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Stories from Outside the Frame: Intimate Partner Abuse in Sexual-minority Women's Relationships with Transsexual Men

This qualitative research study examined the relational experiences of sexual-minority women partners of female-to-male transsexuals (N = 20) using grounded theory analysis. This article reports data on abusive relationships reported by a subset of the sample (N = 5), representing a unique and under-studied population. It explores the theoretical constructions that are available from the mainstream anti-violence movement and those from the anti-violence writings of other marginalized communities. Sexual-minority women described abuse tactics by their trans men partners that were influenced by the particularities of their trans partner's identity and oppression, as well as the features of the activist communities of which they were a part. The research findings of this aspect of the study suggest that the context of a 'first relationship' with a trans man, the social context of transphobia, and the traditional gender-based heterosexual model of relationship violence in which participants do not recognize themselves as victims of abuse all contribute to vulnerability to abuse. Clinical applications and community implications are discussed.

Key Words: *female-to-male, gender, lesbian, violence*

The gendered nature of relationship violence, statistically and cross-culturally, is clear (Amnesty International, 2004; Status of Women Canada, 2004). The disproportionate victimization of women is endemic, and pioneers of the feminist movement have done much to advance our understanding of how abuses of social power and control function to maintain such victimization (Herman, 1992). Traditional conceptualizations of intimate partner violence from a sociopolitical perspective include the idea that partner abuse is rooted in sexism (Merrill, 1996), that it is a consequence of social inequality (Miedema and Nason-Clark, 2004), and that multiple marginality increases vulnerability to violence.

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Substantial critiques of these conceptualizations are two-fold. The first critique is that the marginalized features of minority communities are often not well-reflected in the prevalent anti-violence literature (Ristock, 2005). The general failure of the mainstream movement to integrate differences of social location within the category of gender has been highlighted primarily by women of colour (Timmins, 1995), and the implication of this failure is that interventions are not adequately sensitive to, or grounded in, the realities of target communities, presenting significant barriers to seeking and/or benefiting from available help (Ritchie, 2005). The second critique is that the prevalent theory does not easily apply in cases where there is no obvious imbalance of power, or where the victim would seem to have *more* social power than the perpetrator (Renzetti, 1992). Thus, abuse in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans relationships represents a significant theoretical challenge to the 'grand narrative' of partner violence as an outgrowth of patriarchy and power imbalances (Ristock, 2002). There have been well-founded political fears about disrupting this ideology, such as a fear of contributing to negative stereotypes about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans populations, as well as a fear of discrediting and creating a backlash against the feminist movement(s) or depoliticizing male violence (Ristock, 2002). Despite these fears, it is important to question and expand current ideology. Not doing so limits our understanding of the nature of power and the dynamics of abusive relationships, and has historically functioned to minimize and drive underground other forms of violence (Ristock, 2002).

This article engages these critiques by examining findings from a community-based interview study with 20 sexual-minority women partners of female-to-male transsexuals about their experiences with their partner's transition. The larger study examined multiple domains – conceptualizations of sexual and gender identity, relational dynamics, partners' sense of inclusiveness in community, external stressors and sources of resiliency – and if or how these changed as a result of transition. In order to best capture issues of process and identity development and transition, the relationships under investigation were ones in which partners were in an established romantic relationship prior to the realization or disclosure of transsexuality.

This particular portion of the larger study looked at the significant minority of participants (5 out of 20, 25%) who, in the context of responding to general questions, described their trans man partner and/or his behaviour as abusive. Because participants self-selected and the study did not use random sampling techniques, no conclusions about rates of prevalence can be drawn from this research (Ristock, 2002); however, this proportion is similar to reported rates of interpersonal partner violence among the general population in the USA. (Field and Caetano, 2005). While the number of participants on which this article is drawn is small, the phenomenon of partner abuse in this context requires examination. Except for one general reference on the possibility of trans people being abusive (Cook-Daniels, 2003), discussions of such abuse are absent in the literature, and in public discussions. This article will highlight some of the unique

subcultural aspects of these relationships that contribute to a context in which abuse can take place, and compare and contrast this phenomenon with reports of abuse in other encapsulated communities, and in the mainstream.

PARTICIPANTS

The 20 participants for the larger study were recruited through personal contacts, and local and international list-serves for partners of trans men. All participants were currently, or were once, partnered with a female-bodied person who 'came out' as transsexual during their relationship. At the time of their partner's 'coming out', all identified themselves as sexual-minority women and were not themselves trans-identified. To elicit particular issues of role transformation for the purpose of the larger study, 'female-to-male transsexual' was defined as a female-bodied person who at minimum had transitioned publicly in name and pronoun. Participants from all over Canada and some parts of the USA were interviewed in person (11), or on the phone (6), or via email (3).

