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Callous Lovers and Frightening Victims: How emotional contradictions affect young people's navigation of sexually abusive relationships

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze how young people with sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) victimization experiences describe, interpret and attempt to understand their abusive partners. Building on a qualitative interview study with 27 young participants (ages 17–24) from Norway and Sweden, our analysis demonstrates how young people's victimization experiences in abusive relationships are characterized by confusing, contradictory and conflicting emotions about their abusive partners. We developed two 'ideal types' of relationship dynamics with abusive partners from our empirical material – being in a relationship with a 'Callous Lover' or a 'Frightening Victim', respectively. These ideal types illustrate how emotional contradictions take different forms, are managed differently and bring different consequences for the young, victimized participants. We argue that their efforts to manage their contradictory feelings towards their abusive partners can be understood as 'emotion work'. The demand for such work is shaped by social expectations and norms of what constitutes a 'good' or 'normal' relationship, and of what can or should be expected of romantic or sexual partners in adolescent and young adult relationships. Managing and trying to live up to these expectations has consequences for young people's opportunities to disentangle themselves from harmful relationships.

Keywords
intimate partner violence; youth; sexual violations; sexual subjectivity; emotion work; ideal-type analysis

Introduction

Youth intimate partner violence (YIPV)[1] has come to be considered a pressing social issue (Barter, 2011). Existing YIPV research demonstrates how such violence is a relatively common occurrence in young people's relationships (Barter et al., 2017; Fox et al., 2014). YIPV may have a severe impact on physical and mental health (Datta et al., 2022; Romito

1 YIPV is defined as physical, psychological and/or sexual violence by a current or former partner or someone the young person has been otherwise romantically involved with, in line with Korkmaz (2021a) and Barter (2011).

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et al., 2013), and victimization during youth might affect future relationships in adulthood (Herrenkohl & Jung, 2016).

Scholars have discussed how YIPV differs from adult IPV (Cutter-Wilson & Richmond, 2011; Murray & Azzinaro, 2019). Youth-specific factors that are pertinent to young people's IPV victimization can include parental dependency (i.e., living at home with one's parents while being in an abusive relationship), attending school (often the same one as the abusive partner) and lacking experience with relationships and sex (Korkmaz & Överlien, 2020).

Gender affects young victims' exposure to and experiences of IPV. Victimized girls seem to suffer more severe consequences than do victimized boys (Romito et al., 2013), and girls seem to be subjected to more *sexual* IPV compared to boys (Barter et al., 2017; Korkmaz et al., 2022). Gender norms are key to understanding both young people's intimate relationships and IPV (Barter & Lombard, 2019; Davies, 2019).

Research on *adult* victims of IPV indicates the presence of emotional contradictions in these victims' relationships to abusive partners, which may function as barriers to leaving the relationship (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Donovan & Hester, 2014). Less is known about young people's navigation and management of their relationships to abusive partners, and how these efforts are affected by their perceptions and interpretations. As one exception, Toscano (2014) demonstrated how her 18–20-year-old participants with histories of dating violence had concerns for their abusers, whom they frequently described as 'troubled'. A Swedish interview study (Enander, 2011) with adult battered women showed how they initially conceptualized abusers as good, but their perceptions gradually shifted to bad: "from Jekyll to Hyde" (p. 35). Korkmaz (2021b) found that the ways in which young IPV victims perceive their 'obligations' and expectations as romantic partners can constitute barriers to leaving abusive relationships.

Our aim is to expand the understanding of how young IPV victims make sense of their abusive partners and relationships. We focus on a certain aspect of victims' narratives of their relationships and their partners: emotional dissonance or contradictions. We ask these research questions:

(1) How do young people with sexual IPV victimization experiences describe, interpret and understand their abusive partners and their relationships to them?
(2) Which emotional states and contradictions do young people with sexual IPV experiences formulate when describing their abusive partners, and how does their management of these states and contradictions affect their navigating and leaving the abusive relationship?

Theoretical framework

Sexual violations and IPV

In this article, we place sexual violations under the umbrella term of IPV to enable our discussion of how young people's abusive relationships often include violations of the victims' sexual agency and bodily integrity. According to Alcoff, a sexual violation is "a violation of sexual agency, of subjectivity, of our will" (2018, p. 12). In contrast to violence, a violation can happen with stealth, manipulation and even soft words, if the context and the relationship is based on dependency or when one is "significantly vulnerable to the offices of others" (Alcoff, 2018, p. 12). By using the term 'violation', we wish to include a broad range of sexually violating experiences, where the use of threats or abuse of power may be more or less clear-cut and manifest, in a context of disempowerment and dependency: an abusive relationship.

In line with the works of feminist philosophers such as Alcoff (2018) and Cahill (2014), we argue that *sexual subjectivity* is threatened through being subjected to sexual violations. We conceptualize the right to have and develop sexual subjectivity as a right to sexual freedom, and a capacity for sexual agency. Sexual violations threaten to negate or altogether crush sexual subjectivity, and this fundamentally characterizes their harmfulness (Alcoff, 2018). Conversely, the right to sexual agency is about having the opportunity to shape the sexual interaction, such that one's desires will affect the encounter itself.

Emotion work and feeling rules

Feelings and their management are expressions of the embodied individual history and the social context within which the feelings are expressed (Frosh, 2011; Hochschild, 1979, 1983). Hochschild (1979, 1983) developed the concepts of 'emotion work' and 'feeling rules' to grasp the social aspects of the regulation and expression of emotion.

