

Lesbians in Currently Aggressive Relationships: How Frequently Do They Report Aggressive Past Relationships?

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Findings are reported from a survey examining the frequency with which women in currently aggressive same-sex relationships also report aggressive past relationships involving female partners, male partners, or members of their family of origin. Particular attention is paid to victims who also used aggression and their perceptions of whether their aggressive behavior was self-defensive or mutually aggressive.

Results indicate that about one-fourth of participants had been victims of aggression in current relationships, roughly two-thirds had been victimized by a previous male partner, and almost three-fourths had experienced aggression by a previous female partner. Among those reporting having been both victims and users of aggression, about one-fifth had used aggression in their current relationship, almost one-third used aggression with a previous male partner, and nearly two-thirds had used aggression with a previous female partner. A majority of victims who had also used aggression with a previous male partner characterized this use as self-defense, as compared to only 30% of those who had used aggression with a female partner. Instead, aggression in relationships involving a female partner was most frequently described as mutually aggressive in nature.

INTRODUCTION

Although research on the use of aggression¹ in intimate relationships has increased considerably in recent years, very little attention has been directed toward intimate same-sex relationships, especially those involving female couples. Results from a few studies have recently emerged (Bologna, Waterman, & Dawson, 1987; Brand & Kidd, 1986; Kelly & Warshafsky, 1987; Lie & Gentlewarrior, *in press*; Renzetti, 1988, 1989), but many

unanswered questions still remain about the prevalence of the use of aggression in these relationships, its patterns and correlates, and whether such acts conform to traditional perpetrator/victim models. This paper reports on a survey of women that either used or were targets of aggression, or both, in current and previous relationships.

Two recent studies provide the best available information on victims of aggression who also used aggression in intimate same-sex relationships. Bologna, Waterman, and Dawson (1987) surveyed 70 gay male and female college students. Eighteen percent of gay men and 40% of lesbians in the study reported being victims of physical aggression or violence in their current or most recent relationship. By comparison, 14% of men and 54% of women reported using violence in current or most-recent relationships. Among respondents who had past relationships, 44% of gay men and 64% of lesbians had been victims of violence, while 25% of gay men and 56% of lesbians were reportedly users of violence.

The authors found that for both females and males, being a user of violence in a current relationship was positively correlated with being a victim of violence in that relationship. Similarly, users of violence in past relationships were more likely to be victims of violence in past relationships. Among women, use of violence in current relationships was also found to be positively correlated with using violence in past relationships.

Comparable findings concerning the relationship between experiencing and using aggression in lesbian relationships were reported by Lie and Gentlewarrior (in press). In a survey of 1099 lesbians, 52% indicated that they had been victims of aggression by their partner, and over half (51.5%) of this subgroup also indicated that they themselves had used aggression with their partner. Another 30% of women said that they had used aggression toward a female partner but had never been the target of aggression.

Findings that victims of aggression resort to use of aggression raise questions concerning the circumstances and motivations that lead to this response. Particularly pertinent is the issue of whether such aggression qualifies as self-defense or as a mutually aggressive act. Unfortunately, due to the lack of empirical studies on lesbian couples, the only available literature on this issue is from research on violence in heterosexual relationships.

One frequently cited study by Straus and Gelles (1986) estimated that 158 of every thousand married or cohabiting couples reported at least one violent act between them during the preceding 12 months. The rate of husband-to-wife violence was 113 per 1000 couples as compared to 121 per 1000 couples for wife-to-husband violence. Straus and Gelles, commenting on the reciprocal nature of the violence, noted that in the case of wives, "...a great deal of the violence by women against their husbands is retaliation or self-defense." (p. 470).

Drawing on a study of battered women seeking help at shelters, Saunders (1988a, p. 101) reported that "if women use violence, it is more likely to be against a violent partner than a nonviolent one," and that, "neither self-defense nor fighting back are correlated with initiating an attack ... Many women in this study did not distinguish between self-defense and fighting back" (p. 107). He further notes that:

wives tend to be more greatly victimized than husbands and ...wives' violence may be in self-defense. Yet the current research on battered women's motives has not carefully examined how much violence is in self-defense and whether self-defense and retaliation are mutually exclusive motives as their dictionary definitions suggest. (1988a, p. 101)

The study reported here surveyed women in intimate same-sex relationships in an effort to gather information that would shed additional light on the above issues. The first part focused on describing the frequency with which participants in currently aggressive relationships also reported aggressive past relationships, including those in the family of origin.

origin. The second part concerned the use of aggression by victims in current and past intimate relationships. The primary goal was to ascertain whether women in the sample distinguished between use of aggression that was primarily defensive versus that which could be categorized as mutual aggression.

