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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Social Context of Woman-to-Woman Intimate Partner Abuse (WWIPA)

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Abstract Forty women who had been in abusive adult, intimate relationships with other women were interviewed. Their life experiences leading up to these abusive relationships were qualitatively examined to determine how heterosexism created a social context in which women were left vulnerable to abuse and dependent on their abusers. Childhood abuse, negative coming out experiences, lack of a queer community, and substance/alcohol abuse contributed to survivors' vulnerability to abuse by making them socially isolated from a support system and dependent on their partners to reconstruct a sense of family.

Keywords Lesbian · Childhood abuse · Substance abuse · Heterosexism

Although women in abusive intimate relationships with other women have historically been left out of the popular construction of "battered women" (Giorgio 2002; Girshick 2002; Hassouneh and Glass 2008; Renzetti 1992; Russo 1999), personal narratives and academic research have emerged in the past two decades to document this violence (Bornstein et al. 2006; Mahoney et al. 2001) and to organize public campaigns against it (Ristock 2002). In 1986, Kerry Lobel, with the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence's Lesbian Task Force, published the first edited book on abusive intimate lesbian relationships. This book included personal experiences of violence, narratives of healing, an overview of efforts to provide safe spaces for battered lesbians, and academic examinations of woman-to-woman intimate partner abuse (WWIPA; Hart 1986). Despite Lobel's (1986) call for more research, no other academic work on WWIPA was distributed until 1992, when Claire Renzetti published the first empirical study about WWIPA, a hugely important step in the process of constructing WWIPA as a social problem.

More recent empirical data indicate that queer women are as likely as heterosexual women to experience intimate partner abuse.[1] Most national estimates of physical WWIPA rates range from about 25 to 50 % (Balsam et al. 2005; Bernhard 2000; Brand and Kidd 1986; Cooperman et al. 2003; Murray and Mobley 2009; Scherzer 1998; Tjaden et al. 1999; Turell 2000; West 2002), rates comparable to heterosexual relationships (Eigenberg 2001). Burke et al. (2002) reported that nearly 73 % of U.S. gay men and lesbians completing their survey (n=35) had experienced abuse. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (2009) documented 3,419 incidents of domestic violence within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community. Of these incidents, about half (51 %) involved abuse between women.

Research indicates that queer women are at high risk of adverse life experiences that make women vulnerable to intimate partner abuse. For example, recent studies suggest that, due to cultural heterosexism and pervasive homophobia, queer individuals are more likely to experience emotional, physical, and child sexual abuse than their straight

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[1] Women who are intimately involved with other women may identify as bisexual, lesbian, queer, heterosexual, or choose more specific terms (butch, femme, etc.), while some may prefer to eschew a sexual identity completely. While "there is no generally acceptable definition of queer; indeed, many of the common understandings contradict each other irresolvably" (Jagose 1996, p. 99), I use the term "queer" as an umbrella term to speak about the women in this study as a whole and all non-heterosexuals in general. I use the term with the goal of being more inclusive of all sexual identities (see Girshick 2002).

counterparts (Austin et al. 2008; Belknap and Holsinger 2007; Bernhard 2000; Cooperman et al. 2003; Tjaden et al. 1999). Queer women with these experiences may be more isolated from their family members and childhood friends, and become dependent on their intimate partners to provide a sense of family, love, and support. They may also find it more difficult to establish social support systems when abuse begins, feel as if they deserve the abuse, or normalize violence within families (Girshick 2002; Renzetti 1992; Ristock 2002). Studies also indicate that queer women may be more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs than straight women (Amadio et al. 2008; Drabble and Trocki 2005; Hequembourg et al. 2008; Hughes 2003; Kelly and Parsons 2007; Trocki and Drabble 2008). Eaton et al. (2008) found that among women attending a gay pride festival, substance abuse was significantly associated with having experienced intimate partner violence. Thus, understanding the social context in which WWIPA occurs, and specifically the role heterosexism plays in queer women's lives, is a necessary step in designing interventions for both WWIPA survivors and perpetrators.

Given the importance of documenting the myriad ways heterosexism affects queer women, this study seeks to explain how heterosexism shaped the social context in which 40 queer women entered into abusive relationships with other women. The main research questions include: (a) What is the impact of childhood abuse on women's experiences of adult WWIPA?; (b) How does childhood abuse and coming out as queer contribute to a sense of social isolation?; (c) increasing survivors' dependency on abusers?; and (d) How does substance abuse contribute to WWIPA?

