Consent

Legacies, Representations, and Frameworks for the Future

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Chapter 11

'I wasn't aware at the time, I could actually say "no"'

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Intimacy, Expectations, and Consent in Queer Relationships

Catherine Donovan, Kate Butterby and Rebecca Barnes

Introduction

While there is an emerging body of research exploring the sexual violence perpetrated against lesbians, gay and bisexual men and women, and/or trans women and men, and/or non-binary folk (LGB and/or T+),[1] much of this literature approaches sexual violence as an isolated incident. Prevalence studies based on quantitative surveys ask whether and how many times non-consensual sexual touching or sexual behaviour has occurred and, typically, are focused on the end of the continuum of sexual violence most readily regarded as criminal: rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment.[2] This approach reflects and reinforces a criminal justice system lens for describing and explicating sexual violence, and a wider societal consensus about ‘what counts’ as sexual violence, with rape (defined legally in the UK as forced penetration of any bodily orifice with a penis)[3] as the defining incident/crime with the most devastating impacts. The reduction of sexual violence to a discrete, material experience frames it as a physical act which takes place in a vacuum, rather than – critically – a social process, embedded in social interactions and relationships. This is particularly pertinent when sexual violence in intimate relationships becomes the focus, as in this chapter. What ‘counts’ as sexual violence can then extend to the web of verbal comments and coercive behaviours that can cumulatively sexually victimise an intimate partner and devastate all aspects of their sexuality and/or gender identity.

This chapter explores the social processes by which sexual violence might occur in the relationships of LGB and/or T+ folk. Our focus on relationships addresses a gap in the literature about how sexual violence can be understood and named – or not – in queer intimate relationships. This marks a deliberate shift away from the incident-based, physical violence-focused approach to understanding sexual violence, in order to include how victimisation can result from a relationship ‘demeanour’ of perpetrators who control the nature, dynamics, timing, and meaning of sex in intimate relationships. We adopt a sociological analysis to examine the social processes through which sexual

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victimisation is transmitted, communicated, perpetrated, and, centrally, how consent is best viewed as a social process shaped by cis-heteronormative assumptions about gender and sexuality.

This chapter is divided into five sections. First, we consider some of the key feminist theoretical tools for conceptualising sexual violence in cis-heterosexual relationships, and question whether any of these tools are useful for our work. Second, we summarise some of the research on domestic and sexual violence in LGB and/or T+ people's relationships, including in relation to consent, to show how queering our knowledge about sexual violence might produce more nuanced insights about sexual violence that victimises queer people. Third, we discuss our methodology. In the fourth section, we discuss our data in light of the theoretical tools set out earlier, focusing on sexual scripts that shape and inform queer folk's expectations about sexual intimacy, the sexual contract in queer relationships, and how relationship rules in abusive queer relationships regulate sex and expressions of sexuality. We conclude by calling for more research in this area that focuses on the social processes that produce understandings and enactment of consent.

Broader Societal Beliefs about Sex, Gender, Sexuality, and Adult Intimacy

Catherine Donovan and Rebecca Barnes have argued that a theoretical understanding of the intimate and sexual lives of LGB and/or T+ folk cannot be divorced from the societal context of compulsory heterosexuality in which they live.[4] Dominant cis-heteronormative constructions of sexuality produce understandings of men's and women's sexuality that are binary, oppositional, and assumptive of 'real' (penile-vaginal) sex that is driven by biological imperatives to reproduce.[5] Thus, men's sexuality is believed to be driven to 'spread their oats' with as many partners as possible to secure reproduction of the self and species. This construction underpins assumptions that men, once aroused, cannot control themselves, must be satisfied, and are able to separate sex from love/emotion.[6] Women's sexuality is believed to be driven by biological maternity, and then the need to protect and nurture their children.[7]

Consequently, women are charged with regulating men's sexuality so that children are born into the 'correct' social/legal family unit, and men can be regulated with the responsibility of their provider and father roles.[8] Vaginal penetration, male orgasm, and delivery of sperm provide a particular biologically essentialist account that underpins the social adaptations developed historically to protect and reinforce the cis-heteronormative account of sex, sexuality, gender, and adult intimacy.

