Letting Out the Secret:: Violence in Lesbian Relationships

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Over the past 2 decades, a variety of studies on domestic violence has confirmed that abuse is widespread. This increased attention to violence in intimate relationships has been focused on heterosexual couples, despite the assertion that 4-10% of the population is homosexual. Violence among lesbian couples has largely been ignored by family violence researchers, but clinical practitioners who are sought out by the battered and/or the batterers for therapy are well aware of the extent and nature of the battering that takes place in these relationships, and that battering is not limited to heterosexual relationships. This exploratory study takes a step toward an understanding of lesbian violence by examining the incidence, forms, and correlates of violence in lesbian relationships. Based upon the responses of 284 lesbians to a questionnaire, it was found that lesbian violence is not a rare phenomenon. This finding reflects the need for further research into this social problem in all intimate relationships, including homosexual relationships.

Letting Out the Secret:
Violence in Lesbian Relationships

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Over the past two decades, a variety of studies on domestic violence (Straus & Gelles, 1990; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980) has documented that abuse is widespread in our family units. This increased attention to violence in intimate relationships has been focused on heterosexual couples despite the assertion that 4-10% of the population is homosexual (Marmor, 1980). Although violence among lesbian and gay couples has largely been ignored by family violence researchers, clinical practitioners are well aware of the fact that partner abuse is not limited to heterosexual relationships. Until the 1980s, much of what was known about lesbian battering was based upon clinical and/or practice observation and reports from the battered lesbian. However, during the past 4 years, we have seen a few empirical studies (Kelly & Warshafsky, 1987; Renzetti, 1992) on this important topic. Although

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we acknowledge that more research on the extent and nature of violence in all intimate relationships (heterosexual and homosexual) is warranted, this article is intended to further our understanding of the victimization of women in intimate lesbian relationships from a social-exchange theoretical perspective.

If violence in lesbian relationships is apparent to clinical practitioners, why have family violence researchers ignored the issue? Several theorists offer their "political views" for this omission. Toder (1978) suggests that researchers have assumed either the politically radical position that lesbian couples will not have anything in common with heterosexual couples (including partner abuse), or the well-meaning liberal position that lesbian couples are just like heterosexual couples, and therefore do not warrant special investigation. Hart (1986) suggests several other reasons for the silence and denial surrounding lesbian violence. First, she asserts that lesbians recognize how threatening the reality of lesbian battering is to their dream of a lesbian utopia—a nonviolent, fairly androgynous, often separatist community struggling for social justice and freedom for themselves and other oppressed groups. Second, the lesbian community could not reach consensus about the causes or dimensions of lesbian violence nor about the consequences of discussing that violence publicly. Some lesbians feel it would destroy their credibility, and would make them even more vulnerable to homophobic attacks and to those in the general society who want to discredit the efforts of the battered women's movement (Hart, 1986). Although these viewpoints may have merit, their positions prevent us from understanding violence in intimate relationships, whatever the sex of the partners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Violence in lesbian relationships had not been well-documented. Until the 1980s, much of what was known about lesbian battering was based upon clinical observations and reports from victims and batterers. The last decade, however, has seen an increase in scholarly work on partner abuse. The literature review below provides an overview of abuse in lesbian relationships. Using a social exchange/social control theoretical framework, it offers a definition of lesbian battering, identifies sources of conflict and conflict resolution tactics used in lesbian relationships, and examines the relationship between early childhood victimization, autonomy-fusion, and violence in lesbian relationships. Finally, several hypotheses are generated from the literature review.

Lesbian Battering and Batterers

Many theories have been offered to explain violence in intimate heterosexual relationships (Gelles & Cornell, 1985). A social exchange/social control theoretical framework was used to organize our understanding of battering in lesbian relationships. The key assumption of the social exchange theory is that a partner in a committed intimate relationship will be violent toward the other partner because she can, and because social control mechanisms (e.g., victim hitting back, police intervention, criminal charges, imprisonment, loss of social status, and loss of income) do not serve to increase the cost to the batterer (Gelles & Cornell, 1985).

Following the social exchange/social control paradigm, Hart (1986, pp. 182-183) suggests that for a batterer to choose to batter her partner, she must first feel that she is entitled to control her partner and that it is her partner's obligation to acquiesce in this practice. Second, a batterer must believe that violence is permissible, and must be able to live with herself as an ethical or moral person even if she chooses to use violence against her partner. Third, she must believe that violence will produce the desired effect or minimize a more negative occurrence. Finally, the batterer must feel that neither partner will sustain physical harm or suffer legal, emotional, or personal consequences that will outweigh the benefits to be achieved through her use of violence.

Furthering her explanation of lesbian battering from a social exchange perspective, Hart (1986) defines battering among lesbians as a "pattern of violent and/or coercive behavior whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs or conduct of her intimate partner or to punish the intimate for resisting the perpetrator's control" (p. 173). As in studies of battering in heterosexual relationships, abusive acts employed in lesbian relationships to exert control may be sexual, psychological, emotional, and/or physical (Hart, 1986, pp. 183, 188; Renzetti, 1992).