Method

Sample

The average age of the sample was 37 years old. Thirty two of the women were Caucasian, four were Latina, two were African American, one was American Indian, and one was multiracial. Participants were asked how they self-identified sexually, although were not asked to define these labels. Twenty five identified as lesbians, seven as queer, three preferred not to use sexual identity labels, two identified as bisexual, two as lesbian/bisexual, and one identified as heterosexual at the time of the interview. One participant, who is biologically female, identified as transgender and as a lesbian. All of the women lived in a Western state at the time of the interview, although several experienced WWIPA when they lived in other regions of the country.

Forty women who had experienced WWIPA were interviewed. Thirty-six (90 %) of the women interviewed identified as survivors of WWIPA, two women had exclusively perpetrated WWIPA; one woman was in two same-sex, mutually abusive relationships; and one woman was an abuser in one lesbian relationship and a survivor of abuse in another. Fourteen women had been in multiple abusive relationships; seven women experienced abuse in two relationships, six experienced abuse in three relationships, and one woman experienced abuse in four relationships. Twenty-six women had been in one abusive relationship.

In all, participants discussed 61 abusive relationships. The average length of relationships was 3.5 years. The shortest abusive relationship experienced lasted 3 weeks, and the longest lasted 11 years. Most relationships had ended 3 to 5 years prior to the interview, while three were ongoing at the time of the interview.

Data Collection

Beginning in 2009, 40 adult women who had been in at least one abusive relationship with another woman were interviewed. Two types of non-probability sampling (purposive and snowball) were used to recruit participants for this study. Non-probability sampling is most appropriate when individuals cannot be randomly selected from a list or data set, as is commonly done in social surveys, or when a population is hidden (Babbie 2004). As Weston (2004) demonstrates, random sampling is impossible when studying a population that might be partially hidden, "closeted." This especially resonates with the current study, as the sample was not limited to women who identified as lesbians, as survivors of abuse, or as abusers.

Purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants based on the purpose of the study (Babbie 2004). To recruit participants who experienced WWIPA through purposive sampling recruitment fliers were posted on three free websites, fliers were put up around several college campuses, an on-line classified advertisement was run on an LGBTQ newspaper in Colorado, and a quarter-page advertisement was published in another LGBTQ newspaper in Colorado. The majority of the participants were recruited through the online advertisements on the free websites.

Like purposive sampling, snowball sampling is appropriate to use when members of a group are hidden and allows for the recruitment of individuals who otherwise would not participate. Snowballing "refers to the process of accumulation as each located subject suggests other subjects" (Babbie 2004, p. 184). After each face-to-face interview, each participant was given a "Thank You" note that included a business card with the author's contact information. The notes thanked each of them for participating and encouraged them to pass on this information to any friends or family members who could be interested in the study. Two women were recruited using this method.

In-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were the only source of data collection for the current study. Each participant was asked to choose the location of the interview that was most convenient and safe for her. Fourteen interviews were conducted in coffee shops, five in the participants' homes, four in a public park, ten in an office on a college campus, one in a library, and one came to the author's home. Ten of the interviews were conducted over the phone and three were conducted via instant messaging. Those interviews conducted over the phone or via instant messaging were with women who lived over 100 miles away, making face-to-face interviews impossible.

Following a feminist method of interviewing that seeks to minimize the hierarchical nature of the research process; interviews were conducted as conversations, rather than as formal, structured interrogations (Campbell 1999; Marshall and Rossman 1989). Each participant was given a pseudonym, which was used both in the transcription and the final write-up. When participants identified others (such as their abusers or clients), their names and other identifying information were also changed in the transcription and the final write-up.

All interviews were audio-recorded, except those done via instant messaging. The recordings were erased immediately following transcription. All identifying information was either erased (such as phone numbers or addresses) or when necessary, kept in a locked file cabinet. Interviews generally lasted from 1 to 2 h, and the average interview length was 1 h and 15 min. The methods of this study were approved by the University of Colorado's Institutional Review Board in March of 2009, before data collection took place.

Data Analysis

The first five interviews were transcribed verbatim in their entirety by the author, and a professional transcriptionist transcribed the rest of the interviews. Rather than beginning with a pre-established set of codes with which to organize the data, inductive reasoning was used by carefully listening to and reading each interview in an effort to construct common themes and codes as they emerged from the data (Lofland et al. 2006; Maxwell 2005). A digital spreadsheet was used to keep track of each code and easily compare data across interviews. The spreadsheet was also used to keep track of newly emerging themes that had not been previously coded in earlier interviews. Codes were added and revised throughout the research process, and each interview was re-coded after an addition or revision of a code. The codes that emerged from the data were used to develop the conceptual themes (i.e., experiences of childhood abuse, coming out narratives, alcohol and drug use, perceived isolation from queer communities, and decisions about whether or not to seek help and support from others) that are the focus of the current study.

