



“A Kiss Delivered as a Punch”: Coercively Controlling Tactics in Australian Women’s Same-Gender Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

In 2007, Evan Stark consolidated decades of feminist scholarship and advocacy on intimate partner violence (IPV) into a framework he coined “coercive control” (Stark 2007). Stark’s model was initially heteronormative. He later contended that heteropatriarchy may condition abuse in women’s intimate relationships with other women, but more research was needed to clearly understand how coercive control manifests beyond heterosexuality (Stark and Hester 2019). In this paper, we utilise the voices of 18 Australian same-gender attracted women who experienced IPV in intimate relationships with other women. The participants’ narratives, revealed through this qualitative method, provide insights into perpetrator tactics of coercive control in these relationships. Situating these stratagems within Stark’s framework, we gain a deeper understanding of this, often invisible, manifestation of coercive control. This study is essential and timely because, since Stark (2007) published his book, several countries have criminalised coercive control and some states in Australia have recently followed suit.

Keywords: Coercive control; women’s same-gender relationships; intimate partner violence.

Introduction

In 2007, Evan Stark consolidated decades of feminist scholarship and advocacy on intimate partner violence (IPV) (e.g., Dobash and Dobash 1979; Pence and Paymar 1993) into a framework he coined “coercive control”—a concept that illustrates how heterosexual men subvert and entrap women through a regime of domination entailing multiple abusive tactics (Stark 2007). The stratagems of coercive control described by Stark (2007) include but are not limited to, bodily violence (physical and sexual), threats, intimidation, humiliation, degradation, emotional cruelty, restricting personal territory and freedom, and mind games. The tactics used by perpetrators are personalised, situational, targeted at the victim’s particular vulnerabilities, and will shift over time through a process of trial and error. Coercive control will, therefore, manifest differently in each abusive relationship, but the objective is always the same, namely, to establish and maintain power and control over the victim for the perpetrator’s benefit (Stark 2009).

Stark’s (2007) model is grounded within a feminist understanding of patriarchy, namely, the exertion of power and control by men over women (Kelly and Johnson 2008). Androcentric privilege and masculinist power provide the context within which men’s abuse of women can be perpetrated, legitimised, and continued (Kaschak 2001; Stark 2009). Initially, therefore, Stark’s (2007) framework of coercive control may seem inapplicable to women victimised by other women in romantic



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relationships. However, the social context of the nuclear family and patriarchal and heteronormative values form a foundation for all relationships and are, thus, likely to bleed through to LGBTIAQ+ partnerships (Donovan and Hester 2014). Women's same-gender intimate relationships are also directly impacted by other social structural oppressions arising from masculinist social systems, namely, homophobia and heterosexism (Campo and Tayton 2015; Elliott 1996; Ristock, 2003). The reality of abuse in these relationships are "stories of invisibility" (Donovan and Barnes 2020: 9). The dominance of the stories of heterosexual IPV acts as a barrier to recognition of abuse for both LGBTIAQ+ themselves and service providers (Donovan and Barnes 2020: 9). Same-gender attracted women in abusive intimate relationships may see their abuse as less harmful or severe than abuse in heterosexual partnerships (Donovan and Barnes 2019: 561).

Although existing research demonstrates that coercive control likely has salience for women in same-gender intimate relationships (Frankland and Brown 2014; Hayes and Jeffries 2015; Messing et al. 2021; Raghavan, et al. 2019; Whitton, Newcomb et al. 2019), Stark's (2007) framework was initially heteronormative. He later contended that heteropatriarchy may condition abuse in women's intimate relationships with other women but that more research was needed to clearly understand how coercive control manifests beyond heterosexuality (Stark and Hester 2019). In this paper, utilising the voices of 18 IPV victims, we provide an in-depth qualitative exploration of coercive control in women's same-gender intimate relationships.

IPV in same-gender romantic relationships is not as well understood as in heterosexual couples. As of 2015, research on lesbian, gay, or bisexual partner abuse made up only 3% of the total research in this area (Edwards, Neal and Sylaska 2015). What has been written on same-gender IPV tends to focus on men's same-gender relationships, is statistical, and frequently fails to disaggregate findings by sexual orientation and gender (Balsam 2012; Frankland and Brown 2014; Lie et al. 1991; Miller et al. 2014; Potoczniak et al. 2003; Rose 2012; Schilit, Lie and Montagne 1990; Whitton, Dyar et al. 2019). This makes it difficult to draw inferences about the specific ways in which coercive control manifests. All this research can do is provide prevalence estimates and identify correlates of IPV. Crude estimates place IPV victimisation rates in women's same-gender intimate relationships as equal to, or greater than, that of heterosexual women. Sociodemographic factors, personality (e.g., low self-esteem) and relational characteristics (e.g., co-dependency), prior IPV victimisation, and growing up in families marred by abuse have been identified as key correlates (Badenes-Ribera et al. 2016: 291–292). Homophobia (both internalised and institutional) is also interwoven into same-gender attracted women's abuse experiences (Donovan and Hester, 2014; Hotten 2011; Tigert 2001).