METHOD

Sample

One group of survey recipients was recruited from 350 self-identified lesbian women comprising the mailing list of a lesbian organization in Tucson, Arizona. Questionnaires were sent to all women on the list, inviting them to participate in a study of abusive lesbian relationships. Because of limited resources, the survey was restricted to a single mailing, from which 107 questionnaires (30.6%) were returned. Three of these were later excluded from analyses because of being only partially completed, thus leaving 104 valid responses.

A second group of survey recipients was recruited by word of mouth through lesbian supporters of the research project in the Phoenix metropolitan area. A total of 250 questionnaires was hand-distributed to persons contacted by these supporters, from which 70 completed questionnaires (28.0%) were returned. Because of the different methods used in identifying recipients, the two subsamples ($n = 104$, $n = 70$) were subjected to chi-square tests to assess the comparability of members of the two groups on selected descriptive variables such as age, ethnic/racial distribution, income, and education. Since no statistically significant differences were found, the two groups were combined into a single sample of 174 self-identified lesbians, representing 29.0% of the 600 individuals to whom questionnaires were disseminated.

Women who responded to the questionnaire ranged in age from 21 to 59 years, with a median age of 34.0 years. Whites were the predominant ethnic/racial group (90.3% or 157). Sample members had a median of 16 years of education, and a median annual personal income of slightly more than \$17,000. Almost half of the participants (48.3% (or 84) were currently living with female partners, and roughly one-third (31% or 54) were living alone. And of those who responded to the question, a large majority (80.2% or 134) described themselves as feminists.

Participants were selected for analysis in the second part of the study on the basis of their indicating that they (a) had been the target of at least one form of aggression, whether sexual, verbal/emotional or physical and (b) had used at least one form of aggression on an intimate partner (male or female). A total of 120 women met these criteria. The most numerous members of this subgroup were women who had been both victimized by and used aggression toward an ex-female partner ($n = 107$), an ex-male partner ($n = 40$), and current female partner ($n = 29$), with some women occupying more than one category.

Measures

All participants were requested to complete a 70-item self-administered questionnaire developed by the researchers. The questionnaire covered four content areas—descriptive information (reviewed above), history of victimization and use of aggression, perceptions of the use of aggression in current and past relationships, and information on alcohol and drug use (which will not be covered in this paper).

In the section on history of aggression, participants were asked to record acts that had occurred in (1) the family of origin; (2) past relationships with a male partner (if any); (3) the most recent past relationship with a female partner; and (4) the current lesbian relationship (if any). *Family of origin* was defined as "individual(s) who are members of your biological, step, foster or adoptive family."

Information was sought on acts of sexual, verbal/emotional, and physical aggression. Data on *sexual aggression* were recorded through use of a checklist developed by Finkelhor (1979) and adapted to this study. Participants were asked to indicate whether any of a list of sexual acts had ever been committed against them by a family member. The list of acts ranged from sexual name-calling and unwanted touching to intercourse and oral sex. Also requested was information on acts committed by partners (male, past female, current female). This list of acts included unwanted touching, forced sex, and hurtful sex. Episodes of *verbal/emotional aggression* that participants were asked to check included name calling, criticizing, humiliation, sulking/ignoring, yelling, threats of abandonment, and insulting/swearing. The checklist of acts of *physical aggression* contained pushing, punching, slapping, kicking, throwing objects, choking, threatening with weapons, and threatening life. Participants were again asked to indicate which acts from each of these two lists had been committed against them in the family of origin and/or in intimate relationships.

Also in this section of the questionnaire were a series of questions about acts of aggression committed by the participant in past and/or current relationships. Participants were asked to indicate acts they had committed against previous male partners, previous female partners, and current female partners, choosing from the same lists of behaviors they had used to describe acts committed against them.

In the questionnaire's third and final section, participants were asked for their perceptions of the nature of aggression in current or past relationships. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate (a) whether they considered their relationships (past and current) to be "abusive," and (b) whether they considered *their* use of aggression in these relationships to be self-defense or mutual aggression (referred to in the survey as "mutual battery"). Mutual aggression was defined for participants as "a situation where both individuals are aggressive physically, verbally/emotionally, and/or sexually toward each other for reasons other than self-defense."