Results

Childhood Abuse

Childhood abuse was a common theme among the participants in the current study. Twenty of the participants (50 %) experienced childhood abuse. The most common form of abuse was emotional abuse, followed by physical and sexual abuse. The participants often used their own experiences of childhood abuse to explain why some queer women (including themselves) enter into and remain in abusive relationships. For example, Grace believes that "Anyone that's a victim or anyone that's abusive, it always seems to stem back to problems that have happened throughout their life, especially when they were younger." Most women who had been abused as children reported that these experiences shaped their responses to WWIPA. Childhood abuse made survivors "numb" to WWIPA, gave them the emotional strength to endure WWIPA (by preventing them from blaming themselves or helping them to understand the patterns of abuse), or served to normalize abuse in relationships. Child abuse survivors also looked to their adult partners to help them heal, becoming emotionally dependent on them and vulnerable to WWIPA. Mary explained her decision to remain in the last physically abusive relationship for 10 years in terms of her experiences as a child:

> Like my dad, like I said, he used to beat me every day until I was like 18, so I'm trying to think. I don't think that it really bothered me that he hit me, but it hurt my feelings that I didn't think he loved me. The physical abuse didn't bother me. I mean, you know, it hurt, but I just wanted to be loved. And I still have this problem where I just want love, love, love, love, love…I didn't get that love from my mom. I didn't get that love from my dad…So I chase the impossible now.

In addition to their own victimization, participants were aware of and spoke of 20 partners (out of 61 total partners) who had experienced childhood abuse. Generally, participants felt sympathetic when they learned of their partners' childhood victimization. This sympathy kept many from leaving once WWIPA began. Additionally, participants deflected blame from their partners, instead attributing WWIPA to their abusers' experiences of childhood abuse. Lily's responses to WWIPA were shaped by two of her three abusers' childhood experiences. She remained in these relationships in part because she felt a need to help them recover from these experiences:

> [Abusers tell you], "I was abused as a child, I was sexually assaulted." So now you feel bad for 'em. So for me, the kinds of things that would set me up for

> letting my boundaries down would be one, feeling sorry for the person, and I felt so sorry for [my first abusive partner], because she had a terrible childhood, sexually abused, all these horrible things happened, and you feel bad for them. I'm gonna show you real love. I'm gonna be good. And accepting it because they were hurt and they can't help it…It was my job to make them OK.

The women who identified as WWIPA abusers also claimed they were affected by childhood abuse. Isabella was physically abusive to three former partners, and claimed she learned to use violence during her abusive childhood. She was molested and physically beaten by family members, and describes her reaction to this maltreatment as "adapting." Growing up, she preferred her mother's physical abuse to being ignored by her mother. Isabella stated that she learned that physical and sexual abuse was preferable to nothing, and that people who love each other hurt each other:

> Here were these people I grew up with, I lived with, and told them "I love you," and they were molesting me…[And my mother], because when she went drinking, after my father died, she did some really rotten shit to us, too…If you couldn't adapt with what was happening, I had to. I had no choice.

Coming Out to Family and Friends

Of the participants, 39 had come out or had been outed to their families and friends. Experiences with coming out were primarily structured by age, with women over 30 years old at the time of the interview reporting far more negative reactions than younger women. The relationship between age and experiences of coming out held true regardless of whether or not the participant had experienced childhood abuse.

Besides for one participant, the 10 other women under 30 had mostly positive or at least non-traumatic experiences when revealing their sexual identities to others. When young women did experience negative reactions, it was most commonly on the part of their male family members, who ignored or dismissed their sexual identities. Women under 30 years old were far less likely to have dated men or to have described themselves as confused about their sexual desires for other women. Additionally, all but one of the young women came out to their families while they were still living with them, indicating that they did not fear being kicked out of the home or losing financial support.

Unlike the younger women, women over 30 mostly struggled with the decision to come out and reported largely negative reactions. The women who were out and still lived with their parents tended to have the most difficult experiences. This is due, in large part, to the fact that they still depended on their parents, many of whom felt they had the right or even responsibility to condemn the participants' queer identities, and who had the power to seriously affect their lives. Several women were kicked out of their homes. Hailie's parents tried to commit her to a mental asylum after she came out as a lesbian at age 17. Later, they gave her up for adoption:

> I was still 17, so they threw me in the funny farm… Within 3 days; of course, the doctor determined and said to my parents…"She's actually more sane than some of the people that work here. She has no business being here, and if you don't get her out of here, I will." And my father said, "She is not going to infect my other two children." And my mother looked like she was going to say something, and my father put his hand very firmly on my mother's shoulder, and she didn't say anything. Two weeks later I was in a foster home.