Marriage – as a socio-legal contract to impose relationships with ideals of dependency, responsibility, and inheritance – can be seen as one of society's attempts to manage some of the perceived problematic consequences of men's unregulated sexuality. However, historically, the marriage contract has been based on an inherently unequal relationship between men and women because

women had no legal existence in their own right. Women's positioning as subordinate to their husband in marriage is evidenced in what Carole Pateman calls the sexual contract,[9] which, on marriage, gives men sexual access to women – 'conjugal rights' – and makes irrelevant women's absence of desire or consent. Rape in marriage was criminalised in 1991 in England and Wales, yet there remains a belief that consenting to be in a relationship – not just a marriage – is equivalent to consenting to sex, and that sex is a natural entitlement of men in intimate relationships. Importantly, the dominant construction of cis-heterosexuality is based on those of white, cis-heterosexual women and men, leaving, for example, racially minoritised women's sexualities simultaneously invisible and problematically othered.[10] Generally, however, there is a similarity in the belief that, regardless of their racialised identities, women's role is one of deferring to and satisfying their men's desires.

Unlike in cis-heterosexual relationships which are patriarchally produced to ensure gender inequality between men and women, assumptions are made that the relationships of LGB and/or T+ people lack these gendered power differentials and must therefore be more equal (see Donovan and Barnes for a discussion of this).[11] Yet, these assumptions do not apply to bisexual or trans people in heterosexual relationships, and non-binary people have seldom been considered at all. Setting aside the omissions, these assumptions about queer relationships are flawed since the evidence is clear that domestic abuse and sexual violence do take place.[12] Bisexual women are disproportionately more likely to report having experienced partner abuse and sexual violence than heterosexual women, and rates of sexual violence reported by trans and non-binary people are disproportionately high.[13] As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues in relation to the intersection of race, and gender, and Donovan and Barnes and Janice Ristock in relation to the intersection of sexuality and gender, patriarchal, cis-heteronormative dynamics of power do not adequately explain the multiple ways in which individuals are marginalised and rendered more vulnerable to sexual violence.[14]

Our research finds evidence that the sexual contract exists in relationships regardless of participants' sexuality and/or gender identities. Nicola Gavey contends that heteronormative discourses shape the types of sex that women often agree to, such that they may consent to unwanted sex to conform to social norms and expectations about what happens in a relationship.[15] This, Melanie A. Beres argues, blurs the distinction between 'willing to have sex' and 'wanting to have sex'.[16] Whilst willingness leads – legally, at least – to consensual sex, having sex out of a sense of duty or obligation offers a low bar for consent, and has negative impacts on one's sense of self as a sexual being.[17] In a relationship with 'relationship rules' (see below) that allow an abusive partner to insist on, coerce, or merely 'expect' sex on their terms, the victimised partner might not want, but feel unable to refuse, sex and blame themselves for falling short of the sexual contract.

Theorising Intimate Partner Sexual Violence in the Relationships of LGB and/or T+ Folk

In 2004, Catherine Donovan and Marianne Hester conducted a mixed-methods study which compared love and violence in 'same-sex' and heterosexual relationships.[18] They found that, regardless of gender and sexuality, there were similarities in how abusive partners are able to exert power and control. A key similarity is the impact on victims/survivors: erosion of self and social isolation. Another similarity concerns the relationship rules that underpin domestically abusive relationships. The first relationship rule is that the relationship is for the abusive partner, and on their terms. They make all key decisions, and define the relationship in relation to their needs/wants/demands. The second relationship rule is that the victimised partner is responsible for the partner's abusive behaviour, the relationship, for the abusive partner, the household if they share one, and children if they have them.[19] This relationship rule would include responsibility for meeting the abusive partner's sexual needs. This, Donovan and Hester argue, explains why those victimised often do not recognise their victimisation, because they do not recognise themselves as the ideal victim[20]: they are neither passive nor weak. Rather, they often understand themselves as emotionally stronger than their abusive partner who they perceive as emotionally needy and requiring support and protection.[21] Establishing the relationship rules can happen abruptly when an abusive partner uses physical violence or sexual violence in an incident that warns or punishes the victimised partner for straying from the terms of the relationship. Alternatively, the rules may be established more incrementally through emotional and verbal abuse that undermines the victimised partner's self-confidence and their sense of self and reality.

