

Queer Partner Abuse:  
An Exploration of Gender, Power, and Service Delivery

by

Heather Michael  
B.S.W., University College of the Cariboo, 1999

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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Supervisory Committee

Dr. Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, (School of Social Work)

Supervisor

Dr. Susan Strega, (School of Social Work)

Departmental Member

Dr. Annalee Lepp, (Department of Women's Studies)

Outside Member

**Supervisory Committee**

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Dr. Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, Supervisor (School of Social Work)

---

Dr. Susan Strega, Departmental Member (School of Social Work)

---

Dr. Annalee Lepp, Outside Member (Department of Women's Studies)

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis centers the voices of eight queer participants and explores their lived experiences of partner abuse, for the purpose of theorizing about queer partner abuse in ways that challenge and confirm mainstream heteronormative ways of understanding relationship abuse.

The research was carried out using a critical qualitative thematic approach, which allowed for rich descriptions to be provided by participants through conversational interviews. The eight participants involved in this research were from the BC lower mainland and varied in age, socio-economic status, ability, mental/emotional health, race, and gender identity.

Three themes emerged during the literature review and were central to the analysis: (a) gender; (b) power; and (c) service delivery. The findings indicate that participants not only internalized gender identities, but also constructed their experiences of relationship violence through the available discourse, which is mainstreamed and gendered. The most significant finding in this research has been the extent to which homophobia and heterosexism affected each of the participants within their personal relationships and in relation to their social environment.

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## **Introduction to the Study**

Academic and community researchers have in recent years attempted to increase awareness of same-sex partner abuse (Elliot, 1996; Merrill, 1996; Renzetti, 1996). The focus of this work has been mainly on the descriptive accounts of same-sex partner abuse, issues of prevalence, lack of resources and, in particular, using domestic violence experiences in heterosexual relationships as a reference or point of comparison (Elliot 1996; McLoughlin & Rozee, 2001). When abuse in queer relationships is acknowledged, it is often explained by applying a mainstream analysis of domestic violence, which assumes that violence is male-centered and situated in patriarchal relations. The literature generally fails to theorize the presence of relationship violence in queer relationships that is outside a mainstream analysis.

In this study, I present and interpret the experiences of eight participants from the BC lower mainland who have encountered same-sex relationship violence in order to answer my research question: "Do queer people define their experiences of relationship abuse by using mainstream perceptions of domestic violence?" I examine how the participants understand their experience of partner abuse and explore the possibility of alternative understandings outside dominant mainstream theories of domestic violence.

### ***Significance of the Study***

My aim in this project is to theorize queer partner abuse in ways that contest the mainstream heteronormative ways of understanding relationship abuse. While reviewing the literature, I became concerned about the lack of literature on queer partner abuse.

More specifically, I was concerned about the lack of a critical approach in exploring queer partner abuse (Renzetti, 1998; Kanuha 1990). While my aim in conducting this field study is to promote personal and social emancipation for queer people who have been affected by relationship violence, this research has further significance. First, this is one of a few studies of queer relationship abuse that foregrounds the voices of queers who have experienced abuse. Second, this field study is important because little research has been undertaken that critiques service provision for queer people in relation to partner abuse. This study provides opportunities for queer people to recommend reforms to current policies that guide community service practices in agencies such as police, child welfare, and domestic violence shelters. Finally, I would like this research project to place the issue of queer partner abuse on the agenda of academics, service providers, policy analysts and, most importantly, the queer community.

### ***Methodology, Method, and Outline of Thesis***

In keeping with the main purposes of this thesis, which are to center the voices of the eight queer participants and present their lived experiences of relationship abuse, I chose to carry out the research using a critical qualitative thematic approach. I felt that this methodological approach was appropriate, given that one aim of the research was to challenge heteronormative assumptions inherent in mainstream domestic violence frameworks.<sup>1</sup> A critical thematic approach provided an opportunity to challenge inequalities experienced by queers because of their marginalized position. Moreover, this

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I refer to the term heteronormative to describe the mainstream belief that there are only two distinct sex/gender categories-male/female and masculine/feminine. (<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heteronormativity>. 2006. p. 1)

methodological approach centered the voices of the participants and allowed for rich descriptions of their experiences to be presented.

The research study was geographically focused in the BC lower mainland, but was open to participants throughout the province. A conversational interview guided by semi-structured questions was purposely chosen as the preferred method of data collection. The interview created a space for the participants to express themselves freely in a dialogue that was semi-structured by my research questions. It also provided an opportunity for a reciprocal exchange of knowledge between the participants and myself as the researcher (Mattson & Stage, 2003).

Since my intention was to explore whether participants who identified as queer would understand their experience of partner abuse through a mainstream framework, I purposely recruited and interviewed eight participants who identified as queer.<sup>2</sup> In addition, participants were also recruited on the basis of: (a) being at least 18 years old at the time of the study; (b) disclosing that their abusive relationship had lasted at least three months; (c) indicating that they were not currently in an abusive relationship; and (d) stating that they believed partner abuse had occurred in their relationship. All eight participants in the study met the initial requirements for participation and varied in age, socio-economic status, ability, mental/emotional health, race, and gender identity. A thematic approach was used to analyze the interviews, as a means to examine the rich meaning embedded in the data, while continuing to center the participants' unique experiences and interpretations.

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<sup>2</sup> Although I purposely recruited queer participants and all eight of them initially self-defined themselves as queer, when I began questioning the participants about their identity during the interview, only two participants actually used the term "queer" to define themselves. The reasons for including participants who did not identify as "queer" will be discussed further in Chapter Two (See Appendix C & D for recruitment advertisement).

This thesis is comprised of three chapters. In the first chapter, I discuss my initial assumptions about queer partner abuse by examining existing literature. This chapter also introduces my conceptualization of three key concepts: (a) gender; (b) power; and (c) service delivery. These three concepts emerged during the literature as being essential in exploring how the participants understood their experiences of partner abuse. Furthermore, this chapter outlines my reasons for choosing a critical qualitative thematic approach in undertaking the field study. It discusses the importance of the researcher-participant relationship and my research design for collection and analysis of the data. The chapter concludes with an examination of the ethical dilemmas and research limitations associated with this study.

In the second chapter, I present and explore the rich experiences of the eight participants. The participants' experiences are examined under three main themes: (a) gender; (b) power; and (c) service delivery. Under these three themes, I analyze how the data confirmed, challenged, and changed my initial assumptions with respect to the research question.

In concluding the thesis, I summarize the research findings, discuss the implications of the findings, and suggest directions for further research. I also discuss the research limitations and my learning opportunities.

## **Chapter One: Research Design and Methodology**

### ***Introduction***

In this thesis, I contest the usefulness of mainstream theories of domestic violence to explain abuse in queer relationships. Mainstream theories are problematic because of their reliance on sex-based categories, such as male and female, that restricts the recognition of the existence of queer relationships. Mainstream theories also rely on categories that are gendered, such as masculine or feminine, aggressive or passive. Thus, one member in the queer relationship is assumed to be mimicking male culture, especially in terms of social power. Given these limitations and the fact that mainstream theories of relationship violence rely on heterosexism, I seek to re-conceptualize the notions of gender and power through queer experiences, thereby developing a more inclusive theoretical approach.

In this chapter, I present my reasons for choosing a critical qualitative methodology in undertaking my field study research. I also describe the role of the researcher and address the researcher-participant relationship. Further, I provide details of my research design for gathering and analyzing the data. In concluding the chapter, I discuss the ethical dilemmas and research limitations that were encountered while conducting this research.

### ***Questioning Mainstream Theories of Domestic Violence***

Traditionally, the focus of same-sex partner abuse studies has been on locating similarities between abuse in heterosexual relationships and abuse in queer relationships

in an effort to recognize that partner abuse exists outside heterosexual relationships (Elliott, 1996). In the initial stages of the literature review, I realized that same-sex partner abuse has been and continues to be predominately explained through mainstream frameworks (McLaughlin & Rozee, 2001). This is the result of mainstream theories of domestic violence becoming the “most commonly accepted explanation for domestic violence among academicians, the domestic violence movement, and lay people” (Merrill, 1996, p. 12). More recently, however, mainstream domestic violence theories and their relevance to same-sex partner abuse have been challenged (Renzetti, 1998; Ristock, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

The central idea of mainstream analysis, typically informed by the principles of feminism, is that relationship violence is situated within patriarchy. According to Merrill (1996):

Men learn that it is permissible to use violence and that they are expected to be in charge of (their) women and children; women learn to accept their role as one of a subordinate and a caretaker. According to this analysis, domestic violence is a gender-based phenomenon, a social based illness used as a tool of the patriarchy to keep women down (p. 11).

Although I do not disagree with this position, I agree with Ristock’s (2002) argument that abuse in queer relationships cannot be completely explained by mainstream analysis, since it depends on “gender differences that are based on unequal social power” (p. 61). Hence, I question how a mainstream analysis can be relevant to the experiences of queers, since even the term *queer* challenges the notion of gender (Sullivan, 2003; Turner, 2000). For instance, for a mainstream analysis to make sense of abuse in queer relationships, one of the members within the relationship, the perpetrator, would need to

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I use the terms ‘same-sex’ partner abuse and ‘lesbian’ partner abuse in accordance with their use by mainstream theorists.

demonstrate what are assumed to be male-like characteristics, such as being strong and powerful. The other member, the victim, would need to demonstrate characteristics typically attributed to females, such as being weak and dependent. This is also known as identity borrowing, which assumes that queers assimilate heterosexual-like characteristics. Kelly (1991) provides an example of how lesbians have tried to make sense of relationship abuse through identity borrowing:

[L]esbians may borrow from or identify with aspects of heterosexual and/or gay masculinity in order to construct a sense of self and these identifications might in some way explain a lesbian's choice to use physical force against her lover (p. 19).

This statement suggests that to make sense of abuse in non-heterosexual relationships, traditional gender terms, such as masculinity and femininity, must be accepted. These gendered notions are essential to heterosexuality and, by adopting these terms, theorists are conforming to a mainstream analysis and acceptance of dichotomous gender categories in attempting to make sense of relationship abuse. This tendency indicates how theorists, academics and researchers assume that relationship violence is a gendered phenomenon.

Similarly, the domestic violence movement has tended to rely on a butch/femme dyad to make sense of abuse in queer relationships. The term *butch* commonly refers to an individual, often a member of a lesbian community, who self-identifies with or "takes on some aspects of the masculine" whereas the term *femme* refers to an individual who self-identifies with or "takes on some aspects of the feminine" (Melcombe, 2004, p. 16).<sup>2</sup> Such a mainstream analysis relies on heteronormativity in attempting to make sense of

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<sup>2</sup> While some queer relationships exist within a butch/femme dichotomy, there have been debates over whether "butch/femme relations simply replicate heterosexual relations" (Sullivan, 2003, p. 28).

how power is distributed in relationships based on gender differences. For example, “the perpetrator must be the (man) or the (butch),” given the identification of violence as male in a mainstream analysis, “and the victim must be the (woman) or the (femme) in emulation of heterosexual relationships” (Merrill, 1996, p.12; Ristock, 2001). In contesting the usefulness of a mainstream analysis, I propose that the perpetrator/victim dyad based on heteronormative models should be questioned because it limits alternative explanations outside these structured boundaries.

Rigid dichotomies, such as the male-perpetrator/female-victim, also contribute to how mainstream theorists perceive power in abusive relationships. A mainstream analysis takes a critical approach to examining gender inequality and how these inequalities influence certain forms of social power. Understanding power and acknowledging the existence of power inequalities is fundamental to any research on abuse because the very act of abuse implies that an individual has power over the person being abused. Furthermore, gender and power are central concepts in mainstream domestic violence theories (Ristock, 2002). From my personal experience, power does not always emanate from a place of domination, which is a typical conceptualization in a mainstream analysis. That is, “domination theorists often assume that domination functions on the model of a dyadic master-subject relation” or of a power over relationship (Allen, 1998, p. 25). Marrujo and Kregers (1996) explored the notion of a third category, that of *participant*, which moves beyond the common dichotomy of a victim/perpetrator. “Primary aggressors” are described as individuals who instigate the conflict and are “pathologically jealous, controlling in the relationship, (and) highly intrusive into their partner’s activities” (p. 30). “Primary victims” are described as

individuals who try to avoid and de-escalate conflict and do not exhibit a pattern of fighting back, although they may do so on occasion (p. 30). “Participants” are described as individuals who demonstrate a pattern of fighting back, but do not instigate conflicts (p. 30). The authors’ discussion of these roles suggests that roles can shift in a relationship at different times depending on the situation. For example, an individual may be the primary aggressor at one point, but may later become a participant or primary victim.