Some women guessed that these same experiences could happen to them, and so did not tell their family members until they had left their parental homes. Natalie waited for a full year after she had personally claimed a queer identity to come out to her parents:

> I came out, I would say—I came out to myself probably—well, when I was around 17. But I come from an extremely bordering on fanatically religious family and community, so it was a little bit longer until I—like, a year until I came out to them when I was 18. So that's when I left home, because it was not an emotionally safe environment for me at that point. They still believed it was a sickness and wanted to fix me and pray for me and all that shit.

The coming out process affected women's abusive intimate relationships in several ways. Not surprisingly, women under 30 were more likely to tell their families or friends about experiencing WWIPA, as they felt more comfortable speaking about their relationships with them in general. Older women who had traumatic coming out experiences, however, were reluctant to tell families or friends about WWIPA. Some believed their families and friends would not want to hear about any aspects of these relationships simply because they involved two women. Others felt isolated from their family and friends, and thus did not feel comfortable sharing sensitive information with them (this was also true for women who were abused as children). Additionally, many who experienced such trauma wanted to prove their families and friends wrong, or at least not contribute to negative stereotypes about queer people.

Finally, women who received negative responses to disclosure of their sexual identities felt isolated and alone. They sought out relationships with other queer women as a means of rebuilding a sense of family and intimacy, and remained even when facing abuse. This made them particularly vulnerable to abuse in their first lesbian relationships.

Finding a Community

Most of the participants had little contact with other queer people or with local queer communities before they came out. Part of the coming out process, then, was to establish friendships with other queer people. Yet many women found this difficult to do until they began dating women who had been out for some time. Consistent with other research (Weeks et al. 2001), participants' first lesbian partners were often their only source of connection to queer communities. According to Ristock (2002), "Lesbian women enter into a first relationship as outsiders to lesbian communities, and are often not plugged into any support systems" (p. 59). This dependency, Ristcock argues, creates a context in which the newly out woman is vulnerable to abuse and less able to get help when abuse does occur. In fact, more than half of Ristock's participants (all of whom either perpetrated or were victimized by WWIPA), experienced abuse in their first lesbian relationships.

In the current study, 24 participants (60 %) encountered or perpetrated abuse in their first serious relationship with a woman. Only 2 of these were perpetrators; the remaining 22 women were victims of WWIPA. Nine of the participants (less than 15 %) reported that their partners were in their first lesbian relationships. In all nine of these cases, the participants were the victims and their partners perpetrated the abuse. In other words, when women in this study experienced WWIPA in their first lesbian relationship, they were far more likely to be abused than to be abusive. Additionally, most of their abusive partners had been in prior lesbian relationships. As in Ristock's (2002) study, participants reported being dependent on their partners as their major (or only) connection to the queer community. For example, Beth relied heavily on her partner to introduce her to other queer people when she first came out. She attributes her decision to remain in this abusive relationship for 2.5 years to her isolation from a queer community:

> She was the first one I had ever been with. I didn't really know what to expect, and I really didn't know that many gay people. I didn't know gay people in relationships. The only people I ever knew were the people on the Internet, because the area that I'm from, at that time, there was really no way of getting to know other gay people other than going to the bars, and I was terrified to go to a bar. So that was the only way. So she was, like, my whole gay world, you know?

The WWIPA survivors in their first lesbian relationships also reported that their abusers used their inexperience in lesbian relationships to extend control over them. Most commonly, abusers would deny that abuse was occurring and claim that these relationships were no different from any other lesbian relationship. For example, Alyssa's first girlfriend led her to believe that violence was part of all lesbian relationships:

> She was out from the time she was 18. She had a lot of girls…She would always, throughout our relationship, she would always imply, "I've been in a long-term relationship, I know how to have one and you haven't. You don't know." I don't know if it was her way to control me or just keep me in my place or what.

Claire, who experienced physical and emotional abuse in her first relationship, was surprised that women could be abusive, and her lack of experience in lesbian relationships made it difficult to identify what was happening as abuse:

> It took me by surprise…I convinced myself that that must just be how lesbian relationships were. I didn't know any better. I would have never accepted that from a man, but from a woman it seemed different… I didn't know any other lesbian to know the difference.

