spoke of *“finding a safe space”* where there is not going to be abuse *“away from the oppressive external world”*. For instance, one of the female participants feared that any reference to

violence or abuse within same-sex relationships would be viewed as *“just another neurotic gay or lesbian nightmare”*. To some extent, this anxiety comes out of a history of intolerance and discrimination where same-sex relationships are believed to be untenable, less valuable than straight relationships and ultimately unnatural and sick. Not surprisingly, therefore, the participants had some sensitivity to speaking about problematic dynamics within same-sex relationships, akin to washing one’s dirty laundry in public, and a fear of attracting further negativity towards an already discriminated group; a point made by Elliott (1996) to account for the gay community’s reticence to accept the seriousness of abuse within same-sex couple’s relationships and its slowness in offering a coherent response. Unfortunately, the silence created by this stance fosters the very conditions that advance the likelihood of abuse within these couple relationships, since there is a belief that no-one will believe a victim’s statement, particularly if it involves two men.

### **Summary**

In summary, gender role socialisation for the participants of the focus group provided a particular reference point for thinking about and processing issues specifically relating to male violence. When thought about in the context of gay male couple relationships, the participants seemed to feel that homophobia and internalized homophobia provided the kind of ingredients that could produce violence and abuse within these relationships. However, the participant who emphasised resilience within gay male relationships provided an important consideration in thinking about why some gay male couples manage and others



do not and this, together with the theoretical arguments relating to early trauma or abuse, highlights possible confounding factors. However, the focus group discussion failed to throw light on the question of how and why some men become aggressors and others victims, something which warrants further consideration.

## **Chapter 4**

### ***Discussion***

#### **Introduction**

This research study set out to examine the experiences of gay men in violent and abusive couple relationships. An organising principle was that of attaching meaning to these experiences with a view to expanding the knowledge base in what is clearly a neglected area of study particularly within the United Kingdom. In addition, I was also attempting to understand the mechanisms that exist within the couple relationship itself that might account for violence and abuse within gay male couple relationships, and, the extent to which violence and abuse within gay male couple relationships is the same or different from that seen within heterosexual or indeed lesbian couple relationships.

Drawing further on the analysis of the data from both the individual interviews as well as the focus group discussion, some key concepts were identified that form part of the emerging framework which shapes and gives meaning to the development of thinking about violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men and which also speaks to the questions posed of the study. For instance, in both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, gender and gender role socialisation were seen as occupying a central tenet in the thinking about the meaning of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men, a factor that also spoke to the question of difference in regard to same-sex and heterosexual relationships. An explanation for why gender role socialisation occupies such a central position in the

thinking, is that a tension is believed to exist in relation to gay men sharing intimacy and developing a working partnership against a backdrop of male socialisation which privileges competition and which eschews vulnerability. This tension is believed to give rise to the complex power dynamics that exist within male-male relationships, as the men vie for position, which, at its extreme, may also give rise to the emergence of violence and abuse perpetrated by men towards their male partners. This may also account for the direction of the abuse being the opposite to that seen within heterosexual couple relationships, where mens' instrumental power often goes hand-in-hand with abuse directed towards their female partners, whereas in gay male couple relationships it is the partner with the instrumental power who appears to be most at risk of abuse.

Developing the framework still further, although homophobia and internalized homophobia were felt by members of the discussion group to be important in distinguishing same-sex from heterosexual abusive relationships, the absence of thinking about this within the individual interviews raises questions concerning the role that homophobia and internalized homophobia actually play within same-sex abusive relationships (something that will be explored in more depth later in the discussion). At issue is the importance placed on gender over sexuality or the possible twinning of these forces in ways that give rise to and which shape violence and abuse within same-sex relationships.

It is also of note that thinking about race and ethnicity as another point of reference was missing from the study as a whole. This is surprising given the cultural diversity within some of the couple relationships of the men I

interviewed, not to mention my own failure as a researcher to actively engage with this as another source of difference which may have contributed to the abusive dynamics within the relationship. After all, being gay and being from a minority ethnic group, may act as an additional source of oppression that could then account for the power-play seen, for example, within Simeon's relationship with Gavin and Max's relationship with Tom. In other words, race and ethnicity constitute an obvious form of oppression and one that therefore needs to be considered within gay male couple relationships alongside gender and sexuality. How then do we account for its absence in this research study, both in terms of the individual interviews, the focus group discussion and the researcher conducting the study?

Killian (2002) suggests, in his work with interracial couples, that the dominant hegemonic discourse of homogamy often eliminates difference such as race, class, etc, in favour of what Falicov (1995) refers to as a universalist position emphasising similarity rather than difference. With this slight of hand, racial and ethnic differences are erased and replaced with liberalist individualism, which promulgates a social reality composed of individuals possessing equal opportunity and access to institutional power (Killian, 2002). It would appear, therefore, that the men I interviewed, members of the focus group discussion and myself, were so exercised by gender and sexuality as the dominant discourses relating to violence and abuse within same-sex relationships, that other sources of differences were pushed to the margins and failed to even register as additional considerations.

Perhaps the application of intersectionality, which extends a gender-based analysis of violence to one that considers the connection of relationship violence to all forms of oppression, provides the ultimate framework for understanding the meaning of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men. Intersectionality holds that accepted forms of oppression within society, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, religion, etc, do not act independently of one another but interrelate and, as such, create a system of oppression that reflects the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination. Indeed within a number of the relationships of the men I interviewed, although gender provided an obvious point of reference, there was also evidence of class operating alongside gender, in the form of education being used to bolster one or either partner's position in relation to the other; Simeon for example said of his partner Gavin "not at my level". The importance of this is that a range of factors may have been operating at one and the same time, giving meaning to the violent and abusive dynamics arising between the men, and although I may have captured some of these, it seems that others have not been brought to light.

Despite the limitations outlined above, a number of themes were discernible from my engagement with the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, themes that speak directly to the question of the meaning of violence and abuse within gay male couple relationships. In view of this, I will now explore themes relating to; the nature of the abuse, gender and sexuality, the men's investment in the relationship and a further consideration of attempts to intervene with couples experiencing intimate partner violence and abuse.

### **The nature of the abuse**

It is of note that all of the men I interviewed as part of my study spoke of lengthy and enduring relationships incorporating a range of abusive experiences. The high incidence of physical violence experienced by many of these men testifies to its existence within gay male relationships and also confirms the importance placed on it by victims above all other forms of abuse. This is a finding that is endorsed by Henderson (2003), since the victims in her study also focused on its importance, in that, they were more likely to report to the police abuse featuring physical attack, physical injury (including bruising), physical injury needing medical attention and situations where they feared for their lives, than other forms of abuse. However, the high incidence of physical violence also testifies to the way in which some men use physical means to express themselves, particularly when feeling vulnerable or under threat. This was certainly the case in my study, since the worst instances of physical abuse occurred when the abuser felt under pressure of one sort or another. At the same time, however, it is surprising how few of the men in my study actually fought back, suggesting that although fighting back is often seen as an option in same-sex relationships, particularly when the partners are physically evenly matched, nevertheless, as in straight relationships, victims are often too frightened to fight back. It is also of note that within heterosexual relationships those who do fight back often find themselves on the receiving end of even more serious violence (Dobash & Dobsah, 1992: Nazroo, 1995) and, although

two of the participants in my study did physically confront their abusive partners by hitting out at them, they did so only under extreme provocation.

A further difficulty concerning the primacy of physical violence as the defining feature of abusive relationships is that it minimises other forms of abusive behaviour, so that there is a danger that anything other than physical abuse is experienced as nothing more than conflict or tensions that have to be managed as part of being in an ongoing relationship. For instance, a number of the men I interviewed spoke of their partners being controlling on a number of levels yet, they failed to recognise this behaviour as abusive or themselves as victims of an abusive relationship. However, research shows that different forms of abuse often occur simultaneously and that, in opening 'the black box' of the relationships of the men I interviewed, it was possible to see the full extent of the abusive practices, some of which went well beyond physical abuse.

For instance, emotional abuse existed in most if not all of the relationships of the men I interviewed and yet it received little, if any, recognition and was simply accommodated as part of the ongoing relational dynamic. However, James & MacKinnon (2010) suggest that non-physical abuse severely impacts victims (i.e. physical and mental illness as well as behavioural and relationship consequences) although the severity of its impact seems to be related to the length of time that the victim has been exposed to it as well as the intentions of the abuser in using it as an abusive practice. In fact, James & MacKinnon (2010) draw distinctions between, what they refer to, as first, second and third degree non-physical abuse, to highlight the range and severity of emotionally

and psychologically abusive practices that exist within couple relationships. These distinctions also take us beyond the somewhat limited typology offered by Kelly and Johnson (2008) which, in my view, fails to really take account of emotional and psychological abuse and runs the risk of subsuming it within situational couple abuse involving both partners and where issues of power and control are much less in evidence. To underscore this point, Simpson et al (2007) found, of their 273 heterosexual couples seeking marital therapy and believed to be in the low-level violence group, i.e. situational couple violence a number of the partners were extremely emotionally abusive and really fitted the bill for an abuser profile.

Given the failure by the men I interviewed to recognise emotional and psychological abuse as abuse, and the fact that one of my participants who was clearly in an emotionally abusive relationship failed to meet the criteria for any of Kelly & Johnson's (2008) typologies, it seems therefore important to examine James and MacKinnon's (2010) distinctions in order to raise the profile of emotional and psychological abuse within gay male relationships. According to James & MacKinnon, first degree non-physical abuse usually involves verbal abuse and of the three is felt to be the least severe in terms of its impact. Second degree non-physical abuse takes place over a longer period of time and incorporates a range of emotionally abusive practices, including verbal and non-verbal abuse which can induce fear and trauma in the victim. Third degree non-physical abuse is essentially psychological abuse occurring over a number of years, including verbal and emotional abuse that has the effect of eroding or destroying the victim's social competence and psychological sense of self



(James & MacKinnon, 2010). In third degree non-physical abuse, the perpetrator uses intentional strategies to control, manipulate and undermine and the victim may become depressed to the extent that it affects their capacity to function. In addition, victims of psychological abuse often feel shame and may also assume responsibility for the abuse, believing that it is their fault that their partner is so angry with them. Within this model, there is also a recognition that second degree non-physical abuse incorporates verbal abuse and that third degree non-physical abuse incorporates aspects of emotional as well as psychological abuse, allowing me to locate my participant, who did not fit any of the categories of Kelly & Johnson's model (2008), into the category of second degree non-physical abuse, and thereby confirming his status as a gay man who was indeed in an emotionally abusive relationship which was clearly affecting his state of mind and wellbeing. It seems, therefore, that emotional and psychological abuse within gay male relationships is something that needs to be taken seriously since, like other forms of abuse, it has the potential to severely impact the victim and leave him vulnerable at a number of levels. Furthermore, given the fact that men generally have such difficulty identifying themselves as victims in the first instance, it is even more unlikely that they would disclose themselves as victims of emotional abuse and, so, it reinforces the importance of having emotional and psychological abuse firmly in mind, especially given its impact and potential to harm.

In addition to physical and emotional and psychological abuse, another form of abuse that came up in most of my interviews was that of financial abuse. This is perhaps not too surprising given that Zelizer (1996) believes that monetary

transactions between individuals provides evidence about the degree of equality within the couple, their level of intimacy and the nature of the relationship. Developing the point still further, Stocks et al., (2007) argue that money, its management, its exchange and its meaning is both part of doing gender and also entwined with the doing of and becoming a couple. From my interviews it was clear that the transacting of the relationship through financial means spoke more clearly to the abusive structuring and dynamic of the relationship overtime, since, for many, money was used as a means of control, a way of making partners literally pay for it.

However, the variations within the men's accounts concerning the way in which finances were used and abused, from outright control exerted through financial means, through to a reliance on the victim's financial resources, could be confusing in terms of what actually counts as abuse. Nevertheless, if we assume that there was a struggle taking place within the relationship around notions of 'our money', 'my money', 'your money' (Pahl, 2000), then it is possible to see at least one of the ways in which the power dynamics, channelled through financial abuse, worked within these relationship. This point is further endorsed by Merrill & Wolfe's (2000) findings, that gay men did not report being financially dependent upon their abusers, instead, the participants of their study frequently reported that their partner's financial abuse involved feeling entitled to financial support rather than trying to force financial dependence. And, certainly in my own study, there was a definite exploitation of the ethic of care, which, over time resulted in a build-up of resentment which then led to a number of the victims protesting at their partner's lack of

contribution. However, this, in turn, led to further episodes of abuse, since the victim's reactions were experienced by their abusers as pressure being brought to bear, a sense of them being made to account, which they clearly found threatening and uncomfortable.

It is also important to highlight the fact that, in marked contrast to heterosexual relationships where the financially resourced partner, usually the man, is often found to use his position as a source of power and control over his female victim, abuse along the financial axis within gay male relationships seems to work in the opposite direction. In other words, in gay male relationships it is the financially resourced partner who is most at risk of abuse from their financially dependent other. One possible reading of this is that being male and being dependent is not a comfortable place to be, especially when one's partner is financially independent, and, so, attempts are made to re-balance the books. In other words, shifting the concept of 'your money' to 'my money' actually shifts the balance of power by making the financially independent partner pay for this inequality. That said the extent to which this dynamic speaks to the performance of gender, i.e. men doing business with men, rather than sexuality, is something that warrants further exploration.