At the time of the interviews, 10 of the 20 participants were in active partnership with the trans man of whom they were speaking (relationship length varied from 1 to 9 years, with a median of 4 years). Ten interviewees discussed past relationships (of a 1.5- to 5-year duration, with a median of 2.5 years). Participants were Caucasian ($N = 14$), South Asian, First Nations, and Black. One participant no longer identified as a woman, but as a trans man himself. Participants ranged in age from their mid 20s to 40s (median age of 31). Three participants were actively parenting. All participants had some post-secondary education. Class status varied among participants, half of whom described themselves as being poor, low-income, working or criminal class,¹ and half of whom identified themselves on a middle-class spectrum. There was nothing in particular about the five abused women to distinguish them from the larger group, except that all of their relationships had ended by the time of the interview (median of almost three years in length). Slightly over-represented in this subgroup were white women (four) and working-class women (three), with a lower age median (29), only two of whom had face-to-face interviews (two participated over the phone and one over email).

METHODS

Face-to-face and phone interviews were taped and transcribed by the author and these transcripts were analysed using grounded theory methodology, an inductive qualitative approach generating theory from data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Because the focus of the study was experiences of partner transition, I did not specifically ask about abuse. Two participants were fairly forthcoming about abuse in the context of answering questions about changes in feeling around shifts

in transition, and relationship length. The others disclosed the abuse with more ambivalence. Two completed the interview without any direct reference to abuse – one disclosed abuse in response to the last interview probe, which asked interviewees to share anything that featured as an important part of her experience that had been left out. This participant clearly distinguished between some of this material that was shared to be included as part of the formal analysis, and select material that was shared ‘off the record’, at which time the tape-recorder was turned off. The email participant referred to ‘anger’ multiple times, and a follow-up question of how specifically her partner’s anger manifested itself with concrete examples yielded a much clearer picture that abuse took place. The last participant referred to ‘poor treatment’ and similarly disclosed verbal and physical abuse to my question about the specifics of ‘what [poor treatment] looked like’.

As the author is both a clinician and a researcher, women’s current safety and support networks were informally assessed and deemed to be satisfactory. Non-local participants were sent a follow-up correspondence that related the emergence of abuse as a theme shared by some other participants, and that contained an offer of additional community resources. Each participant was sent a copy of her interview transcript and requested to review it, with the opportunity to make corrections, additions or to request that something be struck from the record, with the understanding that everything in the final transcript was subject to analysis. Each participant acknowledged receiving the transcript and none of them requested that changes be made. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. In addition, each participant was sent a copy of the dissertation that contained the material and concepts on which this article is based. Three of the five women replied, two specifically thanking the author for the chapter related to experiences of abuse.

Because of the small number of participants reporting abuse ($N = 5$), a theme analysis was employed for this topic, where the grounded theory open codes were clustered hierarchically into five distinct factors:² types of reported abuse; difficulties in identifying the abuse; adapting to the abuse; recognizing and escaping the abuse; and explanations for the abuse.

RESULTS

Types of reported abuse

The five participants who reported abuse described various kinds of it in their relationships, all of which had ended by the time of the interview. All reported classic forms of emotional and verbal abuse, including manipulation, yelling rages, name-calling, and demeaning comments. One participant was not allowed to sleep and/or had her sleep interrupted enough to keep her in a constant state of sleep deprivation. Some participants described their trans partners as treating them ‘inconsistently’ (‘Sometimes he treats me like a princess, and other times

he treats me like shit.’). Participants described the feeling of ‘walking on eggshells’, trying to anticipate (and avoid) what would upset their partners. Some participants also described threatening behaviour such as their partner punching walls, destroying objects or throwing objects at them, threatening to take her possessions, and bullying. One woman reported that her partner tried to kick down the door of the room in which she had locked herself for protection. Some participants also disclosed physical abuse such as being shoved, bitten, and strangled. Two interviewees also reported being manipulated into financially supporting their abusive partners. None disclosed sexual abuse per se, although rape in sexual-minority and trans communities is one of the more taboo (and least-studied) subjects (Istar Lev and Sundance Lev, 1999). Sexuality was occasionally featured in different ways as part of a controlling pattern, such as not being ‘allowed’ to initiate sex, and repeated violations of the agreed-upon ground rules in a non-monomamous relationship.

Difficulties in identifying abuse

Abuse in oppressed communities is a complex issue, and one that the participants struggled to recognize and make sense of, in part because the dominant feminist, gender-based (heterosexual) understandings of relationship violence failed to adequately account for their experiences. In particular, the view that transsexual partners were ‘more oppressed’ as a consequence of their transsexual (and sometimes other minority) status(es) seemed to prevent participants from thinking they could also be abusive because it contradicted the dominant model of violence where the abusive partner is the person with more social power. Said Sherisse:

I’d feel like being on the receiving end of emotional abuse that I believed I never would have taken from a non-trans man and I never would have taken from a woman . . . I spent a lot of time . . . educating myself on *his* oppression and [thinking of him as] so powerless in a societal sense that there would be no way he could have enough power to be abusive, so I didn’t recognize it in a way that I would have otherwise . . . but I know that he used his various identities – trans included – to reinforce that myth for me.

