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Exploring Dynamics of Abusive Lesbian Relationships: Preliminary Analysis of a Multisite, Qualitative Study[1]

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This paper presents preliminary results from a multisite, qualitative study on violence in lesbian relationships. A framework for conducting community-based, empowerment research that draws on theories of community psychology, feminism, and postmodernism is presented. The study was designed to understand the dynamics of abusive lesbian relationships and social service providers' responses to the abuse. Results from 80 in-depth interviews with lesbians who have experienced relationship violence are examined with a particular focus on a pattern of first relationships being abusive and a theme of shifting power dynamics. Analysis of focus group discussions with 45 feminist service providers (e.g., counselors, shelter workers, social workers, healthcare providers) reveals the difficulties in assessing the power dynamics of abusive same-sex relationships and in developing appropriate responses when relying on heterosexually gendered models developed to address men's violence against women. The preliminary results present implications both for how we theorize and research this form of violence, and for improving the practices and policies of social services that work with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered communities.

KEY WORDS: lesbians; relationship violence; social service providers; qualitative methods; community research as empowerment.

Over the last 15 years, the issue of abuse in lesbian relationships has been more openly discussed since first being acknowledged, with much trepidation, within the battered women's movement (Lobel, 1986). But there is always the fear that publicly acknowledging this issue will fuel negative stereotypes that pathologize lesbians (and by association, gay men); and there is a strong concern that drawing attention to this form of violence will undermine feminist efforts that have named male violence against women as a significant issue in our culture (Ristock, 1997). In spite of these concerns, there is a growing body of research that has primarily tried to determine the rates of abuse amongst lesbian couples. (Fewer studies exist that document the rates of gay male relationship violence.) Determining the incidence of same-sex partner violence has been an important way to legitimize the issue, secure funding for social services and begin to provide an overall picture of who and how many are affected in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) communities.

REVIEW OF SURVEY RESEARCH ON RATES OF LESBIAN AND GAY PARTNER ABUSE

Several survey studies report varying rates of domestic violence amongst lesbian couples ranging from 17 to 52%. For example, Brand and Kidd (1986) report that 25% of their sample of 55 self-identified lesbians said that they had been physically abused by a lesbian partner in the past. Loulan (1987) in her study of 1,566 lesbians found that 17% had been involved in violent relationships. Coleman (1994) found that of the 90 couples she surveyed, 46% experienced acts of violence in their relationships. Lie and Gentlewarrier (1991) in a survey of 1,099 lesbians at the Michigan

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Womyn's music festival found 52% of their sample reported being abused (this included physical, verbal, and/or sexual aggression) by a former female lover. More recently, Lockhart, White, Causby, and Isaac (1994) found victimization rates of 31% in their survey of 284 lesbians who reported physical abuse in the past year or in a current relationship. This research has been establishing that lesbian abuse does, indeed, exist and is a form of violence that we need to attend to.

On the basis of these studies, many researchers and practitioners have concluded that lesbian partner battering occurs at the same or at even a higher rate than heterosexual partner violence. For example, the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project recently reported that the incidence of violence among gay and lesbian couples matches those in straight relationships—roughly, 1 in 4 (Boston, 1999). There is an urgency amongst gay and lesbian service providers and activists to have this form of violence recognized and not minimized. Yet, we have to interpret the results of the survey research carefully since none of the aforementioned studies used random sampling techniques; therefore, reported rates of victimization cannot represent true prevalence (Renzetti, 1998). In addition, each of the studies relies on different definitions of abuse with some restricting the definition to physical abuse and others not differentiating between the different forms of abuse.

Recently, Waldner-Haugrud, Vaden Gratch, and Magruder (1997) reviewed the studies that report rates of violence within lesbian and gay relationships to show that the range can be accounted for by the different ways violence is operationalized in each survey. Those reporting lower rates of victimization simply ask respondents whether or not they were physically abused or had experienced abuse, whereas those studies reporting higher rates of victimization rely on the Conflict Tactics Scale which is a quantitative instrument that lists items describing physical and nonphysical conflict and asks respondents how many times they have engaged in a tactic and how many times they have been on the receiving end of the tactic (Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). In an attempt to clarify some of the discrepancies in the literature, Waldner-Haugrud et al. (1997) undertook their own study that surveyed 283 gays and lesbians (165 and 118 respectively) using a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale. They found that 47.5% of lesbians and 29.7% of gay men reported having been the victim of relationship violence with pushing, threats, and slapping being the most frequent tactics experienced by lesbians. They also report 38% of lesbians and 21.8% of gay men indicated using violence against their partners with pushing, slapping, and making threats being the most frequent tactics directed towards their partner. These results fall within the range of victimization rates reported by previous research but provide more information on the nature of the violent tactics used. Their research also supports other findings in the heterosexual partner abuse literature that has found women reporting higher levels of perpetration than men. But the data generated from this scale cannot tell us what these higher levels mean—are women hitting back in an act of self-defense? Are women self-reporting their actions differently than men do on these surveys? There remain many criticisms about the assumptions on which these studies are based.