Emotion work describes people's management of their emotions to fit economic, social and cultural demands, both in their public lives (for example at work) and in their private lives, where they must perform such work to maintain and develop relationships and sustain the emotional well-being of family and friends (Hochschild, 1983, 1997). Emotion work can be performed superficially, in that we understand what we should feel and pretend accordingly, which is known as 'surface acting'. Emotion work can also take place as 'deep acting', in Hochschild's terms, where the work is no longer just a matter of convincing others that one is feeling the 'right' way, but also of convincing oneself. This process of deep acting is the core of emotion work.

'Feeling rules' are invoked when people become aware that their feelings need to be managed, and that they need to do emotion work to make their feelings more appropriate and a better 'fit'.

Researchers have used Hochschild's theory of emotion work to understand the navigating of sexual violence victimization in intimate relationships (Fahs & Swank, 2016; Tarzia, 2021) and to unpack the processes by which IPV victims leave abusive partners and end abusive relationships (Enander, 2011). In studies on such ending processes, the emotion work concept is used to describe how victims manage their contradictory feelings towards their perpetrators (Enander, 2010; Tarzia, 2021). Studies of people with IPV victimization experiences emphasize the emotion work that they do when they try to understand the abusive partner's situation and, often as a consequence, trivialize their own experience and minimize the ramifications of being in a violent relationship.

In this article, we build upon this scholarship and use emotion work and feeling rules as theoretical concepts to help us make sense of how our participants manage their dissonant, contradictory feelings toward their abusive partners.

Methods

Data, participants and interviews

This article draws on data that was gathered (1) during 2016–2017 within a larger mixed-methods research project on youth IPV in Sweden and (2) during 2020–2021, in the context of the 'Drawing the Line' project, in Norway.[2] We interviewed 14 Swedish

2 The project *Drawing the Line: Sexual Violence in Young People's Intimate Relationships* is part of the Second Research Programme on Violence in Close Relationships, 2019–2024, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security. The aim of *Drawing the Line* is to investigate and capture two topics and how they are connected: (1) how young people understand sexual violations; (2) how institutions that work with young people understand sexual violations. In the project, we collected data from multiple sites, for

participants and 13 Norwegian participants. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The quotes in this paper have been lightly edited for clarity in English.

For this article, we analyzed interviews with 27 young people (aged 17–24 when interviewed) who had had sexually violating victimization experiences in intimate relationships during their teenage years. Of these 27 youths, 24 were young women who had been subjected to violence in heterosexual relationships; three male participants had been abused by a male partner.[3]

To recruit the Swedish participants, gender-neutral information directed towards any young person who had experienced IPV was sent to various agencies across Sweden that work with young people. Information was also posted on social media in an effort to specifically target young people who had not sought professional support.

Whereas the Swedish participants were recruited to share their experiences with IPV in general, the Norwegian participants were recruited to discuss *sexual* IPV experiences. Some were recruited or self-recruited after they had attended focus groups in their secondary schools about sexual violence in young people's relationships (another strand of the data collection for the 'Drawing the Line' project). Others were recruited through help services for victims of IPV and/or sexual violence, and still others self-recruited after we posted information about the project in relevant social media groups.

The data consists of in-depth interviews, varying in length from 45 minutes to over 2.5 hours. The interview setting was often chosen by the young people themselves, such as public libraries and school study rooms, or via secure digital platforms. Some interviews were conducted at the premises of the help service that had recruited the participant, or at the premises of the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS). In all interviews, regardless of country, questions about the young person's experiences of sexual violations were asked. In Sweden, where young people with experiences of IPV in general were recruited, questions regarding the participant's sex life and specifically sexual violence were included in the interview guide. Thus, sexual violence became a prominent theme during the interviews in Sweden too. In Norway, having experiences of sexual violations was a participation criterion, making this an expected theme to discuss during the interviews.

Ethics

The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) in May 2021, and the Swedish part of the study was approved by the Ethical Review Board in Stockholm in May 2016. The participants were informed[4] about the project and its purpose before

example (a) individual interviews with young people who had been subjected to, or who had subjected others to, some form of sexual violation; (b) focus groups with young people without known violation experiences. We also interviewed school personnel, county governors and employees from the National Mediation Service, all of whom professionally address sexual violence among youth.

3 Considering the gender makeup of the young people we interviewed, we use female and male pronouns for the victimized and perpetrating person, respectively. In conducting our analysis, however, we ensured that the experiences of the minority of young people with experiences from same-sex relationships were properly accounted for. Thus, our analytical framework is valid for understanding the experiences of the three young men in same-sex relationships as well as the young women's experiences in heterosexual relationships.

4 Before signing a participation consent form, all informants received written and oral information about the research project. We clarified that participation was voluntary and that informants could withdraw from or opt out of the study at any point. The interviewer had this situation in mind while interviewing and thus considered consent to be an ongoing process (Spratt, 2017; Överlien & Holt, 2021).

interviews, participation was voluntary, and we had measures available (e.g., support services) to take care of participants' emotional needs[5] if necessary. Confidentiality was ensured by changing all names and identifying details, and some specific and recognizable details of the participants' stories were changed or masked.

Analysis

We have employed a combination of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and a modified version of Stapley et al.'s (2021) ideal-type analysis (ITA) in this study. Our analytical approach was abductive, which denotes reiterative and circular analytical processes that combine a grounded approach to coding, primary categorization and the construction of bottom-up empirical categories with a more theoretically informed conceptualization and interpretation (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). We maintained a clear and enduring connection to the data by moving back and forth between the interview material and our codes, themes, categories and later ideal types, and we held continuous discussions amongst ourselves about our findings and theoretical interpretations.