Since one objective of the study was to ascertain if women viewed their use of violence as "self-defense" or "mutual battery," no definition of self-defense was offered, and no distinctions were made between self-defense, retaliation, and fighting back. Instead, use of aggression as *self-defense* was measured solely by a question following the checklist of physically aggressive behaviors (described above) in which participants were asked if any of the acts they committed were done in self-defense.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Victims of Aggression

Tables 1 to 3 list the forms of aggression both experienced and/or used by participants in the study. With regard to aggressive behaviors experienced in the family of origin (see Table 1), 26.4% (46) reported that they were subjected to at least one act of sexual aggression, 59.8% (104) reported some sort of physical aggression, and 80.5% (140) reported verbal/emotional aggression. The percentage of participants who indicated that they had witnessed at least one instance of sexual aggression between family members was

6.3% (11). Another 29.9% (52) said that they had witnessed physical aggression, and 55.7% (97) had witnessed verbal/emotional aggression. Overall, nearly nine of every ten participants (86.2%) reported either having observed or having been the target of some form of aggression in the family of origin. In fact, roughly every second person in the sample (55.7%) had both observed and experienced aggression in her family of origin. No supplementary data are available to clarify whether these experiences were isolated, one-time-only situations or regular occurrences. However, these results are consistent with findings of other researchers (Carmen, Rieker, & Mills, 1984; Russell, 1983; Straus, Gilles, & Steinmetz, 1980), indicating that female adults and children of both sexes are at high risk for aggression within the family.

Among the 78.2% (136) of participants who reported having been in an intimate relationship with a male partner, 41.9% (57) experienced some form of sexual aggression, 32.4% (44) experienced physical aggression, and 55.1% (75) were victims of verbal/emotional aggression (see Table 2). Overall, almost two-thirds (65.4% or 89) of this subsample of women had experienced some form of aggression in a past intimate relationship with a man.

TABLE 1. Multiple Response Distribution of Types of Aggressive Behavior Experienced in Family of Origin

Type of Aggressive Behavior	Family of Origin		
	Count	% Responses	% Cases
<i>Physical (n = 104)</i>			
Pushing	74	20.9	71.2
Punching	60	16.9	57.7
Slapping	80	22.6	76.9
Kicking	36	10.2	34.6
Throwing objects	46	13.0	44.2
Choking	19	5.4	18.3
Threatening with weapons	20	5.6	19.2
Threatening your life	19	5.4	18.3
	354	100.0	340.0
<i>Verbal/Emotional (n = 140)</i>			
Name-calling	83	15.6	59.3
Criticizing	116	21.8	82.9
Humiliation	71	13.4	50.7
Sulking/ignoring	48	9.0	34.3
Yelling	110	20.7	78.6
Threats to abandon you	38	7.2	27.1
Insulting/swearing	65	12.2	46.4
	531	100.0	379.3
<i>Sexual (n = 44)</i>			
Sexual name-calling	32	28.8	72.7
Unwanted touching	30	27.0	68.2
Fondling genitalia/breasts	11	9.9	25.0
Intercourse	2	1.8	4.5
Penetration with foreign objects	13	11.7	29.5
Oral sex	23	20.7	52.3
	111	100.0	252.3

Almost all of the participants (97.1% or 169) had been intimately involved with another woman at some time. Of these, over half (51.5%) characterized at least one relationship with a past female partner as aggressive, but almost three-fourths (73.4%) reported experiencing acts defined as aggressive. Sexual victimization had occurred for 56.8% (96) of these participants, 45.0% (76) experienced physical aggression, and 64.5% (109) reported verbal/emotional aggression (see Table 3). The discrepancy between participants' characterizations of previous relationships as being "abusive" (51.5%) and the number indicating that they had experienced aggressive acts in these relationships (73.4%) may be due to a number of factors. For example, as a coping mechanism, victims may be in denial about current acts of aggression. Alternatively, they may not perceive some or all of the acts to be of an aggressive nature. For example, it is possible that some participants may not have perceived verbal/emotional aggression as "violence" or "abuse."

