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Author

Hayes, Sharon, Jeffries, Samantha

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ROMANTIC TERRORISM? AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF GENDERED PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL TACTICS IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE¹

SHARON HAYES

s.hayes@qut.edu.au

School of Justice,

Queensland University of Technology

SAMANTHA JEFFRIES

School of Criminology and Criminal Justice,

Griffith University

ABSTRACT. This paper draws on the theoretical arguments outlined in 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. Auto-ethnography is a methodology that “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). The methodological approach taken by the authors is analytic rather than evocative, in the sense that we focus on collaboratively analyzing our dual experiences, rather than simply narrating them. We occupy the dual role of researcher and researched, and turn our gaze both inward and outward (Olson, 2004: 6). 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: coercive control; gaslighting; domestic violence; victimization; romantic love; auto-ethnography

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Introduction

The argument put forward in this paper is that terrorists operate in Australia every day. Innocent women are tortured, held captive and/or killed every week in this country and worldwide by people who rely on fear and intimidation to control them. But because these terrorists torture the women they profess to love, their intimate partners (or ex-partners), their behavior is hidden from public sight, it is hardly ever discussed, rarely evokes outrage and has never resulted in governments or anyone else declaring a “war” against it. These terrorists are perpetrators of gender-based violence, particularly those who engage in psychological and emotional tactics of coercive control in intimate relations. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2016) defines terrorism as “[t]he unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims.” While we do not intend to debate the definition, we do aim to introduce important parallels between political terrorism and domestic violence, particularly with respect to “the unlawful use of violence and intimidation.” Domestic violence is by its very nature characterized by violence and intimidation, and arguably, if the personal is political, as second wave feminists claim (e.g. Hanisch 1970; Firestone 1970), then the incidence of intimate or romantic terrorism is far more insidious and widespread than the more prolifically discussed, but much less threatening (in terms of numbers of actual victims) political terrorism. Drawing these parallels helps to point up the urgency of the need to address domestic violence and violence against women in general, by ascribing at least the same (if not more) resources as those allocated to national and international defense against religious and nationalistic terrorism.

Domestic Violence as Terrorism

Shortly after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001, the Australian government declared a “war on terror.” New laws were quickly enacted to combat the terrorist threat posed by Islamic extremists. These new laws were stunning in scope, number and reach; conferring broad powers on government agencies and impacting on the liberty of those involved or suspected to be involved in terrorism (Williams, 2011: 1137). In spite of the fact that the risk and numbers of victims far outweigh the threat of political

terrorism, governments have never so vehemently responded to acts of terror perpetuated against women at the hands of their romantic partners or ex-partners. Indeed, compared to the “threat” posed by political and religious extremists and the damage caused by their terrorist activity, intimate partner terrorism is perceived as much less serious and hardly a threat at all to the social fabric of modern society. Yet is violence against women in the domestic sphere and the supposed sanctity of romantic relationships really that different from populist understandings of terrorist acts and torture in our post-9/11 world?

We conceptualize intimate partner violence as coercive control, a term introduced by Stark in 2007, which has been recently gaining ground in both the scholarly literature and public narratives (e.g. Williamson, 2010; Fisher, 2011; Government of Western Australia, 2012; Evans, 2014; Murphy, 2014, Hayes and Murphy, forthcoming). Stark’s model emphasizes purpose (perpetrator intent) and process (perpetrator tactics) as well as victim outcomes. Coercive control is a pattern of intentional tactics employed by perpetrators with the intent of governing a woman’s thoughts, beliefs or conduct and/or to punish them for resisting their regulation. Perpetrator tactics may include actual physical and/or sexual violence. However, actual violence inflicted upon victim bodies is conceptualized as a tactic of control.

Coercive control can be distinguished from a bad relationship (in which both partners are abusive toward each other) by identifying a perpetrator’s intent to control and the consequent negative outcomes for his or her victim. The victim’s experience of coercive control can be likened to being taken hostage; the victim becomes captive in a dreamlike world created by the perpetrator, in which she is entrapped by confusion, contradiction and fear. Coercive control takes away victims’ freedom and strips away their sense of self. Much like a hostage held by a terrorist, a woman’s bodily integrity maybe violated, but more profoundly she is stripped of her basic human right to freedom of thought and action. Such behavior, we argue, highlights the insidious, terroristic and torturous nature of intimate partner violence (Stark, 2007).

The purpose and process of political terrorism and torture is strikingly similar to intimate partner violence. Perpetrators of intimate partner violence intentionally threaten, coerce and intimidate their partners, who are mostly women, by using discriminatory frameworks based on gender, homophobia and heterosexism (in the case of same-sex intimate partner violence) to advance their own ideological causes. Akin to torture, the aim of this violence is often to obtain information, confessions and to punish. Qualitatively, the consequences of intimate partner violence and associated acts of torture are comparable to terrorism; both result in physical, emotional, social, and economic pain, suffering and harm to individual victims. Quantitatively, the consequences of intimate partner violence, we argue, are even more acute for

victims and society than political and religious terrorism (Copelon, 1994: 298–299).

Thus, we believe the term romantic terrorism encapsulates the torturous and terroristic tactics employed by perpetrators of coercive control within the context of romantic partnerships. As Hayes (2014) has argued elsewhere, romantic love relationships are characterized by the tendency of their participants to identify as a couple, and encourages a sort of fusing together of identities in which each becomes “the other half.” The goal of this fusion is mutual nurturing, which usually arises out of a sense of destiny and which is therefore perceived to be enduring. Regardless of whether the couple engages in social rituals of commitment such as engagement and marriage, romantic love is always accompanied by expectations of mutual sharing of lives, and most often, children and possessions. These expectations are mutually beneficial if they are indeed entered into mutually. However, romantic love is also characterized by a darker narrative of pain and tragedy, where it is recognized that the path to true love does not always run smoothly. It is generally socially acceptable, therefore, to anticipate that romance and love will be, by their very nature, “hard work,” requiring commitment and a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the other and the relationship itself. The romantic terrorist knows this, and uses it to his or her advantage. Coercive control is able to flourish in many romantic relationships because offenders intentionally exploit the romantic expectations of their victims. While originally written to describe the dynamics of power and control in heterosexual relationships, recent work by Williamson (2010) demonstrates the clear applicability of the theoretical framework of coercive control to female same-sex relational abuse. Coercive control is a useful theoretical framework that demonstrates that the abuse of women is “inextricably bound up with their standing in larger society” (Stark, 2007). This standing is dictated not only by gender inequity, but also by homophobia and heteronormativity.

