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# RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN WOMEN'S SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS: THE ROLE OF MINORITY STRESS

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Despite a large body of literature addressing relationship quality and domestic violence in women's same-sex relationships, few studies have empirically examined how stress specific to living as a lesbian or bisexual woman might correlate with these relationship variables. Degree of outness, internalized homophobia, lifetime and recent experiences of discrimination, butch/femme identity, relationship quality, and lifetime and recent experiences of domestic violence were assessed in a sample of 272 predominantly European American lesbian and bisexual women. Lesbian and bisexual women were found to be comparable on most relationship variables. In bivariate analyses, minority stress variables (internalized homophobia and discrimination) were associated with lower relationship quality and both domestic violence perpetration and victimization. Outness and butch/femme identity were largely unrelated to relationship variables. Path analysis revealed that relationship quality fully mediated the relationship between internalized homophobia and recent domestic violence.

Domestic violence has increasingly been recognized as a significant social problem in contemporary U.S. society. Indeed, studies of domestic violence in the general population of women have yielded lifetime prevalence estimates from 17 to 32% (Russell, 1982; White & Koss, 1991), depending upon operational definition and sampling methods. The majority of these studies focus on male violence against women in heterosexual relationships. More recently, researchers have turned their attention to violence in women's same-sex relationships. Results of these studies have generally yielded prevalence rates that are comparable to rates in heterosexual relationships (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; Burke & Follingstad, 1999).

Although several recent studies have focused on the prevalence of same-sex domestic violence among lesbian and bisexual women, relatively few have examined correlates of such violence. Similar to heterosexual models of domestic violence, some models of same-sex domestic violence tend to focus on individual, psychological explanations. Authors such as Coleman (1994) and Fortunata and Kohn (2003) focus on personality disorders of the perpetrator. Similar to studies with heterosexual samples, some studies with lesbian samples have demonstrated positive correlations between alcohol use and both perpetration and victimization of domestic violence (Diamond & Wilsnack, 1978; Renzetti, 1992; Schilit, Lie, & Montagne, 1990). Other models of domestic violence among lesbians focus on the intergenerational transmission of violence—that individuals who witness or experience abuse as children will grow up to become either perpetrators or victims of violence. Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montagne, and Reyes (1991) found some support for this hypothesis, linking childhood victimization to both victimization and perpetration of domestic violence in same-sex relationships, while others (e.g., Coleman, 1994) have not found such correlations. Still other models focus on interpersonal factors as predictors of domestic violence, such as power imbalances between partners (Lockhart, White, Causby, & Isaac, 1994; Renzetti, 1988) and interpersonal dependency (Renzetti, 1988).

While all of the above factors show some similarities with heterosexual domestic violence, it is important to consider the unique factors that might be associated with domestic violence in women's same-sex relationships. Unlike heterosexual women, lesbian and bisexual women must contend with a society in which their lives and relationships

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are not the norm. The impact of this oppressive cultural context on the individual has been referred to as "minority stress" (DiPlacido, 1998; Meyer, 2003). Minority stress is psychosocial stress derived from being a member of a minority group that is stigmatized and marginalized (Brooks, 1981). For lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people, minority stress can result from external stressors, such as hate crimes and discrimination, as well as internal stressors, such as internalized homophobia (DiPlacido, 1998; Meyer, 2003). Minority stress can also result from experiences related to self-disclosure, including the stress of "coming out" and the stress of self-concealment (DiPlacido, 1998). For bisexual people, minority stress can include both stressors associated with homophobia and heterosexism, as well as oppression within gay and lesbian communities (Rust, 2000).

Prior research has established that stressful events can negatively impact intimate relationships (e.g., Murry, Brown, Brody, Cutrona, & Simons, 2001) and increase domestic violence risk (Cano & Vivian, 2001). For example, Cano and Vivian (2003) found that stress in occupational and interpersonal domains predicted women's use of violence in relationships, whereas only occupational stressors predicted men's use of violence. Furthermore, both threat and loss stressors were associated with women's violence, whereas only loss stressors were associated with men's violence. Women in same-sex relationships must contend with the same stressors as women in heterosexual relationships, such as financial issues, decisions about parenting and childrearing, career stresses, family of origin issues, etc. However, these women face many additional minority stressors due to their sexual orientation. The purpose of the current study was to examine how minority stress and identity variables specific to lesbian and bisexual women's lives impact their same-sex relationships and experiences of domestic violence. Although such variables have been linked to individual women's well-being and adjustment, few empirical studies have directly examined their impact on relationships (Peplau & Spaulding, 2000). In particular, we examined how degree of self-disclosure or "outness," experiences of discrimination and hate crimes, internalized homophobia, and sexual and gender identity are associated with relationship quality and domestic violence.

