

Victimization and Perpetration Rates of Violence in Gay and Lesbian Relationships: Gender Issues Explored

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This study explores gender differences in victimization and perpetration experiences of gays and lesbians in intimate relationships. A sample of 283 gays and lesbians reported on their experiences both as victims and perpetrators of gay/lesbian relationship violence by completing a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). General results indicate that 47.5% of lesbians and 29.7% of gays have been victimized by a same-sex partner. Further, lesbians reported an overall perpetration rate of 38% compared to 21.8% for gay men. Other findings were as follows: (1) lesbians were more likely to be classified as victims and perpetrators of violence than gay men; (2) lesbians were more likely to report pushing or being pushed than gay men; (3) lesbians reported experiencing a greater number of different victimization and perpetration tactics than gay men; and finally, (4) when items were weighted to create an indicator of severity, no significant differences between lesbians and gay men were found.

In spite of commonly held assumptions that gay and lesbian relationships are violence-free (Evans & Bannister, 1990; Hammond, 1989; Island & Letellier, 1991), available research suggests that physical violence within these relationships occurs all too frequently. Reported rates of victimization within lesbian relationships are high, and in fact, are higher than reported rates of gay relationship violence. However, having confidence in this comparative finding is difficult due to problems in this area of research. Few studies on gay relationship violence exist that include both gays and lesbians in the sample. This paucity of research can serve to inflate the importance and/or validity represented in those rates. Second, the reported rates of violence within lesbian relationships vary widely. Brand and Kidd (1986) reported a victimization rate of 30% (when rates for committed and dating relationships are combined), while Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montagne, and Reyes (1991) found the much higher rate of 75%. Differences in rates are due to methodological issues such as differing definitions of violence, time frames (current vs lifetime), and sampling techniques. Since none of the studies used random sampling techniques, reported rates of

victimization and perpetration do not represent true prevalence rates. Third, the data on gay male relationship violence—which is reported to range from 11% to 20% (Island & Letellier, 1991)—was not scientifically derived. Therefore, its comparability to other groups' rates of relationship violence is negligible. Finally, past research on lesbian violence rates did not always exclude violence perpetrated by former heterosexuals partners. This is essential to gain a clearer picture of differences in violence rates between gay men and lesbians. While comparisons among gay/lesbian relationship violence studies are less meaningful than they might be at this time, it is important to explore the details of the current published research and to begin to generate a body of description against which new research can be matched.

One of the earliest published reports on lesbian relationship violence found that 30% of a sample of 55 self-identified lesbians reported being physically abused by their partners in a committed or dating relationship (Brand & Kidd, 1986). Bologna and colleagues (1987) surveyed 70 gays and lesbians, and found that about 56% of the lesbians were physically abused by their intimate partners. Using a sample of 1,099 lesbians, Lie and Gentlewarrior (1991) reported a rate of about 52%. Lie and associates (1991) used a sample of 174 lesbians contacted through a lesbian organization mailing list and found an overall rate of 75% and a current relationship rate of 25%. For estimates ranging in between, both Schilit, Lie, and Montagne (1990), and Lockhart, White, Causby, and Isaac (1994), reported victimization rates of 38% and 31% respectively. Unfortunately, Schilit et al., (1990) did not differentiate between victims and perpetrators so a true victimization rate cannot be derived from their study. While battering involves more than acts of violence, Renzetti's (1988; 1989; 1992; 1993) work on lesbian battering can inform research exploring victimization and perpetration rates of violent acts. Using a sample of self-identified lesbian victims of relationship violence, Renzetti suggested that the cycle of violence in heterosexual relationships, as described by Walker (1979; 1984), also applies to lesbian relationships. Renzetti (1988; 1992) discovered that 71% of her sample reported that the severity and frequency of physical abuse increased over time. If the definition of abuse is expanded to include sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse, victimization rates dramatically increase. Seventy-three percent and 81% of the respective samples reported experiencing verbal and/or emotional abuse (Lie et al., 1991; Bologna, et al., 1987).