Coercive control includes, but goes beyond, an examination of physical violence by considering a plethora of on-going non-physical methods intentionally employed by perpetrators of romantic terrorism to maintain power and control over their victims. We explore some of these power and control tactics below under the following headings: 1) Threats and Intimidation, 2) Humiliation, Degradation and Emotional Unkindness, 3) Restricting Personal Territory and Freedom, and 4) Crazy Making. These categories were constructed from a range of models, including methods of coercive control identified by Stark (2007: 2), perpetrator tactics highlighted by Jones (2000) in her comparative work on terrorism/torture and intimate partner violence, and tactics identified by Murphy (2014; 2009; 2002) in her in-depth interviews with perpetrators and victims of intimate partner violence in Australia and New Zealand.

Methodology

Our research uses 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.² This paper focuses on the first two.

Auto-ethnography is a methodology that "seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). The methodological approach taken by the authors is analytic rather than evocative, in the sense that we focus on collaboratively analyzing our dual experiences, rather than simply narrating them. We occupy the dual role of researcher and researched, and turn our gaze both inward and outward (Olson, 2004: 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. Traditionally, auto-ethnography has been a solo exercise with collaboration only recently emerging 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).

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.

At this point it should be noted that, just like other researchers, auto-ethnographers must seek to protect the privacy and safety of others. Protecting the privacy of others within the auto-biographical text is challenging, but crucial. We have subsequently altered a number of identifying characteristics including 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.

In the following section, we describe and analyze our ethnographic journey. We will refer to ourselves as Grace and Joy and our experiences will be outlined in the third person, partly as story, and partly as thematic illustration of the tactics of abuse within the context of romantic love described above. Our experience will be interspersed with insights and analyses that draw on the literature discussed in the previous sections. First we explore the making of a victim, then move on to discuss how the abusive relationship is maintained. We conclude with some poignant observations about the social construction of domestic violence in the public sphere.

The Making of a Victim

Joy, a single mother, met her romantic terrorist, Joe, at an event hosted in another city. She said she found him funny and intelligent and really enjoyed spending time with him. Their newly formed relationship was characterized by all the common trappings of romantic love. They had drinks, dinner, and spent much time together at the event. He told her up front he was a recovering drug addict and that he had a previous problem with methamphetamine, but had subsequently stopped using after attending drug counseling. This first tactic of confession of failure and rehabilitation was aimed at Joy's natural ability to empathize, and was intended to draw her in through the use of honesty and openness, all part of his initial love-bombing of Joy.

“At the time I thought he must have been a very strong person because he had managed to overcome an addiction to methamphetamine, which I perceived to be a highly addictive drug.”

After returning to her home, they remained in telephone contact, and Joe came to visit Joy and her young daughter, Steph. At the time Joe was living with his brother, but subsequently left because, he said, his brother was physically and verbally abusive toward him. Joe went to live with a female friend and her partner. After a couple of months, Joy was invited to apply for a job in Joe's hometown, which she secured, and moved with her young daughter to an apartment there. Joy says she had no intention of living with Joe, but she was concerned for him because he had nowhere to live and was struggling financially, because (he said) his employer failed to pay him his wages on several occasions. Initially, she offered him a place to stay until he got on his feet. She was sympathetic towards Joe because he was charming, she enjoyed his company, and both she and her daughter “had lots of fun with him.”

Joe also appeared supportive of Joy's career. He frequently told Joy how clever she was, what a wonderful mother she was and how proud he felt to be with such a beautiful, independent and accomplished woman. Since Joy had only recently moved, Joe was all she had, and she came to rely upon him for emotional support and friendship. She says, "I know that [Joe] also came to love us and similarly relied on us for support." She was in the midst of this relationship when she met Grace at her new workplace. At that time, however, the friendship was quite superficial. It wasn't until both women met again two years later as employees of the same university, that Grace became aware of what by then had become Joy's relationship troubles.

Grace's romantic terrorist was a woman, Lee, who she met through a social group in her hometown some years after Joy's relationship had begun. Lee lived a few hours drive away in another city. Grace also found Lee charming and attractive and Lee was very attentive and kind to Grace in the initial months, demonstrating similar love bombing tactics such as helping her with groceries and other errands, taking her out on picnics and for dinner, and showering her with attention and compliments. She was keen to meet Grace's teenage daughter, Anne, and made great effort to put Anne at ease whenever she was around. Lee held a very good job in a professional organization, in which she had been very successful, one of the top achievers. She seemed to be a "people person," often chatting and laughing on the phone with clients and friends. Like Joe, Lee confessed a couple of major faults, one being a failure to engage in any long-term romantic relationships, which she explained was due to her tendency to fall for the "wrong types." Grace thought she understood because of Lee's second confession – that she had been sexually abused as a child. This prompted much empathy on Grace's part, and she admired Lee for having the courage to try another relationship. Grace was happy, and felt extremely lucky to have found someone so wonderful.

