



Layers of Shame: The Impact of Shame in Lesbian and Queer Victim-Survivors' Accounts of Violence and Help-seeking

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Accepted: 16 August 2023
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Abstract

Purpose The journey from shame to pride has been described as a founding and essential part of the modern LGBTQ movement. However, the tendency to treat shame as something that belongs to the past has been criticized by a number of queer theorists. The struggle to secure equal rights through normalization has also meant that certain topics that risk demonizing and stigmatizing LGBTQ people further have been neglected. Intimate partner violence (IPV) in queer relationships is one such topic. This paper explores a new perspective on queer shame through the topic of IPV in lesbian and queer relationships.

Methods Drawing on qualitative interviews with 25 people who have experienced violence in intimate lesbian/queer relationships in Sweden, this paper unpacks the concept of shame in empirical data to examine how shame operates on different levels when it comes to victimization and how it affects the help-seeking processes of such victim-survivors.

Results Many of the interviewees expressed that they continued to feel ashamed about their denial of violence or their own reactions to the abuse even years after the relationship had ended. An additional layer of shame and secrecy affected the violence and help-seeking processes for the interviewees' who lacked support from their social networks or who were not open about being in a queer relationship. The interviewees' accounts also contained strategies to resist and manage shame.

Conclusions The theoretical and empirical contributions of this paper sheds new light on how shame, victimization and queerness are entangled in the case of IPV.

Keywords Shame · IPV · LGBTQ · Help-seeking · Violence · Victim-survivors · Queer (4–8 words)

Introduction

According to Margaret Morrison (2015, p. 21) shame is a salient feature of queerness. She uses her own experience of coming out as a lesbian to her father in the 1970s and being told that “some things are better left unsaid” as an example of symbolic violence of queer shame resulting in alienation and rejection. Shame and secrecy continue to be prominent themes in queer studies. Shame is also a key driving force and component of many social movements: from rape and domestic violence (DV) victims who turn shame into anger, the gay movements and civil rights groups' turn from shame to pride manifested in expressions such as “Black is beautiful” and “gay is good” (Sedgwick, 2009, p. 59; Warner, 2009, p. 286). These are just a few examples of the ways

in which shame is used to mobilize and transform social movements.

Michael Warner (2000, 2009) who has written and theorized extensively about gay shame and the politics of sexual shame argues that narratives about shame and overcoming have shaped the modern gay movement's self-understanding (Warner, 2009, p. 286). Warner argues that growing up in a heteronormative society and family structure “produces a profound and nameless estrangement, a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame” (Warner, 2000, p. 8). A desire to escape such shame has led to the formulation of a collective progress narrative focusing on normalization, conformity, sameness and assimilation. Resistance against such narratives can be found in different forms of queer activism such as the Gay Shame Movement in New York which sought to represent those deemed unworthy to be represented in the mainstream gay movement (Halperin & Traub, 2009, p. 11). Halperin & Traub, (2009) study the notion of gay shame in their anthology carrying the same name in which prominent queer theorists, activists and writers explore different

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forms of gay shame from stigmatised sexual histories and practices, dissident gender identities to embarrassing and outdated moments and figures from the gay-lesbian-queer past. They argue that efforts to present a dignified picture of LGBTQ people, have meant that leading LGBT organizations and researchers may unintentionally or intentionally shy away from topics that could risk demonizing and stigmatising LGBTQ people further (Halperin & Traub, 2009, p. 11). Intimate partner violence (IPV) in queer relationships is a clear example of such a topic which tend to be neglected within research and activism.

This paper draws on data from a qualitative study on lesbian and queer victim-survivors of IPV in Sweden. The study's aim was to explore help-seeking processes and the initial analysis of the data focused on identifying informal and formal types of support, help-seeking patterns and potential barriers. However, shame was a reoccurring theme in the interviewees' accounts. Shame came up in the interviewees' descriptions of violence, it shaped how they engage with people in their social networks both during and in the aftermath of violence and it had also shaped the interviewees' help-seeking processes. In Thomas Scheff's (2000) review of sociological conceptualizations of shame, he argues that the topic of shame has a tendency to be forced upon researchers by their empirical data (2000, p. 94). This was also the case in this study where shame's prominent status in the data convinced me to dedicate the paper to explore the meanings of shame in the interviewee's accounts.

Thus, with this paper, I contribute to the work on gay or more adequate queer shame through the topic of IPV in lesbian/queer relationships, an often overlooked and under-researched topic which invokes different forms of queer shame. The aim of this article is to unpack the concept of shame in relation to empirical data on IPV in lesbian and queer relationships to explore how shame affects the processes of victimization and help-seeking. I explore the different meanings of shame in the interviewees' accounts of violence and their help-seeking processes and move on to how shame and queerness are entangled in the case of IPV and thus needs to be understood in relation to the struggle for recognition.

IPV in LGBTQ Relationships

Research on IPV in same-sex relationships slowly started to develop during the 1980s and 1990s primarily in Anglophone countries. Due to the involvement of lesbian feminists in movements such as the battered women's movement and women's liberation there were significantly more research done on IPV in lesbian relationships when the research fields started to be developed (Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992), but gay

men's experiences of IPV (Island & Letellier, 1991) also started to gain recognition during this time. In the early stages of the research field the topic was often framed as DV/IPV in same-sex relationships, which meant that other groups such as transgender and bisexual victims of IPV were either excluded or made invisible in the research (Heimer et al., 2018: 61–62). However, within the last two decades research on transgender and gender-nonconforming people's experiences of IPV has slowly started to expand (Messinger & Guadalupe-Diaz, 2020). A number of studies have also started to pay attention to bisexual victims of IPV since findings from prevalence studies have suggested that bisexual women in particular are more exposed to IPV (Bermea et al., 2018).