The variation in rates of physical abuse may be explained by variable operationalization and the time frame of the study (current relationship vs. any instance of relationship violence). Table 1 lists the major studies on lesbian victimization and delineates the sample size, sampling technique, survey instrument, time frame, and victimization rates. Studies that reported low rates (30%-38%) only ask respondents whether or not they were "physically abused" (Brand & Kidd, 1986) or if the relationship was "abusive" (Schilit, Lie, & Montagne, 1990). Studies using a list such as the Conflict Tactics Scale reported much higher rates of abuse with the exception of Lockhart et al. (1994). The lower rate of 31% reported by Lockhart and associates can be explained by noting that the focus was not on overall victimization, but rates within the current relationship.

Perpetration rates have not been documented as extensively as victimization rates. The little existing research suggests these rates also are high ranging between 30% and 52% (Lie and Gentlewarrior; 1991). Fifty-two percent of Lie and Gentlewarrior's sample reported using violence against a partner while 30% reported using violence against a nonviolent partner. If physically aggressive and violent tactics are combined, Kelly and Warshafsky (1987) found that 50% of their combined sample of 50 gay men and 48 lesbians perpetrated violence against their partners.

TABLE 1. Comparison of Victimization Rates by Author, Sample Size, Sample Technique, Instrument, and Time Frame

Authors	N	Sample/Technique Source	Instrument	Time Frame	Physical
Brand & Kidd (1986)	55	lesbian/purposive student, ads, groups	survey "physically abused"	any instance	30%
Bologna, Waterman, & Dawson (1987)	70	lesbian/gays attending a student conference	survey CTS	current or most recent partner	56% lesbian 25% gay
Lie & Gentlewarrior (1991)	1099	lesbians/purposeful women's festival	survey author items	current	50.2%
Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montagne, & Reyes (1991)	174	lesbian/purposeful org mailing list	survey CTS Finklehor's checklist	current/any instance	25% current 75% any instance
Lockhart, White, Causby, & Isaac (1994)	284	lesbian/purposeful women's festival	survey CTS	past year current	31%
Schilit, Lie, & Montagne (1990)	104	lesbian/purposeful org mailing list	survey "abusive?"	current	37.5%
Renzetti (1988, 1992)	100	lesbian/self-id victims only groups, stores, ads	survey/interviews author items		100%

While gay relationship violence has been relatively unexplored compared to lesbian violence, projections relative to who will be more violent—males or females—are commonly made. It is a persistent expectation in the relationship violence literature that gays will report higher rates of physical victimization and perpetration than lesbians. This suggested difference—that men are more likely than women to express violence towards their partners—is thought to exist, in part, because of biologically- and hormonally-inspired sex differences (Brand & Kidd, 1986). Brand and Kidd proposed this hypothesis as an explanation for their finding that heterosexual women (whose relationships are with men) reported higher victimization rates than lesbians. A broader view of the literature, however, failed to support this hypothesis (Renzetti, 1992, 1993), and instead found that with many of the forms of relationship violence addressed by Brand and Kidd, the differences existing between heterosexual women and lesbian victims were negligible. Another line of reasoning advancing the expectation that gays would have more violence in their relationships than lesbians is based in the same logic—namely, that males are more likely to be violent in general than females. Given that gay male dyads have two potential perpetrators instead of one (Island & Letellier, 1991), researchers continue to expect greater gay male violence rates. There is some existing research that supports the notion that gays are more violent than lesbians. Kelly and Warshafsky (1987) found one significant sex difference: lesbians were found to

have less physically aggressive partners than gays. There does appear, however, to be scant evidence for continuing the assumption that gays will be more violent than lesbians.

Some studies have suggested that lesbians experience more violence in their relationships than gays. For example, Gardner (1989), using a sample that consisted of intact couples who were heterosexual ($n = 43$), lesbian ($n = 43$) and gay male ($n = 39$), found that lesbian couples have the highest rate of physical violence but the difference was not significant. In another study, lesbians' rates of relationship violence also were higher (Waterman, Dawson, & Bologna, 1989), even when "forced sex" was included as a type of physically violent act. Using a sample of 70 gay men and lesbians, Waterman and associates found that 31% of lesbians reported forced sex perpetrated by their partner compared to 12% of gay men. There is a possible confound, however. Although the authors attempted to screen out heterosexual experiences through the recruitment protocol, the exact wording of the questions did not rule out the possibility that lesbians reporting forced sex were victimized by former male partners. The fact that many lesbians have had relationships with men (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981) makes it necessary to specifically exclude heterosexual experiences when attempting to examine lesbian relationship violence.

