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Nowhere to Hide

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Nowhere to Hide: Lesbian Battering, Homophobia, and Minority Stress

Kimberly F. Balsam

SUMMARY. This article examines the relationship between lesbian battering, homophobia (both external and internalized), and the stress of living as a member of an oppressed minority. While domestic violence in lesbian relationships parallels domestic violence in heterosexual relationships in many ways, the context of homophobia in society, in addition to sexism, creates some unique dynamics, issues, and barriers to change. Drawing upon a review of the theoretical and empirical literature, as well as the author's clinical experience as a lesbian psychotherapist, the impact of the homophobic context on lesbian battering is examined from the perspective of victims, perpetrators, and helping systems. *[[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com>*

KEYWORDS. Lesbian battering, lesbians, domestic violence, homophobia, internalized homophobia, minority stress

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Lesbian battering exists. This much we know. Public awareness of domestic violence in lesbian relationships has come gradually, painstakingly, and with reservations by many. The beginnings of the battered women's movement in the 1970s emphasized male violence against women, leaving little room for explaining relationships in which women were perpetrators of violence. The Lesbian Task Force of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence was the first group to address publicly lesbian battering in 1983. Shortly afterwards, the first book on the topic, *Naming the Violence: Speaking Out About Lesbian Battering,* appeared, providing a voice for survivors and activists and beginning the process of educating the lesbian community and the battered women's movement about this issue. In this book, Hart (1986) provided a definition of lesbian battering that has often been cited:

> Lesbian battering is a pattern of violent or coercive behaviors whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs, or conduct of her intimate partner or to punish the intimate for resisting the perpetrator's control. Individual acts of physical violence, by this definition, do not constitute lesbian battering. Physical violence is not battering unless it results in the enhanced control of the batterer over the recipient. (p. 173)

As more women began to speak out about their experiences of domestic violence in lesbian relationships, empirical researchers in the social sciences began to investigate prevalence rates. Research to date has yielded a wide range of estimates ranging from 7% to 48% for physical abuse, and up to 90% when verbal abuse is included (see Burke & Follingstad, 1999, for a review). These figures must be approached with caution, as the existing body of research is hampered by a number of methodological weaknesses. Some of these issues are the same as those faced by other lesbian/gay/bisexual researchers, such as recruitment of representative samples, small sample sizes, homogeneous (well-educated, White, middle-class) samples, etc. Some studies have failed to assess the gender of the perpetrator, and, therefore, fail to separate abuse by previous male partners and abuse by female partners. Furthermore, the range of operational definitions and measures makes comparisons between studies of lesbian battering and comparisons with studies of heterosexual battering difficult (Burke & Follingstad, 1999). Nevertheless, research to date suggests that lesbian battering occurs with a frequency that is alarming. It is no longer possible to ignore this serious social problem.

Unfortunately, the response of the lesbian community and the battered women's movement has, to date, been less than adequate. For example, Renzetti (1988), in a sample of 100 battered lesbians, found that "few respondents sought help from hotlines and women's shelters, and of those who did, most found them

to be no help at all or only a little helpful. Other institutional sources of help, such as the police, attorneys, physicians, and psychiatrists, proved to be the least helpful of all . . . In total, 64% (of the respondents) stayed (in the abusive relationship) because they 'did not know where, or how, to seek help' " (p. 395). In a later study, Renzetti (1995) reported that out of 566 domestic violence service agencies surveyed, only 9.3% offered services targeted to meet the needs of battered lesbians. Perhaps of more concern is the finding that "The majority reported that they had no plans to expand their services for battered lesbians" (p. 123).

What factors might contribute to the lack of response? Focusing on prevalence rates may obscure the fact that domestic violence in lesbian relationships differs from domestic violence in heterosexual relationships in a number of important ways. Most importantly, lesbian battering occurs in a context of homophobia. Pharr (1986) explained succinctly:

> There is an important difference between the battered lesbian and the battered non-lesbian: the battered non-lesbian experiences violence within the context of a misogynist world; the lesbian experiences violence within the context of a world that is not only woman-hating, but is also homophobic. (p. 204)

Without careful attention to context, we cannot begin to understand the unique factors that have kept lesbian battering hidden, and, more recently, have inhibited adequate response. A closer examination of the complex and multifaceted ways that homophobia influences the experience of lesbian battering might help us to understand this lack of response and point to more effective future interventions.

The purpose of this article is to explore the impact of homophobia and minority stress in the lives of lesbians and to examine ways that it might impact the experience of lesbian battering for the victim, the perpetrator, and sources of help.