Ristock (2002), however, has argued against “adding a third category to describe roles within abusive relationships” because it restricts the inquiry to the “sometimes shifting nature of power relations and the differing contexts that can give rise to different reactions” (p. 74). She maintains that rather than continuing to rely on categories, it is important to explore the implications of power dynamics. I agree with this analysis and would add that roles and identities are not as stable as mainstream analysis might suggest. Mainstream theories see power as typically flowing in one direction, as I have already suggested: the perpetrator is seen as having power over the victim. This limits the ability to acknowledge interplay between power positions, including when empowerment might be occurring. For example, an abused individual may be able to successfully leave the relationship or may gain power in some form and no longer be abused. The flow of power is neither linear nor static, but interactive and dynamic.

Mainstream theories of domestic violence have been typically White-focused, in that they lack any analyses of racial or other forms of oppression apart from gender. Individual and collective realities tend to be overlooked outside of White, male

heterosexuality.<sup>3</sup> For example, in an interracial relationship, one member is likely to experience less social power than his/her partner because of being non-White and as a result of social oppression. This same member can then act abusively in an attempt to gain power in the relationship.<sup>4</sup> Holmes (2000) has challenged the tendency to assume universal descriptions:

Some educators indicated that the perpetrator/victim dichotomy does not help with explaining complexities either; such as cases in which someone might be abused in one relationship and abusive in another (and vice versa), situations where power relations appear to be shifting or cases in which it seemed that more than one form of abuse was occurring (such as racist abuse from disabled white women and ableist abuse from her able-bodied woman of color partner) (pp. 106-107).

While the abused can also be an oppressor, this dynamic is disregarded in queer relationships when the focus is exclusively on gender. Elliot (1996) concluded that, “though infrequent in occurrence, the power base can shift in same-sex relationships” (p. 5). This conception stimulated my interest in examining contextual influences and how queers interpret shifts in power. Of course, this can also be true of heterosexual relationships, but the notion is more relevant to queers because, presumably, gender is a less salient feature of their relationships.

Renzetti’s (1996) research referred to a study by Bologna et al. (1987) that addressed the relationship between power and lesbian partner abuse. Although Renzetti (1992) noted that the study’s findings were inconclusive, they revealed that “[f]or some of their respondents, a perceived lack of power was related to being the perpetrator of violence in a relationship, but for others, it was related to victimization” (p. 47). Further

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<sup>3</sup> By collective realities I am referring to *intersectionality*—the multiple lived realities of oppression that are diverse, subjective, and interactive (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersectionality>. 2006. p. 1).

<sup>4</sup> See Kanuha, V. (1990); Waldron, C.M. (1996); Kwong-Lai Poon (2000).

illuminating this concept, Hart (1996) suggested that power could not shift without considerable force:

Patterns of control and terrorism precipitated by battering are not easily undone. There would have to be an incredible shift in power of the partners so that the battered lesbian acquires the power to use violence as a tactic to control and terrorize her mate (p. 186).

Hart's argument does not rule out the possibility that power may shift in a relationship. Nevertheless, it suggests that, for movement in a relationship to occur, a significant transition must take place. This makes obvious the need to re-examine the universal claims made by mainstream theories, by drawing on queer experiences outside the White heterosexual norm. As Ristock (2002) suggested, there is a need to develop a discussion about "the multiple and interlocking nature of identity and systems of privilege and oppressions that are part of the context of relationship violence" (p. 125).

Ristock (2002) specifically challenged the epistemological claims inherent in gender assumptions as limiting an understanding of relationship abuse. The question is, "[H]ow does our language operate not just as neutral coding for our thoughts about violence, but rather to limit and shape what we are able to think, know, and talk about?" (p. 112). This reaffirms the need to question how truths become legitimized and are seen as the norm. By challenging the techniques embedded in discourse, universal truths may be disrupted. Holmes (2000), influenced by Ristock's work, was similarly "interested in examining how certain discourses come to be dominant (and considered true) and how this depended upon the delegitimization of other discourses" (p. 7). Sharon Lamb (1999) provided an example of how mainstream theorists rely on particular notions related to identities and roles within abusive relationships:

[T]he victim is pure, innocent, helpless, and sometimes heroic. The perpetrator is monstrous and all-powerful. These images are dichotomized; they never are integrated (p. 118).

By recognizing that our understanding of abuse is restricted by the very categories that are created and maintained in society, there is the possibility of understanding alternative experiences by considering the context of relationship violence. We have too often neglected to examine the circumstances that exist in a relationship, such as the existence of multiple oppressions and the impact they have on an individual's position in the relationship. As Ristock argued, "We rely on a simplified version with a corresponding set of assumptions to distinguish a victim and a perpetrator rather than exploring contextualized relations" (2002, p. 114). While Ristock questioned the common assumptions embedded in gender, the gendered dichotomy of victim and perpetrator also needs to be challenged. For this reason, I argue for a more inclusive theoretical approach which moves beyond heterosexual assumptions that are embedded in mainstream theories. Without negating the accounts of individuals who have experienced abuse in past and present relationships due to gender inequalities, my aim is to explore through conversational interviews, the lived realities of the participants.

Challenging the assumed inclusiveness of mainstream theories of domestic violence can be troubling for some feminists, particularly for those who belong to the battered women's movement and who have risked a great deal to address unequal social power rooted in gender differences. By not challenging mainstream theories of domestic violence, however, organizations such as women's shelters will continue with their current practice (Ristock, 2002), naming their inclusiveness instead of restructuring policy. As Ristock (2002) stated, "[I]t is probable that that traditional feminist theories of

battering have contributed to lack of acknowledgement of lesbian battering, as well as to a lack of services to battered lesbians due to adherence of most domestic violence programs to traditional feminist explanatory models,” which are centered around male violence and gendered understandings (p. 4).

This lack of acknowledgement, due to reliance on mainstream domestic violence theories, likely contributes to creating opportunities for abuse in queer relationships or, at least, maintaining the abuse. The lack of services available to address relationship violence in queer relationships can result in greater isolation. This can fuel a sense of dependency in relationships which immobilizes individuals from engaging in any form of power shift to enable the abused individual to leave the relationship.

### ***Purpose of Field Research***

This study explores the lived experiences of partner abuse in queer relationships. My professional experience as a queer social worker and my personal experiences with partner abuse have significantly motivated me to listen, support, and challenge how queer partner abuse has been understood by those who have been directly impacted. It is my view that the majority of service providers that address partner abuse fail to consider the social realities in which queer relationships exist. After spending several years reflecting on my personal experience with partner abuse, I began to question how mainstream explanations of partner abuse fail to capture the experiences of queer relationship violence. In this field study, I examined the multiple experiences shared by eight participants as the basis upon which to theorize about queer partner abuse in ways that challenge and confirm gender-based and heterosexual explanations of partner abuse.

Specifically, by asking a series of questions and centering the voices of the participants I explored their lived experiences with relationship violence and how they interpreted these experiences.

### ***Research Questions***

I am interested in the experiences of partner abuse in queer relationships and, in particular, how mainstream theories influence the way in which queer people interpret these experiences. Specifically, do queer people define their experiences of relationship abuse by using mainstream perceptions of domestic violence? Through the literature review, I identified gender, power and service delivery as three concepts that are essential for understanding the experiences of queer relationship violence. Hence, I wanted to explore how the participants conceptualized gender and how they understood notions of power as experienced in their relationships (for example, does one person's position of power in a relationship change and, if so, under what circumstances?). Finally, I was interested in the participants' assessments of community services.

### ***Critical Research: Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions***

In this thesis, I situate my work within the orientation and assumptions of a critical research design. A critical research approach is a "transformative endeavour unembarrassed by the label 'political' and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 140). I begin this section by providing an overview of the critical methodological approach within which I am situating this study. I then move on to discuss the ontological and epistemological

assumptions underlying critical methodology, and identify how this research is located within a critical framework.

Originally, when considering this research endeavour, I debated whether to use a quantitative or qualitative methodological design. My dilemma stemmed from my personal interest in statistical research and also from my experience as a government employee. I am well aware of the legitimacy afforded to quantitative research, especially as government officials often use numeric description in determining the monetary needs of populations with respect to public funding for services (Reinharz, 1992; Shaw & Gould, 2001). My choice to use a critical qualitative approach is based on the assumption that it is best suited to carry out research which involves “understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1994, pp. 1-2). Thus, I chose a critical methodology to gain “direct representation of an individual’s own point of view and descriptions of experiences, beliefs and perceptions” (Luborsky, 1994, p. 190).

Critical theory originated in the 1920s among a group of German scholars, referred to as the Frankfurt School (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Although variations of critical theory can be found in the social sciences, all critical researchers attempt to seek “insight into the social world in order to help people change oppressive conditions” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 17). They do so by providing avenues of inquiry that allow for the voices of those who are silenced by the dominant ways of knowing to be heard and acknowledged which serves as the basis for “envision[ing] new possibilities” (Creswell, 1998, p. 80). This fits with the overall purpose of this research which is to

challenge structural inequalities experienced by queers as a result of the silencing of their (our) experiences of partner abuse. In my view, a critical approach is necessary since the aim of this research is to challenge injustices rooted in the heteronormative assumptions found in mainstream domestic violence theories.

My personal and professional perspective, as a researcher, has also influenced my choice in using a critical research design, particularly the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind critical research. Such assumptions include the notion that “reality is constructed by individuals” and their differing locations are therefore “subjective and multiple” (Creswell, 1994; Drechsler, 2002, p. 33). These realities stem from the lived experiences of the eight participants, and include differing realities based on their individual social location. Critical research not only considers the experiences of the participants, but also the influence of my experiences as the researcher and how my reality filters into the field study through process and interpretation. Esterberg (2002) suggested that “qualitative researchers pay attention to the subjective nature of human life – not only the subjective experiences of those they are studying but also the subjectivity of the researcher themselves” (p. 2). Evidence of these multiple realities is seen at various levels of interpretation throughout the research process; for example, by participants during their interviews, the researcher during the data analysis process, and again by the reader’s interpretation of the report findings.

A critical approach encourages the researcher and participants to engage in social change. Those who participate in the research, in whatever form, are encouraged to reflect upon their own self-knowledge and to expand their awareness of the dynamics of their relationships and experiences. Too often researchers enter into their work as

outsiders, complete their research, and leave it without considering the strengths of the participants and their capacity to participate in social change. In a critical approach, however, the researcher is encouraged to work collaboratively with the participants, who are assumed to not be separate from the activist goals (Creswell, 1998).

Another underlying assumption of critical research is the creation of social change by working together with participants to challenge existing assumptions. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), "Critical researchers often regard their work as a first step towards forms of political action" (p. 140). As a member of the queer community, my intention is that the research findings be used to advocate for an examination of the policy inequalities that prevent queer people from gaining access to services. The intention is to also hold educational seminars inside and outside the queer community, presenting these findings to those who are directly and indirectly affected.

### ***My Role as a Researcher***

As a critical researcher, I need to be aware of my motives and biases (Creswell, 1994). Accordingly, I needed to ensure that my choice of research topic was not simply an endeavour fuelled by personal gain. While I recognize my insider position as a queer person who has experienced queer partner abuse, I also acknowledge my outsider position as a graduate student completing my thesis. Furthermore, I am aware of my position as a researcher in terms of my professional background, socio-economic status, ability, Whiteness, and non-Aboriginal identity. Although I hold particular assumptions about the dynamics involved in queer partner abuse, I remained aware of my obligation to remain true to the purpose of this field study; that is, to create a space for the eight

participants to share their experiences while recognizing that I am not the 'expert' on their lives.

Self-reflection is a particularly important principle of critical research, since the researcher is often the "main instrument" of analysis (Shaw & Gould, 2001, p. 7).

Reflexivity is the acknowledgement of the researcher's participation in what is being explored or studied (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). As noted by Denzin and Lincoln (1994):

Research in the critical tradition takes the form of self-conscious criticism, self conscious in the sense that researchers try to become aware of the ideological imperatives and epistemological presuppositions that inform their research as well as their own subjective, intersubjective, and normative reference claims (p. 140).

