

Final draft of essay originally posted at <http://joreth.livejournal.com/363601.html>

FB Intro: This post is very long. This post was very hard for me to write, which is why it's so long - I'm having trouble finding the words to explain and describe what I've learned. There are so many interconnected concepts that it's difficult to explain the lesson without connecting all the dots first. In this post, I end up confronting some of my own mistakes in being an observer and contributor to an abusive situation. I hope that people will be willing to read it all the way to the end in spite of the length, because I feel as though I have been permanently damaged from my experience, and I feel as though I could have escaped with only some minor scars had I not been as ignorant as I was.

But I believe that the answers I was missing are still not yet available. Experts in the subject and we as a community are still working on the question of how to solve the problem of abuse. So I have been flailing around on the internet for a couple decades, **feeling** deep down, intuiting the direction the answers can be found but not being able to express them. As I get closer to the answers, I flail around a little more on the internet, trying to get people to see what I "see". This situation is one of those times I had to learn the next step towards the answer of how to solve the problem of abuse the hard way, and there was a lot of splash damage where, in spite of my own battle scars, I was not the one who was harmed the most for not knowing the right answer.

Modified [disclaimer](#): "This is a personal post so it has extra rules. I don't want advice. I don't want condescension about my age or any other aspect of my identity or lifestyle or about not "seeing clearly" precisely because I've been through some fucked up experiences. I do not want devil's advocate. In fact, since this is all completely about lessons I've learned through very painful personal experience, I'm not interested in entertaining any debate over it. You are welcome to believe that I am wrong about my own life and experiences, if you keep that to yourself. If I see anything in the comments section that makes me regret having been open about my life, it'll be deleted without further explanation."

I have an ex-boyfriend. He abuses women. But [he didn't abuse me](#). I'm not the kind to abuse easily. I'm not totally immune to it. I spent several years in my youth engaged to an emotionally abusive person who was successful at it. In fact, that's partially why I refused to believe it when his victim accused my partner of abuse. I had been through abuse, you see, so I should know it when I see it. And I didn't see it, therefore it didn't exist.

In general, I'm not the kind of prey an abuser looks for. I'm loud, aggressive, I have a strong support network, and I'm extremely confident in my memories and in defending my autonomy and my boundaries. Frankly, I'm too much work for an abuser to abuse. But, here's the thing I learned in my most recent lesson with abusive men: abusers aren't comic book villains twirling their mustachios and plotting out their Rube Goldberg-esque schemes to erase their partners' identities for personal gain. The term "gaslighting" is incredibly valuable, but not all gaslighting looks like the movie the name comes from. In fact, most gaslighting does not look like a *film noir* movie.

Abusers are often people in pain. They don't abuse because they hate their partners. They abuse because they're afraid. They're afraid of being abandoned. They're afraid that they're unlovable and if their partner ever discovers the "truth" about them, they'll lose that love. They're afraid of who knows what else. But a lot of us are afraid of things like that. So what makes them abusers and us not abusers?

They believe that they are right to address this fear by overwriting someone else's identity. There is also not necessarily a sharp dividing line between "us" and "them".

From the an article by Shea Emma Fett called [Abuse In Polyamorous Relationships](#)¹ (all bold emphasis in all quoted passages in this post are mine):

"Most importantly, abusive behavior arises from beliefs, not from feelings, which is one of the reasons why people who are abusive are resistant to rehabilitation. I think this is a really important distinction, because people who engage in abusive behaviors can be kind and caring and gentle, and happy and wonderful to be around. They are not abusive because they are evil. **They are abusive because the abuse makes sense and feels justified to them."**

"[Lundy] Bancroft [author of Why Does He Do That?] says, "Anger and conflict are not the problem; they are normal aspects of life. Abuse doesn't come from people's inability to resolve conflicts but from one person's decision to claim a higher status than another.""

"What is this underlying thinking? Well, it's all around you. It is the foundation of rape culture. It is the fundamental belief that women do not have a right to their own personal power. It is the fundamental belief that **they can retain power over their bodies, minds and choices, only so long as we agree with those choices.** ... It is the way we, all of us, men and women buy into the belief that we are entitled to women's bodies, thoughts and choices. In polyamory, this belief makes it easy for us to treat our partners as things and not people.

But more than that, many of our fundamental beliefs in relationship[s] create a fertile ground for abuse. The goal of marriage is often longevity at any cost, and the presumption is mutual ownership over not just intimacy, but our partner's choices, feelings and thoughts. And even if we take care to form our commitments outside of these assumptions, **we still often carry a powerful sense of entitlement in intimate relationships.** In short, intimate relationships often default to the power over model, and the relationship becomes a struggle for this power."

"The purpose of abuse is to erode a person's ability to make choices for themselves. The abuser feels justified in taking proactive and punitive actions because of a fundamental sense of entitlement to their partner's choices."

And from [10 Things I Wish I'd Know About Gaslighting](#)² by Shea Emma Fett:

"Gaslighting only requires a belief that it is acceptable to overwrite another person's reality. The rest just happens organically when a person who holds that belief feels threatened.