Grace had been a single parent for a few years, and this new sense of fun helped lighten her load somewhat. She didn't think much of it when Lee complained about her job, saying she felt stuck in a rut and couldn't figure out how to move on. Lee had been in her current employment for almost a decade and felt it was time for a move. She started talking vaguely about moving to the country. "She dreamt of living on a farm with lots of animals and space to move, a little house with a long verandah," Grace reports, "I thought it was cute, something one might do in retirement." Lee also spoke about her job not going as well as expected that year due to the global financial crisis, which had affected her ability to draw in clients. Lee blamed the market, her boss, and even her clients for her lack of success. Grace was sympathetic.

Here we have two seemingly ordinary women, both single parents, both glad to find someone with whom they each had something in common, and liked spending time with. Both partners initially appeared to be charming, attentive, and funny – not an unusual start to either relationship. And yet, there were several red flags neither woman identified. The first was love-bombing – that helpless falling into romance we see so often in films and books, fueled by the addictive attention of someone funny and attractive, someone who obviously likes us, admires us, and wants to be around us. The second was that each of their partners had an “issue” that plagued them. In Joe’s case it was his history of drug addiction and his financial situation. Lee’s childhood had been traumatic, her job wasn’t going well and she blamed everyone else for it, and her financial situation was also problematic – she was paying off a mortgage and said she was feeling financial pressure. Finally, the third was that neither Lee nor Joe seemed to have many friends, neither did they get along with their respective families.

In no way are any of these red flags necessarily indicative of potential abuse in and of themselves. These values and behaviors are only red flags in hindsight and in combination with other factors. It is the rapid fall into a relationship accompanied by the inundation of attention and gifts in combination with these issues that is the red flag. Had Lee and Joe both proceeded slowly, getting to know their respective partners over a period of time, they might have given a clearer picture of what they actually wanted from a relationship. They are what Hennessy (2012) calls skilled offenders because they hid their real intentions behind an avalanche of affection and a façade of victimhood. In this way, they each managed to cajole and arouse the sympathies of their partners, and to appeal to their romantic and nurturing side.

When the Honeymoon Is Over

Joy first realized something was amiss about four months after Joe had moved in with her. Joy initially invited Joe to stay until he found a place to live, but after four months, Joy asked him to stay. It was at this point, having cemented his place in the family, that Joe began revealing his true character. “For example,” she states, “he would leave whilst I was asleep, take my car, disappear for extended periods of time and not answer his mobile phone.”

“Then he started getting up in the middle of the night and watch pornography until the morning.... The one day when I drove my car to the gym I opened the boot and found a bag of women’s underwear. I initially thought [Joe] was having an affair. I searched through his bags in the house and discovered transsexual pornography, numerous items of women’s clothing, dildos... I also found numerous used syringes scattered through [his] belongings.”

After confronting Joe, he admitted he was using methamphetamine again and added, “when I am high I have unusual sexual thoughts.” Being a fairly broadminded feminist with friends of many genders and sexualities, the transgender role-playing didn’t bother Joy, but his drug use did, so she made him promise he would stop. She started to wonder if maybe Joe was too scared to face-up to his gender identity and used drugs as a way to legitimize going to that place. This made her feel sympathy for him. She wanted to help.

Not long after, they moved to a bigger place, a house in a neighboring suburb, and Joe’s brother had agreed to move in with them and pay one-third of the rent. However, after co-signing the lease, the brother changed his mind and pulled out, so Joe asked one of his friends to share with them instead. This turned out to be a huge mistake, as the friend had ready access to crystal meth and Joe’s drug use subsequently escalated. Meanwhile, Joy was left as the sole owner of the lease, which she could not get out of, and with most of Joe’s money being eaten up by drugs, she found herself responsible for rent and all other household expenses. As a result, she was forced to take Steph out of her private school, and she was \$10,000 in credit card debt. The honeymoon was definitely over.

It is not at all unusual for romantic terrorists to wait until their relationship is cemented before beginning to reveal their true intentions. In hindsight, Joe clearly needed a steady supply of money and a safe place to “get high” and act out his sexual/gender fantasies. Nor is it unusual for romantic terrorists to draw their partner into a situation from which the partner will find it difficult to extricate themselves, such as a signed lease on a property. Joe’s concurrent refusal to contribute to household expenses is typical of perpetrator’s use of controlling behavior to keep the partner in check. She must pay all the bills because the lease and utilities are in her name and she is legally responsible for paying them. The perpetrator, on the other hand, uses his own money to satisfy his need for alcohol, drug and pornography. The partner gets further and further into debt because she doesn’t know what else to do. And the perpetrator is just nice and charming enough to convince her he would be fine if he got help with his “problem.”

For Grace, the first real kink in the relationship came about two months in, on the day before her birthday. They spoke on the phone as usual, around 7pm, and then Grace and Anne had dinner. Later, they were watching television, when Grace remembered something she had forgotten to ask Lee about. It was only about 8.45, so she went into her room and called Lee to chat. Lee began abusing her the moment she answered.

“When she picked up the phone and started yelling at me, I was totally freaked out! She started yelling at me, wouldn’t let me get a word in, just kept abusing me and talking over me. I can’t even

remember what she said, but it was just a string of abuse! I pleaded with her to calm down, but she hung up on me. I was mortified!”

She went to bed crying, wondering what on earth she had done, and thinking her birthday had been ruined. The next morning Lee called back. “I asked if she was okay. She was very grumpy, told me never to call her late at night again and that she supposed I could still come down. I agreed.” Lee explained that she had a kind of “blood disease” that required her to go to bed early during the week, as she needed lots of sleep, and that she didn’t like to be disturbed after 7.30pm. Grace agreed not to call her “late” again.

Maintaining Control: Further Terrorist Tactics

Crazy-making

This was the most insidious tactic and most damaging to self-confidence and personal autonomy for Joy and Grace. Above all else, this tactic undermines a woman’s sense of self, her mental health, and her confidence in both her memory and her reasoning powers. One powerful example for both Grace and Joy was the way in which their respective partners undermined their confidence in themselves as parents.