Currently, there are no qualitative explorations of coercive control in women's same-gender intimate relationships. While there is qualitative research that suggests Stark's (2007) framework has legitimacy in women's same-gender romantic partnerships, no one has specifically examined the tactics of abuse being employed within these relational contexts (e.g., Lobel 1986; Renzetti 1988, 1992, 1996, 1999; Ristock 2012; Walters 2011). By exploring perpetrator tactics and specifically situating these within Stark's (2007) framework, the research findings reported in this paper provide a nuanced qualitative understanding of coercive control IPV in women's relationships with other women.

This study is essential and timely because, since Stark (2007) published his book, several countries have created criminal offences of coercive control. For example, England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland have criminalised coercive control (Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce 2021). In Australia, it is criminalised in Tasmania (*Family Violence Act 2004*) and New South Wales (*Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Act 2022*), and is shortly to be criminalised in Queensland (*Criminal Law (Coercive Control and Affirmative Consent) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2023*; Rose et al. in press). Yet, our understanding of coercive control is predominantly heteronormative and, as such, there is concern about how this move toward criminalisation will impact women who are intimately involved with other women (Australian Women Against Violence Alliance 2021: 13). In Australia, Rugkhla and Dixson (2021) have highlighted the urgent need for qualitative research on LGBTIAQ+ peoples' experiences of coercive control.

Literature Review

Stark (2009, 2009a) dismisses coercive control as a typology of intimate partner violence. He argues that, instead, coercive control is a condition of entrapment that results from a combination of coercive (violent, threatening, or intimidating) and controlling (regulating, depriving, exploiting, or isolating) tactics (Stark 2009: 229) that indirectly compel obedience (Stark 2009: 205). Thus, coercive control is neither a type of violence nor a typology of violence. Conceptualising it as such masks the nuanced and deeply personal manifestation of coercive control, tailored to exploit the vulnerabilities of survivors. By sifting through the limited available studies, using Starks's conceptualisations as our starting point, we developed four key groupings of tactics which have been reported by same-gender attracted women in abusive intimate relationships: 1) assault, threats, and intimidation; 2) humiliation, degradation, and emotional cruelty; 3) restricting personal territory and freedom; and 4) mind games.

Assault, Threats, and Intimidation

Physical and sexual violence can feature in the tactical toolbox of heterosexual coercive controllers (Murphy 2009, n.d.b; Stark 2007). Both are powerful devices for inciting fear, anxiety, despair, and subsequent victim compliance (Johnson and Kelly 2010). However, it is important to note that actual bodily harm can be absent from coercive and controlling intimacy (Anderson 2009). This is because verbal and non-verbal browbeating alone are excellent ways to engender fear and victim obedience, especially if assault has been used in the past (Renzetti 1992; Ristock 2012; Taylor, Fraser and Riggs 2019). Perpetrators may verbally threaten, for example, to physically hurt, disfigure, or kill individual victims, their children, other family members, new partners, friends, and pets (Taylor et al. 2019). Threats of perpetrator self-harm and suicide are also common (Stark 2007: 251). Non-verbal intimidation can involve the use of threatening behaviour, facial expressions, and body language that communicate clearly to victim-survivors that they are under threat (Murphy n.d.a). Menacing behaviours, such as dangerous driving, are also common methods of intimidation (Hayes and Jeffries 2015; Ristock 2012).

Within the context of women's same-gender IPV, studies show that victim-survivors can experience physical and sexual abuse alongside other threatening and intimidating acts. For example, victim-survivors report having items thrown at them, being menaced with weapons, having their property destroyed, and being verbally threatened with harm. This behaviour may include threats to kill the victim and others that the victim cares for (Donovan and Barnes 2019; Glass et al. 2004; Heintz and Melendez 2006; Messing et al. 2021; Miller et al. 2014; Renzetti 1988, 1992, 1999; Ristock 2003; Taylor, Fraser and Riggs 2019; West 2002, 2012). Threats of suicide and self-harm are common (Renzetti 1992). Homophobia is also used by perpetrators who will threaten to out their partners to friends, family, or employers (Campo and Tayton 2015; Elliott 1996).

Humiliation, Degradation, and Emotional Cruelty

Heterosexual coercive control studies show that perpetrators frequently use humiliation, degradation, and emotional cruelty to establish perpetrator superiority via the disintegration of victim self-respect, worth, and esteem (Hennessy 2012: 114; Stark 2007: 258–260). Common tactics under this banner include name-calling, put-downs, swearing, spitefulness, comparing the victim unfavourably to others, denying victim-survivors their ideas and opinions, criticising and diminishing their strengths and achievements, telling them that their current relationship is as good as they will ever get, and shaming (Hayes and Jeffries, 2015: 31; Stark 2007: 259–261). Being regularly insulted and degraded by a perpetrator is also reported to occur in women's same-gender IPV (Donovan and Hester 2014; Renzetti 1992). Homophobia can be weaponised by perpetrators to demean, shame, and emotionally harm IPV victim-survivors (Donovan and Barnes 2019).