Critical research assumes that the researcher interacts with participants to reduce the distances and to encourage a greater degree of partnership (Creswell, 1994). Thus, reciprocity reduces the hierarchy between the researcher and the researched (Esterberg, 2002) during the research process as there is a sense of relationship and/or commitment to the process. My intention, as the researcher, was to actively participate in working across differences by acknowledging what participants had to say about their lived experiences, and by recognizing that these experiences might well be different from mine, especially given our differing locations. For instance, my personal location is that of a White queer person, which assumes a certain degree of privilege. Furthermore, my educational and professional background contributes to my middle-class status and influences my lived experiences. As Fook noted (2001):

If the qualitative researcher is self-reflexive, then she or he recognizes that the self is the lens through which they see the world. The lens itself

therefore becomes an important part of the research, as instrument but also data (p. 129).

Given my personal experience with relationship violence, I am not only able to appreciate and honour the courage it takes to speak out about the issues, but also to recognize the importance of building rapport with the eight participants that I interviewed. Although I do not assume an 'expert' role, I shared my experiences with relationship violence in my interactions with the participants prior to the actual interviews. Many of the conversations began when participants wanted to know directly about my motives for undertaking this research and then they became curious about the details of my experience with relationship violence. Initially, I was reluctant to share my experiences for a variety of reasons, such as being sensitive about seeming to have preconceived ideas about the research findings. However, through being self-reflective and recognizing my subjective positions, I felt that I could overcome these concerns with self-disclosure. Moreover, it helped me remain conscious of my position as a researcher and the power imbalances that come with this position.

### ***Research Process***

Although the geographical focus of this study was the BC lower mainland, it was open to participants throughout the province. Recruitment was conducted through advertisements, which included advertising in local gay and lesbian newspapers, posting signs in a locally owned and operated queer book store, and advertising on websites as well as through word-of-mouth (Appendix C). *Xtra West* offered a discount rate of

\$32.00 per issue, and in hopes of reaching a larger audience, I advertised in two back-to-back issues that were published close to the time of the Vancouver Pride Parade.

Attempts were made to gain access to queer community resources to recruit participants. Surprisingly, I encountered some resistance when I attempted to advertise at a local nightclub by hanging a poster by the front door. Whenever I revisited the poster location, I noticed that it had been removed. Although I was never directly told that I could not advertise at the nightclub, I felt that I was being ignored when I called, left a message, or sent an email with my request to advertise.

Despite some negative experiences with advertising, I was contacted by the editor of the *BC Institute Against Family Violence* who offered to place my ad in its newsletter – a special issue on lesbian partner abuse (Appendix D). This connection was made through a local lesbian service provider in the Vancouver area, whom I had met two years earlier during preliminary discussions about this research topic. The connection was significant because this individual not only works in the area of violence in lesbian relationships, but has also done a considerable amount of research in the area. This service provider not only assisted in advertising for the study, but also acted as a mentor. By working with a local lesbian service provider, I wanted to begin a discussion within the queer community and hoped, by word-of-mouth, participants would come forward. I also hoped that these contacts with community members would prove to be useful in disseminating information on partner abuse in the community. For example, I have been contacted by several community service providers requesting copies of the research findings.

Participants who responded to my advertisements were screened by having them: (a) report that they were an adult (at least 18 years old); (b) establish the duration of the relationship in question as at least three months;<sup>5</sup> (c) indicate that they were not currently in an abusive relationship; (d) state whether or not they believed that partner abuse occurred in their relationship; and (e) identify as queer. The initial screening process occurred over the telephone when participants called the advertised phone number to inquire about the study. All persons who responded to my advertisements met the preliminary requirements for participation as stated above and were questioned again before they signed the consent form. Although I specifically recruited and screened participants who identified as queer, I was surprised that only two of the eight participants actually referred to themselves as queer during their interviews. Since it became apparent that a theme was emerging in the interviews, I decided to include these participants in the study. Four individuals did not show up, after verbally agreeing to participate, and one individual was not living in BC and was unable to travel to Vancouver.

The target sample size was eight participants. Given monetary and time constraints, a larger sample size would have reduced the time that I could have spent on building relationships with the participants. A smaller sample allowed me to develop rapport with the participants which facilitated rich and in-depth conversations about their experiences.

During the early phase of advertising, I had hoped that the potential participants would come from diverse backgrounds. Obtaining a representative sample is especially difficult in queer communities (Renzetti, 1992). In this study, geography constituted one

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<sup>5</sup> This three-month requirement was established to exclude dating relationships.

barrier, as some potential participants from smaller communities were interested, but could not travel to the lower mainland to be interviewed. Furthermore, the placement of my recruitment advertisements required that participants access local night clubs, pride events, and the internet, and read the local gay and lesbian newspaper. Thus, the experiences and perspectives of queer people who lived outside the lower mainland and did not have access to the local organizations and resources through which I advertised were not included. Nonetheless, my sample turned out to be fairly diverse in age, socio-economic status, ability, mental/emotional health, race, and gender identity.

Careful consideration was given to selecting a method of data collection that was both respectful of the participants and effective in obtaining their perspectives on their experiences. The interviews were guided by a set of semi-structured questions. I had several queer identified professionals in the Vancouver area review the questions on the interview schedule to ensure that they were relevant to my research question. Both peer reviewers commented on the use of complex terms, such as *discourse* in the questions, which might confuse participants who were unsure of the definition. Following the recommendations of the peer reviewers, I decided to reword the questions for clarity.

The semi-structured questions were chosen to provide room for participants to assume the direction of the conversation, while keeping the dialogue aligned with the research question (Grbich, 1999; Esterberg, 2002). The interviews began with a preliminary conversation on subjects such as age, education, occupation, and identities. This method provided an opportunity to initiate the interviews with less intrusive questions, before asking more detailed questions about experiences with relationship violence. The following questions were intended to engage the participants in a dialogue

about the research topic, and were developed around concepts theoretically and conceptually explored in the previous chapter.

1. How do you currently identify?
2. What other identities do you feel are central to self?
3. What is your understanding of partner abuse?
4. Can you tell me what your experience(s) with partner abuse have been?
5. When did you realize that partner abuse was actually occurring within your relationship?
6. What is your understanding of power within your relationship? Did power, as you have defined it, influence aspects of your relationship?
7. Did the power dynamics remain the same throughout the relationship? (If not) what do you believe instigated this change?
8. Are there external factors that influenced your relationship with regard to partner abuse?
9. Have you ever sought any kind of support to assist you with your experiences of partner abuse?
10. Did you find these services to be beneficial? Why or why not?

The use of semi-structured questions allowed for variation in the order that the questions were asked, and for further questions to be posed that were not set out in the interview schedule. In my view this enhanced the breadth and depth of the interviews, and encouraged participants to take ownership of the interviewing process.

The interviews occurred at a place and time chosen by each participant, which took into consideration issues of safety and privacy; that is, in a space where participants

felt comfortable enough to discuss their experiences. Safety considerations were also important for me as the researcher, especially because some participants had inflicted violence on their partner. The location of the interviews varied and included participants' homes, a queer-friendly community center, a local park, and a coffee shop. The interviews were approximately one hour in length, and all but one participant asked how long the actual interview process would take. I felt that if the participants were told that the interview would take much longer, they would have been less interested in participating. Nevertheless, I noticed that participants generally became less aware of time once they were engaged in the interviews.

When potential participants responded to one of the ads, I advised them that the interviews would be audio-taped and asked for their approval; this was also explained on the consent form that respondents were required to sign (Appendix A). Before the interviews I told participants about the theoretical assumptions and aims of critical research. This was an important process because, as a critical researcher, I wanted to ensure that participants were aware of my intentions to challenge mainstream assumptions of domestic violence. I also wanted them to know that I would include them in all aspects of the research process. Participants were also made aware that, once in the public domain, research can sometimes be misused, a real fear for the queer community, since disagreements exist about whether "mainstream" research is an appropriate forum for queer issues (Ristock, 1996, p. 58). Participants were advised that the University of Victoria – Human Research Ethics Committee had approved this research project, and that a copy of the certificate of approval would be provided on request. Furthermore,

participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any time without explanation.

The method of data collection included audio recordings to ensure accuracy in presenting the information. I transcribed the interviews for several reasons. While monetary constraints prevented the hiring of a research assistant, I was also concerned that the content could be lost if an outside person transcribed the data.

### *Participant Profiles*

As mentioned above, eight participants were interviewed for this field study. At the time of the interviews, the ages of the participants ranged from twenty-eight to forty-four years with the average age being thirty-nine years. All eight of the participants were living in Vancouver. Three of the participants were raised in Southern Ontario, two were raised in Alberta, two were raised in British Columbia, and one of the participants had been raised in various locations throughout the United States. Seven of the participants were employed at the time of the interviews and one of the participants was on social assistance. Of the seven participants who were employed, three worked in human services, two were employed in the public service, one worked in the private sector, and the other was employed in the hospitality sector. One participant identified as an Aboriginal person and had been diagnosed as having a mental illness. The majority of the participants described a distinct sexual identity, which included homosexual, gay advocate, gay man, Two-spirited, man, gay writer, and dyke; however, one of the respondents did not acknowledge a sexual identity. Although participant recruitment was

directed at people who identified as queer, only two of the participants referred to themselves as queer.

### *Data Analysis*

Qualitative data analysis can be time-consuming and, at the outset, I needed to assume that anything may be data, including email correspondence, verbal and non-verbal cues, and observations. I selected a method of analysis that would bring out the rich meanings embedded in the data, while maintaining an awareness of the various locations of the participants. Therefore, I decided to use a thematic approach as the method of analysis. As noted by Luborsky (1994), a thematic approach allows for the “direct representation of an individual’s own point of view and descriptions of experiences, beliefs, and perception” (p. 190). The aim of a thematic approach is to locate and analyze general themes in the data. Boyatzis (1998) described a theme as “a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organizes the possible observations or at a maximum interrupts aspects of the phenomenon” (p. 168).

The data analysis began during the initial stage of interviewing participants. To ensure that I was capturing the data being presented, I documented my initial reactions and kept notes about any themes I believed were emerging. Furthermore, I made notes about any observations that seemed to be important, such as when a participant struggled to make eye-contact. I also documented demographic information that was not asked during the interviews. For example, one participant was physically disabled. Although we did not discuss the participant’s disability during the recording of the interview, we

had earlier discussed the poor choice in agreeing to meet at a particular location, which was not easily accessed by disabled persons.

I found the process of journaling my initial reactions to be useful, as it allowed me to refer back to specific details that could have been lost, given the time-frame between conducting and transcribing the interviews and analyzing them. I kept a journal of my reflections, including thoughts, questions, feelings, and some identifying themes. The journal was useful for reflecting on my values, biases, and judgments, and in acknowledging the power dynamics between myself, as researcher, and the participants. Through these methods, I remained conscious of my role as the interviewer and the power of this position, despite my attempt to remain unbiased and participate not as an expert but as a learner. During the process of journaling, I was also able to identify similarities and differences in the participants' responses. As themes emerged in the interviews, I began to compare the interview data with the concepts that I had identified in the literature review.

The process of analyzing the data included a combination of several different methods. I began by assigning numbers to each interview, and identified the date, time, location, and how the participant had learned about the project.<sup>6</sup> I then started to review all the transcripts, field notes, and my research journal, and created a table that listed the demographic diversity of the participants. I created two computer files and named them 'analytical memo' and 'procedural memo.' As I began the task of open coding, I placed the emerging themes in my analytical memo file. Esterberg (2002) indicated that open coding occurs when "you work intensively with your data, line-by-line, identifying

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<sup>6</sup> In order to ensure anonymity of the participants I used pseudonyms.

themes and categories that seem of interest” (p. 158). From this point, the data were organized into clusters, themes, and descriptive wording to form the analysis.

I began to compare the interview data with the three concepts *gender, power, and service delivery* which I had identified in the literature review. The process involved creating a second table that listed the three concepts. Under each of the three concepts I noted my assumptions about queer partner abuse that were developed through the literature review. Then I created another column in which I listed what the interview data had revealed. The purpose of this process was to answer my research question by showing how the interview data challenged and confirmed my assumptions about queer partner abuse.

To maintain validity, I followed three key verification steps, which included an audit trail, receiving feedback from participants, and reviewing the findings with participants (Creswell, 1994; Grbich, 1999). I kept a record of the analytic procedures in the ‘procedural memo’ file that I created to ensure that my analysis could be audited, which is necessary in ensuring research dependability.