The aim of ITA is to synthesize and typify data material as a whole through the development of ideal types, which represent main characteristics and important differences within and across the cases and the data material, according to the research questions (Stapley et al., 2021). The concept of the 'ideal type', originally developed by Max Weber, refers to simplified and condensed descriptions of a social reality or phenomenon: "a mental representation that will never be entirely identical with social reality but that helps to make such reality understandable" (Stapley et al., 2021, p. 6).

Our analysis process had six steps, largely following the main principles of Stapley et al.'s ITA (2021). All three authors read and became familiar with the whole material (step 1), followed by coding and preliminary categorization by the first and second authors (step 2). Parallel to the coding process, we developed case reconstructions or summaries of each participant's story (step 3). In step 4, we held two analysis workshops where we discussed (a) our first impressions of the data material and then (b) preliminary findings and possible avenues of further analysis. During step 5, the first author continued to refine themes and categories in dialogue with the second author.

Based on this thematic analysis and the case reconstructions, we constructed an ideal typology representing distinct types of abusive partner/relationship dynamic descriptions found in the material. As recommended in ITA, we asked a member of our project group who was not involved in the analysis to conduct a validity check of this typology as the final and sixth step.[6]

Results

Our participants narrated numerous experiences of exposure to sexual and other (mainly psychological and physical violence) forms of IPV.

The length and 'seriousness' of the participants' abusive relationships varied greatly in both the Swedish and Norweigan sample. Some of the participants described their relationship as having been 'just seeing each other' for a few weeks, while others told of having been in a committed relationship that lasted for several years. Many of our interviewees

5 The interviewer paid close attention to the young participants' well-being, reminding them that they need not answer questions they felt uncomfortable with. At the end of each interview, the interviewer provided information to the informant about where to seek support if needed.

6 We asked our colleague to read our case reconstructions and ideal-type descriptions, and then to assign the cases to what she thought were the appropriate ideal types. Where her case interpretations and ideal-type allocations differed from ours (four cases), we discussed the matter and refined our ideal typology accordingly.

described how the abusive relationship was their first 'real' relationship, and their first time falling in love. In most of these cases, the abusive partner was also their first sexual partner.

None of the participants were still in the relationship with the abusive partner at the time of the interviews, and the time passed between the break-up and the interview varied from a few months to 6-7 years.

In the interviews, the young people talked about their desires and expectations of romantic or intimate relationships. One important expectation was some degree of reciprocity, care and trust. The contrast was often stark, then, with what happened once their partner turned abusive.

Apart from these common factors, the qualities of the relationship dynamics and the young victimized people's interpretations of their partners' troubles and their own varied significantly across the material. This variation, which led to different expressions of emotion work according to different feeling rules of intimate relationships, is what we have attempted to capture in our typology of relationship dynamics with abusive partners.

Our ideal-type analysis yielded a twofold typology in which we outlined two different figures or characterizations of abusive partners that emerged in the young victims' narratives. These ideal types, called the 'Callous Lover' and the 'Frightening Victim', not only represent the abusive partners in themselves but also engender different *relationship dynamics* between the participants and their abusive partner. Our analysis incorporates both these aspects.

We conceptualize these types or figures as 'embodied oxymorons': that is, they are meant to capture important emotional contradictions that the participants voiced when describing and interpreting their relationships to their abusive partners. An oxymoron is a literary or poetic device that combines two seemingly contradictory or opposite elements, such as 'comfortable misery', 'cruel kindness' or 'deafening silence' (Malewitz, n.d.; Muniz, 2019; Nordquist, 2021). Oxymorons manifest and illustrate contradictions; and holding contradictory beliefs is strenuous and causes dissonance (Jansz & Timmers, 2002).

Below, we present and discuss the two types of abusive partners and the harmful dynamics that arise in our participants' relationships to them. For each of them, we first give a general description of the ideal type, before we go into more depth with some core features of the ideal type and the arising dynamics.

The Callous Lover

Around two-thirds of our participants described and interpreted their abusive partners in ways that we synthesize as the Callous Lover.

The young people with Callous Lover stories discussed their wanting to be chosen and desired by someone, and how they experienced becoming a more desirable version of themselves in the eyes of their partners. Being the object of attention and desire of the Callous Lover was often initially gratifying, and their infatuation with and feelings of love for him were often intense. These participants talked about how their partners were (at least initially) a great source of safety, well-being, support and comfort; that they made them feel valuable and recognized; and that they loved the way the partner made them feel about themselves. Some also described their partner as having replaced their parents or family as their primary 'home'. This dynamic soon changed, however. As the abuse gradually worsened, the young victim's will, needs, desires and expectations seemed to matter less and less to the abusive partner.

This figure thus incorporates important features of the emotional dissonance they experienced: The young victims' expectations and initial or periodical experiences of their abusive partners' love, care, reciprocity and trust were paired with the partner increasingly acting in careless, callous and indifferent ways towards the victim, leaving little space for the victim's own needs and vulnerabilities.

Illustration 1. *The Callous Lover*. Artist: Christian Bloom

Previous research on the experiences of victims of IPV has found similar relationship trajectories and dynamics. For example, Enander (2010, 2011) found that adult women who had left abusive relationships frequently described their abusers as considerate, charming and empathic when they first met them, but that they eventually turned into someone quite different as the abuse commenced and worsened.

