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Negotiating Victimhood: Applying the Techniques of Rationalization to the Experiences of Queer Male Victims of Intimate Partner Violence in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Using interviews conducted with forty Queer British men who have experienced Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) from a male partner, this study adapts Ferraro and Johnson's techniques of rationalization to examine how individuals negotiate the label of victimhood in the context of a coercively controlling romantic relationship. Though often considered a respected social identity, victimhood is also associated with weakness and powerlessness thus turning it in many victims' minds into a symbol of deviance or stigma. The paper demonstrates that these Queer male IPV victims drew on three of Ferraro and Johnson's techniques to avoid identifying with victimhood and to rationalize their abuser's behavior. The study contributes to the wider literature on both Queer experiences of IPV and accounts through demonstrating that victims' rationalization of abuse must be understood as adaptive responses to the coercively controlling nature of their relationships. In this context, their rationalizations are heavily influenced by their abuser's coercive control and are not the products of individualistic rational choice as other studies have suggested.

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Introduction

Within the academic field of relationship violence studies there is a growing understanding of the experiences of men who encounter Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) from their male romantic partners. Despite early research often ignoring, marginalizing, and downplaying the experiences of these Queer victims, research conducted over the past two decades has shown Queer men experience IPV within male same-sex relationships at a rate that is equivalent to that found in heterosexual couples (Donovan et al. 2006; Finneran and Stephenson 2013; Rollé et al. 2018). Moreover, research has found that Queer men experience similar patterns of coercive control from their abusive partners as heterosexual women do (Messinger 2011). One of the most prevalent findings that has emerged from within this body of research is that Queer men often struggle to seek help and support for their experiences of IPV and do not tell either formal or informal potential sources of support about their victimization (Martin, Gover, and Langton 2023; McClennen, Summers, and Vaughan 2002). For example, in a survey conducted by the British Queer rights charity Stonewall into the health and wellbeing of Queer men, it was discovered that more than a third of their respondents disclosed having experienced some form IPV from a former partner, yet of this cohort, only one in five had reported their experiences to the police (Guasp 2012). Moreover, qualitative research conducted with Queer male survivors of IPV has found that many men struggle to identify acts such as verbal abuse, sexual

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coercion, or even physical violence as constituting IPV (Cruz 2003; Merrill and Wolfe 2000). Furthermore, other research has highlighted that Queer men maintain an aversion to labeling themselves as victims in the aftermath of experiencing IPV (Donovan and Hester 2010). Several explanations for this unwillingness to accept the label of victimhood or seek help for their experiences have been proposed by academics in the field, ranging from the gendered public story of domestic violence (Donovan and Hester 2015) to the stigmatization of victimhood as a feminized social identity (McAulay 2024). However, many questions remain over the exact mechanisms by which Queer male victims of IPV resist or distance themselves from the label of victimhood in the context of relationship violence. This paper will address this gap and add to our current body of knowledge by considering this question through Scott and Lyman's (1968) concept of accounts and Ferraro and Johnson's (1983) concept of techniques of rationalization. My research diverges from previous studies into this field which have used the framework of rational choice theory (Weiss 2011) as I aim to demonstrate that these victims' rationalizations should instead be seen as a "meta-adaptation" (Enander and Holmberg 2008) to an absurd and coercive social situation.

This argument will be achieved through an examination of data gathered from forty semi-structured interviews with Queer men who experienced IPV from male romantic partners. In analyzing this data, I argue that my participants drew on techniques of rationalization to both "excuse" and "justify" their partners' coercive control, in particular, I identified that three of Ferraro and Johnsons narrative accounting techniques were used by my participants to understand and rationalize their abusive situations, the denial of injury, the denial of the victimizer, and the denial of the victim. I will then conclude by discussing the implications these findings have for the study of Queer IPV victims.

Accounting for deviance

The primary analytical framework I use in the rest of the paper is that of accounts, which can be traced back to the work of Scott and Lyman (1968). In their 1968 article, both authors attempt to outline a sociological framework with which to understand how individuals respond to negative social evaluations of their conduct by other members of their community. Within these social groups, should someone fail to meet the standard of social propriety they will be expected to explain their deviance from the accepted norms of community conduct (Scott and Lyman 1968, 46–47).

The rhetorical techniques that an individual then used to explain these deviations were dubbed "accounts" by Scott and Lyman. (Scott and Lyman, 47–48). This framework can be productively applied to the study of victims of crime, as this particular social group has a contested and complex relationship with both deviance and stigma. Some may have an instinctive reticence to label victimhood as a deviant social identity, particularly the negative connotations often associated with the concept of deviance. This is particularly the case given that within popular discourse victims are often seen as sympathetic figures deserving of support (Walklate 1991). My intention is not to dispute this point nor is it to pathologize victims and seek to blame them for their experiences of trauma. Instead, I want to highlight that, despite our often-sympathetic view of victims, there exists a considerable body of scholarly evidence which suggests that the identity of victimhood is, in fact, often viewed very negatively both by the wider population and more specifically by those who are identified with it (Dunn 2008; Rock 2002). Research conducted with victims of crime has found that many are deeply uncomfortable with the identity of victimhood and often resist accepting it as a label even when their experiences accord with cultural images of the ideal victim (Weiss 2010). Moreover, a closer look at the literature which has examined victims' experiences of crime reveals that the social identity of victimhood is far from one that is universally accepted, valued, and celebrated. To understand this contradiction, we might turn to the notion of identity negotiation within symbolic interactionist tradition.

