

Lesbians and Domestic Violence: Stories of seeking support

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Abstract: Over the past three decades domestic violence in heterosexual relationships has been at the forefront of feminist activism and scholarship in the western world but despite this it continues to be a major social issue. Extensive research generated by feminist scholars and researchers has focussed on male violence in heterosexual relationships and until recently there has been a reticence to explore women's violence, including violence in lesbian relationships. Although there has been some acknowledgement of violence in intimate lesbian relationships, there still remains an ambivalence to come to terms with the existence of this violence. This article draws on qualitative research exploring lesbians' experiences of violence in their intimate relationships. It focuses specifically on experiences of help seeking, arguing that while lesbians may encounter similar forms of abuse in their relationships to those encountered by heterosexual women, dominant heteronormative assumptions shape, produce and limit understandings of violence in lesbians' intimate relationships influencing both policy and practice responses. The heterogeneity of women's experiences poses further challenges to practitioners and policy makers to develop responses that take into account the different needs and interests of lesbians.

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Introduction

Lesbian relationship violence remains an albatross to the battered women's movement recognised as something we must deal with eventually but not fully embraced in research, theorising or action. (Ristock 2002, 8)

Lesbians began to speak out about the violence in their relationships in the early 1980s but, as the above quote indicates, the issue is still one that struggles to get attention. This article illustrates how dominant understandings of domestic violence shape lesbians' experiences of help seeking. It draws on research exploring lesbians' experiences of domestic violence in their relationships and focuses particularly on the participants' stories of seeking help and support. The article begins with a brief overview of the research. It then discusses the important role support can play in women's recovery from violence. The research participant's experiences of seeking help from friends and family, the lesbian community and formal sources are then used to tease out the particular issues that lesbians confront in seeking help and support.

The research and the participants

The research addressed the overall question: 'How are understandings of lesbian domestic violence constituted and how do these understandings influence, shape and produce lesbians' experiences of domestic violence?' Unstructured interviews were used to gather stories from twenty one lesbians who had experienced violence from their partners. Information about the research was circulated through four sources: a National Conference on Lesbian Domestic Violence; to practitioners in the health, human or community services who worked with lesbians; advertisements in the lesbian magazine *Lesbians on the Loose*; and via word of mouth in lesbian communities.

The twenty one lesbians who participated in this study ranged in age from 25 to 53. All identified as having experienced abuse in an intimate lesbian relationship. For some, it was some years ago, for others it was quite recent and for a few it was current. A couple of participants also talked about their own perpetration of violence in this or another relationship. The majority of women were white Australians with the minority being Aboriginal Australians or born in overseas countries. For almost all their first language was English. Generally the participants described their partners as having similar or lower incomes than they did, and in a few situations their partner was

financially dependent on them. Some women had tertiary education qualifications; others had not completed high school. Almost all were employed, but some were receiving some form of income support. The occupations represented were varied and included nurses, community and social workers, teachers, marketing executives, beauty consultants, solicitors and security guards. The majority had lived with their partners, but several had not. The length of the relationships varied from six months to ten years, with the majority remaining in the relationship for longer than two years. For a few women, the abuse was in their first significant lesbian relationship. Almost all of the participants recounted how it took some time for them to acknowledge the violence and how both the decision to leave was often a long and painful process. The abuse included combinations of physical, emotional, sexual, economic and/or social abuse.

The role of support

Support has been identified as critical in recovering from violence, often acting as a buffer to counter the negative consequences of the violence (Carlson et al. 2002). Research has indicated that women who experience domestic violence and have high levels of social support and extensive networks seem to fare better than those with lower levels of support and fewer networks (Fry and Baker 2001; Short et al. 2000; Thompson et al. 2000). An aspect of receiving support includes help seeking. Similar to heterosexual women lesbians seek help from friends, family, and health and human service providers. Some also seek help from services in lesbian communities. The responses they receive can be influential in contributing to how they deal with violence in their lives.

