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Intimate Partner Violence and Help-Seeking
in Lesbian and Queer Relationships
Challenging Recognition



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Abstract

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The topic of intimate partner violence (IPV) in lesbian and queer relationships continues to be under-researched in Sweden. This lack of knowledge and recognition can have severe consequences for the help-seeking of those who are not recognized as victims of IPV. This thesis aims to fill this knowledge gap by examining the help-seeking processes of lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV in Sweden. By drawing on qualitative interviews with 25 people who have experienced violence in intimate lesbian and/or queer relationships, the thesis examines how the interviewees made sense of the experiences of IPV, where they sought help and how they perceived the support they received. These findings contribute to our understanding of the challenges that recognition of IPV in queer and lesbian relationships entails. Many of the interviewees struggled to identify themselves as victims of IPV, as their experiences did not fit with the public stories of violence, which frame IPV as a heterosexual phenomenon and tend to emphasize physical violence. To understand the struggle for recognition, the thesis draws on the theoretical concept of slow violence from environmental studies, which calls attention to invisible and processual forms of violence that manifest over time. The help-seeking patterns of the interviewees were characterized by subtle, iterative and aborted attempts to gain support and included different informal and formal actors. The findings suggest that the help-seeking processes of victim-survivors often mirror the violence experienced, meaning that they are repeated and processual. Many interviewees initially sought support for other reasons than IPV. This indirect help-seeking suggests that help-providers need to be able to recognize potential victims. Failed help-seeking encounters caused by institutionalized heteronormative values were often characterized by inadvertent misrecognition. This included ignoring or minimizing signs of abuse, leading to failed or lack of interventions. To understand the specific conditions for help-seeking in the Swedish context, ideals around progress, family-making and community support are discussed. This includes specifically the social and legal vulnerability which shape both violence and help-seeking in lesbian and queer families. Finally, the ideal of the singular LGBTQ community as a ready resource for support is challenged.

Keywords: LGBTQ, IPV, DV, Help-seeking, Lesbian and Queer, Slow Violence, Sweden, Qualitative Interviews, Temporalities, Community

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Abbreviations

CTS	Conflict Tactics Scales
DV	Domestic Violence
DVA	Domestic Violence and Abuse
FV	Family Violence
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
LGBTQ	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer
LOKK	National Organisation of Women's Shelters in Denmark
NCK	The National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence against Women
NFVS	National Family Violence Surveys (US)
PTSD	Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
RFSL	The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex rights
VAW	Violence Against Women

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1. Introduction

What affects me I would say is actually that I feel that I don't really count. That makes it harder to heal I would say. I have a hard time even, well, when there is a campaign about violence in close relationships, it can be the news where they are talking about it on the morning show. I find it hard just watching it. Just because I know I won't count.

This statement is from my interview with Lovisa, a queer woman in her mid-twenties who identifies as bisexual/pansexual and was in an abusive relationship with a woman when she was in her late teens. She is not alone in her experience. Feelings of exclusion ('I don't really count') from the cultural narratives around intimate partner violence (IPV) were commonly expressed in the twenty-five interviews that I conducted with people who had experiences of such violence in lesbian and/or queer relationships. These feelings had an impact on how people identified themselves as having experienced violence but also on how and where they sought help. In this thesis, I explore the help-seeking processes in lesbian and queer relationships. I should add at the outset that for analytical purposes, I use the categories lesbian and queer relationships, and I refer to the interviewees as lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV. However, and as I shall discuss in the Methodology chapter, these categories may include a number of different identity descriptors such as bisexual, pansexual, homosexual, lesbian and queer.

The topic of IPV in lesbian and queer relationships remains under-researched in the Nordic countries. While research on IPV in LGBTQ people's relationships started to appear during the 1980s and 1990s and was primarily conducted in Anglophone countries, research on the subject has only gradually started to spread to other countries (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2016: 284). In Sweden the issue of IPV in LGBTQ relationships began to gain political recognition during the 1990s. Same-sex relationships are often mentioned in Swedish national action plans on IPV, but they frequently lack specific initiatives due to a dearth in research on the subject (Heimer et al., 2009: 67). Lars Gårdfeldt (1999, 2003) was among one of the first scholars in Sweden to raise awareness around IPV in homosexual relationships. Gårdfeldt emphasized that although homosexual IPV was starting to gain more attention, it was still very much an invisible and hidden subject, both privately and publicly (2003: 23). In 2009, the National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women (NCK) at Uppsala University also published a report on same-sex violence

(Heimer et al., 2009), reviewing the research conducted in Sweden and internationally. According to this report, same-sex intimate partner violence was a relatively new research subject then, with few studies in the Nordic countries (Heimer et al., 2009: 7). In Sweden, the subject has mainly been raised in small-scale studies published as articles or in research papers by students within different disciplines such as gender studies, social work, criminology, law and medicine (Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2007: 49). The exception is Carin Holmberg and Ulrica Stjernqvist's (2005) large-scale survey of violence in same-sex relationships. This survey was sent out to the LGBTQ organization RFSL's¹ members and 2013 people responded. Of this group one-fourth reported having experienced some form of physical, psychological and/or sexual violence in a current or previous relationship. As part of the original study, Holmberg and Stjernqvist also interviewed help providers, both volunteers and professionals, working in either support services or LGBTQ organizations. These interviews showed a lack of knowledge about LGBTQ victim-survivors within general support service organizations. Many of the interviewees working in the general support organizations seemed to assume that LGBTQ people would stick to their own organizations, despite the fact that the respondents who had sought help had primarily used general support services (Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2005: 42). However, due to the lack of research mentioned above we know little about the motivations for seeking particular kinds of help or how those groups experience the help provided. This thesis aims to explore these areas further.

Research aim and questions

The main aim of this thesis is to explore how victim-survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) in lesbian and queer relationships understand their experiences of seeking (or choosing not to seek) help. In this qualitative study, I examine the help-seeking processes of lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV in Sweden. This involves analysing where lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV seek support as well as how they perceive the support they receive, but the study is also a broader analysis of the challenges facing recognition of IPV in queer and lesbian relationships. My research is guided by the following questions:

- 1) How do lesbian and queer victim-survivors describe and make sense of their experiences of IPV and help-seeking in relation to such violence?
- 2) What are lesbian and queer victim-survivors' experiences of the informal and formal support systems?

¹ The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex rights.

3) What are the challenges lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV experience in the act of seeking (or not seeking) help?

I began to explore the general topic of IPV in lesbian relationships in my MA thesis (Ovesen, 2016). There I found that IPV in lesbian relationships was defined by silence. I explained this silence in terms of a lack of cultural narratives to understand and describe non-heterosexual IPV, upheld by a reluctance and sustained by lack of resources to address the issue of violence within LGBTQ communities. While researching my MA thesis I worked at the National Organisation of Women's Shelters in Denmark² (LOKK) on a project that aimed to expand the target group for the national help line and legal counselling to include different gender and sexual identities. This allowed me to discuss the issue with professionals in the field. I noticed that some of the help-providers I talked to were a bit reluctant to talk about their experiences with assisting victim-survivors in same-sex relationships in the setting of women's shelters. It made me want to continue my research on IPV in lesbian and queer relationships with a focus on help-seeking.

Research on LGBTQ victim-survivors' help-seeking

While research on IPV in LGBTQ relationships is increasing, it is still an understudied phenomenon. Much of the early research focused on explaining IPV in same-sex relationships and/or on attempting to measure the prevalence of IPV. Little attention was paid to help-seeking behaviours and processes (Donovan and Barnes, 2020a: 555). However, an increasing number of studies from different countries have addressed IPV and help-seeking in LGBTQ relationships (Calton et al., 2015; Donovan and Barnes, 2020a; Donovan and Hester, 2015; Guadalupe-Diaz and Jasinski, 2017; Laskey and Bolam, 2019; Parry and O'Neal, 2015; Renzetti, 1989, 1996; Turell and Cornell-Swanson, 2008; Turell and Herrmann, 2008). Barriers to help-seeking are prominently in focus. Jenny M. Calton et al. (2015) suggest, for instance, that there are three main barriers regarding IPV in LGBTQ relationships: “[a] limited understanding of the problem of LGBTQ IPV, stigma, and systemic inequities” (2015: 1). These three components reinforce and uphold one another as lack of knowledge, for example, hinders help provision. Fear of being met with phobic responses can also prevent victim-survivors from seeking help through the formal support services (Balsam, 2001; Guadalupe-Diaz and Jasinski, 2017; Renzetti, 1996). Fear of disclosure of one's sexual orientation or gender identification can be an influential factor in preventing victim-survivors from

² LOKK (National Organisation of Women's Shelters in Denmark) is an NGO working as a union of 52 women's shelters and counselling centres in Denmark (LOKK, n.d.)

reporting violence to law enforcement (Turell and Herrmann, 2008: 214). Susan C. Turell and La Vonne Cornell-Swanson (2008) emphasize that the possibilities for help-seeking for IPV vary between and within different groups (2008: 74–75). Although barriers to help-seeking might be commonly shared by LGBTQ people, the nature of these obstacles varies and is articulated differently. Gay men, for example, might encounter additional challenges when seeking help, as many of the domestic violence shelters and agencies are aimed at women. Furthermore, the vast majority of DV resources are not only aimed at women but also work from cisgendered assumptions. This creates a specific obstacle for transgender, queer and non-binary victim-survivors (Guadalupe-Diaz and Jasinski, 2017: 775-776).

In the Swedish context, Holmberg and Stjernqvist's study (2005) also shows a need for more research on the subject of help-seeking as well as the general support services' capacity to assist LGBTQ victim-survivors. Few of the respondents had used LGBTQ services for support. Holmberg and Stjernqvist suggest that the relatively small size of the LGBTQ communities in Sweden could be one reason why many of the respondents had not sought help through LGBTQ organizations, as it can be difficult to remain anonymous and safe when seeking help (Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2005: 126). Most LGBTQ organizations in Sweden also lack specialization in IPV. Unfortunately the original survey only asked those respondents who had been in contact with the police about their help-seeking experiences, thus skewing the data in a particular way. Informal forms of help-seeking were not addressed in this first survey. In order to capture the help-seeking behaviours of the respondents, Holmberg and Stjernqvist (2007) conducted a smaller follow-up survey study with 57 respondents who were recruited from the original survey. Of the 57 respondents, 29 identified as lesbian women, 23 as homosexual men, and two as transgender, as well as one homosexual man who identified as living with a heterosexual woman (2007: 52). In line with the pattern from studies from other countries (see Donovan and Hester, 2015), in this second survey social networks were often the primary source of help, most commonly with friends, followed by family members and, in some cases, work colleagues (Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2007: 56). Most of the respondents were pleased with the help they had received though some had experienced phobic responses such as not having their experiences acknowledged as violence by their social networks. Many of the respondents had received advice from their networks, but few had received any practical help with moving or reporting the violence to the police, for example. Some of the respondents feared a loyalty conflict as LGBTQ communities in Sweden are relatively small, and it is not uncommon that a couple has mutual friends within the community. The respondents who sought professional help had primarily turned to psychiatric institutions, psychologists and other types of counselling services such as family therapy. In total 15 of the 57 respondents had engaged in some kind of counselling/therapy. Six of the respondents had been in contact with the police

(Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2007: 57). The importance of counselling services and the limited contact with the police correlates with other studies on IPV and LGBTQ victim-survivors' help-seeking behaviour (Donovan and Hester, 2015), and with my findings as well, as I discuss further in Chapters Four and Five.

Research on help-providers' perspectives on IPV in LGBTQ relationships are still sparse but are gaining greater focus in research on help-seeking (Donovan and Barnes, 2019b; Simpson and Helfrich, 2005). Emily K. Simpson and Christine A. Helfrich's study (2005), for instance, examines help-seeking barriers in lesbian IPV from the perspectives of the help-providers in a North American context. Following existing literature, their research identifies systemic barriers, institutional barriers and individual barriers. One example of an institutional barrier is the tendency to systematically refer lesbian clients to LGBT³ agencies or to a specific member(s) of staff with LGBT competences, if such a person existed at the workplace and was available at the time (Simpson and Helfrich, 2005: 49). This correlates with Holmberg and Stjernqvist's (2005: 42) findings that many professionals in social support institutions considered IPV in LGBT relationships a matter for LGBT organizations. They also found that organizations with a high level of competence regarding IPV in LGBTQ relationships often depended on one specialized staff member (Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2005: 41). When specialized competency relies on a single individual within an organization, it remains vulnerable to change. Although specialized competence can be comforting in counselling, it can also work as a hindrance to help-seeking if the general personnel is not able to attend to these cases in moments of crisis (Giorgio, 2002: 1240).

The perception of LGBTQ IPV as a specialized subject is in some ways challenged by the idea of sameness. Catherine Donovan and Rebecca Barnes (2017b) explores how discourses of sameness and difference impact agency responses to abusive LGB and/or T partners. They found that practitioners who had a feminist understanding of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) were more inclined to draw on discourses of difference, as heterosexual masculinity was seen as the main cause and motivation for heterosexual men's abuse. However, they found that the sameness discourse dominates how most practitioners in their study make sense of IPV in LGB and/or T relationships. This is perhaps not surprising since the sameness discourse has been used to promote legislative changes supporting equality by suggesting that we are all the same and deserve to be treated equally (Donovan and Barnes, 2019b: 797–799). However, Donovan and Barnes caution against over-emphasising sameness, as this may obscure important differences between experiences of IPV

³ When referring to previous research I use the terminology as it is presented in the research I review. This leads to an inconsistency in the terminology, which is in itself a tendency of the field. I discuss this more here in the research review as well as in the forthcoming Methodology chapter.

and help-seeking in heterosexual relationships compared to LGB and/or T ones and, thus, stand in the way of developing suitable interventions (Donovan and Barnes, 2019b: 789). For example, Holmberg and Stjernqvist's (2005) found that help-providers, especially volunteers, reported that they did not think any specific knowledge was needed to offer help to same-sex IPV victims. These statements were based on the assumption that same-sex IPV is no different from heterosexual IPV and should be treated in the same way (2005: 42). Some of the informants even talked about the lack of LGBT people who (openly) sought help through their services as a possible result of LGBT people's prejudices against heterosexual services. This placed the responsibility for this so-called failure on LGBT individuals (Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2005: 42).

In order to understand barriers for help-seeking and why research on LGBTQ relationships has been relatively absent or left in the margins of IPV research, we need to look at the development of that research. Thus, in the following sections, I focus on the Anglo-American and Swedish contexts to discuss terminologies, debates and methodological and theoretical challenges in the research field.

IPV in LGBTQ relationships: Changing understandings

The public story of domestic violence is a result of decades of feminist activism and scholarship, but it is also, as Donovan and Hester state, "both a story of success and a story of exclusion" (2010: 281). Although empirical studies about violence in heterosexual relationships have increased steadily since the beginning of the 1970s, it took almost two decades before research was conducted on non-heterosexual relationships (McClennen, 2005: 149). This lack of research might be explained by the fact that neither the women's movement nor the LGBTQ movement has been willing to address the issue. The fear of undermining the structural perspective on men's violence against women made the women's movement shy away from the topic; fear of feeding societal homophobic attitudes made the LGBTQ movement reluctant to address it (Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2007: 49). One reason for this can be found in the objectives of the early gay liberation movements in Europe and the US, which strove to change the public perception of homosexuality as sinful and a pathological condition (Baker et al., 2013: 183). The main objectives at the time were to secure civil rights, gain societal acceptance, and create safe spaces to avoid social isolation (Ambjörnsson, 2016: 19–20; Balsam, 2001: 34). When the first National Family Violence Survey (NFVS) was conducted in the US in 1975, there was no civil rights protection for LGBTQ people, and homosexual conduct was still illegal in most states (Baker et al., 2013: 183). In Sweden homosexuality was classified as an illness until 1979 (Smirthwaite and Holmberg, 2014: 120). The exclusion of LGBTQ people in early work on domestic violence has to be seen in the light of LGBTQ people's legal, social

and cultural statuses at that time. It is therefore not surprising that it took around two decades before the subject of IPV in same-sex/lesbian and gay relationships started to gain recognition. However, this would not have been possible without decades of feminist research and activism fighting to make domestic violence a public issue.

Russell P. Dobash and Rebecca Emerson Dobash's influential *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy* (1980) helped pave the way for recognition of the term wife battery to describe domestic violence. Dobash and Dobash developed a theoretical and historical framework to conceptualize violence against wives as an extension of the domination and control of husbands over their wives in the context of marriage (1980: 15). Beth E. Richie (2000) describes the universal notion of violence as being about battered women as a strategic attempt to "focus on the social dimensions of the problem of gender violence, and to resist the stigmatization of race and class commonly associated with mainstream responses to social problems" (2000: 1134). Though Richie acknowledges that unity as a strategy "paid off" by raising public consciousness about violence against women, it also led to a feminist analysis that failed to incorporate other factors such as race and class (Richie, 2000: 1134–1135). The grand narrative of violence in feminist movements was therefore constructed around heterosexuality and presented heterosexual white women's experiences as universal (Holmes, 2009: 80). The term domestic violence (DV) was later applied in feminist research to emphasize the home as a place of risk for women. It was often used as a synonym for wife beating or wife battering (Kelly and Johnson, 2008: 476). During the 1980s feminist scholars and activists started to question the universality of wife battering (Hester et al., 1996: 5; Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005a: 41). They asked which women were not represented in these experiences and in the movements in general (Hester et al., 1996: 5). A challenge for the feminist movement as well as feminist scholarship on violence became, and continues to be, the question of how to maintain a feminist analysis of violence while acknowledging women as a social construct embedded in intersecting structures (Hester et al., 1996: 9).

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) addressed these issues in her influential "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". The women's movement's focus on commonalities among women led, according to Crenshaw, to an exclusion of women at the margins. Crenshaw emphasized that the problem with identity politics was that they often neglect the interplay of inter-group differences which then create tensions between the groups: "[b]ecause of the intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1244). According to Crenshaw (1991: 1258–1259) the stereotype of the marginalized abused woman became an obstacle to be removed by the women's movements in order to address the issue of DV in middle and upper-class communities.

Efforts to politicize the issue of violence against women challenge beliefs that violence only occurs in the homes of 'others.' While it is unlikely that advocates and others who adopt this rhetorical strategy intend to exclude or ignore the needs of poor and colored women, the underlying premise of this seemingly universalistic appeal is to keep the sensibilities of dominant social groups focused on the experiences of those groups. (Crenshaw, 1991: 1259–1260)

The framing of DV as a majority problem was, according to Crenshaw, often used to define DV as a social issue worthy of policy makers' attention (Crenshaw, 1991: 1259). Crenshaw questioned the likelihood that minority women of colour would even be considered in the distribution of resources and concern when DV remained insignificant if framed as a minority issue (1991: 1260). Similarly, violence in lesbian relationships was not considered in early feminist analyses of domestic violence due to the focus on male domination but also due to the assumption that women were not violent.

However, this did not mean that non-heterosexual women were absent in the movement's work. According to Susan Schechter (1982) lesbian activists were frontrunners in the battered women's movement. They were not considered as potential victims of violence themselves but as allies, given that they were able to address violence, seemingly without fearing consequences in their intimate relationships (1982: 45, 47–48). Even though the terminology *wife beating* and *men's violence against women* left little room for conceptualizing violence in non-heterosexual relationships, many feminist researchers emphasize the need to stay with this pronounced gendered framework to name and describe inter-personal violence. Following this line of thought, Dobash and Dobash argue that subscribing to a gender-neutral terminology of violence would mask the long history of oppression of women in marriage by "neutralizing the very word that describes the continued practice of wife beating" (1980: 12).

Feminist researchers' reluctance to adopt gender-neutral terminology to describe domestic violence can also be explained by the impact of the gender (a)symmetry debates, which still affect the research field and the public discourse on domestic violence. While feminist scholars (Dobash and Dobash, 1980; Walker, 1987) began to investigate the consequences of DV in the 1970s, family sociologists (Gelles, 1974; Steinmetz, 1977; Straus et al., 1980) had also started to study the occurrence of violence and conflicts within the family. Both approaches contributed to making interpersonal violence a social and public issue rather than a private one. However, they had very different theoretical and methodological approaches regarding how to examine and understand inter-personal violence (see Kelly and Johnson, 2008). Feminist researchers studying DV often relied on qualitative data such as interviews with victims and help-providers focused on violence as a pattern of control and

explored the effects of violence and victimization. Family violence (FV) sociologists, on the other hand, focused on intra-family conflicts and therefore not specifically on men's violence against women. They turned to large-scale survey studies and would often use quantitative measures such as the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) to identify and measure violent acts and incidents (Kelly and Johnson, 2008: 478–480).

The gender-symmetric perspective on IPV was initiated by family violence sociologists Murray Straus, Richard Gelles, Jan Stets and Susan Steinmetz's studies based on data from the National Family Violence Surveys (NFVS) in the US (Steinmetz, 1977; Stets and Straus, 1989; Straus et al., 1980; Straus and Gelles, 1986). Straus and Gelles, for instance, used data from the NFVS to measure violence in American families. Their research showed a surprisingly equal number of men and women in heterosexual couples perpetrating violence in two surveys from 1975 and 1985 (Straus and Gelles, 1986). This became the guiding principle for their future research as they considered IPV to be gender symmetrical, meaning that men and women were equally likely to perpetrate violence in a relationship (Allen, 2011: 246). Steinmetz had even sparked the gender symmetry debate further by using NFVS related data to support the existence of a *battered husband syndrome* (1977). This was in complete contrast to the standpoint of feminist researchers studying men's violence against women, who argued that IPV is asymmetrical and that women are more likely than men to be victimized (Dobash and Dobash, 2004: 326–327). The findings and the methodological approaches adopted in the FV survey studies have received sustained criticism, especially from feminist researchers (Dobash and Dobash, 2004; Johnson, 2006).

Sociologist Michael Johnson (1995) developed a typology of violence to explain the different results of the FV and feminist researchers. Johnson argues that the two research groups analysed different types of violence and that they varied in terms of reciprocity, frequency, escalation and, perhaps most importantly, gender (Johnson, 1995: 284). Feminist research on violence often relied on data from victims and shelters to examine the consequences of violence as a pattern of control. This type of violence Johnson originally named *patriarchal terrorism*. However, following the general trend of framing IPV in gender-neutral terms, Johnson later changed the term to *intimate terrorism* (Kelly and Johnson, 2008) and also referred to it as *coercively controlling violence*, inspired by Evan Stark (2007). Johnson argues that this type of violence is significantly different from situational couple violence (originally common couple violence) as the latter is less characterized by patriarchal structures and thus closer to FV researchers' perspective on violence as a result of a conflict. This conflict perspective views violence as a result of a conflict or a situation which gets out of hand, but where the relationship itself is not characterized by having one partner controlling the other (Johnson, 1995: 285). Thus according to Joan B. Kelly and Johnson (2008: 480–481), this type of violence is more common and will often be found in large-scale studies on

violence. It is characterized by gender symmetry, whereas intimate terrorism is characterized by gender asymmetry and largely perpetrated by men against women.

Many researchers consider the gender a/symmetry debate to be the most controversial and topical debate in the contemporary field of domestic violence. The debate influences how IPV is studied, mediated and understood in the general media, by professionals working with IPV issues, as well as in researchers' work (Allen, 2011: 245). The dominant focus on the in/significance of gender here has made it difficult to address violence in non-heterosexual relationships. Researchers who support the gender symmetry perspective have even used the existence of IPV in lesbian relationships as a way to undermine gender as a significant factor in IPV (see, for example, Dutton et al., 2010: 13).

This brief review of the debate serves to show how the polarization of the research field contributed to a reluctance to address the issue of LGBTQ IPV. According to Barnes and Donovan (2018: 68) this reluctance can be explained by methodological, reputational and ideological reasons. Fear of stigma and further marginalization can explain the reluctance to address the issue within LGBTQ communities but also within feminist movements and feminist research on violence, where LGBTQ IPV may be viewed as having a destabilizing effect on the prevailing feminist analysis of violence. However, during the 1980s radical feminist groups in the US and elsewhere started raising the issue of domestic violence in same-sex relationships (Heimer et al., 2009: 25). Due to the work by the women's movement to address the issue of domestic violence, a large majority of the early work on same-sex intimate partner violence focused on lesbian relationships. There are fewer studies on violence in gay men's relationships, and research on transgender, genderqueer and bisexual experiences of IPV is still very limited (Calton et al., 2015: 1; Heimer et al., 2009: 7).

Kerry Lobel's (1986) *Naming the Violence: Speaking Out About Lesbian Battering* was among one of the first works that helped to put violence in lesbian relationships on the agenda. The anthology consists of twenty-six texts primarily by women sharing their experiences of violence in lesbian relationships. The stories were supported by articles from activists in the battered women's movement (Heimer et al., 2009: 25; Messinger, 2014: 66). Since then a number of anthologies on the subject have been published. Many combine accounts of IPV and interdisciplinary research articles. David Island and Patrick Letellier's (1991) *Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them: Battered Gay Men and Domestic Violence* is considered pioneering work on gay men's experience of IPV. Though it shared a similar format to the early works on lesbian DV, as the book used Letellier's experiences of IPV as its point of departure, their work challenged feminist and gender-based perspectives on violence, as they drew on more individualistic psychological theories to understand and explain violence in gay men's relationships. Claire M. Renzetti

has conducted a number of studies on IPV in same-sex/lesbian and gay relationships since the late 1980s. In 1992 the results of Renzetti's largescale study were published in *Violent Betrayal: Partner Abuse in Lesbian Relationships*. This study was based on a national survey in the US and interviews with lesbian women who had been subjected to IPV. Since the first publications in the late 1980s and early 1990s, research on the subject has tried to estimate the extent of the problem (Messinger, 2014: 66), and theoretical and methodological discussions regarding its relationship to existing research on domestic violence have followed. The unavoidable question facing all research conducted on violence concerns how to define not only violence but also the target group(s) and how to gather data on IPV in non-heterosexual relationships.

Naming, defining and measuring IPV in LGBTQ relationships

Knowledge and theorizing are not purely for academic debates, but resonances with the realities experienced are clearly important. Naming is not innocent. (Hearn, 2013: 158)

As already indicated in the previous discussion, the terminology used to describe violence has changed since the subject was raised in Anglo-American public discourses in the early 1970s. As knowledge on the subject expanded, the complexity of the issue became more apparent. The expansion of empirical research from the married heterosexual couple to different population groups such as dating and co-habiting couples as well as same-sex relationships, meant that early terminology such as wife battering became inadequate and was replaced by terms such as intimate partner violence (Donovan and Hester, 2010: 280).

Like in English, there are a number of different terms used to describe interpersonal violence in Swedish. One of the most common phrases in the Swedish context is 'våld i nära relationer' (violence in close relationships), which is often used analogously to domestic violence. Other terms such as 'hustrumisshandel' (wife beating), 'familjevåld' (family violence) and even 'lägenhetsbråk' (apartment brawl/domestic disturbance) are also occasionally used. The latter is mostly evident in police reports and in media coverage of crimes and has been criticized, especially by feminists, for depoliticizing violence through emphasizing only the location where the violence occurs (Nilsson and Lövkrona, 2015: 25–26). The terms *violence in close relationships* and *partner violence* have, according to Holmberg, Enander and Lindgren (2015), had a renaissance in Swedish research and public discourse on violence. Holmberg et al. argue that one of the main reasons for their common usage is that as gender-neutral formulations they seem more inclusive of same-sex partner violence. However, Holmberg et al. also state that the terms are still often associated with violence against women (Holmberg et al., 2015: 260), much like the phrase domestic violence (Ristock and Timbang, 2005:

3). Following a similar trend from Anglo-American contexts, there is an ongoing debate in Sweden concerning whether or not the perpetrator should be included in the definitions and perspectives, such as in terms like men's violence against women (Holmberg et al., 2015: 258–259). While the general move towards gender-neutral terms is more inclusive of different social groups such as LGBTQ people, critiques fear that it could also redirect the issue politically by turning towards a more individualistic perspective instead of a structural one (Holmberg et al., 2015: 261).

Although violence in close relationships and intimate partner violence are frequently used interchangeably, they are quite different in scope. The first refers to a greater range of relationships, whereas intimate partner violence refers more specifically to a couple constellation(s) and thus excludes violence against children, among siblings, from other members of the family and other possibilities.⁴ I have chosen to use the term intimate partner violence in order to delimit my target group to people who have been in some sort of intimate/coupling relationship. However, this does not mean that no other actors were subjected to violence in the relationship. I will return to this when discussing the roles children played in the accounts of the interviewees who were parents in Chapter Six. Ristock (2011) argues that we need to reflect critically on the assumptions embedded in our language and the limits these entail. IPV, for example, can be criticized for contributing to upholding a troublesome distinction between private and public forms of violence and the word 'partner' can make other forms of intimate relationships incomprehensible. However, there is a balancing act in using words that are commonly known and used while being aware of how the words applied limit and frame what we end up seeing (Ristock, 2011: 4–5).

When it comes to research on IPV in LGBTQ relationships, naming the violence is not the only issue at stake; defining the research group(s) is also an important factor. In early research the groups were categorized as gay men and lesbian women (Renzetti, 1992, 1997). According to Ristock and Norma Timbang (2005: 3), some researchers as well as LGBTQ groups continue to use the term domestic violence (DV) or domestic violence and abuse (DVA) (see Donovan and Hester, 2015) in order to draw connections and comparisons to existing research. As this research began to appear at a time when the shift towards the gender-neutral naming of violence had begun, same-sex IPV became a widely used phrase (Baker et al., 2013; Heimer et al., 2009; Messinger, 2014). However, this meant that transgender and bisexual victim-survivors'

⁴ The National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence against Women (NCK), for instance, updated their research report on same-sex intimate violence (Heimer et al., 2009) to violence against LGBTQ people (Heimer et al., 2018). While the latter report still focuses on violence in close relationships, it also addresses violence occurring outside intimate relationships as they added a specific focus on violence against young bisexual women, transgender individuals, as well as honour-based violence against young LGBTQ people (Heimer et al., 2018: 5).

perspectives were often not included in early research. The exclusion of these groups is still a debated issue within the research.

The range of different ways of defining the target group/s indicates a key dilemma in the field, which concerns whether to define the population by the gender or the sexual identity of the partners and how these categorizations relate to theories of gender and sexuality. General population surveys on IPV often obscure LGBTQ people's accounts by making heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions about gender and sexuality regarding the respondents or their partner (Donovan and Barnes, 2020b: 5–6). Surveys that do include questions around sexual identification tend to focus on the time of the data collection and thus fail to account for sexual identification at the time of the relationship (Heimer et al., 2018: 33). This is unfortunately a common issue in survey studies that rely on fixed categories and often fail to take unstable identity categories or changes into account. As a result bisexual and transgender victim-survivors' responses are often excluded in large-scale studies due to the small sample size (Turell and Cornell-Swanson, 2008: 72). The few studies that do include or specifically focus on transgender people's experiences of IPV frequently show high levels of exposure to violence and systemic barriers to help-seeking (Laskey and Bolam, 2019: 79–81).

Adam M. Messinger (2014) describes the discussion as a dilemma which has divided the research into two branches. One defines the target group as those involved in same-sex relationships and the other defines the group as sexual minorities regardless whether or not this can be classified as an opposite sex or same-sex relationship (Messinger, 2014: 77). According to Baker et al. (2013), most largescale IPV surveys fail to clarify their definitions and use of categories. Many surveys do not ask about sexual orientation or the gender of the partner, or they neglect to distinguish between same-sex relationships as a behaviour and identity categories such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and genderqueer, for example. Often the two types of categories are inappropriately treated as synonymous (Baker et al., 2013: 184; Laskey and Bolam, 2019: 74). Finally while it is important to be consistent and clear about the terminology used in any given research, it is also important to use a terminology that makes sense to LGBTQ people in their everyday lives (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 1). I will discuss my own use of terminology in this thesis in the Methodology chapter.

Policy research tends to rely heavily on quantitative tools such as surveys (Hester et al., 2010: 251). Prevalence is a major factor in policy decisions because the greater the problem, the more likely it is to warrant intervention. However, this creates issues when it comes to hidden and marginalized population groups. Studies intent upon estimating the prevalence of IPV in LGBTQ relationships have had varying results (Barnes and Donovan, 2018: 68; Laskey and Bolam, 2019: 75). According to McClennen's research review the prevalence rate is often found to be approximately 25 to 35 percent, which is comparable to that of heterosexual IPV (McClennen, 2005: 150). The varying

prevalence rates in different studies can be explained by differences in how the research group is defined and in different definitions of violence and abuse (Heimer et al., 2009: 28). Thus, different methodological approaches make it difficult to compare findings from different studies (Turell and Cornell-Swanston, 2008: 72). Though the prevalence rate varies in different studies and the findings are contested, the severity of the problem is often emphasized (Laskey and Bolam, 2019: 75).

One of the greatest challenges for all research on IPV concerns how to define IPV. A broader definition of IPV, often used by feminist researchers, describes violence as patterns of psychological, emotional, material, sexual as well as physical violence. A narrower definition of IPV tends to focus solely on incident-based accounts of physical violence. This inevitably results in lower rates of reported IPV (Donovan and Barnes, 2020b: 35). Research on domestic violence, especially from the US, has had, and continues to have, a strong reliance on largescale prevalence studies and tools such as the Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS) (Hester et al., 2010: 252). The CTS is the most replicated instrument used to measure IPV quantitatively. The first version of CTS used by Straus et al. in the National Family Violence Surveys in 1975 and 1985 focused solely on physical violence. Respondents were presented with a list of conflict tactics and were told to indicate how often they had experienced and used any of the tactics within the last twelve months. The CTS was heavily criticized for failing to account for sexual violence and injuries following violence. Despite the amendments in the CTS-2, quantitative measures based on incidents and frequency continue to fail to account for context, motives, meanings and the impact of violence and abusive behaviours (Donovan and Barnes, 2020b: 37–38). This critique of quantitative studies does not only apply to research on IPV in LGBTQ relationships. However, prevalence data in marginalized and minority groups is made even more complicated due to limited access. Renzetti emphasizes that “it is doubtful that a true prevalence study of lesbian and gay partner abuse is possible as long as the stigma attached to homosexual relationships leads many lesbians and gay men to hide their sexual identities from others, including researchers” (Renzetti, 1997: 287). Renzetti remains critical of the use of her findings as prevalence data, as she asked for participants with experiences of violence, thus skewing her data in a specific way.

Given these methodological challenges, studies of IPV in LGBTQ relationships often rely on convenience samples. Even larger survey studies are only able to reach a certain part of the LGBTQ-identifying population (Turell and Cornell-Swanston, 2008: 72). The Swedish survey *Våldsamt lika och olika* (Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2005) recruited respondents through the national LGBTQ organization RFSL. This meant that the respondents were either members of or connected to the organization and thus to some extent could at least be expected to be relatively open about their sexuality and/or gender identity. The findings should therefore not be seen as representing the general

LGBTQ population in Sweden (Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2005: 27). Since there are no statistics of the number of people within the population who identify as LGBTQ, it is not possible to create truly representative data on the issue. One of the reasons why it is challenging to use statistics based on random sampling to explore this subject is that certain groups within the LGBTQ population tend to disappear in official statistics. Sweden uses a system of unique personal identity numbers. This system makes it possible to link personal data from various different registers to a specific individual (Vetenskapsrådet, n.d.). While personal identity numbers are also used in the other Nordic countries, they are more widely used in Sweden. They are used in many different areas but the three main ones are population registration, taxation, and healthcare. The data generated from these different registers are therefore the foundation for national population statistics (SCB, 2016b) including the Swedish Crime Survey. This annual survey, conducted by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, explores the attitudes and experiences of the general population (16-84 years of age) concerning fear of crime, confidence in the criminal justice system, as well as experiences of victimization and crime victims' contacts with the criminal justice system (BRÅ, n.d.). Because of the personal identity number system, much of the background information about the respondents is not filled in by the respondents themselves. This includes, among other things such as income and education as well as data on their legal gender, and marital status. This means, for instance, that there is currently no way for respondents to indicate if their gender does not match their legal registered gender (BRÅ, 2021: 8). It also makes it difficult to measure the impact of sexual orientation for those who are not registered as cohabiting, married or in a civil same-sex union. Altogether these factors make it difficult to use official statistics in Sweden to measure the impacts of violence and victimization among the LGBTQ population.

However, despite these methodological obstacles, feminist researchers have turned to quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the impact of violence and help-seeking in LGBTQ relationships. The COHSAR study (COmparing Heterosexual and Same sex Abuse in Relationships) was a UK-based survey and interview research project exploring violent and abusive behaviours in same-sex and heterosexual relationships by using feminist and multi-methodological approaches. The data were created through an elaborate survey, followed by focus groups and interviews in order to be attentive to different types of violence as well as the context, impact and effect of violence and abusive behaviours (Donovan, 2007; see Donovan and Hester, 2015; McCarry et al., 2006).⁵ Using a similar multi-methods approach and adding

⁵ 746 people who had been or were in a same-sex relationship answered the questionnaire. In order to gain further insights, they conducted in-depth interviews with 68 people of different gender and sexualities (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 35, 68). The research was carried out between January 2005 and November 2006 (Donovan, 2007).

help-providers' perspectives, the Coral Project (Donovan et al., 2014), focused on the perpetration of violent and abusive behaviours in LGB and/or T relationships (see Donovan et al., 2014; Donovan and Barnes, 2020b). I will discuss the findings from these studies and how they relate to my data in the empirical chapters.

In the following section I continue to engage with challenges to research on IPV in LGBTQ relationships but focus on theoretical discussions, and I present the main theoretical concepts I draw on in the empirical chapters.

Theorizing IPV

As already indicated, one of the dominant challenges facing research on IPV among LGBTQ people is its connection to existing theories based on what Baker et al. (2013) call the heterosexual marriage model. However, other explanatory models for IPV among LGBTQ people have emerged. One such model is minority stress. Kimberly F. Balsam (2001), for example, applies the concept of *minority stress* to theorize the impact of IPV on lesbian, gay and bisexual people at an individual level. Minority stress had been used before Balsam and is not specifically limited to IPV or to LGBTQ individuals. Virginia R. Brooks (1981) defined it as the following:

The initial cause of minority stress is the cultural ascription of inferior status to particular groups. This ascription of defectiveness to various categories of people, particularly categories based on sex, race, and sociosexual preference, often precipitates negative life events for the minority member over which the individual has little control. (cited in Balsam, 2001: 29)

Minority stress as a concept has been applied in a number of studies since then. It is commonly used when examining the connections between heteronormative structures and the experience of IPV in LGBTQ relationships (Balsam, 2001; Edwards and Sylaska, 2016; Holmberg and Stjernqvist, 2007; Parry and O'Neal, 2015). Minority stress is, according to Katie M. Edwards and Kateryna M. Sylaska (2016), described as both a hindrance to the disclosure of violence as well as a factor that increases the risk of victimization and perpetration of violence (2016: 655). An example of how societies' marginalization of LGBTQ groups has an impact on IPV is the notion of *outing*. Natalie J. Sokoloff and Ida Dupont (2005a: 44) describe outing as threatening to share information about the partner's sexual or gender identification with others. Outing can be used as a strategy to gain control of the partner. Socially learnt heterosexist beliefs and internalized homo-, trans- and bi-phobia have been raised as consequences of minority stress. The concept is used to explain the perpetration of and victimization through IPV in LGBTQ relationships (Messinger, 2014: 71–72).

However, the concept is also contested. According to Donovan and Hester (2015), studies on the correlation between minority stress and interpersonal violence are inconclusive. It is not clear, for instance, whether minority stress should be considered an outcome of interpersonal violence or whether minority stress causes IPV. This is in part because the term is often not clearly defined and therefore used differently across studies. It is sometimes used as a synonym for homophobia and experiences of discrimination, but it has also been measured by levels of openness around one's sexual and gender identification or experiences of heterosexism or even substance abuse. Donovan and Hester also raise the concern that minority stress approaches run the risk of individualising and psychologising experiences of IPV, due to the focus on internal and external stressors rather than on social positioning within an intersectional framework (2015: 76, 74). Despite these critiques of minority stress, Barnes and Donovan (2018: 76) emphasize that being part of marginalized communities impacts experiences of domestic violence and abuse (DVA), both in terms of recognizing abuse and in the help-seeking processes. My own data also provide some evidence of minority stress but, similarly to Donovan and Barnes, I do not use the concept to explain the perpetration of IPV; rather, I use this concept to explore how being part of a marginalized group impacts interviewees' definitions of violence, discussed in Chapter Three, as well as their help-seeking processes, discussed in Chapter Four through Six. An example of the impact of minority stress might be the LGBTQ communities' lack of willingness to address the issue of IPV. This has been raised in several studies (Girshick, 2002; Turell et al., 2012; Turell and Herrmann, 2008: 212). According to Lori B. Girshick (2002: 50–51) the denial of violence within the communities can be explained by the communities' function as a safe space:

Similar to dynamics with other stigmatized groups, lesbian and bisexual communities, loosely defined, provide support from a hostile society. Connection to community becomes all the more imperative when this negativity and the lack of acceptability create a need for the self to be part of a larger group to help sustain that sense of belonging. (Girshick, 2002: 46)

The issue of conflicting loyalties within the community and its impact on IPV has been addressed by Crenshaw for instance, as she described the fear of stigma when raising domestic violence issues in Black communities as a struggle to maintain the integrity of the community (1991: 1253). In Chapter Six, I discuss the meaning and implications of community support further.

Due to the lack of research and awareness around IPV in same-sex relationships the subject is fraught with myths (McClennen, 2005: 150). One of those myths is that of the “the lesbian utopia” which Girshick describes as “[t]he mythology of women's nonviolence and lesbian egalitarianism” (Girshick, 2002: 45). The recognition of gay men as victims of IPV has, for

instance, been obscured by the “Boxing Ring” myth (Island and Letellier, 1991: 16–17). These myths are sustained by the idea that partners in same-sex relationships are equally strong or weak. This makes violence bi-directional (Gårdfeldt, 2003: 19). Both the Lesbian Utopia and Boxing Ring myth therefore obscure IPV in lesbian and gay men’s relationships and reinforce ideas around mutuality (see Donovan and Barnes, 2020b: 97–124; Giorgio, 2002: 1242; Renzetti, 1989: 162). Turell et al. (2012: 290) point to mutual abuse as an influential myth that also affects how help-providers interact with LGBTQ help-seekers. Studies on lesbian IPV show that both help-seekers and providers found it difficult to determine who the primary aggressor and who the victim was, especially when strategies such as fighting back had been used (see Donovan and Barnes, 2020b; Hassouneh and Glass, 2008). In Chapter Three, I examine how gendered assumptions about relationships and IPV can make it harder to define one’s experience of violence and abuse.

The inevitable question researchers are faced with concerns whether to theorize LGBTQ violence as an add-on to existing (heteronormative) models of violence, to apply some concepts specifically to minority communities to understand the phenomenon, or to create a new theoretical framework to describe the violence occurring in non-heterosexual relationships (Ristock, 2011: 4). New theoretical approaches have started to question commonly held assumptions within research on violence, and including LGBTQ perspectives on IPV have contributed to such interrogations. Baker et al. (2013: 184) for instance criticize the tendency to treat same-sex IPV as a footnote or an afterthought within general IPV research. They advocate a new perspective on the matter: “Rather than asking if IPV is gendered, we seek to address questions about how gender roles and the factors for which sex and gender are marker variables influence IPV” (Baker et al., 2013: 183). This turn in perspective on gender is also evident in Kristin Anderson’s “Theorizing Gender in Intimate Partner Violence Research” (2005). Anderson examines how IPV has been theorized in the gender symmetry debate, and proposes inter-actionist and structuralist gender theories to examine the relationship between IPV and gender to overcome the emphasis on so called sex-difference which has dominated the field. The controversy concerning the status of IPV as a gendered phenomenon is, according to Anderson, a question of theoretical neglect:

I argue that, amid the controversy over the definition and measurement of violence, intimate violence researchers have neglected to recognize that there is an equivalent controversy over the conceptualization and measurement of gender. Confusion about how partner assaults are gendered is a reflection of a larger theoretical confusion about what it is that we mean by gender. (Anderson, 2005: 854)

Whereas theories of gender have developed dramatically over the past decades, these perspectives have, according to Anderson, not been recognized

within many substantive research areas in the social sciences (2005: 854). Anderson advocates theoretical perspectives where gender is not considered an individual characteristic but part of a larger societal system of expectations and behaviours, manifesting itself in the ways men and women are socially situated (2005: 863). Clare Cannon, Katie Lauve-Moon and Fred Buttell continue this line of thought in “Re-Theorizing Intimate Partner Violence through Post-Structural Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Sociology of Gender” (2015). The existence of violence among same-sex couples or female perpetrators in heterosexual relationship has been used to dismiss gender as a factor in IPV. However, Cannon et al. suggest that interactional and structural theories propose an exploration of gender as a doing that does not simplify different groups’ experiences of violence into a question of sex-difference or similarity (2015: 680). Instead of eliminating IPV as a gendered phenomenon, Cannon et al. call for an exploration of “how gender interacts with heterosexism to influence the dynamic of violence in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships” (2015: 856). This approach is apparent, for example, in Donovan and Hester’s (2015) UK-based study where they examine both heterosexual and same-sex relationships through positionality and intersectionality to explore how practices of love and intimacies actively construct power and control over a partner across gender and sexualities.

The focus on gender in IPV research, which enables comparative research across heterosexual and gender diverse communities, is important. But it remains the case that IPV in LGBTQ relationships is an understudied phenomenon, with very few large-scale empirical studies from the Nordic countries and only one large-scale one conducted in Sweden. Sweden therefore often relies on studies from other countries, especially from the US (Messinger, 2014: 79) and UK (Donovan and Barnes, 2020b; Donovan and Hester, 2010) on this subject. The use of studies from other cultures opens up the question of how to apply those findings and concepts in a Swedish context, which is very different from Anglophone countries in terms of state regulations, the organization of support systems, and social movement histories around IPV. Here the issue of violence within the LGBTQ communities has been surrounded by silence, sustained by a lack of empirical data. Studies have focused on concepts such as minority stress, community denial and barriers to help-seeking in order to examine the specific conditions of IPV in LGBTQ relationships. Since existing Swedish work on domestic violence primarily focuses on men’s violence against women, it has been difficult to conceptualize a theoretical framework around violence in LGBTQ relationships.

The aim of this thesis is not only to document and give voice to experiences that are often overlooked in public discourse, social movements and in social policies on IPV; the study aims to understand why these experiences have been and continue to be ignored and what consequences this can have for victim-survivors of IPV in lesbian and queer relationships. In the previous sections I discussed influential concepts and perspectives from research on

DVA/IPV. One of the theoretical objectives of this thesis is to engage with and expand feminist theories on violence to include victim-survivors of lesbian and queer peoples' experiences of IPV and help-seeking. I will therefore discuss the theoretical concepts I draw on in the empirical chapters. First, I discuss the concept of slow (and hence seemingly invisible) violence, which is a key concept throughout the thesis as it is associated with the struggle to recognize forms of violence that do not match public discourses on what violence is. Secondly, I discuss the impact of stories and accounts of violence and how we use such stories to make sense of our identities and experiences as social groups and as individuals. Failing to identify with dominant stories can result in dis-identification and silencing. This leads to the third theoretical concept – mis/recognition – which I use to analyse why lesbian and queer victim-survivors run the risk of being seen as unintelligible victims when seeking help against IPV.

Slow and spectacular violence

Departing from postcolonial and environmentalist theories, Robin Nixon (2011) calls for a reconceptualization of violence on a political, imaginative and theoretical level, to pay attention to slow violence. This violence does not centre on a specific time bounded event but rather manifests itself over time as a drawn out process. The concept of slow violence refers to “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon, 2011: 2). Nixon writes about long dyings from pollution as both human and ecological casualties of slow violence. Deforestation, radioactive waste dumping and toxic build-ups are just a few examples of the slow violence which is often inflicted on poorer countries or areas by multinational companies and rich nation-states. The effects of this are frequently delayed, sometimes even for generations, which makes it difficult to mobilize emotionally and politically (Nixon, 2011: 3). Nixon suggests that the relative invisibility of slow violence poses representational, strategic and narrative challenges, especially in contemporary politics and media characterised by speed, lack of attention span, and a fascination with spectacular and image-based visual violence (Nixon, 2011: 2, 11, 275–276). 9/11 serves as a clear example of this fascination with immediately sensational and hyper-visible images of violent events that represent a clearly defined physical threat. In contrast, slow violence is, by definition, image-weak; it is incremental, exponential and less sensorially visible (Nixon, 2011: 13).

While Nixon focuses primarily on environmental injustice, the concept of slow violence is not limited to environmental issues. Nixon calls for accounts of the temporal dispersion of slow violence to explore how it affects how we as a society perceive and respond to a variety of social problems including

domestic violence and environmental issues (Nixon, 2011: 3). Ashley Barnwell, for instance, uses slow violence to examine family secrets, focusing on the unseen structural forces that sustain stigma and social injuries across generations (Barnwell, 2019: 2). The concept of slow violence became very significant in my research because of the insidious processual specificity of that violence. I use this concept in Chapter Three when analysing the interviewees' understanding of their experiences as violence and especially the difficulty of identifying violence when it takes the form of a prolonged, subtle and repeated process. In the following chapters I discuss help-seeking as mirroring that violence. Thus the processual and disruptive temporalities of slow violence are useful for understanding the help-seeking patterns of the victim-survivors. Since the casualties of slow violence often occur out of sync, the effects of slow violence are frequently untimely and delayed. Slow violence's gradual, degrading effects make it difficult to seek support, for instance, to gather evidence to take legal measures for prevention and punishment (Nixon, 2011: 9) but even to conceptualize violence as such in the first place. I discuss this in relation to formal help-seeking in Chapter Five. The effects of repeated violence drawn out over a long time follow the victim-survivor into other areas of their lives, and the abuse itself can be exercised across spatial boundaries, as research on coercive control has shown (Stark, 2007: 334). To think through slow violence means to rethink what counts as violence but also to rethink notions of causation, process and agency in relation to IPV.

One of the greatest challenges of slow violence concerns how to turn the experience of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to raise public and political awareness and support intervention (Nixon, 2011: 3). IPV in lesbian and queer relationships can be described as an untold story within research and within social movements such as the LGBTQ and feminist movements. In order to understand this invisibility, I will discuss how communities and victim-survivors engage with stories of violence to seek identification and make sense of their experiences but also how such accounts can hinder victim-survivors' intelligibility.

Stories of violence

[P]ersonal stories are everywhere, and they make a difference: a difference to our lives, our communities, our cultures, our politics. (Plummer, 1995: 16).

I use the words stories or accounts in a number of different ways in this project. First, I asked the interviewees to talk about experiences in a past relationship. During the interviews, we created accounts of those experiences, but these accounts or stories themselves were also informed by public discourses around violence and victimhood. Stories shape how we talk about and make

sense of our experiences as individuals and as part of a group. Barnes (2008) writes about the absence of a recognizable language to talk about woman-on-woman abuse. She argues that the language around DV is constrained by heteronormativity and gendered constructions of victims as well as perpetrators. This relates to one type of story I return to throughout my thesis, which is the prevailing public story of DV/IPV (Donovan and Hester, 2008, 2010). Drawing on Lynn Jamieson's (1998) work on pervasive public stories, Donovan and Hester (2010: 281–282) describe this story as a public imaginary that positions domestic violence as a heterosexual phenomenon defined by a gendered victim/perpetrator dichotomy and with an emphasis on physical violence. As a result of the pervasiveness of this story, it can be difficult for victim-survivors in lesbian and queer relationships and, especially, those who have been predominately subjected to psychological violence to recognise their experiences as violence and to seek help.

In *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995) Ken Plummer explores the role of stories and storytelling as a sociological phenomenon, focusing specifically on sexual stories. This includes a whole range of depictions of intimate life, the relational, the erotic and the gendered aspects of these depictions (Plummer, 1995: 6). Although the experiences of coming out stories of lesbian and gay men and women's accounts of rape and abuse are seemingly quite different, they represent a similar, recognisable pattern or genre focussed on redemption and transformation. Thus, the stories and the function of the storytelling share striking similarities as they are accounts of recovery where the sharing of personal stories of suffering and silencing can lead to radical change for a collective (Plummer, 1995: 50–51). Such stories create social memories attached to groups as they become the commonly told stories outside and inside social groups, communities and/or movements. The LGBTQ movement as well as the feminist movements and other social movements, for instance, have their own stories or accounts, passed on to the next generation, providing a sense of shared history (Hemmings, 2011). This could include accounts of events or moments in time such as AIDS awareness, gay pride, the Stonewall Riots, or the Transgender Day of Remembrance (Plummer, 1995: 41). Storytelling is part of building and sustaining communities:

Stories need communities to be heard, but communities themselves are also built through story telling. Stories gather people around them: they attract audiences, and these audiences may then start to build a common perception, a common language, a commonality. (Plummer, 1995: 174)

This is, according to Plummer, best described as an ongoing and dialectic process between communities, identities, politics and stories (Plummer, 1995: 87). Stories are also bounded; some get told, others not. Stories that strengthen communities are encouraged, stories that might threaten community are discouraged. As mentioned, the story or, rather, myth about the lesbian utopia, is

often raised in research on lesbian IPV to explain the lack of awareness or denial of IPV within lesbian communities:

The lesbian love tale promotes lesbian love as nurturing and lacking internal strife formulaically. In narratives of the lesbian utopia, the two women have their moment of recognition that produces a double valance of seeing the other while witnessing one's desires as other. However, once the love match has been established, external opposition presents the narrative trajectory. (Giorgio, 2001: 133)

Grace Ann Giorgio (2001: 133) compares the lesbian utopia to fairy tales promoting heterosexual union. In the myth of the lesbian utopia, violence and conflicts always come from outside, often from the family of origin or strangers in the form of harassment and hate crimes, but never from within the relationship. This can help to explain why it has been easier to address some stories about struggles such as hate crimes or discrimination within the LGBTQ movements/communities as they support and create a sense of shared struggle and commonality. Victim-survivors' stories of victimization and coming out stories both have a tendency to be narrated as journeys from suffering to surviving (1995: 50). Thus, when disclosing violence in a lesbian and queer relationship, the two stories Plummer uses as examples of classic recovery stories collide as the lesbian and queer victim-survivor is not surpassing the struggle after coming out and finding love (Plummer, 1995: 126). The clash between these stories makes IPV in lesbian and queer relationships an unimaginable story.

Stories around violence, just like any other social stories, are bounded by their time. An example of this can be found in the debate around Eva Lundgren et al.'s (2001, 2002) definition of violence. When *Captured Queen: Men's Violence Against Women in Equal Sweden - A Prevalence Study* (Lundgren et al., 2001) was first published it was heavily criticized in Sweden in and outside of academia. In this first national prevalence study on violence in Sweden, Lundgren et al. used a feminist definition of *violence as a continuum*, which included more than physical abuse and not only violent crimes (Lundgren et al., 2002: 17). The fact that 46 percent of the around 7000 women who responded had reported having been subjected to violence by a man after they had turned 15, and 56 percent had been sexually harassed (Lundgren et al., 2002: 8) was not deemed trustworthy by the critics, even though the numbers were similar to prevalence studies done in the other Nordic countries (Westerstrand, 2010: 12). However, in the wake of these attacks, Uppsala University started an investigation in 2005 to review Lundgren et al.'s research. Although the complaints were rejected, Lundgren's reputation and feminist research on violence became heavily underfunded following the debate. However, the much later digital #MeToo movement resulted in a flood of everyday stories of violence, specifically sexual violence, and began to re-shape the public discourse around such violence. More than a decade after the debate, discussions

about a public apology to Lundgren et al. began to circulate in social and print media (Skagegård, 2017). While the public discourse around violence and #MeToo changed what stories around violence can be heard, the question of whose stories get to count is still debated (see Hemmings, 2018). Lesbian and queer people's accounts of IPV figure among those stories that are still not readily accepted. This leads me to my final overarching theoretical concept: mis/recognition.

Mis/recognition

In order to explain why lesbian and queer people are deemed unintelligible victims of IPV and how this shapes their identification of violence and help-seeking encounters, I draw on Nancy Fraser's (1995, 1997, 2000, 2003) work on misrecognition as status subordination. This perspective also enables me to make a connection between the struggle to mobilize around the issue of intra-community violence and mainstream LGBT movements' political struggle for recognition. This section is not meant as an extended review of Fraser's theoretical framework but rather a brief *excursus* to elucidate the concept of mis/recognition and to give an indication of how I apply this concept in the empirical chapters.

Fraser's theoretical framework on social justice can be located at the intersections of feminist theory, post-structuralism and critical theory. Fraser (1995) identified a change in the formulation of political claims for justice in the late twentieth century. She describes this as a paradigmatic shift from a politics of redistribution to a politics of recognition. Redistribution traditionally refers to political claims made to redress socio-economic injustices, aiming for a more just and equalitarian distribution of wealth and resources. Recognition focuses on the acknowledgment of difference, mobilized by social groups based on social positions such as sexuality, ethnicity, race and gender, and it aims to redress injustices based on misrecognition (1995: 68). To illustrate the difference between struggles for redistribution and recognition Fraser (1995: 74–77) positions ideal-typical social collectives suffering from either one of the injustices on a spectrum. Here injustices caused by redistribution/maldistribution, rooted in the political economy, are positioned at one end of the spectrum, and injustices based on misrecognition, rooted in the cultural-valuation structure of society, are positioned at the other. Fraser uses class as an example of a mode of social differentiation rooted in the political-economic structure of society. The remedy for inequality and the economic exploitation of the working class is therefore redistribution rather than cultural recognition (Fraser, 1995: 74–76). Fraser (1995: 77) uses injustices towards gays and lesbians as the ideal-typical example of injustices of misrecognition at the other end of the spectrum, since they are rooted in the cultural devalua-

tion of homosexuality caused by heterosexism. Heterosexism positions heterosexuality as the norm and denies those social collectives who are deemed to have so-called “despised sexualities” fundamental recognition. Lack of recognition or misrecognition leaves groups of people subject to shaming, harassment and violence, often sustained and legitimized through a lack of legal rights and equal protection from violence. While misrecognition based on sexuality may have economic consequences, Fraser suggests that since the injustice is based in the cultural-valuation structure, the remedy for injustice is to be found in recognition. The description of lesbians’ and gay men’s injustices as exclusively an example of cultural misrecognition has been criticized by, for example, Judith Butler (1997) who objected to the claim that queer misrecognition was “merely cultural”. Fraser responded by defending her analytical distinction but elaborates in her later work more on the interconnectedness of redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1997), suggesting that injustices based on misrecognition have material effects, and that redistribution and recognition are separate but entangled. I explore this in Chapter Five when discussing formal help-seeking encounters.

The normative core of Fraser’s framework is that justice requires parity of participation. From this perspective, “justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers.” (Fraser, 2003: 36).⁶ In this thesis I focus specifically on Fraser’s (2000, 2001) perspective on mis/recognition as a question of social status. Conceptualizing misrecognition as a question of status subordination locates the wrong in the social relations and institutions rather than in the individual or in interpersonal psychology (Fraser, 2001: 27). Fraser describes the advantages of thinking through misrecognition in the status model in the following terms:

To be misrecognized, in this view, is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down on, or devalued in others’ conscious attitudes or mental beliefs. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem. (Fraser, 2001: 27)

Thus, the status model focuses on the status of group members as full partners in social interaction and the remedy of injustice is to be found in social and

⁶ Fraser later added a third dimension to justice: political representation (Fraser, 2009; Fraser et al., 2004: 380). According to Fraser, injustices take different forms such as maldistribution, misrecognition, misrepresentations and misframing, depending on whether the injustice is caused by economic redistribution, cultural-legal representation or political representation. However, the core of Fraser’s theoretical framework, which treats the different dimensions as “mutually irreducible dimensions of justice” (Fraser, 2003: 37), is to use the normative principle of parity of participation as the overarching evaluative standard to distinguish warranted from unwarranted claims for justice (Fraser, 2003: 38, 2009: 284).

institutional relations (Fraser, 2000: 115, 2001: 24). I use the concept of misrecognition to examine how institutionalized value patterns based on heteronormativity deny lesbian and queer victim-survivors equal access to support and construct these groups as unintelligible victims, not worthy of protection.

