



Que(e)rying Methodologies for Research on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT+) Domestic Abuse

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Abstract

Purpose Research about domestic abuse (DA) in the relationships of LGBT+ people is becoming more commonplace but is also dominated by particular methodological tropes that, we argue, constrain the kinds of knowledge that can be produced about this serious social problem. We critically consider the potential of much of the existing quantitative research either to reflect the diversity of identities of sexuality and gender that exist or to properly interrogate DA relationship dynamics.

Methods Our feminist, intersectional understanding of DA considers relationships of power rather than individual incidents as central to making sense of DA; and recognises that ostensibly abusive behaviours can be motivated by self-defence as well as retaliation or to coercively control a partner (Johnson, 2008). Existing research relying solely on questionnaires can create categories of identities and behaviours that are reductive and provide precarious correlations between abusive behaviours and social variables.

Results In response, we offer the COSHAR Project's mixed methods approach (Hester & Donovan, 2009) as a viable alternative approach. The questionnaire captures the context of, motives for and impacts of abusive behaviour; and offers participants the opportunity to provide qualitative explanations of responses. Importantly, this methodology allows an alternative approach to investigating so-called mutual abuse which is too often suggested as characterising domestic abuse in the relationships of LGBT+ people.

Conclusions We make a case for a more thoughtful and nuanced approach to data collection that draws on what is known about LGBT+ relationships, DA and identities to better ensure a more relevant and useful knowledge base.

Keywords LGBT+ · Domestic abuse · Methodology · Mixed methods

Introduction

This is a paper of two parts. In the first, we point to the inherent problems of existing methodologies for researching intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA) in the relationships of lesbians, gay men, bisexual women and men, trans women and men and non-binary folk (LGBT+), and the need to think differently, epistemologically, about the

design of research tools in this area. In the second, we describe our attempts to address these problems and how our learning from that could inform future LGBT+ IPVA research. We refer to IPVA because of our alignment with feminist researchers (e.g. Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007) who speak about different kinds of IPVA originating in different motives and having different impacts. We refer to domestic abuse (DA) as a particular kind of IPVA, which mirrors Johnson's (2008) coercively controlling violence and Stark's (2007) coercive control as the most egregious kind of IPVA. DA is the term most used in the United Kingdom, as reflected in the statutory definition (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021) that describes the range of abusive behaviors that fall under DA and the relationship contexts that 'count'. The latter include intimate partner and family abuse regardless of gender and/or sexuality, whether cohabiting or not, and in both current and past relationships. In this paper we focus on DA in adult intimate relationships because that has been the

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predominant focus of our research to date; however, many of our arguments also apply to researching family abuse.

Before continuing with the discussion, it is worth us giving a note on terminology. We have adopted the umbrella term LGBT+ people to refer to the range of minority sexualities and gender identities that exist. However, we are keen to caution against any tendency to homogenize identities across the acronym and to be aware of the distinctive experiences, discrimination and oppression resulting from minoritized sexualities and minoritized gender identities. When referring to others' work we use the terminology they adopt, where necessary.

In setting out the first part of the article, we point to the tendency in the DA field to reify numbers and counting. The vast majority of DA research is constituted of different kinds of prevalence studies that attempt to count how much DA (including what types) is experienced by how many participants, across different relationship types (e.g. dating, cohabiting) and demographic groups. The other dominant methodological trend is research that attempts to measure and count relationships between a range of social factors and reports of victimization – or perpetration – of DA. We will consider how such counting depends on the creation of categories of people and behaviors for the statistical calculations necessary to demonstrate causation or correlation, to calculate risk or harm. Quantitative methods that enable large-scale, systematic data collection from regional, national or international samples are vital in evidencing social problems and identifying issues and groups which require further attention and investigation. Whilst this may be to the chagrin of those who reject these more positivist approaches, quantitative findings continue to be a key driver of policy and practice (Boehm et al., 2013).

However, where sensitive or nuanced issues such as IPVA are concerned, quantitative survey methods raise key challenges related to various forms of validity, including construct validity (Evans et al., 2016) and representativeness, or external validity. These challenges are arguably heightened when seeking to access marginalized populations (Adley et al., 2024). It follows, therefore, that using surveys to research LGBT+ people's experiences of DA requires particularly careful consideration and caution. In the second part of this article, we detail how we have sought to overcome some of the limitations of well-established quantitative DA data collection through our alternative mixed-methods approach, based on the COHSAR Project approach (Hester et al., 2010) and refined in the Coral Project (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). This attempts to address the challenges arising from reliance on a positivistic approach that depends on the counting of rigidly bounded categories in relation to people and behaviors that very often defy them. This mixed-method approach triangulates

quantitative and qualitative data to better collect and understand the responses from LGBT+ people about DA. Such a methodological approach, we argue, enables a better chance of including knowledge about violence and abusive behaviors in the intimate lives of a population that is almost invisible in the broader field of DA. Adopting this more nuanced approach was not without its challenges and limitations, and we reflect honestly on these in a way which we hope will be useful for other researchers.

Methods and Measures for Researching Domestic Abuse

Much of the existing research about DA is based on a cis-heteronormative epistemology that speaks to or reflects positions taken in relation to the gender a/symmetry debate between feminist and family violence researchers (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). This long-running debate, which can have profound impacts in terms of policy and development of best practice (Westmarland & Burrell, 2023), seeks to establish whether there is parity in (ostensibly cis-heterosexual) men's and women's DA victimization and/or perpetration (the family violence perspective), or whether women are disproportionately the victims/survivors, and men disproportionately the perpetrators, of DA (the feminist perspective) (Currie, 1998; Johnson, 2008; Mennicke & Kulkarni, 2016). Whilst our focus of research, on DA in the lives of LGBT+ people, might appear marginal to this debate, we are keenly aware of three relevant overlapping issues between the cis-heteronormative mainstream and LGBT+ research (Donovan & Barnes, 2020): how domestic abuse is defined by researchers; the disadvantages and advantages of different approaches to categorizing people and behaviors used; and the sampling and cis-heteronormative assumptions made in the production of knowledge about DA. In our previous work (Donovan & Barnes, 2020; 21), we critically engaged with these issues to develop our own LGBT-sensitive methodology.

Defining the Problem

One of the challenges in IPVA research is that most researchers start with cis-heteronormative assumptions about the social context within which 'the problem' they seek to research sits: that IPVA is a problem for cisgender women and men in heterosexual relationships, reflecting what (Donovan & Hester, 2010) call the 'public story' of domestic violence and abuse. This focus, typically justified by heterosexual relationships accounting for the majority of intimate relationships, has led to many measurement tools being initially only developed for and validated with

heterosexual couples (and sometimes only married couples) (Bender, 2017; Messinger et al., 2013), and LGBT+ people therefore being omitted from IPVA research. Up until very recently (see ONS, 2023 for new questions currently being trialled), the large-scale, government-led Crime Survey for England and Wales has collected data about sexual orientation, but not about partner sex or gender, thus creating important gaps in their findings, particularly concerning bisexual victims/survivors (Donovan & Barnes, 2020).