Participants were asked if they would review a transcribed copy of the recorded data to check for accuracy. However, only four of the eight respondents agreed to do this at the time of their interview. The one participant who did review the transcript did not sign a release, because the review occurred by email. The other participants, who provided me with their contact information and who specifically requested a copy of the research findings, were also asked to review the findings. Despite my efforts to contact the three other participants, none of them responded to my request. I can only assume

that those who did not respond agreed with the transcription of their interview that I sent for review.

### ***Research Limitations***

While social change is one of the goals of critical qualitative research, there are limitations in achieving this goal. For instance, who should decide whether consciousness raising will be an integral part of the research? At this point, the collaboration between the researcher and the participants becomes essential, but I found the collaboration aspect of this study difficult. For the most part, participants were willing to participate in the initial interview, but did not express any desire to engage in any other form of consciousness raising. Only one participant questioned me about the possible outcome of this research and the other participants seemed to be satisfied by the information on the consent form, which mentioned that my goals were to publish the research results in academic and alternative journals and present them at conferences.

Another limitation was the use of semi-structured interviews rather than focus groups. Focus groups were seriously considered because I believed that the “reciprocal process of information” sharing between the facilitator and group would have been beneficial in fostering social change given the critical nature of this research (Grbich, 1999, p. 114). Nevertheless, since the queer communities tend to be small in size, and members are more likely to know one another, confidentiality problems could arise. This could create a situation in which individuals might be reluctant to participate. Due to concern about confidentiality and safety, face-to-face conversations seemed to be more appropriate.

In addition, asking semi-structured questions does not allow the researcher to check for content validity, since the questions are not usually asked in sequence. More structured questions would have increased the comparability of responses, because the participants would have more likely been asked the same questions in the same order (Royse, 1999). On the other hand, more structured questions may reduce the autonomy of the interviewee by inhibiting participants from sharing the experiences that are not directly related to the questions.

As already noted, the method of sample selection also presented a limitation in this research. For instance, given time and monetary restraints, the sample size was small and lacked overall diversity, which limited the generalizability of the research findings in representing the population. However, critical researchers are less concerned with generalizing than with gaining insights that are specific in nature and, therefore, they tend not to see the lack of generalizability as a limitation (Grbich, 1999). The time needed to recruit participants can be unpredictable and time-consuming, especially since in this case participants were not purposely selected but solicited through advertising. The response from potential participants came in spurts, and the entire process of recruitment and interviewing the eight participants occurred over a year.

Because of the sensitivity of the issue under study, the consent form included a list of local support groups so that participants who wished could find appropriate support services (Appendix B). Queer partner abuse has not only been silenced in mainstream society, but also in the queer community. The availability of support is minimal and only accessible in particular areas of BC, such as on the lower mainland. I was concerned about the potential for abuse to occur as a result of the research if, for example, an

abusive partner happens to come across a pamphlet or advertisement for participation. Although I did not interview anyone who disclosed that they were still involved with an abusive partner, I learned that one of the respondents went back to her abusive partner after participating in the research.

Finally, queer communities and particularly lesbian communities have voiced concern that research focused on partner abuse will be used to further pathologize lesbian relationships. Researching a sensitive topic is difficult even for experienced researchers because of the possibility of reporting negative results about a stigmatized population. For example, I am concerned that this research could be seen as an exploration of mutual abuse, or that the data will be interpreted as justifying the silencing of this phenomenon.

### *Conclusion*

The experience of queer people in violent relationships cannot be displaced or be imagined to parallel the experiences of heterosexuals. Queers in violent relationships deserve to be heard and validated, which is a significant reason for my choosing to use a critical research design to address this topic. I believe that knowledge is subjective and open to various interpretations. Knowledge is situated within experience and, thus, a qualitative methodological approach is appropriate in this case, especially since qualitative methodologies see realities as subjective and multiple (Creswell, 1994). The participant-researcher relationship is supported throughout this research process to prevent intrusion by the researcher, and to encourage reciprocal knowledge sharing. Despite some limitations, this research approach was useful in allowing participants to voice their perspectives on relationship violence.

## Chapter Two: Data Analysis

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I center the voices of the participants to answer my research question: “Do participants define their experiences with relationship abuse using mainstream perceptions of domestic violence?” I found that participants did indeed use mainstream notions of domestic violence to understand their experiences. All participants framed their identity in rigid male-female gender categories and described similar definitions of power and control to those that have been noted in mainstream theories of domestic violence. This finding challenged my initial assumption that participants who identified as queer would view gender as flexible and, hence, reject rigid gender dichotomies that are integral to mainstream theories of partner abuse. As the intention of this study was to explore the rich experiences of the participants, I examined their experiences through three main themes: (a) gender; (b) power; and (c) service delivery. These three concepts also emerged during my literature review as important in addressing my research question. Under each of these themes I analyze the extent to which the data confirmed, challenged, and changed my assumptions about these concepts as I discussed in the literature review.

Before I begin my analysis on the concepts of gender and power, and service delivery, I feel it is necessary to present a description of the spectrum of abuse experienced by the participants. The participants’ accounts of the abuse showed numerous similarities to the descriptions found in mainstream accounts of domestic violence. However, they also showed significant differences, particularly in relation to

experiences with homophobia and heterosexism. The most significant finding in this research has been the depth of the participants' fear connected to experiences of homophobia and heterosexism.

### *The Spectrum of Abuse*

Participants identified three forms of abuse: emotional, physical and sexual. As participants shared their experiences, it became evident they all described similar forms of abuse that have been described by individuals in non-queer relationships and are consistent with the definitions provided by Burke and Follingstad (1999). These authors define emotional abuse as “verbal or nonverbal behaviours intended to isolate, humiliate, demean, intimidate, or control a partner” (p. 9). Physical abuse is defined as “physical actions that are directed towards the intimate partner” (p. 14). Finally, sexual abuse includes “forcing another to engage in sexual activities against his or her will through the use of verbal or physical actions, threats, or intimidation” (p. 6). In the next section, I present the varied experiences of abuse described by the participants.

#### *i. Emotional abuse.*

The emotional abuse experienced by the research participants followed a similar pattern of emotional abuse found in mainstream society. It was the most frequently reported form of abuse by the participants, and it involved the same types of abusive behaviour such as intimidation, belittling, demeaning, and various forms of overly controlling behaviours (Ristock, 2002).

Josh was one of the first to frame his experience of emotional abuse. He began by explaining how his partner prevented him from leaving, which led him to stay in the relationship for eight years. Josh's experiences evidently involved intimidation and control:

I remember, in the second year, I wanted to go home to my parents ... and I remember him pulling out a hunting knife and sticking it up to his throat and saying that he was going to kill himself if I left. I call this violence. (Interview 01)

For others, emotional abuse involved a partner actively demeaning them and/or belittling them in social situations. For example, Dan worked with his partner in the same office and was often verbally abused by him in front of his co-workers:

[H]e would talk down to me. Tell me that I was worthless. I needed professional help and I'm getting it for free because he was my lover and he's doing me a service by taking care of me. (Interview 08)

Dan described feeling particularly vulnerable because he felt completely dependant on his partner. He not only worked for his partner, but he was also "in the country illegally," which added to the abuse he experienced because his partner was able to wield more control.

Pete described how his partner was able to break him down to a point where he believed that he was emotionally and mentally unstable. He recalled being constantly blamed for his partner's behaviour and felt that his self-confidence was negatively affected. Pete stated that his partner "was always blaming ... it's always you and never him. They are trying to break you down and make you feel inferior or fucked up" (Interview 07).

As I reviewed the participants' stories, I was surprised how similar their experiences were to those described in mainstream accounts of domestic violence (see

Elliot, 1996; Stahly & Lie, 1995). I assumed that participants who identified as queer would not necessarily experience the same pattern of abuse. I realized that I too was internalizing a stereotype because I viewed queer relationships as being less violent and thought that when violence occurred it would be less chronic.

*ii. Physical abuse.*

Physical violence was reported by three participants. One of the cases was accompanied by incidents of sexual abuse. Tom shared that he had had experiences with physical violence regularly in his relationship, but one incident in particular involved being coerced into having sex with his partner to get his belongings out of their apartment, an act followed by physical violence:

I would move back out, and then he had ... I would have to have sex with him to get my stuff back and then he would come over and he would beat me around a bit. Threw me against the wall and a lot of damage to the building ... the apartment from my skull ... going through the drywall and stuff. (Interview 02)

Corina's experience of physical violence provided insight into an escalating pattern of abuse. She described a progression of physical violence from a minor, isolated incident to regular occurrences of physical harm that intensified over the course of the relationship. This is exemplified by her statement:

Umm ... well the first time ... she ... I was in the bathtub, and when I went to stand up because I wanted to get out, she was blocking the door and screaming at me. Umm ... she pushed me over, and, she did that a few times, and each time I tried to stand up ... and, then finally ... um ... she calmed down enough, and was saying like to get over it; I knew she did really ... she wasn't able to get me out, but anyway got me out of the bathroom ... and, so, she just kept pushing me and pushing me as I was trying to get my clothes, and ah ... and then more intense, umm like that one I walked away with no marks on me ... just really really freaked out. And then it was progressing to the point where big chunks of my hair were being pulled out and bruises. (Interview 04)

Another participant described the difficulties associated with escaping the abuse. After Dan had relocated to a friend's place his partner proceeded to track him down and attack him:

I was taping a video and he started freaking out and threw the video camera and then attacked me. He came to the place where I was staying and attacked me again. (Interview 08)

The nature of physical violence described by the participants involved slapping, punching, destroying property, throwing objects, and being threatened with a weapon. These narratives support Elliott's (1996) arguments that "[t]he dynamic of same-sex domestic violence are likewise similar to that of heterosexual battering" (p. 4).

### *iii. Sexual abuse.*

The experience of sexual abuse was described by two participants. As stated earlier, Tom's experience of sexual abuse consisted mainly of him being coerced into having sex. However, Riley's experience was very different and his account of sexual abuse is particularly significant because it was connected to a form of emotional abuse and to his fear of homophobia:

He got me kind of drunk and stoned one night. And then basically started to play around ... I didn't really know better because I was a virgin, so I didn't really think about it. And then later it was pretty much partially blackmail. (Interview 06)

Riley's abusive relationship was his first 'gay' experience and his partner was aware of his fear of people finding out about their relationship. Riley's fears of being 'outed' contributed to his dependency in the relationship. His fears of people seeing him as gay were greater than his fears of the abuse he endured, which prevented him from leaving

the relationship. This is clearly an instance of how homophobia and heterosexism interacts with other forms of abuse.

*iv. Homophobia/heterosexism.*

The spectrum of abuse described by the research participants suggests that they experienced forms of abuse similar to those in heterosexual relationships. However, two of the participants also spoke of homophobia and heterosexism as an extension of emotional abuse. For instance, Riley's narrative pointed to an incident of being 'blackmailed' via the threat of being outed (Interview 06). Similarly, John confirmed that his partner repeatedly threatened to forcibly "out" him. He said, "Yes, he threatened to ... everyone I was associated with" (Interview 03). These two accounts illuminate how homophobia and heterosexism are integrated into the spectrum of emotional abuse, thus creating an experience of abuse distinctly different from heterosexual accounts of partner abuse. This observation is similar to that of Mary Eaton (1994) who stated:

[O]ne way in which psychological abuse is manifested between lesbians is by exploiting the vulnerability of the closeted and semi closeted lesbian by threatening to "out" her, or fostering her isolation and dependency on the abuser by in fact following through with such threats. This particular kind of abusive treatment is without heterosexual equivalent (p. 207).

Although Eaton is referring to female-on-female accounts of violence, the interviews suggest that this pattern was also evident in other queer relationships.

In conclusion, even though queer participants experienced the same forms of abuse as those found in heterosexual relationships, their experience was unique because it included an extended form of abuse directly connected to homophobia and heterosexism. This form of abuse is wielded in interpersonal and social forms of control. Although not

necessarily experienced as a direct form of abuse, participants described how homophobia and heterosexism affected the level of abuse they experienced.

In the remainder of this chapter, I present the data which both confirmed and challenged my initial assumptions about the concepts of gender, power, and the implications of service delivery. In each section, I describe and analyze the participants' experiences in an effort to answer my research question.