When Joy’s partner Joe began using methamphetamine more regularly, he started to become verbally abusive, and would often direct his long tirades at her daughter. For example, on one occasion Steph’s new kitten had defecated on the floor and Joe had become furious, insisting that she rub the kitten’s nose in it. When she refused, Joe picked up the kitten and threatened to break its neck. He subsequently rubbed the kitten’s nose in its faeces and threw it back at Steph. Then he called Joy and said “Your daughter has been disrespecting me,” and fabricated a story to cover himself, which she believed. It wasn’t until much later that Joy learned what really happened.

After this, Joe started to make unreasonable demands on Steph, in an “attempt to teach her discipline.” He gave her a list of chores – she was expected to clean the entire house every weekend and then maintain the cleanliness during the week. If she left a speck of dust he would scream at her, outlining over a period of hours what he perceived to be her failings and calling her derogatory names such as “a lazy bitch,” “a fucking little smart arse”, and “fat.”

If Joy tried to intervene in one of Joe’s abusive verbal tirades directed at Steph, his abuse would escalate. Joe would begin screaming about Joy’s parental skills. At first Joy tried to argue about this with him. But Joe would always deny that he was either wrong or aggressive, saying “Steph is a lazy little bitch trying to cause problems between you and me and you won’t back me up in my discipline of her because you are a shit mother.”

As a result of this continual verbal abuse and denigration, Joy began to doubt her abilities as a mother: “I mistakenly started to think that Joe was right, that Steph lacked discipline and that maybe she needed more of it.” The ability of the skilled offender to make his partner doubt her values, beliefs and herself is a key tactic in breaking down her defenses. Once she begins to doubt one of her very basic identities (her motherhood), he can easily go in for the kill, making her doubt more and more of her beliefs and perceptions.

Grace’s crazy-making was more subtle, at least at the start. Lee would complement Grace profusely about almost everything she did, wore, or said. But interspersed with these compliments were little and not so little “suggestions” of “better” ways of organizing her life, such as shopping, for example. Grace was accustomed to dropping into the store near her house almost daily to buy fresh food for dinner, along with whatever else was needed. Lee decided that this strategy was inefficient and hard work for Grace, and proceeded to take over the shopping by going with Grace on the weekend and doing one large shop, buying many items in bulk and then showing her how to store them in her kitchen. Lee would also make suggestions about how she should “deal with” her sixteen year old daughter, Anne, who Lee perceived as overweight, moody and unfriendly. “Anne was hard to get to know,” Grace remarks, “but that was because she is an introvert. Of course there are always issues when a mother starts dating someone new, that is to be expected. And sometimes Anne would be jealous of the time I spent with Lee.” She tried to explain to Lee that such behavior is quite natural and that all that was needed was a little patience and kindness. Initially Lee responded by taking Anne on as a sort of project, making all kinds of suggestions about how she and Anne could spend time together so they could get to know one another better. When Anne didn’t immediately respond to these overtures, Lee became resentful.

“Anne was in her last year at school and was very stressed about her schoolwork at the time, on top of the fact she had been suffering from depression and anxiety, for which she had been taking medication that didn’t seem to be working. Lee couldn’t comprehend depression or anxiety, and constantly accused Anne of taking advantage of me, and me of pandering to Anne.”

Lee constantly accused Grace of “making a rod for her own back” by allowing Anne to “get away with” being depressed and anxious. She would berate Grace for hours over the phone about her lack of parenting skills, for being a “doormat,” and for being duped by her daughter. Predictably, Grace recalls: “She was very persuasive, and I began to think she was right. I’m very ashamed to say I started to accuse Anne of playing me.”

After many arguments between Grace and Anne, where Grace tried to “discipline” Anne in ways suggested by Lee, Anne eventually agreed to see a new specialist doctor, who subsequently confirmed the diagnosis of depression and anxiety, and suggested that the medication Anne was taking could actually be worsening her symptoms. He took her off the medication, which ultimately improved Anne’s mental health over a short period of time. In addition, she herself had also been to a therapist to discuss how to “deal with” Anne, because (she told the therapist) it was causing friction in her relationship with Lee. After explaining the situation and after much crying, Grace’s therapist had assured her that she was a great mother, and that she had been doing all the right things to the best of her ability.

Meanwhile, however, on the day of Anne’s doctor’s visit, Grace answered Lee’s phone call eager to explain to her that Anne hadn’t been playing her; that in fact, she was depressed and anxious and that new therapy was needed. However, far from being happy and relieved – as Grace was – at this news, these revelations made Lee furious! She began accusing Grace of all kinds of things, from not trusting her, to deliberately trying to blame her for Anne’s problems. She shut Grace down in no uncertain terms and Grace hung up the phone feeling more confused than ever.

Clearly, these behaviors also smack of the group of tactics we label “humiliation, degradation and emotional unkindness,” and this is an issue we encountered throughout the entirety of our analysis. Each overlaps with the other because they are used together as a psychological and emotional arsenal by the romantic terrorist against the victim and her family.

Other such method that Lee employed to control Grace included constantly correcting her for making “mistakes” in the form of misunderstandings or miscommunications. In her journal, Grace reports a time when she received a card out of the blue from her ex-partner with a handwritten poem expressing how much she missed her. She threw the card in the bin, then discussed with Lee what it could mean, and whether she should respond in any way. Lee’s reaction was typical of crazy-making:

“She suggested I contact my ex-[partner] re the card she sent, then denied that she did so! She questions or challenges my memories and perceptions of events, etc. I recall something she or I said and she denies it or says it was something different!”