Relationships with current female partners, by comparison, were less aggressive. Almost nine out of every ten participants (86.4% or 146) were in a same-sex relationship at the time of the survey. Of these, only 9.6% (14) perceived their current relationship as

TABLE 2. Multiple Response Distribution of Types of Aggressive Behavior Experienced with Male Partners

Type of Aggressive Behavior	Male Partner		
	Count	% Responses	% Cases
<i>Physical (n = 44)</i>			
Pushing	30	24.4	68.2
Punching	20	16.3	45.5
Slapping	20	16.3	45.5
Kicking	6	4.9	13.6
Throwing objects	17	13.8	38.6
Choking	9	7.3	20.5
Threatening with weapons	5	7.3	20.5
Threatening your life	16	13.0	36.4
	123	100.0	279.5
<i>Verbal/Emotional (n = 75)</i>			
Name-calling	31	10.8	41.3
Criticizing	43	15.0	57.3
Humiliation	33	11.5	44.0
Sulking/ignoring	33	11.5	44.0
Yelling	34	11.8	45.3
Threats to abandon you	15	5.2	20.0
Insulting/swearing	29	10.1	38.7
Unfaithfulness	35	12.2	46.7
False accusations	34	11.8	45.3
	287	99.9	382.6
<i>Sexual (n = 77)</i>			
Sexual name-calling	17	9.8	22.1
Unwanted touching	36	20.8	46.8
Forced sex	24	13.9	31.2
Hurtful sex	27	15.6	35.1
	173	100.0	135.2

TABLE 3. Multiple Response Distribution of Types of Aggressive Behavior Experienced with Female Partners

Type of Aggressive Behavior	Female Partners						Current User					
	Past Victim			Past User			Current Victim			Current User		
	C	%R	%C	C	%R	%C	C	%R	%C	C	%R	%C
<i>Physical</i>												
Pushing	54	22.4	71.1	42	10.3	38.5	12	29.3	70.6	10	27.0	66.7
Punching	40	16.6	52.6	22	16.8	40.0	5	12.2	29.4	3	8.1	20.0
Slapping	41	17.0	53.9	28	21.4	50.9	6	14.6	35.3	8	21.6	53.3
Kicking	17	7.1	22.4	10	7.6	18.2	5	12.2	29.4	3	8.1	20.0
Throwing of objects	39	16.2	51.3	17	13.0	30.9	10	24.4	58.8	8	21.6	53.3
Choking	22	9.1	28.9	8	6.1	14.5	1	2.4	5.9	3	8.1	20.0
Threatening with weapons	10	4.1	13.2	2	1.5	3.6	—	—	—	1	2.7	6.7
Threatening your life	18	7.5	23.7	4	3.1	7.3	2	4.9	11.8	1	2.7	6.7
	241	100.0	317.1	131	100.0	238.2	41	100.0	241.2	37	100.0	246.7
<i>Verbal/Emotional</i>												
Name-calling	42	7.9	38.5	27	7.9	26.2	10	9.2	28.6	8	8.1	25.8
Criticizing	75	14.0	68.8	58	17.0	56.3	17	15.6	48.6	17	17.2	54.8
Humiliation	54	10.1	49.5	20	5.9	19.4	5	4.6	14.3	6	6.1	19.4
Sulking/Ignoring	64	12.0	58.7	53	15.5	51.5	18	16.5	51.4	18	18.1	58.1
Yelling	78	14.6	71.6	70	20.5	68.0	20	18.3	57.1	21	21.1	67.7
Threats to abandon you	43	8.1	39.4	25	7.3	24.3	14	12.8	40.0	9	9.1	29.0
Insulting/swearing	53	9.9	48.6	29	8.5	28.2	12	11.1	34.3	6	6.1	19.4
Unfaithfulness	75	14.0	68.8	40	11.7	38.8	3	2.7	8.6	5	5.1	16.1
False accusations	50	9.4	45.9	19	5.6	18.4	10	9.2	28.6	9	9.1	29.0
	534	100.0	489.8	341	99.9	331.1	109	100.0	311.5	99	100.0	319.3
<i>Sexual</i>												
Sexual name-calling	15	31.3	15.6	7	31.8	13.2	3	23.1	23.1	5	50.0	31.3
Unwanted touching	15	31.3	15.6	9	40.9	17.0	4	30.7	30.8	3	30.0	18.8
Forced sex	9	18.7	9.4	3	13.6	5.7	3	23.1	23.1	1	10.0	6.3
Hurtful sex	9	18.7	9.4	3	13.6	5.7	3	23.1	23.1	1	10.0	6.3
	48	100.0	50.0	22	99.9	41.6	13	100.0	100.1	10	100.0	62.7

Key:
 C Count.
 %R Percent Responses.
 %C Percent Cases.

aggressive. One plausible reason for the decreased frequency of aggression is that victims may have learned from past relationships and were careful in their choice of current partners. Another reason might be a self-selection sampling artifact: Women currently in aggressive relationships may be significantly underrepresented in the sample, having decided for whatever reason not to participate in the survey. Still, with respect to current relationships with female partners, slightly over a quarter (26.0% or 38) reported being the victim of some sort of aggression, 8.9% (13) reported having been sexually victimized, 11.6% (17) had experienced physical aggression, and 24.0% (35) reported acts included on the list of verbal/emotional aggression.