Identity abuse and experiential power are under-researched in heterosexual relationships but are important in the relationships of LGB and/or T+ folk. Experiential power can be exerted when a more established 'out' abusive partner plays on their victimised partner's lack of knowledge and/or confidence in their identities of sexuality and/or gender.[22] This is facilitated by the relative social and cultural invisibility of queer people's intimate and sexual lives. Identity abuse can underpin experiential power, whereby an abusive partner sets the terms for the 'sexual' relationship by imposing and normalising their own sexual behaviours and/or demands as representative of, for example, how 'real' gay men behave.

Methodology

The authors of this chapter have between them conducted three qualitative studies that have explored abuse in LGB and/or T+ people's relationships: the Coral Project,[23] Comparing Heterosexual and Same sex Abuse in Relationships (COHSAR) Project,[24] and the Speaking Out Project. Each study explores domestic abuse by framing the question as: 'what happens/what do you do when things go wrong in your relationships?' The COHSAR project

was interested in anybody who had experience of a 'same-sex' relationship, regardless of how they identified their gender or sexuality. The Coral Project recruited those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans+ to more explicitly invite participation from trans and non-binary respondents. The Speaking Out Project followed up nine trans participants from the Coral Project survey to focus on their experiences of violence and abuse in intimate relationships.

For this chapter, we have combined those nine interview transcripts with the 36 transcripts from the Coral Project and the 67 transcripts from the COHSAR Project. The combined data set improves the diversity of the sample with regard to gender and sexuality. However, there is limited ethnic diversity, with the vast majority of respondents being white British. In addition, whilst there are accounts from disabled respondents and respondents from working-class backgrounds, these aspects of their identities do not form part of the analysis. This does not mean that respondents' experiences are not integrally shaped by their race, disability, or social class. They undoubtedly are. However, in the analysis undertaken for this chapter, the intersecting ways that these aspects of respondents' identities have shaped their lives are not overtly visible. This is a limitation of the study.

Of the 112 interviews available for this analysis, 55 included accounts of sexual violence. Of these 55 participants, seven identified as trans or non-binary, one as gender-fluid, 29 as women, and 18 as men. Most of the group identified as lesbian/gay woman (25), followed by gay men (17), bisexual (seven), pansexual (three), queer (three), genderqueer (one) and heterosexual (one). Some respondents identified their sexuality in multiple ways.

Dominant Cis-Heteronormative Beliefs About Gender, Sex, Sexuality and Adult Intimacy

Many respondents' accounts reflect broader cis-heteronormative public stories[25] about romantic intimacy, highlighting qualities such as fidelity, monogamy, and the centrality of love for an enduring relationship. Yet, respondents were not straightforwardly showing allegiance to these public stories through their own intimate lives. Rather, they are referenced as a starting point for how they make sense of their experiences. The extent to which the public stories are presented or internalised as non-negotiable underpins the compromises people make in their intimate relationships and their enactment of consent. These public stories echo dominant cis-heteronormative sexual scripts which assume male initiation and female passivity,[26] and which juxtapose the different ways men and women (supposedly) approach love and sex: that men are more able to separate love from sex, are biologically driven to desire sex for its own sake, pursue a range of sexual partners, and are 'naturally' non-monogamous. This presentation of male sexuality is given by participants regardless of their own gender identity, sexuality, or behaviour:

> I would assume that any man has sexual urges, whether they're in a gay relationship or a heterosexual relationship. And I think ultimately gay men are more open about that, in general, and willing to accept that maybe sex is different to love […] if you think about biology […] men are designed to spread their oats. [*laughs*] […] So that, that will always be inborn.
>
> (Edward, gay man)[27]

> The whole constructed idea is that lesbians go and get your cats and live together and it's all about love and the emotions and whatever, and the guys will do a lot of sex. And I think there are a fair amount of […] lesbian and gay male couples that are doing that, both because it suits them and also because sometimes it's easier to follow those constructed pathways that are available.
>
> (Lynn, lesbian)

Public stories about how sexualities are cis-heteronormatively shaped in binaries are sedimented down into sexual scripts which mandate how men will conduct adult intimacy with men and how women will conduct adult intimacy with women. Alongside these expectations about the centrality of sex and the accommodations that include open relationships in order to secure long-term relationships, some men also talk about how particular kinds of masculinity are normalised that eschew emotionality between intimate partners. Kenneth, a gay man, for example, describes how his first gay partner did not show physical affection, and thus he 'kind of learned that gay men don't show each other physical affection'.