### **Gender & Sexuality**

Those in the focus group discussion placed particular emphasis on the influence of gender role socialisation in accounting for violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men. The essence of this thinking

centered on the belief that men are raised to assert themselves and to compete with other men; a point that is further elaborated by Kaufman (1997), who suggests that the traditional definition of masculinity is not only surplus aggression but also exclusive heterosexuality. As a consequence, men who are gay are faced with something of a conflict, since, being intimate and collaborative with other men is not something they will have been raised to value or embrace. Indeed, men are more socially valued when expressing their autonomy and separate selves, a factor that may be relevant to the financial arrangements that lead to the abusive practices outlined above. That said, the power play seen within the accounts of the men I interviewed, spoke clearly to the way in which masculinity is enacted within gay male relationships; with one partner asserting his will over the other, threats to subdue and, indeed, actual attacks on the body.

However, the extent to which conflict, linked to aspects of masculinity is primary in accounting for violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men is open to question, especially since sexuality seems a more obvious reference point and one that tends to dominate the theoretical debate. Although not empirically validated, Letellier (1994) believes that the correlates between homophobia and the phenomena of gay male battering seem clear. He argues that if we compound the insidious effects of homophobia with the virtual absence of healthy gay relationship role models, then the stage is set for a group of men who tolerate violence from their own partners. This point is further reinforced by Herek (1990) who suggests that abusers may simply confirm a gay male victim's feelings that he is an acceptable target for abuse and

violence, amply captured by the statement of one of my participants that *“abuse was nothing less than I deserved for being gay”*.

However, it is surprising how few of the men in my study actually referred to homophobia or internalized homophobia as possible confounding factors in their abusive relationships. Yet, heterosexism, homophobia and particularly internalized homophobia are felt to be major contextual elements that cause stress and internal conflict which then finds its way into abusive practices within intimate gay relationships. For instance, homophobia and heterosexism are believed to reinforce the isolation of the victim who may then be further controlled and wary of seeking help because of their sexuality (Renzetti, 1992; Ristock, 2002; Bethea et al., 2000). Furthermore, Allen & Leventhall (1999), assert that the domestic violence within gender and sexual minority communities has everything to do with the hostility and condemnation directed against them, since it is used as a weapon within the relationship for one partner to target and attack the other. This would be seen as a case of the enemy without finding its way into the couple relationship and compromising the men’s ability to work together.

It is certainly the case that one of the men I interviewed spoke of his partner being uncomfortable with the participant’s effeminacy, linked to the partner’s own level of internalized homophobia. This then led to a range of abusive practices as the partner attempted to re-work the participant’s image and behaviour into that of a ‘straight male’. This fits well with Kaufman’s (1997) thinking about exclusive heterosexuality, since exclusive heterosexuality

requires the repression of homosexuality, resulting in an attack on all that is perceived as feminine within men and within gay male culture. This is perhaps explainable if one equates effeminacy with weakness and, since a central tenet of masculinity is the eschewing of weakness, then measures have to be found to suppress or to expel its appearance. Perhaps this particular example highlights the overlap between gender and sexuality as an organising factor within gay male relationships which contributes in some measure to violence and abuse.

How then do we understand and account for the absence of the men in my study failing to reference heterosexism, homophobia and internalized homophobia as possible confounding factors in their abuse? Perhaps, part of the answer can be found in Goldner's (1999) thinking when she suggests that the lived experiences of many of the abused couples she worked with, including the extraordinarily intense mutual reactivity, is so absorbing (in other words, that they are so bogged down with the workings of the relationship) that they fail to see or grasp wider contextual forces that may be at work within their relationships. Another possibility is that heterosexism, homophobia and internalized homophobia are simply not active forces within gay male couple relationships, although I would argue that they probably are but remain outside of immediate awareness and are therefore hard to access and reference. After all, the men in my study were, on a day-to-day basis, attempting to manage and indeed influence the relational dynamics to the extent that they were not thinking about how gender and sexuality was impacting their relationship. At the same time, these external forces may also be very subtle, micro aggressions, a

point endorsed by Carroll's (2010) application of thinking about "racial micro aggressions" (Constantine, 2007; Sue et al., 2007) to gender and sexual minorities. For instance, Carroll argues that as a consequence of growing up in a heteronormative society, gay men will undoubtedly suffer 'micro aggressions', suggesting that it is not necessarily extreme physical acts of violence that cause the problem but that gay men will be internalizing more subtle forms of abuse based on heteronormativity or homophobia which then leaves these men vulnerable to managing negative feelings and behaviours triggered within and indeed by the relationship itself. It is therefore hard to see these forces at work and only by carefully unpacking the couple dynamics will it be possible to understand the ways in which gender and sexuality operate within the relationship and the impact of this on the gay male couple. However, as we have already seen, attempts to look at the internal workings of the couple relationship poses particular challenges, something which I propose exploring in greater depth later in this discussion.

### **Investing in the relationship**

The fact that the relationships of the men I interviewed endured for so long, testifies to the ongoing investment made by both partners in keeping their relationships intact. From the men's accounts, and indeed from other studies which have examined the reasons for remaining within an abusive relationship, love for one's partner and a hope for the future of the relationship are among some of the key determinants that account for why victims remain within these relationships (Donovan & Hester, 2011; Renzetti, 1992; Merrill & Woolfe 2000).

To some extent, the readiness of some of the men I interviewed for a relationship based on, for example, a tiredness and even despair of being on one's own and a desire for a meaningful and enduring connection, acted as a powerful reinforcer. And, indeed, throughout the life of the relationship these men asserted and reasserted their commitment to the relationship, evidenced in statements like, *"I couldn't give up like that"* and *"I didn't want to chuck it, if there is a potential for that person to change"*. However, the ideal of a love relationship, based on two partners working together, was frequently undermined by the abuser establishing his entitlement and enforcing it through abusive means. The tensions, therefore, in the work undertaken by victims, who had a strong commitment to making things better, coupled with frequent and ongoing examples of abusers using their power and control, created somewhat confused dynamics within these relationships and may have contributed to the somewhat protracted endings described by my participants.

Some of the men I interviewed felt enormous responsibility both for the wellbeing of their partners and for the relationship as a whole, and, from this position, felt that to leave would be akin to deserting one's post. For instance, towards the end of the relationship when it was clear that they could not continue, a number of the men spoke of feelings of guilt and a sense of empathy for their abusive partner's vulnerability. At the same time, the fact that the victims showed enormous strength within their relationships, not just in terms of survival but also in terms of their investment in making things better, may also have worked against them in terms of leaving, since they held onto the belief that they alone could effect change. Moreover, the fact that *"it wasn't*



*all bad*” also seemed to keep these men invested. In addition, a few of the men drew attention to the importance of the sex as a powerful factor in maintaining their connection to their abusive partners, something which came as a surprise given the absence of thinking about this within the field, especially since research which does exist in this area is primarily concerned with sexual abuse. However, given that the quality of the sex within these abusive relationships appears to have contributed to at least some of the victims remaining with their abusive partners, is something that warrants further exploration? This finding also raises questions about whether the quality of sex within a violent and abusive relationship, as a factor in keeping victims connected to their abusers, is primarily a gay male phenomenon or one that occurs in lesbian and heterosexually abusive relationships, something that is also worthy of consideration.

On the other side of the relational equation was that of the abusive partner’s motivation for getting into and remaining within these violent and abusive relationships. From the men’s accounts, I was struck by the significant level of dependence their partner’s exhibited within the relationship. One particular reading of this dependence is that a number of the partners were in transition or in difficulty, which placed them in quite exposed positions within the relationship and which also put something of a strain on the relationship itself. For instance, three of the partners of the men I interviewed had been married and were still, to some extent, moving from a heteronormative model of couple relating to one that incorporated other possibilities within a male-male relationship where the gender and power dynamics are less prescribed. Another partner was also

struggling to accept his sexuality and two others were in what appeared to be highly dependent states and throughout the relationship showed limited capacity for assuming any responsibility, shared or otherwise. What seemed to be at issue here was the high dependency needs these partners had on the participants in my study. And, as in other studies (see Renzetti, 1992), these dependency needs often translated into very controlling and abusive behaviour. One explanation for this phenomenon is that the combination of being adult, dependent and male, is something of a lethal mix, since the only way the individual, as a man, can manage this level of exposure and vulnerability is to assert himself in an effort to rebalance the dynamics.

However, when efforts to redress this balance went too far, as in the partner deciding to leave, only then were declarations of sorrow, promises to change and even love for one's partner made; a strategy familiar to that seen in the Donovan et al., (2006) study, and which Donovan Hester (2011) label as 'emotion work' undertaken by abusers at key points when they are most at risk of losing their partner. Essentially these men are attempting to re-secure the base, although it is unclear whether they were most worried about the loss of the relationship, their partner, or both. However, as the motives for declaring love and affection were purely in the service of re-establishing the status quo, rather than genuine attempts to assume responsibility for working things out with their partner, their efforts could be seen as first and not second order change.

Acts of contrition, however, functioned to pull the victims back into their relationships and gave the men a greater sense of a shared relationship. To some extent this replicates Walker's (1979) 'cycle of violence' where moments of rupture are followed by relief and reconnection. Serra (1993), however, speaking of heterosexual couple's relationships, believes that a shift in the role of the abuser acts to free the victim of her role as the accused, and places the abuser as the guilty party, the one who is now carrying the shame and guilt. Serra also argues that it is this psychological and moral relief, moving from a humiliating and guilt ridden experience to one that is guilt free, that gratifies the victim and makes her decide to stay. However, the cycle continues, since the submission of the woman, who, having criticised the behaviour of her partner, now acquiesces and decides to remain with him, represents not only rehabilitation for her abuser but also confirms that he continues to have a hold over her (Serra, 1993). It is hard to judge whether a similar process was at work in the relationships of the men I interviewed, but it is clear that they too experienced definite shifts in patterns of relating that repositioned the abuser as victim and resulted in him asking for a second chance.

Another possibility for explaining the continued investment in these couple relationships is that gay males share a common history of oppression and conflict, and, at moments of rupture, there is a shared victim status, a force that, in my view, powerfully reconnects them. For instance, I was struck by the level of compassion and concern from the victims towards their abusive partners, i.e. "but he needs my help", suggesting that there is a real empathy with a victim status, something with which the perpetrator, at key moments, may also be in

touch, although it is also possible that it is used to further exploit the victim. This may also explain why at least one of the participants questioned the utility of the application of the victim and perpetrator model of violence and abuse to all abusive relationships, since it does not take account of the shared victim status gay male couples have as a result of growing up in a heteronormative society. To some extent, the ongoing confusion of where the real enemy resides, i.e. within the relationship or within society, may also explain the lack of clarity some of these men had in regard to identifying as a victim or a perpetrator within their own relationships.

To some extent, the positioning and repositioning that went on in the relationships of the men I interviewed, testifies to the struggle they, as a couple, had in finding non-abusive meeting points. It is also clear from the interviews that the level of resentment many of the victims felt towards their partners had a corresponding effect on the frequency and severity of the violence and abuse. This would indicate that something shifted in relation to the emotion work that was hitherto so effective in closing the gap, suggesting that as these relationships continued the men were no longer sharing a victim status. It is also of note that although the victims had managed to reposition themselves their partners had not and there were examples of their abusers continuing to rely on promises that things could change for the better.

### **Intervening in violent and abusive relationships**

Research relating to help-seeking behaviour (Donovan et al, 2006; Ristock, 2002) indicates that same-sex partner violence and abuse, to a large extent, remains a private matter. Those who do seek help are more often than not likely to turn to friends and family rather than to statutory agencies, although some do appear to approach counsellors, i.e. a third of the participants in the Donovan et al., (2006) study. However, the extent to which therapists within the United Kingdom are trained or equipped to work with same-sex partnerships let alone violence and abuse within same-sex relationships, remains open to question, particularly if they are relying on generic trainings that draw on heteronormative thinking as a basis for practice. Furthermore, the contexts from which counsellors and therapists practice also influences their openness to issues of violence and abuse when this is not the actual presenting problem. For instance, one of the participants in my study who approached a drug and alcohol agency with concerns about his partner's alcohol abuse, felt dismissed. It seems that the counsellor's position was that he could not offer assistance as the partner with the problem was not actually present. Unfortunately, this counsellor, working within the strict remit of his agency brief, failed to explore the impact of the alcohol abuse on the couple relationship and, as a consequence, the domestic violence remained hidden and the partner who did present was not signposted to a more appropriate service.

Having spelled out these considerations, I am aware that few, if any, of the men I interviewed actually thought about contacting a counsellor or therapist, and it seems that their abusive partners would have had even less reason to take this step. Furthermore, the fact that none of the victims in my study actually brought

charges against their abusive partners possibly served to reinforce the belief that the abusive behaviour was not serious and that it did not warrant outside help. Yet, as we saw from the analysis of the data, a number of these men were in highly abusive relationships that could well have benefitted from outside help, especially since many elected to remain within these relationships. However, as we have seen, gay men in abusive relationships are a hard to reach group and, even when they are mandated to seek help or are themselves asking for help, it is likely, because of the way that services are organised within the United Kingdom, that they will be offered individual rather than couple's therapy, since couple's therapy is viewed as anti-therapeutic and potentially dangerous. In view of this, I would therefore like to use the remainder of this discussion to explore the question of conjoint couple's therapy for men in abusive relationships who are committed to staying together, since I firmly believe that it has a role to play in helping such couples.

Harris (2006), in considering the arguments for couple's therapy, suggests that perpetrators who are violent only in their close relationships and who do not have serious psychopathology are much more amenable to couples work. In addition it could also be argued that perpetrator programmes (the treatment of choice for this group of men) fails to address the underlying relationship dynamics that often give rise to and maintain the violent and abusive behaviour. Moreover, conjoint therapy (i.e. working with both partners in the room) can help address projective processes within the couple relationship which may actually reduce opportunities for acting out (Harris, 2006). It is also suggested that when compared to traditional perpetrator programmes, group's couple's counselling

with low to moderate level intimate partner violence, is as effective and just as safe (Dunford, 2000; O'Leary et al., 1999).