We learn how to control and manipulate each other very naturally. The distinguishing feature between someone who gaslights and someone who doesn't, is **an internalized paradigm of ownership**. And in my experience, identifying that paradigm is a lot easier than spotting the gaslighting."

I'm not certain that identifying a paradigm of ownership is easier than spotting gaslighting, at least for me, because I've seen some people who are really good at twisting and using language to appear like they're on our side, but aside from that so, what? I've referenced these articles before, many times. Lots of people are talking about abuse nowadays. Why another essay on abuse that is basically just referencing something that's already been said? Well, because I don't think that the concept of "abuse is about beliefs" has really sunk in yet. I've spent many years yelling on the internet about why [hierarchy](#)* and rules in poly relationships are dangerous. People keep insisting that they can be done "non-abusively" or that everyone agrees to it therefore it's not abuse, but I don't seem to be able to get my point across - that it's not whether this specific action or that specific action is "abusive" or not or is "consented" to or not. It's about the underlying mindset and beliefs that allow people to think that hierarchy and rules can be done "non-abusively" in the first place.

From [Relationship Rights: Can You Negotiate Them Away?](#)³ By Eve Rickert:

"I believe that if you've come to a place in your relationship where someone has negotiated any one of their rights away, that relationship includes coercion, and that invalidates consent."

"There are certainly cases where you might choose not to exercise a right. It might be easy enough to say you don't need the right to leave when, well, you don't want to leave. But when you decide you do want the right? It's still there.

And that's what makes it a right."

That is the foundation of some later blog posts on whether or not hierarchy can ever be "ethical".

From [Can Polyamorous Relationships Be Ethical? Part 2: Influence and Control](#)⁴ by Eve Rickert:

"Healthy relationships are ones in which we can express our needs and desires, but it's when we feel entitled to have our partners do what we want that things go off the rails. **Entitlement makes us feel like it's okay to overrule our partners' agency (and that of their partners)**. If we're part of a socially sanctioned couple, this is especially dangerous, because we've got lots of societal messages feeding that sense of entitlement. And the most damaging parts of hierarchical setups tend to come about when we enshrine entitlement into our relationship agreements."

"Once the tower of intimate influence is defended, however, we see the village once again reoccupied. The village is things that a person feels entitled to control in their partner's relationship, or rules and structures that are put in place to ensure that one person's needs are always favoured in the case of resource conflict."

I didn't recognize that my partner was abusive because he didn't **behave** that way towards me, and I didn't **see** him behave that way towards his other partners. So when this one person came forward and said he had abused her, I, along with his other partners, all stood up and said "He can't be! He's not like that! He's never done anything like that to us! The problem must be with you!"

But the truth is that he **did** do things like that to his other partners. They just looked a little different because we were all different people so he had to use slightly different tactics. His abuse was expressed differently with everyone so it didn't look like "abuse", but they were all expressions of the same set of **beliefs**. So when his other partners succumbed to his manipulation of them, it looked like everyone was consenting, therefore it couldn't be abuse. Because it wasn't necessarily the behaviour, it was the underlying belief that permitted the behaviour. *"[I]f you've come to a place in your relationship where someone has negotiated any one of their rights away, that relationship includes coercion, and that invalidates consent."*³

"Do abuse victims "consent" to be in their relationships? On the surface, perhaps it looks that way, but that is rooted in a victim-blaming, "why doesn't she (he) just leave?" mentality and a serious oversimplification of the psychological dynamics of abuse. Abuse relies on tearing down your partner's sense of self and personal agency to the point where consent is really no longer valid. And it doesn't take physical violence to make a relationship abusive."³

The thing of it all is that this pattern was visible from the beginning. It wasn't invisible at all. It was just camouflaged beneath this community insistence that "anything" that two people "consent" to is A-OK. That whole YKINMKBYKIOK (your kink is not my kink but your kink is ok) mentality that I find so profoundly dangerous. I get why we started that. It's easy for people to place our own biases and judgements on other people even when we're trying to be all liberal and inclusive and shit. Look how often the furies get thrown under the bus by other kinksters, for instance. We had to teach ourselves that we don't have to agree or approve of someone else's preferences for those preferences to still be legitimate and valid and accepted. But instead of opening the door to inclusiveness, the door swung in the other direction and is now being used to bludgeon anyone who tries to critically examine toxic or harmful behaviour. It's like the religious extremists using "freedom of religion" to justify **imposing** their religious values onto other people by granting corporations personhood status to avoid covering contraception.


When I first met my abusive ex, he was in a hierarchical relationship that enforced triad structures only (FMF with bi-women, of course). So I thought "I kinda like him, but there's no way I'm touching that with a 10-foot pole!" Over time, their structure evolved until, many years later as our friendship grew, I was told that they had worked through their issues and they could now have independent relationships without each other and those relationships were allowed to grow on their own. So I thought "Hallelujah! People can change! People can learn and grow and break out of their insecurities!" Boy, was I wrong.