For Joy, the crazy-making was equally insidious, but even more damaging because the relationship persisted for so much longer. After they had been living together for about a year, Joe convinced Joy to become pregnant, claiming that he really wanted to be a father and that fatherhood would help keep him on the straight and narrow, drug-wise. However, about 6 months into the pregnancy, Joe reestablished an old friendship with a man who dealt methamphetamine, and his use of the drug subsequently began to escalate

again. He also began regularly drinking alcohol. Together this combination led him to even more verbally abusive behaviors and classic victim blaming

“He did not like it when his behavior was questioned, and if questioned he would inevitably turn it around to make it about [us]. Everything was our fault. We triggered his abuse. My inability to parent Steph properly made him angry, dust on the bench-top made him angry. Steph was nothing but a ‘fucking lazy little bitch’ and I was a ‘fucking shit mother.’”

Joe was especially volatile when coming down off meth, and it was at this stage that he began to threaten murder.

“For example, a month before [the baby, Katie was due to be born, Joe had been out drinking alcohol at his end of year work Christmas party. In the early hours of the morning he phoned demanding that I come and pick him up. I was very pregnant and very tired and asked him to take a taxi home. He replied to me with words to the effect of: Come and get me or I’ll fucking kill you! I hung up, then the phone rang again. Joe had accidentally phoned me back and both Steph and I listened to what he was saying as he attempted to get a taxi. He kept muttering: I will fucking kill those bitches when I get home, over and over again. Steph and I were terrified.”

Joe appeared to abstain from drug and alcohol use after the baby’s birth, but after about three month, Joy found evidence of continued use in the form of used needles and cross-dressing paraphernalia. Talking to him about it only made Joe more angry and so eventually, Joy began to close off, going into what she describes as “survival mode.” “My entire focus day in and day out was trying to stop Joe from being verbally abusive in front of [the baby] because when he did [the baby] became distressed.”

A year or so later, when Joy, Joe, Katie and Steph attended a children’s party nearby, Joy found Joe in the bathroom with a group of men, all shooting up methamphetamine. She became angry and tried to leave. Joe followed her as she walked out, refused to give her the keys and jumped in the car, all the while shouting abuse at them. Joy and her two girls had no choice but to get in. The three of them were all sobbing uncontrollably. Joe continued to shout at Joy all the way home, weaving across lanes on the highway, sometimes reaching 200km an hour. Joy was terrified: “I thought we were going to die!” When they finally arrived home, Joy decided she had had enough and went inside to pack her bags. Joe physically restrained her, pushed his forehead into Joy’s and said: “You won’t be going anywhere with our kid, you fucking cunt. You won’t be fucking leaving me. If you wanted to fucking leave me you should have thought about that before you had a fucking kid.” She begged him to let her go, then got her phone out to call the police. She managed to make it to the bottom of the stairs before Joe caught her,

dragged her back inside and pinned her to the bed. He had stopped yelling, and said quietly, Joy still pinned beneath him: “I love you. I think you’ve changed and there’s something wrong with you mentally. You need to go see a doctor because you’re acting like you’ve got post-natal depression.” Joy recalls:

“in hindsight I realize that I was so mentally exhausted from dealing with Joe’s abusive behavior that I actually believed him when he told me he thought I had changed and needed help. The day before the party I had gone to the supermarket and.... experienced some kind of panic attack.... Joe took me to the doctor the next day...The doctor thought I had anxiety and depression and prescribed anti-depressants.”

These wearing-down maneuvers are a typical feature of controlling behavior in general, and of domestic violence in particular. It is also a common characteristic of torture. Constant barrages of abuse, accusations of getting it wrong, deliberately lying or making mistakes are keystone tactics of crazy-making and political terrorism alike. As discussed earlier, victims of terrorism and torture are often subjected to long interrogations under insufferable conditions designed to break the victim, either into confessing or some other form of compliance. Continued barrages, administered abruptly and without warning, keep victims on their toes, careful not to agitate their torturers for fear of abuse. The constant challenging of victims’ perceptions can make them feel like they are losing their minds. The threat of murder, however, is probably one of the most effective tools. Whether they mean it or not, romantic terrorists know that threatening to kill their victim will likely terrify them into total compliance. Much like the public threats of random beheadings by religious extremists has caused an exponential increase in the fear experienced, making ordinary people on the street paranoid about bags left on seats and middle eastern men with turbans, threats of murder by an abusive partner or ex-partner can cause extreme terror and paranoia in victims. Yet, the threat of spousal murder is rarely taken as evidence of abuse by the courts (Hennessey, 2012). This makes such threats doubly effective as a controlling tool, especially post-separation when a woman may be seeking a restraining order or trying to defend charges of abuse in court (Robertson et al., 2007). This is particularly true of women who have been in, or are in, psychologically and emotionally abusive relationships not characterized by overt physical violence. People mistakenly believe that where there has been no evidence of physical abuse, there is little risk of death for the victim. The research demonstrates that this is patently untrue. The crowning achievement of crazy-making then, is that, even if you were game to talk about your fears or the abuse, no one will ever believe you.

Restricting Personal Territory and Freedom

We have already seen above how Joy was convinced to become pregnant, found herself in increasing amounts of debt and how Joe enforced a form of domestic slavery on Steph (and to a lesser extent Joy), took Joy to the doctors and then informed him that he thought Joy had postnatal depression. These strategies help keep victims under control by restricting their personal territory and freedom.

For example, one particularly easy way of restricting a victim's freedom is to take financial control. Joe managed to control the household finances by failing to contribute any of his wages, instead using his own money to buy drugs and alcohol. Joy was thereby forced to pay all the household expenses, which made things very tight, particularly when she was off work after having their baby, Katie. When Katie was about 6 months old, Joy and Joe decided to buy a bigger car. Joy had determined that their budget would be \$2000 because that was all they could afford, and Joe had initially agreed. However, when he showed up to meet them at the car dealership he was drunk, and insisted that they buy a car worth \$8000.