At the same time, however, Istar (1996) suggests that there is a dearth of information on how to clinically address the needs of gays and lesbians who are involved in relationships that are actually violent and abusive, although a number of clinicians have put forward ideas for how to make couple's therapy a safe and effective forum for those who wish to stay together and work on their issues. For instance, Vetere & Cooper (2001) propose that when working with couples there needs to be an agreement that both partners wish for and are committed to finding a way to live together safely, whilst others insist on ground-rules that include 'no violence contracts' and will actually terminate the therapy if there is violence or threatening behaviour within the couple sessions. Essentially, therapists working with such couples are attempting to create the conditions where the abuser assumes responsibility for his actions and where the victim is affirmed and absolved of any responsibility for the abuse, as a basis for then exploring the interlocking couple dynamics that most often give rise to the problematic relational processes seen within these couple relationships.

It is also of note and, perhaps no accident, that those working with abusive couples often work in pairs or as part of a team (e.g. Goldner et al., 1991; Vetere & Cooper, 2001); a recognition, perhaps, that the work requires that level of input. In addition, there are particular advantages to having more than one therapist involved in the therapy, since the possibilities for processing the

couple dynamics are increased and, depending on the ways in which the therapists use their working relationship, the couples themselves have the opportunity to become observers to their own dynamics and truths. Furthermore, therapists can also split the couple when it becomes necessary to work individually or in parallel, in a way that a single therapist cannot. Moreover, pressures on the therapist to confront hard truths by, for instance, asking 'just how bad things get' and 'any fears associated with this', whilst at the same time challenging a perpetrator to fully accept the existence of the abuse and their part in it, often requires more than one therapist. This is especially so when there are denials, minimisations and possible collusion from victims who attempt to rescue their abusers, so that, having two therapists working with such couples can offer a more robust therapeutic response.

Also, in situations where the abuser fails to attend or even refuses to attend, having two therapists allows one to continue working with the partner who is available for therapy, whilst the other attempts to engage the absent partner. Jory & Anderson (2000) say that they find it most effective if the therapist contacts the abuser and invites him to an individual session, as a way of engaging him in the early process of the work. After all, therapists are trained to work with those who are reluctant to attend and have techniques that encourage the opening of difficult dialogues. Even when that fails, it is still possible for the remaining therapist to continue working with the individual who is willing to attend whilst the second therapist remains available should the other partner wish to attend.



In light of the above, I am therefore arguing that there is a place for couple's therapy with gay male couples experiencing violence and abuse, especially those who elect to stay together and who are motivated to explore their difficulties together. I am also advocating that this work be undertaken with two therapists and that the model of therapy is flexible enough to allow for individual work with both partners when necessary and appropriate. In common with other therapists in the field (Fox, 1999), I also believe that the therapy should be terminated when it is clearly unsafe. In that regard, I would be reluctant to undertake couple's therapy in situations where there is a recognised coercive, controlling and violent partner within the relationship, since I believe that such individuals require a recognised perpetrator programme prior to commencing a couple's therapy, although there may be a case for undertaking couple's therapy in close conjunction with those conducting the perpetrator programme to ensure appropriate safeguards. It also needs to be recognised that this work takes time, since the breaking of patterns built up over many years is something that is not necessarily amenable to short-term interventions, a factor that may also influence those who are able and willing to commit to such therapy.

## **Future Directions**

Although particular emphasis has been placed on the problematic and abusive end of the spectrum of gay male couple relationships, I am reminded that a participant within the focus group discussion drew attention to the idea of two men being “*a finely attuned pair*” offering synergy rather than opposition, and I wonder if, because of the impact of homophobia, there has been less focus on the resilience factors within gay male couple relationships that act as a protection against the abusive dynamics reported by the men in my study. For that reason, I believe that there is a strong argument for future research focusing on strengths and resilience within gay male relationships.

I am also aware that my own research has highlighted the ongoing challenges of finding and incorporating the voices of perpetrators into research on violence and abuse within gay male couple relationships, and, as a consequence, I believe that greater efforts need to be made to recruit perpetrators to future studies.

Given the importance placed on insecure attachments as an explanation for violence and abuse within intimate couple relationships, and with the paucity of studies to support this, further research is needed to understand the precise role that attachment theory plays in the couple relationships of gay men in which there is violence and abuse.

## **Conclusion**

What this study has shown is that violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men not only exists but that it has very serious consequences for those involved. However, same-sex partner abuse as a field of study is still a relatively new area of research and, studies that currently exist are mainly drawn from American and Canadian populations, although in the last ten years research within the United Kingdom has begun to emerge. Taken together, what this body of research highlights is the complex power dynamics that operate within these relationships, as well as the multiple etiological factors that give rise to the violence and abuse in the first place. In addition, we have also seen how the dynamics and patterns of relating within gay male couple's relationships challenge the limits of the now familiar victim and perpetrator divide as well as questioning the presence of power and control as the only explanatory framework for understanding and accounting for such abuse.

My study has also confirmed the primacy attached to physical abuse within male-male relationships, yet, at the same time, a range of other abusive practices including, emotional abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, etc., were also apparent. However, non-physical forms of abuse appear to have very little status within gay male couple relationships and, as consequence, may prevent gay men from recognising and reporting their abuse, as well as blinding those who could offer assistance from doing so because they are primarily focused on physical violence as the only legitimate form of abuse. The fact that so few victims of gay male partner abuse recognise, report, or seek help for the abuse,

suggests that there is still a lot of work to be done to raise the profile of same-sex partner violence and abuse. In terms of intervening, it would seem that individual approaches continue to dominate the field, although the case for couple's therapy has been advanced as a potential effective alternative. Ultimately, therapists, like researchers, will continue to struggle to reach gay men in abusive relationships, whether they are victims or perpetrators or both, but studies, like my own, attempt to shine a light as a way of better understanding the meaning of violence and abuse in the couple relationships of these gay men.

It seems strange that the thing which actually distinguishes same-sex partner violence and abuse from heterosexual violence and abuse, namely, heterosexism, homophobia and internalized homophobia, should receive so little attention in the accounts of the participants in my study, although it did receive attention from the participants in the focus group. Perhaps, disentangling gender role socialisation from gay male sexuality accounts in part for the lack of emphasis, although it has been suggested that the pernicious forces of homophobia and internalized homophobia are subtle and require particular attention if the workings of them within gay male couple relationships are to be seen and documented. Clearly, future research in this area is indicated.

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## **Appendix 1**

**DAMIAN MC CANN**  
**CQSW. BA. MSc.**  
***UKCP Registered Systemic Psychotherapist***  
***AFT Registered Supervisor***

Tel: 07790 333798

E. Mail: [research@dmccann.demon.co.uk](mailto:research@dmccann.demon.co.uk)

Dear Colleague,

I am currently recruiting participants for an important research study which is part of my Doctorate in Systemic Practice based at the Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust and validated by the University of East London. The research will examine the neglected area of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men. I will be conducting an exploratory study examining the accounts of individual gay men, over the age of eighteen years of age and who are or have been in a violent/abusive couple relationship(s).

Given the paucity of research in this area and the potential implications for therapeutic intervention, it is hoped that participants will feel that they are contributing to a study which is worthwhile, in that, knowledge about their experiences may be helpful to others. Furthermore, the study is endorsed by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust and ethical approval has been obtained from the University of East London (the validating institute for the above mentioned degree).

Attached are, 1) a letter of introduction to prospective participants 2) an Information Sheet – outlining in more detail the aims and objectives of the study 3) a Screening Questionnaire - designed so that participants can opt into the study (i.e. an agreement to be interviewed by me on one occasion 4) an Informed Consent Form - detailing matters relating to the interview e.g. confidentiality,

I very much hope that you will feel able to support the study by distributing the information pack to prospective participants (i.e. members of your organisation/ users of your service). Should you require any further information then please do not hesitate to contact me, or indeed, if you require additional information packs, then please let me know and I will be happy to supply these.

**Yours Sincerely,**

**Damian Mc Cann**



**Researcher.**

**Appendix 2**

**DAMIAN MC CANN  
CQSW. BA. MSc.  
UKCP Registered Systemic Psychotherapist  
AFT Registered Supervisor**

Tel: 07790 333798

E. Mail: [research@dmccann.demon.co.uk](mailto:research@dmccann.demon.co.uk)

Dear Prospective participant,

I am currently recruiting participants for an important research study which is part of my Doctorate in Systemic Psychotherapy based at the Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust.

This research will examine the neglected area of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men and I am seeking to recruit gay men who are or have been in a violent or abusive gay couple relationship.

The study has been endorsed by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust and ethical approval has been granted by the University of East London (the validating institute for the above mentioned degree). By taking part in this research study, you will be contributing to a developing knowledge base about gay couple relationships in which there is violence and abuse, so your experience and ideas could potentially be helpful to others. It is also worth mentioning that some participants themselves have found research interviews helpful. Confidentiality will be guaranteed, since any information you give will be anonymised to fully protect your identity.

I would be grateful if you could take a moment to look at the Information Sheet, which outlines in more detail the aims and objectives of the study. I would also appreciate your participation in the study by agreeing to be interviewed by me.

If you would like to take part in the study then please complete both the Screening Questionnaire and the Consent Form and return them to me via the email address at the top of this letter. You will need to save the Screening Questionnaire and Consent Form as Word Documents which then allows you to open them for completion. Once completed you need to save the changes and you can then attach the saved documents to your return email. Alternatively, you can ring me on (07790 333798) and I can arrange to forward a hard copy of the forms for you to complete and return to me by post.

I very much appreciate your interest in the study and look forward to hearing from you.

**Yours Sincerely,**

**Damian Mc Cann  
Researcher.**

## **Appendix 3**

### **Information Sheet**

#### **Introduction**

You are being invited to take part in an important research study which will examine the neglected area of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men.

Before you decide, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. You can also contact the researcher (Damian Mc Cann) if there is anything that is not clear, or if you require any further information.

#### **Purpose of study**

The purpose of the study is to examine the neglected area of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men. Intimate partner abuse has been identified as the third largest health problem facing gay men today. In common with other studies in this area violence will be defined broadly and include emotional, verbal, physical and sexual acts.

#### **Recruitment Criteria**

You are welcome to take part in this study if you identify as a gay man, are over the age of eighteen years old, and are or have been in a relationship with another man in which there is, or has been, violence/abuse.

Participation is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign both the *Screening Questionnaire* and a *Consent Form*. Also, if you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

#### **What will happen if you agree to take part?**

This study will examine, through an interview process, the experiences of gay men in abusive/violent couple relationships. You will therefore be invited to meet with the researcher (Damian Mc Cann) for a one-off interview. It is anticipated that the interviews will be held in London. During the interview, you will be asked a number of questions relating to your experiences and your answers will be tape recorded and later transcribed. You will be forwarded a copy of the transcript to ensure its accuracy and you will receive a summary of the findings once the research is complete (this should be in September 2009).

### **Benefits and risks of taking part**

By taking part in this research, participants will be contributing to a developing knowledge base about gay couple relationships in which there is violence or abuse, so your experiences and ideas could be helpful to others. The information you provide could also be helpful to practitioners as they seek to develop more effective ways of intervening in this area.

If during the course of an interview you become distressed and require time-out, or indeed if you wish to stop the interview then you can do so at any time.

If during the course of an interview the researcher feels concerned about your safety or indeed the safety of others, then the interview will be halted and an appropriate plan of action will be discussed and implemented.

Should you require assistance with issues raised during the interview then appropriate follow-up resources will be suggested.

### **Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential, unless it raises questions about your safety or indeed the safety of others.

During the course of the research, all personal information will be anonymised and information provided by you will be used in such a way as to completely protect your identity.

### **What happens to the results of the research study?**

It is anticipated that the research study will be completed towards the end of 2009. If you would like a copy of the findings then this will be provided by the researcher. It is hoped that the study will be published, and again, you will be asked if you would like a copy of the publication. In line with confidentiality, you will not be identified in any report or publication.

### **Ethical Approval**

This research study, which is the basis of the researcher's Doctorate in Systemic Psychotherapy, has the full support of the Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust. It has also been ethically approved by the University of East London (the validating institute for the above mentioned degree).

### **Contact for further information**

Email: [research@dmccann.demon.co.uk](mailto:research@dmccann.demon.co.uk)  
Mobile: (07790 333798)

Please note that this Information Sheet is for you to keep.

I thank you in anticipation of your involvement in this study and look forward to receiving your completed *Screening Questionnaire* and *Consent Form*.



**Appendix 5**

**University of East London**

**Consent Form**

**Consent to Participate in an Experimental Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants.**

**Title of Research: What does intimate partner violence and abuse tell us about gay male couple relationships?**

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet relating to the above mentioned study in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purpose of the research has been explained to me, and I have had an opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed, and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particularly data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. The exceptions to this rule have already been explained to me in the Information Sheet. Only the researcher involved in the study will have direct access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen to the data once the experimental programme has been completed.

I hereby fully and freely consent to participate in the study.

Having given this consent, I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the programme at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Participant's name (BLOCK CAPITALS): .....

Participant's signature: .....

Date: .....

Investigator's name (BLOCK CAPITALS): .....

Investigator's signature: .....

Date: .....

Please email this form, as a word document (together with the Screening Questionnaire) to [research@dmccann.demon.co.uk](mailto:research@dmccann.demon.co.uk)

Alternatively, you may wish to ring Damian Mc Cann (07790 333798).