The Conflict Tactics Scale, for example, has been criticized primarily by feminist researchers who are concerned with the failure of the scale to provide a context in which to understand the violence that is reported. Therefore, we have to be careful in how we understand the gender differences reported by Waldner-Haugrud et al. (1997). They too acknowledge that "researchers need more insight into the dynamics of lesbian relationships in order to account for any differences between lesbians and gay men" (p. 182). Scherzer (1998) modified the Conflict Tactics Scale in her study to emphasize emotional abuse and include behaviors "having particular relevance for lesbians (e.g., threats to 'out' a partner)" (p. 36). In her sample of 256 lesbians, 17% reported physical abuse at some time during their current or most recent relationship while 31% reported experiencing emotional abuse. These percentages are much lower than the findings of Waldner-Haugrud et al. (1997). Scherzer (1998) also included open-ended questions to begin to address the experiences of the respondents and the impact that the abuse had, information that could not be reflected in the forced-choice questions. She also suggests that qualitative research is needed to study power dynamics and move us beyond basic incidence reporting of abusive behaviors (Scherzer, 1998, p. 43).

Obviously, many discrepancies still exist in the rates of victimization in lesbian relationships. The surveys using the Conflict Tactics Scale cannot answer questions about basic incidence, let alone about meaning, motive, or outcome of the tactics reported (DeKeseredy, 1999), while other quantitative methods cannot capture the context of the abuse. Yet, incidence rates from these studies continue to be useful to LGBT groups trying to obtain much-needed funding for resources and programs. They provide basic

confirmation of the existence of same-sex partner abuse as more than an anomaly and are therefore likely to remain important to the organizing efforts of LGBT communities. However, feminist researchers argue for more contextualized methods to be used in research on intimate violence where power, gender, and other systems of domination are understood as setting the conditions for violence and contributing to a perpetrator's choice to use violence against her/his partner (Renzetti, 1995; Scherzer, 1998; Yllo, 1993). A pressing question for Community Psychologists interested in research that can lead to interventions and social action is, what kind of research can we undertake to move us beyond incident-counting and to help us to understand the nature and dynamics of same-sex relationship violence?

Researching same-sex domestic violence, in my view, requires new approaches so that we do not simply try to fit same-sex violence into existing models or all-explanatory "grand narratives" that have been developed to account for heterosexual domestic violence (Ristock,1998; Ristock & Pennell,1996). For example, current gender-based theories of violence against women in intimate relationships often assume a male perpetrator and see the roots of violence in misogyny and patriarchy (e.g., Kelly, 1988; Koss et al., 1994). As long as theories assume the maleness of the perpetrator, male gender, and its relation to violence becomes the focus rather than power and its relation to gender (Hollway, 1996). This analysis creates a situation where lesbian abuse is either seen as impossible or the lesbian perpetrator comes to be seen as male-like in order for the analysis to fit. Similarly, there has been a reverse discourse within feminism that valorizes lesbians and lesbian relationships as untouched by patriarchal forces and leads to denying or minimizing lesbian abuse (Ristock, 1991).

Some researchers see the existence of same-sex abuse as reason to reject gender-based theories where same-sex domestic violence is seen as exceptional and argue instead for a social–psychological model that emphasizes "personal" power as an explanation for all relationship violence (Hamberger, 1994; Merrill, 1996; Zemsky, 1990). This view minimizes social identity and focuses more on behaviors in relationships, thereby equating heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual relationships while still acknowledging social oppression as a factor. In my view, we cannot simply equate and generalize about all intimate relationships in research, nor can we rely on heterosexual gender-based frameworks for explaining abusive same-sex relationships (Ristock, 1994). One totalizing theory cannot be developed to account for all abuse in intimate relationships. Our different social locations mean we do not all experience or give the same meanings to the same situations (Crenshaw, 1994). Instead research studies could aim to bring forward partial accounts, focus on the social context, specificity and heterogeneity of relationships and thereby be open to seeing new kinds of complexities and dynamics arising from differently gendered, racialized, sexualized, and personal relations between two women, or two men, or a man and a woman, or two transgendered people.

This paper reports on some of the preliminary results of a multisite, qualitative study on abuse in lesbian relationships. The project was designed to understand the dynamics of abusive lesbian relationships and to examine the responses of feminist service providers (e.g., counselors, shelter workers) to this form of violence. The project brings forward the voices of women who have experienced abuse in lesbian relationships and also the voices of practitioners who are in an important position to have noticed patterns and dynamics that can further help us to understand this form of violence.