Participants struggled with how to place themselves within gendered frameworks of normalcy given their partner’s transition. People typically use outside information as a baseline for comparison. Of the existing literature, however, there is little that clearly articulates a transsexual’s ‘normal’ developmental trajectory and even less available from the perspective of partners of transsexuals. This absence, in combination with the possibility that a significant other may not have access to other experiences of trans people can create a context in which trans partners may set themselves up as ‘experts’ who then define realities. Said Sherisse:

I felt like I had to learn a whole new set of rules that I learned later, were very specific to him . . . but because he was the first guy I was with and also because of the nature of it, he kind of spoke as though he defined trans experience. I

definitely felt like ‘if I was going to be in the trans community that I should know [and do or not do] X, Y, and Z’.

Similarly, Maria said that, although she could identify behaviours she thought were ‘unfair’, ‘there was something about the fact that he was trans that let me think, “Okay, maybe that’s okay”’. These quotes point to the potential vulnerability identified in Ristock’s (2002: 57) research – the context of ‘first relationships’:

Lesbian women enter into a first relationship as outsiders to lesbian communities, and are often not plugged into any support systems. It suggests that vulnerability to violence is part of the cost of a heterosexist context in which lesbians are isolated, unable to access meeting places, and often dependent on their first lover for information . . .

This is a useful analogy in understanding that some of the women in relationships with trans men expressed a particular uncertainty with respect to expectations of ‘normal’ behaviour and, in states of confusion, often deferred to their trans partner who also normalized and dismissed violence.

In addition to the vulnerability of ‘first relationships’, the social context of isolation due to transphobia may contribute to the risk of violence. Experiences of transphobia serve to isolate partners of trans men from their communities and make it difficult for them to identify abuse more publicly. These partners are often supportive of trans people and trans issues, and fear that exposing abusiveness will encourage transphobia. Maria shared:

I can’t tell [my family] the whole truth cause I’m busy convincing them that trans is okay [and that they don’t need to be worried about me]. I needed them to understand and believe trans, and that was true of all of my friends, but especially my family because I knew they would think trans people were crazy if they heard that this person was treating me that way.

Because transphobia is systemic and pervasive, these political fears of backlash are well founded and ‘create the conditions to make violence . . . into a secret or private issue’ (Ristock, 2002: 3).

Adapting to the abuse

None of the women involved the police, told their families, friends or therapists until the relationships had ended. While still in relationships, two women tried to have their partners pursue counseling or an anger management group. Women’s continuation of the relationship was in part sustained by a belief that the abusive behaviour was only temporary: attributable to regressive behaviour during a ‘second’ adolescence, to hormonal shifts, and to experienced social losses. The women also believed that increased effort and support on their part would assuage the violence. These adaptive strategies were also connected to abusive tactics used by trans men.

One of the most powerful themes that emerged from the topic of abuse tactics by

trans men was the use of trans status and/or political discourses against partners, a theme also identified by Cook-Daniels (2003). Lettelier's (1996) concept of abusers 'tailoring' their abuse to specific partner vulnerabilities is relevant here – trans people mobilizing identity politics to explain their abusiveness is powerful because of their partners' commitment to issues of anti-oppression and activism.

Activist communities are highly political, where membership is in part contingent on a set of shared values that require an awareness of, and attention to, power and opposition to forms of oppression. For this reason, they are not sites where one anticipates abuse. Moreover, because membership is contingent, members may perceive their membership as always tentative and fear its revocation. These communities are also fairly marginalized and insular, and typically are highly meaningful to those who are part of them. For this reason, members often have high stakes in their belonging and continue to be concerned with the ongoing evaluation by others of the appropriateness of their membership. Transphobia is one of the more newly identified oppressions, and for the last number of years it has commanded (not without legitimacy) the attention and focus of many activist communities. As a result, there exists a hyperconsciousness around transphobia. At the best of times, this alertness contributes to greater dialogue about, and awareness and understanding of, transphobia. At the worst of times, it contributes to a process of internal policing that creates a climate of fear that shuts down process and the possibilities of what can be discussed. Said Maria:

My impression is definitely that there is a lot of potential for hard times that nobody's willing to acknowledge because it's not PC [politically correct] to say, 'Actually the way you're treating me is like an *abusive* guy, not just a guy, right?'

In trying to be a 'good ally', some partners accepted behaviours they believe they would never have tolerated under other circumstances. Warned Serena, 'I ended up compromising a lot in trying to be too understanding. I totally let my boundaries – about what's okay and what's not – [go] out the window'. This was inextricably tied to trans partners exploiting significant others' desires to support them and explaining abusive behaviour as a function of transition or transphobia. When Serena confronted her partner, he said, "I realize . . . I'm not treating you well. I'm just really dealing with a lot of it [transition]'s bringing up these things for me', at which point she would revoke her threat to leave. Said Sherisse:

I always wanted to make things better for him, and so then he could do things and say, 'Well, it was because someone called me 'she' today', so like that sort of justifies him going off on me for two hours.