Women new to queer communities, who have not yet seen other lesbian relationships or heard about WWIPA, may not know that WWIPA occurs or what constitutes a healthy lesbian relationship. They may therefore overlook or excuse behaviors that would otherwise be labeled as abusive. This is especially true when WWIPA survivors rely on their abusers for connections within their communities, or in Beth's words, when their abusers are their "whole gay world."

Moving in Together

Of the total 61abusive relationships included in the current study, 41 involved women living together. Many of the relationships seemed to move quickly, with women moving in together soon after they began dating. The women who lived together averaged only 3 months of dating before sharing a residence. Several women told me the same well-known joke: "What do lesbians do on a second date? Rent a U-Haul." Because most queer women are not legally allowed to marry, moving in is a major symbol of commitment to one another (Weeks et al. 2001). Additionally, moving in together creates a context ripe for WWIPA, as women are less able to simply walk away from abusive relationships, especially if both women are paying for the residence or if they otherwise are sharing financial responsibilities.

The most common explanation given for moving in together so quickly was that participants were eager to establish committed, loving relationships after negative experiences of childhood abuse or coming out. Becki began dating her abuser when she was 18 years old. After she came out to her parents and they reacted negatively, she and her partner ran away. Separated from their families, Becki and her partner attempted to form their own:

> Coming out was kind of rough, because like I said, I fell in love with my friend in high school. My mom didn't—my parents did not like her at all…So I basically ran away from home, I guess you could say to be with her. We ran all over the country… and I didn't see them again for 8 years …We lived together, bought a house together, had cars, credit cards, did the whole—appear to be a couple, do just what straight couples do—tried to have a kid.

Participants also moved quickly from one relationship to another, usually with less than a month between relationships. Subsequent relationships provided a sense of security and love after they had experienced WWIPA. In this sense, too, participants became dependent on abusers in order to heal from previous abusive relationships with women. After Alyssa's first relationship with a woman who involuntarily outed her to their mutual straight friends, she moved into her next abuser's home after about a month of dating. When she left this relationship, she moved into a battered women's shelter. As soon as she moved out of the shelter, she immediately began dating her third abuser, whom she described as a "rebound." She also lived with this woman, and remained in the relationship for a year. Even though Alyssa identified the relationship as emotionally abusive, she did not leave because it was free of physical abuse, unlike the prior relationship:

> I was single maybe—actually, no, I wasn't. I think I would get over her, she doesn't matter, it didn't count, so I ended up in another relationship that ended up being abusive…I don't know, it was just kind of crazy. But I thought it was OK because there wasn't anything physical there. It was just kind of like, I don't know, a rebound relationship, really. Which is crazy, but I was still just completely dumb and naïve, you know?

Women who lived with their abusers found the breaking up process very difficult. Lucy explained her decision to delay leaving her abuser in terms of their mutual financial dependence on each other.

> Over the years we had amassed—like I said, we owned horses together, and we had rented a house that neither one of us could afford by ourselves. I don't remember if we owned a truck together or not. But we combined our accounts, so there were a lot of ties.

In these cases, breaking up mirrored the divorce process, but without legal guidelines and protections, especially with regard to child custody. Most survivors facing this situation reported cutting their losses and walking away from property that was theirs in order to make the process faster and safer. When Mary left her abuser, she also had to leave their son, who was conceived during their relationship, but to whom Mary had no legal ties.

Substance Abuse

Five survivors reported abusing alcohol during their abusive relationships, four used illicit drugs, with cocaine and marijuana being the most common, and two struggled with both drug and alcohol abuse. Two abusive participants identified as alcoholics. Participants were far more likely to identify their partners as having drug and/or alcohol abuse problems. Twenty-eight abusive partners (46 %) abused alcohol and 10 also abused illicit drugs. One abuser also reported her partner was an alcoholic. Substance abuse for both participants and their partners were linked to the centrality of bars in their queer communities and with self-medicating to deal with past or current abuse and experiences with heterosexism.

Almost all of the participants spoke of bars as being the major socializing site in queer communities, as places to meet potential friends and partners. Emma explained that bars were the major site of socialization because queer people used alcohol to cope with heterosexism:

> There's also the alcohol issue, heavily with gays, because we do have a lot of guilt issues or feelings, family not accepting us. We tend to be a lot into alcohol. Regretfully, a lot of our social places are alcohol places, and that's what's been hard. Over 40, I have nowhere to go. I don't hang in coffee shops. A lot of 'em are settled down. A lot of 'em are closeted. A lot of 'em have families now. A lot of our social places have been the bars, and that's very difficult, because when you're around alcohol, that's one of the worst.