Emotional/verbal aggression was the most frequently reported aggressive act for both current and past intimate relationships. The prevalence of emotional/verbal aggression is not unique to this sample. For example, Renzetti (1988) reported verbal threats as the most common form of psychological aggression experienced by lesbians, and psychological aggression occurred more frequently than physical aggression. Kelly and Warshafsky found that 95% of their sample "used verbal abuse tactics at some time in the relationship" (1987, p. 5). Since research on heterosexual relationships has focused on physical aggression, estimates of the prevalence of verbal/emotional aggression are not available. However, Straus and Smith (1990, p. 254) note that,

...verbal aggression is a relatively stable pattern in [violent] families.... and often sets in motion an escalating cycle of events that ends in physical violence.

In past relationships the second most frequently reported aggressive act was sexual aggression, whereas in current relationships it was physically aggressive acts. The frequency with which the experience of sexual aggression was reported in this study needs to be interpreted with caution. Included in the definition of sexual aggression were acts such as sexual name-calling, which may be designated psychological or emotional/ verbal aggression in other studies. Unfortunately, there is little basis for comparison, since most studies on aggression in lesbian relationships have focused almost (exclusively on physical and psychological or emotional/verbal aggression.

Users of Aggression

Of those participants who had a male partner, one-third (33.1% or 45) reported that they had used aggression toward this person. About two-thirds (67.5% or 114) of participants who reported involvement with a past female partner said they had used aggression in that circumstance. Almost one-third (31.4% or 53) of these participants reported having been sexually aggressive, 32.5% (55) said that they had been physically aggressive, and 61.0% (103) said they had been verbally/ emotionally aggressive. In contrast, 22.6% (33) of participants with a current female partner reported having been aggressive with their partner. Sexual aggression was committed by 48.5% (16), physical aggression by 45.5% (15), and verbal/emotional aggression by 93.9% (31). It is noteworthy that roughly the same percentage of participants reported having used aggression with their current partner as those who reported having been victimized by their current partner.

Combined Victims/Users of Aggression

Of the total number of participants who had ever been involved with a male partner, 29.4% (40) indicated that they had not only experienced aggression but had also used aggression

in that relationship. About two-thirds (68.0% or 115) of participants who had been in a past female relationship had been victims as well as users of aggression, whereas only 19.9% (29) had both experienced and used aggression in the current relationship. In other words, the combined experience and use of aggression was over twice as high with past female partners as with past male partners, and over three times higher with past as opposed to current female partners.

The first of these findings lends support to Walker's (1986) hypothesis that fewer differences in size and weight between female partners, fewer normative restraints on "fighting back," and tacit permission to talk about "fighting back" are reasons for the higher frequency of women-to-women aggression. However, this premise does not explain the much higher level of combined victimization and use of aggression in past as opposed to current lesbian relationships. It is possible that with the advantage of hindsight, experience, and/or intervention, many participants were able to successfully develop nonaggressive current relationships. Alternatively, individuals who had been in an aggressive relationship and who found themselves currently in yet another aggressive relationship might have been embarrassed about or prone to deny this circumstance.

Aggression in Past Intimate Relationships

Three dichotomous yes/no categories were created to denote whether each participant had been (a) the victim of aggression (b) the user of aggression, or (c) both victim and user of aggression in past relationships with male and female partners. Values for these three indicators were then correlated with a second set of yes/no variables indicating whether participants had been victims, users, or combined victims/users of aggression in current lesbian relationships. The resulting correlations are shown in Table 4.