This context aside, there is a lack of any agreed universal definition of what ‘the problem’ of DA consists of and how it is subsequently measured (Follingstad, 2017; Messinger et al., 2013). In our previous work (Donovan & Barnes, 2020), we outlined three considerations in this regard. The first is whether a broad or narrow definition of DA is used. In the latter, only specific types of behavior that might be ‘abusive’ are counted. For example, for Walby and Towers (2018), only physical and the most serious/criminal forms of sexual violence count as what they call ‘domestic violence crime’. Others, and we are included in this, adopt a wider definition informed by the feminist argument that domestic abuse is a pattern of behaviors that might be emotional, sexual, economic or physical (Donovan & Hester, 2010). The latter was adopted in the Coral Project, and unsurprisingly that approach results in higher rates of reported victimization than the narrow approach. Although a wider definition poses analytical and interpretive challenges which we will later reflect on, we argue that it offers a better reflection of the lived experiences of victim/survivors. Stark’s (2007) work provides important evidence that DA is often experienced not as serious physical violence but as chronic micro-regulation of everyday life enforced through emotional, psychological, economic abuses, many of which would not individually reach the threshold of a crime.

A second consideration asks whether quantitative surveys enable participants to report forms of abuse not offered in the research tool (Bender, 2017). This approach is, again, informed by a feminist methodology that both values women’s voices and challenges the typical researcher/researched hierarchy where participants are passive responders to researchers’ categories (Acker et al., 1983; Gavey, 1999). A third, and related, consideration is also an epistemological one. Existing mainstream surveys used to explore DA have, inevitably, been based on growing knowledge about what cis-heterosexual women report as having been done to them by abusive partners. This does a disservice to LGBT+ people who are typically rendered invisible for at least three reasons: surveys often target (cisgender) women as participants; their sexuality is not asked about and they are assumed to be heterosexual; and the gender and sexuality of the perpetrator is also assumed, again reinforcing the survey results as pertaining to cis-heterosexual women (Baker et

al., 2013; Donovan & Barnes, 2020). Thus, the survey tools themselves tend to reproduce and reinforce existing knowledge rather than opening up possibilities for new knowledge to emerge that is inclusive of the lives and experiences of LGBT+ people (see also Hindes et al., 2025; Ison et al., 2025 for similar epistemological and conceptual critiques of the sexual violence literature). When the identity categories, questions and response options funnel survey participants to make themselves ‘fit’ into the survey, it limits how those whose experiences are different can fully participate in such research.

For LGBT+ people, general surveys of IPVA have not fully included the range of behaviors they might be victimized by, or might enact, which means that there have not been the same opportunities for knowledge about differences to be produced. Identity abuse and experiential power are two such types of abusive behavior that have particular resonance for LGBT+ victim/survivors. In fact, abuse based on identities of gender and sexuality has been read as exclusive to, if not defining of, abuse in LGBT+ relationships. We do not agree with this and have argued elsewhere (Donovan, 2024) that identity abuse based on gender and sexuality is a feature in cis-heterosexual relationships as well. Additionally, our work has demonstrated how identity abuse based on social class and age (Donovan & Hester, 2014), education and intelligence (Donovan & Barnes, 2020), ‘race’ (Donovan & Barnes, 2019) and faith (Barnes & Aune, 2024) are also considerations. Thus, an intersectional approach is vital to understanding how the identities of victim/survivors become weaponized by perpetrators. We would argue that all IPVA research should consider including questions about identity abuse to shed light on the ways that identities are targeted by perpetrators as a way of undermining victim/survivors’ sense of self.

We have also defined experiential power (Donovan & Barnes, 2020) to be when an LGBT+ person with more experience of being, for example, gay, or lesbian or a trans man is able to use that experience as an axis of power in which they have the advantage. Experiences might include: being out in their identities of sexuality and/or gender identity; having had (more) intimate relationships in their identities of sexuality and/or gender; being immersed in LGBT+ life, culture, local and national networks and scenes. Such knowledge, experience and connectivity can be used to undermine and coercively control a less experienced, newly-out LGBT+ person possibly in their first relationship (Ristock, 2002; Donovan & Hester, 2014). This concept developed from Donovan and Hester’s (2014) findings that being in a first relationship can position a person as ‘younger’ than an abusive partner who can exert control by assuming hierarchical power as an ‘older’ LGBT+ person, irrespective of chronological age. However, we

do not think that experiential power is exclusive to the relationships of LGBT+ people. On the contrary, experiential power might operate in the abusive relationships of cis-heterosexual people, particularly in intersection with their other identities. Research that explores this possibility could add to the knowledge and understanding of how coercively controlling power operates to both reinforce the abusive partner in a ‘legitimate’ position of ‘power over’ because of their experience and simultaneously, reinforce a victim/survivor as ‘legitimately’ learning from the abusive partner about how intimacy lived through intersecting identities works.

In their work, Baker et al. (2013) argue, as do we, that research on IPVA in ‘same-sex’ relationships can contribute to knowledge production about IPVA more broadly. These researchers do not rely only on gender as a binary variable and explore the interplay between how other biographical, psychological and social-structural factors interact with gender and influence participants’ willingness to use physical violence (their focus). Alongside the challenge to ascertain the gender and sexuality of participants and the partners of which they report, there is also a need to challenge intimacy as always residing in dyads. It is crucial to design research tools that better reflect diverse relationship practices and intimate lives.

Our final consideration concerns language because this can affect rates of reporting, rape being a key example. Direct questions asking whether participants have been raped by a partner produce lower rates of reporting than when specific sexually violent and non-consensual acts are asked about (Gavey, 1999; Jaquier et al., 2010; Walby & Myhill, 2001). Piloting is crucial as a check that terminology achieves some consensus of comprehension (Ruel et al., 2016; see also Evans et al., 2016) of terms as intended by the researchers.

From Definitions to Measures

A definition of IPVA – the who, the how, the co-occurring variables, must then be operationalized in the design of appropriate data collection tools. As stated above, quantitative methods – determining prevalence, or establishing correlations or causal relationships – dominate the DA field internationally. These methods are typically accepted as providing equivalent ‘truths’ about IPVA, even though there is enormous variation in the defining concepts that shape the samples invited to take part and questions asked, and consequently, the robustness of the findings.

