

Comparison of Beginning Counselors' Responses to Lesbian vs. Heterosexual Partner Abuse

Amy J. Wise
Sharon L. Bowman
Ball State University

This study compared responses of masters and doctoral level counseling students to two domestic violence scenarios. Participants read a two paragraph description of a battering incident involving either a heterosexual or lesbian couple and then gave their impressions via a series of open and closed ended questions. Scenarios were identical save the manipulation of sexual partner as same or opposite sex. Experience and/or education with battered and/or gay/lesbian clients is also examined. Results indicated that subjects perceived the heterosexual battering incident as more violent than the lesbian battering incident and would be more likely to charge the male batterer than the female batterer with assault. Differences in treatment recommendations were made according to sexual orientation of the victim. Less than half of the respondents had coursework or practical experience pertaining to domestic violence and/or gay/lesbian concerns.

Domestic violence is an issue that has received extensive attention in research literature since the 1970's; however, battering was overwhelmingly seen as an issue limited to heterosexual couples. More recently, examinations of abuse in homosexual couples have surfaced (e.g., Brand & Kidd, 1986; Harris & Cook, 1994; Renzetti, 1988). This more inclusive focus has thus far focused predominantly on prevalence data or victim impression of service providers. Service providers' responses to lesbian battering has remained largely unaddressed.

While woman-to-woman violence does not receive the attention that violence in heterosexual relationships does, research data (Lie & Gentlewarrior, 1991; Renzetti, 1988), interviews (Renzetti, 1992), and personal stories (Lobel, 1986) of lesbians who are involved in abusive relationships all demonstrate that the problem of domestic violence does exist in the lesbian community. Brand and Kidd (1986) report comparable levels of abuse in both heterosexual and homosexual committed relationships, although heterosexual abusive relationships were characterized by more aggressive acts overall.

The similarities between heterosexual and homosexual abusive relationships are greater than the differences. All battered women, regardless of sexual orientation, appear to experience the cycle of violence, which consists of the tension building phase, the abusive event, and the honeymoon period (Walker, 1984). Battered lesbians, like other battered women, often experience post traumatic stress disorder, exhibiting symptoms such

as nightmares, brief dissociative episodes, and excessive fear in situations reminiscent of the abuse (Hammond, 1988).

Violence in lesbian relationships can be characterized by physical, psychological, or sexual abuse or any combination thereof. In her survey of 100 lesbians in abusive relationships, Renzetti (1988) found that the most common forms of abuse were pushing and shoving (experienced by 75% of the respondents), hitting (65%), scratching or hitting face, breasts, or genitals (48%), and throwing things (44%). Carving into the skin, placing weapons in the vagina, burning with a cigarette, and stabbing or shooting, were least prevalent although disconcerting that respondents mentioned them at all.

Lie and Gentlewarrior (1991) found that their respondents indicated combined physical and psychological abuse to be the most common. Renzetti (1988) also inquired about the prevalence of psychological abuse, which was more frequent than was physical abuse. The most common were verbal threats (70%), verbally demeaning the victim in front of friends, family (64%) or strangers (59%), interrupting eating or sleeping (63%), and damaging or destroying partner's property (51%). Her study also found that of those women who had children living with them (theirs or their partners), 30% of the children were also abused by the violent partner. Similarly, 38% of the respondents who owned pets indicated that the animals were abused as well.

Sexual abuse was targeted by a study conducted by Waterman, Dawson, and Bologna (1989). They report that 31% of the lesbians from their sample experienced being forced into sex by their current or most recent partner. So, while research indicates that heterosexual abusive relationships are characterized by more acts of violence (Brand & Kidd, 1986), it would be wrong to assume that because women are the initiators of violence in abusive lesbian relationships they will use less violent tactics.

Abuse in lesbian relationships is also a relatively common presenting problem for lesbians in therapy. The National Lesbian Health Care Survey (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994) found that problems with a lover was the third most common concern (27%) among lesbians while Morgan and Eliason (1992) found that it was the second most common presenting problem (47.8%). While not listed as a specific concern in relationships, the survey did find that 53% of the women who had been abused as adults were victimized by their partner, although gender was unspecified (Bradford et al., 1994).

