

Gender-Role Implications on Same-Sex Intimate Partner Abuse

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Abstract This paper examines sociocultural factors that influence how same-sex intimate partner violence is viewed, studied, reported and treated, with a specific focus on the effects of gender-role socialization and heterosexism. Further it summarizes the similarities and differences experienced by heterosexual and same-sex couples in order to provide a framework for understanding the unique factors that must be considered when working with this population. It also explores how gender-role socializations and heterosexism create and enforce stigmas and obstacles for validation and reporting of this abuse. The exacerbation of same-sex partner abuse by the dominant and sexual minority culture is addressed and problems that exist within the legal system are highlighted. Issues created by the power dynamics of intersecting identities (race, socioeconomic status, age, disability, sexual orientation) and minority stress are discussed. Suggestions for supportive legislation and implications for helping professionals are provided.

Keywords Intimate partner abuse/ violence · Same-sex relationships · Gender-roles · Socialization · Helping professionals · Literature review

Intimate partner abuse is a major problem facing the United States families, society, and future, and one that has also played a critical role in gender role formations and the socialization of American citizens. Studies report that between two to four million women in the United States are physically battered annually by their partners and that 25–30% of all United States women are at risk of experiencing intimate partner abuse in their lifetimes

(Peterman and Dixon 2003). Recent research suggests that the intimate partner abuse epidemic pertains to more than just women and heterosexual couples. Instead, intimate partner abuse occurs at similar and perhaps even higher frequencies in the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender (GLBT) community (Balsam 2001; Burke and Follingstad 1999; Hamberger 1996; McLaughlin and Rozee 2001; Miller et al. 2000; Poorman 2001; Renzetti 1996; Ristock 2001; Seelau et al. 2003; Walsh 1996). In fact, Peterman and Dixon (2003) report that intimate partner abuse is the third largest problem facing gay men today, “second only to substance abuse and AIDS” (p. 40). Despite this, few empirical articles have focused on the phenomenon of same-sex partner abuse. Further, the majority of the literature that does exist, focuses on only lesbian couples, meaning that there is even less literature regarding intimate partner violence among homosexual males. (Seelau et al. 2003).

What this literature suggests is that intimate partner abuse exists in enormous proportions in all types of relationships, and that the heterosexist power structure of United States culture has dictated how society views the problem. Gender role messages have created myths surrounding who can be a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence. In this way, heterosexism has shaped society’s responses to intimate partner abuse within the GLBT community. These elements of heterosexual privilege within the U.S.’ culture has established how intimate partner abuse is viewed, studied, reported, and even treated. Given this, an exploration into this privilege will help shed light on a predicament that has been hidden in the United States’ “moral closet” for years.

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Intimate Partner Abuse

Intimate partner abuse has been legally defined as “any assault, battery, sexual assault, sexual battery, or any

criminal offense resulting in physical injury or death of one family or household member by another who is or was residing in the same dwelling” (Title XLIII, Chapter 741, Statute 741.28). Intimate partner abuse can be perpetrated in a number of forms or combinations of the following: physical abuse, emotional/verbal, financial dependency, social isolation, sexual abuse, minimizing/denying, coercion/threats/intimidation, and murder (Peterman and Dixon 2003; Walsh 1996). Socialization and victim blaming represent two reasons why numerous myths about intimate partner abuse have become embedded in society. It is important to recognize the existence and impact of these myths so the truth surrounding partner violence is acknowledged. Some of the more common myths are as follows: some people ask for it, if the abuse is not physical than it is not that bad; all abuse is caused by drinking or drugs; it is only a working class problem; the victim could just leave; and finally, all abuse is perpetrated by males against female partners (Walsh 1996). Confronting these biases is essential to fully understanding intimate partner abuse, and the fact that there is no prescribed script associated with its occurrence. Literature that focuses on same-sex partner violence intends to do just this, first by naming some of the similarities and differences between heterosexual and same-sex partner violence.

Similarities and Differences

As previously stated, intimate partner abuse can be experienced through a range of physical, psychological, and sexual abuses and the abuse inflicted in GLBT couples can be just as invasive as that experienced by heterosexual couples. The responses of the abused partner are often manifested in the same way regardless of sexual orientation. GLBT survivors experience many of the same psychological affects of abuse as heterosexual survivors: abuse occurring in a cyclic fashion where it intensifies as time passes, issues of power and control, social isolation, minimizing the abuse, experiencing victim blame, and thinking that they can make the abuser change (Elliott 1996; Walsh 1996).