In order to seek support women who live with domestic violence have to expose the violence and be confident of being heard and believed (Dobash and Dobash 1992; Mullender and Morley 1994). This can raise particular issues for lesbians. Normative discourses of domestic violence depict a male perpetrator and a female victim leaving little or no space for discussion of domestic violence in lesbian relationships. With neither the language nor the understanding of lesbian violence, the possibility of its existence is often erased, thus contributing to the difficulties lesbians may have in recognising that there can be abuse in their relationships. Discourses of lesbian utopia with assumptions of 'the perfect lesbian relationship' can further act to obscure the existence of abuse or lesbians' capacity to speak out about it. Overlaying this are dominant heteronormative discourses with their assumptions of universal heterosexuality which affect the way lesbians are in the world and the way 'the world' is towards lesbians (Williams 1996).

Decisions about seeking support are influenced by a complex array of factors often related to whether a request for assistance is likely to result in a positive outcome. Research undertaken in the early 1990s in the USA by Clare Renzetti, involving one hundred lesbians who were victims of lesbian partner abuse, identified that many are reticent about seeking help because of an anticipated homophobic response (Renzetti 1992). Many expected to get emotional support and validation from their friends but instead their friends avoided naming the abuse and/or excused or denied it. Participants also commented that the homophobic attitudes of police and other service providers acted as a deterrent to them seeking help, thus increasing their isolation.

This resonates with the stories told by the women in this research as they either sought support or chose not to do so because they considered they would not be heard or their stories would be dismissed as fanciful. For many of the women making a decision to seek support was difficult because it meant they had to deal with both the exposure of their sexuality, as well as exposure of the violence. However most of the participants in the study did expose the violence in order to seek help from friends, family, the lesbian community and/or a range of health, community, legal and human services.

Informal supports - friends and family

Lesbians in this study were much more likely to approach friends than family for support with only five of the twenty one women seeking support from their family of origin. For many lesbians asking for support from family in the context of non acceptance of their lesbianism can be difficult. Some of the women were not prepared to approach their families as they considered it likely that

this would result in further homophobic treatment rather than providing them with support.

Most women, however, sought some form of help from friends. Some friends picked up cues that their lesbian friend needed support without being directly asked for help. Others responded to a direct request for help. For many women, the decision to ask friends for support was not always straightforward and was influenced by a variety of factors including: previous experiences of asking for support; anticipated responses; and how much of the situation they wished to expose.

Some women talked about how their friends acted to ensure their safety. For example, in one situation friends removed a woman during a violent physical attack and told her partner that the relationship was over. In another situation a woman's friends rescued her when her depression became so extreme she was unable to care for herself. They told her partner that the relationship was over. She commented:

But there were a lot of people really worried about me at this point, and they were all planning, how can they get me? They just needed to get me, and to take me away from her.

The theme emerging from these stories is one of being rescued from a disastrous situation. When the women seemed unable to change the situation their friends acted for them. Discourses of vulnerability with their messages of helplessness and dependency seemed to reinforce the women's position but at the same time drove the actions of their friends.

The experience of violence prompted some women to realise the importance of a strong network of friends. Some commented on how they had always assumed friends would be supportive but this experience showed them just how significant a role these friends played in their lives. One of the women acknowledged how important her Koori friends were in providing her with both practical and emotional support in the context of rejection and scapegoating by the lesbian community which she considered was linked to her Aboriginality and therefore racist. She says:

My Koori sisters. I was able to talk. There was always someone with me when I got arrested. They knew the bigger picture because they had seen me run away from the relationship and watched me go backwards and forwards.

Some women spoke about their ambivalence in seeking support from friends. One woman recounted how uneasy she was about speaking to anyone about the abuse until after she separated from her partner and even then she was very selective about who she told because she wanted to be sure she would be believed. Some, while confirming the important part friends played in providing support, conceded that this support was often limited because there was little understanding of the ongoing and cumulative impact of the abuse. For example:

My friends - they know I've been going to the support group, have said 'Forget about it - let it go. Throw it to the wilderness' but they didn't realise that it's still – it keeps recurring.