It is estimated that 78% of lesbian victims seek help for their violent situation (Renzetti, 1988). In general, research suggests that lesbians are willing to use (Bradford et al., 1994) and generally have more positive attitudes toward counseling than do their heterosexual counterparts (Morgan & Eliason, 1992). Approximately three-fourths of lesbians have been or are currently in therapy (Morgan & Eliason, 1992, Bradford et al., 1994) compared to only 28.9% of non-lesbian women (Morgan & Eliason, 1992). However, the response to lesbian battering has been less than exemplary.

Unfortunately, the response to lesbian victims of abuse by traditional help providers was rated negatively by lesbians attempting to utilize services (Renzetti, 1989). Victims most often sought help from counselors and friends, with counselors being the most helpful (Renzetti, 1989). Still, almost half of the lesbian sample rated counselors as not helpful at all or only a little helpful, finding counselors to be somewhat negative and reluctant to challenge the batterer for her actions.

Counselors receive only limited training in the area of gay and lesbian issues. While the American Psychological Association and the American Counseling Association both state policies on the importance and ethical responsibility of mental health professionals to be knowledgeable about gay and lesbian issues (Murphy, 1991), most counselors lack any

significant training or practical experience in this area. Buhrke (1989) found that among a sample of 213 female doctoral students, 29.2% indicated that gay and lesbian issues had not been addressed in any of their courses. The average number of these classes in which issues of homosexuality were discussed was only 1.61. In addition, almost half of the respondents had never seen a homosexual client (that they knew of) and felt significantly more comfortable counseling heterosexual as opposed to homosexual clients.

This shortcoming of counselor training also contributes to the lack of appropriate services to not only battered lesbians but to all battered women. Lloyd, Cate, and Conger (1983) admit that training in the area of family violence is deficient among all service providers, including educators, physicians, counselors, police officers, and case workers. One reason that counselors receive little training in this area is that issues of domestic violence are often conceptualized as a social work issue. The reality is that violence or abuse in some form is one of the most prevalent presenting issues counselors will face. Avis (1992) reports that 50% of clients reveal a past or present history of physical violence. Another study found that 12% of clients' initial presenting problems were with domestic violence, but upon further exploration, 40% revealed domestic violence as a therapeutic issue (Stith, Rosen, Barasch, & Wilson, 1991). Martin (1995) also identifies that approximately 55% of couples in treatment for marital issues were violent but the therapist was not aware of it.

Prevailing views of treatment in cases of domestic violence assert that couples counseling is not the recommended first line of treatment. Martin (1995) states that many psychologists do not know how to screen for violence and may recommend couples therapy, an approach which could end up escalating violence between partners. Morrow and Hawxhurst (1989) feel that couples therapy requires that the victim share the responsibility for abuse, facilitates victim-blaming, may allow the abuser to deny responsibility for his or her actions, and even escalate the violence, as what the victim says in counseling could be used by the abuser as a catalyst to further violence. Despite the predominant recommendations to the contrary, Hammond (1989) admits that for lesbian couples, there may be a tendency to try to address the battering in a couples context.

Despite the evidence that domestic violence is a frequent presenting problem for both heterosexual and homosexual women (Bradford et al., 1994; Morgan & Eliason, 1992; Stith et al., 1991), little training in domestic violence issues or lesbian issues is offered to beginning counselors. While education on the entire spectrum of homosexual issues is lacking in many counselor training programs, lesbian battering was chosen for examination in this project because of its prevalence in the lesbian community and because of comparable levels of domestic violence in heterosexual couples (Brand & Kidd, 1986). Only lesbian, as opposed to both gay and lesbian, battering was chosen because of the dearth of information in this area (For comparison of heterosexual and gay male domestic violence see Harris and Cook, 1994).