### *Outness*

In the context of cultural oppression, lesbian and bisexual women are faced with decisions, as individuals and as couples, around how and when to disclose their identity and relationship to others. While a number of contextual factors may serve as barriers for women to "come out," research suggests that a greater degree of outness is associated with lower levels of psychological distress, higher self-esteem, and more positive emotional states (Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001). Disclosure of sexual orientation can contribute to relationship quality by potentially increasing acknowledgement and validation for a couple from important others (Beals & Peplau, 2001). Conversely, lack of disclosure can lead to women becoming isolated within their relationship, potentially increasing pressure to maintain the status quo and reluctance to address problems directly (Almeida, Woods, Messineo, Font, & Heer, 1994). This secrecy and isolation may place additional stress on the relationship by depriving the couple of external validation and support for their relationship, which may in turn lead to increased risk for domestic violence (Sophie, 1982). Furthermore, not being out reduces the visibility of a woman's same-sex relationship and exposure to role models, which may create a sense that she lacks other options, making her more likely to tolerate abuse from a partner. Women who are less out may also be reluctant to seek help for problems associated with domestic violence.

Despite such hypotheses and clinical observations, previous research on outness and relationship quality has yielded mixed results. Murphy (1989) and Caron and Ulin (1997) found a positive correlation between outness and relationship quality, while Green, Bettinger, and Zacks (1996) and Beals and Peplau (2001) did not. These studies may have been hampered by the use of unstandardized measures of outness and small sample sizes. In addition, no study has examined the direct relationship between outness and domestic violence nor the possible indirect relationship of outness and domestic violence through relationship quality.

### *LGB Discrimination and Hate Crime Victimization*

The impact of cultural oppression is particularly important when considering domestic violence in any oppressed group. According to Almeida and colleagues (1994), "[p]rivate, intimate violence occurs within the larger context of cultural violence. This 'culture of violence' is embodied by an implicitly hierarchical patriarchal structure that establishes certain patterns of subordination and oppression. Intimate violence mirrors this more public violence" (p. 100). A great deal has been written about the relationship between individual acts of violence against women and the broader cultural oppression of women (cf. Koss et al., 1994). Lesbian and bisexual women's experiences must be viewed through the additional lens of cultural homophobia and heterosexism.

As a result of this cultural oppression, many lesbian and bisexual women have to deal with experiences of LGB discrimination and hate crime victimization. In a recent large-scale study, approximately 20% of sexual minority women reported being the victim of a sexual orientation–based crime or attempted crime (e.g., physical assault, sexual assault, robbery, and vandalism; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999). In another study, over 50% of LGB participants reported lifetime experiences of discrimination such as being fired from a job and being prevented from renting or buying a home (Mays & Cochran, 2001). Such heterosexist stressors have been linked to problems with individual psychosocial adjustment (Herek et al., 1999;

Mays & Cochran, 2001; Szymanski, in press); however, their link to relationship variables has not yet been empirically examined.

### *Internalized Homophobia*

The external stresses associated with cultural oppression are exacerbated when lesbian and bisexual women internalize negative messages about themselves and their relationships. Many authors have suggested that internalized homophobia and the stress of staying closeted can negatively affect the quality of women's same-sex relationships and exacerbate other relationship problems (cf. Brown, 1995; Ossana, 2000; Zevy & Cavallaro, 1987). For example, Zevy and Cavallaro (1987) asserted that lesbians who are closeted or uncomfortable with their sexual orientation often become experts at deceptive communication and rarely communicate their feelings and thoughts, which can impede intimacy in a relationship.

Internalized homophobia has also been hypothesized to be associated with violence against members of one's own group (Renzetti, 1998). Thus, a woman with negative feelings about lesbians might engage in violence against her own partner. Negative feelings about being LGB may also impact a perpetrator's ability to make meaningful connections with other LGB people, thereby creating a greater sense of dependency on her partner (Balsam, 2001). Renzetti (1992) found that the batterer's dependency on her partner, rather than the victim's dependency, was a risk factor for more severe and more frequent violence in lesbian relationships. Internalized homophobia may also be associated with both current and past victimization. For example, a woman who is victimized by a female partner may experience negative feelings about herself as a lesbian and other lesbians. A woman who believes that she is somehow defective may believe that she deserves to be treated abusively. In a qualitative study of women with histories of sexual victimization by a female partner, several participants reported that they attributed their abuse to being a lesbian (Girshick, 2002). Conversely, a perpetrator may use her partner's internalized homophobia to justify her own violence.

### *Identity Variables*

In addition to minority stress variables, the extent to which identity variables may impact experiences of domestic violence is unclear. The majority of studies on women's same-sex domestic violence focus exclusively on self-identified lesbians or have assumed a lesbian identity based on the gender of the partners. Yet scholarship on bisexual women suggests that these women experience unique stressors that may impact their psychosocial adjustment (Rust, 2000). Additionally, bisexual women may face additional stressors due to negative stereotypes about bisexuality (Peplau & Spalding, 2000). In a sample of LGB adolescents, Freedner, Freed, Yang, and Austin (2002) found that bisexual participants reported higher rates of partner sexual victimization than lesbian participants; however, it is unclear how many of the perpetrators were male. We could find no study that made similar comparisons in an adult sample of women. An additional identity factor to consider is gender roles and gender identity. In society at large, violence is usually associated with masculinity. Thus, it has often been assumed that in lesbian relationships, the more masculine or butch partner is the perpetrator of violence (Renzetti, 1992). Based on clinical observation, some have disputed this assumption (e.g., Balsam, 2001), yet no empirical study has examined this issue.