One of the women who had lived most her life outside Australia had been active in developing friendship networks in the lesbian community which her partner had undermined. She did, however, maintain contact with friends but did not see them as supporting her. Instead she saw their failure to recognise the violence as them being complicit, but at the same time she acknowledged her own culpability because of her inability to move beyond her shame and talk about the abuse. This absence of talk about the abuse left her unsupported to deal with the violence.

Several women had moved to a different geographical area and had few or no supportive networks. One of these women's situation was exacerbated by her relationship being S/M (sado/masochistic) and her contacts being with other women in the 'scene'. This contributed to her hesitancy in speaking about the abuse as she considered she may not be believed. Another woman lived in a small community where her partner was well known and respected. She was hesitant to ask for support as she was relatively new to the community. She did eventually speak to someone but was not believed.

In summary the women's experiences of seeking support from friends were very different. Some

received unconditional support from their friends. Others recognised the significance of friends in their lives but were often uncertain about the extent to which they should involve them. Yet others considered that support from their friends was limited mainly because their friends did not have a real understanding of the impact that the violence had in their lives. For some the invisibility of domestic violence in lesbian communities, reinforced by the dominant beliefs that lesbians are not violent, made it difficult for their friends to understand or believe their stories of violence. Some women had few friendship networks on which to draw and so either relied on the lesbian community or formal services or sought support from no-one.

Lesbian communities

Lesbian communities have not simply emerged, they have been created from the struggle for equal rights for lesbians (and gay men). They are founded on common sexual identities, values and projects, but similar to other communities, they comprise people from diverse backgrounds and experience (Selznick 1992). The focus on common issues and lifestyles often disguises inequalities within communities and contributes to their idealisation.

The notion of the lesbian community emerged in the 1980s and has played an important political role in the increasing visibility of lesbians (and gay men). Stressing commonalities can bring about the obfuscation of differences within communities, resulting in not acknowledging or recognising conflict or unequal relationships. One area of tension within such communities is the public/private dichotomy. The public/private binary plays a critical part in shaping responses (or the lack of responses) to domestic violence in lesbian communities. Lesbian (and gay) communities have been active in the public arena seeking changes to law, legislation and practice to ensure that lesbians (and gay men) have equal rights. In relation to violence, community activists have sought to address the important issue of 'hate crime' by naming it as a public concern and working with both law enforcement agencies and the community in innovative ways. Domestic violence, however, has been dealt with in a different way. Often constituted as a relationship (private) issue, it has not attracted such public attention. It remains a contentious issue so has the potential to be divisive and therefore draw attention to conflicts and differences within lesbian communities. Unlike hate violence, where the perpetrators are outside the community, domestic violence happens entirely within the community. Exposing the violence may mean putting the community at risk of scrutiny akin to 'airing dirty laundry in public'. This suggests that the notion of private is complex and is played out at both an individual and a community level, contributing to the silence and lack of action by the community in addressing the violence.

A strong and supportive lesbian community was seen as important by many of the lesbians in this study, while at the same time some believed that the 'community' was not active enough in acknowledging and challenging domestic violence in lesbian relationships. Those who were recently 'out', or had begun to make connections with lesbian networks all felt affirmed in their new connections with what they referred to as 'the lesbian community'. However, those lesbians who had long term contact with a variety of networks within the community and had been feminist activists were far more cynical. Some commented on the uncritical acceptance and idealised notion of community and how this often made it difficult to bring contentious issues to the fore. Some remarked on the community's complicity in keeping violence in lesbian relationships invisible, thus contributing to the silencing of women who are being abused. For some, their commitment to lesbian politics was challenged when they did not feel supported by what they had previously seen as their 'community'.

One woman described her political activities as central to her sense of self. As the violence from her partner escalated and she did not feel supported by her lesbian friends, the political aspect of her life diminished, having a powerful impact on her sense of self. She reflected on her struggle to tell her lesbian friends about the violence, but believed they should have picked up the cues. She drew attention to how discourses of lesbian utopia prevailed, limiting the community's responses to domestic violence. For her, the community became complicit when it failed to address the violence, thus promoting silence and leaving lesbians unsupported.