This study sought to compare counseling students' responses to battering scenarios involving either a heterosexual or lesbian couple. It was hypothesized that subjects would, incorrectly, more often recommend couples counseling for the lesbian couple than for the heterosexual couple. It was also hypothesized that subjects would be more likely to recommend leaving the relationship in the case of a heterosexual woman than in the case of a lesbian and to find the heterosexual scenario more violent than the scenario depicting an identical lesbian abuse incident. Relationship between Attitudes Toward Women scale and the Homosexuality Attitude Scale is predicted to be such that as traditional attitudes regarding women increase, tolerance for homosexuality will decrease, a replication of previous findings (Harry, 1995; Kite & Deaux, 1986).

METHOD

Participants

A total of 71 (48 female and 23 male) master and doctoral level students in a counseling psychology program at a Midwestern university participated in the study. Ages of subjects ranged from 21 to 54 with a mean age of 29. Approximately 7% of the subjects were African-American, 3% Arab American/Middle Easterner, 79% Caucasian, and 7% Hispanic. Approximately 62% of the subjects were master level students, of which approximately 42% were in the community counseling program, 14% in school, 4% in vocational rehabilitation, and 1% in educational psychology. Approximately 24% of the sample consisted of doctoral students, comprised of approximately 20% counseling psychology students and 4% school psychology students. On average, students had completed one and one half years of their designated program. Further, approximately 3% of the sample identified themselves as homosexual, 92% as heterosexual, and 4% as bisexual (rounded numbers).

MATERIALS

Each subject read a two paragraph depiction of a battering scenario adapted from Harris and Cook (1994). The two scenarios were identical save the manipulation of sexual identity of the client. The text of the story is as follows:

The case of Mary Jones is assigned to you. Ms. Jones requested counseling following an incident with her partner that left her bleeding with a black eye. Mary, a 28-year-old interior designer, relates her story to you. She had arrived home late from work, turned on the TV, and then made some phone calls. Approximately ten minutes later, her partner, Julie Anderson (a sales representative), arrived home from work and became angry because Mary was on the phone. Julie yelled that she had things to do and Mary should make sure she gets home on time.

Mary then went into the kitchen to prepare dinner. Julie followed her, grabbed her by the arm and slapped her, knocked her to the floor, and then kicked her. As Mary lay there in stunned surprise, Julie left the house. The next morning, Mary called the counseling center.

For the heterosexual scenario, "Julie Anderson" was replaced with "Mike Jones." Race of the individuals in the scenario is purposefully not included so as not to introduce any extraneous interactions.

After reading the vignette, participants completed a questionnaire consisting of open ended questions (how would you describe behaviors of Mike/Julie and why, how would you describe behaviors of Mary and why, should Mary leave the relationship and why, and do you believe a similar situation occurred before and why), eight items rated on a seven point scale, and a rank ordering of options for Mary (individual counseling, couples counseling, group counseling, call the police, women's shelter, or do not recommend counseling). Subjects also completed the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS) (Spence & Helmreich, 1978) and the Homosexuality Attitude Scale (HAS) (Kite & Deaux, 1986). Finally, participants completed a demographic form.

Procedure

Participants were presented with the study during a class (either practicum, pre-practicum, internship, or introduction to counseling) and volunteers completed the questionnaire at that time. Half of the sample randomly received the lesbian battering scenario, and half received the heterosexual scenario. Participants were told the purpose of the study was to gather information on initial diagnostic impressions. Participants were then asked to read the vignette and answer the questions that followed to the best of their ability. Participants were also asked to complete the questionnaire without looking back to previous questions. The survey took an average of thirty minutes to complete.

RESULTS

Rank Ordering

A Friedman two-way analysis of variance was performed on the rank ordering of treatment options. The overall order, in decreasing level of recommendation, is individual counseling, couples counseling, call the police, women's shelter, group counseling, do not recommend counseling. There were significant differences by vignette. For the lesbian battering scenario, couples counseling was most often recommended as a first choice whereas individual counseling was the top recommendation for the heterosexual couple. Individual counseling was second for the lesbian scenario while "call the police" was second for the heterosexual scenario. For complete rankings, see Table 1.

Likert questions

The likert scale questions were analyzed with eight three-way analysis of variance, one for each of the eight scales. There were two between subjects' variables, gender of subject and sexual orientation of vignette. An alpha level of $p = .05$ was adopted for all analyses. Post hoc tests were performed where needed to test for differences between means.

