

VICTIMS OUTSIDE THE BINARY:
TRANSGENDER SURVIVORS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

While research on intimate partner violence (IPV) has begun to include gay and lesbian relationships, these studies have almost entirely focused on cisgender relationships or victims. To date, little to no research exists on IPV in the transgender community. The current study explored accounts and meanings of IPV victimization as told by 18 transgender-identified survivors. Thirteen in-depth interviews and five open-ended questionnaires were analyzed from a modified grounded theory method through open and focused coding that revealed three broad and salient themes. First, the accounts of violence illustrated the role of transphobic and genderist attacks in the dynamics of abuse. Central to the power dynamics in these abusive relationships was the use of these attacks against trans identities. Second, participants constructed meanings behind their IPV victimization; specifically, they addressed why they felt this happened to them and what motivated abusers. Participants emphasized the meaning behind much of what they experienced as the abuser controlling transition. The survivors described their abusers as wanting to regulate their transition processes and maintain control over their lives. In their discussions, participants attempted to make sense of their experiences and explain why this could've happened. Participants felt that they were susceptible to abuse and in a period in their life in which they felt unwanted due to their trans status. This trans vulnerability is how most of the participants explained why they felt they were victimized by their partners. Finally, as all of the participants in the study had left their abusive relationships, their narratives revealed their processing of a victim identity. In these discussions, participants utilized a gendered discourse or a “walking of the gender tightrope” as they distanced themselves from a “typical” feminine and passive victim. Further, participants described navigating genderist resources as they sought help

for their experiences. This study offers ground-breaking insight into how IPV affects transgender communities and illuminates the distinct realities faced by these survivors.

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LIST OF ACROYNMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

MTF	Male-to-female transgender
FTM	Female-to-male transgender
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer
LGB	Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For more than three decades, the issue of intimate partner violence (IPV) has been a central aspect of the second-wave feminist movement, public policy, and academic research. Recent estimates have illustrated that IPV continues to be a serious public health concern with 3 in 10 women and 1 in 10 men having been victimized (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith et. al 2011; Centers for Disease Control 2012). Intimate partner violence can be defined as:

“...any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to those in the relationship. Such behaviors include acts of physical aggression, psychological abuse, forced intercourse and other forms of sexual coercion, (and) various controlling behaviors such as isolating a person from their family and friends, monitoring their movements, and restricting their access to information or assistance” (Heise and Garcia-Moreno 2002:89).

This definition encompasses various aspects of IPV that include those behaviors outside of the physical violence that occurs and emphasizes the emotional or psychological consequences that arguably are equally or more devastating than bodily injury (Carlson, McNutt, Choi and Rose 2002; Teitelman et. al 2011).

Intimate partner violence is viewed today as a social problem as a result of the efforts of feminist activists and scholars of the 1970s (Chapman and Gates 1978; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Martin 1976, 1981; Straus et al. 1980; Walker 1979). This movement framed the social problem as violence against women (VAW); a phenomena that exists directly as a result of a patriarchal power structure that fosters a hostile cultural climate against women and enables men to perpetrate violence against them as a means of controlling women in our society (Dobash et. al 1992; Dutton 1994; Yllo 1993). Within this paradigm, our cultural construct of the gender binary is the primary facilitator of the existence of VAW and inherently women are the only

potential victims while men are the only potential perpetrators. The response which emerged from these intellectual exchanges and theorizations about women's place in society provided the foundation for the development of the sociopolitical or sociocultural explanations of the existence of domestic violence. These arguments generally concluded that VAW was a "natural consequence of women's powerless position vis-a-vis men in patriarchal societies and the sexist values and attitudes that accompany this inequity" (Martin 1976:xxi).

Though these theories provided a logical framework to understanding domestic violence, they were limited by heteronormativity and its inherent heterosexism. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars began challenging these approaches and highlighted their inapplicability to the existence of same-sex IPV (Hammond 1988; Hart 1986; Island and Lettellier 1991; Istar 1996; Merrill 1996; Renzetti 1992; Renzetti and Miley 1996). Since then, a multitude of studies have indicated that intimate partner violence affects the LGB population at rates similar to those of heterosexual women (Cruz and Firestone, 1998; Cruz, 2003; Hamberger, 1996; McClennen, Summers, and Vaughan, 2002; Merrill and Wolfe, 2000; Owen and Burke, 2004).

While the literature exploring same-sex IPV and the experiences of gay and lesbian victims has expanded, transgender victims remain largely absent from the research. Borstein et al. (2006) noted that the term "trans" refers to a wide range of people whose gender identity or expression varies from the cultural norm for their birth sex (Feinberg 1998)" (pg. 160). Relatively little is documented in the literature about the distinct realities faced by transgender IPV victims. With decades of research in same-sex IPV having often times lumped trans

experiences with gays and lesbians, little attention has been given to how genderism¹ structures trans victimization, dynamics of abuse, and presents barriers to help-seeking. Girshick (2002) described this as a “complete lack of research on IPV among transgender people” which she characterized as a “serious gap” in the literature (pg. 7). More recently, Ristock (2011) stated that the field of same-sex IPV research has been dominated by a focus on lesbian victimization and that still “very little work addresses trans experiences” (pg.4). In one of the few trans-specific studies available, Courvant and Cook-Daniels (1998) cited preliminary analyses from the Gender, Violence, and Resource Access Survey of trans and intersex individuals that found a 50% victimization rate by an intimate partner. In 2006, the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRC DV) reported that of all their reporting agencies, too few had clientele that identified as transgender to garner any information. This difficulty in obtaining transgender samples has often lead scholars to exclude trans responses in same-sex IPV studies or to just “offering binary gender identity categories (i.e. only men or women)” which does not accurately represent the diversity of genders within the community (NCAVP 2011: 11).

The current study fills the gap of knowledge on transgender victims of IPV. By using in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires to examine in rich detail the experiences of transgender victims who self-identify as a victim of IPV. Developed through a queer criminological approach, a major goal of this study was to empower trans voices that have been historically marginalized in the IPV literature and provide the opportunity to explore the context and dynamics of abuse experienced. These accounts provide invaluable insight into the unique realities of abuse against those living outside of the gender binary. This critical examination

¹ Genderism is can be understood as a “a social system of structural inequality with an underlying assumption that there are two, and only genders”, and is used here to describe the structural, institutional, interpersonal and intrapersonal systems that marginalize, subordinate and threaten gender-variance, and individuals who identify as transgender, genderqueer and/or otherwise gender-variant (Bilodeau 2007)

locates intimate abuse within the larger context of the transphobia and genderism that has long silenced these stories.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Prevalence of Same-Sex IPV – an Absence of Trans Victims

In early explorations of many social issues, obtaining frequencies of occurrence is an essential first step in gauging the magnitude of a problem. The early literature concerned with exploring non-heterosexual victims of IPV focused primarily on cisgender lesbian and gay men. As a result, this growing area of research commonly referred to this IPV as “same-sex”. The term “same-sex” itself ultimately reified the reliance on rigid gender binaries and limited its research to lesbian and gay relationships. Often, many of these studies would refer to their research as specific to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community while actually only focusing on LG experiences (Brown 2011). While limited to same-sex relationships, the prevalence literature in this area presented a strong case for the need of further research and theorization in IPV outside of heterosexual relationships.

It is generally accepted that about one in four women will experience domestic violence within their lifetime (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Prevalence rates require a nationally representative, probability based sampling frame and technique. While nationally representative samples are obtainable for estimating heterosexual IPV rates, the same is not necessarily true for same-sex relationships. For same-sex IPV, obtaining prevalence rates presents many challenges. First, our current heterosexist and homophobic culture marginalizes and isolates the gay and lesbian community. Much of the early research did not bother to seek LGBTQ participants and violence within same-sex relationships went unexamined (Bland and Orn 1986; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Dobash et. al 1992; Demaris 1992; Dutton 1994; Morse 1995; Stets and Straus 1990; Straus 1974, 1990, 1993; Straus and Gelles 1990). Further, as a result of our hostile

cultural climate, many gays and lesbians may not be “out” enough to ever be within any possible sampling frame (Burke and Follingstad 1999). While nationally representative samples can assume that most, or sometimes all, of their participants will be heterosexual, the same is not true when attempting to reach the LGBTQ community. Even among those who live “out” lives, participating in studies would require them to reveal their sexual orientation and intimate details about their relationships which may make it more difficult for researchers to seek respondents. Finally, some have even argued that obtaining a probability based, representative sample of the LGBTQ community will *never* be possible (Owen and Burke 2004; Ristock 2002; 2011). These scholars argue that because we cannot account for those who are not “out”, we cannot possibly assume to generalize an entire population in which we really have no full population to select from (Ristock 2002; 2011). In general, they have proposed that ideal sampling methods are ultimately unrealistic when attempting to study the LGBTQ population; “there is no sampling frame that lists gay and lesbian persons, so all samples are based on self identification of sexual orientation; this makes a random sample impossible to design” (Owen and Burke 2004; 131). Renzetti (1992:19) had previously noted this issue with prevalence rates when she stated that “studies of homosexual partner abuse have had to utilize nonrandom, self-selected samples. Therefore, they are not true prevalence studies. It is doubtful that researchers will ever be able to measure accurately the prevalence of homosexual partner abuse, but this is not to say that these studies have no value”. Finally, there is the issue of social desirability when answering questions about intimate violence. While this is a problem with heterosexual samples as well, it has been proposed that this is a uniquely different barrier in reaching LGBTQ samples. As with many other historically oppressed groups, the LGBTQ community is consistently under attack by

conservatives and others who wish to institutionally marginalize the population. Because so many damaging narratives and myths already exist about the LGBTQ community, members may be even more reluctant to reveal negative information about their relationships (Burke and Follingstad 1999; Cruz 2003; Girshick 2002; Hammond 1988; Renzetti 1992; West 2002).

Despite all of these limitations, a multitude of scholars have not stopped short of proposing that LGBTQ IPV rates are similar to heterosexual rates (Bograd 1999; Brand and Kidd 1986; Kurdek 1994; Lockhart et al 1994; McClennen 2003 2005; Renzetti 1992 1996 1998; Renzetti et al. 2010). Among gay men, studies have shown a wide range with prevalence rates ranging from 14% to up to 50% (Oringher and Samuelson 2011; Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison 1999; Stanley, Bartholomew, Taylor, Oram, and Landolt 2006). In a study by Turell (2000), an author developed survey instrument containing a wide range of abusive physical and emotional behaviors was utilized with a convenience sample of 499 gays and lesbians. This study found that 32%, roughly near that experienced by heterosexual women, had experienced some form of IPV in past relationships. In another widely cited study, Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison (1999) utilized the nationally representative National Violence Against Women (NVAW) survey to compare IPV between same-sex and heterosexual cohabitants. The authors utilized behaviorally specific questions to assess experiences with sexual violence as well as a modified version of the CTS that contained questions about previous family violence. The results illustrated that those who had lived with a same-sex intimate partner were significantly more likely to also have been raped, physically assaulted as children by a caretaker, and physically assaulted as adults by an intimate partner as well as other perpetrators. The authors reported that 23.1% of same-sex cohabiting men had experienced IPV as opposed to 7.7% of opposite-sex cohabiting men.

Further, 39.2% of same-sex cohabiting women said they experienced IPV while 20.3% of opposite-sex cohabiting women reported experiencing IPV. They also added that women in same-sex relationships were more likely to have experienced IPV by a male than even those women currently in opposite-sex relationships and that men in same-sex relationships were more likely to have experienced rape as a child than men in opposite-sex relationships. The authors claim their findings demonstrate that same-sex relationships may be more violent than opposite-sex relationships. Further, they ask whether having “same-sex preferences make men especially vulnerable to male pedophiles” and also ask “do girls who are raped as minors have difficulties relating to males and therefore turn to same-sex relationships?” (1999:423). These controversial statements have been challenged by other researchers (Ristock 2003; West 2002). Considering that this overall sample was 98.2% heterosexual with only 0.8% (N=65) of men and 1% (N=79) of women reporting having lived with a same-sex partner “as a couple”, these findings should be, as Renzetti (1998:119) stated of other studies like it, “interpreted cautiously, given the methodological weaknesses of the studies that generate them”. Finally, the authors note that at the time, the Census estimated 390,992 men and 402,788 women were living with a same-sex intimate partner. Following this estimation, the authors sample would represent less than 0.016% of same-sex male households and 0.019% of same-sex female households; this is far from representative.

In actuality, while prevalence rates are argued to be similar across sexual orientation, it is readily apparent in the literature that the studies do not reflect a consensus. This is largely due to the wide range of different measurements of violence, sampling techniques, and other methodological issues. For example, asking respondents whether they had ever experienced IPV

or whether they are currently in an abusive relationship generates widely different rates. Additionally, many early studies even failed to ask the gender of their perpetrator (Dutton 1990; Waterman, Dawson, and Bologna 1989); assuming that since the sample was gay or lesbian they would only report IPV from a same-sex relationship (West 2002).

Despite the limitations in obtaining same-sex IPV prevalence, several studies have estimated various LGB specific rates. Among the early prevalence studies, Coleman (1990) found that in a convenience sample of 90 lesbians, 46.6% of them could be classified as violent. In another study looking at victimization, Lie et al (1991) found that among their sample of 169 lesbians, 73.4% had reported experiencing some aspect of same-sex IPV. In more recent work, West (2002) stated that the prevalence rate of partner abuse experienced by lesbian women in the available literature ranged anywhere from 8.5% to as high as 73%.

In a more comparative study utilizing the NVAW survey, Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) examined lifetime prevalence of rape and physical assault by intimate partners for a sample of women. When compared to women with only male intimate partners, they found that women with female intimate partners had significantly lower rates of rape and physical assault. Women with female partners had a rate of 11.4% while women with male intimate partners had nearly double the rate at 20.3%. These findings were different than their previous 1999 study which showed higher victimization for women in same-sex relationships as this study focused on lifetime prevalence. Messinger (2011) most recently utilized the data to perform what he referred to as the “first multivariate analyses of the NVAW data to compare same-sex vs. opposite-sex partners” (pg 2229). The author estimated multivariate regressions with a sample of 65 assumed gay men and 79 assumed lesbian women and compared them to 14,038 heterosexually partnered

respondents. While he stated that there “is reason for caution” with his methods, he goes on to conclude that his findings illustrate that “IPV is significantly more prevalent among GLB individuals than heterosexuals. Indeed, GLB IPV is startlingly *twice* as prevalent” (pg 2239).

While the literature reflects a wide range of prevalence rates, it is apparent that this is due to methodological, measurement, and sampling differences. As West (2002:122) stated, the same-sex IPV literature “has been plagued by methodological problems”. However, it is generally accepted that rates for both same-sex and heterosexual IPV fall between “approximately 25% to 35%” (McClennen 2005). As more comparison studies utilize the same methods, measurements, and sampling frame and find consistent rates, these estimates will continue to be refined.

Beyond the issues with obtaining prevalence rates of same-sex IPV, adequately gauging the prevalence of transgender victimization presents even more difficulties. The only national transgender violence survey was conducted by a team of researchers and activists at the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (Gender PAC 1997). This survey measured lifetime experience with biased crime, violence, or harassment in a convenience national sample of 402 transgender identified individuals. The transgender orientations included in the survey were male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals², female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals, transgender male, transgender female, and intersexed. Crossdresser, drag queen, and drag king were collapsed into one category; stone butch and Nellie queen were also collapsed into one category. While this survey generally revealed high rates of biased crimes against transgender individuals, it did not specifically focus on IPV. However, while no questions were asked pertaining to experience with intimate partner

² Unlike transgender individuals who seek little if any medical intervention in their transcendence of gender, transsexuals are categorized as those who have or seek medical intervention to alter their physical bodies.

violence, respondents were given the option to select the relationship to offender in all crime questions. The results illustrated that 5.4% of the reported crimes were perpetrated by either an ex-partner/lover or a current one. Because the survey did not include any tactics of partner abuse or further detail into the crimes committed by an intimate partner, little information was garnered on transgender experiences with IPV.

In a later study conducted by the San Francisco Department of Public Health, 392 MTF and 123 FTM transgendered individuals were surveyed with general health questions that included experiences with abuse. In this survey, respondents could also indicate their relationship to the offender. The results illustrated that among MTF individuals, 44% of those recently abused were abused by a boyfriend, husband, domestic partner, or sex partner; overall 16% of MTF individuals had experienced physical violence by an intimate partner (Clements, Katz, and Marx 1999). Among FTM individuals, 8% reported having experienced physical violence by an intimate partner. No further questions investigated tactics or consequences of IPV experienced by these victims.

Courvant and Cook-Daniels' (1998) Gender, Violence, and Resource Access survey has been cited as the first trans study that specifically addressed IPV victimization (Borstein et al 2006; Brown 2011). As part of the Survivors Project (1998), Courvant and Cook-Daniels sought to obtain prevalence estimates of IPV victimization among transgender and intersexed individuals. Although details of the study including methodology and sampling are not provided, the authors found that 50% of respondents had been raped or physically assaulted by a romantic partner. One quarter of these of these victims required medical attention. While half of the respondents had reported experiencing IPV, only 62% of these individuals identified themselves

as victims of domestic violence when directly asked. In a more recent study, the Transgender Sexual Violence Project conducted by For Ourselves: Reworking Gender Expression (FORGE 2005), surveyed 265 transgender individuals about their experiences with sexual violence. In this study, the researchers expanded the definition of trans to include “a full range of gender variance” (p.1). This included any participant that identified as having a gender identity or expression outside of the gender binary of male and female. The sample revealed that 20% of experiences of sexual violence occurred in the context of a dating relationship. Additionally, 29% of experiences with sexual violence were perpetrated by the respondent’s intimate partner.