## **Appendix 6**

### **Interview Format**

1. Can you say why you agreed to take part in this research study?  
Motivating factors; participants' own relationship to the topic.
2. Before we begin talking in some detail about the violence itself, I just want to be clear whether you will be talking about something which happened some time ago or whether it is happening now, or indeed both?  
Also, I am interested in knowing whether this is something you have ever talked about before?
3. Say more about your relationship(s).  
Illicit relationship history i.e. was/is it a first relationship?  
What other relationships have you had?  
How long were you and your partner together?  
Where and how did you meet?
4. Without, at this point, saying anything much about the violence itself, at what point in your relationship(s) did the violence occur?  
Did/do you consider yourself to be in an abusive relationship, and if so, at which point did you define it as abusive – what were/are the defining features/moment?
5. Describe in your own words the violence you are referring to.  
What was/is the nature of the violence?  
What was/is the extent of the violence – what was said, what was done?  
When did the violence occur?  
What was/is the context for the violence?  
How often did the violence occur?  
If it was ongoing, how did it develop?  
How would you characterise the violence – describe how you behaved?  
How would your partner(s) characterise the violence – similar or different from your ideas about the violence? How did your partner behave?  
Do you know anyone else who is in a violent relationship – how is it similar or different from your relationship?  
At what point did you begin to think you were in a violent relationship?  
Do you think the violence in your relationship is the same or different from say violence in lesbian or straight relationships? If so, why?
6. How did you/are you managing the violence within your relationship?  
What was/is its impact on you?  
What was/is its impact on your partner(s)?  
Did you ever speak to anyone about the violence?  
If so, what did you say and what was their response?  
Have you ever sought help – when, why, how?

Have you ever involved professionals i.e. police, counsellor, solicitor, shelter, etc.?

What have you found most helpful in terms of dealing with the violence in your relationship

7. How do you understand the violence in your relationship(s) – e.g. why do you think happened?  
How would you explain to yourself and others why you were/are in a violent relationship?  
How do you understand and explain your behaviour within the relationship?  
How do you understand and explain your partner(s) behaviour within the relationship?  
How would your partner have understood both your behaviour and his behaviour?  
Do you think that being gay and in a gay relationship contributed in any way to the violence? (Possible links to isolation, invisibility, heterosexism/homophobia. How are issues of power and control enacted within the relationship i.e. greater social power, physical size and strength, age, etc.?)  
Other explanatory frameworks i.e. racism, sexism, intergenerational transmission of violence, alcohol and substance misuse.
  
8. Are there any questions you thought I would ask and didn't or any other points you wish to make before we start to wrap up the interview?
  
9. Debriefing – How was the interview for you?  
Feedback on the interview.  
What are you left with?  
Any particular requests before we finish?



## **Appendix 7**

### **Adjusted interview format**

1. Motivation for taking part in research study?
2. Where would be a good place to start?
3. Establish which relationship(s) we are talking about, time-line, sequence, current, past etc.
4. Entry point – how did you get into the relationship?
5. At what point did things become difficult/abusive/violent? In what ways was it violent or abusive?
6. How would you characterise the relationship? (Victim/perpetrator – same or different from other relationships i.e. straight, lesbian, other)
7. Explanatory frameworks (participant/partner)
8. What was the impact?
9. What helped you get out and was the ending immediate or protracted?
10. What has life been like since you left the relationship(s)?
11. What message have you for others?

### **Additional considerations**

'Coming out'

Price – costs of being in an abusive relationship – linked to financial abuse but much wider

Family considerations

Role of sex

Alcohol

Control and power dynamics.

(Applied to interviews number 6-8)

## **Appendix 8**

### **Memo**

#### **Managing the problem with being gay?**

Being gay doesn't have to be a problem and for many gay men it isn't. However, the process of 'coming out' to self and to others can be lengthy and can, for some, be fraught with difficulty as discomfort both within oneself and from others is felt and has to be managed. This dynamic is best understood within the context of homophobia (particularly internalized homophobia) although wider cultural factors i.e. heterosexism, religion may also be relevant here.

For instance, Participant 1 spoke of knowing he was 'different' and described attempts to hide his sexuality. This same participant was verbally and physically bullied and abused at school and came to believe that he deserved unhappiness and even deserved the violence and abuse he suffered at the hands of his partner. For him, this seems to be related to shameful and guilty feelings connected with being gay. It is also possible that these feelings emanated from the physical abuse, as a boy, he received from his father connected to a belief that "I wasn't the son he wanted."

The carrying of guilt for being gay and especially the burden of letting others down may also result in difficult feelings and states of mind that have to be managed within the couple relationship. It is well documented that pressures arising from homophobia within society often finds its way into the intimacy of sexual minority relationships resulting in stress and conflict. It is as if the fight

with the outside world cannot be fought at source and therefore gets processed between the couple.

Throughout the interviews participants spoke of their partners struggling with feelings of being gay. Participant 1 described the feelings of his 'straight looking, straight acting' partner, who came from a 'laddish culture' where none of his friend knew he was gay, "he loathed himself for being gay and me being there reminded him of what he couldn't feel himself." This raises two important questions for trying to understand the meaning and behaviour of gay men in violent and abusive relationships where identity issues are implicated. Firstly, the question of self-esteem and the way in which this plays itself out in the couple relationships of gay men. Self esteem should also be cross referenced with self esteem issue in straight men's treatment of women. Secondly, the internal and external reminder of being gay by virtue of being in a gay relationship, which, in conjunction with other stressors, may find its way out in terms of violent behaviour towards the perceived enemy i.e. one's partner. Participant 2 of his partner, who was also struggling with issues of being gay, says "He was really fucked-up and he just took it all out on me."

The sense of letting others down (usually parents, siblings and friends) may also fuel the burden of guilt and shame. It is interesting to note that the partners of participants 1 & 3 set about trying to change their partners. Participant 1 says of his partner being gay "For him it was a huge problem and I think that's why he didn't want to go into gay bars." He goes on to say that "He hated camp people, absolutely loathed it and I am, I suppose, camp. I was his little project." The project in question was to make participant 1 a more 'straight looking, straight-acting gay man'. One wonders what the consequences might

be (in terms of violence and abuse) when the project fails or is only partially successful. Participant 3 went one step further in managing his difficulty in accepting his sexuality he tried to transform his gay relationship into one that was straight. For instance, he referred to his partner (participant 3) as his wife and blamed him for provoking aggression by refusing to be the submissive female. In other words, like the women in Goldner's project, participant 3 would answer back.

The issue of 'coming out' and state of 'outness' between partners, also seems to warrant consideration. The partner of participant 2 actually 'came out' for the first time in this relationship. He too was someone who was struggling with feelings of guilt about being gay. It is also noteworthy that the partner in question was raped as a teenager and participant 2 believes that this is why he didn't 'come out' as a young man in his teens. The sense of having one's sexuality derailed by a sexually abusive episode by another male in adolescence is a phenomenon familiar to me and often results in confusion surrounding sexuality that seems to result in marriage as an attempted resolution to the conflict. The decision of participant 2's partner to then leave his wife and children and enter a gay relationship with a man with an established gay identity immediately creates an imbalance within the relationship as well as placing the newly formed relationship under enormous pressure. Although the dynamics were somewhat different for the partner of participant 3, who had also married and fathered children, tensions were created when he failed to introduce or even acknowledge his partner when they visited the extended family. Participant 3 says "He didn't have the courage to say 'this is my boyfriend', he never had that courage even in public." The sister of the partner

in question says “We knew about his sexuality but he has a problem with it.”

The ongoing tensions for both partners may in some measure contribute to the abusive behaviour they exhibited towards their boyfriends!

One solution to the management of the discomfort, as mentioned above, is to attempt to conceal or deny the fact of one’s sexuality. Participant 1 spoke of his partner turning to alcohol as a way of managing the tensions of his struggle. He says, “I think really getting drunk was his way of coping with being gay. Whilst he was in a drunken stupor, he could forget about it.” It is worth noting that in this relationship there was a strong association between alcohol abuse and the worst incidents of violence, including three episodes of sexual violence and rape.

The sense of enhancing one’s masculinity (being more straight – being more macho – being “aggressive” looking) was really in the service of ‘passing’ and again one wonders what the consequences for the individual and the couple when the issues of being gay re-surface. Possibly this is one of the explanations for violence and abuse within gay male relationships?

## **Appendix 9**

### **Memo**

#### **The points of entry into a new relationship**

A central question of this research study is that of Understanding the meaning of violence and abuse within the couple relationships of gay men. From the literature review so far, little seems to have been written about this stage of relating i.e., getting into a new relationship and its possible link to the subsequent emergence of the violence or abuse. I wish to state that my own position in regard to this question is not to imply a linear/causal link, consistent with first order thinking, but more a curiosity about what we can learn from the interviews so far, in terms of what might be around in regard to entering a new relationship that subsequently becomes violent or abusive.

Relying on the Focused Coding of the six interviews, it becomes apparent that physical attraction and indeed sex appeal plays an important part in being drawn to a man that seems to validate and excite something within. It was “like magic” and “he chose me”. These appear to testify to the power of physical attraction and the blinding quality of being chosen in this context by a man who one thinks is a ‘catch’ or someone who will elevate low self esteem or offer

validation. Unfortunately, for these men, something remains hidden, out of view if you like, that only later begins to show itself. In psychoanalytic terms, it speaks of a narcissistic trait that captures and enraptures the other but acts as a defence which appears to conceal envy and rage, which then breaks through in its most primitive and violent form. Nevertheless, first encounters seem to act as a lightning rod for a number of the participants in terms of encountering something special, something attractive and indeed something worth pursuing, even against the odds.

A key question facing all human beings forming relationships seems to be that of how to manage a potential connection. Heterosexual lifestyles (although this particular discourse seems to be up for grabs) relied on a staged entry into a relationship, a standard or moral that has been actively challenged by sexual minorities and particularly gay men. Therefore, the idea of instant gratification (sexual contact at a first meeting) is not uncommon for a gay man as an entry into an ongoing connection (which may or may not be exclusive) and so diving in or holding back has particular meaning in terms of gay men forming and maintaining a relationship. I raise this point because it seems that diving into an intense relationship from a first encounter inevitably begs questions about what is known and that which is not known in terms of one or either partner. Perhaps

the readiness for a relationship, combined with the power of attraction feels enough to proceed, yet the risk, throwing caution to the wind, blinds a more rational analysis of the fit between the couple, which only becomes apparent much later in the relationship.

Perhaps both to underline the previous point and to develop it further, a most worrying trend seems to be the ignorance which surrounds the obvious signs or the writing on the wall. For instance, phrases like “Partner comes and goes as he pleases”, “Partner dictates the terms of the relationship”, “Mind games from day one” and “Partner’s uncertainty as to whether he wants the relationship” begs some questions about why the majority of the participants seemed to pay little or no attention to the meaning of these events and, if anything, committed further to the relationship. And even when there were doubts, “There were other things to this guy than what I saw”, that participant concluded that he didn’t think it applied to him. How do we understand this, given that the price one pays for ‘turning a blind eye’ is serious violence or abuse?

Perhaps the interviews so far offer some insight into a possible phenomenon that speaks to this very question. I have in mind the twinning of a readiness for a relationship with that of adopting a one-down position within the relationship,



usually based on need and poor self esteem that may lead one to conclude that they should be grateful even if the connection is less than desirable. The power dynamics that dog most relationships seem to take a particular route for the participants within the study, in that, the neediness did not always come from the party who lacked the instrumental means to develop and advance the relationship but in exercising this quality they were attacked for their ability to take charge or their competence because it folded back on the perpetrators lack of self agency, their own insecurity if you like, that then became the weapon they used to beat their lovers. This seems to be played from both directions e.g., one partner moves into his boyfriend's home and in then used and abused within that system and another moves into his partner's home and then takes revenge.

The other dynamic which seems to be important to consider is the question of unfinished business and the extent to which the relationship can withstand this burden and hold both partner's in a secure relationship.

## **Appendix 10**

### **Coding**

#### **Line-by-line – open coding**

The following extracts from two of my interviews (number 3 and number 6) show the way in which I approached the line-by-line coding (see pages 252-263)

#### **Focused Codes**

The whole of the focused codes for the same two interviews (number 3 and number 6) are provided. These show the ways in which the line-by-line open coding are formed into low level categories, i.e. focused codes, which then inform the development of higher level coding known as theoretical codes and core categories.

#### **Core Categories**

Core categories, also known as theoretical coding is a sophisticated level of coding that follows from the codes selected during focused coding and they often specify possible relationships between categories developed in focused coding.

## **Axial Coding**

Axial coding relates categories to subcategories and specifies the properties and dimensions of a category. Axial coding follows the development of a major category and essentially reassembles the fractured data derived from the initial coding to enhance the coherence and emergence of the analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Interview Number 3 (Part 1)

4.9

Researcher: How did the competition manifest itself?

5.0

Simeon: Well, I think he had a lot of problems with himself and he was working as a ticket assistant at a station which he thought was nothing special. He really didn't like his job but he knew he couldn't do anything better and he was not qualified, he was not educated. I'll tell you more about his childhood background because he told me later and that's why he wasn't educated and he was nine years older than me, so he realised, I think there was not much for him to do at that stage, he couldn't go back to school or university, he was looking after two children, even though he wasn't seeing them he was paying towards maintenance and everything and his hands were tied, he was a parent and yet not, and he was working but not doing what he wanted to do, he had a big chip on his shoulder for doing what he was doing and he always saw my job as much superior to his and that made him quite uncomfortable so he started mocking it.

Partner stuck in job he doesn't like. Lack of qualifications held him back

sense of inferiority.