For symbolic interactionists, identity is not a preexisting or stable category that is simply given or adopted by an individual. Instead, identity is a process that only comes into existence through the interactions that occur between social actors, networks, and symbols (Blumer 1969). This latter point is important, as it recognizes that identity can be achieved through interactions with non-human

actors such as wider cultural norms, narratives, and symbols as much as with real flesh and blood individuals. A core part of interactionist theory is that identity is something that must, in effect, be learned and that individuals must come to internally accept and reconcile external social identities with their internal understandings of themselves (Carter and Fuller 2016). This processes also recognizes an important fact, that individuals might be labeled with identities that go against deete their internal self-conceptions, and work to reconcile these two distinctive aspects of their social life. In this way, identity can be seen as a negotiation between a range of internal and external actors and norms. The use of the word negotiation here should not be taken to mean that this process has a defined end point, it instead signifies a messy ongoing process of internal and external interaction that is never quite completed and always socially situated.

Within the interactionist framework then, all identity, whether accepted, resisted, or both, is a negotiated achievement, and this includes victimhood. Indeed, several interactionist scholars have applied this process of negotiation to the process of victimhood. For example, the scholars Holstein and Miller have argued that victimhood is a negotiated social identity that is utilized to deflect blame and deny responsibility for harm, wrongdoing, or suffering (Holstein and Miller 1990). One is not automatically a victim, instead they must become one. Whilst we might accept their characterization of victimhood as a negotiated social identity, other scholars have questioned the extent to which victimhood is a socially valued identity whose achievement is always positive. For example, Dunn has noted that despite the value of victim identity in deflecting responsibility and blame, many individuals who by all rights could claim such an identity refuse to do so, even when claiming such an identity could entitle them to social or financial support (2008). Fohring made a similar observation in a more recent studying, noting that individuals who had been harmed by crime often were willing to recognize that what had happened to them was wrong or even harmful, but still struggled or outright refused to accept that they were victims (Fohring 2018). Fohring went on to argue that this reticence to accept a victim identity came, in part, from the overwhelming stigma and negative associated they attributed to the idea of victimhood, which was tied up in the idea that to be a victim is to be weak, vulnerable, and incompetent. This clashed with their self-understandings as competent and moral individuals who were in control of their lives (Fohring 2018). This reticence to identify as a victim can also arise from fears of the consequences that such an identity might have from external agents. Studies have demonstrated that many individuals fear that by identifying as a victim they will be judged as weak and incompetent by others, unable to handle their own affairs and passively in need of help (Gillis et al. 2006; Gracia, García, and Lila 2014; Lempert 1997; Meyer 2016). This can have real consequences, for example, in a recent study female victims of IPV expressed fears that identifying as victims of domestic violence might put them at risk of having their children removed by social services (Stephens and Melton 2016).

Thus, from this I argue that victimhood, like all identities, is a negotiated process of interaction that occurs with both outside agents and social norms and internal self-perceptions and preexisting understandings of self. Moreover, for victimhood in particular, individuals have a variety of reasons that might push them avoid identification with the victim label even in situations where they could adopt it.

Thus, despite narratives put forward by some academics who raise concerns that we are living in a time of uncritical acceptance and celebration of victim identity (Best 1997; Furedi 2004), research conducted with actual victims of crime finds instead that they are often frequently judged for their conduct, and treated with suspicion and hostility by their family and friends (Meyer 2016), the wider public (Randall 2004), and the criminal justice system (Javaid 2017, 2018).

Thus, I argue that it is appropriate to at least consider how Victimhood can be understood as a form of deviant social identity which violates assumed norms of conduct rooted in both personally and culturally significant ideas of self-sufficiency, control, and strength (Janoff-Bulman 1992; Lamb 1999). In this context, the concept of accounts can be fruitfully applied to the experiences of victims of crime. As individuals may be called to account for their identification with the potentially deviant identity of victimhood.

The work of Karen Weiss provides a strong example of the value an accounts-based approach to the experience of victims of crime can bring to our understanding of victim identification. Weiss (2011) applied a mixture of accounts and rational choice theory to the experiences of victims of sexual assault to understand their self-described rationale for not reporting their victimization to the police or seeking the prosecution of their assailants. Weiss argued that for many of the victims, the decision not to report was a rational one; victimhood is a socially stigmatized identity that many of the individuals she studied wanted to distance themselves from, and accepting the label of victimhood may put a strain on preexisting social relationships. This was especially important given that the assailant was often known to the victim and was a preexisting part of their social circle (Weiss 2011: 460). Weiss thus noted that victims used distinct types of accounts to dispute that their experiences constituted a real and reportable crime and justify to themselves why they did not come forward to the police.

This framework of victimhood as a deviant social identity can also be applied to the study of a particular sub-group of victims; survivors of IPV.

Accounting for IPV

Academic research within the field of relationship violence has long recognized that victims of IPV often struggle to make sense of their experiences or recognize that their partner's behavior constitutes abuse (Donovan and Hester 2010; Enander 2010; Mills 1985).

These findings have only been reinforced by more recent theoretical developments in the field which have shifted our understanding of IPV from being a form of recurrent physical assault to a more nuanced concept of coercive control. I take the term coercive control from Evan's Stark work on the subject, where he argues that the core harm of IPV lies less on individual acts of mental, physical, or sexual violence, but rather in an over-arching process of abuse where the abuser works to isolate the victim and slowly dominate their lives, removing their independence and in effect trapping them in their control (Stark 2007). Stark's concept has proved revolutionary within the wider of scholarship of IPV (Stark and Hester 2019) and in the United Kingdom coercive control is now a specific criminal offense under law (CPS 2023). Though this perspective is not enshrined in law in other parts of the world, I still maintain that Stark's model is an effective means of understanding of the harms of IPV and more specifically for this paper, it provides the correct way of understanding the context in which victims of IPV must negotiate their experiences of victimhood. Coercive control is not simply a sub-type of IPV but a framework for understanding the true core harm of IPV. This is important to keep in mind as we now turn to examine how previous scholars have attempted to understand what techniques or mechanisms are used by both abusers and victims to prevent the recognition of an abusive relationship and the development of a victim identity.