To understand the reluctance to address the issue of IPV in LGBTQ movements, it is important to look at traditional approaches used to combat injustices based on misrecognition. Fraser (1995: 82–83) identifies two broad approaches to redress injustices: affirmative and transformative approaches. The first refers to remedies aimed at correcting unequal outcomes of social arrangements without disrupting or changing the underlying generative framework. Transformative approaches on the other hand are associated with deconstruction that, in the case of misrecognition, redresses disrespect by transforming the underlying cultural-valuation structure. Fraser uses the example of gay-identity politics versus queer-theory politics. The mainstream LGBT movement has generally focused on affirmative strategies of recognition, re-evaluating devalued identity categories and groups, whereas queer-theory politics seeks to deconstruct the homo/hetero dichotomy. The mainstream LGBT movements' fight for same-sex marriages is perhaps the most prominent example of affirmative strategies. It has been praised for revaluing same-sex relationships but it has also been critiqued for reinforcing rather than destabilizing the underlying institutional structures that generate inequality. Critiques of the last point have been formulated by, among others, Lisa Duggan (2003) as homonormativity. Fraser's point is related to Duggan's when it comes to reinforcing rather than challenging the existing structures. But she also emphasizes that one of the main drawbacks of the affirmative approach is that it may end up reifying and valorizing collective identities to a point where people are pressured into conforming to a specific group identity and where the multiplicity of identities is denied (Fraser, 2003: 76).

The silence and lack of recognition around IPV within the LGBTQ community needs to be understood in the light of the political claims and struggles for justice, which social movements are, and have been, fighting for and the possible identity positions these claims enable and hinder. Affirmative strategies for justice have been very successful in terms of securing legal rights and recognition for certain groups within the LGBTQ movement, but they also run the risk of reifying certain identities and claims at the expense of others. Fraser's distinction between different strategies helps to understand some of the struggles within the LGBTQ movements as a result of different conceptualisations of what constitutes justice, and the remedies needed to achieve justice, and for whom. This also impacts on how communities figure in people's lives as I discuss in Chapter Six.

Fraser suggests that social movements create new dimensions of justice and that new claims of justice are made possible that transgress the established grammar of 'normal justice' (Fraser, 2008: 404). When Fraser uses homosex-

uals as an example of a group facing misrecognition, she writes that the negative validation of groups who are deemed to have a despised sexuality needs to be addressed through reevaluation:

Overcoming homophobia and heterosexism requires changing the cultural valuations (as well as their legal and practical expressions) that privilege heterosexuality, deny equal respect to gays and lesbians, and refuse to recognize homosexuality as a legitimate way of being sexual. It is to revalue a despised sexuality, to accord positive recognition to gay and lesbian sexual specificity. (Fraser, 1995: 77–78)

To claim rights to protection against IPV for lesbian and queer victim-survivors goes beyond positive recognition and looks very different from claims for legal equality, for instance. Nonetheless, the different claims depend upon each other and are tied to the general acceptance and legal standing of LGBTQ people.

Non-recognition (Fraser, 1995: 71) is perhaps the most common form of misrecognition when it comes to lesbian and queer IPV, and it has an enormous impact on how victims will be encountered when seeking support. The question of who will secure their claims is not easily answered, since it is not only a matter of changing the legal statutes for specific groups but of changing practices in the way communities and support services value and address potential victims of support. I suggest that claiming justice through recognition of lesbian and queer IPV is in itself a transgressive claim for justice within the existing framework that needs to be understood in relation to ideas around violence, victimization and communities.

Structure of the thesis

In this introductory chapter, I have so far presented the aim and research questions that guided my research project. This chapter began with a discussion of previous research on LGBTQ IPV and help-seeking in particular. I have also identified general debates and challenges to the field of IPV research to understand the methodological, theoretical and political challenges LGBTQ IPV research face in a polarized field. I introduced my main theoretical framework, particularly highlighting the concept of slow and spectacular violence (Nixon, 2011) and how we rely on and engage with stories to mobilize against violence and create communities (Plummer, 1995). Finally, I outlined how I draw on Fraser's (1995, 2003) concept of misrecognition to understand the challenges facing lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV.

Chapter Two covers methodology, beginning with a short description of the Swedish context. I present my research design, which includes details of the recruitment process, my positioning as a researcher and my reflections

around the interview situation as well as the data analytical processes I undertook. The first empirical chapter, Chapter Three, explores why many of the interviewees struggled to define their experiences as violence. The two chapters that follow examine informal and formal types of help-seeking. Chapter Four is based primarily on three case studies. These derived from interviewees whose help-seeking processes varied in terms of how much support they had sought during and after their violent relationships had ended and whether the support was primarily informal or formal. Chapter Five is an analysis of the interviewees' encounters with formal help-providers in the criminal justice system, the healthcare system and, finally, their use of counselling services. In Chapter Six, I continue to focus on help-seeking but in relation to kinship by exploring the impact of children and ideas around community support for IPV and help-seeking. The conclusion discusses how these empirical chapters have contributed to answering my research questions and also includes policy suggestions and implications for practitioners. I end with a discussion of what future work might be useful.

2. Methodology

At the centre of this thesis is original empirical qualitative data in the form of semi-structured one-on-one interviews with twenty-five individuals who experienced IPV in a lesbian and/or queer relationship. These interviews were conducted between March and June of 2018. In this chapter I describe and discuss the different stages of this study: from formulating the project to my analysis of the data. I discuss methodological dilemmas and issues that arose along the way, such as the struggle for definitions, the consequences of framing research participants as vulnerable, the difference between a research interview and a therapeutic interview, and researcher dilemmas in the process of managing this distinction. However, before describing the research design for the study, I begin with a short description of the background for the study, its Swedish context.

Setting the scene: The Swedish context

This introduction to the context of my study includes a short description of the geography of Sweden, as this has an impact on the size, visibility and functions of Swedish LGBTQ communities, as well as a brief historical overview of the Swedish LGBTQ movement/s, especially focusing on its/their connection to the lesbian feminist movement and legal rights related to family and reproduction. The latter are important in connection with my informants' reported experiences of IPV and help-seeking when they had formed families and had children.

The Swedish population was just over ten million in 2019. The capital and largest city, Stockholm, had just under a million inhabitants (Stockholms stad, n.d.). Sweden has a relatively low population density, with 25,2 people per square kilometre in 2019. This is similar to other Nordic countries such as Finland (18,2) and Norway (17,3) but dramatically lower than Denmark's (138,5) and the average density for the 27 European member countries at 109,0 inhabitants per square kilometre (Eurostat, 2021)⁷. Sweden's population

⁷ The Eurostat dataset contains the population density data from 2008- 2019. I have used 2019 as a reference year to make the comparison between the different countries. Latest available data from 2020 shows that Sweden's population density has increased to 25,5 inhabitants per square kilometer (SCB, 2021)

is mainly concentrated in the southern and coastal areas of the country. Many people live in small towns (Eldér, 2015: 8); in 2015 one third of the population was reported to live in one of only nine larger localities with more than 100,000 inhabitants (SCB, 2016a).

Thomas Wimark and John Östh (2014) examined the geographical concentration of lesbian and gay individuals in Sweden using data from official population databases, containing statistics on registered same-sex marriages, combined with an internet-derived dataset from *Qruiser*, the largest gay and lesbian networking site in Sweden. Most research on the LGBTQ population relies on official records such as marriage registrations, which provides only an indication of certain types of same-sex couples. Wimark and Östh's study therefore aimed to capture members of the lesbian and gay population that are often left out of national population studies: single people and unregistered couples. Their study showed that lesbian and gay men were located in virtually all municipalities but tended to be concentrated in and around larger towns. They found that areas with higher education institutions tended to have a larger population of gays and lesbians compared to the more industry-oriented municipalities (2014: 749, 746). While confirming previous findings that highlight the importance of metropolitan cities, they also found that cities are less important to couples compared to singles, and that cities seemed to be more important for gay men than lesbian women (Wimark and Östh, 2014: 749–750). Research suggests that lesbian couples more often than gay couples tend to have children, which could be a factor in explaining why lesbian couples tend to migrate to less urban regions (Wimark and Östh, 2014: 741).

The migration patterns of lesbians and gay men are more complicated than a simple rural-urban distinction, which is often addressed in research on mobility. Thus, according to Wimark and Östh (2014: 749–750), mobility patterns need to be explored further from a life course perspective. They mention factors such as education, occupation, marriage, cohabitation and family formation as potential life course events leading to migration. According to Statistics Swedish (SCB) young adults between the ages of 19-34 move the most compared to other age groups; the average Swede will move 11 times during their life course (SCB, n.d.). Thus, geographical and demographic factors shape the constructions of LGBTQ communities differently around the country and across the life course. This also includes political initiatives directed towards LGBTQ communities. In their 2015 report, RFSL evaluated and ranked the different municipalities in Sweden on how well they included LGBTQ perspectives in their work. The report looked at topics such as municipal plans, education, the level of LGBTQ infrastructure, economic support for LGBTQ organizations, attitudes towards LGBTQ people and reported hate crimes. It showed that LGBTQ perspectives and initiatives were very unevenly included in the different municipalities in Sweden. Out of the 290 municipalities, 35 had an active local LGBTQ organization. The municipalities who got the highest ranking in the evaluation were almost all in the bigger

cities or in surrounding municipalities with more than 50,000 inhabitants. 27 of the municipalities did not have any same-sex marriages or couples in registered partnership living in the municipality. These were all municipalities with less than 15,000 inhabitants (Jonsson, 2015: 19, 14). The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF, 2021: 6) published a report based on data from 2020 which showed that the majority of municipalities in Sweden are still missing meeting places for young LGBTQ peoples, and the majority of the current meeting places are still located in urban areas. Lack of meeting places and local LGBTQ organizations in large areas of the country are not just social problems but it is also a political one. In a UK context, Surya Monro and Diane Richardson (2014), for instance, found that urban areas with a larger LGB population were more successful in implementing initiatives for LGB equalities, while this was very different in localities with low levels of visibility of LGB people, which was more common in rural areas (Monro and Richardson, 2014: 879).

Thus, factors such as mobility, low population density implying long distances between localities, the unequal distribution of LGBTQ meeting places and initiatives in the different municipalities are all factors which impact on the construction of communities and networks for LGBTQ people (see Liliequist, 2020). However, LGBTQ communities are not just determined by geographical conditions but also social, legal and political contexts. To understand these it is important to look at the history of the LGBTQ movements in Sweden.

LGBTQ histories in Sweden

Homosexual behaviour by both women and men was illegal in Sweden until 1944, although the vast majority of convictions were against men. Between 1880 and 1944, 1400 men and ten women were prosecuted for same-sex sexual relations (Norrhem et al., 2015: 119–120). When the ban was lifted a higher age of consent applied to same-sex sexual acts (18 years compared to 15 years) than to heterosexual ones, and homosexual behaviour went from being a crime to being regarded as an illness (*RFSL*, 2015; Rydström and Mustola, 2010: 21). The National Organization for Sexual Equality (Riksförbundet för sexuellt likaberättigande RFSL) was founded in 1950 by 35 men and one woman. The organization focused primarily on homosexuality but later expanded to fight for LGBTQ rights. This is evident in their current (2021) name: The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex rights. However, it was not until 2001 that transgender people became officially recognized as part of the organization's target group (Bromseth, 2015: 69). In 1972, Sweden became the first country in the world to allow transgender people to change their legal gender after social and medical investigations and surgery, but it was not until 2013 that the demand for sterilisation and sex reassignment surgery was removed from the legislation

(Nygren et al., 2016: 47) thanks to the work of activists within and outside RFSL who pushed for the change of legislation. RFSL is still the leading LGBTQ organization in Sweden. The history of RFSL and the LGBTQ movements in Sweden in general are characterized by changing politics, collaborations and alliances but also exclusions and conflicted perspectives.

RFSL's early years focused on discretion and anonymity for its members, as homosexuality was considered an illness and regarded as immoral in general public discourse. During the 1970s the gay movement in Sweden, with inspiration from the US and other European countries, started to become more politically radical (Norrhem et al., 2015: 147). The most infamous example occurred in 1979 when a group of young activists occupied The National Board of Health and Welfare, protesting that homosexuality continued to be classified as an illness. Homosexuality was removed from the Swedish classification of illnesses that same year (*RFSL*, 2015).

Even though women have been part of the gay movement from the beginning, it was dominated by men. As a result lesbian, bisexual and homosexual women's experiences are often left out or invisible in the history of the gay movement in Sweden. Marie Carlsson (2004) criticizes the tendency to place non-heterosexual women's experiences in the realm of the private. Klubb Diana (Club Diana) works as a good example of a public space for non-heterosexual women. Club Diana opened in 1956 in Stockholm and helped to attract a number of women to RFSL. The objective of the club and the sub-organization of RFSL was to create a public space where women could gather around shared interests (Carlsson, 2004: 12, 20). For practical reasons, Club Diana and Kretsen, the group and club for gay men, joined together in 1973 with the student organization Albert and became Club Timmy. This led to intense debates around separatism, visibility and access to spaces. As a result many lesbian activists left RFSL (Hallgren, 2008: 178). However, in 1973 Grupp Viktoria (Group Viktoria) was founded. This was a lesbian activist group within RFSL. The group quickly expanded into several groups within the Stockholm-Uppsala area. They were inspired by the women's movement's organization with decentralized and non-hierarchical organizational structures and methods. During 1974 at a Scandinavian lesbian seminar in Oslo, activists from Denmark, Sweden and Norway discussed the need to develop a separatist movement for lesbian feminists. This was the beginning of lesbian feminist groups such as the Lesbisk Front (Lesbian Front) later called Lesbiska Feminister (Lesbian Feminists) in Sweden. Lesbian feminist groups were particularly active in all the bigger cities in Sweden such as Malmö, Göteborg and Stockholm (Hallgren, 2008: 143–144). Lesbian Front decided to leave the RFSL in the mid-1970s in order to focus on the women's movement instead, as they felt alienated from the male domination of the RFSL (Hallgren, 2008; Norrhem et al., 2015: 146, 149; *RFSL*, 2015).

At the beginning of the 1980s Sweden had its first known case of HIV, and thus begun a decade of activism primarily focusing on the survival of gay men

and their subculture (Hallgren, 2008: 135). Unlike in the US, where AIDS activism is often described as unifying the lesbian and gay movements, the situation looked quite different in Sweden (Rydström, 2008: 204). The Public Health Authorities played a very active role in the AIDS crisis in Sweden, which differed from the US context. While Swedish authorities collaborated with AIDS activists and organizations they simultaneously implemented strict and invasive restrictions targeting the LGBTQ populations and other marginalised groups. Physicians were, for instance, allowed to forcibly isolate individuals who were HIV-positive. The so-called Sauna Club Act of 1987 prohibited public facilities which were encouraging casual sexual encounters and promiscuity (Rydström, 2001: 1). However, rather than seeking confrontation, which had been the case for social movements in other countries at the time, the volunteer-driven AIDS organizations chose to collaborate with the authorities (Rydström, 1996: 84). RFSL, for instance, played an important role in advocating for the need for medical assistance, research and prevention. In some ways AIDS changed the gay movement's relationship to the state by opening up a dialogue among activists, politicians, and local authorities for the first time (Rydström, 2008: 202). While the Swedish context is, of course, unique in terms of the structure of the welfare state, the development of the mainstream LGBTQ movements followed trends similar to those in other countries by moving from discretion towards more radical approaches, ending in extended organizational collaborations and lobbying (Rydström, 1996: 83).

As mentioned, the gay rights movement in Sweden had historically been dominated by gay men, and with the AIDS crisis, tension around who the movement was for became more evident. This made many women leave the joint organizations. While there were lesbian activists who took part in AIDS activism, many were more involved in the feminist and women's organizations of the period (Norrhem et al., 2015: 174–176, 150–151; Rydström, 2008: 204). It is therefore difficult to describe the lesbian community or movement in Sweden as a single unit, as lesbian and gay activists were not organized into one fixed group or movement but, rather, embedded in a number of interrelated social movements. The literature on lesbian and queer communities in Sweden is limited. The existing research tends to apply a historical approach to feminist and specifically lesbian feminist movements (Bromseth, 2015; Hallgren, 2008; Lindholm, 2010). Nevertheless, it is safe to suggest that there exists a close alliance between feminist and lesbian movements in Sweden. It was, for instance, Lesbisk Front that in the autumn of 1976 initiated a discussion about setting up a women's house in Stockholm with a number of other women's and feminist organizations. The idea was to create a safe meeting space for women which should also function as a shelter and safe space for abused women (Hallgren, 2008: 366–367; Nilsson, 2010: 84). During the 1970s and 1980s the feminist movement in Scandinavia succeeded in creating a number of such meeting places in the form of women's houses, summer

camps and courses, which became popular meeting points for lesbian feminists. While many of these community places gradually disappeared, some continued to be active (Bromseth, 2015: 45). Janne Bromseth's research on the older generation of lesbian feminists gives a picture of a lesbian feminism that valued the collective, chosen families and friends instead of and in resistance to the biological nuclear family (Bromseth, 2015: 72). According to Norrhem et al. (2015), lesbian feminist activism of the 1980s focused on feminist separatism with a close alliance to the feminist movement, which was very critical of patriarchal institutions such as marriage (Norrhem et al., 2015: 151). Many lesbian feminists initially shunned registered partnership as it, similarly to marriage, was considered an extension of patriarchal structures (Rydström, 2008: 197). Although the 1980s are often described as a time of separatist activism, they were also a time for alliances in family constellations. In the 1980s *fyrklöverfamiljerna* (clover families) started to become a more widespread family constellation in Sweden. This term refers to families in which (most often) a gay and a lesbian couple share custody of the child(ren) (Norrhem et al., 2015: 151). However, this started to change in 1990s with changing legislation for same-sex couples.

With the 1990s began a period of political and legislative changes. The state's ombudsman against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation was put in place in 1999 (Rydström, 2001: 1). In 1995 registered partnerships were implemented for same-sex couples and in 2009 the gender-neutral marriage provision made it possible for LGBTQ people to marry in Sweden (Norrhem et al., 2015: 176). During the 1990s, the public debates around reproductive rights for lesbian and gay families peaked. The rights to adoption and artificial insemination were implemented in the early and mid-2000s. The fact that many children were already growing up in LGBTQ families became a strong argument in this debate (Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011: 162–163). This meant that so-called rainbow families became an important priority for the LGBTQ movement (Rydström, 2008: 211).

Whereas Margareta Lindholm (2010: 12) describes the decades 1980-1990s in Sweden as *öppenhetens decennier* (the decades of openness), there is also pushback against the single narrative of progress (see Dahl, 2018). The focus on same-sex marriage and family-making has been criticized for dominating the mainstream LGBTQ movement at the expense of other groups within the LGBTQ acronym. Critics have objected to the assimilation of lesbian and gay men into mainstream citizens which risks suffocating other parts of queer subculture (Rydström, 2008: 214). Bromseth, for instance, suggests that while the conditions for sexuality and intimacy have changed in the last decades, allowing for new ways of thinking about family constellations, we are also witnessing an increasing assimilation of white, middle-class, cis-gendered lesbian families in particular into normative nuclear family constellations through marriage and reproduction rights (Bromseth, 2015: 71–72). I

will discuss the impact these changes have had on ideas around community support in cases of IPV in Chapter Six.

The political climate

In their study of the everyday risks LGBT people face in Sweden, Katarina Giritli Nygren, Susanna Öhman and Anna Olofsson found that greater visibility and social acceptance did not mean that homo-, bi- or transphobia had disappeared (Nygren et al., 2016: 47). Sweden, following the trend of many other European countries, is experiencing a rise of nationalist right movements. The entry of the nationalist and racist political party Sverigedemokraterna (The Swedish Democrats) into parliament in 2010 is one of the most prominent examples of this. There are also a number of other homo-, bi- and transphobic and racist right-wing groups that have started to spread their agenda in public discourses and have made explicit threats against the LGBTQ community and other marginalised groups (Nygren et al., 2016: 47). Since the beginning of the 2000s a number of RFSL's local groups have reported cases of vandalism and threats by right-wing groups as well as attacks (Rossetti, 2019). In Piteå, for instance, RFSL was attacked with incendiary bombs twice during the autumn of 2005 (Olsson, 2006). In February 2007, RFSL Stockholm had their office windows smashed by stones carrying the logo of the Nordic resistance movement (NRM), a violent far-right group, and in the same year an employee at RFSL was attacked with an axe by a man who claimed that his objective was to make society react (Poohl, 2007a, 2007b). Since the mid-2010s several pride events have been attacked or harassed by right-wing groups (*QX Sveriges största Gaysajt*, 2019; *RFSL*, 2017). The right-wing movement has also affected RFSL's political work. The organization usually participates alongside other organizations and political parties at the Almedalen week, an annual event where the island of Gotland serves as an open democratic meeting place. However, in 2019 RFSL had to cancel their participation at Almedalen as NRM, who have made threats and committed violent actions against RFSL and different Pride organizations in Sweden before, had been granted permission to participate at Almedalen and gather outside RFSL's location (*RFSL*, 2019).

Sweden is often described as a progressive and exceptional country when it comes to LGBTQ rights, especially regarding family and reproduction. However, it is also a country with increasing support for far-right politics and increasing social inequality (Alm et al., 2021: 301). Despite improvements of legal rights and visibility, LGBTQ people are still experiencing different forms of discrimination and harassment in Sweden. Nygren et al. (2016) suggest that improved conditions and wider acceptance "have led to changes in the way homophobia is expressed, with it taking more sophisticated forms than before, making it harder to confront" (2016: 47). This suggests that the

progress story itself might make it more difficult to confront violence and discrimination facing LGBTQ people in their everyday lives.

This overview of the Swedish geographical, historical and political context of the LGBTQ movement and its relationship to the lesbian feminist movement/s outlines the context in which my research took place. Sweden's geographical spread, for instance, creates very different opportunities to set up and participate in LGBTQ communities depending on where one is located within the country. The historical context of social movements' struggles affects the societal acceptance and legal rights of LGBTQ individuals. This impacts relationships and family constellations and determines who gets to belong to certain communities. Finally, the social imaginary of Sweden as a safe haven for LGBTQ people also influences how IPV is addressed within LGBTQ communities. I discuss these issues and their implications for IPV and help-seeking further in Chapter Six. The section that follows discusses my research design, my use of terminology, and the challenges and choices I encountered and made in my research.

Research design

In order to broaden my understanding of how to conduct this research I contacted the RFSL support service⁸, the only specialized organization to support LGBTQ victim-survivors of violence in Sweden, and asked if they would be interested in collaborating on this project. They agreed, and we had ongoing contact throughout the research project. I did a pilot interview with counsellors from the organization in the early stages of the project to help me identify some of the challenges they experience in their work. This also helped me prepare for the recruitment of individuals with experiences of IPV. At the time I started my PhD, the RFSL support service had also just begun running targeted campaigns for lesbian and bisexual women affected by IPV, as they found that these women did not seek help through their facilities as often as other groups in the LGBTQ community. As one of the counsellors said in the pilot interview, "we cannot bypass the women. This has been an ongoing problem within the LGBTQ movement that lesbians and women are not being prioritized the same way as men, so we have to be aware not to fall into that trap." This led me to decide to continue working with a focus on lesbian relationships and help-seeking.

⁸ RFSL Stödmottagning (RFSL Support Service) is located in Stockholm. Since 1998 the organization has offered support services to LGBTQ people who have experienced hate crimes, domestic abuse, honour-based violence or sexual violence. They also provide services for relatives and friends of LGBTQ people who have experienced violence, and for professionals working with LGBTQ people (RFSL, n.d.).

Call for participants

Deciding which categories to use in my study to name my participants was an early issue in my research and not an easy task. The main focus for the study was IPV in lesbian and in queer relationships but those terms can include a number of different sexual and gender identifications. In my call for participants (see Appendix A) I stated that I was interested in examining IPV in lesbian relationships and that I was looking for participants who met the following criteria:

- identified as lesbian, gay, homosexual, bisexual or queer or as a woman who engages or has engaged in relationships with women (trans, cis, non-binary etc.)
- had experienced violence in an intimate relationship. This could involve any type of violence (psychological, physical, material, sexual, controlling, stalking, etc.)
- were at least 18 years old
- lived in Sweden

I delimited my study to people who live in Sweden since there is a lack of studies on the subject of IPV within LGBTQ communities in the Nordic countries. In line with Swedish ethics regulations, this study was approved by the Ethical Review Board in Uppsala (Etikprövningsnämnden Uppsala)⁹ in June, 2017 (DNR 2017/225). Following my ethical approval, I only recruited adult participants aged 18 and over. However, some of the interviewees talked about IPV experiences from before they had turned 18.

The question of which sexual and gender identifications and which relationship categories to include was, as already mentioned, very challenging. I decided to include queer as well as lesbian as sexual categories but also looked for certain kinds of relationships, often grouped as *same sex*. Focusing on relationship categories as well as on identity categories makes sense in the context of IPV. However, I was a bit sceptical regarding the phrase same-sex relationships which is commonly used in studies on IPV. This was for instance the case in Holmberg and Stjernqvist's work (2005). They describe their target group as LGBT people but rely on the language of same-sex relationships in their study. Focusing on relationship categories instead of identity categories can be fruitful, as people might identify as homosexual, lesbian, bisexual or queer and engage in same-sex relationships. However, the LGBTQ acronym contains a number of different gender and sexual identities some of which are not easily represented in the language of same sex (see Richardson, 2018: 22). As a result certain groups are often misrepresented or excluded in studies on

⁹ Since January 2019 the regional ethics boards has been combined into the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. The Central Ethical Review Board is now called the Ethics Review Appeals Board (*Ethics Review Appeals Board*, n.d.).

IPV (Calton et al., 2015: 588). Patricia Durish discusses this problematic terminology regarding same-sex abuse in the following terms:

The inclusion of trans and bi individuals within the scope of the project rendered the language of same sex partner abuse (SSPA) inaccurate at best and offensive at worst, because it excluded a large segment of the LGBTQ community that suffered a similar degree of marginalization due to their queer identities, but did not identify their partner as being same sex. (Durish, 2011: 233)

I therefore decided to apply two relationship categories, which I consider to be relatively open for different sexual and gender identifications. I had included the term queer as one of the potential identity categories for interviewees in my call for participants, as queer is very widely used within the Swedish LGBTQ communities, often interchangeably with lesbian, dyke (flata) or gay. When it comes to the term queer it is important to keep in mind that it has very different meanings in different national contexts (Richardson, 2018: 23–24) Tiina Rosenberg (2006) suggests that the easy adoption of the term in Sweden was due partly to the lack of a linguistic history around the word in Swedish. Whereas queer in Anglophone contexts held negative connotations until the latter part of the twentieth century, it did not have the same meaning in Swedish and it was easily adopted by academics, in activist circles and in general public discourses (Rosenberg, 2006: 73–74). Queer theory and queer activism have been strongly connected to feminism in Sweden, and Rosenberg's *Queerfeministisk agenda* (2002) is an example of this strong alliance (Kulick, 2005: 17). This helps to explain the widespread usage of the term within lesbian/feminist spaces. Apart from being a commonly used identity category within Swedish LGBTQ communities, queer also emphasizes instability and the impossibility of fixed definitions, such as gender and sexuality identifications, and these very features make the term both relevant but also difficult to apply in a research study (Browne, 2010). Kath Browne (2010: 213), for instance, describes queer as a potentially messy term as it refuses to be fixed within a particular set of definitional categories. The term queer holds both several meanings and no fixed meaning at the same time. Similarly, Ristock and Norma Timbang (2005: 19) use queer as an inclusive and diverse term that “can include transgender, intersex and questioning people as well as people who consider themselves heterosexual and engage in same-sex sex even though they do not identify as bisexual or gay.” Ellen Lamont applies the term queer “to signify both non-heterosexual sexualities and a politicized identity premised on resistance to normalization.” (2017, 644) Similarly to Browne, Lamont, Ristock and Timbang, I use the term both as an identity or relationship category used by my interviewees to describe themselves or their relationship, and I also employ the latter meaning, as a term that critiques the idea of stable identities and embraces the notion of fluidity in social identity categories.

Out of the 25 people I interviewed, 12 reported that they no longer identified with the same sexual identity categories they had at the time of the relationship(s) in which they experienced IPV. Some who had identified as bisexual in the relationship now identified as lesbian; in other cases it was the other way around. One had gone from queer to lesbian and another from lesbian to queer. Another had gone from identifying as homosexual to pansexual/bisexual. There was no clear pattern as to how people identified at the time of the IPV or afterwards. One woman had, for instance, identified as heterosexual despite being in a relationship with a woman, and it was first after the relationship had ended, that she had started to identify as bisexual but still questioning. One interviewee reported that she had been unsure about her sexuality in the relationship but now identified as lesbian. Another had identified as lesbian before and was now unsure. Two of the interviewees had changed gender identification since the time of the relationship(s). When describing my interviewees in this thesis I use the pronouns that match their gender identification at the time of the interview. For instance, in the case of Alexander, a transman in his early fifties who talked about having experienced IPV in two previous lesbian relationships, pre-transition, dating back twenty and thirty years, I refer to him as *he*. Similarly, I use the pronoun *she* when describing Kari. At the time of the interview, Kari was in her early twenties and identified as lesbian. However, she talked about experiences of sexual violence in a polyamorous relationship when she was in her mid-teens and had identified as non-binary. After the interview Kari said that she had been unsure about whether her experiences would fit the study, given that she and her partners had identified as non-binary and she would describe their relationships as queer rather than lesbian. I thought that this type of relationship was within the scope of the project, and I emphasized this by adding queer relationships into the framing of the participants. This also made me include, for instance, the interviewee Josefine who identified as lesbian at the time of the interview but talked about IPV in a queer relationship with a transman. Josefine described a lack of community response to IPV and difficulties with being part of a small tightknit community of mutual friends. She shared this difficulty with other research participants despite the difference in relationship categories.

However, there was one interview in particular that made me question whether the framing of my study was, in fact, too wide. Kristina, a woman in her mid-thirties, was critical of being asked to define herself in terms of a sexual identity category and described herself as without label but living heterosexually. When talking about how she had defined herself in the abusive relationship, she described herself as being a lesbian who lived heterosexually, as her partner had started to transition during the time they were together. A large part of her interview focused on her reflections regarding her struggle to

define her identity at the time of the relationship and subsequently: “I am really...living very heterosexually but I have this strong lesbian identification...and feel this identity in me.”

After the interview I felt very frustrated and started to question how I could even justify the inclusion of a relationship which was not defined as lesbian, same-sex or queer by the two parties at the time. At the same time it did not feel right to exclude an interviewee on the basis that her identity categories were not stable or fixed enough to match the framing of the study, especially since I had started to find that not fitting into categories and dominant narratives was a recurrent theme in my material. Of course, including different kinds of relationship categories also meant that I had to be aware of differences between the participants’ experiences of violence and help-seeking, depending on how their relationships were defined and perceived. Given that my study is qualitative within a queer theoretical framework, my aim was not to quantify my interviewees’ experiences into fixed categories. On the contrary, I wanted to describe and provide a nuanced picture of my interviewees’ accounts, and this includes how they identified with or dis-identified from certain identity categories (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014: 47).

Recruiting my participants

In order to find participants for the study, I created a WordPress blog in February, 2018 (see Appendix A), which I then shared through my networks on social media and on LGBTQ platforms such as RFSL. It is well established that hard-to-find groups can sometimes be more easily recruited via social media and online platforms than via other means (King et al., 2014; Whitaker et al., 2017), which is why I decided to use this approach. The blog consisted of information about the project, contact information, links for help-seeking, and information in English. My intention was to interview around 20 individuals. I unexpectedly received many responses from potential research participants within the first few days after having created the blog. In total 37 people contacted me and were given information about the study (see Appendix B). A few of the potential participants cancelled and some stopped responding when we were setting up the time and date for the interview. A small number also contacted me after the recruitment process was over. In the end I conducted 25 interviews.

Using social media to recruit research participants and especially LGBTQ targeted platforms such as RFSL limits participants to those who either have access to these platforms themselves or through their social networks. The original plan was to make additional flyers to be distributed at LGBTQ venues such as bars and community centres. However, as I got more responses than expected from my first call for participants, I delimited my recruitment strategies. I tried to be as inclusive as possible in the recruitment process by being willing to travel around the country to meet participants from different areas

of Sweden. However, most of the participants lived in, or on the outskirts of, the most populated cities in Sweden, which has to be taken into account when discussing who is represented in the study. A few of the research participants offered to travel to meet up with me. However, since I did not feel comfortable asking for more of their time than necessary, and to make it as easy as possible for the research participants, I decided that I would travel to meet the interviewees in a location of their choice. I did not exclude any informants due to their geographical position. However, due to limited time and resources I was unable to return to areas located far away repeatedly. This also meant that I would conduct several interviews within a few days whenever I was visiting a new area. This was of, course, not ideal for me as an interviewer, as it was quite a draining process, but I saw it as a necessity since I wanted to get research participants from different parts of Sweden within the timeframe of three months. I will return to the impact this had on me as an interviewer when discussing how vulnerability is used in the research process.

Researching IPV in the wake of #MeToo

When I started to recruit for the PhD project, I expected it to be difficult to reach potential research participants since for my Masters research I had struggled to get interviewees. However, I experienced quite the opposite: within the first week 28 people had contacted me. This could, of course, be caused by a number of different factors. One reason may be that I had completely misjudged research participants' willingness to participate in this type of study. Secondly, the context was different from my MA thesis work; it could also be that people were more willing to share their story in a PhD project than for a MA thesis. Finally, I suspect that the timing of the study in relation to the #MeToo movement might have had an impact on the level of participation.

I was recruiting research participants at a time when the #MeToo movement had been widely discussed internationally and in Sweden. According to Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2018) the movement functioned as a challenge to individualizing approaches which had dominated many debates on violence, sexual harassment, sexism and inequality. This collective response meant an increased focus on sexual violence as a public and collective issue (Gill and Orgad, 2018: 1318). However, as indicated by Clare Hemmings, the #MeToo campaign primarily raised a binary perspective on gendered violence:

The opportunities for an integrated account of how violence works to position a broad range of subjects as outside heteronormative authority [we]re briefly raised, only to be dismissed as part of a lamentable fragmentation that dilutes feminist politics and experience. (Hemmings, 2018: 972)

Hemmings criticizes the lack of coalition work within the movement (2018: 972). According to Gill and Orgad, the dominant focus on gender inequality made it difficult to raise experiences of multiple structures of oppression such as racism, homo-, trans- and biphobia, ableism and other inequities. This meant that violence against LGBTQ people was often left out or at best foot-noted in the #MeToo movement. However, the #MeToo movement meant an increased focus on the language of victimization and on different forms of violence. Whereas the #MeToo movement primarily focused on harassment and violence in public spaces, domestic violence was also discussed since DV activists and organizations have used its increased visibility to raise awareness about their cause (Gill and Orgad, 2018: 1319). Perhaps the #MeToo movement's exclusions and limitations made those who had been less visible within this movement more eager to share their accounts for a study such as mine. Lovisa, one of the interviewees, mentioned coverage of IPV on social media several times during the interview and described how reading about violence in social media often made her feel excluded and frustrated:

I have even read about those who say that it would never happen in a lesbian relationship and those who say, like, 'I would always choose to be with a woman over a man to avoid being subjected [to violence]'. And then I feel how I'm itching [to say something], I just want to explain that it's not like that. But I guess there is something inside of me telling me that well, I shouldn't get involved but at the same time I think it needs to get out more and that's why I am so happy every time I hear about someone who dared to speak up. Because that doesn't mean... Well, I know that we are an exposed group in general and that's why it is so difficult. It has to be done the right way. But at the same time I think it's not weird to think that violence occurs in all types of relationships... But maybe it sort of goes against that idea that violence is always about women being subordinated to men in some way and then it is difficult to talk about that violence occurs in same-sex relationships. It sort of clashes in some way ideologically, I don't know.

Many of the interviewees raised this, emphasizing the need to talk about IPV in LGBTQ relationships but also voiced an awareness of the risks and difficulties this might involve. Lovisa, for instance, emphasized that she was glad to participate in the study and get a chance to spread knowledge about what she had experienced, without being named. A few of my interviewees talked about having shared their experiences of IPV on social media, and one even sent me her status update a few months after our interview.

The interview guide

The interview guide (see Appendix C) was structured around questions related to violence and help-seeking. The main areas of the interview guide focused on the definition of violence, the contexts in which violence and/or help-seeking took place, the actors involved and the reasons for the choice of support

(or lack of support). In the actual interview I started by stating my motivation for conducting the study and asking the interviewee about theirs. Then I asked about how the relationship started. When answering this question most of the interviewees would start telling me about their experiences of IPV, what type of violence they had experienced, and what kind of support they had sought. I did not necessarily follow the interview guide chronologically except for the opening questions since I tried to engage in the interviewees' account and asked relevant follow-up questions along the way. However, sometimes I would return to questions for clarification or to areas from the interview guide that had not been covered. I noticed after a few interviews that some of the interviewees would talk about different types of violence they had experienced after the interview had ended. For this reason, I decided to add a question at the end where I asked them to summarize what types of violence they had experienced.

The last part of the interview consisted of a debriefing section. Here I would ask them what it was like to have been interviewed about their experiences. After this, I turned off the audio recorder, and we filled in the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D), with me asking the questions and writing down the answers. This allowed us to continue the conversational format of the interview and was also a way for me to make sure that the interviewees had understood the questions, which allowed for a discussion around identity categories, for instance. Since the interviews were semi-structured and to some extent led by the interviewees' accounts, the questionnaire worked as a tool to secure that I got the same basic information about all the participants, such as age, ethnicity, length of the relationship(s), sexual and gender identifications and occupation. While much of this information was repeated from the interview, not all of it had always been covered. For instance, when summarizing the questionnaire data about age, I noticed that many of the interviewees had been significantly younger than their partner, which had not been evident in all of the interviews. I discuss this further in Chapter Three.

I also asked if the interviewees would be willing to be contacted for a second interview, and some also asked to be contacted when I publish the dissertation. I did not contact any of the interviewees for a second interview, since I found that the 25 interviews had provided me with very rich material. Two interviewees got in touch with me after the interview to add reflections, and one provided me with an update of their situation. At the very end of the debriefing part of the interview, I explained that if we were to run into each other in another context, I would let them decide if and how they wanted to approach me. In the following section on the research participants I focus on the demographic data I got from the questionnaire to discuss the interviewees as a group.

The research participants

I have already indicated the diversity in gender and sexual identities among the research participants. The majority were relatively open about their sexual or gender identification at the time of the interview. Most had identified as lesbian during the relationship/s. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 55, and the average age was 32.5 years old. As Table 1 illustrates, the majority of the interviewees were between their early twenties and their late thirties at the time of the interview. Using social media as my only source of recruitment could be a factor in the prevalence of this age group.

Table 1. Age of interviewees at time of interview

Age at time of interview	Number of interviewees
20-24	4
25-29	5
30-34	7
35-39	5
40-44	2
50-54	1
55-59	1
Total	25

Source: Interview Data 2018.

For my purposes, one of the most interesting features which came out of the questionnaire data concerned the time of the abusive relationships, as many of the interviewees talked about violence that occurred in their late teens and early to mid-twenties (see Table 2). Many also talked about the relationship as either their first serious relationship or their first lesbian/same-sex/queer relationship. This raises interesting questions about IPV over the life course of individuals - both in relation to their relationship experiences but also in relation to how research participants talk about experiences from a different period of their life. In 19 out of the 27 relationships described in the interviews, the interviewee had been younger than their partner(s).

Table 2. Age when entering the abusive relationship(s)

Age of entering abusive relationship(s)	Number of interviewees
15-19	8
20-24	10
25-29	7
30-34	1
50-54	1
Total	27*

*Two of the interviewees talked about two relationships where they experienced IPV.
Source: Interview data, 2018.

The group was broadly defined by being well educated. Many of the interviewees had higher education ($n = 10$) or secondary education ($n = 9$) as the highest level of education at the time of the relationship/s. Two had vocational training and four primary education ($n = 4$). The majority of those who had primary education as the highest level of education were in the process of completing their secondary education at the time of the relationship. Many of the participants had worked during the relationship, either full-time or part-time, combined with studying, and a smaller number had been on sick or parental leave during the relationship/s. Since many of the participants talked about relationships in their late teens to late twenties, their level of education and occupation could very possibly have changed since then, and it was therefore difficult to use this information as an indication of interviewees' socio-economic or social class status. Although class is not easily definable (see Skeggs, 1997), it is highly important to examine how different socio-economic structures play into the participants' experiences of IPV and inform their help-seeking process. The participants, for instance, varied in terms of the social and economic resources they had available to seek help. Those who owned a property, had a rental contract or could afford to live on their own were often in a better position when the relationship ended than those who were economically dependent on their partner. Since the majority of the participants were well educated, and many had the resources to go to private psychological counselling, one might describe them as middle class, but there were intra-group differences. This was most evident in cases where economic abuse had been prevalent.

The vast majority of the participants could be read as white. In the questionnaire at the end of the interview, I asked about ethnicity. Most research participants listed the countries where they or their family were from. Siniša Malešević describes ethnicity as a term which holds very different meanings and which, within European traditions, is often used “as a synonym for nationhood defined historically by descent and territory” (Malešević, 2004: 1). This was also how many of my interviewees answered this question. 21 of the interviewees had grown up or lived in Sweden for most of their lives. Within this group, there was one whose family were from another Nordic country, one who was of Arab descent and one who was of Middle Eastern descent. Four research participants had immigrated to Sweden, one from a country in Latin America, one from a western European country, and two from central and eastern European countries.

In the questionnaire following the interview I did not ask about faith or religion. However, during the interviews, religion came up in two of the participants’ accounts as an important factor in their lives. One had sought counselling through church services following the abuse. The second interviewee named the church as a potential place for support. But since she did not recognize her experience as IPV at the time she did not seek this support.

None of the interviewees talked about having physical disabilities. However, mental health issues and disabilities came up in some of the interviewees’ accounts. Some interviewees had received diagnoses such as depression, eating disorders or PTSD following IPV. A few had been diagnosed during or before entering the relationship(s). One interviewee had an obsessive compulsive disorder which had been influential in the abuse she had been subjected to. Her ex-partner would, for instance, isolate her from her social network, which she depended on for support and mobility. Another interviewee had a learning disability which her ex-partner had used to justify the abuse. A significant number of the interviewees talked about their ex-partners’ mental health issues and diagnoses as either a part of the abuse or a factor which hindered the recognition of IPV. I will discuss the implications of this in Chapter Three.

Five of the interviewees had shared children or parental responsibilities with an abusive partner. This I found had a great impact on their experiences of IPV and help-seeking, and I explore this further in Chapter Six. One interviewee talked about experiencing IPV in a polyamorous relationship with two partners. The rest of the group talked about relationships with just one partner, but two interviewees talked about having experiences of IPV in two different lesbian/queer relationships. A few talked about having experienced IPV previously in heterosexual relationships. The data from the questionnaire, which much of this section is based on, only concerned lesbian, same-sex and/or queer relationships. However, the interviewees who had experiences of IPV in heterosexual relationships (with cis-men) would often reflect on the impact these experiences had had on them in the interview.

In this section, I have discussed the research participants as a group, rather than, for instance, presenting all of the demographic information about each participant in a comprehensive table. In *Diasporic Narratives of Sexuality: Identity Formation among Iranian-Swedish Women* (2007), Fataneh Farahani writes about the importance of deserving the trust of the research participants as a guiding element when writing her thesis, even when this meant potentially harming the analysis by limiting the reader's ability to follow each individual continuously and sufficiently (Farahani, 2007: 52). Throughout the thesis, I address this dilemma by balancing between giving the reader adequate information in order to understand the material, while at the same time being wary of not revealing too much about specific research participants, which could make them identifiable. Like Farahani, I have chosen to provide general information about the research participants in this chapter, while avoiding revealing detailed information about each of the participants when quoting them in order to prevent recognition. Some of the interviewees explicitly stated that certain information about them should not be revealed. In general I have tried to be as considerate as possible around identifiable information. I can of course never guarantee that an interviewee will not be recognizable based on the information I provide. However, I have followed the rule: when in doubt, leave it out. The names of the interviewees and their partner(s), friends and animals have all been changed. I chose pseudonyms which to some extent matched the age and ethnic background of the interviewee. At times, I also quoted interviewees without using any names, and I made small alterations to remove identifiable information. I also do not refer to specific geographical locations in my material.

The interview process

There were many factors to consider in the interview process, including preparations and safety measures, the interview situation, and working with the concept of story and storytelling in my material.

When preparing for an interview, I wrote in my field diary about what kind of information I had been given by the research participants beforehand, what I needed to be aware of, and at times reminders to myself based on previous interviews. Some interviewees provided me with more information beforehand than others and this created a different interview setting. Information about interruptions and the interview situation were documented in my field diary, where I would write down, for instance, observations around the interview which might not be captured in the audio recording (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014: 156), such as whether interviewees were nervous or how I experienced the interview. Since most of the interviews took place in the interviewees' homes and I was conducting the interviews by myself, I quickly realized that I needed to come up with some form of safety routine, which would make

it possible to track my location if needed without sharing the interviewees' location with others. In the end I decided to leave details of where I was meeting up with the interviewee in an envelope on my office desk. Before each of the interviews I would write to my colleague, with whom I shared the office, to let her know what time I was meeting the interviewee and I would write to her again after I had finished the interview.

All 25 interviewees I met agreed to participate in the study voluntarily. They signed the consent form (see Appendix E) and agreed to have the interview audio recorded. The interviews were semi-structured, lasting between 39 and 109 minutes and were on average just over an hour long. At the beginning of each interview I introduced myself and asked if the interviewee wanted to have a printed copy of the information sheet they had received by email before. When starting the interview, I explained that although I had certain questions and themes I wanted to discuss, the interviewees could talk about their experiences as they wished and were thus not forced to follow a certain structure when answering. I made it clear that they did not have to answer any questions they were not comfortable with and that they could stop the interview at any time. Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkman (2014: 170) emphasize that interviewees assess the interviewer within the first few minutes of an interview, and therefore it is important to create good rapport from the start and to be clear about what the purpose of the interview and the study is. As my interviews took place in different locations, most often in people's homes, I had frequently talked with them for a while already before sitting down to the interview. This facilitated rapport (Thomsson, 2010: 83). However, the interview situations were quite different depending on the location. Once when I met an interviewee living in the countryside, the lack of public transport meant that I was picked up at the nearby station, and we had some time to talk in the car before even arriving at the interview location. Such an interaction, where I stayed at a house for several hours and ate lunch with the interviewee's family was very different from, for instance, when I conducted interviews in cafés or in other public places. I found it quite challenging to interview people about this topic in public places since some of the interviewees got noticeably upset when talking about their experiences. This also made me a bit wary about asking follow-up questions when I thought the question could be too upsetting. However, I understood very well that it might be easier for some to meet in a public place since they did not know me.

All 25 interviews were conducted individually. I interviewed two couples, where both had had experiences of IPV in previous relationships. In both these instances, the interviews were conducted separately, but the other partner was close by and would at times enter the room. In one situation, an interviewee needed to look after a child during the interview. These were, of course, not ideal conditions for interviewing (Thomsson, 2010: 108–111). However, limited space and obligations as a parent are unavoidable factors when one conducts interviews with people in their home and in their spare time.

Talking to a stranger about personal experiences might be experienced as challenging and uncomfortable. In her study on grief, Britta Lundgren emphasizes the significance of asking indirect questions to facilitate rapport: “I wanted to question the different imperatives about emotionality. In trying to get hold of this, I did not ask so much about what they *felt*, rather about what they *did*” (Lundgren, 2016: 204). I found this approach not only useful but also necessary when interviewing about IPV and help-seeking. For instance, one of the interviewees and I had been in contact for a while before deciding on a date for the interview. She had been very eager to participate in the study but needed to get approval from medical professionals, as she was going through a medical investigation related to the aftermath of the IPV. I had one other interviewee who had written similarly beforehand to tell me about certain movements and behaviours I was to avoid in the interview situation. In other situations, I was told about diagnoses such as PTSD when we met up for the interview. In all these situations, I noticed that I tended to become a bit more hesitant and used indirect questions more pronouncedly to make it easier for the interviewees to avoid answering questions they were not comfortable with. In general I tried to focus on having them describe situations and contexts and on how they acted rather than focusing on how they felt about their experiences. When I asked the first mentioned interviewee, for instance, what it had been like to be interviewed, she answered:

Yes... it wasn't so weird. It was nice that there wasn't so much emotional talk about how I felt and experienced it, but more concretely this and this. Because how I feel about it all, I am not, like, ready to handle that yet. Then you would have [met] someone who would have completely broken down instead. So, well, it was good that it was concrete.

This comment shows not just the importance of asking indirect questions but also how the interview situation is conditioned by the timing of the interview in relation to help-seeking. The fact that interviewees would address and name the conditions for their participation shows how the interview situation is often determined by the work done in preparing for the interview. However, working out how much to ask was difficult. I found that I often shied away from asking follow-up questions too directly since I would let the interviewees decide how much they were willing to share. I was a bit wary of opening up issues that might upset the participants. This in turn made me struggle with the fear of missing something or not giving the participants the chance to reflect on how previous experiences of violence might have shaped their experiences of IPV. Patrycja Sosnowska-Buxton identifies this dilemma very well in the following reflection: “[h]ow was I to navigate the space between rich data and the need for participants to control their narratives?” (2016: 163). However, after having conducted around half the interviews I became more confident, as I found that the interviewees were quite capable of letting me

know when there were issues they wanted me to exclude or questions that they preferred not to answer. I will return to the discussion around assumptions of vulnerabilities in the last part of this chapter. While many of the interviews followed a similar pattern, they were all unique and the result of a situated and collaborative process between the interviewee and me as an interviewer, which I discuss next.

Interviews as collaborative storytelling

We engage with stories in our everyday lives to make sense of our experiences, our lives and identities and I view storytelling as a continuous process, where a story is constructed as it is articulated. I use the terms stories or accounts to describe the interviewees' reported experiences. I consider interviewing as an interactive and collaborative process, where the knowledge produced between interviewee and interviewer is dialogically constructed and determined by a number of factors, such as social and cultural context, social positions, time, location, and other elements (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014: 34; Woodiwiss et al., 2017: ix). In my interviews I was primarily interested in the participants' experiences of violence and help-seeking. Although the interviewees' stories were informed by memories, those are also constructions and by no means direct representations of a given event or situation (Woodiwiss, 2017: 17–18). The stories that emerge in the interview situation are better described as situational and determined by the context, as both the interviewee and interviewer produce or encourage particular accounts (Woodiwiss et al., 2017: x). My interviewees' stories were in part determined by the questions I asked and the order in which I asked them. For instance, after having discussed their reasons for participating in my study, I asked each interviewee to tell me how their violent relationship/s had started. I noticed early on that many of the interviewees would begin to interpret and connect their early relationship experiences to their experiences of IPV. When I asked Tina, for instance, how her relationship had started, she also began to talk about how the violence had unfolded:

Then it became more and more violent, so it was,...it was...yes, with hitting and kicking. The favourite activity was I guess choking. So it happened more or less all the time... And then it became the classic [story] that you get more and more isolated from other people. You're not allowed to hang out with other people, and stuff like that. So you [end up] having a very small sphere to be in all the time, where she ruled, so to speak. Well, yes, it was difficult and... I don't know.

Here the description of how the relationship developed and the specific character of the violence experienced become intelligible by referring to “classic” descriptions of violence. This can be seen in how Tina, for instance, refers to herself using the indefinite pronoun one/you (Swedish: ‘man’) instead of I.

The word “classic” is a reference to commonly told stories, images and accounts about IPV. These were referenced in many interviewees’ accounts. Sometimes their purpose was to show similarities with such “classic” scenarios, as in Tina’s case, and at other times they served to describe dis-identification from the conventional description of violence in heterosexual relationships. Arthur W. Frank suggests that “human life depends on the stories we tell: the sense of self that those stories impart, the relationship constructed around shared stories, and the sense of purpose that stories propose and foreclose” (Frank, 2010: 3). The interview can be seen as the construction of a story, which is always bounded and also dependent on existing stories.

Margareta Hydén (2008) writes about her experiences of doing interviews with people who had been abused and who had been abusive, and she characterizes these interviews as untold stories. This means, according to Hydén, that the interviewees would often not have had the opportunity to process and give meaning to their experiences, which made it harder for them to talk about these experiences (2008: 125). This was quite different from my own research. Although some of my interviewees had only recently started to address their experiences as violence, all of them had already told their story or parts of it, either to professionals, friends, colleagues, a partner, or to family members. Some had even talked to their ex-partner’s ex-partner(s) in order to make sense of their experiences. Evelina described the time after having left her partner as a process of “continuous rambling” (evigt rabblande), as she was finally able to talk, but also forced to retell the story about her experiences of violence:

But in the end I was so used to telling it all, the whole story, and then I think I did it without, without really showing anything.... Yes, it just became a story that I told and then for the one who had to receive it, then maybe it wasn’t possible for them to understand how difficult it had been, or, like, the extent of it, since I was kind of unconcerned when I talked about it. It was just... It became this damn long story that I needed to tell all the time to a lot of people and... Well, she has done so many crazy things so... I don’t even remember it all anymore.

Thus, in the aftermath of violence, Evelina’s story of IPV became a repeated story which seemed to result in a dis-engaging process. Telling here may have acquired a restorative function as it served to disentangle the telling from the teller, who no longer performed the emotions expected or experienced. Other interviewees described the telling as being like reading a book or referencing a movie. The (re)telling removed the emotional basis from the account, but it was never the same story, as talking about your experiences with a friend is different from talking to a researcher.

Although my interviewees’ accounts were not untold stories in literal terms, the context of the research interview provided a space for the construc-

tion of a new type of story, perhaps with a more reflective perspective on previous ways of telling one's stories. As emphasized by Jo Woodiwiss, stories change over time as we revisit and reinterpret past experiences from our current context and position (2017: 18). Different contexts have different purposes, and as people develop and change their understanding of themselves and their past experiences, such stories change. Some interviewees explicitly talked about redefining their experiences of violence in relation to this study or in the process of seeking help, for instance. Every telling is a new construction. In this sense my thesis itself also constitutes a telling.

Interview analysis

The first stage in the interview analysis was the transcribing of the data. As Kvale and Brinkman (2014: 227) argue, there is no one way to transcribe interview data, as the process depends on the purpose of the research and how one plans to use the data. I transcribed all the interviews verbatim. I removed or changed obvious identifiers such as names and location, I and highlighted certain parts of the transcriptions that I thought might be removed from that person's account if I chose to use them. I kept the transcriptions simple; indicating fill words like ehm, eh, ah with three dots, as I also did with short pauses. However, since my material went through two levels of translation, from oral form to written, from Swedish to English, I thought it important to maintain details such as breaks and pauses when analysing the interviews and only cleaned up the language when quoting the interviewees and translating them from Swedish into English. Although I was primarily interested in the content of the account, this cannot be completely separated from the narration itself. For instance, whether an account is expressed fluently or very fragmented can be of importance as the first can give the impression of a repeated story. This is, for instance, relevant in the following chapter, concerning the struggle to define violence.

When transcribing the interviews I used minimal but clear indications of non-verbal cues such as laughter, long breaks, or crying. When one interviewee, for instance, started to laugh softly when telling me that she had been unable to be in a kitchen with other people after being attacked by her ex-partner with a knife, I indicated that in the transcript by writing (laughs quietly). This is quite different from participants' voicing of their own emotional reactions to their experiences or reflections, such as when Maryam talked about her ex-partner's behaviour after their break-up where she added,

Well, I laugh now but it was, that's because it was just so absurd. I usually laugh at things like that. But it is not funny. It is not amusing but [...] that's how I deal with it.

These two instances of laughter are quite different in how they are articulated but both show the ways in which laughter can have a distancing effect in the account. Moran et al. (2003) found that laughter is often absent or underexplored in social science research on violence. Laughter had a pervasive presence in their data from research with focus groups talking about violence. They emphasized the need to take laughter seriously in research on violence, as laughter can have multiple meanings. These very qualities of laughter should not be ignored as they show everyday practices of safety and responses to being subjected to violence (2003: 111, 123). It is therefore not without importance for the analysis which verbal and non-verbal cues make it into the final transcription.

Transcribing the interviews was a time-consuming process, but it did give me a chance to familiarize myself with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014: 221). While transcribing I did a grid analysis in Excel on information connected to help-seeking patterns – for example where the informants had sought help, first contact, which kind of formal and informal support they had sought, and how satisfied they were with this help. I also used a free software program called Visual Understanding Environment (VUE)¹⁰ in order to visualize the help-seeking process of the informants (see Chapter Four). When mapping the interviewees' help-seeking patterns I marked informal network actors (green) and formal actors (blue) and other actions or activities which contributed to the help-seeking process (white). This also helped me to memorize the interviews as well as provide a structure to start detecting help-seeking patterns and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 89). The help-seeking maps follow to some extent a chronological order from left to right. However, the maps should not be read in a simple linear or sequential way. Rather, they are meant to help visualize the complexity of help-seeking processes with repeated and aborted attempts for support and interrelated types of support actors. I will discuss this more in Chapter Four.

Thematic analysis

For my data analysis, I drew on Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) description of thematic analysis. They discuss thematic analysis as a six-step process: familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finally producing the report (2006: 87). They suggest that the process of a thematic analysis "starts when the analyst begins to notice, and look for, patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest in the data - this may be during data collection" (2006: 86). I had, for instance, already written down themes as well as general reflections in my field diary after and between the interviews.

¹⁰ Visual Understanding Environment (VUE) is an Open Source software program based at Tufts University (Visual Understanding Environment, n.d.).

I also wrote down specific themes or significant phrases when transcribing. Such notes and preliminary themes were all part of the analysis process and would later become grouped into different themes across the interviews. After each transcription, I uploaded the file into NVivo and created a memo for each interview with the topics I had picked up on while transcribing. Meanwhile I wrote down general reflection notes as a way to start focusing on topics across the interviews. After having finished the 25 transcriptions, I went through each interview again and started coding in NVivo. I developed the codes as I went along, informed by previously detected themes. As new codes or subcodes were created, I would return to previous transcriptions to re-code. The analysis could be described as a recursive rather than a linear process, as I kept re-coding and re-grouping different codes as my analysis developed (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 89, 86).

I conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews using coding partly derived deductively, from the themes that had guided my interviews, and partly derived inductively, based on what the interviewees told me. Since the interviews were *conversations with a purpose* it follows that the coding could not be entirely inductive. As emphasized by Braun and Clarke, researchers cannot free themselves from their theoretical and epistemological commitments (2006: 82–83). One of the main themes I looked at based on my analytical questions concerned help-seeking, which I then divided into several sub-themes. Some of the themes were more descriptive such as *informal sources of support* and *formal sources of support*. Others were more interpretive such as *lack of support*, *aborted attempts* or *feelings of not fitting in*. While coding different sub-themes I started to detect a theme which I named *part disclosure*, which I coded as a form of help-seeking and will explore further in Chapter Four. Therefore, while my initial and main themes were mainly driven by my analytical questions, focusing on types of violence, community responses and help-seeking, the interpretive subcategories could be described as more data-driven. Coding is inevitably informed by the data and by one's knowledge of previous research and epistemological and theoretical commitments and is therefore neither purely inductive nor deductive (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84).

Even though Braun and Clarke's last step concerns the writing-up of the report, writing has been a crucial part of the analysis from the very beginning, from writing field notes, transcribing, creating themes and coding each interview and across the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 93, 86). The last phases of analysis can therefore also be described as a recursive process, as I looked for meaning/s through the different themes and how they connected to the analytical questions while engaging with previous research on the subject (2006: 94). I kept the transcriptions in Swedish throughout the analysis and only translated specific quotes into English in the last phase of the analysis.

Language

Language has powerful effects in producing meanings, so interpretation of data is like translation in constructing rather than just conveying meaning. (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 118)

As Ramazanoglu and Holland state, all kinds of interpretation can also be described as a form of translation, as producing new meanings. Language and translation thus play a role on several levels in this study, both in the analysis but also in the production of the interview data. As I mentioned briefly, I conducted the interviews in Swedish, but I am writing this thesis in English, both of which are not my native language, Danish. In this section, I want to discuss the issue of language and translation in relation to my study and specifically in the translation of terms to describe violence.