Within the Nordic countries, attention to LGBTQ IPV has slowly started to grow. Yet there are to this date relatively few studies focusing specifically on IPV within LGBTQ communities (Holmberg & Stjernqvist, 2005; Ovesen, 2021; Ummak et al., 2022) and IPV in LGBTQ relationships still remains an under-researched topic within the wider field of DV/IPV research.

Research on LGBTQ peoples' exposure to IPV still faces a number of key theoretical and methodological challenges. It is, for instance, challenging to conduct prevalence data on IPV particularly within minority groups (Calton et al., 2015; Renzetti, 1997). Fear of undermining the structural perspective on men's violence against women can make it challenging to address the issue within feminist movements and scholarships whereas fear of feeding societal homophobic, transphobic and bi-phobic attitudes can make LGBTQ movements reluctant to address the issue as well (Holmberg & Stjernqvist, 2007: 49).

Previous studies tend to focus on prevalence and seeking explanations to understand why violence occurs in LGBTQ relationships. A common tendency in the literature is to discuss sameness and difference between cisgender women's experiences of IPV in heterosexual relationships and LGBTQ victim-survivor's experiences of IPV (Donovan & Barnes, 2019). Catherine Donovan and Marianne Hester suggest that public stories which frame domestic violence and abuse as a heterosexual phenomenon with a clearly gendered victim-perpetrator dynamic and an emphasis on physical violence have made it challenging for LGBTQ victim-survivors to recognize their experiences as violence and seek support (Donovan & Hester, 2010, pp. 281–282).

Previous studies on help-seeking behaviors of LGBTQ victim-survivors suggest that psychological counsellors and therapists are often the first choice of formal help-providers and that few will seek support in services specialized in IPV (Donovan & Barnes, 2020; Donovan & Hester, 2015). There are a number of potential risks involved with this type of help-seeking pattern as the support is often individualized, privatized and IPV can be misinterpreted as a conflict rather

than violence (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). In the following section, I present and discuss the theoretical frameworks of shame that I draw on in my analysis.

Theoretical Framework: Shame – a Slippery Concept

Most people know how shame feels, how it manifests itself in the body and how to recognize when others feel ashamed through subtle clues such as lowering of the eyes, blushing or bowing the head. Yet to identify, define and analyse shame is challenging because of the very “slipperiness of shame” (Fischer, 2018, p. 371). While there are many common conceptions of shame, shame as a concept is often left undefined or conceptualized primarily within psychological/psychoanalytic fields. Queer theorists’ have conceptualized shame across different disciplines often within the frameworks of affects (Ahmed, 2014; Kondakov, 2022; Munt, 2007; Probyn, 2004; Sedgwick, 1990). These works have contributed to a multidisciplinary theoretical and empirical discussion on affects/emotions in relation to normative and violent practices around gender and sexuality (Juvonen & Kolehmainen, 2018; Kondakov, 2022). One of the perhaps most prominent examples of this line of work is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who builds on American psychologist Silvan Tomkins’ work on affects in her exploration of shame in *the Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Sedgwick describes shame as an essential component in the very construction of “the closet” which she regards as the defining structure of gay oppression (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 71).

The relationship between affect and emotion has been extensively debated and theorized within different disciplinary fields. Within psychological fields, affect has traditionally been conceptualised as a state or a pre-discursive force which shape and moves the body while emotions on the other hand were regarded as the result of social and cognitive processes. However, this dichotomy between the pre-discursive bodily and the social/culturally represented has been heavily contested by a number of affects theorists (Juvonen & Kolehmainen, 2018; Kondakov, 2022; Wetherell, 2013). As Alexander Kondakov suggests: “a boundary line between affect and emotions, physicality and discourse is ultimately an illusory one that offers little heuristic insight” (2022, p. 140). In line with this reasoning, I do not make a distinction between affects or emotions in my analysis and with inspiration from affects theorists (Juvonen & Kolehmainen, 2018; Kondakov, 2022; Sedgwick, 1990).

I conceptualise shame as social and relational combined with sociological approaches to shame. For the latter I rely primarily on the work of Thomas Scheff. Drawing on the work of prominent sociologists such as Helen Lynd, Charles Cooley, Scheff proposes a wide definition of shame, where shame includes a large set of emotions such as embarrassment, humiliation and other descriptions of feelings related

to rejection, inadequacy and failure. While psychological conceptions of shame tend to focus on discrepancies in perception between the ideal and actual self, Scheff suggests that shame arises from threats to the social bonds and thus needs to be understood as a relational and social emotion rather than an individual one (Scheff, 2000, pp. 96–97). In line with Scheff’s work, I too wish to move away from primarily including individual/psychological explanations in my analysis of the impact of shame, since the inclusion of a sociological approach allows for an exploration of the relationship between individual and collective form of shame and its effects on solidarity and alienation (Scheff, 2000).

As emphasized by Sedgwick “[t]he forms taken by shame are not distinct “toxic” parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral and residual in the process in which identity itself is formed” (Sedgwick, 2009, pp. 59–60). I suggest that the different frameworks of shame I have presented here can be useful to explore shame not just an individual felt emotion or affect but rather as a relational and social one which impact individuals and collectives’ self-understanding.

Shame and IPV

The concept of shame and stigmatization has been addressed in research on LGBTQ IPV often as part of the minority stress model framework which use homo-bi or transphobia to explain barriers for help-seeking, victimization and in some cases even perpetration of violence (Carvalho et al., 2011; Scheer & Poteat, 2021; Tigert, 2001). Shame has also been addressed in relation to victimhood within the broader field of IPV research (Beck et al., 2011; Buchbinder & Eisikovits, 2003; Enander, 2010; Towns & Adams, 2016), often as an outcome and effect of IPV.