Two of the eight analyses showed a main effect by vignette and another approached significance. Subjects reading the heterosexual battering incidents ($M = 6.06$) rated the incident as more violent than did those reading the lesbian battering incident ($M = 5.56$), $F(1,70) = 7.20$. Subjects would be more likely to charge the batterer with assault if it were a male abusing a female ($M = 6.63$) than a female abusing a female partner ($M = 5.72$), $F(1,70) = 10.77$. Those reading the heterosexual scenario ($M = 6.74$) held the abuser more responsible for the incident than did those reading the lesbian scenario ($M = 6.33$) which approached

TABLE 1. Treatment Option Recommendations Overall and by Scenario

Option	Ranking		
	Overall	Heterosexual	Lesbian
individual counseling	1	1	2
couples counseling	2	4	1
call police	3	2	4
women's shelter	4	3	5
group counseling	5	5	3
do not recommend	6	6	6

Note. Options given rating of 1 to 6, with 1 being the most popular, 6 the least.

significance, $F(1,70) = 3.62$. No significant differences occurred by gender of subject. No significant differences were found by gender of subject or scenario read in Mary's level responsibility, the batterer's right to use physical force, whether the abuser should be charged with assault, whether the abuser had acted this way in the past, or how much subjects liked both the abuser and Mary.

AWS AND HAS

A Pearson correlation was performed on the relationship between the AWS scores and the HAS scores. A significant negative relationship of $-.52$ was found such that as the AWS increased the HAS decreased; as participants' view of women became more traditional, their attitudes toward homosexuality became less tolerant.

More specifically, a main effect was found for gender of subject with men having more traditional views of women ($M = 37.83$) compared to their female counterparts ($M = 33.46$), $F(2,69) = 4.76$. A significant two-way interaction was also found. Women responding to the lesbian scenario had the lowest AWS scores ($M = 32.77$) while men responding to the lesbian scenario had the highest ($M = 40.79$), $F = 5.33$. No significant results were found for the HAS by gender of subject of vignette read.

Open Ended Questions

To the question "What terms would you use to describe the behaviors exhibited by Mike/Julie" and "Briefly explain why you chose these terms" subjects reading the heterosexual scenario elicited a total of 39 different terms to describe the behavior, the most common being "aggressive" and "abusive." From the subjects' explanations, themes were identified and answers were placed into one of seven categories: focus on description of physical violence (most common), focus on provocation, focus on control/self-centeredness, focus on communication style, focus on attitude toward women, focus on legal or professional definition of abuse, and focus on abuser's stress level/irrational behavior. Subjects reading the lesbian scenario elicited a total of 47 terms to describe the abuser's behavior, the most common also being "aggressive." Answers here only warranted three categories: focus on description of physical violence (most common), focus on provocation, and focus on denouncing use of violence/poor communication.

To the question "What terms would you use to describe the behaviors exhibited by Mary" and "Briefly explain why you chose these terms" subjects reading the heterosexual scenario elicited a total of 43 different terms to describe the behavior, the most common being "passive." From the subjects' answers, themes were identified and responses were placed into one of five categories: focus on appropriateness of help seeking behavior (most common), focus on self-centeredness of victim, focus on discrepant descriptions (i.e. both passive and assertive), focus on shock/surprise, and those not responding. Subjects reading the lesbian scenario elicited 33 different terms to describe Mary's behavior, the most common also being "passive." Answers here were placed into one of seven categories: focus on passivity or victim blaming (most common), focus on choice to seek help, focus on pity for victim, focus on shock/surprise, comments that the victim was not provoking batterer, focus on Mary as a victim, and failure to answer due to lack of information.