In my call for participants, I listed information about the project and myself in Swedish and in English. Most of my interviewees were native Swedish speakers, and all of the interviews were conducted in Swedish. All of the interviewees spoke fluent Swedish, and it did not cause any problems to conduct the interviews in Swedish. On the contrary, I found that a discussion about language issues became a way to connect, especially with non-native speakers, similarly to Magdalena Górska's reflection on the process of negotiating different words' meanings as a way to develop an understanding between interviewer and interviewee (2016: 74–75). Talking about similarities and differences between Swedish and Danish turned out to be a good opening conversation before starting the interviews. In my thesis, the Swedish quotes can be found in Appendix F in order to make it more transparent how I worked with the material since the process of translation is not innocent. As Farahani (2007: 55) suggests, every translation always involves some alteration, and the final translation is just one possible interpretation. Farahani, similarly to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), points to the very re-telling of an interviewee's story or the interpretation of data as a mediation, which in itself is a form of interpretation.

In "Lost in translation? Comparative and international work on gender related violence", Gigi Guizzo, Pam Alldred, and Mireia Foradada-Villar (2018: 237) discuss how different social, cultural and linguistic contexts affect the process of translating and interpreting terminology and connotations in research on violence. Since my research focuses on the Swedish context and all the interviews were conducted in Swedish, but I wrote my thesis in English, I had to negotiate meanings in the process of translation as well as when I refer to previous research in the field. For example, while the terms abuse or domestic violence abuse (DVA) are widely used in many international studies, abuse is not easily translated into Swedish. One possible translation could be *misshandel* which can mean maltreatment or abuse when associated with verbal, mental or psychological abuse. This is also how it surfaced in the interviews. But when *misshandel* is used on its own, it is often translated as assault,

referring to physical violence, which is also how it is used in the Swedish penal code regarding crimes against life and health (Brottsbalk (1962:700), n.d.; Regeringskansliet, 1999). However, many of the interviewees, as well as I in the call for participants, used violence as an umbrella term to describe a wide range of different experiences of both the kind of violence which could be translated as mental/emotional abuse and as physical assault. I chose to have a very open definition of violence in my call for participants (see Appendix A) by writing that violence could include any type of violence. I did not go into a more precise definition of what I meant by violence. I did this because following Belle Liang et al. (2005) I wanted to examine how victim-survivors identify their experiences in help-seeking processes, as this informs the processes themselves (Liang et al., 2005: 80). However, as I discuss in the following chapter, the term violence has many possible meanings, even within one language, and the lack of a clear definition may have alienated potential research participants, but it may also have had the opposite effect.

Vulnerability in the research process

Defining victim-survivors as a vulnerable group can be both necessary and problematic. IPV is often described as a sensitive topic that makes high demands on research participants and researchers (Hydén, 2008; Lee and Stanko, 2003; Renzetti and Lee, 1993). Róisín Ryan-Flood (2010: 189) also emphasizes that feminist research in particular often faces epistemological, methodological and ethical challenges, especially when engaging with marginalized groups. From this perspective, I dealt with both a sensitive topic as well as marginalized and potentially vulnerable participants. Renzetti and Lee (1993) suggest that the phrase *sensitive topic* is often assumed to be self-explanatory even though such definitions imply specific methodological and technical considerations and thus call for further definitions (1993: 3–4). Research ethics committees often characterize research on IPV as sensitive and presume that the research participants are therefore vulnerable (Downes et al., 2014: 2.6). However, this is a problematic approach according to Julia Downes, Liz Kelly and Nicole Westmarland who describe vulnerability as “a slippery and ambiguous term” (2014: 2.8). They argue that framing research participants as vulnerable is often based on assumptions that victims cannot comprehend potential risks or the consequences it might have on them to take part in a research project on IPV. They argue that it is important to view research participants in studies on violence as active agents and thus able to make informed decisions about their research participation. While research on violence should be done with proper attention to the participants’ wellbeing, they encourage restraint in terms of defining everyone who has been victimised as vulnerable (Downes et al., 2014: 2.8). They suggest that researchers should

neither underestimate the risk of re-traumatization nor overestimate the vulnerability of victim-survivors: “[i]n contrast to the stereotype of a victim of domestic violence as passive, women who live in (or have lived through) violent and abusive situations are often highly skilled in managing risk and harm to themselves and their children” (Downes et al., 2014: 3.3). In line with this perspective, I suggest that research participants often have strategies to protect themselves in research situations. I encountered this in a number of ways. Many of the interviewees deliberately chose not to name their partner, their children or themselves during the interview, or they let me know when there were things they did not feel comfortable sharing with me. I also had quite a few potential research participants who cancelled our interview appointment. Some gave reasons such as feeling distressed or renewed contact with their previous partner, while others simply stopped responding to my emails. These withdrawals can be seen as participants’ or potential participants’ ways of managing their risks in relation to my study. I suggest there is a need to rethink how vulnerability is part of the research process without reducing research participants to a fixed and assumed position of vulnerability. That being said, different forms of vulnerabilities became evident in the research process that did not only concern the research participants.

Following a request from the Ethical Review Board, I had contacted an independent psychologist with LGBTQ competences and included her contact information in the information letter given to potential research participants (see Appendix B). I saw this as an important but perhaps rather symbolic gesture, since many of them lived far away from where this therapist was located, and not everyone had the means to seek such support. Although the majority of the research participants seemed at ease in the interview situation, a few mentioned that they were or had been quite nervous or anxious when I met them. Even though I tried to make them feel as comfortable as possible, I was making them revisit experiences and memories that could be triggering and painful.

I ended all the interviews by asking the interviewees about their reflections on taking part in the interview. The majority described the interview as a positive experience, while some emphasized that they had been nervous before the interview and that it had been difficult to talk about their experiences. When I asked Yvonne, about what it had been like for her to be interviewed, she answered,

Yes... Well, it was very rewarding to get to... ‘Cause I feel like you have asked some questions that, well that I haven’t, that have made me go back and remember situations from a different perspective than what I have thought about before and that is valuable. ‘Cause it’s like, no matter whether or not you can solve a problem or figure out some answers or some solutions, it’s, it’s healing to get to talk about it. ... For me it was also a bit of a test to see if I would be able to talk about this without falling apart or if I would be traumatized for another 20 years after this [laughs] ... So at the same time, well, I think that it

feels like an advantage to get to participate, and to get to talk about it. ‘Cause this, I mean these kind of things you don’t talk about with friends or your buddies about [...] Yes, what was the question again? [laughs] Well, why it, why it, yes... I don’t know. My brain is a bit tired now.

Yvonne’s reflections show how it can be draining but also rewarding to participate in an interview about one’s experiences of IPV. Yvonne’s reflection also illustrates the precariousness of such participation, as reactions cannot be predicted beforehand. Adele D. Jones and Hazel Da Breo (2017) emphasize the complex position violence researchers face: “[a]s researchers, we move consciously and sometimes unconsciously into the role of therapist, crossing role boundaries in ways that challenge conventional research boundaries” (2017: 155). This points to a concern I had since I started interviewing: how to uphold the distinction between being a researcher and *not* being a help-provider.

Much research on the subject of feminist methodologies in studies on violence has focused on how to ensure that the studies have a positive impact on the research participants (Campbell et al., 2010; Downes et al., 2014). Campbell et al. (2010), for instance, explored the impact of participating in an interview study on rape survivors. They found that the vast majority of the participants considered the interview to be a supportive, helpful and even insightful experience (Campbell et al., 2010: 60). As they discuss the issue of expectations, Campbell et al. touch upon an interesting issue which they unfortunately fail to elaborate on further. This concerns the role and responsibility of the interviewer. As one informant in their study expressed a desire for more individually focused guidance by the interviewer, the interviewer engaged with this by sharing some reflections on the difficulties this can cause researchers:

Interviewer: I’d go crazy if I brought everyone home with me.

Survivor: I understand. And you shouldn’t. . . .

Interviewer: I mean I think all of us, us interviewers, have to work on that on our own. But the other thing is, I think for some people who haven’t talked about it at all, and I’ve had people come in here that say it’s been a good experience to be able to talk to me about it. Or maybe if you’re interested in it you should find a counsellor who will be that type of a relationship for you. (...)

Survivor: But you can’t have it now [laughing].

Interviewer: Exactly. I can’t be that for you. I am not a trained counsellor [both laughing]. I wouldn’t know how. (Campbell et al., 2010: 74)

Campbell et al. use this as an example of how the interviewer can engage in sharing an open dialogue with the interviewee and thus live up to their ideals of feminist interviewing. However, as I read the paragraph I was even more intrigued by the ambiguity of the interviewer’s position when it comes to the question of responsibility, as this is a recurring concern of mine. I am not a help-provider; I am not a trained psychologist or counsellor in any way. However, I was asking my participants to share their experiences of violence with

me in a format that is often used in therapeutic settings. For instance, I had a few participants who had only started to think about themselves as having experienced violence in connection with the study. Others, like Yvonne, expressed concerns about not knowing how they would react, and some of the interviewees were noticeably upset during the interview. But, as Campbell et al. emphasize, “the interviewer’s role is fundamentally different from that of a therapist” (2010: 74). I fully agree with this point. However, I found that in practice this fundamental difference and how the interviewer can ensure that this distinction is upheld is not very clear.

Kvale and Brinkman (2014) argue that the therapeutic interview and the research interview are both similar and different at the same time. They both aim to enhance understanding to create some sort of change. But the first focuses on personal change and the latter, on the production of knowledge (2014, 60). There are also methodological and ethical differences between the two, for instance in what kinds of questions the interviewer asks and how interpretations are made, which inform the dynamic between interviewee and interviewer. However, the research interview also draws inspiration from the therapeutic interview, for instance, in the open-ended structure, an often used approach in qualitative research (2014: 63). The fact that I asked my interviewees to reflect on their experiences of violence in the past could also lead to blurred lines between the different interview forms. Although I did not ask questions in order to make my interviewees reach a new level of personal understanding of their experiences, this is a potential outcome of the interview, since any telling is a (re)construction of their story. For instance, to return to my interview with Yvonne, when I first asked her about previous experiences of violence she was a bit hesitant and started to talk about her parents’ relationship as conflicted. Later she talked about their fights as a form of violence and made connections between this and her own experiences of IPV:

[My dad] was maybe acting really threatening, maybe just like Rebecca [ex-partner] was acting towards me [...]. If we say that... This is really interesting, what a question can make me start to think about. Well, this thing about me not thinking that there was something to report when Rebecca pushed me up against the shelter or when she was acting threatening and running after me at [location], but maybe that was what my dad did to my mum when she called me and said ‘he’s hitting me’.

Here Yvonne made connections between minimizing her experiences of violence in her own relationship and how her father had acted violently towards her mother. I think this example shows how the research interview can generate new insights for the interviewee. The fact that some of the interviewees found the interview therapeutic does not necessarily make it a better or worse research interview. Nevertheless, it does raise interesting methodological and ethical questions, given that most researchers are not trained counsellors and therapists, and we are often not provided with the tools or suitable framework

to deal with our interviewees' reactions or our own, for that matter. I think the interviewer in Campbell et al.'s (2010) study pinpoints the problem very well when stating that interviewers have to work out how to deal with their experiences. How we think about vulnerability and responsibilities in the research process affects not only the research participants but also the researcher and the research produced. Even though the interview is often constituted as a dialogical process, very little attention is given to the researcher's emotional wellbeing in this experience (Jones and Da Breo, 2017: 52).

While there is an increasing focus on the emotional costs of working with people who have experienced trauma, the research often centres on front-line emergency workers, social workers and therapists, and little attention is given to researchers (see Isdal, 2017; Williamson et al., 2020). This is perhaps not surprising given that researchers and front-line workers have very different encounters with people who have been exposed to, for instance, violence and abuse. However, as Williamson et al. (2020) suggest, it might also have to do with a traditional view of researchers as supposedly objective, detached and neutral, which gets in the way of recognising that they can also be affected by their own research (2020: 56).

During the three months I conducted the interviews, I started to notice that the interviews were taking a toll on me, especially when conducting two interviews a day or interviewing for several days in a row. While I felt more tired and at times dizzy, I also started to worry that I had gone numb since the interviewees' stories did not affect me in the same way as in the beginning. I had expected the interviews to be emotionally demanding, but I was quite surprised by how draining the process following the interviews became, when I started to transcribe and analyse the material. Williamson et al. argue that qualitative methods require the researcher to remain immersed in the data for a long period of time and often in iterative processes of interviewing, transcribing, coding and writing. When it comes to research on violence this can be quite a demanding process, especially for the researchers who, like myself, have been drawn to the topic due to personal experiences (2020: 58).

Insider positioning and feminist ideals

In my MA thesis (Ovesen, 2016) on narratives of violence in lesbian relationships, I discussed the advantages and disadvantages of conducting research as an insider. I found that explicitly positioning myself as an insider both as a lesbian and as person with experiences of IPV was a way to suggest to my informants that I was trustworthy. I used this positioning in my current project as well. I would begin every interview by briefly stating my motivation for doing this research. Although I found this to be a helpful approach and I wanted to be transparent about my relation to the subject, this could also be interpreted as a disadvantage. The interviewees might have had concerns about mutual connections in the LGBTQ communities, for instance. There are

also a number of advantages. According to Sosnowska-Buxton, an insider position can make it easier to access informants, especially for studies on sensitive topics, as an insider position may indicate greater legitimacy and trustworthiness (2016: 158). However, I think it is important not to consider the insider position as by default better or worse than other positions. What is important is to reflect upon how enacting different positions might influence the recruitment, the interview process and the subsequent analyses. For example, by claiming to hold an insider position, a person might run the risk of assuming sameness. This can make it harder to acknowledge differences. This risk runs both ways, I think, as the researcher and the research participant might assume that they share a similar perspective on the research topic because of their positioning.

Positioning myself as an insider obscured the ways in which the interviewee and I might differ from each other. In my interview with Sasha, for instance, we talked about struggling with Swedish, at the beginning of the interview.

Sasha: ... I also mix several languages sometimes so just let me know if I need to clarify some things.

Nicole: Yes, yes, and the same goes for you [laughs].

In her interview, Sasha talked about the struggle of meeting people in Sweden, and after the interview she asked me about how this had been for me, as I am also a foreigner in Sweden. Sasha had been granted asylum in Sweden due to her sexual identity after having experienced, among other things, corrective rape and living in hiding for many years. Thus, when I answered her question it became clear that although we could bond around language, and we both identified as lesbians and had moved to Sweden when we were around the same age, our histories of migration and our experiences of homophobia and violence were very different. I wanted to raise this one example, as I think this shows how positioning oneself as an insider can potentially obscure the ways in which the research participants and researcher actually differ from each other in terms of experiences, background, ethnicity, migration status, abilities and other identities. Thus, it is not possible to predict how one's social positions will determine the interview situation, as no single trait but a whole range of intersectional factors determine how the social encounter unfolds. Though it cannot be predicted, it is necessary to critically reflect on how assumptions about sameness and difference play out in the interview situation and what kind of impact these can have on the social encounter (Griffin, 2016: 20).

In her widely cited text from 1981 Ann Oakley wrote that feminist research relies on a recognition that "personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives" (Oakley, 1981: 58). This was often reproduced in early

feminist writing on interviewing where the objective was to strive for an egalitarian relationship, built on mutual exchange between interviewer and interviewee (Ryan-Flood, 2010: 190; Sosnowska-Buxton, 2016: 157). There are two feminist research ideals that shaped my research process. The first is the feminist ideal of personal involvement in the research process, which I suggest is valuable but not without complications. For the interviewer, disclosing information about oneself and one's experiences can have advantages in the interview. It can help to make the interviewee feel more relaxed by making the interview seem more like an informal conversation. However, it is important to keep in mind that while the researcher has obligations such as ensuring the anonymity of the interviewees, interviewees do not have the same responsibility towards the researcher, and they are therefore free to share any information disclosed by the researcher with others. This is important to keep in mind, especially when conducting research in communities the researcher also belongs to.

The feminist ideal of personal involvement tends to focus on the power of bonding. However, having empathy or bonding as an unquestioned objective in the research process can also mean that the unequal power relationship between researcher and research participants is unaddressed. Ryan-Flood and Gill (2010) raise this as they argue that “empathy might potentially become a means of exploitation – extracting more from research participants, and generating expectations of friendship that may be impossible to sustain” (2010: 4). This is not to say that one should not be, or strive to be, empathetic. However, I think that the assumption that empathy will inevitably lead to socially accountable research is problematic. As noted by Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002: 158) for example, research subjects who are led to trust and feel empathy from the researcher can become particularly vulnerable, as the researcher will always be in a position of power when it comes to the interpretation of the data.

The second feminist ideal I want to address is that socially accountable research should be *for* the research participants rather than *about* them (DeVault and Gross, 2007: 191). I believe this is a crucial and important point and something to strive for in feminist research, but similarly to the ideals of the egalitarian interview, I think it is important to acknowledge the related challenges and that a researcher cannot guarantee that all research participants' expectations will be met. The first question I asked all the interviewees after stating my own reasons for doing the project was, “What made you decide to participate in this study?” Some had more individual motivations, such as wanting to process their experience of violence, while most expressed the desire to make a difference, hoping that their experience could be useful for others. Many emphasized the general lack of knowledge on the subject as a strong motivation for taking part in the study. Although there were general patterns in their accounts of violence and help-seeking, the interviewees also expressed different views on certain topics, specifically concerning, for example, how to

identify perpetrators and victims and the role the LGBTQ community should play in this process. Some of the interviewees had experienced that the LGBTQ community had provided them with protection while others had been the subject of exclusion. One interviewee had, for instance, publicly named her perpetrator and talked about checking to see if their mutual friends on Facebook had unfriended the ex-partner, while another feared that their mutual friends would judge her ex-partner as an evil person and she was therefore wary about sharing her experiences of IPV with mutual friends.

At first such contradictions made me very uneasy since I was afraid that I would not be able to meet the participants' expectations. However, my fear of failing the interviewees may be a statement on the assumptions I make regarding what impact my research might have on the interviewees' lives, but this fear can also be a failure to acknowledge that the research participants have very different experiences and social positions which create different expectations. Instead of trying to find ways to resolve these conundrums, I tried to reflect on how I could embrace them (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 117). For me, accountability in research became about *staying with the trouble* and allowing contradictions to be shown in the material, while being transparent about the interpretations I made, how I applied theoretical perspectives in my analysis and my own positionality. I think this allows for a more nuanced picture of the help-seeking processes I explore and the challenges facing help-seekers as well as help-providers.

This chapter presents a short background on the Swedish context in which my research took place. I outlined the different stages of my research, from its framing, to conducting the interviews, to the analysis of the data. In this process, overall information about the research participants and discussed methodological issues involving terminology, recruitment and interviewing are also presented. I discussed my interviews as dialogically produced stories and addressed how to ensure that the research participants remain unidentifiable while securing rich material. This led to the final section, which connected issues raised throughout the chapter concerning the concept of vulnerability as a complexity in violence research (Downes et al., 2014). I addressed both the dynamics in the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and also how implied expectations about vulnerability or expectations of the research participants affect not just the research produced but also the researcher (Jones and Da Breo, 2017; Renzetti and Lee, 1993: 6), as well as how to embrace contradicting perspectives and assumptions in the research process. This methodological overview lays the foundation for my analysis of the data in the next chapter, as well as my exploration of the struggle to define violence that many of the research participants experienced.

3. The struggle to define violence

Nicole: What was your motivation for wanting to take part [in the study]?

Evelina: [...] I haven't thought so much about belonging to this category, like, someone who has been in a relationship with violence, but apparently this is the case and then I thought I might as well go on since it's for a good cause I think. It is more like, if [friends and current partner] hadn't told me about this, then I would never have reflected on this and thought yes, this is something I should do.

This statement is from the very beginning of my interview with Evelina, a homosexual woman in her early forties, who had been in a violent relationship for more than seven years, starting when she was in her mid-twenties. During the interview, which lasted almost an hour and a half, Evelina would go on to tell me how she had been controlled, isolated and assaulted by her previous partner. This was sustained through many actions such as threats, manipulation, physical attacks, and financial fraud causing economic dependency. Finally, as Evelina attempted to leave the relationship, her partner had reported her to the police and she was not allowed to see their children for an extended period of time. Nonetheless, Evelina said she had not thought much about belonging to the category of those who have experienced IPV. This points to the issue of how to define violence and victimization.

In the 25 interviews I conducted with people who had experienced violence in lesbian and/or queer relationships, the struggle to define violence was one of the most recurrent themes. In this chapter I examine this issue to discuss what kinds of meanings around violence and victimization emerged in the interviews I conducted. I start by examining how different types of violence were articulated in the interviews. I then discuss the matter of language to define violence, specifically how legal terminology effects conceptions of what counts as violence. This leads to a discussion of how certain types of violence become obscured due to heteronormative discourses around violence and victimization as well as societal norms and scripts around emotional work in relationships. Here I discuss the consequences of the lack of accounts for understanding IPV in non-heterosexual relationships. I also analyse how feminist conceptions of victimization might be applied in my material and what difficulties this might entail. I end by discussing IPV as a difficult-to-define and repeated process sustained through asymmetric relationship scripts around care work and feelings of responsibility for the partner.

Defining violence is no easy task, as there is no consensus on the delineation of this phenomenon (Kelly and Johnson, 2008: 480). According to Evan Stark: “[d]efinitions are the life-blood of social science. By declaring what sort of problem battering is, the violence definition determines whose knowledge is needed to understand and solve it, hence whose futures are tied to its fate” (2007: 205). This makes it all the more important to reflect critically upon these definitions, their associated embedded assumptions, and their potential effects. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, there are intense debates within research on IPV and in public discourse around the terms one might use to describe violence. On one side, activists and researchers stress the importance of finding the words to describe experiences of violence as a pattern of control and to resist the hierarchal understanding of violence often found in social and legal institutions, which focuses on physical violence (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 90). On the other side, a close reliance on the criminal justice system has meant that there continues to be an incident-based focus on violence (Kelly and Westmarland, 2016: 116) in order to classify and differentiate between different types of violence, focused on harm, intention and cause. In my call for participants (see Appendix A), I used a very wide definition of IPV, which could involve any type of violence such as psychological, physical, material, sexual, controlling, and stalking. Even though the interviewees’ accounts varied in terms of how long they had been in an abusive relationship, the severity, and the impact of IPV, there were also strong similarities across the interviewees’ accounts in terms of which types of violence they described as the most dominant in the abusive relationship.

Types of violence

When I asked the interviewees what type of violence they had been subjected to, they often focused on particular incidents or recurring scenarios either during their relationship or after it had ended. After each of the 25 interviews I specifically asked the interviewee to name the primary types of violence they had experienced in the relationship. Table 3 illustrates the words they used. Some interviewees reported several types of violence while others mentioned just one. Analytically I separate different kinds of violence. However, it should be noted that most people are not the object of just one kind of violence.

Table 3. Types of violence experienced in lesbian and queer relationships

Primary type(s) of violence experienced in the relationship ¹¹	
Psychological violence/abuse	22
Physical violence	8
Control	6
Manipulation	5
Material violence	4
Sexual violence	3
Economic violence	3
Verbal violence	2
Stalking	2
Emotional violence	2
Limited freedom	2
Jealousy	1

Source: Interview data, 2018.

As Table 3 shows, the majority of the interviewees said that psychological violence/abuse was the predominant type of violence in their relationship, and when adding subcategories of psychological violence/abuse such as control, manipulation, emotional violence, and limited freedom, this figure was even higher. Furthermore, different types of violence often overlapped, and some were easily identified while others were not. Some of the interviewees referred to “the classic description of violence”. This was used either to identify their experiences as violence or at times it was referred to when describing how their experiences did not match the popular view of IPV as a heterosexual phenomenon that tends to emphasize physical abuse. In the latter cases, experiences could become incomprehensible as violence.

One example of how violation can become incomprehensible occurred in my interview with Maryam, a woman in her late twenties who identified as lesbian and queer. She had been in a violent relationship for three years in her mid-twenties. When I asked her about why she did not tell anybody about this violence, she said that she felt ashamed and had put a lot of responsibility on herself. She found the fact that her partner had sexually assaulted her particularly difficult to address:

¹¹ The table shows data from the questionnaire filled out immediately after the interview. The types of violence were later translated into English, which affects how the categories are constructed (see discussion on translation in the Methodology chapter).

I just thought, ‘how the hell can a lesbian rape, or do it’, you know? I think it was some kind of denial issue. I was just like ‘this did not happen’. ‘Cause you would think that it’s a man who sort of tries to rape you and then it’s like this and this. But, well, I think that was the reason. I was just like, this didn’t happen, this wasn’t real. ‘Cause this wasn’t really how a rape is supposed to be, like according to the normative imaginary of it.

This “normative imaginary” that Maryam refers to can be seen as the effect of the public story of IPV, as mentioned in the Introduction. The story is characterized by the notion of a binary gendered victim/perpetrator dynamic where the stronger and bigger man physically controls the weaker and smaller woman (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 9). Maryam afterwards added that the notion that she should have been able to defend herself since it was a woman who attacked her might have had an impact on her denial. Here gendered expectations of violence are associated with physical strength and body size, which can prevent or delay victim-survivors from recognizing their experiences as violence (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 9, 161; Hassouneh and Glass, 2008: 320).

Although physical violence is often described as easily identified compared to other types of violence (Hodes and Mennicke, 2019) this is not necessarily so. Lovisa, a bisexual/pansexual woman in her mid-twenties, who had been in a violent relationship with a woman when she was in her late teens, illustrates this in her account. When asked what kinds of violence she had experienced in the relationship, which had lasted just under a year, she answered:

I guess it was.... well previously, I have seen it as only psychological violence but now I can see that I have underestimated a lot, so to speak. I thought that if you haven’t gotten punched then it’s not physical violence. But I realize now that she did do things to me that hurt me physically, even if I blamed it on other things since I thought she is not doing this the way one would do if it was violence. However, she did things that she shouldn’t have done, which were physically harmful. But, above all it was psychological and then you could say, it’s difficult, I can’t really say that it was sexual violence. However, it did affect me sexually which it wouldn’t have if there hadn’t been psychological violence. It was like an underlying threat you might say. So I went along with things that I didn’t want to do even though there was no, like, pronounced threat. It was more like an underlying threat.

Lovisa’s statement describes certain difficulties in recognizing IPV at the time of the relationship. Here several issues play into the struggle to define violence. Her account shows how entangled forms of violence reinforce each other but also make it harder to differentiate and recognize abusive behaviour as violence. It also emphasizes how the public story of IPV shaped how Lovisa thought about her own violations when she referred to her partner’s behaviour as not matching norms about perpetration of violence. This is very much connected to the issue of intentionality. So while Lovisa clearly described her

partner's behaviours as harmful to her, she struggled to determine her partner's intentions. Lovisa provided an example of an incident where her partner wanted to use essential oil as a lubricant. She emphasized that she had said no several times but that her partner had continued to assert that this would work and in the end her partner had applied the oil, causing Lovisa a great deal of pain. Lovisa describes how she reflected on this at the time:

It wasn't on purpose so... well, it took me a long time to realize that okay but I said no and she did it anyway. It was also that I didn't say no when we had sex and I thought it was quite obvious that I didn't want to at times. But it happened anyway and it could hurt so bad that I couldn't walk properly for a couple of days after... and I didn't dare to show it, so I blamed it on everything else. And it is also that I, like, find it hard to... I find it hard to see it as violence even though I realize that... okay, you should have sensed it better... so.

Although Lovisa clearly states that she had been physically hurt, she was unsure about whether her partner had meant to hurt her or not, and this affects whether she defines the action as violent.

The question of intention is very much debated, and different researchers, organizations and practitioners use definitions that either emphasize or de-emphasize the role of intention as well as the consequences of an action or behaviour. According to Zeev Winstok (2016) there are different approaches to defining IPV, which often follow a pattern of focusing on different aspects, such as the behaviour of the perpetrator, the cause of the behaviour such as control, or the outcome of IPV (Winstok, 2016: 96). The first approach can be found, for instance, in Straus et al. (1980), where "normal violence" is defined as "an act carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury to another person." (Straus et al., 1980: 20) According to Winstok, many researchers later adopted this definition which focuses strongly on intention as a theoretical definition of partner violence. However, a number of studies have shown a high level of rejection from perpetrators of assuming responsibility for their violence. This also leaves the concept of violent acts as self-defence in a somewhat grey area (Winstok, 2016: 96–97). Where control and restrictions are very central elements in the understanding of domestic violence from a feminist perspective (Hester et al., 1996: 29), a similar focus on coercive behaviour is not evident in all definitions of violence. The criminal justice system's dominant perspective on investigation and evidence means that there is still an emphasis on incident-based violence, or what in Nixon's (2011) terms one might describe as spectacular violence. This can make it harder to conceptualize other types of violence such as relationally specific features of coercive control (Donovan and Hester, 2010: 280–281).

Identifying IPV: The impact of legal perspectives on violence

When examining woman-to-woman sexual violence, Girshick (2002: 84) emphasizes how cultural and legal definitions of violence influence, for example, how we can talk about different types of violence such as sexual violence, and who is perceived as a potential victim and perpetrator. This became very clear in my interviews, especially when discussing experiences of sexual violence. For example, Cecilia, a woman in her early forties, had experienced violence in her first lesbian relationship in her late teens. Since she had agreed to take part in the study, Cecilia had started to reflect on her experiences of sexual violence in the relationship:

But now I can see with more experience as well that Siv was in fact controlling me and that... you could call it, well depending on how you look at the legislation, you could almost say... that it was rape or sexual exploitation... and that on its own... well, it can easily become a stigma. That it becomes something shameful, which is very, very difficult because... to put on myself that... why didn't I say no more clearly or why did I allow her to go on or why didn't I leave earlier than I did, when I indeed felt quite early on that this is not... this is not good. This isn't making me feel good.

Cecilia references the legislation as a way of framing her experience of sexual violence while emphasizing the definitional struggle implicit in the comparison between that legislation and her own definition. As the latter part of her statement shows, the definition of violence is not just a matter of identifying a perpetrator but also of accepting the role of victim and negotiating one's lack or level of agency in this contested position. Catherine Hodes and Annelise Mennick (2019) argue that as domestic violence and responses to DV have become increasingly more institutionalized, the definition of a crime plays an important role in how such violence is defined and how victims are identified. Turning to legal frameworks for descriptions and definitions of violence has meant an overemphasis on physical violence as well as simplifications in definitions and responses. This has resulted in a narrow view of violence where not-as-easily identifiable types of violence such as coercive control are often left under-emphasized or unaddressed.

Legal definitions reproduce discourses of who is regarded as a legitimate victim of IPV. Girshick found that lesbian and bisexual victim-survivors of abuse and sexual assault were often discouraged by their reception in the legal system, as their experience did not fit the dominant gendered assumptions around victimization (Girshick, 2002: 117). This was evident in the interview I did with Tina, a woman in her mid-thirties who had experienced IPV in a lesbian relationship when she was in her mid-twenties. The relationship lasted just under a year and ended when her partner was arrested by the police after assaulting Tina with a knife. When I asked her how she had experienced the

legal proceedings afterwards, she described the process as extremely challenging and even absurd in many ways, partly due to the negligible punishment her ex-partner had received but mainly due to procedural difficulties. This included uncertainty around how her violation should be classified in the legal system:

They didn't even know how they should classify the things. First, they or the prosecutor wanted to combine different classifications. She even called me the evening before the trial and just talked for a long while, like, 'Ah, I don't know... I've been thinking about maybe classifying it like this, but I can't classify it as gross violation of a woman's integrity' and I was like, 'why not?' 'Yes, 'cause she is a woman and therefore you can't do that. That is only when it's a man who is doing that towards women.' So in the end she classified it as gross violation of integrity.

This illustrates the importance of language in defining the intelligibility of legal subjects or, in this case, her unintelligibility. Tina's case shows that it is not just a matter of having the legal framework but also of how that is understood and applied in practice. The crime *gross violation of women's integrity* that Tina mentioned was adopted in the Swedish penal code in 1998, after the Commission on Violence Against Women was given the task to scrutinise issues related to violence against women and propose new measures to counteract such violence. Informed by feminist research on men's violence against women, the new act aimed to take the normalisation process of violence in intimate relationships into account. This classification allows for convictions based on a series of repeated and long-term violations that, viewed separately, could be regarded as relatively minor but as repetitions cause substantial violation of the victim's integrity (Lundgren et al., 2002: 12–13; Nordborg, 2005: 105). The gendered framing of the new crime act was debated at different stages of the legislative process. The commission in particular emphasized the importance of addressing the perpetrator as a man and the victim as a woman (Prop. 1997/98:55, 1998; SOU: 1995:60, 1995). Thus, the article is divided into two paragraphs: one describing *gross violation of integrity* in gender-neutral terms, and the second part specifically focussing on violations committed by a man against a woman¹² in a close relationship. This suggests that it should be possible to use the first paragraph in cases of parents' violence

¹² "Section 4a: A person who commits criminal acts as defined in Chapters 3, 4 or 6 against another person having, or having had, a close relationship to the perpetrator shall, if the acts form part of an element in a repeated violation of that person's integrity, and suited to severely damage that person's self-confidence, be sentenced for *gross violation of integrity* to imprisonment for at least six months and at most six years.

If the acts described in the first paragraph were committed by a man against a woman to whom he is, or has been, married or with whom he is, or has been, cohabiting under circumstances comparable to marriage, he shall be sentenced for *gross violation of a woman's integrity* to the same punishment" (Law 1998:393) (Regeringskansliet, 1999).

against children, non-cohabiting relationships or same-sex relationships, according to Heimer and David Sandberg (2008: 257). However, as emphasized by Nordborg, “articles of the law do not automatically translate the norm into reality and turn ‘should be’ into ‘is’” (2005: 102). As Tina’s case indicates, it is not just a matter of having a legal classification that fits one’s case; it also matters how these classifications are described and, finally, how they are used and understood in everyday practice and in the legal system. In Tina’s case, the responsibility was placed on her as an individual to negotiate her unintelligible position as a victim. In Chapter Five I discuss the challenges queer and lesbian victim-survivors faced when seeking help through the criminal justice system. However, one of the main issues when it came to reporting IPV to the police was that the recognition of IPV was often delayed as many only started to recognize their experiences as IPV after the relationship had ended. This has to do with the processual nature of IPV.

Violence as a process

Many interviewees took a long time to recognize and identify the violence they experienced because the violence itself was a cumulative and slow process. Elin, a woman in her early twenties, had been subjected to psychological violence in a lesbian relationship for a couple of years in her late teens. She found it difficult to define her experiences as violence for several reasons. First, she did not feel that her experiences matched common assumptions regarding violence, and second, similarly to Lovisa, she thought that her partner was not purposely trying to harm her. However, eventually Elin had started to identify a pattern of controlling behaviour: “I think I define violence as something that repeats itself, ‘cause if it just happens once then it could be a mistake, but if it is systematic then... yes”. The notion of repeated behaviour can be found in many feminist definitions of violence where the focus is not on isolated incidents of violence but, rather, on patterns of controlling behaviours (Donovan and Barnes, 2019a: 743). Here the aspect of time is important to understand these patterns: IPV often takes the form of a *slow violation*. All of the interviewees talked about situations of repeated offending and many had long-term experiences of living with violence. In many cases of IPV the risk is seemingly low-level and chronic, and represents a specific relational power dynamic of control, which can be difficult to recognize for those who are victimised but also for bystanders. Nixon (2011) explains this as a problem of representations: “[v]iolence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (2011: 2). Slow violence, on the contrary, is cumulative, often invisible and obscured by the production of doubt. This is quite clear when it comes to environmental injustices, where doubt around the effects of pollution, for instance, makes it possible for states and corporations to

continue their violations. This production of doubt is highly relevant in cases of IPV. Violence is perpetrated in situations where tactics such as gas lighting, for instance, aim to destabilize victims' sense of reality and make them doubt themselves (Sweet, 2019: 855). It is also the case when it comes to understanding the challenges of seeking help, as doubt and lack of evidence to prove the violence create space for continued and repeated victimization and seemingly justify lack of intervention.

For Saga, a woman in her mid-thirties who identified as lesbian and had been in a violent relationship for around ten years, it had also been easier to recognize the physical violence, while it took her a long time to recognize how her partner Mikaela had been psychologically violent towards her. She told me that Mikaela made it seem like she was trying to help her. I asked what she meant by this and Saga explained:

Well, it could be things like telling me how other people perceived me and stuff like 'no one else would dare to tell you this', like that I was not socially competent and that people actually didn't want to be around me but they would just invite me to things because they felt sorry for me [...] Well, as if she did it to help me somehow to become a better person, someone that people could like.

Here Mikaela's so-called help made Saga question herself, and she started to pull away from friends as a result. Giorgio (2002) examines the identification of violence through the concept of *definitional dialogues*. These are "ongoing negotiations and assessments that each partner internalizes and expresses about the relationship and its violence" (Giorgio, 2002: 1236). The concept of definitional hegemony is used by Giorgio in order to understand how abusers assert and gain power and control in lesbian relationships by making their definition and interpretation of the relationship the only one that counts (Giorgio, 2002: 1244). Many of my interviewees, Saga included, talked about taking on their partner's perception of themselves and the relationship. Saga described how she slowly adjusted herself to Mikaela's perspective of her; hence Mikaela gained definitional hegemony.

One way to describe this process is by using the concept of normalisation. One of the most commonly used concepts for the process of IPV in the Nordic countries is Eva Lundgren's (2012) notion of "våldets normaliseringsprocess" (the process of normalising violence), which describes how violence becomes naturalized in everyday life. As it becomes normalised, boundaries are slowly moved and transgressed, and violence itself is reinterpreted, making it harder to recognize and identify (Holmberg and Enander, 2011: 15, 21; Lundgren, 2012: 28–29). Saga's account shows how the partner's so-called help became a way of controlling and isolating her from her social network, a version of Lundgren's concept of controlling isolation (Lundgren, 2012: 31–33).

The difficulty of defining violence is an important dimension of coercive control; not being able to name one's experiences as violence makes it harder

to react to this violence. This was so for Malou, a woman in her mid-twenties who had been in a relationship with a controlling partner for around five years, starting in her mid-teens. When I asked her when the violence had occurred in the relationship, she said that it was very difficult to say exactly. She described her experiences of psychological violence as a very diffuse process:

It sort of came creeping somehow or for me it sort of, I guess, it became... kind of a constrained situation very fast when she moved in. I didn't really have any right to question it... Sorry I'm starting to... [cries]. So it sort of became... There was a lot of guilt and silencing of my experiences. So in one way I think it went quite fast, but it sort of gradually developed quite naturally as she moved in and had some sort of power to control or whatever you might call it.

Malou describes the process where her partner gained more and more control over her as moving both fast and slow. The silence and guilt could be read as part of the destabilizing process that unmoored Malou's sense of self. This was a recurring theme: several of my interviewees talked about how their partner's perspective became dominant in the relationship, and they slowly started to question their own abilities to judge matters, similarly to Malou's and Saga's accounts.

Many of my interviewees stated that they had started to notice that something was wrong quite early on in the relationship. They described being alarmed by their partner's reaction in specific situations, often within the first couple of months. However, they did not recognize the patterns of violence until after the relationship had ended. For some it took a long time even after that. Stark describes the violence used in coercive control as having cumulative effects rather than incident-specific ones (2007: 369). This explains why it can be difficult to understand and identify coercive behaviour. The behaviour seems to present often early on and increase throughout the relationship; it may even continue after a break up (Stark and Hester, 2019: 91). Coercive control is also characterized by a certain intensiveness, and this is enforced by the use of tactics to penetrate everyday life so "that the typical condition of victims is to be free and subjugated at once" (Stark, 2007: 375).

An important way in which this dynamic of control is reinforced by an abusive partner is, according to Donovan and Hester (2015), through the setting and changing of rules in the relationship. They describe relationship rules as having three overall characteristics in abusive relationships. Firstly, the rules are imposed by one partner. Secondly, breaking the rules invokes punishment of some sort. Finally, the knowledge that the breaking of the rules has consequences acts to prevent the rules from being broken, meaning that the victim-survivor is kept wary of these rules at all times (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 131–132). This type of rule-making might be explicitly stated, but most often it derives from non-verbal forms of communication or, more accurately, intimidation, where the victim-survivor learns what is allowed and accepted and

what is not (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 137). This concept of rules played an important role in many of my interviewees' accounts.

Ulrika, a lesbian woman in her early thirties, had experienced primarily psychological and control violence in her relationship, which had lasted around eight years. She explained that she had lived under certain rules to avoid triggering her partner Viviann's anxiety or angry outbursts. Some rules were explicitly articulated, like, for instance, that whenever Ulrika received a gift she would have to get rid of another item in the house. Others worked as unspoken rules, often based on previous experiences, such as keeping the house clean, avoiding inviting people over, and quickly covering up any mess their child might make. Ulrika struggled to define her experiences as violence and, like many of the interviewees, focused a lot on her partner's mental health problems as the cause of this violence. However, eventually she had started to interpret the behaviour as controlling:

It wasn't like she was surveilling me, like you can read in the more, well, classic descriptions. It could be like, if I was out walking and talking to someone on the phone, the whole time I would be like, if she calls then I have to answer 'cause otherwise she'll panic and not know where I am. So it was this kind of control also.

The demand to be constantly available to take care of their partner's needs appeared in many of the accounts. This played into a type of dissociation from the classic description of violence since power was not explicitly enforced, yet it was effectively exercised through surveillance and the manifestation of need. The spatial and temporal extension of this control meant that there were no safe spaces, since the difference between confinement and freedom had been erased by this extension.

Although many of my interviewees had lived with their partner, others had lived apart and some had even been in long-distance relationships, at least for some periods, in the relationship with a controlling partner. With the help of communication technology it has become easier for abusive partners to be controlling, even in settings where victims could potentially seek support such as the workplace, school and meetings with social networks (Stark, 2007: 374). In many accounts, mobile phones had been a way for their partner to keep track of them by demanding a response, or they were a way of stalking them after their break-up. Ulrika's partner, for example, had continued to control her in different ways after their break-up, for instance, by demanding that many pictures be sent of their child when she was with Ulrika:

It's these kinds of things and actually, it's completely fine to send MMS with like pictures of your child to the other parent, but given our history it triggered this feeling of being controlled.

The seemingly innocent request for photos became very triggering for Ulrika, since it made it possible for the ex-partner to keep track of her and question what and how they were doing things even when she was not physically present. It also illustrates the difficulty of identifying coercive behaviour as it can take the form of a *condition of unfreedom* (Stark, 2007: 205) which is not easily identified as it often cannot be isolated into specific situations or conflicts but is rather cumulative, slow and develops over time (Stark and Hester, 2019: 91). The struggle to identify IPV was both connected to the types of violence experienced but also to how the interviewees' reacted to IPV.

Resistance or adjustment

According to Holmberg and Enander (2011), there have been two main feminist perspectives on violence in the Swedish research field. One is Lundgren's (2012) concept of the process of normalizing violence as I have already discussed, and the other is Margareta Hydén's (2005) focus on women's resistance strategies in violent relationships. Although both perspectives are based on heterosexual experiences of IPV, I think they are also useful in relation to non-heterosexual IPV. Lundgren's structural perspective on violence focuses on men's violence against women in society at large; the concept has been especially influential within the women's shelter movement in Sweden. Lundgren describes how the abusive man gains control over his partner by isolating her from her social networks and switching from being loving and caring to being aggressive and hurtful, and she compares this dynamic to that of torture. This combined with isolation means that the boundaries of the victim are constantly crossed and moved. The main strategy of the victim is, according to Lundgren, to adjust herself to the violence. The violence becomes internalized as she starts to take on the partner's perspective and his interpretation of her and of their relationship. It is a gradual process where the woman slowly loses agency (Holmberg and Enander, 2011: 15–17)

Many of the people I interviewed described how they had lost contact with their social networks because of their partner's controlling behaviour. They had lied to friends and family and avoided their social networks in order to prevent violence. Tina saw the situation in the relationship as living in some kind of bubble without much contact with her surroundings:

She would have my phone and stuff like that so that I couldn't talk to people or something like that, often, so that she would take it, like, so she had it and when someone did call to talk, then she wanted to stand next to me. So she could hear what I talked about and stuff like that. So it was really weird [...] But when you are in it, then it is sort of the norm. So you get kind of manipulated or what you might say. So in the end you almost don't see these things anymore, it just is how it is.

This is a good example of the features of normalisation of violence, leading to extended isolation as the abusive partner becomes the only point of reference as well as the person setting the norms for the relationship (Lundgren, 2012: 33). Tina explained that it was not until after the relationship had ended that she started to realize what she had been subjected to: “I was sort of reprogrammed because I realized that, well, this is not normal and then I had to learn again what is normal.” In this process she was supported by her social networks as well as professional help-providers.

Hydén (1995) is critical of Lundgren’s concept of normalisation of violence for its focus on subordination and domination. She argues that it fails to take the social, cultural and societal contexts into account and thereby leaves out any chance of agency in the victimization (Holmberg and Enander, 2011: 17). Hydén researched narratives of leaving abusive relationships by applying a social-psychological perspective to violence that focuses on resistance as a way to negotiate and highlight the agency that she considers missing in Lundgren’s emphasis on women’s adjustments and adaptations to violence. Similarly to Lundgren, Hydén also focuses on the heterosexual couple and has studied interactions in violent relationships, such as how they describe incidents of violence and their perceived causes. Hydén argues that “[b]attered women’s ways of opposing and resisting violence are still underemphasized, and ultimately insufficiently examined in feminist discourses of violence in close relationships” (Hydén, 2005: 170). However, Hydén in turn has been criticized for failing to question the uneven power dynamics between perpetrator and victim, for example when she conducted interviews with couples and used both partners’ perspectives to define their experiences in terms such as mutual disagreements or mutual fights (Holmberg and Enander, 2011: 19). Jenny Westerstrand (2010) criticizes Hydén for focusing solely on the relationship as the cause and explanation for violence and for only seeking psychological explanations for the perpetration of violence, thus missing a structural perspective on violence which is emphasized in Lundgren’s work (Westerstrand, 2010: 11).

Similarly to Holmberg and Enander (2011: 19), I do not consider Lundgren and Hydén as contradictory models for understanding violence and victimization. The notion of normalisation is useful to describe how violence was internalized by my interviewees, how it was legitimized and minimized as boundaries were slowly and gradually moved, and the violence was obscured through this process. I suggest that the gendered analysis of IPV that characterizes Lundgren’s conception of IPV should not be dismissed but rather expanded. Donovan and Hester (2015) for instance discuss how heterosexual gendered norms around relationships work as dominant expectations of how a romantic relationship should be. They argue that such scripts around love work to accommodate and legitimize expressions of controlling behaviour such as dependency and jealousy, regardless of gender and sexuality (2015: 127). They also found that gendered expectations have an impact on IPV,

which means that women, for instance, regardless of sexuality, were more likely to live in situations characterized by dependency, such as sharing households or having children. This might explain why women reported having longer abusive relationships than the men in their study (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 196).

Hydén's focus on how power relationships are reproduced in everyday life in connection with socio-cultural structures, norms and dominant assumptions (Holmberg and Enander, 2011: 20) provides a more nuanced picture of power than perspectives which focus solely on gendered inequality when examining IPV. In my research, I do not seek to explain why violence occurs in my interviewees' relationships. My aim is to analyse how they account for and negotiate their positions in the relationship and afterwards. It is in this context that I discuss strategies of resistance. I think it is possible to use Hydén's notion of agency in victimization without individualizing IPV or solely focusing on it as a relational issue. Indeed, the concept of resistance can even apply to how victim-survivors adjust to violence as a strategy. This brings Lundgren and Hydén into closer dialogue with each other. For instance in the discussion of sexual violence in my interviews, I found that both Lundgren's and Hydén's perspectives were relevant. In this chapter, I have already quoted Cecilia, Maryam and Lovisa, who in different ways described experiences of sexual violence. They all talked about a certain level of denial of violence and shame at finding themselves in that situation. Lovisa described the context of violence as an unarticulated threat. This was also evident in Ewa's account, a pansexual woman in her mid-thirties, who had been in a violent relationship for around 12 years:

I feel like I have had sex a lot of times where I felt almost forced to do it even though I didn't want to. Even though I said no. But then either, like, out of fear of... the threat of physical violence that was not spoken aloud like, 'I will hit you if you don't have sex with me', but because it happened sometimes that I said no and then we ended up having some sort of discussion and then it had happened that she hit me afterwards. So it was... yes, it just felt like I had learnt that way that I shouldn't say no. And that I have sort of... I think it is sexual violence nevertheless when you have sex when you don't want to.

This quote could easily be read as portraying the normalisation of violence, where the boundaries are slowly and repeatedly crossed and the victim adjusts and adapts her behaviour to the threat of violence. As I have already suggested, it can be difficult for those who experience sexual violence to identify with the commonly used terms to describe such violations. Lundgren et al. (2002: 17) discuss sexual violence as haunted by a continuum of violence, as the boundaries between different types of sexual abuse and the threat of violence merge into each other and cannot be separated. Ewa talked about having learnt

not to say no in order to prevent physical violence, which suggests an adjustment to violence. However, it does not mean that Ewa internalized or accepted the violence.

Hydén argues that the dominant cultural discourses around resistance often leave no space for subtle, indirect forms of resistance that one engages in when being subjected to IPV. As a consequence, any action or tactic that does not explicitly contain resistance is categorized as non-resistance (Hydén, 2005: 171). Hydén argues for a definition of resistance that includes subtle forms of resistance to make room for more indirect expressions of resistance even at the time of the relationship. Hydén mentions fear of one's partner as promoting a form of resistance. Fear can be read as a type of unarticulated knowledge which can function as a way to reject violence even if one does not have the immediate means to get out of the situation or relationship (Hydén, 2005: 172). From such an expanded perspective of the concept of resistance, Ewa's reflections can also be seen as a strategy for dealing with violence and managing risks when living with IPV. An example of this occurred when she explained that she felt disgusted in the moment, but she just wanted to get it over with, since this was a way for her to secure the evening. It is this kind of reasoning which leads me to think that it is both useful and important to add the concept of resistance in dialogue with normalisation in order to expand the notion of agency in the process of victimization.

These two approaches to the dynamics and processes of victimization from a feminist perspective both depart from a heteronormative framework, where the man is described as the perpetrator and the woman as the victim. Although this would seem to clash with the scope of my research project, given that I focus on violence in lesbian and/or queer relationships, I still think that it is relevant to use and engage with these concepts. To begin, I identified similar patterns of subtle resistance and normalisation of violence in my material, and many of my interviewees also explicitly used such concepts to make sense of their victimization. I also think that engaging with these concepts is not treating IPV in LGBTQ relationship as the same as heterosexual violence, but neither is it a completely separate phenomenon that can only be explained through the development of separate concepts such as minority stress (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 86–87). I do not consider my engagement with feminist theories on violence as a threat or as a way of undermining structural feminist perspectives, but more like Ristock (2011: 4), I see it as a way to raise nuances and complexities in how we conceptualize power, social positions and context in research on IPV.

In summary, I argue that Lundgren's concept of normalisation contributes to an understanding of the processes of victimization, such as the process of isolation. Normalisation also helps to identify why it is difficult to recognize violence and how violence becomes integrated into the everyday of the victim-survivor. However, Hydén's discussion of resistance can be used to emphasize the different strategies employed to manage risks even when these strategies

might seem to sustain and obscure the process of violence itself. This is where the two foci meet and support one another. In the next chapter, which focuses on help-seeking, I discuss in more detail how specific strategies to deal with violence were articulated in the interviews. The two perspectives I have discussed here help to explain the dissonance expressed in many of the interviewees' accounts about not identifying as a victim.

Dis/identifying as a victim

The exact word violence, that I have actually only used once with my therapist two months ago. I've said everything else, talked around it [laughs] a lot. And other people have used the term to describe my relationship. And I rejected it so hard. That doesn't apply to me. Absolutely not [laughs]. This is about somebody else. It is somebody else who can't come and go as they want to in their own lives. Who can't visit friends or sleep over or go away somewhere or who has to 'vabba'^[13] after half a workday 'cause the other person cannot handle being by themselves.

The quote comes from my interview with Olivia, a pansexual/bisexual woman in her early thirties, who had been in a violent relationship for around eight years, starting when she was in her mid-twenties. Olivia primarily experienced psychological violence, and as her statement above reveals, she did not easily identify herself as someone who was subjected to violence. Donovan and Hester (2010) suggest that the public stories about DV construct the idea of victim in a particular way that works as a hindrance to recognition. The negative connotations associated with the term victim do not apply exclusively to same-sex DV as "the term 'victim' is held by many – both women and men – to be a label that jars with their self-perception. They resist the notion that they have been weak or passive" (2010: 282). Olivia described her partner as very dependent. Thus, Olivia had to be responsible for managing her partner's life while taking care of their children as well. Similarly to Malou and Saga, Olivia saw the process of control as evolving gradually, for example in the ways her partner Agnes would make comments about Olivia and her social life:

[My social life] in the end became extremely restricted. Because whenever I went somewhere, she always knew where I was and how long I would be there. I never got to finish a cup of tea at someone's place before she would reach out and wanted me to come home or needed help with something or wanted to get picked up or something.

Donovan and Hester (2015) frame this as practices of love which are often associated with care and emotional work such as taking responsibility for

¹³ 'Vabba' is a verb made from the abbreviation VAB (Vård Av Barn) meaning 'care of child'. It is a legal form of sick-leave in Sweden.

one's partner wellbeing. In abusive relationships, the victim-survivor is often made responsible for the care and emotional work in the relationship. With cohabiting couples this can also include the household, and for those who are parents, the care of children. These practices are reinforced through relationship rules, as I already mentioned, set by the abusive partner on their terms (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 121). Several of my interviewees described their partner as acting in a childlike manner or as very dependent on their support and help. Such expressions of need and neediness positioned the victim-survivor as emotionally stronger than their partner. The binary of strength and weakness that dominates the public story of IPV reappears here and makes it harder for victim-survivors to identify their experiences of violence, as they are often constructed by their partner, and hence see themselves, as the stronger partner in the relationship (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 152). These practices of love, combined with the difficulty of identifying control violence and the dominant narratives around victimhood thus act to obscure violations. This was the case for Amina, a woman in her mid-thirties, who had experienced violence in a previous relationship with another woman. She described herself as a strong person who knew who she was and where she wanted to go, until one day she lost track of herself:

I didn't get what she was doing. What I was exposed to. I never thought of it that way, it was she who had, had it hard when she was little, who had been sexually abused by her stepfather and her whole family had turned against her, her dad had hit her. So it was a lot and she was always talking about it and felt sorry for herself. So I felt, well it's just because she is not doing well. So I thought that I should just put up with it and help her out till she gets better. I should sort of fix her, make her whole.

Similarly to many of my interviewees, Amina expressed a need to take care of her partner, of feeling responsible and wanting to fix her (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 139). Many of the interviewees expressed thoughts of being the only one who understood the partner and the only one who was there for them. Malou, for instance, explained that her partner at one point during their relationship had cut all contact with her parents and was fighting with her friends. This made Malou feel even more responsible for her partner's wellbeing as she was the only one she had left. Accounts from Donovan and Hester's COHSAR study similarly suggested that abusive partners were often able to disguise controlling behaviour by using relationship practices, enacted as expressions of neediness and expectations of care from their partner (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 152).

The demand for care and attention was a shared theme in many of the accounts and often worked to isolate the interviewees from their social networks. Many interviewees explained that their partner did not like certain members of the interviewees' social networks, and socializing with friends and family members was therefore a reoccurring cause of conflict. Olivia's partner Agnes

frequently made Olivia change her plans at the last minute when she was meeting up with friends that Agnes did not approve of. Agnes's demand for care also affected Olivia's ability to work. She would for instance often call Olivia at work to demand that she come home or let her know that she would not be able to pick up the children as planned. This meant that Olivia had to leave work, which caused economic stress and worries, as they depended solely on Olivia's income. Olivia describes this as one of the ways in which Agnes also continued to control her even after their break-up. Thus, all of this effort and emotional care work that the interviewees put into the relationships made it difficult to see themselves as a victim or their partner as a perpetrator.

Control and emotional violence can take particular forms in lesbian and queer relationships. A commonly addressed issue in research is, for instance, the concept of outing or threatening to out one's partner (Calton et al., 2015; Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005b). However, embedded in the language of care and commitment, emotional blackmail can easily be disguised. An example of this came up in my interview with Selma, who was in her mid-thirties and had experienced violence in an intimate relationship with a woman, which had lasted for around four years. It was Selma's first relationship with a woman, and she had not told her family about her sexuality before the relationship. Selma explained that she had struggled to come to terms with her sexuality, which her partner had found very challenging:

I got, like, an ultimatum in the very beginning. 'If you don't tell your parents then I'll break it off' or 'then we can't be together'. So there wasn't much to do but tell them. But, well, returning to the thing about control. Now I remember what it was. Because she lived in [another town] and I lived here before we moved in together. And when we were in [Selma's town] then she always wanted us to hold hands when we were outside and walked. But in [partner's town] there we couldn't do that because she didn't want people to know that she was homosexual or, like, colleagues and so, so it was very much on her terms all the time.

This shows the complex and highly contextual form that coercive control can take, one that makes seemingly benign actions such as taking one's partner's hand a manifestation of power and control rather than a token of affection. Selma added that she felt safer holding hands when they were in her partner's town, yet this was not an option, which again points to the abusive partner's definitional hegemony in the relationship (Giorgio, 2002). Selma described how she would constantly try to adjust herself to her partner's conditions in order to avoid getting told off. "[...] and when you had finally succeeded doing it one way, well then that wasn't right anymore and you were forced to find a new mold to fit into." Expressions such as "always being on guard" or "walking on eggshells" recurred in my material. Many of the other interviewees tried, like Selma, to figure out how to act and behave in order to understand the rules set by their partner and avoid potential punishment.

Asymmetry and relationship scripts

Western cultures are embedded in heteronormatively gendered narratives around love and coupling, which tend to focus on love as the sole purpose and meaning of life. These scripts provide us with a language which can also legitimize violence such as the encouragement to believe in the power of love and unconditional commitment which relies on forgiveness and sacrifice (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 126; Fraser, 2005: 10; Papp et al., 2017: 101; Wood, 2001: 242). Studies focusing on heterosexual IPV have shown how romantic scripts such as ‘love conquers all’ and ‘commitment to the relationship’ can help normalise abusive behaviours (Fraser, 2005; Papp et al., 2017). When examining how queer people negotiate culturally dominant gendered dating and courtship practices, Lamont (2017) discusses how queer relationships hold the potential to challenge the notion of distinct gendered behaviors in romantic relationships. However, Lamont’s findings also suggested that the desire to be free from heteronormative and gendered relationship norms was not easily translated into relationship practices (Lamont, 2017: 643). Lesbian and queer relationships do not exist in a vacuum; they, too, are shaped by dominant relationship norms, some explicit and others implicit (Sanger and Lynch, 2018: 203). The notion that same-sex/queer relationships are free from gendered norms can lead to what Lamont calls *family myths*, including suggestions that same-sex relationships are by default egalitarian and freer. This can obscure inequality in such relationships (Lamont, 2017: 627). The paradox of the script of ideal love as unconditional and the idea that relationships should be a place where one finds support is that the demand for care, which many of the interviewees described, was conditional and thus asymmetrical, as it was imposed on one partner by the other.

An abusive partner in a lesbian/queer relationship can play on the dissonance between different scripts of intimacy when setting and changing the rules in the relationship. Lauren Berlant and Michal Warner (1998) argue for queer culture as potentially subversive, as relationship norms and social scripts can be re-negotiated. Lamont (2017) suggests that queer people are dually socialized, both exposed to queer politics that is critical of normative constructions of intimacies, and simultaneously embedded in normative cultural scripts around love, family and kinship (Lamont, 2017: 625). This duality can be seen, for instance, around the question of monogamy. While often questioned within queer communities, the normative status of monogamy in our society means that it is common practice, even within such communities, and it often assumed if not negotiated before entering a relationship. This dissonance between scripts around intimacy became apparent in Lovisa’s account:

After one or maybe it was two months, she called me up to say that she was in love with someone else. But it was all fine because we could be together, the

three of us. For me that was quite strange. Not that there is anything wrong with polyamory but more because I didn't know about this, and she told me, 'it's always been like that and that was one of the conditions for me to have a relationship'. I felt like, 'it would have been better if you had told me about this before we got together'. It got a bit tricky to deal with 'cause then it was like I was selfish and narrow-minded for not being able to handle this. For me it was more like, well, I was so fragile and this was sort of new for me. It wasn't what I had expected maybe.