### *Gender Identification*

As I began the data analysis process I started by exploring the gender identification of the participants. In spite of the fact that the eight participants initiated participation in this study on the basis of being "queer," only two self-defined themselves as "queer" during the field study interviews. I was interested in how participants defined themselves in relation to gender, given that six research participants overtly rejected a queer identity and, instead, framed their identity around a male/female dichotomy. As described in the literature review, mainstream theories view relationship violence as situated in patriarchy, with the 'male' generally seen as the perpetrator and the 'female' as the victim of abuse (Merrill, 1996; Ristock, 2001). Thus, I assumed that 'queer' would be the basis on which to contest gender and gendered-based positions. Interestingly, participants found identifying themselves outside of gender to be difficult. Instead of viewing queer as a place to reject notions of gender dichotomies, participants appeared to have internalized rigid gendered terms. I begin the next section by describing how participants framed their gender identities and then present the difficulties described by the participants who identified as queer.

### *Gender as a Fixed Identity*

As mentioned above, I was perplexed by the fact that only two of the eight participants defined themselves as queer. I was equally surprised to find that the participants who did self-identify as queer also spoke in terms of rigid notions of gender. Nevertheless, what remained consistent in the participants' accounts was that queer was not a platform where they contested gender dichotomies.

Corina was one participant who self-identify as queer.<sup>1</sup> When I initially asked her how she felt about the term *queer*, she stated:

I actually really like the word because it feels like an umbrella to me ... it's a ... feels like a way of bringing a lot of under-recognized people together ... I really like queer. (Interview 04)

Corina acknowledged that, for her, queer implies a collective identity and the fluid nature of identity ownership. She is comfortable with various identities and described herself as holding several:

Sometimes queer, sometimes lesbian, and sometimes dyke, [and] the strongest two ... or what comes out of my mouth the most are dyke and witch. (Interview 04)

For Corina, queers can vary in age, status, physical appearance, sexual identity, and spiritual identity, but what remained stable in her identification was gender. Contrary to assumptions about the fluid nature of queer, Corina situated herself within a fixed female identity, referring to herself throughout the interview as a "lesbian," "woman," and "dyke" (Interview 04), all of which are connected to assumptions about the female gender category. It was clear during the interview that she maintained a stable gender identity (name, physical appearance, and her use of pronouns). It is my

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<sup>1</sup> I use pronouns that are associated with the gender categories (male or female) in the body of the text as they were presented by the participants during the field study interviews.

understanding that Corina, like the majority of the participants, viewed queer as a collective identity.

Brian was another participant who identified himself as being “queer” (Interview 05), and shared that he felt comfortable with his identity. When I asked Brian about his thoughts on the word *queer*, he said: “I have identified myself as queer forever” (Interview 05). Brian also recognized queer as an identity that encompasses multiple identities. “Yeah, gay, fag ... two-spirited ... all those identities” (Interview 05). However, similar to the first participant, Brian maintained a stable gender identity; that is, he consistently used pronouns associated with the male gender category, such as “him, his, and he” (Interview 05). Although Brian identified himself as a “two-spirited person” (Interview 05) and explained that being “two-spirited” was “central to his whole being” (Interview 05), he also identified himself as being “gay” (Interview 05).<sup>2</sup> This is significant because Brian also framed his identity around his sexual identity, including a clear connection to the male gender category (i.e., gay).

The majority of participants relied on gender when describing their experiences. However, Riley was the only participant who spoke about the connection between sex and gender as being flexible where people are neither “completely male nor female” (Interview 06). Riley’s narrative demonstrated the extent to which he had internalized rigid sex and gendered categories. For instance, he recognizes gender as flexible, but

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<sup>2</sup> Although I recognize that the participants’ identities and realities were multiple and diverse, my analysis centered on their marginalized queer identity. For instance, in Brian’s interview issues of racism and ableism were not discussed in relation to his experience of partner abuse.

when he described the gender identity of pre-operative and post-operative trans candidates, his assumptions about gender appeared to be rather rigid.<sup>3</sup>

I had a friend and he was a man and now he has had an operation and now he is a woman. No. He is still a man. And if you were going to get a sex change you would still be a woman. You could look different. You could have no tits. You could have a dick but so what. You would still be a woman. And I really have a hard time with guys. I find that strange. (Interview 06)

The paradox is that Riley recognized that gender is capable of shifting between categories, yet his analysis was restricted by internalized assumptions about how society naturalizes gender categories. As Drechsler (2002) has argued, society is regulated by particular beliefs:

One of these beliefs is that there are two sexes, male and female, and two genders, man and woman. A further aspect of these two genders is that they are each connected to certain presentations, masculinity and femininity respectively (p. 29).

Although gender may not be overtly named, it is often recognizable by particular pronouns in describing experiences, in addition to other characteristics, such as names, body features, and behaviours that are ascribed to particular male and female categories.

Another interesting finding was that not only did the participants' accounts suggest that gender was internalized, but also that participants were gendered in their position. The participants described their partners, often as the perpetrator of abuse, using rigid gendered terms and stereotypical gendered descriptors. For example, in the following excerpt, Tom described his partner as being strong, powerful, and successful, all of which are opposite attributes to how he described himself:

Oh...well he was 7ft, and he looked exactly like Christopher Reeves. We would get stopped at the airports where people would ask for autographs. So, here is

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<sup>3</sup> By pre-opt and post-opt I am referring to persons who are undergoing sex re-assignment by surgically removing their primary, and, in some cases, their secondary sex organs.

Superman -- 7ft tall, who could, with one hand, throw me to the other side of the world. (Interview 02)

Similarly, Corina referred to herself as a victim and, at the same time, she stressed that her partner was more powerful in physical size and strength:

Yup ... she's a lot bigger and stronger than me ... a lot actually (laughter) ... I watched her carry a stove on her back once ... you know ... you can see that I'm not really that big. (Interview 04)

Corina's description of her partner's physical size and strength connects to how she makes sense of the abuse through available discourse. Specifically, this dialogue occurred when Corina was describing incidents of violence that her partner had inflicted on her. The fact that an alternative discourse may be unavailable to many queer people became evident when Corina said, "I still couldn't grasp that a woman could be abusive" (Interview 04). Indeed, the notion that women are non-aggressive and non-violent is consistent with mainstream understandings of relationship violence because in mainstream frameworks violence is viewed as being male-centered (Ristock, 2002).

As presented in the literature review, queer is organized around multiple identities and, arguably, intersects with a multitude of lived experiences. Queer is ambiguous and "mark[s] a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non-(anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception" (Jagose, 1996, p. 97). Although queer is a platform from which gender categories and gendered assumptions can be actively disrupted (Sullivan, 2003; Turner, 2000), this was not the experience of the participants in this study. My assumption that participants who identified as queer would reject gender categories on the basis that stable gender dichotomies do not recognize their experience was challenged. Instead, my analysis shifted to recognizing how deeply the participants internalized gender dichotomies, and the difficulties they would face in challenging

gender as the basis of heteronormativity. The next section will present the reasons given by the participants for contesting the label *queer*.

### *Sameness versus Difference*

As I worked through the participants' narratives, I wondered why gender was so internalized in their lives and began to question this further. I was interested in whether participants would assume mainstream understandings of relationship abuse because of internalization. The reason given by participants for contesting a queer identity was connected to fears of homophobia/heterosexism, which led participants to internalize societal norms.

Josh was the first participant I interviewed who appeared uncomfortable with my use of the term *queer*, conveyed initially by his body language and then confirmed by his verbal statements. When I began discussing the topic of identity, Josh sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. He expressed a sense of discomfort in using *queer* in reference to identity. Josh explained that although he belongs to the "queer community," he is more comfortable identifying himself as homosexual. Josh indicated that the term *gay* feels too "out there." He said, "I would say that I'm a homosexual ... I don't like the term *gay* because when I think of gay I think of the pride parade and all those 'out there' people" (Interview 01).

When I pursued the topic of identity further, Josh explained that he felt the term *queer* was derogatory and prevented societal acceptance. For him, the more "straight-looking" and "straight-acting" one appears to be, the easier it is to be accepted in mainstream society. Basically, he stated that compliance with heterosexual standards

conveyed a level of sameness necessary for social acceptance whereas difference is less accepted and opens the door to social oppression. According to Sullivan (2003), the desire for sameness is significant because “punishment or stigmatization of so-called ‘unnatural’ actions and identities is everywhere apparent in our society, and functions to reaffirm or naturalize that which is held to be ‘normal’” (p. 84).

When I asked Tom how he identified himself, he referred to himself as a “gay advocate” (Interview 02). He explained that identifying himself as a “gay advocate” was important to him, as this seemed an accurate description of his life experience. As Tom said, he has always been interested in fighting for same-sex rights:

I’ve done my bit, I helped all ... you know ... all the fags that are not as strong as I am. I’m willing to put myself out there, so all the people behind me would now have an easier lifestyle. They can have same-sex spousal benefits ... you know ... they don’t have to go through the insanity ... I had death threats, I had everything. (Interview 02)

Tom refused the label *queer* and when questioned about his identity, he stated:

I’m a gay advocate; on my tomb stone it will say ... and the world took a collective sigh of relief ... And ... it will say (gay advocate) and I want a pride flag and a pink triangle. (Interview 02)

Tom’s experience in supporting the gay rights movement resulted from his belief that gays deserve the same rights and responsibilities as their heterosexual counterparts (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Jagose, 1996). Therefore, Tom could not identify as *queer* and challenge gender dichotomies because he would be challenging heterosexuality as the foundation of mainstream society, the very system to which he wanted equal access. It is apparent that his rejection of *queer* was connected to his desire not to go against mainstream assumptions of gender. As Jagose (1996) suggests, “gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality” (p. 83).

When I asked Dan about how he felt about the term *queer*, he stated, “It’s fine. I guess because I lived in California ... and I spent some time in San Francisco behind the AIDS crisis ... I was exposed to the queer nation” (Interview 08). He further noted that he had previously struggled with the term *queer* and said, “[The] word *queer* made me cringe” (Interview 08). Dan struggled to separate the term from its historically negative connotations, particularly “homophobia” (Interview 08). Although Dan reported that he had struggled with the term, he now felt more comfortable using such expressions as *queer*, *gay* or *fag* (Interview 08). However, all through the interview he clearly referred to himself in gender specific terms. When I asked how he identified, he invoked his sexuality by stating: “If you back me into a corner I sleep with men,” thus avoiding the issue of gender identity and reducing his queer experience to his sexuality (Interview 08).

Similarly, John rejected a queer identity and pointedly referred to himself as a “gay man” (Interview 03). John felt that the term *gay* had been used too loosely to identify different groups of individuals. He indicated that by including the noun ‘man’ in his identity, his gender would be unquestioned. John also mentioned that being accepted by mainstream North American society was important to him. John felt strongly that his identity, as well as his relationship, should resemble those accepted by mainstream society. Although he felt accepted in society, he remained concerned about “discrimination in the workplace,” and therefore was reluctant to identify too far outside socially acceptable norms (Interview 03). He acknowledged that these fears influenced his position in the queer community as one who is non-political. As he stated, “I’m out, but not willing to go to drags” (Interview 03). John’s need for acceptance by mainstream society is hardly surprising. According to Paley (1995), “[T]hose who most resemble the

values and appearances of the mainstream culture and political system are those who have been integrated into it, and who have been promoted by it” (p. 203). These discussions on the difficulties of being different correlate to the gendered position adopted by participants in understanding abuse and their identities. To an extent, this explains why the participants understood their experiences with violence in a mainstream manner.

The findings suggest that participants have internalized notions of gender, as evidenced by how participants framed their identities. Although all the participants initially identified themselves as queer, deeper examination revealed that they did not truly accept this identity. They all expressed a need to fit into the mainstream North American norms, and stated fears of homophobia and heterosexism as the main reason.

In the next section, I begin with an analysis of the concept of power and discuss barriers to services. I conclude by discussing the connection between power, gender, and violence.

### ***Making Sense of Power***

As I continued to explore whether or not participants defined their experience of partner abuse through mainstream perceptions, it became essential to understand how the participants conceptualized power. In the following section, I explore the dynamics of power as described by the eight participants, centering their experiences into the two sub-themes: (a) interpersonal power; and (b) societal inequalities.