See, he and his wife still had a lot of rules with each other that I found ... disconcerting. But I wasn't told the full scope of all the rules, just that they found what works for them but that they had reached a point in their lives where they could accept that their other relationships couldn't work that way. So, in enters YKINMKBYKIOK - it works for us and we're not imposing it on you, so don't question it unless you want to be

seen as intolerant of other people's preferences. So I didn't inquire too much, except to insist that this structure absolutely, without a doubt, no exceptions, would not work for me. They assured me they wouldn't try to impose it, and thus reassured, I entered into a relationship with him.

In the throes of NRE, I saw all the red flags, but I ignored them. Because he wasn't doing them **to me** and the person he was doing them to **said** she was OK with it and even claimed to be her idea in some cases. But they niggled at the back of my brain, so I stored these red flags in my memory (sometimes literally - a lot of our conversations were via chat, so I have the chat logs and I'm not relying purely on my memory) and when things came to a head years later, I was deeply ashamed that I hadn't paid more attention back then. And holy shit, when I learned what some of their rules were much later I was **really** upset with myself that I didn't press the issue in the beginning.

One of the red flags was that his wife didn't allow pictures taken of herself. Not just explicit photos, but any photos. Well, very occasionally she would pose for group photos of social events. But no candids and definitely no sexy shots. At the time, I thought this was just a quirk of hers. And it was, but sort of. She's also a very dominant personality, much like me in a lot of ways. Back in the beginning, when I thought "nope, not ever gonna go there!", I thought it was because **she** was calling all the shots and I didn't want anything to do with any relationship where the wife had more power over my relationship than I did. But they inadvertently introduced me to what I now call Relationship By Hostage Crisis. This is where two people get into a relationship with each other and one of them allows their partner to remove their agency in some way because the first person wants to remove the agency of the other themselves. So they basically trade their own agency in exchange for controlling the other person's agency.

Some people seem to think that this is a fair power exchange, that it's not abusive if it goes both ways. But we're not talking about a D/s agreement where someone has the power to concede something. The reason why that's different is because **that person always maintains the power to take it back**. If they don't, it's abuse, by definition. I know this gets a lot of serious edge-players up in a snit when I say this, but kink is all about fantasy and illusion. None of it is real. Sure, it's real **enough** that it triggers the reactions in our brains so that it **feels** real. But it can end at any time. Franklin ( [tactic](#)) once knew a guy who insisted his wife was his slave in every sense of the word and he owned her in exactly the same way he owned his TV. He insisted that it was a real slave relationship right up until his wife divorced him. You'll note that she wasn't summarily hunted down by the government and lashed or hung for leaving him. But we do see cases where women try to leave their male partners and the men punish them by stalking, harassing, raping, and killing them. He feels entitled to control her agency - her choices - and she is punished when she makes choices he doesn't approve of. She does not have the power to take her agency back. This is not a D/s consensual power exchange fantasy.

Giving up your agency in order to have control over someone else in trade is not a BDSM power exchange fantasy. You may indeed have power over someone else, but you **lose power over yourself** in exchange. This is not something you can renegotiate later when it's not working for you. You have become **powerless**, and it takes a great deal of effort to wrest that power back, if you ever get it at all. As they say, two wrongs don't make a right. Sometimes you can have two bad actors in the play instead of just one.

"Our brains are optimized to seek pleasure and avoid threat. It's most of what we do. There's nothing wrong with trying to avoid things that we believe will hurt us. However, most people would also agree that you can't put a gun to someone else's head in order to avoid the things you fear, no matter how uncomfortable the consequences. Sometimes we have to face what we fear because all other options require taking actions that we consider to be wrong. Therefore when we harm each other because of fear, **let's recognize that it was not the fear that was the problem.** We all have fear. **The problem was a belief system that said, well, maybe I can put a gun to your head.**"¹

So, the wife wanted control over her husband in some way so she allowed her husband to control her body in this way (among others). He didn't want other people looking at her body in ways he didn't approve of. They held emotional guns to each other's heads. This is not a fair power exchange. No one was empowered by this situation, they were both disempowered **even while** they held power over each other. So, no pictures of her. Except that **he** obsessively took pictures of her. Of everyone. At all times. And I mean at **all** times. I had ample opportunity during group sex to see him actually stop the sex, reach for a camera, and take a dozen pictures, all with her glaring at him in the picture because she didn't like having those pictures of herself taken. **She** wanted to control when pictures were taken and right then was not when she wanted to have pictures taken. But it didn't matter, because **he** wanted them.

I had a conversation with her about this once. This is where I learned that the no-dirty-pictures rule wasn't her own preference. She would have wanted to have posed for something for her own enjoyment, but he wouldn't allow it. She saw nothing wrong with his prohibiting her because, as her husband, he had that right to determine what happened to her body, but he also had that right (she believed) because she gave it to him. But there was no consideration for renegotiating that rule, at least not in practice. He made disagreement with him so traumatic to everyone in the family that everyone avoided disagreement with him at much cost. He literally made it a matter of life and death when people disagreed with him. So it was easier to capitulate than try to talk him out of one of his catatonic or self-harming states, and then they got to believe that it was their "choice" to negotiate that power away.