While no significant results were found regarding whether the victim should leave the relationship or whether a similar situation had occurred before for the couple, the majority

of persons responded "don't know" to these questions. 59.2% of subjects responded "don't know" to the question "Do you believe Mary should leave the relationship?" Explanations for this answer in the heterosexual scenario fell into four categories: felt there was not enough information to make a decision, answer would be dependent on Mike's willingness to change/seek counseling, answer would depend on Mary's opinion, and answer would depend on past history or frequency of abuse. For subjects reading the lesbian scenario, reasons given for responding "don't know" fell into five categories: felt there was not enough information to make a decision, answer would be dependent upon Julie's willingness to change/seek counseling, answer would depend upon past history or frequency of abuse, answer would be dependent upon whether or not issues could be worked out through counseling, and could not respond because subject did not know what kind of relationship it was.

Experience

Less than half of the subjects had classes pertaining to gay/lesbian issues or domestic violence. Of the respondents, approximately 37% had practical experience, 38% had personal, 70% had done reading, 41% had coursework, and 15% identified other experience with domestic violence or battered clients. Approximately 28% of the respondents had practical experience, 59% had personal experience, 65% had done reading, 48% had coursework, and 13% identified other experience with gay/lesbian clients or issues.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the present study demonstrates a difference in perceptions of a lesbian domestic violence incident compared to an identical incident between a heterosexual couple. Further, there is a tendency to make different treatment recommendations according to the couples' sexual orientation, more often recommending inappropriate treatments for lesbian couples than for heterosexual couples. The study also indicates that students' level of experience with battering and gay/lesbian issues is mediocre and could be improved upon. This study also demonstrates a general tendency to view a victim of domestic violence in a negative light, regardless of sexual orientation.

Renzetti (1989) claims that most sources of assistance utilized by heterosexual victims of domestic violence are not perceived by lesbians to be viable options. Hotlines, shelters, and police were the outlets least often used and most likely to be rated as little or no help. Results of this study demonstrate that mental health professionals don't view shelters or calling the police as options for lesbians either. Calling the police and going to a women's shelter were the least selected options for lesbian victims of domestic violence, but were the second and third most selected options for heterosexual victims of domestic violence. It would follow, then, that one of the reasons lesbians do not utilize shelters or the police is because the people providing services do not believe them to be an acceptable option for lesbians. Other possible reasons include perceived as well as actual homophobia present within these services and the type of reception given by therapists and other service providers.

Attitudes toward women and attitudes toward homosexuality could also play a role in how victims, both lesbian and heterosexual, are treated by services providers. This study demonstrated that as subjects' view of women became more traditional, their attitudes toward homosexuality became less tolerant. Significant differences between male and female respondents were also noted, with men tending to have the most traditional view of women. Negative

attitudes toward women on the part of service providers may then be an important indicator of whether appropriate services will be rendered to domestic violence victims, regardless of sexual orientation.

Results also support Hammond's (1989) assertion that there may be a tendency to try to handle lesbian battering in the context of couples counseling, while prevailing theories caution against it. Couples counseling was the most recommended option for lesbians while it was the next to last option cited for heterosexuals. Responses to open ended questions also indicated a greater tendency for subjects reading the lesbian scenario to recommend trying to work things out as a couple before making the decision to leave the relationship. Beginning counselors are likely to recommend a treatment that is detrimental not only to the lesbian victim's mental health, but also potentially to her physical safety and well being.

This study demonstrates the need for more training for counselors in the area of appropriate treatment options for all victims of domestic violence. Research estimates show domestic violence to be a therapeutic issue for 40-50% of clients (Avis, 1992, Stith et al., 1991) yet less than half of this study's respondents had any coursework or personal or practical experience in the area of domestic violence. As it is almost imminent that all therapists will at some time in their career work with victims of domestic violence, required courses examining evaluation and treatment of both heterosexual and lesbian victims of domestic abuse would seem warranted.

Extending the research of Harris and Cook (1994), who compared male to female battering, female to male battering, and male to male battering, the present study found that male to female battering was seen as more violent than female to female battering. The results of Harris and Cook (1994) (male to female battering was viewed by subjects as more violent than male to male domestic violence) paired with the present study results establishes a trend that heterosexual domestic violence is generally seen as more violent than homosexual domestic violence. However, other research indicates that in reality, domestic violence is equally abusive regardless of sexual orientation of the couple (i.e. Lie & Gentlewarrior, 1991; Renzetti, 1988; Waterman, Dawson, & Bologna, 1989).