Restricting Personal Territory and Freedom

In coercive and controlling heterosexual relationships, the methods exercised seek to deprive victim-survivors of social support, reduce their personal space and freedom, and crush their self-identity. Victim-survivors become increasingly dependent on the perpetrator as their ability to resist is diminished and they lose their sense of self. Examples of tactics under this heading include social isolation, financial abuse, and the invasion of personal space and privacy (Kutin, Russell and Reid 2017; Woodlock 2017). Perpetrators of coercive control also work to estrange their partners from loved ones and may weaponise homophobia to engender co-dependency and consequent social isolation (Frankland and Brown 2014; Lockhart et al. 1994; McClennen, Summers and Daley 2002; Renzetti 1988; West 2002). Isolation may begin innocently, spending quality time with each other or going everywhere together, and both partners may develop a closeness and reliance on one another as a response to living in a homophobic world (Hayes and Jeffries 2015).

Mind Games

Mind games are deliberate attempts at psychological manipulation. They are covert, coercive, unscrupulous actions masked by everyday-sounding communication (Murphy n.d.b). The purpose is to brainwash victim-survivors into compliance. Perpetrators withhold critical information, gaslight, lie, minimise, or deny their abusive actions and cause their partners to question their sanity (Hayes and Jeffries 2015: 37–39).

For example, in the early stages of a heterosexual relationship, *love-bombing* is often used. Love-bombing is a grooming tactic involving repeated and exaggerated signs of affection. These may include constant flattery, gift-giving, grand romantic gestures, declarations of intense adoration and love, and expressing a desire for life long commitment (Blyth 2021: 21). This is a particularly insidious form of manipulation because perpetrators intentionally hijack, and play into, the survivor's narrative of romance for their gain (Hennessy 2012). The presence of love-bombing as a perpetrator tactic shows that periods of romance, love, and calm are part of a strategy. Ultimately, these gestures of kindness are revoked by perpetrators, intermixed with abusive behaviours, or eliminated (Hennessy 2012). Later, gaslighting, transference of blame, mixed messages, and contradictions in perpetrators' private and public personas can be observed. Taken together, this results in the

victim-survivor losing her ability to trust their thoughts. They are, as Hennessey (2012: 77) states, “like a person who has been secretly invaded by a virus and does not know why she is feeling bad”.

Mind games and manipulation have been highlighted in a handful of studies on lesbian IPV (Elliott 1996; Hart 1986). Early research into abusive lesbian relationships revealed that perpetrators withheld critical information from their partners and enacted gaslighting behaviour which minimised or denied the abuse and instilled a sense of insanity (Hayes and Jeffries 2015; Hart 1986; Peterman and Dixon 2003). Additionally, same-gender attracted women have experienced their partners using threats of self-harm or suicide as a further means to control them (Glass et al. 2004; Renzetti 1992).

Method

This research qualitatively examined the narratives of 18 same-gender attracted women who had experienced same-gender IPV in a total of 21 abusive relationships with women. It used a combination of snowball (Maxfield and Babbie 2014), purposive (Patton 2002), and convenience sampling. A convenience sample was initially obtained through recruitment flyers and calls for participants through radio, website, and social media. Thereafter, snowball sampling was used to recruit additional women willing to tell their stories.

Ethical clearance was obtained through [removed for peer review] Human Research Ethics Committee (2016/476) and adhered to the international ethical standards for research on domestic violence (World Health Organisation 2016). Written informed consent was obtained from all research participants. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, we assigned a pseudonym to each research participant and their intimate partners throughout this paper. Minor details of women’s stories that had no bearing on the research were also altered to protect their anonymity.

Interviews were conducted online, over the telephone or in person, depending on how the women chose to engage. Some women sent emails containing their stories. The interview schedule was open-ended, with broad discussion topics, allowing participants leeway to express their experiences of IPV on their terms (Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte 1999). More specifically, participants were asked to discuss how they met their abuser, to talk through the progression of the relationship, and to discuss incidents of “conflict”, abuse, and harm. Written stories, follow-up questions and raw interview transcripts were analysed using manual and software-assisted thematic analysis, whereby patterns or themes that emerge within data are identified and analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006). This method of analysing data was beneficial because it allowed for the identification of several key themes that illuminated various dynamics and dimensions of abuse for women in abusive same-gender relationships.

