Introduction

Abstract: This chapter introduces the term “romantic terrorism” and explains how it relates to domestic violence. It details the methodology of collaborative auto-ethnography used by the authors in analysing their lived experiences of domestic violence. It also provides an outline of the structure of the book and its chapters. The academic and theoretical are intertwined with the personal and subjective to elicit an evocative and yet empirically validated study. The theoretical underpinnings of romantic love distortion, misogyny and sexism are used to frame these experiences of domestic violence, and the differing sexualities of the authors provide a rich context for exploring the ways in which domestic violence victimization experiences are impacted by gender, sexuality and heteronormative discourses of love, sex and relationships.

Keywords: auto-ethnography; domestic violence; heteronormativity; romantic love; romantic terrorism; sexuality


This book draws on the theoretical arguments outlined in Sex, Love and Abuse (Hayes, 2014) to frame critical analyses of two real-life domestic violence narratives. The authors are both academic criminologists and victims/survivors of domestic violence, but within differing contexts – one a conventional heterosexual relationship, the other a female same-sex relationship. Their experiences are intertwined in an extensive collaborative auto-ethnographic analysis that spans seven years of working and socializing together, in which each provided a sounding board and support for the other. The analysis therefore documents two personal journeys. The academic and theoretical are intertwined with the personal and subjective to elicit an evocative and yet empirically validated study. The theoretical underpinnings of romantic love distortion, misogyny and sexism are used to frame these experiences of domestic violence, and the differing sexualities of the authors provide a rich context for exploring the ways in which domestic violence victimization experiences are impacted by gender, sexuality and heteronormative discourses of love, sex and relationships.

The term “romantic terrorism” has been adopted recently in popular culture and social media to variously describe love distortion, smothering relationships and abuse, but to date there is very little academic work on this topic. Briefly, “romantic terrorism” describes the emotional and psychological tactics...
used by perpetrators of domestic violence to keep their partners compliant and stop them from leaving. Such terrorism is often subtle, as in the film Gaslight – where the husband skilfully manipulates his wife into believing she is mad – but also may present as outright verbal, emotional, financial or physical abuse. The key characteristics of such abuse – and what gives it the label of “terrorism” – is the way in which perpetrators of domestic violence intentionally utilize tactics of control that are akin to torture to ensure that their agenda is met. This causes fear in victims, and changes their thoughts, behaviours and actions. It can lead to feelings of entrapment and there are significant short and long-term negative consequences to victims’ psychical and emotional well-being. “Romantic terrorism” therefore provides a useful analogy for discussing and describing the insidious nature of domestic violence.

Apart from the lived experiences of the authors, the analysis also draws on extensive academic research into domestic violence, sexism, misogyny and masculinity.

**Methodology**

In this book we use a collaborative auto-ethnography of the authors’ own lived experiences as victims of intimate partner abuse to (1) explore and challenge common understandings of “victims”; (2) shed light on the tools and tactics of power and control employed by romantic terrorists; and (3) illuminate the journey to recovery from romantic terrorism. We use the term “victim” rather than “survivor” because in our experience, the process of recovering from romantic terrorism is protracted, and there is always the threat of being revictimized when revisiting the abuse. The ability of romantic terrorists to continue victimizing their ex-partner, even in the absence of any contact, needs to be recognized.

Auto-ethnography is a methodology that “seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). The extent of researcher focus on the auto and the ethno will vary along a spectrum between the evocative and analytic. Evocative auto-ethnography, which is also described as emotional or emotive auto-ethnography, prioritizes analysis of the self. The primary concern in evocative auto-ethnography is with the ethno. Its principal goal is emotional resonance rather than analytic exploration. The focus of evocative auto-ethnography is on the construction of self-focused narratives that create spaces for dialogue and evoke emotional responses (Ellingson and Ellis, 2008: 445).

While analytic auto-ethnography is concerned with the emotional, it is also committed to the analytical. The goal is not just to capture emotional and evocative content, but rather, to employ evocative content as a framework for developing a broader analysis of a given social phenomenon (Wakeman, 2014:}
Thus, analytic auto-ethnography is “not so much a method of self-investigation [as is the case with evocative auto-ethnography] but a technique of social investigation conducted through the self” (Wakeman, 2014: 708). An analytic auto-ethnographer is not just content with accomplishing the representational task of capturing an individual’s story. Rather, she is interested in producing generalizable insights into the broader issue at hand and providing theoretical illumination of the topic under investigation (Anderson, 2006: 387–388). This theoretical elucidation is not meant to produce unchallengeable conclusions; rather, analytic auto-ethnography should contribute to a “spiraling refinement, elaboration, extension, and revision of theoretical understanding” (Anderson, 2006: 388).