Community Research As Empowerment

I approach this research from a community-based empowerment framework (Ristock, 1998; Ristock & Pennell, 1996) using features of feminism, postmodernism, and community psychology. Empowerment as an approach to community research means thinking consciously and critically about power relations, cultural context, and social action. It is an approach to knowledge building that seeks to change the conditions of people's lives both individually and collectively (Zimmerman & Perkins, 1995). It involves consulting or collaborating with diverse individuals, groups, and communities as part of the process of illuminating people's lives and social issues. Fundamentally, it is research that is "committed to identifying, facilitating, or creating contexts in various settings in which heretofore silent, isolated people, those who are 'outsiders' in various settings, organizations and communities, gain understanding, voice and influence over decisions that affect their lives" (Rappaport, 1990, p. 51). But empowerment is not left as an unproblematized goal. "Community research as empowerment" affirms marginalized voices that have been ignored or silenced while at the same time disrupting (through deconstruction and discourse analysis) any

tendencies to create grand narratives about experiences and engaging in reflexivity to remain conscious of what and how we are studying. When working with LGBT communities, it is important to enact a double play of affirming real people who live their lives as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered while rejecting the simplistic notion that such labels represent a set of natural categories that accurately describe people and distinguish them from each other. This "postnormal" framework for social research seeks to provide solid information that can be acted upon by LGBT communities while revealing complexities that do not pretend that LGBT people are homogenous and an undifferentiated community.

Specifically, the approach taken in this study involves researching material conditions of abuse in lesbian relationships by bringing forward experiences as reported by participants; researching discursive conditions as a way to disrupt rigidified thinking and break down false dichotomies by examining language to see how our current categories and constructs in the field of violence might limit or shape the way we can experience and respond to violence; and engaging in reflexivity for critical analysis and accountability by critically examining what is being produced and who is producing it. This includes being aware of my own subjectivity as a White, middle-class lesbian who has not experienced relationship violence and who has worked in feminist social service settings that respond to relationship violence.

My methodological approach is consistent with recent writings in psychology that call for innovation in methodology; for example, Prilleltensky (1997) writes about the need for an emancipatory communitarian approach to guide the praxis of psychologists; Marecek, Fine, and Kidder (1997) encourage psychologists to engage in qualitative research as a way to study power relations that have been oddly ignored by the discipline yet remain so central for those who are interested in social issues and social justice; Banyard and Miller (1998) in the special issue of the *American Journal of Community Psychology* on qualitative research, suggest that qualitative approaches can help us to understand the "why" of human actions and will increase our capacity as community psychologists to respond to the complex challenges that communities face.

METHOD

The current report is part of an on-going study that is being conducted in Canada in different geographic regions and different size cities (i.e., Winnipeg, Manitoba; Vancouver, British Columbia; Toronto and London, Ontario; future sites include Calgary, Alberta; and Halifax, Nova Scotia).

The project uses multiple methods, triangulating information from interviews and from focus groups, and discourse analysis of each, to illuminate different aspects of the issue of violence in lesbian relationships (Lather, 1991; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). This paper offers a preliminary analysis of some of the findings based on 80 in-depth interviews with women who self-identified as having experienced abuse in a lesbian relationship, and on six focus groups with a total of 45 feminist service providers who have been working to respond to lesbian partner abuse.

Interview Research

In each city, notices about the research were placed in gay and lesbian community newspapers, women's bookstores, women's bars, and a variety of LGBT and feminist organizations. The posters and advertisements used inclusive language inviting participation from women who identify as gay, bisexual, queer, heterosexual, and transgendered in order to welcome women who are involved in intimate relationships with other women but who do not identify as "lesbian." Research participation from women who self-defined as having experienced violence included those who defined as victims and perpetrators, and those who felt they fit neither category.

The interviews were all conducted by the author and lasted from $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 hr on average. The interviews were semi-structured with the questions serving as a guide for interactive discussion rather than as a question–answer format. The same topics were covered in each interview: information about the relationship (e.g., length of time, commitment, dynamics); when the abuse started; the types of abuse experienced; patterns in relationship dynamics; the responses of friends, family, coworkers, professionals (e.g., police, shelters, counselors, doctors); the impact of the violence (e.g., long-term, short-term effects); the background of the participant and her partner including previous histories of abuse, and use of drugs and alcohol. At the end of the interview as part of a de-briefing process, participants were given a handout with names of counselors, LGBT organizations, and other resources that respond to same-sex partner abuse. Each interview was transcribed and all participants who wish

will receive a copy of the final report and of their transcript.