One of the first attempts to do this can be found in the work of Ferraro and Johnson (1983), who examined how female victims of male perpetrated IPV made sense of the experiences of abuse that occurred within their romantic relationships. As part of this research, the authors observed how the women attempted to resist identifying their partners' actions as abusive or criminal and avoid having to grapple with the implications of adopting a victim identity. In explicating this process, the researchers borrowed from Sykes and Matza's (1957) concept of the "techniques of neutralisation" used by criminals to avoid labeling their own actions as deviant. They reformulated this concept to apply to the experiences of the female victims they studied and dubbed them "techniques of rationalisation" (Sykes and Matza:327–328). The women used these rationalizations to defuse their partners' abusive actions and to combat the negative evaluations of their decision to stay with a partner who physically, emotionally, or sexually harmed them.

I argue that Ferraro and Johnson's framework can be expanded upon by turning to another concept within IPV scholarship, that of Enander and Holmberg's (2008) theory of meta-adaptation. The two authors developed this theory through studying the leaving processes of women who had separated from abusive male partners. In documenting and analyzing these experiences, the authors noted that the women frequently described resisting or fighting back against their abusers (Enander and

Holmberg 2008, 208–210). Through examining these acts of apparent resistance, the authors noted that they rarely worked to protect them from abuse and in fact were often not aimed at leaving or terminating the relationship, but instead in providing subjective relief from acts of coercion (Enander and Holmberg's (2008, 211). They went on to argue that we should understand these actions as a means of providing the female victims a way to buttress their self-esteem and create a temporary sense of control over the situation. The authors label these actions “meta-adaptations” by which they mean actions that may look like resistance to the abuser but are in fact simply adaptations to the abusive and coercive relationship. In effect, the victims find ways to adapt to life in the relationship, rather than, initially at least, attempting to break out of it.

This is not to suggest that these meta-adaptations are futile, as other research has demonstrated acts of resistance or adaptation can create a sense of control which allows women to develop an internal sense of agency which may eventually lay the groundwork for the termination of the relationship (see for example Potter 2008).

In an analogous way, I argue that we can understand Ferraro and Johnson's techniques of rationalization as a form of meta-adaptation, a way for the women to feel in control of their situation and to defend their sense of self in the face of their partner's abuse.

Though this framework clearly has explanatory power when applied to the experiences of female victims of IPV, there has been little attempt to apply it to the unique situation of Queer men who experience abuse from their male romantic partners. This oversight is concerning, given that Queer men may have a unique difficulty in identifying their experiences as victimhood.

Firstly, as men, Queer male victims of IPV are unlikely to initially see themselves as victims. This is because larger cultural norms paint relationship violence as a problem that is largely experienced by heterosexual women (McAulay 2024). Indeed, many studies conducted with both heterosexual and Queer men have found that this population struggles to identify abuse that is directed at them from a romantic or intimate partner and to label that abuse as criminal and thus themselves as victims (Corbally 2015; Donovan and Hester 2010; Tsui, Cheung, and Leung 2010).

I argue that these factors may suggest that Queer men will face barriers to identify themselves as victims of IPV, and indeed there is some empirical evidence to support this theory. For example, in a study conducted by Merrill and Wolfe (2000), several participants noted that the primary reason they struggled to leave an abusive male romantic partner was that they did not recognize that they were experiencing IPV. Moreover, more recent research has highlighted that Queer men are reticent to both identify themselves as victims of IPV and to disclose this label to others (Hine, Bates, and Wallace 2022; McAulay 2024). Despite these insights, there is still a lack of understanding of what concrete rhetorical and social mechanisms are used by Queer male victims to resist, rationalize, or neutralize identification with the victim label during an intimately violent relationship. This was the theoretical gap I wished to fill through this research, and in the next section I will outline the methodology I used to investigate and study this exact question.

Methods

The data this paper analyzed was collected from fieldwork conducted between August 2020 and January 2022 as part of a larger study which examined how IPV was experienced by Queer male victims. Ethical approval was sought and gained from my research institution before empirical data collection began. My participants were recruited from an online survey which was advertised on LGBTQ+ focused Facebooks groups. After gaining the permission of the groups administrators I would post a link to the survey along with a photograph of my face and a text post that explained I was interested in hearing about the experiences of Queer men who had encountered domestic violence in a previous or current relationship, crucially none of the advertisements used any references to “victims” and “victimization.” The term domestic violence was used instead as it is more commonly understood than the more clinical and less well known “intimate partner violence.”

Men who completed the survey were then invited to participate in a follow-up interview which would go further in-depth about their experiences of abuse and how it has impacted their lives and were given the option to leave contact details, whereupon I reached out to them and organized a time to conduct an interview. Prior to the interview the men were required to read an information sheet which explained the aims of the research project and provided detail on their rights as research participants. At the start of every interview, they had to read and then verbally agree to an oral consent form which affirmed they understood the purposes of the research and that they consented to participate. Over the course of fieldwork, I conducted forty semi-structured qualitative interviews with Queer male participants. As part of these interviews, I asked the men about experiences of abuse within their intimate relationships and inquired as to how the men made sense of them at the time.