Overview of the Research Participants

The mean age of interviewees was 34.7 years. At the time of the interviews, nine women identified as lesbian/gay, five were bisexual or pansexual, and one was asexual. The remaining three victim-survivors did not wish to disclose their current sexual orientation. Everyone had experienced at least one abusive same-gender relationship with a woman. Most identified as being cisgender ($n=14$), two were trans women, one was feminine presenting non-binary and another was a trans man who had lived with IPV as a lesbian woman pre-transition. Table 1 provides a summary of critical information relevant to each survivor, including their pseudonym and age; the pseudonym of their partner; and details of the relationship, including relationship length and time since separation.

Table 1. Victim/interviewee, perpetrator/s and relationship details

Victim/Interviewee		Perpetrator/s	Relationship details	
<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age at interview</i>	<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Time Separated</i>
Alice	53	Jo	8 years	2 years
Ava	37	Fiona	4 years	8 years
Emily	24	Lisa	2 years	7 years
Mary	42	Chloe	8 Months	10 years
Georgia	32	Amy	2 years	2 years
		Kate	3 months	8 years
Vicky	18	Robin	<3 months	1 year
Lucy	35	Kristy	2 years	5 years
Kelly	26	Hannah	4 years	2 years
James	48	Elle	8 years	20 years
		Helen	5 years	8 months
Vivian	60	Nancy	26 years	<6 months
Natalie	49	Julie	1.5 years	1 year
Megan	21	Sally	9 months	2 years
Taylor	32	Jenny	1.5 years	2.5 years
Rebecca	24	Wendy	3.5 years	<6 months
Christine	46	Jill	5 years	4 years
		Jackie	3 years	1 year
Sarah	21	Jordy	1.5 years	<6 months
Jess	25	Britt	2.5 years	5 years
Julia	32	Becky	5 years	4 years

Coercively Controlling Tactics

The study participants reported a vast array of coercively controlling behaviours. These revealed the highly personalised and targeted nature of coercive control and the weaponisation of internalised and externalised homophobia in same-gender relationships between women. The tactics they experienced reflected the themes we had observed in our literature review and are presented under the same headings: 1) assault, threats, and intimidation; 2) humiliation, degradation, and emotional cruelty; 3) restricting personal territory and freedom; and 4) mind games.

Assault, Threats, and Intimidation

Physical violence, sexual abuse, threats, and intimidation—whether direct, indirect, verbal or non-verbal—are crucial instruments in the coercively controlling perpetrator’s arsenal because they provoke dread, anxiety, despair, and subsequent compliance in victim-survivors (Renzetti 1992; Ristock 2012; Stark 2007; Taylor, Fraser and Riggs 2019). Over half the interviewees reported experiencing some form of physical harm, including being choked, pinned down, punched, hit, slapped, pushed, shoved, pinched, assaulted with objects, and having their hair pulled. James described an instance where his abuser, Elle, punched him in the face, resulting in a black eye. “Her fist, it came out of nowhere [and then] she hit me in the head with a snooker cue, and [my head] busted wide open. I was knocked unconscious. I had whiplash for six weeks”.

Some reported non-lethal strangulation, which is recognised as “a risk factor for future serious harm and death” (Douglas and Fitzgerald 2022: 271) and has been identified as a powerful tool of coercive control in same-gender relationships (Messing et al. 2021). For example, Kelly explained that her abuser would “squish my windpipe or bruise my neck just constantly, where I couldn’t breathe”. Christine was strangled multiple times throughout her abusive relationship. She described one horrifying incident in which Jackie “snapped” and “went from the hitting, punching, and pushing a chair up against me and

pinning me against the wall” to attempting to asphyxiate her with a lanyard Christine was wearing around her neck at the time. Christine said, “she was twisting [the lanyard] tighter, she kicked the chair out of the way, and her knee went into my stomach and just kept twisting, kept twisting until I couldn’t scream anymore”.

Some interviewees relayed having lived with sexually coercive behaviours, such as being forced to kiss and sexually touch their partner, and penetration without consent. Robin made Vicky feel violated by “talking dirty about her mother and saying how she wanted to have sex with her”. Vicky explained that Robin “would threaten to masturbate over my mother unless I sent her homemade pornography”. After Vicky sent this to her, Robin used the “homemade pornography” as another control mechanism via threats to post it online if Vicky was recalcitrant.

Rebecca had lost a close friend in a motor vehicle accident involving drink driving. The distress this caused was exploited by her girlfriend, Wendy, who would threaten to drive while under the influence of alcohol if Rebecca refused to have sex with her. Wendy would frequently “completely blow up and scream” at Rebecca “for hours” when she said, “no”. Wendy would say “a whole lot of really nasty things, being completely hurtful”. One evening, when Rebecca was drunk, Wendy sexually assaulted her while she was asleep and unable to consent.