These two major efforts represent the only attempts at obtaining lifetime prevalence rates of trans IPV victimization (Brown 2011). While these prevalence rates did not result in generalizable estimates, they did illustrate a need for attention on trans-specific IPV. These studies show that trans IPV victimization is a problem and one that has largely been absent from the same-sex IPV literature. Beyond prevalence, even less is documented in the literature on trans-specific experiences with abuse.

Contexts of Abuse – Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Transphobia

For the LGBT community, the cultural and social context in which IPV occurs frames the experiences of violence differently than for heterosexual victims. Specifically, homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia structurally disadvantage LGBT victims and also foster opportunities for abuse that rely on this power structure. The marginalization of LGBT individuals may fuel intimate abuse through the isolation and shaming of victims as well as present barriers to help-seeking.

Homophobia has been defined as is the “fear, disgust, hatred, and/or avoidance of lesbians and gay men. The behavioral manifestations of homophobic feelings and beliefs include anti gay discrimination and anti gay hate crimes” (Cramer 2002; 2). Similarly, Cramer (2002:2) describes heterosexism as the “expectation that all persons should be or are heterosexual; the belief that heterosexual relations are normal and the norm”. While homophobia is conceptualized as more of a personal attitude towards LGB, heterosexism refers to the larger, institutionalized system of oppression that stems from our rigid patriarchal gender hierarchy and fosters a culture in which homophobic attitudes are common and “normal”. As Girshick (2002:35) describes it: “heterosexism rests on patriarchal male privilege”. Because same-sex relationships exist within a culture that is largely homophobic and heterosexist, dynamics of abuse occur within this larger context. Lastly, transphobia refers to the “feeling of unease or even revulsion towards those who express non-normative expressions of gender identity and expression (Lombardi 2009). Throughout the literature, the role of homophobia and heterosexism is prominent in tactics of abuse, the internalization of such beliefs, and how it systematically disadvantages same-sex IPV victims. However, because very few trans-inclusive studies exist, less attention has been given to the role of transphobia and genderism in the IPV victimization of transgender individuals.

Homophobia and Heterosexism in Victimization

Considering the problem of homophobia and heterosexism, researchers have conceptualized these as unique risk factors for LGB. West (2002:124) stated that “researchers argue that societal discrimination fosters homophobia, which becomes internalized when [LGB] accept society’s negative evaluations of them and incorporate these beliefs into their self-concept”. As a result, these internalized beliefs may decrease feelings of self-worth and self-

esteem, and contribute to feelings of powerlessness which may make some LGB more susceptible to IPV (2002). For example, in Cruz and Firestone's (1998) sample of gay men, they found that internalized homophobia was a common theme in same-sex IPV victimization. The men in their sample described the abuse as part of "gay relationships". The authors cited this as an example of internalized homophobia. Renzetti (1998) further argued that the issue of internalized homophobia is an area of same-sex IPV research that needs to be further explored as it leads to other IPV victimization risk factors and consequences such as substance abuse and self-destructive behaviors. She argued that internalized homophobia may lead to an obsession with closeting ones relationship; an isolation that could contribute to IPV risk or exacerbate existing same-sex IPV. She stated that "framing this information more schematically, we could say that societal homophobia (a social-structural variable) produces internalized homophobia (a psychological variable), which in turn may generate, among other outcomes, partner abuse in homosexual relationships" (1998:123).

In addition to it playing a role in victimization risk, other researchers have also stated that homophobia and heterosexism contributes to the perpetration of same-sex IPV (Allen and Leventhal 1999; Balsam 2001). Erbaugh (2007) explains that all intimate relationships occur within three concentric circles regardless of sexual orientation: they are the intimate relationship, the immediate social circle, and the larger society. As a result, because same-sex relationships exist within a larger structure that is homophobic and heterosexist, perpetrators may utilize these oppressions in tactics of abuse. Renzetti (1992) explains that perpetrators in same-sex relationships often utilize psychological threats that involve "outing" a victim to friends, co-workers, or family or even convincing victims they are worthless in our society because they are

gay or lesbian. The use of homophobic and heterosexist tactics by abusers in same-sex relationships has been widely documented (Erbaugh 2008; Girshick 2002; Island and Letellier 1991; Leventhal and Lundy 1999; Merrill 1996; Merrill and Wolfe 2000; Renzetti 1988 1992 1998; Ristock 2002). In the Cruz and Firestone (1998) study, one participant described, when asked why they thought domestic violence was perpetrated in same-sex relationships, that [gay men] bring in “problems to the relationship that they’ve had growing up and coming out, coming to grips with their homosexuality and sometimes you’ve got so many emotions” (Cruz and Firestone 1998:168). In the example they cited, the participant is describing a reason for same-sex IPV as one that is a result of homophobic/heterosexist issues in the larger culture. That, as he stated, “the straight community does not realize....the ridicule, discrimination and bias faced in our relationships” (168).

The uniqueness that homophobia and heterosexism plays as perpetrator tactics has led the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Projects (NCAVP) and other regional/state-wide anti-violence projects to incorporate these common tactics into their measures of abusive behaviors. In Renzetti’s 1992 study, the survey instrument included questions about protecting the lesbian identity and societal attitudes towards lesbianism but did not include homophobic or heterosexist tactics utilized by abusers. In a recent report released by the NCAVP (2011), they found that in 7% of their reported cases of same-sex IPV, threats of “outing” sexual orientation and gender identity were utilized by abusers. While this is not an overwhelming number, it does represent a figure that is a unique aspect of same-sex IPV. As the report stated, “outing someone to their friends, family or workplace, can be dangerous for survivors, possibly endangering their employment and isolating them from support and safety networks (2011:30).

Transphobia in Victimization

Fewer studies have examined the role of transphobia and genderism in the IPV victimization of transgender people. Recently, Borstein et al. (2006) conducted in-depth interviews with lesbian, bisexual, and transgender victims of IPV in a study where participants could more freely describe their experiences in lengthy detail. While respondents expressed feelings of isolation, difficulty in identifying abuse, and a lack of community resources, no themes emerged that were trans specific. In one example describing attacks against victims' queer identities, the authors included one response from a trans participant who was attacked by their abuser as "not trans enough" (2006:163). The authors cited transphobia as a potential barrier to help-seeking but no further detail was provided into how this played out in the lives of trans victims. Further, the authors relied on only 5 transgender respondents.

In studies with larger samples, both Courvant and Cook-Daniels (1998) and Munson and Cook-Daniels (2003), the authors discussed how transphobia and genderism are utilized by abusers to structurally disadvantage trans victims. As a result of a victim's gender variant status and the transphobic culture that permeates all aspects of social life, Munson and Cook-Daniels (2003) note that perpetrators may tear down victims by attacking their trans-status. As Brown (2011: 117) states, "perpetrators are acutely aware of the individual and institutional vulnerabilities faced by trans people and these vulnerabilities feature explicitly in the abuse tactics and harm done." For example abusers may undermine trans identities by intentionally using the wrong pronouns, ridiculing bodies, or destroying tools used to communicate gender (i.e. breast binders or breast enhancers) (Munson and Cook Daniels 2003). The authors add that abusers may regulate victims' perceptions of their own ability to pass as the gender they wish to

present; this often includes tormenting victims into thinking that they are not “believable” men/women, that they do not look like “real” men/women, and taking advantage of the lack of structural support for gender identity and expression protections against victims with threats of “outing.” Ultimately, these abusers may deteriorate trans victims’ sense of self by isolating them, making them feel less than human, or undeserving of love. Others have argued that transgender victims are especially at risk for partner victimization due to reported shame, isolation, or loneliness (Bockting, Robinson, and Rosser 1998). Brown (2011) argues that these factors may lower relationship expectations and make transgender victims vulnerable to staying in harmful relationships. Furthermore, the vulnerability of a gender variant status may also be a problem in many help-seeking resources (Munson and Cook Daniels 2003). That is, many avenues for help are sex-based and are reportedly hostile to transgender clients. Mottet and Ohle (2003) argue that domestic violence shelter systems are known to be both inaccessible and dangerous places for transgender victims. How shelters and other services define “woman” typically dictates who is labeled a “deserving” victim. As Brown (2011) states, this gender-based admission process often puts both female-to-male (FTM) and male-to-female (MTF) transgender victims in unique situations that force them to either “pass” as female (for MTF) or reject their identity and accept help from a women’s shelter (FTM).

While these works have opened the discussion on unique tactics of abuse and structural realities faced by transgender IPV victims, they did not rely on empirical evidence. The available empirical studies on trans-specific violence have been limited to incidents of crime in which IPV was not the focus. As a result, very little empirical inquiry has examined the accounts of trans IPV victims.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist Contributions

Feminist theoretical perspectives have traditionally dominated the discussion on explanations of intimate partner violence (Bograd 1988; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Martin 1976; Yllo 1984). Feminist theorists view domestic violence as gender asymmetrical, which is that men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of domestic violence and have framed the issue as “violence against women” (VAW). Beyond the gendered pattern, they describe the existence of intimate partner violence as a phenomenon that exists directly as a result of a patriarchal power structure that fosters a hostile cultural climate against women and enables men to perpetrate violence against them as a means of controlling women in our society (Dobash et. al 1992; Dutton 1994; Yllo 1993).

From this theoretical perspective, this violence was not “domestic violence” or “intimate partner violence”, but rather it was conceptualized as “wife beating”, “wife abuse”, or “woman abuse”. Feminists’ efforts were primarily focused on highlighting the evident gendered pattern as they saw it and shaping a political agenda that would ultimately change our systematic response to the needs of these female victims. Arguably one of the most cited pioneering works, Dobash and Dobash (1979) sought to examine the experiences of battered women in a Scottish shelter through a feminist perspective. Over the course of five years, they conducted 109 in-depth interviews with these women. Commonalities in the women’s experiences lead to the conclusions that batterers held rigid patriarchal family ideals. When these victims were perceived to be out of line by their abusers, they would reassert their patriarchal authority in the relationship through violent means. These women expressed that their husbands had certain

gender specific expectations of them as wives and that their violence was a mechanism in which batterers regulated their lives.

These findings had roots in works prior by Martin (1976) and Brownmiller (1975) who both traced a sociohistorical foundation to the problem of VAW that was echoed in the Dobash's 1979 work. One key element that both Martin and Brownmiller cite is the very construct of marriage itself. Brownmiller (1975) conceptualized marriage as arising not because of the "voluntary desire" for institutional monogamy but rather a product of the constant fear of rape that women faced. She argued that marriage was therefore an exchange of women as property; an exchange that provided the illusion of protection for women against the fear of rape and violence by other men. As Martin stated, "wives were inescapably slaves to their husbands' lust" (1976:27). Lenore Weitzman (1974:1173) added further, "the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protections, and cover she must perform everything". Given this perspective, battered women within the context of heterosexual marital relationships were the primary source from which to gather information. Operating within a feminist research methodology, these researchers sought to obtain rich, detailed descriptions of their experiences to provide empirical validation for their sociopolitical explanations of domestic violence.

In addition to these key theoretical foundations and early qualitative works, findings from Kersti Yllo and Murray Straus that utilized the first national family violence survey in 1980 further supported the theoretical link between patriarchy or internalized patriarchal norms and the perpetration of wife beating. This survey utilized the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) that measured counts of physical violence used in families (Straus 1979). In an early study, Yllo

(1983) examined states for their “egalitarian” qualities between men and women. The results illustrated a curvilinear relationship between how egalitarian a state was and the perpetration of wife beating or a rate of violence. States that were the least egalitarian yielded the highest rate of wife beating while the most egalitarian came second. To explain these two findings, Yllo proposed that for states that had the least egalitarianism, men were collectively oppressing women through violent means and also that in these states women had less options to violent relationships. However, while note the highest, states that had very high egalitarianism also had very high rates of wife beating. She concluded that this was a result of men collectively resisting the changing gender structure in those areas; that wife beating was a direct reaction by men who felt threatened by women’s progressive stand in society.

In another study, Yllo (1984) expanded the investigation into the structural inequality or egalitarianism of states with a look at the nature of inequality inside these marital relationships. What she called “interpersonal inequality” was measured by a six item scale that assessed the decision making process in marital relationships. Specifically, it measured who ultimately had the final say in decisions. These results illustrated the highest rates of violence were in states that had the highest egalitarianism but in which relationships were “husband dominated”. She explained that in these states where there was less structural inequality against women, wives were less tolerant of their dominant husbands thus resulting in greater conflict.

Finally, in another key study Yllo and Straus (1984) introduced the measure of internalized patriarchal norms while keeping the structural inequality variable to examine potential relationships to wife beating. The patriarchal norms variables utilized the same interpersonal inequalities measure from the Yllo (1983) study but reframed the question to who

“should” have the final say in marital decision making rather than who did in their relationship. This, they claimed, measured what husbands and wives thought were the cultural norms or expectations. These results illustrated no significant relationship between their structural inequality measure and patriarchal norms but did find a strong relationship between patriarchal norms and wife beating. Specifically they found that the stronger the beliefs in patriarchal norms the more wife beating was present. This finding was most prominent in states that had higher egalitarianism. Even though states could have higher egalitarianism between men and women, that didn’t necessarily, mean that patriarchal norms were lessened.

While there were a multitude of other studies that showed support for the feminist perspective on domestic violence, these were key pivotal findings that shaped the early direction of inquiry. Through empirical validation, both qualitatively and quantitatively, feminists were successful in framing the violence as a [heterosexually] gendered phenomenon. Not only did men commit the overwhelming amount of intimate partner violence, but they did so because of the larger patriarchal power structure that constructed women as property in marriage, a legal system that supported or tolerated this view, and the gender socialization that fostered hostile beliefs against women in our society. Framing intimate partner violence through this perspective limited the research to the context of heterosexual relationships with discussions of female-only victims. As Dobash et al. (1992:72) stated the use of “gender-neutral terms such as “spouse-beating” are *misguided*. If violence is gendered, as it assuredly is, explicit characterization of gender’s relevance to violence is essential”.

This overarching and generalist theoretical framework is problematic; particularly when examining same-sex IPV or trans victims who exist outside of the gender binary. Further, many

of these early Feminist scholars assumed that gender was the primary form of oppression for *all* women; failing to take into account the intersecting qualities of race, class, and sexual orientation. This undermined the experiences of women of color, economically marginalized groups, and more. Michele Bograd's (1999) theoretical contribution to the study of intimate partner violence challenged many assumptions underlying the dominant feminist domestic violence theories. Bograd argued for the inclusion of the intersecting qualities of race, class, sexual orientation, and gender in the theorization of how intimate partner violence is experienced. This direct application of intersectionality demonstrated the effectiveness of theorizing that includes interlocking systems of oppression that shape distinct social localities and ultimately shape experiences of violence and help-seeking barriers.

Bograd conceptualized intersectionality within the study of domestic violence as having the ability to “color the meaning and nature of domestic violence, how it is experienced by self and responded to by others, how personal and social consequences are represented, and how or whether escape and safety can be obtained” (Bograd 1999). Bograd saw social reality as being a complex intersection of dynamic systems that are patterned in nature and mutually reinforcing. She claimed that most theories of domestic violence did not address these many dimensions of our social contexts. She stated that “an implicit assumption of many theories and practices is that domestic violence posed a central threat to the boundaried, protected, inner space of the family” (1999: 53). These theories typically relied on gender inequality as the main explanatory factor in the existence of domestic violence and conceptualized other factors as mere “stressors” (1999). She argued that these understandings of domestic violence reflected primarily white, middle class, heterosexual families and did not encompass the realities of other members of society.

These theoretical processes did not take into full account the social context that domestic violence occurs in. The racist, heterosexist, and classist dimensions of our social and cultural contexts cannot be removed from the experiences of domestic violence. Bograd argued that “intersectionality suggests that no dimension, such as gender inequality, is privileged as an explanatory construct of domestic violence, and gender inequality itself is modified by its intersection with other systems of power and oppression” (1999: 55).

Bograd utilized domestic violence research to provide an overview of what she called consequences of intersectionality (1999). As an example, she cited national domestic violence surveys that included research on “minority” populations but offered no insight into Latino communities. She stated that research on race was extremely ineffective as it attempted to collapse diverse ethnic groups into particular, boiled-down categories. She cited how major researchers have studied Mexican American populations and overgeneralized the findings to all Hispanics; many of the studies on Asian populations have had the same occurrences. By failing to produce accurate data on minority populations, accurate generalizations cannot be made. Domestic violence experiences and perceptions differ across racial and ethnic lines; without an intersectional perspective that can capture the complexities of multiple identities, Bograd claimed that more inclusive theories would be difficult to reach.

While Bograd claimed that social class was a standard dimension of most domestic violence research, she argued that research into the prevalence of violence in the lives of low income women was scarce. In particular, she emphasized how low economic status intersects dynamically with race, gender, immigration status, disability and more. The high levels of

violent victimization of the homeless population and the inability for women to leave potentially deadly situations both tie into the many dimensions of social class.