### *Interpersonal Power*

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how participants conceptualized power, I began by asking them how they perceived the power dynamics in their relationship. As noted in Chapter One, I assumed that power relations were more fluid in queer relationships, contrary to the power and control models described in mainstream theories of domestic violence. In this section, I present the participants' accounts of themselves as victims of abuse and their partners as perpetrators, which affirmed dominant feminist theories of power and control (Ristock 2002; Marrujo & Kreger, 1996). I also present another finding that emerged from the data, echoing what Ristock (2002) found. Participants described experiences in which power did not always reside with the perpetrators of abuse, but instead moved along a continuum of "agency, strength [and] resiliency" (p. 74).

Several participants said that, for them, a perpetrator wielded power over a victim and a victim was powerless. When I questioned Dan about the possibility of power shifting in his relationship, he said: "No never, I guess ... yeah I don't think I gained power in the relationship. I don't know! So the only thing that I knew how to do to gain back power was to leave" (Interview 08). The uncertainty in Dan's response indicates the rigid duality of the victim/perpetrator system and the difficulty in naming power outside this dichotomy. It also affirms a mainstream understanding of relationship abuse.

John was another participant who struggled with acknowledging his own agency. Like all the other participants, he referred to himself as a "victim" (Interview 03) and appeared to have difficulty in answering the question about whether he regained power in the relationship. He responded:

I thought, this is ridiculous; I shouldn't be kicked out of my own home. I was dreading going home. The fact that I'm not an aggressive personality ... umm ... I'm more passive personality wise .... So, I went to the bathroom and closed the door - locked the door. He walked in and screamed at me. He screamed. I said 'You're out of here.' 'You're just out of here.' He said 'No I'm not.' I said that I will call the police if I have to. 'You're out of here.' And he screamed louder and louder. It seemed like he intensified. 'You're out of here. Your stuff is going to the curb. It is not my responsibility.' (Interview 03)

I found John's experience interesting because not only did he struggle with acknowledging that he was not powerless, but he also identified internalized notions of power. For instance, he used a gendered stereotype in describing himself as a passive victim suggesting that he viewed power as gender-based (see Ristock, 2002; Merrill 1996; Eaton, 1994). Indeed, John was drawing on culturally shared norms as he described himself as a passive victim and powerless (Sullivan, 2003).

Tom described his experience with power as existing within a strict victim/perpetrator dynamic. When asked if power had ever shifted in his relationship, he replied, "[N]ever. I was always the victim and I was always at his mercy. Whatever he said was the gospel" (Interview 02). Like the other participants, Pete identified himself as a victim and viewed himself as being powerless. Pete recalled having to measure up to his partner's social standards, which aligned with characteristics of white male privilege. He described his partner as being "very appealing" (Interview 07) which seemed to be a barrier in his gaining power: "He was the type that everyone wanted to befriend and be with. He was seen as being stylish and strong. He was very appealing. It was hard to be powerful" (Interview 07).

Josh was one participant whose experience questioned the rigidity of the conventional "power-over" dynamic found in mainstream domestic violence theories. Mainstream theories of domestic violence view power as an either/or dynamic, where

individuals are either abusive or they have been abused. Although Josh referred to himself as a “victim” throughout the interview, when I asked him if he felt that power had ever changed in his relationship, he stated: “Well there was this time that I had made up my mind that I was going to leave, so I split his eye open right here” (Interview 01). Josh’s sense of power shifted in that moment. It was not about having power over his partner in an “abusive way,” but rather a reaction. He shared that it was about “survival” and “personal power” as a way out of the relationship (Interview 01). At this point in the interview, I asked him how he viewed his partner’s position of power. Josh named his partner a “victim”; not a victim of abuse per se, but a victim of social oppression:-

Well! We are both victims. He is the victim of himself with his internalized homophobia and the cohort that he grew up with and the times and the religion. And I’m the victim of him and the age difference and being rejected by family for being sexually abused and being a homosexual myself. (Interview 01)

Brian spoke about intentionally retaliating against his partner on more than one occasion. Like Josh, Brian referred to himself as a “victim” (Interview 05) of violence and only when directly questioned about possible changes in power dynamics did he offer the following account: “Oh yup ... I hit him. I burned his cock one time. I would say that you’d never see anyone like me again” (Interview 05). Brian’s acts of retaliation often occurred after he had been abused by his partner. Although he did not elaborate, Brian explained that his partner “would freak right out” (Interview 05) when he fought back physically. Indeed Brian framed his experience within a victim/perpetrator dichotomy by naming himself as victim and his partner as “abusive” (Interview 05). However, another dynamic of power was occurring in the relationship when Brian retaliated against his partner’s abuse, which does not necessarily fit into the traditional

perpetrator/victim dichotomy because power is viewed as stemming from a place of domination (Ristock, 2002).

Corina was another participant who identified herself as a “victim” and yet described having periods of “momentary power” (Interview 05). When I questioned her about her feelings of fear and anger, she said, “I think by the time I started to retaliate it was anger ... fear would come after” (Interview 04). Corina’s experience with power was not always about physical retaliation, but she also identified “personal power” (Interview 04) as an element of her experience. When she reflected on the questions that I asked about her position of power, she said, “Umm ... even with that I could feel a shift ... when I walked home I could feel something different in me ... like I got out of there without being hit or nothing ... there was no victim in me” (Interview 04).

Corina named a “shift” in power that would suggest that she, like Brian and Josh, does not fit easily into the rigid categories established in mainstream accounts of domestic violence. At the same time, she relied on the victim/perpetrator categories to make sense of her experience as evidenced by referring to herself as a victim and her partner as “abusive” (Interview 04). This is significant because a mainstream victim/perpetrator dichotomy does not necessarily account for acts of agency on the part of the victim.

Riley also acknowledged that power was not static and power roles were not clearly delineated, as suggested in the following dialogue:

I think that a lot of the time people that are the victims are often the perpetrators. I don’t think you can define yourself as a victim or me as a perpetrator because everyone has been a victim and everybody has done good things and everybody has done bad things. It is a very odd time that there is someone that has only done good things or has only done bad things. (Interview 06)

Participants appeared to rely on established criteria to affirm their identity and these criteria were situated in mainstream understandings of power and control. The importance of this finding is that although participants understood their experience of abuse through a mainstream perspective, the dynamics of power were not always linear. This suggests the need to entertain a more flexible notion of power which includes experiences outside the mainstream understandings of how power operates. As Ristock (2002) has pointed out, “Interlocking layers of oppression operate in many different ways, with many of us having the experience of being simultaneously in a position of social privilege and power (for example being white), while also being in a subordinate position [non-heterosexual]” (p. 56).

### *Societal Inequalities*

The most significant finding of this research is associated with the participants’ accounts of social inequalities associated with environmental homophobia and heterosexism. In other words, the participants’ narratives suggested that power stems from a place of social oppression that affects their social realities. The majority of participants described experiencing increased levels of abuse because of enforced dependency and isolation due to homophobia. Although it is important to acknowledge that issues of dependency and isolation are relevant to heterosexual relationships, the marginalized position of queers was a factor which exacerbated the level and extent of abuse.

Tom was the first participant to explain how he felt in his relationship. This experience began when he was forced to leave his military career because of his identity.

He said:

Yup! It was almost like the cliché ... the lesbian relationship ... where the lesbian pulls up with the U-haul the next day. Pretty much the same cliché but in a gay relationship, because we spent the first night together. It wasn't that night, but you know, we had a couple of more dates ... and then at that point I had been discharged from the military for being a homosexual. (Interview 02)

The military was Tom's source of employment, so he was forced to abandon his career.

Tom was now in a position where he was dependent upon his partner financially and socially.

This was Tom's first gay experience, and he was not "out" to his parents or any other immediate family or friends.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, he did not have any reliable sources to compare this relationship with, so this normalized the abuse he experienced. He explained:

I had never been in a gay relationship, or and ... never had a gay experience, so I thought that this was the way that all gay people were. So in my mind ... it's like while if you want to suck cock this is the way it is. So, I had nothing to compare it to, so I just thought this was what gay life is. So I thought this was normal. (Interview 02)

Tom's lack of connection to his family and queer community increased his sense of dependency. He maintained that his partner continued to restrict social contacts outside their relationship: "I wasn't allowed to have any friends. He had friends. I was only allowed to associate with them" (Interview 02). Although he recalled being aware of his dependency, he spoke about not feeling empowered enough to challenge the situation in which he found himself. As the relationship progressed, Tom said, "I was literally

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<sup>4</sup> Pete (Interview 07) and Dan (Interview 08) also reported that their abusive relationship was their first "gay" relationship.

trapped, a housewife, literally like the Stepford Wives ... la, la, la, la, no life of my own” (Interview 02).

This account raises the question of how societal oppression becomes internalized and contributes to notions of powerlessness. In an extreme effort to protect his partner from being rejected by family members because of his gay identity, Tom decided to portray himself as heterosexual. He described the following incident:

When his parents came to visit ... umm ... for Expo 86 for a month he was totally paranoid, and we made two bedrooms up hoping that his parents would believe that we were roommates. And, I thought I was doing him a favour, and I brought a girl home and I slept over at a girl’s place; she knows I’m gay. And I brought her home the next morning with his folks there, so that they would think that ... you know ... so that they would think that I’m bringing a chick home after a night on the town. (Interview 02)

In spite of his intention to protect his partner against homophobic hatred, Tom’s partner ended up turning on him and physically attacking him:

He freaked out and kicked the girl out ... and then proceeded to strangle me, and his mother had to pull him off of me. He then went down stairs and jumped on top of the hood of my car, which dented the hood completely, and poured sugar in my gas tank and the whole bit. (Interview 02)

This account indicated the potential for increased incidences of abuse. The reality of homophobia and heterosexism affected Tom’s experiences because he had to deal with societal oppression as an added layer to relationship violence.

Some of the participants’ ability to access family support was dependent on family acceptance of queer relationships. Where the acceptance was lacking, the relationships were kept clandestine. Consequently, the participants were unable to reach for family support in matters that were officially non-existent.<sup>5</sup> Tom felt that he was left

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<sup>5</sup> The participants that I am referring to are Josh (Interview 01), Tom (Interview 02), Brian (Interview 05), and Riley (Interview 06).

with little option but to isolate himself further. He ended up hiding his relationship given the reality that his own family did not know about his sexual identity and his partner's family would "absolutely not" (Interview 02) approve of their relationship. In the following excerpt, he explained:

His parents couldn't understand. I said ... I would like to tell you what this is about, but I can't. You're going to have to talk to your son about this ... about you know. I wasn't going to tell his parents that he is gay! I wouldn't do that to him, because I love him. (Interview 02)

Josh's experience with isolation was different, in that it involved his partner hiding the nature of their relationship. He had to follow along with his partner who "didn't feel comfortable" being "out" to family members, co-workers, and friends in general. In fact, Josh explained that his partner refused to identify as non-heterosexual out of absolute fear. When I asked Josh about his partner's identity, he said:

No I would say he didn't use anything. He didn't ... he was very much closeted and he was very worried about being found out. I know that he worked up north in Grand Prairie and Prince George at that time. And you know he had already sort of packaged that we were both related by marriage to make out... (Interview 01)

The implication of Josh's experience and that of other participants is that they were not only being controlled in their relationship by having their abusive partners restrict their social, family, and community contacts.<sup>6</sup> They also had to contend with societal control over their relationships in general. Thus, participants have had to endure the effects of environmental homophobia, which contributed to the silencing of their relationships and shaped their experiences of relationship violence.

Riley's experience was particularly chilling because he used this study as an avenue to speak about his experience for the first time. He said, "Except you..." nobody

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<sup>6</sup> The participants that I am referring to are Tom (Interview 02), John (Interview 03), Corina (Interview 04), Brian (Interview 05), Pete (Interview 07), and Dan (Interview 08).

knows about the abuse (Interview 06). This reality made me wonder how many more queer individuals have remained silent and stayed in their abusive relationships because of their marginalized position.

The data indicates the depth of the participants' fear of possible rejection, isolation, and abandonment connected to experiences of homophobia and heterosexism. The result of their marginalized position was a more chronic level of violence. This finding affirms that societal and institutional inequalities, particularly associated with homophobia and heterosexism, were relevant to the participants' experience of partner abuse.