Participants frequented bars when they were first coming out as a way of meeting people. Recently out women also tended to follow their partners' substance abuse habits. In her first adult relationship with another woman, Crystal began drinking to cope with the WWIPA she was experiencing and to establish a bond with her partner and her partner's friends. "She was an alcoholic, so I kind of just mirrored her behavior, so I drank a lot with her." Becki and Amber both began using cocaine for the same reasons Crystal began drinking. Lily began drinking at age 13 to cope with her own suspicions that she was not straight. Although Lily eventually got sober, her

abusive partner pressured her to begin drinking again. Lily did so, both to help her cope with the pain she was experiencing in the relationship, and as a way to socialize with other queer women and her partner:

> She was a heavy drinker, and she didn't want me to not be drinking. . . The lesbian community, especially the one I was in, was a work hard-play hard and most of them were alcoholics…So I started drinking again with her at the end of 2004…I'd been around it so much, and I was in so much pain… You can imagine where that relationship went with both of us drinking.

As stated above, while many of the participants did not speak of their own alcohol or drug abuse, they did identify nearly half of their abusers as struggling with these issues. And many, when asked what they thought led to WWIPA, blamed it on alcohol and drug use. Blaming WWIPA on alcohol or drug use allowed both abusers and survivors to justify or excuse the WWIPA, and instead focus on substance abuse. This focus often gave them hope that the abuse could end and the relationship could be salvaged. Danica stated that if she could get her alcoholism under control, she could stop physically abusing her current girlfriend.

> My mom keeps saying once abuse starts in a relationship that it'll never stop, but I think that it will, just because, again, I don't identify as an abuser, so I feel like if I can get my drinking under control, it won't happen.

Beth related her abusive partner's substance abuse on her experiences of both childhood abuse and heterosexism, which led to a low sense of self-esteem. She believed her partner abused her because of the low self-esteem and her use of alcohol and drugs to cope with heterosexism. Therefore, Beth felt sorry for her partner and remained in the abusive relationship to try to help her deal with these issues:

> I think it had a lot to do with her childhood abuse and her lack of self-esteem, how she felt about herself and what she carried. And the fact that trying to just use alcohol and drugs in order to be able to do something about that pain…She was a rather butch-looking woman, so people often stared at her, and that would make her angry, and she would make comments. I think being insecure about who she was, period, had a lot to do with it.

Discussion

The current study adds evidence to a growing body of literature documenting the ways heterosexism impacts the social context in which many queer women become involved in abusive, intimate same-sex relationships (see Bornstein et al. 2006; Eaton et al. 2008; Girshick 2002; Hardesty et al. 2008; Renzetti 1992; Ristock 2002). Extant research on survivors of male-perpetrated, heterosexual intimate partner abuse (Gelles and Straus 1988; Hotaling and Sugarman 1986; Kalmuss 1984; Straus et al. 1980; Waltz et al. 2000; Widom 1989) and WWIPA (Girshick 2002; Renzetti 1992; Ristock 2002) indicates that girls who either witness intimate partner abuse or are themselves abused as children are more likely to experience adult intimate partner abuse than girls who do not witness or experience abuse. Consistent with these findings, stories of violence during childhood were common among the participants in the current study. As childhood abuse resulted in tenuous relationships with their families of origin, the majority of women could not tell family members about the WWIPA they experienced as adults, and in this way, childhood abuse shaped their help-seeking behaviors after the onset of WWIPA. In addition to the participants' experiences with childhood abuse, many reported that their WWIPA abusers had also been abused as children. Knowledge of their abusers' past victimizations made many survivors feel sympathy for them or excuse the WWIPA.

Coming out as queer was also challenging for many women and, for some, this process led or contributed to their experiences of childhood abuse. Several reports by D'Augelli and colleagues show that both queer girls and boys are at risk of childhood abuse *because* of their sexual identities (see D'Augelli 2003; D'Augelli et al. 2006; Pilkington and D'Augelli 1995). More specifically, some of the participants of the current study were victimized as girls because of their identification as queer. Notably, women over the age of 30 at the time of the interview tended to wait until they were older to come out to family members and friends, and they typically reported this process to be much more difficult and emotionally damaging than reported by the women under 30. These age differences in others' reactions to participants' queer identities point to the possibility that parents are becoming more accepting of their queer children. However, the vast majority of participants, even those women under 30 years old, still reported an internalized sense of shame about their sexual desires, and reported feeling confused and worried that they were not straight. Taken together, these findings indicate that experiences of childhood abuse and negative responses to disclosures of their queer sexual identities left many participants feeling isolated and lonely.