The emotional contradiction in the Callous Lover figure resides in the contrast between the young victims' intense emotions of love and their desire to be and remain in a relationship with their partner, and in their emerging experience of his lack of care, respect or even interest in how they felt, and in what they may want or need from the relationship.

Sexual entitlement and sexual subjectivity negation

Callous Lovers do not seem to care much for their partners' needs or desires and see sex as something they are entitled to as a boyfriend. Experiences of sexual violations come across as a core feature in these young people's stories.

Lene was with her boyfriend (Oliver) for around a year when she was in her mid-teens, and he was the same age. They broke up around five years ago. He was not her first boyfriend, but she said that she was deeply in love, in a way that she had never before felt with anyone else. "I don't think I'm able to describe how much I was in love with him, I valued him more than I valued myself", she said. The couple went to the same school and spent most of their time together. Lene said Oliver was not physically violent, but that he sexually violated her on numerous occasions, and that he often acted coldly and callously towards her when she was struggling emotionally or psychologically.

Oliver was Lene's first sexual partner, and she said that she often felt that she had no right to say no to having sex when he wanted it. "It was like he owned my body", she said. "I remember he said that – because we were together, he owned my body".

Many young interviewees with Callous Lover partners reiterated Lene's experience: how their ownership of their bodies faded and was essentially taken over by the partner as the abuse progressed, together with their right to decide when, where, how often and what kind of sex they wanted to have. The violence and brutality were mitigated through his ignoring and normalizing of the abuse, often pretending that nothing unusual had happened afterwards.

Tess was one participant who related such experiences of sexual subjectivity negation. When Tess was in her late teens, she met Johan, who was twice her age. They soon became a couple and stayed together for around eight months. When we interviewed her, they had been broken up for two years.

Tess said that she quickly became "emotionally addicted" to Johan. She opened up and shared her vulnerabilities, and he provided some sense of security and care for her, although he did not reciprocate her candidness. While they were together, he subjected Tess to both physical violence and psychological control, in addition to sexual violence.

Tess talked about how her boundaries were constantly pushed and altered by her partner's behavior and that the violence and control he subjected her to became normalized over time, thus progressively threatening her sexual subjectivity. She was often visibly hurt and bruised after sex, but because Johan acted unfazed afterwards, she started to wonder whether pain was to be expected as part of their sex life or indeed their relationship.

> For example, the first time I went home with him, and the next day, when I looked as if I'd been wrestling with a tiger, he was like, 'God, thanks for a great night, that was awesome. I like you so much; that was such great sex'… Or when he physically abused me, and then the next day, he said, 'No, we just argued, that's all' … It just felt logical in a way.

At the same time, Tess thought that if she turned down his sexual suggestions or failed to concede to his sexual preferences, he would find her "prudish" and "boring":

> I'm exchangeable, and if I'm boring, he'll just exchange me with someone else. I need to show him that I'm kinky too, 'cause if you're not kinky, you're just boring.… You always have to be so up for sex all the time, that you need to be, like, 'But I love to have sex; I want to have sex all the time. I'm always wet and horny and happy' … you have sex to satisfy him, so he enjoys it, so he's happy, so he thinks you're good in bed.

This ideal of sexual availability and adventurousness seemingly became a tool for Johan to convince Tess that she was the problem, not his crossing of her boundaries, which reduced her convictions of her own right to sexual subjectivity. As she said, the situation just "felt logical". When she voiced her opinion or asserted her right to disagree with him on sex-related issues such as prostitution, he would shame her for being "sex-negative".

Tess's story shows how the young victims' emotion work in abusive relationships with Callous Lovers not only demanded their management of doubt or protest towards his setting of their sexual agenda; sometimes, they also had to altogether ignore their own sexual subjectivity and instead fashion a new sexual self – one that complied with his expectation of a "sex-positive", "wet, horny and happy" girlfriend (see also Tarzia, 2020).

If our young participants with Callous Lover abusive partners made claims to their own subjectivity or autonomy, sexual or otherwise, they feared the loss of their partner or his interest. These harmful dynamics seem to arise partly from the participants' feeling of

'non-being' or lack of subjectivity in the relationship, and partly from their fear of the partner and what he would do if they exercised their sexual autonomy – to retaliate with verbal abuse or physical violence, or lose interest and eventually end the relationship.

Confusion and interpretive precedence

The young people we interviewed retrospectively described the Callous Lover as manipulative and sometimes 'psychopathic'. He subjected her to violence, sexual and sometimes other forms of IPV, and tended to twist her words and her experience to minimize or trivialize his own actions (as with Tess, quoted above), or he shifted the responsibility for how things had turned out to her.

We presented the story of Lene and Oliver in the previous section. When they had sex, it was usually painful for her, but never enough for him to stop, Lene said. He once forced Lene to perform oral sex on him in a way she found particularly demeaning and physically painful. She cried afterwards, and tried to explain to him why she was upset by what he had done:

> I remember he said, like, 'That shouldn't have happened; let's draw a line under all that. We won't talk about this; this hasn't happened. I don't want you to tell anyone about this. It was a mistake that just happened, and let's forget about it. We'll never talk about this when we're arguing – this is the last time we'll talk about it, ever again. I'll say I'm sorry now, and then we'll put this whole thing to rest'.