### *Goals of the Current Study*

The purpose of the current study was to examine the impact of minority stress and identity variables on women's same-sex relationships. The hypotheses were as follows: (a) lower degree of outness, higher internalized homophobia, and greater experience with discrimination will be associated with lower relationship quality for women who are currently in same-sex relationships; (b) lower degree of outness, higher internalized homophobia, and greater experience with lifetime discrimination will be associated with higher lifetime levels of perpetration and victimization of verbal, physical, and sexual violence in women's same-sex relationships; and (c) lower degree of outness, higher internalized homophobia, and greater experience with lifetime and recent discrimination will be associated with higher levels of recent victimization and perpetration of verbal, physical, and sexual violence in women's current same-sex relationships. Further, based on prior literature on minority stress among lesbian and bisexual women and literature linking relationship quality and domestic violence in heterosexual couples (cf. Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004), the relationship between minority stress and domestic violence was expected to be partially or fully mediated through its impact on relationship quality. That is, we expected that minority stress would result in lower relationship quality, which in turn was expected to predict higher levels of violent perpetration and violently being victimized. Based on minority stress theory and the work of Freedner and colleagues (2002), we tentatively hypothesized that bisexual women, compared to lesbians, would report higher levels of recent and lifetime domestic violence. Based on previous theory and clinical writings, we tentatively hypothesized that butch identity would be associated with higher levels of lifetime and recent domestic violence perpetration, and femme identity would be associated with higher levels of lifetime and recent domestic violence victimization.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants were 272 women who ranged in age from 18 to 66 years, with a mean age of 34.75 years ($SD = 10.27$). The

sample comprised 85% European American, 6% African American/Black, 2% Hispanic/Latina, 1% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American, and 4% biracial women. Levels of education completed by participants included 1% some or no high school, 3% high school diploma, 20% some college, 30% college degree, 16% some graduate school, and 30% graduate/professional school. Participants' total household income included 5% under $10,000, 20% $10,000–$29,999, 26% $30,000–$49,999, 23% $50,000–$69,999, 12% $70,000–$89,999, and 16% $90,000 or more. Residence of participants included 41% Northeast, 22% South, 16% Midwest, 18% West, and 3% Canada.

### Measures

*Demographic variables.* Demographic questions assessed gender, age, race/ethnicity, education level, income, and relationship status. Relationship status was assessed by asking participants if they were currently in a relationship with a partner and, if so, to indicate the gender of their partner and the length of their current relationship.

*Outness.* Participants' degree of outness was assessed using the Outness Inventory (OI; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000), which consists of 10 items reflecting the degree to which individuals are open about their sexual orientation in three spheres of their lives—family, religion, and work. Each item consists of a particular individual (e.g., mother) or type of individual (e.g., work peers) who is rated using a fully anchored 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status*) to 7 (*person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about*). For this study, we calculated an overall outness score by taking the average of the three subscale scores (Out to Family, Out to Religion, and Out to World). Reported alphas for the OI ranged from .74 to .97. Validity was supported by correlating the OI with variables such as identification with the LGB community and time spent in the coming out process. For this study, alpha for scores on the overall OI scale was .86.

*Internalized homophobia.* Participants' internalized homophobia was assessed using the Lesbian Internalized Homophobia Scale (LIHS; Szymanski & Chung, 2001), which consists of 52 theoretically derived items reflecting internalized negative attitudes concerning lesbianism across five dimensions: personal feelings about being a lesbian, connection with the lesbian community, public identification as a lesbian, attitudes toward other lesbians, and moral and religious attitudes toward lesbianism. We modified several of the LIHS items to be inclusive of bisexuals. Example of items include "I am not worried about anyone finding out that I am a lesbian/bisexual woman," and "I hate myself for being attracted to other women." Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The mean rating for all items is used to create a total scale score with higher scores indicating more internalized homophobia. Reported alpha and test-retest reliability for scores on the LIHS were .94 and .93, respectively (Szymanski, 2001; Szymanski & Chung, 2001). Validity of the scores on the LIHS was supported by expert review and significant correlations between the LIHS subscales and measures of self-esteem, loneliness, depression, social support, passing for straight, membership in a LGB group, and conflict concerning sexual orientation (Szymanski & Chung, 2001; Szymanski, Chung, & Balsam, 2001). For this study, alpha for scores on the LIHS was .89.

*Experiences of discrimination.* The frequency with which participants experienced discrimination was assessed using a series of questions developed for this study. Participants were asked if they had ever, since age 18, experienced any of the following kinds of incidents because someone presumed or knew them to be a lesbian/bisexual woman: been excluded from family events, been disowned by a family member, had a family member refuse to come to an event or party at your home, been fired from a job, been verbally harassed or verbally attacked, had your home or property vandalized or damaged, been threatened with physical violence, been physically attacked, and been physically assaulted. Participants were also asked to indicate whether or not each of these incidents had occurred in the past year. Responses were summed to create "discrimination ever" and "discrimination past year" scores.

*Sexual identity.* Participants were asked to select the category that best applies to how they identify themselves. Responses were then coded as "lesbian/gay" or "bisexual."

*Butch/femme identity.* Participants' identification with a butch or femme identity was assessed using a Likert scale ranging from 0 (*very femme*) to 6 (*very butch*). Participants were asked to rate themselves on the "butch/femme continuum."