Later on, some other things were happening regarding her relationship with her boyfriend and my partner and I were arguing over his wife's autonomy and the boyfriend's rights in his own relationship with her, and we circled around to the subject of sex work, which led to the subject of dirty pictures. He was appalled, I mean **appalled** at the idea of a partner of his either "selling her body" or of his wife having nude pictures that someone else could see. We veered into all kinds of tangents, including me demanding him to explain how "selling one's body" through sex was any different from me getting paid to dance or to perform manual labor or how sex work was any more inherently demeaning than my soul-sucking retail job at barely above minimum wage.

I also had to watch him go through a series of mental gymnastics to explain why it was OK to be dating me, who has naked pictures of myself on a public website from when I posed as a tutorial model for Franklin's BDSM site, but not OK to have a wife who might have similar pictures. The gymnastics got even more convoluted when I disclosed to him that I had been paid to pose for a nudie calendar years before and that

picture is out there, floating around somewhere that I've never even seen and certainly have no control over what happens to it. The takeaway I got from that exchange was that it actually **did** bother him, but he was unable to admit it to himself so his cognitive dissonance forced him to justify on the spot why it was somehow different to be dating someone with that kind of exposure than to be married to someone with it.

But what really stuck in my memory was his explanation of why he believed he was in the right for not allowing nude pictures of his wife on the internet. He told me the story of the bowl of M&Ms. So, let's say you have a bowl of M&Ms on your desk at work. You love your M&Ms. They're your favorite candy. And sometimes you don't mind sharing your M&Ms with your coworkers, but you have this one coworker who you hate with a passion. He's a major asshole to everyone and he definitely doesn't respect you or your M&Ms. He feels entitled to them. You don't want him to have your M&Ms because they're not **his** M&Ms, and, in fact, you hate him so much that you don't want him to have any M&Ms ever because you don't want him to have the pleasure of eating M&Ms at all because he's such an asshole that he doesn't deserve the profound bliss that is the M&M.

I couldn't believe what I was reading (this was a chat argument). I couldn't believe this was coming out of the same person who was otherwise so aligned with all my values and beliefs and philosophies! So I said "but your wife isn't a bowl of M&Ms, she's a person who you can't own and she gets to make up her own mind about what happens to her own body." He tried to handwave away the objectification inherent in his analogy and pushed the "but he's an asshole and doesn't deserve to see the glory that is her body" angle.

He tried to appeal to my sense of justice but I don't actually want people I dislike to not have good things. I might often wish bad things on them, but all the times I can think of when I did that, what I wished was for the bad thing to be relevant to why I disliked them so that they would ultimately learn compassion and empathy from the bad thing, or at least be punished in the same way they were punishing others. I honestly don't give a fuck if Racist Joe in the next cubicle gets a lot of pleasure out of his cold Budwiser while sitting in his favorite recliner watching football at the end of the work day. I don't want to steal his Budwiser just so he can't have one. I'm not bothered by the idea that someone I don't like might actually be experiencing something pleasant or enjoyable or feeling happy. But I am deeply disturbed by the idea that other people are bothered by that.

There are so many other examples, that I have been using my experiences with him as moral tales for years since it all went down and I have yet to run out of examples. Argument after argument, random side comment after pointed discussion, there are a million different ways that he expressed his underlying belief that his partners could not be trusted to make their own decisions about their bodies; that if left to our own devices we would necessarily choose things that were not in **his** best interest; that what was in **his** best interest was therefore what was in **our** best interest; that what was "best" for the group took precedence over what was "best" for the individual; and that he was absolutely entitled, as the romantic partner, to have the power to make those kinds of decisions and to ask, demand, or manipulate his partners into doing what he decided we should.

I didn't see any of this because, for most of our relationship, what I wanted for myself and our relationship and what he wanted for me and our relationship were in alignment. *"It might be easy enough to say you don't*

need the right to leave when, well, you don't want to leave. But when you decide you do want the right? It's still there." Until one day, we weren't in alignment. He had no need to try any of the gaslighting or logic-circling or even more blatantly abusive tactics like threats of self-harm because I wasn't doing anything contrary to his vision of how our relationship ought to be or how I ought to be in our relationship. Until one day, I did. And then I saw it. I saw what his victim had been crying to me about just a few weeks before. I saw the entitlement. I saw the belief that he ought to be able to dictate my actions. I saw the carrot-and-stick game he played with her - using group acceptance as the carrot to get me to fall in line and group shunning as the stick if I didn't fall in line. "I talked with everyone else, and they all agree that you are wrong. You're hurting the whole group, don't you care about us?" I saw everything she said he had been doing to her for the length of their relationship, finally, in one day, directed at me.

And then I saw that I had always seen it. It had always been there.

"Therefore when we harm each other because of fear, let's recognize that it was not the fear that was the problem. We all have fear. The problem was a belief system that said, well, maybe I can put a gun to your head.