Shame is often addressed in studies on psychological abuse and it has also been addressed as a key element in patterns of controlling behaviors in IPV. In his influential work on coercive control, Evans Stark (2007) suggests that, compared to other victims of capture crimes, women who have been subjected to coercive control experience a more profound shame. Stark contributes the sense of profound shame to the familiarity of the setting in which the abuse occurs, the ambiguous nature of the coercion along with the widespread assumption that the women have freely chosen their lot (Stark, 2007, pp. 204–205).

Swedish studies on IPV have examined the way in which cultural ideals of gender norms shape abused women’s feelings of shame in relation to their victimization (Enander, 2010; Hydén, 2005). In her study on women who had left an abusive male partner, Viveka Enander (2010) finds that the women’s self-blame and shame and particularly their view of themselves as stupid are part of a specific form of gendered and battered shame. This shame is connected both to staying

and leaving the abusive relationship which Enander relates to a perceived failure to live up to Swedish ideals around gender equality and independence. Lucas Gottzén (2016) combines affect theories' focus on shame as performative with social interactionist approaches to violence in his study on male perpetrators of IPV in Sweden to show how perpetrators use shame and disclosure in an attempt to distance themselves from the shameful subject position of a woman batterer.

Similarly to Gottzén I also combine different frameworks of shame in my analysis but my focus is not on shame in the form of remorse after perpetration and I do not use shame to explain perpetration of violence. I explore the way in which shame is an essential part of the violence itself and shapes the conditions for support. Thus, in this paper I unpack the meaning of shame in relation to queer victimization and I do so by combining concepts of shame from queer theories to explore the relationship between shame and pride, individual and collective shame and the struggle for recognition with social theories of shame as a threat to the social bonds. In the following section, I present the data and methods used in the current study in more detail.

Method/Data

This article draws upon semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 victim-survivors who have been subjected to violence in a lesbian and/or queer relationship. The interviews were conducted between March and June in 2018. The recruitment for the study was done through a call for participants, which was shared on social media and on relevant LGBTQ platforms. The inclusion criteria for the study were that the research participants had to be 18 years or older, live in Sweden, identify as lesbian, gay, homosexual, bisexual or queer or as a woman who engages or has engaged in relationships with women and have experienced violence in an intimate relationship.

A wide definition of violence was used in the call for participant which included any type of violence (psychological, physical, material, sexual, controlling, stalking, etc.). The initial focus of the study was to explore IPV and help-seeking in lesbian relationships. In order to acknowledge the instability of identity and relationships categories and to use the categories that the interviewees used to describe their relationships, queer relationships was added in the framing of the sample. The final sample consist of people who report having been in lesbian relationships which includes cisgender lesbian and queer identifying participants as well as a trans man who reported having been in previous lesbian relationships. The sample of research participants included a number of different sexual identities such as lesbian, bisexual,

pansexual, queer and homosexual and a couple of the participants did not wish to label their sexual identity. Two of the interviewees had experienced IPV in a queer/lesbian relationship where their partner had gone through transition and this had therefore changed how they categorized their relationships.

Throughout this paper, I use queer when referring to my interviewees as a group or as a community. The participants' age ranged from 20 to 55 years at the time of the interview, and the average age was 32.5 years old. The vast majority of the participants could be read as white. 21 of the interviewees had grown up or lived in Sweden for most of their lives. Four research participants had immigrated to Sweden. The study was approved by an Ethical Review Board in June 2017. Potential research participants were informed about the premise of the project: that their participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, that they had the right to withdraw at any stage and information about relevant support services was provided prior to the interview. All of the interviews were conducted in person at a location of the interviewee's choice, and they were all conducted in Swedish.

Most of the interviews took place in the interviewee's home and most of the participants lived in, or on the outskirts of, the most populated cities in Sweden. All of the interviewees had left their abusive partner(s) at the time of the interview. The interview-guide was structured around themes related to the help-seeking processes such as how the interviewee defined of violence, the contexts in which violence and help-seeking took place, the actors involved and the reasons for the choice of support (or lack of support). All interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

The interviews were transcribed and qualitatively coded for themes related to the process of identifying violence and seeking support using the qualitative coding software NVivo. I used a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022) when coding and analysing the transcripts and I made individual help-seeking maps for each of the interviewees to track their help-seeking process. As mentioned in the introduction, shame came up in the interviewees' understanding and definition of IPV and in descriptions of their help-seeking processes. As Scheff (2000, pp. 96–97) suggests there are many different expressions of shame which are not always captured in the word shame. Thus, when starting the analysis for this paper I returned repeatedly to recode the data, for instance, to include different connotations of shame. The analysis phase can therefore also be described as a recursive process where I moved between the empirical data and theory. In the next section I explore the dynamics of shame in relation to IPV and help-seeking.

Analysis

In the analysis I unpack the meanings of shame in lesbian and queer victim-survivors' accounts of violence and its impact on their help-seeking processes. I start by examining expressions of shame in the interviewees' account of violence. I then move on to analyse the relationship between shame and guilt and concealment and exposure in relation to IPV and help-seeking. Finally, I explore the links between individual and collective feelings of shame and the strategies used by the interviewees to navigate and manage shame during and after the relationship had ended.