Women often refer to male sexuality in order to convey the oppositional differences that frame the expectations of their intimate lives:

> I think men get a lot of messages that they're supposed to be really, really sexually driven and women are supposed to be quite sexually passive […] women are supposed to nurture and be cared for, you know, all those kinds of things.
>
> (Janet, lesbian woman)

The consequences of sexual passivity as a gender-defining characteristic might be obvious if there were not such similarities in the accounts of sexual violence from respondents across different identities of sexuality and gender. As we will show later in the chapter, experiential power can be as important as anybody's gender identity in shaping expectations around intimacy and consent in LGB and/or T+ relationships. Yet, there is also evidence amongst most women that their expectations are shaped by notions of monogamy, fidelity and longevity, and that love and sex are connected.

For bisexual people, the public stories that privilege cis-heteronormativity result in the construction of bisexuality as inherently problematic, threatening

and – in abusive relationships – needing to be controlled. This renders bisexual people vulnerable to biphobic identity abuse.[28] In Clare's account, we see how her abusive partner problematised her bisexuality in two ways: first, that her sexual interest in men made her resemble a straight woman more than a lesbian, and second, that her identity was damaged by having been sexually intimate with men:

> She always used to make a comment that *[short laugh]* that I used to fuck like a straight woman, which used to kind of bemuse me […] so you know it was, "you're only a true lesbian if you've never slept with a man" and that, that was always there as well kind of poking at my kind of, well am I?
>
> (Clare, bisexual woman)

Trans and non-binary folk can also be othered because of their perceived/ actual non-conformity to public stories about existing 'natural' norms of gender and sexuality (often sexuality and gender are confused as being the same). This includes assumptions that they cannot conform to biologically essentialist norms of cis-heteronormative sexual desire and reproduction. The resulting perception of trans people as unnatural and the structural positioning of them as minoritised combine to produce their objectification in ways that reinforce a perception of them as fetishised, dehumanised, and as objects to be sexually coerced and/or undermined:

> I think that's what worries me the most that I could end up in that situation, simply because someone wants to […] say "oh, I've done it to a trans woman".
>
> (Zara, trans heterosexual woman)

For those who are trans and have interests in bondage, discipline, submission, and sado-masochism, this combination can elicit reactions from abusive partners who justify their abuse because of the victimised partner's sexual desires being perceived as unintelligible and culturally taboo:

> He also had issues about the things I liked, like kinks and fetishes, and he told me that he thought I was too young to be that perverted.
>
> (Timothy, trans pansexual male)

There is an impact on Timothy of being called perverted which provides an example of how sexual violence in an intimate relationship can be conveyed verbally to set a tone and a dynamic that positions one partner – the one victimised – as problematic, as a threat, as in need of being controlled. This positioning legitimates a disregard for consent, with sexual violence being employed to contain, punish, and regulate the threat posed by the victimised partner's constructed otherness.

So far, we have outlined some of the ways in which respondents reference dominant public stories about sex, sexuality, gender, and adult intimacy in their explanations and descriptions of their own sexual and intimate lives. Yet, many simultaneously point to their own and others' deviation from those expected norms. For example, Patrick refers to the trope of rampant male sexuality and non-monogamy, and how gay male relationships will accommodate these needs and expectations. Yet, his final comment suggests that not every gay man is on board with these behaviours and will only tolerate them in order to maintain the relationship:

> I think there's more acceptance [in relationships between men] that [...] sexual activity will, can, can involve other parties and, and the partners will do that together or separately or sometimes will *tolerate it just for the sake of keeping the, the relationship* so that the other partner doesn't feel so bored or trapped and can indulge any, any side of them that they want to.
> (Patrick, gay man, our emphasis)

This excerpt also illustrates the ways in which consent might be reluctantly given and/or negotiated in a calculation of pros and cons about staying in a relationship and might be understood as one of the 'compromises' that Eddie (bisexual man), refers to as being made for the sake of love.