When studied through the lens of intersectionality, race and gender particularly exacerbate violent situations. With the feminization of poverty and the overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minority women in these statistics, domestic violence experiences vary intensely. Bograd stated research that indicated that “over one-third of woman-headed families lived in poverty and over half of those were Black and Hispanic” (1999: 56). She highlighted the intersectional qualities the dimensions of social class may have and challenged research to look beyond income and violence correlates and explore the various intersecting identities present.

At the time, Bograd proposed that as far as same-sex battering was concerned, there “were few or no available statistics on the intersections of homosexuality, domestic violence, race and class” (1999: 57). She argued that the “invisibility of certain populations reflects more their social importance in the eyes of the dominant culture than the absence of domestic violence in their midst” (1999: 58). By relying on theories that unintentionally disregard the social contexts of many victims, researchers disregard the existence of their experiences. Without the appropriate theoretical understandings we cannot encourage the development of the research based statistics that fuel changes in the public sphere. She conceptualized this lack of attention to this largely under theorized and under researched area as a denial of victimization. She stated that “the intersections of race, class, sexual orientation and gender often influence whom we define as “real” or “appropriate” victims, a theme which she expanded upon through this project.

The hostile social climates and contexts that surround the violence that occurs for many victims add many layers of challenges and obstacles. Not only are these individuals victimized in

their homes, families and relationships but also in the outside communities. She conceptualized heterosexism, racism and classism as “microaggressions” that compound in the context of the violent experiences. Additionally, she argued that victims may have internalized these ideologies and thus further hinder their help-seeking behavior. Without appropriate theoretical understandings, research will continue to fall short on adequately capturing the experiences of survivors within historically oppressed communities.

Beyond Feminist Explanations

Island and Letellier (1991: 2) made a provocative break from the dominant feminist paradigm arguing that intimate partner violence was “not a gender issue at all since both men and women could be batterer or victim”. Rather, they argued that the focus should be on batterer’s psychological characteristics stating that “individual acts of domestic violence are not caused by a victim's provocation, not by a violent, patriarchal society, not by alcohol or by any other excuse” (1991:2). In their explanations of gay male battering, Island and Letellier (1991) proposed that violence is learned, that batterers choose to be violent, and therefore utilize it to cause harm, enforce power, and control. They argued that batterers “suffer from a learned, progressive, diagnosable, and curable mental disorder” and that no “well-functioning” person would commit domestic violence (1991). While these points were influential in challenging the dominant framework, they did ignore some evidence that intimate partner violence is gendered in some aspects of prevalence and dynamics. They argued to remove all social and cultural explanations of IPV and move entirely to a psychological approach that was not widely accepted.

To merge various theoretical explanations together, Merril (1996) proposed an integration of the social and psychological aspects of intimate partner violence. He argued that feminist

approaches and the more psychological perspectives of Island and Letellier (1991) were not mutually exclusive. Instead, intimate partner violence could be seen as a gendered phenomena, specifically its heterosexual manifestation, while also acknowledging that gender was only one of many social factors involved. Zemsky (1990) and Gilbert, Poorman and Simmons (1990) proposed that the causation of battering could be classified into three categories:

1. Learning to abuse
2. Having the opportunity to abuse
3. Choosing to abuse

Individuals have learned to abuse from the following usually in the setting of their own families:

1. Direct instruction
2. Modeling or learning through observation
3. Operant conditioning/learning violence is effective

While learning and choosing are primarily psychological, or individualistic explanations to battering, Zemsky (1990) emphasizes the context of opportunity to abuse. For batterers, having the opportunity to abuse and learning what one could get away with are gendered. Here, men are particularly at risk for perpetration due to the same gender socialization factors to which sociocultural feminist researchers point. Not only are men encouraged to be violent but they also learn that this violence is often normalized, effective, and their privilege enables them. Gender is not the only social factor involved; race, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity all contextualize the abusers opportunity and choice to abuse. Finally, Zemsky (1990) proposed that this social context makes one member of the relationship the one with less or perceived less social power. With less power, there is a diminished capacity to enact negative consequences against the perpetrator. This can again be gendered because men in our society are typically

ascribed this social power. However, in its application, all relationships, regardless of sexual orientation, are subject to power dynamics.

Lastly, Erbaugh (2007) argued that the victim-perpetrator gendered binary in dominant intimate partner violence theorizing is another central factor in the silencing of LGBT victims. As a result of this dominant framework and limited explanation of violence, the cultural construct of “victim” is gendered – always female. This cultural construct of victim extends beyond the victims’ gender when applied to intimate partner violence. This gendered heterosexist assumption behind perpetrator-victim dynamics assumes that the victim is passive and submissive; it assumes effeminacy. Within the context of same-sex relationships, this pervasive construct of victim assumes that the victim in the relationship is the “woman” or the passive and submissive member. Conversely, it assumes that the perpetrator is the “man” or the aggressive and dominating member. While this may be commonly assumed, it is not empirically supported (Marrujo and Kreger 1996). As Erbaugh (2007: 454) explains, “the gender identities of the participants in a given relationship may counter normative gender stereotypes, and first impressions based on gender-normative assumptions will not reliably reveal which partner has the upper hand in an abusive dynamic”. This cultural construct has consequences in police reaction that may approach lesbian battering as a “cat fight” or gay battering as a fight between roommates.

Symbolic Interactionism

Along a similar pattern of social psychological thought, the current study is guided by a symbolic interactionist perspective. As a major goal of this study was not only to describe stories of victimization but also to illustrate meaning and interpretation, symbolic interactionism offers a

perspective that examines the process of defining and constructing realities in social life. Setting out to explore the meanings behind victimization as told by participants, symbolic interactionism informs the researcher to “interpret the real world from the subjective perspectives of the subjects under examination” (Herman 1994: 93). Through this process the researcher taps into the participants’ construction of meaning behind lived experiences. As an influential scholar in the development of the symbolic interactionist perspective, Mead (1934) viewed the mind and the self as an internal conversation between words and actions that all involved some form of shared meaning held by larger society. In other words, the self was characterized as a conversation between the inner personal drives or desired actions and the expectations of society. These expectations were regulated by the shared meaning attributed to various action; the social consequences of action. Thus, meaning was characterized by Mead as a response to an action that emerged within social interaction. Meaning is constructed through a social process in which individuals not only attribute to others actions but also into lived experiences.

Expanding on these fundamental understandings of microsociology, Blumer (1969) argued that the meanings of our actions and of others are not just intrinsically evident but rather they are explained through the concept of interpretation; interpretation involves the active construction of meaning of these actions. Blumer (1969: 79) stated that:

“human beings interpret or “define” each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions. Their “response” is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions.”

For survivors of IPV, reflecting upon their experiences and sharing stories involve a process of interpretation and meaning construction. For example, survivors of IPV must describe what dynamics and behaviors they deemed abusive. Further, these conversations may involve how

these abusive behaviors were interpreted and what they meant. Through an examination of the active construction, symbolic interaction offers a unique insight into the experiences of IPV in the lives of transgender survivors.

A Queer Approach

While integrative social psychological and symbolic interactionist perspectives effectively merge the importance of psychological attributes, situational opportunities, and sociocultural explanations of gender to explain IPV, a postmodernist framework emphasizes the power behind language. Through critical examination of this power, a more trans-inclusive approach to gender within feminist criminology is possible. “Queering” gender in this framework highlights the power that arises through the use of language and discourse that make it a social reality. Brown and Nash (2010: 4) explain that queering “can be any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations”. Through this approach, trans experiences can be examined through the meanings embedded within a genderist power structure that marginalizes their victimization, shapes their experiences, and limits their help-seeking opportunities.

Postmodern Feminism and Gender in IPV

The feminist criminological approaches to the study of intimate partner violence relied on an explanation of gender that was either largely sociocultural or socialized. As previously explained, these conceptualizations of gender held that the patriarchal power structure enabled intimate partner violence. As Dobash and Dobash (1979:ix) explained, “the use of physical violence against women in their position as wives is not the only means by which they are controlled and oppressed but it is one of the most brutal and explicit expressions of patriarchal

domination". These feminist scholars viewed gender as a socialized role that was a product of a patriarchal power structure that oppressed women and privileged men (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Martin 1976; Walker 1979; Yllo 1984). Through this perspective, gender was a socially constructed and learned attribute existing only in the constructs of a male role and a female role. Outside of IPV research, West and Zimmerman (1987) would later expand the idea of gender as more than an individual attribute or role that was either "naturally" or structurally defined but that gender itself was accomplished or "done". Through this perspective, individuals "do" gender according to social prescribed notions or definitions of what is ideally "masculine" or "feminine" behavior. Thus, gender arises through daily interaction and comes into reality as an outcome of these exchanges. As Anderson (2005:856) stated, this interactionist perspective shifted "our thinking from the question of how masculinity causes violence to the question of how violence causes masculinity." This approach effectively framed previous findings in feminist IPV research that concluded male aggression against women as an action that represented their culturally defined superiority as masculine (Dobash and Dobash 1979). Violence thus comes to represent an act of masculinity; one that reinforces or "does" hegemonic masculinity.

More recently, the concept of gender in intimate partner violence has expanded further through a postmodernist framework. An early figure in postmodernist thought, Foucault (1970, 1972) explained that power, the ability to get others to do as you please, was rooted in hegemonic discourse. He proposed that the power behind legitimized language was the source of conflict in society that constructed dominant narratives and subordinate or oppositional discourses (Milovanovic 1994). For feminist scholars and criminologists examining intimate partner violence, this meant that power was not simply embedded in structural or social

categories, but rather that ways of “knowing” were the root of power. Postmodernism, generally speaking, challenged the notion of concrete categories and proposes that identities were situational, variant, and fluid (Arrigo and Bernard 1998; Butler 1990; Foucault 1970, 1972). Through this framework then, intimate partner violence is not solely a result of a patriarchal power structure, but rather a consequence of structurally informed discourses that marginalize women but also create distinct realities across race, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Postmodern feminists have since departed from the notion that “woman”, or “man” for that matter, are static identities. As Butler (1990:145) questioned, “what is *meant* by women?” Butler’s proposition was that woman, and therefore biological sex, was just as much a social construct as gender. Through this perspective, gender is not “a singular act, but a representation and a ritual” (Butler 1990: xv). It is here that Butler locates the concept of gender as performance; these acts or ways of being are culturally sustained and represent hegemonic idealization of heterosexual gender.

This approach to gender is particularly crucial for the incorporation of trans experiences in IPV research. Feminist scholars have historically been divided on what transgenderism means to the overall concept of gender. Many lesbian and radical feminists had traditionally opposed the notion of transgenderism as they saw women as oppressed largely as a result of society’s marginalization of female bodies. To transition from man to woman did not constitute a legitimate “woman”, one that had the lived experiences of a “natural female bodied” person (Jefferys 2003; Raymond 1980, 1994). Conversely, those women who transitioned to men were viewed as “giving up” on the cause and shedding their subordinated identities as women to embody the privilege of a man (Johnson 2011). Because feminism relied on a sisterhood of those

born female, labeled, and marginalized as female bodied, those who transitioned in a female representation could never be “real” women (Grosz 1994). Some feminists have argued that transexualism, unlike transgenderism, has only served to support a rigid gender binary; switching one’s gender from one to another only acknowledged two gendered outcomes (Greer 1999; Grosz 1994). Transgenderism challenged second-wave feminism to “move beyond identity politics and into a feminism that based itself on the politics of gender performativity, choice, personal power, and individualism” (Johnson 2011: 606). While second-wave feminists relied on a social constructionist argument for the dismantling of gender inequality, they were resistant to accept biological sex and the body as a similar construct. In more recent discussion, the postmodern “feminists accounts of transexualism and transgenderism have prevailed over radical feminist critiques” and has produced a more trans-inclusive perspective that views gender as an “ongoing process of *becoming* male or female” regardless of trans-status (2011: 613-615). This approach is particularly critical in incorporating trans experiences in IPV research. Because the transgender individuals exist outside of the gender binary, larger sociocultural explanations of gender may be limited to explaining only the experiences of cisgender individuals. Moving beyond gender as a dichotomous social construct embedded and regulated in a patriarchal power structure, the current study views gender as situational power discourse that frames the experiences of abuse for transgender victims.

Queering Criminology – Framing Trans Experiences in IPV

In this postmodern tradition, discourse or language fosters the domination of individuals through subjective interaction. In its application to criminology, the “language of the court or law expresses and institutionalizes the domination of individuals by social institution” (Bernard,

Snipes, and Gerould 2010: 278). This perspective focuses on how meaning and sense are constructed by victims, criminals, and the larger criminal justice system. As Arrigo and Bernard (1998:44) explain, “postmodern criminologists maintain that there is a conflict that underscores our understanding of crime, law, order, justice, and victimization. In short, only certain definitions are used to convey society’s meanings for these constructs”.

In its direct application to heterosexual IPV, Davis and Glass (2011:18) state that this form of theorizing “seeks to de-center the dominant homogenizing grand narrative that accounts for *all* violence, for *all* women, in *all* situations”. In essence, they seek to deconstruct the binary gender constructs of the victim/perpetrator dynamic as well as the power and control assumed behind it. In another similar application, Arrigo and Bernard (1998:42) state that when rape victims testify in criminal court, “they must re-present their experiences in a way which is consistent with legally justifiable speech (i.e., acceptable, credible testimonial evidence)”. Not adhering to the hegemonic discourse could result in the cases’ dismal; they further claim that “the language the victim is required to speak may also be a language that marginalizes and oppresses her” (1998:43). Postmodern criminologists interested in examining IPV can analyze the language used by both victims and perpetrators to construct micro contexts of power. Following Foucault (1970, 1972), power is not structural or held by a group of individuals but rather it emerges from the discourse between individuals. For trans victims, the power lies behind the cisgendered discourse that shapes structural responses to IPV.

In examining IPV, queer criminology falls into the categories of both postmodern and critical traditions. Queer criminology has been vaguely defined as “exploring the manifestations of transphobia and homophobia in the realm of crime and criminal justice” (Friedrichs 2009:

216). More appropriately, it can be understood as locating both gender and sexuality as it is regulated by law, legal discourse and how it affects victim's experiences. Further, this approach encompasses intersectional approaches that examine the "notion that doing gender, race, and class entails more than simple demographic categories" (Trahan 2011).

Through this perspective, this study located trans experiences of IPV within a cisgenderist culture that marginalizes their victimization. The current study examined how transgender victims interpret and experience IPV victimization and how they negotiate the larger cultural contexts that have long ignored these unique realities. Through examination and analysis of their stories, this study sought to illuminate the distinct meanings behind IPV in trans lives and develop a more refined understanding of their victimization.

Research Questions

In examining these accounts, queer criminology informs the most effective research questions that seek to explore how those who are victimized come to identify as victims, experience dynamics of abuse, and barriers to systematic aid and resources. Queer criminology challenges researchers to examine how language constructs victim identities. One of the crucial elements in getting victims to seek help is to first identify as victims. As queer criminology would suggest, transgender IPV victims face the pervasive genderist constructs of victim/perpetrator that dominate the discourse and could be even more obstructive than for cisgender gays and lesbians. Examining the language that transgender victims use to describe their experiences may help criminologists more adequately address the needs of the community by locating barriers through personal experience. Paying particularly close attention to the role of their gender identification and expression within the context of their stories as they intersect with

race, class, and other identities may inform more appropriate survey instruments that attempt to gauge abuse tactics and barriers to help. This methodological approach would place the victim as the subject and not the object of research, empowering them in their retelling of their stories.

Framed through this theoretical approach and given the near total absence of transgender victims from IPV research, the following broad research questions were asked:

RQ1: How do transgender victims of intimate partner violence describe their experiences?

RQ2: What meanings do transgender victims of intimate partner violence attribute to their victimization?

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

The overall research design of this study was framed through a queer, feminist methodological perspective. Mainly, this asserts that I do not intend to locate some form of objective truth, but rather I sought to examine accounts of lived experiences and highlight emerging patterns in subjective discourses (Brown and Nash 2010; Hesse-Biber 2012). This feminist epistemological approach proposes that in order to understand a particular social phenomenon, one needs “to understand it from the perspective of the people who are participants in it” (Ezzy 2002: 22). As such, this study sought to obtain rich, qualitatively detailed accounts of IPV victimization as told by transgender participants through semi-structured, in-depth interviews as well as through free-write questionnaire responses. The goal of this study was to empower otherwise marginalized voices and account for their distinct realities to further broaden our understanding of IPV victimization outside of hegemonic, genderist discourses.

Population of Interest

As previously defined, this study sought participants who identified as transgender. This large umbrella term encompasses all gender identities that exist outside of hegemonic definitions of male or female. While there is much debate on who should be considered transgender and what it means as far as identity or medicalization, this study considered participants transgender if they report a gender identification other than cisgender male or female (Johnson 2011).

Data Collection Methods

Two different data collection methods were incorporated to maximize participation from this small and marginalized population. One involved an open-ended questionnaire administered online through *Qualtrics* and the other through in-depth interviews that were conducted by

telephone and one that was conducted via online chat. Appendix A illustrates the semi-structured interview guide that was given on both the web questionnaire and in person/telephone/online formats. Having an online version of the interview questions in an open-ended questionnaire format provided a site in which participants could freely answer without necessarily having to agree to an in-depth interview with a researcher. The listservs of participating LGBTQ organizations outlined in the sampling strategy were utilized to send requests for participation. In addition to national agencies, these local organizations all offer trans outreach and they have obtained e-mail addresses from those who have frequented events, services, or their locations.