This study gives an indication of prevailing views of a sample of our next mental health professionals; however, the sample was not randomly drawn and is thus not generalizable all counselors in training. The sample size was small, but fairly inclusive of most students with, at minimum, an introduction to counseling principles.

Avenues for future research in this area are virtually limitless. Specific areas that seem to require the most immediate attention, however, include an investigation of shelter workers' and practiced counselors' responses to battered lesbians as well an inquiry into the curriculum of graduate programs to see what, if any, lesbian issues are being addressed. We have some indication of how lesbians who use services feel about the way they are treated and the service effectiveness (Renzetti, 1989). Directly surveying the service providers about their perceptions of and biases toward battered lesbians would provide even greater direction for future educational efforts. Finally, heterosexual domestic violence has been the norm of comparison in virtually all studies of battering to include homosexuals (this one included). Greater similarity may lie between lesbian abusive relationships and gay abusive relationships and would warrant further research.

REFERENCES

- Avis, J. M. (1992). Where are all the family therapists? Abuse and violence within families and family therapy's response. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 18, 225-232.
- Bradford, J., Ryan, C., & Rothblum, E. D. (1994). National lesbian health care survey: implications for mental health care. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 63, 228-242.
- Brand, P. A. & Kidd, A. H. (1986). Frequency of physical aggression in heterosexual and female homosexual dyads. *Psychological Reports*, 59, 1307-1313.
- Buhrke, R. A. (1989). Female student perspectives on training in lesbian and gay issues. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 17, 629-636.
- Hammond, N. (1988). Lesbian victims of relationship violence. *Women and Therapy*, 8(1-2), 89-105.
- Harris, R. J. & Cook, C. A. (1994). Attributions about spouse abuse: It matters who the batterers and victims are. *Sex Roles*, 30, 553-565.
- Harry, J. (1995). Sports ideology, attitudes toward women, and antihomosexuality attitudes. *Sex Roles*, 32, 109-116.
- Kite, M. E. & Deaux, K. (1986). Attitudes toward homosexuality: Assessment and behavioral consequences. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 7(2), 137-162.
- Lie, G. Y. & Gentlewarrior, S. (1991). Intimate violence in lesbian relationships: Discussion of survey findings and practice implications. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 15, 41-59.
- Lobel, K. (Ed.) (1986). *Naming the violence: Speaking out about lesbian batterer*. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.
- Lloyd, S. A., Cate, R. M., & Conger, J. (1983). Family violence and service providers: Implications for training. *Social Casework*, 67, 431-435.
- Martin, S. (1995). Psychologists may spark violence by using inappropriate couples therapy. *APA Monitor*, 26(10), 35.
- Morgan, K. S. & Eliason, M. J. (1992). The role of psychotherapy in Caucasian lesbians' lives. *Women and Therapy*, 13(4), 27-52.
- Morrow, S. L. & Hawxhurst, D. M. (1989). Lesbian partner abuse: Implications for therapist. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 68, 58-62.
- Murphy, B. C. (1991). Educating mental health professionals about gay and lesbian issues. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 22(3-4), 229-246.
- Renzetti, C. M. (1992). *Violent betrayal: Partner abuse in lesbian relationships*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Renzetti, C. M. (1989). Building a second closet: Third party responses to victims of lesbian partner abuse. *Family Relations*, 38, 157-163.
- Renzetti, C. M. (1988). Violence in lesbian relationships: A preliminary analysis of causal factors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 3, 381-399.
- Spence, J. T. & Helmreich, R. (1978). *Masculinity and femininity*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Stith, S. M., Rosen, K. H., Barasch, S. G., & Wilson, S. M. (1991). Clinical research as a training opportunity: Bridging the gap between theory and practice. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 17, 349-353.
- Walker, L. (1984). *The battered woman syndrome*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Waterman, C. K., Dawson, L. J., & Bologna, M. J. (1989). Sexual coercion in gay male and lesbian relationships: Predictors and implications for support services. *The Journal of Sex Research* 26, 118-124.

Copyright of Violence & Victims is the property of Springer Publishing Company, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.