Hannah frequently used Kelly’s previous sexual encounters with men to justify assault. Hannah knew Kelly “hated every minute” of her heterosexual relationship, and that it was a source of “great shame” for her. Hannah used this to make Kelly feel, in her own words: “disgusting”. In one instance, after forcibly digitally penetrating Kelly, Hannah called her a “fucking whore” and told her that her prior sexual history with men meant that she “deserved it”. Rebecca relayed how her perpetrator used her bisexuality against her to coerce her into sex. If Rebecca was “not in the mood,” Wendy would respond by saying things like, “You’re not really queer” or “if you’re really into girls... then prove it”.

Some interviewees spoke of incidences where their partners made overt threats to murder them, their children, or their victims’ subsequent intimate partners. Everyone relayed indirect attacks that included the destruction of property and shouting to intimidate and cause fear. James’s abuser destroyed “all of [his] clothes, everything that was hanging up ... had been cut right up the back”. Kelly’s partner “pulled a knife, cut up all our furniture, yelled and went crazy”. When Georgia attempted to end her relationship with Amy, who had just completed training to be a police officer, Amy would “rock up at the house and be yelling and banging on the door”. Although Amy had never been physically violent, Georgia feared for her life because she had access to a firearm and “could kill me if she wanted to”. Alice reported incidents where her abuser would slam doors, punch walls, drive dangerously, and destroy household objects as a means of intimidating her.

Making a victim believe a perpetrator is capable of intimate partner homicide is an extremely effective compliance mechanism. Even when abusers were not making direct threats to kill, for every victim interviewed, there was often an unspoken murderous subtext within the intimidating and threatening actions of their partners. For instance, Alice said, “when Jo did that, threw and smashed up objects, it was to show me that ‘I can also do this to you’”.

Other perpetrators destroyed non-physical assets to cause harm. Ava ran her business from the house that she shared with her abuser, Fiona, who deliberately hacked and attempted to destroy Ava’s business website. More generally, Fiona also liked to disrupt Ava’s business activities by behaving belligerently, throwing things, making loud noises, and arguing with Ava’s clients. Ava said, “she would scream at my clients for little things like somebody dared to park on the wrong side of the driveway”.

Finally, the majority of interviewees explained that their abusers would use threats of suicide and self-harm to cause fear and, in turn, inculcate victim compliance. For example, Vicky’s girlfriend demanded that she call her at a particular time of night. Once, when Vicky failed to comply, she awoke to the news that her partner had attempted suicide. Rebecca’s abuser would frequently contact her by phone and express suicidal ideation after the relationship had ended, seemingly in a bid to get her to come back. When Emily started to question Lisa’s behaviour, Lisa said she would “kill herself and that her blood would be on my hands and that just made me stop. I was terrified that she was going to do it”. Likewise, Taylor said, “one night, I told her [perpetrator] that the way she was treating me wasn’t fair and that we needed to break up. That night, she locked herself in the bedroom, took a handful of pills and cut her arms at least 30 times with a small blade”.

Humiliation, Degradation, and Emotional Cruelty

Humiliation, degradation, and emotional cruelty are tools used to establish perpetrators’ superiority via the disintegration of the victim’s self-respect, worth, and esteem (Beckworth et al. 2023; Stark 2007: 258). Every interviewee relayed having endured these perpetrator tactics which incorporated verbal put-downs, insulting and verbally abusing loved ones, withholding affection, cheating, and using homo/bi/transphobia to cause harm. As is always the case with coercive control, perpetrators would capitalise on the vulnerabilities of their victims.

Verbal put-downs were commonly used to make victim-survivors feel “shitty”, “disgusting”, “selfish”, or “stupid”. Often, these verbal harms would be targeted at the specific victim’s insecurities, such as concerns about weight, appearance, or intellect. Emily told of instances where her partner, Lisa, made fun of her physical appearance, which would leave her feeling humiliated:

She would start telling me that whatever I was wearing made me look enormous, and that I had ugly taste in clothing. She would try to put me down on myself by commenting on my weight, hair, or skin. She made me wear makeup because I was starting to get a little too “homely” in her eyes.

Similarly, Natalie explained that Julie used verbal put-downs to chip away at her self-esteem by trying to convince her that there was something wrong with her physical appearance. Lucy’s abuser would constantly “tell me that I was stupid. That I was a fucking idiot”. Emily’s abuser, Lisa, weaponised her food allergy as a tactic of degradation and humiliation. Lisa would insist on going to seafood restaurants when Emily had a life-threatening seafood allergy. Once there, Lisa would berate and yell at Emily in front of customers and waitstaff because “I couldn’t eat anything”.

Victims described enduring tirades of dehumanising and damaging verbal abuse but equally harmful were the quiet, snide, and cruel remarks that also contributed to the erosion of self-esteem and worth. Georgia’s abuser would degrade her by saying things like, “nobody will ever like you” and “you’re no good at this and you’re no good at that”. When Georgia used artwork and photography to express her creativity, Kate would tell her that her work was “not very good”. James’s abuser would say cruel things to convince him that he was dull and unlovable, saying things like, “you are boring” and “you can’t dance”. Eventually, James came to believe these things. Although 20 years had passed since fleeing the abuse, James said, “I don’t dance anymore”.