Limited opportunities for further education

Partner's responsibilities towards children

Resentment towards participant's job and status. Put down's.

5.1

Researcher: Mocking it?

5.2

Simeon: Yeah, mocking it and then the mocking turned into humiliation and then it was criticising and making me feel I am not capable of doing my job - really he had no idea how ...

Competitive dynamic Partner uses emotionally abusive tactics to rebalance things.

5.3

Researcher: How did he do that?

5.4

Simeon: Well, he was always saying things like eh, oh, I would come home and he'd tell me all about his day and whenever I started talking about my day he was putting it down, like my experience of work like the fact that I was stressed out, oh, just get over it, it's nothing important what you are doing, stop making a big drama out of it. I wasn't, but it was all "oh, that's easy, I can do that, it's just that I don't have the qualifications and the

Attempts by Partner to portray himself as strong and capable and participant as weak and over dramatic

right skills, but if I was in your shoes, I would have done it much easier and you can't cope with it".

5.5

Researcher: And what was the effect of that on you?

5.6

Simeon: I think, luckily I think I have got a strong personality. I'm confident in what I am doing and I know what I am doing is good and I think I am good at it, so he couldn't, he couldn't really make me doubt that because I was getting a lot of praise at work and completely the opposite at home and I knew it wasn't true, but the effect it had on me was stress. I constantly had, two years I couldn't get rid of a headache from him, being with him he had this negative energy with him. The whole aura of him was very, very hostile and then he started, eh, just making me feel so uncomfortable that I'd sometimes feel that I wished I had stayed at work and not have to go home. So, that was really the effect on me, because I was stressed and tired, really exhausted everyday and I would wake up in the morning and it would feel like I hadn't slept and I couldn't I have never experienced that until I lived with him. I always felt fresh, I slept and since I have split up with him, I am back to my own life. I don't have any of those feelings I had with him, it is completely gone and he just make me feel like I hadn't had a rest, that I hadn't slept.

Participant is confident in his abilities

positive feedback at work protects participant from partner's attempts to demean still produces stress - headaches

partner's negative or hostile energy takes its toll on participant. Exhaustion, or attempts to avoid engagement with partner

no comfort or rest

Resilience factors

Discomfort withdrawal wish to stay at work NO RESPIRE.

5.7

Researcher: So, was it a thing that gradually started to happen, or did it sort of appear in that form?

5.8

Simeon: Well, it was very interesting, because I was also paying, I was very aware of what was going on. Gradually I started being aware of it and because of the field that I work in, it was helping me to open my eyes to see it, cos I work in social work, so I see lots of people, relationships and I'd go to work and see an element of my own relationship in some of the clients.

Participant is "paying" for it in so many ways sees his own relationships reflected in his clients' relationships

Reality of what participant is in client's gradually Awareness of relationships being in difficulty

5.9  
Researcher: Right.

Gradual but  
evolving awareness  
of difficult relationships  
Organic development  
of abuse.  
From competition  
to control?

6.0  
Simeon: And that would make me think or would make me realise and answers questions sometimes, eh, it was gradual, yes, but it was also evolving constantly. It was changing from competition, then it became complete sort of abuse and then it evolved to something else and something else, it didn't stay at that stage, it was constantly evolving, but instead of evolving more positively it was going downhill. It was control later on.

so did it go  
through stages?

6.1  
Researcher: So, it sounds like there might have been stages that it went through, so you were describing the first stage as this competition, did that feel abusive or did it feel more ....?

Decision to tolerate  
but hoping things  
would change for  
the better

6.2  
Simeon: In the beginning and going back to me saying I have a strong personality, I'm also quite tolerant, so I thought I will tolerate it for a while hoping it would stop, hoping it might get better and hopefully I may be able to change it. I didn't succeed at that but I did try and, eh, first it was kind of tolerable, because it hadn't gone that bad yet and I thought well its okay he might be different tomorrow and also because I didn't know him that well and I didn't know that to expect, I was thinking a nice side is going to come out one day and eh it would be a shame to sacrifice it now, now that we live together, we have set up a home for us and settled down together so it would be better to wait and wait and so I was blaming it on lots of other things and hoping it might change, so yes it was gradual and then there were different stages because later on we had a dog together so the relationship then the three of us was completely different.

Belief that  
"Participant  
could change it"  
for better.

Holding onto the  
possibility of  
change.

Hold on - don't  
throw towel in  
just yet.  
Sense of them as  
couple building  
something together.  
Investing in  
relationship counts  
for something.

Importance of  
home they  
have together

meaning of dog  
as another stage  
in the relationship

6.3  
Researcher: When did you get a dog, at what stage?

Partner's idea to have a dog

Participant not up for dog - yet another responsibility - harder to leave.

Dog = child / family

Partner's attempts to commit participant control?

Partner "couldn't accept his sexuality"

To create a substitute heterosexual family

b.4

Simeon: I think after six or seven months after we lived together we got a dog together. It was his idea, not mine. I realised in his eyes he wanted to have a family and a dog. I didn't particularly want a dog because it was another responsibility when I was quite exhausted with him and I thought, well I am going to have another dog and it is tying us together, it's, I can leave anytime, but when we have a dog it is going to be much harder, it's like having a child, but that is what he wanted. I realised he wanted a child, he wanted to tie me down to be with him and have something between us, because he couldn't accept his sexuality and him having previously children, he thought relationships should be productive, it should produce something and as being a gay couple you don't produce children, he wanted us to have a dog so that it would be as near to a heterosexual relationship as possible.

b.5

Researcher: What evidence did you have that he didn't accept his sexuality?

b.6

Simeon: Because he kept telling me you're my wife and I didn't like that very much, not that I have anything against wives, but I'm a man, I want to be your partner, your boyfriend, but I'm not a female and I don't, I just want to be equal, but he wanted to label it as wife and he would compare it, well my mum and dad were like this, my mum shuts up when my dad says something and if she doesn't she would get a slap and then he started doing all this, well maybe I should be like that with you and this was sort of becoming more often, this hint would be dropped quite often and I realised that he's actually not joking and that he really believed that the relationship should be abusive and that he wanted to control and very much dominate me. And he believed it and sometimes he would just turn to me and say well I'd wish you wouldn't argue with me, why are you arguing with me, why are you arguing, you are a difficult person

Partner calls participant his wife  
Relates to him as wife / mother

Relies on parents relationship as his model for couple relationship.

The woman shuts up when the man speaks

Partner's impatience at participant answering back

Participant wants an equal man-man relationship

Growing realization that partner wants to dominate & control.

A wish for participant to do as he is told. Getting on = doing it the way partner says. Just shut up & do as I say!

Consequences of partner not getting his own way. Sulking - silent treatment.

Partner's childlike determination to impose his will.

to me because you answer back and you should just do as you are told. I said I am not a dog. He said we would get on if you just shut up and didn't have to talk back, your mouth that's the problem in this relationship he would say to me. For defending myself, for telling him he was wrong when I thought he was wrong.

b.7

Researcher: And was this happening before the dog came or after?

b.8

Simeon: Around that time. The dog was his idea, he really insisted on having a dog and he had a side to him which was like a child who would sulk if he didn't get his way, he wouldn't talk to me, he would make it very clear that the relationship is threatened if he doesn't get his way and in the end he'd really make you feel guilty for upsetting him, like upsetting a child and you would give in the end because he really didn't know, didn't want to understand my point of view and the consequences of having a dog and the responsibility it was no we got to have it, I want it, I want a dog.

The need for the participant to defend himself

Attempts by partner to punish. Silent treatment designed to induce guilt.



Interview Number 3 (Part 2)

7.1

Researcher: So, what did you like about him?

7.2

Simeon: What did I like about him?

7.3

Researcher: Or what kept you there is what I am thinking.

7.3|5

Partner's humour is a positive reference point

Question over - Partner's caring side. on one hand attractive to participant but on other hand "too much"

Jealous & possessive "you belong to me," "you're mine & no-one else is allowed to touch you"

Simeon: He used to make me laugh, he used to - I thought at the time I don't mingle - I don't think that now at all. But that time I thought he had a good sense of humour. He portrayed himself as a very caring person, caring in the sense that he was very territorial, protective and he wasn't really caring in that he wouldn't listen to my stress or problems when telling him about my day. But he was very jealous, very possessive, very protective, which, at the time, I thought was quite attractive and different from other people, but then I realised it's too much, too much, because he kept saying you belong to me, you're mine and no-one else is allowed to touch you, no-one else is allowed to come and talk to you if we go out, you are mine and this was followed by, I will do what I like to you.

Participant's own lack of confidence - a consequence of the relationship?

Partner's need to possess - a sign of his insecurity?

Ultimate control "I will do what I like to you".

7.4

Researcher: What did he mean by that?

7.5

Participant is Partner's property This infringes certain rights

Simeon: Well, I will do what I like to you and when I asked him what that meant, he was, well, I can have sex whenever I want, regardless of whether you want it or not, cos, you are my property and if I shout at you or swear at you or say something, it's my right. Basically I think he was just like his parents.

"I can have sex whenever I want".

7.6

Researcher: Did he have sex whenever he wanted?

7.7

Partner forces sex Sometimes mutual

Simeon: He tried, yes. He didn't succeed all the time, but very often he did come up to me when he wanted to have sex, other than when I wanted to have sex. Sometimes it was mutual but he was very controlling,

Partner controlling in bed

Sex is not  
exciting for  
Participant.  
humiliation, rather  
than pleasure.  
Sex rather than  
love-making.

Participant blocks  
feedback  
disconfirms  
discredits

Know your  
place in this  
relationship!

even in bed, he was very, very controlling and I got bored with having sex with him. I got bored and I felt, however, I have never felt like this before, after having sex with him I felt humiliated rather than a pleasure. I felt that I had been used. It wasn't making love, and I told him, I said. He said once "oh well, when we make love, and I said, well we don't make love, we have sex" and he said, "Well you analyse too much, that is your problem, but he didn't want to listen. Why, he would never say "oh, I am sorry about it or what made you feel that, or, what gave you that idea, oh, let's discuss". It was, "oh, you were wrong to think that, you are wrong." He never acknowledged my feelings, never recognised them never discussed them. It was denying my pain, denying my rights and my feelings, it was "no, you are wrong, sort it out in your own head, I don't want to know about it and you are wrong, but what I am doing is right." And also, "how dare you criticise me because you are younger than me you haven't lived", that was his comment.

Participant says  
"I feel that I  
had been used."

Participant refuses  
to listen to  
feedback.

Denial  
A wish not to  
see or hear

Feedback is  
experienced as  
criticism.

Interview Number 6.

b-1

Researcher: How long were you together before things started to go wrong in your view?

b-2

Frank: Probably about 10 months or so and it had manifested itself in things like, well he hit me with a table. We had been given a little coffee table and there was like a u-shaped metal thing with a formica top and we were having an argument, I can't remember what the argument was about, I remember him sort of kicking the top off and picking up the table and sort of hitting me with it. Fortunately, I was stood against the wall so the wall took most of the force but I still had sort of bruises across my body, and then on other occasions it would be things like to humiliate me. Things like you are fat, you are unattractive, things like that. Em, or he would just do things like, I remember one time we were having a row in a supermarket and him just picking out all the money from his pocket and just throwing it at me in the queue, so there was money raining down and him just walking off and getting in the car and driving away and leaving me, that kind of thing, so yeah, that sort of stuff. As I say like it wasn't an everyday occurrence. Em, then we moved to South London and we used to row a lot then because he'd just basically stay in bed or I would go to work and he would just stay in bed all day eh and have no drive, no ambition to find a job and here in London I mean you should be able to find a job here in London it shouldn't be a problem. Any kind of job really. We used to row a lot about the fact that he just used to do nothing to get himself a job eh and he was unemployed I guess for a good 5 months down here, and then he got into the same sort of scheme I'd got into so he joined that. Eh, I guess there was just a sort of ongoing deterioration really. Always constantly belittling me, putting me down eh, you know, like the first words when he walked through the door was not, "oh hello, how was your day been", it was like "what's for tea. Oh I don't like that. Why are we having that?"

Problems start 10 months into relationship.

Can't recall substance of argument but does remember being hit with table bruising to body.

Partner attacks participant in public

Abuse "not an everyday occurrence"

Resentment at partner doing nothing

Ongoing deterioration in relationship  
Partner of partner belittling, demanding expecting to be looked after by participant.

Physical abuse from partner during argument.

Other times it was emotional abuse - humiliation  
"you are fat"  
"you are unattractive"

Tensions over structuring of relationship  
Participant hard working  
Partner lacks drive  
lots of rows over partner's lack of motivation

6.3

Researcher: And this was him having been at home doing nothing all day.

6.4

Frank: Yeah.

6.5

Researcher: So you were expected to....

6.6

Frank: Yeah, even when we were both out to work the first thing he'd say when he got through the door was, "What's for tea?" Like I had not been at work all day too eh so I was in the role of...

Partner's high expectations are a problem.

Responsibility within relationship not being shared

6.7

Researcher: (over the top) How did you understand that?

6.8

Frank: Eh it just used to piss me off really but I didn't think oh things must change and things like that.

Participant resented but accepting.

6.9

Researcher: Why do you think it fell into that pattern? What was it based on? I mean why would he assume that was your responsibility rather than a shared responsibility or his responsibility?

7.0

Frank: Don't know. Maybe I'm a better cook and I still do yeah because probably I am a better cook.

Participant believes he was more able.

7.1

Researcher: Or more responsible?

7.2

Frank: More energy, I guess, more drive. He was a very sort of introverted, self absorbed person, I would describe him as.