Joe frequently shouted at Joy about money. They were struggling financially and he kept expecting Joy to cut back on living expenses. Joy went back to work when Katie was four months old, but for that four months or so when she was off work, when Joe was the "sole breadwinner," she was afraid to ask him for money, and often paid the rent, utilities and grocery bills with her credit card. Joe refused to reduce his spending on drugs and alcohol, but would become abusive if Joy bought toys or clothes for Katie. Joe also insisted on an extremely restrictive grocery budget of \$150 per week for their family of four, but then would shout loudly if she didn't buy him the treats he wanted, or provide a different lunch for him each day. On one occasion, he refused to let her pay a telephone bill, which resulted in a black mark on her credit record that took seven years to clear. Joy was also prevented from buying Steph anything including the basic necessities that children need including school shoes, books and stationary. Joe insisted that Steph find employment as soon as she reached 14 years of age and once she started work she was expected to pay board, purchase her own clothes and pay for her school expenses.

Lee and Grace never lived together and so Lee had little access to Grace's finances. However, she skillfully controlled Grace's freedom in other ways. Lee was very strict on herself – one might almost call her a perfectionist. She didn't drink alcohol, eat meat or dairy, and insisted on going to bed at 7.30 at night. While she never insisted that Grace become a vegan like herself, she dropped hints on every possible occasion about the harm caused to animals used for meat, about how fish are able to think and feel just as much as other animals, and about how bad alcohol is for one's health. She would often cite

articles she had read in the news about alcohol causing various types of cancer and so on. After about three months, Grace decided that perhaps she was right about the health aspects, and she certainly knew about the ethical aspects of veganism already, and so decided to try veganism for herself. After 6 months, Grace was so thin from this restrictive diet (and the added stress of psychological abuse) that she was constantly ill with colds, flu, and allergies and looked extremely scrawny.

But diet restrictions were not enough. At one point Lee told Grace she was drinking too much tea. Lee suggested that the caffeine content was bad for Grace, and began to monitor how many cups per day she was drinking. She also disapproved of any drugs whatsoever, including prescription and common over the counter medications such as aspirin. When Grace was prescribed a mild sedative to help her sleep when suffering from symptoms of menopause, Lee was disapproving. When staying over, Grace was forced to wait until Lee was asleep before getting up and stealthily making her way to the bathroom where she kept some of the tablets in her toiletry bag. Lee insisted Grace take herbal supplements for menopause symptoms, and became upset and abusive when Grace stopped taking them.

Lee also monopolized Grace's weekend and holiday time, making it all but impossible to catch up with friends and family. Though Grace had given her a standing invitation to spend weekends at her house, Lee often found excuses not to do so, insisting that Grace come to her instead. She also insisted Grace take the train rather than drive "because it was safer and she didn't want to worry." This resulted in Grace being without a car when Lee had to go into work on the weekends.

"She never seemed to want to meet any of my friends, although she did come to a family dinner once for two hours. There were always seemingly legitimate excuses, as there were again when I'd ask to meet her friends. If we did make a date with her friends, she would always make an excuse to cancel at the last minute."

Although she had always complained about her job not being fulfilling, a few months into the relationship, Lee began talking about moving "out into the country." She had dreams of owning a rural property with dogs, chickens, and other animals, and of living a "quiet, peaceful life." She began researching areas around where they both lived and eventually decided on a large town nestled in the mountains about an hours drive west from where she lived. Thinking it was just a "retirement dream," Grace was happy to play along, and accompanied her on a trip to the town to scope out places where they might like to live. However after a few more months, Lee decided that she would move as soon as she could find a job at the new town, she would sell her current house and buy a pretty little house for them both to live in. When Grace expressed surprise, Lee said Grace could commute the one and

a half hours each way to her job in the city. Grace said she'd think about it, but in reality, she knew such a move was going to be very difficult, especially for her daughter, who Lee expected to live on her own in Grace's apartment once she left high school.

This attempt to move and thus isolate Grace from her family and friends – even her daughter, who was not yet even 18 – was ultimately unsuccessful, but is another common tactic used by romantic terrorists. Often they will meet a potential partner in another city or even country, and woo them by love-bombing, until they agree to move to the offender's hometown or country. If they meet in the city in which both live, the offender might obtain a job in a far away location in order to accomplish his isolation of her. This geographic isolation of victims takes them away from threatening others who may interfere in the relationship, and provides a breeding ground for total control of almost everything, including with whom she socializes, where she works, and how she lives (Hennessey, 2012).

In Joy's case, Joe utilized a variety of different methods to ensure her isolation from family and friends. When his demand for certain things were not complied with e.g. money and access to Joy, Joe would threaten ringing the Australian Government to embargo Katie's passport. Joy and Katie were thus denied their freedom of movement. They were isolated from Katie's maternal grandparents and uncle who resided outside of Australia. Drunkenness, rudeness and aggression were also employed as tactics by Joe to ensure Joy's social isolation. If Joy invited people over to the house Joe would behave inappropriately so Joy, who found this situation highly embarrassing, stopped asking people around. Any attempts made by Joy to go out by herself were also thwarted. In the early days of their relationship, Joe would use love and connectedness to stop Joy from leaving his side. He would say things like, "please don't go to the gym, I will miss you, please stay home with me." Later, these seemingly somewhat passive pleas to stay with him were replaced by more overtly aggressive tactics. After Katie was born, if Joy suggested catching up with friends, Joe would tell her that she already neglected Katie enough by working and that it was negligent of her to spend any more time away from the baby. As a result, he refused to care for Katie. Joy had to take her everywhere she went.

Humiliation, Degradation and Emotional Unkindness

We have already seen how Joe's treatment of Joy involved humiliation, degradation and emotional unkindness, and this is one of the most common tactics used by skilled offenders, not necessarily to obtain compliance, but to make themselves powerful by disempowering the victim. Humiliating and degrading the victim's family also makes them victims, and is not often tolerated, except by those who have no choice – the victim's children.

