

FREQUENCY OF PHYSICAL AGGRESSION IN HETEROSEXUAL AND FEMALE HOMOSEXUAL DYADS¹

PAMELA A. BRAND AND ALINE H. KIDD²

Mills College

Summary.—75 self-identified heterosexual and 55 self-identified homosexual women between the ages of 19 and 58 yr. completed a 24-item anonymous questionnaire to determine whether men or women were more violently aggressive in the form of attempted or completed rape, physical abuse, or infliction of pain beyond that which was consensual in the practice of sadomasochism in dyadic relationships. *z* tests for the significance of differences between proportions in analyzing questionnaire data indicated that men committed violent acts against women significantly more often than did women against men, which supports the hypothesis that the frequency of aggressive violence would be significantly higher for heterosexual than in female homosexual dyads. Of 104 incidents of violence, however, 29 acts (28%) were committed by women, which suggests that the nature of the relationship may also be an important variable in dyadic violence. Further research is indicated.

Intraspecies physical aggression, abusive violence, and even rape have long been accepted as male rather than female attributes. Acceptable causal reasons for such aggressions, however, have become increasingly unclear. Cross-cultural studies and studies of other primates suggest a possible biological basis and hormonal influence for gender dimorphism and concomitant intraspecies aggressive tendencies (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Parsons, 1980). The 1984 FBI data indicate that 89% of arrests for violent crimes and 86% of arrests for "offenses" against families and children were of males (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1985).

Typically, the studies of physical aggression in dyadic relationships have not sought a biological explanation or cause for aggressive behavior. Instead, such studies have examined demographic profiles and the drug and alcohol use patterns of the aggressors as well as of the victims of dyadic violence. Indeed, alcohol use is too often the identifying characteristic of physically abusive husbands and of their battered wives (Coleman, *et al.*, 1980). Carlson (1977) found that in battering incidents, 67% were alcohol-related and 12% were drug-related. She also found that persons of both sexes who had observed parental violence as children were apparently given to perpetrating or withstanding increased domestic violence as adults.

¹Request reprints from A. H. Kidd, Mills College, Oakland, CA 94613.

²The authors express their gratitude to Diana E. H. Russell, Ph.D., Arthur Elliott, A.C.S.W., and Robert M. Kidd, M.A., for their careful reading, suggestions, and editorial assistance with earlier drafts of this paper.

Other studies (Carlson, 1977; Coleman, *et al.*, 1980; Ulbrich & Huber, 1981) indicate that low educational and low socioeconomic status of both aggressors and victims appear to be related to domestic and/or dyadic violence. Walter (1970) interviewed 120 battered women who ranged in age from 17 to 76 yr. and represented many races, religions, cultures, educational levels, and socioeconomic groups and found that low self-esteem and social isolation were characteristic of the female victims of spouse abuse.

In abusive relationships other than marital, the accepted position of males as major physical aggressors and females as victims appears to be held. Studies of college women indicate that about 83% of the women had encountered "sexual aggression at some level of erotic intimacy" (Kanin & Parcell, 1977, p. 69). A rare mention of sexual aggression toward females by other females recorded that eight of the 103 females responding had been sexually propositioned by another female and that of these, five were "moderately to extremely offended" (Harold, *et al.*, 1979, p. 70).

Violence against females in the form of rape, attempted rape, and battering has been reported in professional journals and popular media within the past ten years but the studies focus on males as perpetrators of the violent acts and seem to ignore any evidence of similar violence against females by other females. This is not too surprising because physical aggression by males is socially encouraged and accepted in our society as a norm of male behavior, and physical aggression by females is socially discouraged and unacceptable as a norm of female behavior. Too, studies of domestic violence and rape are still relatively new and investigations limited to available mainstream heterosexual populations. Unfortunately, nonpsychotic populations of lesbians are virtually invisible in the larger population, are generally inaccessible to non-lesbians and, wishing to avoid any label of "deviant," are understandably reluctant to participate in psychological studies.

Rape, currently categorized as a crime of violence rather than as sexually motivated aggression, has been defined by one researcher as "the use of sexuality to express issues of power and anger" (Groth, *et al.*, 1979, p. 70). Russell's (1984) study, however, found rape (more broadly defined as vaginal, anal, or oral sex, whether forced, yielded to under physical threat or drugs, unconsciousness or other total physical helplessness) to be more prevalent than previously believed. Of 930 randomly selected San Francisco women, 44% reported at least one rape or attempted rape at some time in their lives. Only 16% of the total number of rapes reported were attempted and/or completed by strangers, and only .7% of the women in the study reported being raped by another woman.