HOMOPHOBIA

Weinberg (1972) coined the term "homophobia" to describe the irrational fear, hatred and intolerance of homosexuality. This definition places homophobia in parallel with other irrational "phobias." Contemporary activists and theorists, however, tend to view homophobia as linked with sexism, racism, classism, and other "isms"–forms of oppression of one group of people by another group based on a particular characteristic or trait, rather than a clinical "phobia." Conse-

quently, some have proposed that "heterosexism" is a more appropriate term. Herek (1990) defines this term as "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, and community" (p. 316). For the purposes of this paper, the words will be used interchangeably.

The homophobic context means that intimate lesbian lives and lesbian relationships are pathologized by the dominant culture. Milestones in family development such as dating, marriage, pregnancy, child-rearing, retirement, and illness are all shaped and restricted by lack of role models, social approval, and legal and institutional support. When progress is made toward legitimating lesbian relationships, backlash usually follows, bringing homophobic stereotypes and prejudice even more out in the open. The recent passing of the Civil Union legislation in Vermont, followed by the rise of anti-LGB sentiment and political action throughout the state, is a very tangible reminder of this.

The feminist response to domestic violence has included the awareness that it occurs in a context of violence against women in society. Women's vulnerability extends beyond their risk in the home. Whether or not a woman has previously been a victim of other male violence, she is invariably aware of the threat of such violence. This awareness shapes her experience of violence within the home. Similarly, lesbian battering takes place against a backdrop of violence against women and homophobic violence against gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Berrill (1992), in a review of 24 studies, found that 80% of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals report having experienced verbal harassment, 44% report threats of violence, 33% report being chased or followed, 17% report being physically assaulted. In a more recent study of 2000 lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults, 20% of women and 25% of men reported experiencing victimization based on their sexual orientation (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999). Such victimization has an even greater impact on mental health and well-being than non-bias related attacks.

In a broader sense, we can see homophobia and violence as inevitably interconnected. Neisen (1993) refers to heterosexism as a form of "cultural victimization" that parallels other victimizations such as rape and abuse in its impact on individuals' well-being. Almeida, Woods, Messineo, Font, and Heer (1994) describe a "hierarchy" of oppression. In this hierarchy, white heterosexual men are at the top of the power structure, then white heterosexual women, white gay men and lesbians, heterosexual men and women of color, and lesbians and gay men of color. We might also add groups such as immigrants, disabled people, old people, and others who differ from "the norm" to the lower rungs of this hierarchy. If power and privilege accompany higher status in the hierarchy of oppression, we can see violence, in all its manifestations, as a tool that enforces the hierarchy.

Internalized Homophobia

Internalized homophobia has been defined as the internalization by lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals of negative attitudes and assumptions about homosexuality (Shidlo, 1994; Sophie, 1987). In models of sexual identity development, it is seen as being most acute early in the coming out process, as an individual struggles to reconcile his or her own private feelings with the stigmatized view of homosexuality in the outside world (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982). In its most overt form, it manifests as a hatred of one's homosexuality, the belief that one is "sick" for being LGB, and the desire to change one's sexuality. However, internalized homophobia can persist even after the initial stages of the coming out process, and even if the individual appears outwardly to have come to terms with his or her sexual orientation. In more covert forms, it can manifest as a discomfort with other LGB people, attempting to "pass" as heterosexual, and feelings of shame and guilt about one's sexual orientation. Negative feelings, attitudes and beliefs about self and other lesbians, gays, and bisexuals can become integrated into an individual's identity, and are inevitably reinforced by messages from society. Not surprisingly, internalized homophobia in lesbians has been empirically linked with lower social support, lack of connection with the lesbian community, loneliness, low self-esteem, and depression (Szymanski & Chung, in press; Szymanski, Chung, & Balsam, in press).

Minority Stress

One approach to conceptualizing the impact of homophobia on the individual lesbian, gay, or bisexual person is the notion of "minority stress." Brooks (1981) provides a useful explanation:

> The initial cause of minority stress is the cultural ascription of inferior status to particular groups. This ascription of defectiveness to various categories of people, particularly categories based on sex, race, and sociosexual preference, often precipitates negative life events for the minority member over which the individual has little control. (p. 71)

Brooks pointed out that lesbians are doubly at risk for such "negative life events" given their multiple minority status as women and lesbians. For lesbians of color, lesbians in poverty, lesbians with disabilities, lesbians who are immigrants, and others who are members of marginalized groups, the risk multiplies even further.