For others, the supposed differences between men and women are only presuppositions. Tessa exemplifies others who question whether the gendered assumptions hold up or whether the differences are individual: 'I think mostly it's about differences in people rather than differences in gender' (Tessa, lesbian woman). Yet, whilst some respondents can both articulate dominant public stories about gender, sex, sexuality, and intimacy and retain a critical view about whether these public stories always translate into predicable behaviours, respondents' accounts are more typically imbued with the broader societal influences. This is nowhere more strongly demonstrated than in how the sexual contract is assumed to exist in queer intimate relationships, as we consider next.

The Sexual Contract

For the vast majority of respondents, sex is expected in intimate relationships and it becomes problematic when one partner believes there is not enough or not good enough sex. Most accounts suggest that this results in a partner feeling pressured – from themselves and/or their partner – either to have (unwanted) sex or to end the relationship:

> As soon as you stop having sex with somebody that you've started having sex with, over a long period of time, I don't think that can work. I don't think you can be celibate and still have a relationship with somebody. I don't think that's fair on them, especially when they're a very sexual person.
> (Kay, lesbian)

> When we're seeing each other, say, three times a week if, say, something doesn't happen on the Monday then you know that when you see each other on the Friday something's, you would hope [something] would happen and if it doesn't then you're like "something's not right".
>
> (Eddie, bisexual man)

In these accounts, the lack of sex is understood to raise a question about the viability of the relationship and a recognition of the unfairness for one partner – typically the one who still wants to have sex – when a partner does not want as much or any sex.

For too many others, the existence of the sexual contract means that sex occurs that is unwanted yet performed to meet the other person's needs. Some respondents couch their experiences in language that reflects a sense of reluctance and 'duty', making notions of consent ambiguous. As Julie explains: 'I think I've certainly slept with women for the sake of a quiet life, yeah' (Julie, lesbian woman). Ryan speaks of his duty and Marc recalls being unable to say no to sex and using sex as a means of conflict resolution:

> I think more times than not I would have said no but I think there were times where just in my head I was thinking "well we haven't had sex in a week, I really should probably" you know, [...] it was more of a duty as a, as a, as a partner to do that.
>
> (Ryan, gay man)

> I remember like feeling like I'd had to sleep with her to keep the peace or to um [sighs], you know, dissolve the situation when it's really not what I wanted.
>
> (Marc, queer trans man)

Both Ryan and Marc's accounts conjure up contexts of non-consensual sex but also suggest that they understood and complied with (albeit reluctantly) the expectations of the sexual contract in their relationships. These accounts highlight the limitations of consent, as it is legally defined, and the tensions between the sexual contract and more explicit, affirmative understandings of consent.[29] Other respondents give accounts that more explicitly depict contexts of non-consensual sex. Here, the rationale of the sexual contract is invoked, albeit implicitly, but the unequal power relationship is more overtly recognisable as providing a context for sexual violence:

> I'd say "can we not, you know, can we not have a cuddle tonight" and stuff and he'd say "well you just lie there and I'll get on with it" kind of thing [...] I'd felt really pressured into having sex, you know, when I didn't want it at times and, you know, and he did that a lot.
>
> (Marcus, gay man)

Reflecting the first relationship rule – that the relationship is for them and on their terms – Marcus's abusive partner believed that he was entitled to sex regardless of whether Marcus wanted it. In fact, it was quickly established that Marcus was the 'passive' one in the relationship with sex being 'done to' him. Consent is not acknowledged here because the assumption is that Marcus has consented to the relationship and therefore 'owes' his partner sex.

A belief that a sexual contract exists within an intimate relationship can be operationalised in different ways depending on the partner whose demands are prioritised and the partner who feels obligated to fulfil their perceived duties. In abusive relationships, relationship rules provide a further context-setting backdrop that often leaves the victimised partner blaming themselves for their victimisation. We explore this next.