*Relationship quality.* Participants' relationship quality was assessed using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976), which consists of 32 items reflecting the quality of adjustment in marriage and other dyads. The DAS contains four subscales: Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction, Dyadic Cohesion, and Affectional Expression. Respondents are asked to rate the extent of agreement between you and your partner on a variety of items such as "handling family finances" and "leisure time interests and activities." Each of the first three subscales use a 6-point Likert scale, however Affectional Expression uses a yes/no format for rating items. For Dyadic Consensus, the scale ranges from 0 (*always agree*) to 5 (*never agree*). The scale for Dyadic Satisfaction ranges from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*all of the time*). The Dyadic Cohesion subscale ranges from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*often*). We added three items relevant to lesbian relationships: "being 'out'," "my desire to be independent,"

and "my partner's desire to be independent." Respondents are also asked to rate how often things such as "discussing ending your relationship" and "have a stimulating exchange of ideas" occur in their relationship. According to Spanier (1976), the scores on the total scale and four subscales had internal consistency reliabilities of .96 (DAS), .90 (Consensus), .94 (Satisfaction), .86 (Cohesion), and .73 (Affectional Expression). Validity was supported by expert judges, factor analysis, correlations with other measures of relationship adjustment, and discrimination in scores of divorced and married persons. Mean total and subscale scores indicate higher relationship quality. Alphas for the current sample were .93 (DAS), .84 (Consensus), .87 (Satisfaction), .76 (Cohesion), .62 (Affectional Expression), and .77 (LGB-specific items).

*Domestic violence.* The amount of domestic violence experienced and perpetrated by participants was assessed using a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale, Revised Edition (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The CTS2 is a 60-item scale designed to measure the extent to which certain tactics, including violence, have been used to deal with conflict in an intimate relationship in the past year. The CTS2 includes two questions for each item, assessing actions done both by and to the participant. The CTS2 assesses the frequency of each item within the past year, ranging from 1 (*once*) to 6 (*more than 20 times*). In the current study, participants were asked to report only those tactics that occurred with a female partner. Individuals who reported being the recipient of one or more tactics on the physical violence, injury, or sexual coercion subscales were classified as victims of physical violence; individuals who reported perpetrating one or more experiences on these subscales were classified as perpetrators of physical violence. Participants were also asked to circle yes or no to indicate whether they had ever experienced each item in the context of any intimate relationship with a woman since the age of 18 and were categorized similarly according to whether or not they had ever experienced or perpetrated physical abuse, sexual abuse, or injury on or by a partner. Given the high frequency of use of at least some tactics of psychological aggression, participants' responses were summed on these scales.

For the current study, items were added to assess LGB-specific tactics of psychological aggression. These items are: "I threatened to tell my partner's employer, family, or others that she is lesbian/gay/bisexual," "I forced my partner to show physical or sexual affection in public, even though she didn't want to," "I used my partner's age, race, class, or religion against her," "I questioned whether my partner was a 'real' lesbian, gay, or bisexual woman," and "I told my partner she deserves what she gets because she is a lesbian/gay/bisexual woman." As with the rest of the CTS2 items, parallel items that read "My partner did this to me" followed each LGB-specific item, and participants were asked to indicate tactics that occurred in the past year and ever since age 18. Participants were then classified as perpetrators or victims of LGB-specific tactics based on whether they endorsed at least one of the four items.

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited through two methods. First, lesbian and bisexual women were asked to participate at two regional "pride" events, one in Burlington, Vermont, and one in Atlanta, Georgia. Participants were given the option of completing the survey at the event or taking it with them with a stamped return envelope. Only 10 participants opted to fill out the survey at the pride events; the rest mailed it in. Second, participants were recruited through "snowball" sampling by distributing e-mails advertising the study on lesbian and bisexual women's listservs. E-mails were sent specifically to listservs for women of color to increase the diversity of the sample. Potential participants were instructed to complete the survey only if they were over 18 years of age, female, and had ever dated or had a relationship with another woman. Those who expressed an interest were asked to distribute additional surveys to their lesbian and bisexual friends. Of 600 questionnaires distributed, 272 were returned, yielding a response rate of 45%. Because it was not certain that all surveys reached potential respondents, this figure may be an underestimate.

## RESULTS

### *Descriptive Data*

Of 272 participants, 210 (77%) identified as lesbian or gay, 50 (18%) identified as bisexual, 1 (0.4%) identified as heterosexual, and 11 (4%) identified their sexual orientation as "other." Seventy-five percent (204) of participants reported that they are currently in a relationship with a partner or spouse. Of these participants, 92% (186) reported that their partner is female. Length of current same-sex relationship ranged from 1 month to 25 years, $M = 4.2$ years ($SD = 4.9$). All participants were retained for analyses of lifetime domestic violence experiences because the study was advertised as being for women who have ever had a same-sex relationship, regardless of current sexual identity label or relationship status. The lifetime domestic violence questions assessed relationship violence that occurred only in same-sex relationships, so domestic violence in current or past heterosexual relationships would not be reported in the survey.