The results suggest that individuals who had been victimized in a past relationship with a male partner were also likely to have been a victim, user, or both victim and user of

TABLE 4. Associations[†] Between Aggression in Current Relationship and Aggression in Past Relationships

Past Relationships	Current Same-Sex Relationship		
	Victim	User	Victim & User
<i>Male</i>			
Victim	r = .1479*	r = .1431*	r = .1853**
	n = 169	n = 171	n = 169
User	r = .0733	r = .0910	r = .1058
	n = 169	n = 171	n = 169
Victim/User	r = .1988**	r = .1836**	r = .1884**
	n = 168	n = 170	n = 168
<i>Female</i>			
Victim	r = .1113	r = .1015	r = .1042
	n = 169	n = 170	n = 169
User	r = .1016	r = .1156	r = .1468*
	n = 168	n = 169	n = 168
Victim/User	r = .1014	r = .1094	r = .1355*
	n = 167	n = 168	n = 167

[†] Associations reported as Pearson's correlation coefficients.

* p ≤ .05.

** p ≤ .01.

aggression with a current partner. There was no statistically significant relationship between having used aggression on a male ex-partner and being a victim, user or combined victim/user of aggression in a current lesbian relationship. The experience of being a combined victim/user of aggression with a previous male partner was associated with all three possibilities of being a victim, user, or victim and user of aggression with a current female partner.

Table 4 also examines associations between aggression in past and current relationships involving female partners. Though the results show fewer significant correlations than was the case for aggression in previous male relationships, they do indicate that individuals who had never been victimized but had used aggression in a past relationship were likely to report being a victim/user in current relationships. In addition, those who had used aggression *and* been victimized by a female ex-partner were likely to be victimized by and aggressive with a current partner. There was no significant association between aggression in past relationships involving a female partner and being a victim or an aggressor in a current relationship with a female partner. In addition, being a victim in a past relationship with a female partner was not significantly related to aggression in a current relationship. These results seem to support the contention that aggression in past relationships is a risk factor for current experiences with aggression. However, this link appears to be stronger for past relationships with male partners.

Aggression in the Family of Origin

Table 5 details results from an analysis of relationships between the three composite indices detailing history of aggression in the family of origin and a second series of indices showing whether each participant had been a victim of aggression, a user of aggression, or both. Results show, first, that participants who had witnessed aggression being perpetrated on another member of their family of origin were significantly more likely to have been victimized, or to have been both victimized by *and* aggressive with a male ex-partner. Participants witnessing aggression between family-of-origin members were also more likely to have been a victim of aggression of a current female partner, to have used aggression in this relationship, or to have been both the target of aggression and the aggressor in this relationship. However, having witnessed aggression in the family of origin was not significantly associated with aggression in past relationships with a female partner. These results are consistent with those reported by Hotaling and Sugarman (1986), who conducted an analysis of potential risk markers in husband-to-wife violence. They report that "women who had been victimized physically by their husbands were more likely to have witnessed violence between parents/caregivers while growing up" (p.106).

Somewhat different results appear concerning the connection between being a victim of aggression in the family of origin and being involved with aggression in adult relationships. As the second column in Table 5 shows, being a victim of aggression in the family of origin was not significantly associated with aggression in previous relationships with males, nor with having been a victim or an aggressor in an ex-relationship with a female partner. However, victimization in the family of origin was significantly associated with being a victim of aggression, a user of aggression, or both, in current relationships, and with being both a user and victim of aggression in a past relationship with a female partner.

A series of significant associations appears with respect to having been exposed to aggression in the family of origin (i.e., having witnessed and experienced acts of aggression). Though this exposure was not associated with being a victim of aggression in a

previous relationship with a female partner, it was significantly associated with: (a) being a victim and combined user/victim of aggression in a past relationship with a male partner; (b) being a user and combined user/victim in a past relationship with a female partner; and (c) being a victim, user, and combined victim/user in current relationships.

This last set of findings suggests that growing up in an aggressive environment, where the individual either witnessed, was victimized or was exposed to aggression in the family of origin, rendered such a person vulnerable to aggressive current relationships. In such relationships the individual was likely to become a victim again, or an aggressor, or both a victim as well as an aggressor. The results support the contention that:

when one member of a couple had experienced the double whammy of being hit as a child and observing his or her parents hitting each other, there was a one in three chance that at least one act of violence had occurred [in a current relationship] (Straus et al., 1980, p. 113).

Other studies have produced inconsistent findings concerning associations between being the victim of aggression in the family of origin and involvement in violence in adult relationships (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Widom, 1989).