The prioritization of fear arises when we replace a relationship of mutual support and co-creation, with one of parental protection. ... A relationship that is hostage to fear is one where everything, the relationship, the mental health of the participants, the future, everything hinges on the avoidance of something. Every relationship that forms on top of that avoidance, forms under the premise that the fear is more important than anything else. **But just because you've agreed to never open the box, doesn't mean the box isn't there, informing the health and stability of every relationship that touches it."**¹

When we first broke up, it came as a shock to everyone. To everyone on the outside, he and I were the most compatible and stable of all his other partnerships. We were so similar in so many ways. And by the time we broke up, his relationship with the victim who came forward had gotten so tumultuous that all his other relationships were being affected, except, apparently, ours. Everything in his life seemed to be falling apart. He was so wrapped up in the drama with this one person that he had no more resources for maintaining any of his other relationships and they were all in danger of blowing up too. His last blog post prior to our breakup was lamenting the fact that his life was falling apart and I was his one port left in the storm. So no one saw it coming, because no one understood that this box containing his beliefs and fears was still there, informing the health and stability of every relationship including ours.

When I told people who had met him or who were privy to my gushings of my relationship with him during NRE, when I told them of how it ended, without exception everyone said that it sounded like I was describing two different people. It was a total Jekyll and Hyde story. His victim once said that she tried to reconcile these two people in her head. Part of what made her stay with him so long is that she kept thinking that she could get back to the nice Dr. Jekyll if she could only find the right way to behave that wouldn't let out Mr. Hyde. But her other partner pointed out to her, "He's not two different people. Your nice, sweet boyfriend is also the abuser. They're the same person."

I keep saying that patterns are important. But I also keep saying that it's the underlying beliefs that are important. People might be tempted to say "but look at all these other relationships he has! She was the outlier! The pattern is that he's a good guy and she's the problem!" But that's not the pattern. The pattern is in his beliefs. Sure, he didn't try to manipulate me or control me ... as long as what I was already doing was something he approved of. So it may have **looked** like there was no pattern of manipulation or control because he didn't seem to try that on me. But the real pattern was that he **believed** that manipulation and control are appropriate methods of dealing with a partner whose behaviour was something he didn't approve of. *"It is the fundamental belief that they can retain power over their bodies, minds and choices, only so long as we agree with those choices."*

This is why benevolent sexism is still sexism and still a problem. The behaviour, on the surface, might seem like it's not oppressive because it supposedly elevates women. It rewards them. It "privileges" them. But only as long as women toe the line. Only as long as women fall within acceptable ranges of behaviour or dress or thought. A pedestal **seems** like a place of power and enshrinement, until you realize how confining it is to stand in one spot or risk falling to your death for daring to sit down or change positions.

It's tempting to say "he's not an abuser because he didn't abuse me!" I know, I said that at one time. But it's also tempting to say "but abusers don't abuse everyone yet they're still abusers". The thing is that they actually do, we just can't see it behind the camouflage. As Franklin, and one of my [metafores](#), are fond of saying, it's not a problem ... until it is. *"Every relationship that forms on top of that avoidance, forms under the premise that the fear is more important than anything else. But just because you've agreed to never open the box, doesn't mean the box isn't there, informing the health and stability of every relationship that touches it."* A racist who keeps his mouth shut when a black customer walks into his store is still a racist towards that customer. He's not a racist because he does racist things. He's a racist because he holds racist beliefs. And he holds those beliefs all the time, at everyone. A person who believes that they are entitled to control other people's bodies, thoughts, and choices still believes those things even when they don't choose to exercise that entitlement, for whatever reason they choose not to in that moment. And those beliefs leave signs. It's not about whether or not he tries to manipulate a partner who is already doing what he wants her to do. It's about whether he **believes** he is right to manipulate her should she ever not want to do what he wants her to do. And that kind of thinking leaves footprints, if we only learn how to identify them.

The reason why this is important is because it is too easy to dismiss abuse when it doesn't look like how we think abuse ought to look. It's also too easy to accuse people of abuse when they are not, in fact, abusing anyone.

I wrote a paragraph in a recent post where I distinguished between "selfish" and "self-interest". That paragraph got quoted, and some people took exception to that distinction because abusers will just turn around and call what they're doing "self-interest" to justify their actions. What these detractors didn't seem to get was that this was my whole point.

What worked on my partner's victim was the accusation that she was being "selfish". That it was **she**, not he, who was the abusive monster. Her story is remarkably similar to the same one I linked to and quoted above. That's why I keep sharing Fett's writing - it really hits home with how similar it is to everything we

(mostly she) went through. It all started unraveling for me when she called me crying, desperate that she had harmed him in some way, and how could she fix it? When she told me what she was afraid she had done, I was horrified that she could possibly think that she had done anything wrong at all. But how could she be such a monster? she wondered. How could she treat him so heinously? Are you fucking serious? I asked her. This had nothing to do with her at all. This was all about him.