Starting with the sample, research with LGBT+ people can give rise to two contrasting problems. Firstly, data from random and non-random samples are often presented as if

they are equivalent. Because surveys of LGBT+ people are typically non-random (Hartman, 2011) and, consequently, suffer from response bias due to necessary reliance on self-selected samples, rates of reported victimization and perpetration tend to be higher. Systematic review evidence on DA in lesbian relationships, for example, finds prevalence figures of up to 58% and 64.5% for physical and psychological/emotional abuse, respectively (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2015). There is a risk, we argue, that inflated ‘prevalence’ figures can then be used by people and organizations with homophobic and transphobic agendas to undermine LGBT+ people’s relationships.

The contrasting problem is that evidence to demonstrate the problem of LGBT+ DA can be dismissed or minimized because the sampling methods are considered insufficiently robust, compared to those used with heterosexual people. However, random samples are difficult to achieve in LGBT+ research (Hester et al., 2010; Donovan & Barnes, 2020), with structural and ideological barriers to collecting data (e.g., limited visibility or invisibility in criminal justice data and official statistics) that would inform accurate sampling frames (Guyan, 2022), and persisting homo-, bi- and transphobia meaning that even when questions about sexuality and gender identity are asked, LGBT+ people may not feel safe to disclose their identities (Stange et al., 2018). Although the reliance on community and self-selected samples is often the best we can currently do to capture LGBT+ people’s experiences and perceptions, transparency is crucial when reporting methods and findings to create knowledge about IPVA.

Moving onto what is asked, the appetite for quantitative research has resulted in various measures of DA that are widely replicated with different populations, which, as noted above, have typically been designed and validated for heterosexual, cisgender samples (see Bender, 2017 for a review and critique of different measures). In this article, we focus particularly on the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 2005) because it is the most-replicated instrument to date for use with intimate partners, using conflict resolution as a proxy for DA (Straus & Douglas, 2004). Studies using the original or amended scale (amended in response to criticism, Straus et al., 1996) consistently find parity between women’s and men’s use of violence (see Dobash et al., 1992; Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Saunders, 2002; Straus, 2005); and occasionally some violent conflict tactics reported being used by women more highly than men (Archer, 2002; Straus, 2005). To offset the latter, however, the CTS invariably finds that women are more likely than men to report injuries which leads Straus to argue that a major concern about women’s use of violence is that it can provoke escalation in harm and injury from men (Straus, 1999, 2005).

Even with its later amendments, the CTS can be critiqued (Currie, 1998; Dobash et al., 1992; Kimmel, 2002; Loseke & Kurz, 2005) primarily because of ‘the problem’ being framed as conflict and the apparent lack of awareness that our understanding of violence, why and how it is used in intimate relationships depends on the relationship context, motives and impacts surrounding the use of violent behaviors. Even decisions about using ‘violence’ or ‘abuse’ require some consideration. ‘Violence’ is most associated with physical violence so can be leading in its use by directing participants towards physical violence as what counts. ‘Abuse’, though now part of the statutory definition in the UK, can be misleading unless the researchers recognize that whether any behavior is ‘abusive’ depends on its context, the motives for their use and their impacts.

The CTS is also blunt insofar as it is not able to distinguish degrees of violence; for example, one push might entail little force and not unbalance a recipient, whereas another push (down the stairs, for example) could cause serious or even fatal injuries. The CTS scale would treat both acts as equivalent. Another example of its bluntness results from the amended scale for injuries being restricted to physical injuries. This causes problems of reliance on the participant knowing (and recognising) the impacts of their violence and implies a hierarchy of ‘injury’ in which non-physical injuries do not count. Yet research tells us how profoundly impactful DA can be on victim/survivors’ physical and mental health and social relationships (Abrahams, 2010; Donovan & Hester, 2014; Stark, 2007).

The CTS is also blunt in how findings are understood. A victim or perpetrator is decided on by the reporting of one conflict tactic once in the previous 12 months. This is regardless of Straus’ own argument that the CTS measures conflict in relationships, not the prevalence of DA as a chronic pattern of behaviors (Straus, 1999). Such categorising of research participants as either a victim or a perpetrator is widespread across the quantitative literature, including the LGBT+ IPVA literature (Donovan & Hester, 2014). As we have argued elsewhere (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Donovan & Barnes, 2020), counts of one behavior in a 12-month period have to be interrogated much further before there can be any confidence in classifying anybody as a victim or perpetrator (we return to this below). This approach also leads to very high prevalence rates which conflate ongoing, entrenched abuse and single instances of an ‘aggressive’ behavior. These methodological and conceptual problems led to Johnson’s (2008) work providing a typology of violence which, though focusing entirely on cis-heterosexual people’s experiences, was adopted and extended in our research (Donovan & Barnes, 2020).

At the heart of the critique of the CTS scale is its purpose which is to explore conflict as they explain in their preamble:

No matter how well a couple gets along, there are times when they disagree, get annoyed with the other person, want different things from each other, or just have spats or fights because they are in a bad mood or tired or for some other reason. Couples also have many different ways of trying to settle their differences. This is a list of things that might happen when you have differences.

(Straus & Douglas, 2004, p. 521)

We argue elsewhere (Donovan & Barnes, 2020) that this kind of wording is ethically worrying, presenting conflict scenarios that might normalize abusive behaviors as being expected aspects of intimate relationships. Such a definition might also lead some participants to leave out control-motivated behaviors or those without any apparent precursor (Kimmel, 2002).

In recent work (Donovan & Barnes, 2021), we also critiqued the quantitative methodology proposed by Walby and Towers (2018). Walby and Towers have undertaken pioneering quantitative work with the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), which is a large-scale, cross-sectional, annual government survey of experiences and perceptions of crime, including IPVA. Their work can be seen as a response to the gender symmetrical findings of the CTS and as stated earlier, they focus on what they call domestic violence crime (DVC): those behaviors that they believe to be most problematic and most symbolic of gender asymmetry (Walby & Towers, 2018). DVC privileges physical and sexual violence and harassment and, they argue, renders concepts such as coercive control or other non-physical violence as unnecessary for evidencing men’s violence against women and its asymmetrical nature. Yet, this approach appears to dismiss the lived experience of victim/survivors of domestic abuse who report the long-term impacts of non-physical violence as often being more profound than physical violence (Donovan & Barnes, 2021; Myhill & Kelly, 2019; see also Hester et al., 2023, for discussion of how the CSEW is being amended to better include experiences of coercive control and impacts).