Participants

The women's ages ranged from 18 to 66 with most being in their 20s (28%), 30s (38%), or 40s (24%). Most identified as lesbian or gay, with five identifying as bisexual and one as heterosexual. A majority of the women interviewed were White; 16% were women of color and included Native Indian, South Asian, Asian, Black, and Latina women. Five women identified as immigrants. The sample includes mainly middle class (56%) and working class (36%) women with four who identified as upper class. The majority of the participants are able-bodied. Those with disabilities (13%) reported hearing impairment, physical disabilities, chronic illness, and mental illness. Nineteen percent of the interviewees had children.

Focus Groups

In each city, various organizations that worked either on issues of domestic violence or with LGBT communities were contacted to get names of individual feminist service providers who had a reputation of doing work on this issue. Feminist service providers were sought because they have been at the forefront of responding to abuse in lesbian relationships despite some of the contradictions this issue presents for gender-based theories. A telephone interview was then conducted by a research assistant to ask further questions about their background and willingness to participate in the focus group, and to get their input into the questions that were being developed for the discussion. The discussion questions and consent form were mailed to them in advance.

Six focus groups were conducted with each one having approximately seven participants. The author served as a facilitator for each discussion. A research assistant from the area who helped make the initial contacts was also present for the group. The discussion for each group lasted 3–3$\frac{1}{2}$ hr. The focus group questions were meant to encourage lively conversation and allow different viewpoints to be expressed rather than seeking consensus on a single answer. The questions served as a guide and addressed topics such as the patterns and dynamics participants have noticed when addressing lesbian relationship violence; how they define abuse (including their views of issues like consensual sadomasochism); how clients come to them; how they work with clients (e.g., groups, couple counseling, individual, work with perpetrators, etc); questions that they have when doing this work; their own analysis/understanding of this form of violence and how it fits within feminist, gender-based theories of violence against women.

Focus groups offer social contexts for meaning-making and allow for a balance of power between researcher and research participants (Montell, 1999; Wilkinson, 1999). Further, this method involves "collective consciousness work" (Fine, 1992) to be undertaken by participants rather than simply gathering data from them. The discussions allowed for information to be gathered on their observations about lesbian partner abuse and at the same time encouraged them to engage in critical reflexivity and to network with one another since service providers who are addressing lesbian partner violence often work in isolation. At the end of the discussion a bibliography of resources and other handouts were provided. The focus groups were transcribed and participants will receive a final report. Focus group participants also requested that they be part of a directory that I would create based on my contacts in other cities so they could share information and resources, and continue conversations.

Participants

The focus group participants ranged in age from 20–61 with 77% being in their 30s–50s. The majority have a university degree (37% undergraduate degree only; 42% master's level) with a few having college certificates. Thirty-three participants identified as lesbian, six as heterosexual, and one as bisexual (5 did not identify). The participants were mainly White and 16% were women of color who identified as Native Indian, South Asian, Asian, and Black (two did not provide this information). Thirty-five of the participants worked in agencies including shelters, battered women's services, LGBT organizations, family services, sexual assault centers, women and community resource centers, drug and alcohol addiction programs and university/college counseling services; while 10 of the participants worked solely as counselors in private practice. They bring a range of experience in the area of domestic violence (1–26 years) with an average of 11 years. As a group they have worked more with heterosexual domestic violence clients (average of 193) than with lesbians (average of 26), and they have seen far fewer gay men (average of 8).

Data Analysis

Research assistants transcribed the interviews and focus groups and compiled demographic information. The author reviewed all transcripts from both the individual interviews and from the focus groups. The transcripts were analyzed both to identify common themes and to examine the underlying assumptions and effects of the language used to talk about relationship violence. The voices of the participants and their constructions of their experiences were placed at the center of the analysis. Each transcript was read over three or four times. The first reading of the transcript focused on the material content of the narrative and asked, "what are the participants telling me?" Several themes were identified within each transcript following approaches similar in concept to "grounded theory" and "local integration" (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Weiss, 1994). The second reading shifted to the discursive level and asked, "What does the participants' language suggest about the ways in which their experiences have been produced by the available discourses and their social positionings within those discourses?" Language is seen as something that not only describes experience but also as something that constructs it and our responses to it. Analyzing the discursive content included looking at the dichotomies that are created and that relate to sexual identities and roles in abusive relationships. This approach draws on feminist psychological perspectives of discourse analysis and deconstruction which examine systems of oppositions that produce identities and meanings (Burman, 1998; Marecek, 1999; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). The third reading was done to make comparisons with themes found across the transcripts as a way of identifying patterns and counterpatterns (Lather, 1991). This approach to qualitative data analysis is consistent with those described by other psychologists working from feminist, social-constructionist, and postmodernist frameworks (e.g., Brown, 1998; Burman, 1998; Gavey, 1989; Marecek, 1999; Parker, 1992; Ussher, 1997) where experience is seen as a key source for action and empowerment, and is also seen as a socially constructed text.