These experiences of abuse provided a social context ripe for WWIPA. The findings suggest that women are particularly vulnerable to WWIPA when they first come out, especially if their first partners have been out longer and have established connections within queer communities. This may be because abusers of recently out women can use their

victims' isolation from queer communities and general ignorance about lesbian relationships to extend control over them and deter them from ending the relationships at the onset of abuse. Many participants reported feeling dependent on their partners for a sense of love, intimacy, family, and friendship that they lost either due to childhood abuse or negative responses when they publicly came out. Participants also believed they needed their partners to help them establish friendship networks within their queer communities. Therefore, they were reluctant to leave when the abuse began. Additionally, because lesbian relationships provide queer women so much in terms of social networks, participants reported that their relationships moved quickly from dating to living together. For the most part, queer women cannot marry, so moving in together is a major statement of commitment, and often involves shared finances (Weeks et al. 2001). The importance of lesbian relationships and the quick decision to commit meant that many participants were not able to simply walk away from their abusers, creating a context in which WWIPA abusers were able to extend control over their partners without fear of being left.

Substance abuse also contributed to WWIPA. Queer women reported turning to alcohol or drugs to cope with heterosexism and childhood abuse. Many participants also identified bars as primary sites in which to socialize with other members of their queer communities, increasing the centrality of alcohol in their lives. Sometimes survivors' own substance abuse issues prevented them from leaving their WWIPA relationships, but more commonly survivors blamed WWIPA on their abusers' alcoholism or drug habits. Many survivors felt sorry for their abusers or believed that if they remained in the relationships long enough, their abusers would get sober and the abuse would stop.

There are several limitations in the current study that should be noted. Given the small and non-random sample, it is not possible to generalize about larger populations (Babbie 2004). The current study included interviews with 40 women who had experienced WWIPA, most of whom lived in Western states, and were Caucasian and middle-class. Therefore, the present findings might not reflect the experiences of other WWIPA survivors or abusers. Queer women of color or women from other regions of the country may have very different perspectives on WWIPA than the participants of this study. Additionally, only one of my participants identified as transgender. Future research must make efforts to recruit more diverse samples of participants. All of the participants in the current study were self-selected. Those women who do not volunteer to partake in such studies may be different from the participants.

Additionally, due to time and budget constraints, 10 interviews were conducted over the phone and 3via instant messaging. The setting in which interviews are conducted is important, as it influences the comfort level of the participant, the information the participant is willing to provide, and the interaction between the participant and the researcher. In qualitative research, face-to-face interviews are generally considered ideal, as they allow researchers to build rapport with participants and take note of non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, hand gestures, and tone of voice (Kvale 1996). Phone interviews were advantageous to the research process, because they allowed for wider geographical access to participants, and still allowed a verbal conversation to occur (Opdenakker 2006). Three women, however, preferred being interviewed over the Internet, either by instant messaging or through email. Instant messaging was selected by the author as the preferred method, as they allowed for synchronous communication (Opdenakker 2006). Although there are drawbacks to instant messaging (for a review, see Opdenakker 2006), they allow people to participate who otherwise might not, and can provide a sense of anonymity and safety for participants sharing personal and sensitive information. To ensure some standardization between the various interview methods, the author relied on the same interview guide for face-to-face, phone, and instant messaging interviews. However, it is possible that had phone and instant messaging interviews been conducted in person, participants would have shared different information or would have framed their responses differently.

Finally, all interview coding and interpretations about the data was done by the author. Often, qualitative researchers use multiple coders to check for coder reliability, that is, the degree to which two or more coders would evaluate data and reach the same conclusion of how the data should be classified (Kvale 1996). In an effort to overcome this limitation, the author did solicit feedback from participants at the end of the interviews and after data collection was complete. While member checking or respondent validation is one way to ensure researchers do not misinterpret data, it does not eliminate the researcher bias that can influence interpretations (Maxwell 2005). Therefore, the lack of coder reliability is a serious shortcoming.

Despite these limitations, the findings of the current study point toward the need for several policy changes. The women in the current study were not only located in a "matrix of domination" (Collins 1990) that included heterosexism and sexism (and sometimes racism, ageism, etc.), but also included a dimension of vulnerability during the coming out process. If we are to develop strategies that can help to prevent WWIPA or offer greater social services to survivors of WWIPA, we must remember that it does not occur in a vacuum. Interventions must take into account the social context of WWIPA, particularly the numerous ways heterosexism operates to leave queer women vulnerable to abuse.