The methodological approach taken by us in this book falls more at the analytic end of the auto-ethnographic spectrum. We occupy the dual role of researcher and researched and turn our gaze both inward and outward (Olson, 2010: 6). We explore our journeys as victims of romantic terrorism by situating our stories within broader social and intellectual contexts to gain an in-depth understanding of domestic violence through the unique lens of self (Chang et al., 2012: 18). Thus, we seek to intertwine the academic and theoretical with the personal and subjective, in order to elicit an evocative yet analytically framed exploration. Further, the auto-ethnographic approach that we take is collaborative rather than individual. Traditionally, auto-ethnography has been a solo exercise with collaboration emerging only recently as a realistic extension. In collaborative auto-ethnography the self continues as studier and studied, but analyses are undertaken collectively within a team of two or more researchers. Collaborative auto-ethnographers work together, build on each other’s stories and gain insight from collective sharing and by providing various levels of support as they explore their topic of interest. This approach increases data sources from singular to multiple, and the questioning and probing of others adds analytical depth (Chang et al., 2012: 21–29).

Collaborative work can engender a deeper understanding than is possible from a solo analysis. In the process of dialogic engagement, researchers can thoroughly interrogate one another’s experience. Elements of importance that may have been hidden from one researcher’s view may become apparent to a co-researcher and vice versa. Thus, collaborative auto-ethnography has the potential to produce richer data. It can expose hidden assumptions and elucidate previously taken-for-granted happenings that may in fact be significant incidents (Chang et al., 2012: 28). Chang et al. (2012: 28–29) note that “having two or more co-researchers collectively making meaning of personal stories can enable them to reach a deeper level of analysis, connect the stories to wider issues within the disciplines, link to existing literature, and over all provide the scholarly balance necessary to keep it from being mere navel-gazing”.

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Auto-ethnography is a widely accepted research methodology in disciplines such as anthropology, education and sociology. It has been used to analyse personal experiences of abortion, sexual abuse, illness, death and grief, teen pregnancy and bulimia, just to name a few. Criminology has been comparatively resistant in accepting auto-ethnography as a legitimate methodology. As argued recently by Wakeman (2014: 705), “it would be fair to say that most criminologists do not like to talk about themselves and their feelings very much. This has often been attributed to the ways in which the discipline is structured as a social science – criminology’s fixation with ‘methodology’, ‘objectivity’ and ‘restrained language’ effectively discourage any form of biographical or emotional intrusion by the researcher”. Although not strictly criminological, there have been two previous auto-ethnographic accounts of domestic violence – one exploring the lived experiences of domestic violence within a female same-sex intimate partnership (Giorgio, 2009) and the second within a traditional heterosexual relationship (Olson, 2010). Collaborative auto-ethnography has not yet been employed, either within the broad disciplinary field of criminology, or in a specific exploration of intimate partner violence.

Both authors are victims of romantic terrorism, but within differing contexts – one a conventional heterosexual intimate relationship, the other a female same-sex intimate partnership. We were also colleagues at the time of analysis and were and are friends. The analyses we present is, therefore, a two-person auto-ethnography. As Chang et al. (2012: 38) report, duo analyses are more common than other models of collaborative auto-ethnography and frequently stem from already existing relationships. The already professional and sometimes personal rapport between duo auto-ethnographers becomes the fuel for enriching stories. The research that is produced is based on many hours of in-depth conversation. We lived our experiences of intimate partner violence together. Our analysis spans seven years of working and socializing together, in which we both provided a sounding board for and supported each other. Our collaborative auto-ethnography therefore documents a journey of victimization and survival that we simultaneously, yet coincidentally, took and subsequently analysed together.

We drew upon the full collaboration model, with each of us engaging in all aspects of the research process from the beginning to the conclusion of abuse and thereafter. Although our individual participation and contributions to the study varied at different points, we were both engaged and shared responsibility at all levels of the process until the analysis was completed. In terms of our data sources, we drew on the following: (1) conversational data between ourselves; (2) conversational data with key informants beyond ourselves; and (3) archival documents about ourselves.
Collection of conversational data in collaborative auto-ethnography obviously involves interaction between researchers. Whether formal or informal, systematic or casual, face-to-face or virtual, conversations are a unique data source in the collaborative auto-ethnographic exercise (Chang et al., 2012: 85). Our conversations were always verbal, occurring either in person or over the telephone. We talked for extended periods about our experiences of romantic terrorism both during our abusive relationships (although we were unaware that this was exactly what we were doing at the time) and retrospectively after escaping the violence. During these conversations we worked in tandem to dialogically probe and critically reflect on our experiences, comparing and contrasting perpetrator tactics, experiences of victimization, escape and recovery (Chang et al., 2012: 86).