In light of these similarities there are a number of marked differences that are salient to same-sex partner abuse which not only impact the situation for those involved but also shape the reactions and views of society as well. Perhaps the most influential difference in same-sex partner abuse is living as an oppressed minority in a heterosexist and homophobic society. Weinberg (1972) coined the term “homophobia” to refer to the “irrational emotional reaction of fear, disgust, anger, discomfort, and aversion to homosexuals” (p. 145). This emotional reaction can be manifested both internally and externally causing added elements of stress (minority stress) to an abuse

situation (Byrne 1996). The consequences of heterosexism also contribute to the added problem of gender role socialization in determining who can and cannot be a victim of partner abuse; creating inexperience and the lack of GLBT friendly helping/legal agencies, and limiting the legal protection that is available to those suffering from same-sex partner abuse. Heterosexism also creates additional confusion surrounding the logistics of violence in GLBT partnerships, such as the belief that this abuse is mutual or just a form of sadomasochism (Walsh 1996).

In addition to the problems associated with living in a heterosexist society, victims of same-sex partner abuse experience the added threat of social isolation on a grand level. That is, although they experience all of the same threats as heterosexual victims (lack of friends and support) they also can experience being “outed” by their partner. Their partner may threaten to reveal the victim’s sexual orientation to employers, friends, and family members which can lead to greater isolation and perhaps even job termination. Similarly, the abusive partner may threaten to limit the other partner’s involvement in the gay community, or discourage them from reporting because doing so will shame the gay community (Balsam and Szymanski 2005; Miller et al. 2000; Peterman and Dixon 2003). Understanding these differences is crucial to understanding, treating and preventing violence in GLBT partnerships.

According to Disempowerment Theory, individuals who feel inadequate and/or lack self-efficiency are at a greater risk of using unconventional means of power assertion, including substance abuse and violence” (Mckenry et al. 2006). This is particularly true for same-sex couples, which a heterosexist society places in an oppressed and less valued status. Given this less valued status, one might expect that instances of same-sex intimate partner violence would have higher incidences of lethal violence compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Although to date there are no prevalence studies that include specific indicators and examples of lethality for this population, presenting a direction for future research, several studies have attempted to compare patterns of violence among same-sex and heterosexual couples Turell (2000). Stanley et al. (2006) conducted an empirical study with 300 gay and bisexual men investigating patterns of intimate partner violence. Participants reported that the level of violence in their relationships varied from mild to severe and in the majority of cases the violence was often an escalation of a preexisting conflict. Stanley et al. (2006) reported that these results were very similar to studies conducted with heterosexual and lesbian couples. However, compared to heterosexual couples, both gay and lesbian couples reported experiencing greater instances of emotional abuse. Additionally, in one of the first empirical studies to compare intimate partner violence among heterosexual, gay and

lesbian couples, Gardner (1989) found, among 43 heterosexual, 39 gay, and 43 lesbian couples, that perpetrators and survivors of abuse, regardless of sexual orientation were more aggressive, hostile, more distressed, had more substance abuse problems, and reported being less satisfied with their relationships than those not in abusive relationships. Results of this study indicate, then, that couples regardless of sexual orientation, seem to have quite similar experiences with abuse quality in intimate relationships.

Differences that were noted, however, need to be understood so that the experiences of heterosexual individuals are no longer viewed as the norm and used to approach and understand the dynamics of same-sex partner violence. It is clear from this brief discussion that heterosexism and gender role socialization are perhaps the biggest contributing factors to these differences. As such, it is important to investigate the specific ways by which these factors contribute to the maintenance of and difficulties surrounding same-sex partner violence.

Minority Stress

As stated by Balsam (2001) “one approach to conceptualizing the impact of homophobia on the individual (GLBT) person is the notion of ‘minority stress’” (p.29). Minority stress has been defined by Brooks (1981) as:

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, and often precipitates negative life events...over which the individual has little or no control (p.71).