Lovisa's partner opening up the relationship and blaming Lovisa for being narrow-minded is an example of how conflicting scripts about relationships can be used to justify demands. In this case, the queer communities' scripts around non-normative relationships was mobilized to justify changing the relationship. In the interview, Lovisa seemed almost apologetic about having assumed monogamy and explained that she considered herself introverted and fragile at that time, which made it harder for her to deal with more people in the relationship. Her ex-partner had insisted that Lovisa's jealousy was the problem. Lovisa explained that her partner would cancel plans with her in order to be with the man she was in love with and then accuse Lovisa of being jealous and selfish when she got upset.

A similar yet seemingly opposite situation appeared in the interview with Malin, a woman in her late twenties, who talked about a relationship in her early twenties which had lasted two years. Malin explained that she and her partner at one point had decided to have an open relationship. However, once her partner found out that Malin had had sex with other people, she got mad and left her, yet continued to stalk her after the relationship had ended. In this last example, the partner returned to the general script on fidelity and monogamy at will, and used it to punish her partner. These two examples show how relationship rules can be set and changed in ways that challenge the partner's perception of the relationship in situations of definitional hegemony (Giorgio, 2002).

Stark and Hester (2019: 87) argue that coercive control is characterized by particularity. This means that the abuse is individualized based on privileged access to personal information and knowledge about the partner. Such control can be difficult to identify because of the subtle ways in which power is performed. Selma's partner, for example, used Selma's dyslexia as an excuse to impose rules on her and argued that her dyslexia made Selma unable to read social codes. This supposedly justified that different rules applied to Selma and thus enabled her partner to defend why she should be the one setting the rules in the relationship. These restrictions would often be reinforced by simultaneous demands for care. This meant, for instance, controlling Selma's social whereabouts. Selma was, for example, not allowed to drink any alcohol because her partner had a family history of substance abuse, and she feared that alcohol would take Selma away from her. Similarly to other accounts,

Selma's partner had let her know that she was the first person she really trusted. Such declarations of love, based on the needs of the abusive partner, encourage investment in the relationship (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 127). Selma explained, for instance, that during the time she was preparing to leave her partner, she also agreed to move in together to try to save the relationship, which made it even harder for her to leave.

Controlling behaviours such as the ones discussed above are asymmetrical by definition, but they are also often informed and enforced by asymmetrical social positions in the relationship. Sasha, a woman in her mid-thirties who identified as a lesbian/dyke, came to Sweden as a refugee since same-sex relationships were not generally accepted in her country of origin. Once in Sweden, in her mid-twenties, she met a Swedish woman ten years her senior who abused her psychologically, physically and economically for around two years. Sasha's partner had, among other things, attacked her language skills and her lack of economic resources. Sasha described herself as being particularly vulnerable at the time she met her partner:

Because I didn't know how it worked here in Sweden, you know, different mentalities and I had been hiding for several years so I didn't know how to talk to other people. And everything was new to me and she started to pressure me from the beginning [saying] that I wasn't good at Swedish or English. That I didn't understand what she meant. So it was that kind of pressure at first. And then economically. I had no money at that time since I was studying Swedish. So then it was always she who paid for things. She was in charge. She was older. She was better. So... well, I didn't know how to get out of this kind of relationship.

Here the asymmetrical relationship was constructed intersectionally around age, migration status, finances, language skills, and social networks. Like in Selma's case, Sasha's ability to understand and judge social situations was attacked. Yet her partner also used their unequal positions in the relationship to justify her abusive behaviours. Sasha, for instance, described a typical scenario of apology from her partner in the following way: "Honey, forgive me. I was just jealous. You are so nice and pretty and I am so much older than you and this makes me think that you might not love me as much". Here Sasha's partner drew on a script of jealousy as a sign of romance when justifying her controlling behaviour, positioning herself as the fragile and insecure partner. IPV can easily be disguised by drawing on such scripts, which emphasize care and unconditional support. This makes it difficult to distinguish norms around intimacy from abusive controlling behaviour, especially when these norms are underwritten by asymmetry in demands and social positions.

Many of the interviewees described power imbalances in their relationship(s), for instance, regarding age differences, since quite a few of them had been younger than their abusive partner. For many it had also been their first lesbian/queer/same-sex relationship or their first serious relationship. Studies

of young peoples' experiences of IPV suggest that factors such as no prior relationship experience and being with an older partner can lead to enhanced vulnerability (Hellevik and Øverlien, 2016; Korkmaz and Øverlien, 2020; Øverlien, 2020). Being in a first same-sex/lesbian/queer relationship can therefore add an additional layer of vulnerability, especially if the partner is more experienced or has been out longer (Donovan and Hester, 2008; Ristock, 2002). Donovan and Hester (2008) found, similarly to Ristock (2002: 53–55), that having one's sexual identity affirmed and falling in love could make it more difficult to recognize abusive behaviours, and that lack of knowledge about what to expect in a same-sex relationship could also lead to people minimizing or overlooking signs of IPV. Furthermore lack of embeddedness in LGBTQ communities or lack of social network support could also have a negative impact on IPV and help-seeking (Donovan and Hester, 2008: 281).

This was particularly evident in my interview with Kari, who talked about experiences of sexual violence in a polyamorous queer relationship with two older partners. This was Kari's first relationship, and it had started when she was in her mid-teens. Kari had been very fascinated by the older, more experienced partners and described thinking that meeting them was the best thing that had happened to her. However, their relationship had been very uneven:

I had very low self-confidence. I didn't think that anything I said really mattered. That I couldn't do anything because I was younger. It felt like they were above me intellectually all the time. Well, because of their age but also because they had been part of the queer movement, or whatever you might call it, for a long time. So I didn't know anything, was always just following, you might say I was manipulated into doing what they told me to do.

The unequal relationship between Kari and her partners can be described as the result of experiential forms of power (Donovan et al., 2014). Experiential power refers to the privileged position abusive partner(s) mobilize when having, or claiming to have, more experience of being in LGBTQ relationships or having access to LGBTQ communities, which a less experienced partner might be excluded from (Donovan et al., 2014; Donovan and Hester, 2015). In Kari's case, age was a social marker of power in her relationship, and this was linked to her lack of previous community engagement. However, experiential power does not necessarily refer to chronological age. Yvonne, a bisexual woman in her mid-fifties, for instance, entered into her first same-sex relationship when she was in her early fifties. During the relationship she still identified as heterosexual, and she had no connection to LGBTQ communities where she lived. After the relationship had ended she talked to an acquaintance who was bisexual and discovered that her ex-partner was known for being violent in the LGBTQ community in the city where they lived:

Then I found out that the last couple of years she's been converting [laughs] hetero-girls to be with her. And now I can almost understand why. Because we

don't know about it. We don't know about her history and because we haven't been part of those social circles before we might not know any lesbian girls or LGBTQ... well I have no friends in that world here in [town] that I hang out with ... who would know this. But apparently she is sort of blacklisted. So no girls in [town] want to be with her.

Despite the fact that Yvonne was a bit older than her abusive partner, this did not put her in a position of power. On the contrary, the lack of embeddedness in the local LGBTQ community made Yvonne isolated and prevented her from hearing about her partner's reputation. Yvonne had previously been in an abusive relationship with a man, and it had not occurred to her that a woman could be violent as well since she associated IPV with men's violence against women. During the interview she started to reflect on her pattern of attraction to abusive people to make sense of her experiences. While some interviewees, like Yvonne, tried to understand why they ended up with an abusive partner, others struggled to understand and explain their own response to IPV. While some struggled to understand why they did not react more, others struggled with the fact that they did respond physically. In particular, active resistance could often stand in the way of the recognition of IPV.

Responsiveness and responsibility

Do motivation and intention matter in all instances of partner violence? How do we decide? How do we assess acts of resistance or differing levels of intention within each partner when there is fighting back or when abuse continues? Grappling with these complexities in abusive relationship dynamics is necessary not only for theorizing and researching lesbian partner violence, but also for developing effective responses. (Ristock, 2002: 71)

Out of the 102 women Ristock interviewed in her study of lesbian abuse, 38 spoke of fighting back in different ways. When analysing lesbian victims' accounts of fighting back and resisting abuse, Ristock emphasized the great diversity and complexity in their narratives (Ristock, 2002: 69). My interviewees negotiated their responses to violence in different ways, depending on their ability to resist violence and how they interpreted their experiences at the time, among other factors. This also had an impact on how they viewed their own responsibility in relation to the violence. The issue of responding to physical violence came up in my interview with Therese, a lesbian woman in her early thirties who had been subjected to IPV in her first lesbian relationship with a woman who was significantly older than her. The relationship had lasted for around five years, starting when she was in her early twenties. Therese described how she would try to resist the physical violence she was subjected to in different ways:

Okay, if I do this, then she might stop. Okay, if I say that it hurts, then maybe she'll stop. Or if I say 'stop, stop, stop'. Or if I say, "I don't want this, it hurts", or if I'm really like, 'I'm drawing the line. I don't want this!' But she would just continue. Didn't listen at all. But if she said no at one point... I remember once, well she was choking me and then I managed to kick her away. And she hurt her head on something and then it was like, 'wow, now something really happened here'. Then it became like [gestures] really serious and she was like 'wow, now I lost my sight a bit'. Aha, okay so now we stop. Or like I'm not gonna go at you. So it was only about her. When she hurt herself, then... yes.

Therese here talks about her failed attempts to stop her partner verbally and the different ways she tried to gain control of the situation. Finally, she responded by using force herself. However, as Therese described herself as being taller and stronger than her partner, she did not see herself as victimized. This was complicated further by the notion that she would often end up physically holding down her partner to stop her and this had become a repeated routine in their relationship, which they addressed as fights, not violence. The struggle to recognize IPV in lesbian relationships is often ascribed to the myth of mutual abuse, where any form of resistance is interpreted as mutual aggression (Giorgio, 2002: 1242; Holmes and Ristock, 2005: 96; Ristock, 2002: 71). Therese's bodily strength and size as well as her ability to defend herself gave her a sense of control, but it also made her minimize the severity of the violence she experienced at the time of the relationship.

Like the vast majority of my interviewees, Therese had been subjected to different kinds of violence. She described how especially the physical violence had escalated towards the end of the relationship. Although she had positioned herself as partly responsible or at least in control of their so-called fights at the time of the relationship, this perception was also challenged:

And then there was a time when she strangled me. And although it wasn't for a long time at all, I did feel like... I didn't get any air and I was just like, this is what it feels like to die. I remember thinking 'okay, now I'm going to die here'

In this situation Therese clearly was in very severe danger and thus by no means in control of the situation. Whereas physical size does play an important role in the enactment of physical violence and influences one's ability to respond in the situation, which was evident in the interviews where the abusive partner had been significantly bigger, the ability to respond cannot simply be measured in physical strength. The idea that one should be able to defend oneself can even work to obscure the severity of the violence as was the case for Therese.

Responding to psychological violence was also often described as extremely challenging by the interviewees. Guilt and responsibility for the partner were elicited by threats or acts of self-harm in many of the accounts in my

study, similarly to other studies on IPV (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 210; Ristock, 2002: 47; Stark, 2007: 454). This was, for instance, the case with Amina's partner:

If I hadn't been there for her like she wanted me to or if I had been gone too long, or looking at my phone too much she would get angry and then she would approach me and threaten to cut herself. She also did it sometimes. She would stand up and cut herself... in front of me.

Amina explained that her partner continued to threaten self-harm even after the relationship had ended. This made Amina feel forced to keep in contact with her to prevent her from killing herself. The enactment of responsibility for the partner can thus exceed the time of the relationship, and threats of self-harm contribute to feelings of responsibility towards the partner. In other accounts, the threats were more implicit, such as in Sabrina's account. Sabrina was a lesbian who had experienced psychological and emotional abuse from her partner, with whom she had had a long-distance relationship part of their time together. Her partner would, for instance, let her know that she planned to hurt herself and would afterwards ignore all calls and attempts at contact. This made Sabrina feel guilty and fear what would happen if she were to leave. It ended up prolonging the relationship.

According to Hanna Pickard, the prototype of violence in our society is other-directed, and this has both theoretical and ethical implications for how we view self-harm (Pickard, 2015: 71). Pickard argues that perpetrators of violence directed at others are generally regarded as rational agents, at least to the extent that they can be held accountable for their actions, unlike those who commit self-directed violence (Pickard, 2015: 77). While Pickard does not specifically focus on self-harm in the context of IPV, her discussion of agency, responsibility, and the different ends of self-harm are relevant to the recurring issue of intentionality in violence, which can be difficult to determine when it comes to self-harm, when the perpetrator is simultaneously the victim. Pickard suggests that while self-harm is directed at the self, it can also have other-directed ends. When directed at others it can function as "a symbolic weapon, turning anger towards others inwards on the self, while yet communicating this anger to them" (Pickard, 2015: 80). Self-harm can be difficult to recognize as a form of violence given that it is self-directed, easily pathologized and associated with mental health issues. This in turn affects how responsibility is conceptualized (Pickard, 2015: 72).

Some of my interviewees' partners had been diagnosed with mental illnesses, whereas others had discussed potential diagnoses with their partner;

some self-diagnosed their partner or themselves during the relationship or after it ended.¹⁴ While very few had used the word violence when talking to their partner, some had discussed mental issues as the main problem. This impacted on how they would describe the violence and how they viewed their own responsibility towards the partner, which Ulrika described in the following way:

I've felt really alone in my experience of this, especially since it becomes so complex when mental illness is involved and when it is in a lesbian relationship. I can't really relate to any of the stories. I can somewhat relate to the thing about codependency for example or normalization, that I can sort of relate to, when it feels like... That it is difficult to see it, but when it comes to focusing on, for example, physical violence, that the one who engages in physical violence is the perpetrator. That has made it harder for me to see what happened because I kept thinking that I exposed her to physical violence, that we were both in on it. Then I would have to be a perpetrator, too. I guess I am in one way, in that situation, but it made it hard for me to see how exposed I was, too.

The concept of codependency, as Ulrika mentioned here, was raised a few times by different interviewees. When asked how she came to use this term Ulrika explained that she had first focused on herself as the problem and tried to look for information on how to handle a conflicted relationship, and later through psychological counselling, readings and a conversation with a friend she had found the concept of codependency useful to explain her situation. Codependency is a contested concept within violence research. It comes from addiction counselling and is used to describe individuals who are in a relationship with a substance abuser. The concept has been criticized especially from feminist perspectives for putting the blame on the victim, as the codependent diagnosis indicates that the codependent has a certain need to be with their abusive partner and thus helps to sustain the abuse (Frank and Golden, 1995: 111).

In the search for concepts to make sense of her experiences, Ulrika landed on codependency and the normalisation of violence. The contradictory elements embedded in these perspectives created an ambivalence which was evident in Ulrika's account, where she continuously changed between describing herself as an active part of the violation, as a codependent, and even as a perpetrator, but also as the one being victimized and acting in self-defence.

Yes, well, I still find it difficult to know or like really see what happened. But now I see more clearly what came before or what kind of led to these fights. I sort of see it like we were both part of... the physical... but it was also a long, kind of, it was built up over a long time, in her control over me, or she would

¹⁴ A similar topic of the role of mental health in explaining violation was found in Anna Hart's (2018) MA thesis on sexual violence in lesbian relationships in a Swedish context. All of the five interviewees in Hart's study had used their partner's mental health issues to make sense of the perpetration of violence. Hart found that this at times was used to minimize their own experiences of sexual violence (Hart, 2018: 22).

wake me up in the middle of the night threatening to throw herself from the balcony and things like that, which made it... I think I see it as, or feel like it was a way for me to defend myself. I felt extremely assaulted or attacked in some way all the time, and then it became a way for me to defend myself, to grab her physically like that. To make her stop in some way. To hold her back like that. This might be how I have started to see it now, that it was just about some kind of physical defence.

While some of the interviewees expressed feelings of shame about their lack of response to violence, shame also resulted from responding to violence, as both Therese and Ulrika's accounts have shown. Being outside the heteronormative IPV framework can make it harder to define actions as self-defence, as the gender dynamic is interpreted as equal. It gets even more complicated when the violence is self-directed. However, while seeing certain behaviours as the result of mental illness made it difficult for some interviewees to conceptualize their own experiences as violence, focusing on their partner's mental health provided them with a framework and a vocabulary to talk about their partner's behaviours. It also made it possible to suggest or pursue more acceptable forms of help-seeking such as counselling, either for the partner or as a couple in the form of couples counselling which I will discuss in the next chapter on the process of help-seeking.

Conclusion: Violence as a hard-to-define and asymmetrical process

I started this chapter by discussing the difficulties of defining IPV. This difficulty affects not only the research field but also how people identify or fail to identify themselves as victimized and how practitioners work with victim-survivors and perpetrators, which I shall explore in Chapter Five on formal help-seeking. This chapter has highlighted five factors which contribute to the struggle to identify violence in lesbian and queer relationships. Firstly, exclusion from the public story around violence, which is based on heterosexual relationships, makes it harder to identify oneself as a potential victim of IPV. Secondly, the tendency to focus on physical violence in this story does not correlate with the experiences many have of diverse, interrelated forms of violence as well as violence as a repeated and diffuse process that develops over time. Thirdly, in this repeated process victim-survivors tend to adopt different strategies to deal with the constant threat or enactment of violence. Such strategies work to preserve the self, but they can also hinder the recognition of violence. Physical resistance, for instance, can easily be interpreted as a sign of shared responsibility and feeds into the myth of mutual abuse. Fourthly, romantic scripts feed into and support asymmetrical dynamics of rule-setting in the relationship, where controlling behaviour is portrayed as an expression

of love. Finally, the recognition of IPV can be challenged when the demand for care by the partner is based on socially legitimate grounds such as mental illness or previous trauma. This makes it challenging to recognize when such demands cross the line to become controlling and, thus, abusive.

Despite the struggle for recognition and the on-going negotiations of intention and motivation behind the violations, all of the interviewees had at some point identified violence in their relationships.

Nicole: Around what time did you start to think about leaving?

Olivia: Well, I think the thought had popped up from time to time for many years. But it was quickly suppressed. But actually I think the first time I dared to think it all the way through was... [Year], after our oldest child was born. Because then I felt a turning point. Then it became so obvious when I had this little infant that I suddenly needed to spend all my time and energy on, that I couldn't put any time or energy into Agnes. Then I couldn't in the same way help out, facilitate or fix all the conflicts she created or like...it just didn't work.

For Olivia, the asymmetrical demands in her relationship with Agnes had at one point become overwhelming, and this led to a turning point. The process of leaving a violent relationship may be triggered by specific events such as having children, but it is often also an ongoing process which can include subtle strategies of resistance such as daring to think this thought and staying with this thought, as expressed in Olivia's account. In this and many other cases it took several years before the relationship officially ended, and even this did not always mean the end of the violence. In the following chapter, I discuss help-seeking which, just like violence itself, is often a repeated and non-linear process, where social networks, interpretations and responses have determining roles.

4. Understanding help-seeking as a fragmented, slow and iterative process

Therese was in an abusive relationship that had lasted for around five years starting when she was in her early twenties. Living with an abusive partner meant that she barely hung out with her friends anymore. In our interview, she described one time when she had been looking forward to meeting friends and colleagues for a coffee in an attempt to escape the constraints of the relationship, even temporarily. However, when they finally met up these friends and colleagues had planned an intervention to get her out of what they believed to be an abusive relationship:

Therese: They had talked to a women's shelter and printed some papers for me and were like, 'look, this is what the law says and this is how it's written. These are all the signs.' And I was just like, no... I was not receptive at all [...]

Nicole: How did you react after this intervention?

Therese: I distanced myself from them and I was really ashamed. I didn't tell my ex. I don't think I told anybody. But yes, I primarily reacted with distance. A lot of distance. Yes, and I thought they were stupid. Even though I also knew... but yes

This description of a failed intervention shows the ambivalent position that can manifest with victim-survivors of IPV when support comes at the wrong time or in the wrong way. In this chapter, I discuss help-seeking as a fragmented and iterative process involving multiple support actors. Here even failed attempts such as the example above play a significant part in the process. Utilizing three main cases from my interviews, I explore themes that emerged around the process of seeking help, such as disclosure(s), aborted attempts and/or failed attempts, and the temporality of both violence and help-seeking

The three cases: Amina, Maryam and Therese

The three case studies in this chapter are based on the interviews of Amina, Maryam and Therese, with supporting examples from other interviews. I created help-seeking maps for these three cases (see Figures 1-3). In selecting them I adopted three main criteria: first, they should exemplify different types of help-seeking patterns. I specifically selected cases where the help-seeking processes varied regarding the interviewees' use of informal and formal support services. Amina's case is an example of looking primarily for informal support, Maryam's shows a combination of primarily informal but also formal support actors, and, finally, Therese's case involves a more complex pattern where multiple formal and informal services and actors were involved in the help-seeking process. Second, the selected cases share common features with other interviewees' help-seeking patterns. They therefore enable the discussion of themes and patterns related to the help-seeking processes across the interviews. Third, although I used pseudonyms and changed identifiable information about the interviewees and the support services to avoid potential identification, every help-seeking map is quite unique. Thus, I did not select any cases where I thought that the interviewee was still being controlled by their ex-partner, for instance, in shared custody cases.

Figure 1: Amina’s help-seeking map

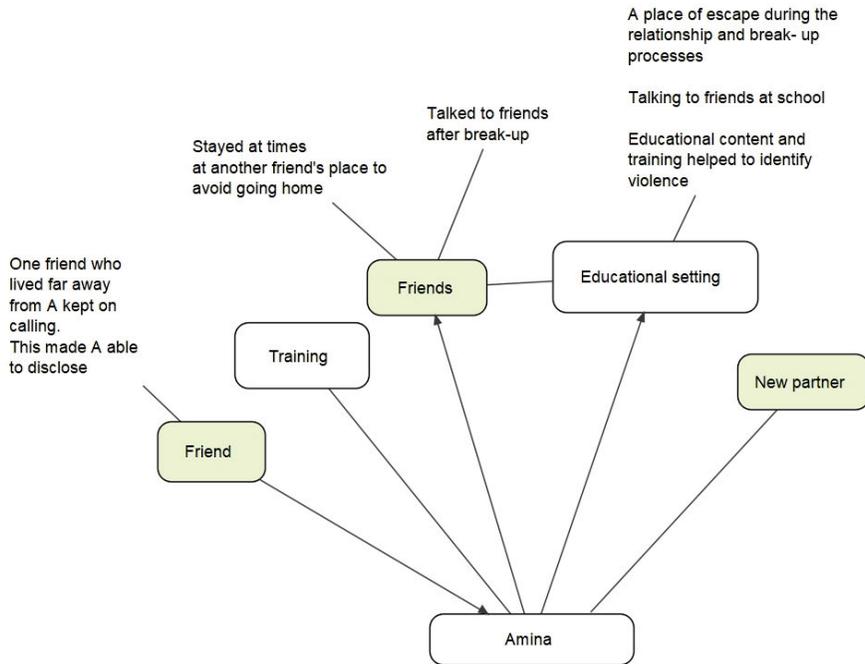


Figure 2: Maryam’s help-seeking map

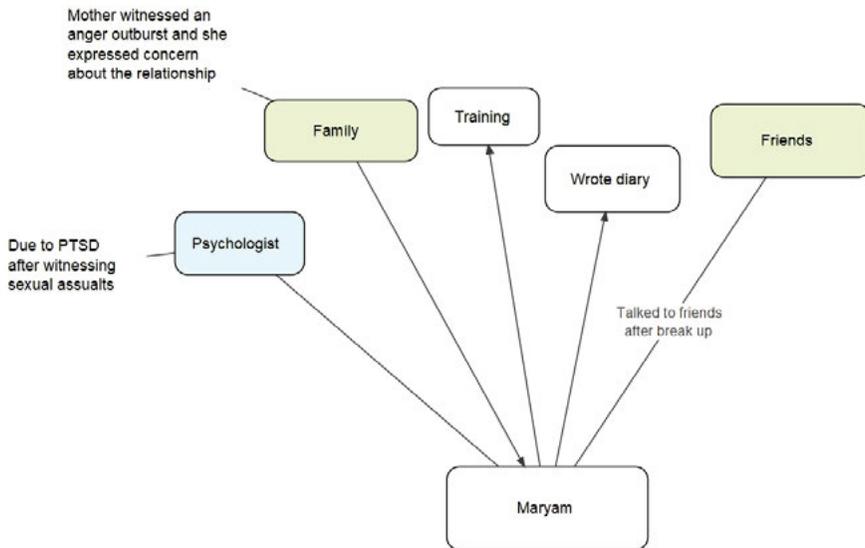
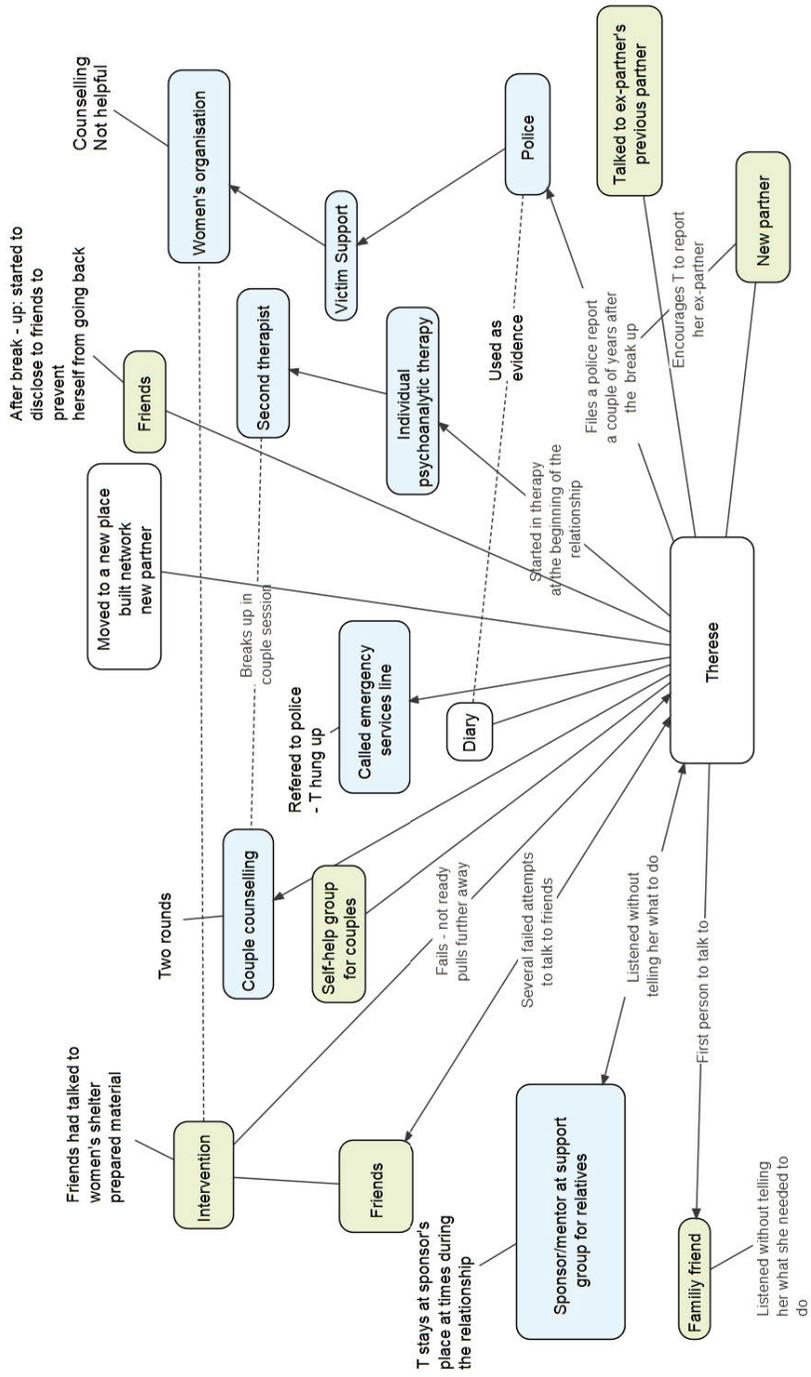


Figure 3: Therese's help-seeking map



All three interviewees had entered an abusive relationship when they were in their early or mid-twenties. Amina, who at the time of the interview was in her mid-thirties, identified as bisexual at the time of the relationship. The relationship had lasted around three years. Maryam, who identified as lesbian/queer, was in her late twenties at the time of the interview. Like Amina's, her relationship had also lasted around three years. Finally, Therese, a lesbian woman in her early thirties, had been in an abusive relationship for around five years. All of them had lived with their partner during the relationship.

The three interviewees' help-seeking patterns were both similar and different. Although Amina stated that she had never sought any help for IPV, she did use her informal networks in various ways to cope with the violence in the relationship and for support during the break-up, a very prolonged process as she and her ex-partner continued to live together for half a year after this break-up. For Amina, who was studying at the time of the relationship, the educational setting played an important role. She would for instance often stay behind on campus in order to avoid going home to her abusive partner, but it was also through her educational training that she started to identify and process her experiences of IPV.

Maryam's help-seeking process varied from Amina's in that the initial support was of a formal nature through a psychologist. Even though she did not at first seek IPV-related counselling, the sessions quickly began to focus on her relationship. She shared limited information about the abuse with her social networks during the relationship. On one occasion, Maryam's mother expressed her concern, after having witnessed her partner being verbally abusive towards Maryam. However, it was not until after the relationship had ended that Maryam started to disclose the violence to her informal networks. Similarly to Amina's description of staying out to avoid abuse, Maryam used her workplace and the gym as places of escape.

Like Maryam, Therese sought psychological counselling, initially also for other issues than IPV. She had spoken to some friends about having problems in the relationship but she did not address this in terms of violence. She was, however, confronted with it being violence by a group of friends and colleagues while still in the relationship. But as she was not ready to leave her partner at the time, she ended up distancing herself from the people involved in the intervention, as described at the beginning of this chapter. Therese called the emergency number 112 on one occasion, but she had then disconnected before the call was redirected to the police.

During the relationship, Therese and her partner sought different types of couples counselling, and she also went to individual therapy. The final break-up occurred at the couples therapist's office. After the relationship had ended, Therese filed a police complaint against her ex-partner. Due to the statute of limitations and lack of evidence, no charges were brought up. As part of the

police investigation Therese was contacted by a victim-support organization which referred her to a women's organization for counselling. She also talked to her ex-partner's previous partner after the relationship had ended.

The three cases represent different help-seeking routes and vary in terms of when informal and formal support actors were sought, but they also share some of the same support actors such as psychologists, friends and new partners. To explore the help-seeking patterns in the three cases, I first examine previous research and theoretical models used to analyse help-seeking processes and strategies.

Models for help-seeking

The field of research on IPV has undergone an enormous shift from describing victimization in terms of Walker's learned helplessness (1987), towards acknowledging victims as active subjects, engaging in attempts and strategies to stop or control the violence experienced (Goodman et al., 2003: 164–166). These are often addressed as help-seeking strategies, which cover a range of different actions and are defined differently in diverse studies. Deanne Chang's (1989) often-cited definition of strategies differentiates between problem-solved coping and emotional-focused coping. The former refers to strategies used to control violence, and the latter, to strategies to keep intact a sense of self. Goodman et al. (2003: 165), for instance, focus exclusively on the former in their development of an index to measure battered women's strategies to keep themselves safe from IPV. They found that the women in their study were more inclined to use private strategies than public ones, and more severe violence was associated with increasing use of both private and public help-seeking strategies. The most helpful strategies identified in their sample involved informal networks, along with safety and planning measures and legal support strategies (2003: 179–181).

Both quantitative and qualitative studies have given rise to thought about certain stages in help-seeking strategies. From this perspective, help-seekers tend to progress from private attempts to deal with the violence, such as resisting and conciliating, to informal networks for support, and then to more public and formal entities such as DV agencies and the police (Goodman et al., 2003: 166; Liang et al., 2005: 77). This approach can also be found in Catherine Kaukinen's studies on help-seeking strategies of female victims of violent crimes through national survey data from the US¹⁵ (Kaukinen, 2004: 973) and Canada¹⁶ (Kaukinen, 2002). Kaukinen found that women who had

¹⁵ The US National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAW) examined violence and threats of violence against women and men in the United States from 1994–1996, conducted by Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes.

¹⁶ Data for this study was taken from the Canadian Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS) from 1993.

been victimized by spousal offenders were more likely to engage in substantial help-seeking strategies. These, apart from the social networks, included disclosure to formal services such as social services, the police and medical agencies (2002: 5). The help-seeking strategies varied not just according to the victim-offender relationship and the types of violence experienced but also according to social position. White women were more likely than minority women to engage in increasing levels of informal and formal help-seeking strategies (Kaukinen, 2004: 984). Kaukinen concludes that the data appear to align with the *pathway-to-care* thesis. From that perspective, informal networks such as family and friends function as facilitators for formal interventions. However, as Kaukinen's data did not show the temporal ordering of the help-seeking (Kaukinen, 2002: 32), this makes it difficult to argue whether the pathway to care thesis actually holds or not.

Different theoretical models for help-seeking vary depending on what types of strategies they include, what part of the leaving process they address and what perspectives they apply. Viveka Enander and Carin Holmberg's (2008; Holmberg and Enander, 2011) work on the leaving processes of battered women is well-established within feminist violence research in Sweden. They explored the processes undergone by women who left abusive heterosexual relationships by interviewing ten women who were recruited from women's shelters as well as two groups of volunteers and staff at the shelters (Enander and Holmberg, 2008: 204). They describe three overlapping break-up processes: breaking up, becoming free and understanding. The first stage, *breaking up*, covers the actions of physically removing oneself from the relationship. The second, *becoming free*, centres on the process of emotionally removing oneself from the relationship and the bond to the partner. The third and last process, *understanding*, covers the cognitive process of gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences as violence and one's status as a victim of abuse (Enander and Holmberg, 2008: 212, 214, 218). Enander and Holmberg describe the process of leaving an abusive relationship as complex and multifaceted. They found that the majority of the informants did not label their experiences as abuse until after the relationship had ended (2008: 222–223).

As was the case with violence as a concept, there is no common theoretical framework to understand the help-seeking behaviours of victims of IPV either. One of the dangers of understanding help-seeking through models is that it can leave the impression that help-seeking is structured into linear, chronological stages. To avoid this pitfall, Liang et al. (2005) developed a conceptual framework consisting of three overlapping and interacting stages or processes: "problem recognition and definition, the decision to seek help, and the selection of the help-provider" (2005: 73). They describe the help-seeking stages as a dialectical process where each stage informs the other in an ongoing feedback loop (2005: 74). Although Liang et al.'s framework primarily describes the help-seeking processes in cognitive terms, they emphasize that these processes are influenced by sociocultural and inter-personal factors such as the

political, cultural and economic contexts (Liang et al., 2005: 73–74). In line with Liang et al.'s model, I also found that many of my interviewees' help-seeking patterns did not follow a linear or sequential pattern and that their decisions on where and how to seek support were shaped by their social contexts. As I argue in the previous chapter, the struggle to identify IPV was also a dominant theme in my interviewees' accounts. In this chapter, I shall examine further how this impacted on their help-seeking processes.

The help-seeking models, strategies and processes discussed in this section are based primarily on men's violence against women, and most of the studies were conducted through formal support services connected to IPV. Studies on help-seeking behaviours for LGBTQ victim-survivors of IPV suggest that LGBTQ victim-survivors face a number of additional obstacles when seeking help for IPV. Informal types of support are therefore more frequently pursued than formal ones and more often in relation to friends than family members (Donovan and Barnes, 2020a; Messinger, 2017; Turell and Herrmann, 2008). Much of the research on IPV and help-seeking in LGBTQ relationships focuses on the lack of effective support and barriers to help-seeking (Calton et al., 2015; Donovan and Hester, 2015; Kurdyla et al., 2019; Simpson and Helfrich, 2005; St Pierre and Senn, 2010). However, in order to understand the barriers, it is also important to explore how, where and when the interviewees actually did seek help and how helpful they considered the support to be. Given that the vast majority of my interviewees did not seek help through IPV services, it is necessary to explore how their help-seeking patterns might differ from the models presented in this section. I suggest that the effectiveness of different help-seeking strategies cannot be measured by focusing solely on the identification of different categories of help-seeking strategies or barriers for help-seeking. This indicates the need for qualitative measures to capture the temporal dimensions, the effectiveness of the strategies, and the relationships between different actors and help-seeking strategies. This is what I shall deal with in this chapter, beginning with the connection between types of violence and help-seeking.

Help-seeking as a mirror of the violence

All three interviewees mentioned psychological abuse as the primary type of violence they had experienced. For Maryam, this was verbal violence, control, manipulation, and to a lesser extent physical and material violence. Therese mentioned psychological and physical violence as the primary types, and Amina, psychological violence. They all described repeated examples of controlling behaviours. Both Maryam and Therese described experiences of sexual violence. Amina, who talked primarily about psychological abuse, had used fewer help-seeking strategies, or at least fewer formal ones than Maryam

and Therese, who both, apart from the psychological abuse, described incidents of physical and sexual violence. Therese described more severe types of physical violence than the other two, such as hitting and choking. She had also used the most formal and informal strategies for support. Their help-seeking patterns appear to align to some extent with the stage model perspective, where increasing, especially physical and hence “spectacular” violence is associated with increasing numbers of strategies in all the different categories including formal and informal as well as private and public strategies (Goodman et al., 2003: 179–181; Kaukinen, 2002: 30). This perspective can help to explain why Therese used several different help-seeking strategies, as she described the violence as gradually increasing over time.

However, a move from private strategies to more public and formal ones is less obvious in the three cases, especially given that much of the formal support consisted of psychological counselling which was not primarily focused on IPV. In order to understand the help-seeking processes, it is also important to take in the context of the relationships, including previous experiences of violence. Maryam, for instance, sought formal help through counselling after having witnessed severe physical and sexual violence outside the relationship. Amina, who did not seek any formal support, had experienced IPV in a previous heterosexual relationship, and had been subjected to honour-based violence in the form of social control from her brother and father growing up. Similarly to her experiences of IPV, it was only when she had become an adult that she recognized this control as a form of violence. During the interview she started to reflect upon the ways in which this control had been a returning factor in her intimate relationships and that this could have impacted on how she normalized abusive behaviours, which in turn impacted on her help-seeking process.

In many ways the interviewees’ help-seeking mirrored the violence experienced. Spectacular violence was more likely to result in formal help-seeking than the often-slow violence of psychological abuse, which Nixon describes as “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive” (Nixon, 2011: 2). I argue, and my data demonstrate, that the help-seeking patterns my interviewees described involved similar structures to the violence they had experienced: they tended to be iterative, interrupted, gradual, and escalatory. Taking this view allows for a more integrated perspective on help-seeking, which can capture how help-seeking, just like abuse, often develops gradually over time and might change along the way, for instance, from slow towards spectacular violence. This may occur not in successive but in additive fashion. Seeing help-seeking as mirroring the violence experienced also helps to understand indirect forms of help-seeking – a significant theme in my material. Although I had cases that were characterized by outside intervention in life-threatening events leading to the termination of the relationship, the majority of the interviewees had a slower process of dealing with both violence and help-seeking.

To approach help-seeking as a mirror of such slow violence requires a broad and inclusive definition of help-seeking to capture subtle and seemingly invisible attempts for support or resistance. Thus, when mapping the help-seeking patterns, I noted expressions of activities and places used for support, which might not typically be thought of as help-seeking resources in the informal-formal support actors divide but nevertheless had an impact on how the interviewees dealt with the violence. This could be activities such as Amina's staying behind on campus, or Maryam and Therese documenting their experiences in diaries during their relationships. Keeping a diary turned out to be significant for Therese's help-seeking process, as she used her diary as evidence of her abuse for the police report. In Maryam's case, her diary functioned as a reminder of the continuity of the abuse:

I wrote a bit in a diary on some occasions and when I read it I always reacted: 'God, I wrote this two years ago. To think that it was like this then. What the hell am I still doing with this person?'

This is an example of a process-based rather than an event-based form of help-seeking. It is often difficult to capture, as it, similarly to the abuse, consists of subtle, repeated actions to elicit support, similar to talking to friends or adopting behaviours to try to prevent violence from escalating. These actions could start years before any actual separation took place.

Many of the help-seeking models and strategies that I discuss in the previous section of this chapter were based on data from support services connected to IPV, often women's shelters (Chang, 1989; Enander and Holmberg, 2008; Goodman et al., 2003; Lempert, 1996, 1997). This is based on the notion that victim-survivors sought help or were provided with support through IPV services. However, this was not prevalent in my material or in other studies of help-seeking in cases of IPV in LGBTQ relationships (Donovan and Hester, 2015; Messinger, 2017: 130; Rollè et al., 2018). Even for Therese who was the only one of the three who went to a women's shelter organization, the shelter was not her initial port of entry; she was referred to the organization through the general victim support organization who had contacted her after she had reported her partner to the police.

Rather than seeking help to deal with IPV, most of the interviewees' help-seeking patterns were characterized by a focus on psychological issues and thus constitute indirect forms of help-seeking. These were at times already initiated during the relationship.

Indirect help-seeking through counsellors

Counsellors such as psychologists were the most common source of formal support sought by my interviewees. This finding aligns with the results of Donovan and Hester's (2015) survey study. Counselling support may be utilized because seeking psychological counselling is not an unusual move in the general population, and it can be done without alerting the abusive partner to the help that is actually being sought. It could also be that the abuse victims were not (yet) clear about what they needed support for. Like Maryam and Therese, many of my other interviewees sought help for what could be described as symptoms of the effects of IPV such as depression, anxiety and PTSD symptoms. Counsellors were contacted at different times, sometimes during the relationships and sometimes after. Both Maryam and Therese sought help during their relationships. Interestingly, some interviewees were already in therapy when the relationship began.

Therese initially started therapy to work out unresolved issues of her own. She explained a feeling that something was wrong with her but she struggled to identify the reasons behind those feelings. This happened around the same time as she and her partner got together. While she did not initially seek help because of her experiences of abuse, eventually the therapy session started to address her relationship issues even though they were never explicitly addressed as violence. Maryam also sought psychological support after having witnessed violence outside the relationship and was diagnosed with PTSD. The sessions soon centred on her relationship; this became an important factor which enabled her to leave her partner. Maryam emphasized the significance of talking to someone who was an expert but also an outsider:

But I think it was really good that I went to therapy during that time to try to figure out some strategies on how to think and so on. Not to put everything on myself and always think about what other people feel and think and that was something she always told me, the psychologist. She was just like 'what do you feel? You are always talking about what she feels'. My ex, that is. 'But what do you feel?' I was just like, 'I don't know'. I mean I hadn't thought about this. I just went on and on and never stopped to think 'how do I actually feel?' So stuff like that. And it was really good to hear it from someone who is a professional, you know an expert... So that I could take it seriously, which I don't think I would have done probably if it came from a friend. It has greater weight when it comes from someone who is educated, competent in this, in mental health issues and who says like 'there is something wrong here' or 'it shouldn't be like that in a relationship.'

Maryam used the psychologist as a way to develop strategies that enabled her to end the relationship. She therefore broke with the informal to formal model of help-seeking as she sought formal help first through a psychologist during the relationship and later, after having ended the relationship, sought support

from her informal networks. She also ended the therapy around the same time as the relationship.

In her study on help-seeking strategies, Lora Lempert (1996, 1997)¹⁷ found that her informants would often initially use individualized strategies to cope with the violence. These strategies relied on self-blaming explanations or on the idea that the violence was a problem to be fixed. This could be the result of definitional dialogues between the women and their partners, where the abusive partner often defined and delegitimized experiences of abuse. However, as the women began to ask for outside help the dialogue turned into a *multilog*, where third actor perspectives became crucial (Lempert, 1996: 283). Counselling can be a means of turning away from definitional isolation in a relationship, where the perpetrator's perspective is dominant and the violence is interpreted as the result of the victim-survivor's own issues and shortcomings. Many of Lempert's interviewees (1996: 283), similarly to the participants in my study, did not initially seek support explicitly with the intention of leaving the relationship. They expressed wanting to fix their problems, and it was through the help-seeking process, and often not until after the relationship had ended, that they started to define their experiences as abuse. Previous studies on help-seeking in LGBTQ groups which show a low use rate of IPV-specific services also highlight this (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 174; Messinger, 2017; Rollè et al., 2018: 9; Turell and Herrmann, 2008). Psychological counselling both individually and as a couple might therefore have a lower threshold than IPV support services, as counselling does not rely on the recognition of abuse; couples counselling in particular can even be interpreted as a sign of investment in the relationship.

The fact that Maryam started seeing a psychologist during the relationship had not been an issue for her partner, as it fitted into the narrative that it was Maryam who was the problem. On the contrary, Maryam said that her partner would occasionally call her mentally ill or crazy as part of the verbal abuse. However, her partner started to become more critical of the psychologist when Maryam disclosed that her psychologist was questioning their relationship. A successful outcome of the multilog in the case of counselling therefore depends on if and how the therapist/counsellor recognizes the abuse and how they proceed with the help-provision, but also how the abusive partner reacts.

Therese and her partner tried different kinds of therapy: couples therapy, support groups and group counselling with other couples. Therese even ended the relationship in a couples counselling session:

I had a session with my own therapist very early in the morning that day. She just asked, 'but do you love her?' I just... 'I don't know.' I can't be with someone if I don't know if I love them. And then I was just like, 'no, I don't. And

¹⁷ In Lempert's study on help-seeking strategies and the role of informal networks, the 32 participants were recruited from an outreach support group connected to a women's shelter (Lempert, 1996, 1997)

also I don't want this.' So then straight after my own session, we met up with our couples counsellor. So I was really encouraged and dared to say it in this safe space with this person that, "I don't want this anymore". And then my ex left. Well she left before me and I waited around for a while.

Here the couples therapy in combination with individual therapy provided Therese with the emotional and even physical space where she could end the relationship. Couples counselling is often considered to be most successful in cases of IPV when it works as an entrance into individual therapy (Rollè et al., 2018: 8). This was also the case for Therese, although she used both individual and couples counselling in the help-seeking process. When it comes to couples counselling, the focus on the couple as a unit has its limitations, I shall return to this in Chapter Five when I discuss counsellors' responses further.

Psychological counselling was by far the most common type of formal support sought by the interviewees. However, the individualized and privatized focus of therapy and counselling is also a cause for concern when it comes to providing support to LGBTQ victim-survivors of IPV. According to Donovan and Hester (2015), it may well indicate lack of support and trust between LGBTQ communities and the mainstream services specializing in IPV. Individualized therapy also reinforces the idea that IPV is a private or relational issue. Thus, it demonstrates that same-sex IPV has still not achieved the status of public concern (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 212). Although Therese, for instance, went to several different types of therapists, violence was not the focus of these sessions, and it was not until she was sent to a women's shelter after the relationship had ended that she was given a definition of abuse that resonated with her experiences. Thus, seeking support through counselling did not mean that the help-seeker automatically disclosed violence. As with any type of support services, their effectiveness is shaped by what time the help is sought, how the issue is interpreted by the help-provider and the help-seeker(s), and last but not least the help-seekers' ability to disclose violence at the specific moment in time.

Disclosure of violence

Kaukinen emphasizes the significance of disclosure as a help-seeking strategy: "once the process of disclosure is initiated, women victimized by spousal offenders may no longer be able to conceal or normalize the violent actions of their abuser" (2002: 28–30). Telling others about the violence was also identified as the primary help-seeking strategy by the interviewees in Lempert's study (1997). According to Lempert, the act of telling can have a cumulative effect, for instance, by challenging women to re-frame and redefine their experiences and thus reach a new definition with the help of outside validation

(1997: 298). However, disclosure is a two-sided coin, and its helpfulness depends on how it is received and how the abuse is perceived. Thus, disclosure involves a number of challenges and risks as it can turn into definitional oppression rather than definitional assistance (Lempert, 1997: 300, 302). This is often the case when members of the social networks offer unwanted advice, such as encouraging the victim to leave the relationship or report their partner to the police when they are not ready, able or willing to leave the relationship (Boethius and Åkerström, 2020: 200). The failed intervention quoted at the beginning of the chapter serves as an example of definitional oppression, which did not provide Therese with the opportunity to disclose her experiences at the time.

A number of studies have shown that friends are the most commonly sought informal help in case of IPV in LGBTQ relationships (Donovan and Hester, 2015; Messinger, 2017: 130; Sylaska and Edwards, 2014). LGBTQ victim-survivors tend to disclose more to friends than family members compared to heterosexual victim-survivors (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 173). Amina, Maryam and Therese had primarily disclosed the violence to friends after the relationship had ended. Maryam said that even her closest friends were not aware of the severity of the situation during the relationship. However, some friends knew they were arguing a lot and had begun to question their relationship:

‘Why the hell are you still together?’ So it could be questions like that but never like, ‘you have to leave her now’. I would probably have heard that if I had told them how things really were, like the truth, the whole truth.

Since Maryam anticipated lack of support from her friends, she did not tell her friends “the whole truth” during the relationship. Many of the interviewees described similar feelings of concern or worry about what might happen once other people knew about the violence. In line with Susanna Boethius and Malin Åkerström’s (2020: 198) findings on disclosing domestic abuse to the informal network, both potential responses and the social consequences of disclosure impacted on the interviewees’ decisions on whether and how to disclose violence to their informal networks. Many of the interviewees lied to friends and family members by denying that their partner was being abusive towards them or had downplayed the severity of the situation (Boethius and Åkerström, 2020: 192). Maryam, for instance, described how she kept it all in to keep up appearances during the relationship. Feelings of shame and guilt around the partner were often named by interviewees as a reason not to disclose violence to others, which in the long run would often turn into feelings of guilt and shame around friends and family members for lying.

Despite the obstacles and risks involved in disclosing violence to informal social networks, it is still one of the first and most common types of support sought by victims of IPV (Boethius and Åkerström, 2020: 187). Among my

interviewees, support was often first sought from friends and family members, or a combination of the two. In their study on the role of informal support, Rachel E. Latta and Lisa A. Goodman (2011: 986) mention physical proximity and emotional closeness as two conditions which shaped the informal network's awareness of violence and the possibilities to intervene. However, I found that physical and emotional closeness could also work as a hindrance to disclosure. Therese, for instance, first disclosed that they were having problems to a family friend who lived in another town after a big fight at the very beginning of the relationship. The friend had invited her to stay and would listen without telling her what to do. At times Therese would call her after something had happened, but not often. Amina also first disclosed violence to a friend who lived far away, and Maryam first disclosed to her psychologist. For all three, the significance of *not* having to disclose violence or being able to disclose without repercussions determined where they sought support during the relationship. Therese, for instance, stayed with a mentor whom she had met at a support group for relatives with addictions. She explained that she would sometimes stay for several days or even a week at a time at her place to avoid going home. Whereas Amina thought the friend she stayed with during the relationship did not dare to ask her what was going on, Therese appreciated being able to stay with someone who would listen without telling her what to do and who would not pass judgment on her when she returned to her partner, which she did repeatedly.

The interviewees therefore negotiated anticipated risks following disclosure in order to avoid definitional oppression. Such negotiations could take different forms. In these three cases, emotional and spatial proximity worked as a hindrance to disclosure. Maryam, for instance, found it easier to confide in her psychologist than in her mother. In the interview she described one incident when her mother had witnessed her partner's outburst of anger:

There was one time when we were at my mom's place and [her partner] freaked out on me. And my mom saw it and she reacted immediately. She was just like 'this does not seem normal' (light laughter). And I just kind of broke down in front of my mom. I cried because I just got so sad about the fact that this thing that was so normal for me, that someone else had to witness that. It was so... it was so awful. I felt bad for my mom who had to witness that.

When confronted by her mother's concern Maryam focused on her mother's feelings and how it must have been for her to witness this scene, rather than seeing this as a moment to disclose. When she described what her therapist had said about their relationship I noticed that it sounded very similar to the concern raised by her mother:

Nicole: Because your mom said sort of the same thing.

Maryam: Yes, my mom, yes. But I was just like, 'mom is mom' (laughs) She is so mommy like. So I thought she would, like, always say stuff like that.

‘Think about yourself’ (light laughter). I was just like, ‘okay, yes, I’ll think about myself.’

The direction of the support and, as previously addressed, the proximity both geographically and emotionally of the help-provider could therefore impact on the effectiveness of the support sought and given. It could therefore be easier to disclose to a more peripheral person in one’s social networks, especially to someone not invested in the relationship continuing, such as family members or mutual friends (Boethius and Åkerström, 2020: 199). Some of the interviewees, for instance, disclosed to a colleague or an acquaintance, and Therese and Amina disclosed to friends living far away rather than ones living nearby. This is part of a general pattern of maintaining agency in the help-seeking process, for instance, through indirect help-seeking strategies. The most prominent type of these in my interviewees’ accounts was part disclosure.

Part disclosure

When mapping my interviewees’ help-seeking patterns, it quickly became clear that in many of the accounts it was not possible to identify one singular moment of disclosure. Rather, a recurring theme was multiple part disclosures. This came up in my interview with Therese:

I told some friends a little bit but then it became quite clear how they positioned themselves or distanced themselves, or like you must do this and that, and so on. And when I couldn’t do that then, I distanced myself from them instead. So my mentor knew, but she didn’t know it all either. So there were a few who knew a little bit. But no one had the whole picture.

Therese described disclosing in terms of testing, disclosing to some of her friends but in bits. This allowed her to remain in control of the narrative around her relationship and the abuse. Immediately after having ended the relationship in the therapy session, she disclosed this to a number of friends to prevent herself from going back to the partner. This she described as a way of anchoring her decision. Part disclosure can therefore be a way to manage the support, achieving definitional assistance rather than being exposed to definitional oppression (Lempert, 1997: 300).

Part disclosure was not limited to informal support. Maryam, for instance, used part disclosure with her psychologist. The relationship with her partner quickly became a subject they discussed in the counselling sessions, and the psychologist had started to ask why Maryam stayed in the relationship. In the interview, I asked how she had experienced this and she responded:

Maryam: Well, I guess I knew that she was right in some ways, that it was maybe not smart to stay and so on. But I was still very much defending her [partner] so I did not tell her all the things I said today. No, then I think she would have reacted differently if I had told everything. But it wasn't until afterwards that I realized how bad things had been then. Yes.

Nicole: What parts didn't you want to tell her?

Maryam: Well, I wonder if I told her in detail what she would call me and about when she tried to assault me. I don't know if I said anything about that. No, I don't think I said anything about the sex thing... it was kind of, it was a big thing in the relationship. For example, when she wanted to, well, made a sexual invitation and I would, like, always say no... then she would immediately freak out and scream and throw stuff for a long time. It was like there was no stop to it. And I was, like, panicking 'cause it was such aggressive behaviour. And then she would also at times hit herself. I was just like, 'god what is she doing?' Then I had to, like, comfort her. So, well, it was a really weird situation. When it should have been me who should have been comforted... yes but no I think I did not say that actually. Those things. I think I said. She asked like this, 'do you have sex?' and I said, 'yes, sometimes.'

Just as with her informal network Maryam anticipated the reactions she would get if she were to disclose the violence, and this led her to withhold information. The quote also contains an interesting contradiction as Maryam mentions both not realizing how severe the situation was and simultaneously thinking that the situation was too severe to disclose. Similarly to my findings, Donovan and Hester found that some of their interviewees would provide edited and partial narratives to friends. For some this was out of loyalty towards their partner. Others, especially the interviewees who had been victimized in a same-sex relationship, also feared that their sexuality made the abuse unrecognizable for their friends. This made them edit their stories (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 177). While these findings resonate to some extent with mine, I want to add that part disclosure should also be recognized as a subtle strategy in the help-seeking process. Maryam's decision not to disclose sexual coercion to her therapist was a way for her to keep control of the narrative of the relationship as she engaged in the process of redefining it as abusive. Lempert uses the term "crisis of ambiguity" to describe the moments when the women in her study had exhausted their individual resources for reinterpreting the violence they experienced. In some cases such moments allowed for the possibility to take in other people's interpretations of the relationship and the abuse (1997: 300). In Amina's case it was, for instance, the repeated support of her friend, who lived further away, that allowed her to disclose in her own time:

Amina: I had a friend who would call me once in a while, and I think she might have understood it. One day she called me and asked, like, 'how are things?' And then I said it like it was, that I was not doing well. And then she said, 'Yes, I have seen that'. And when she began to say what she saw I could also put it into words. That made me able to begin the process of leaving.

Through repeated and continued contact over time, Amina's friend provided her with the support that enabled her to disclose and begin the process of leaving. These examples illustrate that disclosing is not a singular event (Alaggia et al., 2011: 310). It is more often a repeated process involving different degrees of disclosure depending on time and context and anticipated reaction.

Fragmented help-seeking and slow disentanglement

The three cases varied in terms of which support actors were involved in the help-seeking processes. Even in Amina's case, where no formal help was sought, more than one actor or action was involved. Maryam sought support through friends, she found formal help through a psychologist, and her mother made an attempt to get her to disclose. Finally, Therese used a combination of several different types of formal and informal support including different types of therapists, counselling and support groups, the police, and a women's shelter organization.

The three cases all show some level of aborted, dismissed or missed opportunities for support, whether it was Maryam's dismissal of her mother's concern, Therese's friends' and colleagues' failed intervention, or the friends, teachers and classmates who, according to Amina, knew that something was wrong but never asked her why she was avoiding going home. Part disclosure, as discussed in the previous section, is a version of fragmented help-seeking. Aborted attempts are attempts to seek support that appear to be abbreviated in one way or another. As discussed in Chapter Three, IPV itself is an iterative and slow process, and people's help-seeking behaviour often mirrors this. For that reason, I argue that aborted attempts to seek support should not automatically be considered failed attempts but, rather, a fundamental part of the help-seeking process. An example of this was Therese calling the emergency number 112 after her partner had locked her into a closet, preventing her from leaving their apartment:

She had taken my stuff and was just like, 'You can't go to work. I will destroy you.' [...] somehow I succeeded in getting my phone back and then I just called 112 and I said like: 'Hi, I can't leave, I live at this address, my partner won't let me leave or she has locked me in and is preventing me from leaving.' And they were just like, 'okay we'll connect you to the police'. This probably took about ten seconds but it felt like half an hour so in the end I hung up. But I didn't tell her that then. So she was like, 'what did they say?' and I just went, 'they'll be here soon' and then I just left.

This could be interpreted as a failed attempt to seek formal support, given that no contact was established with the police. However, although Therese hung up it did serve an important purpose both in the situation and in Therese's general help-seeking process. It allowed her to get out of the violent situation

and also served as a subtle way for her to reject her partner's behaviour without forcing her into taking specific measures, such as actually reporting or leaving her partner. She described this incident as the closest she came to reporting her partner to the police during the relationship. The aborted attempt then became part of her later account of the relationship as abusive, even though this was also at a point where she had still not fully defined her experiences as IPV and was still not ready to leave the relationship. Thus, for Therese, being trapped in the closet meant that she needed to call for support. Such intervention, whether aborted or not, can lead to a "crisis of ambiguity" (Lempert, 1997: 300) allowing the victim-survivor to reject the abuse in subtle or even explicit ways, even if it just means to begin questioning the relationship.

Incidents like these can also make it possible for others to address the violence with the victim-survivor. However, as I have shown in both Therese and Maryam's cases, intervening actors did not always have an immediately positive response. Lempert (1997) argues that confrontation, even with well-meaning intentions such as in Therese's case, can strengthen the abusive partner's grip rather than loosen it. However, this does not mean that all support must be initiated by the victim-survivor in order to be helpful. Juliana, another of my interviewees who had experienced violence in a relationship that lasted around a year in her late twenties, ended up leaving her partner after what could be described as a successful intervention by friends. However, this intervention was not a singular event, as her friends had also questioned the relationship for some time. The combination of repeated and smaller confrontations and the fact that the days before the intervention had been filled with tensions and conflicts contributed to the helpfulness of the intervention.