This preliminary analysis focuses on identifying a few themes related to the context of power dynamics, given that previous quantitative studies have been unable to address this. In the section on interviews, two themes are reported: first relationships and shifting power dynamics. The section on focus groups reports on the two themes of difficulties in making assessments and constraints in organizational mandates.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Findings From Interview Research

Of the 80 women interviewed most identified as being victims of abuse although three women defined themselves as perpetrators, and a few others described the roles as muddled and shifting over the course of the relationship. Most participants said that they wanted to tell their story so that it could help others who were in similar situations. They also felt the interview process would help them in their own recovery process—to tell it to another lesbian, albeit a stranger, who would bear witness to their experience. For some, I was the first person they had ever told about the abuse.

A range of abuse was experienced by the women in this sample and included emotional abuse (isolation, threats to kill, threats to pets, homophobic threats, threats to commit suicide, harassing phone calls), verbal abuse (yelling, name calling, insults, racist attacks), stalking, throwing objects, destroying property, driving recklessly to frighten, financial abuse (creating debt, stealing money, running up credit cards), physical abuse (restraining, pushing, shoving, punching, slapping, biting, throwing, using weapons), and sexual abuse (coercion, forced sex, rape with an object). Most of the women who were interviewed experienced a combination of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse.

First Relationships

Two themes stand out that are related to understanding power dynamics of the relationships. The first is a pattern of women being abused in their first relationships. Almost half (49%) of the 80 participants described their first relationship as abusive; most often this was with someone who had been "out" for a longer period of time and who was older. The following excerpts support this theme (all names used are fictitious):

> OK so probably the physically abusive relationship was my first relationship with a woman . . . . It would have been really nice if someone at the very beginning had—had told me, like when I first met her, said, "Na, na, na stay away from her." But because I was also very new to the community too, that's probably a big part of it. And she wasn't, I mean she was really firmly established and a lot of people know her. Well you know how the community is, everybody knows everybody. So she was an insider and I was an outsider

> and I looked straight and I had a child. Having a child in the lesbian community makes you ostracized right there. (Interview # 10, Florence)

> It was my first relationship. First long-term relationship. But you know I was—I was head over heels madly in love and I thought this is the relationship for life. And it started out really good. This woman was nine years older than myself. It was verbally abusive to start off with and then physically, I was, quite often had black eyes and she tried—she almost killed me once. Strangled me and then this went on for three years . . . . I was too young and insecure about the whole relationship—gay relationships, whatever. Anybody could have walked all over me. (Interview #17, Robyn)

> I was just out for less than a year. This was my first experience with a woman; I didn't care which woman it was. (Interview # 27, Sonia)

Some women also mentioned that they now classify their abusive partners as serial abusers who were abusive in one relationship and then the next and had a reputation for preying on women who were just coming out. They often learned of the reputation of their partner only after the relationship ended.

This pattern of first relationships being abusive has not been reported in other research. (The number I am reporting may in fact be low since I had not asked about first relationships directly in the first 10 interviews; my practice of reflecting on the research process allowed me to add questions for future interviews based on some unexpected responses from participants.) In many ways this pattern is not surprising given the additional vulnerabilities lesbians face when just coming out. The pattern suggests that vulnerability to violence is not internal but is part of the cost of a heterosexist context where lesbians are isolated, unable to access meeting places, and often dependent on their first lover for information about lesbian culture. Consistent with this context are similar forms of social vulnerability to violence mentioned by some of the other participants in this research, such as moving to a new city, or moving from another country, or speaking English as a second language.

When using discourse analysis to view these texts, a theme of desperation is identifiable in the narratives of first relationships; for example "This was my first experience with a woman, I didn't care which woman it was." This statement, and others like it, reflect the influence of dominant discourses in shaping subjectivities. A desperate logic is produced by dichotomies of thought that characterize the coming out experience in a heteronormative world. The first lover is logically constituted as the conduit from the lonely, isolated side of the binary to the happier side:

I'm the only one—>There's someone else; loneliness—>community; outsider—>insider; same-sex desire—>real live lesbian.

These subject positions reproduce the heterosexual/homosexual divide in which lesbians are marginalized. We can see vulnerability to abuse as an effect of heterosexism, not in the way often meant (self-loathing women accepting abuse as deserved) but as an effect of desperateness arising directly from the social effects of having no nonheterosexist discourse through which to constitute oneself in any other way other than as desperate. (Ristock, 1998)

The theme of first relationships being abusive may be specific to same-sex abuse because of a social context of coming out. Another theme that may also be specific to same-sex violence is the opportunity for shifting power dynamics (Elliot, 1996).