DiPlacido (1998) provides a broader model of minority stress in the lives of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. She makes the distinction between internal stressors and external stressors. Internalized homophobia is seen as an internal stressor, arising from within the individual, and presenting "a major roadblock to well-being for many lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals" (p. 147). Self-concealment and emotional inhibition are hypothesized to be additional internal stressors. While being completely or partially closeted may serve as a buffer against some overt forms of homophobic discrimination and violence, the stress of "hiding" may have particularly deleterious effects on well-being. Indeed, Morris (1997) found a strong correlation between degree of "outness" and mental well-being in a large, diverse sample of lesbians.

DiPlacido's (1998) model of minority stress also examines external stressors including anti-LGB violence, anti-LGB discrimination, and daily hassles. She cites the general literature on stress, which tends to conceptualize stress in terms of life events and daily hassles, both of which have been linked empirically to health and mental health outcomes. Although little research examines the impact of stress on lesbians, DiPlacido hypothesizes that the experience and threat of anti-LGB violence and discrimination (e.g., loss of custody of children, lower wages than same-sex counterparts at work, restricted access to housing) put lesbians at great risk for "negative life events." Furthermore, she cites daily hassles such as "hearing antigay jokes" and "always being on guard" as more chronic stressors experienced by lesbians.

While much of DiPlacido's model awaits empirical investigation in lesbian samples, it is useful as an integrated explanation of the multifaceted ways that the context of homophobia impacts the lives of lesbians. The rest of this paper will begin to explore some of the specific ways that this context is significant in understanding the phenomenon of lesbian battering.

Context of Homophobia: Impact on Victim

Laura, a 41-year-old Caucasian lesbian, presents for therapy to deal with depression and anxiety. In therapy, she begins to relate these symptoms to the aftermath of a violent rape that occurred by her stepbrother when she was 12. She admits after five months of therapy that her partner of seven years "pushes me around sometimes." In fact, this past weekend during the heat of an argument, she grabbed Laura's arms and slammed her up against a wall, leaving several bruise marks on her arms. Laura downplays the significance of this to her therapist, stating that "I really provoked her this time, I should know better." Laura explains that she would never tell her family, who lives nearby, about the violence. "When I told them about being gay they couldn't accept it. Now Eileen is in my life, and at least my mom has finally come around. How could I give her a reason to reject

me again?" Laura becomes tearful as she explains "I'm all Eileen has in this world. I would never do anything to make people think badly of her."

Homophobia and minority stress may impact on the victim in several ways. Using Neisen's (1993) concept of "cultural victimization," we can see the potential for interaction between the trauma-related feelings of guilt, shame, depression, and lack of self-worth resulting from both the homophobic context and the experience of domestic violence. She may blame herself for the abuse, or see it as a natural consequence of choosing a lesbian lifestyle. Neisen (1993) draws parallels between the self-blame that often occurs in victims of sexual and physical victimization ("I deserve to be abused; it's all my fault") and the self-blame that may occur because of being a lesbian ("Maybe gay people are sick and I deserve to be put down, beat up, etc."). These internalized homophobic messages may interact with more overt messages she receives from her abuser.

It is also important to take into account the concept of re-victimization in understanding the traumatic impact of lesbian battering on the victim. Empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated that individuals who experience traumatic victimization are at greater risk of other victimization experiences in the future (e.g., Banyard, Arnold, & Smith, 2000; Messman & Long, 1996). Furthermore, there appears to be a cumulative effect of trauma, such that re-victimization experiences lead to even worse mental health outcomes and more difficulty coping with trauma. The statistics on anti-LGB violence and harassment indicate that the victim of lesbian battering has most likely experienced at least some form of verbal, physical or sexual victimization. Furthermore, she may have been the victim of verbal, physical, or sexual violence in her family of origin as a result of her perceived sexual orientation and/or gender-role orientation. The multiple layers of victimization in the lives of many battered lesbians compound the experience of trauma and its impact on mental health and well-being.

Finally, asking for help may be severely impacted by homophobia. Feminist models of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships have illuminated the many barriers, both internal and external, that prevent women from leaving their abusive partners. While these barriers may apply to battered lesbians as well, other factors related to the homophobic context might come into play. Neisen (1993) makes the point that while victims of domestic violence can leave the abusive environment as part of their healing process, lesbians cannot leave a homophobic society and culture. To reach out for help involves a degree of trust, and a lesbian may be particularly reluctant to make herself vulnerable to others, and may fear subtle or overt homophobic reactions from help providers.

If the victim is partially or completely closeted, this poses additional factors that may impact her experience. If she is not connected with a lesbian community, she may not know other lesbians and may feel that leaving her partner would mean being single and isolated. Her partner may have threatened to "out" her to family, friends, coworkers, or other members of their community. In addition to the psychological and social implications of this threat, there is the very real threat that this "outing" would expose her to even greater danger of hate crimes. Less overt messages, such as "It's okay to be gay, but not to talk about it" may also have been internalized, making her reluctant to "rock the boat" by drawing attention to her lesbian relationship.