Extent and Nature of Lesbian Violence

Few empirical studies have examined the extent and nature of violence in lesbian relationships. The two most cited studies were conducted by Renzetti (1992) and Brand and Kidd (1986). Renzetti (1992, p. 19) reported that of the 100 victims of lesbian battering in her study, more than half of the respondents (54%) experienced more than 10 abusive incidents during the course of the lesbian relationship, although 74% experienced 6 or more abusive incidents. Brand and Kidd (1986) studied the extent of physical

aggression experienced by 75 heterosexual women and 55 lesbians to determine whether men or women were more abusive in their intimate relationships. The results of their study indicated that men (76%) were more abusive against their female partners more often than were females (51%) in their lesbian relationships. Brand and Kidd also found that physical abuse occurred more frequently in heterosexual relationships than in lesbian relationships. Of the 55 lesbians in their study, 25% reported physical abuse in their committed relationships, whereas 27% of the heterosexual women stated that they had been physically abused by their male partners. The findings of these two studies support a growing body of empirical investigations, clinical observations, and polemic articles acclaiming the reality of lesbian violence. Many battered lesbians have reported that the emotional abuse encountered along with, or separate from, the physical battering, and diminished self-esteem are more painful and difficult to endure than the physical injuries (Hammond, 1989; Hart, 1986).

In short, battering threats may be direct, but often these threats are indirect or veiled efforts at intimidation used to establish control and power over the battered partner. Consequently, whenever the battered lesbian responds with increased fear, with efforts to change the batterer's behavior and/or attempts to distance herself from the batterer to prevent more battering, the batterer's control, power, and battering escalates. Thus a battered lesbian's increased sense of powerlessness may be one reason she remains in the relationship (Hammond, 1989, p. 92). This pattern of control, intimidation, and escalation of violence also characterizes violent and abusive heterosexual relationships (Straus & Gelles, 1990; Straus et al., 1980).

Early Childhood Victimization

Many female children are physically or sexually abused by family members or friends. As victims of violence, young women may learn that violence grants power (Hart, 1986; Straus et al., 1980). Children who are recipients of violence, mere observers, or actual perpetrators often learn that violence reduces the victim's control over her life. The fact that a woman was abused as a child is not a reliable indicator that she may batter her adult partner (Hart, 1986). However, as in heterosexual relationships, she may be more likely to seek a partner who will subsequently batter her in a repetition of her childhood experiences (Hart, 1986; Straus & Gelles, 1990). Waterman, Dawson, and Bologna (1989) found that 81% of all respondents in their study reported they were victimized (26.4% were sexually abused, 59.8% were physically abused, and 81% were verbally/emotionally abused) within

their family of origin (cited in Humphrey, Harrison, & Sowers-Hoag, 1991, pp. 16-17). According to Humphrey and her colleagues (1991), Waterman et al. further reported that past victimization in the family of origin was correlated with both increased vulnerability to being a victim and, at the same time, increased likelihood of being a batterer. Lie, Schlitt, Bush, Montagne and Reyes's (1991) investigation revealed that a lesbian who had been abused by a member of her family of origin or who had witnessed family violence as a child was significantly more likely to be a victim or a batterer in her intimate adult relationship. Coleman (1990) and Kelly and Warshafsky (1987), however, did not find a significant relationship between violence in family of origin and violence in current lesbian and gay relationships. Renzetti (1992, p. 70) stated that due to the lack of controls in her investigation, the link between early childhood abuse and likelihood of abuse in adult intimate relations could not be determined. From these findings, it can be concluded that the verdict is still out on the intergenerational thesis of violence in intimate relationships, which suggests the need for further research on this thesis.

Sources of Conflict

Some contemporary social scientists still are focusing their efforts on how daily living in a homophobic environment negatively affects lesbians' self-concepts and the quality of their intimate relationships. Other writers have suggested that conflicts in lesbian relationships tend to develop around a set of specific but related issues such as the dependency versus autonomy of the partners and the balance of power between partners (Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Kurdek, 1988; McCandlish, 1982; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978; Renzetti, 1992). Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that arguing about money management, the intrusion of work into the relationship, the habit of spending a lot of time apart from each other, and nonmonogamy were sources of conflict associated with poor relationship quality of couples in general, whether they are lesbian, gay, heterosexual married, or heterosexual cohabiting couples. These possible sources of conflict are further examined below.

Attachment and Autonomy—Social Fusion: All couples, regardless of sexual orientation, confront the difficulty of balancing the need for attachment or intimacy with the need for autonomy or independence in their relationships (Peplau et al., 1978). Problems often arise because of differing interpretations by the partners regarding appropriate or desirable types or levels of interaction in a love relationship (Renzetti, 1992).

Minuchin (1974) stresses the importance of "rules" in forming "boundaries" of the relationship that define who may participate in the relationship and how they may participate. The task of defining both the inner and outer boundaries of the dyad involves the crucial issue of how close to each other partners can become before they lose their individuality. Lesbian couples often discover in the course of therapy (McCandlish, 1982) that they have assumed "rules" against being separate that they were not openly acknowledging. If an unstated rule mandating "fusion" (Krestan & Bepko, 1980) is operating and if one partner makes an attempt to have separate friends, to be emotionally distant, or to hold a different point of view, the other partner may view her actions as a rejection. Sometimes even talking or dressing differently is viewed as a threat. Having thoughts and feelings that are not shared is especially threatening for some lesbian couples when one or both partners are overly fused with the other (McCandlish, 1982). Verbal and physical violence are some of the more defensive ways a threatened partner may attempt to express her need to be separate (McCandlish, 1982). Krestan and Bepko (1980) suggest that such conflicts, arising out of an inability to differentiate adequately between partners, occur more frequently and with greater intensity in lesbian relationships than in heterosexual relationships.