"If you are being abused, there is a very high chance that you will be accused of being abusive or of otherwise causing the abuse. That's because this accusation is devastatingly effective at shutting you down and obtaining control in a dispute. However, I also believe this accusation is often sincere. People often engage in abusive behaviors because they feel deeply powerless and that powerlessness hurts. But not everything that hurts in a relationship is abuse, and not everything that hurts your partner is your responsibility. It's important to be able to distinguish abuse from other things that may happen in relationships that are hurtful, or may even be toxic or unhealthy, but are not fundamentally about entitlement and control."¹

There are all kinds of things that are problematic to varying degrees. But they are not all about entitlement and control. And this is *very* important to recognize. And they should never be conflated. That harms actual victims of entitlement and control. It's not always just the abuser accusing his victim of being abusive. I see it in communities as well. Now that we're finally talking about abuse in my various subcultures, a lot of terms are getting bandied about - abuse, harassment, consent, violation, predator, narcissism, borderline personality disorder ... just to name a few. Not all of these terms are being applied where they should. When things that aren't abuse get mislabeled as abuse or "rounded up" to abuse, it makes it much harder for actual abuse victims to find proper support. When things that are indeed problematic but not "abusive" get labeled as "abusive" instead of their real problem, then we can't address the problem in ways that are effective for solving the problem.

And when people live in fear that any possible misstep might get them cast out of communities under accusations of "abuser", especially if those people are actually victims who have been told by their abusers that they are the abuser themselves, it makes it way more difficult for anyone to seek help or to seek correction for things that might actually be correctable (or not even offensive at all).

I think we're on the right track now that we're sensitive to abuse and harassment and control in our communities. But I think we're also in danger of slipping off the track too easily. We're not quite at the destination yet and we still have further to travel. One of the dangers is in stopping too soon. Now we know all these words, and now we have started supporting victims and accusers in order to break the previous chilling hold on victims from finding the support they needed when they come forward. But we still don't quite have our finger on the pulse of the problem yet.

Patterns are important, but it's the underlying beliefs that those patterns reveal that are the real key. Those underlying beliefs are what enable abuse and harassment and control and oppression and all the other bad things we're finally starting to look at and combat. Those beliefs set up the foundations that allow abuse and control and manipulation to happen. But not all bad things are about entitlement and control. It's the beliefs that make abusers so resistant to rehabilitation, so it's the beliefs we need to confront. If we don't confront the

beliefs but instead attack the behavioural patterns, abusers will simply change their behavioural patterns to continue avoiding detection. It's the beliefs that need to change, and the behaviour changes will follow naturally as a consequence.

At the same time, if those beliefs aren't present, then not only is the attack the wrong way to approach the situation, the behaviour itself also has different chances of correction. It's much more likely to correct someone's behaviour if the behaviour doesn't stem from a deep belief that their behaviour was, in fact, already correct. I'm repeatedly told by those with social anxiety and other social awkward issues that we need to stop excusing bad social behaviour by labeling it some mental illness because people who aren't predators but legitimately socially awkward often feel horrified when it is brought to their attention that they have done something wrong and they want to learn how to do better. That's because they don't have an underlying belief that they were right, they were simply unaware, and they don't want to do these wrong things. These issues are correctable, but not if we ostracize everyone who does something wrong without first finding out if it was a social awkwardness / anxiety thing or if it was a boundary-pushing predator masquerading as socially awkward thing. One of them believes they didn't do anything wrong and the other doesn't. One of them can have their behaviour corrected with guidance and the other can't because they don't believe their behaviour was wrong.

How we address the problem needs to be changed if the belief underlying it isn't about entitlement and control, if we want our efforts to be effective. And, as my partner's poor victim learned the hard way, if there are no underlying beliefs about entitlement and control, then there's a good chance that she wasn't doing the abuse she was accused of in the first place. She, like Fett, wracked her brain trying to figure out how to stop this "abuse" she was doing to him, and that only made things worse for her. Fett describes many times about the extreme self-loathing and self-hatred they felt because they believed themselves to be an abuser when they weren't. Because they weren't actually abusing anyone, the intense searching for the root of non-existent abuse only deepened the wound and left them more and more vulnerable to their abuser's manipulation.

As Fett says, being victimized by your control is not the same as being victimized by my resistance to your control. His victim wasn't abusing him because, no matter how much he felt hurt, she wasn't the one doing any hurting of him. She did not have any underlying beliefs that she was entitled to control him. In fact, all of his hurt stemmed from her very strong belief that no one was entitled to control anyone else. She was resisting his control and that made him feel hurt. If your hand hurts after slapping someone who raised their arm to block the slap, that person didn't hurt you; you hurt yourself by slapping them.

But **his** underlying beliefs of entitlement were always there, and were always visible. When he first accused her of abusing him, almost everyone who knew her were shocked and suspicious. What do you mean she abused him? She had never exhibited that kind of behaviour before! They had relationships with her that weren't abusive at all! When she later accused him of the same, people said the same thing about him.