Lesbians are often at a double risk of minority stress due to their social status as both women and sexual minorities. Lesbian women of color often experience what is known as “triple jeopardy,” that is, they experience minority stress threefold, gender, race, and sexual preference (Waldron 1996). Issues of minority stress can be exacerbated by one’s intersection of social locations of oppression such as disabilities and socioeconomic status (Balsam 2001). Exploring the connection between issues of minority stress and partner abuse among the GLBT population can help and produce more effective treatment and help articulate how issues of minority stress and homophobia affect every aspect of this violence, the abused partner, the abuser, and the helping resources.

Balsam and Szymanski (2005) conducted an empirical study that investigates the effect of minority stress variables (internal/external homophobia and discrimination) on relationship quality and intimate partner abuse among lesbian relationships. They illustrate that minority stress among sexual minorities can come from a variety of sources such

as hate crimes, discrimination, internalized homophobia, stress from coming out, and the stress of hiding one’s identity (p. 259). Literature has conveyed that the stresses brought on from these obstacles can take a toll on intimate relationships (Murry et al. 2001). This analysis suggested that greater instances of minority stress were associated with lower relationship quality and both intimate partner abuse perpetration and victimization. The overall analysis of this study indicated that relationship quality fully mediated the relationship between minority stressors (internal/external homophobia and discrimination) and recent instances of intimate partner abuse (p. 267). These results postulate that understanding the variables that produce minority stress among lesbian couples can help in the treatment and prevention of future instances of violence. Therefore, it becomes evident that the “multiple layers of victimization in the lives of many battered GLBT(s) compound the experience of trauma and its impact on mental health and well-being.” Although it is argued that a person may leave the abusive relationship they cannot “leave a homophobic society and culture” (Balsam 2001, p.31). Reaching out for help can become very difficult for GLBT victims of intimate partner abuse since they need to trust they will not be discriminated against, which is often not what past experience has taught them.

Minority stresses related to homophobia is just one of the many contributing factors that separate the experience of GLBT victims of partner abuse from their heterosexual counterparts. The impact of gender roles and the function of power dynamics are two other very important variables to consider when working with this population.

Gender-Role Socialization

Given that the majority of reported instances of partner abuse involve a woman being abused by a man, the disproportionate exposure of these types of power imbalances have created expectations that can lead to numerous problems in regard to intimate partner abuse among GLBT partnerships. These problems are especially salient when outsiders (such as law enforcement) try to identify the victim. It is easier for people, for whom these gender roles have been internalized, to picture a woman being abused by her male partner, someone who is bigger and has more social power. However, same-sex partnerships consist of two people who are assumed to be basically physically and socially matched in terms of power. The danger in this situation is that the seriousness may be trivialized, and the abuse disregarded as merely a tiff or an argument. This creates difficulties, especially for the partner being abused, since trivializing the abuse may encourage the abuse to be down played by removing responsibility from the abuser

and blaming themselves. This reaction is likely to hamper their ability to receive proper help and therefore discourage them from reporting the abuse (Walsh 1996). Investigating how gender roles complicate same-sex partner abuse is therefore crucial.

One of the biggest impacts of gender role socialization on intimate partner abuse is the belief that only females can be victims and only males can be perpetrators. This notion for GLBT(s) whose relationships are not the norm can have major effects on the legitimization of the abuse. The basic reasons for this argument come from the biological theories that males are naturally more aggressive and prone to violence than females, and therefore, are more dominant members of society (Burke and Follingstad 1999). As such, it is often expected that same-sex couples would not experience this form of violence because the power differential that exists in heterosexual is not present.

In lesbian relationships, a failure to acknowledge partner abuse is often compounded by the societal view that females are less aggressive and violent than males. Since males are perceived as the only type of perpetrator, society (even the lesbian community) has been unwilling to recognize that partner violence occurs within these relationships (Burke and Follingstad 1999). Heterosexist assumptions based on these gender roles often leads to victim-blaming and “invisibility for lesbians who are battered” (Balsam 2001, p.35).

Since the majority of lesbians are raised in households dominated by heterosexism and traditional gender roles, the gay community has been known to contribute to these myths that surround same-sex partner abuse. That is, they foster the myths lesbian relationships are much more egalitarian, that lesbian partners do not oppress or beat each other, and that women are certainly not big and strong enough to ever really hurt one another (McLaughlin and Rozee 2001). The myths created here, which are often enforced among the gay community, can make it especially difficult when abused partners seek help.