This quote clearly demonstrates how Oliver's negotiation of Lene's experience demanded her management of how she felt upset, sad and angry in order to align her experience with his – that what had happened was a minor incident, perhaps a bit 'out there', but nothing they couldn't just draw a line under and forget about. Lene said that her intense feelings of love and her strong desire to remain Oliver's girlfriend created confusion in her about what had really happened between them – she thought that she must have misunderstood something when he was abusing her, and not that the problem was him doing anything wrong. She said that she just couldn't fathom how her boyfriend was also the one who was causing her so much pain.

Enander and Holmberg (2008; see also Holmberg & Enander, 2004) point out how determining the causes and meaning of abusive behavior may feel pressing for people who experience IPV. People who have been victimized by their partner often feel that they need to understand the abuser, although this need to understand may also serve to bind them to the abusive relationship because of the empathy such understanding often creates. Still, and resembling what Lene described above, Överlien et al. (2019) found that young victims of IPV may find the abusive behavior to *lack* meaning, which creates confusion and difficulty in seeing any reason behind the abuse. Such situations make efforts to understand abusive behavior difficult and exhausting, and may – as in Lene's case – lead to victims thinking they have misunderstood what happened instead of holding the abuser accountable for his actions (see also Enander, 2011). Such processes are also part of the emotion work that IPV victims may do to make their feelings align with what they perceive the situation to demand of them (Hochschild, 1979, 1983).

This emotional adjustment was a gradual process for Elsa, who was in her late teens when she was with her slightly older boyfriend, Kasper. They were together for just over a year, and it's been six months since their break-up. Elsa said he did not physically force her to have sex, but she often woke up at night because he "did things" to her sexually, and if she refused sex with him, he would continue pressuring her until she said yes. In this respect, Elsa's experience resonates with that of several other participants, who told of often waking up to their partners initiating sex while they were asleep, though never checking whether they wanted sex or not.

At one point during her relationship with Kasper, Elsa did not feel like having sex for a few weeks. These were the worst weeks in their relationship, she said. He reacted to her sexual rejection by verbally abusing her, saying demeaning things about her body, and accusing her of not loving him anymore and of being unfaithful to him. Elsa said that in the end, his abuse resulted in her having sex with him even though she didn't want to. She feared losing him if she didn't. The process in which Elsa's sexual autonomy receded was gradual, the way she described it:

> If you take a frog and put it straight into boiling water, it'll try to jump out of the water at once, you know. But if you put it in regular water and then heat the water little by little, it gets used to the heat but dies in the end. I like to describe our relationship that way. 'Cause in the beginning, he was all you could ever wish for, but I became very addicted to him. He had me addicted to him, so that if I didn't have him, I'd have nothing.

While she was still together with Kasper, Elsa tried to talk to some of her close friends about how he pressured her to have sex and often initiated sex with her while she was sleeping, as she felt that what he was doing wasn't quite right. They responded by saying that they thought such behavior was legal and a common practice. It was not a big deal: they were in a relationship, after all.

Elsa's experience resonates with how other participants calmed their own unease about the abuse by framing it as something that perhaps should be expected or tolerated in romantic relationships, and that their social contexts often supported such a notion.

Our study participants told of many experiences akin to Elsa's: boyfriends initiating sex with a sleeping partner without checking for permission; facing expectations or demands to have sex according to a partner's sexual interests or preferences that were contrary to one's own; experiencing few or no real opportunities to refuse unwanted sex; or having physically painful sex with a partner who didn't care for one's pain or one's sexual pleasure. They thought they were expected to tolerate these sexual violations because they happened within the bounds of an intimate relationship. Hence, one important element of their emotion work was evoked by the social norms – the feeling rules – of what sex should be like in a relationship, what their abusive partner expects and what is condoned in their social contexts (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Hochschild, 1979).

In Callous Lover stories, the young people talked about their abusive partners as people who enjoyed a higher social status than themselves and whose words and opinions carried greater legitimacy with others. Often, he was someone people trusted and listened to, and he seemed to wield a certain social power in their shared social context. In other words, one important aspect of the abusive partner's capacity for controlling the narrative about his actions and their normalcy was his higher social status and the legitimacy and power that came with it.

In the dynamic between the young participants and their Callous Lover partners, the partners seemed to have an 'interpretive precedence' to define what he did to her, and if it was violent or not. This precedence arises through cultural ideas of what sex in relationships should look like, is legitimized through the disparity in social status between the victim and her abusive partner, and is exacerbated by her fear of losing him and her desire to keep being chosen by him. This situation creates confusion and ambivalence in the victim. The result of these dynamics is that retrospectively, the abuser appears in the interviewees' stories as someone who denied their subjectivity and autonomy through indifference and numbness to their perspectives, and through sexual objectification of them.

Managing the dissonant experience of wanting badly to be chosen and desired by the same person who ignores your needs or vulnerabilities and disregards your experiences, and the contradictory emotions this produces, is central to the emotion work these young, victimized people do. We argue that one result of this emotion work is a negation of their subjectivity: both in terms of their right to sexual integrity and autonomy and of being recognized as someone with legitimate needs, desires and vulnerabilities.

Illustration 2. *The Frightening Victim*. Artist: Christian Bloom

The Frightening Victim

Around one-third of the young participants described and interpreted their abusive partners in ways that we synthesize as a 'Frightening Victim'. Like the Callous Lover ideal type, the Frightening Victim also represents an embodied oxymoron in the young people's narratives.