One study does compare lesbians' heterosexual and homosexual experiences with relationship violence. Once again, however, the finding of greater female violence was found. Using a sample of 174 lesbians, Lie et al., (1991) found that lesbians reported greater rates of violence perpetrated by their female partners than by their prior male partners.

Since there are so few studies comparing relationship violence within the lives of lesbians and gays, more research aimed at exploring gender differences in victimization and perpetration rates is needed. An additional concern with past research is the use of small samples. All comparison studies on gay relationship violence have used samples of 100 respondents or less. The purpose of this paper, then, is to strengthen the literature using a large sample ($N = 283$) in the following ways: to clarify the link between gender and one's status as a victim or perpetrator; to explore the nature of the violent tactics used; and to determine whether or not violence severity is related to gender.

METHODS

Data were collected via snowball sampling during the Spring and Summer of 1991. Contact with respondents was accomplished in three ways: (1) through gay/lesbian organizations, (2) gay/lesbian pride events, and (3) personal contacts in the gay/lesbian community. Despite the difficulties in reaching a lesbian and gay sample, 816 surveys were distributed with a response rate 37.5% (306 returned). After eliminating 14 who did not indicate either their sexual orientation or gender, and 9 bisexuals, the sample consisted of 165 gays and 118 lesbians for a total of 283 respondents. Sexual orientation was assessed using Kinsey's continuum (i.e., range is from 1 = Completely Heterosexual to 7 = Completely Homosexual) (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). Because bisexuals were dropped from the analysis, only cases with Kinsey scores higher than 4 were retained. Means for the gay and lesbian groups along this dimension were found to be different ($M = 6.76$, $SD = .50$; $M = 6.63$, $SD = .62$, respectively; $t_{217.4} = 1.93$, $p < .05$). This difference will be explored in the discussion section of this paper for its possible effects on reported rates of experiencing and perpetrating relationship violence.

Potential respondents were asked to complete a 15 page questionnaire which covered a variety of topics (e.g., political participation, physical attractiveness, alcohol use) in addi-

tion to the principal area of interest for this paper—relationship violence. The anonymous nature of this study required the use of a modified type of informed consent which consisted of asking respondents to read a cover letter that explained the purpose of the study, described the questionnaire, and invited them to be participants. It is important to point out that when making recruitment presentations to community groups or sending surveys to organizations for distribution, we were careful to emphasize that the research was not meant to portray the gay/lesbian community negatively, but rather to provide greater depth of description regarding the nature of gay and lesbian relationships.

The mean age of this all-white sample was 32 ($SD = 10.3$ years), and ranged from 18 to 79. Approximately 22% of the respondents classified themselves as students; 44% as managers, professionals, or executives; and 23% as skilled or unskilled workers. The other 11% were scattered across miscellaneous occupations, or retired. The majority were highly educated and possessed, or were in the process of obtaining, a college degree. Seventy percent of the participants claimed their annual income was below \$30,000, with a modal categorical response of "between \$15,000 and \$30,000." The discrepancy between high educational attainment and lower income can be explained by the large proportion of undergraduate and graduate students in the sample. To establish the comparability of the gay and lesbian subsamples, the demographic variables of age, income, and education were tested for gender differences. Sample demographics did not differ by gender for any of the demographic variables.

A t-test (2-tailed) did not find significant differences in mean ages of gays and lesbians ($M = 32.41$, $SD = 11.61$; $M = 31.71$, $SD = 8.37$, respectively; $t_{280} = .54$, ns). Since categorical variables were used to measure income and education, chi-square analyses were used to test for gender differences. Neither income ($X^2_4 = 6.28$, ns) nor education were found to differ significantly by gender ($X^2_3 = 4.33$, ns). Given low cell frequencies for some for the occupational categories, chi-square could not be used to check for gender differences. Furthermore, collapsing occupational categories to meet the chi-square requirement would have resulted in less meaningful categorical distinctions.

