

Intimate Partner Violence in Lesbian and Queer Relationships

Ovesen, Nicole. 2021. *Intimate Partner Violence and Help-Seeking in Lesbian and Queer Relationships – Challenging Recognition*. PhD diss. Uppsala University: Department of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies. (256 pages)

NICOLE OVESEN'S THESIS adds to the exciting new research coming from Sweden, by providing insight into how intimate partner violence (IPV) works in lesbian and queer women's relationships, their help-seeking processes and the responses of formal and informal networks and communities. While it is an often difficult and harrowing topic, the work is a pleasure to read because it is an excellent and carefully crafted thesis.

Ovesen situates the thesis and its Swedish context within the wider international literature, showing where there are resonances with work elsewhere, but also very clearly how the specifically Swedish context of the work may be of importance. One aspect that stands out is the Swedish history and legislation related to LGBT communities and the ways this has impacted on her interviewees in terms of their experiences of IPV and also their possibilities for help-seeking.

Ovesen's work is important in building Nordic knowledge of an under-researched area. Given the lack of research, it is entirely appropriate that she uses a qualitative approach to understand the field, interviewing 25 individuals who had experienced IPV in lesbian and/or

queer relationships. She points to the importance of asking about the sexual identity at the time of the abuse – how did the individuals in the relationship identify at the time? – as those identities could have changed since then. In addition, the thesis encompasses insightful reflections on the problems researchers have in practice of situating themselves as interviewer versus becoming therapist for the interviewee, and how these distinctions are by no means clear cut. Research on such a difficult and emotional topic can have negative effects on the interviewer as well as re-traumatising the interviewee, but can also be positive for both. Ovesen engages with this complex territory as well as the complex material that resulted.

While Ovesen is Danish, she studied for a PhD in Sweden and wrote her thesis in English. She has used to good effect the insights brought by such “outsider/insider positionings” and the different perspectives that different languages bring. Her approach to translation is also very sensitive, and she provides the original Swedish quotes for comparison with the English text.

She uses a thematic approach to analyse the interview data – based around and driven by the research questions – and identifies the categories of “types of violence”, “community responses and help-seeking”, and more interpretive sub-categories to provide further depth. There is mapping of help-seeking by the participants to pick up both complexity and temporality, and much of the analysis is presented through case studies of participants.

Overall, the thesis draws on a wide range of relevant literature and uses three theoretical concepts in particular to frame the work: Nixon’s (2011) work on “slow violence”, Fraser’s (2003) work on “mis/recognition as status subordination”, and issues of dis-identification and silencing of experience where “public” accounts of IPV are heteronormative and relationships subject to “relationship rules” (see Donovan & Hester 2014).

The concept of slow (seemingly invisible) violence is applied by Nixon (2011) to describe how populations become damaged over time through corporate and state violences such as pollution and dumping by richer nations. Ovesen argues that IPV also fits with the concept of slow vio-

lence because not only is it complex and often difficult for those experiencing it and others to identify and define, but manifests mainly as psychological abuse and over long periods of time. The ways “relationship rules” (Donovan & Hester 2014) play out and become normalised are part of an ongoing process that embeds the IPV. At the same time, the process of adjusting normalisation also involves agency and resistance and may make it more difficult for the individuals concerned to identify as victims. Ovesen sees coercive control as part of this IPV process, and could perhaps have used Stark’s (2007) approach to coercive control to a greater extent, as that can also be seen to explain IPV as a form of “slow violence” where the form may change over time as abusers adjust their violence to isolate and control victims-survivors. The notion of “loss of liberty” that Stark argues takes place but is not seen by others, can be seen as “invisible” in the way that Nixon’s (2011) slow violence also suggests. These are areas that could have been discussed. And what about the perpetrator in these scenarios? In Nixon’s (2011) concept the perpetrator is far removed from the victim – yet in this thesis the topic is IPV where the perpetrator and victim not only know each other but are “intimate”.

Ovesen talks about the impact of stories and accounts of violence to make sense of experiences, where main accounts of IPV are heteronormative, resulting in dis-identification and silencing among participants. Along with research results from the UK and US, Ovesen’s interviewees talk to friends and family, and use counselling and therapeutic services rather than the criminal justice system, as means of seeking support. The process of help-seeking becomes slow, fragmented and iterative – and Ovesen makes a point of how it mirrors the IPV. The professionals involved find it especially difficult to recognise IPV among the lesbian and queer women, thus showing how mis-recognition is also a form of status subordination, i.e., it is misrecognised because not heterosexual IPV and thus sub-ordinate to the (supposed) heterosexual experience (from Fraser 2003).

Having children was found to have a profound effect on identification of IPV in the relationship and decisions by the victim-survivors

to stay or leave the relationship. The Swedish legislation and approach to LGBT communities provides a particular context of lesbian and queer parents as “normal families”, but also differentiates between having children via state healthcare services (legal parents) or “privately/doing it yourself” (non-biological parent has to adopt the child), thus creating different contexts for abuse that can be difficult to see. Meanwhile, there are also many different issues and problems regarding lesbian and queer IPV related to aspects of the LGBT community that are highlighted by the thesis: where the abuser is in and has friends in the community; that they themselves were not in the community; outsiders view of the community; and not wanting to lose the community or to be outed. At the same time the notion of “LGBT community” could possibly be problematised to a greater extent. There is mention that the participants challenge the idea of such a singular community. This point is made in relation to the interviewees’ help-seeking experiences. But what about possible differences in IPV experiences across LGBT communities? The lesbian and queer women in the study experience mainly psychological IPV, but would those experiences of IPV be the same for instance for gay men?

Ovesen concludes by highlighting that there are gaps in understanding in both IPV support services and services for those identifying as part of LGBT communities. Thus, she suggests the way forward has to include professional training about IPV in LGBT relationships, collaboration between IPV and LGBT support organisations, and relationship education in schools to include LGBT perspectives. Overall, there is a need for professionals to understand IPV as it manifests in different types of relationships, whether heterosexual, lesbian or queer.

**MARIANNE HESTER,
UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL**

REFERENCES

- Donovan, Catherine & Marianne Hester. 2014. *Domestic Violence and Sexuality: What's Love Got to Do with It?* Bristol: Policy Press.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2003. Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation. In: *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (7–109). London; New York: Verso.
- Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Stark, Evan. 2007. *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.