An abusive partner who is a Frightening Victim is simultaneously vulnerable and terrifying. The way the young people described it, they had observable and real reasons to sympathize with and care for him. He had perhaps been traumatized by previous life experiences, had mental health or addiction issues, or generally had serious trouble managing the various challenges of adolescent or young adult life, such as attending school, keeping a job or preparing for an independent adult life of supporting himself. At the same time, he was also unpredictable, controlling and violent and thus created fear in his partner.

In common understandings of a victim, he or she is someone whom one should feel sorry for, someone who needs to be empathized with and taken care of, and someone whose needs sometimes must be prioritized over those of others. When people are framed as victims, the implication is often that they cannot be expected to take full responsibility for

their own actions – that they need to be 'cut some slack'. A victim is also someone whose vulnerability is visible and heightened. In the narratives where the abusive partners figure as Frightening Victims, dissonance arose by how this vulnerability in the partner was paired with experiences of his violation, abuse and violence towards her – i.e., situations in which *she*, in fact, was made vulnerable through *his* actions.

In the narratives where the abusive partner emerged as a Frightening Victim, the way the young participant related to her partner was characterized through her navigating around two different emotional contradictions: her fear, together with her feeling of care or responsibility for her partner, and her simultaneously having to grapple with his vulnerability and his violence.

In their study of domestic violence and abuse in heterosexual and same-sex relationships, Donovan and Hester (2014) found similar relationship dynamics and associated them with gendered role expectations in intimate relationships. They argue that IPV is maintained through "relationship rules", which establish the victim's disproportionate responsibility for both the relationship and especially her partner's well-being. As a result, the abusive partner's expressions of vulnerability and neediness and the victim's perceived obligation to care for him shroud and confound his violence and abuse, thus functioning as a powerful 'glue' binding her in the relationship.

Below, we outline what characterized the Frightening Victim type of abusive partner that emerged in the participants' accounts, and we unpack the relational dynamics borne out of being with a Frightening Victim.

Mental health problems, self-harm and suicidality

A core feature of the participants' Frightening Victim narratives is how they described their abusive partner as someone with mental health problems who, because of these problems, depended heavily on the relationship, and on her, to feel good and be okay.

The participants reported that their partners struggled with anxiety, depression, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder, alcohol or drug addiction, or aggression issues – often severe, often in combination, and often affecting multiple life arenas such as relationships, school and work. According to the young interviewees, these problems were not under control or well regulated and managed; they were poorly treated or not treated at all. The abusive partners' mental health problems frequently included suicidal or self-harm behaviors.

Malin was one participant who described her partner's situation in this way. She was 16 when she met her boyfriend, Kalle, also 16, and they attended the same school. They were together for four months, during which time Kalle subjected Malin to severe physical, psychological and sexual violence. When we met her, around three years had passed.

Malin said that Kalle had serious mental health problems. He struggled with aggression issues, and she said he also had a largely untreated ADHD diagnosis. Although Kalle lived at home with his family, his parents failed to adequately manage his problems, although they were aware of them. As a result, Malin said she felt that his parents had left it to her to handle Kalle and his issues. She had a great responsibility for keeping Kalle "under control", catering to his well-being and dealing with the same problems that the adults in Kalle's life did not manage properly.

Kalle appears in Malin's narrative as a young man who is not just subjecting her to violence, abuse and control, but is also struggling with mental health issues, bad impulse control and self-harm behaviors. She talked at length about Kalle's vulnerability, and how it constrained her opportunities to leave their relationship: "He said so many things to me

that made me not dare to leave him. He said that I was so good for him. He cut himself, like he self-harmed, and [he said] being with me made him feel good", she said.

Kalle threatened to cut himself if Malin didn't send him nudes when he wanted them, or to kill himself if she left him, if he saw her talking to other boys or if she wanted to spend time with her family. At the same time, Kalle berated Malin, humiliated her and verbally abused her, got to her "weak spots", she says. She was constantly afraid of him, and what he said and did affected her badly. But she also felt trapped in the relationship. Malin was afraid of what he might do if she left – not so much of what he might do to her, but more so of what he might do to himself, as he had demonstrated numerous times:

> I was terrified of him. I tried to leave him at least five times, but then he cut himself in front of me, and then I got so anxious – 'I can't leave you, 'cause I don't want you to kill yourself' … I was scared all the time. I didn't dare tell anyone.

Frightening Victim abusive partners would threaten to harm or even kill themselves, often in conflict situations, when the young participants tried to set boundaries, refused to comply with their partners' wishes or attempted to leave the relationship. Within these relationship dynamics, the partners' threat of self-harm or suicide became a highly effective means of control.

The abusers' threats of suicide or self-harm left the participants with constrained possibilities for confronting their partners with the abuse and leaving them. In one sense, the interviewees expressed how they had wanted to honor their own need to set clear boundaries for what others were allowed to do to them, and to speak their truth, but on the other hand the abusive partner's threat to kill or harm himself placed great responsibility on their shoulders. Emotion work for participants with Frightening Victim partners entailed attempts to balance these two experiences. Most often, the interviewees at the time emphasized the latter and primarily delayed or suspended the former.

Notably, among the participants with stories of being with a Frightening Victim, many had their own particular vulnerabilities, including histories of parental abuse or neglect, bullying and social exclusion, and several struggled with mental health problems of their own. One common feature in the relationships with a Frightening Victim, however, was that they lacked room for the participants' vulnerability or needs. That space was largely taken up by the abusive partner and his difficult situation.