Joe's continued abuse of Steph continued until she finished high school and moved out to live with her boyfriend. Prior to leaving the family home, Steph had been subjected to ongoing barrages of abuse such as: "You are a lazy little bitch," "You are a fat little bitch," and "you stink." Being called lazy and fat is incredibly humiliating for a teen, as is the slur about her hygiene. As she grew older she would try to respond to him – Joy had by that time gone into "survival mode" to protect Katie, and had shut herself off from Joe – but Joe considered this to be "back-chatting," which he found unacceptable. Joy recalls,

"Steph herself was not an unruly teenager. She was a high academic achiever and subsequently won junior dux of her school. Her peer group were also high achievers. When Joe grounded her, the activities she missed out on were going to the gym, going for walks with me and going to the library."

Lee's abuse, on the other hand, was much more concentrated and intermittent, except toward the end of their relationship. On one occasion when she had shouted at Grace for an hour over the phone about her bad parenting skills, Grace had tried to remain calm, trying to counter each accusation with evidence. However, as usual, Lee wouldn't let her get a word in. Eventually, Grace was so frustrated and fed up she told Lee she was intolerant and had no understanding of parenting, to which Lee responded with spite, "Go have another drink" implying that Grace was an alcoholic "just like [Lee's] mother!"

Lee continually blamed Grace for everything that went wrong in her [Lee's] life. At one point, she decided that, rather than changing careers, perhaps changing agencies would make her happier with her work. Grace was doubtful, but kept her doubts to herself. Instead, she was supportive, and encouraged Lee to take up an offer of a job at a competitor agency close by. However, from the first week, Lee complained even more bitterly about her new boss. She also claimed her old boss was unhappy with the move, which was reasonable, and that he was stalking her, which was not reasonable at all, Grace thought. She claimed her former boss was following her in his car, had paid some young people to graffiti her fence, and was sending her threatening letters. In fact, the letters were simply legal advices about communicating with clients of her previous agency, but Lee insisted they were malicious. She became more and more paranoid, agitated and angry. When Grace arrived to spend the weekend, Lee was preoccupied with her stalker, practically ignoring Grace. The next day, she asked Grace to help her fix something on her phone, and while Grace was trying to fix it, the phone went dead. Lee flew into a rage, calling Grace all kinds of names and telling her she broke Lee's phone, that she knew nothing about computers and that she "thought she was so smart" but she was "stupid." She left the house, slamming the door behind her, to go and get it fixed.

“I didn’t know what to do. By this stage I couldn’t put a foot right and I considered walking down the street to catch a cab to the train station. In the end I decided to go for a walk and see what she was like when she got back. But when I got home she was lying on the spare bed with her dogs, sulking. I asked her how she was, and she grumbled something. I had a bad feeling, so I told her I didn’t want to stay the night and that’s I’d catch a cab to the station. The she lost it again, saying everything was my fault, I was hopeless and should realize it. She pushed me when I tried to get past with my bag, then demanded to drive me to the station. Against my better judgment, I said okay.”

Lee abused Grace all the way to the station, with snidely made remarks such as “Sorry I wasn’t much fun this weekend,” “You always expect so much,” “Some of us have to work you know” and “You shouldn’t have touched my phone if you didn’t know what you were doing. You’re such a know-all.” At the same time, she was speeding and driving wildly and dangerously. When they arrived at the station, Grace said, “Please don’t be angry. Drive safely.” Lee replied that she wasn’t angry and Grace went into the station to wait for her train. Ten minutes later Lee walked onto the platform and said “I don’t want you to go.” Grace recalls:

“She didn’t say, ‘I’m sorry I got mad’ or anything nice like that. It was just she didn’t want me to go. It was all about her! I say ‘I think I’ve been supportive,’ and she calmly replies ‘I can see you want to leave,’ then starts crying. I didn’t say anything, even though it was really hard not to, and she left. At this point I just wanted out of there. Five minutes later she calls me from the car and she’s sobbing uncontrollably. She said I’m not supportive at all! Then she breaks down completely and I’m so afraid she’ll crash the car that I tell her to come back and get me. She says ‘no!’ and so then I have to beg her!”

Lee ended up saying she’s go back, and Grace met her at the car, where Lee kept sobbing and saying she “can’t take any more” and that she’s “going crazy.” After Lee calmed down, Grace drove them back to Lee’s house, and stayed overnight.

Lee’s tactic of turning her own bad behavior into accusations against Grace is also typical of the romantic terrorist. Lee behaved very badly after the phone incident. She shouted, lashed out, insulted Grace, and stormed out of the house. Even after Grace stayed to see how she was, Lee acted petulantly, saying that Grace was unsupportive, and belittling her attempts to assist. When Grace decided she had had enough and wanted to go home, Lee lashed out angrily again, even pushing her this time, while continually belittling her both in the house and then in the car on the way to the station. When she realized Grace meant business, she used tears and pathetic claims

of going crazy to change Grace's mind. Then, after Grace spent the night comforting her, she lashed out again, calling her "unsupportive" and "not interested in her problems" in an attempt to impose guilt upon Grace. Both these tactics – drawing sympathy and imposing guilt – work because Lee is so good at them.

However, by this point Grace had talked to Joy and another friend about her situation, and had come to the conclusion that she needed to step back and let Lee sort herself out. That night she ended the relationship by phone, to much abuse. This did not put an end to the insults, however. During the following weeks, Grace was subjected to a barrage of nasty, abusive text messages. As we will see in the next section, separation is usually followed by threats and intimidation, tactics used by romantic terrorists to continue to harass and frighten their victims.

Threats and Intimidation

Joy was desperate to move out and "live in peace," but she could not find a way to accomplish this.