The interviews themselves occurred remotely, with the vast majority conducted over video-conferencing platforms such as Skype and Microsoft teams (N/37) due to COVID-19 related social distancing restrictions at the time. A small number (N/3) were conducted via text exchanges across either instant messaging platforms (N/2) or e-mail (N/1). In these cases, participants would be asked questions from the same interview schedule as the other interviewees, creating a back and forth in messages between myself and the participants as I either moved through the questions or asked follow-ups or clarification based on their responses. This would occur via message or e-mail until both the interviewees and I agreed to bring the text conversation to an end. I found the interviews a powerful technique for eliciting deep and meaningful conversations with my participants in particular, many were able to thoughtfully consider how they navigated their experiences of abuse. This was significant given that for many of the men I spoke to I was the first or only person they had ever discussed their experiences of abuse with, which accords with previous research which shows that many Queer victims of IPV often do not discuss their experiences of abuse with anyone prior to encountering researchers (Cruz 2003; Martin, Gover, and Langton 2023; Merrill and Wolfe 2000).

Data was then transcribed and anonymized so that all identifying details were removed and deleted. All participants were then given a pseudonym which will be used to refer to them when I quote them below in the findings section. It is of course possible for different interviewing techniques to produce different types of responses, to that end each transcript was examined separately to compare how the participants told their stories, once it was determined there was a sufficient similarity between their accounts, these transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software where they were subjected to thematic narrative analysis (Sandberg 2022) and coding.

Eventually from collating these related codes into larger and categories, I arrived at three dominant codes for the entire data set. I now turn to report on my findings.

Results

During my data analysis, I began to recognize parallels in the men's experiences to the techniques identified by Ferraro and Johnson's (1983) article on the techniques of rationalization, thus I came to adopt these techniques as a framework to understand how the men in my study altered the symbolic meaning of their partners' actions to avoid labeling their conduct as abusive. Out of the authors' original six techniques, only three appeared within my participants' accounts, whilst the other three, the appeal to the salvation ethic; the denial of options; and the appeal to higher loyalties, were not present within my data. This means the three techniques I focused on were:

- The denial of injury.
- The denial of the victimizer.
- The denial of the victim.

Each of these individual accounts appeared concurrently within all the interviews conducted with my participants and in each case they were used to neutralize the deviance of victim identity and manage the coercive control inflicted upon them by their partner at different points in their

relationship. It is important to note that these techniques were used by my participants to normalize violence whilst in their relationships, it was typically only after they had separated from their partner that my participants were able to recognize that what had happened to them was abuse and thus discuss their experiences retrospectively. Let us now look at these techniques in turn.

The denial of injury

The denial of injury is a technique of rationalization in which the victim denies that their partner's conduct is deviant by arguing that it caused no real or serious harm. This type of rationalization thus appeared within the men's accounts as what Scott and Lyman (1968) would classify as a justification. That is, it recognizes that their partner intended to act in a particular way and is responsible for the disputed conduct, but the conduct was justified in that it was not in any real sense harmful (Scott and Lyman: 47–48). Within this technique, I noted two further sub-types that differed slightly in how they disputed the harm caused by their partner.

The appeal to normality

The first of these is the appeal to normality. Within this account, the victim attempts to dispute the deviance of their partners conduct by presenting it as normal and expected part of any intimate relationship. Rather than being a harmful, criminal, or even deviant act the behavior of their partner is transformed into a routine and harmless indiscretion that is common to any “normal” type of romantic relationship. The harm is thus transformed from a potential act of abuse into what I term “relationship trouble.” This conduct, whilst often unpleasant or distasteful, is considered normal and expected within romantic relationships, and does not normally reach the realm of harm or severe injury. In this way the abuser's conduct is separated from the potential designation of IPV and resigned to the private domestic sphere of interpersonal conflict. We can see an example of this in Nikoli's account when he describes how he rationalized the verbal and psychological abuse his partner would frequently inflict upon him throughout their relationship:

I kind of normalized it, like everybody has rows like this, and you know, I just kind of made it seem quite normal . . . I didn't really understand that it was something against the law, you know, people bully people all the time. It's not against the law, you know, so I just think I didn't, I didn't really see it as . . . definitely at the time, I just didn't view it as of, you know, a criminal thing. (Nikoli, 30–40)

Another example is Stefan's account where he explained why he never felt he could legitimately go to the police about his partner's coercive control during their relationship:

Yeah, I just, I just felt like it was a bad relationship. And it didn't feel serious enough for me to go to the police. (Stefan, 25–30)

Stefan's designation of his situation as being merely a “bad relationship” constitutes a denial of the inherent seriousness of the harm and deprivation that he encountered at the hands of the partner. Coercive control is reframed and normalized as a failed or inadequate personal relationship, and in this way moved outside of the symbolic boundaries of the criminal justice system and thus the police's competence to investigate. In this way, Stefan simultaneously casts himself outside of the identity of victimhood through presenting his experience as not harmful enough to constitute a legitimate crime.