In another example, Sherisse talked about the emotional and physical exhaustion of working long hours to completely financially support her partner, who essentially blackmailed her with the threat of 'exposing' her to the community as 'transphobic' if she did not:

I spent so much time paying for his blood work and his testosterone, which he needed and if I didn't pay for . . . I was a bad girlfriend, I wasn't supportive of him, and then I became 'anti-trans'.

Participants also reported the tactic of 'denying that you are affected by the transition or by being partnered with a trans person' (Cook-Daniels, 2003). Serena had a difficult time confronting her partner about his behaviour because he would often deflect and invalidate her concerns in this way: 'This is not about you, it's about me. *I'm* transitioning, not you.'

While these aspects were specific to the activist and trans subcultures, participants also described a more general and classically recognizable abuse tactic; a cycle of double-binds where any and all efforts they made were criticized by their trans partners. Maria said:

I had become very, very insecure by the end of the whole thing because I wasn't *femme* enough, I wasn't *me* enough, I didn't *love* enough, there was nothing I could do that was enough – it felt like an endless dissatisfaction that I was trying to fill.

Recognizing and escaping abusive behaviour

A top factor in recognizing abusive behaviour (even if only retrospectively) was meeting or knowing other trans men or other couples where a trans man was partnered with a sexual-minority woman. Serena reported that meeting healthy people who had transitioned put her situation into perspective. Similarly, Sherisse talked about later meeting more trans men and realizing there was no 'one way' to be a trans man. 'I spent some time after I broke up with him, learning to undo some of those "rules", sexually as well as politically'. For Amber too, knowing another trans man, Sam, helped dispel the myth of Li's abusive behaviour as being a normal part of the transition process:

Sam has, I feel, excelled at healing and transitioning at the same time. His disappointment, fear, anger and stress around being trans and the treatment of trans people in the society is handled with insight and self-love . . . Having Sam has helped me to see that anger and transitioning are not synonymous. I was in a relationship with an angry person.

Abuse is gradual in nature and, sadly, another factor in identifying and leaving an abusive pattern was its escalation in severity. Amber hoped it was temporary in nature:

At the time I believed that maybe he would snap out of it – that he just had an angry spell that would quiet in time. Certainly, we still continued to have quiet and peaceful times together. But when we did fight, we seemed to be taking it further and further.³

All participants described increasing violence from their partner, feeling fearful, and an ultimate incident or physical act that participants recognized as a personal 'point of no return'.

Explanations of abuse

As partner behaviour gradually became recognized as problematic or abusive, participants utilized one or more of the following categories of explanation for this behaviour: 'sex', 'personal', 'gender', and 'oppression', each of which vary in their attributions of responsibility.

The sex-based discourse framed the troubling or abusive behaviour as biological and developmental in nature through the use of trans-specific phases of transition. Drawing on biopsychosocial discourses of change not only minimized and excused the behaviour, but indeed framed it in a manner that made it appear normal or 'to be expected'. For example, Cher⁴ prefaced her own concerns with the idea that the problematic behaviour was only temporary:

I think the *hormones are fighting inside his body* right now, so that's a bit hard, um and I'm assuming it will settle itself a little bit, in a couple of months, from what I've read and understood. (my italics)

She goes on to say that, since starting testosterone, she and her partner have been having more sex than they have had in the past. Although she is unequivocally positive about this shift, she was at times uncomfortable with the nature of its expression:

I'm assuming again, that that will find its way *as his body copes with the surge of testosterone* because in a sense, *he's going through puberty*, right? [my italics] Um, but there's a part of it that bugs me. It's not like, 'Wow – I'm hot for you. I want to have sex with you', it's like, 'I have this urge. I need to take care of it', you know?

Cher employs the popular subcultural reference 'he's going through puberty' as having developmental explanatory and normalizing power for her partner's behaviour. Furthermore, she draws on the biological, in which 'the hormones' are cast as a contributing force, a force that the body is 'fighting' and with which it is 'cop[ing]'. This active speech acknowledges the behavior as unusual (and by implication, something to be tamed) at the same time that it normalizes it. While not denying that hormones do affect the body's physicality, Cher's emphasis on the body also serves the function of positioning her partner's behaviour as outside his direct control.

In an example of multiple explanations, Collette identified the interaction of the effects of testosterone and her partner's own unresolved personal issues as contributing factors to his increasing anger:

I thought [testosterone] made him more rageful and he already *was* rageful . . . I thought the rage was his own fucked-up shit that he was going to have to take care of, no matter what, and [the hormones] exacerbated it . . .

A personal-based discourse utilized personality and personal problems as explanations for abuse. Amber thought transphobia was one aspect of the context, but not an explanation for abuse: 'There were many compounded issues going on for [my partner]. Being trans doesn't happen in a bubble. I guess it just made things a lot harder.' In this way, she also integrated personal history and responsibility.