If the victim is "out" and involved with the lesbian community, she may feel that she has an image to uphold. If she is in a long-term relationship, she may receive the message from her community that she is a role model, and may fear loss of support if she damages this public image. She may also see herself as a model for the heterosexuals in her life, and may fear that her experience will lead others to judge all lesbians negatively, confirming negative homophobic stereotypes, if she reveals the violence. Her sense of loyalty to her batterer may be impacted by homophobia. She may see the impact of homophobic violence, discrimination, or hassles on her partner, and empathize with this pain.

Context of Homophobia: Impact on Perpetrator

Mary, a 28-year-old Latina lesbian, is referred to therapy by her girlfriend for "anger management." Mary admits to "slapping her girlfriend around" when she "gets too mouthy." She acknowledges that this is hurtful to the relationship, but wonders "what else would I do? I'm up to here with stress already, I can't take it when she goes off on me like that." She states that she witnessed her father beating her mother on a regular basis when she was growing up. After her father left her mother for another woman, her mother dated a series of violent men. Mary says she made the decision early on "that I wasn't ever gonna be some man's punching bag." In fact, she says that she sometimes disrespects her girlfriend for staying with her after "I get physical with her." On several occasions, when men in her neighborhood have made homophobic remarks, she threatened or physically attacked them. One of these confrontations led to Mary being beaten severely, leaving her with chronic pain and nerve damage in her left arm.

The feminist literature on battering in heterosexual relationships emphasizes battering as a tool to maintain power and control. In heterosexual couples, this means that the man enforces his male privilege through the use of violence. However, the issues of power and privilege and their impact on battering must be examined more closely in dealing with couples who differ from the white,

heterosexual norm (Almeida et al., 1994). Lesbian batterers are multiply disempowered as women and as lesbians. Battering of a female partner, then, is not so clearly an enforcement of the social hierarchy, but a complex expression of multiple social and personal factors.

When a lesbian couple differs in terms of race, class, disability, or immigration status, issues of power and privilege can play out in a number of ways. The partner whose status is more "privileged" may exert this privilege in subtle ways, leading the less "privileged" partner to attempt to establish power and control through violence. Almeida et al. (1994) explain: "Within an interracial couple, the partner who can 'pass' for white usually accrues more social power through his or her affiliation with the privileged majority. This often influences intimate relationships by mirroring the imbalance of power created in the societal context . . . " (p. 119). Alternatively, the partner with more privilege may attempt to use this privilege to control and abuse her partner.

Living with the very real stresses of homophobia may fuel the violence. A batterer may experience herself as a victim in the outside world. She may encounter verbal or physical homophobic attacks, discrimination at work, or rejection from family and friends. Her intimate relationship may provide a context in which she feels the need to assume a position of power and control, taking herself out of the "victim" role. Alternatively, she may view her partner's actions as "provoking" the violence, and therefore view herself as a victim in her relationship as well. For the lesbian who has been the victim of male-induced violence, using violence as a strategy may signify resistance to the cultural stereotype of woman as victim. Violence as a strategy may appear to be the only acceptable alternative to this stereotype.

Homophobia, both external and internalized, may translate into lack of a social support network. The batterer may be cut off from family of origin or other possible sources of support. Negative feelings about homosexuality may impact her ability to make meaningful connections with the lesbian/gay/bisexual community. This isolation can create a sense of dependency on the partner. Renzetti (1992) found that the batterer's dependency on her partner, rather than the victim's dependency, was a risk factor for more severe and more frequent violence. This was especially true if the victim exerted the desire to be more independent. Institutional homophobia prevents lesbians from gaining legal ties, which may create a sense of relationships being unstable. Renzetti (1992) also found jealousy to be a strong correlate of battering behaviors.

Context of Homophobia: Impact on Sources of Help

In the early 1990s I was employed in a feminist/lesbian bookstore. The store served as an information and resource center for the local women's community,

with bulletin boards and notebooks full of information. One morning, during my shift, a member of the newly formed local lesbian battering task force came into the store. She requested permission to leave a stack of pamphlets with basic information about lesbian battering in the resource room. I consented. Later that day, the store manager found them. She appeared hurt and angry, exclaiming "how could they leave something like that here!" The message, loud and clear, was that making this issue visible would portray lesbians in a negative light.