The Mirroring Effect of Shame

In this section I explore the mechanism of shame in relation to victimization. In the interviewees' accounts I found that shame was described both as a tool for control in the violence itself but also that the interviewees' experienced shame because of their victimization which in turn affected their help-seeking processes. Many of the interviewees described how their abusive partner's perspective on them and their relationships with others such as family members and friends had dominated their lives and had eventually controlled how they viewed themselves. Saga, a lesbian woman in her mid-thirties who had been in an abusive relationship for around ten years with psychological and physical violence, explained that her partner would often tell her how other people perceived her:

She would tell me that things I was wearing didn't fit or that my appearance was wrong in different ways and that she said it because she didn't want me to embarrass myself or something like that.

Saga explained that these statements were framed as a form of support and care. This is an example of how the dynamic of shame and its relation to the perspectives of the "imagined others" can be a central part of psychological abuse in IPV.

Sociological theorists suggest that shame should be read as a social emotion as it is often the result of social monitoring since shame is triggered by viewing the self through the perspectives of the other(s) (Cooley, 1922, p. 184; Longhofer, 2013, p. 299; Scheff, 2000, p. 88). In the formulation of the looking-glass self, sociologist Charles H. Cooley explained that: "The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind" (Cooley, 1922, p. 184). Social monitoring is an essential part of IPV and especially in coercive control (Stark & Hester, 2019) and an abusive

partner can in subtle ways trigger the perspective of the imagined others as a way to enhance their control. Saga's partner would, for instance, enact her shame by telling Saga that her friends only hung out with her was because they felt sorry for her. This worked to isolate Saga further from her social networks.

Elsbeth Probyn suggests that shame is perhaps the most intimate of feelings as it is brought into being by an intimate proximity to others (Probyn, 2004, p. 331). In cases of IPV these intimate others are not just limited to the partner(s), but also other relationships since many of the interviewees had feared what family members, colleagues and friends might say or think about them, their partner or their relationship if they found out about the abuse. Some of the interviewees had therefore distanced themselves from family and friends in order to avoid potential judgement and humiliation. But this also meant that it became more difficult to seek support as they were more isolated in the relationship. An abusive partner can also enact shame more explicitly by threatening to disclose compromising information about their partner to members of their social networks. This would often be information that would change how other people perceived them. One of the interviewees explained, for instance, that her partner had threatened to release recordings of their fights in an attempt to portray the interviewee as the perpetrator. For the interviewee Lena, who identified as a lesbian and had been in an abusive relationship when she was in her late-teens, it had taken her a long time to leave her abusive partner. Lena attempted to end the relationship several times and her ex-partner had continued to stalk her. Lena eventually managed to cut all contact. However, in order to do so she had to cut contact to their mutual friends as well. Following the break-up Lena felt very isolated, depressed and ashamed about how things had turned out:

I was ashamed that well, I was quite chaotic back then as well and then people might get this image of you, that you are in a certain way and then you have to kind of take it back or kind of become normal again.

Lena explained that she felt ashamed about her own reactions and particularly the fact that she kept going back to her partner but also that she continued to miss her. According to Tomkins shame is connected to enjoyment and interest given that "one must have expected something good to come from the other person before the other's contempt produces shame." (Tomkins, 1995, p. 138). This helps to explain why IPV is strongly upheld by shame since the abuse is entangled with feelings of affection and love. Furthermore, the imagined judgement from others contributed to Lena's feeling of shame. She talked about having to redefine herself after the relationship had ended.

Many of the interviewees had struggled to define their experiences as violence. This was, for instance, the case for Malou, a queer woman who had been in a relationship with an abusive and controlling partner for around five years, starting in her mid-teens. She described the abuse as a confusing and diffuse process:

Well it was very much about overriding my experience of things and that it became quite clear that [my experience] was invalid or what to say. It was a lot of guilt and shaming. Perhaps mainly it was... well it's a bit unclear to talk about or it's hard to pinpoint sometimes and that's why I feel that it can be difficult to define it as violence. Well it depends a bit on what your definition of violence is, but in the long run for me it became a situation of psychological abuse. In some sort of uncertainty about what would happen if she got angry. Sometimes she disappeared. There was one time when she hit me. I remember that it was right at the end of our relationship. It was almost nice to kind of have something like that hold on to. That it wasn't just my imagination.

IPV will often take the form of a subtle, iterative process and can therefore be difficult to recognize as it was demonstrated in Malou's account. Malou described the psychological abuse she experienced as characterized by guilt and shaming which made it difficult for her to trust her own judgement. Paige Sweet (2019), who has researched the role of gaslighting in IPV, suggests that inflicting doubt and making the victim question their own sense of reality is a key feature of control in IPV. Similarly, to many of the other interviewees' accounts it was not until the relationship had ended that Malou finally managed to define her experiences as violence. This process started when she began to disclose her experiences to members of her social networks and her new partner. Even at the time of the interview, several years after the relationship had ended, she struggled to talk about the abuse and she continued to doubt whether her experiences actually counted as violence. As sociologist Helen Lynd suggests:

In shame there is a doubt, a questioning of trust. It is for such reasons as these that shame may be said to go deeper than guilt; it is worse to be inferior and isolated than to be wrong, to be outcast in one's own eyes than to be condemned by society. (Lynd, 1999, p. 207)

The interviewees talked about strong feelings of shame but also guilt. Some felt ashamed about how they reacted or failed to react to the abuse or guilty about lying to friends or family members during the relationship. In the following section, I explore the relation between guilt and shame in the interviewees' accounts.

Shame and Guilt

When going through the interview transcripts and looking specifically for implications of shame I would often be conflicted about whether a certain passage concerned shame or guilt or both. According to Lynd (1999, p. 22) guilt and shame can alternate and reinforce each other. However, while the two were often used interchangeably in the interviewees' accounts they also served slightly different functions. Whereas shame is commonly conceptualized as related to as a sense of self, of who one is. Guilt on the other hand involves what one does (Scheff, 2000, p. 92; Sedgwick, 2009, p. 51). I suggest that understanding the relationship between guilt and shame is essential to understand the dynamics of IPV.