Auto-ethnographers are confronted with self-related issues at every stage of their analyses and this can lead to self-absorption. When the subject under investigation is traumatic, as is the case with intimate partner abuse, the potential for anxiety and re-traumatization is also very real. It can be difficult to detach oneself from the analyses and for victims of intimate partner violence, the anxiety produced by victimization often results in memory loss – a natural psychological protection mechanism. Very early on in the process, one of the authors in particular began to realize that her memories of some highly abusive incidents were faded, lost in the foggy darkness of her psychological trauma. Our desire to produce a more analytical and thorough auto-ethnographical account therefore led us to enter into a dialogue with others outside of our dyad (Anderson, 2006: 385–386). Anderson (2006: 385–386) argues that methodologically robust auto-ethnography should ideally include “dialogue with informants beyond the self [because] unlike evocative auto-ethnography, which seeks narrative fidelity only to the researcher’s subjective experience, analytic auto-ethnography is ground in self-experience but reaches beyond it as well”. We therefore undertook conversations with our adult children who had either stood beside us during our journeys or had been abused themselves by the perpetrator. To gain additional insight into our path to recovery we talked extensively with our current non-abusive partners. This helped us not only to unearth memories that had been lost to us as a result of the trauma we had suffered, but also added depth and breadth to our analyses via the provision of data beyond our immediate selves.

In auto-ethnography, archival materials include a variety of public and private documents that the researcher or others have compiled for different purposes prior to or during the study. Like conversational data with key informants, archival materials are useful because they can add details to the conversational data, aid memory recall and act as an important mechanism by which researcher recollection can be cross-
checked, verified and corrected (Chang et al., 2012: 77). We accessed personal journal entries, text messages and emails written by the authors during the course of their abusive relationships.

Data interpretation in auto-ethnographical research is not as easily articulated as that within more positivistic research traditions. Meanings are not available from the data as ready-made answers. Instead, meanings are formulated in the researchers’ minds through the interactive process of “doing” collaborative auto-ethnography (Chang et al., 2012: 110). Broadly speaking, our data was interpreted thematically, but this developed through on-going researcher dialogue. During this process, connections were made between ourselves, others, the broader literature, theory and social context to illuminate victim experiences. As noted by Chang et al. (2012: 110–111), “in collaborative research, meaning-making is the dynamic and iterative process of connecting researchers, empirical materials, interpretations, and theory to better understand the phenomena under study”.

Finally, just like other researchers, auto-ethnographers must seek to protect the privacy and safety of others. However, this is an especially challenging task because of the overtly personal nature of the research method. Researcher relationships with others will appear in the auto-biographical text and auto-ethnographers will often continue to live in the world of these same relationships after the study is completed (Ellis et al., 2011). Protecting the privacy of others within the auto-biographical text is thus challenging, but crucial. We have subsequently altered a number of identifying characteristics, such as certain circumstances surrounding particular incidents, locations, places and the personal characteristics of others in our research, including gender, age and name. We have also allocated ourselves pseudonyms within the text. It goes without saying that we were careful to ensure that the alterations made did not impact on the integrity of our analysis.

**Structure of the text**

Chapter 1 introduces the concept of “romantic terrorism” and explores what it means for an analysis of domestic violence. Many scholarly analyses enumerate the characteristics and types of abuse and discuss models of perpetration, such as the cycle of violence. Much research has been undertaken to demonstrate prevalence, and there are even studies that report the experiences of victims. None of these to date accurately depicts the terrorist nature of abuse, particularly emotional abuse.

In this chapter we juxtapose terrorism and intimate partner abuse. We argue that the purpose and process of both violences are strikingly similar and while the consequences are qualitatively similar they are
quantifiably worse in cases of romantic terrorism. Despite this, societal responses to the romantic terrorism are contrastingly lacking.

Like hostages taken and tortured by political terrorists, victims of intimate partner abuse are often subjected to a regime of coercive intimidation. They live in a state of terror and are stripped of their liberty. The purpose, from the standpoint of the perpetrator, is to dominate and control the victim; to make them behave or think differently than they ordinarily would. The outcomes are dire. Alarmingly, high numbers of victims die as a result of domestic violence (more so than are killed at the hands of political terrorists) and even more experience immediate and on-going harm to their physical and psychological well-being. Like hostages, victims of domestic violence may, for example, develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Stockholm Syndrome. Unlike hostages, victims of romantic terrorism must also deal with social exclusion and a social world that is generally unsympathetic and unsupportive to their plight. This is despite the fact that the social and economic cost of domestic violence far outweighs that of political terrorism.