Table 1 presents prevalence of lifetime and past-year domestic violence. Forty percent of participants reported that they had been physically or sexually violent to a female partner; 44% reported that they had been the recipient of physical or sexual violence by a female partner. Looking at overlap between lifetime perpetration and victimization, 31% of participants reported both, while 10% reported only victimization and 7% reported only perpetration.

**Table 1**

Prevalence of Lifetime and Past-Year Domestic Violence

| *Variable* | *N* | *%* |
|---|---|---|
| Lifetime domestic violence ($n = 272$) | | |
| Physical/sexual perpetration | 105 | 40.1 |
| Physical/sexual victimization | 112 | 43.6 |
| LGB-specific perpetration | 89 | 33.5 |
| LGB-specific victimization | 92 | 34.8 |
| | *M* | *SD* |
| Verbal perpetration[a] | 2.8 | 2.3 |
| Verbal victimization[a] | 2.8 | 2.1 |
| Past-year domestic violence[b] ($n = 144$) | | |
| Physical/sexual perpetration | 31 | 21.5 |
| Physical/sexual victimization | 38 | 26.4 |
| LGB-specific perpetration | 24 | 16.7 |
| LGB-specific victimization | 21 | 14.6 |
| | *M* | *SD* |
| Verbal perpetration[c] | 11.1 | 16.0 |
| Verbal victimization[c] | 11.1 | 16.8 |

[a]Sum of "yes" responses to five types of verbal aggression. [b]Past-year domestic violence analyses include only participants who have been in a relationship with a same-sex partner for at least one year. [c]Summed frequency score for five types of verbal aggression, with 0 = not at all, 1 = once in the past year, 2 = twice in the past year, 4 = three to five times in the past year, 8 = 6 to 10 times in the past year, 15 = 11 to 20 times in the past year, and 25 = more than 20 times in the past year.

### *Correlates of Relationship Quality*

To test the first hypothesis, we conducted bivariate analyses examining relationships between minority stress variables and relationship quality. Given that the DAS assesses current relationship quality, only participants who reported a current relationship with a female partner ($n = 186$) were included in these analyses. As predicted, internalized homophobia was negatively correlated with relationship quality ($r = -.26, p < .001$) and with four of the five DAS subscales. The strongest correlation was with the LGB-specific subscale ($r = -.30, p < .001$), indicating that participants with less internalized homophobia reported less discord regarding LGB-specific issues such as outness and independence. Outness was not correlated with overall relationship quality but was correlated with the LGB-specific subscale ($r = .27, p < .001$), indicating that participants who are more out experience less discord regarding LGB-specific issues. Lifetime and past-year experiences of discrimination were not significantly correlated with relationship quality.

### *Correlates of Lifetime Domestic Violence*

To test the second hypothesis, we conducted bivariate analyses to examine relationships between internalized homophobia, lifetime discrimination, outness, and lifetime domestic violence. The results are shown in Table 2. As predicted, internalized homophobia was correlated with being victimized by physical/sexual violence. Contrary to prediction, internalized homophobia was not significantly correlated with perpetration of physical/sexual violence, although this analysis approached significance ($p = .056$). Also as predicted, lifetime discrimination was positively correlated with all of the domestic violence variables except for LGB-specific perpetration and victimization. Contrary to our prediction, outness was not correlated with any of the domestic violence variables.

**Table 2**

Intercorrelations Between Minority Stress Variables and Relationship Variables

| | *Outness Total* | *LIHS Total* | *Discrimination Ever* | *Discrimination Past Year* | *DAS Total* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Mean *(SD)* | 4.9 (1.4) | 1.8 (0.6) | 1.5 (1.7) | 0.6 (1.0) | 3.7 (0.4) |
| DAS total | .07 | −.26*** | .01 | −.02 | — |
| PSY ever P | .08 | .08 | .30*** | — | — |
| PSY ever V | .08 | .10 | .30*** | — | — |
| LGB ever P | −.03 | .07 | .12 | — | — |
| LGB ever V | −.06 | −.05 | .11 | — | — |
| DV ever P | .08 | .12 | .20** | — | — |
| DV ever V | −.03 | .12* | .18** | — | — |
| PSY year P | −.03 | .12 | .01 | .01 | −.51*** |
| PSY year V | −.09 | .09 | −.06 | .09 | −.46*** |
| LGB year P | −.08 | .07 | −.10 | −.01 | −.38*** |
| LGB year V | −.09 | .11 | −.03 | .10 | −.30*** |
| DV year P | −.07 | .19* | −.13 | −.00 | −.41*** |
| DV year V | −.13 | .22* | −.10 | −.08 | −.49*** |

*Note.* For all domestic violence variables, P = perpetration; V = victimization; PSY = psychological aggression; LGB = LGB-specific psychological aggression; DV = physical or sexual violence; LIHS = Lesbian Internalized Homophobia Scale; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale. Analyses of past-year domestic violence include only participants who report that they have been in a relationship with a female partner for at least one year.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