Shifting Power Relations

Many of the women interviewed described relationship dynamics that can be explained as resembling the "cycle of violence" model often described in abusive heterosexual relationships: this is where violence occurs in a predictable cyclical fashion and intensifies over time. Part of the cycle includes a period of calm which follows an acute battering episode. In this relationship dynamic there is clearly a perpetrator and a victim (Walker, 1979). Yet other women spoke of less predictable and even fluctuating power dynamics within their relationships. In their accounts power is not something that resides fully in one person (the abuser) but is instead relational as is evident in the following excerpts from the interviews:

> The imbalance of power between a man and a woman is constant just because a man has privilege in society. And so there's always going to be that, whether he's going to chose to work on it or not. Different factors may change some aspects of power but that power will remain constant. Whereas with two women, I think that the power fluctuates more . . . there's more variables involved that can change. I know with my relationship with S at certain times she was so weak I had the power. I remember at certain times I would say things and I would go, "oh my God, I can't believe I said that." And I think I was verbally abusive to her in several ways. (Interview # 3, Rhonda)

> It's a dance between two people of submission and dominance. (Interview # 24, Lindsay)

> R: . . . The next thing you know we were in fisticuffs
>
> J: And both of you were physically fighting?
>
> R: Yeah, yeah well I wasn't going to stand there and let her beat on me you know, I mean I was a street kid myself, you know and you protect yourself. (Interview # 20, Becky)

The focus on shifting, relational power dynamics within abusive relationships has implications then for how we understand the categories of victim and perpetrator. In examining the discourses available for women to talk about the power dynamics we see how the image of a victim as pure, innocent and blameless looms large in dominant culture and makes it difficult to speak about agency, strength, resiliency and even, a "taste" for revenge as other features of being a victim (Lamb, 1999). For example, the statement "I wasn't going to stand there and let her beat on me" shows how participants justified their responses in order to place their experiences within the binary category of victim–perpetrator because the victim portion of the binary is constructed as innocent and passive no matter what.

In this sample, seven women (9%) described fighting back with the intent to hurt their partner and to retaliate, while 16 (20%) spoke of fighting back in self defense throughout the relationship, and nine (11%) spoke of fighting back towards the end of the relationship (usually a single episode when they reached a point where they had had enough). Some women spoke to me of being abused in one relationship and becoming controlling in the next. More work is needed to explore these different power dynamics that women describe. The contextual information learned in these interviews support research based on questionnaires and clinical observations conducted by Marrujo and Kreger (1996) who suggest that rather than only two roles existing in violent relationships, victim and perpetrator, there may be a third—what they call a participant. A "participant" establishes a pattern of fighting back against her abusive partner with the intent not just to protect herself (a motive assimilable into the pure victim category) but to retaliate (a motive that should perhaps trouble that category).

One woman interviewed in this study described a role reversal where she had been abused and now had become the primary aggressor within the relationship:

> J: You say the dynamics have switched? How have they switched? What is happening for you?
>
> R: I just got tired of her trying to control me all of the time so I guess I took over the role.
>
> J: So you fought back? What happens now?
>
> R: She just said she'd never hit me again and she never did. She's never hit me again but now I hit her.
>
> J: And when do you hit her?
>
> R: (laughs) Whenever she pisses me off . . . .
>
> (Later) R: It's like she taught me to hit people because I never did before.
>
> J: And she doesn't hit back? But do you feel she still has more power or control in the relationship?
>
> R: She tries . . . (Interview # 11, Danielle)

Although this dynamic was not reported by any of the other participants in this sample, it is important to be aware of as yet another example of the complexities and changes that can occur over time in relationship power dynamics. Too often complex dynamics between women, where there is fighting back, have been labeled as mutual abuse. Like "innocent victim," "mutual abuse" is clearly a problematic term, in this case one which assumes symmetry in a relationship with equal power, motivation and intention to harm when that is not what is being described. Results from quantitative research like the Conflict Tactics Scale cannot provide a context to help understand what is meant when respondents report using violence and being victims of violence (e.g., Bologna et al., 1987; Lie & Gentlewarrier, 1991). Grappling with these complexities in abusive relationships is necessary not only for theorizing and researching same-sex violence but also for developing effective responses.

Findings From Focus Groups

The focus group discussions confirmed many of the patterns identified in the interview research. Service providers spoke of the barriers that women face in making the decision to seek services for abuse, such as concerns over confidentiality in small lesbian communities and feelings of shame that another woman had done this to them. An interesting context was that often women came for counseling presenting other issues such as self-esteem or depression or relationship problems, rather than presenting with abuse as their primary issue. This means that service providers were often in the position of being the one to define the relationship as abusive. Their perceptions, then, become influential in how a woman will understand her own experience and in determining the kind of support she will receive.