When applying the term *fragmented help-seeking*, I suggest that it is important to differentiate between aborted attempts, such as part disclosure, and failed attempts. Whereas the former can be seen as a useful part of the fragmented help-seeking process, where the victim-survivor tests disclosure, the latter often correlates with the surroundings' failed, lack of, or untimely, reaction to IPV. This can happen at any point in the help-seeking process. For instance, after Therese ended her relationship, her new partner convinced her to file a police report against her ex-partner. Therese was then offered counselling at a women's shelter organization. But she felt that the counsellor lacked understanding in relation to the fact that she had been victimized by a woman:

[Therese imitating counsellor] 'Ohh, aha, so you lived with a woman?' [light laughter] 'Because otherwise, when it's a woman who has lived with a man it's this way'. And I was just like, 'ah okay but... yes it could be like that, but it could also not be like that at all'. So I felt like there wasn't any LGBTQ competence. It was always, 'oh, how weird that it wasn't some big and strong man who hit you.'

This is an example of a failed attempt at support seeking, as the help-provider failed to address Therese as an appropriate victim of IPV because her story did not match the public story of violence, framed around heterosexual women's victimization. Fortunately, this occurred at a point when Therese had already started to identify her experiences as violence and had received substantial forms of informal and formal support. In other cases where the interviewees tried to disclose experiences of abuse and this was not recognized by their social network or counsellors, it could lead to closure rather than support. I address failed support and misrecognition of IPV further in Chapter Five.

The fragmented help-seeking process was part of the slow disentanglement from the abusive relationship that occurred in the three cases. Many of the interviewees, including Maryam and Therese, mentioned that they had tried to leave or had broken up several times before the relationship finally ended. Therese, for instance, explained that her partner's use of threats prevented her from leaving for some time. She described feeling very alone, and even though she was unhappy in the relationship she thought that leaving would be like dying, as she had become isolated from her social networks. A couples counselling session provided Therese with the physical and emotional space to end the relationship. However, she described this as just one of several factors that had affected her ability to end the relationship. One important other factor had been that she had gotten a job in another city:

So I was there a lot and I had my own apartment there. Got new friends and sort of fell in love with a colleague there, even though I didn't get that at the time. Well, later on I understood it. But I got my own *space*.

Here space has several meanings and the lines between problem solving strategies and coping strategies for keeping intact a sense of self are not just blurred but entangled (Goodman et al., 2003: 165). The importance of having one's own space was also apparent in Maryam and Amina's help-seeking process. Amina mentioned the importance of her education, and both she and Maryam talked of working out as a place of escape and as a way to deal with the restrictions imposed by their partner. However, this became a temporary escape for Maryam, as her partner started to accuse her of cheating with someone at the place where she worked out.

Thus, one reason why help-seeking should be described as iterative and fragmented rather than as a linear process is that it is not just determined or influenced by the victim-survivor's readiness to leave and the definition of abuse; the social network and formal support systems' responses as well as the abusive partner's behaviours are also influential.

The process of disentanglement also depends on certain material conditions. Housing security or lack thereof has a huge impact on IPV and help-seeking (Little, 2015: 38, 40). Therese and Amina had very different housing situations, which impacted their break-up processes. Amina continued to live

with her ex-partner for six months after they had broken up since they were both still studying at the time. Therese, on the other hand, owned the apartment she and her partner had lived in and was furthermore able to move to a new town where her work was located during the time in which her partner refused to leave the apartment they had shared. Amina described the time after the relationship when they continued to live together as extremely difficult. Her now-ex-partner continued to try to control her and force her to have contact with her through threats of self-harm. The fact that Amina found a new partner while they continued to live together made the situation both harder but also easier in some ways:

Everything she did just became, like, worse. Even more. But then I could also leave. I had somewhere else to go. And then I, when I broke up with her I had been mulling it over for a long time and prepared myself to end the relationship. For her it came as a shock.

While having a new partner escalated her ex-partner's violence towards Amina, it also provided her with a refuge and support. The emotional preparation that Amina speaks of was an indirect form of help-seeking, where the victim-survivor begins to disentangle from the control of the abusive partner mentally before leaving the relationship.

Although some interviewees talked about specific turning points, such as specific events of violence or confrontations, these moments often worked as the beginning of a longer process of ending the relationship. Similarly to Amina, another interviewee, Ewa, talked about preparing to leave for a long time. In Ewa's case, their marriage became that turning-point that triggered this process. Before they got married her partner had promised her that she would never hit her again, but just a few days after she did exactly that. Ewa described this incident as the beginning of the end. However, it took almost two years before she was actually able to leave the relationship:

But after that it really felt like I had closed her off somehow. I might not have dared to break up but I started building up something on my own, sort of. Yes... to strengthen myself in small steps.

Similarly to Therese's account, Ewa's disentanglement from the relationship included slowly building up her own social network, which became vital support for her as her ex-partner refused to leave their apartment after the break-up, and she relied on accommodations from her friends for several months.

Enander and Holmberg (2008) describe leaving as a process of disentanglement from the traumatic bond between the abusive partner and the victim-survivor (2008: 222). They regard *understanding* as the very final stage of the break-up process, in which the victim-survivor begins to identify the relationship as abusive. They draw the conclusion that "women do not leave because they realise they are abused; rather, they realise they are abused because they

have left” (Enander and Holmberg, 2008: 218). Enander and Holmberg found that the leaving process was often initiated by a turning-point, where the women had either hit rock-bottom or feared for their lives or other people’s safety, for instance (Enander and Holmberg, 2008: 212). Escalation of violence or fear of escalation has also been associated with increasing help-seeking strategies (Goodman et al., 2003: 181). Some of my interviewees had left the relationship after immediate, and to use Nixon’s (2011) term, spectacular violence. However, the three main help-seeking patterns I have discussed in this chapter show a more prolonged and slow form of help-seeking. Similarly to Enander and Holmberg, I also found that for many of my interviewees, identifying oneself as the victim of abuse was a prolonged process, which often occurred after the relationship had ended. However, rather than taking as a point of departure the physical removal of oneself from the relationship as the initial break-up process, I suggest that the entanglement of the second process of *becoming free* into the process of leaving the relationship can be useful in understanding the subtle ways victim-survivors start to reject the violence they experience during the relationship. We need to think about help-seeking as a slow disentanglement shaped not only by cognitive processes but also by social and material conditions as well as the responses of the social and formal networks. Such disentanglement may start long before the relationship officially ends, and it may continue afterwards. This approach makes it possible to include more indirect types of help-seeking to explore strategies that do not depend on the victim-survivors being able or willing to identify themselves as victims of abuse or even leaving the relationship at that particular moment in time.

The temporalities of help-seeking

As I have already discussed in the previous sections, the help-seeking patterns of the three main cases were not represented very well by linear and sequential models of help-seeking. In this section, I will focus on another dimension of the temporalities of help-seeking, specifically on what could be described as delayed forms of help-seeking. This was a common theme across the interviewees as coming to terms with one’s experiences, as violence or seeking support for digesting what one has experienced in the past could take place a long time after the abusive relationship had ended. Based on the interviewees’ help-seeking patterns, I argue that a limited and linear time perspective fails to capture the complexity of the help-seeking processes of victim-survivors of IPV. According to Deborah Anderson and Daniel G. Saunders’ (2003) research review of the processes of leaving an abusive partner, very little attention is given to what actually happens after the relationship ends. They suggest, in line with the findings discussed in this chapter, to conceptualize leaving as the continuation of a process which begins during the relationship and

extends beyond the point of physical departure (2003: 179, 185). I have already discussed different ways in which my interviewees sought support during the relationship, and I will now focus on help-seeking in the aftermath of violence.

At the time of the interview with Amina, it had been ten years since she had left her abusive partner, yet she still felt affected by her experiences of IPV. Similarly to other interviewees, she explained that her body still remembered what had happened to her and she would sometimes get very strong reactions to certain behaviours. This would often happen if she felt that people were trying to control her, for instance, by telling her what she should do. Therese also talked about the long-term effects of IPV, which impacted many of her social relationships. She ended up filing a police complaint a few years after the relationship had ended, when she had finally identified her partner's behaviour as violent. However, due to lack of evidence and the statute of limitations, it was not possible to prosecute her ex-partner. This points to the challenges of prosecuting cases of IPV when the recognition of IPV is often a prolonged process. I will return to this issue in Chapter Five when discussing the role of the criminal justice system.

Many of the interviewees struggled to remember what had actually happened in their relationships. To understand help-seeking as a prolonged and fragmented process we also need to understand violence as a disruption of time. Clementine Morrigan writes about the queer temporalities of the traumatized mind and suggests that disorientation in time, for instance through flashbacks, partial forgetting, dissociations and amnesia, disrupts the linearity of time after having experienced violence (Morrigan, 2017: 51, 55). This disruption of time was also evident in many of my interviewees' accounts where struggles to remember, reliving moments and doubting one's memories were often addressed. Evelina, who had not received any form of formal counselling, described how she had a delayed reaction to the violence she had experienced, a few years after the relationship had ended:

Well, I was at a routine check-up at the gynaecologist and then she asked me, 'yes, how do you feel in general?' and then I just [makes crying sound] broke down and then she was like, 'oy, oy, oy, you need to talk to our counsellor', and then he called me and I got an appointment quite fast.

Here we see the disruption of time, as the body reacts in the present to an event of the past (Morrigan, 2017: 54). Evelina also described how certain sounds and noises would trigger a strong bodily response, and she felt as if she was ready to defend herself and act in the moment. Although she said that she was pleased with the counselling she had received, she also expressed mixed feelings about receiving counselling after such a long time, as she was no longer "completely broken down" when she went to see the counsellor.

Therese also expressed concerns around the matter of time when she sought counselling specifically for IPV a few years after the relationship had ended. This was at the women's shelter organization, in connection with the police report. Apart from the fact that the counsellor lacked an inclusive LGBTQ perspective, Therese also got the impression that her timing for seeking help was off. She had been told beforehand that the objective of the counselling sessions was for her to process the experiences of abuse through a ten-step model, not necessarily following a specific order. She initially thought that this would be a great idea, as she was still having issues related to her experiences of IPV. However, when she started to talk about her experiences of IPV and how it had affected her in relation to friends and in her current relationship, the counsellor dismissed the topics as irrelevant to the session:

I also said it several times that I had been going to therapy for a long time. Both during the time we were in the relationship and after. So I had worked through some issues by myself but I was absolutely not done. I think that, since it was at [women's shelter organization] it would have worked well if it was an emergency, but it didn't feel like she... As I said, I only met with one person there but she couldn't really connect with me in the sense that, okay, I had moved on a bit... but I wanted more help with some things... or now I wanted to... I don't know. It was sort of unclear, or I thought it was clear. Aha, there is this plan. I want to do that. But once I got there I felt that it was like, I would talk and then she would tell me what I could and could not talk about. I felt really controlled and it became really weird.

Therese's process of having worked through some parts of her experiences disrupted the planned path to recovery, which according to Therese, appeared to be departing from more acute and urgent cases of violence. She then became unrecognizable as a victim of IPV, not just for being subjected to violence by a woman but also for being too late in seeking help. Following Morrigan's suggestion that trauma queers time, it is clear that the temporality of help-seeking in the case of IPV refuses to follow a straight trajectory (2017: 53).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed help-seeking processes by focusing on three of my interviewees. The cases varied in terms of the number of informal and formal actors involved, and the complexity of the help-seeking patterns. However, the three help-seeking patterns were also similar in many ways. They served as examples of a slow but also fragmented disentanglement from an abusive relationship. In line with Enander and Holmberg's (2008) research, I found that many interviewees would only begin to recognize their partner's behaviour as abusive after the relationship had ended. However, this did not mean that they did not seek support to deal with the effects of IPV before that

point. A significant theme was the importance of indirect forms of help seeking. This could be subtle ways to process one's experience such as writing a diary, avoiding going home, or trying to build up one's social network. Counsellors such as psychologists were the most common type of formal help sought during and after the relationship had ended. This could also be described as an indirect form of help-seeking since many would seek help for what could be described as symptoms of IPV, such as depression and anxiety, rather than IPV directly.

The theoretical help-seeking models discussed in this chapter tend to focus on sequential stages or processes of help-seeking or leaving an abusive relationship, and they often draw on data from organizations or institutions connected to IPV (Enander and Holmberg, 2008; Goodman et al., 2003). I think it is important to enter into dialogue with these models but also to address the ways in which these models tend to illustrate the help-seeking patterns of certain groups of victim-survivors, such as those who have sought help through women's shelters, the police or court services. So in order to understand the help-seeking processes of victim-survivors in lesbian and queer relationships, where the victimization itself can be less recognizable, and especially to understand cases where the violence might be difficult to define, we need to include new perspectives on these models. What was significant in my material and supported by findings from other studies on IPV in LGBTQ relationships (Donovan and Barnes, 2020a; Turell and Herrmann, 2008) was that very few of the interviewees had actually sought help at facilities that specialize in IPV. For the few who did, it was often later, to deal with the aftermath of IPV. Furthermore, the *Pathway-to-care thesis* (Kaukinen, 2002: 32), which focuses on the move from informal to formal support, represented very few help-seeking patterns in my material. On the contrary, the cases discussed in this chapter show help-seeking patterns that are better described as slow, fragmented, iterative and non-linear.

I have also discussed disclosure as an important part of the help-seeking process. However, with disclosure comes the risk of definitional oppression, for instance, by members of one's social networks (Lempert, 1997). A missing perspective in the discussion of disclosure, which I saw as a recurring theme across my interviewees' help-seeking patterns, was part disclosure. I found that part disclosure, which allows the victim-survivor to begin or continue the process of seeking support while maintaining a sense of control of the narrative about the relationship, played an important role in some help-seeking processes. Many of the interviewees had also broken up or tried to break up several times. Strategies such as part disclosure or seeking support where they knew they would not be questioned and forced to disclose impacted on who the interviewees turned to for support during the relationship. Thus, I suggest that aborted or abbreviated attempts are part of the fragmented help-seeking process rather than failed attempts by default. Finally, the temporalities of IPV and help-seeking were addressed. IPV help-seeking models have a tendency

to focus on the moment of leaving or the stages leading up to the ending of the relationship. I suggest that we need to address help-seeking as a prolonged process, which includes both subtle forms of resistance in the relationship as well as the long-term effects of IPV, which could appear years after the relationship has ended. In this respect, it is closer to the notion of slow violence discussed by Nixon (2011). And, importantly, as a process it mirrors the experience of abuse which is also iterative, uneven, and exercised in many different ways.

5. The unintelligible victim: Mis/recognition and formal help-seeking

Responses to violence show how others interpret it, including their constructions of the perpetrator and victim. They can dramatically influence, or fail to influence, the social and material conditions facing the offender and victim. The victim will assess how best they can respond and the offender will decide to continue, escalate or desist their violent actions in the context of, and in response to, these responses. (Hydén et al., 2016: 2)

As discussed in the two previous chapters, IPV is often difficult to recognize, both by those who are victimized as well as by their social surroundings, since it often occurs “out of sight” (Nixon, 2011: 2). However, this does not mean that the violence exists in a social vacuum. On the contrary, as the text above and the previous chapter illustrate, the social surroundings’ responses to violence affect whether and how the victim-survivor seeks help and where they might look for support. During their relationship(s) and the often prolonged and repeated help-seeking process, victim-survivors frequently encounter a number of different potential actors who might support them. The latter’s responses will inevitably shape the outcome of the help-seeking process. I use the term ‘responses’ similarly to Hydén et al. (2016) to refer to a wide set of practices including actions but also lack of reactions from friends, family members, neighbours, professionals involved in specific situations such as social workers, criminal justice professionals and other professionals victim-survivors might encounter such as health care practitioners and counsellors (Hydén et al., 2016: 3). The decision of whether to seek help, when, and where, will often be informed by the anticipated or actual reactions of others, and while my findings show that formal and informal responses frequently informed each other, this chapter focuses on how the interviewees perceived the responses they encountered in the formal support services.

Being recognised as a victim of violence is key to the help-seeking process. In this chapter, I examine how the mis/recognition of being a victim of IPV plays out in relation to different formal support services. Misrecognition in cases of IPV can be everything from failing to recognize the abuse in the first place, to the downplaying the severity of the abuse, to deliberate dismissal shaped by derogatory attitudes towards lesbian and queer people. In this chapter I engage with Fraser’s (2003: 36) discussion of misrecognition as a matter of status subordination shaped by institutionalized heteronormative values

that deny lesbian and queer victim-survivors equal access to support. In order to understand who is and who is not easily recognized as a victim I discuss the concept of the ideal victim (Christie, 1986), a discursive figure shaped by the public story of abuse (Donovan and Barnes, 2018; Donovan and Hester, 2015), which helps to understand why lesbian and queer victims are seen as less than ideal victims.

Sweden is often praised as a welfare state with a broad range of public healthcare services and a commitment to equal access to these services. One might therefore assume that this would make Sweden a relatively low threshold country when it comes to seeking help in cases of IPV. However, as emphasized by Mariana Dufort et al. (2013: 2),¹⁸ it is still estimated that only a minority of those who are exposed to IPV in Sweden actually seek formal help through specialized services. Similar patterns can be observed in studies from other countries focusing specifically on LGBTQ victim-survivors (Messinger, 2017: 130). For this reason, it is crucial to look at help-seeking encounters and to include both services traditionally associated with IPV such as the criminal justice system but also other non-specialized services such as healthcare institutions and counselling, and to discuss the specific challenges victim-survivors of lesbian and queer IPV may encounter in the help-seeking process. Thus, in this chapter I examine encounters and responses from formal support services, starting with the criminal justice system and health care services, and ending with the most common type of formal support sought by my interviewees, psychological counselling. I discuss the difference between what I term *incident-based* and *processual types* of support. The former refers to help-seeking in cases of acute or spectacular violence, for instance if the victim-survivor sought help due to injuries or pressed charges against the partner. The latter, processual support, shares features with the experiences around informal network support by offering slower types of support to cope with the experiences of IPV. In my material, counselling services shared the processual support feature of the informal support, despite the fact that they are not always recognized as an obvious source of IPV support. Thus, in the second half of this chapter I explore the ways in which the interviewees used counselling in the help-seeking process, what kind of responses they received, and how it was both useful but also problematic. I suggest that there is a need to pay more attention to processual forms of help-seeking, even where formal support services are concerned.

¹⁸ Dufort et al.'s (2013) cross-sectional study included data from two groups of women exposed to IPV by a male partner. One group contained help-seekers and the other non-help-seekers. Help-seeking was defined as a woman's contact with either a women's shelter or social services due to IPV.

The criminal justice system

According to Veronica Ekström and Peter Lindström (2016), societal responses to IPV have increasingly come to focus on the criminal justice system. While this is in many ways a sign that IPV is considered a public rather than a private and relational issue, the one-sided focus on legal responses can also prevent victim-survivors from receiving the support they need (2016: 258). This may be particularly true for victim-survivors in lesbian and queer relationships.

Seven interviewees shared stories about incidents and situations during or after their violent relationship(s) had ended, when the police became involved. Only three of them had contacted the police themselves. Furthermore, one interviewee was convicted of assault against their partner, and one had been reported by their ex-partner but was not convicted. Of those who did not file a report, some wished that they had reported their partner while others were content with their decision not to report. Some explained that they did not think that reporting would be worth it, and among those who had experienced primarily psychological violence, some were unsure whether that violence was even legally defined as a crime. Kristina, who had been in a violent queer relationship in her early twenties, explained that reporting her ex-partner had never crossed her mind:

You are in your own world with this person, it's only you and me there. And then going to the police to report this person. That [option] does not exist in this world. Then I also wonder, you know, what would that do for me? Are they supposed to offer me safety? To take care of me? To help me? So really, it's like... this idea doesn't exist. It really doesn't.

Thus, isolation and feelings of loyalty towards the abusive partner can make the police an unimaginable source for support, as was the case with Kristina. This, alongside fear of retaliation and stigma were also commonly raised reasons not to report the partner (see also Lantz, 2019: 3). For Sasha it had been completely unimaginable to report her partner to the police because she did not trust that she would be taken seriously. Sasha, who had entered into an abusive relationship shortly after she had arrived in Sweden as a refugee, explained that she had threatened to call the police when her partner continued to stalk her after the relationship had ended, but she never considered this a viable option for her:

But I didn't know that I could go to the police and show everything she was doing. I didn't know that they would take it seriously. That's something you don't just know. That you can seek help. Now I know that. But at that point around ten years ago... I didn't know. She was Swedish and I'm not Swedish so I didn't think that I would be taken seriously.

Sasha's reflection about why she did not turn to the police points to a lack of trust in the system as well as anticipated stigma which was intensified by the fact that her partner, unlike her, was Swedish. As raised in Chapter Three, Sasha's migrant status and her socio-economic position were used by her partner to control and isolate her. Thus, the asymmetric power dynamic in their relationship did not just manifest itself in the violence she was subjected to but also affected Sasha's sense of possibilities for support. Her reflections around her migrant status confirm that support services, such as the police, are not equally accessible to victim-survivors but, rather, determined by victim-survivors' intersecting social positions (Crenshaw, 1991).

Help-seeking against violence, especially within formal institutions such as the police and the criminal justice system in general, depends on being seen as an intelligible victim and relies on a sense of belonging: to be seen and perceived as a victim worthy of protection within the given context (Ovesen, 2020: 182, 170). Previous studies from other countries suggest that LGBTQ victim-survivors of IPV are often reluctant to seek support through the criminal justice system (Donovan and Hester, 2008: 284; Lantz, 2019: 2; Turell and Cornell-Swanson, 2008: 73–74). This was also the case for my interviewees – very few used these services. Very limited research has been conducted on the responses to LGBTQ IPV in the criminal justice system in order to understand this lack of reporting. However, research primarily from Anglophone contexts has started to identify some main barriers for support. These include fear of discrimination based on homo-, bi- and transphobia, lack of trust in the criminal justice system, fear of being “outed”, or a desire to handle the issues privately, intersecting with oppression structures such as racism and sexism (Lantz, 2019; Turell and Cornell-Swanson, 2008: 3, 5, 13–14).

Brendan Lantz's study (2019) contributes to the limited research on prosecutorial responses by comparing the police and prosecutorial responses to IPV in cases of same-sex and opposite-sex IPV in the US context. Lantz's findings show that victims of same-sex IPV were less likely to collaborate with the police than victims of opposite-sex IPV. Lantz suggests that victims' lack of engagement with the criminal justice system is problematic, as research has demonstrated that the criminal justice system can improve victim safety and reduce the risk of future victimization (Lantz, 2019: 3).

My research supports the previous findings, since only three of the interviewees pressed charges against their partner and out of the three only one, Therese, had contacted the police herself. Evelina filed a counter-complaint against her partner, and Tina's friend called the police when Tina was assaulted by her partner with a knife. Of the three, only Tina's case went to court and her partner received a lenient sentence after having appealed the first verdict. As addressed at the beginning of Chapter Three, the prosecutor in Tina's case struggled to categorize Tina's victimization legally. To understand les-

bian and queer people's unintelligible victim status and how it informs responses to help-seeking, we need to examine common assumptions about violence and whose victimization counts within the criminal justice system.

The ideal victim and offender

By 'ideal victim' I have instead in mind a person or a category of individuals who – when hit by crime – most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim. (Christie, 1986, 2018: 12)

According to Nils Christie (1986), the ideal victim is defined by distinct attributes which clearly separate her – and it should be a *her* – from the offender. The ideal victim should be weak, carrying out a respectable task, in a place where she is supposed to be. The offender should be unknown to the victim and be physically bigger and unmistakably bad compared to the respectable victim (Christie, 2018: 12). Christie's ideal victim is, according to Donovan and Barnes (2018: 85), best understood as the result of a social and interactive process between those who are victimized, the informal and formal help-providers who (are supposed to) respond to the victimization, and societal responses to a broader definition of violence. The ideal victim as a discursive figure can be used to explain why victims of IPV, and especially those who have been victimized in LGBTQ relationships, are less than ideal victims (see Donovan and Barnes, 2018). The ideal victim is in many ways informed by the public story of IPV, which frames IPV as a heterosexual phenomenon within a gendered victim-perpetrator framework and an emphasis on physical violence (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 9). This can explain why it might be difficult for help-providers to recognize IPV in lesbian and queer relationships and for the help-seekers themselves to recognize themselves as victims of abuse (Barnes, 2008: 36–38; Hassouneh and Glass, 2008; Lantz, 2019: 4).

When discussing motivations for reporting or not, interviewees raised concerns about what would actually count as violence within the legal justice system. One of the interviewees, Josefin, who had been in a queer relationship with a transman for a couple of years in her mid-twenties, explained that she had considered reporting for a while. She even discussed the possibility with her therapist but then decided not to report. She did not think that it would be worth it to report her ex-partner since the violence was not serious enough to count:

But I think I was sort of calculating, what are the odds that he will get convicted for anything? Around zero. And it's also based on the fact that you know that people don't get convicted even in the cases where there might have been medical reports and really severe physical violence and people don't get convicted anyway. So in this case, to get him convicted of something that is primarily psychological or, like, psychological abuse and, like, physical violence towards the end, which would count as assault but just not severe. I didn't have

any injuries. I had nothing. I wasn't hurt physically in any way. So I just thought it wouldn't be worth it. It would be more trouble for me. But at the same time I think it would have felt good to do something, in some way. After I had been thinking about it for a while, I thought that if I were to report it, it would have been a way to show to myself that I took this seriously. That it is actually legally wrong and illegal or whatever you might call it. But in the end I decided that it wasn't worth it.

Josefin's decision not to report the abuse was informed by assumptions about the criminal justice system's effectiveness and the types of victimization that count within that setting – victimization which causes physical injuries and which have been documented and can be proven. Thus, the figure of the ideal victim concerns not only who the victim and offender are but also the type of violence the victim has been subjected to and the anticipated systemic response to this violation. Despite her decision not to report, Josefin did contemplate reporting as a way to demonstrate to herself that she took her victimization seriously.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the importance of being recognized as a victim and having one's experiences validated by help-providers. The criminal justice system is traditionally assumed to be the place where victim-survivors should be able to find justice after victimization (see Antonsdóttir, 2020). However, the helpfulness of the criminal justice system depends on how they assess the situation and who is recognized as in need of help as well as what situations are seen as needing help. This is evident in the two cases in my material where interviewees described encounters with the criminal justice system with very different outcomes. As mentioned before, Kristina, a cis-gendered woman in her mid-thirties who had been in a violent relationship with a transman when she was in her early twenties, explained that she would never have considered reporting her partner to the police. However, on one occasion during their break-up the police was called to their apartment, and Kristina was very pleased with the way they responded to her:

But the police came and then this female police officer said, they were so lovely, because she said like, 'You know that there are women's shelters, right?' she said that to me and part of me was like, how does she see it? I didn't even see it myself and I was so surprised [...] I don't know what gender they identified him as... you know, at that point, but she was able to identify me as a victim. It felt good when I remembered that after a long time had passed and it also felt good that they have that knowledge in some way. Because I don't think I counted on being understood.

Kristina described herself as taller than and just as strong as her partner. In this particular situation she had been fighting back physically, which often works as a hindrance to being recognized as the victim (Turell et al., 2012: 290). Although Kristina did not identify herself as a victim at the time, and she did not file a report against her partner, the response she got from the

police officer – recognizing her as a victim worthy of protection - would later become an important part of her own recognition of the violence she had experienced. Christie (2018: 18) suggests that the ideal victim exists in interdependence with the ideal offender. Although Kristina might not fit the features of the ideal victim by not appearing weaker than her partner, her victimization was still intelligible within the feminine-masculine dichotomy of the public story of IPV. Furthermore, as suggested by Donovan and Barnes (2020b: 10-11), heteronormative as well as cisnormative gender roles can have an impact on the police's decision-making and assessment of who is the primary aggressor and who is the victim.

Kristina described feeling understood and recognized by the police. However, this was not the case for the other interviewee. Alexander, a transman in his early fifties, had been in two violent lesbian relationships pre-transitioning, when he was in his twenties and thirties. The relationships were primarily characterized by control and psychological abuse. He described one night when his partner had kicked him out of their house. When he tried to get the keys back from her pockets, he ended up hurting her thumb. His partner later reported him to the police and Alexander was convicted of assault. As is often the case in IPV incidents, there were no witnesses, and although they both described the situation in similar terms, they interpreted the outcome and the context of the assault quite differently. Alexander explained that he thought the criminal justice system failed to take the specific context of the assault into consideration. He also described feeling mistrusted during the legal proceedings, which he thought could be related to his masculine appearance: "I don't know if it was because she was a mother and I... well had a shaved head and, like, looked very butch. I don't know." Apart from presenting as more masculine than his partner, Alexander was also not registered at the same address as his partner since this would have affected his partner's right to social benefits. Thus, he was in many ways closer to being the ideal offender than victim, as he was more masculine-presenting and out of place – an intruder in the home of his more feminine-presenting partner. Donovan and Hester (2015) suggest that representations of gender and sexuality can have an important impact in police decision-making, and may lead to recognition or misrecognition of abuse. Due to the public story of abuse, masculine-looking survivors are also more likely to be blamed for IPV (2015: 187). Thus, being the ideal or less than ideal victim is a matter of being perceived as belonging within a certain category and in relation to the perceived offender.

Very few of the interviewees had been encouraged to press charges against their partner in the cases where the police were involved. Some felt that the police and other help-providers had not taken them seriously. Studies suggest that violence between two men or two women tends to be viewed by practitioners, such as the police, refuge workers, psychology students and potential jury members, as less serious, less risky, less likely to escalate and to need police intervention (Donovan and Barnes, 2020b: 12). Simpson and Helfrich

(2005: 46) found that the help-providers in their study would often frame the violence as less severe than violence in heterosexual relationship, where the perpetrator was a man. This reinforces common assumptions and myths relegating violence in lesbian relationships to so-called catfights (Simpson and Helfrich, 2005: 46; Turell et al., 2012: 299).

Dena Hassouneh and Nancy Glass (2008) examined how stereotypical ideas about gender shape the perception of IPV in same-sex relationships. The notion that women are merely hysterical and the violence they enact is less serious, for instance, shaped how female victims responded to experiences of IPV in same-sex relationships as well as the responses they received from family, community and professional help-providers (Hassouneh and Glass, 2008: 320). An example of this can be found in the account of one of the interviewees in my study who had worked for the police as administrative staff. During their break-up her ex-partner would occasionally show up at her workplace or follow her into work. On one occasion, a couple of her colleagues and her boss took her ex-partner in for questioning. The interviewee expressed ambivalent feelings about the intervention:

My boss at the time was, well, good, but also bad in some ways. Because [colleagues and boss] should have said 'Report her' and they didn't. It was more like, 'well, women can be a bit crazy but it will calm down' [...] my boss did try and call her, and for that I'm thankful. But I still think that, if the thought had crossed his mind^[19], that this can actually occur, that even a woman can act like this and use violence, he might have taken it more seriously. I don't know.

While the interviewee felt supported by her colleagues and boss, she was also disappointed that she had not been encouraged to press charges. This she saw as indicating that they had not taken her ex-partner's abusive behaviour seriously because she was a woman. Stereotypes about gender and sexuality can make the violence between women seem less serious and thus reinforce help-seeking barriers (Girshick, 2002; Hassouneh and Glass, 2008: 320).

The supposed lack of an identifiable power imbalance in lesbian and queer relationships can also create the illusion of mutuality in IPV in same-sex relationships (Donovan and Barnes, 2020b: 120; Giorgio, 2002: 1242; Renzetti, 1989: 162). Barnes (2008: 38) suggests that abuse in woman-to-woman relationships can be difficult for mainstream domestic violence support services to handle, as this demands a particular sensitivity due to the complex power dynamics involved. This was evident in Evelina's case: her partner reported her to the police when she discovered that Evelina was going to leave her. When the police arrived, they talked to both Evelina and her partner, Evelina was then told to leave the area. She then relied on friends for accommodation

¹⁹ The interviewee used the Swedish word 'manshuvud' – which could be described as bloke's head.

and support as well as legal counselling to gain custody of her children. Evelina filed a counter-complaint against her partner but due to the statute of limitations and lack of evidence, both cases were dropped.

Professional help-providers' difficulties in determining who is the perpetrator and who is the victim may lead to misrecognition of abuse. This confusion can also be used by the perpetrator to sustain the abuse through the system (Barnes, 2008; Lantz, 2019: 5). In the following chapter, I discuss how lesbian and queer families with children are in a state of enhanced legal vulnerability (Hardesty et al., 2011), which creates different conditions for violence and help-seeking. Altogether, seeking protection through the criminal justice system was far from a natural choice for many of the interviewees. Moran and Skeggs (2004: 5) suggest that lesbian and gay men's demands for legal and state protection have paradoxical effects, as they may generate restricted and fixed representations of lesbian and gay men's experience and identities.

Different degrees of agency and temporalities in the pursuit of justice

Elizabeth A. Stanko and Paul Curry (1997) argue that engagement with the police "means entering a realm where control over one's identity is impossible" (1997: 515). They suggest that an undesirable outcome of asking for police protection against hate crimes is having one's sexual identity fixed and made public. Following this line of thought, I suggest that engagement with the police, whether in the case of a hate crime or IPV, inevitably involves several levels of categorization. Apart from having one's sexual and/or gender identities fixed and outed, it also means being placed within the category of victim, a term strongly associated with lack of agency which, as addressed in Chapter Three, was a position that many of the interviewees struggled to identify with.

Many respondents had only begun to recognize their experiences as violence after the relationship had ended, and at that point, they thought it was too late or not worth it to report it. Donovan and Hester (2015: 186–187) found that the police had often gotten involved at the behest of third parties during the relationships when respondents had experienced increasing physical violence. In my material, the police were also called by other people. The police seem to be considered appropriate for support in cases of acute and spectacular violence (Nixon, 2011), as was the case for Tina. Tina's help-seeking patterns were quite different from many of my other interviewees since she escaped from her partner by running to the nearest neighbour's house and calling her best friend on the way, who then called the police. Her partner arrived shortly after the police, and she was immediately arrested.

The sense of control or agency in the help-seeking process varied in the interviewees' accounts, depending on how they had accessed the police. Tina,

for instance, described herself as a puppet in the relationship, where her partner had orchestrated her every move. She suggested that this explained why she did not call the police herself on the night of the assault. Unlike many of the interviewees whose help-seeking was slower and more processual, Tina described her break-up and help-seeking as a rude awakening, where there was no going back after the police intervention:

It was like all of a sudden I was in some kind of movie with the police and everything. There was no going back from that. It was like... now it's just over... So it was kind of a sudden ending. So I don't know. It didn't feel like I decided on it in that way. I guess I did but it didn't feel that way 'cause it just happened somehow.

In Sweden IPV crimes have been subject to public prosecution since 1982. The prosecution is not dependent on the accusation being made by the plaintiff and it does not rely on the victim's cooperation or consent (Lindgren et al., 2012: 168; Stenson, 2004: 3). Ekström and Lindström (2016) suggest that there are four factors which increase the likelihood of prosecution: that there are witnesses to support the complainant's version of the event, there are documented physical injuries, the suspect admits the offence, and the victimized person participates in the investigation (2016: 260). In Tina's case, there were witnesses to the aftermath of the assault and medical records to support the violence. These were quite unique conditions compared to the majority of my interviewees' cases, and it may explain why Tina's was the only case that went to court.

Tina expressed satisfaction with the encounters she had with the police and the immediate support she got on the night of the police intervention. She also received medical support and counselling through the social services' victim-support organizations and she was very pleased with that support. However, the lack of agency, which Tina articulated in the break-up process above, continued and worsened during the legal proceedings. Although she was content that her ex-partner eventually received a sentence, she described the trial as a re-traumatizing experience. She compared the legal proceedings to abuse and was very disappointed with the general process:

You want it to be worth it. To report people who have done horrible things to other people, and that they get punished and stuff like that. But it took maybe a couple of years before it was over. All of the legal proceedings and everything. And I couldn't move on. It was like a vacuum that whole time. So it felt like my life was on hold. All I wanted was to move on, pull myself up. Be strong and feel safe again and live my life. Just get back to normal... things like that.

During the interview Tina criticized the prolonged process of the legal proceedings, which confined her in a "vacuum". She was unable to move on since she was forced to remember and re-live the abuse to be able to be a reliable

victim/witness. After the final trial Tina also ran into her ex-partner on the street one day because her ex-partner had been ordered to wear an electronic tracking device, which allowed her to continue working and living at home while serving time. As a consequence, Tina started to avoid the parts of town where she thought she could potentially run into her ex-partner. She emphasized that this made her feel unsafe and was yet another obstacle that prevented her from getting back to “normal life”.

Hildur Fjóra Antonsdóttir’s (2020a) thesis in sociology of law examines victim-survivors’ of sexual violence understanding of justice in a Nordic and primarily Icelandic context. Antonsdóttir suggests that recognition is a key ingredient in victim-survivors’ understandings of justice. This involves more than just being believed; it also means having one’s suffering acknowledged and that the consequences facing the offender are perceived as meaningful by the victim-survivor as well (2020b: 5). She emphasizes the law’s limited abilities to deliver justice and draws on Liz Kelly’s (1988) *continuum of sexual violence* to address the *continuum of injustice* facing many victim-survivors in the aftermath of violence both within and outside of the criminal justice system. Regaining a sense of belonging is an example of a form of justice which is not achieved when the offender is still able to invade the space of the victim-survivor or is still part of the same community as the victim-survivor (Antonsdóttir, 2020b: 6).

Although Antonsdóttir’s work focuses on sexual violence, I find it relevant for my work since it addresses various levels of misrecognition. I particularly found the concept of the continuum of injustice useful, as it emphasizes that the pursuit of justice does not follow a single recipe, and the prolonged process of the ‘support’ systems can even sustain the process of injustice for the victim-survivors. This was evident in how some interviewees reflected upon their choice not to report, since they considered that it would not be worth it, that their victimization would not count, or it would not offer them safety. As described in the statement above, Tina considered the legal proceedings an obstacle to her own wellbeing. Although her ex-partner was convicted in the end, the lenient sentence and the fact that, despite being sentenced for assault, her ex-partner was able to continue her everyday movements in the city they both lived in served as a misrecognition of victimization from Tina’s viewpoint.

While Tina described her entrance into the criminal justice system as a sudden event and the aftermath as a prolonged and extended process, her help-seeking process leading up to the police intervention involved repeated visits to the hospital because of physical injuries. The health care system is therefore an important source of formal support in cases of IPV as the services deal with the immediate as well as prolonged effects of violence. They can, for many, become an involuntary entrance into formal help-seeking depending on how the victim-survivor is received in the healthcare services.

Healthcare services

In this section I explore how healthcare settings worked as a place of mis/recognition of IPV. The healthcare services were accessed by interviewees at different times, during and after their abusive relationship/s. Most of the interviewees who came into contact with these services did so to deal with the aftermath of IPV, often through mental health counselling, which I will explore further in the last section of this chapter. However, some of the interviewees also came into contact with the health care services for various other reasons during their relationships. Thus, in this section I analyse how the interviewees who accessed these services perceived these encounters.

Healthcare services hold unique positions in relation to support for victims of IPV, given the broad scope of their services. Vatnar and Bjørkly (2009: 239) found that the women in their Norwegian study were more likely to contact their family doctors and psychiatric and psychological facilities after serious physical or psychological injuries. The healthcare services not only provide support following injuries but are often described as a potential context where IPV might be detected, for instance, through screening programs (Dufort et al., 2013: 9). Since LGBTQ IPV is characterized by invisibility in the context of IPV services, the role of the healthcare providers may be all the more critical. According to Kevin L. Ard and Harvey J. Makadon (2011: 631), the initial steps help-providers should undertake when responding to patients subjected to IPV are to recognize the problem, offer empathic support, and help ensure the victim-survivor's safety. For Lovisa, a bisexual/pansexual woman in her mid-twenties, the healthcare services became a place where she could escape her abusive partner:

What I at that point saw as a suicide attempt I realized was probably just a way [for me] to get out. Because I just wanted to get into the hospital immediately. I just wanted to get out. I didn't know how I would get out otherwise. In my head, this became the only option I had. I had to get out and the way to get out without dying was quite simple, to get myself to the psychiatric ward.

Lovisa's suicide attempt was therefore more an attempt at escape, even though it was only temporary. When her partner came to visit her in the hospital, she was very upset with Lovisa and she tried to hit her, but a nurse stepped in and blocked her. Lovisa's mother, who was there at the time, also intervened and managed to calm her down. In this case, the healthcare services served as a space for support and safety outside the private realm even though Lovisa returned to her partner after leaving the hospital. This should be understood as part of the often-prolonged and repeated help-seeking process, which I addressed in the previous chapter.

The healthcare services were also sought by some interviewees to deal with injuries following immediate and acute violence. Both Tina and Evelina described repeated visits to the emergency ward due to physical injuries during

their relationship. Tina jokingly added in the interview that she should have had a punch-card for the emergency ward at that time. She thought it was very unfortunate that the staff there did not question why she kept returning:

It's a bit weird because even though I was there so many times, no one reacted. They must have thought that I was the clumsiest person in the entire municipality. But when the police requested my medical records for the trial then I hope they learnt that lesson so that they might get it the next time... it was a shame. I wish there was more information out there so that people would be able to see more than they do. It would have been helpful in this situation if someone had... because if someone confronts you it's really difficult to... deny it. I think I would have broken down immediately if someone had confronted me in that situation.

Tina's encounter with the hospital staff was a clear example of missed opportunities for support. It might appear contradictory that the breakdown that never happened, due to a lack of engagement, is described as a desirable outcome in Tina's account. This can be explained by Lempert's 'crisis of ambiguity' (1997: 300) which describes moments when victims of IPV have exhausted all their individual resources to interpret the violence they are subjected to and are therefore more open to taking advice and suggestions from their informal networks. I suggest that the crisis of ambiguity can even be applied to understanding the possibility for intervening in formal help-seeking encounters, especially in the healthcare setting, as these will often be accessed after severe and/or increasing forms of violence or danger, which may mean that the victim is more open to interpretations by third parties. However, it is not always enough for the help-providers to merely recognize violence. Evelina described two encounters when the help-providers recognized her as a potential victim but when their responses were unhelpful:

The doctor asked like, 'is this something that should be reported?' But that was difficult for me to say while [the partner] was in there. But well, we sort of said that we were just fighting for fun and things got out of hand, it was nothing serious.

In this situation Evelina was recognized as a potential victim of IPV, but she was questioned under compromised conditions since her partner was allowed to be in the room with her. As I discussed in the previous section, reporting the partner to the police was, for many, unimaginable. Thus the help-provider's approach focusing solely on reporting left Evelina with very little room to disclose the violence.

The second encounter Evelina described took place at the psychiatric emergency clinic, where Evelina went with her partner to get help. Here they were separated into two examination rooms, which enabled Evelina to talk to the help-provider alone. Despite the changed circumstances, Evelina did not view this encounter as helpful. She described feeling that the medical staff probably

thought that they were being two silly and dramatic girls, and when I asked her if she remembered what they had talked about, she answered:

Not really. I remember I said, when they asked about why I stayed [with her], [I answered] that I had to because she had made it so that... Yes, well, she'd made it so that I had been reported to Kronofogden^[20] and so on. Because it was her apartment and she could, well, she would destroy my life if I left.

While the help-providers in this last encounter recognized that Evelina was in need of help, they were not able to offer her support when she revealed that she was subjected to, among other things economic violence, and that she feared what her partner might do to her if she were to leave. Additionally, the fact that Evelina thought the healthcare workers had perceived them as silly and dramatic girls can be read as an example of anticipated stigma. According to Overstreet and Quinn (2013), people who experience IPV and seek help through formal support services “may be particularly alert to subtle cues in nonverbal communication that convey a lack of caring. Perceiving these cues, in turn, may lead people experiencing IPV to anticipate stigma and be reluctant to disclose about their abuse or seek help about IPV.” (2013: 112) Anticipated stigma might be the result of previous problematic experiences in the healthcare system and can be triggered by both verbal and nonverbal behaviours, such as gestures and looks (Overstreet and Quinn, 2013: 112).

According to Messinger (2017), LGBTQ victims face a conundrum when considering where and if they should seek formal help since the same support services hold “the capacity for both empathy and oppression—and victims may not know which they are getting until after they ask for help” (2017: 128). Lovisa, for instance, explained that she was generally pleased with the responses and the help she received in the healthcare settings, but she had also experienced a few problematic encounters with medical help-providers. She had gone through several psychiatric and medical investigations, both related to her experiences of IPV but also to childhood abuse. In both cases, the perpetrators had been women. When I asked her if she could elaborate on what she meant by problematic encounters, she shared a story of an encounter with a new psychiatrist that had been appointed to her case. When Lovisa started to disclose childhood abuse, the psychiatrist immediately asked, “Who was he and how old was he?” Lovisa then had to correct her and explain that it had been a woman. Lovisa felt that the psychiatrist had acted dismissively towards her, and things did not improve when she disclosed that she had experiences of IPV where the perpetrator had been a woman:

Then when I said that I had been in an adult relationship [with IPV] as well, she said, ‘I suppose that was with a “he” at least’. So then I said something like

²⁰ ‘Kronofogden’ - The Enforcement Authority is a government agency in Sweden that registers, monitors and collects debts.

‘No, that was also not with a “he”’. It felt sort of like... well as if it was not as dangerous then.

Lovisa explained that these types of comments and assumptions about the gender of her perpetrators often made her feel that her victimization did not count. She described feeling that it was draining and frustrating having to explain herself both in everyday encounters and in the support services. This again demonstrates how stereotypes and gendered assumptions about the severity or lack of severity of lesbian and queer IPV come into play. It is also an example of how small cues of disbelief such as the repeated use of the wrong pronoun to describe the perpetrator(s) can render the victim-survivors of IPV in lesbian and queer relationships unintelligible victims in help-provision, even after the victim-survivors have recognized their experiences as violence.

When IPV is left unrecognized, or when the help-providers are not able to provide adequate support, the support services can become an extended part of the violence and control. Evelina’s partner was, for instance, in charge of all her medical decisions and had pressured Evelina into taking antidepressants for being too aggressive, making her go to the GP to increase the doses. After their visit to the psychiatric emergency room, Evelina’s partner even gained access to her personal information and read her medical records. Thus, seeking help can lead to increasing danger when the support fails. In sum, the health-care system serves an important function in help-seeking against IPV, but when the support fails, it can have severe consequences. Showing respect for potential victims of IPV in LGBTQ relationships means, according to Messinger, screening for violence rather than dismissing warning signs and referring LGBTQ victims to appropriate organizations specializing in victim support (Messinger, 2017: 138–139).

Recognition through screening and referrals

Since very few of the interviewees sought help through services specializing in IPV in the first place, it becomes all the more important for other support services to recognize and potentially refer victims to relevant services. This was often easier when the interviewees had started to recognize themselves as victimized. Therese, as discussed in Chapter Four, was, for instance, referred to a women’s shelter for counselling through victim-support services after having reported her ex-partner to the police. Sasha received support from a counsellor/advisor²¹ at the local LGBTQ organization, who contacted a coun-

²¹ Many of the interviewees had come into contact with a *kurator* during their help-seeking process. The Swedish word *kurator* can be described as a counsellor/advisor; they are often trained social workers, and some might also have additional psychoanalytic training. *Kurators* work in many different support services often as a first contact advisor/counsellor in healthcare or educational settings.

sellor at the local hospital to support Sasha during her second abusive relationship, and they collaborated together to get the partner expelled from the LGBTQ organization. Kari, who had experienced violence in a polyamorous queer relationship, was referred to a psychologist when she disclosed sexual violence to counsellors in a trans-specific healthcare service²².

Some interviewees also found support in services that were not focused on IPV. Olivia and her partner's midwife referred them to a support group for parents with infants who needed extra care. This group became an important source of support for Olivia, as they lived far away from friends and family and had a limited social network. They met up with the group regularly and Olivia described the two coordinators of the group as important helplines for her. She would often call them in an emergency, for instance, when her partner threatened self-harm or disappeared. One of the counsellors later disclosed that they had been aware of the situation. Olivia explained this in the following way: "I still keep in contact with one of them a little bit. When we talked about it last summer she said, 'We knew it. We knew how you were doing. But we didn't know what to do.'" Here the repeated nature of the support and the fact that Olivia could access the coordinators in moments of crisis had turned them into a vital resource of support. This shows that naming violence is not the only form of recognition victim-survivors need, especially not while they are still in a relationship with the abusive partner. Olivia's account also illustrates that the healthcare workers who might not be specialized in IPV may be able to recognize abusive behaviours but may lack the knowledge or resources to know how to support the victim.

There could therefore be several different reasons for lack of referral. Some of the interviewees shared stories about their encounters with the general health care system where no referral was made because they were simply not recognized as in need of additional support. A couple of the interviewees had accessed psychiatric services because of their partner's mental health issues. One of them, Ulrika, was especially critical of the psychiatric services' inability to help both her partner and herself. She and another interviewee, Olivia, explicitly criticized that they as partners had been left out of the services' scope and were never addressed as in need of support. Even though Ulrika thought it would have been difficult for an outsider to get her to disclose violence at that point, as she had normalized her partner's controlling behaviour, she thought it would have been useful to have standardized questions for the help-provider to detect IPV.

²² In Sweden, trans-specific care is included in general healthcare insurance. In order to gain access to gender-confirming medical procedures, you need to undergo an evaluation process, and part of this includes clinical evaluations often run through psychiatric clinics (Linander et al., 2017: 25).

Although screening for IPV is part of healthcare providers' professional responsibility, Swedish studies have shown that it is not always easily performed in practice. The existing studies examining the healthcare setting's role in care for and detecting victims of IPV tend to focus on heterosexual and ostensibly cis-gendered women exposed to IPV (Lawoko et al., 2011; Pratt-Eriksson et al., 2014; Stenson, 2004; Sundborg et al., 2012, 2017). Stephen Lawoko et al. (2011) found that only around half the healthcare practitioners in their study, recruited from a large healthcare facility in Sweden, had screened for IPV within the last three months of the study, and that occupational role and gender had an impact on who had screened or not: women were more likely to screen than men, and nurses and doctors were more likely to screen for IPV than midwives.

The healthcare provider's individual attitudes towards IPV may also affect how and if questions around violence are asked (Lawoko et al., 2011: 1–2). Darcia Pratt-Eriksson et al. (2014) explored how women who were victims of IPV perceived their encounters with healthcare providers and found that unhelpful responses were characterized by disappointment, lack of referral, re-traumatization, and uncaring behaviours. In Eva Sundborg et al.'s (2012) research on nurses' preparedness to care for women exposed to IPV, the majority of the respondents lacked knowledge about IPV, and as a result, they felt unprepared to identify or ask about IPV. Half of the nurses reported that they asked only when they suspected IPV and that this was only the case when the help-seeker showed visible injuries. Very few had received any formal training in IPV, and those who had knowledge about IPV had often gained it on their own initiative (2012: 9–10). Sundborg et al. (2017) also studied district nurses' experiences of encountering women exposed to IPV and identified several barriers which prevented the nurses from asking about IPV. They identified the process the district nurses go through before asking as *the hesitation process*. The nurses went through different phases: from being unaware that they had a professional responsibility to identify IPV, to becoming ambivalent about asking, to starting to prepare themselves to ask, to finally being able to ask about IPV (2017: 2256). This process was shaped by their judgement of their knowledge of IPV, what kinds of IPV training they had received, and their knowledge regarding resources for support if the help-seeker disclosed violence. Time and space were raised in Kristina Stenson's thesis (2004) on screening women for IPV in antenatal care. Repeated questioning led to higher disclosure rates of IPV, especially late in pregnancy or after delivery. The most prominent obstacle for the midwives was the sensitivity of the issue, which made it difficult for them to ask about IPV, and this was reinforced by the presence of the male partner (2004: 54).

These studies illustrate some of the different challenges involved in recognizing and responding to victims of IPV within the healthcare support services. Importantly, they suggest that lack of knowledge around IPV leads to general misrecognition of victims of IPV. This should not be framed as merely

an individual issue concerning the attitudes of the specific help-providers but, rather, as a sign of a systemic and institutional issue due to lack of training, structures and guidelines as well as working conditions, which prevent help-providers from recognizing and offering support to victims of IPV. Victims of IPV in lesbian and queer relationships will undeniably face additional barriers, as they may be regarded as unintelligible victims of IPV. This may lead to the healthcare workers failing to establish trust and to ask, or neglect to create conditions for the help-seeker to disclose violence, which was evident in the descriptions of the failed encounters in the healthcare services. The hesitation process illustrates that even help-provision often takes the form of a prolonged and slow process, with aborted attempts, conditioned by time and space. Having the time to ask the question, ideally repeatedly and privately, can be difficult due to lack of resources, especially since many support responses are based on brief incident-based encounters.

Incident-based and processual support

When starting to analyse how the interviewees perceived formal help-seeking encounters, I noticed that when the interviewees described the criminal justice system and even to some extent the healthcare encounters, they were often quite clear in their expression of whether they considered the support they received as helpful. I suggest that this is because these types of encounters are often likely to be more incident-based. Encounters in the healthcare setting, especially if IPV is not recognized, will often focus on treatment of physical injuries, for instance. Although not all encounters with the criminal justice system can be described as one-off events, I still suggest that use of the criminal justice system is based on certain specific moments of intervention, such as accusation, arrest, interrogation, testifying and verdict(s). For the few interviewees that did report their partner to the police most cases did not go beyond accusation and interrogation since the reports were often dropped due to the statute of limitations. In contrast, informal support, especially from the social networks of friends and family, was more often a processual form of help-seeking, and actions such as sharing concerns as well as offering advice or accommodations, as addressed in Chapter Four, might not be recognized as requests for support for IPV by the victim-survivors' networks or even by the help-seekers themselves at that point in time.

The other form of processual support commonly referenced by the interviewees was, as already discussed, psychological counselling. Counsellors fall under the category of formal support, but unlike the two previous types of support, counselling is processual, since it commonly involves repeat visits and is often indeterminate both regarding content and timeline. Many of my interviewees went to several counsellors and were in counselling for extended

periods of time, some even before entering the abusive relationship. Counselling is an overlooked but commonly used type of support for IPV, and because of its processual and indeterminate nature, it produces many different kinds of experiences.

Counselling

Of the 25 research participants in my study, 21 had sought counselling at some point, starting either before, during, or after the abusive relationship. Several had sought different types of counselling or had been to several counsellors. Despite or perhaps because it is rather common to seek counselling for psychological or mental health issues not necessarily related to IPV, psychological counselling is not always viewed as a support service for IPV. Following the criteria for help-seeking set out in a cross-sectional Swedish study by Mariana Durfort et al. (2013), comparing help-seekers and non-help-seekers who had experienced IPV, only a small number of the interviewees in my study would have qualified as help-seekers solely based on the source of support. This is because the study only recognized help-seekers going to social services and shelters, which indicates what is commonly regarded as support services for IPV. A more inclusive approach was adopted in a Norwegian study by Vatnar and Bjørkly (2009) focusing on interactional aspects of help-seeking where participants were recruited from the police, shelters and family counselling. However, one of the main criteria for this study apart from being a woman, above 18, and having been contacted through one of the recruitment services, was that the women should have experienced IPV within the six months preceding the study (Vatnar and Bjørkly, 2009: 233). The two studies exemplify the ways in which certain help-seeking behaviours and non-heterosexual victim-survivors can be rendered invisible in research on IPV, not just for falling outside the hetero- and cis-gendered identity categories used in these studies but also for not seeking help at specialized IPV services at the right time.

The support offered in counselling is significantly different from the support provided at shelters, by the police and in the criminal justice system, where violence is often explicitly recognized before or at least in the process of seeking support. People go to counselling for a number of reasons. I have chosen to focus specifically on whether and how violence was interpreted in the counselling context and how the interviewees perceived the support they received. I begin my exploration by looking at couples counselling, as the reliance on the partner's participation and the shared space make it very different from individual counselling but also from the previously mentioned help-seeking encounters, where the shared space was described as a compromised condition. I then go on to examine three types of interrelated responses and functions of counselling: first, the process of naming violence, second, issues

of conflicting perspectives and explanations in counselling, and finally, the potential of counselling to provide processual and cumulative support but it also holds major challenges when dealing with IPV, especially if the violence is left unrecognized.

Couples counselling: Shared or compromised space for support

Seven interviewees had sought help with their partner in some form of couples or family counselling during the relationship. Around half had found it helpful, some expressed mixed feelings about the usefulness of the counselling, and some were not pleased at all. None of the interviewees mentioned having talked about violence in their couples counselling session. The couples therapy/family counselling was entered at different stages during the relationship and played different roles in the help-seeking process. Seeking help for IPV as a couple is a debated issue in research on violence. It can be a necessary means to assess the dynamics of a relationship, but there is also the risk that the violence is treated as a couples issue rather than a case of abuse (Rollè et al., 2018: 7), or that the abuse is not recognized at all.

Jamye R. Banks and Alicia L. Fedewa's (2012) review of research examining counsellors' attitudes toward DV in same-sex versus opposite-sex relationships showed that counsellors were generally more likely to perceive same-sex DV as less serious and less likely to escalate. One of the studies that supported this finding by Amy J. Wise and Sharon Bowman (1997) found that psychology students in a counselling program recommended different treatment plans according to the sexual orientation of the couple when presented with identical cases of opposite and same-sex DV scenarios. The students were also more likely to recommend couples counselling for lesbian than for heterosexual couples (Wise and Bowman, 1997: 133). This correlates with their finding that lesbian IPV is considered less serious and often regarded as a couples conflict rather than violence.

When Saga and her partner sought help, Saga had not yet defined her experiences as violence, but she had recognized that they had a problem in their relationship since she had tried to avoid being at home at the same time as her partner, and they barely talked to each other. They went into counselling on Saga's initiative, but their counsellor was not able to recognize the abusive dynamics of the relationship:

Well, they were just like, 'But you are really good at communicating with each other.' And I'm sure we were when we were there [...] and I thought, well, maybe we are doing well. Maybe it's just me who needs to change my attitude... and it was easy to blame it on lack of sleep and that having small children is tough, things like that.

In this case, the counsellor not only failed to recognize IPV, but also contributed to minimizing Saga's perception of the abuse. This led her to believe that she should change her own attitude and focus on the positive things in the relationship instead. This emphasizes the point raised by Liang et al. (2005) that the process of seeking support should not be assumed to be a solely positive experience since it can have quite the opposite effect as well. Minimizing interventions can therefore enable the abuse to continue (Oswald et al., 2010: 293). In Saga's case, the counselling hindered her help-seeking process by normalizing her partner's abusive behaviour.

Josefin, who had been in a queer relationship with a transman, described the couples counselling she had initiated as a slightly unrealistic last resort. Her partner had set up restrictions on what she was allowed to disclose in the sessions. His use of threats and enactment of self-harm, for instance, which had played a very big part in his control over her, were some of those issues. He quickly terminated their couples counselling because Josefin broke the rules he had set up:

[Josefin, imitating partner] 'You can't say that. That's, like, embarrassing for me'. So then we stopped going there after just a few times, and I think it was because he was like, 'I won't go back' because I had said something that was getting too close. Like started to talk about what was going on or something. I don't know. I don't remember exactly what it was. But it was something. The therapist didn't seem to have a clue.

In this case, restricted disclosure made it difficult for Josefin to get support through counselling, as the dynamics of control established in their relationship accompanied her and her partner into the counselling session. The counsellor was unable to recognize the abuse and not given the opportunity to do so, as the support was quickly aborted.

A couple of other interviewees described experiences similar to Josefin's where the counselling was discontinued after just a few sessions because the partner or the interviewee themselves felt attacked or misunderstood by the therapist. These experiences underscore one of the vulnerabilities of couples counselling: that it relies on partner participation (Stith and McCollum, 2011).

Some of the interviewees went to several different counsellors. In Olivia's case, the first family counsellor they went to was not able to gain their trust, and the support was quickly aborted:

Well, the first lady we went to was worthless. She couldn't even tell us apart. It was so bloody confusing for her to talk to two women. So... we made a joint decision that we would not continue with her.

Olivia's experience serves as an example of an encounter where the lesbian couple was unintelligible to the counsellor. This created a particular barrier for support, as people seek help where they are expected to be understood.

The second counsellor Olivia and her partner Agnes went to was, according to Olivia, able to assess the situation and their relationship. Although the counsellor did not explicitly address their problems as violence, she supported Olivia in their session and shared her concern about Agnes's parental abilities. She also confronted Agnes, which Olivia found very helpful:

In the end the family counsellor also got so frustrated with her and said straight up: 'But stop playing the victim card' (laughs). It's probably the least professional thing I've heard someone say. She was so annoyed in the end. None of the things we talked about got through [to Agnes]. But stop playing the victim card... and Agnes was so angry when we left from there (laughs) Oh God that was... that was exciting.