A series of hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted to identify the best predictors of lifetime physical/sexual violence perpetration and victimization. To identify covariates for this analysis, we first examined demographic correlates of domestic violence. Race (White or Woman of Color) and education were significantly associated with both perpetration and victimization, with Women of Color and those with less education reporting more violence. These demographic covariates were entered as predictors in Step 1 of the regression analyses. Internalized homophobia and lifetime discrimination, the two minority stress variables showing the strongest relationships with domestic violence variables in the bivariate analyses, were entered in Step 2. The overall model predicting lifetime perpetration was significant, accounting for 10% of the variance. Education, internalized homophobia, and lifetime discrimination made unique contributions to the model, while race did not (see Table 3). The overall model predicting lifetime victimization was also significant, accounting for 28% of the variance. Race and lifetime discrimination made unique contributions to the model, while education level and internalized homophobia did not. Follow-up analyses using lifetime verbal perpetration and victimization as outcome variables had similar results, with lifetime discrimination emerging as the strongest predictor of verbal violence. Because none of the minority stress variables significantly predicted lifetime LGB-specific violence, analyses were not conducted with this outcome variable.

### *Correlates of Recent Domestic Violence*

To test the third hypothesis, we conducted bivariate analyses to examine relationships between minority stress variables, outness, and recent domestic violence. Given that the domestic violence questions assessed violence that occurred in the past year with a female partner, only participants who reported a current relationship with a female partner of at least one year were included in these analyses ($n = 144$). As predicted, internalized homophobia was associated with both perpetration and victimization of physical/sexual violence in the past year (see Table 2). However, contrary to our prediction, lifetime discrimination, past-year discrimination, and outness were not correlated with any of the domestic violence variables. We also examined associations between relationship quality and recent domestic violence. As shown in Table 2, relationship quality was strongly negatively correlated with all of the domestic violence variables.

### *Path Analysis Predicting Recent Domestic Violence*

To test the fourth hypothesis, we conducted a path analysis. Because internalized homophobia was the only minority stress variable that correlated significantly with recent domestic violence in bivariate analyses, this was the only minority stress variable selected for inclusion in the path analysis. We conducted bivariate analyses to identify potential demographic covariates. Age, race, education, and income were not significantly correlated with recent

**Table 3**

Hierarchical Linear Regression Analyses Predicting Lifetime Domestic Violence

| *Criterion* | *Step* | *Predictor* | *B* | *SEB* | *ß* | *R* | $R^2$ | *Change in* $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lifetime DV perpetration | | | | | | .20** | .04** | .04** |
| | Step 1 | | | | | | | |
| | | Race | .13 | .09 | .10 | | | |
| | | Education | −.06 | .03 | −.16* | | | |
| | | | | | | .31*** | .10*** | .06*** |
| | Step 2 | | | | | | | |
| | | Race | .10 | .08 | .08 | | | |
| | | Education | −.06 | .03 | −.15* | | | |
| | | Internalized homophobia | .12 | .06 | .14* | | | |
| | | Lifetime discrimination | .05 | .02 | .21** | | | |
| Lifetime DV victimization | | | | | | .21** | .04** | .04** |
| | Step 1 | | | | | | | |
| | | Race | .21 | .09 | .16* | | | |
| | | Education | −.04 | .03 | −.11 | | | |
| | | | | | | .28** | .08** | .04** |
| | Step 2 | | | | | | | |
| | | Race | .19 | .09 | .14* | | | |
| | | Education | −.04 | .03 | −.11 | | | |
| | | Internalized homophobia | .07 | .06 | .09 | | | |
| | | Lifetime discrimination | .05 | .02 | .18** | | | |

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

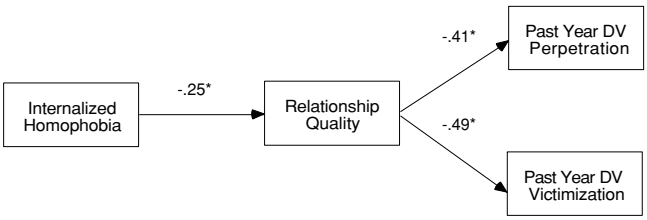


**Fig. 1.** Path analysis predicting recent domestic violence. DV = Domestic Violence
*$p < .01$.

domestic violence and thus were not included in the path analysis.

To test whether relationship quality mediated the relationship between internalized homophobia and recent domestic violence, we followed the steps outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986; see Figure 1). First, a significant relationship must exist between the predictor variable (internalized homophobia) and the outcome variables (past-year perpetration and past-year victimization). Indeed, two separate regression analyses indicated that higher internalized homophobia was associated with increased perpetration, $\beta = .19$, $p < .05$, and having been victimized more often, $\beta = .21$, $p < .05$. Second, a relationship between the predictor variable (internalized homophobia) and the mediator variable (relationship quality) must be demonstrated. A regression analysis showed that higher internalized homophobia was associated with lower relationship quality, $\beta = -.25$, $p < .01$. Third, a relationship between the mediator and the outcome variables must be demonstrated. Two separate regression analyses showed that lower relationship quality was associated with increased perpetration, $\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$, and increased victimization, $\beta = -.49$, $p < .001$. Finally, to demonstrate full mediation, the path between the predictor and the outcome variables must no longer be significant when the mediator is included in the model. A regression analysis showed that when internalized homophobia and relationship quality were entered simultaneously as predictors of past-year perpetration, only relationship quality was a significant predictor, $\beta = -.37$, $p < .001$. Similarly, when internalized homophobia and relationship quality were entered simultaneously as predictors of past-year victimization, only relationship quality was a significant predictor, $\beta = -.44$, $p < .001$. Thus, the relationship between internalized homophobia and past-year domestic violence appears to be fully mediated by relationship quality.