Abusers would also verbally put down victims’ loved ones to cause harm. For example, Georgia described a particular instance when her abuser, Amy, began to rant about Georgia’s teenage brother when he drove away from their home after a visit:

My brother visited our house one time. He was new to driving at the time, so when he was leaving, he rolled the wheels, and they made a screeching sound. She just started calling my brother spoiled and a fuck head, and saying really, really nasty things about him.

Amy also liked to use transphobic slurs against Georgia’s friend, Craig, who identified as trans. Jess’s abuser would make comments about the closeness of her family relationships to evoke shame and make her feel as though they were “borderline incestuous”. Christine described an instance where her abuser, Jackie, verbally abused her children when they tried to defend Christine during an argument: she said, ““you are fucking cunts, go run to your mummy ... yeah, that’s what you’re going to do’ and all that degrading stuff”.

Cruelty in actions as well as words was also a common tactic of humiliation and degradation. For example, Jo cheated on Alice without showering or washing her hands afterwards, so that Alice would “smell it on her”. Taylor’s abuser, Jenny, would withhold affection and cheat on her. Jo destroyed Alice’s beloved possessions—she explained:

I have loved objects that have been torn up and smashed, a nice handmade gift from a friend broken on the ground. I’ve got all the treasures and trinkets, ripped-up letters from loved ones. Those things designed to hurt.

Christine’s abuser threatened to obliterate irreplaceable possessions left for Christine by her mother after she had passed away.

Some victim-survivors reported that their partners used LGBTIAQ+ related slights to justify the abuse. For example, one bisexual participant, Rebecca, expressed that her lesbian partner, Wendy, was very vocal about bisexual people being unfaithful. Consequently, Rebecca was often the target of Wendy’s bi-phobic rants. During these rants, Wendy would tell Rebecca that she was “untrustworthy”, that her bisexuality was a phase, and that Rebecca was “not really attracted to women”.

In heterosexual instances of partner abuse, justifications for abuse based on a victim’s sexual history are commonplace. Slurs like “whore” and “slut” are frequently used by abusive men to degrade their female partners. These slurs neutralise the perceived severity of abuse by blaming the victim or labelling them otherwise deserving of harm. The use of sexist behaviours such as “slut shaming” was present for several victim-survivors whose abusers used their previous heterosexual relationships to diminish their lesbian identity or to justify their enactment of abusive jealousy. Hannah vilified Kelly for her prior heterosexual relationship that was a source of regret and discomfort for Kelly. Rebecca had a similar experience, with her partner often bringing up her relationships with men in arguments:

She found the fact that I have slept with men before her to be really disgusting, and she would tell me that ... she would go on these really angry rants about how it really disgusted her and how she was really uncomfortable with it and all that kind of stuff.

Restricting Personal Territory and Freedom

The methods exercised under this heading are aimed at depriving victim-survivors of social support, reducing their personal space and freedom, and crushing their self-identity (Jones 2000). Tactics include isolation, financial abuse, and invasion of personal space and privacy (Donovan and Hester 2014; Frankland and Brown 2014; Hart 1986; Hayes and Jeffries 2015; Lobel 1986; Renzetti 1993).

Stark (2007: 262) contends that “controllers isolate their partners to prevent disclosure, instil dependence, express exclusive possession, monopolize their skills and resources, and keep them from getting help or support”. Stark’s conceptualisation expresses the importance of confinement in the absence of bars. This sensation was experienced by several interviewees who discussed instances where their abusers attempted to isolate them from family, friends, community, or other sources of support. Natalie recounted her abuser’s attempts at limiting her contact with family and friends. She explained:

I couldn't visit my friends and I couldn't go out on my own. She would tell me: “you are not going out”. I wasn't allowed to go and visit my sister, my daughter, my friends. She was like: “you can't visit them, and you can't talk to them either”.

Taylor’s abuser, Jenny, complained that Taylor “spent too much time with my friends and would threaten to self-harm if I left her alone to hang out with them”.

Isolation was achieved by interviewees’ abusive intimate partners through various techniques. For Natalie and Taylor, their perpetrators were very directive in their demands. Georgia’s and Alice’s abusers were more covert, lying to friends and family in a bid to isolate them. Georgia’s girlfriend told her close friends that Georgia “didn’t even like them” and “always spoke badly about [them] behind their back”. Alice said “Jo was a liar, an absolute liar. She would have made any sort of story to make me look bad [to others]”. Some perpetrators acted rudely or belligerently in the presence of friends or relatives to instigate estrangement. For example, Lucy stated that Kristy would be discourteous toward her friends, which resulted in “my friends hating her so I couldn’t see them unless she [Kristy] wasn't around”.