The counsellor's response supported Olivia's decision to leave the relationship, even though this approach also ran the risk of alienating Agnes, which could have made the situation worse for Olivia. However, the two women had entered into family counselling in the last stages of the relationship when Olivia had already been preparing to leave for a couple of years. She was therefore in a position where the counsellor's harsh and some might argue unprofessional response to Agnes served as a recognition for Olivia, although it was not addressed as violence at this point. It was only a few months before our interview that Olivia had begun to talk about her experiences as violence in an individual counselling session. Thus, in order for the counselling to be helpful, a recognition of the problem as well as the timing of the support and the approach of the counsellor need to fit. Altogether, these factors determined how helpful the support eventually became. One response which was identified as helpful by several interviewees was when counsellors named, or helped the interviewees to name, their experiences as violence, and as it was the case for Olivia, this was often an indirect and slow process.

Naming violence and creating spaces

The importance of having the counsellor/therapist acknowledge IPV was evident in my material, even though many had not named their experiences as violence during counselling. This was also particularly difficult for the interviewees who were still in abusive relationships when seeking counselling. In their study of lesbian mothers' experiences of IPV, Oswald et al. (2010) found that the counselling was deemed more helpful when the counsellor acknowledged the abuse and guided rather than directed the help-seeker towards a solution (2010: 292). While some of the interviewees had been advised by their therapist to end the relationship, such advice was often the outcome of a longer and more indirect process, consisting of subtle and cumulative confrontations.

Juliana, a lesbian woman in her early thirties, had gone to a psychologist before and during her relationship. When she disclosed to her therapist that

her partner had kept her up all night by screaming at her, he expressed his concern for her:

‘I just want to ask you one question - what would you say to a friend who was in your position? What advice would you give?’ I was just, okay I knew what the answer was but I couldn’t answer.

Despite the fact that Juliana was not ready to answer the question at the time, she had already begun to formulate the answer for herself, and it was through the help of her friends that she was able to end the relationship. Thus, when recognizing abusive behaviours, the counsellors could begin asking critical but careful questions in order to confront but avoid alienating the help-seeker, even though the violence was not necessarily named as such.

As I discussed in relation to Therese’s account in the previous chapter, the different therapists she consulted had different approaches and had offered different types of support. Whereas she described the first counsellor as more careful and hesitant, the second one had been more confrontational and had asked critical questions which made her reflect on the nature of her relationship. A similar trajectory occurred in Ewa’s help-seeking pattern as they went from couple to individual counselling. Ewa and her partner Tanja sought counselling through a health support service for LGBTQ people. During the couples counselling sessions, violence was never openly discussed, and Ewa’s partner Tanja took up a lot of the space to talk about her own issues. Ewa appreciated the counsellor’s cautious approach and that violence was never raised. At the time of the interview she interpreted this as a strategic move by the counsellor to keep them in therapy and create an alliance with Ewa. Ewa also guessed that Tanja would refuse to return to the therapy if they had talked about their problems as violence, and she suspected that she would not have been able to go against Tanja’s wishes at that point. They were given a referral to see separate therapists quite early on, and this became an important step for Ewa:

For me, my own therapist became even more important. It really felt like it was a matter of life and death and she was like a lifeline. And she was also very straightforward. Like the first time, in the first therapy session I was saying something and she just went ‘okay, how did she hit you?’ She could just ask that question. It was just like, wow, I can talk about this openly with you. It was so liberating and straightforward. It was so perfect. To take like the back-door around my shame like that and just ‘aha how did she hit you?’ I will never forget that question. It really felt great to be asked that question. Mm... to feel that okay now I can really start to talk about how things were.

Having the therapist name the violence directly provided Ewa with a space where she could talk about her experiences of violence without feeling ashamed. When successful, counselling gave interviewees a space where they

had the opportunity and the vocabulary to reflect on their experiences as violence. Sasha was already in trauma counselling during the relationship due to previous experiences of violence. She went to therapy twice a week for several years and had used these sessions to have a space where she was allowed to release her frustrations by talking freely, crying and screaming. Madeleine, a bisexual woman who had been in an abusive lesbian relationship when she was in her early twenties, explained that the therapy was a crucial source of support during the time of her break-up. Her partner had pressured her into buying a house with her. This made the break-up a prolonged and draining process, both emotionally and financially. Her psychologist offered her crucial support during this time.

Then I could say, well she had done this and now she is saying that... and that for me was normal, but my psychologist could say, 'But Madeleine, this is not normal and one shouldn't behave like that. This is violence. This is coercion. This is a threat.' It helped a lot that someone else could put words to what was happening... for me to understand that this is not my fault.

Counselling can therefore work as an important support for the help-seeker to cope with their experiences of IPV. Madeleine's counsellor helped her to identify specific behaviours, such as coercion and threats, as violence. Apart from actually naming the abuse, victim-survivors also appreciated counsellors explaining the dynamics of abuse and expected reactions following IPV. Some reported that the therapy had helped them to deal with their feelings of shame around their own behaviours in the relationship, particularly having lied to friends and family, defending their partner, fighting back physically or adopting the behaviour of their partner. However, in order to name or explain the dynamics of the violence, the counsellor needed to have recognized the IPV, and the help-seeker needed to be ready to identify it as such, which was not always the case.

Conflicting perspectives and explanations

Counselling was often a repeated process. Madeleine stopped going to therapy when she was finally able to cut off contact with her partner. However, once all the practical issues around the house had been solved, she had a breakdown, went on sick-leave and back into counselling, this time with a new counsellor since her previous one did not work there anymore. She described feeling that the new counsellor was very dismissive towards her:

She started out by asking like, 'why are you here? I have read your files'. And then I explained why I was there. That I was now on sick-leave because I'd tried to keep it together for so long... and ... I hadn't really begun to process it all... and then what I remember specifically was that she didn't listen to what I was saying. I felt that very clearly. And then she said like this, 'yes sometimes when you like someone a lot you end up hurting them even though that was

not the intention'. That got stuck in my head. And then after that I sort of just sat there and went 'mm hmm, mm...hmm'. And I just wanted to get out of there ... and then later on I thought what if this had been a child or a teenager who had experienced violence and someone just told them 'people act violently towards you because they like you' or something like that. I thought that was awful treatment.

The counsellor's response minimized Madeleine's experiences of violence, first, by questioning why she had returned to counselling, and second, by making a general statement around abusive behaviour as evidence of love rather than violence. Interpreting behaviours such as jealousy and dependency as signs of love and commitment can be seen as an example of how practices of love obscure and accommodate abuse (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 126–127). The response Madeleine received from the second counsellor was completely contrary to the support she had been given by her first counsellor, who helped her to name coercive behaviours as violence.

This also shows the problematic nature of counselling as relying on individual counsellors' interpretation and judgment. Madeleine filed a complaint against the counsellor and was offered an apology by the leader of the healthcare centre, but she was not offered a new appointment with another counsellor, and she did not go back into counselling after this experience. Counselling can therefore turn into yet another context where the victim-survivor's experience of abuse is minimized and normalized, leading to failed attempts at garnering support.

Oswald et al. (2010) found that mental health counsellors were considered least helpful by their research participants when they ignored or minimized IPV or treated the abuse as a negotiable relationship issue (2010: 292, 294). Psychological counselling's focus on the individual or the couple might run the risk of blaming the victim rather than addressing the issue of IPV when the abuse is treated as a mutual problem (Turell et al., 2012: 291). In some of the interviewees' accounts, the counsellor or the interviewee themselves had used psychological diagnoses to explain the behaviour of the partner. While it might be helpful to be provided with some form of an explanation, the pathological focus also meant that these interviewees struggled to conceptualize their own experiences of victimization in IPV. Hydén et al. (2016) suggest that therapy can be challenging in cases of IPV because therapy traditionally aims to understand the perspective of the other. However, being responsive to IPV victim-survivors means recognizing their needs for safety and demands for justice. Thus, according to Hydén et al., responsiveness "may well mean taking what appears to be an 'unresponsive' position regarding perpetrators" (Hydén et al., 2016: 3). This means providing counselling where the primary emphasis is *not* on trying to understand the position of the perpetrator or necessarily explaining their behaviours. Saga who sought counselling through a women's shelter organization emphasized the helpfulness of this approach:

I've spent so much time trying to understand why. But I don't think it works. Because I, well, it's so illogical... so along the way I've accepted that I won't be able to understand why, but I can try to find a way to approach it so that she won't affect me to the same extent as today. And things are moving forward. I feel that I become less and less effected. Whether that's because I get tougher and used to her power over me, I don't know. But the counsellor [at the women's shelter organization] was really good. Because we have worked a lot with exactly that. You'll never understand and you'll never get an answer to why.

The fact that the help-provider was trained in IPV and had a victim-centred approach in the counselling had been very helpful for Saga's help-seeking process. This shows that the accounts provided in counselling can be very different depending on where the counselling takes place, the timing of the support and the individual counsellor's knowledge of IPV.

To access a women's shelter for counselling implies that the help-seeker has begun to recognize their experiences as violence. Thus, counselling at a women's shelter might have a higher threshold for support than general psychological counselling. Some interviewees also feared that they might be seen as a disturbance within the shelter context. However, Saga's quote demonstrates how specialized knowledge of IPV allows for more responsive approaches towards IPV victim-survivors by staying with their perspective and exploring the effects of IPV rather than trying to explain the behaviour of the partner. However, in order for the encounter to be helpful, the counsellor needs to recognize lesbian and queer people as intelligible victims of IPV, and the help-seekers need to feel welcome within the context of the shelters.

Nonetheless, most interviewees did not seek specialized IPV counselling, and violence was often not mentioned as the main motivation for seeking counselling. Instead, the reasons for seeking counselling varied in the different accounts and even in the help-seeking process. Whereas the helpfulness of the counselling relied on the counsellor/s' abilities to recognize and respond to IPV in an adequate manner, the processual and indeterminate character of counselling may explain why many interviewees were able to seek this type of support.

Processual, subtle and cumulative support

Donovan and Hester (2015) suggest that critical questions from the social networks can have cumulative effects and encourage the victim-survivor to start reflecting on the opinions of friends and family members (183–184). I would argue that counselling can have a similar function. This makes it different from many of the other formal help-services, since it can be a slow and repeated form of support. Some interviewees emphasized that it had been helpful to discuss their relationship with an outsider and someone professional

who did not pick sides, as opposed to discussing it with mutual friends. In their study of lesbian mothers' experiences of IPV, Oswald et al. (2010) found that the research participants who had sought counselling had often not made a clean break from their abusive partner. They suggest that the ongoing nature of the relationship explained why this group in particular sought this kind of support (2010: 291). It mirrors the experience of violence and help-seeking as a slow, fragmented and repeated process, as I discussed in the previous chapters.

The broad scope of psychological counselling and therapy and the focus on the individual make this a more socially acceptable form of help-seeking than services specializing in IPV. Abusive partners may agree to such help-seeking since it does not overtly address IPV. The victim-survivors also do not need to have recognized their experiences as abuse when entering this form of support. Ideally counselling should offer the help-seeker a space to reflect on their situation, slowly confront them with the nature of the abusive relationship, help to name the violence and understand the dynamics of abuse and violence and offer support in the aftermath of violence.

Concluding discussion: Unintelligible through misrecognition

In this chapter, I have examined how the interviewees perceived the support they received from formal support services, focusing specifically on mis/recognition of violence in three contexts: the criminal justice system, healthcare services, and counselling.

To understand why lesbian and queer victims of IPV are at enhanced risk of being perceived as unintelligible victims when seeking help through formal support services I use Fraser's (1997, 2000, 2003) term *misrecognition*. Fraser conceptualizes recognition as a question of status (2003: 29). Thus, misrecognition should be understood as the "consequence of institutionalized patterns of interpretations and evaluation that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem." (Fraser, 1997: 280) These institutionalized social values and norms systematically depreciate certain categories of people and as a result prevent status-subordinated groups and individuals from participating as peers in social life (1997: 280, 2003: 36). Institutionalized heteronormative and sexist value patterns take many different forms and are displayed in many ways, including in the formulation of the law: from family to criminal law, they structure everyday interactions and practices within social institutions which in this case shaped the help-seeking encounters within formal help-seeking (Fraser, 2003: 18, 21).

The responses the interviewees received in the formal support services were often not characterized by explicit homophobia in the form of verbal

attacks or explicit discrimination but, rather, by what I describe as *inadvertent misrecognition*. This can be interpreted as the subtle unintended effects of heteronormativity, where the queer or lesbian victim-survivor becomes unintelligible as a potential victim of IPV. It is expressed through subtle and sometimes nonverbal cues, such as a lack of understanding, not being encouraged to press charges by help-providers, not being screened for IPV and a lack of understanding for one's situation when the abuse is recognized. Thus, the effect of misrecognition was most often invisibility (Fraser, 2003: 29). Institutionalized value patterns denying groups of people the status of full partners in interactions can do so by "burdening them with excessive ascribed 'difference' or by failing to acknowledge their distinctiveness." (Fraser, 2003: 36) The ascribed difference – transferred from heterosexual victims – renders lesbian and queer victim-survivors unintelligible as a consequence of being excluded in public assumptions concerning IPV as well as through social myths around gender and sexuality such as the lesbian utopia (of equality and non-violence) and ideas about reciprocity, which can make it difficult to recognize lesbian IPV or lead to assumptions about mutual abuse when violence is recognized. I suggest that these additional layers of invisibility distinguish lesbian and queer victim-survivors' help-seeking encounters from those of their heterosexual counterparts.

In line with previous research, relatively few of the interviewees had received help through the criminal justice system. This lack of reporting has been interpreted as a sign of distrust or as a gap in trust between LGBTQ communities and the criminal justice system (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 188; Pattavina et al., 2007: 379). To understand why so few of the interviewees had even considered the police and the criminal justice system to be a relevant form of support, I suggest that we need to address the gap of trust as part of a larger process of misrecognition of victims. The process of misrecognition is evident in police responses, where acute physical and visible violence informed by a dominant narrative of abuse featuring an ideal victim and offender are considered more plausible, especially when the violence can be documented. The two previous chapters' findings suggested that the most common types of violence experienced by the interviewees would be very difficult to prove within the criminal justice system. Some expressed distrust regarding whether their victimization would count and doubted that police involvement would improve the situation, adding to factors such as fear of retaliation and anticipated stigma. All of this can contribute to a lack of engagement with the criminal justice system (Ekström and Lindström, 2016: 261). For the few that did report, most cases were rejected due to the statute of limitations. This points to the difficulty of capturing and pursuing justice for slow violence in the allowed timeframe (Nixon, 2011). Even in the one case where the interviewee was recognized as a victim in the criminal justice system, the effects

of misrecognition were apparent in the prosecutor's struggle to label her victimization, the lenient verdict, and the extended legal proceedings resulted in a continuum of injustice (Antonsdóttir, 2020a).

The healthcare services were accessed at different times by the interviewees. Some had used these services to deal with the aftermath of IPV. In this chapter I focused specifically on how the healthcare services responded to the interviewees who had accessed these services during the relationship(s). These services should ideally be a place to identify and support IPV victims. However, as indicated, unhelpful healthcare encounters were often characterized by inadvertent misrecognition. This took the form of a lack of response such as neglecting to screen for IPV, allowing the partner to be present in the examination room which led to a failure of disclosure and a lack of referral to relevant services. Such failure or lack of recognition can be crucial disincentives to help-seeking and can thus hinder or prolong the help-seeking process.

The criminal justice system and the healthcare settings serve quite different functions and offer different types of support for victims of IPV, yet they also showed similar signs of misrecognition. The criminal justice system focuses on intervention, and the pursuit of justice relies on identifying and being able to prove who is the offender and who is the victim. As addressed by Stanko and Curry (1997: 515), the law, and the police as its agents, are by no means neutral. Assumptions about the ideal victim and offender (Christie, 1986) based on intersectional positions, including gendered assumptions and stereotypes, feed into social myths that perceive lesbian IPV specifically as not very serious or as the result of mutual abuse. The broad scope of the healthcare services creates a great responsibility for services to be able to recognize signs of IPV, screen for violence, and refer victims to relevant types of support. However, even here social myths around who is perceived as a potential and intelligible victim of IPV come into play. The responses were often more helpful when the help-seeker had identified their experiences as abuse prior to seeking support. This meant that the interviewees often had to rely on individualized forms of support, such as counselling.

Counselling was the most common type of support sought by the interviewees, and it was often a more indirect form of help-seeking. One of the strengths of counselling is that it is a more socially acceptable form of general help-seeking, since people use it for many different reasons not necessarily related to violence. This support was often described as helpful when it provided the help-seeker with a space to reflect on their relationship and to start naming the violence. However, interviewees also reported encounters where the counsellors failed to recognize IPV or minimized or normalized abusive behaviours. Couple counselling could be especially problematic when the counsellor failed to recognize the dynamics of the relationship as abusive but also due to the compromising shared space of the support.

I find Fraser's (1997: 280) status model perspective useful when discussing misrecognition, as it helps to resist the temptation to create identity-based dichotomies which position cisgendered heterosexual women as always intelligible victims and queer and lesbian victims as the opposite. The focus on status and institutionalized values helps to address how social myths, such as the ideal victim and offender and the public story of IPV, are incorporated into the structure of the support services and shape how victim-survivors are perceived and treated. The analysis of the criminal justice responses showed that some interviewees were more readily recognized as victims than others. Thus, it is important to be aware of the different forms of misrecognition that occur and that depend on the intersecting social identities of the help-seeker(s).

Seeking support in organizations that are not specialized in IPV demands from the help-providers that they be able to recognize IPV, and have knowledge and resources to refer the victim-survivor to the support they need. Across the different support services, misrecognition was often reported as the result of a lack of knowledge around IPV and, thus, a lack of professional competence to support IPV victims. Even though Fraser analytically distinguishes between misrecognition and redistribution she also suggests that the effects of and redresses to both these experiences cannot be completely separated (Fraser, 1997: 280). Thus, misrecognition due to status subordination involves institutional remedies which also concern redistribution (Fraser, 2000: 116). For a help-provider's response to be both responsive and responsible, they need to be enabled by particular resources (Squire, 2016: 53). It is not enough for healthcare professionals to ask about violence if there is no knowledge of how to respond to this and no resources in place after disclosure. This calls for additional training for the help-providers to be able to detect victims of IPV in general and even more for them to be able to identify victims who do not fit the public story of IPV. It also calls for more collaboration or inter-agency work between different types of support systems.

Although I suggest that we need to focus more on processual forms of help-seeking, as this reflects the contemporary help-seeking patterns of many victim-survivors, it is important to be aware of the issues related to services such as counselling. Apart from being often privatized and expensive, meaning that not everyone can afford to access this support repeatedly, the individualized focus of psychological counselling means that lesbian and queer victim-survivors are left responsible for their own safety. This feeds into what Stanko and Curry (1997) describe as the discourse of the *responsible queer*. Individualized responses to IPV not only feed into the neoliberal trend of self-care and individual responsibility; they also render lesbian and queer victim-survivors invisible by placing support for them outside the public institutions' responsibility and records and, ultimately, treating IPV in those relationships as a private rather than a public concern (Donovan and Barnes, 2020a: 567). In the following chapter, I continue to discuss the implication of this discourse when

I explore the impact ideals around lesbian and queer families and LGBTQ communities have on IPV and help-seeking.

6. Challenging lesbian utopias: The impact of kin and community on help-seeking

One of the reasons that I didn't want to tell people how bad we were doing was that on some level I felt that I wasn't just representing myself and our family, I was also representing lesbian family constellations and somehow I was like ... well, we have to! I wanted to show that we are actually good parents, that they were right to allow us to have children, so it was also a thing like that.

This excerpt from my interview with Saga touches upon the conditions for lesbian motherhood and imagined bonds with other families through the struggle for recognition, and it illustrates how the burden of representation inevitably shapes the help-seeking behaviours of lesbian and queer victim-survivors. In this chapter, I explore the impact of two utopias on the help-seeking behaviours of lesbians and queer victim-survivors of IPV: that of family and kinship, and that of kinship and community. Thus, I focus on imaginaries and lived experiences of different types of kinship in relation to IPV and help-seeking.

The myth of the lesbian utopia has been repeatedly addressed in research on lesbian IPV (Barnes, 2011; Giorgio, 2001, 2002; Walters, 2011: 252). In this chapter, I want to explore the consequences for IPV help-seeking of the national discourse of Sweden as a lesbian and queer utopia, where especially the white, reproductive, middle-class, lesbian family often serves as the example of achieved equality (Dahl, 2018). I discuss how these family ideals impact help-seeking behaviours and ideas around communities and support. Ultimately, I challenge the two kinds of utopias around kinship: the utopic lesbian family and lesbian/queer communities. In the first part of this chapter, I explore how normative ideals around family-making and compulsory couplehood played a role in my interviewees' accounts as well as what implications children had on help-seeking behaviours. The second part of the chapter focuses on kinship in broader terms and, specifically, in relation to how LGBTQ communities figured in the interviewees' accounts.

The Nordic countries, and Sweden in particular, are often praised for being progressive when it comes to gender equality and LGBTQ rights (Martinsson et al., 2016; Simon and Brooks, 2009: 89). Swedish family policies are seen as at the forefront of gender equality, with generous regulations regarding parental leave. The general normative couple ideal entails a dual earner/dual career model (Malmquist, 2015b: 3–4). This has given Sweden a very strong self-image, often described in terms of 'Swedish exceptionalism' (Martinsson

et al., 2016: 1). This ideal around families and family politics has also had a significant impact on lesbian families and queer kinship in general, according to Anna Malmquist (2015a, 2015b: 4, 2015c), who has conducted extended research on experiences of family-making in Swedish lesbian families.

During the 1990s and 2000s, so-called rainbow families became an established and important priority for the LGBTQ movement in Sweden, as legislative changes enabling registered partnerships (1995), a gender-neutral marriage code (2009), as well as reproductive (2005, 2016, 2019) and adoption rights (2003), changed the discourse and conditions for many LGBTQ families in Sweden (Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011: 158; Rydström, 2008: 211). Kath Weston (1991: 169), writing within an Anglophone context, describes the 1980s as the lesbian baby boom era in the US when lesbian couples would use artificial insemination to form families outside the heterosexual marriage and thus construct new forms of gay kinship based on families of choice. Malmquist (2015b: 3–4) suggests that the Swedish lesbian baby boom first really took off during the 2000s because of the new family laws. While gaining access to state-regulated fertility treatments has made it easier for some lesbian and queer families to reproduce, it has also meant that lesbian couples are now encouraged to embrace heterosexual norms by reproducing within same-sex marriage, cohabiting and civil partnerships (see Dahl, 2018). In order to challenge the imaginaries around utopic lesbian families, I start by discussing clashes of ideals between queer kinship and commitment to coupledness.

Committing to coupledness

While the new family laws meant that more LGBTQ families and couples gained legal recognition and reproductive rights, these also came at a cost. The demands for recognition from the state through parental and partnership rights are often articulated based on ideas of sameness: given that we, the minority, are just like you, the majority, we deserve equal rights. This prioritizes the demands of those who resemble the norm, in this context those who are the closest to heteronormative family ideals (Dahl and Gabb, 2019: 210). Jenny Björklund and Ulrika Dahl (2019: 13) suggest that legal recognition along with assisted reproductive technologies have created an emphasis on normality in queer kinship which is quite different from previous discussions around families of choice (Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). In the latter, queer kinship was created as a contrast to the hostile society's values and the rejection from the family of origin. Based on research on lesbian families in the UK, Jacqui Gabb (2018: 1011) suggests that investment in the couple dyad through marriage and civil partnership, which traditionally has been applied to compulsory heterosexuality, has now also become a mode to aspire to for non-heterosexuals.

This is where the first clash of ideals regarding utopic relationships comes into play, as ideas around obligatory relationships are no longer only associated with the family of origin but also impact lesbian and queer relationships. This becomes relevant in the case of IPV, as addressed in Chapter Three, because Western culture's dominant discourse around love and coupling legitimates violence through the encouragement to believe in the power of love and unconditional commitment (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 124–126). Such ideals around commitment and coupledom came up in my interview with Madeleine, a lesbian woman in her mid-twenties, who had experienced violence in a relationship a couple of years before the interview. She explained that her partner had pressured her into buying a house together within the first six months of their relationship. Although Madeleine had objected they had ended up buying the house. It was after this that the abuse started to escalate. Despite not feeling well from the very beginning, Madeleine thought that leaving was not an option:

Madeleine: I remember thinking, I just need to put up with this for five years. This was something I thought and then I can leave.

Nicole: Why five years?

Madeleine: Well, maybe it was like the failure of not handling a relationship or that you don't think that you can or deserve any better so [...] Five years, that I can put up with. Then I can leave.

What I found particularly interesting in Madeleine's statement was that the fear of failure was attached to the idea of commitment to the relationship, and it was shaped by feelings of shame involved with not being able to "handle" a long-term commitment. Donovan and Hester (2015: 128) found that ideas around unconditional commitment help sustain the notion that one has to stay in a relationship through good and bad times, as this is how romantic relationships are scripted by societal norms across gender and sexuality.

For the interviewees who had children with their abusive partner, the cost of commitment was even more pronounced. Saga, who I quoted at the beginning of the chapter, was committed to her relationship and struggled to accept that her abusive partner left her in the end. When reflecting about her reluctance to separate, she explained,

I guess I've realized that the main reason why I didn't want to separate was that I wanted to be with my children 100 percent and not 50 percent. Not because I wanted to live with her but more because I had a hard time picturing myself as someone who was separated. I had this idea that I would stay with the person I have children with for the rest of my life.

Saga's concerns about separating are characterized by ideals around family-making, which include committing to one person for the rest of one's life, but they are also very practical concerns since leaving her partner would have meant shared custody and less time with her children.

Seven of the interviewees described the impact of children on IPV, help-seeking, and/or their participation in LGBTQ communities. One interviewee had had children with a new partner after leaving her abusive partner but mentioned the impact children had on her engagement with LGBTQ communities. Four interviewees had children with their abusive ex-partner. Three shared a form of custody with their ex-partner, and one had sole custody with a new partner. One interviewee's ex-partner had children from a previous relationship, and one interviewee was in the process of having a child with her partner when she ended the relationship. In the following sections of the chapter, I focus on the accounts of this group of interviewees.

Children's impact on IPV and help-seeking

While the victimization of heterosexual mothers and their children has been researched for some time, very little attention has been given to IPV in lesbian and queer families with children. Jennifer L. Hardesty et al.'s (2008) pioneering US-based research on lesbian mothering in the context of IPV showed that while lesbian and heterosexual mothers' experiences of IPV may be comparable to some extent, oppressive structures such as heterosexism and homo- and biphobia create different conditions for lesbian and bisexual parents (Hardesty et al., 2008: 193).

The significant impact children had on conditions for IPV and help-seeking became very clear in my interviews with informants who had children with their ex-partner. Echoing research on heterosexual mothers' experiences of IPV/DV (Dufort et al., 2013: 2; Radford and Hester, 2006: 44–45), children appear to have contradictory effects on help-seeking. Children are often seen as both a reason for leaving but also for staying with an abusive partner. Whereas concerns about the children's safety can be a reason for seeking support and leaving, fear of losing custody might prevent victims from seeking support, and parents might stay in order to protect their children. An example of this contradictory role of children can be found in Ulrika's account:

Nicole: What do you think made it possible for you to get out of the relationship?

Ulrika: Becoming a parent. I am pretty convinced about that. Because then I could put parenting and my child first and I could see that I had to get myself out of it for her sake. So I could be a good parent. Otherwise, I think it would have taken a lot longer. One thing that did make it harder for me to get out was the process of... we were waiting for a long time in line to have a child. I saw myself as involuntarily childless for several years. Because first we were waiting in line and then there was the investigation, and then one thing and another, and then the treatments. So that went on for four years. If I had ended it within those four years, then it would have felt like I was also ending my chances of having a child. So that contributed as well, in making me stay. But then it also made me able to leave the relationship when the child came.

For Ulrika, trying to have a child was initially a reason to stay, but actually having one became the reason to leave her partner. The process of having a child in the Swedish state-regulated healthcare system is not as costly as doing it privately, and it ensures legal rights for both parents from the beginning. Alexander Rozental and Anna Malmquist (2015) describe public fertility treatment's inclusion of lesbians as both a case of opportunities but also restrictions (2015: 129). Since it is often a very time-consuming and uncertain process which consists of both medical procedures as well as social services investigations and evaluations, it may delay or complicate the process of leaving an abusive partner. Ewa and her partner Tanja had also started the process of having a child through public health services. However, instead of prolonging the relationship, as was the case for Ulrika, this worked as a turning point for Ewa:

We had started with the fertility investigation and also signed up in [city] and then we got a letter after like 18 months saying, now it's time for another appointment, and then I just thought, there is no way in hell I'm having a child with this person. It just became so clear to me that this, no, I cannot continue to lie to myself by saying that things will work out and... It will never work. I don't, like, trust her. When I was standing there with the letter in my hand, I was just like, no, we will never go to this appointment.

Ewa's statement here illustrates how the very idea of a child and becoming a family can accelerate the help-seeking process. The realization that things were not good in the relationship was, of course, not solely based on that particular letter. Because they had started to plan for a child, Ewa had also convinced Tanja that they needed to seek support through couples counselling. Through the couples counselling, and later on in her individual counselling sessions, Ewa was then supported in her own perspectives on the relationship. As addressed in the previous chapters, the help-seeking process is often shaped by multiple actors and events, and, in this case, becoming a family had facilitated the help-seeking process.

Alexander and his partner had also sought family counselling during his second abusive relationship. Since he had not previously sought any formal support, I asked him why they chose to seek this type of support and he answered: "Well, I suppose it was an attempt to... well, actually it had a lot to do with us becoming a family because she had children. So, it was a desire to really make it work somehow." In these cases children, both living and hypothetical ones, worked as a catalyst for help-seeking. Having children was therefore often described as important turning points in the help-seeking process. Olivia, for instance, had contemplated leaving her partner Agnes for many years, but after they had children, it became very clear to her that she could not continue as things were. Olivia reported that Agnes's abusive behaviour had started to escalate during Olivia's pregnancy and postpartum

since she could no longer take care of Agnes's needs in the same way as before.

And then her [abusive] behaviour towards me really started to escalate. So I think I already decided that spring when she threatened to commit suicide after our first child was born and she was pregnant that I don't want to do that to my children. I can't stay in this.

Pregnancy inevitably changes the dynamic of a relationship physically but also emotionally, economically, and socially, and it can be a particularly vulnerable time for victims of IPV (Van Parys et al., 2014: 1). In Olivia's case, the conditions for the violence then also changed, as Agnes became pregnant herself, and the threats of self-harm became a threat to their future child. Dufort et al.'s (2013: 8) Swedish study shows that having children with a perpetrator is strongly associated with help-seeking. Maternal healthcare services in Sweden are very frequently attended during pregnancy, as are follow-up healthcare check-ups, as they are free of charge (Dufort et al., 2013: 2). Thus, having children can open up new pathways into formal support, for instance, through the health care services or social services. Both Ulrika and Olivia sought support through the healthcare services in relation to their children, and Evelina and her partner underwent an investigation performed by a private company on behalf of the social services after her partner's help-provider left a notification of concern for their children's wellbeing. However, as I discussed in the previous chapter on formal help-seeking encounters, the healthcare providers did not necessarily detect IPV when the interviewees sought help, or they did not always know how to approach the issue when they did.

The interviewees who had children with their partners reflected in different ways on the effects the violence had had on their children. One interviewee thought that their children had been too young to understand what was going on during the relationship, though she had noticed that the children were calmer when her partner was not around. Three of them talked about specific situations where their children had been targeted by the abusive partner. One of the interviewees had been hit by her partner while she was holding one of their children in her arms, and two described situations where their partner had pushed the children or thrown objects at them. Such situations were often described as significant moments that reinforced existing worries and concerns about their relationships and a desire to leave (see Hardesty et al., 2011: 34).

While children could therefore accelerate the help-seeking process, they also made it harder to have a clean break. Children could enhance isolation in the relationship and at times created a deeper bond of dependency on the partner, which changed the conditions for IPV. Olivia, for instance, talked about using the children as an excuse to explain to her friends why she could not

longer meet up with them even though her partner Agnes continued to socialize with their common friends:

So I would often use the children as an excuse. Well, I cannot go away because our oldest is a bit sick, or our youngest didn't sleep well last night, so I don't feel up for it actually or, well, something like that. As if it was my choice not to come out or not to do something.

All of the four interviewees who had children with their abusive ex-partners as well as the interviewee who had stepchildren described themselves as being responsible for the partner's wellbeing, for their relationship, and after they had children they were also expected and obligated to care for the children as well as their partner's needs (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 147, 153). The interviewees who had children with an abusive partner were also forced to have ongoing contact with their ex-partner, especially in cases where they shared custody. Saga described how the abusive behaviour continued after separation:

When there are children involved, it doesn't end just because the relationship ends. Even though we don't live together today and it's not at all the same way [as before] our exchanges still have the same structure as before, the same pattern, and there is still this huge power imbalance. And that I find difficult to handle because there is this idea that, well, now you don't live together anymore. And we don't, but our relationship still affects me because she hasn't changed just because we got separated. We don't have an equal or equitable relationship just because we are separated. The problem was not living together. The problem was our, well our communication, our relationship. And we can't cut contact.

Saga described her and her ex-partner's parental relationship as mirroring their abusive relationship, characterized by a power asymmetry where the children served as tools for continued control. The struggle of sharing parental responsibilities was mentioned by all four interviewees with parental rights. Saga and Evelina talked about being prevented from seeing their children for months by the partner or that the ex-partners did not respect the parental agreements. Olivia and Ulrika talked about the difficulty of being dependent on their ex-partners to take their share of the parental responsibilities but not being able to rely on them, as they had a history of not showing up or cancelling at the last minute. It was not uncommon for the interviewees to talk about their ex-partner's behaviour as childlike.

Evelina, Ulrika, and Olivia described themselves as the primary caregiver for their children, even during their former relationships. Evelina explained that she did not trust her partner to take care of their children by herself. She felt that the social workers who did the investigation regarding their family shared the notion of her as the responsible but also sufficient parent:

They had seen that she wasn't that good but I was so good that it made up for the both of us. So, no interventions were put in place and we sort-of made it through the investigations or what you might call it.

While Evelina eventually reported her partner to social services herself, she was very critical of the way they handled the case. The two social workers who were in charge of the investigation developed a very friendly relationship with Evelina and her partner. After the relationship had ended, Evelina went through the documentation for the investigation and discovered a number of procedural errors. Evelina suspected that lack of professional distance between them was part of the reason why they failed to detect the severity of the situation and failed to intervene at the time. This had severe consequences for Evelina who, despite being the primary caregiver, was not legally recognized as a parent to her children when the relationship ended.

Legal vulnerability and waiting as a form of violence

Hardesty et al.'s (2008) study of lesbian mothering in the context of IPV shares similarities with my material, and other studies point to the common use of counselling (Oswald et al., 2010) as support but also social and legal vulnerability (Hardesty et al., 2011). One of the key differences between our studies, apart from context, size and level of diversity, is that among their participants the majority of the children were from previous heterosexual relationships and they were therefore defined as stepfamilies, whereas in my study the children were mostly conceived in a queer/lesbian relationship. This creates different conditions for victimization and help-seeking, socially but also legally.

In Sweden a non-birth parent in a female same-sex relationship can be granted legal parenthood with or without a second-parent adoption process depending on how, but also when, the child was born. While the birth parent is registered as the child's legal parent at birth, the non-birth parent has to gain legal rights to the child. Since 2003, registered partners have had the right to apply for joint adoption and for second-parent adoption, which enables same-sex parents to become legal parents to shared children. Since 2005 the non-birth parent in a female same-sex couple can be recognized as a legal parent without going through an adoption process by having both parents sign a written consent form.²³ However, this could initially only be done if the couple had undergone assisted reproductive treatment through the public health services in Sweden (Malmquist, 2015a: 354). This is often a long and uncertain

²³ A proposal suggesting that the principle of parenthood presumption should be the same for all married couples as well as registered partners, regardless of their gender and sexuality, has been submitted to Riksdagen for approval (Regeringskansliet, 2021).

process, as Ulrika's account shows. Previously, couples who went abroad privately for insemination had to go through second-parent adoption for the non-birth parent after the child was born. However, in 2019 it became possible to gain parental rights through written consent by the two parents unless the couple had used an anonymous donor (Regeringskansliet, 2018; *RFSL*, n.d.). In this case, as with home insemination, the non-birth parent has to adopt the child after the paternity investigation has ended (Malmquist, 2015a: 354).

Contrary to Ulrika, who stayed with her partner in order to have a child through the state-regulated healthcare system, Olivia and Evelina had conceived their children outside that system. However, despite the different routes they took into parenting all three ended up staying longer with their abusive partner because of the children. Evelina's partner had been inseminated through a private clinic in a neighbouring country. This meant that Evelina was not legally recognized as a parent to their children²⁴. Both Olivia and her partner Agnes became pregnant through home insemination, and this made Olivia stay longer in the relationship because she had to gain legal rights to the child her partner had given birth to.

I think I actually decided to leave a long time before. But because we had not gone through the county council but had done home insemination with a private donor, this meant that we had to adopt the child the other had given birth to. So then I knew I couldn't even start to think about leaving before all that was taken care of. It took a while because if I would have started to leave before my youngest daughter was legally mine, then I could easily have lost all contact to her. And that would have been extremely bad both for her and for me. So I was forced to wait it out through the paternity investigation, the district court's investigation and all kinds of stuff with social services and the office turn-around time and these kinds of things.

Waiting time and insecurity about the legal proceedings meant that Olivia ended up staying with her partner for a couple of years after having decided to leave. This illustrates an important dimension of lesbian and queer parenting, which is the blurring of the public and the private. Through state-funded fertility services, the state is quite extensively involved in lesbian and queer families' parental arrangements. Couples and individuals who wish to reproduce outside the reproductive heterosexual family must agree to have their intimate lives negotiated with the state when undergoing social investigations and evaluations to see if they are deemed fit to be parents (Ovesen, 2020: 176). These investigations often take time. This can become an issue for lesbian and queer victim-survivors living with violence as well as for their children. When exploring the embodied consequences of the Swedish legislation on gender-

²⁴ There has been a change of legislation since 2019 - if the couple chooses a sperm donor with donor-release, which means that the child will have the option to contact the donor when they have reached a mature age, the non-birth parent can become legal parent by signing a written consent form from at authorized clinics abroad and in Sweden.

confirming procedures, Signe Bremer (2011) describes waiting as a form of violation, where people seeking legal recognition and/or medical procedures are forced to follow an obligatory, often confusing and slow route to become intelligible subjects (2011: 125). Following Bremer's perspective, waiting becomes another aspect of the slow violence. In this case waiting and uncertainty become part of the systematic violence towards lesbian and queer families, which shape the conditions for IPV. While using children as a tool for control is not something specific to queer or lesbian IPV, an abusive partner can use the legally disadvantaged position of the non-birth parent against them. This was, for instance, the case for Evelina:

It got a lot harder after we had children because then she had me on the hook. Because she wouldn't let me do the second-parent adoption because she wanted to get child support. That's how the system works. So then she had that as a hold on me... yes, and so she would say 'you should adopt them. It will be best for the children.' Then one week later it would be, 'I think you are stupid and I won't let you go through with it'. So she had all the power. So it got really difficult once we separated. Because I didn't have custody. So it became a long battle.

In this case, the birthmother used her privileged position as assigned legal parent to keep Evelina in legal limbo and thereby control her. After they separated, the children were placed in foster care with Evelina, but it took around three years before she got full custody and was recognized as the legal parent of her children. During this time her ex-partner tried to prevent Evelina from having access to her children by accusing her of abuse. Later on, she also tried to deny having gone through artificial insemination by claiming that the children had fathers who wanted to have contact with them. However, no 'fathers' came forward; in any event Evelina at that time already had full custody of the children. However, this again demonstrates the ways in which an abusive partner, especially the birthparent, can use heteronormative and biological prerogatives against the non-birth parent to question their right to legal parenthood. When asked about the process following the separation, Evelina explained:

It's been difficult, most of all for the children since they were forced to be with her. On paper it's all about putting the children's needs first. But the reality is quite different. Parents, biological parents have very strong rights. Even when it's not in the children's best interests. So it's been tough. And it has taken a toll on the children as well.

Evelina's statement points to the birthparent's rights above the primary caregivers and the power and prioritized role of biological kinship in custody battles. Hardesty et al. (2011: 206) also found that legal insecurity was an emergent theme in their sample of lesbian and bisexual mothers experiencing IPV, and that custody concerns were more likely when the abusive partner had more legitimacy, for instance, as a biological family member. Hardesty et al. (2011:

206) discuss the practices of choosing family as a resilience strategy within the LGBTQ community, which seeks to include and grant same-sex partners legitimacy as parents rather than basing kinship on legal and biological bonds. However, when it comes to IPV, they argue that these family practices are being challenged:

Ironically, lesbian mothers experiencing IPV may be well served by defining family boundaries in such a way that abusers are excluded. Well-meaning efforts to see the same-sex couple as legitimate should be tempered with an awareness that mother-children ties may take precedence over the partnership when there is violence. (Hardesty et al., 2008: 206)

Here the difference between the legal and social context of Hardesty et al.'s (2008, 2011) and my study stands out. Since their participants consisted mostly of stepfamilies, and the parental rights for same-sex parents in the US vary according to state legislation (Hardesty et al., 2011: 30), commonly expressed fears concerning unwanted intrusion from outside of the abusive relationship, for instance from the children's biological fathers, grandparents or the authorities. However, this was not an expressed concern among my interviewees. Perhaps part of the explanation could be that in Sweden the family of choice discourse is increasingly being replaced by family-making, centred on the couple as well as biological and legal bonds (Dahl and Gabb, 2019: 228). The legal insecurity in my sample was more connected to the power of the abusive co-parent who, if they were the birthparent, could refuse to consent to the second-parent adoption. In Evelina's case, it was her ex-partner who called in the authorities to try to discredit Evelina and to prevent her from being granted custody. Evelina described the legal proceedings following separation as a long battle and she was very critical of how the social services handled the case:

I've learnt that you shouldn't just trust and believe what they tell you and that they know what they are doing. Because they really don't. I think we ordered every book you can find from The National Board of Health and Welfare^[25]. And it took them three years before they finally admitted that they had made a mistake and they should have acted differently. They could have granted me custody earlier, and it's really sad to know that the children have suffered so much for no reason. If they would only have opened a book and read up on it, then they would have seen the same thing we did, that I could have been granted custody. But they didn't do that.

Despite her role as the primary caregiver, Evelina had to navigate the social and legal systems for herself in order to gain custody of her children. In the previous chapter, I discussed the figure of the responsible queer whose protection relies on self-regulation and is left outside of public concern. Evelina

²⁵ Socialstyrelsen

becoming responsible for the investigation of her parental rights can be seen as an example of such self-reliance.

In summary, children had a very significant impact on the interviewees' help-seeking behaviours. Having children could both accelerate and delay the help-seeking process, and the two tendencies could at times be present simultaneously. Having children also meant that the abuse would often continue after the relationship had ended through shared custody or in custody battles. While it might be tempting to draw parallels between heterosexual women's experiences of mothering through IPV (see Radford and Hester, 2006), and in some cases it might even be beneficial, I suggest that we keep the different conditions regarding the violence as well as the help-seeking in mind. The state's extensive involvement in lesbian and queer routes to parenthood structures the help-seeking process as well as the violence itself. Going through state-funded reproductive services means that couples are subjected to assessments and evaluations for an extended amount of time. However, those who conceive outside the public healthcare system run an enhanced risk of not being recognized as legal parents to their children. This made two of the interviewees stay longer in their abusive relationship. The final point connects to the statement I started this chapter with: the burden of representation can add additional pressure on lesbian and queer parents facing IPV and make it harder to seek support.

New family norms and legislation have created new conditions for lesbian and queer families but also for IPV and help-seeking. In the same way as lesbian families and rainbow families in general challenge heteronormative family ideals, the increasing focus on the lesbian nuclear family also challenges the family of choice and relationships based on affinity, thus in turn challenging the notion of LGBTQ communities as based on ideas of kinship. In the next section of this chapter, I explore the impact of kinship in a broader sense as I discuss how ideas and connections to communities figured in my interviewees' accounts and how this related to their help-seeking behaviour.

LGBTQ families and IPV

'Family' is a euphemistic term that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people use among ourselves to designate membership in LGBT communities. Ironically, our 'family' is minimally aware of the intimate partner violence (IPV) that occurs within our families, and minimally supportive to its victims. (Turell and Herrmann, 2008: 212)

Susan C. Turell and Molly M. Herrmann (2008: 220) explore community support systems for lesbian and bisexual women who have experienced abuse. Based on their findings from the US, they conceptualize the diamond model,

where the narrow top and bottom symbolize the smaller LGBT community and the thicker middle part the general support services such as healthcare, legal and social services. They suggest that there is a need for more peer support from within the LGBT community, especially in the initial stages of the help-seeking process but also afterwards, after having potentially sought support through the general support services. Turell and Herrmann (2008: 218) state that they struggled to keep their participants focused on their support needs related to the LGBT community, as many instead directed the conversation toward frustrations with the general service providers. They mention briefly that the participants spent some time defining the concept of peers but without engaging further with what kinds of definitions were discussed. However, most of their research participants explained that they would feel more comfortable talking to a woman, preferably a lesbian/bisexual woman with training in DV advocacy. It is not uncommon to find this kind of family vocabulary in writings on LGBTQ communities, with the family of choice being the most prominent term (Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). Turell and Herrmann refer to the LGBTQ community as a family, which in case of IPV often fails to provide proper and adequate support. I found this particularly interesting in relation to my interviewees, as many of them were very critical of the LGBTQ communities' lack of awareness of IPV, while they also struggled to define what LGBTQ communities and community support actually meant. Thus, before I can get to community support, I first examine how lesbian and queer communities/scenes figured in the interviewees' accounts.

The multiple meanings of community

The LGBTQ community is a tricky concept as its meanings are contested yet often taken for granted (see Formby, 2017; Weeks et al., 2001: 88). Eleanor Formby (2017) explores the concept of community in this context, criticizing the way in which the term is often misused, over-used or simplified within politics, research and policymaking in a UK context. The singular use of the term community obscures not only diversity within and between communities but also the different ways in which LGBT people engage (or not) in such communities. It also feeds into a commonly held assumption that LGBTQ people automatically belong to ready-made communities or that community can be used as a proxy for social groups or people (Formby, 2017: 1). Sara Edenheim (2019: 33) also suggests that within feminist and queer studies as well as activism there is a tendency to theorize around and adopt an American model of communities, which due to the absence of a functioning welfare state in the US has meant that identity-based communities serve key social functions. Thus, the translation of the concept into a Nordic setting is not without concerns, and although many activists, researchers and stakeholders use the English term community, it is important to be aware of the different meanings

the same word holds in the different contexts. Edenheim argues that “[i]n the Nordic countries, it may be possible to observe a clashing of ideals of communities as necessary for survival (US version) and communities as necessary for recognition (liberal version).” (2019: 33)

Thus, during the interviews, I asked each interviewee whether the LGBTQ community or scene (Queer/HBTQ-miljö/community) was a relevant part of their life. To be part of an LGBTQ community was, for some of the interviewees, a question of identifying openly as an LGBTQ person. For others it meant having friends who identified as LGBTQ and meeting up with other rainbow families, while for a third group it was a question of being politically involved in LGBTQ organizations or standing up for LGBTQ rights and perspectives in their everyday lives.

As was the case with the sexual identity categories, the interviewees’ connection to a community seemed to be somewhat fluid and unstable (Formby, 2017: 201). It was therefore not always easy to categorize how relevant LGBTQ communities were in their lives since ideas around what a community is, and the role it played in the interviewees’ lives, were very diverse. It turned out that it was not just a difficult question for the interviewees to answer but even a difficult one to formulate when I started to question my own assumptions about what community actually means. For instance, when I asked Maryam what her connection to a queer or LGBTQ community was, she jokingly responded:

Maryam: You mean if I am a ‘member’ (light laughter) of the community or...?

Nicole: or more like... would you say that your social circles are queer... or is it within this community that you identify yourself with...

Maryam: Yes exactly. Well, all of my friends except my colleagues are LGBTQ.

Nicole: So it’s a very relevant part of your life.

Maryam: Absolutely. I don’t have any... well, I have one close friend who is heterosexual and a cis-gender woman (light laughter) but the rest are trans or non-binary or gay or lesbian or queer or bi.

Maryam’s response and my attempt to clarify the question points to the conceptual struggles and the multiple meanings associated with the term community. While I categorized Maryam as having a strong connection to an LGBTQ community based on the fact that her network of friends consisted primarily of LGBTQ people, her response to my question also demonstrates that the concept of community might not be a term she would use to describe her personal relationships and groups of friends. Not surprisingly, the interviewees who talked about connecting socially with LGBTQ peers in their everyday lives were mostly located in or around bigger cities or urban areas.

The conditions for taking part in a community had often changed during or after the relationship(s) had ended. When asked about their relationship to

LGBTQ communities, around ten out of the 25 interviewees described it as relevant to their lives. Around the same number described having little or limited access to community, and five expressed ambivalence about whether it was important or whether they had any access to community at this moment in time or during the relationship(s). Thus, eventually more than half of the interviewees described having limited access to an LGBTQ community or scene; for some community mostly centred on family and coupledom rather than a community of peers. This was, for instance, the case for Saga. When asked about how relevant the LGBTQ community was in her life she responded,

Oy... tough one... but of course it is. It's a part of my identity, and it was a very relevant part of my life when we had the children, and especially when the children were small, it felt important to have many different family constellations around them. That they got to see that there are many different ways to be a family. Not just hearing that it exists but to actually have friends who had two mothers or two fathers or several mothers or several fathers. But maybe I don't really go looking for... well, I haven't thought much about it. I am not really active in those circles, but that probably that more to do with who I am. Not that I don't want to.

Saga's desire to take part in an LGBTQ community was mostly associated with her children's needs rather than her own, and it had been more relevant when the children were younger. The interviewees' sense of belonging and connection to community was therefore both temporally but also spatially specific (Formby, 2017: 1–2). When I asked Cecilia, a lesbian woman who at the time of the interview was in her early forties, whether an LGBTQ community was relevant to her life and a community she identified with, she answered,

Yes, it is. Even though I live...well, in general it's quite a heteronormative environment here in [small town] and the LGBTQ community is not blooming, so to speak [light laughter] But I identify as a lesbian, and I feel safer when I go out to gay places than hetero places even though I can go out to hetero places and I don't have a problem holding my girlfriend's hand or kissing her in public or something like that... But I was more in that world when I lived in [bigger city].

In Cecilia's case, being part of an LGBTQ community was about identifying as lesbian, but it was also based on a sense of belonging and safety in LGBTQ scenes, which she found easier to access when living in a bigger city. The lack of an LGBTQ scene was connected to the dominant heteronormative environment in the small town where she lived at the time of the interview.

A similar perspective on social-geographical conditions which shaped the interviewees' possibilities to take part and engage with a community came up in Amina's story which also related to the topic of having children:

We are very typical ‘Svenssons’. We have children, we go to work, the children go to school, get home, eat and go to basketball. We meet up with our friends occasionally. We have friends who are heterosexuals and some who are homosexuals. But other than that, there is not that much going on around such things in [small town]. They have a little pride flag hanging... was it around pride week? [...] yes, and that’s good and we have a pride flag hanging out there but *that’s it*. We don’t hang around in those circles so much.

In this statement, Amina describes the life she lives with her current partner and their children. Her lack of engagement with an LGBTQ community at this point in her life was explained by their everyday life as a family living in the Swedish countryside. While stressing that they were living a very normal family life and referring to themselves as Svenssons, a hypothetical average Swede, the difficulty and challenges of bringing up children in a small town as the only lesbian couple around was also raised in our interview. As lesbian parents in this context, they were very aware that people would talk and that their children had to hear some comments at school.

This also points to the paradox of normalization. While lesbian families can be described as being the same as heterosexual families, such assumptions also mean that it gets harder to acknowledge the way in which they are still treated differently. This might be particularly difficult to raise if a person is not part of an LGBTQ community, which in Sweden is often determined by geographical conditions. According to Formby (2017) the multiple meaning(s) and the complexity of LGBT communities, rituals and symbols work to reaffirm and sustain a sense of commonality and belonging. The rainbow flag in Amina’s account therefore works as a symbol of affinity with LGBTQ pride and presence (Formby, 2017: 138) which may be particularly important, given the limited access to an LGBTQ scene in the rural area.

Imagined communities: Commonality and dis-identification

The interviewees described participating in a community in many ways. In the interviewees’ statements above, community was addressed in terms of personal relationships, more scene-based communities (Formby, 2017: 196) but also as a form of imagined community based on identification. The concept of imagined communities was popularized by Benedict Anderson (1991) to describe the dynamics and development of nationalism, but it has since been applied to different forms of communities, where the members are not bound to each other by personal connections necessarily but through ideas around communion (Anderson, 1991: 6). Communities can therefore be connections to specific places but also practices (Weeks et al., 2001: 90–91), including identifications. While the interviewees had different relationships to LGBTQ

communities, most described the idea of community and the idea of a shared space of belonging as something desirable. However, there were also a few, like Selma, who had more contested relationships to LGBTQ communities:

I've done everything I could to stay out of it because I didn't want to have to come out to myself. I've known since I was fifteen and since then I've built up a wall. I have friends, guys who are homosexuals, but I've never had friends who were girls and homosexuals - to sort of keep it at a distance. To not get too close to my feelings [...] I have never been near a Pride festival or a Pride parade. On some occasions, I thought about it but then I always ended up getting ill. So it never happened for that reason. But no, I'm pretty alone in my homosexuality.

Selma's story was quite different from the other interviewees' stories, not because she had limited or no access to community but because she had deliberately avoided being part of a community. This was in part because Selma had struggled to accept her sexuality, which had also been a major issue in her previous relationship; her abusive ex-partner had used this against her. Whereas some interviewees talked about the importance of raising LGBTQ perspectives and issues in their everyday life as a way of being connected to an imagined community, Selma was very critical of having to represent specific issues at work based on her sexual identity.

Juliana, a lesbian woman in her early thirties with a migrant background, also talked about dis-identifying from community but for slightly different reasons than Selma. Juliana explained that although she had many friends who identified as lesbians and bisexuals, she did not identify with the urban queer community/scene, which she associated with her abusive ex-partner:

Everybody knows each other and they have these values that I didn't really... well, that you have to be a vegan and that you have to have this kind of hair. You know, rules that... I don't think that just because I'm homosexual, then I have to be like that. So, I got pretty tired of the scene and that you have to think and do this and that. The friends I have mostly identify as bisexuals but they are what I would call 'normal people'. People who don't talk so much about sexuality [...] it's more like: you happen to be a lesbian or you happen to be heterosexual. That's just how it is. These what I call '[bigger city] queers', they don't like men, only go out to certain places and not other kinds of places, and have strong opinions about a lot of things, and I just like to be myself.

Juliana's reflection touches upon a number of interesting dimensions regarding urbanity and the perceived need for communities. The urban space is often described in research on LGBTQ people's lives as a liberating place where queer people come out and reconnect with peers for support and recognition (Liliequist, 2020: 18). However, in Juliana's reflection the urban queer community is also a contested space. From a temporality perspective, Juliana's statement might suggest that the perceived need for communities might not be

as strong for younger generations of queers because of the increasing normalization of LGBTQ peoples' lives. However, while Juliana did not identify with what she described as the urban queer community, she also explained that many of her close friends were in fact bisexual and lesbian, and that part of their commonality was that sexuality was not the focus of their relationships. Thus, through her social networks, Juliana was able to connect with peers even if it might look quite different than more scene-based forms of communities, which she rejected.

Following Formby's (2017) critique of the LGBT community as singular, Juliana's reflection about the queer scene demonstrates that there is more than one type of community for LGBTQ people. In this case, the urban queer scene/community proved to be far from supportive, but rather restricting, normative and rule bound (Weeks et al., 2001: 84). This challenges the ideal that communities, whether imagined or built on personal relationships, are by default based on similarities and mutual understandings (Formby, 2017: 155). This idea of commonality can easily be undermined when dominant norms and attitudes around social practices and appearance have exclusionary effects instead. Juliana, who came out in her late twenties, suggested that she did not feel a compulsion to change her demeanour to fit into this specific and very narrow queer ideal which she found dominated the community. This is an example of the *problem of reification*, which, according to Fraser (2003: 91–92), is an unfortunate consequence of affirmative strategies of recognition, when group identities are simplified and reified and thus fail to promote respectful interactions across differences or ignore intra-group differences.

A number of the interviewees talked about identifying and belonging to lesbian/queer feminist communities/scenes. Elin, an interviewee in her early twenties who had been subjected to psychological violence in a lesbian relationship, explained it in the following way:

For me feminism has a lot to do with the LGBTQ movement. A lot of my friends are both [feminist and LGBTQ], and these go well together against the patriarchy. I think within feminism there is this really good trend to always stand by the victim, and if it is a woman who has been subjected to violence by a man, then you turn your back on this man and believe the woman. And you kind of create your own separatist space to keep out perpetrators. But that is quite difficult (laughs) when you haven't been with a man.

While being part of a lesbian feminist community provided some interviewees with knowledge and awareness of different forms of violence, it also created contradictions in terms of how to deal with the violence they were exposed to. Elin, for instance, explained that she wished she could get support for the abuse she had experienced, but she did not want her partner to be excluded from the LGBTQ community or for people to turn their backs on her. Another of the interviewees had been shunned by the LGBTQ community and felt obligated to move to another city because the ex-partner had made accusations

about IPV. This points to potential difficulties of relying on community support in cases of IPV.

Identifying or dis-identifying with communities was therefore not simply a matter having access to a community or the LGBTQ scene. It was also about how a given community operates and to what extent interviewees felt supported and connected to these communities. Weston describes a community as a contrast to isolation, where coming out would mean entering into a gay/queer scene and building one's family of friends (Weston, 1991: 122). However, among my interviewees, some described that their connections to communities depended on their partners. Amina's ex-partner had, for instance, not been open about her sexual identity. This prevented Amina from taking part in the LGBTQ community/scene as well. Some interviewees only gained access to a community through their partner. Lena, for instance, who did not see herself as part of a community, explained: "I had almost no friends who were LGBTQ in any way except for a few but not so many. I wasn't part of that world except for when I was with her then." After the relationship ended Lena had to redefine her identity. Her partner, who had been older, had introduced her to new friends and connections. This meant that when Lena ended the relationship she also lost contact with many of these friends.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the personal connection to a community could be a marker of power in the relationship, which Donovan et al. (2014: 26) frame as experiential power. This was evident when an abusive partner had a stronger connection to the LGBTQ community and used this social capital against the less experienced partner. However, for some like Evelina, being with an abusive partner meant that their connection and access to a community and social relationships to LGBTQ peers was very limited:

Well, during the time I lived with her we kept to ourselves mostly. I understand now that it was a too-small [scene], and there were many people who knew about her and she probably just wanted to get out of there. So I didn't really have much to do with that during that time. That was more before I met her.

Evelina and her ex-partner had relocated quite often during their relationship. Evelina interpreted this as a deliberate plan by her partner to keep her isolated. It prevented her from taking part in community and making friends of her own. Moving can have an impact on the building of social networks and communities depending on when a person/and or couple move and where to. Experiences of dislocation were particularly noticeable in the accounts of interviewees who had migrated to Sweden, but the isolating effects of relocation leading to social vulnerability also came up among interviewees who had relocated with their partners within Sweden (Ristock, 2002: 57; Ristock and Timbang, 2005: 8). However, feelings of dislocation can also make one more inclined to seek community support from other LGBTQ people.

Queer families and community support

Two of the interviewees who had a history of migration talked about the informal support they had received from their gay family as a significant part of their help-seeking process. The two interviewees described having relationships in line with Weston's (1991) family of choice definition of kinship, and these relationships had played an important role in their help-seeking process. The first, Sabrina, was a lesbian woman in her mid-twenties who had been in an abusive relationship a few years earlier. The relationship had partly been long-distance between Sweden and another European country and partly in the other country where she and her partner had lived together. While Sabrina sought formal help through a psychologist at her university in Sweden when she tried to end the relationship, it had been the informal support she received by a local older lesbian couple that had helped her the most:

It started with my friends Ann and Charlotte. They are my *fairy gay mothers*, and spending time with them made me realize that things were not okay. Not as they should be. It made me realize that something was wrong. To be able to see it from the outside. Before I was really caught in my own... well, I had a hard time listening to other people but they made me realize it myself somehow in the way that they asked. And also because they had been in this type of relationship before, so I think they knew how to make someone realize it. So it started with them.