Some authors (e.g., Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Widom, 1989) argue that studies on the link between childhood and adult violence are liable to methodological flaws and therefore are

TABLE 5. Associations[†] Between Aggression in Family of Origin and Aggression in Subsequent Relationships

Relationships	Family of Origin		
	Witnessed Aggression	Victim of Aggression	Both Witnessed & Victim of Aggression
<i>Past</i>			
<i>Male</i>			
Victim	$r = .2977^{**}$ $n = 171$	$r = .0635$ $n = 169$	$r = .2889^{**}$ $n = 169$
User	$r = .0758$ $n = 171$	$r = .0693$ $n = 169$	$r = .0798$ $n = 169$
Victim/User	$r = .1784^{**}$ $n = 170$	$r = .0959$ $n = 168$	$r = .1913^{**}$ $n = 168$
<i>Female</i>			
Victim	$r = .1113$ $n = 169$	$r = .1015$ $n = 170$	$r = .1042$ $n = 169$
User	$r = .1016$ $n = 168$	$r = .1156$ $n = 169$	$r = .1468^{*}$ $n = 168$
Victim/User	$r = .1014$ $n = 167$	$r = .1094^{*}$ $n = 168$	$r = .1355^{*}$ $n = 167$
<i>Current</i>			
Victim	$r = .1939^{**}$ $n = 169$	$r = .1692^{*}$ $n = 167$	$r = .2067^{**}$ $n = 167$
User	$r = .1414^{*}$ $n = 171$	$r = .1462^{*}$ $n = 169$	$r = .1527^{*}$ $n = 169$
Victim/User	$r = .1278^{*}$ $n = 169$	$r = .1318^{*}$ $n = 167$	$r = .1384^{*}$ $n = 167$

[†] Associations reported as Pearson's correlation coefficients.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

not conclusive. In contrast, Hotaling & Sugarman (1986, p. 111) argue that, “(w)hile not a consistent marker, experiencing aggression from parents/caregivers has been found to discriminate batterers from non-batterers in a majority of studies.”

Overall, there appears to be some agreement that a history of aggression does render an individual at risk but does not necessarily predict future experiences with aggression. This viewpoint is supported by the finding that there was no significant association between aggression in the family of origin and being a user of aggression in a past relationship with a male partner. Similarly, no significant association was found between aggression in the family of origin and being a victim of aggression in a past relationship with a female partner.

Self-Defense Versus Mutual Aggression

Among the 136 participants who had past relationships with male partners, 45 (33.1%) both experienced and used aggression in these relationships. Of these, 55.6% described their use of aggression as self-defense, 42.2% described it as a combination of both self-defense and mutual aggression, and only one person described it as strictly mutual aggression of participants who had reportedly engaged in mutually aggressive behaviors with a previous male partner ($n=20$), 15% claimed that such episodes were usually self-initiated. One-quarter (25.0%) reported that the episodes were usually partner-initiated, and the majority (60.0%) said that they and their partners had both initiated the aggression.

Relative to relationships involving female partners, a higher percentage of participants (68.0% of the 169 ever involved in a lesbian relationship) reported both having used and experienced aggression in these relationships than was the case with past male partners. Of those who responded ($n=66$), 30.3% perceived their use of aggression as a self-defensive measure, whereas 39.4% characterized this use as mutual aggression and 30.3% said they used aggression both in self-defense and as mutual aggression. However, it is important to note that a significant proportion of this subset (42.6% or 49 participants) did not respond to the question of whether their use of aggression constituted self-defense or mutual aggression. This may indicate that participants had difficulty characterizing their use of aggression—they could not accurately describe it as either “self-defense” or “mutual battery” or would not describe their use of aggression using either term. Alternatively, it might suggest that use of aggression was a sensitive topic for the participants; thus, they may have avoided the question to avoid having to characterize their use.

In terms of the way that episodes of mutual aggression were initiated, 49.1% (27) of participants who reported engaging in this behavior were able to indicate that it was partner-initiated, while 36.4% (20) shared the blame with their partners. Only 14.5% (8) reported that they usually initiated such episodes themselves.

In short, participants were more likely to describe their use of aggression on a male partner as self-defense or combined use of self-defensive tactics and mutual aggression, than as strictly episodes of mutual aggression. However, use of aggression on female partners was more likely to be described as mutual aggression, or as a combination of self-defense and mutual aggression. Again, Walker's (1986) hypothesis (see p. 14) may account for the greater propensity to use aggression with a female as opposed to a male partner. Alternatively, one confounding factor that may have affected the participants' perception of their acts is that victims may be confused about whether they were aggressors and/or victims when they resorted to aggression, even if it was to defend themselves.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Certain limitations of the study should be noted. First, since the findings are based on a nonprobability sample, self-selection by participants limits the generalizability of results. In addition, there may be a response bias, as would be indicated by the low overall response rate (29.0%). For example, participants who had personally experienced aggression may have been more likely to complete and return the form. Alternatively, women currently in aggressive relationships may have been more likely not to participate in the survey. Findings of the study may thus be unique to the sample itself.