The second data collection technique involved in-depth interviews. Personal, in-depth interviews were the primary and most ideal method of data collection for this study. This method allowed for more detailed discussion of experiences and provided more context and rich accounts. Through interviews, the study “gained coherence, depth, and density” in the examination of victims stories (Weiss 1994: 3). As Weiss (1994:3) explains, in-depth interviews achieve a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena, one that “permits ourselves to be informed as we cannot be by brief answers to survey items”. While participants were asked to participate in personal interviews, they were also provided the option to answer interview questions via an online questionnaire format in place of speaking to a researcher directly. The online, open-ended interview questionnaire allows potential participants to describe their experiences with IPV victimization without having to speak personally with an interviewer. While this format sacrificed the opportunity for the interviewer to freely probe and develop responses, it is particularly important to have this option as these conversations may be extremely intimate and uncomfortable for discussion with researchers.

Initially, these in-depth interviews were semi-structured. Appendix A illustrates the series of questions that I originally started with before conducting the first interview. While loosely structured, these questions were broad and open allowing for the participant to speak more freely. The probes featured under the main questions were there as ideas to further the conversation if needed. After the first couple of interviews, I found that interviews worked best when I let participants speak more openly with less prescribed probes and simply use probes that emerged from their stories. Essentially, the probes related to the stories they were actively telling and served to gather richer detail on the directions they were taking. On average, these interviews lasted well over an hour but generally under two hours.

In conducting research on marginalized populations, a number of ethical concerns are raised. As a result of the marginalization of the transgender community, information obtained from respondents was held confidentially and securely. The *Qualtrics* online software transmits responses in an encrypted format. This protected against any possible interception of the data by making sure it could not be decoded. Further, it insured that each individual response could not be traced back to an individual's identity. For in-depth interviews, recordings and transcriptions were held on a protected USB with a password that was known only to the researcher. In both methods, an informed consent form was provided in which the participant was made aware that they could opt out of any or all of the questions at any given time and that their confidential information would be securely stored.

Due to the sensitive nature of discussing IPV, the ability to skip or refuse a response at any point during either the online questionnaire or the interview is essential. Before a participant can agree to begin the questionnaire or interview, they were reminded that the questions may ask

them to reflect upon previous experiences with violence that may be difficult to discuss. All participants were provided contact information in the consent form to local services for IPV victims including the Harbor House of Central Florida for local participants and the National Domestic Violence hotline which connects callers to services in their areas around the nation; both of these resources were trans inclusive and welcoming.

Sampling Strategy

This study utilized targeted and snowball sampling techniques in an effort to cast a wide net and obtain the largest sample possible. Because the purpose of this study was to gain understanding into the rarely discussed issue of IPV in the transgender community, generalizability was not the goal. Rather, the sampling strategy sought to gain access to a highly marginalized group and explore how IPV is experienced, identify meanings, potential categories, and describe accounts of abuse. These sampling techniques involved advertising study participation through local and national LGBT organization e-mail listservs, trans advocacy groups, anti-violence projects, as well as businesses or other locations that are known to be LGBT frequented (i.e. bars, clubs, community centers, churches, etc.). In both the e-mails and the physical advertisements used at the specified locations, a flyer was used that described the purpose of the study and participant requirements. The flyer stated that participants should be at least 18 years of age or older, identify as transgender, and have experienced violence or abuse by an intimate or romantic partner. Further, it specified that transgender was broadly defined to include MTF, FTM, transsexual, genderqueer, androgynous, or any gender non-conforming identities.

Central Florida is an ideal location to recruit transgender respondents as it is a large and diverse metropolitan area. Listservs from the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Center of Central Florida, the Gay and Lesbian Law Association of Central Florida, and the Florida L.E.G.A.L. (Law Enforcement Gays and Lesbians) were utilized for initial recruitment. The “snowball” aspect of recruitment stems from word of mouth distribution or learning from other participants where to obtain more recruitment avenues or specific participants. This was expanded through outreach to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Projects and the National Center for Transgender Equality.

Respondents

A total of 18 trans-identified respondents participated in the study. Twelve of the participants were interviewed via telephone, one via online chat, and five through the open-ended online questionnaire. Although I offered participants whose first language was Spanish to tell their stories in either English or Spanish, all opted for English. Table 1 describes the participants using pseudonyms by gender identity, race and/or ethnicity, and age; participants used their own words to describe themselves. While a majority of the sample identified as white, there was considerable racial diversity including three black and five Latino/a identified participants. The group was also diverse in terms of gender identities³ with seven identifying as female-to-male (FTM) transgender, six male-to-female (MTF) transgender, and then a variety of other identifications including transmasculine and transfeminine, genderqueer, transsexual, and transgender stone butch. The average participant was 31 years old. As a group, all participants

³ See Appendix C: Glossary for gender identity descriptions

were either early into their transitions or coming out processes or just a few years into their transition. This may be due in part to the relatively young age of the participants.

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Age
Todd	Transmasculine / Genderqueer	White	22
Jessica	Male-to-Female (MTF) Transgender	White	49
Brittany	Male-to-Female (MTF) Transgender	White	34
Anna	Male-to-Female (MTF) Transgender	Latina	30
Laura	Female-to-Male (FTM) Transgender	Black	33
Tom	Female-to-Male (FTM) Transgender	Black	24
David	Female-to-Male (FTM) Transgender	White	23
Joe	Female-to-Male (FTM) Transgender	White/Latino	18
Rebecca	Male-to-Female (MTF) Transgender	Black	38
Chris	Transfeminine / Genderqueer	White	22
John	Female-to-Male (FTM) Transgender	Multiracial/Latino	29
Fatima	Male-to-Female (MTF) Transgender	Latina	30
Audrey	Male-to-Female (MTF) Transgender	White	42
Jim	Female-to-Male (FTM) Transgender	White	21
Sam	Transgender Stone Butch	White	38
Casey	Genderqueer	White	32
William	Female-to-Male (FTM) Transgender	White	35
Owen	Female-to-Male (FTM) Transsexual	Latino	19

Analytic Strategy

The analytical strategy was informed by a modified grounded theory method (GTM).

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a “systematic, inductive, and

comparative approach for conducting inquiry for the purpose of constructing theory” (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). Through this approach, I moved from the specific to the more general as I continuously engaged in the analysis of the data. Charmaz (2006:3) explains that grounded theorists study their “early data and begin to separate, sort, and synthesize these data through qualitative coding”. This coding process attempts to summarize parts of the data utilizing a researcher defined label that constructs emerging categories. These codes ultimately represent the meanings behind stories. Charmaz adds that coding “shapes an analytic frame from which you build the analysis”. Together, these codes were analytically integrated into categories that emerge through “scrutinizing data and defining the meanings within it” (Charmaz 2006:46). These categories then merge into concepts that come to “represent an analyst’s impressionistic understandings of what is being described in the experiences, spoken words, actions, interactions, problems and issues expressed by participants” (Corbin and Straus 2008:51).

While this grounded method was the overarching analytic strategy I employed, I acknowledge that I approached the analyses with a solid understanding of the IPV literature and theoretical frameworks. This informed my curiosities, some of my questions, and analyses of the data. For example, as previously discussed, prominent aspects of the IPV literature involve understandings of the dynamics of abuse, help-seeking behaviors, and victim identities. However, while prior knowledge enters the realm of analyses, I remained open to new directions and close to the data. Through this process, I avoided “imposing a forced framework” and allowed for the opportunity for emerging directions in the data (Charmaz 2006:66).

Coding Strategy

All interviews were transcribed and stored in a text file format. Further, the five online questionnaires were also downloaded as text files. To begin, I utilized an initial line-by-line coding technique that assigned a code for each line of data. These initial codes were open and useful in moving through the data quickly while remaining open and close to the data; codes were kept short, simple, and precise (Charmaz 2006:49). Line-by-line coding effectively fuels the discovery of implicit and explicit concerns participants raise during the interview process. Utilizing this strategy familiarizes the researcher with the data and begins to illuminate themes, patterns, and particular points of interests in participant accounts. As Charmaz (2006:53) explains, “line-by-line coding gives you leads to pursue”. This was particularly important in the initial stages of analysis as I sought to understand the meanings behind reported experiences. Crucial to the development of grounded analyses are analytic memos. After each interview was conducted or each questionnaire was read, I utilized these analytic memos as a “site of conversation with myself about the data” (Clark 2005:202); analytic memos assisted in the reflection and processing of data. Saldaña (2012:33) notes that these memos allow the researcher to think critically about what is being done and why, confronting and often challenging assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which one’s thoughts, actions, and decisions shape the research and what you see (Mason 2002:5). For this initial wave of coding and memoing, interviews and online questionnaires were analyzed separately to examine any potential differences in the accounts as they were collected through different methods. The only significant difference between interviews and online questionnaires were that interviews were far

more detailed. The accounts did not differ in any other way and therefore, were all analyzed as one body for the second wave of analyses.

After initial line-by-line coding, I progressed to focused coding. Focused codes are “more direct, selective, and conceptual” than the initial line-by-line codes (Charmaz 2006:57, Glaser 1978). This second wave of coding sifted through the data for the most frequent or significant codes found in the initial line-by-line stage. Through this process, the initial open codes obtained were read through and conceptually arranged into emerging categories. Here I began to join initial codes that made the “most analytic sense to categorize data incisively and completely” (Charmaz 2006:58). Throughout this process, new codes were compared with existing codes to examine how they related to each other or if unexpected findings emerged. Comparing data to data helped the development of focused codes and ultimately refined the larger concepts they define. Here, the analytic memos became essential as they serve as a focused “code and category-generating method” (Saldaña 2012:157). The linking of codes and categories within the accounts became systematically integrated and built theoretical concepts.

Author Reflection

Despite adhering to a solid grounded approach, I recognize that any form of research in which one is interpreting and echoing the meanings behind the lived experiences of others requires reflection on the part of the researcher. Before, during, and after conducting interviews and analyses, I needed to continuously stay mindful of how my own experiences and standpoints may frame conversations and findings. By remaining honest and open about myself as a researcher, I made a concerted effort to avoid assumptions. First, I would like to discuss how and why I selected this topic. This requires that I also trace a bit of personal history which often

times shapes interest in topics. Finally, I discuss the learning experience and the strategies I employed throughout this exploration to improve not only the quality of the data but also to ensure that participants felt comfortable and empowered to share their stories.

Arriving at this specific topic of interest has been one that I consider years in the making. I first became interested in issues of violence during an undergraduate course in violence against women at Virginia Commonwealth University. As many other undergraduate sociology students may also attest about other courses, this one in particular changed the way I viewed the world and opened my eyes to the various societal and cultural dynamics involved that shape and foster violent social problems. Further, the course was service-learning and it connected to me many local and campus anti-violence organizations and agencies. Prior to the course, while this interest was developing, I had also begun working in advocacy on behalf of the LGBTQ community. As a gay Puerto Rican male, I quickly made personal the connections between what bell hooks refers to as “white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy”, gender, sexuality, and violence (hooks 1981). Having experienced personally how racism and hegemonic masculinity contextualized violence that was directed towards me both by strangers but also intimate or romantic interests, I cultivated a strong academic and applied interest in addressing issues of violence within and against the LGBTQ community. Throughout recent years, I have undertaken several projects, initiatives, research endeavors, and positions that sought to address these issues. These experiences ranged from volunteer work for domestic violence programs and or state-wide anti-violence organizations, to campus diversity leadership and peer bystander initiatives or social norm campaigns in addition to conducting community-based research that explored various

dimensions of violence as experienced by LGBTQ and served to improve services or outreach to the community.

Throughout my experiences, I continued to notice the absence of transgender community members and a lack of information on how the issues of violence we were addressing affected transgender people. Most recently, I partnered with local agencies in gathering data on central Florida LGBTQ and experiences with same-sex IPV. While we made a rigorous effort to obtain a diverse sample, we were only able to reach eight transgender respondents over the course of several months. After several years of this glaring absence of trans experiences and voices in both my own work and in the academic literature, I arrived at the decision to undertake an exploration on IPV within the transgender community.

While I have a strong, personal connection to the advancement and advocacy of issues affecting the transgender community, I do not identify as transgender. For many researchers, this may be seen as a weakness. Further, many activists may also feel that it is not the place for cisgender academics to make subjects out of the transgender community. In a recent law review article on transgender IPV, Goodmark (2012) quoted Serrano (2007), a transgender activist, writer, and performer, as stating:

If cissexual academics truly believe that transsexual and intersex people can add new perspectives to existing dialogues about gender, then they should stop reinterpreting our experiences and instead support transsexual and intersex intellectual endeavors.

Serrano echoes what many other transgender activists also feel regarding cisgender researchers and their work on the transgender community. These sentiments are rooted in the thought that those without this standpoint or lived experience could not possibly interpret, construct meaning, or understand second hand accounts. As a gay Latino man, I do empathize with the notion that

outside researchers may not be best at constructing knowledge on otherwise oppressed communities. However, I disagree that only researchers with similar or identical experiences should conduct research on said populations. When I approached this project, I did so with the intention of empowering marginalized voices and advancing the development of knowledge on IPV as experienced by those who exist outside of the gender binary. The purpose of this project was not to make the transgender community the center of curiosity but rather to expand this area to include those voices that have been otherwise excluded from the conversation. Therefore, my intent was rooted in a social justice perspective that aimed to string together prominent themes in IPV victimization and provide deeper context into the unique realities faced by the transgender community. It is my belief that social research is strengthened by the incorporation of diverse perspectives regardless of the identities of the researcher and the subjects.

Finally, establishing rapport with participants is a common challenge in many social research projects. In particular, the current project presented unique challenges as it dealt with highly sensitive topics of violent victimization and gender identity. A common interview strategy is to engage in warm-up conversations that initially establishes some kind of trust between the researcher and the participant. I found it particularly helpful to start a conversation about how the participant found out about the study. Because the study was marketed through outlets that serve the trans community whether they be private business or social services, I could first engage participants in conversations about their community resources. I believe that these informal conversations helped establish that I was familiar with the needs and services of the transgender community or at the very least that I cared about the over-all well being of the community. After discussing the mandatory consent information and providing participants with IPV resources,

another small portion of the conversation was devoted to their experiences with coming out as trans and the transition process. While not the focal point of this study, in these initial conversations, participants spent some time openly describing their gender identities as well as their development and processes in transition. Through these conversations, I learned more from the participants about what terminologies or language to use when regarding them, their abuser, or some other part of their life and identity.

Ultimately, I remained open in our conversations and avoided making any rushed assumptions or filtering the discussion through my own experiences and knowledge. I approached the participant's narratives grounded and open to finding the most salient themes in their experiences with IPV victimization. By staying close to the data, through constant comparisons, and conversations with myself on how I was piecing together this larger story, I was best able to construct descriptions, processes, and meanings according to the participants' own words.

The following chapters detail three prominent themes in the narratives told by transgender survivors of IPV. First, I discuss the salient patterns within the accounts of violence abuse. These included how transphobia and genderism manifested in the respondents' experiences with IPV. Second, I present major aspects of the meaning behind participant's victimization as they make sense of their experiences. I discuss a prominent dynamic of the abuse as controlling transition, in which victims felt that abusers wanted to regulate their transition processes. Further, participants described what I called trans vulnerability when struggling through the interviews why they feel this happened to them and making sense of why abusers latched on to these abusive tactics. Finally, as all of the participants in the current study

have left their abusers, all of the narratives involved discussions around the processing of victim identity. Through this, participants described what I refer to as “walking the gender tightrope” in which respondents used gendered language in the processing of their victim identity. Additionally, they discussed various help-seeking strategies and how they navigated genderist boundaries and barriers to these resources.

CHAPTER 5: ACCOUNTS OF VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

A major goal of this study was to empower trans voices to simply tell their stories and through their own words, describe their violent and abusive experiences by an intimate partner. As previously mentioned, at the beginning of each interview, participants very generally described themselves, told me briefly about their lives, their relationships, and their transitional development. As table 1 illustrates, respondents ranged in diverse gender identities. Many of the respondents identified as either MTF or FTM transgender or transsexual. These experiences ranged from those who felt they were born in the wrong bodies to those who described just feeling more like the other gender socially or personally. Anna (30, MTF) was a participant that described the feeling of being born in the wrong body. She stated, “I was always a girl but I just uh, you know I just didn’t fit in my body right.” As Laura (33, MTF) described, sometimes trans identities do not necessarily involve the complete rejection of biological bodies. She stated:

So, I was born in a male body and like it’s not like I completely rejected that body but its like um, I just, I don’t know I didn’t like being a boy? Just didn’t feel like me. I always just felt more like, like a girl or a woman rather.

For some of the respondents, descriptions of gender identity were sometimes more fluid or perhaps something that developed over time. For Tom (24, FTM), it was a process from identifying as more of a butch woman to a transman. He stated, “I’m a transman. I started transition about 3 years ago but I was genderqueer or at least always just butch for 5 years before.” Others described that they didn’t belong in either masculine or feminine identifications and that they were more fluid. For example, Chris (22, transfeminine genderqueer) described:

I grew up as a boy so I am biologically a boy but I identify as transfeminine or genderqueer but more feminine than anything. I don’t want to change my body but I present as female mostly although I don’t really care about passing, I just do my thing,

that's why I like the genderqueer label. I'm just a free spirit with gender and I don't like to confine my expression.

Similarly, Todd (22, transmasculine genderqueer) described:

I am queer because I like the fluidity and the um sort of label without any kind of any commitment to anything that it has to mean. Um, and I just find that it allows me to sort of move fluidly through a lot of different relationships and identities just day to day.