To explore the relationship between the two I start with a quote from my interview with Ulrika. Ulrika, was in her early thirties at the time of the interview and she had been exposed to primarily psychological violence in a lesbian relationship, which had lasted around eight years. Ulrika talked about being controlled in subtle ways by her partner. She was, for instance, responsible for her partner's wellbeing at all times while also being the main caregiver for their child. During the relationship, Ulrika had to live by and obey a number of unspoken rules to avoid causing her partner distress. These rules concerned, for instance, how many things she was allowed to have in the house, how clean the house had to be and who she could invite over. Her partner would at times act out in panic and Ulrika would sometimes end up physically restraining her. Ulrika struggled to identify herself as a victim of IPV and continued to feel ashamed and guilty about her own reactions:

It feels shameful or like I'm still taking it on because I was also involved in it. I take on the guilt and it feels difficult to talk about it because it's so loaded with violence. It feels difficult in our situation or it's probably often like that. It can be so complex and I would need to explain so much about the circumstances, in order to give the person I'm talking to a more real picture of what it was like or what happened and so on [...] well it feels like I'm taking on the blame and it's also difficult to talk about this so that somebody else understands what it's about.

As I discussed in the previous section, the uncomprehensive nature of IPV often leads victims to question their own experiences and judgments. Feelings of ambiguity about who is actually responsible for the abuse is a powerful tactic for control and is often used to silence victims of IPV (Towns & Adams, 2016, p. 514). In Ulrika's account her feelings of guilt are exacerbated by an underlying doubt about the intention behind her partner's controlling behavior since her ex-partner struggled with mental health

issues. This caused Ulrika to doubt her own involvement and responsibility for the abuse and made her question whether she was actually the perpetrator. Similarly, to Lena's account, Ulrika also refers to the perceived reactions and anticipated judgements from an "imagined other" to explain her feelings of shame and guilt.

Many of the interviewees expressed feelings of shame and guilt not only towards their previous partner(s) or the perception of the 'imagined other' but often towards family members and friends. Juliana, a lesbian woman in her early thirties, talked extensively about how guilt impacted her victimization. She had entered the abusive relationship with a woman after having ended her marriage with a man:

I got out of there [the marriage] and felt really guilty about having ended a relationship which, well on paper looked great and in the everyday life worked really well. Well it was very functional and we lived a "Svensson life"¹ [average life], apartment, dog, both worked. It went well and then yes. [We] broke up and everything that followed, so much pain which I feel like guilty about that I had caused him pain. I lost my dog. I started to come out to my family and that was really painful for them to accept. So there was a lot of guilt and I think that this *mindset* caused me to find someone who could make me pay this debt. So I met a person who wanted something... who wanted to be a victim to put it like that... well she was in the victim role from the very beginning. She never took any responsibility for things.

Juliana positions herself as the cause of pain, not only to her ex-husband but also to the rest of her family. Juliana suggested that it was feelings of guilt that had led her to her abusive partner. Her new partner made Juliana responsible for their relationship and demanded constant attention and care. These are common dynamics in IPV. Donovan and Hester (2015) frame this dynamic as *practices of love*, where the abusive partner is the main decision-maker in the relationship and the victimized partner is made responsible for the partner and the relationship. These practices are often upheld by expressions of neediness and expectations of care which can help to explain why many victim-survivors struggle to identify themselves with the image of the weak and passive victim (Donovan & Hester, 2010).

Even though Juliana only explicitly mentioned feelings of guilt in the quote, I argue that her guilt relies on and is reinforced by shame. Juliana felt guilty over breaking up her marriage and causing her family pain by coming out. It

is the latter form of guilt which is only intelligible through the light of queer shame given that her family's struggle to accept her coming out is not solely related to her decision to divorce but also related to her identity as queer. This serves as an example of the way in which queer shame can be upheld by guilt in IPV. It also highlights the relational character of shame in IPV which is shaped by power inequalities inside as well as outside the dyadic relationship through, for instance, norms and ideals around gender and sexuality.

One of the most prominent themes in the interviewees' accounts was a struggle to identify as a legible victim of IPV. I suggest that this is in part due to the public story of IPV which frames IPV as a heterosexual phenomenon and favors physical violence (Donovan & Hester, 2015) combined with a missing narrative to understand IPV in queer relationships. This means that queer people's experiences of IPV tends to become individualized and thus creates ideal conditions for self-blame and guilt which in turn contribute to feelings of shame. In the next section, I continue along the same line of thoughts to explore the concept of concealment, disclosure and exposure – both in relation to being queer but also a victim of IPV.

Concealment and Exposure

The interviewees would often talk about fearing exposure in relation to their victimization. They mentioned situations where they had covered up for their abusive partner to hide the violence from family and friends and in a few cases also from the social services. Sara Ahmed suggests that there is a double play of concealment and exposure in the work of shame as it both "involves an impulse to 'take cover' and 'to cover oneself'. But the desire to take cover and to be covered presupposes the failure of cover; in shame, one desires cover precisely because one has already been exposed to others. Hence the word 'shame' is associated as much with cover and concealment, as it is with exposure, vulnerability and wounding" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 104).

For the interviewees who lacked support from their social networks because of their sexuality or who were not open about being in a queer relationship, the shame of exposure was two-folded. One such example came up in my interview with Alexander, a transman in his early fifties, who had been in two abusive lesbian relationships pre-transitioning when he was in his twenties and thirties. He shared experiences from his first lesbian relationship:

We lived in secret. We were not open. We lived like two friends. And that made the situation, which was very difficult, very difficult to handle. Just from the fact that we were living secretly, I was so afraid of what people would think of... that I was living as a lesbian.