The effects of gender role socialization on same-sex intimate partner violence impacts gay males just as much as lesbian couples. Of particular importance here are the myths that “boys will be boys” and that males can not be victims of domestic violence. Men rarely talk about being victims for fear that they will be feminized (Island and Letellier 1991). As a result of these gender role messages, intimate partner abuse among gay males is not seen as a real problem; and these males are often left struggling with an abusive situation while at the same time struggling with what it means to be masculine in their culture (Walsh 1996).

Gender role expectations create several obstacles for GLBT victims of intimate partner abuse and lead society to develop several false conclusions such as: an outbreak of gay male intimate partner abuse is logical because all or most men

are: prone to violence, but lesbian intimate partner abuse does not occur because women are not violent. Same-sex partner abuse is not as severe as when a woman is battered by a man because the partners are of the same gender; therefore it is mutual abuse with each perpetrating and receiving equally. The perpetrator must be the larger ‘man’ or the ‘butch’ and the victim must be the smaller ‘woman’ or the ‘femme’ in emulation of heterosexual relationships (Island and Letellier 1991; Merrill 1996).

Likewise, power dynamics are down-played since power and control are traditionally defined in the context of a man versus a woman. Nonetheless, literature has illustrated that the use of power and control is a commonality among batterers regardless of gender and sexual orientation (Balsam and Szymanski 2005; McLaughlin and Rozee 2001). Power is based on social dynamics between the couple aside from gender, such as relative personal power, socioeconomic status, and level of education, disabilities, and race (McLaughlin and Rozee 2001; Walsh 1996). Aside from creating these myths, gender roles and heterosexism also create barriers for GLBT victims of partner violence in regards to help-seeking behaviors and reporting. Several studies have looked into these barriers and discovered that most GLBT victims do not report their abuse and that a lack of support and gay-friendly services is one of the primary reasons.

Barriers to Reporting

Empirical evidence shows that because of gender role stereotypes regarding domestic abuse, such abuse in heterosexual partnerships is viewed as more serious than abuse suffered in same-sex partnerships (Poorman 2001; Seelau et al. 2003). Seelau et al. (2003) investigated gender and role-based perceptions of domestic abuse in order to determine if sexual orientation mattered. In their study, 252 undergraduates read scenarios in which the victims and perpetrators varied by gender, implication and sexual orientation. Results illustrated that victim and respondent gender affected the responses to intimate partner abuse even more than sexual orientation. That is, violence against women was perceived as more serious, more believable and in more need of intervention than abuse against men. Women were more likely to be believed to be the victim instead of the perpetrators, whereas the opposite was true for men. Similarly, cases involving same-sex partners or heterosexual male victims and female perpetrators were not given equal treatment by the respondents and were not recommended intervention. Nonetheless, gender was an even stronger predictor than sexual orientation (Seelau et al. 2003). Similar to these findings, Wise and Bowman (1997)

discovered that counselors perceived partner abuse among heterosexuals to be more violent, and were more likely to recommend charging male batterers than female batterers. As such, when the abused partner in a same-sex couple seeks mainstream resources for help, they face many of the same risks of coming out for the first time, as well as other forms of heterosexist discrimination. This is one of the reasons why so many instances of same-sex partner abuse go unreported.

Homophobia/heterosexism along with ignorance regarding intimate partner abuse and same-sex couples creates barriers to reporting incidents of same-sex partner violence. A number of studies have cited that the lack of adequate support groups, shelters, and treatment programs for the gay community make it hard to report in the first place. Likewise, many GLBT individuals find that when they do report instances of partner abuse they encounter discrimination and disbelief (Peterman and Dixon 2003).

Renzetti (1989) used questionnaires with 200 lesbians and found that the fear of service providers violating their trust and confidentiality often prevented lesbian survivors from seeking help. Lesbian relationships are stigmatized and devalued by our society and this affects help seeking behaviors for same-sex partners. When asked about their experience in seeking help most reported that shelters were unhelpful and unwelcoming. They were sometimes turned away and told that their experience did not constitute domestic violence. Many reported not being able to go to their family for help because they did not know they were lesbians or in a relationship. When seeking help against intimate partner abuse is met with a supportive response the survivor is more likely to escape future acts of violence. However, if the survivor is met with blame or non-belief this causes him/her to become isolated and more vulnerable to future attacks. This is often the experience of GLBT victims.