Relationship Rules and Experiential Power

The relationship rules that underpin a domestically abusive relationship govern its sexual aspects too. The abusive partner expects to have – or not have – sex on their terms. Any problems with sex are assumed to be the victimised partner's failings – not having a high enough libido; not being sexually competent; not being attractive; not being authentically, for example, gay or lesbian; being untrustworthy as a result of being bi- or pansexual; having an unreliably gendered body as a trans or non-binary person. All of these can be drawn on to establish a coercively controlling sexual relationship. Consent in these relationships is assumed through the sexual contract, yet at the same time constantly threatened by the abusive partner's perpetration of sexual violence. The victimised partner is often left deliberating over whether and how they have contributed to their own victimisation.

For many, the perceived rule that the relationship is for the abusive partner and on their terms is established early in the relationship:

> The thing with sex, it was because she'd use sex against you. […] that was another way she'd control. It was like if she wanted she'd get it. If I didn't want it all hell will play [sic]. In fact it was always done on her terms.
>
> (Zara, trans woman, lesbian)

> I think that I just kind of went along with whatever he wanted me to do and one evening I just said no to sex and […] I went and slept in the spare room and basically he then kind of just took advantage of me, but being drunk I wasn't able to fight it off.
>
> (Adam, gay man)

Typically, accounts of rape are given by those sexually victimised by men, though often there is difficulty with using the word 'rape', as Adam's excerpt illustrates. Kenneth's account also reflects this hesitancy:

> One time, fairly early on in our relationship, he [breathes out] and I still find I can't actually say that he raped me, cos it wasn't quite as simple as that, but he certainly forced, and forced very violent sex on me. Against my will. So it's effectively rape.
>
> (Kenneth, gay man)

Establishing the relationship rules not only through being the initiator of sex but also by rejecting the victimised partner's invitations to be sexual is a very powerful tool. It not only sets up the pattern of coercive control but also positions the victimised partner as subservient. Often, they are unable to recognise the relationship as controlling even as they describe the impacts of being sexually rejected by their partner:

> I remember trying to instigate sex but being very scared of it at the time, partially because it was my first relationship, but partially because she did seem to lead things, I suppose, in the relationship […] when we'd fallen out, if she came to me, I might be able to go, "OK, we'll have a hug or maybe we'll have sex or whatever", if I tried it the other way, it never seemed to work […] there wasn't an openness properly about that I suppose. And I wasn't aware at the time, I could actually say "no" to her. I mean it wasn't like I was raped or anything but it was, [pause] I wasn't aware enough to be able to say "I'm not entirely comfortable" […] I couldn't get it to go the other direction properly.
>
> (Lynn, lesbian woman)

Lynn's account of her first relationship with another woman illustrates experiential power. The abusive partner positions themselves as having superior knowledge about how being a lesbian might be sexually expressed in a relationship. A person in their first relationship, like a woman who brings with her an understanding of her own sexuality derived from public stories that construct female sexuality as passive, deferential, and/or responsive, might feel grateful that their partner 'knows what to do' and is willing to initiate sex. However, when that pattern does not change, it becomes clearer that Lynn's abusive partner is using sex to control their partner, demanding intimacy after an argument, but not reciprocating when Lynn instigates it. Consent relies on the sexual contract, i.e. sex is to be expected, and the lack of ability to make it happen gradually begins to corrode Lynn's self-confidence.

Experiential power can be considered a form of capital, both more widely in queer communities, but critically, in how sexual power dynamics become established in intimate relationships. When young age intersects with identities of sexuality and/or gender, experiential power is more explicitly visible. Young people's naivety about both sex and adult intimacy make them situationally vulnerable to their abusive partners who groom them to believe that their victimisation is to be expected and 'normal' in queer relationships. The impacts of these initial relationships inform how people think about and enter into future

relationships, in ways that are typically shaped and reinforced by experiences that reflect public stories about sex, sexuality, gender, and adult intimacy:

> [I] started a relationship with one of the boys in the group who was 17 and I was 12 and at first it was mostly that he was just controlling, so he'd want to see me all the time […] and then […] he'd be phoning me very late at night and then wanting to have sexual conversations on the phone […] At the time I didn't see that as abusive, I just thought this is normal, this is what happens in relationships [and] I was stupid for not being able to do it […] I was 13 at the time […] I skived off school […] and met him […] and he sexually assaulted me.
>
> (Allan, trans masculine, pansexual)