¹ Svensson is a common Swedish surname and the terms *svensson/medelsvensson* refer to the imagined average Swede and is used similarly to average Joe (*svensson* | *svenska.se*, n.d.).

The secrecy around their relationship had made it particularly challenging for Alexander to disclose violence and seek support. He mentioned a particular situation where his partner had attacked him in public:

One time when we were out and I was talking to some other girl she [the partner] just kind of came up to me and bit me right across the nose. Just like bit me. And the hardest part was not that she bit me. It was how I was going to explain to my friend sitting next to me why she bit me. Because if I had been able to say that we were a couple, it would have been like saying "well, she's jealous". But now I couldn't explain why she just came and bit me. So it was like that. If we hadn't been living in secret, I would have been able to talk to other people and then maybe... well, then the relationship would probably have ended sooner, I think.

Alexander's victimization was unintelligible since his partner and he were not regarded as a couple and when his partner bit him in front of their friend it could therefore not be read as IPV. This is therefore an example of how queer victims of IPV can be positioned as 'double closeted', both regarding their queer identity but also their status as victims of violence (McClennen, 2005) and this can serve as an additional barrier for help-seeking. In her work on the shame of gay pride in early AIDS activism, Deborah B. Gould (2009, pp. 222–223), draws on the work of Sedgwick, to suggest that shame flows from the experiences of non-recognition commonly experienced by marginalized and subordinated groups. One way to navigate such shame of difference and non-recognition is to cover up – as it was the case for Alexander. However, this also creates the risk of exposure.

Sasha, a woman in her mid-thirties who identified as a lesbian/dyke, came to Sweden as a refugee on the grounds of her sexuality. She ended up in two abusive relationships in Sweden. In the second relationship her partner had threatened to *out* her:

I have some relatives who don't know about my (sexual) orientation. But she tried to *out* me when my family was here visiting. And it was horrible. To do something like that. I don't know what you'd call this kind of violence. When you threaten to out someone like that... "if you don't do something I want, I'll say you're a lesbian or a LGBTQ person"

Sasha explained that she had entered into a 'truce agreement' with her immediate family regarding her sexuality. This meant that she could continue to have a somewhat close relationship with her family as long as she did not mention her sexuality or any relationships she may have around them. On the occasion described in the quote, Sasha's partner had turned up uninvited and tried to kiss and hug her in front of her relatives and thereby endangered Sasha's relationship

with the rest of her family. In their exploration of affective inequalities, Marjo Kolehmainen and Tuula Juvonen emphasize the power of mundane, subtle forms of affects in intimate relationships which can "be used to cover, reveal and negotiate power relations and related inequalities. Thus, the norms concerning a dyadic couple or a nuclear family can be mobilized to maintain affective inequalities within or between relationships." (Juvonen & Kolehmainen, 2018, p. 6). Thus, seemingly innocent actions such as kissing, hugging or holding hands in public or in front of one's partner's family take another meaning in the context of queer shame as it can be used by an abusive partner as a discrete, but powerful means of control.

I find that the dynamic of outing held several meanings in the interviewees' accounts. Outing is typically referred to as a specific strategy used to control queer victims of IPV such as in Sasha's account. However, to be outed or to out oneself as a victim of IPV is also an essential part of the help-seeking process. In my interview with Tina, a woman in her mid-thirties who had experienced severe physical and psychological violence in a lesbian relationship when she was in her mid-twenties, I asked her whether anyone had reacted to the abuse. She responded that her best friend had started to suspect that something was not right:

I remember one conversation where she [the best friend] was like 'I'm always here, whatever is going on. I'm here.' And that's what made me call her afterwards too. Because I felt that I had no one left, but she had said that. So I knew she was there. So I called her. But otherwise I was pretty isolated.

Interviewer: when she said that, in the situation. Do you remember how you felt then?

Tina: I felt exposed. It became a huge conflict, because somehow you're in that situation and it's your reality and it was revealed and that very difficult as well. Because you feel so ashamed as well. So it becomes very...well it is very hard. It feels empty, tough. But I think the best description is that you feel exposed. Although I didn't tell her anything or anything like that. But she just told me.

Tina's account shows the struggle victims face when being confronted with other people's knowledge or suspicion of abuse. Even though her friend's concern caused Tina to feel ashamed and she did not disclose violence at first, the gesture also made Tina call this particular friend when she finally escaped from her partner one night following a serious physical assault. This points to the importance of processual and subtle forms of support in cases of IPV in order to avoid a vicious circle of shame and distancing. Feelings of shame around victimization also needs to be understood in relation to collective feelings of shame.

Shame of Shame

In this section, I explore how the progress and pride narratives of the LGBT movement impact queer victim-survivors' help-seeking processes.

I still think about this shame thing. That it became an extra thing. So even if you have friends you can talk to and even if you can say today things like "but it's not a big deal to come out as a homosexual". No, maybe it's not because society says it's okay. But still, you don't really know what people think. And it's still unusual in the grand scheme of things. It's not the norm to live homosexually. So I think that contributes to the fact that it's perhaps more difficult to raise and discuss such a problem. Because it has to be sort of happy and rainbow-colored (laughs) in a way.