And it's like, I feel like I have to question everything all over again. Who can you trust? You think you can trust your lesbian sisters. Then you find you can't. What's left? That's very hard. And then the anger about the whole utopia - lesbian community - which I think is important, but - women have wanted to hold onto it, without critically engaging with it at all. That's my concern. I couldn't critically engage with it, and it was destroying my capacity to feel good about myself. And I wouldn't engage with it, because it was just too difficult. And the ways in which we've taken some part of critiques, notions of what is wrong with heterosexual relationships and just taken them into our relationships, without critique. Because we think that things are different because of our notions of lesbianism.

She considered herself part of the community but at the same time felt excluded because she was unable to speak about the violence. If she spoke out, she believed she would draw attention to uncontested assumptions about idealised lesbian relationships and open herself to criticism. Her desire to remain connected to the community was strong because the community provided her strength and her sense of self, but she considered that talking about the violence could put this at risk.

Formal Services and Supports

The majority of women had contact with a range of formal support services including the health, welfare and criminal justice systems. Several women chose not to engage with any formal support services. The reasons for this included: not acknowledging the violence until the relationship had ended; not wanting to out themselves; fear of losing their child/children; fear of not being believed; and not wanting to expose the violence. The most frequently sought after services were counselling, with over half the women seeking some form of counselling, mainly from private counsellors. Just under a third of the women had contact with the police, with half of these having more prolonged contact with the criminal justice system. Around a quarter sought medical assistance after being physically abused and a small number had encounters with mental health services. Very few women sought help from refuges or accommodation services.

Police and the Criminal Justice System

Several themes emerged from the women's engagement with the police, legal and criminal justice systems: difficulties the police had in recognising domestic violence between lesbians; trivialisation of domestic violence by the police generally and more specifically domestic violence between lesbians; and the imposition of a normative heterosexual model of domestic violence to lesbians with the consequence of inappropriate responses.

The vast majority of women in this study experienced physical and/or sexual abuse, but fewer than a third of the women had made direct contact with the police. In the vast majority of these situations it was generally neighbours or onlookers who contacted the police. Clearly for some lesbians engagement with the police and criminal justice system was not a choice they actively made. This raises questions about why lesbians are reticent to contact the police, especially in the current context where police are expected to be pro-active in their policing of domestic violence.

The last decade has witnessed changes to police policy throughout Australia, as domestic violence has moved from the private sphere to become a public concern with a range of legal and criminal justice responses (Holder 2001, Laing 2000). Police practice has changed as a consequence but these changes have often happened in uneven ways as beliefs, attitudes and old practices can continue to inform and influence ways of doing things. This 'delay' can work to reinforce 'old' narratives of police responses to domestic violence such as: trivialising 'domestics'; not dealing with domestic violence in the same way as similar assaults in the public domain; and constituting women as responsible for the violence, especially if they remain in abusive situations. As a consequence beliefs remain prevalent that police are reticent to deal with domestic violence, not seeing it as the real business of policing. For particular groups in the community, these ambivalent attitudes towards police involvement can be magnified by previous negative experiences

with police. For example, Indigenous Australians have a long history of racist and discriminatory treatment by the police and this can be a powerful influence in decisions about engagement with the police. Negative stories also circulate about police treatment of gay men and lesbians, influencing attitudes and beliefs that the police may act in discriminatory ways or not act at all. All these factors can come together to play a part in shaping women's decisions about whether to seek police assistance.

Discourses of love, involving unconditional loyalty to the woman they love, influenced some women not to involve the police. As one woman noted:

I didn't want to hurt her. How can I hurt somebody that I love?

Other women considered that the police did not take women, domestic violence or lesbian relationships seriously, so questioned why the police would respond in a reasonable way to domestic violence in a lesbian relationship.

I would never feel like I could go to the police. 'What do I care? They're women.' I mean, number one, I don't think - the police might now - but then I don't think, they wouldn't really see our relationship as a real relationship anyway. And they'd probably say something like 'Just work it out yourselves' or 'Get out of the situation'.