Downplaying seriousness

The second sub-type that I identified within my participants' accounts was an attempt to downplay the seriousness of the coercive control. Within this account, the individual recognizes that, indeed, some harm may have occurred or that they may have received some form of injury. However, they

rationalize away the deviance of this act by downplaying or denying its seriousness. By contextualizing the harmful conduct as minor or not truly serious, they attempt to rob it of any deviant quality and in doing so deny that it constitutes behavior that is in need of being accounted for in the first place. We can see an example of this if we turn to Niall's account. Niall experienced recurrent physical and emotional violence from his partner, but he struggled to label himself as a victim. In describing his reticence to embrace the term, he notes that:

I guess, in my eyes, like, because he wasn't doing things every single day. Or, like, you know, he, he wasn't hitting me every day, or he wasn't threatening every day. (Niall, 18–25)

We can see here that Niall downplays the seriousness of the abuse he suffered by noting that it did not occur "every single day." In this way, Niall creates a distinction between his own experiences of abuse and the hypothetical experiences of abuse faced by other victims. By rhetorically placing his own experiences as less frequent and thus less abusive he creates a distance between his own identity and that of a victim. This finding accords with the work Weiss (2011) conducted analyzing the non-reporting accounts of victims of sexual assault. She noted that within the accounts she analyzed, victims emphasized the perceived lack of seriousness of their injuries or the minor nature of the harm they suffered to justify not going to the police. In the same way, the men I interviewed similarly downplayed the seriousness of the abuse they encountered from their partners as a means of avoiding identification with the victim label.

However, I did note that within the accounts of the men I studied, there was frequent reference to their identities as men. Critical to this rhetorical turn was the notion, implicit in some accounts and explicit in others, that violence, injury, and harm were common and expected parts of male relationships, and thus that they were not particularly serious or worthy of condemnation. Adnan's account provides an example of this dynamics. Adnan is a self-identified gay Muslim man who had grown up experiencing violence both from his friends and male relatives. When he eventually entered his first relationship with another man, his partner became frequently physically and verbally violent toward him. When I asked him why he never considered himself a victim of IPV, he noted that:

To be honest, because I had been involved in violence myself, I just thought it was normal. I thought this is how men show affection. (Adnan, 30–40)

Here we can see Adnan engage in the same rhetorical appeal to normality we saw other men engage in above ("I just thought it was normal"), however, in this formulation he goes on to contextualize this normalization through his experiences of male sociality ("I thought this is how men show affection") where violence is expected as a core part of masculine identity. In this context, Adnan's rhetorical account is given added cultural weight due to his appeal to a particular construction of masculinity in which violence is expected, tolerated, and normal for men to experience. Thus, even when male victims use the same types of rationalizations as female victims, the exact rhetorical formulation these accounts take can be filtered through their positionality as men.

The denial of injury can allow the men to effectively neutralize the perceived deviance of their partners actions and thus to rationalize their own decisions to remain in the relationship. However, the men's ability to continuously normalize or minimize their partners' actions was often eventually constrained by the increasing frequency and seriousness of the coercion and control they were subjected to. At a certain point, new types of accounts had to be deployed to maintain their meta-adaptation to the relationship.

The denial of the victimiser

In the denial of the victimizer, the victim accepts that they have in fact been harmed by their partners actions in some way, and that this harm is serious enough to potentially warrant the label of victimhood. However, the account functions to neutralize this potential victimization and rationalizes the victim's continued presence in the relationship by denying their partner is

a fundamentally bad person. This account pushes the idea that the victim's partner is not in fact an abuser who deliberately intended to hurt, control, or humiliate them, but is in fact an otherwise good person acting out of character and who can thus be forgiven. In this way, the denial of the victimizer functions as an excuse within Scott and Lyman's (1968) original framework. The denial of the victimizer appeared numerous times throughout the accounts of my participants, often arising in their narratives at points when their partner's actions can no longer be rationalized as not serious or harmful. Instead, it is their partners culpability that must be recontextualised to present them as a fundamentally good person. To achieve this goal, my participants often argued that whilst their partner did engage in morally questionable or harmful acts, they did not truly intend to do so, or that it did not represent their true self. In this way, these accounts often work to downplay the abuser's responsibility for their actions and thus this can allow the relationship to continue as normal. Within the denial of the victimizer, I identified two common sub-types of account. The appeal to inebriation, and the appeal to illness.

The appeal to inebriation

A common trope within these accounts was to blame the partner's actions on inebriation through substance abuse. An example of this appears in Alexi's narrative where he outlines how he attempted to rationalize the first time his partner became physically violent with him:

I don't know. Because that that had been the first major time, and I just put it down to that he'd had too much to drink. And the alcohol got the better of him ... For me, I think it went back to him being drunk. When it happened, a lot of the times he was drunk, so I put it down the alcohol as well. (Alexi, 30–40)

The use of the phrase "the alcohol got the better of him" frames the partner's actions as the result of him giving into an external force which overwhelmed him, rather than a purposeful act that he perpetrated on the victim. The point here is not to suggest that alcohol has no relationship to IPV as indeed research has demonstrated a correlation between the two (see for example Leonard 2001), but rather to highlight that within Alexi's framing he center's the alcohol as an important factor to consider in determining whether to hold his partner responsible.

The appeal to illness

A secondary sub-type of the appeal to the victimizer that arose within my participants' accounts was to blame their partners' actions on physical or mental illnesses that they had. Similarly to the above appeal to inebriation, these accounts of illness excused the partner's actions through arguing an external force pushed them to violent acts that otherwise they would never commit. We can see an example of this in Kai's account, where he explains how he was able to rationalize his partner's increasing verbal abuse and coercive control as arising from a physical disability he had long struggled with:

Another reason why I didn't realize [I was in an abusive relationship] was everything was about his legs. And I thought maybe his legs are causing him this reaction, so I try to understand, I say "I know it's your legs, it's not you!" (Kai, 30–40)

Here, Kai frees his partner of any guilt or blame for his actions by placing responsibility for the abuse onto an outside force. It is not his husband who is deliberately abusing him, he is only acting this way because of his illness.