These examples illustrate the diversity of experiences the respondents had with their trans identities. Overall, there were no prominent themes in the descriptions of their gender identities but rather, they described a wide array of experiences.

As participants continued to describe themselves and their backgrounds, conversations of family and relationships emerged. A prominent commonality across these conversations involved the role of family or support networks during their transition or "coming out" processes. For many of the participants, families were not always the most supportive networks during their coming out or transition processes. For John (29, FTM), coming out as transgender resulted in severed ties with his single mom and two sisters. Describing how his mother reacted to his coming out as transgender he stated:

My mom, she, well, let's say ma' was not having it. It would turn into fights like, she would say like "oh you used to look so pretty" like "why do you have dress like that, can you please just wear a dress for me just this time" and all and try to like bargain with me and say that she was embarrassed when we'd have to do something formal and I wore like a tie and shirt and uh slacks. So, I had to just, um, I just I needed to leave.

Several other participants described similar stories of rejection from family members. Audrey (42, MTF) described that coming out as transgender resulted in the loss of her long term partner, family, and friends. She stated, "...most of my people in my life, my family, had abandoned me at that point." Fatima (30, MTF) who was a Latina immigrant described her family's rejection but also the additional elements of her community's isolation.

My upbringing was a nice one, no family issues until I came out. Because we were immigrants we were uh, definitely, like, really super reliant on our community and lived with other immigrants, I mean it was the reason we came here, we knew others here. So I grew up with that kind of environment of community. I lost all that. I lost it all. My family was not kind to the gender issues, they didn't understand.

In Anna's (30, MTF) story, she described that she began presenting and dressing as a woman in high school. Her fathers' reaction eventually led to her homelessness as a teen. She stated:

...my dad found out I was dressing like a girl more and he went crazy too, like bad. He was like real bad so he beat me...He said I let the devil inside me and the house and he said I needed to go.

While many of the respondents had negative experiences with family and coming out as transgender, a smaller portion of the group either had positive experience or had family that progressed over time on the issue. For a few, family reactions were never a problem. Brittany (34, MTF) simply stated that "my family supported me, and so did my friends." Similarly, Joe (18, FTM) only stated "I have a good support network" and that he was still living with his mother who was supportive of his transition. In Todd's (22, transmasculine genderqueer), his family eventually supported his trans identity. He stated, "I basically just tried really hard to work on the relationship and now we've become really close."

Once we were engaged in conversation, I broadly asked each participant to share with me the story of their experience or experiences that led them to respond to this study call. For all but one of the respondents, only one of their prior relationships had been abusive. Brittany (34, MTF) was the only respondent that had been in two abusive relationships. She stated:

I've had trouble with abuse in a couple relationships. One lasted two and a half years, and the abuse started after about a year, verbal, emotional. She ended up breaking up with me partially because she felt bad about how she treated me. The second one was worse verbal, emotional abuse lasted for about six months, and she lived with me.

Brittany spent the majority of our time telling me the story of the second abusive relationship which she deemed “worse” than the first.

The types or characteristics of relationships varied and not all respondents spoke in detail about all of those aspects outside of their stories of abuse. Some of the participants, as Todd (22, transmasculine genderqueer) described, had been dating their abusers for years. In his story, he had spent four years with his abuser during their college years. He stated: “we started dating when we were both 18 and stopped when we were both 22 and between those years there were lots of things that happened.” Anna (30, MTF), who had been working as a drag performer at a bar and engaging in sex work on the side, met her abuser at work who patronized her shows. She stated: “after like maybe 4 months...he asked me to move in and stuff and it was getting serious”. Similarly, Fatima (30, MTF) had dated her abuser for some time before they decided to move in together. She met her abuser on an online dating site. She stated “yeah we dated for over a year and then he had to move for work... He got the place, I quit my job, and then I found work up there.” In a different type of relationship, Jessica (49, FTM), was the only respondent who was legally married to her abuser. In addition, she was the only respondent who was not out as transgender before the start of her relationship. While she was not initially out to her abuser as transgender, she stated: “...she knew two years prior [to getting married] when we were dating...we dated 5 years and married 23. So she knew for 25 years.” Jessica’s (49, MTF) abuser entered their marriage knowing Jessica’s trans identity and was, in Jessica’s words:

very supportive. She didn’t quite understand but the following day she came home with a bra and panties and a skirt for me she went shopping and she bought me some clothes...

For Joe (18, FTM), his abusive relationship started off as more of just a casual dating process and he had no intentions of pursuing the abuser. Joe met his abuser while working on a theatrical production. He stated:

...I would just sort of brush him off from time to time and I would be just like whatever its some dude in the background and it just sort of progressed from there...I was like okay I've never been in a real relationship I'll just have a little fun and break it off and just do whatever I need to do and enter a relationship with this guy and it was okay at first...

As these examples illustrate, the types of relationships varied throughout the stories and included dating relationships, cohabiting partners, and a married couple.

Respondents spoke only briefly about their relationships prior to the abuse beginning. This was likely because they knew in advance that the focus of the study was on IPV. After discussing in brief about their abusers and their relationship(s), I asked all participants very broadly to share with me their story of abuse. Examining these accounts of violence and abuse are important because there is little to no research on trans IPV victimization and there may have been different types or dynamics of abuse and violence that have not been previously discussed in the available literature. Participant's stories spanned various types of abuses including physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological violence. Todd (22, FTM) experienced various types of violence as he stated:

...we had different forms of violence that happened throughout the relationship...Um, that weren't that apparent to me in the beginning but I guess as the relationship progressed, they became more prevalent.

Some participants experienced frequent physical and sexual violence. Anna's (30, MTF) abuser was a former client of hers' during her time as a sex worker. She engaged in sex work as a means

for extra money and because she had difficulty obtaining a job. Anna's abuser regularly raped her and in a scene that she described as a jealous rage, she stated:

He pushed me down and he held me hard like, down on the floor and I kind of struggled but I was so shocked like what do I do? I have to let him just do what he wants or he's gonna hurt me and plus I was the one that messed up so I deserve this? ...I screamed and he kept going and I was crying and crying and he didn't stop and he put his hand on my face like and said stop crying baby stop and put his hands on my face and after he was done he said um "see I don't need to pay you cuz you live here feel free to get out any time if you don't like it."

Other participants also described more physical and sexual abuses. Owen (19, FTM) stated:

"Despite my disgust with vaginal/anal sex, he would force me into it and make loving comments about how we were "truly" together." Rebecca (38, MTF) mentioned about her abuser: "he would have no shame in shoving me, he's punched me, and he's slapped me. One time I fell and he even kicked me in the sides."

While all participants experienced different types of abuses that could be classified as physical, sexual, emotional or psychological violence, a major focus of many of the stories included mostly psychological, verbal, and emotional abuses. For example, Sam (38, transgender stone butch) stated: "It was all emotional and verbal but I sometimes became afraid she would physically hurt me when she got very angry. She sometimes would punch things, but never hit me." Todd (22, transmasculine genderqueer) described struggling with these types of abuses as they are generally difficult to see or label as IPV given the focus on physical violence; he stated:

When it comes to violence that's always a hard word for me to define because I understand physical violence of course...that sort of tangible thing. But other forms of violence, uh, for me are a lot harder to understand and spot and I think those were the most often occurring circumstances and manipulations.

Laura (33, MTF) echoed a similar story when reflecting upon her experiences. While her experience involved severe violence, she reflected on how she felt during the early stages of her

abusive relationship when much of it involved verbal and psychological torment. She mentioned, “I didn’t think it was abusive, I mean, I know it is now but, it, it like hurt my feelings so bad. He crushed me...” These accounts illustrate similar findings across the IPV literature that those abuses that leave no physical mark are not only difficult to label but very often among the most damaging to survivors. In the following section, I separate out two major and salient themes of abuses against transgender victims: genderist and transphobic attacks. These types of abuses emerged as prominent aspects in the accounts of violence and abuse. While many of these types of abuses involve psychological and emotional torment, they manifested through physical and sexual violence as the examples will illustrate.

Genderist Attacks

The utilization of genderist attacks was prominent throughout the accounts of violence and abuse. Brittany (34, MTF) was in an open relationship with an abusive partner who would police her gender performance by attempting to regulate her behaviors. Brittany stated “she would say my promiscuity was more like a man than a woman”, reinforcing traditional aspects of femininity. Further, she’d micromanage other gendered performances as she stated “sometimes she would say I didn’t do something like a girl, like how I wash my hair.” Beyond genderist attacks that were intended to regulate gender performances, many of these abuses were directed against a victims’ personality or character. As gender is embodied through performance, it is also a characteristic of our personalities which were the sites of many attacks. When asked to describe some details of his experiences with genderist abuses, Todd (22, transmasculine genderqueer) described:

At a certain point he held um, I guess traditionally masculine characteristics over me like “if you were more of a man – you would do x, y and z” or um, if you had more honor and

integrity you wouldn't be acting like this or why can't you just talk to me face to face like a man that were specifically gendered that were supposed to be used as threats against my character or my transition.

Through these attacks, abusers manifest their power to police gender appropriateness and control intimate and personal aspects of these survivors' gender expression and identities. Genderist attacks can be an attempt to disempower victims as Audrey (42, MTF) stated when reflecting on some of the genderist attacks against her. She described:

...her attacks on my passability as a woman...it was an attempt to manipulate me. To take away something that I was feeling good about and you know, how I was able to present myself as female and learning how to, you know, look beautiful and look pretty, you know, and the way I dressed and the way I see myself and trying to turn that into a negative for me. It was taking away those things that I found uh, you know, self fulfilling and trying to pull those away so that there would be a void there and that she could come in and fill it.

In addition to regulating and policing gender expectations, abusers often reinforced the superiority of masculinity against those victims who were femininely identified. As a component of genderism, abusers attacked femininity and directed severe violence against these survivors. In Laura's (33, MTF) account, like other respondents, she described being early into transition and progressing through what was that current relationship with a partner who was seemingly supportive. In an instance in which a fight over what Laura was wearing and how she was presenting herself escalated to physical violence, she recounted:

He stopped me. He pinned me against the wall and he slapped me and said you wanna be a bitch? You wanna be a bitch that bad? This is how bitches get treated" and he slapped me and pushed on my chest...I was screaming.

Laura's abuser regularly policed her feminine expressions through verbal and psychological degradation that marginalized and subordinated femininity. In this example, the perpetrator physically abuses Laura and makes the direct connection between the violence and her

femininity. Essentially, her abuser regarded femininity with contempt and deserving of violence and cruelty.

In another example, Anna (30, MTF) experienced similar abuses that reinforced the subordination of femininity. Anna was engaged in sex work throughout the relationship and the abuser had been a former client. Anna expressed that engaging in sex work allowed her to earn extra money in which she could meet her transitional goals that included several surgeries and hormonal therapy. Like a few of the other participants, Anna had difficulty getting and maintaining employment due to her trans status. Anna's abuser was informed by a friend that she had not quit her sex work while they were dating and in one of her many experiences with physical and sexual abuse, he lashed out violently. She described that

When he found out ... he hit me, he hit me like, slapped me and said I was a dirty bitch and a whore and that I was worthless and ... [that] he should've known better with a slut.

In addition to the physically violent attack, Anna's abuser utilized these gendered verbal attacks that degraded womanhood and her femininity. To him, she had violated the boundaries of her appropriate feminine expression and the genderist attacks were a reminder of what kind of woman she was; a woman deserving of violence. Genderist attacks involved the policing of gender performance and the reinforcement of traditional or hegemonic notions of gender. By utilizing genderist narratives that exist in our culture, abusers were able to manipulate and control victims' emotions and psychological well-being. By disempowering victims, abusers gain control and establish a power dynamic that subordinates the other.

Transphobic Attacks

A majority of the participants also experienced patterns of transphobic attacks. These attacks were directed specifically against their trans status and further served to keep victims

disempowered and isolated. Similar to the experiences of many gay and lesbian survivors of IPV in which homophobia and heterosexism were used to abuse, perpetrators in these accounts utilized the existing transphobic culture to attack their victims. As Jim (21, transmasculine) described: “She said that it was very difficult to date a trans person and made me feel like I was a burden...this behavior affected my self-image negatively and impacts me to this day.”

Abusers disparaged victims’ trans status and identities by belittling bodies, making victims feel that they were doing *them* a favor in staying, stereotyping and misunderstanding their transition processes, or threatening to out them. In Anna’s story, the abuser went as far as ridiculing her in public spaces. In one instance, Anna and her abuser were out a bar when the abuser began to tell others loudly that she was a transwoman. Anna prided herself on her ability to “pass” as a ciswoman and described herself by stating:

I was always kind of like a smaller, skinny person so I was already kind of, easily effeminate and small so I didn’t have to do much to look more like a girl. I have a soft face and I made it softer with makeup...

During the night of this part of her experience, Anna’s abuser not only outted her in public but also made attempts at selling her. Anna’s abuser frequently pimped her out without consent. She recounted:

...he would like, see if someone at the bar wanted ... me. Like he would get drunk and even if we were at like a straight bar he would say like “you wanna fuck her? The “shehe” is with me! She’s a freak and cheap” and people would like just be like get away from me but he liked to humiliate me in public.

In this account, Anna states that even if they were at a straight bar, he would out her trans status, indicating that he would do this in spaces that were assumingly most hostile.

Abusers commonly relied on transphobic tactics that instilled fear of not passing or fear of being outted to others. Rebecca (38, MTF) described how her abuser constantly harped upon her insecurities with passing by frequently telling her that any of the men that looked her way would never love or want to be with her if they knew who she “really” was. She stated:

...he would ask about other men that worked at the mall, like this one in particular he said “I seen the way he looks at you” blah blah and then follow it by “you better be careful cuz he find out you were really a man he’s gonna flip out on you.

In many of the accounts, the notion that these survivors were not “real men” or “real women” was cited as a tactic of abuse. Rebecca went on to tell how her abuser would consistently remind her she was not a “real woman”. In one example detailing an argument fueled by the abusers jealously, she stated:

He shattered my favorite perfume... We weren’t even fighting over perfume but he quickly tried to justify it like, he said “you only wear that perfume for everyone else you don’t wear that for me, you just trying to get other men” blah blah and he said “if you ain’t gonna look like a real woman you might as well smell like one right?” he would just say mean things like that to attack me. He’d start trying to put me down all the time and making feel bad.

Similarly, Laura (33, MTF) described that her abuser would refer to her as a “liar” for passing as a woman. In one argument that severely escalated, Laura stated that her abuser was angered by her new position as a secretary and that he took issue with her working with the public. She stated:

...he just said you really think you’re something, “you’re just gonna be like this ebony princess answering phones and batting eyes at strangers and shit”, “sitting around like you this fine woman” “lying to everyone is what you’re doing.

Abusers commonly relied on the notion that because these survivors were trans, others would not “understand” them or that others would view them negatively. As with the genderist attacks, these tactics left victims feeling that beyond the context of this abusive relationship, the world is

also unfriendly to transgender individuals. As Anna (30, MFT) described what her abuser would regarding the outside world: “No man is going to see you as a woman and even if you get one they just wanna sleep with you they don’t want to love a circus act like you.” Laura (33, MTF) also echoed how abusers would remind victims that others would be hostile to them as well in a scenario she described as a typical lunch date that took an abusive turn. In this story, Laura is describing getting ready for their outing:

When I was almost done he came in the room and was like “whoa whoa, baby what are you doing, what are you doing?” “I thought we was going out for lunch, what are you doing?” and I was like well, I want to go like this, I want to go as “Laura” as me – this is what I want. The other days and months prior I was still just toggling between my boy self and then privately Laura. He said “please don’t do this to me right now, I cant. He just was like “no, this is gonna be a problem baby they’re gonna spit in our food you’re gonna be miserable and you know I think you look good but that’s for home baby please you look like a freak.”

Fatima (30, MTF) met her abuser online and like the majority of the participants, entered a relationship openly and proudly trans to her partner. She described that her trans status was never an issue in the relationship but that her abuser avoided being “seen” with her. After over a year of this isolation and feelings of insecurity largely instilled by her abuser, Fatima confronted him and told him that she felt as if they were purposefully not seen together very frequently in public. Fatima described her abuser’s response:

...he got upset, he got really upset and was like well um “well I mean Fatima, I see a lot of people around, that place is small minded there and with work you know, who knows if they would see me and then talk about me and that could really hurt me” and I said “see you what ? see you with me?” and he said “well no, no hun, I’m just saying people are small minded and they’ll judge” and like all this other shit he started saying like basically that I was right, he was not wanting to be “seen with me” or whatever. I couldn’t believe that. It just hit me like a ton of bricks, like I mean, I do fine with passing and I try not to be consumed by it but this um, now with him saying that I just got like so um, like I don’t know like hyper vigilant about it, about what I looked like.

In that account, Fatima's abuser tells her that he in fact has been isolating her and that it's about others' transphobia and not his. She describes what this experience meant to her and how it affected her identity. Preoccupations with self-image and the negative effects of these transphobic abuses are apparent in how she viewed herself.

Finally, in some stories, abusers undermined victims' transition processes. Tom (24, FTM) described his abuser's misguided attacks upon beginning testosterone hormone therapy. Tom stated:

She started getting really suspicious of me like because I was on T she thought I was going to get like out of control sexually and she started just regulating everything. She was always checking my phone and asking me questions. If I didn't answer to her, she would scream, she even broke my phone at one point.