We argue that likening abuse to terroristic torture better reflects the insidious and extreme nature of domestic violence, hopefully in a way that instills greater understanding by scholars, practitioners, victims and the general public. The analysis offered in the following chapters starkly illustrates these tactics as experienced in real life.

In Chapter 2, we further elucidate our re-conceptualization of domestic violence as romantic terrorism. Like political terrorists, perpetrators of intimate partner abuse distort ideology for their own insidious purposes. In the former, religion is frequently misrepresented to legitimize regimes of terror. In the latter, it is the script of romantic love that is twisted and warped. Romantic terrorism, we argue, best encapsulates the torturous and terroristic tactics employed by perpetrators of domestic violence.

In addition to physical abuse, similar to hostages, victims of intimate partner abuse are subjected to a plethora of on-going non-physical attacks intentionally employed to maintain power and control. These tactics/tools include threats, intimidation, humiliation, degradation, emotional unkindness, restrictions of personal territory and freedom, and crazy making. We explore each in detail in this chapter and note that it is important to understand that romantic terrorists are no more “out of control” than political ones; they are skilled offenders who have hijacked love to cause significant harm.

Chapter 3 explores common understandings about “victims” of domestic violence drawn from scholarly and popular sources in order to challenge and destabilize the popular narrative or profile of what a victim looks like. It is here that we begin our journey into the lived experiences of the authors to identify
gaps and misunderstandings about victims/survivors of domestic violence. While the scholarly literature clearly reports that both victims and perpetrators may be any gender, our study necessarily focuses on women as victims. We present two highly educated, middle-class, successful women, both of whom have a stable relationship history, teach and research in criminology and who nevertheless fail to appreciate the nature of abuse in a relationship. This challenges the conventional wisdom and much of the psychological literature, which for the most part views female victims as having personality disorders, attachment issues or otherwise being emotionally damaged in some way. We thus aim to illustrate just how powerful the tactics of romantic terrorism are.

In this chapter we also utilize our auto-ethnographic journey to identify and illustrate the tools and tactics used by abusers against the abused. As mentioned earlier, such tactics include threats, intimidation, humiliation, degradation, emotional unkindness, restrictions of personal territory and freedom, crazy making. We provide examples and personal vignettes to expose the often devious, paranoid and psychopathic strategies that allow one individual to keep another in fearful thrall. For example, early on in one of the relationships discussed, the victim spoke to the abuser on the phone as was their usual practice after dinner. After hanging up, she realized that the relationship was travelling quite fast and worried that they should slow down. She called the partner back to discuss the matter and was subsequently accused of being needy and pathetic. Following on the back of the previous conversation, which had been romantic and upbeat, this subsequently left the victim confused and self-reflecting. She concluded that perhaps she was being needy, when in fact her reservations were quite reasonable for that stage of the relationship. This was the first instance of several months of similar gaslighting (a form of crazy making) that eventually led the victim to seek counselling for psychological and emotional distress. Further examples of this and more violent and overtly abusive behaviour are described in this chapter to graphically illustrate how fast a previously strong and independent woman can become a “victim”.

The fourth and final chapter explores the journey to recovery from romantic terrorism, the ongoing impact and strategies for regaining identity and subjectivity. For example, one of the victims eventually realized her relationship was typical of domestic violence when she began researching same-sex domestic violence with a colleague. She subsequently sought counselling and thereby came to understand the narcissistic nature of her (by that time) ex-partner’s behaviour. Mutual discussion between the two authors at that time caused the other author to identify her partner’s narcissistic behaviour as well.

As discussed in Sex, Love and Abuse, women tend to take on the role of nurturer in a romantic partnership, eager to work on issues and help maintain and grow the relationship. Part of this is helping
one’s partner to heal from past or current trauma/addictions, and so on. According to psychological literature, however, the narcissist cannot be “fixed” because he/she suffers from a pathologically precarious personal identity that causes them to engage in abusive behaviour when “threatened”. Once we understand that such a damaged person cannot be fixed, we are free to heal ourselves and this indeed was what happened with our two victims. Awareness – of both self and other – is thus key to identifying and dealing with domestic violence. We suggest that one of the strategies for raising awareness in victims is therefore a form of guided narrative therapy, which helps the victims explore their experiences while shedding light on the nature of abuse and highlighting the impracticality of trying to “help” or “fix” the abusive partner. On the back of such strategies, Chapter 4 also makes suggestions for policy and practice in domestic violence service provision and legislation.