The support Sabrina received from her "fairy gay mothers" was helpful because it was processual and slow but also because it came from a place of commonality, as the couple had knowledge about IPV and lesbian relationships. These components made it possible for Sabrina to start her help-seeking process. Through Ann and Charlotte, Sabrina also became friends with Jonas, an older homosexual police officer whom Sabrina lived with for a while when their house was undergoing reconstruction. He talked to Sabrina about her partner's abusive behaviours. One night when the two of them had been alone together he had asked her, "Why would you even go back? She's going to stab you one day." Sabrina had laughed at him and dismissed the idea at the time, but it fed into her own concerns about the psychological abuse she was experiencing, and she started to contemplate how to leave her partner. Ann and Charlotte then provided guidance and support throughout Sabrina's process of leaving her partner.

The other interviewee, Sasha, had also received informal support from an older lesbian couple whom she described as her "bonus mothers" and whom she met through the local LGBTQ organization:

Sasha: Yes, as I said, my bonus mothers have helped me a lot. I even stayed with them for a while to avoid her attacks and they also went to my house quite often and talked to her and said ‘you cannot do this’. That she had to leave me alone. I think she listened to them anyway. Because they were Swedish and older and...

Nicole: What is a bonus mother?

Sasha: I met this lesbian couple who are the same age as my mother and my mother lives in [another country] so I don’t have any family so they have adopted me, so to speak.

Nicole: Ahh.

Sasha: They also call themselves my bonus mothers... so yes.

In Swedish “*bonus mother*” (bonusmamma) is meant as an alternative to step-mother since bonus holds more positive connotations. The terms bonus mother, bonus father, bonus parents, bonus children and bonus families can potentially hold more extended meanings than stepparents, and it can therefore be used to describe elective forms of kinship, as in Sasha’s example. What is interesting in these two accounts is the extended role the older queer friends had taken in the informants’ help-seeking process, providing practical support such as accommodation but also advice and support during and after the relationship. Both Sabrina and Sasha had migrated to Sweden, and Sabrina was living outside Sweden for part of the abusive relationship. Sasha’s position as a refugee meant that she had been placed in a town where she had no social network, and the local LGBTQ organization was therefore an important source of support for her. Although Sasha was one of the interviewees who was most involved in organizational work around LGBTQ rights, she was also very critical of the lack of support for women within these contexts:

There is not so much for women unfortunately. That’s what I am trying to address. Can’t we find some more women who want to come here and start different activities and groups and stuff? I think it’s a big deal and it’s very important. Because in my country it wouldn’t work. You had to hide all the time and lie to everyone about who you are.

To explain her disappointment with the lack of organizational activities for women in her local LGBTQ organization in Sweden, Sasha referred to the situation in her country of origin, where LGBTQ people cannot live openly out of fear of repercussions. This touches on the dilemma of progress. While one might expect there to be a stronger formalized LGBTQ community in a Swedish context because of lack of restrictions and punishment, the lack of visible hostility against queer people might also weaken the perceived need for LGBTQ communities. It was particularly adult women who Sasha felt were missing from the LGBTQ organization’s work.

If she is over 25, where can a woman go if she has experienced something terrible? There is nowhere to go. The women’s shelter mainly takes care of people who have been in heterosexual relationships. But women over 25 who

might have been married, and have several children or one child and then suddenly realizes 'I might be a lesbian'. There is nowhere to go.

Sasha's reflection points to the invisibility surrounding women within the LGBTQ movement but also the invisibility of lesbians within the feminist shelter movement, which has focused on heterosexual women's exposure to IPV. Similarly to Turell and Herrmann's (2008) findings on community support, the importance of talking to others who had similar experiences was often raised by the interviewees. Five of the interviewees had either contacted or been contacted by ex-partners of the abusive ex-partner and talked to them about their experiences. Many described these encounters as liberating and that it felt good to be able to talk to someone who could relate to their experiences. However, the fact that the commonality of these encounters was based on being victimized by the same person also meant that the conversation often had a more individualized focus on the ex-partner's mental history and behaviour.

Many of the interviewees sought primarily informal support through friends. Some, like Sabrina and Sasha, found support through lesbian, queer and gay friends, and others talked to friends who did not necessarily identify as LGBTQ or as part of a shared community. However, interviewees also talked about wanting to have access to more inclusive formal support services or services with an explicit LGBTQ perspective. Saga, for instance, who had sought counselling in a support group at a women's shelter organization, had been very pleased with the support she received there. However, even though the counsellors had helped her to identify and deal with her experiences of violence, she still missed talking to others with a similar experience of IPV in same-sex relationships:

It might sound stupid because I don't wish there to be other people with the same experiences as I but at times I sort of miss talking to someone who has also lived in a same-sex relationship where there was physical and psychological abuse. Just because there are so many other aspects apart from that and because in my experience when the question comes up at different occasions and people share their experiences about violence in heterosexual relationship then ... well then it doesn't fit, I don't fit in or it feels like I am disturbing a bit.

This quote points to the importance of feeling understood and sharing commonality with others in the help-seeking process but also the fear of being perceived as a disturbance. This was a recurring theme in the interviewees' accounts when talking about seeking support through general support services. Saga explained that when looking for support she did not find or look into LGBTQ-specific services. She explained that it had been a big step for her to even begin looking for IPV-related support services, and she also assumed that if such services existed she would be referred to them. Very few

of the interviewees had any knowledge of particular LGBTQ support for victims of IPV, which might not be surprising given that there is only one organization in Sweden that works specifically with LGBTQ victim-survivors, and it is located in Stockholm. Tina, who had received extended support and counselling through the general victim-support services throughout her legal proceedings, found information about RFSL support services on her own and had called them for additional support. When I asked what it had been like to talk to them, she answered,

I thought it was really good. It always feels good to feel understood on a deeper level. To talk to someone who actually gets what it means to be outside the norm. Because that also has an effect on these kinds of things. Everything is different, the encounters in healthcare or with the police or the legal justice system, it's just different. When they didn't even know how to label it, then it starts to get weird. So when you finally end up with people who actually understand and can relate to your situation, that feels very good. It's sort of liberating in some way. Because you can just let that part go. You don't have to explain so many things.

Tina found the support she received through the specialized LGBTQ support organization very helpful because it was based on an implicit and mutual understanding of her experience as a lesbian victim-survivor. Her experiences of having her victimization ignored or made unintelligible within the legal and healthcare system supported the need to seek specialized support within the LGBTQ context. However, since RFSL support services are only located in one place in Sweden, and this was not close to where Tina lived, she only sought support through these services once. While some of RFSL's local organizations offer non-specific counselling for LGBTQ people, there is generally very uneven access to LGBTQ services across Sweden, and, in particular, services with specialized knowledge about IPV are often missing outside the bigger cities.

Conclusion: Challenging utopias

In this chapter, I challenge utopic ideas around kinship in two ways. First, in relation to lesbian couple and families, I focused specifically on children's impact on IPV and help-seeking. In the second half of the chapter, I moved on to explore family in a broader sense to challenge ideals around the singular and supportive lesbian/queer community.

By analysing the accounts from the interviewees who had children, I found that having children had a significant impact on IPV and their help-seeking processes. Children both had an impact on an abstract level, for instance, through the burden of representation, which made it harder to talk about IPV within lesbian and queer families in light of recently won rights. But also there

was a more practical level, where having children could both accelerate and delay the help-seeking process. The decision to leave the abusive partner was often accelerated when the interviewee noticed that the violence started to affect their children. However, children also made it harder to actually leave an abusive co-parent, and the abuse could continue through the children after the relationship had ended. The delayed help-seeking process was especially prevalent in the cases when the interviewee was not legally recognized as a parent. The state's extended involvement in lesbian and queer families' parental arrangements proved to have an impact on IPV as well as help-seeking. Lesbian and queer families have to go through different legal, medical and social systems and agree to have their relationships, bodies and parental skills assessed in order to get fertility treatments through the public health care system. This is often described as a very insecure, uncertain and time-consuming process (Rozental and Malmquist, 2015). On the other hand, the interviewee who had children outside the state-regulated system ran the risk of enhanced legal vulnerability and having to go through secondary adoption processes. Preventing the non-birth parent from going through with the second-parent adoption was one way in which the abusive partner could use the legal system as part of the abuse.

While the issues facing lesbian families and the role of communities are somewhat different, I suggest that they are also related. The increasing focus on the reproductive lesbian couple challenges queer communities' ideals of families of choice. More than half of my interviewees described having limited or no connection to a community of peers. My analysis of how LGBTQ communities figured in my interviewees' accounts challenges the idea of the singular LGBTQ community. Some of the interviewees defined communities as built on social relationships, some, as a more scene-based and an urban phenomenon and some, as imagined communities based on shared struggles. Thus, I found that socio-demographic and geographical conditions had a significant impact on how the interviewees engaged with LGBTQ communities; some did not identify with LGBTQ communities or certain types of communities. Community support from other LGBTQ people was often informally based on the interviewees' social networks. Despite this, a number of the interviewees wished for more awareness around IPV and more community-based or LGBTQ-friendly services to deal with IPV, as many victim-survivors looked for support from people they could identify with.

The LGBTQ movement's struggle for recognition in Sweden is often described as a story of progress, as LGBTQ people have gone from being criminalized and pathologized to receiving legal and social recognition and rights to protection and reproduction. The reproductive lesbian couple often serves as the image of queer utopian family ideals (see Dahl, 2018). However, to refer to Clare Hemmings' (2011) tropes around feminist storytelling, we are often invested in the singular progress narrative, as it provides us with a sense of a unified and shared *we*. However, this celebratory tone leaves little space

for dissent (2011: 20–21, 24). While the new reproductive and legal family rights have been celebrated as signs of progress for the LGBTQ movements, they have also been subject to reservations and include stories of loss. The perceived need for LGBTQ communities, for instance, might decline as lesbian and queer families turn to the state for recognition of their families. One of the main issues with the one-sided progress narrative is that it assumes that the expansion of LGBTQ rights means that recognition and validation from all social institutions have been secured when, in fact, the progress is often mainly based on expanding reproductive possibilities and technologies for certain groups of LGBTQ people (Björklund and Dahl, 2019: 14–15). The increased focus on the nuclear family and coupledness can be seen as part of a general social trend to use *we are all the same* arguments to argue for equal rights which also impacts on imaginaries around exposure to IPV (See Donovan and Hester, 2015: 70). I suggest that the increasing normalization of lesbian and queer families in Sweden draws on perceptions of sameness but comes at a cost when different conditions for family making, violence and help-seeking are disregarded, and it has an impact on how lesbian and queer people, especially those with children, engage or fail to engage with communities of peers.

7. Conclusions

[T]he nature of archival silence is that certain people's narratives and their nuances are swallowed by history; we see only what pokes through because it is sufficiently salacious for the majority to pay attention. [...] Trying to find accounts, especially those that don't culminate in extreme violence, is unbelievably difficult. Our culture does not have an investment in helping queer folks understand what their experiences *mean*. (Machado, 2019: 161)

The quote above is from Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* (2019), in which Machado explores different types of stories, from court cases and research to cultural narratives and tropes, in order to make sense of both her own experiences of abuse in a queer relationship as well as the cultural silence surrounding abuse in same-sex/queer relationships. Machado uses archival silence to describe why stories of IPV in queer communities are often missing and excluded from collective narratives (2019: 2). Similarly to Machado, in this thesis I set out to challenge certain dominant collective stories that have made queer and lesbian victims of IPV unintelligible and invisible. In order to understand not just the silence but also the consequences this might have for lesbian and queer people's help-seeking behaviours, I had to engage with how we as individuals, communities and institutions work with and respond to such dominant collective accounts about violence, kinship and communities (Plummer, 1995). As I was analysing the interviews, I quickly realized that in order to understand the interviewees' experiences of violence and help-seeking I needed to challenge what is commonly perceived and counted as violence.

Violence could be described as an essential part of the constitutive story of LGBTQ movements and communities. Queer people have mobilized and continue to mobilize to avoid violence. Hate crimes are often portrayed in the media, reports and public discourse as the type of violence LGBTQ people face, and specifically the types of violence that are, to use Nixon's (2011) term, spectacular and prominent enough to "poke through" and gain public attention. However, by applying Nixon's concept of slow violence to the interviewees' accounts of IPV, it became possible to pay attention to a form of violence that is not often noticed or recognised as violence at all - a more subtle, repeated type of violence that is frequently hidden from public view. As raised by Machado, queer people's experiences are not usually the centre of public attention. However, with this thesis I challenge the assumption that

individuals, groups and communities perceived as *on the margins* of our society can only make their experiences comprehensible by responding to or being informed by the majority's perspectives and experiences. I suggest that by centring lesbian and queer people's experiences of IPV and help-seeking and exploring the meanings they have in their own right, we create space for more nuanced and complex understandings of victim-survivors' experiences of IPV and help-seeking, both within LGBTQ communities and within other communities.

In this concluding chapter, I discuss the main findings and contributions of my thesis. I first discuss how conventional definitions of violence and victimization serve as a challenge to conceptualizing violence in lesbian and queer intimate relationships and how this affects how the interviewees describe and make sense of their experiences. Following this is an exploration of how these challenges affect their help-seeking processes. To contextualize the findings, I discuss how the Swedish context creates different types of help-seeking and definitions of community support compared to the findings from primarily Anglophone contexts. Finally, I end with the implications of my findings for practitioners and for future research. The temporalities of violence and their impact on lesbian and queer victim-survivors' help-seeking processes are at the centre of this concluding discussion. I suggest that we need to use a more inclusive definition of violence and help-seeking to capture the effects of slow violence. Such approaches have methodological and theoretical implications, concerning which categories and definitions we apply in research on IPV, but also how we discuss and conceptualize violence, and victimization.

Struggling with conventional definitions of IPV

I started the introduction of my thesis with a statement by Lovisa, an interviewee who found that her victimization did not count in the general media because she had been victimized *by a woman*. Similarly, the first analysis chapter started with a statement by Evelina, who initially did not feel that she really belonged to the victim category but whose friends and partner had encouraged her to be interviewed for this project. The two accounts point to the importance of recognition, whether by others as having been subjected to violence or having one's story recognized in public discourses on violence. This was the first help-seeking challenge I identified in my research, which became apparent early on in the analysis and even during the interviews, as some of my interviewees still struggled to talk about their experiences as violence at the time of the interview and continued to question the designation of their experiences as violence.

In Chapter Three, I explored how the interviewees described and made sense of their experiences of violence. To understand this struggle of recognition, we have to engage with the common and dominant imaginaries and

myths that exist around IPV and victimhood. I used Donovan and Hester's (2015) public stories of DVA, which places DVA/IPV within a heteronormative framework with an emphasis on physical violence to understand the disidentification many of my interviewees experienced. When reflecting on whether their experiences counted as IPV, interviewees would often draw on such conventional accounts of violence, and some turned to legal definitions of violent acts, either to legitimate or question their own experiences as violence. Slow violence, such as coercive control, is often not depicted in public awareness campaigns. The criminal justice system's reliance on proof tends to over-emphasize physical violence (Hodes and Mennicke, 2019). Furthermore, much research on IPV favours violence that can be measured. Large-scale quantitative studies relying on narrow incident-based definitions of violence tend to favour physical violence that can be counted in terms of number of incidents within a limited and set timeframe. The Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS) continue to be the most common and well-known measuring tool, despite feminists' continued critique of the scales' inability to account for the impact of victimization and degree of perpetration as well as the context and motives of the violent behaviour as well as the inability of the scales to capture chronic patterns of abuse (Donovan and Barnes, 2020b: 35–38). These narrow definitions of violence dominate much of the research on IPV, which in turn also informs social policies and interventions and therefore has a significant impact on how we talk about IPV in general.

To capture the effects of the types of violence that are not easily identified as violence, I introduced the theoretical framing of slow and spectacular violence (Nixon, 2011) from environmental studies. Nixon encourages us to rethink what we regard as violence. However, such rethinking “requires that we complicate conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound, and body bound” (Nixon, 2011: 3). As my interviewees' accounts show, psychological violence was identified as one of the dominant types of violence they experienced. However, the problem with psychological violence is that it often leaves no physical mark. This lack of visibility makes it difficult to recognize psychological abuse as violence. It can also be extremely difficult to capture a pattern of repeated violence, as each incident can easily be dismissed as minor or insignificant. Many of the interviewees reported that they had been controlled by their partner. The violence was often iterative and processual, and as they were slowly isolated from their social networks, this gave the abusive partner extended possibilities to control them. To understand this process of isolation and control I drew on feminist concepts of violence, such as the process of the normalization of violence (Lundgren, 2012) and coercive control (Stark, 2007; Stark and Hester, 2019).

It has been debated whether feminist concepts that have been developed in research on men's violence against women can be used to understand IPV in LGBTQ relationships. Stark suggests that abuse in relational settings could be

shaped not only by gender inequality but also by heteronormativity. In addition, Stark stresses that there is a need for more research on coercive control in LGBTQ relationships to understand how this unfolds (Stark and Hester, 2019: 92). My findings offer a contribution to this research by showing the ways in which the dynamics of psychological control play an essential part in the violence experienced by the interviewees. While the focus of this thesis is not to explain why violence occurs in lesbian and queer relationships, I draw on these feminist concepts of violence (Lundgren, 2012; Stark, 2007), as they allow us to understand the effects of violence and to have a more nuanced discussion of the effects of power inequality and asymmetry in intimate relationships. They also enable us to understand the help-seeking behaviours discussed in my thesis.

Various heteronormative and gendered structures around intimacy and relationships legitimize abusive behaviours, and although the relationship norms in LGBTQ relationships should not be seen as the same as heterosexual relationships, they do not exist in completely different spheres. Lesbian and queer relationships do not exist in a social vacuum, and as I have discussed through the myth of the lesbian utopia, assuming that these relationships are equal by default can be quite harmful. For instance, Donovan and Hester (2015) found that relationship rules was a recurring theme in abusive relationships, across gender and sexuality in their COHSAR study. The first rule was that the relationship was couched in the abusive partner's terms and, second, that the victim-survivor was responsible for the partner, the relationship, and their household. I found that violence was often disguised as *practices of love* (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 121), where the abusive partner used need and neediness to justify their abusive behaviours. This frequently resulted in care and emotional work being performed by the interviewee, who would feel responsible to provide care for the abusive partner. Donovan and Hester suggest that those who perform the emotional work in the relationship are more vulnerable to being victimized across gender and sexuality (2011: 81). Being positioned as the person who was stronger and responsible for their partner and household made it harder for my interviewees to identify themselves as victims of IPV since this breaks with popular perceptions of the victim of IPV as weak, passive and stripped of agency (Donovan and Hester, 2010). This explains why so many of the interviewees struggled to identify themselves as victims.

Furthermore, slow violence and coercive control in particular are difficult to detect as these are characterized by specificity, and the abusive partner will often use privileged information about their partner to control them (Stark and Hester, 2019: 87). This means that the same dynamic of coercive control might look quite different depending on the social positions of the perpetrator and victim, yet it follows a similar dynamic of abuse based on asymmetric positions in the relationship (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 205). Interviewees reported how their partner had used their lack of experience in queer relation-

ships, their ages, migration status, disabilities or precarious legal and economic situations to justify or enact violence. Thus, while the means and the conditions for IPV and help-seeking might look different, I argue that it is important to understand IPV in relation to oppressive social structures in order to avoid individualizing IPV in lesbian and queer relationships because their victimizations do not fit conventional definitions of IPV. Based on the findings of this thesis, I suggest that we need to challenge constraining definitions of violence and victimhood in order to produce accounts of victimization that resonate with victim-survivors' experiences. To do so I suggest we include forms of violence that are not easily identified as such to explore how unequal power dynamics are legitimized and upheld.

Help-seeking is the focus of this thesis. However, the question of what constitutes help-seeking is not straightforward. As addressed particularly in Chapter Four, it is not just violence that deserves a wider definition; help-seeking, too, needs to be viewed as a slow, indirect and iterative process.

The vicissitudes of help-seeking

To understand lesbian and queer victim-survivors' experiences of informal and formal support services, I set out to explore which support actors they turned to at what times and how helpful they considered the support. I used help-seeking maps to capture the complexity and the multiplicity of help-seeking actors and activities. While the mind maps were initially meant to be merely an analytical tool to help me keep track of the interviewees' help-seeking processes when transcribing, they turned out to be a useful source for visualizing the complexity and the interrelatedness of different types of support. They thus constitute an important methodological contribution to research on help-seeking by challenging how and what we usually define as help-seeking.

One of the main findings and contributions of this thesis is that help-seeking often mirrors the violence experienced. Most of the interviewees described psychological abuse as the most dominant type of violence. This is processual and iterative, and these victim-survivors' help-seeking patterns mirrored this. Whereas incidents of physical and more spectacular violence did at times trigger immediate outside intervention, for instance, from the police, the majority of the interviewees' help-seeking was more processual and indirect. They would, for instance, go to counselling, start to disclose information about their relationship to members of their social networks or seek practical support.

As I was mapping the interviewees' help-seeking routes, it quickly became clear that in order to make sense of their complex help-seeking processes, I needed to expand the notion of what help-seeking is. This also constitutes an important contribution that my thesis makes to studies of help-seeking in cases of IPV. Certain actions, such as keeping a diary, might not be characterized as

traditional forms of help-seeking for IPV, but the processual nature of documenting one's experiences can have great significance in the help-seeking process (for example, as evidence to formal bodies such as the police and the courts) and needs to be recognised. Documenting experiences of abuse can help challenge the interpretive dominance of the abusive partner regarding the relationship and support the victim-survivor's decision to start the process of leaving the abusive partner.

In line with previous research on help-seeking behaviours and strategies, I found that victims of IPV used a significant variety of informal and formal help-seeking strategies (Goodman et al., 2003: 163; Kaukinen, 2002: 5). However, research on this topic tends to focus on help-seeking actions (Lempert, 1997: 290–291), ranging from informal and private forms of help-seeking to more public and formal ones (Kaukinen, 2002, 2004), focusing on the moment of leaving the abusive relationship. This, I argue, fails to account for the prolonged process of disentangling oneself from an abusive partner. Furthermore, the informal/formal divide does not do full justice to the multiplicity of help-seeking my data shows. In line with Liang et al. (2005) and their theoretical framework for help-seeking processes among survivors of IPV, I suggest that help-seeking is often not a straight path but rather a fragmented, slow and iterative process, where both informal and formal help-seeking strategies inform and complement each other at different times.

One reason why I decided to use a mind map format to capture help-seeking processes was that this enabled me to view them as *patterns* rather than as chronological *timelines*. It helped me to pay attention to the range of different actions and actors which were shaping the help-seeking processes of victim-survivors. I identified a wide variety of help-seeking activities. Some were more subtle, such as adaptive behaviours to try to prevent the violence from escalating, while others could be characterized as practices of self-care and protection, such as finding places of escape in everyday life such as the workplace, gyms or a school setting. Thus, based on my findings and documentation of help-seeking processes, I argue for the need to capture processes that I term *mundane*, meaning everyday practices of help-seeking. This includes paying attention to actions that are not normally identified as help-seeking.

For many of the interviewees, help-seeking consisted of a prolonged and slow process of disentanglement. I identified certain factors which influenced these processual dimensions of help-seeking. First, the struggle to recognize violence was often tied up with the experiences of slow violence that contradicted the public story of IPV, as already mentioned. However, the process of recognizing violence and seeking support was also conditioned by factors such as age and relationship experience. Many of the interviewees had been younger than their partner(s) and/or had been subjected to IPV in one of their first lesbian or queer relationships, which made it harder to recognize the IPV. Similarly to Ristock (2002) and Donovan and Hester's (2008) research, I also found factors such as lack of embeddedness in a community, lack of support

from social networks such as one's family, or a form of coming out euphoria which can make it difficult to identify abusive behaviours. Additionally the burden of representation might make it harder to address IPV in a lesbian/queer relationship. If family members and/or friends are not supportive of one's sexuality, it can be even harder to disclose violence as the social networks' acceptance of one's partner(s) is tied up with the acceptance of one's sexuality.

In Chapter Six I analysed how parenting children with an abusive partner created specific conditions for IPV through social and legal forms of vulnerability. Having children could both escalate and delay the help-seeking processes. For some, realizing that the partner was unable to parent or fearing for the safety of the child(ren) worked as a turning point in the help-seeking process, whereas slow and uncertain institutional processes related to parent claims would delay the process. Lesbian and queer couples who wish to parent rely on the state's assessment of their relationship, both in terms of getting access to fertility treatments and for legal recognition as parents. Further, the interviewees that had limited or no legal rights to their children would often stay longer with their abusive partner to ensure legal recognition as parents before leaving, and an abusive partner could use this as a means of control. Thus the particular conditions for the violence and help-seeking in lesbian and queer families with children are shaped by institutionalized heteronormative values (Fraser, 2003). This can be used by an abusive person in institutional settings to prevent their partner from getting custody and from leaving an abusive relationship.

Given that help-seeking was often a long and indirect process of recognizing one's experiences as violence, many of the interviewees talked to friends and family members in their help-seeking processes. Previous research has shown that informal types of help-seeking, especially from friends, are the most common types of support sought by LGBTQ victim-survivors (Calton et al., 2015; Donovan and Barnes, 2020a; Messinger, 2017; Turell and Herrmann, 2008). Barriers for help-seeking, such as a lack of trust in the general support services, are often used to explain this pattern (Calton et al., 2015; Donovan and Hester, 2015). While these are very important perspectives, I suggest that we need to include factors beyond barriers for help-seeking to understand how informal support actors intervene in IPV and what functions informal help-seeking serves. Unlike the formal help-seeking encounters, where interviewees would often describe specific incidents of helpful and unhelpful responses, informal actors' helpfulness was not as easily identified as failed or successful responses. I suggest that this points back to the mirroring and the temporality of IPV as slow and cumulative, where those who are victimized will often seek different types of support unrelated directly to IPV before recognizing the relationship as abusive. Being confronted with the views of members of one's social networks can have cumulative effects when

done in a processual manner with respect for the agency of the victim-survivor (Donovan and Hester, 2015: 184).

While members of a social network may be the first to detect signs of IPV and may express concern, their responses or attempts at support can unintentionally turn into definitional oppression rather than definitional assistance if the victim is not in a position to identify the experiences as violence or to leave the abusive partner/s (Lempert, 1997). As I discussed in Chapter Four, many of the interviewees were wary of disclosing violence to members of their social networks. This meant that informal help-seeking was done in a more fragmented manner, such as telling (different) parts of one's story to different people, using part disclosure or seeking support where they knew they would not be forced to disclose.

Expanding the concept of help-seeking makes it possible to understand that informal help-seeking does not necessarily equal disclosure. There are various reasons why lesbian and queer victim-survivors cannot or choose not to confide in friends. This is especially the case if a couple has mutual friends that are part of the same LGBTQ community (Ortiz, 2020: 112). Many of my interviewees had been isolated from their social networks during the relationship, which made it harder to disclose violence to friends. In Chapter Four, I also addressed how social and geographical proximity could even hinder disclosure, which made some interviewees more inclined to reach out to friends or family members living further away or to seek practical support from friends or acquaintances without necessarily disclosing violence. Finally, some interviewees found it easier to confide in professional help-providers such as counsellors first rather than turning toward their own social network, as there was less at stake when disclosing to a professional since that relationship could be aborted more easily without repercussions. These are just some of the ways in which victim-survivors negotiated and managed their help-seeking processes. Thus, at times formal types of support, particularly ones not specifically targeted at IPV, could be easier to access than informal types of support such as friends and especially family members, who might have particular views about the abusive partner and/or the relationship.

Many of the interviewees sought support through psychological counselling. The helpfulness of the counselling depended on whether the counsellor(s) had recognized signs of IPV. Psychological counselling is often described as a less-than-ideal type of support in cases of IPV. Whether the support is sought individually or as a couple, psychological counselling tends to be expensive, privatized and have a very individualized or couple focus. This runs the risk of minimizing or legitimizing IPV if the counsellor does not have adequate training or experience to detect IPV. However, as my findings suggest, identifying one's experiences as IPV is often a prolonged and slow process, and psychological counselling services can therefore be easier to access for victim-survivors than services specializing in IPV. Regardless of whether psychological counselling is considered as a less-than-ideal type of support or

not, I argue that it needs to be acknowledged that it is a common initial and indirect type of help-seeking. I discuss its implications in the next section when offering suggestions for policies.

In summary, the responses the interviewees received in the help-seeking processes affected how they interpreted the relationship and their situation. The helpfulness of the responses, both informal and formal ones, depended on the timing, the direction and formulation of the support and who offered the support. I suggest that we need to regard aborted or partial attempts for support as an important part of the help-seeking process and distinguish them from failed and missed opportunities for support, which will often be the result of failed responses and misrecognition of IPV by the informal and formal support actors.

Whereas many of the interviewees expressed ambiguity when answering to what extent or whether their informal networks had been supportive or not, this was not the case for formal help-seeking encounters, especially not the more incident-based encounters such as those in a healthcare setting and the criminal justice system. While some of the interviewees had found formal help-providers' responses helpful, others described failed encounters where the help-providers had unintentionally legitimized abusive behaviours, ignored signs of IPV or simply failed to provide adequate support for the interviewees to disclose violence or gain support. In some cases, the abusive partners had been allowed into the examination room in healthcare settings, which made it difficult if not impossible to disclose violence.

To understand the help-seeking processes of lesbian and queer victim-survivors I used Fraser's (2000, 2003) social justice framework, specifically the conceptualization of mis/recognition. Applying the concept of mis/recognition to understand injustice and the different interrelated ways in which struggles for recognition and the effects of misrecognition shape the help-seeking processes of lesbian and queer victim-survivors is one of the main theoretical contributions of this thesis. Using this concept I suggest that the failure to recognize lesbian and queer victims in formal support services is based on institutionalized heteronormative values, which determine who is viewed as an appropriate victim worthy of protection. This points to misrecognition as a matter of status subordination, where certain social groups, in this case lesbian and queer people, are denied the recognition they need to participate as full members in social interactions (Fraser, 2003: 49). Fraser states that "the form(s) of recognition justice requires in any given case depend(s) on the form(s) of misrecognition to be redressed." (2003: 45) I argue that to understand why lesbian and queer victims become unintelligible victims of IPV, we need to look at the intersection of different forms of injustices lesbian and queer people face and how these have been redressed.

Social movements such as the LGBTQ movements but also feminist movements have to some extent relied on affirmative identity-based strategies to gain recognition for marginalized groups that face structural discrimination

and violence, such as hate crimes and gender-based violence. One of the major drawbacks of affirmative strategies in relation to misrecognition is, according to Fraser, that they can end up valorising group identities, pressuring people to conform to the imaginaries of the group type while simplifying the complexities of people's lives and identifications (2003: 45). Feeling the burden of representation made it harder for some interviewees to recognize and speak up about IPV. This came up in my interview with Saga, for instance, who struggled to identify and speak about her experience as violence because she wanted to show that they as a lesbian family were worthy of the earned political rights to form a family.

Thus it is important to address the ways in which struggles for legal and social recognition of LGBTQ people interrelate with the struggles for recognizing IPV. The investment in progress narratives and a desire to show that LGBTQ people are worthy of legal recognition and protection are often based on discourses around sameness (see Donovan and Hester, 2015: 70). However, as is clear from my interviewees' reflections on the burden of representation, the stakes are not the same for queer and heterosexual couples.

This leads me to one of the greatest theoretical and practical challenges researchers as well as help-providers encounter when it comes to the subject of lesbian and queer victims of IPV: concerns regarding how to balance contradictory discourses of sameness and differences. This serves as an example of the multiple and sometimes contradictory consequences of misrecognition, when subordinated groups are at times ascribed excessive distinctness or when distinctness is left unacknowledged (Fraser, 2003: 47). Treating lesbian and queer IPV separately from heterosexual IPV falls into the difference discourse, which may end up othering lesbian and queer IPV victims. However, to treat queer victims as exactly the same as victims of IPV in heterosexual relationships runs the risk of ignoring the different conditions around violence and help-seeking created by intersecting oppressive structures such as homo-, trans-, and biphobia as well as sexism. One of my theoretical contributions to the field of LGBTQ IPV research has been to refuse to give in to the binary framework of either sameness or difference by exploring the misrecognition of slow violence and help-seeking but also the context and conditions which might distinguish lesbian and queer victim-survivors' help-seeking processes further.

To understand experiences of misrecognition in the help-seeking processes of victim-survivors, I suggest that we need to be attentive to less spectacular forms of injustices. In my thesis, I described this as the subtle unintended effects of heteronormativity, where queer or lesbian victim-survivors become unintelligible as potential victims of IPV. This includes small cues such as when help-providers assume the wrong gender for the interviewee's partner or act surprised or confused about the very existences of non-heterosexual IPV. These subtle forms of inadvertent misrecognition can have severe consequences for the help-seeking processes of the interviewees. My findings

show that being recognized as a victim of IPV and having one's experiences validated by one's social networks as well as by formal help-providers proved to be of great importance. Tina, who was among the few who had accessed LGBTQ services specializing in violence, talked about how liberating it had felt to be understood on a deeper level and not having one's experience questioned, as she had experienced in the criminal justice system, or have it made invisible, which had been the case in the health care system. This importance of being understood and recognized brings me to the final point for this section, namely the importance of but also the challenges that arise from the concept of community support.

Studies of LGBTQ help-seeking from primarily Anglophone contexts have emphasized the need to raise awareness around IPV within LGBTQ communities to develop community support and community-based perspectives on IPV (Giorgio, 2002; Renzetti, 1989; Turell and Herrmann, 2008). However, one of the main challenges of implementing community-based initiatives of support, which is often overlooked, is the lack of a clear concept of what actually constitutes community as well as what community services and support should look like. One of the first things that struck me when I was interviewing and asking about community support was how the concept of community had many different meanings. For some, being part of a community or scene was about being active in LGBTQ organizations, which not that many of the interviewees were at the time of the interview. Other interviewees described it more as an ideological identification, and for yet others it meant having a number of LGBTQ people as friends. A few did not identify as part of the LGBTQ community at all. The multiple meanings of community expressed by my interviewees call for the need to critique the idea of a single LGBTQ community (Formby, 2017), and for re-thinking community as a ready resource. Thus, an important contribution of this research was to focus attention on the specificity of context to understand help-seeking and IPV, such as understanding what community support and even community itself means in the Swedish context and how this might differ from other countries where similar research has been done.

Given that Sweden has a relatively small population compared to its vast terrain, there are fewer services available for the LGBTQ population in general and specifically for those who live far from the bigger cities. Thus, access to formalized LGBTQ organizations and social activities for LGBTQ people very much depends on one's geographical location, as LGBTQ organizations are very unevenly spread across the country and, not surprisingly, more available in urban than in rural areas (Jonsson, 2015; MUCF, 2021). To understand the different functions LGBTQ communities serve in Sweden, it is not enough to take geographical considerations into account but also political and social contexts (Siverskog and Bromseth, 2019: 337). As Edenheim (2019: 33) argues, it is not unproblematic to adopt the concept of community from Anglo-

phone countries for a Nordic context. In the US, for instance, lack of a functioning welfare state puts more pressure onto identity-based communities to provide social services and functions. I would argue that the growing public acceptance of LGBTQ people and progressive legislation in Sweden might even change the perceived need for or functions of LGBTQ communities; it could create the expectation that the general services should be LGBTQ-inclusive even if this is not always true. Very few of the interviewees had even considered seeking support through LGBTQ-specific services. A few had expected to be referred to LGBTQ services when seeking support through general services but were not, and many were not aware of the existence of such services. This is perhaps not surprising given the limited number of services.

Progressive family legislation and anti-discrimination laws have created the image of Sweden as a safe haven for LGBTQ people. However, this image does not necessarily match the social reality of LGBTQ people. Two of the interviewees, for instance, who had moved to Sweden specifically to be able to live openly, experienced disappointment and isolation once they arrived. While this could also be seen as a consequence of living in an abusive relationship, the lack of community engagement was a common theme across the interviewees' accounts. Perhaps the increasing normalization of the reproductive queer family in Sweden might also have come at the expense of community engagement (Dahl, 2018). Lack of previous engagement with LGBTQ communities and the relatively small number of formal LGBTQ support services specialized in violence might help to explain why community-based support was not one of the first sources of support sought by my interviewees.

Despite different levels of engagement with LGBTQ communities, many of the interviewees wished for more awareness around IPV in these communities, and expressed feeling alone in their victimization, even after seeking support. In her influential work on the conceptualization of trauma, Judith Herman (2001) emphasizes the role of communities and storytelling when working through experiences of trauma. IPV isolates the victim-survivor, and an important part of recovering from trauma is, according to Herman, seeking commonality and sharing one's story of violence with others who have had similar experiences. Feminist support groups for abused women are one example of this (2001: 214–221). The lack of community-based initiatives for lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV risks not only isolating these victim-survivors; it also risks making lesbian and queer help-seekers feel like a disturbance in the general support services, and it risks framing IPV as merely the result of individual or relationship issues (Donovan and Barnes, 2020a: 567). The lack of awareness and limited number of LGBTQ-specific initiatives on IPV in Sweden might also explain why many of the interviewees sought individualized forms of support. While I argue that there is no one singular LGBTQ community, it is important to recognize that we need to address LGBTQ people's experiences of IPV collectively, as a public and social issue, by creating community-informed initiatives.

Policy suggestions and implications for practice

In this section, I revisit my main findings and themes to discuss their implications for practitioners and policies. The interviewees who sought help through formal help-providers had very different experiences of how helpful the support had been, but the most successful cases were characterized by recognition, trust and appropriate conditions for disclosure. Based on my interviewees' experiences of formal help-seeking encounters, I have suggestions for how formal help-providers can improve help-seeking encounters with queer and lesbian victim-survivors of IPV. My research shows that help-seeking processes often involve a number of different interrelated types of support actors and/or services. I cannot go through all of the different types of support services mentioned in my study here, so I focus on policy suggestions in the areas of psychological counselling, inter-agency collaborations and education. I also recommend two specific ways to improve first encounters with lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV.

The most common type of support sought by the vast majority of the interviewees is psychological counselling. First, it is important to acknowledge that many victim-survivors initially seek support for reasons other than IPV, in particular counselling. As my research suggests, many victim-survivors struggled to identify their experiences as violence and sought counselling for what might be described as symptoms of IPV, such as depression, anxiety and signs of PTSD, whereas others might seek support to confirm their suspicions about their partner or the relationship. This was particularly relevant for those who were primarily subjected to psychological forms of violence and other types of violence that do not match with public stories of IPV. The usefulness of psychological counselling very much depends on the individual counsellor's ability to recognize signs of IPV, how and whether they name the IPV, as well as the help-seeker's ability and readiness to disclose IPV at the given time.

Recognizing and responding to help-seekers who might have an undisclosed agenda is no easy task and calls for more training to alert counsellors to the types of IPV that are not easily recognizable. Couples counselling is also an example of a form of support that is often not recommended or considered suitable as IPV support. However, as an indirect help-seeking strategy, couples counselling can be the first entrance into formal help-seeking, and although it might be a difficult situation to navigate for counsellors, especially in cases of coercive control, it is an opportunity to offer victim-survivors processual support, build trust and possibly refer help-seekers to individual counselling or organizations specializing in IPV. This calls for more training for different types of counsellors on how to detect and respond adequately to IPV. Part of the training should address how to recognize signs of abuse that contradict the public story of IPV as well as how to provide help-seekers with processual support to avoid alienating potential victims of IPV. As counselling might be the first entrance into formal support services, it is important for

help-providers to be ready to respond and have knowledge of where to refer lesbian and queer help-seekers with experiences of IPV.

In my second area of policy suggestions, I want to highlight the importance of referrals and inter-agency collaborations. My findings on formal help-seeking encounters show examples where the general services were not prepared to recognize IPV in lesbian and queer relationships. Victims of IPV often come into contact with a number of different support services at different times, and each one on their own might not be able to fully embrace the range of different needs victim-survivors have, both immediately and long-term. *Incident-based* services such as the police and healthcare services often provide urgent and immediate support following injuries or acute incidents of violence and might therefore offer a turning point for victim-survivors if the help-provider is able to establish trust, recognize signs of IPV and give the help-seeker support to disclose violence. However, these services may not always be able to offer long-term support. This calls for referring potential victims of IPV to more *processual* types of support services, preferably organizations specializing in violence and with LGBTQ competence. Women's shelters, for instance, have extended knowledge and expertise on how to recognize IPV as well as how to understand and deal with one's reaction to violence. However, since most of the shelters in Sweden focus on men's violence against women, this could discourage lesbian and queer victims from accessing these services themselves. Similarly, local LGBTQ organizations might not have expertise regarding IPV and would therefore gain from collaborating with shelter and victim organizations to develop their knowledge on IPV. Thus, I argue that we need to have more collaboration between LGBTQ organizations and mainstream support services but also transparency among the help-provision services to make it easier for help-providers to refer potential victims of IPV to inclusive services. As of May, 2021, there was only one LGBTQ organization working specifically on violence in Sweden. To ensure continued training, access, and collaboration we need to provide LGBTQ organizations specializing in violence with financial stability, as this would enhance the possibility for more long-term initiatives to be put in place (Donovan and Butterby, 2020).

Finally, my third area of policy suggestions relates to education. The two previous policy suggestions point to the need for more professional training to detect and respond to IPV. Here I suggest that we need to introduce the subject of diverse relationships and IPV in different types of relationships in educational settings. Educational settings, whether at secondary or higher level, serve many functions. For many of my interviewees, educational settings were a place of escape from their violent partner, and for some, it was through the teaching content that they started to identify their experiences as violence. This has to be seen in a context where many of my interviewees described experiences of IPV in their first lesbian/queer relationship or their first serious relationship. These findings align with those from IPV youth studies such as the STIR project (Safeguarding Teenage Intimate Relationships)

in Sweden (Korkmaz and Øverlien, 2020; Øverlien, 2020), which suggest that young people in general are more vulnerable or at risk of being exposed to IPV in their first relationship. Further, entering into one's first lesbian/queer relationship can create specific conditions for exposure to violence (Donovan and Hester, 2008; Ristock, 2002). Thus, in line with Donovan and Hester (2008) I suggest that there is a need to include more LGBTQ relationship perspectives in sex and relationship education in school and educational settings. The teaching should not only have a specific portion of the curriculum that focuses exclusively on LGBTQ perspectives but also should include types of violence that are not easily identified as violence due to, for example, norms around practices of love (Donovan and Hester, 2015). Thus, teaching how jealousy and demands on exclusivity in the name of love can be abusive would help young people to identify abusive behaviours as well as support them in the process of addressing such behaviours and leaving abusive partners.

In addition to these three main suggestions for policy changes, I have two recommendations based on these findings, which summarize what professional help-providers should bear in mind in their encounters with lesbian and queer people who might be victims of IPV.

First, it is important to recognize the importance of first encounters and responses. The first responses help-seekers received in the process of seeking support determined whether the help-seekers proceeded with the support, disclosed violence or aborted the attempt for support. Small attempts to garner support, such as an expression of concern from a help-provider can facilitate the help-seeking process even if the help-seeker does not disclose violence at that point. On the other hand, help-providers can also unintentionally minimize the help-seeker's experiences of IPV by failing to react to signs of abuse. Seemingly small slip-ups such as repeatedly using the wrong pronoun for the help-seeker or their partner or acting surprised by the gender of the partner can hinder the help-seeking process further. This calls for the need to be open and attentive when responding to potential help-seekers of IPV. This can be done by asking open-ended questions, which give the help-seekers the possibility to choose what information about themselves and their relationship to disclose.

Second, support services need to have training for personnel and routines in place that secure the conditions for disclosure. More specifically, there is a need to separate the partners in formal help-care settings or counselling to create opportunities to disclose IPV. Help-providers should also be aware that victim-survivors seek formal support at very different times. Some might seek indirect help during an abusive relationship while others might turn to formal support later on to deal with the aftermath of violence. Since the first formal entrance into help-seeking will often be through services that do not specialize in IPV, help-providers should be ready and open to the possibility that help-seekers' motivation for seeking support may change and have knowledge

about who to refer the help-seekers to after disclosure or when there is suspicion of IPV.

Future directions

In this last section, I begin to look forward and reflect on the research yet to be done. As is often the case with subjects that are understudied, the list of potential research topics is extensive. I have therefore limited myself to a few key areas and types of research that need to be developed based on the empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions of this thesis, using my empirical contribution to the field of LGBTQ IPV research in Sweden as my point of departure.

Starting from the perspective of the (potential) help-seekers was very important due to the lack of empirical research on the perspectives of lesbian and queer victim-survivors in a Swedish context. To further understand and improve the help-seeking processes of lesbian and queer help-seekers, we need to take into account several perspectives, starting with those of the help-seekers and the help-providers. Based on my findings on indirect help-seeking, research on help-provision might take as its starting point the proposed expanded perspective on help-seeking, which should include but also go beyond the services working specifically with IPV. As my research suggests, there is a need to document the experiences psychological counsellors have when encountering lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV. Research on help-provision should examine routines and procedures when there is suspicion of IPV and when help-seekers disclose IPV in the general support services. This includes mapping systems of referrals and researching the experiences of different types of help-providers to inform providers' training on how to detect and respond adequately to lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV.

In order to inform social policies and improve help-seeking initiatives, we need more research to understand the different conditions for IPV and help-seeking for the different groups within the LGBTQ spectrum. In my thesis, I focused specifically on lesbian and queer relationships. While this framing included different identities such as lesbian, gay, queer, pansexual and bisexual, the vast majority of the interviewees were cisgender lesbian, bisexual and/or queer women. In my thesis I criticized the tendency to think of LGBTQ communities as a homogenous group, as such framing runs the risk of ignoring intragroup differences (Turell and Cornell-Swanson, 2008: 74). Research on same-sex relationships, specifically lesbian and gay men's relationships, has dominated the field of LGBTQ IPV for the last few decades. While there is still a need for more research on IPV within these groups, such as gay men's experiences in a Nordic context, we also need more research specifically on the experiences of bisexual queers and transgender victim-survivors, as these groups are often excluded or made invisible in research. Bisexual women, for

instance, have been addressed as particularly exposed to IPV, but they are not always included or visible in studies focusing on same-sex IPV (Donovan and Barnes, 2020b: 6; Heimer et al., 2018: 61). Research on transgender people's experiences of IPV and help-seeking is seriously lacking, both in Sweden and internationally (Messinger and Guadalupe-Diaz, 2020: 5–6). The research that we do have from other countries suggests that transgender people experience high rates of IPV (Brown, 2011: 154; Messinger and Guadalupe-Diaz, 2020: 7–9; Woulfe and Goodman, 2021). This calls for the need to explore the ways in which cisnormativity and transphobia shape experiences of IPV and create additional barriers for help-seeking for transgender victim-survivors.

As my findings suggest IPV and conditions for help-seeking are shaped by asymmetrical positions and intersecting oppressive structures. Interviewees reported that different factors such as mental health, migration status and lack of economic resources impacted the violence they experienced and their help-seeking processes. This shows that it is not enough to look at LGBTQ people's experiences of IPV through the categories of gender or sexuality alone. I found that age was an important factor in shaping my interviewees' experiences of IPV and help-seeking. Youth and/or lack of relationship experience was a significant factor in the violence described by the interviewees who had been victimized in one of their first serious and/or first queer relationship. There is a need to include lifespan perspectives in studies on IPV, as different temporal events and expectations around coming out, coupling and having children also affected conditions of violence and help-seeking. Future research should therefore focus on the changes in vulnerability across the lifespan of queer people (see Eggebø et al., 2019).

Qualitative studies on the experiences of older queer people have started to gain attention (Siverskog and Bromseth, 2019). However, there is a lack of knowledge about the effects of IPV later in life and specifically among older queer victim-survivors. Research exploring the experiences of IPV and help-seeking for victim-survivors with disabilities is still very limited and tends to focus on heterosexual and cisgender women's experiences (NCK, 2014: 92). Future research should therefore aim to explore how diverse queer identities create specific support needs in cases of IPV. Eggebø et al. (2020), for instance, have done research on discrimination and social exclusion of queer migrants in Norway. We need more research for the Nordic context specifically focusing on how different forms of violence systems such as racism and heteronormativity are entangled with and shape experiences of IPV for people of colour and indigenous queer communities' experiences of violence and help-seeking.

Finally, I argue that we need more research on how different forms of violence shape the lives of queer people in different ways. The LGBTQ organizations and activists continue to raise awareness around the effects and causes of hate crimes and discrimination against LGBTQ people. In many studies and reports on violence against LGBTQ people, there is a tendency to assume that

violence only comes from the outside in forms of hate crimes and harassment in the public spheres (European Union and Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). This thesis pushes for the inclusion of IPV into these discussions but also suggests to explore the correlation between hate crimes and IPV.

Moving on to methodological suggestions, I return to the struggle for definitions, which is a recurring topic throughout the thesis. In order to make visible the experiences of IPV and help-seeking in lesbian and queer relationships, I relied on certain identity categories such as lesbian, homosexual, queer, bisexual, and pansexual. As researchers in Gender Studies, we often find ourselves invested in the very same categories we try to dismantle. Similarly to the category of victim, I found that sexual and gender identity categories are by no means stable or fixed. Yet, in order to make sense of the lived experiences of misrecognition experiences by my interviewees, I had to understand the process and effects of these categories. Thus, in my thesis, I used qualitative methods to capture the complexity and the processual dimensions of IPV and help-seeking. However, this does not mean that we should or can completely write off quantitative research measures to explore IPV. In fact, policy makers often rely on quantitative measures such as national health surveys to inform social policies and interventions. Such measures often fail to provide adequate and representative measures of IPV in minority and marginalized groups. Specifically, if such research applies a narrow definition of identities, violence and help-seeking, it fails to capture the nuances of marginalized people's experiences of violence. The design of quantitative surveys can make certain groups invisible or leave out important information about the social positions or context of relationship(s). For a long time LGBTQ people have been invisible in national surveys on violence in Sweden. In the latest LGBTQ action plan, the Swedish government proposed that the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention should investigate the possibility of changing the Swedish Crime Survey (SCS) to incorporate information about LGBTQ people's experiences of crime, safety and general trust in the criminal justice system (Regeringen, 2021: 11). While this is a small step forward, we need to do more than just include more identity categories but also be aware of the instability of these categories. As my findings suggest, it is not enough to simply ask how respondents identify when conducting the research. We also need to ask specifically about the sexual and gender identities of the respondents and their partner(s) during the abusive relationship(s).

The findings of my thesis support the need to work with an inclusive definition of violence to be able to detect the impact of chronic, gradual and cumulative forms of slow violence (Nixon, 2011). For quantitative research this would mean turning away from incident-based focused questions towards a more processual focused approach which would include questions around decision-making in the relationship to capture controlling behaviours. This would also mean rethinking the temporality of the questions asked in the survey. Questions concerning shorter timespans such as the last six months might

not be ideal for capturing the effects of slow violence that are cumulative over an extended period of time. While quantitative research is valuable and needed for researching and understanding the extent of IPV, we need to acknowledge its limitations when it comes to capturing diverse experiences of IPV. Thus, in line with Donovan and Barnes (2020b: 94), I argue for the value of mix-methods research where quantitative measures are accompanied by qualitative studies to understand the complex effects and contexts of IPV.

The final methodological suggestion I propose concerns qualitative research practices in particular. I have discussed the complexity of vulnerability in research on violence and the dangers of positioning victim-survivors as vulnerable people who cannot make informed decisions about participating in research on violence (see Downes et al., 2014). As feminist researchers we are often encouraged to seek reciprocity in the interview situation as a way to deal with power imbalances. This is an important ideal, but it can also create unrealistic expectations for researchers. We have started to see more nuanced discussions of the vulnerabilities but also the agency of research participants, and we need to include researchers' conditions and positions in these discussions. There is a need to pay more attention to the impact that research on violence has, not just on informants but also on researchers. It is no revelation for feminist researchers that knowledge is not objective and we, as researchers, affect and are affected by the research we conduct, especially when researching violence. This needs to be acknowledged more in research practices. Thus, in line with Emma Williamson et al. (2020) I suggest that the impacts on researchers should be addressed in everyday research routines. This includes practical implementations such as pre-fieldwork and post-fieldwork sessions, where coping strategies and potential triggers can be discussed. In order to make sure the wellbeing of the researchers is kept in mind we also need the cost of supervision, training and support to be included in grant proposals.

In this thesis I aimed to explore and make sense of lesbian and queer peoples' experiences of IPV and help-seeking, a topic which is often overlooked in research particularly in the Nordic countries. As Machado (2019) indicates in the quote I started this chapter with, our culture rarely invests in helping queer people to understand the meaning of their experiences. When presenting my research at conferences, seminars and workshops, I was often asked to compare my findings to mainstream research on IPV. The discussion frequently ended up focusing on whether IPV in LGBTQ relationships should be seen as the exact same phenomenon as heterosexual IPV or something completely different. While I understand the curiosity and the relevance of these questions, it always makes me a bit uneasy that we can only understand queer peoples' experiences in relation to the dominant and majority group, as if our experiences are not relevant on their own. I would therefore strongly encourage researchers in the field of LGBTQ IPV to stay with the perspectives of LGBTQ people to explore the different conditions for violence and help-seeking. We need to allow these accounts to have value in their own right.

Still, my uneasiness is balanced with the importance of acknowledging the broader contributions this field has to offer. Research on queer people's experiences can help us to develop more nuanced perspectives on IPV by challenging conventional definitions and commonly held beliefs about IPV and help-seeking, as I have addressed in this thesis. The expanded perspective on slow violence and help-seeking as mirroring the forms of violence experienced, a perspective that I applied in this thesis, can be useful to understand the experiences of victim-survivors of IPV more generally. This perspective also helps to understand the impact of mundane and subtle help-seeking practices across different groups of victim-survivors who have experienced slow violence, including heterosexuals. In this way, centring queer people's experiences of violence can challenge the one-way traffic of knowledge between dominant and marginalized groups by facilitating discussions of how concepts such as slow violence and misrecognition impact on the help-seeking processes of other groups, including dominant ones that are conventionally recognized as potential victims of IPV.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: call for participants

Have you experienced violence in a lesbian relationship?

Call for participants to join a research project on intimate partner violence in lesbian relationships.

Very little research has been conducted on the topic of intimate partner violence in non-heterosexual relationships in Sweden. There is therefore a serious lack of knowledge about how people in lesbian/queer/same-sex relationships deal with experiences of violence. Your contribution is important!

I am looking for participants to interview who:

- identify as lesbian, gay, homosexual, bisexual, queer or as a woman who engages or have engaged in relationships with women (trans, cis, non-binary etc.)
- have experienced violence in an intimate relationship. This could involve any type of violence (psychological, physical, material, sexual, controlling, stalking, etc.)
- are at least 18 years old
- live in Sweden

If these criteria match you and if you are happy to answer some questions regarding your experiences of being in a violent relationship, I would like to talk with you. Also, if you know anyone else who might be interested in participating in this study, please pass this on. The length of your relationship is not important, and you do not have to be open about your sexuality/gender identification to participate in this study.

My name is Nicole Ovesen and I will be conducting the interviews at a time and place convenient to you. I am a PhD student at the Centre for Gender Research at Uppsala University. All personal information will be handled confidentially. Names and locations will be changed. No unauthorized person will have access to your data. You can withdraw from the study at any time. This project has been approved by the Uppsala regional ethical vetting board.

If you're interested in participating or would like more information before deciding, please feel free to contact me on: nicole.ovesen@gender.uu.se
or on: 018-471 5889

Supervisors:

Gabriele Griffin

gabriele.griffin@gender.uu.se

Renita Sörensdotter

renita.sorensdotter@gender.uu.se

Appendix B: information letter



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Hi,

You have shown interest in participating in an interview, and this letter contains some more information about the study and your participation. My name is Nicole Ovesen and I am a PhD student at the Centre for Gender Research at Uppsala University. I will be conducting interviews as part of my dissertation on the subject on experiences of violence in lesbian relationships. The regional ethical vetting board in Uppsala has approved the project. The main objective of the study is to enhance knowledge on the subject on how lesbian/queer/bisexual women who experience violence in an intimate relationship handle their experiences. I hope to conduct around 20 interviews, which will function as the main empirical material for the dissertation. The interviews that you would take part focus on your experiences, mainly how you defined and handled experiences of violence.

The interview will last around 1-2 hours in a location of your choice. It could be my workplace at Uppsala University, a public setting such as a café or your home etc. The interviews will, if you consent, be audio recorded. This audio file will be for my use only, and your name will not appear anywhere in the transcription. In the final dissertation, as well as any publications, or presentations quotations will be stripped for any personal information such as names, workplace, location etc. Finally, I wish to ensure you that all participation is completely voluntarily and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The entity principally responsible for the research and the data control is Uppsala University. According to the Personal Data Act PUL (1998:204) you have the right to access any stored information once a year free of charge and if necessary to have any mistakes regarding your case altered.

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisors, Professor Gabriele Griffin or Renita Sörensdotter, for more information.

Best wishes,
Nicole Ovesen

Contact information:

Main person responsible for the project and supervisor: Gabriele Griffin. Professor at Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University.: gabriele.griffin@gender.uu.se, Tel: 018-471 5790,
Renita Sörensdotter. Lecturer at Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University: renita.sorensdotter@gender.uu.se, Tel. 018-471 5013

PhD student and interviewer: Nicole Ovesen. Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University. [**nicole.ovesen@gender.uu.se**](mailto:nicole.ovesen@gender.uu.se)
Tel: 018-471 5889,
Box 527, 751 20 Uppsala.

If you find that, you need professional support we can refer to:
Psychologist: Lisa Kron Sabel - Psykologtjänst
Tel: 0762138843
Email: psykologtjanst@lisakronsabel.se - www.lisakronsabel.se

Appendix C: interview guide

Individual interviews English

My motivation for conducting the study

What made you decide to participate?

History around violence

Timeline

- Opener: Can you tell me how the relationship started?
- Where were you at the time?
- Where did the violence occur? What did you do afterwards?
- When did you begin to think of this as violence?
- When did you first talk to someone about the violence/abuse?
- How did you talk to your (former) partner about this?
- Did your conception of the violence change? Was it challenged at any point?
- Did you know of other people in a similar situation?

Definitions of violence

Seeking help

- Did you and/or your partner talk to anyone about this?
Seek any counseling?
- What did you know about where to seek help?
- What made you decide to seek/not seek help?
- (if) What triggered you/them into seeking help?
- What were your expectations? Intentions?
- What did you experience?
- What were your thoughts on seeking professional help?
- What were your thoughts on reporting the violence?

Where → Contexts/situations

Confrontation/Intervention

Different forms of help seeking

Strategies of resistance in the relationship

Friends/family

- Who? When? What made you reach out? Why did/didn't you reach out to your social network?
- What were your expectations?
- What did you actually experience? Reactions?
- Their definition of the violence

Who → Participants in the help seeking process

When → Identifying significant phases of the help seeking processes

LBTQ community

- Is the LGBTQ/Queer community a relevant part of your life?
- Did you talk to anyone from the LGBTQ community about this?
- How do you find that the queer/LGBTQ community address the issue of IPV?
- Virtual communities? IRL?

Reflections

- Previous experience with violence?
- What enabled you to get away?

Why → decision to seek help/not to seek help

- Could you find yourself in a similar situation again?
- (added question – can you describe the different kinds of violence you experienced)

Debriefing

Anything to add?

How did you find this experience of being interviewed about your experiences?

(Turn off audio recorder)

How would you like me to respond if run in top each other in another context?

Possibility for a second interview?

Appendix D: questionnaire

Questionnaire 2018

	You	Partner(s)
Sexual identity		
Change		
Gender identity		
Change		
Ethnicity		
Highest level of education		
Living arrangement		
Primary type of violence experienced		
Occupation		
Age		
Now		
Return		

Appendix E: informed consent form



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Informed consent form

Project Working Title: Intimate Partner Violence and Help Seeking Behavior in LBTQ relationships

- I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.
- I agree to take part in the above project.
- I agree to the discussion being audio recorded.
- I agree to the use of interview quotes in the PhD thesis and other related publications and talks.
- I agree that the data gathered in this study (the audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews) will be stored securely on the Uppsala University Server, and can only be accessed by PhD Candidate Nicole Ovesen and supervisors Gabriele Griffin and Renita Sörensdotter.