Partner preoccupied with self

Participant more energy, more drive

7.3

Researcher: I mean I am not here to kind of do therapy, so I may be completely on the wrong fact. But it sounds from what you are saying that he had you, in his mind anyway, as some sort of person who would look after him, or take care of him, or somehow take responsibility for things. I may be wrong.

was partner expecting participant to look after him?

7.4

9

Frank: No, that's not an unfair assessment I think. I think yeah. When I met him he had 2 very good friends, Harry and Paul, and Harry was I guess 6/7 years older than Mark was and Paul was probably 20 years older than Mark was, they were a couple and they used to call him daughter (researcher laughs) so they very much looked after him, cooked him his meals, you know, and I think he transferred that role from his mum, his mum was very much a sort of doing everything for her children type mum, so I think he probably just did expect without, not in a sort of machiavellian type way, but he did expect to be looked after and I'm quite happy, actually I've got no problem playing that role at all, as long as there is some give and take in the whole thing. I mean I do most of the cooking, less so now because Jim works at home but I used to do most of the cooking for Jim and I, but Jim would take on other roles, so it is very much a partnership, in how you both operate whereas as with D it wasn't that kind of partnership, it always had to be me in the running to make things happen and I don't know whether that undermined his confidence further which is what probably lead to his sort of violent outbursts towards or his desire to undermine my self esteem. I don't know. I don't know. I mean, I have never really worked out. I used to put it down to his frustration and his inability to articulate how he felt about things or an inability to how to respond to things. So you know, there was definitely elements of frustration and he was very much a bully as well, attempting, you know, to make me kowtow to him in the way he operated towards me.

Partner looks to others to look after him  
Continuation of being mothered.

Participant happy to look after partner but needs to be someone a task

looking for a partnership.  
Belief that imbalance within relationship leads to violent outbursts  
Frustration builds & leads to attempts to control

Current relationship more of a Partnership

Partner felt to be a bully.

7.5

Researcher: How would he do that?

7.6

Frank: Oh, as I say, belittling, nasty comments, "no-one would ever find you attractive, look how fat you are. Look how that is hanging over. Oh you look awful in that", blah, blah, that kind of thing, put down comments basically, just put you down all the time to undermine your own self confidence.

constant put-downs designed to undermine participant's self-esteem & confidence

The power of emotional abuse.

7.7

Researcher: But are you saying there was a period when it wasn't like that?

7.8

Frank: No, I mean within the first 8-10 months ..and it wasn't like that all the time. I think it was when he had periods of either feeling down, depression or whatever it was that was going through his head, he would deal with that by trying to make me lower than him so that he would feel higher up in the pecking order. And if we had a row about something and he felt he couldn't win it, you know by winning it orally, he'd result to hitting me or throwing coffer over me or whatever it was he did, banging my head on the wall.

Attempts to bring participant down. When couldn't succeed verbally would resort to fists or physical attacks

Attempts by Partner to re-order the power structure of relationship.

7.9

Researcher: What was the worst thing he did?

worst incident

8.0

Frank: Eh.

8.1

Researcher: From your perspective?

8.2

Frank: Crushing a glass... I don't know really.

Crushing Glass into participant's leg.

8.3

Researcher: Yes you mentioned him crushing a glass in your leg.

8.4

Frank: Yeah, which broke but somehow didn't, you know, didn't cause much damage, which was quite amazing really. Eh I don't know really. I mean lots of things. He once threw a cup of black coffer over me.

Damage could have been worse lucky escape

Partner throws hot coffee over participant

8.5

Researcher: Hot.

8.6

Frank: Yeah. Oh yeah. I had just made it for him, so potentially that could have been quite I mean the violence got worse towards the end and eh, I mean I generally didn't retaliate, I would walk out or leave, or just wait for him to clam down. I mean, I never got sustained beatings. It was usually, or strangling or it... it would be like a flash of rage which would then be over and then there would be all the "oh I'm sorry", there would be, "Oh I'm so sorry I didn't mean

Violence gets worse towards end of relationship

Participant doesn't fight back wants for partner to calm down

abuse = violence sporadic

never sustained beatings

Partner contribute after event.

Partner attempts to strangle participant

"oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it"

Love follows.  
Flash of rage.

it. I love you", all the usual crap that I suspect most abused partners get, male or female.

8.7

Researcher: So he would then calm down and then be very contrite?

8.8

Frank: Yeah, pretty much.

8.9

Researcher: What was happening to you in these exchanges or flash points?

Partner's violence & abuse & his fear  
Relief after event

9.0

Frank: Probably, actually at the time fear and probably quite pleased he had calmed down again cos he used to become so enraged that, you know, I think there were points where I thought, because it was uncontrollable you know, but his rage was so flash and wanted to hurt me then it would go, but there was a point where you think he is going to do something he's going to hit me over the head or something like that, you know, like Jo Orton or something.

"uncontrollable" flashes of rage

Few that partner will one day kill participant  
- hit of rage

9.1

Researcher: So, did you talk about it or were they isolated events where life carried on until the next one, or were they integrated somehow into the relationship?

9.2

Frank: It's hard to ... I can't remember whether we actually talked about .... I certainly know that things used to carry on. I remember going into work once with bruises all over my neck and some of the guys at work just wanted to go around and kill him, which I thought was quite nice for a group of straight lads at work. I think things just carried on really and often you'd just cover up cos as a general rule I didn't go in and say, "Oh hello, guess what happened to me at the weekend" I didn't really tell my family. I didn't really talk to anybody about it actually, just used to deal with it. I have a way of dealing with things. I deal with things on my own quite self contained about dealing with issues like that.

male work colleagues react by wanting to go & kill partner.

No real punctuation continuation.  
Participant's bruises there for all to see

Participant touched by straight colleague reaction  
Partner of covering up keeping things to self.

Silence as protection?

Relies on self to sort things out

"Self contained"

Self reliant.

### Interview number 3

#### Focused Coding

##### Motivation for taking part 3

“A contribution to the field”. 0.2  
A wish to help others. 0.2

##### Defining the Relationship 3

Relationship was of two years duration. 0.4  
A “difficult relationship”. 0.4  
“We didn’t have a violent relationship as such physically”. 0.4  
(Relationship was psychologically violent and emotionally abusive)  
Participant could see a time when it would be violent physically.  
“A very unhealthy relationship”. 0.4

##### Duration of relationship 3

“Luckily” it was only a two year relationship. 0.4

##### Comparing the relationship 3

Participant’s previous relationship was perfect in comparison to  
“unhealthy”, “difficult” and “abusive” relationship. 1.4  
Partner liken aspects of participant’s behaviour to his previously  
abused partner, “Oh, you are like A” (ex-boyfriend), “Oh, you are like  
D” (ex-wife). 12.3

##### Readiness for a relationship 3

“I was emotionally ready to fall in love”. 2.0  
Strong motivation to have a relationship. 2.0  
Looking for a “physical”, “emotional” and “psychological” charge,  
A “turn-on”. 2.0  
Willingness to move into partners home. 4.0

##### Initial point of contact (entry point) 3

Met on internet. 2.0



Chatted for sometime before meeting up.	2.0
They got on well at first meeting.	2.0

Duration of courtship 3

Six month courtship before they began living together.	2.0
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More to partner than meets the eye 3

Warning bells.	2.0
Subliminal awareness of “other things to this guy than what I saw”.	2.0
Partner is believed to have issues.	2.0
Absence of partner’s contact with his family begs questions.	2.2
Repeated multiple rejections of partner begs questions – “Why has everyone left this guy?”	3.6

Turning a blind eye or ignoring gut reactions 3

Knowing and not knowing all at the same time.	2.0
Awareness that something isn’t right.	2.0
“I felt there were issues, he had some issues but I didn’t know what they were and I didn’t think they would affect me.”	2.0
“Something missing in this person’s life”.	2.2
Seeing, but going along with it.	4.6
Despite reservations, participant invests in relationship.	2.0
Courtship convinces partner that they are compatible.	2.2

The start of the problems within the relationship 3

The problems begin once the couple live together. (Exploiter – exploited). (Moving in with someone, locates one differently).	2.2
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Partner’s hidden past 3

Learns of partner’s previous five/six year marriage and existence of Partner’s two children when first visits partner’s home (during the Courtship).	2.6
Shock reaction.	2.6

Blocks to confronting partner’s hidden past 3

Partner’s sensitivity and upset about his past silences participant. “I didn’t want to push and he was reluctant to tell”.	2.6
---	-----

Partner's isolation blocks participant from knowing more  
(no reality testing). 3.4

### Blame 3

Partner portrays ex-wife as evil and suggests it was all her fault. 3.4  
Partner's intolerance leads to attacks on others, who he then blames. 12.3  
Participant reflects on what he might have done that contributed to  
the abusive relationship. 12.3  
Partner convinces participant that there is a flaw in his character  
That is provoking partner. 9.1

### Pulling the wool over one's eye 3

Participant is convinced by partner's account that ex-wife is evil and  
She is preventing children from seeing father. 3.4  
Partner's children spill the beans and set the record straight –  
it is the partner who exhibits vicious and threatening behaviour  
(broke ex-wife's arm and threw her down the stairs). 3.4  
Partner "pretending to be calm and nice but there was still this  
burst of anger lurking". 10.5  
(Implicit issue of control in all this).

### Impact of violence on children 3

Negative impact on children witnessing violence. 3.4

### Risk taking 3

"Part of me wanted to take the risk and take the chance". 3.6  
Participant is willing to take the risk of a relationship with partner  
and visa versa. 3.6

### Feeling sorrow for partner 3 3.6

More sorrow than fear 8.9  
Partner is viewed as childlike and insecure. ?  
Partner shows rigid thinking and behaviour. 8.9

### Definition of violence 3

"We didn't have a violent relationship as such physically".  
However, "it was psychologically violent and emotionally abusive." 0.4

Evidence of financial abuse.	4.8
<u>Relief 3</u>	
“Luckily” it was a short lived relationship.	0.4
<u>Attempts to conceal truth 3</u>	
Partner keeps participant in dark i.e. debts.	4.0
Extent of debts only becomes apparent later.	
Participant learns retrospectively of partner’s vicious and threatening past.	3.4
<u>Getting in or getting out? 3</u>	
Partner “jumps at offer” of them living together.	4.0
Justification for living together and helping partner financially. (Possibly partner has a bigger investment in them to live together?)	4.0
Participant keeps his own flat as security.	4.4
“Participant hasn’t much to lose”.	4.4
Partner’s pressure to have a dog (whilst living together) is viewed by participant as partner’s wish to have a child, and is viewed by participant as a dilemma since it will remove his escape route.	6.4
Living together seems to increase the investment in the relationship and possibly reduces the motivation to leave. (Investing in the relationship makes it more difficult to get out)	6.2
<u>Alarm bells start ringing 3</u>	
Once they live together more is revealed. Two or three months into living together partner’s treatment of participant changes for the worse.	4.6
“The way he started treating me changed”.	4.6
<u>Paying the price 3</u>	
Unacceptable financial responsibilities placed on participant.	4.6
Agreement for partial financial help ends up with participant spending much more than was ever expected, doing all the shopping and paying the mortgage, cooking, cleaning and doing everything necessary for them to live and “he (partner) wasn’t spending a penny.”	4.8
Partner has financial responsibilities towards his children.	
Gaining an advantage at expense of participant.	9.3
Partner obsessively buying items from the internet which he didn’t need.	14.7
Guilt at how much time and money was wasted on a bad investment.	15.9

Attempted solution causes an even bigger problem 3

Partner comes to resent participant for being capable and keeping things going at home.	4.8
Participant's competence appears to show partner in bad light.	4.8
Partner starts to compete with participant.	4.8
Partner has limited options and begins to mount verbal criticism of participant around areas of stuckness in partner's own life. (Projection) (Biting the hand that feeds you).	5.0
Participant pushes for more equal relationship.	6.4
Partner has big chip on his shoulder, stuck in a job he hates, views participant's job as superior. Only option in partner's mind appears to be an attack on participant's job and to demean him.	5.0

Process of emotional abuse 3

From mockery to humiliation to criticism.	5.2
Used with intention of undermining participant's confidence – (put downs, "You can't cope") disqualification.	5.4

Inequality 3

Unequal sharing	5.4
Partner is characterised as child-like	8.9
"Not on my level"	8.9

Resilience/Protective Factors 3

Participant lacks fear (taller and bigger than partner)	8.9
Participant will challenge that which he doesn't like	11.3
Strong personality and positive feedback from colleagues at work protects participant against attempts by partner to disqualify him	5.6
Ability to tolerate things	6.3
Participant's confidence comes from his physical strength Confronts partner "Well hit me and then see who is going to come off worse"	8.8

### Impact of emotional/psychological abuse 3

Stress and tension affects sleep – no let up – no respite – no escape	5.6
Stress “I constantly had two years where I couldn’t get rid of a headache from him”	5.6
Partner’s negative energy and hostility increases participant’s attempts to avoid	5.6
Participant’s stress is associated with being blamed for provoking anger in partner	9.1
“He kept drilling into my head you are bad it’s you”	9.1

### Dawning of reality 3

“Gradually I started being aware”	5.8
The opening of one’s eyes to the reality of the relationship being in difficulty	5.8
A growing realisation that partner wants to control and dominate	6.6

### Pattern of abuse 3

From competition then abuse and then something else, “It was control later”	6.0
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### Change no change dilemma 3

Tolerating in the hope it (abuse/relationship) will change	6.2
Participant hopes he can change things from within the abusive relationship	6.2
“I was thinking a nice side is going to come out one day and eh, it would be a shame to sacrifice it now	6.2
Wait and see, don’t sacrifice what has been built up or achieved	

### Stages 3

Relationship viewed as having gone through various stages	6.2
Relationship changes over time	8.1