Perhaps as a response to a general lack of social validation and support (except within the lesbian and gay communities), lesbian couples may attempt to insulate themselves from the negativism and hostility of the heterosexual society by nurturing a relatively "closed" relationship (Krestan & Bepko, 1980). Although this perspective fosters emotional closeness, it also has the potential to generate insecurity (Lindenbaum, 1985). Indeed, Renzetti (1988) found that lesbian batterers tended to be overly dependent on their partners and resorted to violence in an attempt to inhibit their partners' efforts to be independent.

Power Imbalances: According to Renzetti (1992, p. 43), personal power refers to the ability to get others to do what we want them to do regardless of whether or not they want to do it. Thus personal power may be based upon differences in "social currencies" such as social class positions, income, economic security, employment skills and marketability, and social skills and network. It also can be based upon differences in age, physical power/ stature, and/or health conditions (Hart, 1986, pp. 176-177). As Hart states, spouses/ partners do not abuse their partners just because they have more or fewer attributes of personal power, and violence is not a necessary outgrowth of differential power. Violence may occur if the abuser believes: (1) it will achieve the change or compliance desired of her partner (a controlling

mechanism), (2) it will be tolerated in the relationship, and (3) it is safe to use violence (limited adverse consequences).

Studies of heterosexual couples have indicated that actual power imbalances or shifts in the power balances—particularly ones related to economics—between men and women are significant correlational, if not causal, factors in marital violence (Coleman & Straus, 1990; Renzetti, 1988, p. 384). Violence is more likely when the male perceives that his power in the relationship is diminishing because he is failing to live up to self-expectations or he is underachieving relative to his wife (Renzetti, 1988). These are status and economic issues revolving around the traditional rights and duties of the breadwinner. Total financial dependency of one partner on the other is both the usual situation and the "ideal" situation in the traditional heterosexual relationship, whereas it is neither in lesbian relationships (Hart, 1986). There is less likelihood that one partner will be the sole breadwinner in a lesbian couple, although it is also unlikely that both partners will contribute equally to the relationship.

Kelly and Warshafsky (1987) tested the use of this status perspective in understanding violence in lesbian relationships. They found no significant associations between specific status differentials (i.e., income, education, race, religion, and age) and the incidence of partner abuse. They did find, however, that respondents who reported having primary responsibilities for financial expenses as well as for household chores such as cooking were more likely than other women to be abused by their partners. These researchers also reported that while decisions were shared by partners, battering occurred more often in relationships where they were experiencing decision-making problems in household expenses and cooking.

Caldwell and Peplau (1984) reported that although 97% of the 77 lesbians they interviewed promoted and supported the ideal of equal power in their relationships, a sizable minority of them (39%) reported that the power distribution in their own relationship was unequal (Renzetti, 1992). Lesbians perceive a power imbalance to exist when one partner has greater resources (i.e., more education and a higher income) than the other. Moreover, such a power imbalance lowers the weaker partner's sense of satisfaction with the relationship (Hart, 1986). This pattern also has been demonstrated in heterosexual relationships (Coleman & Straus, 1990). Waterman, Dawson and Bologna (1989) tested a hypothesis that lesbian and gay male victims of forced sex would perceive themselves as having less power in their relationships, and fewer alternatives to their current relationships than those who are not victims of forced sex. The researchers used three 7-point scales to assess respondents' perceptions of their power in their current relationships, their

economic power in their relationships, and their ease in finding another partner for a future relationship. The results of the investigation revealed no significant differences between the victims of forced sex and nonvictims in their levels of perceived power, economic power, or ease of finding a new partner.

Although a power imbalance does not automatically generate violence, Renzetti (1992) found that abusive lesbian relationships tended to be characterized by an imbalance of power between partners. In particular, certain imbalances (e.g., large differences in social class and intelligence) were associated with a high incidence of severe forms of physical and psychological abuse.

METHODOLOGY

We designed an exploratory study to determine the extent and nature of conflict and violence in lesbian relationships. From the literature review, the following exploratory hypotheses were derived that are based on a social exchange/social control theoretical framework:

1. There are significant differences between levels of violence and sources of conflict experienced by the respondents.
2. More respondents will report higher levels of verbal aggression (psychological violence) in their relationships than physical violence.
3. Lesbians who were victims of childhood abuse (e.g., physical, sexual, and/or psychological) will report higher levels of physical abuse and verbal aggression than those who reported no early childhood victimization.
4. Lesbians who report higher levels of social fusion in their relationships will report higher levels of verbal and physical abuse.
5. Unequal social power in lesbian relationships has a positive correlation with levels of physical violence and verbal aggression.

Respondents for the investigation were participants at a large, regional, women's music festival held in the Southeast during the summer of 1989. We staffed a booth in the informational network area and solicited the participation of the women who came into this area of the festival grounds. About 400 questionnaires were passed out and 284 women (71% response rate) returned a completed questionnaire. Each respondent was, or had been during the past 6 months, involved in a committed, cohabitating lesbian relationship.