Fear, care and responsibility

Participants who depicted Frightening Victim abusive partners talked about being afraid: sometimes of what their partner could do to them, but more often, of what he could do to himself. Research has firmly established that fear, and often fear of being seriously injured or even killed, is central to experiencing IPV (Stark, 2007), including among victimized young people (Överlien et al., 2019). Fear seems to be a gendered aspect of IPV victimization (Bjørnholt & Hjemdal, 2018).

But what stands out in the stories in this material is how this fear is mixed up with feelings of care for the abuser, and often also with a sense of responsibility for his well-being, his mental health and even for his life – as with Malin, quoted above (see also Korkmaz, 2021b). Being in an intimate relationship with a Frightening Victim involves a challenge that would be a tall order for most, but maybe especially so for a young person with limited life- and relationship experience.

Anna's story demonstrates how even in situations where the young victim herself is in extreme danger, her care and worry for her partner do not necessarily subside. Anna was 16 and her boyfriend Peter was 20 when they became a couple. He was her first boyfriend and her first sexual partner. Their on-and-off relationship lasted four years, and they broke up around six months before the interview. Anna experienced sexual, psychological and physical violence. She lived with her parents, and she described her partner as someone in need of help and who had mental health issues, including aggression problems. At one point, Peter threatened to kill both her and himself, and the situation was so critical that she had to flee and seek shelter with a neighbor. The police came to the building, and Anna and Peter were kept in separate rooms after they intervened. When Anna's parents picked her up, Peter remained with the police. Anna said she was very worried about who would take care of him, because after all, he was suicidal:

> It was really hard for me to leave, because I didn't know what he was capable of, if he was going to kill himself or something, 'cause he'd said he was going to do just that.... When my parents came [to pick me up], they kind of just left him behind, that's what I think was really difficult. Like, 'Are you just going to leave him here?' So I stepped up and called his parents, and told them what had happened.

Even after this dramatic situation, Peter and Anna were together for quite some time. When talking about Peter in retrospect, Anna described how she had repeatedly tried to help him get better and change, and how she ended up downplaying her own fear of him in the process:

> I have a rather good heart, I guess. I think well of everybody, and care about everybody. And I want to believe that he can change, and I think that I can help him, too, but I can't. I have tried... After all, I was afraid all the time, but I didn't accept it; I didn't want to admit it to myself. I just wanted him to change, and I wanted him to want to be with me.

Anna's story highlights both her care for and her fear of Peter, and how her hope for his change and desire to help him mitigated this fear.

For many of the young people we talked to, neither the fear they experienced nor the care they felt passed with the ending of the relationship. They detailed how they feared meeting their abusive ex-partner on the street, at school or at parties long after the relationship was over – but also how the care and worry they felt for their ex-partner lingered after they had broken up. The emotion work their situations demanded did not necessarily disappear or subside when they exited the relationship; instead, the work felt pressing for a long time afterwards.

Discussion

This article demonstrates how young people with sexually abusive relationship experiences describe and interpret their abusive partners, and how these understandings are interlaced with emotional contradictions. Evidence is emerging of how young victimized people may feel trapped in and bound to abusive or violent relationships in similar ways to adult victims (Davies, 2019; Toscano, 2014; Överlien, 2020). We suggest that the emotional dissonance our participants related in stories of their victimization demanded considerable emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) on their part, and this narrowed their opportunities to leave harmful relationships. As our analysis shows, these emotional contradictions and the

work that followed in their wake took two different forms in our material, with different ramifications for the young people.

In the wake of Callous Lovers and Frightening Victims

To understand the differences between Callous Lovers and Frightening Victims, two aspects of our participants' experiences are particularly important: their *fear* and their sense of *subjectivity*, or their right to selfhood. The two types evoke different forms of cultural and social expectations: of being a good (female) partner in being sexually available and passionate, and of 'standing by your man' as a caregiver.

Participants with Callous Lover partners related their fears of violence, abuse and control, but as we have shown, more central to their stories was their fear of losing their partner, of him falling out of love or ending the relationship from dissatisfaction. In combination with the young people's desire to be chosen (and to keep being chosen) by their partners, this fear appears to have confounded their capacity to name their experiences as harmful when the relationship was still ongoing. Korkmaz (2021a) argues that the desire to be in romantic relationships is still gendered in a Scandinavian context; for young women, being someone's girlfriend offers opportunities to perform an idealized form of feminine heterosexuality. The feeling of 'craving love' and wanting to be 'good enough' to be someone's girlfriend may thus inhibit young victimized people from ending abusive relationships (Korkmaz, 2021b).

Despite a growing consensus among young people on the importance of consensual sex, Scandinavian studies show that in their own experience and descriptions of sex in intimate relationships, the boundaries between consensual and non-consensual sexual interactions become blurred (Helseth & Överlien, forthcoming; Holmström et al., 2020; Johansen et al., 2020a, 2020b). The ideal of being the 'cool, sexual and liberated girlfriend' is present in the discourse, which is marked by taking care of the male partner's needs and letting sexual interactions happen because a rejection could lead to his frustration or embarassment (Helseth & Överlien, forthcoming; Holmström et al., 2020; Johansen et al., 2020a, 2020b). Traditional gender norms of female responsibility to prioritize the needs of others over their own are still effective in the sexuality discourses of young Scandinavians.