### ***Barriers to Community Services***

In this section, I analyze the participants' narratives regarding their experiences with social services in the community. As mentioned in the previous section, greater isolation and dependency exacerbated the participants' experiences of abuse because they were unable to access familial forms of support. The majority of participants also described a negative experience when attempting to access community services. They reported that service providers either dismissed their concerns or were unprepared to deal with issues related to queer partner abuse because the services were geared towards heterosexual relationships. This finding confirms that there is another layer of oppression that queer people must contend with that not only includes lack of family support due to homophobia and heterosexism in their social environments, but also the lack of community support services. In all, six of the eight participants attempted to seek some form of community support to address the abuse they were experiencing. Of those six

participants, five reported experiences that involved some level of homophobia and heterosexism.

Three participants described being dismissed by police when they requested assistance in dealing with their abusive partner. Brian reported that when he attempted to access help he was turned away by police: "They don't do anything for gays or lesbians" (Interview 05).

Josh explained that when he finally found the courage to call the police on his partner, he was humiliated. Josh described this negative experience as follows:

Two weeks later he came over to my house and we're arguing and he refused to leave and then I tried to push him out the door and he wouldn't go. His thumb was in my face, so I bit his thumb and then he turned on me and beat the shit out of me to the point where the whole left side of my face was black and blue. And ... my left eye couldn't be opened for days. I went to the police and they said, 'We don't deal with your kind here'.... They just laughed. (Interview 01)

The vulnerability that Josh experienced because of his marginalized position did not end with this incident, but occurred several years later when he went back to the police to apply for a "no contact order" (Interview 01). Similar to his first experience, Josh noted:

They just laughed at me again. They said that if there was all this violence before, why didn't I pursue charges? And ... I got up and said, 'Because we are "fucking homosexuals," that's why.' (Interview 01)

Josh reported that his experience with the police was detrimental, as he believes that "it gave his partner an open invitation to become more abusive" (Interview 01).

Tom described a similar experience involving the police. He recalled going to the police department to make a formal complaint against his partner out of fear that he was going to be seriously harmed the next time. Once the police officers had identified him as "gay," he said:

The police laughed. The first question they said to me was ... 'Are you gay?' when I went down to make the complaint about him strangling me, and coming at me with a knife and you know manhandling me ... throwing me through walls and through doors. The first question out of the Vancouver Police Department ... 'Are you gay?' 'Yes. What does that have to do with anything?' Complete dismissal of the whole thing ... they literally turned on their heels and walked away as if I didn't exist. (Interview 02)

In these incidences the participants perceived the responses they received from the police as homophobic. Homophobia was evident in the verbal responses of the police officers and also in their refusal to acknowledge that abuse exists in queer relationships. The implication of this kind of response from community services is that it leads to the possibility of more frequent experiences of abuse. It also means that queer people are less willing to attempt to access services. As Tom reported, he "did not want to call the police again" (Interview 02).

The awareness that homophobia is still present in our society also prevented some participants from even attempting to access *any* form of support. This was communicated by Riley, who said, "I have never attempted to access support" because of his fear of being "outed" (Interview 06).

Of the three participants who sought counselling services, two reported indirect experiences of homophobia. In John's case, he felt that the counselling services that he received were useful because the counsellor "reassured me about things that I already knew" (Interview 03). John's fear about his employer finding out his identity was such that it took him until he was "scared for his life" to contact a counsellor (Interview 03). Indeed, John's fear of homophobia indicates the difficulties associated with implementing preventive services. Dan reported that he attended some counselling to deal with his experience of abuse, but did not find the counselling useful, "because in

both instances the therapists that I got talking to were both straight” (Interview 08). It was not that Dan felt the counsellors he saw were overtly homophobic, but rather that they could not relate to his experiences because they “had never been confronted with experiences of homophobia” (Interview 08).

Corina appeared to come to terms with the abuse she experienced more quickly than the majority of the participants. She acknowledged that she needed support and was able to use appropriate resources to look for community programs that addressed the issue of domestic violence. However, what she experienced when she began her search surprised her. As Corina said:

I started to search for supports ... in my organized fashion I went through the red book ... I thought of some of the organizations that may have some support and discovered a lot of new ones in my searching, and called 25 agencies. I was shocked that none of them had a lesbian group. (Interview 02)

While Corina was surprised at the general lack of community support services for queer people, she was even more astonished when she contacted the GLBT community center and was questioned by a staff member as to whether partner abuse is even an issue in queer relationships.<sup>7</sup> Corina stated:

When I called here at the Centre—the person who answered the phone said ... ‘Oh ... women get abused in queer relationships?’ ‘Yah, they do and I have, and I really, really, need to talk to other women who have gone through this.’ Wow, I had no idea. I felt so incredibly unsupported by her. (Interview 04)

Corina recalled feeling really “angry that that wasn’t something that went into the training at the Centre” (Interview 04) and was upset by the general lack of acknowledgement that partner abuse occurs in the queer community.

As the dialogue with Corina continued, the issue of service funding arose, particularly the problem of securing regular funding and how funding can restrict service

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<sup>7</sup> GLBT is a common abbreviation used to refer to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons.

delivery. She recognized that even if community services for domestic violence are inclusive of queer people, there are often restrictions as to who is able to access this support. Corina saw the need to support “womyn who’ve done the abusing” (Interview 04) as well as those who are victims of abuse. It was this realization that drove her to try “to compile a list of therapists willing to work with lesbian batterers” (Interview 04). The implication of services being focused solely on the victim is that these services force individuals into rigid victim/perpetrator categories that perpetuate notions of gender and power.

The process of categorizing service users occurs most often during the intake process. For instance, St. Paul’s Hospital in Vancouver recently offered a support group for abused gay men. This group was offered only to victims of abuse, however, as the following caption indicates:

Are you gay? And being abused by your partner? St Paul’s Hospital Domestic Violence Program is offering a support group for gay men abused by their partners. ([http://www.vch.ca./programs/domestic\\_violence](http://www.vch.ca./programs/domestic_violence), n.d., p. 1)

Indeed, if individuals want to access this service, they must not only identify as a victim of abuse, but also allow themselves to be interpreted that way. This apparent need to differentiate the victim and the abuser has been the basis for denying queer people services because of the inability to distinguish which of the two individuals meets the mandate of the service (Ristock, 2002).

The refusal to acknowledge queer domestic violence stems from entrenched heteronormative assumptions in North American society. In some instances, community services have refused to accept the idea of queer partner abuse, because by acknowledging the existence of queer partner abuse most agencies would contradict their

policies, protocols and practice standards which are based on dominant gender-based assumptions. This refusal to accept queer partner abuse translates into experiences of homophobia by those attempting to access services. The result experienced by the majority of participants was a lack of support services available to them to address the issue of queer partner; thus, leading to more prolonged and severe experiences of abuse.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I centered the voices of the participants and found that they did indeed frame their identities around rigid male and female gender categories. They described similar forms of power and control that have been noted in mainstream theories of domestic violence, affirming a mainstream understanding of their experience. This finding challenged my initial assumption that participants who identified as queer would contest rigid gender dichotomies that are essential in gender-based theories of partner abuse. The participants I interviewed found that identifying themselves apart from gender was difficult. Instead of viewing queer as a space to reject gender dichotomies, participants internalized rigid gendered norms. Although the participants appeared to rely on established criteria to affirm their victim identities, I found that few experiences fit neatly into an either/or category. The importance of this finding is that although participants understood their experience of abuse in terms of a mainstream, gender-based framework, there is a need for service providers to entertain a more flexible notion of power that is inclusive of a multitude of lived realities.

The most significant finding in this research has been the depth of the participants' fear connected to experiences of homophobia and heterosexism. Their marginalized

position resulted in the participants' experiencing increased levels of violence because of the enforced dependency and isolation in their relationships. This finding affirms that social inequalities associated with homophobia and heterosexism are relevant to their experience of partner abuse. In addition, participants described a lack of support services available to them to deal with the issues of abuse. This lack of support adds another layer of oppression that queer people must contend with. Their fear of being different leads them to internalize a gendered identity and misconceive their relationship in mainstream ways. It includes not only homophobia and heterosexism in their social environment, but also in community support services. Thus, an important implication of these findings is that community services need to integrate into their counselling not only issues of environmental homophobia and heterosexism, but also specifically how to deal with internalized gender rigidification, which is a particular source of oppression for queer people.

## Chapter Three: Discussion and Conclusion

### *Introduction*

I begin the conclusion by summarizing my research findings. I then present the implications of the research findings in advocating for policy changes in community service organizations, and possibilities for further research. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the learning opportunities that emerged for me as the researcher during the research process.

### *Summary of the Research Findings*

This critical qualitative study centered the voices of eight participants as they described their lived experiences of partner abuse in queer relationships. The experiences described by the participants challenged my initial assumptions that queer people would contest mainstream theories of domestic violence. Instead, the participants recognized the difficulty of identifying themselves apart from gender because of the fear of being seen as different. The participants not only internalized gendered identities, but also constructed their experience of relationship violence through the available discourse, which is mainstream and gendered. Moreover, the participants internalized mainstream notions of power and control, and understood their experiences of partner abuse through a dominant feminist framework. By this I mean participants referred to themselves and their partners as either victims or perpetrators of abuse, which mirrors assumptions of power and control in mainstream theories of domestic violence. However, participants

also recognized that their experiences did not always fit neatly into a victim/perpetrator dichotomy and were able to acknowledge the shifts of power in their relationships.

By exploring the diverse experiences shared by the eight participants, I have come to recognize that the most significant finding in this research has been the extent to which homophobia and heterosexism affected each of the participants in their relationship and in their social environment. Although the participants described a spectrum of abuse similar to that in heterosexual relationships, their accounts of abuse illuminated significant differences in their experience of abuse due to their marginalized position. This study has been beneficial in showing that the participants' experiences are unique because homophobia and heterosexism are an extended form of abuse, which consequently increased the level of abuse they experienced.

### ***Implication of Research Findings***

As I have stated, recognizing the importance of how homophobia and heterosexism affected the participants' experiences of partner abuse was the most significant finding of this research. Besides identifying how the participants' marginalized position resulted in increased levels of violence because of enforced dependency and isolation in their relationships, the findings also suggest that there is a serious lack of resources available to queer people. The implications of this finding are that queer people are reluctant to seek out support services because of fears of homophobia. In cases where the participants did attempt to access support they often found little available that was sensitive to the issue of queer partner abuse. I believe that the reason for this is because there are either few services available for queer people or

the services that are available are intended to deal with issues of violence in heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, there is also a significant fear that by accessing support there is the likelihood of being 'outed' adding another layer of oppression to contend with.

During my analysis of the participants' narratives, it was clear that more resources are required to help queer people by supporting those affected by partner abuse. Existing mainstream community service agencies, including police departments, child welfare agencies, and shelters, must require senior as well as new staff members to attend training on the impact of homophobia and heterosexism, as a form of abuse and as a barrier to accessing support services. This requirement is also relevant to community service agencies that provide support through volunteer programs, and should be included in the agencies' training manuals. Besides the obvious lack of queer sensitive services, one of my foremost concerns is the issue of accessibility. I found participants were reluctant to access support if they had previously had a negative experience. It is clear that the voices of queer people are largely missing from decision-making and policy development in community social service agencies. The issue involves not only challenging the overall lack of support services available, but the fact that there is virtually no support available for queer people who abused their partners.

Another implication of this research stems from the need to adopt a more flexible notion of power. On the one hand, it is clear that participants in this study relied on a mainstream understanding of power and control. On the other hand, the participants' experience did not always fit neatly into an either/or dichotomy. By challenging the rigidity of the victim/perpetrator categories it is possible to consider alternative experiences, including those described by the participants, such as fighting back,

resiliency, retaliation, and empowerment. In light of this finding, further theory development is needed to explore the implications of shifting power dynamics. What precedes a shift in power in a relationship? How can service providers critically explore these experiences given that policies of community support services remain focused on the victims of abuse?

The challenge for service providers is how to remain open to different experiences outside the norm. It is important for front-line staff to recognize differences in perspectives and experiences, including how multiple realities intercept and complicate power dynamics. As a front-line worker, I recognize that we restrict our understanding of relationship violence by the very categories we create and maintain. Service delivery must be support-centered and risk-reduction focused. There is the need to set goals of safety planning by offering preventative measures rather than stereotyping and resisting differences. More work is needed to understand how to implement change effectively with minimal resistance from those who benefit from current heteronormative models. Queer communities, front-line staff, policy analysis, and most importantly those directly impacted by queer partner abuse must work together to generate solutions. A suggestion for future research would be exploring how service providers understand and make sense of queer partner abuse that challenges mainstream perspectives of domestic violence. Are service providers able to critically examine their practice and organization policies including their intake and assessment procedures?