A common feature that occurred in both sub-types of the denial of the victimizer was that the participant would construct lengthy narratives of their abuser's life which highlighted previous trauma, illness, or misfortune. These stories seemed to operate as an explanation for their partners' dismal mental states which in turn functioned as excuses for their bad behavior and abusive tendencies. Jay's account provides an illustrative example. Jay had been in a long-term relationship

with his husband who had frequently verbally and physically abused him. When I asked him what he thought about these instances, Jay constructed a long and elaborate narrative of his partner's life which highlighted the various tragedies that had befallen him as a form of account to explain his otherwise deviant actions:

I felt sorry for him. Because I knew his background, his mental health issues. He suffered abuse as a child. There was [sic] problems within the family. And then his experiences during the troubles. He was on duty during [an IRA] bombing. So, he's suffered PTSD as a result. . .and also his partner that he had when I first got to know him died from AIDS . . . So, so he had a whole lot of things to deal with. Although that shouldn't excuse him being physically violent toward me. I just felt like, again, I couldn't just throw him out. (Jay, 60–70)

Here we see Jay construct what Scott and Lyman would call a “sad tale” (Scott and Lyman 1968:52), which they define as: “a selected (often dis-torted) [sic] arrangement of facts that highlight an extremely dismal past, and thus “explain “the individual's present state” (Scott and Lyman:52). This tale function as an account in that it is meant to excuse the individual's behavior and thus neutralize their deviance. In this context, Jay's sad tale works to explain his partner's physical violence through reference to numerous traumatic events, a bad childhood, war-time PTSD, and the death of a former lover. Crucially, Jay seems aware of the inherent tenuousness nature of this accounting, noting that while this story should not “excuse him being physically violent towards me” he “couldn't just throw him out.” In this way, these rationalizations can function even if the victim is aware of their inherent artificiality and construction.

One further aspect of the denial of victimizer that is worth noting is how the offender becomes implicated in the process of accounting. Whilst the participants framed their accounts as their own rationalizations of their offender's behavior, I noticed that frequently the offenders appeared within the victims' narratives as co-constructors of excuses and justifications. The abusers thus appeared to pro-actively shape the victims own understanding of the abuse and thus their accounting of it. This was particularly pronounced within the denial of the victimizer, where the abuser would appear to give their own accounts to excuse their actions and deny their own deviance. For instance, Nate describes how his partner would attempt to explain his actions after he physically and verbally abused him:

He was always very sorry, afterward, he'd cry, and they'd say, “I'm so sorry. I don't want to hurt you. Why am I doing this? My head's mashed. I'm trying to hurt the person I love, and I shouldn't be doing that!”

I'd always forgive him. (Nate, 50–60)

Nate's partner is active in producing his own account that matches the denial of the victimizer perfectly. He attempts to separate his actions from his wider sense of self, acting as if he had no control over the abuse he caused (I don't want to hurt you. Why am I doing this?) and uses the appeal to illness to excuse his actions as the result of an outside medical force (My head's mashed). In this way, the abuser works to neutralize their own deviance, but crucially this neutralization occurs in tandem with the rationalization of the victim. Given that the victim is privy to this accounting, the victim seems to undertake and potentially incorporate the abuser's accounts into their own process of deviance management. Nate accepts his partner's account in the moment and acts to excuse the behavior (I'd always forgive him.)

With this set out, there is one more account that can be used by victims when they are unable to either deny the harm they are experiencing or to argue that their partner has done nothing wrong. That is to turn on themselves.

The denial of the victim

In the denial of the victim, the victim aims to rationalize their partner's behavior not by denying its harmfulness or excusing their partners mental state, but instead by denying their own innocence. In this way, the denial of the victim acts as a perverse justification for the actions of their partner, in which the partner's abuse is recontextualised as not deviant or criminal because

the victim fundamentally deserved what happened to them. Within this account, the victim typically takes on responsibility for having wronged or provoked their partner in some way, often by failing to be attentive to their needs or emotions, or through an infraction such as perceived insults or physical attack. In this framework, the actions of the abuser become not an unprovoked act of abuse, but instead either as acceptable retaliation or, in a particularly perverse way, a justified punishment that the victim must endure as penance for their “crime.” This dynamic appears absurd on the surface; how can the victim believe they are at fault for the actions of their partner? However, my participants were clear that this account played a significant role in mediating and rationalizing their partners’ abuse during particularly intense or violent parts of their relationship. Fred, for instance, had been in a relationship with a younger partner who frequently sexually and physically abused him. When I asked him how he reacted to these episodes, he inadvertently provided a condensed account of how he rationalized his partner behavior:

Interviewer: You know, how did that make you feel?

Participant: Em, pretty shit [soft sad chuckle]. It’s difficult because it was it was drummed into me that it was my fault, and I deserved it. (Fred, 30–40)

Here, we can see Fred engages in a denial of victimhood which works to rationalize his partner’s abusive behavior. First, he shifts the ultimate responsibility for the action, removing agency and cause from his partner and internalizing it within himself (“it was my fault”). He then neatly provides a justification for his partner’s action (“I deserved it”). This account works to deny his partners action of any serious malicious content through both removing responsibility for the abuse and then simultaneously providing a justification which transforms it from deviant or criminal assault to acceptable and “deserved” punishment.

Similarly, David described how he began to rationalize his partners actions after the relationship began to turn physically abusive:

It obviously never kind of crossed my mind that anybody would hit me. Particularly the person I was having a relationship with. So, when it did happen, because it was so out of the blue. I kind of thought “Well uh, maybe I deserved it?”