### *Bisexual Women Compared to Lesbians*

To test the fifth hypothesis, we conducted *t* tests and chi-square tests comparing lesbian and bisexual participants on the domestic violence variables. Participants who indicated that their sexual orientation was heterosexual or other were excluded from this analysis ($n = 12$). As predicted, two significant group differences were found. Bisexual women (46.2%), compared to lesbians (15.2%) were more likely to report LGB-specific aggression against a female partner in the past year, $\chi^2$ (1, $N = 138$) = 7.6, $p < .01$. Lesbians ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 2.3$), compared to bisexual women ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 1.8$), reported more lifetime psychological aggression against a female partner, $t(247) = 2.6$, $p < .01$.

### *Correlates of Butch/Femme Identity*

On the butch/femme identity item, the participants reported a mean score of 2.5 ($SD = 1.5$), indicating that participants overall identified closer to the femme end of the scale. To test our final hypothesis, we conducted correlational analyses between butch/femme identity and domestic violence variables. Contrary to our prediction, butch/femme identity was not significantly correlated with lifetime or recent verbal or physical/sexual victimization or perpetration. In partial support of our prediction, butch/femme identity showed a weak correlation with lifetime LGB-specific verbal victimization, $r = -.17$, $p < .01$, with more femme identity associated with more victimization.

## DISCUSSION

The current study was one of the first to empirically examine the role of minority stress in lesbian and bisexual women's same-sex relationships. Consistent with DiPlacido's (1998) theoretical model, minority stress was operationalized to include both internalized homophobia and external experiences of heterosexist discrimination. Consistent with clinical and theoretical reports, internalized homophobia was negatively associated with relationship quality. Contrary to expectations, recent and lifetime heterosexist discrimination were not related to relationship quality. It may be that same-sex couples are better equipped to cope with experiences that happen outside of the dyadic relationship than with internal beliefs, which may be more hidden. It is also possible that the couple relationship can serve as a safe haven for such experiences, helping to buffer individuals from their effects. It is also important to consider that the current study measured the occurrence of discriminatory events, but not the perceived impact of these events. It is possible that the extent to which an individual experiences discriminatory events as stressful may play a more salient role in their relationship functioning.

Using better assessment methods than previous studies, our findings did not reveal a significant relationship between outness and relationship quality. This finding was contrary to our hypothesis, but consistent with some research indicating no relationship between these two variables (cf., Green et al., 1996; Beals & Peplau, 2001). An alternative hypothesis is that a discrepancy between or discord over partners' level of outness is more important in influencing relationship quality than outness itself. Indeed, in the current study, outness was negatively associated with

the LGB-specific conflict items on the DAS, which included conflict regarding being out and issues of independence. Thus, outness may impact women's same-sex relationships in a more circumscribed way. In addition, it is important to consider that outness can have both benefits and costs, depending on specific social context factors. For some lesbian and bisexual women, not disclosing to friends, family, or colleagues may represent a self-protective stance against the perceived threat of discrimination or violence.

Although the sociocultural context of homophobia and heterosexism plays a role in the lives of all lesbian and bisexual women, individual women experience this context differently. As hypothesized, the extent to which participants endorsed internalized homophobic beliefs and the number of self-reported experiences of discrimination showed some correlation with lifetime domestic violence variables, although these relationships were generally modest. Internalized homophobia was associated with lifetime victimization by a female partner. It may be that women who have been treated badly by a lesbian or bisexual partner hold more negative beliefs about lesbian and bisexual women in general. Conversely, women who have internalized more negative beliefs about themselves as lesbian or bisexual women may be more likely to remain in abusive relationships because they may harbor beliefs that they deserve the abuse.

Also as predicted, experiences of discrimination showed moderate correlations with lifetime perpetration of psychological and physical/sexual aggression against a partner. This finding is consistent with previous literature on stress and women's use of violence in intimate relationships (Cano & Vivian, 2001). While women's violence in general may be particularly influenced by external stressors (Cano & Vivian, 2003), the stress of living in a heterosexist society may be one factor that specifically contributes to the use of violence against one's partner among lesbian and bisexual women. Discrimination was also associated with lifetime victimization by a same-sex partner. Individuals who have experienced one traumatic interpersonal event are generally at increased risk for future events; this connection among lesbian and bisexual women should be explored in future research. Finally, when both lifetime discrimination and internalized homophobia were considered together, lifetime discrimination emerged as a stronger predictor of domestic violence. Thus, external experiences of minority stress are particularly important to consider in understanding the role of the sociocultural context in women's same-sex domestic violence.

Our hypothesis that minority stress would predict past-year violence in a current same-sex relationship was partially supported. Internalized homophobia, but not discrimination, emerged as a modest predictor of past-year domestic violence. Consistent with our hypothesis, the relationship between internalized homophobia and recent domestic violence was fully mediated by relationship quality. Thus, our data is consistent with minority stress theory suggesting that internalized oppression results in poorer relationship quality (e.g., Brown, 1995) and with research on heterosexuals suggesting that poorer relationship quality leads to domestic violence (Stith et al., 2004).