It sounds selfish but I was scared the stresses he was about to face [with the disclosure of his transsexuality] would leak onto me. I already noticed a trend in his behaviour – that is when he was hurt, he tended to shut down or be spiteful.

The gender-based discourse employs traditional gender role conceptualizations as accounting for abusive behaviour. Participants alluded to the contributions of problematic cultural models of patriarchal masculinity. Cher's own observation from the trans men's community was that at times it encouraged competitiveness around machismo and created 'peer pressure' to exhibit a stereotypical masculinity 'especially when you want to pass'. Maria wanted to give her partner feedback about his behaviour 'but you can't say that to the person who's being kind of abusive to you, especially if that's their idea of what guys do'. The emphasis on gender roles produces a sympathetic view of trans men trying to 'fit into' a predetermined masculinity.

The oppression-based discourse explains abuse as a function of struggles with transition and transphobia and with being an oppressed person. Despite describing acts of perpetration, sexual-minority women partners employ a discourse that functions to highlight the victimization of trans men. In one example of this, Maria drew on ideas about internalized transphobia:

In order to make himself feel okay, I had to feel so small all the time . . . I think he didn't feel satisfied with himself, so that anyone who loved him was going to feel that way . . . I think there's something about being really uncertain about your confidence and your self and your identity that makes you try to control everything around you . . .

Said Amber:

Li also was prone to making fun of stereotypical female behaviour. He would call girls flippant or stupid or make remarks about women's bodies. He was suspicious of women: women were definitely something other than what he was. He constantly made distinctions between the 'way women act' and the way he acts.

It is difficult to distinguish what amount of this report may reflect sexism (an *identification with dominant, misogynist masculinity*) and what may reflect a *disidentification* process through devaluation (a trans man's attempt to distance

himself from, or reject, what is 'female'), or both. These quotes from Maria and Amber may represent attempts to understand the abuse as a form of 'projective identification'.⁵ Projective identification is a popular intrapsychic concept from the psychodynamic literature, meaning the unconscious process whereby a person invokes, through their behaviour, their disowned feelings in another person. In this case, the participants construct, although not explicitly, their abusive trans partners as lacking entitlement as a result of oppression, and yet because these self-devaluative feelings are intolerable to the trans man, he instead disowns them and 'passes them on' in the devaluation of his women partners (i.e. Maria's 'I had to feel small so he could feel okay'). The implications of incorporating projective identification into the meaning-making process are again to locate responsibility for the abuse in the inequalities of the social world rather than with the individual partner.

DISCUSSION

Although there are no known texts that directly address the issue of abuse by transsexuals, there are a number of vague references to offensive or angry behaviour by trans men in the transsexual literature. These texts are important to engage because, in the absence of accessible information about transsexuality and given the authority bestowed on 'insider' accounts,⁶ such representations may serve to reinforce or undermine women partners' explanations for abuse. Aligning with the oppression-based discourse, a hypothesis about questionable behaviour by trans men is provided by Rubin (2003: 165), who asserts:

the most dominant beliefs about sexed bodies and gendered core identities can produce some of the most secure forms of masculinity . . . [and that] being recognizably male-bodied makes it more likely that FTMs [female-to-male transsexuals] will reject stereotypical versions of masculinity . . .

According to this theory, trans men in the early stages of transition, or those who are unable to transition, are in a position where their status as men is most likely to be challenged. Under this threat, they may react defensively and 'over-compensate with stereotypical forms of masculinity . . . to make legitimate claims to male status . . . [where oppressive behaviours are] meant to serve as "proof" of manhood' (Rubin 2003: 167). Given that the dominant culture is both transphobic and sexist, abusive behaviours by trans men may be understood as more likely in the context of a desire for and pursuit of normalcy – that 'fitting in' includes asserting a hegemonic masculinity of establishing and having power. In the end, however, Rubin's (2003: 168) argument slides into a definitive claim: 'If a core identity is denied and transition is inhibited, they [transsexual men] *will need to* reiterate even the most offensive aspects of maleness' (my italics).

This perspective serves to abdicate trans men of individual responsibility for their behaviour, and serves as a potential justification for abuse. In an unfortunate

way, it mirrors the very ideology some trans men *have* incorporated in their construction of their abusive behaviour, and that abused partners have accepted as a rationale to their own disadvantage. It is also a theoretical argument that does not bear out in practice. If true, then presumably trans men would reproduce less offensive behaviour as time went on and as their transition progressed. What the women told us, however, was that, as time went on and their partners' transitions progressed, the abuse followed the classic pattern of escalation and increased violence over time.