You know, and I very much kind of felt at that time, you know, that . . . that kind of thing that, you know, I shouldn’t have said what I said. I should have, you know, should have just been alright, with what, you know, all the verbal abuse he was giving me. (David, 50–60)

Here David provides as a more elaborate account which still functions in a comparable manner to Fred’s more concise statement, in that it works to recentre blame for the abuser’s violence from the abuser to the victim. Within this account, David notes that this type of rationalization worked to move him toward accepting other abusive aspects of the relationship, noting that once he had internalized that he was the person at fault for being assaulted, this meant that he should also accept his partner’s verbal abuse to not provoke further attack.

Moreover, just like in the denial of the victimizer, the abuser appeared within my participants narratives as an active co-constructor and participant within the accounting process. The abuser provided their own account of their behavior, and in this way worked to influence the victim’s understanding of what had happened. In this case, abusers worked to blame and shame their partners for provoking or attacking them first, be it verbally or physically, and thus working, in their argument, to justify the abusers often significantly more violent reactions. This narrative framing is a type of account, a way for the abuser to justify their own behavior as appropriate and moral and thus remove it out of the realms of deviancy and criminality that might otherwise threaten the larger symbolic structure of the relationship. Notably, the abusers accounts are instrumentalised as part of their campaign of coercive control, both to neutralize their own behavior, and put pressure onto the victim to take more responsibility for the abuser

and the relationship. Either through positioning the abuser as someone who needs care and support (as in the denial of the victimizer) or by positioning the victim as at fault and who thus needs to engage in penance for their actions within the confines of the relationship (as in the denial of the victim.)

A particularly brutal example of this dynamic is evident in the following excerpt from Ernie's interview. Ernie was in a relationship with a partner who was incredibly sexually and physically violent toward him. In our interview, he described one encounter where his partner tried to sexually assault him and Ernie fought back, leading to the following exchange:

He pinned me up against the wall and so I just pushed him off. He fell, he was that drunk he fell over and sprained his wrist. It was then my fault. Because I was the abusive person. I'd physically abused him . . . he was gonna report me to the police, he was gonna press charges. I was like "I just pushed you. You had me pinned up, against the wall by my throat. I just pushed you."

No, you hit me.

No, I pushed you.

No, you hit me!

He then . . . beat 10 bales of shit out of me, and I just took it because I thought I deserved it. (Ernie, 30–40)

In this excerpt we can observe the ways in which abusers can instrumentally use the accounting process to neutralize their own deviant actions. In this case, Ernie's self defense against his partner's attempted assault is reframed by the abuser as a violent act which deserves retaliation and punishment. Through a combination of both this proffered denial of the victim and the violence used to enforce it, we then observe Ernie appear to internalize this account as a rationalization for why he accepted that this abuse occurred ("because I thought I deserved it"). We can also note the frequent re-occurrence of the words "deserve" or "deserved" in the language used by my participants to deny their victimization. I argue that such language echoes notion of the just world delusion identified by Lerner (1980), in which individuals incorrectly believe the world always rewards good behavior and punishes bad. The victimologist Anthony Pemberton (2011) has used Lerner work to argue that the deviance sometimes associated with victims can in part be understood as a means of reifying the just world delusion. If a victim can be blamed for the conduct which led to their victimization, they can be understood to have gotten what was coming to them, and that, in effect, they deserve it. In a perverse way then, we might suggest that my participants use of words like *deserve* and *deserved* reflects this underlying attempt to grapple with the deviance ascribed to victimization within society.

This idea is significant as it further reinforces the notion that this process of rationalization is an adaptation to a preexisting violent and coercive relationship. In this context, the victim, like Ernie in this example, is not so much actively choosing to not identify as a victim out of any perceived benefit, but instead is attempting to rationalize and make the best of the already violent and coercive situation that he has found himself trapped within, even if it ends in him toying with the idea that he "deserved" to be beaten by his partner. This is important to remember as without this understanding we may inadvertently blame victims for "choosing" to account for their victimization rather than wholeheartedly embracing a victim identity. Instead, we must understand that these rationalizations are adaptations which aim to reduce tension and allow the victim to maintain a sense of agency within coercive and violent relationships. In a perverse way, believing that the abuse is not serious, that their partner is not actively malicious, or even that they are in some way responsible for being abused, may allow them to maintain a sense of control and self-esteem. They can, (incorrectly), believe they can cure their partner and return them to the loving person they once were or even that they may improve themselves and thus stop "provoking" their partners wrath. However, like all meta-adaptations these strategies do not undermine the coercive structure of the relationship. In their original article outlining the concept of meta-adaptation, Enander and Holmberg (2008) note that it is typically only when

victims feel their relationship has become intolerable, or that their life is in danger, that they can finally take the steps to leave the abuser. In effect, when the situation becomes so dire that negotiation with victim identity becomes the only option left.

Discussion

Queer men who experience IPV at the hands of a male partner use techniques of rationalization whilst trapped in the structure of coercive control to manage the deviance and symbolic disorder that would come from their identification with a victim identity. This process, however, is not one taken through an economic view of rational choice in which the victim decides to actively reframe their relationship as non-abusive due to a perceived benefit, but is instead a response to the “absurd” (Enander and Holmberg 2008) nature of the abusive relationship. These rationalizations are clearly influenced by the coercive actions of their partners who work to use physical, verbal, and emotional violence to coercively impose their own version of reality onto the victim. These techniques of rationalization response to a preexisting coercive relationship structure and are used by victims to diffuse their tension and disquiet at their structural position as an oppressed and abused partner within an abusive relationship. In this way, the techniques of rationalization I have identified fit into Enander and Holmberg’s (2008) understanding of a meta-adaptation to abuse.