We also found fault in their construction of the gender category as a variable. Their proposal is to have four ‘gender dimensions’ (Walby & Towers, (2018): victim sex, perpetrator sex, ‘the relationship between perpetrator and victim (intimate partner or other family member; acquaintance; or stranger’), and whether or not ‘there is a sexual aspect’ (Walby & Towers, 2017: 13). We concluded that this construction of gender renders sexual, trans and gender non-conforming minority identities invisible. Whilst Walby and Towers (2018) point to the flaw in most surveys of intimate partner violence of there being no questions about the

perpetrator's gender and sexuality, we disagree that their solution of focusing on the relationship and whether there is a 'sexual aspect' falls far short of understanding the relationship contexts people live in and how structural inequalities accrue to those relationship contexts, depending on their intersecting identities. Gender matters, but the data, where it exists, also suggests that other identities matter too, including sexuality. As Donovan and Barnes (2021) point out, the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2018) found that bisexual women (10.9%) and lesbians (8%) are more likely to report partner abuse to the CSEW than heterosexual women (6%). Similar findings have been reported elsewhere (Donovan & Hester, 2014) in Europe (Fundamental Rights Agency (2014) and America (Walters et al., 2013). Privileging woman as the most important category variable risks assumptions that women are a homogenous group who are cis-heterosexual, which for research purposes is deeply problematic and for practice could be extremely dangerous.

The underlying problem with existing approaches to quantitative surveys of intimate partner violence is the lack of attention to context, motives and impact. Feminist thought has historically made the crucial point that domestic abuse is not a problem of either a single or series of apparently isolated violent incidents but rather, a relational problem of power and control with abusive behaviors used purposively and chronically to maintain control. Understanding not just what is done but also why, in what context, for what purpose, and with what impacts should be central to a comprehensive understanding of DA, so that responses can be tailored accordingly (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Saunders, 2002). Straus's response with the CTS was to establish a measure pertaining to 'initiation' of conflict tactics, which reported almost equal rates of initiation by women and men (Straus, 1999). However, as we argue (Donovan & Barnes, 2020), research on women's use of violence towards men in intimate relationships suggests that self-defense is not only 'in response to' but can also be in 'anticipation of' (Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Miller, 2001) making the question of who 'hit first' too narrow. Our work developed the concept of 'space for reaction' to account for the complexities of self-defense, retaliation and anticipatory 'abusive' behaviors (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). Notably, in our own work we choose to place 'abusive' within inverted commas to be clear that we are not making assumptions about the motives behind behaviors that participants report, given that, as with CTS-based approaches, we did not seek participants who exclusively self-defined as victims/survivors or perpetrators.

Walby and Towers (2018) argue that physical violence is in and of itself coercive and therefore a focus on physical violence pre-empts the need to consider coercive control or non-physical acts of violence. Again, our response to this

is that this apparently undermines the legal concept of the use of violence in self-defense and risks identifying those women who use weapons – seen by Walby and Towers as the most egregious DVC – as the most serious perpetrators (Donovan & Barnes, 2021). We show how in Hester's (2013) work, comparing women and men arrested for DA, arrested women were more likely to have used weapons and, generally, were twice as likely to be arrested than men. Hester speculates that the women might have been more likely to use a weapon because of a lack of confidence about how else to defend themselves, but in Walby and Towers' (2018) measure they would fall into the category of having used DVC. This approach would also seem, again, to move away from the feminist approach which prioritizes a relational rather than an incident-based approach to understanding DA.

The focus on physical violence and sexual assault also denies the profound impacts of non-physical identity abuse that can coerce victim/survivors in a range of ways to change their presentation of self, their identities, their everyday family, social and employment practices (see Donovan & Barnes, 2019; Donovan et al., 2023 in relation to family abuse). Walby and Towers (2018) argue that both impact and harm are implied in DVC, again leading to their main point that it is not necessary to consider coercive control or non-physical violence. As we argue elsewhere, 'It is an astounding oversight to read impact and harm only in physical ways.' (Donovan & Barnes, 2021: 250). In our work (Donovan & Hester, 2014) we found that, regardless of sexuality, victim/survivors reported loss of self and social isolation as the key abusive behaviors reported and the key impacts of domestic abuse. Whilst men reported more physical and physically sexually violent victimization than women, emotional abuse, including identity abuse, was widespread and impactful. To dismiss this for the convenience of creating a quantitative design and statistical analysis intended to prove an 'ideological' point (Donovan & Barnes, 2021) evidences how important methodological transparency is to understand what knowledge is being produced and for what end.

Impacts of domestic abuse are, in our view, closely connected to the identity abuse that often accompanies and 'justifies' the other emotional, economic, sexual abuse that can take place (see, for example, Donovan et al., 2023). Identity abuse is most often delineated as what makes LGBT+ domestic abuse different to the DA victimization of cis-heterosexual women. We have disagreed with this (Donovan, 2024), arguing that identity abuse is a fundamental aspect of domestic abuse. Perpetrators of domestic abuse accumulate knowledge about the victim/survivor, often as part of the practices of 'falling in love' such as disclosing intimacy (Jamieson, 1998). Intimate partners share secrets, fears, desires, histories, that can be (Donovan & Hester,

2014) used by abusive partners to shame, berate, and close down ‘space for action’ (Sharp-Jeffs et al., 2017), whilst for victim/survivors the shared knowledge can lead to feelings of loyalty, protection and care towards their partner. The knowledges abusive partners can rely on are both individual and structural. Threatening to out somebody’s sexuality and/or gender identity can only present a threat if the society in which they live positions minoritized sexualities and gender identities as subordinate. The harms are not only isolated to the individual but also to their social identities and place in society. Understanding research participants’ intersecting identities is challenging yet crucial for producing more multi-dimensional knowledge about participants’ experiences.

Typologies have been used in research on IPVA, both as a way of categorizing types of perpetrators based on their motives and as a way of categorizing the type of violence/abuse being used. As our work is rooted in a sociological epistemology underpinned by social constructionism, we are sceptical of an essentialist understanding of perpetrators or abusive partners that fixes them as ‘types’ of people who are ‘wired’ to behave the way they do. Instead, our interest has been in attempts to make sense of the different ways violence is used and the meaning making attached to the use of violence. The work of Johnson (2008) and Stark (2007) has been foundational for this approach. Both apply feminist insights about domestic abuse being about power and control, and that understanding how power operates in the relationship is more important than any single incident. Their work has some overlap in centring coercive control as pivotal in DA, notwithstanding that Johnson privileges physical coercion and Stark (2007) privileges the ‘cage’ of micro-regulation, punishment and coercion that might also include physical violence. Both attempt to establish that DA is a particular kind of IPVA that is individual and structural. Their focus is on the structural oppression of patriarchy, the result of the evidence that cis (ostensibly) heterosexual women are, by far, the largest social group reporting DA. We agree with Stark (2007) that patriarchal societies such as the UK provide a social-structural context in which women are positioned unequally in relation to men. However, we also suggest that the patriarchal construction of gender and gender norms are cis-heteronormative and positions those who are not heterosexual subordinately to heterosexuals, and those who are trans and gender queer as subordinate to cisgender folk. As intersectional feminists we also hold that other organizing systems such as capitalism and colonization also produce intersecting hierarchies of inequalities such that individuals’ DA victimization is shaped, perceived, understood and experienced through and in the resulting intersecting identities. We agree with Crenshaw (1989) that homogeneity within social group categories is

a fallacy and research tools must be designed that enable the lived experiences of those with intersecting minoritized identities to be heard and included in the production of knowledge about DA.