Second, the collection of retrospective data with no means of verification and the private and extremely sensitive nature of the information being solicited may have led to reporting inaccuracies.

As Hart (1986, p. 185) explains:

[m]ost battered lesbians are ashamed of the violence they have inflicted on the batterer. Since all battered lesbians have engaged in extensive efforts to protect the batterer from exposure as a terrorist and from the consequences of her violence, battered lesbians may continue "taking care of" the batterer by blaming [themselves], maximizing [their] violence and minimizing that of the batterer.

Third, the survey instrument did not directly address the intent of the use of aggression other than to ask whether such use was in self-defense. Therefore, conclusions regarding motivations for the use of aggression are at best speculative. Fourth, the "family of origin" definition (see p. 124) does not distinguish age, and therefore, power differences between victims and users of aggression that researchers such as Finkelhor (1983) are careful to make. One consequence of such imprecision in definition may be that the prevalence rates reported in this study are higher than those reported in other studies.

On the other hand, limitations such as the study's use of a nonprobability sample are similar to those faced by almost all researchers endeavoring to assess populations that are not readily identifiable or committed to participation in research. As such, the findings are intended to be suggestive rather than definitive, and the overall goal of the study to provide foundation data on the use of aggression in lesbian relationships does not seem to be excessively jeopardized by these limitations.

CONCLUSION

The findings here mirror those from studies of other populations which indicate that a history of aggression, whether the person is a target or observer of aggression, is a risk factor for subsequent experiences with aggression. Still, this does not necessarily mean that aggressive pasts always lead to aggressive futures, as evidenced by the considerably lower frequency of aggression in current relationships than in past relationships with either male or female partners. Apparently, some women learn from earlier experiences so that they are able to reduce the level of aggression in later relationships. As Widom (1989) points out, a need remains for research to identify the "dispositional attributes, environmental conditions, biological predispositions, and positive events" that can avert the development of propensities toward violence (p. 24). In the same article, Widom also notes that research on the consequences of family aggression has focused mainly on subsequent aggressive

behavior and aggression even though there is ample evidence to suggest that "abuse may also lead to withdrawal or self-destructive behavior" (1989, p. 24). This possibility should not be overlooked in practice or research with women in same-sex relationships who either use, experience, or use and experience aggression. Recommended interventions would address the psychological mechanisms (perhaps guilt and anger) underlying withdrawal or self-destructive responses.

Popular stereotypes of domestic violence typically portray apparently helpless women who are victimized by physically overpowering males. Much debate is currently under way about whether this is an accurate characterization of aggression in heterosexual relationships, but it is clearly not supported by this study. Results of this study indicate that aggression in intimate female relationships tends to be reciprocal, with many women who reported experiencing aggression reporting having used it as well. In addition, this use of aggression was less often in self-defense alone than it was mutual aggression or self-defense combined with mutual aggression. This illustrates the deficiency of traditional perpetrator/victim models in characterizing aggression in intimate female relationships, and it points out the need for further research on the ways in which it develops.

For example, additional study is needed on motives for the use of aggression by a victim, perhaps by adapting Saunders' (1988a) study to individuals in same-sex relationships. The focus would be on whether distinctions are made by victims/users of aggression between the concepts of "fighting back," "retaliation," and "self-defense." Another important dynamic to be addressed is the process whereby victims of less severe aggression respond with more severe acts, and whether this is perceived as a self-defense tactic. Finally, longitudinal as opposed to cross-sectional research needs to be conducted to better understand the evolution of aggression, e.g., from self-defense into mutual aggression, or vice versa.

NOTE

¹ Refers to, "any malevolent act, i.e., an act carried out with the intention of, or which is perceived as having the intention of, hurting another. The injury can be psychological, material deprivation, or physical pain or damage. When the injury is pain or damage, it can be called 'physical aggression' and is then synonymous with 'violence'" (Gelles & Straus, 1979, p. 554). "Violence" is defined by Gelles & Straus as "an act carried out with the intention of, or perceived as having the intention of, physically hurting another person."

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