The recruitment method and the sample used in this study pose severe limitations on the generalizability of the findings. Reliability of data is always an issue in retrospective studies that cover sensitive and private topics such

as family/partner violence (Lie et al., 1991). Thus to minimize the effects of using retrospective data we asked respondents to recall battering episodes that occurred during the year prior to this investigation. Certainly the sample is not random because it is based upon a self-selected group of women attending a women's music festival. Consequently, respondents who volunteered to participate in a study on a sensitive topic such as lesbian violence may be vastly different from nonparticipants. Additionally, women who attended the music festival as compared to nonparticipants could have been better integrated into the lesbian community, more active participants in community-sponsored functions (e.g., women's music festival), and more comfortable with their sexual orientation. As shown by the demographics of this sample, the respondents are homogeneous in terms of racial backgrounds, educational levels, occupations, income levels, and age, which further limits generalizability. Moreover, an unknown percentage of the respondents have a partner in the sample. Also, insofar as we asked questions only about acts of violence directed toward the respondent, the partners who were the major abusers in a couple would have reported violence only if the victim responded in kind. For these reasons, we cannot interpret our percentages as reflecting the incidence in lesbian couples, and must remember that the percentages reflect victimization rather than occurrence of violence. However, the difficulties involved in obtaining a truly representative sample of a group as hidden and highly stigmatized as lesbians would be virtually insurmountable, thus dictating the use of a purposive sample.

Data Collection Instrument and Variable Identification

Predictors of Intimate Violence: Each woman completed a questionnaire requesting information about the nature of her intimate relationship and her experiences of conflict and violence. Background information collected from each respondent included educational and income levels, occupational status, number of dependents, religious/spiritual affiliation, and whether her relationship was monogamous.

Social fusion was conceptually defined as the degree to which partners balanced their need for attachment or intimacy with the need for autonomy or independence, without losing their individuality. Each woman was asked to describe the degree of social fusion characterizing her relationship. In particular, each respondent was asked to rate on a scale of 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*) how often she and her partner: (a) feels they need to do everything together; (b) feel they need to share all recreational and social activities; (c)

communicate in a way that includes mind reading and assumptions regarding the other person's needs or desires; (d) feel they never need to have independent time with personal friends not shared with the other partner; (e) insist on sharing professional services such as doctors or therapists; (f) insist on making regular telephone calls to the other partner at work; and (g) insist on sharing monies, clothes, and so on. The higher a woman's score, the greater the degree of fusion with her partner on each of the seven items used to measure social fusion.

An almost infinite number of issues can serve as *sources of conflict* in an intimate relationship. Based upon typical sources identified in the family violence literature (Hart, 1986; Straus & Gelles, 1990), we developed a list of 26 potential sources of conflict. Each woman was asked to indicate the extent to which she and her partner argued over issues such as employment, financial dependency, friends, who has the right to make decisions, and alcohol or drug use. Responses could range from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*almost all the time*).

Previous research has suggested that intimate marital/partner violence may be learned as a child in a violent home and repeated as an adult (Petersen, 1980). Therefore, we asked whether the respondent or her partner had been a victim of violence or abuse as a child, especially in her family of origin. *Prior victimization* was determined by asking whether the respondent or partner, while still a child, had been (a) raped by a relative and/or nonrelative, (b) sexually abused by a relative and/or nonrelative, or (c) physically and/or emotionally abused by a parent. These six variables were coded 0 (*No*) and 1 (*Yes*).

Measures of Intimate Violence: The *Verbal/Symbolic Aggression* subscale, the *Violence* subscale, and the *Severe Abuse* subscale of Straus's (1979) Conflict Resolution Tactics Scale (CTS) were used to measure verbal aggression, violence, mild abuse, and severe abuse in this investigation. Straus (1979, p. 77) defines *verbal or symbolic aggression* as the "use of verbal and nonverbal acts (e.g., threats) which symbolically hurt the other." Six items make up the Verbal/Symbolic Aggression subscale, with a response system of 0 (*never*) to 6 (*more than 20 times a year*). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they used acts of verbal/symbolic aggression toward their partners during the year prior to this investigation. The internal consistency reliability coefficient of the CTS-Verbal/Symbolic Aggression subscale was .80 for husband-to-wife verbal aggression. The parallel coefficient for the respondents in this study was .84, thus supporting its use with lesbian couples.

Straus's CTS-Violence subscale measures the extent and nature of physical force used to resolve conflicts. There are nine acts with a response system of 0 (*never*) to 6 (*more than 20 times a year*). The subscale has an internal consistency reliability coefficient of .83 for heterosexual couples, and .86 for respondents in this study. *Mild Physical Abuse* consists of the first three acts (e.g., throwing something at respondent; pushing, grabbing or shoving respondent; and slapping respondent) on Straus's Violence subscale (see Lockhart, 1985, for a detailed discussion of the methodological limitations of the CTS and this classification.). Straus's *Severe Physical Abuse* subscale measures the extent and nature of violent acts that carry high risk of causing serious physical injuries to the victim, and consists of six items (e.g., shooting a partner, cutting a partner, and beating up a partner). The reliability coefficient for the Severe Abuse subscale was .96 for the respondents in this study.

FINDINGS

Description of the Sample

Our questionnaire on violence in lesbian relationships was returned by 284 women. The majority of the respondents were White females (92.3%), were between the ages of 21 and 60 ($\overline{X}$ = 34, SD = 7.4), residing in the southeastern United States (73%), and currently involved in a committed monogamous lesbian relationship (89%). The vast majority (95%) had either some college education (65%) or had completed college, graduate, and/or professional school (30%). Most were employed full-time (75%), and most were located in administrative or higher occupational positions (72%). The median annual income of these women fell between $20,000 and $30,000.