As such, our work researching DA in the lives of LGBT+ people produces knowledge that is not only of interest or relevant to the field of LGBT+DA. It is not a niche sub-field but instead researching the lives of minoritized peoples can result in significant insights about the production of knowledge of DA in general. To summarize, quantitative approaches relying only on what counts as DA and counting what types of violence have been used over what period of time are flawed. Below, we return to this with suggestions from our work to address the problems we have outlined in relation to definitions, about what counts and who counts as important knowledge about DA; and relationship contexts, including motives and impacts.

Counting on Relationships Between Variables

The other way that quantitative methods have been used to produce knowledge about IPVA is in the application of statistical computations to explore and test relationships between behaviors, attitudes/beliefs and victimization and/or perpetration. Similar problems exist in the setting up of this research about the definition of IPVA used and variable boundaries around identities, behaviors, beliefs. Our interest was, as explained earlier, piqued by North American research suggesting that mutual abuse or bi-directional violence characterizes DA between ‘same sex’ couples. Our initial thoughts about this were that first, there is not enough known about DA in the lives of LGBT+ people to speak confidently about what types of IPVA might be most or least prevalent; and second, we worried that the public story of DA (Donovan & Hester, 2014) was having an impact on how methodologies are being designed to ‘test’ this assumption. The public story of DA constructs the problem as being of cis-heterosexual men for cis heterosexual women, of physical violence typically, and of a particular construction of gender – the big ‘strong’ man being violent towards the small, ‘weak’ woman. In our later work (Donovan & Barnes, 2020) we developed this further pointing to the binaries that the public story of DA rests on and how these have impacts for understanding DA in the lives of LGBT+ people. The overlapping binaries are perpetrator/victim, (cis-heterosexual) man/(cis-heterosexual) woman, agentic/passive, strong/weak, masculinity/femininity. We have argued that these binaries become operationalized where there are two women or two men in a relationship. Here, the assumptions result in beliefs that because there is no heteronormative gender inequality, there is a more egalitarian distribution of power; that each partner is more able

to defend themselves and/or to stand up to the other and/or to ‘give as good as they get’. In other words, that where they occur, abusive behaviors might be more likely mutual than in cis-heterosexual relationships (Rolle et al., 2018).

We are not the only researchers to have problematized the methodologies that provide evidence of apparently high prevalence of mutual abuse (see Messinger et al., 2018). One of the problems is the tendency to use categories based on time periods rather than specific relationships to capture perpetration and victimization, as well as exploring relationships between abuse perpetration and/or victimization with potential facilitators of either, e.g. substance use. Studies often use – as is usually the case in prevalence research – the reporting of one or more acts of victimization or perpetration to count a participant as a victim and/or a perpetrator. As we have explained above, we find such an approach unhelpful, without any further information about the relationship context, and tends to overstate the problem.

We also take issue with the assumption that where counts of victimization and perpetration are reported as similar across intimate partners that this means there is an equality in the relationship that precludes the abusive power and control associated with perpetrators in DA relationships. Without having any other contextual information about motives and impacts it is not clear that an equivalence in power can be read from such a count of equal reporting of incidents. In our work we found this not to be the case universally: ‘space for reaction’ was evidenced in participants’ accounts of their ‘abusive’ behaviors that in fact were acts of self-defense, retaliation or other kinds of resistance (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). We concluded much more work is needed to properly consider the methodological approaches to exploring mutual abuse or bi-directional violence (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). We return to these problems of counting and categories when we address our methodological approach.

Capturing the Nuances: An Alternative Approach

Having set out the main problems, as we see them, in current dominant methodologies for researching IPVA, we now reflect on our attempt to develop a more nuanced and LGBT+ sensitive methodological approach. Others have also done this by retaining quantitative methods that better explore power and control in a relationship, rather than a focus on counting incidents (Bender, 2017). Much of this work has drawn from and/or developed further using cluster analysis of Johnson’s (2008) typology of IPVA and attempts to better explore mutual abuse (Frankland & Brown, 2014; Mennicke & Kulkarni, 2016; Messinger et al., 2013, 2018). Others, particularly those informed by

feminist methodological approaches, have leaned towards qualitative methods drawing on interviews primarily with victims/survivors (Ristock, 2002; Rogers, 2020; Cleghorn et al., 2024). More recently, research informed by participatory action methods (Jobson, 2025) and arts-based methods (e.g. Wydall et al., 2023) centre the lived experiences of victims/survivors and address the power dynamic that can exist between the researcher and researched.

Mixed-methods research has also been attempted in the mainstream DA field. This typically triangulates quantitative data with thick qualitative data which provides contextual information and illuminates the nuances and intersecting experiences that could otherwise be lost in the privileging of researcher-defined categories (e.g. Ambrozewicz et al., 2024; Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Katerndahl et al., 2012). Our mixed-methods approach enabled us to offer a rich and complex discussion about the ways in which ‘abusive’ behaviors are not always equal and that the binary of perpetrator/victim can sometimes result in an unjust categorizing of those who have defended themselves as ‘perpetrators’ or ‘secondary perpetrators’ or ‘mutually abusive partners’ when an analysis of power and control would position them as victims who have created what we call ‘space for reaction’ (Donovan & Barnes, 2020).

The inspiration for our approach has been the pioneering mixed-methods methodology designed originally for the COHSAR Project (Hester et al., 2010; Donovan & Hester, 2014). This research and methodology was the first in the UK to comprehensively explore DA in what they called ‘same-sex’ relationships, regardless of sexuality or gender identity. The COSHAR method intended to address many of the limitations outlined above by drawing on self-definition and providing open text opportunities as well as to systematically ask about motive and impacts of perpetration and victimization and by including a range of identity-based abuse items (McCarry et al., 2008). Interview participants were recruited from the questionnaire which allowed for a thick data set illuminating some of the findings from the questionnaire. In our work with the Coral Project we built on the COSHAR methodology but extended it to produce original data about the perpetration of IPVA.

Can Quantitative Research Produce LGBT+ Inclusive Knowledge about DA?

Our research in the Coral Project was the first time in the UK – and as far as we know, internationally – that a mixed-methods study has been used to focus on the use of ‘abusive’ behaviors in the relationships of LGBT+ people. We conducted a national survey (available online and in hard-copy, with postage-paid envelopes) of LGBT+ people ($n=872$) and we conducted 36 follow-up interviews with

purposively-selected survey respondents. We recruited for the survey via a very extensive range of channels, including social media and via over 200 LGBT+ organizations, groups and venues that agreed to share the survey. The Coral Project also included interviews with practitioners involved in the provision of IPVA perpetrator services and focus groups with a wider range of practitioners whose roles include supporting LGBT+ people with their intimate relationships, not reported on in this article (see Barnes & Donovan, 2023).