Likewise, jealousy was duplicitously used to curtail victim-survivors’ social activities, cutting them off from friends, families, and other support systems (Stark 2007: 249). Perpetrators would go into jealous rages if interviewees displayed affection towards others, such as when greeting acquaintances or hugging friends. One perpetrator frequently lashed out whenever a random man in public glanced in the victim’s direction. They would rant about how she could tell that the interviewee “wanted to fuck” these men, even though she was openly lesbian and not sexually interested in men at all. Wendy refused to let Rebecca attend a bi-specific support group because she believed that bisexual people were unfaithful. They assumed that Rebecca would use the pretext of attending these gatherings as a means of cheating on her. To placate Wendy, Rebecca stopped attending. Constantly accusing partners of perfidious intent when they leave the house is a powerful segregation tactic. For victim-survivors, the consequences of moving around in public spaces are not worth the ensuing anguish that will be meted out by the perpetrator. Thus, victim-survivors altered their behaviours to avoid arguments or conflict with their partners.

Isolation is a pivotal means of control because it prevents victim-survivors from hearing others’ perspectives and brings them into line with the perpetrators’ worldviews (Murphy n.d.b). As Rebecca herself said, “Wendy was scared that if I was involved in queer social groups ... that they would turn me against her”. By isolating victims, perpetrators seek to inculcate reliance and prevent their intimate partners from disclosing the abuse to others, seeking help and, ultimately, leaving the relationship.

Economic abuse is a common feature of intimate relationships marred by coercive control, with the “distribution of money being sharply skewed in the [perpetrator’s] favour” (Stark 2007: 272). By curtailing victims’ access to money, the perpetrator constrains agency and restricts freedom. For the interviewees in this study, common tactics of economic abuse included taking or stealing victims’ money and refusing to contribute to household expenses. Perpetrators also prevented victim-survivors from spending money on themselves. This forced them to do without to meet the perpetrators’ demands for certain items, and the victim incurring debt as a result of their abusers’ actions.

Kelly’s abuser, Hannah, would “take my wallet, my phone, and my car and leave. I had no way of getting to work, no way of contacting anyone or paying for anything”. Hannah would then spend Kelly’s money and refuse to return it. At one stage in the relationship, Kelly had not “eaten properly in about a month. I asked for money, some of the money that she had stolen from me, but she refused and punched me in the pit of my empty stomach”.

Invading victims' personal space and privacy is another means to restrict freedom. Several participants reported that they experienced their abuser conducting surveillance or enacting stalking behaviours during the relationship. Others reported having their space invaded by perpetrators who demanded access to computers, laptops, phones, and other personal items. Christine reported incidents where her abuser would walk into the room and demand access to whatever electronic device she was using. If Christine refused to surrender the device or was too slow to do so, her abuser would act aggressively or destroy the device by smashing it in front of her.

Alice's perpetrator was covert. She would access Alice's phone, emails, private journals, and personal correspondence in secret, without consent. Alice could tell when Jo had done this because Jo would try to bait Alice by directing their conversations toward the content of Alice's private messages. Alice said, "Jo would stalk my phone, break into my social media, read my private messages using my password and then deny she had done so". Jo also convinced Alice to install a program on her smartphone that allowed her to pinpoint its physical location using GPS tracking. Half the interviewees also experienced some degree of post-relationship stalking and harassment. This included abusive social media posts, phone calls, unannounced visits, nuisance behaviours, and more serious verbal threats of harm and murder.

Mind Games

Several interviewees identified perpetrators utilising mind games to manipulate, cause fear, confuse, brainwash, and entrap them. Perpetrator tactics included love-bombing early in the relationship, gaslighting and other lies, threatening suicide and self-harm, dual personalities, and the meshing of love and abuse. Each is considered in detail below.

Many interviewees expressed that their abusers used gratuitous displays of affection early in their relationships. For example, Taylor described the first six months of the relationship with Jenny as "a dream". Taylor said, "[Jenny] bought me presents, took me on extravagant dates and left love notes on my desk. People would envy how she treated me and spoiled me". Natalie explained that, at this point, "the relationship was beautiful. I felt like nothing could go wrong. I was head over heels for this woman". Similar feelings were experienced by Christine, who recalled the early stages of her relationship with her abuser, Jill: "In every way, I thought this relationship was going to be for the rest of our lives". Love-bombing was a shrewd foundational tactic of coercive control because, once the overt abuse began, victim-survivors invariably downplayed this as a "rough patch" in their relationship, rather than abuse. Gaslighting was also used by perpetrators to minimise, recast, or erase their abusive behaviour. For example, Jo would send Alice text messages following instances of abuse and "change the [abuse] story".