### The push for "happy family" 3

Partner's strong desire to have a dog is viewed as baby substitute	6.4
An attempt to mimic heterosexual families in context of partner's struggle to accept his sexuality	6.4
Also viewed as partner's attempt to tie participant down	

### The challenge of accepting one's sexuality 3

Partner calls participant his wife – relates to him as wife/mother	6.6
Participant endeavours to assert his manhood	6.4

### "Just shut up and do as I say" 3

Partner endlessly invokes his parent's relationship as the blueprint	7.0
Partner provides participant with his preferred model of relating	
"My mum just shuts up when my dad says something and if she doesn't she would get a slap"	6.6
Participant is viewed as a difficult person because he insists on answering back	6.6
"Your mouth, that's the problem in this relationship"	
"You should do as you are told" Participant says "I am not a dog"	6.6
Participant's need to defend his position	6.6
Participant's insistence in having his own voice	

### Methods of psychological punishment 3

Basic lack of trust	14.1
Sulking, silent treatment, threatening to end the relationship, inducing guilt for causing upset to partner, refusal to negotiate	6.8
Negative and critical of participant's friends, silent treatment when participant sees them	10.9

### Mind games 3

The employment of psychological splitting as a means of disappearing the abusive behaviour	7.0
"Let's pretend it didn't happen"	7.0

### Reasons for staying 3

Humour, a caring side to him, a wish to protect	7.3/5
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### Protection or possession? 3

Partner's wish to protect seem more about possession and protecting his own interests i.e. fear that his partner would leave (territorial) "Too much"	7.3
"You belong to me, your mine and no-one else is allowed to touch you"	7.3
Implication of partner's control of participant	7.5

### Sexual abuse 3

Sexual relationship was not always mutual	7.7
Partner exerts control in sexual domain	7.7
Participant feels used and humiliated in sex	7.7
Sex rather than love making	7.7

### One-sided relating 3

Partner refuses to consider participants thoughts and feelings or point of view	7.7
Participant rights and feelings are denied	7.7
Participant is wrong to have these needs	7.7
Participant's view of reality is challenged and denied	7.7

### The primacy of physical violence/abuse 3

Physical violence is the defining moment for participant	8.1
Participant leaves on the night of the attack	10.3
Partner adopts an intimidating and threatening manner	8.5
Pushing and cornering	8.7
Stops short of striking participant	8.1
Participant believes partner has to use physical violence when all other means of subduing have been exhausted	8.1

### Shifting sands 3

Challenge of managing partner's extreme states of mind – kissing and hugging one minute – five minutes later he "would be monstrous and you wouldn't recognise him"	9.1
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### Madness 3

Links are made by participant regarding partner's extreme shifts in mood and partner's brother being schizophrenic and father having alzheimer's	9.1
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### Confusion 3

Participant is confused by partner's mood, "Why is he different now?"	9.1
Partner's ill-mannered behaviour confuses	9.3
Viewed by participant as deliberate and functional i.e. to gain some advantage at participant's expense	9.3

### Victim's state of mind 3

Biggest question was "What have I done?"	9.3
Participant takes onto himself guilt and blame overtime	

### Turning the tables 3

Partner uses projection as another tool in his armoury	9.1
"You want to dominate, you want to control me, you want to kill my identity and you are so domineering"	9.1
Partner suggests that participant has a split personality.	
Participant feels that these are all elements attributable to partner	9.1
Partner questions participant's credentials for questioning him	9.3

### Influence of family of origin 3

Partner's behaviour patterns were evident in family of origin	
"I thought well this guy hasn't seem any better"	9.3

### Comfort versus discomfort 3

Relationship between the comfort of partner and the increasing Discomfort of participant	9.3
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### Naming the abuse 3

Participant begins (albeit from an angry and provoked position) the process of confronting partner with the inequality in the relationship	9.3
Line of attack provokes partner "Don't you dare question me"	9.3

### The act of physical attack 3

Partner perpetrates an unexpected physical attack to participant's face	9.5
No time to mount a defence (caught off guard)	9.5



Partner leaves participant shocked and hurt	9.5
Partner's son tells participant "I knew this would happen, this is what happened to my mum"	9.5
Partner threw his ex-wife down stairs and broke her arm	9.5

### History repeating itself 3

Partner's son tell participant "I knew this would happen this is what happened to my mum"	9.5
Partner's repetitive pattern of abusive behaviour	12.3
Partner's previous violent attack	12.3
Sister of partner says "This is identical to what happened to his ex-wife"	13.3

### Get out-leave 3

Partner's son advises participant to find someone else, that he deserves better	9.9
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### Attack – withdraw 3

Following "bloody" attack, partner returns to watch tele	9.9
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### Point of departure and endings are not the same (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> order change) 3

Participant leaves on night of the attack	10.3
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### The messiness of leaving (Staging the ending) 3

The struggle to break free	10.3
Partner is desperate and issues repeated pleas for participant to come back	10.3
Promises of change (only partially delivered)	10.3
Participant decides to give partner a chance – (importance of second chances) hoping he would change	10.3
A 4/5 month negotiation period "To see if he changes"	10.5
The struggle for participant to get partner out of his system	10.5
The need for discipline	10.5

### From a distance 3

Participant keeps relationship but from a distance	10.5
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Motivation for a continuation of the relationship 3

Participant's hope for change in partner	10.3
Partner's need of financial assistance	10.5

Terms of relationship 3

Relationship is now on participant's terms	10.5
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The pretence of change 3

"It was all acting, pretending to be calm – nice but there was this burst of anger still lurking"	10.5
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Reclaiming one's life 3

Participant is more comfortable apart – sleeps better, more concentration, more relaxed socially	10.5
"I was sorting myself out"	10.5
Recovery takes a long time	14.7
Participant gradually put on weight, appetite came back, more time for himself	14.7
Participant believes that partner didn't want him to have a life	14.7
"I feel that I owed myself a time to recover"	15.3
Rejects short-term comfort (Partner comfort buys!!!)	15.3

Recovery 3

Participant believes that when you recover you have to hurt someone else – a version of history repeating itself or Freud's notion of ?	15.3
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Social isolation as a form of abuse 3

"Partner absolutely cut the cord for me with my friends"	10.7
Participant's friends are unwelcome in couple's home	10.7
Attempts to cut-off and isolate participant	10.7

The need for secrecy 3

Participant finds a way of coping and managing friends in parallel to his relationship "I kept my mouth shut and didn't tell him"	10.9
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### The role of friends 3

Friends comment on a perceived negative change in participant's mood/behaviour – Friends express concern	10.9
Friends name the relationship as unhealthy and express dislike of partner	10.9
Participant has a need to talk to friends	11.1
Friends offer valuable advice and ongoing support	11.3

### Establishing and enforcing boundaries of relationship 3

Partner holds the view that the couple relationship should be private	11.3
Participant is clearly challenged by this edict “But then he (partner) had no friends and he wasn't the one suffering”	11.3
Participant challenges the boundary saying that he will speak to others as he cannot speak to partner	11.3

### Partner's insistence in having his own voice 3

Risk or resilience	11.3
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### The influence and impact of being in care 3

Partner's status as a LAC linked in participant's mind with a lack of insight and self awareness	12.5
Partner is rejected by parents	12.5
Partner was physically and emotionally abused in care	12.9
Feelings were denied, lack of love, cold and rejecting mother	12.9
Distant and estranged relationship with siblings, ejected and excluded from his family	13.1
Distant relationship with his own son (who is gay friendly)	14.3

### Managing the challenge of being gay 3

Partner lacks courage re sexual orientation (May be related to the challenge of physical intimacy rather than sexual orientation)	13.3
Partner is tense even in gay spaces	13.3
Failure by partner to introduce participant to family (May be linked to his own feelings of rejection and distance from FOO)	13.3
Never acknowledged “this is my boyfriend” “This is my partner”	13.3
Partner passes participant off as lodger	13.3

### Other's awareness (Linked to knowledge of violent relationship) 3

Sister confirms knowledge of brother's sexuality, believes he has a problem with it	13.3
Sister says "He is a very difficulty person, leave, you deserve something better"	

Mothers 3

Participant's mother doesn't like partner	13.7
Mother senses participant's unhappiness	13.7
Mother's sentiments prove fatal to the relationship	13.9
She confirms that partner has issues and problems	14.1

Protection 3

Participant's mother is protected from the truth	13.7
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"Break all contact" 3

Participant recommends strongly that all contact with partner is broken as a means of properly ending the relationship and getting out	15.9
Participant also believes that he wouldn't have gotten rid of partner if he had maintained contact with partner's son	14.5

Life beyond an abusive relationship 3

Participant has had encounters with other men since leaving but nothing serious	15.1
Struggle to find self and adjusting to being single	15.9

The impact of extreme abuse on future relationships 3

Give future relationship a longer time before falling in love	15.3
Have more of a lead-in	15.3
Attempts to avoid relationship like this in the future	
Depressed and guilty following relationship (angry with self)	15.7
Toughening effect on participant	15.9

Guilt 3

At not finishing relationship earlier	15.9
Guilt at how much time and money was wasted on a bad investment	15.9

Recovery 3

“I knew I had to feel pain as part of the recovery process”

15.9

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## **Interview Number 6**

### **Focused Codes**

#### **Motivation for taking part in the study 6**

Paucity of research on gay people in stable relationships  
Adding to the body of knowledge 0.4

#### **Previous violent relationship 6**

Participant had gone out with partner's old boyfriend and he describes that "they both had an extremely violent and abusive relationship" 2.6

#### **The development of violence 6**

Partner wasn't violent at first, but the incidence of violence – "it wasn't that frequent, I didn't get a beating every night" increases the more time the couple spend together 2.8  
Described as a steady flow of violence and abuse over a couple of years 3.0  
Rows develop over partner's wish to stay in bed all day 6.2  
Violence graduated and was worst towards the end of the relationship 8.6  
"He certainly became more violent as I became more distant from him" 10.8  
No pattern to it, psychological and physical abuse were intermixed 10.8

#### **An expression of frustration 6**

Partner couldn't deal with his frustration or emotion through an argument or discussion, it ended with a violent attack a "rage" 2.8

#### **Flashes of rage 6**

"I never got sustained beatings" 8.6  
It would be a flash of rage followed by "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it" 8.6  
"I love you" 8.6  
Because partner was so uncontrollable during these rages, partner fears for his life "...he's going to hit me over the head .. you know, like Jo Orton" 9.0

#### **Acts of violence 6**

Hitting participant with a table	
Crushing glass into his leg – described as the worst incident (8.2)	
Surprised it didn't do more damage because it broke (8.4)	
Hands around his throat	
Throwing hot black coffee over participant (8.4)	
Throwing objects – had bruises across his body	
Partner throws money at participant in public and then drives off	6.2
Partner attempts to strangle participant	8.6
Punches	9.6

### Emotional abuse 6

Humiliation forms part of the abuse, e.g. “you are fat” “you are unattractive”	6.2/7.6
Ongoing deterioration – “constant belittling”	6.2
Constant put downs designed to undermine participant's self esteem	7.6
Partner uses the fact that he cheated as a weapon	15.1

### Falling for 6

Participant thought partner was “really cute”	4.0
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### Indifference 6

Initially participant expresses indifference “If you two want to get back together, well that's absolutely fine, I don't give a shit”	4.2
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### The (couple) fit? 6

Partner unemployed and lacks drive and ambition.	
Participant takes charge and pressures partner to get a job	4.6
Sorts partner out with a re-training scheme (who's the daddy?)	6.0
Partner's unemployment is a problem	6.2

### Getting started 6

Early stages of the relationship were unsettled – lots of comings and goings	4.8
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### Homophobia 6

In the early stages of the relationship, the couple suffer homophobic

bullying from partner's flatmates	5.0
Kicking on bedroom door "come out you dirty queers"	5.2
Landlord serves partner with eviction notice	5.2
Partner's mother couldn't cope with him being gay – strong wish for grandchildren	15.5
Partner's brother had a negative reaction "but he's a builder"	17.3
Participant loses some friends by 'coming out'	17.1

### Moving in 6

Couple move in together 8/9 months into relationship	5.6
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### Dependence 6

Partner communicates dependence, i.e. "What's for tea?"	6.3
Partner is then critical	
Partner's dependence extends to others	7.4
Partner's mother did everything for her children	7.4

### "Not an everyday occurrence 6

Violence is not an everyday occurrence!	6.2
"Like I say it wasn't an everyday occurrence"	9.6

### Unequal 6

Responsibility within the relationship is not shared equally	6.6
Participant feels that he was more able than his partner	7.0
More energy	7.2
Partner lacks drive	7.2
Not an equal partnership	7.4

### Quietly resentful 6

"it used to piss me off really, but I didn't think, oh, things must change	6.8
Desire to undermine participant's confidence	7.4
"I began to resent him for the things he did"	10.8

### Power struggle 6

Expectation that participant will work hard to make things happen	7.6
Desire to undermine participant's confidence	7.6
Partner characterised as a bully	7.6



Participant's attempt not motivate partner and keep things moving leads to frustration and violent outbursts from partner	7.6
Pattern of partner trying to diminish participant if he (partner) felt down or depressed "so that he would feel higher up in the pecking order"	7.8
Partner trades off emotional attacks on participant to make him feel better	
When partner loses the argument, he will hit out "banging my head on the wall"	7.8
Participant says "It was almost like we were in competition with one another" "Partner competes for attention, wanted to be "fancied" or "liked"	18.7

### Taking cover 6

Generally, participant would not retaliate "I would walk out or leave, or just wait for him to calm down"	8.6
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### The urge to cover up 6