Her transphobic attacks relied on stereotyped and erroneous assumptions about the effects of the hormone therapy. Beyond the inherent transphobia in the abuses, the erroneous assumptions about hormonal therapy also gave her a sense of justification to control Tom's communications with anyone outside of the relationship. Similarly, through Anna's transition, she described that her abuser ridiculed her process and told her "you're looking more like a freak now with looking like a full woman but then have that shit between your legs".

Power and the Social Context of Transphobia

"Like every now and then I'll think, just like, how lucky everyone is that they don't have to think about their gender clashing with their bodies and I wish sometimes that I wasn't trans but then I think, no, no, that's what she would've wanted". -Tom

As Zemsky (1990) argued, social and cultural contexts shape the opportunity for abuses to occur within intimate relationships. While traditional feminist models argued that the patriarchal power structure fostered the opportunity for men's violence against women, the stories in the present study were analyzed in a grounded and open method that allowed for the

illumination of the micro-contexts of power within relationships that are largely informed by the larger social structure. Through this perspective, while social and cultural contexts could make one member of the relationship the one with more power, ultimately the power is constructed between two partners. For example, the patriarchal power structure informs a social system that recognizes two and only two genders while simultaneously defining one superior gender and subordinating any and all gender variance (Bilodeau 2007). While this characterizes the social context, power is made real through interaction and in its application to the present study, it is constructed through language and discourse. The power is not necessarily conferred on any one partner according to their category in the social structure but rather, it is constructed in the context of the intimate relationship.

Transphobia, which embodies the negative attitudes towards those who are gender variant, stems from a genderist system that recognizes only two genders and one of those as dominant. The use of transphobic verbal and psychological attacks was a particularly salient theme across nearly all of the participants' accounts of violence and abuse. While not empirically supported, Munson and Cook (2003) proposed that transgender victims of IPV are highly susceptible to transphobic attacks by partners as a result of the larger social and cultural environment that facilitates violence towards those who are gender variant. This theme throughout a majority of the participant accounts in the present study illustrates that this is indeed a prominent dynamic of the verbal and psychological abuses perpetrated against transgender victims. Further, it is important to note that while abusers commonly relied on transphobic attacks, for five of the participants, the abuser was also transgender. Audrey (42, MTF) described her abuser as genderqueer and stated that she [the abuser] "retained her female

name and her female pronoun. She just feels like she lives her life right down the middle so she didn't really feel the need to change anything like that." In another example, Chris (22, transfeminine genderqueer) described his abuser as "biologically male but genderqueer identified, also feminine mostly". Todd (22 year old transmasculine genderqueer), attributed some of the violence to the fact that his transgender abuser was not getting help for his transition stating that "for me, my partner was also trans identified so the fact that I was able to start hormones and he wasn't, he used to manipulate me in multiple ways." These accounts illustrate that while abusers utilized transphobic attacks from the larger genderist culture, the abusers were not necessarily cisgender themselves or in the category of privilege. While the social and cultural contexts facilitate and make possible these attacks against gender variance, the power used to control and manipulate victims is constructed through the use of language regardless of the abuser characteristics.

Summary

Through the policing and regulation of gendered expectations and marginalization of trans identities, abusers subordinated their victims. These tactics served to cripple victims' self-concepts and established an abusive power dynamic. Whether the abusers were cisgender or not, the existing genderist and transphobic social and cultural contexts fosters the opportunity for these abuses to occur. Similar to the experiences of gay and lesbian victims of same-sex IPV in which abusers are also gay and lesbian themselves, homophobia and heterosexism were intertwined with tactics of abuse.

These accounts of genderist and transphobic attacks that emerged as the most salient themes in the patterns of violence provide evidence and support to the claims made by Munson

and Cook-Daniels (2003) that trans identities could be a central component to IPV abuse. In addition, Brown (2011) echoed many of the same tactics of abuse that included undermining trans-identities, ridicule, manipulation, and other genderist or transphobic attacks. However, neither of these works was based on empirical evidence but rather they were proposed as potential susceptibilities to abuse.

For these survivors, these attacks served as a constant reminder that they were inferior and deserving of abuse or violence. Through the recurring degradation and devaluing of their trans-identities, many of the participants became more isolated and further ensnared in the cycle of abuse. The genderist culture permeates these relationships and encouraged or at least partially motivated the abuses.

Given that the vast majority of these participants were early into transition during these abusive relationships, it is possible that these tactics against trans-identities are more common and more damaging. In future research, samples with participants in varying stages of their transition processes would allow for more detailed comparisons that could investigate whether these themes are salient across transgender IPV abuses across various stages of transition. Further, future research could examine how racial identities are incorporated into abuses and if differences exist among and between racial categories in terms of violence experienced.

CHAPTER 6: MEANINGS OF VIOLENCE: CONTROLLING TRANSITION AND TRANS VULNERABILITY

“I wanted this to work because, who’s going to want me now? ...who wants to build a life with someone who is figuring out life in another gender and has these issues and my body and all?” -Laura

As participants were asked to share their stories of IPV victimization, they all constructed meanings behind the abuse as they made sense of their experiences. As participants recounted what had happened to them, they developed narratives about abuser motivations and why they felt these abuses occurred. In other words, sharing these stories of victimization at the hands of a partner they once loved, participants began to construct what the abuse meant, what the abuse was directed towards them, why, and what did abusers seek to accomplish? Throughout the accounts, a majority of the participants described their abusers’ tactics as means of controlling their transition and trans-identity. Specifically, abusers controlled aspects of bodily changes and how/when participants expressed their gender and gendered identities. I refer to this as “controlling transition”. The second salient theme that emerged in the construction of meaning behind violence and abuse experienced was the notion of trans-specific vulnerabilities. As a majority of the participants shared their stories, they made consistent reference to the idea that abusers knew where and how to inflict the most damage and this was almost always trans-specific. These participants described a susceptibility to abuse as they were in vulnerable and developing transition stages. Beyond directly targeting trans-status, participants attributed meaning to the abuse as a result of vulnerability. Many participants cited that this vulnerability led them to stay in abusive relationships for fear of never finding another partner. I refer to this as “trans vulnerability”. To these survivors, these abusive tactics constructed a dynamic that placed the abuser in a position of power as they felt they would never be loved again. As

mentioned previously, other scholars have proposed that transgender individuals are at greater risk for IPV because abusers may take advantage of trans vulnerability. Brown (2011) argues that this vulnerability may lead transgender victims to lower relationship expectations. These accounts provide evidence and support for these propositions and expand what is known on the meaning constructed behind abuse experienced as told by transgender survivors.

Controlling Transition

As participants described and retold their stories and experiences in abusive relationships, a majority of them perceived the reasons for these abuses as the perpetrators desire to control their transitioning process. In maintaining power and control over victims, abusers often take charge over victims' lives and in these accounts, they control transitions. In the process of making meaning and sense of her experiences, Jessica (49, MTF) described why her abuser began to control her bodily changes and gender expression. Jessica was in a 23 year married relationship with a cisgender woman. In the early stages of their relationship, Jessica came out as transgender to her abuser and much to her surprise, received her support. Jessica lived her public life as a man and her home/private life as a woman. As the years progressed, Jessica wanted to be more public with her feminine identity and desired to fully transition into a woman. She stated:

More people were transitioning and coming out and telling their stories and more in the media and with the internet more trans people were finding each other so uh so there were conventions and stuff that was easier to uh seek help and you know resources. And I think once that happened I realized I was starting to embrace my identity as being something we could work with and figure out where before she had a lot of control over it when it was secretive so it was something for the bed room or in the house but when we went to [City] I could leave with my wig and clothes on but basically you couldn't tell it was me and we had to be secretive about it whereas now even within the last 8 years I grew my hair long, I started um, putting highlights in it, piercing my ears and being more effeminate and I'm 6 foot 3 so I don't really look feminine but I have this look and so

people knew it was still me it's just that they saw me as more effeminate type man and then the hormones started so obviously things in my body started changing and now you know...living my life as Jessica and most people don't know me as Bob anymore.

While there had been issues throughout the years of control and abuse, over time they grew worse. She described that as the decades passed and the social atmosphere changed, she became more and more comfortable with transitioning. What Jessica described above is that her abuser once "had a lot of control" over her trans identity but as that began eroding, the abuses became more intense. She described that her abuser would use feminine gifts and items as "leverage".

She could often do anything she wanted you know? She simply just had to pick up lip stick or you know a pair of nylons for me and throw me a bone like "here I got you something" that was supposed to forgive anything she chose to do and I really felt like she was manipulating me.

Abusers sometimes held control over the items that these survivors used to pass. Jessica described not being allowed to even do so much as "buying a pair of shoes without her prior knowledge". In particular, the control over items used to pass was salient throughout those stories in which the survivor wished to pass as female. This may be due to the fact that there are many more materials required to emphasize, present, and physically construct femininity; for example, the use of makeup, bras and silicone cups, dresses, hair products, and more.

In Laura's (33, MTF) experiences, her abuser destroyed several items she used to present her femininity. Laura's abuser wanted total control over when and how she presented as a woman. She described an instance:

...he started to rip up my clothes. It was a nice outfit, I loved that dress, I went out just grocery shopping in it but I loved it and I always got compliments on it. He ripped it up, he took a knife off the table and ripped it close to my skin and he cut me. He cut me while ripping it up and yelling things and he said "you wanna be a woman so bad". And he kept ripping up my dress and turned me around.

In another example of her account, Laura prepared for a night out and dinner with her abuser.

After getting dressed Laura's abuser claimed, "you look like a drag queen you look ridiculous".

She went on to state:

...and I said but I thought you said the hormones were working and I feel like my voice is better and I had gotten this new bra that had the breasts in it and I looked real good. He said "please don't do this to me right now, I can't. I can't be like, you know, no, no, no this" he just was like "no, this is gonna be a problem baby ... you're gonna be miserable and you know I think you look good but that's for home baby please you look like a freak.

Laura's abuser would dictate and regulate gender expression and transitional goals and decisions.

In another example of an abuser intervening in transitional decisions, Fatima's (30, MTF) abuser went as far as persuading some minor surgical interventions. She stated:

I started doing some of the things he got like, the better bras and silicone, I even did more on my face like the lips and cheeks [referring to surgeries] that were just easy one day things. He would praise me for that and then do stuff for me, like things that I had been asking to do like just more public things. I started to just lose myself; I was just now this thing. This like experiment or something of his to use and "Doll Up". It only made me more depressed which made him more angry and then that's when he got colder, more distant, more angry and um kind of like violent.

Transmen and other transmasculine respondents also experienced similar aspects of abusers controlling transition. While in these accounts there were no instances of using gendered items as leverage, abusers did control or block many aspects of the transitional process. In Sam's (38, transgender stone butch) experience, his abuser was also trans identified. Sam stated:

I was genderfluid at the time. I was told I could not transition before him, and was often not allowed to present in masculine ways. I was ordered to embody particular genders by him and the people he traded me to for goods/services.

In another example of transmale experiences with controlling transition, Joe (18, FTM) described how his abuser would prevent him from seeing medical and health professionals. His abuser

sometimes intervened in any transition decision and attempted to convince or stop Joe from changing his body. Joe described:

he would say “I can handle you physically modifying the upper half of your body but if you change the lower half of your body it’s wrong” that you have to keep what you have you have to use it you have to get over it and make a baby with me.

Joe described that while his abuser was seemingly supportive of his transmale identity, calling him “boyfriend and use male pronouns” he also stated that he would “make offhand comments like he was just doing that as a service to me like he didn’t really respect me, he didn’t understand.” Beyond preventing Joe from seeing medical professionals, Joe described repeated instances of rape and sexual abuses. Through sexual violence, Joe’s abuser sought to consistently remind him of his biological female body. As Joe described:

...[he would] pressure me into doing sexual activities that I didn’t want to do at all....I had been able to ignore my lower dysphoria for a while because I knew it was a long way off before I could take care of it and he um, I had never been an angry person before but after all of these things that he made me do and make comments like “now we’re really together” “were a couple” “were going to be together forever.”

Joe often described being at odds with his biological body and that these threats to impregnate him were connected to his abusers feelings of ownership and control. By threatening to make Joe pregnant, Joe’s abuser wanted to establish permanency.

For Todd (22, transmasculine genderqueer), his abuser’s process of controlling transition was more psychological. His abuser tried to delay and prevent him from seeking hormone therapy and when Todd followed through with his desires, he relied on psychological isolation. Todd describes how his abuser would hold contempt towards his bodily changes and that he would never provide the emotional support he needed. He described:

He never wanted to hear about doctors' appointments, he never wanted to go with me to doctor's appointments, he didn't ever want to help me celebrate the changes in my body that I was really excited about um, he basically just wasn't there to support me.

This lack of support and disdain for his transition left Todd isolated and emotionally secluded.

Through this isolation, Todd's abuser may have been attempting to regain control over his transition and influence or prevent his development.

While there were varying aspects to how abusers attempted or followed through with their desires to control the transition process, the theme of controlling transition was a salient theme throughout the meanings constructed behind abuse. To the participants, the abuse was perpetrated to gain control over their development and served to further disempower victims. When reflecting and making sense of their experiences, participants saw many of their experiences with abuse as attempts by abusers to control transition and define them on the abusers own terms.

Trans Vulnerability

A second major and salient theme throughout the accounts that constructed meaning behind abuse experienced was the concept of trans vulnerability. Throughout a majority of the stories, participants described themselves as vulnerable and susceptible to violence and abuse due to their trans status and evolving transition process. When retelling their experiences, most participants saw their vulnerability as meaning an opportunity for abuse to occur. This vulnerability was always trans-specific. For example, Joe described how his transition process meant it made him vulnerable to abuse:

I do feel like it made me more vulnerable. I was in a really sensitive and kind of unstable place and I was trying to find my footing and I just, it's not a good; it's an ideal time for an abuser to strike. They take advantage of your fears or your uncertainty.

In addition to what participants described as the instability of transition and the process of evolving and becoming one's self, most participants also felt unwanted. Throughout the accounts, participants described wanting stability and wanting to be loved; this meant that even when being abused, participants stayed. This insecurity constructed the overall meaning behind trans vulnerability.

Chris (22, transfeminine genderqueer) described how hir⁴ trans vulnerability influenced hir acceptance of abuse in relationships. Zie⁵, like other participants, accepted abuses in hir relationship because zie came to expect zie would never find a better relationship. Zie stated:

I think of myself as queer sexually because I don't need to engage in penetrative sex to be having sex but that was just not an option. For some odd or just weird reason I thought, well [name of abuser] already knows this about me and zie was still willing to stay with me and I'm happy to be with another genderqueer identified person so maybe I should just count my blessings and not be picky about everything. It's hard to think now, that rejecting sexual abuse, essentially, rape, was something I thought was being "picky" – it's scary that I hit that low, that I felt I wasn't worthy of a healthy relationship because my sexuality was weird or that my gender was weird and people won't understand me so no one will want me, so maybe I thought, well at least I have hir.

These feelings were echoed by many participants who feared being alone as a result of being transgender. For John (29, FTM) and several other participants, past experiences of abandonment due to their trans status left them hopeful abusers would change and that they could somehow make this relationship work. He described:

I didn't really think it would ever get like this and also, I was in love and I had it good so I just thought, I don't know. I had been single for 2 years because my long term girlfriend left me after coming out trans. So maybe I thought this was like a rare thing that I should try to fix. I had other trans friends and they all didn't have relationships or couldn't keep one so maybe I was trying to be like the one that had a success.

⁴ Hir is a gender neutral pronoun used in place of "him/his" or "her".

⁵ Zie is a gender neutral pronoun used in place of "he" or "she".

In John's account, his fear of never finding another relationship was directly tied to his trans identity. He made the direct connection between not having intimate or romantic relationships and being transgender. Trans vulnerability was not necessarily only for those who had been new into transition or just coming out during the abusive relationship but rather, it was susceptibility that abusers picked and manipulated. Even though John described having been out as trans for long before meeting his abuser, he still mentioned:

I was so proud of myself and everything that I had accomplished and I had done it all on my own, and I been out as trans, I got the things that I needed to do it, I went through it and had to deal with so much loss but then, on top of all of that shit, all that I had to deal with before, she came in and had to do that to me. It was just such a power play for her

Similarly, Rebecca (38, MTF) stated:

I always had a good sense of self, like since I transitioned years ago before him, I really came to be myself, who I was but he just had this way of pulling out old insecurities, ones that I had put behind me, like he just knew where I was vulnerable and he knew what to attack. I got really down on myself and preoccupied with my looks since he went after that a lot....After a while, I felt just defeated, I was now just basically back to what I had been feeling like years ago, I was self-conscious, timid, I started isolating myself from everyone.

Here, Rebecca articulates that even though she had transitioned long before meeting her abuser, he still emphasized trans specific vulnerabilities that over time left her feeling isolated.

In Tom's (24, FTM) account, he directly addressed the need for continuity and stability during his transition process. He stated:

I didn't want to break up with her and when I tried to leave she would just guilt me back in or if she didn't I would just change my mind, I'd feel lonely or something. When you're going through changes it's best to have a steady and consistent home and intimate life you know and I thought I was doing the right thing with just keeping this the way it was.

This was a similar sentiment throughout many of the stories. As Rebecca (38, MTF) added:

It's easy for that person to just look from the outside and say just leave but when I've literally lost so much over the years, it's hard to just leave. I wanted so badly to have stability that I just made myself put up with him. I thought it was a small price to pay for the stable home.