In focus group discussions, many service providers spoke of seeing more muddled or confusing

power dynamics than they had often seen in heterosexual relationships because they could not rely on a gender lens to help determine power dynamics. As one woman said, "The more I work with this issue the less I know. I just know less and less and less all the time" (Focus group #2). They spoke of abusers often feeling victimized and not taking responsibility for their behaviors and many abused women feeling responsible and identifying as abusive (this has also been reported in Hammond, 1989 and Hart, 1986). Service providers were very aware that examining relationship patterns closely is necessary for accurate assessments; all the more so when other factors like drug and alcohol abuse, childhood histories of abuse, or racism are also present.

Assessing Power Dynamics

Service providers are often asking, What is abuse? What is an unhealthy relationship but not necessarily abusive? and, How do we make such distinctions? The following excerpts speak to this search for adequate concepts and definitions:

> I think racism is another thing we don't talk about—the ways white women might use power over their partner who is a woman of color—there is power and control there. How do we talk about that and then also talk about other power complexities in the relationship? (Focus group # 3)

> I've noticed in my practice in lesbian relationships where one is the survivor [of childhood sexual abuse] and the other isn't. Then often in part of her healing, she doesn't want to be sexual any longer and we've got a partner who wants to be and a survivor who is saying "no"—would that qualify as sexual abuse? There is power and control . . . it could get that way. (Focus group # 3)

These comments reflect the ways in which dominant gendered discourses of relationship violence cannot be used by counselors working with lesbian clients. For feminist service providers who are used to working within dichotomies of women as victims and men as oppressors, where power and control are seen as being held by one person (the man) and used against the other (the woman), it becomes difficult to assess complexities. The clear lines between perpetrator and victim break down and gendered theory fails, for example, in the situation of an interracial couple where one woman is physically abusive and the other is verbally and emotionally abusive through her use of racist verbal attacks. Similarly, Marecek (1999), in her recent study where she interviewed feminist therapists, identified "trauma talk" as a dominant lexicon used to speak about the physical and sexual abuse of women with homogenizing effects. She writes, "as a clinical discourse . . . it does not suffice for capturing complexities of motives, meanings, and emotions or the shifting, layered and ambiguous dimensions of personal relations" (p. 179). Many feminist service providers in this study are struggling against the dominant heterosexual discourse on domestic violence in order to see lesbian abuse more accurately; but the "trauma talk" discourse remains their foundational framework for understanding all forms of abuse. For example, consider the following excerpt from a focus group discussion:

> Domestic violence assumes marriage, assumes spousal relationships, assumes a lot of things that do not apply to lesbians . . . so there is a problem with using that paradigm of domestic violence. The whole issue of heterosexism and homophobia in the relationship and sort of projecting maleness onto a partner or projecting issues around an abusive mother onto a partner with same-sex abuse. So I think those are issues—how those issues play out in the relationships—the issues of race and class—the power dynamics in the relationships—I think they are different than they are when I'm working with heterosexuals. But a fist is a fist. So the other part is entirely the same. Violence is violence and trauma is trauma. (Murmurs of agreement from the group; Focus group #5)

The statement "violence is violence and trauma is trauma" restores the "trauma talk" discourse to its dominant place, denying the significance of different contexts and making it difficult to explore the problems with current models that explain domestic violence. Yet, focus group discussions acknowledged that differences in lesbian relationships can mean that unitary models of domestic violence cannot necessarily be relied upon for appropriate service delivery.

Organizational Mandates

A related theme of the discussions was the ways in which organizational mandates reinforce a tendency to conceptualize violence as homogeneous and serve to mask more complicated dynamics. For example:

> A: If both people are hitting and yelling at each other—in assessing there is usually a difference. Usually there is one person who is fighting back and that fighting back can look different. It can be the initiator, y'know that person has had the silent treatment for four days and now they are fighting back and so their fighting back looks like initiation

> but it really is not. It's been extremely important for us to look at who is the primary aggressor, who is the one who is really afraid, who is the one who changes their behavior.
>
> B: Can I ask if you were to see two of them coming where maybe one is the perpetrator—but you saw there was some willingness to change on her part—would you see them both or would you still say, "No we can't"?
>
> A: We can't because of our mandate. So that's a real gap for us. (Focus group #6)

Because of a mandate to work with victims, women's organizations that are confronted with both members of a lesbian couple may define the initiator of the violence as the abuser. They can then work with a woman who has fought back or who now retaliates against her partner with physical violence. Yet, a consequence of this strategy is that "victim gets constructed" as "the one who did not start it" regardless of her subsequent actions or intentions. This then reinforces the dichotomies of victim/perpetrator; passive/active; innocent/evil that underlie gendered discourses of violence and mask complexities.