Domestic violence services, originally constructed to help battered straight women, must do more to provide help

to queer women. This is especially true for women who cannot get help from their friends or family members. Few WWIPA survivors in the current study sought help from domestic violence services or went to counseling during their abusive relationships. This is consistent with other research that indicates most survivors of male-perpetrated, heterosexual abuse (Beaulaurier et al. 2007; Ingram 2007; Morrison et al. 2006; Potter 2008; Pròspero and Vohra-Gupta 2008; Swan and Sullivan 2009) or WWIPA (Duke and Davidson 2009; Girshick 2002; Renzetti 1992; Ristock 2002) do not access these services. WWIPA survivors may worry that their experiences will be minimized or misunderstood by counselors accustomed to dealing with heterosexual, male-perpetrated abuse, or fear that talking publicly about WWIPA will stigmatize queer communities and same-sex relationships (Duke and Davidson 2009; Renzetti 1992; Turell and Herrmann 2008). Girshick (2002) and Duke and Davidson (2009) argue that intimate partner abuse services need to do more outreach to queer communities, properly train service providers in how to address WWIPA, use more inclusive language in their fliers and brochures, and become more collaborative with queer community groups in order to demonstrate that WWIPA survivors are welcome to access these services and to ensure they will have positive experiences.

Intimate partner abuse outreach in queer communities could also spur a public discussion of same-sex abuse within queer communities (Turell and Herrmann 2008). Almost every participant in the study reported that although they knew of other men and women in abusive, same-sex relationships, they did not feel as if members of the queer community discussed this problem openly. They also expressed the concern that by openly talking about same-sex abuse, they would increase the stigma already attached to queer communities and would therefore be viewed as "traitors." In an era in which the mainstream gay and lesbian rights movement is attempting to secure basic human rights for queer people, publicly acknowledging the existence of same-sex abuse is thought to be risky. However, this conversation must take place if same-sex abuse is to be condemned and prevented (Turell and Herrmann 2008).

It is also important for addiction and rehabilitative centers to be culturally sensitive and non-heterosexist, especially as queer women may be less satisfied with treatment than straight women (Drabble and Trocki 2005). To be effective, these centers must do more outreach in queer communities and address the intersection of sexual minority status and risk of alcohol and drug addiction. Matthews and Selvidge (2005) suggest the hiring of more openly lesbian, gay, and bisexual counselors would increase awareness in these communities, as well as provide role models for queer men and women struggling with addiction. Furthermore, counselors must remember that recovering from addiction can have different meanings and consequences for queer women. Since many recovering addicts must separate themselves from prior social networks, queer women face the added burden of finding new friends in small communities that are often centered in bars (Kerby et al. 2005).

Perhaps the most pressing problem is the heterosexism (combined with other forms of oppression) that queer individuals face daily (Girshick 2002). An important beginning step in addressing heterosexism is to enact legislation that gives equal protection to same-sex couples. Most states do not protect queer individuals from discrimination in the workplace on the basis of their sexual identities, and even fewer protect discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression (Lambda Legal 2010). Policies that refuse to protect or extend the same basic rights to queer individuals not only directly infringe upon the rights of all queer people, they provide a context in which several forms of WWIPA emerge. Outing a partner can result in that partner's employment termination; the threat of outing can extend an abuser's control over the survivor and could result in economic dependence on the part of the survivor (Balsam 2002). If queer women were guaranteed freedom from discrimination on the basis of sexual or gender identity, at the very least, WWIPA survivors would be more confident about their ability to keep their jobs regardless of being outed by an abuser. Furthermore, WWIPA survivors in the current study spoke of the difficulty in separating from abusers, especially if they lived together. As many combined bank accounts, bought property together, or otherwise shared money, ending the relationships required a great deal of negotiation or, more commonly, required the survivors to simply cut their losses and leave. Perhaps if their commitments to each other were legally recognized, survivors would have more legal recourse to protect their property and feel more economically secure to leave abusive relationships sooner.

While it is extremely important that service providers and academics take note of the unique experiences of WWIPA survivors, this issue cannot be fully addressed without dismantling various systems of oppression, including the pervasive heterosexism that influenced every one of the participants' lives and experiences of WWIPA. If queer communities did not have to battle for basic human rights and protection from discrimination, conversations about same-sex abuse would be less taboo and far more common. If queer women, relative to straight women, did not feel so isolated in their daily lives from members of "mainstream" society, they might be less vulnerable to being both victimized by WWIPA as well as less likely to perpetrate WWIPA as a means of securing control and power in their lives. Addressing WWIPA, then, requires widespread cultural change in attitudes about sexual identity and the rights of all queer people.

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