The sample consisted of respondents from fourteen different states, but the majority lived in Iowa ($n = 157$). Eighty percent of the sample resided in metropolitan areas including suburbs. Since the sample was not geographically homogeneous, an ANOVA was used to determine if the non-Iowa sample differed significantly from the Iowa sample. Since no significant differences were found for either victimization ($F_{1,272} = 2.53$, ns) or perpetration ($F_{1,270} = .75$, ns) by geographic area, data were aggregated. Principal limitations of this non-random sample include the lack of class and racial/ethnic diversity.

The scale measuring victimization was a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Respondents indicated whether any of the following types of violence had ever been used against them in a gay/lesbian intimate relationship: threats, pushing, slapping, punching, striking with an object, and using a weapon. Each conflict tactic was measured using a dichotomous category with 0 = "not experienced," and 1 = "experienced." This allowed for composite scores (possible range: 0 to 6) to be created by summing across all tactics. Resulting scores are indicators of the number of different tactics experienced by victims of gay and lesbian relationships. Higher scores indicate a greater variety of tactics were experienced. The scale does not assess the frequency of violence. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the unweighted victimization scale indicated a reliable measure (.83 for gay males and .74 for lesbians). Because unweighted scores cannot assess differences in the severity of victimization, items were weighted as follows: threats (1), pushing (2), slapping (3), punching (4), striking with an object (5), and use of

a weapon (6). Weights were multiplied by whether or not a tactic had been experienced (1 = "experienced," 0 = "not experienced") and then summed. Higher scores indicated more severe victimization. Cronbach's alpha reliability scores suggest that the weighted scale is reasonably reliable with scores of .78 for gays and .72 for lesbians.

The modified Conflict Tactics Scale also was used to measure violence perpetration. This time, respondents were asked to indicate which physically aggressive acts they had ever used against a partner in a gay/lesbian relationship. Like the victimization scale, items were summed to create composite scores. Higher scores indicate that perpetrators used a greater number of different tactics. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the unweighted perpetration scale was .78 for gays and .71 for lesbians, indicating a reasonably reliable measure. Items also were weighted using the same scheme as the victimization scale. Higher scores indicated more severe perpetration. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the weighted perpetration scale was .72 for gays and .70 for lesbians. Factor analysis confirmed that all items loaded on one factor for both the victimization and perpetration scales.

RESULTS

Through the data analysis, the following three questions are addressed. (1) Is the *classification* of victim or perpetrator linked to gender? (2) Does the *number* of different tactics either experienced as a victim or perpetrated against a partner differ by gender? And finally, (3) Does the *severity* of violence experienced as a victim or perpetrated against a partner differ by gender?

The frequencies demonstrate that 47.5% of lesbians ($n = 56$) and 29.7 % of gays ($n = 49$) reported being or having been the victim of relationship violence. The victimization rate for lesbians is within the 30% to 75% range found by other studies with reported frequencies of milder forms of violence exceeding severe. Lesbians reported experiencing the following tactics in descending order of frequency: pushing (37.9%, $n = 44$), receiving threats (26.7%, $n = 31$), slapping (25.9%, $n = 30$), punching (12.9%, $n = 15$), striking with an object (7.8%, $n = 9$), and using a weapon (2.6%, $n = 3$). Gays reported the following overall frequencies in order of the most prevalent forms experienced: receiving threats (19.4%, $n = 32$), pushing (18.1%, $n = 30$), slapping (17.6%, $n = 29$), punching (15.1%, $n = 25$), striking with an object (6.7%, $n = 11$), and using a weapon (2.4%, $n = 4$).