Ethical approval for the survey and follow-up interviews was received from Sunderland University's research ethics committee. Ethical considerations including restricting inclusion to people aged 16 years and over for the survey, and 18 years and over for the follow-up interviews; being very clear about anonymity and the right to withdraw or decline to answer any question; and providing a list of help providers participants could turn to in the event that taking part caused any concerns for them. Our steering group provided feedback and contributed to the design of the survey, including the questions. Members included key practice, policy and academic stakeholders.

As we have argued earlier, we were cautious about repeating mistakes of other researchers who, in our view, limit the invitation to participate to those who overtly define their experiences as being domestically abusive. Alongside this, our reading of the literature suggested that our target population are an overlooked population that find it difficult to recognize their experiences as DA, largely as a result of the public story of DA (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Donovan & Barnes, 2020). Consequently, we explained that our research explored, 'What do you do when things go wrong in your same-sex, bisexual and/or transgender relationships?' Our ethical position meant that we further explained that questions would include the use of physical, sexual, emotional, financial behaviors. Having a focus on relationships rather than DA likely widened the sample, evidenced by substantial proportions of the sample not reporting having experienced or used any of the behaviors that we asked about. However, above, we critiqued the CTS preamble for arguably normalizing abusive behaviours, and whilst different, not using the term 'domestic abuse' could be seen to minimize the experiences of those who have been victimized or perpetrated violence or abuse. It is, we reflect, very difficult to strike the balance between not making the survey overtly about DA and not deceiving or triggering participants by failing to disclose some of the topics that the survey will cover.

Extending an Inclusive Invitation to Participate

To create more inclusive research, those most marginalized need to be specifically invited to take part. To ensure

that the survey extended a clear invitation to those identifying beyond any binaries of gender and/or sexuality, we ensured that demographic questions gave space to self-describe identities that were not provided in our options. We also explained that the categories 'woman' and 'man' included trans women and trans men respectively; and asked whether current gender identities were the same as those assigned at birth. Notably, terminology is highly contested and politicized and, in the current context of so-called 'gender-critical' or trans-exclusionary ideology, our gender-inclusive approach could have deterred some LGB people from participating. However, as happened in The COHSAR Project, providing opportunities to self-define produced more categories of sexuality and gender identity than are produced when more limited, categories are used in research. This, we believe, can lead to more sophisticated analysis across categories.

However, the nature of quantitative work means that there is a need for minimum sizes of categories to undertake robust statistical analysis. Invitations to self-define inevitably require researchers to make decisions about how to balance honoring participants' identities and creating data that can be analyzed. We have critiqued other researchers for inviting self-definition and then neither using the data in their analysis nor providing any commentary on the data collected, even with caveats about its provenance (Donovan & Barnes, 2021). Being transparent about these decisions and the problems that arise from those is what we would promote.

Our decisions left us with three categories of gender: woman (including trans woman) (54%); man (including trans man) (41%), and gender-queer and non-binary (4%) (see Donovan & Barnes, 2020) so that we could identify particular experiences of those who do not fit the cis-heteronormative binary. Eleven per cent of participants disclosed ever having identified as transgender. The most common sexualities were gay man (32%), lesbian/gay woman (23.1%), bisexual (13.9%), queer (5.5%), heterosexual (3.7%), and 'other' which subsumed those who identified as pansexual, asexual, use no labels or in other ways communicated fluidity of sexuality. The importance of separating bisexual people cannot be overstated. In much DA research they are typically conflated and counted as 'heterosexual' because of the assumed sexuality of a woman in a relationship with a man. This is a really concerning example of how such disappearance of sexuality invisibilizes the particular dangers bisexual people face. For example, ONS (2018) figures show bisexual women to be five times more likely to report sexual violence than heterosexual women.

Representing LGBT+ Communities and Intersecting Identities

Of course, we can still make no claims about representativeness because this was a self-selected sample. We are also aware that the profile of our sample is, as elsewhere in research on the lives of LGBT+ people (Hartman, 2011) mainly white (94%) and well-educated (a third had a university degree and an additional quarter held a postgraduate qualification). Participants were a mix of ages, from 16 years old to 70+ years old, with 55.5% aged in their 20s and 30s. However, participants were not on commensurately high incomes relative to their educational level, with just over half reporting a household income of less than £33,000. Income was, on average, lowest amongst trans and non-binary participants, with higher rates of disability in this sub-sample contributing to multiple marginalization (see Donovan & Barnes, 2020 for further detail).

We monitored our sample as the survey progressed and enacted targeted recruitment strategies to address gaps, such as approaching UK organizations outside of England and reaching out to groups for older LGBT+ people and ethnically minoritized LGBT+ people. Despite these efforts, lack of ethnic diversity is one of the key limitations of our approach. Barriers to increased ethnic diversity are likely to include issues of trust; intersecting experiences of homo/bi/transphobia and racism making LGBT+ identities and DA even more difficult to recognize and disclose; and racism in LGBT+ spaces meaning that ethnically minoritized people may have been less likely to hear about the research. The survey and other research materials were also only produced in English. Future research would be strengthened by sustained and reciprocal engagement between researchers and the most marginalized LGBT+ communities, such as participative action research (Jobson, 2025) to increase trust and develop more sensitive and culturally safe recruitment strategies. However, this requires a substantial investment of time and financial resource in order to ensure that such activities are mutually beneficial, and neither tokenistic nor exploitative.

From Definitions to Measures

In terms of our approach to operationalizing DA, as noted above we adopt a broad definition which conceptualizes DA as typically being a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviours, as opposed to discrete incidents. Our survey tool provided extensive lists of potentially ‘abusive’ behaviors (70 items for victimization, and 69 items for perpetration), organized around four sub-categories of physical, emotional, sexual and financial behavior. At the end of each sub-category, we provided open-text boxes for participants

to add any further information they wished to about their experiences. Participants often used these boxes to either add other behaviors that we had not asked about, or to provide some context on behaviors that we asked about. We also asked questions about the frequency with which these behaviors were used, the motives for behaviors that participants reported using, and the impacts of behaviors experienced. We asked about help-seeking behaviors and barriers to help-seeking. Whilst this approach was very comprehensive, we acknowledge that a drawback was the length of the survey and the burden for participants, taking approximately 35–40 min to complete. The online survey metrics indicated that a similar number to the number of completers accessed the survey without completing it, with length and detail likely to have been key contributing factors.