But she did not have those underlying beliefs, and her supporters were not wrong to question the accusation. It **was** contrary to everything about her. And because it was so contrary to her very nature, it was a sign that she was actually a victim of abuse herself. When his supporters questioned her accusation of him, well, I don't want to go so far as to say it was "wrong" to question, because serious accusations deserve to be

treated seriously, which includes inquiry into the situation. But their dismissal of her accusation in favor of their personal experience with him **was** misplaced because they were looking at the wrong thing - his actions and feelings vs. his beliefs.

When her supporters questioned his accusation of her, they investigated her beliefs. In light of what she believed about entitlement and control, the accusation was patently absurd. The absurdity of the accusation is what led to the situation finally being identified accurately - that he was gaslighting her and emotionally abusing her. He accused her of abuse. Some people who knew her (not me, to my great shame), questioned that accusation. It didn't fit what they knew about her. She had never done anything like that to them. But, more than that, her **beliefs** were so contrary to the accusation, that her supporters were able to start piecing things together for her when she was so mired in self-doubt and illusion that she couldn't do it herself. So they started adding things up and told her "you are not this person he says you are. He is gaslighting you."

She finally broke free and accused him of abusing her. Some people who knew him questioned that accusation. It didn't fit what they knew about him. He had never done anything like that to them. But that's where they stopped. They did not question his **beliefs**. If they had, like I eventually did, they would have discovered that his beliefs are not actually contrary to the accusations at all. And they would have discovered, like I eventually did, that signs of his beliefs had been visible from the beginning. So no one else started adding things up, and to this day people believe that she abused him and that I also abused him because I withdrew my support and then resisted his attempt to control me when I withdrew that support. Because they looked at actions and feelings and not beliefs.

Those beliefs were visible, and showed a pattern, if you knew how to look for them. Without those beliefs, she could not have abused him. Hurt him, sure, because we all hurt people, especially when we are in pain ourselves and especially because the people who are the most vulnerable with us are also the most susceptible to being hurt by us precisely because of that vulnerability. But she **could not** have attempted to control or manipulate him because she **does not** hold any beliefs that she is entitled to his thoughts, his body, his choices. Everything she ever did in that relationship was an attempt to escape his control, not exercise it. But her attempts to escape that control were **felt** by him as "harm". And misunderstood by everyone else as "selfishness". And I, of all people close to that dynamic, should have been able to see the difference, since that is essentially my very existence within the context of romantic relationships - constantly attempting to escape control and being labeled "selfish" for the attempts.

The problem is that this subject is so complex and so nuanced that I don't think I'll ever be done writing about it. And so this post now becomes a mini-novel. All to explain that patterns are easy to disguise or misinterpret if we only look at actions and not at underlying beliefs. When we look at patterns of **beliefs**, things appear very different. Someone who seems totally affable becomes a manipulative monster (everyone's favorite TV dad, for instance). Someone who is accused of being that monster turns out to be a victim themselves. And within communities concerned with social justice, it's hard to see sometimes because those monsters learn to co-opt the language of social justice. But the beliefs are still there, and they show up, if you know how to look for them. So when you go looking for them and they don't show up, it's time to wonder just who is the attacker and who is being attacked and maybe all is not as it seems.

When a bunch of people all stand up and say "I looked, and they didn't perform those actions on me!", maybe we can question the validity of the group defense. But when a bunch of people all stand up and say "I looked, and those beliefs just aren't present", maybe we ought to question the validity of the **accusation**, like when my abusive ex accused his victim of being abusive for daring to resist his control of her. She (and later, I) was ostracized from her community and her support group because everyone automatically believed the "victim", meaning he called dibs on the label first and everyone jumped to his side by default, without critically examining whether his claims were even plausible, given the beliefs of the people involved. Her actions were deemed "abusive" simply because he felt hurt by them, without looking to see if there were any elements of entitlement or control present and, if so, which direction they flowed.

But those who cared enough to look beneath the surface finally saw the truth. Those who took the time to look for patterns of **belief**, not actions or not simply whether someone felt "hurt", when we saw the patterns of belief, we knew that she could not have been abusive, even if she might also have caused harm. And my refusal to see this pattern when it was first shown to me, that led to consequences of my own. Consequences that could have been avoided, and possibly even resulted in better protection for his victim sooner, had I learned to look for belief patterns and had I learned to recognize that internalized paradigm of ownership rather than quibbling over whether or not specific actions "counted" as "abusive".

Maybe, had I done that instead, I wouldn't today be wracked with guilt and self-doubt, all these years later. Maybe his victim would have escaped sooner and healed faster had I not backed the wrong horse and had I not challenged everyone else who said "but she can't be an abuser because our experience of her is different!" Maybe she wouldn't have been so easy to isolate had I listened to **her** other supporters instead of arguing that they just didn't see how much drama the family had only when she was brought into the fold. Instead of questioning their support of her on the basis that they were too close to her to be "objective" and not close enough to the situation to see all the hurt feels he had. Maybe if I had acknowledged that, as people who knew her so well for so long, they might actually have had some insight into her belief structure and been exactly the right people to know if she had the beliefs necessary for her to abuse him. Maybe, if I had known that it was the beliefs that were important, not actions that happened behind closed doors that can be interpreted in many ways or rationalized and not simply "feeling" hurt by someone, things could have been different and we both could have been spared at least some of the damage that dating an abuser left us with. Maybe, had I understood all this back then, I wouldn't today feel like that [house with broken windows](#)**.