Similar findings were reported for perpetration experiences. Thirty-eight percent ($n = 45$) of the lesbian respondents and 21.8 % of the gays ($n = 36$) reported using violence against their partners. Lesbians reported pushing their partner (29.3%, $n = 34$), slapping (17.2%, $n = 20$), making threats (16.3%, $n = 19$), punching (12.1%, $n = 14$), and striking a partner with an object (3.5%, $n = 4$). None of the lesbian respondents reported using a weapon. Gays reported perpetrating the following aggressive acts: slapping (12.9%, $n = 21$), making threats (11.7%, $n = 19$), pushing (11.7%, $n = 19$), punching (9.2%, $n = 15$), striking a partner with an object (3.1%, $n = 5$), and using a weapon (.6%, $n = 1$). Like victimization experiences, rates of milder forms of violence tend to exceed the more severe. Table 2 compares frequencies and percentages between gays and lesbians for each of the tactics comprising the victimization and perpetration scale.

With the exception of using a weapon, the victimization and perpetration rates of lesbians exceed those reported by gay men. However, the differences between gays and lesbians are not that dramatic with the exception of pushing. To test for a significant association between gender and pushing, for both victimization and perpetration, two 2x2 con-

TABLE 2. Percentage of Gays and Lesbians who have Perpetrated or Experienced Relationship Violence

Tactics	Lesbian		Gays	
	Perpetration	Victimized	Perpetration	Victimized
1. Threat	16.3	26.7	11.7	19.4
2. Pushed	29.3	37.9	11.7	18.1
3. Slapped	17.2	25.9	12.9	17.6
4. Punched	12.1	12.9	9.2	15.1
5. Struck with an object	3.5	7.8	3.1	6.7
6. Use of a weapon	0	2.6	.6	2.4
Total	38.0	47.5	21.8	29.7

tingency tables were created and chi-squares were computed. Results indicate significant differences between gender and either pushing a partner or being pushed ($\chi^2_1 = 13.72, p < .001$; $\chi^2_1 = 13.69, p < .001$) respectively. In both cases, lesbians were more likely than gay men to report pushing their partners and being pushed.

Gender differences in classifying victims and perpetrators were tested using chi-square analyses. In order not to be classified as a victim, a respondent must have answered "did not happen" for all of the tactics. The analyses suggested that lesbians are more likely to be classified as victims than are gays ($\chi^2_1 = 9.3, p < .01$). Lesbians also are more likely to be classified as perpetrators than gay men ($\chi^2_1 = 8.9, p < .01$).

Next, a two-tailed t-test was used to check for significant gender differences in reporting the use of different tactics for victimization and perpetration experiences. For victimization, a significant difference in means was found indicating that lesbians ($M = 3.0, SD = 1.39$) experienced a greater number of different tactics than gay men ($M = 2.7, SD = 1.37$) ($t_{279} = -2.0, p < .04$). There was also a significant difference in group means for perpetration, suggesting that lesbians ($M = .78, SD = 1.25$) used significantly more tactics than gay men ($M = .49, SD = 1.12, t_{277} = -2.0, p < .04$).

Finally, a two-tailed t-test was used to test for significant gender differences in the severity of victimization and perpetration. Results failed to document significant differences between gays and lesbians in the respective means of the weighted scores for victimization ($M = 2.16, 2.86; SD = 4.36, 4.31; t_{279} = -1.3, ns$) or perpetration ($M = 1.29, 1.92; SD = 3.12, 3.59; t_{277} = -1.6, ns$).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to expand the database of descriptive information relating to the degree of violence that occurs in lesbian and gay relationships. A second goal was to clarify in some measure the discrepancies that currently exist in the literature around rates of violence both experienced and perpetrated within gay and lesbian relationships. It was hypothesized that gender would be related to the degree to which gays and lesbians reported violence within their relationships. Results, both relative to experiencing and perpetrating physical violence, revealed that lesbians consistently reported greater involvement. Lesbians were more likely than gay men to be classified both as victims and perpetrators. An examination of the frequencies suggested that this difference is a result of experiences with pushing. Lesbians also experienced a greater number of different victimization and perpetration tactics than gay men. Finally, no significant differences were found between gay

men and lesbians regarding the severity of violence experienced as a victim or perpetrated against a partner. While this appears to be in direct conflict both with other more practical measures of relationship violence (e.g., crime statistics, hospital emergency room records) and with feminist theories (Coleman, 1994; Dutton, 1994) related to sex-role socialization that would place men as the more likely perpetrators of violence and aggression (Epstein, 1988), it is quite consonant with the majority of research on intimate violence that seems to find females reporting higher levels of perpetration (O'Leary, Barling, Arias, & Rosenbaum, 1989). What factors might account for these findings?