Rebecca's reference to having "lost so much over the years" brought to light what many other respondents also expressed. To place trans vulnerability into an even deeper context, it is crucial to take into account that beyond the perceptions of unwantedness by potential intimate partners, many of the respondents have already been rejected by many others including those they had once loved romantically, family members, and even jobs. For Tom, he stated:

My family doesn't talk all that much and I definitely didn't want to talk about this because they may just side with her and be like, yeah, it's just too much this trans thing is even breaking that up.

Chris (22, transfeminine genderqueer) mentioned that zie struggled with garnering romantic interests and zie largely attributed this to his trans status. Zie stated:

It was easier to date when I was just a gay boy and dating other gay boys, but when I started embracing my femininity and dressing more feminine, I felt like gay men were just not interested anymore. For about a year or so, I was just not dating anyone because no one really wanted to date me or maybe I just wasn't having any luck.

Similarly, Audrey (42, MTF) shared how often her abuser would remind her of a time when she was rejected by her former partner for following through with her transition. Audrey stated:

she would attack me for not being able to love her especially, kind of in comparison to my ex [male name] who I really was in love with and it was very devastating for me that when I started expressing myself femininely uh, then, you know he broke up with me because I was, I was beginning to, you know change the way I presented from male to female and it was horribly, horribly devastating because it was the only person in my life that I had ever actually been in love with even though I had been married a couple of times I only really ever loved him... You know, it was kind of one of the reoccurring things was you know, that I lost the love of my life and she would always grab a hold of that because it was a thought reminder that somebody else had rejected me.

Audrey's abuser would remind her that she was not in the position to freely leave the relationship. Participants made meaning and sense out of these experiences as a time of vulnerability and one opportune to their abusers. In establishing and maintaining control over victims, abusers in these accounts could minimize or excuse their abuse and violence by reminding survivors that rejections, loneliness, and isolation were part of their lived realities. Through these mechanisms, abusers once again used the hostile social and cultural contexts as leverage to entrap victims.

Summary

As participants constructed meaning and made sense of their victimization, these concepts of controlling transition and trans vulnerability emerged as salient themes. Given that the majority of the sample was relatively early into the transition processes, abusers found ways in which to manipulate, regulate, and control victims gendered expressions and identities. This theme in the accounts was particularly salient as even those participants who had been farther into transition recounted abusers' desires to control aspects of their gendered expressions. Participants constructed abusers' desire to control transition processes as having significant meaning behind their experiences. Whether tied with physical and sexual abuses, these emotional and psychological tactics were used to disempower victims and subordinate their trans status within the context of the relationship.

As the transgender community continues to be one that is marginalized and oppressed, abusers can utilize these social vulnerabilities to their advantage. Scholars have more recently discussed how trans specific vulnerabilities place the trans community at high risks for HIV and other health issues including unsafe sexual activities, police, employment, and social service

discrimination to name a few (Brown 2011; Munson 2006; Nemoto et al 2004). However, little to no empirical evidence has been offered to make a similar argument for IPV. It is evident through these accounts that the vulnerability transgender individuals feel are known to abusers and fosters the construction of abusive micro contexts of power.

CHAPTER 7: PROCESSING VICTIM IDENTITY

Towards the end of each of the stories and accounts of IPV victimization, participants discussed how these abusive relationships came to end. All of the participants in the study had left their abusers and thus described and constructed their process of identifying as a victim of IPV and seeking help. The process of identifying as a victim is one that is both personal but also socially informed. The idea or notion of being victimized or being a victim is one that carries with it cultural significance. In terms of its application to IPV, the larger heteronormative and genderist culture assumes a certain dynamic between perpetrator and abuser. Specifically, it assumes male perpetration and female victimization. Grappling between actual lived experience of IPV victimization and this larger cultural narrative about what it means to be a victim, participants constructed the process of how they came to identify as a victim of IPV. Identifying as a victim and identifying their experiences as abuse allowed for participants to leave.

In these accounts, participants' most salient and consistent pattern involving what I termed the "walking of the gender tightrope"; that is, throughout the accounts, participants regularly utilized gendered language when discussing their victim identities. Specifically, they constructed the notion of "victim" as hyper feminine and passive. Even for those whose gender identities were more feminine, there was an evident rejection of the idea that they were that kind of victim – a feminine and passive victim. A major component of this process involved others outside of the relationship acknowledging and confirming their victimization. Participants invoked the idea that others would either not take their victimization seriously because of their gender or that they would simply not be believed.

Finally, most of the participants sought some form of help from either formal or informal resources. Examples of the formal resources included calling the police, using legal action, or going to shelters while informal resources involved mostly family, coworkers, or friends. In describing these experiences, participants described “navigating genderist help resources”. Several of the participants experienced and encountered structural barriers to formal help on the basis of their trans status. These experiences ranged from genderist or transphobic discrimination in the courtroom and by law enforcement as well as hospital and shelter staff. The majority described that informal resources were most helpful.

Walking the Gender Tightrope

As participants discussed and reflected upon their victimization and how they came to both view the abuse as problematic and themselves as victims, a gendered discourse emerged that constructed “victim” as totally submissive and in many ways, traditionally “feminine”. Several of the respondents discussed feeling conflicted with this regardless of their own gender identification. Anna (30, MTF) described her thought processes and grappling with the notion of being a victim of IPV. She and others invoked the heteronormative and genderist cultural narrative behind IPV victimization and stated:

Well like I wasn't just some helpless house wife or something like getting punched in the face and then apologizing for her husband or some shit like that I mean, I guess it's hard because I still feel sometimes that I put myself in that situation but also because I just think victim means that you lost, like that you lost, something happened to you that was bad. But for me , I don't want to think of myself as I lost I didn't lose – bad things happened to me and I was able to get up and pick up the pieces and move forward and learn. That's not like “victim” to me.

Anna described grappling between what she knows it means to be a victim of IPV which is largely informed by the larger heteronormative and genderist culture, with her actual lived

experience. Other participants shared similar struggles in their process of identifying as a victim that invoked the idea that a victim was submissive, traditionally feminine and one that did not fight back. In another example, Rebecca (38, MTF) described: “I wasn’t gonna be just any victim, I had to just butch up and survive.” As part of this gendered narrative behind IPV victimization was the belief that victims “lose” and “don’t fight back”. In Laura’s (33, MTF) words, she stated:

I was screaming, I was screaming and I punched and scratched him back but I couldn’t get away [p] I tried I tried its not like I wasn’t like these other people who just freeze up, no I tried but my whole upper body was just sore and he was beating on me I was on the ground and he kicked me.

Laura distanced herself from “these other people”, those who “just freeze up”. She essentially distances herself from a typical expectation of a victim because she fought back.

Contributing the processing of victim identity, participants discussed their concern that they would not be believed by others. This also involved the walking of the gender tightrope, a process in which participants grappled with what they thought others expected of a victim and their actual lived experience. For Tom (24, FTM), his experience with physical violence ended in a hospital emergency room. Tom’s abuser, a cisgender woman, had thrown a hard object at his head which knocked him out. His abuser called an ambulance and Tom described what proceeded:

...she told them [the police] that I tripped on the router cable and fell and hit my head. The story was stupid and it just didn’t even seem right and you know they didn’t even question her at all. They just took her word for it like what?! That made no sense and I woke up in the hospital and I’m sitting there thinking, oh she’s gonna get in trouble and nobody had even accused her of doing anything!? They just bought that story hook line. And since nobody asked me what happened, I just didn’t even want to start anything...So to me, it just seemed like clearly I wasn’t a priority, I wasn’t a victim, I was just some butch woman who fell out and thankfully this girl was there to call the ambulance. I knew

then that people just, just weren't going to get me or get that situation or anything. They're just going to think I just, I should just deal with it.

Tom described the significance of others not viewing him as a victim and did so in a way that invoked the gendered discourse behind "victimhood". To him, others would see him as "butch" and able to handle it himself and that his abuser was just a "girl". Rebecca (38, MTF) echoed a similar account that included how others would perceive her victimization since she was "male bodied" and larger, unlike her abuser. She stated:

... I didn't have anyone to tell it to anyway but I mean, what if people didn't understand how serious it was. I mean, even the friend that finally took me in said, "why didn't you just beat him up? You're bigger than him." I think others would just see that I have a big build, I mean I was born biological male so that means I can just beat him up too and just deal with it that way. So I thought, well, I mean, I'll deal with what I can. Like I said, I never just didn't do anything, I protected myself too.

Rebecca and many other participants described similar accounts in which they were either expected to "handle things" on their own or that they would otherwise not be validated by others.

As John (29, FTM) described:

I didn't think of myself as like, a soft, like you know, I'm a tough man, I really am, but I would've never thought that words could just bring someone down like she did. All those insecurities and all that, she got into it... I wanted no one to know, I just wanted to handle it myself and see if I could just make it stop. I didn't really think to do anything about it but, um, I don't know.

For John, contending with the notion of being victimized and his masculinity meant that he should help himself and not reach out. This was not just evident in those who were masculine identified but was also told by most participants as they struggled with processing their victimization. In the examples above of two transwomen Anna and Laura, it is evident that regardless of gender identification, the notion of being victimized embodied a disempowered status in which the participants sought to distance themselves from.

Navigating Genderist Help Resources

As previously mentioned all of the participants in the present study have since left their abusive relationships and thus opened the opportunity for discussion on how survivors were able to leave. In the majority of the accounts, participants left abusive relationships with the help of friends and family. However, for most participants, this was neither the first nor the only help resources they sought. Many of the participants either had experiences with or held strong perceptions on law enforcement and the criminal justice system; few contemplated shelter resources. When describing their experiences with seeking help or reflecting on their available options, participants recounted stories of exclusion and isolation and genderism structured and limited many of their choices.

For many participants, especially for those who had experienced severe physical violence, the option of involving police was contemplated, called on by others, or called on their own accord. While there was no universal experience, most participants had strong negative perceptions or interactions with the police. Todd described what several other participants also feared about the police:

I didn't want to call the police for lots and lots of reasons. One because I don't feel comfortable around the police...but the police, there was a high likelihood that there would be some kind of discrimination – based on our gender identity and I guess things like that. They wouldn't understand the names or the pronouns or some kind of discrimination. Or they wouldn't take it seriously or something like that.

Many of the participants felt reluctant to involve police because of this fear of discrimination.

This perception led to the majority of respondents not seeking any legal assistance at all. As Joe (18, FTM) stated:

I never did go to the police, I don't trust them because of my situation...I had just heard a lot of bad things, um it's a different situation someone who is um, trans, being abused by

someone I was torn by the whole the “men can’t get raped mentality” that people had taught me growing up, the whole “you are a freak” police will see you as the attacker instead of the victim it would just be a whole mess and I didn’t want to draw it out further I was afraid of the police, I was afraid of what other people would do if they found out.

Beyond a perception of transphobia in the police, Joe echoed a similar narrative that police would misunderstand the situation.

For some participants, negative accounts of the police were not just perceptions but actual experiences and interactions. When John (29, FTM) had neighbors call the police more than once and after one of many violent incidents escalated, he found himself injured and locked away in the bathroom as they arrived through the front door. While police eventually helped John, he described a painful process in which police were reluctant to see him as the victim. He stated:

...I mean maybe they saw her and saw me and then expected that I was the one starting things. She had just gotten off work so she was all in a business skirt and pretty and all but they don’t know what she had just done. I bet they thought it was just like a common heterosexuals couple fight and so they were just ready to blame me because I was more masculine or just looked stronger or something I don’t know. Instead of just like evaluating the situation they were quick to jump to conclusions about things. They asked her about her bloody knuckles and they saw my bruises and then they saw my head bleeding and the cup smashed on the floor, it was obvious they had it wrong. They arrested her and not me at least but if there had been no physical evidence, I bet you they would’ve arrested me or at least the both of us because, like most the other times, there was no real physical evidence.

In these accounts, the police represented a genderist help avenue that likely did more damage than good. Even for Jessica (49, MTF) who had local police swing by her car garage shop frequently for coffee and snacks described that after her transition, the police and local community distanced themselves. When she was arrested in one of many domestic disputes, Jessica stated:

Not one of them treated me as if they knew me, in fact I had asked for a female officer to do the search on me and they refused to do that and they didn’t allow me to call a lawyer.

Rebecca (38, MTF) described interactions with police and the overall thought process behind deciding not have them involved. She stated:

I had two cops before just refuse to call me by my girl name before I had everything changed and they still called me he. They'd kind of exchanged glances at each other and stuff. I mean I don't know, maybe I'm just paranoid and expected that but then again it's something I think about. How will they see me, will that play a role in how they treat me or believe me or something? Like if I have to explain myself before I can even explain my being a victim?

As victims navigated potential options, this was a common process in the evaluation of help seeking avenues. The perception and actual experience of transphobia by police structured and limited legal recourse for these survivors.

For a majority of the respondents of color, their accounts of the police took a different dimension that included perceptions of racism. While white respondents still echoed similar perceptions of genderism and transphobia by the criminal justice system, respondents of color shared experiences of racism and fear of racial bias. In our conversation on the police, I asked Laura (33, MTF) why calling the police was not an option when she was severely beaten. She replied:

I mean I was in mid transition... I am still a man on record and my ID and stuff and I'm black. I'm black in [southern state]. It's like first they're going to see I'm this black dude that got beat up by a white man, think that we're gay, then see that I'm trans and that I'm in mid transition and it would be a disaster having to explain all of that and you know the police have a certain way of looking at trans people.

Rebecca (38, MTF), another black respondent, described past experiences with police that contributed to her negative perception and included racial bias. She stated:

...I've had bad experiences with them [the police] in the past like just having to explain myself all of the time and I think they're just immediately suspicious of me. I mean I lived life as black teenage boy and I know what it feels like to be judge by them but then being trans in addition and then being in the transition state, it was just all, just never good with the police

For Anna (30, MTF) her immigrant status came up in her discussion of the police. When I asked her specifically about what made her feel the police was never an option, she stated:

oh gosh definitely no I would have never called the police I mean like what are they going to do? I am a transsexual woman and I'm an immigrant and also I mean I was doing illegal things like the hormone sharing and I don't think they would've believed that my ex was forcing me to have sex for money. I mean they would've been seen me like a stereotype like what he used to say you know – I think that's true they would've just gotten me into trouble too.

Respondents of color faced unique realities that involved racial discrimination and bias. For these survivors, the structural realities and oppressive dynamics manifested into more negative experiences and perceptions of the police.

Very few participants discussed domestic violence shelters as an option and only one had utilized this help resource. While only four participants mentioned this avenue, it is important to note the processes described that constructed this option as inaccessible to trans survivors. As John discussed how he processed his victim identity and attempted to leave, he debated the idea of seeking help at a domestic violence shelter. John's abuser owned the location they lived in together and he had very few options for shelter. He stated:

for a while I thought well maybe like, I don't know maybe a shelter will take me but then, you think these things through and when you're like thinking about it, it's just like, "really!?" like what am I gonna do inside a women's shelter? Like, they don't let men in there for a reason and I look like a man, and I mean, like I am a man. So then I thought a homeless shelter maybe for a little bit but then, no, I can't really, I don't look homeless, I mean, I don't know how that works and it just, I don't know, what if someone found out I was in a homeless shelter, like my work or something?

Several factors played into this thought process but central to this discussion was the assumption that only women were victims and that help avenues for IPV victims were strictly gendered.

While more shelters now accept and place men, there is still a strong perception that these

avenues are strictly for women. This is largely informed by the gendered narrative of victimization.

Anna (30, MTF) was the only respondent who lived briefly in a domestic violence shelter. In her discussion, she described needing shelter regardless of whether it had domestic violence resources. With that in mind, she first contemplated a homeless shelter before then seeking out the domestic violence shelter. She described:

The homeless shelters are mostly full of men and I learned it wasn't safe for me there. Plus years ago when I needed them, I looked too much like a woman then that the staff was saying I needed to go a woman's homeless shelter that the men there may threaten me or something. But I remember the woman's shelter didn't want me either they said they only allow women there and they have children there and that I would cause like a scene or something I don't know they were just weird about it.

Here, Anna's account represented the challenge of navigating resources that were gender based. She was "too woman" for the men's shelter and "too man" for the woman's shelter. Eventually, she pursued a domestic violence shelter that accepted her. However, this came with its own issues as she stated:

...well they wanted to help but they made a big fuss about my trans status. I overheard the staff say "the other residents are going to be scared and the children are going to be scared and it's not going to be the environment that we want here" and then told me they didn't have a room for a single person. So they put me in another room that housed four women in 2 bunk beds and I had one bunk...I couldn't wait to get out, I mean the women were not violent to me but they were just not welcoming like they were just like they'd stare at me and when we tried to do the first group counseling like the women just stared at me or just whispered or something. Even the staff was a little off because I knew from the start they weren't even on the same page about having me there.

While Anna's account only serves as one experience, it highlights the many dimensions involved in seeking formal help from a rigidly gendered structured resource.

The majority of participants managed to leave abusive relationships through supportive informal resources. Chris (22, transfeminine genderqueer respondent) stated that for hir "it was

pretty easy once I came to just realize and accept what happened...I just went back home to my family.” While most participants did not have supportive family structures, they did have supportive friends and coworkers. For Joe (18, FTM), it was an online friend that helped him through the process of seeing that he was victimized and needing help. He stated: “...she was a friend online for the longest time and I just sort of, I just sort of asked her some vague questions and I just sort of basically told her everything I told you up until that point.” Similarly, Rebecca (38, MTF) described: “I got closer to one coworker and I told her what was happening. She immediately told me that I need to move in with her and just not tell him.”