Police responses to domestic violence come under state or territory legislation and, in most states, when police are called to a domestic violence incident they are expected to charge or remove the perpetrator and take out a protective order on behalf of the victim. The legislation regarding protective orders differs in each state and territory, with not all being inclusive of domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships. However, in all states and territories police can arrest and charge the perpetrator of violence with assault (Alexander 2002). In this study very few women reported that the police initiated action against the perpetrator. In most situations it was left up to the women to pursue action.

In situations of lesbian domestic violence, when there is no gender marker as there is in heterosexual domestic violence, it is often difficult to identify the perpetrator or victim and this poses difficulty for the police, especially when women fight back. As one woman recounted her experience with the police:

The police – the guy said to me 'listen mate. The thing is, we've got to stop treating it like lesbians are different. The thing is, there's the bloke and there's the woman. And you're the bloke and she's the woman.'

As can be seen from the above quote when understandings of heterosexual domestic violence are transposed to lesbian domestic violence they do not always fit neatly; especially regarding approaches to identifying the victim and perpetrator.

Counselling Services

The women in this study were more likely to seek assistance from counsellors than any other formal supports. Negative responses from counsellors often influenced women not to seek further assistance and also contributed to the invisibility of the violence, whereas positive responses were often experienced as empowering and supporting women to make changes in their lives.

Over half of the women sought some form of counselling either during or after the abuse. Many of these women sought private counselling with their partners and initially saw themselves as experiencing relationship problems rather than domestic violence. Many commented that this reticence to understand that their partner behaved violently was influenced by either their belief that women were not violent or that violence did not exist in lesbian relationships. While domestic violence may not have been articulated by these women, from their stories it appears that the indicators for its recognition were present and a careful assessment may have contributed towards the possibility of its identification. When the focus of counselling is on intrapsychic or, in couple counselling, on interpersonal issues, the abuse dynamics may be obscured. The dominant

heteronormative discourse of domestic violence contributed to this invisibility. As one lesbian stated:

It was a very important thing for me to have done that because I was starting to acknowledge that things - that I was needing help, and I needed some assistance at that point and I was like looking for help. But the psychologist I think, at that time - I don't think - I think she just didn't understand about lesbian relationships. And I don't think she could see that it was - I think if she'd been able to frame it as domestic violence.

The constitution of domestic violence as only a heterosexual issue appears to have obscured the identification of abuse between lesbians, potentially compromising their safety. The limited knowledge and skills counsellors have in working with lesbians is a theme that recurred throughout the interviews. Some lesbians experienced this as signifying homophobic or heterosexist assumptions, attitudes and beliefs, while others constituted it as a limited awareness of the issues that lesbians confront in their daily lives.

Medical Services

Several of the women sought medical treatment from either their general practitioner or hospital emergency services after being severely abused. Emergency departments are frequently used by women who have experienced domestic violence, with Australian research showing that one in four women presenting at Emergency Departments have experienced domestic violence (Bates et al. 1995) and that more medical treatment is sought for injuries resulting from domestic violence than from any other cause (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996). One of the women in this study sought assistance regularly from the Emergency Department in a large hospital several times, always accompanied by her partner. With her partner present, she told medical personnel that she had been mugged or had a fall. This was never questioned and the issue of domestic violence was not raised, despite the number of times she presented at the same hospital. Whether staff even considered domestic violence or whether the pressures of a busy Emergency Department meant that the focus was purely on the treatment of physical injuries was not known. However, for this woman, the consequence was that she was not offered support or referral and after treatment returned home with her abuser.

Overall, the women who used hospital and general practitioner services did not feel confident enough to be open about either the violence or their sexuality, so it was only on rare occasions that they were referred to support services. The fear that they would not be believed or taken seriously often acts as a barrier to women disclosing violence and, for lesbians, the exposure of their sexuality is often an additional barrier. The heteronormative assumptions about domestic violence of medical and nursing staff also worked to obscure the presence of violence between lesbians thus compromising the women's safety.

Groups

About a third of the women attended groups for lesbians who had experienced domestic violence. All the women commented on the important role these groups played in their recovery. They stressed how important it was to: hear other lesbian's stories; increase their own understandings of abuse between lesbians; be able to speak openly about the abuse; and take steps to regain control of their own lives.