There are two important implications that arise from my findings. The first is that Queer male victims of IPV work to manage deviant victimhood through techniques of rationalization in a manner similar to female victims. I have demonstrated that Ferraro and Johnson’s (1983) basic framework has some clear explanatory power in helping us to understand the experiences of Queer men as much as it originally did for women. One interesting point of divergence, however, is that the men in my study appeared to be able to appeal to their positionality as men to rationalize some of the abuse that they experienced. In doing so, the men drew on gendered notions of masculine stoicism and the normalization of male violence to downplay and rationalize the violence they experienced as being part and parcel of male relationships, and thus normal and not worthy of criminal condemnation. Whilst other studies have demonstrated that men often attempt to downplay and normalize experiences of criminal violence so as to avoid identification with a victim identity (Burcar and Åkerström 2009; Dorahy and Clearwater 2012), this paper develops on these findings by demonstrating that Queer men also engage in this process when they experience relationship violence, and do so in a way that is similar to, yet still distinct from, previously researched female responses.

Second, this research has expanded our understanding of the process of accounting itself. Following in the footsteps of earlier research, this paper has highlighted that victims engage in a process of accounting when confronted by violence as a means of warding off the assignation of a victim identity. Yet, my work has demonstrated that for victims in abusive relationships this process is complicated by their coercive and hierarchical structure. As I have demonstrated, abusers appeared frequently within the accounts of my participants and often seemed active in trying to co-construct the excuses and justifications for their behavior which became dominant in the victims own accounting of the event. The victim’s process of accounting thus does not occur in isolation from the wider coercive structure of the relationship and can be seen as an extension of the abusers attempts to control every aspect of their life, including their internal symbolic lifeworld. In this way, the abuser forces the victim to adopt rationalizations which account for and neutralize their own deviant actions. These rationalizations diffuse the tension that may otherwise destabilize the symbolic order of the relationship and allow the victim to both correctly label their situation and potentially escape. My work thus challenges accounts-based research like Weiss’s (2011), which frame accounting as part of a broader rational choice made by victims in their best interest. Within the context of a coercively controlling relationship, accounting cannot be understood as arising from rational choice and instead, I argue, is better understood as an adaptation to a preexisting abusive situation. Moreover, the presence of the abuser as a co-constructor of rationalization

further complicates the rational choice model, which assumes a singular rational consumer making choices for their benefit (Zedner 2006). In contrast, for the men in my study, their rational choices were heavily circumscribed by the coercive structure of the relationship. This, I argue, breaks down some of the core conceptual geography of a rational choice view of accounts in that it is clear the victim is not a sealed off individual choice maker but is instead embedded in a structural relationship with other important social actors. My findings thus echo other critiques of rational choice theory that argue the framework focuses too much on individual choice and voluntary calculation, whilst ignoring the communal social context from which choices emerge (England 1989; Sandel 1998).

However, this research still has some limitations. First, the qualitative nature of my analysis and the non-representative nature of my sample means that I am not able to make claims about the extent to which these accounts are present within the wider population of Queer victims. Though my research accords with similar findings in research conducted with women (see, for example, Leisenring 2006) future studies which attempted to quantitatively identify the presence of these types of accounts in the wider population of Queer survivors would be useful for further validating these theories. Furthermore, I was only able to interview the men in my study once and thus was only able to gain insight into their accounting process at one moment in time and for an experience which was described retroactively. The evidence does not consider how the men's accounting process may vary and change over time to reflect different perspectives on their abuse as they move further away from their victimizing experience. Indeed, future research should track a larger number Queer male victims over a longer period, observing if and how their accounts of their relationship change and what variations exist within the sample.

A thorny theoretical question I wish to consider at this stage in the paper is the fact that my research principally concerns what narratives techniques men use to avoid identification with a victim identity, yet despite this fact, the men in my study have already self-selected into a study and identified as people who have experienced IPV. Whilst I did not advertise or use the term victim during the recruitment process, most of the men in the study identified as either having been victims of IPV or were still in some sense victims now. There is an argument that my study is at risk of a retrospective bias in which the men are transposing current identifications onto a past event and creating a false narrative. Further there is the risk of a selection bias in which only men who have identified themselves as having experienced IPV would put themselves forward to participate in the study. In response to the latter concern, I would say that this focus on men who identified as having experienced IPV was deliberate, as a large part of my wider research project was understanding how these men came to understand their experiences as abusive, and what that realization did to their understandings of their identity. To speak to men who did not have this realization was thus outside the scope of my research interests. In response to the former concern, I can say first that such a concern is a methodological issue within the study of accounts in general, as it is typically not possible to study account making processes as they occur in real time. As such accounts must be excavated from memory either through archival or interview-based methodologies. Moreover, this was a necessary sampling decision given that, due to the small nature of the targeted population, it is unlikely that generalized or randomized sampling of the wider Queer community would produce sufficient numbers of interviewees who had experienced IPV yet were unaware of their status.

Future research could also investigate if alternative social settings work to shape the content or form of accounting victims engage in when making sense of abusive relationships. Fruitful research has already been conducted in this vein, for example in examining the nature of victim's sense-making at female survivors' support groups (Loseke 2001). Such research could similarly help us understand how communal social settings could influence Queer male victims own accounting processes. Irrespective of this, my paper has demonstrated that rhetorical accounting processes clearly play some role in allowing Queer male victims of IPV to engage in the arduous process of negotiating a deviant victimhood.

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