Such ideals evoked different feeling rules, implicitly or explicitly employed by the participants' abusive partners. In Callous Lover narratives, the ideal of the 'cool, sexual and liberated girlfriend' and corresponding feeling rules contributed to the participants' confusion about what crossing the line in sexual relationships meant, and when or how they could legitimately draw their own boundaries. In Frightening Victim stories, the strong imperative – and feeling rule – to cater to a male partner's sexual needs and insulate against his frustration or feelings of rejection exacerbated the young people's sense of obligation to take care of their partner, and to prioritize his needs over her own.

In Callous Lover stories, the relative indifference to their abusive experiences that the young people encountered in their social contexts exacerbated their confusion, and their abusive partners' interpretive precedence lent legitimacy from their higher social status. Aghtaie et al. (2018) and Korkmaz and Överlien (2020) highlight similar dynamics in young people's abusive relationships, where young victims tend to be unsure of where to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior within intimate relationships. The young people's stories about being in abusive relationships – and the feeling rules of romantic love that may have entrapped them there – hence had clear discursive elements.

Gender norms might also contribute to young people's struggles to determine an act as violation, violence or abuse. Young people sometimes view IPV as acceptable

masculine-gendered behavior (Aghtaie et al., 2018), and gendered norms on what one needs to 'put up with' in a relationship may make identifying sexually violent acts as such difficult (Korkmaz, 2021b). The normalization of abuse is further perpetuated when youths equate control with love, care and protection (Aghtaie et al., 2018).

Against this backdrop, in Callous Lover stories, sexual subjectivity – to be recognized and treated by a partner as someone with sexual agency and bodily integrity – is threatened by the abusive partner's sense of sexual entitlement, in combination with his relative upper hand in social status and the lack of cultural support for the right to sexual agency in the young people's social contexts. This scenario includes (as in Tess's story) an ideal of perpetual sexual availability and 'sex positivity'.

We acknowledge that conceptualizing an abusive partner as a Frightening *Victim* may be read by some as an uncomfortable centering of the person's own presumed victimization or otherwise 'troubledness'. However, the reason for our highlighting this feature is the center stage it took in our participants' stories. As such, it should be understood as a discernable dynamic in young people's abusive relationships as well as an important phenomenon to be aware of for professionals working with youth.

In Frightening Victim stories, the young interviewees' experiences of subjectivity and autonomy were undermined by the sheer space taken up in the relationship by the abusive partners' emotional or psychological difficulties and their need for care, as well as how the young people felt burdened to prioritize a partner's needs over their own and their fears of what he might do if she didn't. Being afraid of someone who is also a victim causes dissonance, which restrains or narrows one's opportunities for acting on that fear. As we have seen, this scenario diminished our young participants' capacity to recognize their own perspective on the situation as valid. These young people's sexual subjectivity was jeopardized along with other forms of subjectivity or selfhood: mainly their capacity and space to take care of their own needs and to leave a harmful relationship, out of fear that their partner might harm or kill himself if they set boundaries, exercised their sexual agency or ended the relationship.

Emotions: Ties, rules and work

Previous research has established that people who are victimized by an intimate partner may experience strong emotional ties with their abuser, despite the harmfulness of the abuse and a developing desire to leave the relationship. Adult female victims of IPV frequently describe emotional ties as love, compassion and hope towards their abusive partner. These ties may create traumatic bonds that entrap the victims in their abusive relationships (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; see also Graham et al., 1994; Holmberg & Enander, 2004).

Emotion work is not necessarily a burden: the *exploitation* of emotion work is what becomes a problem, for example when only one partner in a relationship processes and manages the feelings that may arise in their interactions, while the other does little or nothing for their partner (Hochschild, 1983). Such exploitation is to a large degree a gendered phenomenon, in the disfavor of women (Fahs & Swank, 2016).

This scenario is what IPV scholars Donovan and Hester (2014) found when they analyzed the dynamics in sexually violent same-sex and heterosexual relationships. They described two rules that are established in abusive relationships: (1) "the relationship is for the abusive partner and on their terms" (p. 132) and (2) "the survivor is responsible for looking after the abusive partner and the relationship" (p. 147). These rules become established through the abusive partner's unilateral decision-making in every important aspect of relationships, his expressions of his needs and/or neediness, and his expectations that the other will accept

the relationship on his terms and respond to his expressions of need. Breaches of these rules can result in punishment, including control or violence. In other words, what makes the relationship rules effective in shaping a victimized person's response to her abusive partner is his interpretive precedence over the relationship and its terms (such as in our Callous Lover stories) and his expectations and obligations of care (as in our Frightening Victim stories).

In this article, we have demonstrated how young people in Norway and Sweden – countries that have high levels of formal gender equality – respond to victimization experiences of violation and violence by reworking and adjusting their emotional responses to their abusive partner's behavior. In doing this emotion work, they attempt to align with romantic relationship ideals that they find relevant to their own lives and experiences. They find cultural support for accepting much of what happens within their relationships in their social contexts, including demands to 'put up with' unwanted, violating or painful sex, or in expectations to take responsibility for their troubled and sometimes sick partner's health and well-being. Such expectations affected our participants even when they were at a very young age, and even in situations where the partner's parents or other adults could have intervened and taken over their heavy responsibility.

A common denominator in all our participants' narratives, across both types of abusive partner/relationship stories, was how their emotion work functioned to confound the overstepping of boundaries and undermined the victimized young people's sense of their right to having, developing and maintaining subjectivity. Understanding how this happens, and the various expressions such harmful dynamics may take, is crucial for society's ability to prevent, address and confront IPV among young people – and for society's ability to support young people who want to leave relationships that are harmful to them.

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