Therefore, accepting the possibly biologically-based and hormonally-influenced sex differences for aggressive behavior and noting the extensive litera-

ture documenting violent acts between men and women, it is hypothesized that the frequency of violent acts in the form of attempted or completed rape, physical abuse, and the infliction of pain beyond that which is consensual in the practice of sadomasochism will be significantly higher in heterosexual than in female homosexual dyads as measured by data from an examiner-designed questionnaire completed by both heterosexual and homosexual women.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 130 women residing in the Greater San Francisco Bay Area, 75 self-identified heterosexuals and 55 self-identified homosexuals, between the ages of 19 and 58 yr. For the heterosexual women, the mean age was 33.12 yr. (*SD* 9.36 yr.) and the median age was 32 yr. For the homosexual women, the mean age was 31.04 yr. (*SD* 8.50 yr.) and the median age was 30 yr. One of the heterosexual and two of the homosexual women did not indicate their ages. There was no significant difference between the mean ages of the two groups of women as measured by a *t* test. The median ages for both groups were close to the median age of 32.2 yr. reported in the 1980 Census for women residing in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Demographic data for the two groups were compared by using a *z* test for the *significance of the difference* between proportions. The study's subjects were mostly well-educated Caucasian women from middle and upper-middle socioeconomic groups, and no significant differences in age, race, education or socioeconomic status were found between the subject groups.

Equipment and Procedure

Each subject was given a sealed envelope containing instructions in a covering letter, a 24-item questionnaire developed by the researcher, and a stamped researcher-addressed envelope for returning the anonymous questionnaire. All subjects were given identical questionnaires. Questions were not altered on the basis of sexual preference. For example, all subjects were asked both: "Has a male you were dating ever raped you?" and "Has a female whom you were dating ever raped you?" Most of the subjects were students at a women's college in Northern California. Other subjects were members of a lesbian discussion group which meets weekly on the San Francisco Peninsula or were respondents to personal ads placed in two monthly newspapers distributed in the San Francisco Bay Area. These have predominantly homosexual readerships. Of 232 questionnaires distributed, 144 were returned—a 62% return rate. Of the 144 questionnaires returned, 14 were not included because 13 self-identified bisexual women comprised too small a sample, and one woman did not indicate her sexual orientation, leaving a sample of 130 women of heterosexual or homosexual orientation.

RESULTS

Using z tests for the significance of the difference between proportions, the data were analyzed five ways: comparison of aggressors by sex for all cases of violence, comparison of aggressors by sex for each question, between-group comparisons for each question, between-group comparisons for corresponding questions with respect to the sexual orientation of the subjects, and total-group comparison between corresponding questions.

Of the 104 cases of violence reported, men were the aggressors significantly more often (72%) than were women (28%; $z = 7.10$, $p = .001$). Of the aggressors 33% were reported as being under the influence of alcohol, and 21% under the influence of drugs at the time the violence occurred. When the percentages of men versus women aggressors were compared for the entire group for each question, male aggressors accounted for a higher percentage of all categories of incidents except one, the infliction of pain beyond that which was consensual when practicing sadomasochism. Only two differences proved significant, however. Men were more often the aggressors in attempted rape ($z = 4.12$, $p = .001$) and in physical abuse ($z = 3.40$, $p = .001$).

Comparing the responses of the two groups for each question, significantly more homosexual than heterosexual women had experienced rape by a female whom they were "dating" ($z = 2.03$, $p = .05$). Significantly more homosexual than heterosexual women had been abused by a female with whom they had a committed relationship ($z = 4.28$, $p = .001$). Significantly more homosexual than heterosexual women had experienced pain beyond that which was consensual when practicing sadomasochism with another woman ($z = 2.03$, $p = .05$). Significantly more heterosexual than homosexual women had been physically abused by a man with whom they had a committed relationship ($z = 3.74$, $p = .001$), and more heterosexual than homosexual women had been physically abused by men whom they were dating ($z = 2.57$, $p = .02$). No significant differences were found between the groups regarding attempted or completed rape by men whom they were dating, attempted rape by women whom they were dating, or the infliction of pain beyond that which was consensual when practicing sadomasochism with men.