In oppressive environments, an "us/them" mentality can become a way of survival for the oppressed group. The lack of support, affirmation, and recognition of lesbians by the larger culture creates an intense need for a community in which lesbianism is affirmed. The prevalence of sexist and homophobic violence leaves many in the lesbian community longing for a "safe space" where these threats do not exist. Recognition of lesbian battering, violence perpetrated by and against our own, shatters this sense of safety. The reality of homophobia gives lesbians important reasons to protect our image, both inside and outside of the community. Almeida et al. (1994) explain: "Domestic violence enacted in response to public violence often is used as evidence by the dominant culture to support notions of the 'other's' inherent inferiority." Furthermore, the minority stress experienced by lesbians, especially those who are active in social change movements, may create a sense of "burnout" and reluctance to take on another complex social issue.

In the battered women's movement, a similar "us/them" mentality is often drawn along gender lines. Women are seen as victims, men as batterers. Men who batter are often viewed as incapable of change, and are excluded from systems working for change. Criminal prosecution is often seen as the most appropriate treatment for batterers. At the very least, treatment of batterers is generally conducted separately from treatment of victims in order to ensure safety for everyone. The lesbian community may be reluctant to recognize fully the danger that lesbian battering represents because to do so would raise questions about drawing similar lines within our own community. In a society that already denigrates and excludes lesbians, it may be difficult to consider ostracizing our own. Furthermore, much of the work of the lesbian/gay/bisexual rights movement over the past three decades has been to de-pathologize individual lesbians, gays, and bisexuals and shift responsibility for our distress back onto the shoulders of society. An acknowledgement that some lesbians abuse their partners raises difficult questions about the relative roles of individual responsibility and the impact of oppressive social forces on such behavior.

Who is worthy to be defined as a victim? All too often, helping systems respond to complex social problems by organizing experience into categories of "good" and "bad." While this rigid thinking style may be a response to the

stresses of dealing with difficult issues, it can seriously impede the ability to understand and help those whose lives are outside of the "norm." For example, Renzetti (1999) points out that "femininity" has often been equated with "victim status":

> I found, when conducting my research on lesbian battering, that many heterosexuals were not at all surprised by the abuse itself. After all, they said, lesbians really want to be men, and men are often violent. Not surprisingly, then, many struggled with applying the label "victim" to the abused partner, since lesbians, by this definition, were masculine and could successfully repel an attacker. Consequently, lesbian abuse victims who had a masculine appearance, whose abusers appeared more feminine, and who did fight back faced tremendous obstacles when they sought help. (p. 48-49)

Heterosexist assumptions about gender roles and gender expression can therefore lead to victim-blaming and invisibility for lesbians who are battered.

In the battered women's movement, homophobia further impacts the availability of appropriate response. Suzanne Pharr (1988) made the argument that homophobia serves as a weapon of sexism. As long as women are afraid that to be labeled "feminist" is akin to being labeled "lesbian," an even more stigmatized role, they are less likely to become involved in feminist activities and thus the status quo is not threatened. This dynamic can be seen in the battered women's movement as well. Fear among heterosexual shelter workers and activists of being identified as "lesbian" may lead to tensions with staff who are lesbian or bisexual, and reluctance to address the issue of lesbian battering.

The specific setting in which help is provided to victims of domestic violence must also be examined. The battered women's movement has given rise to a network of shelters and safe homes across the U.S. These agencies are often the first line of intervention for women who are leaving domestically violent relationships. Most shelters have "women only" policies. For heterosexual women coming to these shelters, as well as shelter staff, it may be the first time that they are in such an environment. Some battered women may have been isolated from other women by their batterer, others may have been accused of lesbianism by their batterers in an attempt to control their contact with female friends. Battered heterosexual women may hold homophobic views and may feel uncomfortable living in the shelter with lesbians. Thus, while social service organizations as a whole may be impacted by homophobia, the setting of the domestic violence shelter creates unique challenges.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Over the past two decades, survivors, activists, researchers and scholars have brought lesbian battering into the public eye. Much work remains, however, in understanding the factors unique to lesbian battering. Feminist theory and interventions addressing domestic violence have illuminated the relationship between domestic violence as a private experience and sexism as a societal experience. In order to begin to understand lesbian battering, we must examine more closely and thoroughly the impact of the sociocultural context on the ways that lesbian battering manifests and is experienced by victims, perpetrators, the lesbian community and helping systems. While we have done much to bring lesbian battering out of hiding, we must also acknowledge that for the battered lesbian, there is nowhere to hide from the pervasive and devastating effects of homophobia. It is incumbent upon researchers, theorists, and activists to continue to work towards developing models to understand and address lesbian battering that adequately take this into account.

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