Extent and Nature of Violence in Lesbian Relationships

According to their responses to the items in the CTS-Verbal Aggression subscale, almost all of the respondents (90%, n = 256) had been recipients of one or more acts of verbal aggression from their intimate partners during the year prior to this investigation (see Table 1). Among the women who reported verbal aggression, the median number of aggressive acts experienced by a verbally abused woman was 4.5 acts during the year. Sulking and refusing to talk (85.5%, Md = 3.6) and verbal insults or profanity (75.8%, Md = 4.8) were the most common forms of verbal aggression reported. This finding supports

TABLE 1: Percentage of Respondents Reporting Verbal Aggression and Physical Abuse with Median Number of Incidents Reported

CTS-Verbal Aggression Index	*Respondents* N	*Respondents* %	*Median Incidents*
Total with experiences	256	90.1	4.5
Partner insulted or swore at respondent	194	75.8	4.8
Partner sulked and/or refused to talk about it with respondent	219	85.5	3.6
Partner stomped out of the room, house or yard	197	77.0	2.8
Partner did or said something to spite respondent	170	66.4	2.3
Partner threatened to hit or throw something at respondent	40	15.6	2.2
Partner threw or smashed or hit or kicked something	102	39.8	2.0
Total with no experience	28	9.9	—
Total sample	284	100.0	3.0

CTS-Violence Index	*Respondents* N	*Respondents* %	*Median Incidents*
Total with experiences	87	30.6	2.8
Partner threw something at respondent	32	36.8	1.5
Partner pushed, grabbed or shoved respondent	68	78.2	1.5
Partner slapped respondent	31	35.6	1.2
Partner kicked, bit, or hit respondent with fist	30	34.5	1.3
Partner tried to hit respondent with something	19	24.1	1.2
Partner hit respondent with something other than fist	19	21.8	1.2
Partner beat up respondent	10	11.5	1.0
Partner threatened respondent with knife or gun	6	6.9	1.5
Partner shot or cut respondent with gun/knife	4	4.6	0 .5
Total with no experience	197	69.4	—
Total sample	284	100.0	0.24

Renzetti's (1988) conclusion that verbal threats were the most common form of psychological abuse reported by lesbians.

Although far fewer lesbians reported being the recipients of physical than of verbal violence, one or more incidents of physical abuse were reported by 31% ($N = 87$) of our respondents. The median number of incidents was 2.8 times during the year prior to this investigation. The most common forms of physical abuse were their partners pushing, grabbing, or shoving them (78.2%, $Md = 1.5$); their partners throwing something at them (36.8%, $Md = 1.5$); and their partners slapping them (35.6%, $Md = 1.2$).

A total of 11.6% ($n = 33$) of the respondents reported that they had been the victims of one or more of the *severe* forms of physical abuse (severe acts which consisted of the last six items in the CTS-Violence Index, a median of 1.3 times) during the year prior to this investigation. The two most common forms of severe abuse reported by these women were their partners kicking, biting, or hitting them with their fists (90.9%, $Md = 1.5$) and hitting them with something other than their fists (57.6%, $Md = 1.1$).

Sources of Conflict Experienced by Abused and Nonabused Lesbians

Verbal Aggression: The data presented in Table 2 indicate that important differences existed in level of conflict for respondents reporting no verbal aggression and those reporting verbal aggression in their relationships. In 19 of the 26 issues posed as potential sources of conflict, significant differences (as assessed by the *t*-test statistics) were found between the means of the verbally abused and nonverbally abused women reporting that they argued over the issues. The verbally abused respondents reported arguing over partner's job ($t = -5.36$, $p = .0001$), partner's emotional dependency ($t = -3.82$, $p = .0006$), housekeeping/cooking duties ($t = -3.40$, $p = .0008$), sexual activities ($t = -4.58$, $p = .0001$), and respondent's alcohol/drug use ($t = -5.51$, $p = .0001$) significantly more often than the respondents reporting no verbal abuse in their relationships. There were no significant differences between the two groups regarding conflict over their children, their friends, partner's financial dependency, partner's unemployment, and respondent's going out socially without partner. As in heterosexual relationships, verbal abuse between lesbian partners tends to revolve around issues relating to the level of commitment partners have toward each other and the relationship. Specifically, verbally abused respondents as compared to nonverbally abused respondents reported more conflict about sexual activities, jealousy, intimate involvement with others, and the respondent going out socially without her partner.

Renzetti (1992) has identified power imbalance between partners as a correlate to violence and abuse in intimate relationships. In Table 2, several sources of conflict were identified as issues relating to power imbalance: unemployment status and financial dependency of partners, housekeeping/cooking duties, and who has the right to make major decisions in the relationship. The data revealed that there was more conflict among the verbally abused on respondent's unemployment ($t = -2.76$, $p = .009$), respondent's financial dependency on the partner ($t = -2.72$, $p = .01$), housekeeping/

TABLE 2: Mean Scores for Sources of Conflict by Levels of Verbal Aggression Reported by Respondents

Sources of Conflict	*Mean Score for Respondents Reporting No Verbal Aggression*	*Mean Score for Respondents Reporting Verbal Aggression*	t *value*	p *value*
Partner's job	.26	.83	–5.36	.0001
Respondent's job	.41	.80	–2.28	.02
Partner's unemployment	.14	.22	–.64	n.s.
Respondent's unemployment	.09	.32	–2.76	.009
Partner's financial dependency	.27	.55	–1.64	n.s.
Respondent's financial dependency	.18	.44	–2.73	.01
Partner's emotional dependency	.41	.86	–3.82	.0006
Respondent's emotional dependency	.45	.84	–2.28	.02
Spending money	.64	1.04	–2.29	.02
Housekeeping/cooking duties	.41	1.00	–3.40	.0008
Partner's jealousy	.36	.77	–3.04	.005
Respondent's jealousy	.27	.66	–3.06	.01
Partner's children	.17	.24	–.69	n.s.
Respondent's children	.37	.26	–.65	n.s.
Sexual activities	.45	1.01	–4.58	.0001
Partner's intimate involvement with other people	.24	.53	–2.78	.009
Respondent's intimate involvement with other people	.24	.61	–3.46	.002
Who has the right to make major decisions	.23	.57	–3.32	.002
Partner's friends	.40	.58	–4.47	n.s.
Respondent's friends	.45	.64	–1.58	n.s.
Partner's relatives	.27	.63	–2.25	.03
Respondent's relatives	.27	.62	–3.23	.003
Partner's alcohol/drug use	.19	.47	–2.32	.03
Respondent's alcohol/drug use	.04	.41	–5.51	.0001
Partner going out socially without respondent	.14	.42	–3.28	.002
Respondent going out socially without partner	.26	.47	–1.82	n.s.