In addition to producing descriptive statistics for individual variables, our analysis included bivariate analyses such as correlations, chi-square and subgroup analyses. In line with the COHSAR methodology, comprehensive recoding took place to test Johnson’s (2008) typology and to consider relationships between attitudes, perceptions of dominance (through questions about relationship practices such as decision-making) in relationships, the use of, and motives and impacts for, ‘abusive’ behaviors.

Some Headlines from our Survey

Our critique earlier, of quantitative research that categorizes any participant reporting the use or the experience of one ‘abusive’ behavior as a perpetrator or victim inflate prevalence rates is true of our own headline data. Even when asking for the use ever of any abusive behavior in the last 12 months of a current or previous relationships (to prevent the conflation of time periods with relationships), our findings indicate 64.3% of participants reported experiencing at least one ‘abusive’ behavior, while 55.4% reported enacting at least one ‘abusive’ behavior (see Donovan & Barnes, 2020 for details of this analysis). For victimization and perpetration, emotional behaviors were most frequently reported, although there was widespread reporting of physical, sexual and financial items. The ten most frequently reported behaviours that participants disclosed using include one of the identity abuse items; interestingly, ‘Used their education/intelligence against them’ (5.6% reported using this at least once in the last 12 months of their current or most recent relationships), demonstrating the importance of our earlier call to examine multiple and intersecting aspects of identity.

Taking into account frequency, reported frequency of perpetration is far lower than for victimization. For example, the average number of behaviors enacted was 1.94 and

the average number of behaviors experienced was 4.27 (Anonymous 1). It was also the case that in most cases only one ‘abusive’ behavior was reported as being enacted:

Only 3.3% of the sample reported having used ten or more different behaviours, compared to 12.8% of the sample who reported having experienced ten or more different behaviours (Donovan & Barnes, 2020: 76)

Importantly, 88% of those who reported experiencing at least one ‘abusive’ behavior in the past 12 months also reported using at least one behavior. On the face of it, as per our earlier critique, this could be taken to assume a high proportion of mutual abuse. However, what these findings do not tell us is the motives, context and impacts of these behaviours. This is what we wanted to interrogate and trouble in our follow-up interviews.

Triangulating the Survey Findings: Qualitative Interviews and Vignettes

For the interviews, we developed topic guides that allowed for comparisons across interviews, as well as the possibility to explore participants’ narratives; and vignettes (scenarios) which we invited participants to comment on (see Supplementary Material). We included vignettes to invite participants to comment on what could be considered to be ‘abusive’ behaviors without necessarily implicating their own behavior. In fact, many volunteered their own accounts having been in a similar situation to that depicted in a vignette. The use of vignettes to conduct research on sensitive topics is recognized elsewhere (e.g. Barter & Renold, 2000; Cheah et al., 2023).

Questionnaire participants were invited to provide us with their contact details if they wanted to take part in a follow-up interview. Approximately one-third of the 872 participants did so. We subsequently purposively selected interview participants, using their survey responses as a filter. This was to ensure that interviewees met our criteria of having used ‘abusive’ behaviors in an intimate relationship; not being in that relationship at the time of doing the survey; were aged 18 years or over; and had completed the section of the survey about readiness to change in such a way as indicated they recognized that their behavior was a problematic and/or had done something about changing their behavior. These criteria were intended to provide ways of minimizing any risk to either the interviewee or the researcher (Donovan & Barnes, 2020).

Taking an approach to the interviews that enacted an ‘ethics of care’ (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Edwards & Mauthner, 2002) meant that the well-being of participants was more important than achieving the fieldwork objectives. Consent

was understood as ongoing (Miller & Bell, 2002) so, for example, if a participant found any part of the interview upsetting, for whatever reason, the interview was paused so that the participant could reflect on whether they wanted to continue. Participants also knew that they could contact us after the interviews if they had changed their mind about our using their data. This happened in a very small number of cases, not to entirely withdraw transcripts but to redact particular parts of them. All participants were given an after-care sheet which listed national organizations and helplines and relevant support services in their local area.

The demographic profile of the interviews was akin to that of the survey sample. In the interviews, we asked participants’ coming out stories of sexuality and/or gender identity, their relationship history, their approach to relationship decision-making and dealing with disagreements, their perceptions of differences and similarities between heterosexual and LGBT+ relationships, and experiences and views about help-seeking for relationships. The vignettes are what make the interviews distinct. We had four that enabled exploration of participants’ perceptions of the use of physical, sexual, emotional and economic ‘abuse’ respectively. In some interviews, vignettes were not needed as respondents reflected on their use of ‘abusive’ behavior as they described their relationship history, thus it emerged as part of their narrative. In others they were used strategically with prior knowledge from the survey data to explore relevant relationship experiences. This worked because participants and sometimes researchers were able to use the vignette as a springboard to reflect on personal experiences that seemed similar. Such a route to discussing the use of ‘abusive’ behaviors was felt to be less of a challenge than a question such as ‘have you ever been abusive to a partner?’

Triangulation: The Learning

Once interviews were transcribed the analysis had two aspects. First, they were analysed as life histories which enabled us to consider pre-defined codes to identify relationship types that mapped onto Johnson’s (2008) typology. We both read each transcript, independently categorized them, and then discussed our process and evidence before making the final decisions about relationship type. Using the transcripts in this way was important for us to reinforce our agreement with feminist thinking that DA can only be understood and named through relationship contexts rather than isolated incidents. Second, we used NVivo to undertake a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006¹) to code and make sense of the data.

¹ This was the text we drew from; however, Braun and Clarke’s (2019) later work on reflexive thematic analysis is what informs our recent research.

It is through triangulation that we became aware how participants interpreted terms in the survey differently to how we intended (see Ackerman, 2016). For example, as we have explained elsewhere (Donovan & Barnes, 2020), sometimes survey participants used open text boxes to explain that some of the behaviors they reported were enacted consensually because of being part of a bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism (BDSM) relationship. However, we realized that not all took this opportunity after interviewing Paul, a white, cisgender, gay, disabled man in his 50s at interview. He had reported both experiencing and enacting a range of physical violence but at interview, it became clear that he was part of a BDSM community. This, and other examples, reinforced how important it is to capture context and the range of different meaning people ascribe to behaviors in their relationships, and not rely on quantitative data in isolation.

We had to consider whether some of the inconsistencies between survey and interview data might be the result of participants being dishonest or selective, either in the survey or interview (Donovan Barnes, 2020). Sense-making is contextual and contingent on being socially constructed and/or reinterpreted in different ways at different times in people's lives, including when being asked specific questions in research (Presser, 2009; Riessman, 2008). However, we have argued that there is never any one 'truth' about a relationship and that whatever is remembered – even if it is selective – can reveal the sense-making of individuals about their experiences of IPVA. We are also aware that our data about the use of 'abusive' behaviors is not from a clinical or criminal justice sample, but from the general LGBT+ population. This means that they have been motivated to take part in a piece of research about behaviors they might not feel proud of. There is no equivalence with research on ostensibly cis-heterosexual male perpetrators using mandatory or voluntary perpetrator interventions or those who have been convicted (Hearn, 1998; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016) where concerns have been raised about the credibility of their accounts.