The quote above is from my interview with Alexander. He was one of the oldest interviewees in the study and while he acknowledged that the view on gay and queer people in Sweden had changed, he also suggested that the progress narrative could work as a hindrance and make it harder to raise shameful issues such as IPV. Sweden is often praised as a frontrunner for LGBTQ rights and the political, cultural and social context affected the interviewees' help-seeking processes in various ways. Two of the interviewees, for instance, had moved to Sweden due to their sexuality. One of them Ewa, a pansexual woman in her mid-thirties, had been in an abusive relationship for around 12 years and she and her partner had moved to Sweden from another European country. After they had moved the violence started to escalate which made it harder for Ewa to seek support:

I think I'm very ashamed of it. Everything that happened and I was very lonely. So there were many different aspects of it and the fact that we moved to Sweden to be together. Because I felt that I wanted to choose a country where I could feel free in my (sexual) orientation and possibly have children and so on. That's why I moved from (country of origin). Just to be together with her and then all of a sudden... Well it felt like I couldn't really admit that all this was wrong.

Ewa describes Sweden as the place where they *should* have been able to live freely and her shame of failing to live up to this ideal was intensified by her partner's abuse. I argue that the shame is intensified since Ewa's account breaks with the popular trajectory of coming-out stories which tend to be portrayed as progress stories – moving from painful loneliness, confusion and secrecy to exposure and awakening to a final acceptance and integration into a community of peers (Love, 2007, p. 52). In his exploration of gay shame, Warner criticizes the tendency within organized LGBT movements to treat gay shame as “a thing of the personal and collective

past” (Warner, 2009, pp. 286–287). Ewa and Alexander's accounts can be read as examples of what Warner describes as shame about shame (Warner, 2009, p. 287) since violence, isolation and secrecy do not match well with the rainbow-colored happiness discourse of pride and progress.

Saga, who was among the group of interviewees who had children with their abusive ex-partner, said that she struggled to admit that something was wrong in their relationship exactly because they were a lesbian family and she explained that “I wanted to show that we are actually good parents, that they were right to allow us to have children”. This again points to the strong connection between affects such as shame and moral judgment (Juvonen & Kolehmainen, 2018, p. 6) and in this case it is related to homonormative ideals around commitment, coupledness and progress (Ovesen, 2021).

These three accounts demonstrate the ways in which queer shame operates on a personal and collective level simultaneously and that shame in IPV in queer relationships needs to be understood in the light of the struggle for recognition.

Dealing with Shame

In this section, I explore how the interviewees dealt with feelings of shame in the help-seeking processes. All of the interviewees in this study had disclosed violence to others, either informally or formally, prior to the interview. Some of the interviewees shared stories about being confronted by others as part of their help-seeking process. Ewa explained that she and her partner had a very limited social network in Sweden. They had first sought help through couples counselling but were quickly referred to individual sessions. It was her own therapist who ended up playing an important role in Ewa's help-seeking process when she confronted her about the abuse:

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 backdoor 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.

Shame is strongly associated to silence, taboo and secrecy. The therapist's decision to confront Ewa during their first individual session without signs of hesitation or subtlety therefore worked successfully by overtaking Ewa's shame. As Scheff suggests: “Identifying or calling shame by its right name seems to be an important aspect of

understanding and managing it” (Scheff, 2000, p. 94). Since IPV is entangled and upheld by shame the remedy may also be the same. Disclosing the abuse to others, whether it was a family member, a friend or a help-provider was often described as a key element in the interviewees’ account of their help-seeking processes.

After each interview, I would also ask the interviewee how they felt about sharing their experiences with me. One of the interviewees, Therese, a lesbian woman in her early thirties, explained that even though she still felt ashamed and that she was somehow to blame for the abuse, re-telling the story continued to feel liberating:

Well, since it ended, it's just been nice to talk about it. Or like there's a lot of shame in it, like it's my fault. But it's also like I'm *coming clean* or something when I'm telling someone a friend or my family, then it's like I'm being true to myself too. Even though I've told them kind of retroactively that this is what happened, it just feels good. [...] It's like the shame gets a little bit smaller every time I tell it and that it's not so stigmatized.

The coming clean metaphor is often associated to the power of confessions. The way in which Therese points to the act of disclosure as an ongoing and repeated process, demonstrates how help-seeking following IPV is processual and long-term and depends on many different social relationships and actors.

Attempts to meet changing and unreasonable demands set up by an abusive partner (Donovan & Hester, 2015) means that victims of IPV are often forced to lie and to some extent to deceive their friends and family members and this can result in a spiraling dynamic where feelings of deception and shame work to isolate the victim further from their social networks. However, several of the interviewees explained that their feelings of shame had also decreased with time. Cecilia, a lesbian woman who, at the time of the interview was in her early forties, shared experiences of being subjected to psychological and sexual violence in her first lesbian relationship when she was in her late teens. She explained that her shame had changed over time in the following way:

It feels good because on the one hand I feel that I have a good distance to what has happened. It feels good actually to be able to formulate it and then it becomes more defused as well. It feels good to be able to put into words what has happened, even if it hasn't affected me emotionally for a really, really long time, it still feels good to be able to [talk about it], well, without feeling any shame, for example about the sexual abuse, I don't feel any shame now. Which I would if I had tried to talk about it before.

While time is an important factor and works to redefine shame, it is not enough on its own. Understanding shame as inherently social and relational also means that the strategies which mobilize and transform shame need to mirror this (Scheff, 2000). As mentioned, all of the interviewees had eventually disclosed violence to someone else. Many of the interviewees said that they wished they could share their experiences of violence with others who had been in a similar situation. It was only a few of the interviewees who had sought support through IPV specialized services and there are very few formal support services working specifically with LGBTQ victim-survivors of IPV in Sweden. The interviewees had primarily sought informal types of support often in combination with psychological counseling. Josefin who had been an abusive queer relationship explained that she had detected a way in which people who had been exposed to violence leave discrete clues in the way they speak about their past relationships:

So if you don't want to understand that there have been violence, then you can ignore it. And if you want to understand it, then you get it. And then it's an entry point to start talking about it. And I think if you've been a victim yourself, you'll recognize it.