When responses were compared for corresponding questions with respect to the sexual orientation of the subjects (e.g., percentage of heterosexual women who had been raped by men whom they were dating compared with percentage of homosexual women who had been raped by women whom they were dating), only one statistically significant difference was found: heterosexual women had been physically abused by men whom they were dating more often than homosexual women had been physically abused by women whom they were dating ($z = 2.57$, $p = .02$). No significant differences were found regarding attempted or completed rape in dating relationships, physical abuse in com-

mitted relationships, or the infliction of pain beyond that which was consensual in the practice of sadomasochism. Of the forms of violence in which no significant differences were found between the two groups, physical abuse by a man in a committed relationship was reported by 27% of the heterosexual women, and physical abuse by a woman in a committed relationship was reported by 25% of the homosexual women. These results are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1
RAW SCORES AND PERCENTS

	Heterosexual Women <i>n</i> = 75		Homosexual Women <i>n</i> = 55		Total <i>n</i> = 130	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Completed Rape: Dating Relationship						
Male aggressor	7	09	3	05	10	08
Female aggressor	0	00	4	07	4	03
Attempted Rape:						
Male aggressor	15	20	9	16	24	18
Female aggressor	1	01	3	05	4	03
Physical Abuse: Committed Relationship						
Male aggressor	20	27	3	05	23	18
Female aggressor	0	00	14	25	14	11
Physical Abuse: Dating Relationship						
Male aggressor	14	19	3	05	17	13
Female aggressor	0	00	3	05	3	02
Infliction of pain beyond consent when practicing S/M						
Male aggressor	1	01	0	00	1	01
Female aggressor	0	00	4	07	4	03

Note.—Rounding results in not all percentages adding to 100%.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that the frequency of physical aggression would be higher in heterosexual than in female homosexual dyads was supported by the finding that, of all cases of violence reported in this study, 72% were committed by men and 28% by women. There are, however, some important differences between the present data and the data in the literature. Although the definition of rape in this study is identical to that used in Russell's (1984) study, there is a striking difference in the number of completed rapes by women. Russell reported that attempted and completed rapes by women constituted only .7% of the total number of rapes while rape by another woman constituted 29% of the rapes in the present study.

Unlike Carlson's (1977) study in which 60% of the batterers were reported to be under the influence of alcohol, the aggressors in the present study were influenced by alcohol in only 33% of the violent episodes reported. Although Carlson also reported that 21% of the aggressors were under the influence of drugs and the same percentage of aggressors in the present study were under the influence of drugs at the time the violence occurred, no causal relationship between substance use and violence can be inferred. Substance use may indeed cause episodes of violence, or feelings about violent behavior may lead to substance use. But there may be such other factors as some aggressors using alcohol or drugs to have an excuse for expressing violent feelings physically.

A very important finding in this study, however, is that the types of violence reported are not limited to one sex or even to heterosexual dyads. The high frequency of physical aggression in committed relationships for both heterosexual and female homosexual dyads indicates that, in addition to sex differences, the nature of the relationship may be an important variable in the occurrence of physical violence. Unfortunately, the psychological characteristics of the aggressors, the victims, and the nature of the committed relationships were not investigated. Further research should clarify the characteristics of the interactions in dyadic relationships in which violence occurs.

A further limitation of the present study was the omission of male homosexual dyads because of their inaccessibility to the present investigators. If there is a strong biological factor in physical aggression, the frequency of aggression should be highest in such a group. If individual personality traits and characteristics of relationships are more important than biological or cultural influences, no elevation of the frequency of violent episodes should be found in male homosexual dyads.

Finally, given the problems in defining and operationalizing verbal and psychological abuse and aggression, these were not included in the present study. Yet, because many of the subjects reported that they had suffered these forms of aggression more often than physical violence, verbal and psychological aggression certainly warrant further investigation.

REFERENCES

- CARLSON, B. E. (1977) Battered women and their assailants. *Social Work*, 22, 455-460.
- COLEMAN, K. H., WEINMAN, M. L., & HSI, B. P. (1980) Factors affecting conjugal violence. *Journal of Psychology*, 105, 197-202.
- FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION. (1985) *Uniform crime reports: crime in the U.S.—1984*. Washington, DC: US Gov't Printing Office.
- GROTH, N., BURGESS, A. W., & HOLSTROM, L. L. (1977) Rape: power, anger and sexuality. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 134, 1239-1243.
- HEROLD, E. S., MANTLE, D., & ZEMITIS, O. (1979) A study of sexual offenses against females. *Adolescence*, 14, 65-72.

- KANIN, E. J., & PARCELL, S. R. (1977) Sexual aggression: a second look at the offended female. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 6, 67-76.
- MACCOBY, E. E., & JACKLIN, C. N. (1974) *The psychology of sex differences*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univer. Press.
- PARSONS, J. E. (Ed.) (1980) *The psychobiology of sex differences and sex roles*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- RUSSELL, D. E. H. (1984) *Sexual exploitation*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- ULBRICH, P., & HUBER, J. (1981) Observing parental violence: distribution and effects. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 43, 623-631.
- WALKER, L. E. (1979) *The battered woman*. New York: Harper & Row.

Accepted October 9, 1986.