Experiential power is not only connected to age differences, but the comparative duration of being 'out' and the amount of existing experience with sex and adult intimacy. It is these factors that can construct an unequal relationship dynamic and allow abusive partners to exploit weaknesses in their partner's confidence and self-esteem:

> Aye, I loved her but […] [f]or a first time being with a woman, it was very bizarre, and even looking back on it now, I think, [half laughs, half does sharp outtake of breath] "wow!", you know […] I thought all lesbians were the same, but she was very dominant, very, very dominant, and there was a lot of things went on within that relationship and it took me *years* to get over […] Looking back, maybe if I'd been a bit more experienced or something, I would have said, "er no," you know, but I didn't know any different, I thought this is how it goes.
>
> (Jill, lesbian)

Respondents abused by women made more references to emotional coercion than physical force. These accounts described relationship contexts in which the victimised partner was systematically undermined so that their sense of self as a sexual person inhabiting identities of gender and/or sexuality was rendered situationally vulnerable to the expectations of abusive partners exerting relationship rules:

> Almost on a daily basis she'd say something negative about how I looked and my body, my appearance, everything […] and after sort of ten, 12 years, 13 years it does make a big dent.
>
> (Alan, bisexual, genderfluid)

> Oh she was just so sexual […] I would dread going to bed because I knew it had to be done, especially towards the end […] And it's just, whew, yeah it was too much, sexually, for me definitely.
>
> (Marie, lesbian woman)

After 12 years of sexual abuse, Marie still makes sense of what happened with reference to her own failings of not liking sex enough and to her abusive partner's and her own expectation that she should acquiesce to the sexual demands, regardless of her own lack of desire.

Refusal of an abusive partner's sexual demands constitutes a breach of the relationship rules, which is met with increasingly punitive behaviours. Punitive abusive behaviours can be seen in accounts from trans respondents who report being sexually assaulted in relation to transition, as Allan described:

> Someone I was seeing when I first transitioned, who was sexually abusive to me when I transitioned, which obviously is very difficult, and I split up with him very shortly after that […] basically they sexually assaulted me and I completely cut off the relationship […] in my view the crime […] had been committed against me because of my female body parts.
>
> (Allan, trans masculine, pansexual)

This can be read as an attack on Allan's gender non-conforming body by an abusive partner unable and/or unwilling to accept his decision to transition, and attempting to regulate his gender identity with sexual violence.

Conclusion

The role and implicit assumptions about sexual consent in the context of the abusive relationships of LGB and/or T+ folk are rarely the focus of research. Within this chapter, we offer a critical intervention in a discussion we hope to see continued. In future research, we also hope to see a more intersectional analysis that addresses the limitations of this chapter and interrogates how identities including race, social class, disability, and citizenship status intersect with gender and sexuality to produce the conditions in which sexual violence takes place.

In too many accounts, respondents are reluctant to name their experiences as rape or sexual assault, and to describe what happened as non-consensual even when they describe force, pressure, or their unwillingness to acquiesce to abusive partners' sexual demands. The broader relationship context provides insights into how individual incidents of sexual violence are contextualised by the abusive partner's demeanour towards the victimised partner: how the relationship rules have been established, the regular sexual intimidation, insults, withholding of affection to punish or humiliate the victimised partner, and ridicule of the victimised partner's body, their sexual attractiveness, and/or sexual performance. In addition, the sexual abuse is part of a range of abusive tactics adopted by the abusive partner to establish and maintain power and control over their victimised partner: economic abuse, physical threat, intimidation, physical violence, and/or coercively controlling emotional abuse. Cumulatively, these reinforce the relationship rules that the relationship is for the abusive partner and on their terms, and that the victimised partner is responsible for everything including the abusive partner's

sexual satisfaction. It is in this context that conversations about consent must be understood – not only in a situational context in which incidents of sexual violence take place but in a relationship context where relationship dynamics and the demeanour of abusive partners shape the meanings and motives of sexually abusive behaviours.

Notes

1 We adopt the acronym LGB and/or T+ in order to better emphasise the diversity of identities included in the term and, especially, to draw attention to the distinctions between sexuality and gender identity, i.e. for example, a trans woman might identify as heterosexual. We also use the term 'queer' as a shorthand way of referring to this diverse range of people.