NOTE: n.s. = not significant.

cooking duties ($t = -3.40$, $p = .0008$), and who has the right to make major decisions in the relationship ($t = -3.32$, $p = .002$). The former two issues relate to economic power imbalance, which supports Renzetti's (1992) findings.

Level of Physical Violence: A one-way analysis of variance was employed to examine differences in sources of conflict for respondents who reported

no physical abuse, one or more acts of mild physical abuse (and no severe physical abuse), and one or more acts of severe physical abuse. If the overall F test was significant at the .05 level, the Duncan's Multiple Range Test (DMRT) was used to determine which set of means was significantly different (Kirk, 1982). The DMRT is an a posteriori contrasts test designed to systematically test for homogeneity of group means while controlling the Type I error rate. The data presented in Table 3 indicate that important differences exist among the no physical abuse group, the mild physical abuse group, and the severe abuse group regarding sources of conflict present in their relationships. In 23 of the 26 issues posed as potential sources of conflict, significant differences were found between the three groups. No significant difference was indicated for issues of sexual activities, partner's children, and partner's intimate involvement with others.

The DMRT revealed a significant difference between all three groups on the issue of partner's unemployment, with the severe physical abuse group having the greatest conflict and the no physical abuse group having the least conflict. The severe physical abuse group had significantly more conflict than the other two groups (but there were no significant differences between the mild physical abuse and the no physical abuse groups) on the following issues: partner's job, partner's financial dependency, spending money, housekeeping/cooking duties, respondent's children, who has the right to make major decisions, and the respondent going out socially without the partner. When there is an increased perception of power imbalance around issues of partner's financial dependency, spending money, housekeeping/cooking duties, and who has the right to make major decisions, the respondents reported significantly more severe physical abuse in their relationships than the other two groups. Also, level of abuse tends to escalate as conflict around partner's unemployment increases, which is another indicator of power imbalance in this investigation. This finding may indicate that when one or both partners began to have an increased perception that there is an imbalance of power, or a movement away from an egalitarian relationship to more traditional roles—duties and rights characterized in heterosexual relationships—some couples resort to more severe levels of physical abuse.

The physical abuse groups (mild and severe) had significantly more conflict than the no physical abuse group on the following issues: respondent's unemployment, respondent's emotional dependency, partner's jealousy, respondent's jealousy, partner's relatives, respondent's relatives, and partner's alcohol/drug use. The majority of the above conflictual issues seem to be centered on relatives, partners' relationships with each other, and alcohol/drug use. Working through issues of emotional dependency and jealousy could characterize a struggle for dependency versus autonomy in

TABLE 3: Respondents' Mean Scores on Sources of Conflict by Level of Physical Abuse

Sources of Conflict	*No Physical Abuse* (n = *196*)	*Mild Physical Abuse* (n = *48*)	*Severe Physical Abuse* (n = *30*)	F *value*	p *value*
Partner's job	$.68^{B}$	$.77^{B}$	1.43^{A}	13.9	.0001
Respondent's job	$.70^{B}$	$.85^{AB}$	1.13^{A}	4.24	.01
Partner's unemployment	$.19^{C}$	$.48^{B}$	$.75^{A}$	12.53	.0001
Respondent's unemployment	$.15^{B}$	$.40^{A}$	$.37^{A}$	5.98	.003
Partner's financial dependency	$.44^{B}$	$.67^{B}$	1.00^{A}	7.79	.0005
Respondent's financial dependency	$.34^{B}$	$.65^{AB}$	$.55^{A}$	5.26	.006
Partner's emotional dependency	$.73^{B}$	1.00^{AB}	1.23^{A}	7.07	.001
Respondent's emotional dependency	$.72^{B}$	1.02^{A}	1.07^{A}	5.07	.007
Spending money	$.93^{B}$	1.08^{B}	1.43^{A}	5.80	.003
Housekeeping/cooking duties	$.86^{B}$	1.02^{B}	1.50^{A}	9.38	.0001
Partner's jealousy	$.64^{B}$	1.00^{A}	1.03^{A}	5.54	.004
Respondent's jealousy	$.52^{B}$	$.94^{A}$	$.83^{A}$	9.13	.0001
Partner's children	$.18^{A}$	$.30^{A}$	$.43^{A}$	2.33	n.s.
Respondent's children	$.23^{B}$	$.23^{B}$	$.57^{A}$	3.34	.04
Sexual activities	$.95^{A}$	$.89^{A}$	1.23^{A}	1.65	n.s.