In addition, this research is significant in that my assumptions were challenged. I assumed that the participants who identified as queer would reject gender categories, and hence, gender-based theories of partner abuse. In fact, the participants' narratives instead

indicated high degrees of internalized gender identification. Their fear of being perceived as different led participants to internalize gender assumptions thus adding another layer of oppression. The significance of this finding is recognizing the need for support services that offer counselling to deal with queer relationship violence. The implications of gender identity in their therapeutic approach must be acknowledged. In other words, gender identities as well as issues of gendered relationships must be addressed when working with queer communities on relationship violence.

It is my hope that this research will contribute to understanding issues of queer partner abuse and bring awareness to different communities. It was my intention from the beginning of this research to engage in community awareness. I have already been approached by several community organizations, including police, a family support agency, and a queer law firm for copies of this thesis. I have also been asked by a Ministry of Children and Family Development office to provide an information session for staff members. It is through these avenues that I will continue to work towards breaking the silence surrounding queer partner abuse. I have been honoured by the response that I have received from community-based organizations. However, I believe the true honour belongs to the individuals who entrusted their lived experiences to me in order to complete this research.

### ***Limitations of the Research***

As discussed in Chapter Two, there are limitations to this research, three of which seem to be significant: (a) the limited generalizability; (b) conceptual limitations; and (c) the lack of response from participants in reviewing the transcripts and research findings.

In this thesis the research was based on the narratives of a relatively small number of participants. Although I purposely selected a small sample size, I found that for the majority of the participants the contact was limited to one interview. The small size of the sample also limited its diversity. Furthermore, the participants' narratives were not only specific to their lived reality, but also to the context and time that the interview was conducted. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings is limited.

Another significant limitation to this research involves the inherent subjectivity that I as the researcher and each of the participants brought to the research. Although I believed that the three main concepts that were identified in the literature review were clearly understood by each of the participants in similar ways, I cannot say for certain that each of the participants' understanding was the same. In fact, without a doubt there are variations in the interpretation of not only the concepts that I defined in this research, but also in the research findings. I tried to avoid this problem by having the data and research findings verified by each of the participants. However, I felt that this method of verification was not successful given the participants' lack of interest in engaging in this process, which leads to the final research limitation.

The final limitation to this research, which is particularly troublesome to me personally, is that only one of the eight participants reviewed her transcript for verification purposes. Even though half of the participants agreed to participate in this process and provided their contact information, none of them responded when I attempted to contact them. Initially, I took this as an indication that participants were only interested in describing their experiences and not in taking on a further role in the research process. However, upon further reflection I came to realize that this process

would require additional time and resources. I also needed to consider the time that passed between interviewing the participants, transcribing the interviews and analyzing the data. It is quite possible that participants lost interest because of the amount of time it took me to complete these steps in the research. Although I was on a limited budget for this research study, I would strongly recommend for future research that a research assistant be hired to transcribe the interviews, which would reduce the amount of time between gathering the data and analyzing it. While I will never know the reasons why the participants were not willing to participate in reviewing their transcripts or the research findings, I can only hope that the other seven participants felt empowered during the research process. As Corina said, "Talking with you was a powerful experience and remembering it today through reading the transcript provided another gift" (Interview 04).

### *Learning Opportunities*

As mentioned, I admire each of the participants for their courage in sharing their stories and for trusting me with their experiences. This process has been a tremendous learning opportunity for me academically, professionally, and personally. Academically my learning has been broadened by becoming more familiar with the literature on same-sex partner abuse, queer theory, critical research, and anti-oppressive practice. My learning has also been broadened by listening to the participants describe their experiences which challenged and changed my initial assumptions about how I believed queer people would define their experience of relationship abuse.

Professionally this research has nourished me to become more confident in my practice. I have noticed a shift and feel more willing to learn about my clients' lived experiences and to use my position in an organization to act as a catalyst and challenge barriers to services that exist because of difference. This research has led me to connect with other community professionals who share a similar interest in addressing issues of queer partner abuse. In spite of initially feeling alone in this journey, I now feel surrounded by people who are motivated to learn and work towards collective social change.

This research has also nourished my personal growth. As mentioned, my confidence has increased tremendously throughout this process. Several times I did not feel that I could continue with this work and would be unable to finish the thesis. The nature of this research brought up many emotions that I had to work through before I could move forward through the different stages. Fortunately with much support I was able to confront my roadblocks and move forward. The most significant impetus to complete this work has been remaining true to the participants and their experiences.

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## Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA  
OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT, RESEARCH  
HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

## *Participant Consent Form*

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### **Queer Partner Abuse: Deconstructing the Roles in Violent Relationship**

You are invited to participate in a study entitled *Queer Partner Abuse: Deconstructing the Roles in Violent Relationship* that is being conducted by Heather Michael. I am a graduate student in the School of Social at the University of Victoria and you may contact me if you have further questions by phone at (604) 981-0062 or by email - [hjmichae@uvic.ca](mailto:hjmichae@uvic.ca)

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for the Degree of Master's of Social Work. The research is being conducted under the supervision of Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha. You may contact my supervisor at (250) 721-8041 or by email [mehmoona@uvic.ca](mailto:mehmoona@uvic.ca).

The purpose of this study is to obtain and present the perspectives of individuals, who identify as queer, and who have been involved in a violent relationship. More specifically, the intention behind my inquiry is to reveal how queer individuals interpret their experiences with abusive relationships. Despite the confirmation that the statistical frequency of same-gender violence parallels that found in heterosexual relationships, limited acknowledgement has been afforded to this population, and virtually no research exists exploring the experiences of those who identify as queer. Contemporary theories/models available constrict the experiences of non-heterosexuals to those paralleling the experiences described in heterosexual abusive relationships, which renders the contextual influences invisible. The analysis will produce important information into the perspectives of queer individuals and their experiences with categories that have been put forward by heterosexual models to explain partner abuse.

The possible benefits of this research may occur at individual, societal and organizational levels. Participants will have opportunities to critically reflect upon their experiences and the influences of mainstream society on these experiences. This reflection could inspire a greater depth of understanding of the self and how the self is influenced by dominant accounts of knowing. Moreover, you are also contributing to the greater understanding of perspectives that remain outside of the norm. At the organizational level, this research will focus attention on an issue that has traditionally been silenced within the academy, service organizations, and policy development. Furthermore, this research will promote

the exploration of category construction and the restrictions these categories impose when universally applied without consideration for contextual experiences.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will consist of individual (one-on-one) conversational interview(s) between yourself and the researcher. In general, these conversational interviews will take place in the Vancouver area, at a place and time mutually agreed upon by you and the researcher, provided that issues of safety and privacy are considered, so as to ensure that you feel that you have a safe and comfortable space to speak.

The length of the interviews should be approximately one hour, but may last longer if you and the researcher are agreeable to the extension. Due to the importance of your information, a second interview may be requested. You are free to decline or agree to a second interview. If you agree to a second interview, I will review your consent form with you again at that interview. It would also be expected that the second interview should be approximately one hour in length. All interviews will be recorded on audiotape, provided that you agree, so to ensure the researcher's accuracy in presenting the information.

Since this research deals with issues of sensitive nature, you must be aware that certain discomforts may arise. While the researcher will try to ensure and respect your comfort levels and rights to privacy, some discomfort may persist. Given the potential risk of discomfort connected to participating in this research, the following steps will be taken: Advertisements will be posted in spaces that are accessible but out of view of the general public, such as bathroom stalls, postings on Internet sites, and safe spaces within service organizations. The print on the advertisements will be large enough to be as accessible as possible from a distance. The following references have been identified as services that are supportive to queers, who have been involved in abusive relationships, should you need support services and/or trained counsellors:

- Asian Society for the Intervention of AIDS  
One-to-one support for Asian & South Asian people. (604) 669-5567
- Battered Women's Support Services  
Crisis support, counselling, advocacy, legal information. (604) 687-1867
- Multicultural Family Support Services  
Counselling, advocacy, support for immigrant & women of colour. (604) 436-1025
- Prideline (The Centre) Information, referrals, and peer support for LGTB people.  
Call (604) 684-6869 or 1-800-566-1170 ([www.lgtbcentrevancouver.com](http://www.lgtbcentrevancouver.com)).
- Sexual Assault Services (Vancouver General Hospital Emergency). 24-hr care & treatment for victims of Sexual assault (604) 254-7732.

- Urban Native Youth: Two-Spirit Youth Program. One-to-one support. (604) 254-7732
- Vancouver Family Services: LGTB Service Options. Counselling for LGTB people. Fee: sliding scale. (604) 731-4952.
- Women Against Violence Against Women. Crisis support, counselling, advocacy, legal information. (604) 255-6344.

**Websites:**

[www.hotpeachpages.org/paths/abuse.htm](http://www.hotpeachpages.org/paths/abuse.htm);

[http://www.womanabuseprevention.com/html/same-sex\\_partner\\_abuse.html](http://www.womanabuseprevention.com/html/same-sex_partner_abuse.html);

<http://www.gayCanada.com>

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you decide to withdraw from the study, all information provided by you or connected to you will be deleted from the study and destroyed. The researcher may also choose to discontinue your involvement with the study should the incident of abuse, harassment, willful misrepresentation, and/or an incident that compromises the confidentiality and anonymity of another participant occur. Again, all information provided by or connected to a participant in this situation will be deleted from the study and destroyed. In addition, you should also be aware of your right to refuse to answer any of the questions asked by the researcher.

All steps will be taken to ensure anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms and changes to all identifying information. The only person who will have access to names and interview transcripts is Heather Michael and her thesis supervisor, Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha. Audiotapes and transcripts will also only be accessed by the researcher, Heather Michael, and her thesis supervisor, Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, and will be stored in a location known only to the researcher. Furthermore, identifying information, such as consent forms, will be securely stored in a location separate from the data.

However, you also need to be aware that due to the nature of the research and the potential difficulties of accessing a hidden population, a snowball sampling technique may contribute to the process of locating participants. In the case where I use contacts to help identify possible participants, I will ensure that confidentiality is maintained by asking my contacts to sign a form consenting to keeping the names referred to me confidential and also by limiting my interaction with my contacts to a one way referral system whereby I will receive names and contact numbers of potential participants, after my contacts have asked due permission from my participants, but I will not then inform my contacts of the outcome of my meeting with these potential participants.

All participants will be sent a copy of the results with a request for feedback. This will be done by arranging with you, prior to the end of the interview, a method of delivery either by email or regular post mail, or any other delivery method deemed appropriate.

The information provided by or connected to participants will be kept confidential. Audiotapes and transcripts will be accessed by the Heather Michael and her thesis supervisor, Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, and will be stored in a location known only to the researcher.

Upon completion of the research, all research materials, including audiotapes and transcripts, will be destroyed when the thesis is completed and accepted by the thesis committee and the University of Victoria.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others, including the end result of a published thesis, presentations at conferences and public forums, academic and alternative journal submissions, and training/educational opportunities.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher, Heather Michael, and the supervisor, Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4362).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

---

*Name of Participant*

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*Signature*

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*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***



## Appendix C



## Participants Needed

**Graduate student from the School of Social Work is in need of queer volunteers, who have been involved in a past abusive relationship of 3 months or longer. Volunteers must be 18 years of age or older, to participate in this study on queer partner abuse. Participation consists of a conversational interview about your past relationship experiences as related to issues of power, control and abuse.**

Confidentiality Assured

**If you are interested in participating, please contact Heather at the phone number or email address provided below.**

Thank you very much.

**Heather  
(XXX) XXX-XXXX  
[hjmichae@uvic.ca](mailto:hjmichae@uvic.ca)**

# University of Victoria

## RESEARCH ON QUEER PARTNER ABUSE

### Participants Needed

A graduate student at the UVic School of Social Work is seeking queer volunteers who have been involved in a past abusive relationship of three months or longer.

Participation will consist of a conversational interview about past relationship experiences as related to issues of power, control, and abuse.

Volunteers must be 18 years of age or older. Confidentiality is assured.

If you are interested in participating, please contact Heather at 778-838-7986 in Vancouver or email [hjmichae@uvic.ca](mailto:hjmichae@uvic.ca).