Participants' sex-based arguments (i.e. violence as attributable to hormones and biology) also appear in transsexual accounts and texts. Linking testosterone and aggression is a controversial and politically charged claim that has been both denied and supported in the existing literature. Cohen-Kettenis and Gooren (1992) concluded that androgens had no systematic effects on aggression and anger in trans men. A number of high-profile trans men have commented on the physical and emotional effects of testosterone: having to manage new and difficult impulses including the experience of a 'rapid escalation in temper' (Cameron, 1996: 20) and, more provocatively, the urge to rape (Valerio, 1998). In Devor's (1997) study, trans men participant reports ($N = 45$) were inconsistent, but some reported a perceived increase in their aggressiveness. Reports of Rubin's (2003: 159) interview participants ($N = 22$) were also 'mixed, sometimes confirming and sometimes challenging our normative assumptions about gender'. Rubin points to accounts in which trans men reported becoming more calm and centred after receiving testosterone, mirroring observations made by multiple sexual-minority women partners of trans men in this larger study (Brown, 2005). Rubin (2003: 145) argues:

Transsexualism itself does not necessarily subvert or affirm dominant forms of masculinity. Transsexual men have the potential to generate either alternative or hegemonic forms of masculinity.

Rubin (2003: 156) asserts that particular 'normative claims about male embodiment and biology' may not be tenable, but to some extent trans men may depend on these claims 'to make themselves into recognizable, gendered subjects'. These claims are not consistent with reports that trans men are often abusive only towards their female partners, suggesting they are choosing who and when to be abusive. While it may be that the traditional feminist literature fails to adequately capture the experiences of sexual-minority women partners of trans men, it is also true that available theory and accounts in the transsexual literature fail to offer a coherent explanation of abuse by a transsexual partner. These failures problematize the viability of singular explanations and underscore the need for context-based understandings of relationship violence.

Sexual-minority women described abuse tactics that relied on the particularities of their trans partner's identity and oppression, as well as the features of the activist communities of which they were a part. A lack of knowledge about trans

people and typical transsexual trajectories was used against them and fear of being viewed as transphobic often kept them from speaking out when they finally did recognize their partner's behaviour as abusive.

Another perspective on this material is that, while this population is unique, some of the themes are familiar, both with respect to the experiences reported by other encapsulated communities and with respect to the mainstream literature on abuse,⁷ an amended version of which can lend an important framework through which to understand the particularities.

These types of reported abuse – emotional, physical, sexual, and economic – are similar to those reported in other marginalized communities as well as those in the mainstream.

The difficulties sexual-minority women partners of trans men had in identifying the abuse were also similar to those reported in other marginalized and non-marginalized communities in that the abuse was gradual in nature, and was facilitated by a re-conceptualization of the perpetrator as a victim. Perpetrators tend to perceive and construct themselves as victims (Farley, 1996), and a perpetrator's power is in getting their partners to join them in that construction. Partners then use these available myths to preserve the relationships (Jones and Schechter, 1992). What is particularly powerful about discourses of victimization in marginalized communities is that they are readily available and reinforced, and not *merely* a construction as they are in non-marginalized communities. Men of colour *are* at risk for and regularly experience racism; trans men *are* at risk for and regularly encounter transphobia. A number of research studies (Lombardi et al., 2001; Xavier, 2000, 2003) suggest 'the pervasive and everyday presence of violence and insecurity in the lives of transgender people'⁸ (Moran and Sharpe, 2004: 396). Furthermore, current human rights legislation does not recognize gender identity as a protected category,⁹ placing trans people at considerable vulnerability, and with little recourse. Despite this increased vulnerability, trans people face particular barriers in accessing social services, many of which are sex-based (Ross, 1995; Vancouver Rape Relief Society v. Nixon and British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal, 2003) and operate on 'conditional acceptance criteria' – subjective policies whereby entry depends on the degree of passing¹⁰ – that is, the ability to pass as the gender for which the service is designed (Namaste, 2000). These are realities that for a partner of a trans man add persuasion to an argument about victimization. Moreover, what separates significant others of trans men from many other marginalized communities is that they generally *do* have greater social power than their partner, making the situation difficult to identify as abuse if we understand abuse as something requiring social power. Although never directly addressed by participants, another dimension to the relationship's 'hook' may in fact be guilt associated with the biological privilege she has that her partner does not. Merrill (1996: 19) argues that guilt, shame, fear, and a distorted sense of responsibility can be manipulated, and once partners 'have been robbed of their personal sense of power, [they] can be dominated by an abusive person with less actual power'.

Themes identified from abuse tactics and adaptations to abuse such as participants' ideologically based solidarity and fear of extradition from the community apply to other encapsulated communities such as some communities of colour (Hill-Collins, 1991), and some religious (Horsburgh, 2005) and rural (Doherty and Hornosty, 2004) communities. Community settings 'shape the context in which their abuse occurs' (Harrison, 2004: 156). Abusive partners also often use the context to shape the abuse by employing tactics based on the victim's commitments or attachments to specific issues, or that distort the victim's character with respect to these issues as a means of control. This is a general pattern in the abuse literature and is related to the particularities of the setting or community. For example, lesbian women may be threatened with being 'outed' at the risk of job or child custody loss (Ristock, 2002); undocumented or non-status women may be threatened with deportation or losing their immigration sponsorship relationship (Wachholz and Miedema, 2004); and women of colour who resist abuse (from a partner of colour) may be accused of racial disloyalty (Bent-Goodley, 2001). In this study, sexual-minority women partners who resisted abuse were accused of being 'anti-trans' and were implicitly threatened with the status of their political reputations.