Another factor contributing to the lack of reporting in same-sex partner violence is the fact that same-sex intimate partner abuse is largely avoided/ignored by governments, law enforcement, and society. State laws are designed for heterosexual couples, many times GLBT victims are not able to obtain EPO(s) or restraining orders, and 11 states do not have any provisions for same-sex nonrelated cohabitants to obtain protective orders (Peterman and Dixon 2003). In regards to gaining a “safe way” out of an abusive relationship, research illustrated that many GLBT victims cited the “blatant homophobia of police, courts, and shelter staffs as their primary hesitation for not accessing these resources” (Poorman 2001, p.14). In response to this, service organizations stated that they may be “reluctant to provide specific services to GLBT victims or they may conceal the services they do provide because they fear losing funding” (Renzetti 1996, p. 65). The decision to leave or report an abusive partner is thus often mediated by the lack of supportive resources.

One final barrier to reporting same-sex partner violence is the role of shame; shame bought not only to the victim through possible “outing,” but also the shame bought to the gay community as a whole. Research indicates that there has always been the fear of acknowledging same-sex partner violence out of the fear that it would fuel negative stereotypes about GLBT and would undermine the idea of egalitarian relationships (Ristock 2001). A study by Morrow and Hawxhurst (1989) revealed that “lesbians thought that public discussion (about partner abuse) would reinforce homophobia” (p.58). Likewise, Island and Letellier (1991) state that,

It (partner violence) is embarrassing, and it makes us look bad in the eyes of others, such as the heterosexual American. As a community, we wish it were not happening, and we do not wish to have to deal with it....Until the gay community decides that intimate partner abuse must be prevented everywhere, hundreds and thousands of GLBT will be battered and their cries ignored (p.57–58).

Therefore even the gay community can make it difficult for abuse victims to find the help they need.

Implications for Helping Professionals

Since we now know that same-sex partner abuse happens, and at the same or higher rates than heterosexual partner abuse, there are many implications for those in helping professions. Before you can acknowledge same-sex partner violence, you must first learn how to acknowledge same-sex relationships. Those involved in helping professions must be willing to address their own issues with homophobia as well as be clear of their own limits/bias surrounding both GLBT issues and intimate partner abuse (Walsh 1996). Second, helping professionals must be provided with education regarding the special concerns and issues that face same-sex partners along with the knowledge that intimate partner abuse occurs at all social class levels, at all education levels, and in all cultural backgrounds and should always be taken seriously and never trivialized. After this they must learn to practice techniques that focus on the relationship, such as being non-judgmental, trusting, providing unconditional positive regard, being genuine and empathic, and never blaming the victim (Peterman and Dixon 2003). Only after taking these steps to work on themselves, helping professionals will be able to empower the client.

Renzetti (1996) states that in order to improve services for same-sex partner abuse one should have in place “explicit policies for addressing homophobia in staff, volunteers, heterosexual clients; written and spoken language that is not heterosexist; materials that are gender neutral and GLBT inclusive” along with affective advertising that allows victims to know what service providers are safe

for GLBT (p. 67). Morrow and Hawxhurst (1989) suggest that when working with this population, one ought to provide victim safety by working to pass laws that protect both hetero/homosexual couples. In addition, one ought to find resources that are “gay friendly,” and work to identify friends and family members that are able to help provide a safe place. Locating “gay friendly” community resources is also important. Creating victim empowerment by helping individuals to make the best decision for themselves, and helping to establish a support system and reduce isolation is beneficial as well. Finally one ought to provide victim healing by providing validation to victim (perhaps the most important element), emotional support for both anger and grief, exploration of alternatives for a “new way of life” such as helping them to become involved in social justice.

Conclusions

The problem of same-sex partner violence will not go away if it is allowed to remain in the United States’ “moral closet” by being ignored and denied. Likewise, the victims of this type of violence will never heal if service providers continue to only half-heartedly enforce anti-discrimination polices. The unresponsiveness of most of these agencies only continues to exacerbate the problem. We must truly challenge heterosexism in society and provide workshops, adequate training, and policies in order to truly combat this problem. Only then will those who fall victim to this problem truly have the chance to heal.

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