Friendships and informal avenues were very crucial to these survivors as many of them had lost familial ties and relationships due to their trans status. Further, while some had informal ties with coworkers, most described a fear of involving their personal issues with the workplace. Fatima (30, MTF) described the importance of and what it meant to have a friend that would be supportive. She stated:

I don't have any family and I was not really like familiar with the community, I didn't have connections to family anymore or that community at all, so um that was not an option. But I did have the, the friends back home and it was two hours away but I, I knew that was the only way. To call a friend...Um, if it wasn't for her. I don't know what I would've done.

Her account emphasizes that without this connection, she may have had no better way out. When structural and formal resources are inaccessible, unwelcoming, and discriminatory, families and friendships become much more important.

Summary

As survivors recounted their experiences with IPV and how they managed to leave abusive relationships, the unique realities of those who exist outside the gender binary emerged

as they processed their victim identity and navigated genderist help resources. The larger cultural narratives constructed a gendered discourse behind victimization that left participants rejecting their realities. In the broader IPV literature, it is common to find evidence of survivors struggling with seeing themselves as victims and then subsequently how that limited their ability to seek help. However, as this study illustrates, there are unique processes that play out for transgender survivors.

A significant factor in understanding help-seeking behaviors for survivors of IPV is to explore how individuals come to see themselves as victims. While for cisgender and heterosexual survivors of IPV this struggle may include feelings of embarrassment, denial or in some cases religious devotions to marriage or gender subservience, transgender survivors in the current study struggled with the gendered constructs of victimization and the cisgenderist response system. In a critique of dominant theoretical approaches to IPV, Erbaugh (2007) argued that the genderist assumptions in the victim-perpetrator binary contribute to the silencing of LGBT victims. She argued that these approaches were largely representative of the cultural assumptions of “victim” as feminine or always female. In the present study, most of the participants invoked some form of gendered discourse when describing their process of identifying as a victim of IPV. Specifically, they struggled with perceiving victims of IPV as “helpless house wives” or passive and non-resistant. Regardless of a participant’s own gender identification, many of them described what it meant to be a victim of IPV in this way. Of particular interest was the role that the perceptions of others played in how participants struggled to see themselves as victims.

Because of the gendered assumptions behind victimization, many participants described feelings of not being believed either because they were “too butch” or that they were “once a man” among other reasons. The role of the perceptions of others was prominent in how participants described navigating various help resources. While most turned to friends and family, many accessed more formal resources. In these accounts, participants experienced a range of various genderist barriers to help. In a world where the rigid gender binary structured these resources, participants described not fitting into the services or spaces provided.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

At the onset of this project, I sought out to explore transgender experiences with IPV. Specifically, I sought to examine how participants described these experiences and what meanings were constructed behind victimization. These accounts went beyond retellings of experiences with IPV but encompassed discussions of power dynamics and control, how transgender survivors interpreted or made sense of the abuse, and how they processed these experiences. In addition to the goals of the exploration, I sought to empower trans voices that have largely been excluded from the discussion on IPV by remaining open in our conversations and allowing participants to freely share their stories without much direction from my own interests. With much assistance from community agencies, local and national organizations that serve the LGBTQ community, I had the opportunity to personally interview thirteen trans identified survivors of IPV in addition to receiving five free write responses to an online version of the semi-structured interview questions.

During the data collection process and throughout the analyses, I remained grounded and close to the data. Through this approach, I extracted prominent themes that broadly pertained to the dynamics of abuse, victim identity, and help-seeking. Specifically, the following major concepts emerged in the narratives: 1) transphobic and genderist attacks, 2) controlling transition and trans vulnerability, and 3) the processing of victim identity as involving gendered discourse and navigating genderist help resources. The proceeding sections include a discussion of the significance of these findings, implications, limitations of the study, and outlines directions for future research.

Review of Key Findings

Understanding the dynamics of abuse as experienced by transgender survivors of IPV is crucial in illustrating the unique realities faced by the community. In the accounts of violence and abuse, a majority of the participants emphasized the central aspect of transphobic and genderist attacks in the relationship. While previous scholars have pointed to the notion that abusers of transgender individuals may utilize these tactics as gay and lesbian abusers have often utilized homophobia and heterosexism, no data have previously been reported to demonstrate how this is manifested among transgender victims (Brown 2011; Courvant and Cook-Daniels 1998; Munson and Cook Daniels 2003). While participants had experienced a wide array of abuse in the context of an intimate relationship, many of the accounts focused on these emotional and psychological torments directed towards their trans-status or ability to “pass”. These experiences illustrated the significant role that hostile social contexts play in the construction of power and control in these relationships. As Zemsky (1990) and many others have argued, intimate relationships do not exist separate from social influence but rather the power dynamics of any relationship are informed and shaped by the larger context in which they occur. In its current application, the abusers of transgender victims utilized attacks that would shame and isolate on the basis of their gender variance. Essentially, these attacks represented more than put-downs from their abuser and victims experienced them as representations of the external hostile social environment. As the transgender community continues to be marginalized and oppressed, it serves as an opportunity for abusers to manipulate, control, and shame. Of particular importance in the findings was that abusers needed not be cisgender themselves but

rather than the opportunity to abuse and direct attacks towards trans identities exists regardless of their own gender identities.

As participants told their stories a majority of them explained abuser motives and why these abuses happened to them. Through these discussions, participants were attributing meaning behind their victimization. Specifically, they were addressing why abusers acted in the ways that they did. These narratives were of particular significance as they offered a deeper understanding into the dynamics of abuse as told by transgender victims. In some discussions, I asked about the participant's transition and potential role it played in the abuse. For others, it emerged as they told their stories of abuse. Overall, the most salient meaning constructed behind victimization was the abusers process of controlling transition. This finding expands what is known about power dynamics in abusive relationships in which the victim is transgender. Survivors explained how strong and consistent their abusers' desires were to control their transitional development. Among the aspects of controlling transition, abusers intervened in personal medical decisions, ridiculed the transition process, and micro managed victims' gendered presentations. While the majority of respondents had either already started transitioning before they entered these relationships or they were open with their transition goals with abusers, they described the abusers as wanting to control the process. Further, survivors described their transition or this process as becoming more like their "true self" or gaining confidence. Many of the survivors described this as threatening to abusers' whose motives involved keeping victims isolated and feeling ashamed or unwanted. Many participants described that the desire to control transition was rooted in the abusers desire to cripple their self confidence and gain power over as many aspects of their lives as possible.

As participants fleshed out what their experiences meant to them and as they described how they perceived abuser motivations, they often invoked discussions about the “state” in which they found themselves in. As most were early into transition or not far into the process, many described themselves as vulnerable, susceptible, or open to attacks regarding their trans status. Participants saw this as a time in their life in which an abuser could easily control and abuse them. Even for the few respondents who had transitioned long before this abusive relationship, they described abusers as latching on to past insecurities and bringing them to the forefront. According to the survivors, trans vulnerability meant that they longed for stability, love, and wantedness. This vulnerability was tied to the trans abuses perpetrated by abusers. Abusers used trans vulnerability to ensnare victims in abusive relationships. Many of the participants described feeling that this was what they deserved or that it was the best they could do given their trans status. As a result, for many of the survivors, it was a primary motivation to stay in abusive relationships.

Finally, survivors explained in detail grappling with their victimization and how they managed this process. These conversations revealed a key aspect in the processing of victim identity which involved the use of a gendered discourse in the meaning behind victimization. As survivors discussed how they struggled with viewing the relationship as problematic and then finally seeing themselves as victims, they often contrasted what happened to them with their cultural assumptions about IPV. Many participants described struggling with labeling their experiences as IPV, domestic violence, or even as abusive. The survivors distanced themselves from what they perceived an IPV victim was; this involved the construct of victim as feminine and “helpless”. Participants often rejected the notion that they were either passive or helpless.

Further, this contributed to their perception that others would not believe their stories. Because many of the participants grappled with not being what they thought was a typical victim, they felt as if others would not validate their experiences as IPV or abuse. For some of the participants, these feelings were validated as others would advise them to handle it themselves. The validation of others becomes significantly important as most of the participants found help through friends and families more so than formal resources. Survivors that attempted to access more formal avenues found themselves navigating genderist resources that were either not welcoming or not suited to their needs.

Implications

These key findings have several implications both to how we approach and understand IPV as well as services, community education, and outreach. This exploration lends a broadened understanding of how IPV affects transgender communities. Even with the recent advances in the area of same-sex IPV, the body of research and theorization has been traditionally limited to cisgenderist explanations of IPV. While several scholars before had previously proposed ways in which the trans community may experience abuses, to the extent of the authors' knowledge, none had proposed data to validate this assumptions (Brown 2011; Courvant and Cook-Daneils 1998; Munson and Cook-Daniels 2003). The present findings expand what is known about the dynamics of abuse in relationships in which at least one partner is transgender. Regardless of the gender identity of the abusive partner, power dynamics may involve the control of and degradation of gender variance. Further, the narratives of trans vulnerability illustrate how these unique dynamics contribute to a common problem addressed by the field of IPV – “why do victims stay?” As told by the participants in the present study, transgender victims may be more

susceptible to marginalization and isolation within the context of abusive relationships. Overall, the findings illustrated how a cisgenderist and transphobic culture may foster and fuel abusive power dynamics against transgender victims.

Regarding applied-outcomes and service oriented implications, several issues materialize from the present accounts. First, it is evident that transphobia and genderism are real problems and have significant consequences for transgender victims of IPV. This in and of itself is not a unique revelation; however, it does raise concern to the fact that the transgender community continues to be largely ignored by the mainstream gay rights movement. While gays and lesbians have advanced in visibility and political power, the unique needs and realities of the transgender community have yet to be fully addressed. Monica Roberts (2007), an African American transgender activist who has previously served as the lobby chair for the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition (NTAC), recently addressed many of the issues transgender activists have faced in the modern day gay rights movement. These problems have included the barring of transgender activists from discussions at national LG organizations, removing transgender protections in state and federal legislations including hate crime and employment non-discrimination policies and more. It is imperative that gay and lesbian organizations work towards the development of stronger connections with the transgender community. Programs, educational, and community outreach that address issues of homophobia and heterosexism should also include discussions on transphobia and genderism. Second, transgender services that do not already address relationship issues should work towards including this discussion. Healthy relationships workshops, materials, and educational outreach should address trans-specific issues and cover signs of abuse in intimate relationships. Third, any program or service

that seeks to address homophobia, heterosexism, transphobia, and genderism should do so from a comprehensive perspective that examines interlocking systems of oppression. Not all transgender experiences are alike and intersecting identities and systemic oppressions construct unique realities within the community. Addressing issues of oppression on multiple levels is most effective at promoting and fostering healthier communities. Finally, domestic violence shelters and programs should provide comprehensive training on trans issues to staff and volunteers. As evidenced in a number of the participant accounts, these formal resources seemed out of reach or were unwelcoming. These are issues that can be addressed through training and community outreach. Further, domestic violence programs should make efforts to ensuring their services are accessible to those who exist outside of the gender binary.

Limitations

The present study sought to explore how IPV affects transgender communities and expands the available knowledge on various dynamics of abuse, victimization, and help-seeking within this population. While these findings offer invaluable insight, there are several limitations to the study that should be mentioned. First, the themes of these accounts are not generalizable to the entire transgender community and were offered with a reliance on participant memory. While generalizability was never a goal of this study, it should be mentioned that the themes represent findings from a sample of eighteen participants that were non-randomly selected. The findings provide strong evidence and support for these themes but are not necessarily representative of all or even most experiences with IPV in the transgender community. Additionally, by chance, most participants were in very similar stages of transition with just a handful that had started transitioning well before the abusive relationship. Every participant had undergone some form

hormone therapy or other medical interventions which is not necessarily representative of all transgender experiences. Many trans identified individuals do not seek medical interventions either by choice or because they cannot afford the luxury. This may have biased many of the experiences as their transition statuses were so central to many of the accounts of abuse.

While rigorous recruitment techniques were utilized to maximize the size and the diversity of the sample, it was rather limited in both aspects. Given the constraints of conducting a study of this nature, the diversity of the sample was still robust with seven of the eighteen participants identifying as non-white. However, it is apparent that this may not have been sufficient as not many differences emerged between white respondents and those of color. This is not to assume that differences must necessarily exist, but it does call into question whether the sample was diverse enough to provide a stronger picture of these narratives.

The method in which the data were collected may also present several limitations. As I made the decision to provide both a personal interview option and an online free write questionnaire, the latter option resulted in significantly shorter accounts. I noted that the online free write responses were significantly less detailed and thus limited the ability to gather richer data. However, the accounts did not differ in content but rather in length and detail. Providing this more anonymous method of participation allowed for a greater number of respondents to feel comfortable in sharing their stories.

Future Research Directions

This exploration presents numerous potential directions for future research. First, expanding the current sample presents a wide array of opportunities to expand and strengthen the findings. Specifically, stronger intersectional analyses could be conducted that would encompass

more of dynamics of race, class, and other aspects that may emerge from the accounts. With the existing data, there were two softer themes that I plan on examining further. Many of the participants described the role of community in the abuses. Specifically, many participants mentioned that their relationships were part of a tight knit group of other queer or trans identified community members. Some of these participants described the role this played in the abuses including problems with others “taking sides” and the abusers status in the community. For a few participants, community members were actively involved in the abuses they experienced. Additionally, another theme that I plan on examining further deals with the importance of informal help seeking avenues. Having supportive family and friends were far more common in the experiences of white transgender survivors than in those survivors of color. This is a direction that could be strengthened with more respondents.

Given the richness and detail in the accounts and relative strength of this unique data, these findings could inform a larger quantitative study that examined types of abuses experienced, most helpful or common help resources, abuser characteristics, experiences with the criminal justice system and more. While many strong survey instruments already exist to measure violence in intimate relationships, none of these would be inclusive of trans specific experiences. If it were a goal to be more generalizable, a quantitative survey informed by the findings in this study could reach a much larger sample and provide slightly more representative results.

Conclusion

Overall, the present study represents one of the only attempts to reach the transgender community and examine experiences of IPV. Further, it accomplished several goals in that it

offered unique insight into how IPV is experienced by transgender victims, the meanings behind victimization, and how barriers are navigated. The findings of the study challenge dominant approaches and paradigms, encourage us to incorporate trans voices, and offers an exploration into the distinct experiences of transgender survivors of IPV. Ultimately, it is my hope that these courageous voices are heard and that the findings of the study continue to be part of ongoing discussion and action.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: Xavier L. Guadalupe Diaz

Date: August 15, 2012

Dear Researcher:

On 8/15/2012, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	"Victims outside the Binary: Transgender Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence"
Investigator:	Xavier L. Guadalupe Diaz
IRB Number:	SBE-12-08608
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 08/15/2012 11:01:30 AM EDT

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Joanne Muratori'.

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE / OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE

Part I: Participant background

1. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself.....
 - a. *Prompts*
 - i. Where you're from or grew up?
 - ii. What is your racial or ethnic background?
 - iii. How old are you?
2. How would you describe your gender identity and sexual orientation?
3. Could you describe your experiences with transitioning? How did that play out in your life?

Part II: Relationships

1. How would you describe your relationship status now? Are you seeing / dating someone?
 - a. *Prompts*
 - i. What do you consider "seeing" or "dating"?
 - ii. Are you currently living together?
 - iii. How long have you been together?

Part III: Intimate partner violence, and abuse

2. As I mentioned a little earlier, the central aspect of this study is focused on experiences with intimate partner violence; have you experienced some form of violence or abuse by an intimate or romantic partner.... Could you please share your story with me?
 - a. *Probes*
 - i. What was the sexual orientation and gender identity of your abuser?
 - ii. Were you of the same racial or ethnic background?
 - iii. Had you transitioned before or after this began?
 1. Do you think transitioning made it more difficult for you?
 2. Did you think transitioning or trans-status played any role in your abuse?
 - iv. How long did the abuse last? Are you still with this person?
3. Do you see yourself as a victim? Why / why not?

Part III: Help-Seeking

1. (If still with abuser) Have you ever thought about leaving the relationship? Why / why not?
2. (If not with abuser) At what point did you decide to leave? Or at what point did the abuser leave (if abuser left and not the participant). What did you do? What were those experiences like?
 - a. Where did you go for help? Was that/were they helpful to you? Why / why not?
 - b. Did you ever need to call the police or seek legal help? If yes, how did that process go?

Part IV: Closing

1. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about that we didn't get a chance to address?

APPENDIX C: GLOSSARY

Zie: a gender neutral pronoun used in place of “he” or “she”.

Hir: a gender neutral pronoun used in place of “him/his” or “her”.

Cisgender: an individual who’s assigned gender and gender identity matches his or her own biological/physical sex.

Genderqueer: a gender identity that is fluid and exists outside of the masculine or feminine dichotomy.

Trans Stone Butch: a biologically female bodied individual with a strongly emphasized hyper masculine gender identity. Not to be confused with a female-to-male transgender, these individuals may express not identifying as either a man or a woman but as very masculine and masculine presenting.

Transfeminine: a biologically male bodied individual with a more fluid and situational feminine gender identity and presentation.

Transmasculine: a biologically female bodied individual with a more fluid and situational masculine gender identity and presentation.

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