It is also pertinent to revisit our earlier point about the importance of piloting survey questions in order to maximize consensus in how these are interpreted (Ruel et al., 2016). We piloted our survey with a small number of pilot respondents and critical friends in order to check the clarity of the instructions and flag any items that were difficult or ambiguous to respond to. Despite these efforts, our qualitative interviews subsequent to the actual survey sometimes revealed participants' different understandings of terms that we had asked about in our survey. For example, one of the financial behaviors that we asked about was giving 'pocket money', which in our minds meant limiting a partner's access to money. It became apparent in the interviews that

some participants understood this as allocating each partner some personal spending money, and intended or experienced this as an equitable financial arrangement, and not a means of financial control. This example illustrates the difficulty of reaching consensus of meaning in an overwhelmingly one-way communication tool such as a survey.

Testing Johnson's Typology

Our analysis was also intended to queer analyses that have assumed that categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' are neat, fixed, and mutually exclusive. We used Johnson's typology to interrogate the extent to which IPVA in the relationships of LGBT+ people is operationalized for different purposes and to challenge the concept of homogenous categories of 'victim' and perpetrator'. To do so we created three groups of victims and perpetrators: high, low and no victimization and perpetration respectively (see Donovan & Barnes, 2020, for detailed discussion of our process). Our research interest was in DA in the relationships of LGBT+ people so following the COHSAR analysis, we identified that 12.8% ($n=55$) of the sample fell into the high victimization group and 11.6% ($n=56$) into the high perpetration group. It was felt justified to assume that these two groups represent the groups with most affinity to Johnson's (2008) categories of coercively controlling violence and violent resistance. As the analysis progressed, we noted that 16 participants fell into both the high perpetration and high victimisation groups. We made the decision to exclude these cases from the two groups in order to isolate the high victimization and high perpetration groups, and analyze them as independent categories. It would have been interesting to look more closely at the high victimization-high perpetration group, but the numbers were too small for any robust analysis. However, we were able to draw on our qualitative data which included participants whose survey profile suggested 'mutual abuse', with reporting of behaviours indicating victimization and perpetration. Triangulating the data in this way enabled us to expand Johnson's (2008) typology to include what we called 'space for reaction', whereby victims/survivors use 'abusive' behaviors to try to redress power imbalances. Thus, by using mixed methods to better capture motives, context and impact, we have been able to tell a much more nuanced and complex story about so-called 'mutual abuse'. We were also able to demonstrate that Johnson's types of violence are too limited in their focus on physical violence and could usefully be expanded to include non-physical forms of violent resistance and situational couple violence.

Being able to consider the contextual factors of motive and impact and explore relationship histories with qualitative interview data is, we argue, key to producing more

nuanced and rich knowledge about what IPVA looks like in the relationships of LGBT+ people. It helps to overcome the limitations of more simplistic prevalence surveys that leave too many questions about what and who counts in discussions about IPVA. It produces a rich data set that is complex and better reflective of the diverse range of people who are experiencing and enacting IPVA. There are, however, challenges. This work is resource-intensive and the limits on the number of interviews that can feasibly be conducted means that, when seeking to collect quantitative data on a large scale, the findings that can be triangulated will be partial, and there may also be response bias or safety considerations in relation to who takes part in follow-up interviews. As researchers' access to, and adoption of, more sophisticated online survey technologies develop, there may be the potential to collect richer and more dynamic qualitative data as part of surveys, though this would be more deductively-driven.

Conclusion

Our work is intended to create discussion both about LGBT+ domestic abuse and methodologies for producing knowledge about domestic abuse more generally. There are implications, therefore, for researchers to consider in how best to design research methods that better include the experiences of all those victimized by DA and those who are abusive. We conclude that it is important to include IPVA in the relationships of LGBT+ people under an intersectional feminist theoretical framework; and that the methodology leading to a gender symmetrical understanding of DA is fundamentally flawed. However, as we have argued previously, currently, LGBT+DA is 'still somewhat ignored by family violence scholars and feminist scholars alike' (Donovan & Barnes, 2020: 54). To that extent, LGBT+ research is still in its infancy which means there are opportunities for this field to learn from the methodological mistakes of the mainstream and develop a queer methodology that will not only shed better light on LGBT+DA but also provide methodological insights to improve knowledge production in the cis-heteronormative field.

We have suggested mixed methods as an antidote to the sole reliance on questionnaires that have traditionally expected participants to fit into researcher-defined categories, whether these are about identities, behaviors, beliefs or previous cis-heteronormatively produced knowledge about IPVA. Mixed methods that reuse existing tools such as the CTS, however, are not what we advocate for. Instead, we call for a queer approach to the design of methods to produce knowledge about IPVA that is not reliant on

cis-heteronormative methodological precepts. Providing options for self-definition, identity abuse, motives, information about the perpetrator, impact will enable a more nuanced analysis of IPVA types, and relationships between demographic variables that better reflect the lives and identities of those who have taken part.

The turn to qualitative research in this area is also crucial. Our choices to invite participants to tell us about what they had done wrong in their intimate relationships, hopefully, created a non-judgemental research space for people to come forward and give their accounts. Using interviews supported with vignettes were critical for us to better unpack the quantitative data especially in relation to mutual abuse and to understand that many of our respondents who would have been identified as 'perpetrators' in other research, are actually victims employing space for reaction to resist the DA they are experiencing and seek to (re-)establish an egalitarian intimacy. However, there are other qualitative methods that can be used and other methodological approaches that further centre the importance of lived experience and involving those with lived experience to be co-researchers in participatory action research (Jobson, 2025).

We have acknowledged limitations in the diversity of our sample, and the risk of excluding, and inhibiting understanding of the lives of, LGBT+ people who are most marginalized. Ensuring that LGBT+ samples become more diverse, particularly in relation to ethnic diversity, socio-economic status and educational attainment, should be priorities for future research. Qualitative research, when sensitively conducted, is central to creating inclusive research spaces where the voices of some of the most minoritized LGBT+ people can be heard and make a contribution to our general knowledge of DA. This is imperative if we are to use research findings to advocate for, and inform, the development of inclusive provision, prevention, early intervention and social and cultural change to address DA regardless of the sexuality and/or gender identities of those victimized or those who cause harm; and all IPVA.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval Ethics approval was given for the Coral Project by Sunderland University Ethics Committee following the University's ethics guidance and that of the British Sociological Association Ethics Guidance.

Competing interests There are no competing interests to report.

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