Partner's intimate involvement with other people	.43[A]	.68[A]	.63[A]	3.58	n.s.
Respondent's intimate involvement with other people	.48[B]	.75[AB]	.97[A]	7.41	.0007
Who has the right to make major decisions	.46[B]	.64[B]	.93[A]	6.21	.002
Partner's friends	.49[B]	.70[AB]	.87[A]	6.33	.002
Respondent's friends	.55[B]	.75[AB]	.97[A]	5.38	.005
Partner's relatives	.51[B]	.82[A]	.90[A]	6.05	.005
Respondent's relatives	.46[B]	.85[A]	1.07[A]	13.79	.0001
Partner's alcohol/drug use	.28[B]	.89[A]	.87[A]	21.39	.0001
Respondent's alcohol/drug use	.29[B]	.53[AB]	.70[A]	6.00	.003
Partner going out socially without respondent	.32[B]	.54[AB]	.67[A]	5.63	.004
Respondent going out socially without partner	.39[B]	.51[B]	.95[A]	6.26	.002

NOTE: There are 10 missing cases. Means with different letters reflect they are significantly different from each other. n.s. = not significant.

lesbians' relationships. This struggle could generate physical abuse as suggested by McCandlish (1982) and Renzetti (1992). The severe physical abuse group had significantly more conflict than the no physical abuse group (but the mild physical abuse group did not have significantly more or less conflict than either of the other two groups) on the following issues: respondent's job, respondent's financial dependency, partner's emotional dependency, respondent's intimate involvement with other people, partner's friends, respondent's friends, respondent's alcohol/drug use, and partner's going out socially without respondent. This finding may lend support to Renzetti's (1992) finding that lesbian batterers tend to be overly dependent on their partners and resort to violence in an attempt to inhibit their partners' efforts to be independent. Specifically, the severe physical abuse group argued more over issues of partner's emotional dependency, partner's friends, partner going out socially without respondent, and about respondent's intimate involvement with other people and the respondent's friends. Each of these issues relate to a struggle for independence versus autonomy in relationships.

Fusion and Violence

We used factor analysis on the seven social fusion variables and a factor score was calculated that accounted for 37% of the variance. The items in the factor analysis that explained the largest amount of variance were partners feeling a need to share all recreational and social activities ($r = .86$) and feeling a need to do everything together ($r = .87$). The remaining items in the scale had factor correlations ranging from .39 to –.55. A difference score was calculated to determine if there was a significant difference between respondents' need for social fusion and respondents' perception of partners' need for social fusion. This analysis revealed that respondents perceived their partners to have higher needs for social fusion in their relationships than they needed ($\overline{X} = -.20$, $t = -4.27$, $p = .0001$).

When examining the need for social fusion for the nonverbally abused and the verbally abused group, it was determined that there were significant differences in respondents' need for social fusion ($\overline{X}_{\text{no verbal abuse}} = -.49$, $\overline{X}_{\text{verbal abused}} = .08$; $t = 2.00$; $p = .05$) and respondents' perception of their partners' need for social fusion ($\overline{X}_{\text{no verbal abuse}} = -.53$, $\overline{X}_{\text{verbal abused}} = .17$; $t = 2.00$; $p = .05$). Regardless of respondents' need or their perception of their partners' need for social fusion, the verbally abused group felt a greater need to share everything with their partners than did the nonverbally abused group in this investigation.

The one-way analysis of variance and the DMRT revealed no significant difference between levels of physical violence and respondents' reported need for social fusion in their relationships ($F = 1.66$, $df = 2$, $p = .19$). However, there was a significant difference in level of physical violence and respondents' perception of partners' need for social fusion; that is, respondents who reported severe levels of physical abuse, compared to nonphysically abused respondents, perceived that their partners had a greater need for social fusion ($F = 4.34$, $df = 2$, $p = .01$).

Childhood Victimization and Lesbian Violence

The chi-square (χ^2) statistic was used to determine whether there was a significant relationship between experiencing verbal aggression/abuse and physical abuse as an adult at the hands of an adult partner, and having been a victim of abuse as a child. Only two significant differences were found between childhood victimization and verbal aggression/abuse. Respondents who reported having been emotionally abused by their parents ($\chi^2 = 5.16$, $df = 1$, $p = .02$) and partners who were physically abused by their parents ($\chi^2 = 5.02$, $df = 1$, $p = .02$) were more likely than other women to also report being the adult victims of verbal aggression/abuse in their lesbian relationships. The remaining sources of prior victimization (i.e., respondents and/or partners being raped by a relative and/or nonrelative, sexually abused by a relative and/or nonrelative, respondents being physically abused by a parent, and partners being emotionally abused by a parent) did not produce significant differences between respondents who were verbally abused and those who were not verbally abused in their current relationships.

There were four significant differences found between levels of physical violence and prior victimization. Respondents who reported that they were raped by a relative ($\chi^2 = 7.7$, $df = 2$, $p = .02$), raped by a nonrelative ($\chi^2 = 11.7$, $df = 2$, $p = .003$), physically abused by their parents ($\chi^2 = 6.0$, $df = 2$, $p = .04$), and emotionally abused by their parents ($\chi^2 = 6.3$, $df = 2$, $p = .04$) were more likely to experience physical violence and severe abuse in their current lesbian relationships. These findings lend support to previous studies on violence in lesbian relationships (e.g., Lie et al., 1991), which suggest that respondents who have experienced childhood victimization report more vulnerability to verbal and physical abuse in their current relationships. They also dispute the findings of other studies (Coleman, 1990; Kelly & Warshafsky, 1987; Renzetti, 1992), which did not find a relationship between prior victimization and current levels of abuse. Further research is warranted on

the intergenerational hypothesis; that is, whether the family of origin serves as a catalyst of adult violence, which, in turn, presupposes one to be a victim or abuser; or whether past victimization socializes one to live a "life script" of being a victim or abuser (Renzetti, 1992).