This is not the only time I made this mistake, either, although I was closer to this situation than to others. There was another time someone cried "abuse", and I believed them automatically because I was told I should, and only many months later did I learn that he was, in fact, an abuser. He was just the one who cried foul first. But, again, it took a confrontation with him personally where his beliefs that it was acceptable to overwrite another person's reality became visible for me to see the pattern. Two people accused each other of abuse, and I took this side because I now "knew", thanks to my experiences dating an abuser, that abusers often think of themselves as victims. So, obviously, his abuser was just doing that, right? Except that later, he tried to gaslight me too. After telling him multiple times my feelings on something, he continued to insist that I did not feel those things, and to insist on his own narrative of what I felt. Now his "abuser's" accusations of gaslighting sounded more plausible. He **believed** that he was entitled to control another person's reality, and patterns of that belief were visible, if you know what to look for. That doesn't let the other

person off the hook for whatever wrongs they committed in this very messy situation. But it does mean that I was wrong to "believe the victim" without treating all the accusations flying around seriously and critically examining the situation *even though I thought I did at the time*. My bias towards "believe the victim" and my personal experience with abuse telling me that I should now know what abuse "looks like" fogged the matter and I did not examine the situation critically enough, or with enough information (knowing the difference between beliefs vs. behaviours or feelings) to be able to examine it properly.

So I yell on the internet, hoping people can learn very expensive lessons without paying the high price I paid to learn it first. After I believed the wrong "victim" more than once, I'm not positive that "believe the victim" is the right response. ***Support*** the victim might be a better response, because support allows for the ability to examine the situation and then provide the **right type** of support based on that examination. Had I "supported" all the actors in that messy double-accusation drama instead of "believed" just one of them, I might have been able to provide better support for the actual victims in the story, given that I had some community authority and responsibility in the matter. Had I "supported" my then-boyfriend instead of "believed" him, I might have discovered the truth sooner and been able to support him by [holding him accountable](#) instead of inadvertently contributing to the gaslighting of his real victim. Had I "supported" him instead, I might have been able to hear the chorus of "she couldn't have done that because we know her!" and looked into it more clearly instead of dismissing it out of hand, and I might have then learned about this beliefs vs. actions/feelings problem.

And maybe we might both have escaped without breaking first.

* I will not be hosting any debate in my comments about the definition of hierarchy. That's why I linked to the definition I'm using here. If your definition differs, then you're not doing what I am calling "hierarchy" and I don't care. I absolutely refuse to hold space for this endless circular argument because it has managed to keep the entire community derailed for over 20 years. I'm insisting on moving on. Any comments that include anything even remotely resembling "but sometimes hierarchy is..." or "but I don't do that..." or "but my kids really do take priority!" will be summarily deleted regardless of what other content the comment may have. If you're feeling the desire to make a comment like that, go read the link I provided for the definition of hierarchy, and then parts 1 and 2 of *Can Poly Hierarchies Be Ethical* first. If you still feel the desire to make those comments, re-read all three posts. Continue re-reading until you no longer feel the need to make those rebuttals.

** This is in reference to an essay that might not be available. The essay is an analogy to living in a house with windows that aren't perfect but that do the job. They're good enough and the house is sound. Then one day, someone comes along and breaks the windows. And you spend a long time ignoring the broken windows, and then working around the broken windows, and then finally learning how to fix the broken windows. One at a time, you repair them. They're not all repaired yet and some rooms are still unusable because of the broken windows, but the house is getting fixed, the new windows look great, and you learned a new skill. But the windows were fine to begin with. You didn't need to learn this skill or replace the windows until someone came along and broke them. So you've had to spend all these years learning how to fix windows that shouldn't have had to be fixed in the first place, and all these years ahead of you continuing to fix each window, when you could have been using that time to learn a different skill, to get better at something new, to grow or improve. Instead, you spend all this time just trying to move backwards to get back to a place you were before

because you can't move forward until you get there first. The breaking of the windows was a huge step backwards and now you're playing catchup. And it all feels unnecessary because the windows were fine to begin with.

1. Abuse In Poly Relationships by Shea Emma Fett -

<https://medium.com/@sheaemmafett/abuse-in-polyamorous-relationships-d13e396c8f85>

2. 10 Things I Wish I'd Known About Gaslighting by Shea Emma Fett -

<https://medium.com/@sheaemmafett/10-things-i-wish-i-d-known-about-gaslighting-22234cb5e407>

3. Relationship Rights: Can You Negotiate Them Away by Eve Rickert -

www.morethantwo.com/blog/2015/01/relationship-rights-can-negotiate-away

4. Can Polyamorous Hierarchies Be Ethical? Part 2: Influence and Control by Eve Rickert -

www.morethantwo.com/blog/2016/06/can-polyamorous-hierarchies-ethical-part-2-influence-control

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