Hannah kept Kelly in a perpetual state of confusion by twisting the reality of everyday life. Kelly would "do something" and Hannah "would say, 'oh, no, you didn't do that'". Kelly was on medication to treat anxiety (as a result of living with abuse). Hannah knew this could "mess with [my] memory" and took advantage of that. Blaming her apparent confusion on her medication made it seem real, even when Hannah had provoked it. Kelly felt like her sanity was slowly eroding and she doubted her thoughts, feelings, and actions. Likewise, Taylor explained that her abusive partner would "often try to convince me of conversations that never happened. Even over small irrelevant things that didn't matter. She convinced me I was paranoid and losing my mind, that I was wrong about my memory of events or conversations".

Perpetrators of IPV often present very differently in public than they do in private. This can create immense confusion for victim-survivors because family and friends may perceive the abusers as charming, loving, and attentive. Alice articulated that publicly people would "see [Jo] filling the glass for me, but they wouldn't see her smash it". For Alice, this shift between public kindness and private cruelty caused cognitive dissonance. Maybe Jo was, at heart, a kind person who sometimes did unkind things. The filling and smashing of the glass reflected a larger tactical pattern of perpetrator behaviour that mixed acts of love and intimacy with aggression, cruelty, or violence. Alice poignantly described this as a "kiss delivered as a punch". She explained that "Jo would kind of grab and forcefully kiss me... but it was not a kiss... not really. If you could imagine a kiss, but a kiss delivered as though it were a punch".

Similarly, Christine's second abusive partner, Jill, engaged in what Christine aptly termed "negative affection": abuse disguised as love. For example, on one occasion, while Christine was cooking over a hot stove, Jill approached her for a hug and "accidentally" drove Christine's hand onto the boiling pot, scalding her. Afterwards, when Christine wanted to hold hands, Jill would respond by squeezing Christine's knuckles together, hurting her. At other times Jill would act as though she were performing romantic gestures like running her fingers through Christine's hair, only to unexpectedly yank or pull at it "and then she would just smile".

Summary and Final Thoughts

Since Evan Stark (2007) synthesised decades of feminist domestic violence scholarship under the banner of coercive control, numerous Western nations, including Australia, have moved to criminalise the non-physical aspects of IPV. While initially heteronormative, Stark's (2007) framework was later revised to also consider the salience of coercive control for same-gender couples (Stark and Hester 2019: 92). However, while many of the perpetrator tactics noted by Stark (2007) are strewn through previous studies on lesbian IPV (e.g., Davis and Taylor 2002; Donovan and Hester 2014; Lobel 1986; Messing et al. 2021; Renzetti 1992; Ristock 2012) systematic qualitative research that has specifically explored the pertinence of Stark's framework beyond heterosexuality is absent. Utilising the narratives of 18 victim-survivors, this research fills an important gap in the existing knowledge by qualitatively exploring the tactics used by IPV perpetrators in women's same-gender romantic relationships.

Our study found that perpetrators utilised a plethora of coercively controlling strategies, including assaults, threats, intimidation, humiliation, degradation, emotional cruelty, mind games, and restricting victims' territory and freedom. While these tactics resembled those reported by heterosexual women in prior studies, they also manifested in specific ways for the victim-survivors in this research. For example, some perpetrators used homophobic rhetoric to manipulate and isolate victim-survivors. Other survivors described their abuser exploiting myths about LGBTIAQ+ people to justify invasive or restrictive abuse tactics. Some perpetrators used myths about bisexual people being unfaithful to justify going through the victim-survivor's personal correspondence, isolating them from friends and acquaintances of both sexes, or damaging items gifted to the victim-survivor by others. In other cases, abusers completely disregarded their relationships in public out of a sense of internalised homophobia.

This research identifies a significant gap in the literature surrounding the patterns and progression of coercive control. If coercive control is understood as a pattern of abusive behaviour and can increase in severity and frequency over time (Stark 2007, 2009), then it is important to examine not just the tactics of abuse but how different tactics are combined and deployed as a relationship progresses. For instance, coercive and controlling abuse can be masked, particularly early in the relationship, by coercive and controlling tactics that mirror healthy relationships (e.g., love-bombing). The stories of victim-survivors in this study speak to coercive control as an ever-developing trajectory of both violent and non-violent behaviours. This conceptualisation better encapsulates the changing experiences for victim-survivors and better serves the notion that abusive relationships do not usually begin as severely coercive and controlling, and coercive control may present very differently depending on the maturity of the relationship as it moves toward dissolution.

In Australia, we will soon learn what the impacts of criminalising coercive control will be in practice (Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce 2021). Understanding the nuances of IPV beyond the heteronormative is, thus, especially time critical. Early evaluations of criminalisation in Scotland, England, and Wales have paid almost no attention to the consequences for the LGBTIAQ+ community (Home Office 2021; Scottish Government 2023). Thus, moving forward, future research must consider the repercussions of legislative change on diverse groups of victim-survivors, including women romantically paired with other women (Wangmann 2022; Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce 2021).

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