"Often you'd just cover up" linked to participant's way of dealing with things "I deal with things on my own, quite self contained"	9.2
"I remember going into work once with bruised all over my neck and some of the guys at work just wanted to go around and kill him which was quite nice for a group of straight lads"	9.2
Had tried to cover the evidence of the finger prints where partner had tried to strangle him	9.4
Kept it a secret from family and friends "Just used to deal with it"	9.2
Just got on with it (Survival strategy)	9.8
"...it is embarrassing to talk about it"	17.9

### The power of love and property 6

Participant says "I did love him and we had a nice flat together"	9.8
"I loved him and you know it won't happen again"	9.8
"..it's the financial stability stuff, it's the fact that you do actually love the person, you just don't want to chuck it if there is the potential for that person to change and not do those things"	10.0

### Fooling oneself 6

"..you would fool yourself into believing it's not going to happen again until the next time"	9.8
"It's a common theme"	10.0
"..you really don't want to believe that someone who says that they love you, also wants to know you around..."	10.4

### Keeping the victim in place 6

It seems that the constant psychological abuse served to undermine participant's confidence and this kept him in place	9.8
No confidence to meet others	9.8
Emotional pressure, i.e. silent treatment, and partner's ability to create a "nasty air" prevents partner from returning to his parent's home to say goodbye to his dying dog (the final straw)	10.8
Participant fears that if he hit back things would escalate	11.4

### Re-editing the story 6

Participant meets someone who sees him in a completely different light and this helps participant to re-write the script of himself	9.8
Having a new partner restores participant's confidence to say "no, that's it, I've had enough, I am not doing this any more"	11.2
Participant gets finally strength to say "Why don't you just piss off"	11.8/12.5

### The final straw 6

"It was almost like the last straw"	
"As I became more distant he was less able to affect me"	
"I don't really give a shit what you have to say ... I don't care"	10.8
Participant describes it as "some kind of mental switch off in my mind"	10.8
"And the last time he ever attacked me, I was walking out the door and to get out of the front door, he sort of got me in ... he's only small, it wasn't like he was some big bloke or anything like that, he was a tiny, blond haired (coughs) and he got me and he was banging my head against a wall (coughs) so I sort of pushed him off and went through to the kitchen, picked up a knife and held it to his throat and said "if you touch me again I'll kill you"	
Partner realises that participant would have killed him	11.2
"..but after that he never did it again"	11.2

### Avoidance 6

There was no discussion "we never really sat down and talked it through"	10.6
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### Absence 6

Relationship lacked a common value system	15.1
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### Motivation for staying put 6

“It wasn’t all bad, otherwise I wouldn’t have stayed with him and tried to make it work” 14.9

Partner described as “very sweet”, “very loving”, “really bright”, “witty” “cute”

They shared a lot of common interests 14.9

### Confusion re status within relationship 6

Researcher says the “when I arrived you said that you were going to be talking about a victim of DV – is that how the relationship is characterised in your mind?” 15.6

“Yeah, well no, I mean, I don’t know, I mean, I recognise fully that I was a victim of domestic abuse” 15.7

Partner never instigated violence or abuse, (never fought back, 11.2) although towards the end of the relationship, participant goads partner to “slap him back”

“I would mentally give him a good tongue lashing” 16.3

Participant reflects on his own violent feelings but believes that he wouldn’t act on them 16.5

Pattern of participant choosing relationships where he is the victim 16.7

### Challenge of breaking the pattern 6

Participant says that it was hard to break pattern of subsequent relationships with guys “who could play around with your head” 16.9

### Experience leads to more discernment 6

Participant believes that having been through a violent and abusive relationship helped him to appreciate the man who came after 16.7

### Get to hell out of there 6

Participant emphasises the seriousness of being in an abusive relationship and advises others to get out  
“...there will come a point where, if you are in a relationship like that, they will lose it at some point and they will end up either really hurting you, or killing you” 17.9

### Breaking the silence 6

Participant tells a friend at work (female) who reacts strongly  
"He's a bastard, you ought to leave" 18.1

Getting the strength to end it 6

Participant says it is only when "...your own self-confidence re-asserts  
itself that you eventually get the balls to do something about it" 18.3  
The psychological hold had gone 14.0

Targeting the victim 6

"Like I say, he was very charming, very bright, it was only really me  
that got it" 18.7

Reluctance to leave 6

Staged departure 12.8  
Pressure to leave comes from participant 12.8  
Despite securing a flat, partner continues to live with participant 13.0  
At one stage participant, his new boyfriend, partner and his boyfriend  
were all living in a one bedroom flat 13.6  
It takes partner 8 months to leave 13.6  
Partner expresses love for participant and says that he doesn't want  
to be alone 14.0  
Disbelief by participant at how little self respect partner has 14.0

Feeling guilty 6

Participant feels guilty for partner 13.0  
Confusion as to why he feels guilty – taps into partner's vulnerability 13.2  
Some residual feeling for partner 13.2

## Example of the development of a core category

### Core Category    The pressure mounts

#### Sub-categories

##### 1. Reasserting Power

###### Focused Codes

###### Threats to the balance of power

Resentment builds (1:3.8)  
Participant “more pissed-off with his jealousy and with his moods and with this and the other and his drinking and promising this and promising to give up” (1:6.4)  
Expression of resentment unleashes serious physical attack (1:6.4)

###### Responsibility for actions

Participant takes no responsibility for his actions (2:2.8)

###### Attempted solution causes even bigger problem

Partner resents participant’s capability and keeping things going (3:4.8)  
Participant pushes for a more equal relationship (3:6.4)

###### Assuming responsibility

Participant feels burden of responsibility for relationship (4:3.2)  
Growing resentment at having

to assume responsibility (4:3.8)  
Frustration (4:1.8)

### Mounting Pressure

Participant questions partner's  
lack of investment and rows  
develop (5:1.4)  
Partner feels under pressure (5:1.4)  
Tension mounts and leads to  
more arguments (5:1.4)

### Quietly resentful

"I began to resent him for the  
things he did" (6:10.8)

### Power struggle

Participant attempts to  
motivate partner, leads to  
violent outbursts from  
partner (6:7.8)

## **2. The abuse is there for all to see**

### **Focused codes**

#### The visibility of abuse to others

Black eyes and bruises  
visible for all to see (1:3.8)  
Couldn't hide injuries (1:6.6)  
Difficult to hide (1:4.8)

#### The role of friends

Friends express concern (3:10.9)

#### The act of physical attack

Partner's son tells participant  
"I knew this would happen, this  
is what happened to my mum" (3:9.5)

#### The urge to cover-up

"I remember going into work once

with bruises all over my neck and some of the guys at work wanted to go around and kill him” (6:9.2)

### **3. Naming the abuse and its consequences**

#### **Focused Codes**

##### **Naming the relationship as abusive**

“Once it became something I couldn’t hide” (1:4.8)

##### **Importance of others**

Others name the abuse (1:5:2)

##### **Consequences of disclosure**

Pressure from others to leave (1:5.2)

##### **Naming the abuse**

Participant’s mother names the abuse (2:2.8)

##### **Significance of naming abuse**

Participant tells partner, “I can’t carry on, this has got to end” (2:2.8)

##### **Speaking out**

Participant talks to friends who say “dump him, leave him, let him go, don’t stay with him” (5:6.1)

##### **Breaking the silence**

Participant tells a friend at work who reacts by saying “he’s a bastard, you ought to leave” (6: 18.1)

(See below for an explanation of how these subcategories informed the development of the axial code)

### **The development of the axial code**

The axial code was arrived at through a process of linking the focused codes to subcategories which then informed the construction of the core category. It should be said that the construction of the focused codes relating to the first interview informed that of the second and so on. In other words, the focused codes were built up with the previous interview(s) in mind and were also compared across the data set as a whole. This is reflected in the way in which a range of interviews inform the construction of the subcategories and then the development of the core category. The axial code then attempts to provide a more abstract concept, in this instance, designed to capture and speak to the processes at work within the abusive couple relationships of the men I interviewed. The idea of 'the pressure mounting' for these men, helps to explain aspects of their behaviour as well as those around them. In addition it also suggests a sense of movement, since the frustration and anger relating to the build-up of pressure, ultimately lead to action from the men themselves.

A further example of the construction of a core category, linked to the development of an axial code is provided below.



## *The development of a core category*

### **Core category** **Managing powerful encounters**

#### **Subcategory**

#### *Entertaining Doubt*

#### *Focused Codes*

##### *Turning a blind eye or ignoring gut reactions*

Knowing and not knowing all at the same time (3:2.0)  
Awareness that something isn't right (3:2.0)  
"I felt there were issues, he had some issues but I didn't know what they were and I didn't think they would affect me" (3:2.0)  
"Something missing in this person's life" (3:2.2)  
Seeing, but going along with it (3:4.6)  
Despite reservations, participant invests in the relationship (3:2.0)  
Courtship convinces partner that they are compatible (3:2.2)

##### *More to partner than meets the eye*

Warning bells (3:2.0)  
Subliminal awareness of "other things to this guy than what I saw" (3:2.0)  
Partner is believed to have issues (3:2.0)  
Absence of partner's contact with his family begs questions (doubt) (3:2.2)  
"why has everyone left this guy?" (3:3.6)

##### *Alarm bells start to ring*

Once they live together more is revealed - partner's behaviour changes (3:4.6)  
"The way he started treating me changed" (3:4.6)

### *Neediness shatters illusion of perfection*

Partner's "claustrophobic neediness surfaces within four weeks and finds a perfect fit with participant's need to be needed (4:1.4)

A mutually reinforcing relationship (4:1.4)

Partner's dependency needs overwhelm the relationship (4:3.2)

Participant's utter frustration and despair at partner's inertia (4:10.8)

### *Warning signs are ignored*

Three months into the relationship participant questions whether to stay "because it just wasn't right" (4:5.0)

Participant feels revulsion for partner who he describes as "pathetic", "weak", "needy" and "just unable to make any decisions" (4:5.0)

### *Reluctance*

Reluctance of partner to let participant into his world (5:1.0)

### *The couple fit*

Partner unemployed and lacks drive and ambition (6:4.6)

Participant takes charge and pressures partner to get a job (6:4.6)

These focused codes were linked to a subcategory labelled 'entertaining doubt' and were linked to other subcategories labelled 'instant connection', 'responding to the other' and 'the challenge' - all related to the early stages in the development of the couple relationship. These were subsequently developed into a core category named 'Managing powerful encounters' and the axial code for this section of the data analysis became 'The meeting point and beyond. Responding to the challenge of a new relationship'. This section of the data analysis spoke to an important stage in the couple relationship and helped to raise some interesting questions concerning the emergence of violence and abuse in these initially blissful relationships, where, as the relationship

developed, doubt in one's partner was not embraced. The importance of this is that it allowed for an exploration of an important stage in the development of a gay male couple relationship in the context of violence and abuse.

## **The entry point**

These codes formed the basis of the development of memo “Points of Entry into a New Relationship” (Appendix 9). They allowed me to really understand the way these men entered their relationships and factors that were motivating and organising their decisions.

### **Focused Coding**

#### **Terms of engagement/Rules of engagement** (2) 2.8

Partner comes and goes as he pleases.	(1) 1.8
Partner dictates terms of relationship.	(1) 1.8
A willingness to engage.	(2) 2.8
Participant sets the terms.	(2) 2.8

#### **The struggle for control**

Mind games from day 1.	(1) 3.2
Participant moves into partner’s home.	(3) 2.0

#### **The power of an attractive man**

Fancied by a gorgeous man who could have been anyone’s.	(1) 17.4
“He chose me”	(1) 17.4
Impressed by partner’s good looks.	(1) 12.2
Attractive gay man fancied by many.	(4) 0.7
Attraction to “cute” boyfriend.	(6) 4.2

#### **Readiness for a relationship**

Participant’s readiness for a relationship.	(3) 2.0
Readiness and need for a relationship.	(5) 0.8
Spotting someone who matters and making his move.	(5) 0.8

#### **The power of the first encounter**

“Like magic”.	(4) 0.7
Lingering and powerful memory of first point of contact.	(4) 0.7
Positive first meeting.	(3) 2.0

### **Working at and for the relationship**

Relationship demands commitment and management of times together and times apart. (6) 5.0

### **The role of ambivalence**

Declaration of disinterest paradoxically brings couple together. (6) 4.4

Partner comes and goes as he pleases. (1) 1.8

Partner's uncertainty as to whether he wants the relationship. (1) 3.2

### **Knowing and not knowing**

Admission of doubts. (3) 2.0

Awareness of "other things to this guy than what I saw". (3) 2.0

"I didn't think they would affect me". (Turning a blind eye!). (3) 2.0

### **Throwing caution to the wind**

The pull of the wild and reckless. (1) 12.2

The allure of good sex. (1) 12.2

### **Occupying the one-down position**

Gratitude. (1) 17.4

"Emotionally needy". (1) 12.2

"Unbelievably needy – claustrophobically needy". (4) 0.7

Poor self esteem. (4) 0.7

Partner shows vulnerability and neediness. (5) 1.0

### **Diving in versus taking one's time**

Lots of talking before the first meeting. (3) 2.0

Six month courtship. (3) 2.0

An intense relationship from day one. (2) 0.7

"We were virtually living together from that point onward". (2) 0.7

Sexual contact at first meeting. (5) 1.0

### **A coming together**

A shared wish to continue with the relationship. (5) 1.0

Fast tracking an intensive live-in relationship. (4) 0.7

### **Unfinished business**

Unfinished business with past relationships. (6) 4.2  
“He wanted to ‘come out’ and leave the marriage and his children  
(and he has just split-up from his boyfriend). (2) 2.8