Groups have been a central feature of the Women's Movement over the last three decades, emerging as an empowering and effective means to achieve understanding and change. This is particularly so in relation to violence, where groups have been used to confront issues of violence in women's lives and work towards achieving personal empowerment and social or political change (Thorpe and Irwin 2000).

The groups attended by the women in this study were, with one exception, specifically for lesbians. They were all facilitated or organised by women (often lesbians) who were aware of day to day issues that lesbians confront in their lives. The women who attended stressed how these groups

were instrumental in enabling and supporting them to make major changes in their lives. Working from feminist principles, the groups did not incorporate the heterosexist assumptions that were part of much service provision. I am not arguing that groups work for all lesbians but in this study these 'lesbian only' groups provided the safest and most supportive environment for the women to make changes in their lives.

In summary the lesbians in this study sought formal support from a range of services. Some practitioners in these services played an important role in supporting women to make changes in their lives. This seemed to happen most frequently when practitioners were aware of the issues that lesbians face in their daily lives. Lesbian only groups seemed to provide a safe place for women to share their stories. As health and human services are located in a context in which heterosexuality is normalised, this can mean services and practitioners struggle to offer support that is relevant to the particular needs of lesbians. So for many women, seeking support was counter productive as heteronormative assumptions influenced how and what services were provided.

Implications for policy and practice

The stories of the women in this study draw attention to the shortcomings of relying on a 'one size fits all' model to explain domestic violence and also to the importance of understanding the complexities of violence, particularly how the personal, social and political contexts influence the impact of violence in lesbians' lives.

This has implications for both educators and service providers in the health, human and community services as the development of tertiary, secondary and preventive services that are safe and relevant for lesbians is important. Similar to heterosexual women, lesbians who experience domestic violence need to be able to access a variety of different services. These could include counselling, court support and group programs. However, the women in this study were often ambivalent about approaching services because they feared a negative response. It is crucial that service providers have knowledge and understanding of both the variety of ways in which lesbians experience violence and the issues that they have to deal with in their lives which may impact upon this.

It is also important for educators and practitioners to challenge the heteronormative assumptions that pervade much of the existing service delivery. If mainstream agencies are to be available to *all* women, there is a need to examine who has access to their services and who does not. In addition, agencies have responsibilities to provide ongoing training and supervision for their staff to ensure the relevance of their services for lesbians.

Conclusion

Seeking and finding help and support often plays an important role in assisting women to address the violence in their lives. However for lesbians this often means being open about both their sexuality and the violence. The heteronormative context can mean that lesbians are ambivalent about seeking help because of the fear of homophobic responses and negative judgements. The fear of homophobic responses from families means that lesbians are more likely to seek assistance from friends. Friends, however, while playing an important role in many women's lives, often can only give limited support.

Lesbians' engagement with formal service provision is also variable. Heteronormative assumptions pervade the women's stories of seeking help from mainstream service providers. These assumptions also frame and produce limited understandings of the way lesbians are in the world, shaping how service providers respond. Services that were not based on heteronormative assumptions (for example the groups for lesbians who have experienced intimate violence) were regarded by participants much more positively than other mainstream services. In many services the need to identify the victim and perpetrator of violence poses issues for many lesbians, especially when both partners have participated in the violence or both seek support services. The absence of gender as a marker of domestic violence often precludes this identification. Transposing the conceptions of heterosexual domestic violence to domestic violence between lesbians often

discounts the different contexts in which the violence occurs, thus closing options for more nuanced understandings of the complexities of the violence.

Discourses of femininity, constructing women as passive, nurturing, caring and non-aggressive, rule out possible physical harm because it is ‘just two women fighting’. Simultaneously, they interact with heteronormative discourses to produce silence about the intimate violence. Lesbian communities, although politically active on many fronts, seem reluctant to take up the issue as it has the potential to create conflict and division and exposes the internal (private) issues within communities. This further works to make intimate violence between lesbians invisible, compromising the safety of many women.

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