2 Emily F. Rothman, Deinera Exner, and Allyson L. Baughman, 'The Prevalence of Sexual Assault Against People Who Identify as Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual in the United States: A Systematic Review', *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 12.2 (2011), 55–66 (p. 56); Jieru Chen et al., 'Sexual Violence, Stalking, and Intimate Partner Violence by Sexual Orientation, United States', *Psychology of Violence*, 10.2 (2020), 110–19 (p. 112); Loree Cook-Daniels and Michael Munson, 'Sexual Violence, Elder Abuse, and Sexuality of Transgender Adults, Age 50+: Results of Three Surveys', *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 6 (2010), 142–77 (pp. 145–46); Liz Kelly, 'The Continuum of Sexual Violence', in *Women, Violence and Social Control,* ed. by Jalna Hanmer and Mary Maynard (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1987), pp. 46–60 (p. 47).

3 *Sexual Offences Act 2003* (c. 42, pt. 1).

4 Catherine Donovan and Rebecca Barnes, 'Help-Seeking among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender Victims/Survivors of Domestic Violence and Abuse: The Impacts of Cisgendered Heteronormativity and Invisibility', *Journal of Sociology*, 56.4 (2020), 554–70 (pp. 555, 567); Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5 (1980), 631–60 (p. 631).

5 Nicola Gavey, *Just sex? The cultural scaffolding of rape*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 117.

6 Ibid., p. 98.

7 Ibid., p. 100.

8 Norman Dennis and George Erdos, *Families Without Fatherhood* (IEA Health and Welfare Unit, London, 1992), p. 10.

9 Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 5.

10 Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (1991), 1241–99 (p. 1260).

11 Catherine Donovan and Rebecca Barnes, *Queering Narratives of Domestic Violence and Abuse* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 11–12.

12 Ibid.

13 Office for National Statistics (ONS), 'Women most at risk of experiencing partner abuse in England and Wales: Years ending March 2015 to 2017' (London: ONS, 2018); Chaka L. Bachmann and Becca Gooch, 'LGBT in Britain: Trans report' (London: Stonewall & YouGov, 2018), p. 15; Adam M. Messinger, *LGBTQ intimate partner violence: Lessons for policy, practice and research* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), p. 6.

14 Crenshaw, pp. 1242–44; Donovan and Barnes (2020), pp. 11–16; Janice Ristock, *No more secrets: Violence in lesbian relationships* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

15 Gavey, pp. 73–128.

16 Melanie A. Beres, ‘From ignorance to knowledge: Sexual consent and queer stories’, *Feminism & Psychology*, 32.2 (2022), 137–55 (p. 140).
17 Gavey, pp. 128–30.
18 Catherine Donovan and Marianne Hester, ‘Exploring emotion work in domestically abusive relationships’, in *Intimate partner violence in LGBTQ lives*, ed. by Janice Ristock (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 81–101 (p. 87); Catherine Donovan and Marianne Hester, *Domestic Violence and Sexuality: What’s love got to do with it?* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2014), pp. 35–55.
19 Ibid., p. 121.
20 Nils Christie, ‘The Ideal Victim’, in *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*, ed. by Ezzat A. Fattah (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1986), pp. 17–30 (p. 18).
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23 Ibid., p. 33.
24 Melanie McCarry, Marianne Hester, and Catherine Donovan, ‘Researching Same Sex Domestic Violence: Constructing a Survey Methodology’, *Sociological Research Online*, 13 (2008), 174–87 (p. 3).
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26 Michael Wiederman, ‘The Gendered Nature of Sexual Scripts’, *The Family Journal*, 13.4 (2005), 496–502 (p. 499).
27 All participants’ names have been changed to ensure anonymity.
28 Sarah Head and Martin Milton, ‘Filling the silence: Exploring the bisexual experience of intimate partner abuse’, *Journal of Bisexuality*, 14 (2014), 277–99 (p. 294).
29 Charlene Muehlenhard, Terry Humphreys, Kristen Jozkowski, et al., ‘The Complexities of Sexual Consent Among College Students: A Conceptual and Empirical Review’, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 53.4–5 (2016), 457–87 (p. 465).

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