"Joe made it very clear on numerous occasions that if I left him I would be going without Katie and frequently told things like:

'I will make sure you never fucking see her again.'

'I'll take you to family court and get 100% custody because you are fucking mental.'

'I'll fucking kill you.'

'I'll slit your fucking throat if you try to leave.'"

Most terrifying for Joy was a veiled murder-suicide threat that Joe made one day. In the midst of a particularly long, abusive episode, Joe looked at Joy with a particularly "evil look on his face" and shouted, "I understand now why men take their children, kill them and themselves." This threat continues to haunt Joy to this day.

Joy finally reached the point where she realized her relationship with Joe was domestic violence, while writing an academic paper on same-sex domestic violence with a colleague at work. Prior to this she had always regarded Joe's behavior as the result of his drug use. "When I was reading through the literature it suddenly dawned on me that research descriptions regarding emotional violence fitted my circumstances." Further, her therapist had convinced her that her anxiety and depression were not caused by some organic mental health problem, but were the direct result of her life circumstances, and particularly the verbal abuse that was by this stage a "normal" part of her life.

"Through counseling I had come to realize that my relationship with Joe had seriously compromised my mental health and that anti-depressants were not the solution; the only way to stop my

depression and anxiety was to change my life by ending my relationship.”

This was a defining moment for Joy, but she still couldn't work out how to leave. She was in debt and couldn't afford to move, so made an arrangement to continue sharing the house with Joe as “friends.” This upset Joe, and his abuse subsided. He appeared to be trying to win her back. Some months later, she had saved enough to move and announced to Joe that she was moving to a small house about 30 minutes drive away. He became so abusive, Joy had to call the police on the day she moved, and they made him leave for 24 hours so she could move their things

Grace's separation was also marred by threats and intimidation, though to a lesser extent than Joy's, as well as more humiliation and degradation. After the initial break up, Lee continued to text insults and abuse to Grace, which she tried to ignore. Grace refused to answer Lee's calls, so Lee would leave abusive voicemail messages instead. She also engaged in much email abuse, where she would send emails outlining many things that Grace had done wrong in the relationship, including being unsupportive, arrogant, and moody. Lee accused Grace of “being nothing but a pathetic drunk” and of making Lee switch jobs so that she would fail. She called Anne “your bitch daughter” who Grace let make “a rod for your own back” and “walk all over you,” and blamed Anne for their breakup. Lee called Anne “moody and obnoxious” and Grace “financially irresponsible,” though Grace was living quite frugally as a single parent.

When she finally got sick of the abuse and responded, Grace received another barrage of nasty emails accusing her of being “two different people,” the “sweet one” and the “nasty one.” When Grace answered her emails with counter accusations, she was abruptly threatened with an AVO (Apprehended Violence Order) for stalking and harassment. Then she threatened to throw out the clothes and other belongings that Grace had left at Lee's house unless Grace came to pick them up the next day. Grace said she would, but in the end was too terrified to do so. Lee had promised to leave Grace's things in the kitchen when she went to work and Grace was supposed to use her key to enter and then leave the key behind when she left. However, Grace was sure Lee would be there, so she decided not to go. Sure enough, at 10.30 the next morning – thirty minutes after Grace had said she would be there, Lee texted Grace to ask her why she didn't come, indicating that she had indeed been there waiting for Grace.

“I replied that I had been called in for a meeting at the last minute, but that I had a friend who lived nearby that could pick my things up after work. I was terrified of being confronted by Lee. By this stage I'd had begun shaking uncontrollably every time I read a text or email from Lee, I'd lost a lot of weight, and was sick with

anxiety. I had been seeing a therapist almost since the beginning of the relationship, but was still really anxious and upset. I felt I couldn't trust her at all. In the end, she offered to drop the things over to my friend after work and I agreed and gave her the address. When my friend delivered the stuff the next day she said Lee had been 'pleasant and nice,' which was just typical!"

Conclusion

The fact that Lee could come across as very charming was not unknown to Grace – it was what had drawn her to Lee to start with. And this, together with Lee's physical attractiveness, led people to believe she was a "people person." The fact was that Lee was a loner who didn't like most people, complained about everyone behind their backs, and preferred her own company to the company of others. The ability of the romantic terrorist to present as charming and sociable is what helps them quickly lure their victims into relationships. However, their underlying dislike and distrust of people in general eventually shows through in their romantic relationships. Such people generally have few friends and don't reveal too much of themselves to anyone. The pleasant façade hides the kind of character that threatens and intimidates those who won't comply with their very strict view of how things should be. They consider a separation instigated by their victim as a breach of contract that must be paid for by the victim. Hence the continued threats and intimidation months and even years after separation. When they have children in common with the offender, victims may find they almost never rid themselves of any association with them. Thus, while Grace has not had any contact from Lee in over three years, Joy still continues to have contact with Joe because of their shared child, and therefore is still subject to abuse, although much less often.

Clearly, these narratives demonstrate the insidious and terroristic nature of domestic violence. No doubt, those who consider themselves terrorism experts would disagree, not least because political terrorism is often aimed at entire groups of people (such as 9/11) and is politically motivated. However, in answer to this we draw on the work of our second wave feminist sisters and argue that, where domestic violence is concerned, the personal *is* political. Domestic violence is a political issue, one that is plaguing many thousands of women and children (and of course, other types of victims) every day in this country. It is perpetrated by skilled offenders who know exactly what they are doing, and whose aim it is to terrorize their partners and their children into compliance through confusion and fear. This year alone (2015), at least two women per week have been killed by their partners. Only by taking political action against domestic violence as an issue, will we ever be able to come to terms with the extent of the problem, and how to address it.

NOTES

1. The data analyzed in this article were first reported in Hayes, S. and S. Jeffries (2015), *Romantic Terrorism: An Auto-Ethnography of Domestic Violence Victimization and Survival*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

2. 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.

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