Personal accusations, however false or distorted, are often embedded in very real and larger subcultural struggles as well, and, in this respect, represent a distinctive feature of many encapsulated and minority communities. The concern about the public exposure of abuse is a complicated issue involving silence as a means of protection against further oppression. In the same way that partners of trans men talked about their reluctance to discuss the abuse publicly having to do with transphobia in the culture, and fears about reinforcing people's negative stereotypes about transsexuals, some lesbians (Ristock, 2002) and people of colour (Chung and Lee, 1999) have had this same reluctance for fear of fuelling damaging stereotypes about their group and of further exposing them to homophobia and racism. West (2005) refers to this phenomenon as a 'political gag order'.

Non-trans partners of trans men share greater similarities to other marginalized groups in the use of oppression as an explanation for their partner's abusive behaviour. Across almost all marginalized and non-marginalized groups, sex-based vulnerabilities and gender socialization are readily available as having explanatory power (with perhaps the exception of woman-woman relationships), as are personal reasons such as substance use or a trauma history (Jones and Schechter, 1992; Ristock, 2002).

Escaping the abuse is a highly personalized process, but one that is facilitated by a changed perspective and outside support. There is a shared burden among minority groups in escaping abuse that is distinct from non-marginalized groups, and that is that the available interventions (i.e. involving the criminal 'justice' system) involve disproportionate vulnerability and risk issues for their partners. Immigrant men may be deported (Wachholz and Miedema, 2004); men of colour are at increased risk for police brutality (Méndez, 1996), are disproportionately

incarcerated (Coker, 2003), and suffer more harsh sentencing penalties when compared to whites (Steffensmeier and Demuth, 2000). Similarly, trans activism has highlighted serious problems with police and the prison system (Moran and Sharpe, 2004), and a system divided by sex raises safety concerns for incarcerated transsexuals (see *Kavanagh v. Attorney General of Canada*, 2001).

While trans people are often victims of violence, this research reveals that they can also be perpetrators. This illustrates the need to understand power relations and violence in more complex ways than the oversimplified binaries of victim/powerless and abuser/powerful, which have traditionally been tied to gender (Ristock, 2005). Vulnerability to abuse along lines of social privilege is a reality, but it is not the *only* reality. Traditional feminist theory is not a sufficient explanation for vulnerability and resilience to relationship violence. In minority subcultures, the values and perspectives of that community shape experience and meaning-making (Tummala-Narra, 2007), and the more subcultures one identifies and relies on for one's sense of self, the more salient the interactions of those influences with the larger culture (Koss and Harvey, 1991). In a larger context of victims often defensively claiming power through self-blame (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), there may be more, and more subtle, pressure from victims in political communities to assume responsibility given the premium placed on supporting members with less social power. In this way, Mary Harvey's (1996, 2007) ecological theory of trauma and recovery points to the importance of attending not only to the relevance of the dominant culture, but also to the dominance of the relevant culture.

Clinical application

Given the findings of this research, therapists will want to listen closely for the potential for abuse in these relationships as they would any others, particularly because sexual-minority women partners of trans men may not recognize themselves in traditional abuse narratives. This research suggests women's vulnerability to abuse is higher in the context of a 'first relationship' with a trans man and in not knowing other trans men and their partners, which the therapist should consider potential risk factors. In retrospect, participants realized they had not held their relationship to the same relationship standard in terms of expectations for treatment and degree of reciprocity. When uncertain, client and therapist should revisit and clearly articulate these standards to establish a baseline and to determine if, and by how much, a client has deviated from her baseline. This research suggests that the primary reason significant others leave their baseline is because they believe, and their partners encourage them to believe (although never in such a formulaic or explicit way), either that abusive behaviour is connected to a normal trajectory of undergoing transsexual transition (i.e. a period of regression or adolescent-like egocentrism), or that their political status as allies in activist communities is at stake unless they comply with particular demands. This latter belief also involved participants' own constructions of what it meant to be

an ally, which appeared to be taken up in a way that positioned the trans partner, because he was seen as 'more oppressed',¹¹ as someone to whom to defer. As a result of this experience, participants' reflections on the process often involved an expanded and more nuanced understanding that solidarity with trans people need not come at their own expense.

Therapists can hopefully incorporate knowledge of these 'hooks' into discussions with clients in order to help them identify abusive behaviour. Because women may be committed to trans issues, and to their partners who they see suffering and as lacking support, the idea of leaving them may be particularly guilt inducing.