DISCUSSION

As Renzetti (1988) concluded, the dearth of research on lesbian violence should not be construed to imply that violence does not occur. Violence in lesbian relationships, just as in heterosexual relationships, has existed behind closed doors for a long time. The present research documents that violence in lesbian relationships is a problem that deserves further attention, especially if we are going to more fully understand violence in all types of intimate relationships.

The data presented here support Hammond's (1989) conclusions that abuse in lesbian relationships more often takes a nonphysical than a physical form. However, physical abuse, including its severe forms, is used as a mechanism for resolving conflicts. Verbal aggression/abuse in lesbian relationships tends to revolve around conflicts about partner's job, partner's emotional dependency, spending money, housekeeping/cooking duties, sexual activities, and respondent's use of alcohol/drugs. Physical abuse appears to be triggered by, or to erupt around, issues of power imbalance and/or a struggle for varying levels of interdependency and autonomy in the relationship. Respondents who perceived that their partners felt less of a need for social fusion in their relationship also reported lower levels of verbal aggression/abuse than their counterparts. Respondents who perceived that their partners had a greater need for social fusion tended to report higher levels of severe forms of physical abuse in their relationships. Verbal aggression/abuse was reported by respondents who had been emotionally abused and were living with partners who had been physically abused by their parents when they were children. Respondents who reported that they were raped by a relative or a nonrelative as a child, and who were physically and emotionally abused by their parents, were more likely to report physical violence in their relationships. It appears from this finding that these respondents have not been able to break the cycle of violence—a pattern so often cited as a consequence of victimization in heterosexual relationships.

In the present study, a limited set of potentially relevant personal resources were examined; however, we were unable to classify our respondents into couples for purposes of analysis. Future research might examine a wider range of resources (e.g., prestige, affection, intellectual companionship) and

use couples as the sample unit. Particularly, we suggest that power and status differences between partners; power and status differences between each participant and the cultural ideals; the self-esteem of each participant; and the attitudes and values of the participants regarding violence, dominance, and the rules surrounding intimate relationships are all variables crucial to the understanding of intimate violence.

It may be that women in lesbian relationships differ from those in heterosexual relationships in the availability and importance of particular resources that engender power. The determinants of the balance of power may go beyond attitudes and reflect processes of social exchange that can occur regardless of ideology or affectional preferences. Finally, lesbian batterers who believe that violence against their intimate partners is an acceptable means of resolving conflicts and achieving their personal goals may be similar in important ways to their male counterparts in abusive heterosexual relationships.

Research on the relationship between the balance of power and violence in heterosexual relationships has resulted in contradiction in propositions and findings. One such contradiction is that egalitarian marriages are characterized by a high level of conflict. The presumed reasons include: reluctance of males to give up their traditional prerogatives; the need to negotiate many issues that are normatively prescribed for couples following the traditional "husband as the head of the household" patterns; the fact that equality leads to greater interpersonal intimacy, which, in turn, is associated with conflict; and the higher the level of conflict, the greater the probability of violence (Coleman & Straus, 1990, p. 287). Based upon lesbians' strong adherence to ideals of egalitarianism in their intimate relationships and the nature of their relationships, it is hypothesized for future testing that egalitarian lesbian relationships will have lower levels of conflict, and consequently lower levels of violence than egalitarian, male-dominant and/or female-dominant heterosexual relationships, and in one-partner dominant lesbian relationships. This hypothesis may further the contradictions, but we must continue to research them for clarity and understanding.

Alhough our study did include a brief analysis of the concept of fusion-social distance in lesbian relationships, we feel additional research is warranted if we are to begin to fully understand lesbian battering. The statistics indicated that several significant differences were observed in the levels of fusion between victims of abuse and nonabused respondents, but future studies may benefit from other variables descriptive of the extremely high levels of fusion projected as characteristic of lesbian relationships. Some of those indicators may be the level of sharing of household and personal maintenance items or clothing between two women, perceptions of feminin-

ity by both partners, and a feeling of co-dependency, which may be perpetuated as insulation from discrimination and lack of acceptance by the larger society. Difficulty in establishing and maintaining careers as they relate to geographical mobility are also important issues that may affect fusion and ultimately affect the potential for violent relationships.

It has been commonly reported and believed that lesbian women feel that they gain a significant amount of warmth, caring, and understanding in lesbian relationships that is unlikely or unable to be gained in traditional heterosexual relationships. In essence, women are able to give these things to each other. This belief, whether substantiated or not, suggests that the relationship between fusion and violence may be very important as it relates to possible dependency, co-dependency, and conflict resolution within lesbian relationships. A high level of fusion in a relationship may produce behaviors used and emulated by both partners. Margolin (1980) proposes that if one partner views the other partner as benefiting from the use of coercive behavior, then the probability of the other partner resorting to similar behavior increases. This method of conflict resolution—coupled with blurred personal and role boundaries within a relationship—may enhance abusive tendencies and behaviors.

In short, if we are to provide better counseling services to lesbian batterers and their victims, as well as to heterosexual batterers and victims, we need further research on the incidence and correlates of violence in all forms of intimate adult relationships. The questions needing attention are not simple ones, but it is hoped that the present study has provided an impetus to, and useful suggestions regarding, their investigation.

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