Name of participants

Date

Signature:

Contact details:

Postal address: Nicole Ovesen, Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University, Engelska parken, Humanistiskt centrum, Thunbergsvägen 3G, Box 527, 751 20 UPPSALA

E-mail: nicole.ovesen@gender.uu.se

Phone Number: 018-471

5889

Appendix F: Swedish quotes

1. Introduction

Lovisa: Det som påverkar mig, det kan man väl också säga faktiskt, är att jag inte känner att jag räknas riktig. Alltså det gör det svårare att läka måste jag säga. Alltså jag har ju svårt att ens liksom, jag skulle ju vilja kunna... Alltså när det liksom är kampanj kring våld i nära relationer, det kan vara nyheter, det kan vara liksom på nyhetsmorgonen att dom pratar om det. Alltså jag har svårt att ens klara av och kolla. Just för jag vet att jag kommer inte räknas.

2. Methodology

Anställd vid RFSL stödmottagning: Men då får vi ju se till att vi inte missar kvinnorna, för att det har ju varit ett ständigt problem inom HBTQ-rörelsen att kvinnor och lesbiska inte prioriteras i lika hög grad som männen, så där får vi akta oss för att inte falla i den fällan.

Kristina: [...] Jag är väldigt... lever väldigt heterosexuellt men kan ha en så här stark lesbisk igenkänning... och känner den identiteten i mig.

Lovisa: Så jag har ju till och med läst dom som säger att 'det skulle aldrig förekomma i en lesbisk relation' och dom som liksom säger att 'jag skulle alltid välja en kvinna framför en man, för att inte behöva bli utsatt'. Och då känner jag ju liksom hur det kliar i fingrarna, jag vill ju bara förklara att det inte är så. Men det är väl nånting inom mig som säger att 'nämen jag bör nog inte lägga mig i', men samtidigt så känner jag att det behöver ju komma ut mer så och därför blir jag glad varje gång jag höra nån som vågar öppna upp sig om det, för att det innebär ju inte... Alltså jag vet ju att vi är en utsatt grupp generellt och därför blir det ju svårt. Det gäller att göra det på rätt sätt. Men samtidigt så, jag tycker inte att det är konstigt att våld skulle förekomma i alla typer av relationer... Men att det kanske också går emot den där tanken om att våld alltid handlar om att kvinnor är liksom underlägsna män på nåt sätt och då blir det ju svårt att förstå hur det kan förekomma i en samkönad relation och det krockar på nåt sätt liksom ideologiskt kanske, jag vet inte.

Informant: Ja... det har inte varit så konstigt. Det är skönt att det inte har varit så mycket känsloprat över hur jag kände och upplevde förutom mer

konkret det här och det här. För hur jag känner kring det hela kan jag liksom inte hantera än, då hade du haft en som var helt ihopbruten istället. Så liksom bra att liksom, att det är konkret.

Tina: Sen blev det ju mer och mer våldsamt då, så det var ju, ja med slag och sparkar. Favoritsysselsättningen var väl att strypas. Det hände ju hela tiden mer eller mindre. Och sen så blev det ju det här klassiska att man blev avskärmad från alltså andra människor. Man fick inte umgås med andra människor och såna saker. Så man hade ju en väldigt liten sfär man var i hela tiden, där hon regerade, kan man säga. Alltså, ja det är svårt och...Jag vet inte.

Evelina: Till slut så var jag ju så van att bara berätta allting, hela historien, och då tror jag att jag gjorde det utan att, utan att egentligen visa nånting... Ja, det bara blev som en historia jag berättade, och då för den som tar emot det, då kanske det inte gick för dom att förstå hur jobbigt det har varit eller liksom omfattningen, för att jag var ju ganska så obrydd när jag sa det. Det var bara... Det blev bara som en lång jäkla historia jag behövde berätta hela tiden, för väldigt många och... Ja men hon har gjort så mycket tokiga grejer så... Jag kommer liksom inte ens ihåg allt längre.

Maryam: Alltså jag skrattar nu men det var, för att det är, det är så absurt bara. Jag brukar skratta åt såna saker. Men det är inte roligt alltså. Det är inte kul men [...] det är så jag hanterar det.

Yvonne: Nä men det är ju väldig givande att få, för jag känner ju att du har ställt några frågor här som jag inte har liksom, där jag då får gå tillbaka och minnas situationer ur ett annat perspektiv än vad jag själv har tänkt innan och det är ju värdefullt. För det som, oavsett om man kan lösa ett problem eller komma fram till något svar eller någon lösning så är det så, det är ju helande att få prata om det. Eller på nåt vis så att... För mig var det nog ett litet test också, för att se om jag klarar av att prata om det utan att bryta ihop eller om jag ska bli traumatiserad 20 år till eller [skrattar] liksom... Så det är samtidigt, så... Jag kan nu känna att det känns som en förmån att få vara med, att få prata om det. För det är ju, jag menar sånt här pratar man inte om med sina vänner eller med sina kompisar om [...] Ja, vad var det nu för frågeställning? [skrattar] Ja men varför det, varför det ja... Jag vet inte. Jag är lite trött i hjärnan nu.

Yvonne: Han kanske betedde sig väldigt hotfullt precis som kanske Rebecca [ex-partner] gjorde med mig alltså [...] Om vi nu säger att... Det här

är väldigt intressant och, vad en fråga kan få mig att börja tänka på... Nämen det här med att, att jag tycker ju inte att det är nåt att anmäla när Rebecca trycker upp mig i kuren eller när hon springer hotfullt efter mig vid [plats], men det kanske var så pappa gjorde med mamma och mamma ringde mig och sa 'han slår mig'.

Sasha: Jag också blandar ihop flera språk ibland så det är bara säga till om du vill att jag ska förtydliga vissa saker och ting. [Nicole:] Ja ja, och du med [skrattar]

3: The struggle to define violence

[Nicole: vad var din motivation för att vara med?] Evelina: [...] Jag har ju inte tänkt så mycket på att jag hör till den kategorin liksom, som har varit i en relation med våld men ... Det är ju uppenbarligen så och då tänkte jag att det är väl lika bra att köra så att det blir... ja för en bra sak tänker jag. Hade dom inte sagt det till mig då hade jag nog aldrig reflekterat liksom och tänkt att ja det här borde jag göra.

Maryam: Jag bara, hur fan kan en lesbisk person våldta, alltså så här göra det. Förstår du? Det går liksom inte ihop i mitt huvud. Men det är klart att det, alltså det, jag tror det var en sorts förnekelsegrej. Jag bara 'det har inte hänt' typ. Ja, för man tänker sig att det är en man som typ försöker våldta en och då är det så här och så här. Men... jamen jag tror det var den anledningen. Jag bara men det här har inte hänt, det här var inte riktigt. Det här var ju liksom inte en... Jamen, ja som en våldtäkt ska bör vara, alltså den normativa föreställningen om det.

Lovisa: Det var väl, alltså jag har ju... Tidigare har jag ju sett det som att det enbart var alltså psykiskt, men jag inser ju idag att jag har ju förringat mycket om man säger så, att jag har tänkt att får man inget knytnävsslag, så är det inget fysiskt våld. Men jag inser ju att hon gjorde ju saker som rent fysiskt skadade mig så att säga, fast jag skyllde ju på allt möjligt annat... Alltså jag tänkte, hon gjorde det inte som jag tänker att man gör om det är våld utan, men ja hon gjorde ju saker och ting som hon inte borde ha gjort, som ändå var fysiskt skadliga. Men framför allt kan man väl säga att det var psykiskt, och sen var det väl ändå att, ska man säga, det är ju svårt, jag kan inte riktigt säga att det var sexuellt våld, men det påverkade mig sexuellt vilket det inte hade gjort om det inte hade funnits nåt psykiskt våld. Det var liksom ett underliggande hot kan man väl snarare säga, så

jag gick med på saker som jag inte ville fast det inte var uttalat hot, utan mer ett underliggande hot.

Lovisa: Det var inte med flit så... men det tog tid innan jag insåg att okej men jag sa nej, hon gjorde det ändå. Och även annat, som framför allt handlade om att jag sa inte nej när vi hade sex och jag tyckte att det skulle kanske vara uppenbart att jag inte ville vissa gånger. Men ändå så blev det som det blev och det kunde göra så pass ont att jag inte kunde gå ordentligt liksom ett par dagar efter... och jag vågade inte visa det, så jag skylldes ju på allt möjligt annat. Och det också att jag liksom har svårt... jag har svårt att se det som våld även fast jag inser att... okej man kanske borde känt av det lite bättre liksom... så.

Cecilia: Men nu kan jag liksom se med erfarenhet att Siv faktiskt kontrollerade mig att det... man skulle kunna, alltså beroende på hur man ser på lagstiftningen, så skulle man nästan kunna säga... att det blev en våldtäkt eller sexuell utnyttjande ... och.. det i sig har ju för... det där är väldigt lätt att det blir ett stigma. Att det blir liksom nån skam som är väldigt, väldigt svår att... lägga på mig själv att... varför sa inte jag nej tydligare eller varför lät jag henne hållas så eller varför gick jag inte tidigare än jag gjorde, när jag ändå liksom... kände ganska tidigt att det här är inte... det här är inte bra. Jag mår inte bra av det.

Tina: Dom visste ju inte hur dom skulle rubricera grejerna. För först var det olika rubriceringar, som man ville slå ihop då eller, åklagaren ville slå ihop. Hon till och med ringde mig kvällen innan första rättegången och bara pratade en lång stund 'ahh jag vet inte, jag har funderat på, borde rubricera det så här, men jag kan inte rubricera det som grov...kvinnofridskränkning' och jag bara 'varför inte då?' 'Ja för att hon är en kvinna och då kan man inte det, utan det är bara om det är en man som gör sånt mot kvinnor då.' Så att det blev ju, sen rubricerade hon det ju som grov frihetskränkning.

Elin: Jag tänker att jag definierar våld som nånting som upprepar sig, för om det bara sker en gång så är det...kan det vara ett misstag liksom, men om det är systematiskt så... ja.

Saga: Jamen det kunde vara saker som att hon upplyste mig, om hur andra uppfattade mig och att det var så att ingen annan vågade säga det till mig, jamen att jag inte var socialt kompetent, att människor egentligen inte ville umgås med mig utan att dom bara bjöd in mig till saker för att dom tyckte

synd om mig. [...] Jamen som om hon hjälper mig att någonstans bli en bättre per-son som gick att tycka om.

Malou: Det var väl nånting som liksom smög sig på eller, för mig blev det väl... liksom en trängd situation ganska fort med att hon flyttade in. Jag hade inte riktigt nån rätt att ifrågasätta det... Förlåt jag börjar... [gråter] Så att det blev liksom... Det var väldigt mycket skuldbeläggande och tystande av mina upplevelser liksom. Så att på ett sätt tror jag det gick ganska fort, men det blev liksom, det infasades ganska naturligt i och med att hon flyttade in och hade, nån typ av makt att kontrollera eller vad man nu ska säga.

Ulrika: Det var inte som att hon bevakade mig som man kan läsa om i mera, ja klassiska be-skrivningar. Men mera det där ja. Och att det kunde också vara att, eller ja, för det kunde vara att om jag var ute och gick och liksom pratade med nån i telefon, var jag hela tiden liksom om hon ringer så måste jag svara, för att annars får hon panik och vet inte vart jag är. Så på ett sätt var det ju den typen av kontroll också.

Ulrika: Lite såna grejer som egentligen, det är fullt rimligt att skicka MMS med liksom bilder på sitt barn till den andra föräldern, men att utifrån vår historia så triggade det hos mig känslan av att bli kontrollerad.

Tina: Hon hade ju min telefon och såna grejer, alltså så att jag kunde inte prata med folk eller sådär, oftast utan, hon brukade ju ofta ta den liksom så att hon hade den och var det nån som ringde och ville prata så skulle hon gärna stå bredvid liksom. Så hon hörde vad jag pratade om... och såna saker. Så det var väldigt konstigt [...] Det blev en väldigt bisarr situation. Men när man är i det så blir det ju normen liksom, alltså man blir ju så... manipulerad eller vad man ska säga. Så att man till slut inte ser nästan dom här grejerna utan det bara är så.

Tina: Så där blev jag ju omprogrammerad då liksom. För att jag insåg att jamen det inte nor-malt liksom... utan jag fick lära om då, vad som var normalt igen.

Ewa: Det känns som jag har haft sex massor med gånger då jag kände mig nästan tvungen att ha det fast jag har inte velat. Fast jag har sagt nej, men liksom antingen i rädslan för att... Hot om fysiskt våld som kanske inte var uttalat 'jag slår dig om du inte har sex med mig'. Men liksom det är så det har blivit några gånger. Att när jag har sagt nej, så har det hamnat i

någon diskussion och det har blivit så att hon har slagit mig efteråt. Så det var... Ja det känns bara' då har jag lärt mig att jag skulle inte säga nej' liksom ungefär på det sättet. Och det, det har jag liksom... Jag tycker det att det är sexuellt våld ändå om man har sex fast man inte vill.

Olivia: Alltså just det ordet våld har jag nu faktiskt bara använt en enda gång till min psykolog för två månader sen. Jag har sagt allting annat, pratat runt det här [skrattar], extremt mycket. Och andra har använt det begreppet om min relation. Och jag har slagit det ifrån mig, nåt så otroligt. För det gäller ju inte mig. Absolut inte [skrattar]. Det här handlar om nån annan liksom. Det är nån annan som inte, som inte kan komma och gå som dom vill i sitt egna liv. Inte kan hälsa på vänner eller sova över eller åka i väg eller, ja måste 'vabba' efter en halv jobbdag för att den andra personen inte klarar att vara själv.

Olivia: Som i slutänden blev extremt begränsad. För att var jag iväg nånstans hon visste ju alltid vart jag var, hur länge jag skulle vara där. Jag hann aldrig dricka upp en kopp te hos nån utan att hon hörde av sig och ville ha hem mig eller behövde hjälp med nånting eller ville bli hämtad eller sådär.

Amina: Jag förstod inte vad hon gjorde. Alltså vad jag var utsatt för. Jag tänkte aldrig på det så utan hon hade haft det svårt när hon var liten och hade liksom blivit sexuellt utnyttjad av sin styvpappa och hennes familj hade vänt sig mot henne, hennes pappa hade slagit henne. Alltså det var mycket, och hon pratade alltid om det. Och tyckte att det var så synd om henne och så. Så jag tänkte att ja men det är bara för att hon mår dåligt. Så då tänkte jag att jag skulle stå ut och jag skulle hjälpa henne att må bättre. Jag skulle liksom laga henne, göra henne hel.

Selma: Jag fick ju ultimatum där i början också liksom. Men om inte du berättar för dina föräldrar så gör jag slut liksom eller då kan vi inte vara tillsammans så. Så att det var inte så mycket att göra mer än att berätta liksom. Men sen om man om man går tillbaka till det här kontrollerandet, nu kom jag på vad det var igen. Hon bodde ju liksom i [annan stad] och jag bodde liksom här innan vi blev sambos. Och då när vi var i [Selmas stad] så, så ville hon ju alltid vi skulle hålla hand när vi var utomhus och gick. Medans i [partners stad], så kunde vi inte göra det för hon ville inte att folk skulle veta att hon var homosexuell liksom eller kollegor och så, så att mycket var ju på hennes villkor hela tiden.

Selma: Och när man väl hade lyckats göra det på ett sätt, jamen då var det inte rätt länge, utan då var man tvungen till att föra in sig i en annan mall liksom.

Lovisa: Efter en månad, det var väl kanske efter en eller två månader, så ringde hon mig och sa att hon var kär i nån annan. Men att det var okej för att vi kan vara tillsammans alla tre. Och för mig var det ju dels främmande, inte för att det är nåt fel med polyamori, utan mer för att jag visste inte om det och hon berättade 'så här har det alltid varit och det var en förutsättning för att jag ska ha ett förhållande'. Och jag kände att 'det hade varit bättre om du berättade innan vi blev tillsammans'. Och det blev väl lite knepigt att hantera, för att där var det också att jag var egoistisk och trångsynt som inte klarade av det här. För mig var det litegrann så här, det... Ja jag var så skör det var liksom nytt för mig. Det var liksom att det var inte vad jag hade räknat med kanske.

Sasha: För att jag visste inte riktigt hur det fungerade här i Sverige, du vet olika mentalitet och jag har ju gömt mig i flera år, så jag visste inte riktigt hur man pratar med andra. Och allt var ju så nytt för mig och då började hon pressa mig redan från början. Att jag inte kan bra svenska eller engelska. Att jag inte förstår vad hon menar. Och det var ju en sån press först. Och sen ekonomi. Jag hade ingen ekonomi då och jag pluggade ju svenska. Så det var ju alltid som att det är hon som betalar för vissa saker. Det är hon som bestämmer. Det är hon som är äldre. Det är hon som är bättre. Så... Ja så jag visste ju inte då att man kan komma ur en sån relation så.

Sasha: 'Älskling förlåt mig. Jag var bara svartsjuk, du är ju så fin och snygg och jag är mycket äldre och jag tror ju inte att du kanske älskar mig så mycket.'

Kari: Jag hade jättedåligt självförtroende så jag trodde att inget jag sa skulle spela någon roll för att jag ändå inte kan någonting för att jag var yngre. Så det kändes som att deras intellekt stod jättemycket över mitt hela tiden. Alltså också ålder, att de var äldre också att dom hade varit i queer-rörelsen, eller vad man säger, jättelänge. Alltså jag visste ingenting bara tog efter så man kan ju säga att jag blev liksom manipulerat att göra det som dom sa.

Yvonne: Dom senaste åren, har jag nu fått reda på då, det är att hon gärna omvänder (skrattar) heterotjejer till att bli ihop med henne. Och då kan jag ju nästan förstå varför. För vi kan...vi vet ju inte det. Vi känner ju inte till

hennes historia och vi som inte innan har varit i dom kretsarna och kanske känner andra lesbiska tjejer eller HBTQ... Alltså jag har ju inga vänner i den värl-den här i (stad), som jag umgås med som ... vet detta. Men hon är tydligen liksom typ svart-listad...så det ju ingen tjejer här i (stad) som vill vara ihop med henne.

Therese: Okej, men om jag gör så här kanske hon slutar. Om jag säger att det gör ont kanske hon slutar. Eller om jag säger 'stopp, stopp, stopp'. Eller om jag säger 'jag vill inte, det gör ont' eller... Att jag verkligen så här 'nu säger jag det. Jag vill inte det här!' Men att hon också, hon bara fortsatte. Det lyssnades liksom inte på alls. Men om hon däremot sa stopp nån gång, jag minns nån gång, jamen då när hon tog stryptag så här lyckades jag på nåt sätt sparka bort henne. Och då slog hon huvudet i nånting och då var det som såhär 'wow, nu ah nu hände det nåt här'. Alltså då blev det så här [gestikulerar] jätteallvarligt, eller när hon så här 'oj nu har jag tappat synen lite'. Aha okej, så nu slutar vi. Eller jag kommer liksom inte ge mig på dig. Så det hand-lade liksom bara om, om henne. Om hon skadade sig illa, då ja.

Therese: Och också nån gång så tog hon stryptag på mig. Och då, det var inte alls länge men det var ändå så här jag kände, jag fick ingen luft och bara 'okej det är så här det känns att dö' hann jag tänka. Bara 'okej, nu dör jag här'.

Amina Om jag inte hade varit med henne som hon ville eller jag hade varit borta för länge eller jag hade suttit med min telefon för mycket, då kunde hon bli arg och hon kunde gå fram till mig och hota att hon skulle skära sig. Hon gjorde det också ibland. Hon ställde sig med en kniv och skar sig... framför mig.

Ulrika: Jag har känt mig väldig ensam i min upplevelse just i det här och just för att det är, det blir så komplext när det är psykisk ohälsa inblandad och när det är en lesbisk relation. Det lik-som, jag kan inte känna igen mig i nästan nån berättelse egentligen. Jag kan känna igen mig litegrann liksom i det här med medberoende till exempel, eller med normalisering kan jag relatera till liksom så där men just det här när det känns som att... Ja när det är svårt att se, men just när det blir så mycket fokus på till exempel det fysiska våldet, att den som ägnar sig åt fysiskt våld är den som är förövaren. Det har ju försvårat för mig att se vad som hände, för att då har jag hela tiden tänkt att 'ja men jag utsatte henne också för fysiskt våld liksom, vi var två i det'. Då måste jag också vara förövare. Det är väl kanske

på ett sätt, i det, i just den situationen, men det försvarade för mig att se hur utsatt jag var också.

Ulrika: Ja alltså jag tycker fortfarande det är svårt att veta eller se riktigt vad som hände. Men jag ser det ju liksom ur... Nu ser jag mycket tydligare hela tiden vad som föranledde det. Eller vad som ledde fram till dom här bråken. Jag ser på det som att vi var två i att, som, i det fysiska... Men det var också liksom en lång, det byggdes upp väldigt långt utav, hon kontrollerade mig, eller väckte mig mitt i natten eller hotade med att kasta sig ut från balkongen, och liksom såna grejer som, som gjorde att det blev... Jag tror att jag ser det som att... Eller jag kan känna att det var ett sätt, för mig var det ett sätt att försvara mig. Jag kände mig extremt påhoppad eller angripen på ett eller annat sätt hela tiden och då blev det ett sätt att försvara mig att ta tag i henne fysiskt liksom. För att så här få henne att sluta på nåt vis. Hejda henne eller liksom ja. Det kanske är så jag har börjat se det nu att det handlade om nåt sorts rent fysiskt försvar bara.

[Nicole: När ungefär började du tänka på att lämna?] Olivia: Alltså jag tror att tanken har poppat upp till och från under väldigt många år. Men har väldigt snabbt blivit kväst. Men jag tror att jag faktiskt vågade tänka den fullt ut... [Årtal] efter att våran äldste var född. För jag känner att där var det en brytpunkt. Där det blev så uppenbart, för när jag då hade det här lilla spädbarnet som jag plötsligt behövde lägga all min tid och energi på, då kunde ju inte jag lägga nån tid eller energi på Agnes. Då kunde inte jag på samma sätt, hjälpa eller underlätta eller reparera alla konflikter hon skapade eller liksom... Det gick ju inte.

4. Understanding help-seeking as a fragmented, slow and iterative process

Therese: Dom hade pratat med en kvinnojour. Dom hade skrivit ut papper till mig och 'kolla såhär säger lagen och såhär står det så. Det här är alla tecken' och... jag bara nej såhär... inte... Jag var inte mottaglig för det alls [...]. [Nicole: Hur reagerade du efter den här interventionen?] Therese: Då tog jag väldigt mycket avstånd från dom. Och jag skämdes jättemycket. Jag sa det inte till mitt ex. Jag tror inte jag sa det till nån. Men ja, jag främst reagerade med att ta avstånd. Jättemycket avstånd. Ja. Och typ tyckte att dom var dum i huvudet. Fast jag visste att jag också... men ja.

Maryam: Jag skrev lite dagbok under vissa tillfällen och när jag läste dem så reagerade jag alltid ”gud det här skrev jag för två år sedan. Tänk att det var så då typ. Va fan gör jag med den här personen fortfarande.

Maryam: Men jag tror att det var jättebra att jag gick i terapi under tiden för att försöka ta reda på strategier till hur jag ska tänka och såhär. Inte lägga allting på mig själv och alltid såhär utgå från vad andra känner och tycker eller mår. Alltså det var ju någonting som hon alltid sa till mig psykologen. Hon bara: ’vad känner du? Du pratar alltid om vad hon känner’ alltså exet. Men vad känner du? Jag bara ’jag vet inte’ alltså jag har liksom inte känt efter. Jag bara så fortsatt och fortsatt och aldrig stannat upp och bara ’vad fan känner jag egentligen?’ Men typ sådana saker. Det var jättebra att få höra det från någon som är, en professionell, alltså en expert... för att jag skulle ta det på allvar alltså. Jag tror inte jag hade gjort det kanske om det vore en kompis liksom. Alltså det blir mer tyngd i det när det är en person som är utbildad, kompetent i det, i psykisk ohälsa och som bara men ’det här är något så felaktigt eller så det ska inte gå till såhär i en relation.

Therese: Så jag hade en session med min egen terapeut jättetidigt den morgon. Och hon bara ’men älskar du henne?’ Jag bara... ’jag vet inte’. Jag kan inte vara ihop med någon som jag inte vet om jag älskar liksom. Och så bara ’nej men det gör jag inte. Och typ jag vill inte det här’. Och då direkt efter min egen session så träffade vi våran, så skulle vi till våran parterapeut. Så då hade jag såhär taggat på och vågade säga det här i det här trygga rummet när den här personen fanns där att såhär ’men jag vill inte det här mer’. Och då gick mitt ex alltså hon gick därifrån innan mig och jag hängde kvar och väntade.

Maryam: ’Varför fan är ni tillsammans?’ Alltså det kunna vara såna frågor men det var aldrig såhär ’du måste verkligen lämna henne nu’ alltså det hade säkert, jag hade säkert fått höra det om jag sa hur det låg till alltså sanningen alltså hela sanningen.

Maryam: Det var ett tillfälle när vi var hemma hos min mamma som hon flippade på mig. Och min mamma såg det och hon reagerade direkt. Och hon bara ’det här verkar ju inte normalt’ typ... (småskrattar) Och jag typ bröt ihop då framför mamma. Så jag grät liksom för att jag blev så ledsen över att det här som var så normalt för mig att någon annan fick bevittna det typ. Det var också såhär... det var så hemskt. Jag tyckte synd om min mamma att hon fick se det.

[Nicole: För din mamma hade ju sagt lite samma...] Maryam: Ja mamma ja, absolut. Men jag bara 'Mamma är mamma' typ (ler) : Hon är så mam-mig. Att det såhär. Så jag tänkte liksom.. hon skulle säga så jämnt typ 'tänk på dig själv' (småskrattar) och jag bara 'okay. Ja tänk på mig själv'.

Therese: Jag berättade lite för några vänner men då blev det så tydligt hur dom tog ställ-ning eller tog avstånd eller, du måste si du måste så eller dadada. Och när jag inte kunde göra det så liksom tog jag avstånd från dom istället. Så att hon, min mentor visste fast hon visste inte heller liksom allting. Alltså det var några få som visste litegrann. Men det var ingen som hade liksom hela bilden nej.

Maryam: Ja men jag visste väl att hon hade rätt på något sätt, att det var inte så klokt kanske att stanna kvar och sådär. Men jag var ju också väldig såhär försvarande gentemot henne alltså såhär jag sa inte allt det jag har sagt idag till henne. Nej, så jag tror att hon hade haft.. kanske reagerat annorlunda om jag hade berättat allt det här liksom. Men det var först efteråt då som jag eller det gick upp för mig hur dåligt det egentligen hade varit då. Ja. [Nicole: Vilka delar var det som du inte ville berätta?] Maryam: Alltså jag undrar om jag sa detaljer om vad hon kallade mig, och när hon för-sökte förgripa sig på mig och jag vet inte om jag sa det. Nej jag tror inte jag sa det här med sexgrejen... det var nästan, det var en jät-testor grej liksom i relationen. Till exempel när hon ville ta, alltså gjorde sexuella inviter och jag sa alltid nej typ...då kunde hon flippa liksom direkt och bara skrika och kasta saker och bara skrika, bara jättelänge. Och utan att det fanns liksom inte ett slut. Jag fick ju typ panik för att jag det var liksom så aggressivt beteende... och så kunde hon såhär slå på sig själv också. Jag bara 'jamen gud vad håller hon på med?' så måste jag typ trösta henne. Alltså så jävla konstig situation. När det är jag som måste få tröst typ. ... ja, men jag nej tror inte jag sa det faktiskt. Just dom grejer-na. Jag sa väl typ att. Hon frågade såhär har ni någon slags sexuell samliv?' och jag sa 'ja ibland har vi det'.

Amina: Jag hade en kompis som... jamen som ringde mig ibland och jag tror att hon kanske förstod... Nån dag så frågade hon liksom 'hur är det?' och då sa jag som det var, att jag inte mår bra. Och då sa hon att 'jamen jag har sett det'. Och när hon kunde säga vad hon såg, då kunde jag också sätta ord på det. Det gjorde att jag liksom kunde börja lämna, den proces-sen.

Therese: Hon hade tagit mina saker, bara 'du ska inte få gå och jobba. Jag ska förstöra för dig' [...] På nåt sätt lyckades jag få tag på min mobil och då ringde jag 112 och bara 'hej jag får inte gå... jag bor på den här adressen, jag får inte gå ut för min sambo... typ hon har stängt in mig, eller hon såhär hindrar mig för att gå ut'. Och då dom bara 'åh då kopp-lar vi dig till polisen' och det här kanske tog tio sekunder, men det kändes som att det tog en halv timme, så att till slut la jag på. Men jag sa inte det till henne då. Utan... hon typ såhär, hon bara 'men vad sa dom?' jag bara 'dom kommer snart' och så gick jag bara.

Therese: 'Uhm aha du levde ihop med en kvinna' (småskrattar) 'för när det, annars då när en kvinna som har levt ihop med man, då är det på här sättet'. Och jag bara ah okay, men... ja så kunde det vara, fast det kunde också inte vara så alls. Så att jag kände inte att det fanns nån liksom HBTQ kunskap Att det hela tiden var så 'oj va konstigt att det inte en stor och stark man som har slagit dig typ.'

Therese: Så att jag var där mycket och hade såhär en egen lägenhet. Fick nya kompisar, blev typ förälskat i en kollega där fast jag fattade inte riktig det. Fast sen fattade jag det. Men att jag fick ett eget *space*.

Amina: Allt hon hade gjort blev liksom bara värre. Ännu mera. Men då kunde jag också åka. Då hade jag nån annanstans att vara. Och då jag, när jag gjorde slut då hade jag hållit på ganska lång tid för mig själv och förbered mig att jag skulle avsluta vår relation. För henne blev det som en chock.

Ewa: Men efter det så kändes det verkligen liksom som att jag har stängt av henne på något sätt. Men kanske inte vågat göra slut, men började bygga upp något upp något lite eget liksom. Ja... stärker mig själv så småningom med små steg.

Evelina – Ja men jag var på rutin gynbesök och sen när hon frågade 'ja hur mår du an-nars?' och då så bara (ljud gråter) bröt jag liksom ihop och då var hon så oj oj oj du ska få prata med en kurator, så ringde han upp mig och jag fick en tid ganska snabbt.

Therese: Det sa jag flera gånger, men alltså det här är, jag har ändå typ gått i terapi jät-telänge också. Båda under tiden vi var i relation och efter. Så att jag har jobbat med grejer själv men jag är absolut inte klar men typ. Jag tror att... för det var (kvinnoorganisation), jag tror det hade funkat jättebra

om det var så krisläge, men det kändes som att hon inte... Jag träffade som sagt bara en person där, men som att hon inte riktigt kunde möta mig i att såhär okay men jag har gått vidare en bit... men jag vill ha mer hjälp med dem här... eller jag ville nu att... jag vet inte. Det var liksom lite otydligt eller jag tyckte att det var tydligt. Aha det finns den här planen. Den vill jag göra. Men när jag väl kom dit så kände jag att jag, det var som att jag så pratade, att hon sa till mig vad jag fick prata om och inte. Och då kände jag mig jätte styrd och det blev så, men det här är jättekonstigt.

5. The unintelligible victim: Mis/recognition and formal help-seeking

Kristina: Alltså man är ju så i den världen med den här personen och är liksom, alltså det är bara du och jag som finns. Och så skulle jag gå till några, alltså till polisen och anmäla den personen. Alltså det finns inte i ens värld. Det liksom... och så tänker jag då...jamen du vet. Vad skulle det ens ge mig? Liksom ska dom kunna ge mig trygghet? Ska dom ta hand om mig? Ska dom hjälpa mig? Alltså det är som att, det existerar inte.. den tanken. Nej det gör verkligen inte det.

Sasha: Men jag visste inte att jag kunde gå till polisen och visa upp allting som hon gjorde. Jag visste inte att dom skulle ta det på allvar. Det är ju det som man inte vet riktigt. Man får söka hjälp. Nu vet jag att jag kan göra det. Men då för tio år sedan ungefär så.. jag visste inte riktigt. Hon är ju svensk och jag är inte svensk så jag trodde inte att jag blev tagen på allvar.

Josefin: Men jag tror att jag bara kalkylerade med såhär, vad är sannolikheten att han skulle bli dömd för nånting? Ungefär noll. Och det grundar sig också på att man vet att folk inte ens blir dömda fastän det finns eller kan finnas liksom läkarintyg och såhär väldigt grovt fysiskt våld och att folk ännu inte blir dömda liksom. Så jag tänkte att i det här fallet, att få honom dömd för nånting som i huvudsak är en psykologisk eller liksom psykisk misshandel och såhär till slut fysiskt våld, men som visst räknas som misshandel men inte grovt. Jag har inga skador liksom. Jag har ingenting. Jag har inte varit på sjukhuset och dokumenterat nånting för det behövdes ju liksom inte. Jag blev inte skadad fysiskt på det sättet. Så jag bara tänkte att det inte skulle vara värt det. Att det bara skulle bli jobbigt för mig typ. Eller mera jobbigt för mig. Samtidigt som jag hade tyckt att det hade varit skönt också och göra det på nåt sätt. Jag tror att jag ett tag när jag funderade på det, så tänkte jag att om jag skulle anmäla så skulle det också vara ett sätt att ta mig själv på allvar i det och liksom se det som, jamen så... Det här är faktisk också juridiskt fel eller olagligt eller vad

man ska säga. Men jag kom fram till att det... att det inte skulle vara värt det.

Kristina: Men polisen kom dit och då så sa den kvinnliga polisen. Dom var så fina. För hon sa såhär ”du vet att det finns kvinnojour va?” sa hon till mig. Dels kände jag att såhär att hur kan hon se det? Och jag förstod inte själv och jag blev för-vånad [...] Jamen jag vet inte vad dom såg honom som för kön... eller du vet det där. Men så kunde hon ändå identifiera mig som ett offer. Det blev så fint för mig att komma på det långt efteråt och också att det kändes såhär. Vad fint att dom har den kunskapen på något sätt. För att jag kanske inte räknade med att bli förstådd nånstans liksom.

Alexander: Och jag vet inte om det var för att hon var mamma och jag var.. ja då rakat på huvudet då också liksom sådär och så väldigt butch ut. Jag har ingen aning.

Interviewee: Min chef, som jag hade då... var alltså bra, men också dålig på ett sätt. För att dom skulle ha sagt såhär ”men anmäl” så det gjorde dom inte. Utan det var så ”men kvinnor dom...dom kan vara såhär lite galna men det...det lägger sig” [...] Min chef...alltså det var jag tacksam för då ändå. Jamen så han ringde och försökte liksom. Men... jag tror ändå liksom att såhär hade det funnits... alltså i hans manshuvud att såhär jamen det här kan faktisk hända, även en kvinna kan bete sig...och använda våld. Så hade han kanske tagit det seriösare. Jag vet inte.

Tina: Där när jag helt plötsligt hamnat i nån slags film liksom med polis och annat. Det fanns liksom ingen väg tillbaka sen. Det var liksom...bara att nu...nu är det förbi alltså... så det blev nåt slags abrupt slut. Så det...jag vet inte...det känns inte riktig som att jag bestämde det heller på nåt vis. Det gjorde jag väl egentligen, men det känns nästan inte så, för det bara...allt bara blev på nåt vis.

Tina: man vill ju ändå att det ska vara värt det alltså... att anmäla och att människor som gör hemska grejer mot andra människor får straff och såna saker men det... Alltså det tog ju när man tänker, det tog kanske ett par år... ungefär innan det var över. Hela den här rättsprocesserna och alltihopa liksom... och jag kunde ju inte gå vidare... Det var ju ett vakuum liksom hela den perioden. Så det kändes som mitt liv hade fått ställas på paus. Och jag ville inget annat än att gå vidare, alltså ta mig upp och bli

stark och känna mig trygg och leva mitt liv. Alltså komma tillbaka till det normala och...såna saker.

Lovisa: Så att det jag då såg som ett självmordsförsök insåg jag idag inte var det, utan förmodligen var ett sätt att bara komma bort. För att jag ville prompt in på sjukhus. För att jag ville bort. För att jag visste inte hur jag skulle komma ifrån annars. Så att den enda lösningen jag hade i mitt huvud då var att jag måste bort, hur ska jag ta mig bort utan att dö och det var liksom att jag tar mig in till psykiatrin helt enkelt.

Tina: Det var lite underligt, för jag var ju där ganska många gånger och det var ändå ingen som reagerade på det. Dom trodde väl att jag var den mest klantiga i hela kommunen... Men sen, polisen begärde ju ut mina journaler till rättegången då... så dom kanske fick sig en tankeställare efterhand hoppas jag. Så att dom kanske klockar det nästa gång dom... det är lite synd. Jag önskar att det fanns mer information därute så att människor faktiskt ser mer än vad dom gör...alltså... för det hade varit jätte-hjälpsamt i en sån situation och faktiskt om nån konfronterar en så det väldigt svårt och... vägrar sig. Jag tror att jag hade... brutit ihop direkt om nån hade konfronterat mig vid det laget.

Evelina: Läkaren frågade 'är det här nåt som ska anmälas?' Men då... det var ju svårt för mig och säga nåt också när hon var därinne men... Nämen vi sa väl... nämen vi har bara skojbrottades som gick överstyr så... det är inget, det är ingen fara.

Evelina:: Nej inte riktigt. Men jag minns att jag sa när dom frågade varför jag stannade, att jag var tvungen för att hon hade gjort så att... jamen hon hade ju gjort så att jag hade fått prickar hos kronofogden och sådär. Så jag kände att jag inte hade nåt val. För att det var hennes lägenhet och hon kunde liksom, hon skulle förstöra mitt liv om jag drog.

Lovisa: Så sa jag, jag har varit i en vuxen relation också. 'jamen det var väl en han i alla fall' sa hon. Och det var lite såhär 'nej det var inte heller en han' att det kändes litegrann som att jamen då var det inte lika... liksom bara okay ja... ungefär att så var det inte farligt liksom

Olivia: Och jag har fortfarande kontakt med en utav dom litegrann. Och hon när vi pratade vid förra sommaren så sa hon det att 'vi visste ju. Vi visste hur du hade det. Men vi visste inte vad vi skulle göra'

Saga: Men det... alltså dom var så ”jamen ni jättebra på att kommunicera med varandra” så. Och det var vi säkert där liksom [...] och jag tänkte så men vi kanske har det bra. Kanske bara jag som behöver ändrar inställning till... och det var lätt att skylla på att vi inte hade sovit på länge och småbarnsåren är tuffa och alltså såna saker.

Josefin: ’Det får du inte säga, det blir typ pinsamt för mig.’ Så sen slutade vi efter bara några gånger och det tror jag var för att han var, nu tänkte inte jag gå nåt mer eftersom jag hade sagt nånting som säkert var alldeles för nära liksom. Att berätta om vad som hände typ eller såhär, jag vet inte. Jag kommer inte ihåg exakt vad det var. Men det var nånting. Den terapeuten verkade inte fatta nånting.

Olivia: Alltså den första damen vi var hos hon var usel. Hon klarade inte ens att hålla isär vem som var vem utav oss. Det var så himla förvirrande och prata med två kvinnor för hennes del. Så henne tog vi det gemensamma beslutet att vi inte skulle fortsätta med.

Oliva: Jag vet till slut var familjerådgivaren så frustrerad på henne också, så familjerådgivaren sa rakt ut ’men ta av dig of-ferkoftan’ (skrattar). Det var nog det minst professionella jag har hört nån säga. Nämen hon var så less till slut. För det gick bara inte fram nåt utav det vi pratade om. Men tar av dig offerkoftan... och Agnes var så jävla arg när vi gick därifrån (skrat-tar) åh gud det var... det var spännande

Juliana: ’Och det enda jag ska fråga dig är vad skulle du säga till en kompis som är i din situation? Vilket råd skulle du ge?’ Jag bara okay jag visste vad svaret var, men jag kunde inte svara.

Ewa: Sen var min egen terapeut ännu viktigare för mig. Och det var verkligen, det kändes verkligen som att det var... ja det var någon slags... ja när det var liksom lite på liv och död, så var hon verkligen en livlina. Att det känns verkligen att det... att hon var så rak på sak. Det var liksom på första gången, första terapin såhär. Så var hennes, när jag berättade nånting, hon bara ’ja okay hur slog hon dig?’. Så hon kunna ställa den här frågan. Alltså det var såhär wow jag kan prata om det, öppet med dig. Alltså det var så befriande och så avdramatiserande. Det var så perfekt. För att bara gå bakvägen runt om min skam liksom utan bara ’jaha hur slog hon dig?’. Det känns verkligen såhär, jag kommer aldrig glömma den här frågan såhär. Ja... väldigt skönt att få den frågan verkligen. Mm... att kunna verkligen känna bara okay nu kan jag verkligen berätta hur det var

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Madeleine: Då kunna jag berätta, jamen såhär har hon gjort och det här säger hon nu... och som att för mig var det som nånting normalt, medans min psykolog kunde säga: 'men Madeleine, det här är inte normalt alltså såhär får man inte bete sig. Det här är våld. Det här är utpressning. Det här är hot.' Att nån annan kunde sätta ord på det som skedde hjälpte jättemycket... för att jag skulle förstå jamen det här är inte mitt fel.

Madeleine: För då...det börjar med att hon frågat såhär 'varför är du här? Jag har läst i dina journaler.' och så förklarar jag varför jag var där. Att såhär nu är jag sjukskriven på grund av att jag hade liksom hållit ihop så länge... och...inte eller lik-som börjat bearbeta allting... och då vet alltså. Vad jag kommer ihåg så specifikt för då hon, alltså hon lyssnade inte på vad jag sa... det märktes så tydligt. Och sen så sa hon 'ja ibland när man tycker om nån väldig mycket, så gör man den illa istäl-let och det kanske inte är meningen'...så. Och det vet jag såhär. Det fastnade i mitt huvud. Och sen efter det satt jag nästan och så 'mm hmm, mm...hmm' så. Och ville komma därifrån... och sen tänkte jag såhär men tänk om det här hade varit ett barn eller en tonåring som hade liksom upplevt våld och säger nån såhär... 'personer är våldsamma för att dom tycker om dig'... på något sätt. Och det, det tyckte jag var fruktansvärt dåligt bemötande.

Saga: Jag har tillbringat jättemycket tid med att försöka förstå varför. Men jag tror inte att det går. För att jag, det är olo-giskt så... utan nånstans har jag väl landat i att jag inte kommer att kunna förstå varför, utan det enda jag kan göra är att försöka hitta ett förhållningssätt som gör att hon inte kan påverka mig lika mycket som idag. Och det går ju också framåt. Jag märker att jag påverkas mindre och mindre. Sen om det är för att jag blir härdad och van eller för att hon liksom hennes makt över mig minskar

eftersom tiden ändå går. Det vet jag inte. Men där har samtalskontakten på [Kvinnorganisation] varit väldigt bra eller liksom. För vi har jobbigt med just mycket det här med att såhär. Men du kommer aldrig kunna förstå och du kommer aldrig få ett svar på varför.

6. Challenging lesbian utopias: The impact of kin and community on help-seeking

Saga: En ut av anledningarna att jag inte ville berätta för folk hur dåligt vi hade var för att jag någonstans kände att jag inte bara representerade mig själv och våran familj utan jag också representerade lesbiska familjekonstellationer och att jag någonstans alltså men... vi måste! Alltså min upplevelse var så att jag vill visa att vi faktisk är bra föräldrar att vi har, att dom gjorde rätt som tillät oss att skaffa barn att det var mer liksom en sån grej också.

Madeleine: Då vet jag att jag tänkte såhär, jamen jag behöver bara stå ut med det här i fem år. Det var nån sån här grej jag tänkte och sen kan jag lämna det här då. [N: varför fem år?] M: jamen... kanske som... misslyckande att inte klara en relation eller... sådär man tror inte man... kan eller vet, eller förtjänar bättre så [...] fem år kan jag stå ut med det här liksom. Sen kan jag lämna.

Saga: Men jag hade väl insett att den största anledningen till att jag inte ville separera var för att jag ville vara med mina barn 100 procent och inte 50 procent. Inte för att jag ville leva tillsammans med henne utan... och för att jag nånstans hade så svårt och se mig själv som en person som var separerad. Att jag nånstans hade bilden av att så, men den jag skaffar barn med ska jag leva med i resten av mitt liv.

[Nicole: Vad tror du gjorde det möjligt för dig att komma ur relationen?]
Ulrika: Det var att bli förälder. Det är jag rätt övertygad om. Just för att då, då kunde jag sätta liksom föräldraskapet och mitt barn först och då kunde jag se att för hennes skull så måste jag ta mig ur det här och för att jag skulle kunna vara en bra förälder. Så det var... annars tror jag att det hade kunnat dröja jättemycket längre. Det var ju också, tror jag en sak som försvårade för mig att ta mig ur det var att... men just den här processen, vi höll på jättelänge och stod i kö för att få barn. Jag hade väl upplevt mig som ofrivillig barnlös i flera år när mitt barn kom. Just för att vi köade och det var utredning och det var liksom det ena och det andra... så sen dem här försöken så att... det var så under fyra år. Hade jag gjort slut under

dom fyra åren så hade det varit, liksom kändes som att göra slut med mina chanser att få barn också. Så att det bidrog ju till och hålla mig kvar. Men det bidrog också till att jag... att jag kunde ta mig ur det sen när barnet hade kommit.

Ewa: Vi hade börjat med en sån fertilitetsutredning och liksom anmält och så och ställt oss i kön i [stad]...och vi har fått brevet med efter typ 18 månader att nu är det dags att komma på nytt besök och då kände jag bara jag ska fan inte ha barn med den här människan. Där var det verkligen, det var som, det var så solklart för mig att det här nej jag kan bara inte ljuga längre och för mig själv och... att det här kommer att gå. Det här kommer aldrig att gå. Jag litar inte på henne liksom. Så det var verkligen jag stod med det där brevet och så bara nej, vi kommer aldrig gå på det här besök liksom.

Alexander: Nämen det var väl ett försök, alltså... det var nu mycket med egentligen att där blev vi ju en familj i och med att hon hade barn. Så att det var ju en vilja det här med att verkligen få det att fungera... på något sätt.

Olivia: Där det blev så uppenbart, för när jag hade det här lilla spädbarnet som jag plötsligt behövde lägga all min tid och energi på, då kunde ju inte jag lägga nån tid eller energi på Agnes. Då kunde inte jag på samma sätt, hjälpa eller underlätta eller reparera alla konflikter hon skapade eller liksom... det gick ju inte. Och då eskalerade hennes beteende gentemot mig rejält. Så jag tror att jag redan den våren bestämde mig. Jamen lite det här jag sa också att... jamen när hon började suicidhota även efter att vi hade fått barn och hon var gravid. Att det här gör inte jag mot mina barn. Jag stannar inte i det här.

Olivia: Och så använde jag också barnen väldigt mycket som en ursäkt. Nämen jag kan inte åka iväg för att våran äldste är lite krasslig eller nämen våran yngsta har sovit så himla dåligt i natt, så jag orkar faktiskt inte eller jamen nåt sånt där. Som att det var mitt val att inte följa med ut eller vad det nu kunde vara.

Saga: Jamen i en relation där det finns barn så tar det ju faktiskt inte slut bara för att relationen tar slut. För att även om vi inte lever tillsammans idag, och det inte alls är på samma sätt, så har ju våran kontakt fortfarande samma struktur som den hade innan. Samma mönster och det är ju fortfarande liksom... en oerhörd maktobalans. [N: mm] Och det kan jag ibland

tycka är jobbigt för att det nånstans finns en upplevelse av att så men nu lever ni inte tillsammans längre. Och det så nej, det gör vi inte men våran relation påverkar mig fortfarande för att hon, hon har inte ändrats bara för att vi separerat. Hon är inte blivit... ja vi har inte fått en jämlik eller jämbördig relation bara för att vi separerade. Det handlar inte om... problemet var ju inte att vi levde ihop. Problemet det ju liksom våran kontakt, våran relation. Och vi kan inte sluta ha kontakt.

Evelina: Man har sett liksom att hon inte är så bra, men jag var så bra att det täckte upp för oss båda. Så därför blev det liksom ingen insatser eller så utan vi klarade den utredningen eller vad man ska säga.

Olivia: Jag tror att jag bestämde mig för ganska länge sen för att lämna faktiskt. Men i och med att vi har fått barn... vi har inte fått barn via landstinget utan vi har gått via heminsemination och privat donator, vilket ju har betytt att vi har behövt adoptera det barn som den andra har fött liksom. Och då visste ju jag att jag kan inte ens påbörja, jag kan inte ens andas om att lämna förrän det här är klart så. Och det tog ju sin tid, för att hade jag valt att börja lämna innan min yngsta dotter på papperet var min, så hade jag lätt inte kunnat ha med henne att göra. Och det hade varit vansinnigt dåligt... båda för henne och för mig. Så att jag var så tvungen att vänta in liksom hela jamen... faderskapsutredning och tingsrättens utredning och... ja socialtjänstens alla grejer och ytligare handledningstider och så där.

Evelina: Och allt blev ju mycket svårare efter att vi fick barn för att... då hade hon ju det som en hållhake för... hon lät inte mig göra närståendeoptionen, för att hon ville få ut underhållsbidrag. Det ju så systemet ser ut. Och då hade hon ju liksom det som en hållhake och sen... jamen och så sa hon ju 'jomen du ska få, du måste adoptera. Det blir bäst för barnen'. Sen kunde hon komma en vecka senare 'nämen nu, jag tycker du är dum. Du får inte göra det' och det var ju hon som hade den makten. Så det blev ju jobbigt när vi väl separerade. För då hade inte jag vårdnaden. Så det blev en lång kamp.

Evelina: Den har varit jobbig fram för allt för barnen för att dom har liksom blivit tvingade till umgänge med henne. För det här barnens behov i centrum det är ju på papperet. Det är ju inte så verkligheten är. Föräldrar, biologiska föräldrar har ju väldigt starka rättigheter. Även om det inte är det bästa för barnet. Så det har varit tufft. Och det har ju satt sina spår hos barnen också.

Evelina: För det har jag ju lärt mig, att man inte bara ska tro på det dom säger och lita på det. Att dom vet vad som gör, för det gör dom verkligen inte. Vi har nog beställt varenda bok som finns på Socialstyrelsen och... ja det tog ju tre år innan dom sa, erkände att dom hade gjort fel och kunde agerat annorlunda. Dom kunde ha gett mig vårdsnaden tidigare och... så det lite trist och veta att barnen har lidit en himla massa i onödan. Om dom bara hade öppnat en bok och läst, så hade dom sett samma som vi, att jag hade kunnat få vårdsnaden. Det gjorde dom inte.

Maryam: Du menar om jag är 'medlem' (småskrattar) i communityt eller? [Nicole: Eller mer om det är något... alltså om du skulle säga att din umgängeskrets är queer eller... eller att det liksom är det.. inom det communityt som du skulle identifiera dig som..] Maryam: Ja precis, jamen absolut. Alltså alla.. alla mina vänner utom mina kollegor är... HBTQ [Nicole: Så det är en ganska relevant del av ditt liv] Maryam: Ja, absolut. Det är det. Jag har liksom ingen... jag har en nära vän eller hon var en nära vän, som är heterosexuell ... cis-kvinna (småskrattar), men de övriga är trans eller icke-binära eller gay eller lesbisk eller queer eller bi.

Saga: Oj... va svårt... jamen alltså det är klart det är. Det är ändå en del av min identitet... liksom... det var en väldigt relevant del av mitt liv i samband med att skaffa barn och när barnen var små så kändes det väldigt viktigt att ha många olika familjekonstellationer i barnens närhet. Så att dom skulle få upplevelsen av att det fanns flera olika sätt att, att vara familj på liksom. Inte bara höra talas om att det fanns andra utan också så faktisk ha kompisar som har bara en mamma eller bara en pappa eller två mammor eller två pappor eller flera mammor eller flera pappor alltså såhär så... men jag kanske alltså jag söker mig kanske inte till... Ja jag har nu inte tänkt så jättemycket på det. Jag är inte så speciellt aktiv i liksom... i såna sammanhang...men det var nu mer med att det är jag. Inte för att jag inte vill liksom.

Cecilia: Ja det är det. Även om jag lever... alltså det... men det är ändå en väldigt heteronormativ miljö rent generellt jag lever i... (lilla stad) HBTQ värld är inte blomstrande så att säga (småskrattar) Men nej utan... jag identifierar mig som lesbisk och det liksom... jag känner mig... om man går ut till exempel så är jag tryggare på gay-ställen än hetero-ställen även om man liksom kan vara på hetero-ställen ändå. Jag inget problem att hålla handen, när jag går runt med en flickvän eller pussa henne offentligt sånt där, men det... den är absolut... Den var mera... var jag mer i den världen, när jag bodde i (större stad).

Amina: Vi är väldigt typisk Svenssons. Vi har barn, vi åker till jobbet, barnen åker till skolan, och kommer hem, ska äta mat och åka på basket alltså. Vi träffar våra vänner ibland. Vi har vänner som är heterosexuella och vi har vänner som är homosexuella. så... men annars så är det ju inte så mycket. Det händer inte så mycket i (lilla stad) just. Kring den delen. Den miljön. Dom har något liten Pride flagga här under... Är det under prideveckan? [...] Ja och det är bra... och vi har pride flagga härute men that's it. vi rör oss inte jättemycket i dom kretsarna.

Selma: Jag har gjort allt vad jag kunnat för att hålla mig utanför det tills, för att jag själv inte skulle liksom behöva komma ut för mig själv. Jag har vetat sen jag var femton och sen har jag byggt upp en mur. Så jag har ju... jag har ju haft vänner som liksom killar som är homosexuella men jag har aldrig haft vänner som är tjejer och homosexuella liksom för att hålla distans och liksom inte behöva komma i närheten av mina känslor [...] Jag har ju aldrig varit i närheten av en Pridefestival nånstans eller ett Pridetag. Nån gång har jag tänkt men då har jag, har jag ju blivit sjuk i samband. Så då har jag liksom inte blivit av den anledningen så. Nej jag är, jag är ju ganska ensam i min homosexualitet.

Juliana: Alla känner varandra och dom har såna här värden som jag inte riktigt... alltså att man ska vara vegan att man ska ha hår, du vet såhär regler som jag inte riktigt alltså jag tycker inte att det... just för att jag är homosexuell behöver jag inte vara det här. Alltså... jag blev ganska trött på det där sammanhanget att du ska tycka såhär eller ja göra såhär. Och dom kompisar som jag har, dom flesta identifierar sig som bisexuella men... dom är ändå och jag säger såhär alltså 'vanligt folk'. Det är folk som inte pratar för mycket om sexualitet och [...] Det är väldigt mycket såhär: du råkar vara lesbisk eller du råkar vara heterosexuell. Det bara som det är. Det här (storstads) queers som jag kallade dom, dom flesta tycker inte om män... går bara till dom här ställen. Inte dom där ställen och... tycker väldigt mycket om saker och ting och jag gillar att vara mig själv.

Elin: För mig har feminism väldigt mycket med HBTQ-rörelsen att göra typ. Väldig många av mina vänner är båda delar... och det är lätt att det går hand i hand liksom mot patriarkatet. Och jag tror att inom feminismen så finns det en delvis väldigt bra trend av att alltid välja offrats sida och att om en kvinna har blivit utsatt för våld av en man, så vända man mannen ryggen och tror på kvinnan liksom. Och att man då kan såhär skapa sitt eget rum, typ separatistiska rum och stänga ute förövarna liksom... och det vart, det blir det svårt (skrattar) när man inte har varit med en man typ.

Lena: Jag hade nästan inga kompisar som var... HBTQ på något sätt... eller ett par men inte många... så nej. Jag var inte inne i den världen annat än att jag var med henne typ... då.

Evelina: Alltså under tiden som jag levde med henne, så var vi ju... höll vi nog oss ganska mycket utanför det. Det har jag ju förstått att det blev ju en väldigt liten, och många som kände till henne och, så hon ville nog bara bort därifrån, så egentligen har jag inte haft så mycket med det at göra alls under den tiden. Det var ju innan jag träffade henne.

Sabrina: Det började med mina kompisar Ann och Charlotte som är mina fairy gay mothers... för dom verkligen liksom... att få spendera tid med dem och kunna se att saker var inte okay, som dom skulle vara. Det fick mig att inse... nej nånting är fel. Att se det utifrån. För innan dess så var jag väldig fången i mitt egna och... ja hade svårt och lyssna på på folk. Men ja dom fick mig att inse det själv på ett sätt som dom frågade efter... också för att dom hade just den typen av relation innan, så tror jag dom kände liksom hur dom liksom ska få en att inse det. Så det var dom som det började med.

Sabrina: 'Varför tänker du ens gå tillbaka? Hon kommer knivhugga dig nån gång.'

Sasha: Ja men som sagt mina bonusmammor dom har ju hjälpt enormt. Jag fick ju bo hos dom ett tag för att slippa hennes påhopp och dom har ju varit hemma hos mig också ganska ofta och dom har ju pratat med henne och sagt "såhär ska man inte göra". Att hon ska lämna mig i fred. Så jag tror att hon har lyssnat på dom i alla fall. För att...ja dom är ju svenska och dom är äldre och... [Nicole: Vad är bonusmamma?] Sasha: Jag har ju träffat...det ett lesbiskt par som är samma ålder som min mamma och min mamma bor ju i (land), så har jag har ju ingen familj, så dom har ju som sagt adopterat mig så att säga [Nicole: ahh] Sasha: Så dom kallar sig själva för mina bonusmammor så...ja.

Sasha: Det är inte så många kvinnor tyvärr. Det är det jag försöker att liksom lyfta upp och bara jamen kan vi inte skaffa liksom...kan vi inte hitta fler kvinnor som vill komma hit och starta olika grupper och aktiviteter och sånt. Ja... nej men det ju ganska stort för att jag tycker att det är enormt viktigt. Ja för att som sagt i mitt land. Det går ju inte. Man gömma ju liksom hela tiden och ljuger för allt och alla vem man är.

Sasha: Om hon är över 25, var går en kvinna som är över 25 och har varit med om något hemskt? Det finns ingenstans och gå. Kvinnohuset tar ju emot oftast folk som har varit med i heterosexuellt förhållande. Men kvinnor över 25 som kanske har varit gift och har flera barn eller ett barn. Och sen plötsligt jamen just det jag är kanske lesbisk. Det finns ju ingenstans och gå.

Saga: Men ibland kan jag sakna... Det låter ju dumt för jag vill ju inte att det ska finnas andra med samma erfarenhet, men ibland kan jag önska eller liksom sakna att prata med någon som också har levt i en samkönad relation där det har förekommit fysisk eller psykisk misshandel... just för att... ja just för att det finns andra aspekter utöver det och för att... Jag har upplevelsen av att när frågan kommer upp i olika sammanhang och personer delar med sig av sina erfarenheter av våld i heterosexuelle relationer så... jamen så, så passar det inte, passar inte jag in eller det känns som att jag förstör lite.

Tina: Jamen jag tyckte det var bra. Det jag... alltså det är alltid skönt när man känner sig... förstådd på ett djupare plan. Alltså just när man pratar med nån som faktiskt förstår vad det innebär med att inte vara norm, för att det spelar ju in faktiskt i dom här sakerna också liksom att det... allting blir annorlunda... i möte med sjukvården eller polis eller med... med rättsväsenet... allting blir ju annorlunda. När dom inte ens vet hur dom ska brottsrubricera liksom, det börjar ju bli bisarrt. Så att när man väl hamnar med folk som faktiskt förstår och kan sätta sig i situationen, så är det väldigt skönt. Alltså det är ju en befrielse på nåt vis, för det... då kan man släppa den delen och bara... alltså då behöver man inte förklara så mycket saker.

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1. Nicole Ovesen, *Intimate Partner Violence and Help-Seeking in Lesbian and Queer Relationships: Challenging Recognition*. 2021.