Prior research on women's same-sex relationships has typically focused on lesbians. A relative strength of the current study was the inclusion of self-identified bisexual women. Contrary to our prediction, bisexual women did not differ from lesbians on lifetime or recent experiences of physical/sexual domestic violence. However, bisexual women reported more recent LGB-specific psychological aggression, and lesbians reported more lifetime psychological aggression. These differences should be investigated further in future research. Specifically, it would be interesting to assess whether or not this aggression occurred in mixed-orientation relationships. It may be that the unique stresses facing bisexual women and the group tensions between bisexual women and lesbians (Rust, 1993) lead to greater levels of conflict around issues of identity in intimate relationships between bisexual women and lesbians.

This study assessed the extent to which butch/femme identity is related to domestic violence aggression and victimization. The hypothesis that butch women would be more likely to perpetrate and femme women would be more likely to be victimized was not supported in the majority of our analyses. This finding is not surprising, given that clinical and theoretical writings on this topic have disputed the stereotyped notion of perpetrators and victims in lesbian communities. It is important to interpret this finding with caution, given that a single item was used to assess the butch/femme construct. Nevertheless, the stereotype that masculinity is associated with aggression and femininity with victimization may not hold true in women's same-sex relationships. It will be important for service providers to keep this finding in mind and to avoid making assumptions when working with lesbian or bisexual women as clients. It is also important to note that women who scored closer to the femme end of the scale did report more lifetime LGB-specific psychological victimization. Zipkin (1999) has written about the rejection of femininity by the lesbian community and the greater value placed on butch or androgynous gender presentations over femme gender presentations. It may be that femme women who do not conform to this butch ideal are vulnerable to insults regarding their sexual orientation by abusive partners.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. Most important, the use of cross-sectional data limits our ability to draw conclusions about causality. Although it is plausible to assume that minority stress variables have an impact on relationship variables, it is also possible that relationship variables can create minority stress. For example, women who have been victimized in a same-sex relationship might encounter discrimination as they attempt to leave the relationship and get support from others. Women who have had unsatisfying relationships with other women may develop more negative

beliefs about themselves as lesbian or bisexual women. The direction of causality between relationship quality and domestic violence is also a remaining question. Although our model suggests that poor relationship quality is a precursor to domestic violence, longitudinal studies reveal that components of poor relationship quality, such as low relationship satisfaction, can also be a consequence of experiencing domestic violence (Testa & Leonard, 2001). These questions can be answered in future longitudinal research with lesbian and bisexual women samples. Such research should include additional variables that have been linked to domestic violence in heterosexual and lesbian samples, such as depression, substance use, self-esteem, and poor anger control (Danielson, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998; Renzetti, 1998).

Another limitation of the current study is the convenience nature of the sample. Women who saw and responded to our advertisements or who were attending a pride event were likely more out than lesbian and bisexual women in the general population. It is possible that in a sample that included more closeted women, outness and minority stress variables would show stronger correlations with relationship variables. Additionally, participants in this study had a fairly high level of education. In this respect, the sample is similar to other volunteer-based samples of lesbian and bisexual women (e.g., Morris & Balsam, 2003). Studies that included a heterosexual comparison group have demonstrated that these women, on average, are better educated than their heterosexual peers (e.g., Rothblum, Balsam, & Mickey, 2004). However, given that education was a predictor of domestic violence, it will be important for future researchers to specifically recruit more women with lower education levels, perhaps through the use of participant incentives.

Finally, generalizability is hampered by the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the sample. Despite efforts to recruit women of color through listservs and organizations specifically serving ethnic minority LGB communities, women of color made up only 15% of the final sample, which precluded the possibility of looking at each ethnic/racial group separately. As a whole, women of color in this sample reported more experiences with domestic violence—a finding that is consistent with prior research on lesbian and bisexual women of color (e.g., Morris & Balsam, 2003). It is important to consider that women of color face minority stress associated not only with their sexual orientation but also with their race or ethnicity. It will be particularly important for future researchers to investigate how these stresses impact relationship variables among lesbian and bisexual women of color. It is also important to note that all lesbian and bisexual women also experience sexism and internalized sexism to varying degrees. Although research has demonstrated the negative effects that both heterosexism and sexism can have on individual lesbians' psychological distress (cf. Szymanski, in press), no research has examined the concurrent and interactive nature of external and internalized heterosexism and sexism on women's same-sex relationships. Researchers are encouraged to more fully examine the impact of multiple oppressions on women's same-sex relationships.

In conclusion, feminist approaches to understanding domestic violence emphasize the link between individual men's acts of violence and the broader cultural context of men's oppression of women. The recent emergence of data on the prevalence of violence in women's same-sex relationships challenges us to broaden this paradigm to understand women as both victims and perpetrators. It is no longer sufficient to view domestic violence through a gendered lens. The results of the current study suggest the importance of incorporating other forms of oppression into our understanding of domestic violence in both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships. Identifying the external and internal minority stressors that negatively impact relationships can direct future violence prevention and intervention efforts among diverse populations of women and men.

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