In another example, two women who run support groups for survivors of same-sex abuse reported in the focus group that when screening for group members they only accept women who have never used violence (not even in self-defense) because they feel they cannot address the complexities such behaviors may raise in the group:

> C: We have a very narrow paradigm that we're looking at for women in the group so the women in the group primarily experience violence. They haven't become violent themselves. And if they are violent themselves then they are not appropriate for this specific type of group. We've had a lot of difficulty with that because we have met women and spoken and spent a lot of time with women who have experienced some really hideous things but then at the same time they've acted out in violent ways themselves sometimes. And so it's a real dilemma because they can't come into the group with other women who have primarily experienced violence. But I think there is a tremendous need to and actually we've been talking about this more lately. There's a tremendous need for more of a mish mash or something that's focused on that gray area of maybe primarily experiencing violence but they need some sort of anger management themselves—they act out themselves.
>
> D: It is true that in our groups someone has come in and they have certainly defended themselves—there's been strong pretty dramatic self-defense because you know a lesbian might have been fearing for her life and she took strong measures to defend her life. So that would be where that line is drawn but it is very tough—it's become very, very complicated and I guess one of the principles that we're trying to stay with is a kind of safety for the lesbians in the group. (Focus group # 5)

An unintended consequence of this "nonviolent victim" approach is that the "real victim" is constructed as the one who never responds or defends herself. Further, other concepts such as "safety" that are also related to the "trauma talk" lexicon and victim/perpetrator, female/male dichotomies remain unproblematized and homogenize women's experiences. Who are the groups made safe for? For example, many focus group participants noted that it is primarily White women who have been seeking services for lesbian abuse. Whiteness however can remain unexamined as a barrier to safety for many women of color if the dichotomy of safe/unsafe remains rigidly linked only to gendered constructions of victim/perpetrator.

These excerpts from the focus group discussions point to the ways in which institutional practices have to be constantly reexamined. In Foucault's terms (Rabinow, 1984) we need to ask how "regimes of truth" (dominant discourses) on domestic violence operate in social services to obscure, delegitimize or subjugate certain knowledges or subjects while legitimizing or normalizing others. Feminist service providers that participated in these discussions are reflecting and struggling in the work that they are doing while urgently responding to the needs of lesbians. Their comments can be said to reflect a reliance on "trauma talk" and what I am calling "necessary speech" that arises from the social effects of having no alternative discourse through which to constitute their work with lesbians. The discursive force of contexts such as needing funds to set up services for LGBT issues or needing to remain aligned with heterosexual, gender-based theories that operate within their organizations means that feminist service providers often adopt dominant discourses for strategic reasons and then end up deploying that discourse in press releases, support group eligibility, and even therapy.

CONCLUSION

Overall the preliminary results reported suggest the need for more research to be done that attends to the specificity and heterogeneity of lesbian relationship violence. This report has highlighted the context of power dynamics that cannot be uncovered when

using forced choice surveys, especially those based on heterosexual relationships. For example, the pattern of first relationships being abusive is one that arose from flexible, open-ended interviews. This context has implications for initiating community interventions. For example, there may be ways of reducing violence in first relationships by having educational campaigns, "coming out" literature and LGBT services specifically address this context. Materials could be developed for women who are just coming out that dispute harmful, limiting stereotypes of lesbian relationships, define healthy relationships, and identify some troubling warning signs of which they could be aware.

Further, discourse analysis of both interview and focus group accounts reveals the ways in which our views of violence and responses to it remain gendered and based in dichotomous thinking. Yet as this study has shown, relying on rigid, inappropriate, dichotomous categories only perpetuates a lack of services for lesbians in the end, in particular for those who use violence when fighting back and for those who are perpetrators. As Istar (1996) suggests, service providers cannot hide behind the cloak of inappropriate paradigms and must be open to listening to the experiences of their clients. More research is needed to evaluate existing services and to help develop new services that can respond to the needs of lesbians who are victims, perpetrators, and participants. This study has also shown that in focus group conversations, many service providers are aware of the limits of practices based on heterosexual dynamics and need on-going opportunities for discussion and reflection as well as more support from organizations to be able to make changes to services and mandates and move beyond the discursive context that creates "necessary speech" with all of its implications.

Many other themes and issues arising from the study have been left unaddressed in this report. Several focus group participants raised questions that they would like research to be able to answer: What is the impact of homophobia, heterosexism, racism, and other forms of oppression on abuse? What are the links between different forms of woman-to-woman violence? What are the similarities and differences between gay male partner violence, lesbian partner violence, and transgender partner violence? What are the meanings/implications of these categories? My research will address some of these questions as my analysis continues. Their questions are challenging ones for community psychologists and reflect the need for research that can lead to empowerment and action, that attends to the material and discursive conditions of lesbian lives, and that considers relationship violence an issue facing communities rather than an individual problem.

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