The description of this form of discrete communication is remarkable similar to what Morrison (2015, p. 20) describes as the double movement that queers use to communicating to “those in the know” while carefully disguising themselves and their attempts to disclose at the same time. While shame might often prevent victim-survivors from speaking out or sharing their experiences freely it also works as a source for mutuality and bonding through the “takes-one-to-know-one double coding typical of closet formations” (Warner, 2009, p. 284).

Concluding Discussion: Layers of shame

In this final section I shall summarize and discuss key findings from my analysis of shame and based on these findings I suggest that rather than seeing shame as merely one symptom of IPV it can be used as a fruitful political and theoretical tool to understand violence, alienation, identification but also social transformation. In IPV an abusive partner’s perspective dominates and controls the victim and shame is key in upholding this victimization. Apart from the abusive partner’s perspective, shame is often triggered by the imagined perspectives of others which I framed as the mirroring effects of shame. This was explicitly evident in the cases where the abusive partner had threatening to *out* their partner as part of the abuse. In other cases, when the couple had lived in secret the conditions for the relationship and the violence were shaped by layers

of shame and thus worked as additional barriers for help-seeking while creating the perfect conditions for isolation.

Drawing on Scheff's definition of shame as the result of any threat to the social bonds, I examined expressions of shame which were not necessarily pronounced or captured by the word shame. Guilt and shame were often used interchangeably in the interviewees' accounts, the former used to describe perceptions of one's actions and the latter to a sense of self. I found that the dynamic between guilt and shame were essential part of the victimization in IPV specifically when the abuse itself was unintelligible. Feelings of guilt, for instance, related to accountability and thus helped to sustain shame through a continued questioning of trust in oneself and in others. This questioning of trust often continues in the aftermath of violence.

Scheff describes shame as a long-lasting and social emotion similarly to grief. However, shame is more frequent than grief since it is triggered by even a slight threat to the social bond (Scheff, 2000, pp. 94–95, 97). Shame can therefore be a useful concept to understand the prolonged process of recognizing oneself as a victim and seeking support. Drawing on the works of Ahmed (2014) I discussed the connection between shame, concealment and exposure. As Warner argues, queers face the "burden of disclosure" (Warner, 2000, p. 8) which the prominent figure of the closet exemplifies. However, the same can be said for victims of IPV who also cover up due to shame and where exposure is an essential part of the help-seeking processes. In the case of queer IPV it can be particularly difficult to identify oneself as a victim since queer people are often not portrayed as victims of IPV in the general public discourse on violence. The shame of queer victimization is therefore shaped by non-recognition (Gould, 2009).

To understand the impact of queer shame, I included its opposition—the progressive narrative of pride. Sweden is often praised as a "queertopia" due to progressive family legislation and LGBTQ rights. Yet the topic of IPV within queer communities is challenging to address within this context as well which I have discussed as a shame about shame (Warner, 2009). I argue that IPV in queer relationships disrupts the ideal of progress on a collective and on an individual level as it does not align with the story of "coming out" and seeking refuge in one's chosen family.

While I have focused on the particularity of queer shame in relation to IPV, I suggest that shame is a fruitful perspective and framework to understand the dynamic of IPV even across different groups of victims without denying the particularity of victimization. As I have shown through the analysis, shame creates disidentification and alienation and thus works to control and isolate the victim from their social networks and communities. Strategies used in IPV and particularly in coercive control are characterized by *particularity* since the abuser uses privileged access and

knowledge about their partner to individualize the abuse (Stark & Hester, 2019, p. 87). However, while the micro-level strategies of abuse may take distinct forms, they are also shaped by macro-level social inequalities such as homo- trans and biphobia, racism and sexism (Sweet, 2019). Shame can therefore help us to go beyond existing frameworks and discussing sameness and difference in victimization to explore the ways in which gendered and battered shame is connected to queer shame. Even though the former might be primarily attributed to sexism, and the latter to homo-bi and transphobia they are also connected, for instance in this study, in a perceived failure to live up to the Swedish ideal of equity, freedom and individual independence. The way in which the social, political and cultural context create specific types of shame around victimization was particularly evident in accounts of the interviewee who felt the burden of representation after family legislation changes or in the accounts from the interviewees who had moved to Sweden to be able to live freely with their chosen partner.

Finally, in order to address IPV within LGBTQ communities I suggest that there is a need to embrace the paradoxical nature of shame. While shame works by isolating individuals, it can also be productive and transforming by mobilizing collectives and social movements in a joined refusal to turn one's face away from such isolating shame (Dahl, 2014, p. 337). The AIDS activism, for instance, shows us that shame has a great potential for forming collectivities across differences which do not need to rely on sameness (Gould, 2009, p. 223). IPV in queer relationships is a very clear example of a form of unacknowledged shame and its perhaps not surprising that its often left outside the scope of mainstream movements' work against violence. To disrupt the silence there is a need acknowledge this shame since fear or denial of shame only risk preventing us from exploring hurtful aspects of queer lives and experiences. I end this paper with an encouragement from Halberin and Traub to embrace shame: "Because of gay pride, we have become proud enough that we don't need to stand on our pride. [...] We have become proud enough that we are now unashamed of our shame" (Halperin & Traub, 2009, pp. 10–11). Thus, to address the issue of queer IPV we need to acknowledge the social and layered nature of shame where individual and collective feelings of shame are highly entangled with the struggle for recognition.

Funding Open access funding provided by Uppsala University.

Data Availability The data presented in this paper contains sensitive information that cannot be shared openly. 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).

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