Community-based implications

This research also shows the limitations of a traditional gender-based heterosexual model of relationship violence. While explaining many forms of violence, there are ways in which it also renders particular forms, such as those experienced in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans communities, incoherent and invisible, so much so that some participants could not *conceptualize* their trans partner's behaviour as abusive because of his oppressed status. While the limitations of the popular model are not new, the existence of abuse in trans communities is not well documented. This suggests that concepts and violence prevention initiatives need to shift to be able to incorporate understanding of these phenomena if we are to fully appreciate the complexity of power relations and violence. More specifically, violence perpetrated by and against trans people should be part of community discussions and initiatives to raise awareness among members in order to better recognize and organize around it.

Fear of fuelling transphobia and anticipated poor treatment within the criminal 'justice' system are very real issues that will also require working through on a community level. None of the abused women in my sample involved the police, despite having cause for doing so, a few in part because of a complicated web of feelings of concern and protection for their partner, shame of admitting they were abused, and fear of judgment from activist communities they were not sure would believe them or support such a decision that conflicted with the ideological opposition to police affiliation. There are no organized community alternatives for justice. Some women reported that the lack of options left them unprepared to involve formal systems, and yet feeling both angry that their partners 'got away' with abusive behaviour and guilty that they did not take some action against them. This dilemma speaks to the importance of the creation of community alternatives, and working to improve knowledge and sensitivity in the 'justice' system through anti-oppression trainings and increased liaisons with community.

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NOTES

1. Two of the interviewees made their primary income from sex work. Participants denoted 'criminal' to draw attention to the criminalization of their labour from an institutional perspective, and to the particular stigma and risks their employment carries.
2. Like grounded theory, the process to generate a basic category is similar, and what distinguishes a theme analysis is a more general focus on 'sameness'. The absence of a critical mass in numbers did not allow me to be able to look for what was different within a category, which would have produced the categorical properties and dimensions characteristic of grounded theory.
3. None of the interviewees described themselves as engaging in abusive behaviour in a way that might be understood as 'mutual'. Some described themselves though as participating in rather than disengaging from conflicts with their partner. They reported acts that can be thought of as 'fighting back' in ways that appeared both to be more involved than 'self-defense', but still in response to partner threats or initiation of abusive behaviour. Collette said she 'could scream right back' at her partner, and Amber reported resisting Li's attempts to control her and, as his violence increased, deploying a political threat similar to ones Li used against her. These responses challenge traditional constructions of victims as passive.
4. Cher did not identify her relationship as abusive. She is not counted among the 'five' participants but this questionable passage is included nonetheless.
5. Thank you to Dr. C. Malkin for this interpretation.
6. Such standpoint theory principles are reflected in debates about who may make knowledge claims. Standpoint theory claims that one's position as an 'insider' not only gives one 'epistemic privilege' (i.e. a more rich and insightful understanding of other 'insiders', as well as a superior and less distorted knowledge of that experience (Wolf, 1996)), but that indeed it 'takes one to know one' (Wolf, 1992, cited in Kirsch, 1999, p. 16).
7. Comparing the features of sexual-minority women partners of trans men to other minority groups is to draw attention to analogous aspects of intimate partner violence, and not to imply equivalence. Analogies nevertheless serve a limited function, and fall into the trap of artificially dividing up membership along one axis, when people often belong to multiple communities of reference. It falsely implies, for example, that the category 'sexual-minority women partners of trans men' is made up only of white women when the analogous community of reference is 'women of colour'. I am not sure how to draw attention to tensions in the social structure without falling into this trap, except to acknowledge that it is one.
8. One limitation of the mentioned studies is the lack of distinction made between trans-

sexual and transgendered people, which tends to erase the specificity of violence directed towards transsexuals (Namaste, 2000). Within the category of transsexuals, little mention is made of the fact that the majority of known victims are both male-to-female and working as prostitutes, obscuring other forms of oppression (i.e. anti-prostitute sentiment, sexism, racism) at work (Namaste, 2005).

9. In Canada, this is true with the exception of the Northwest Territories which was the first Canadian jurisdiction to pass explicit legislation in October 2002 (EGALE, 2005). Ontario has stopped short of that, but the provincial human rights commission passed a policy on discrimination and harassment based on gender identity in 2000.
10. Namaste (2000) notes that this criterion differentially impacts low-income and poor people as they are rarely able to finance the means to transition or pass well, as well as people who are disqualified from medical transition because of seropositive status, or unable to fulfill the preconditional 'real life test' set out by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's Standards of Care (e.g. sex workers whose employment does not count as such).
11. 'Assessments' of oppression (often based on the assumption there is a hierarchy of oppression, itself a problematic concept) are complicated. While it seemed to be women's perceptions that their partners were 'more oppressed' than they were on account of them being transsexual, experiences of oppression are based on multiple, interactive axes (including race, class, sexuality, dis/ability). Furthermore, some community consultants wondered whether, if trans partners 'passed', they did not actually have more social power in some instances, however tenuous and dependent that privilege on not being 'discovered' as transsexual.

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