Various factors unique to "being lesbian" in a heterosexist society might be useful in explaining these results. For example, prior research suggests that (1) the isolation from society experienced by lesbian couples, and (2) feeling dependent within one's relationship (which may be a result of isolation) increase the likelihood of relationship violence. Several researchers have discussed the problem of *lesbian fusion* as a possible explanation for lesbian relationship violence (Evans & Bannister, 1990; Lockhart, et al., 1994; Renzetti, 1988, 1992, 1993). Fusion is the tendency for lesbian couples to withdraw from the community, and become socially isolated and fused within the relationship unit. According to research, this kind of isolation would breed a type of overdependency on one's partner in the relationship and, borrowing from research on heterosexual couples, would lead to a greater likelihood for relationship violence (Pagelow, 1984). In support of this notion that dependency is related to violence in lesbian relationships, Renzetti (1988, 1992) has found that when a relationship has one member who is highly dependent and the other partner is wanting more autonomy, physical violence is more likely to occur. Further, given the observation that heterosexual couples seem not to depend solely on solidarity and love to bind their relationships, but often resort to force as an alternate strategy to maintain family structure (Goode, 1971), lesbian couples—without the social support mechanisms offered by normative institutions like "marriage" or "the family"—may exhibit even greater tendencies to fuse or create "closed" relationships. According to Krestan and Bepko (1980), this would increase the likelihood of relationship violence. While this sort of prejudice-encouraged isolation may also encourage over-dependency and subsequent violence in gay couples, lesbians are more noted for creating closed systems than gay men. Recognizing the tenacity of the lesbian closed couple system has resulted in some therapists breaking the cardinal rule of domestic violence therapy by initially offering couples counseling, if only to gain entrance into the couple system. Once entrance has been gained and initial resistance overcome, individual therapy can be proposed as a means of working with both partners while safeguarding the victim (Bagarozzi, & Giddings, 1983; Istar, 1996). The fact that these issues are not mentioned by therapists working with gay male couples suggests that fusion is more of a problem in lesbian relationships (Hamberger, 1996; Byrne, 1996).

Gender-role socialization may be another factor explaining the higher rates of victimization for lesbians. Gendered definitions of victim and perpetrator render it easier for women to acknowledge their victim status. Gay men may have a harder time admitting that they are being physically abused by their partners for some of the same reasons heterosexual men fail to report abuse, the stigma of victimization (Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988). This explanation suggests that lesbians are not being victimized at higher rates than gay men, but that gay men are underreporting their experiences as victims of same-sex violence.

"Power differentials" has also been suggested as another possible factor responsible for physical violence within lesbian relationships. According to Renzetti (1992), however, the results of these studies that would lead to such a conclusion are often contradictory and inconclusive. Within heterosexual couples, the culture offers greater power to males (Epstein, 1988), and has demonstrated support of their power through multiple social and legal insti-

tutions. That sort of gender-derived social power would not be the fulcrum around which power differentials would be organized within lesbian relationships, though. Status and power in lesbian relationships would have to come from other indicators of power such as physical size, physical attractiveness and conventionality, or economic and job status. There is research that supports the removal of some of these factors from this set of potential contributors to power and status within lesbian relationships. For example, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) have suggested that lesbians often make a "political" decision not to use income as a means of determining power. Also, Renzetti (1992) has found that differences in power-giving resources such as social class, intelligence, and earning power were not significant predictors of relationship violence. In fact, Renzetti's research demonstrated that dependency is a more important variable than power. Variables such as physical attractiveness, physical size, and conventionality are unstudied at this point relative to violence within lesbian and gay relationships. Since this unique version of possible within-gender power differentials is an issue for gay couples as well, this may be a rich source of inquiry for future research but may not explain the greater victimization and perpetration rates of lesbians.

A related issue is status inconsistency which has been found to be associated with violence in heterosexual relationships (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). An example of status inconsistency is someone with a Ph.D. who works as a cab driver. Since women may have a more difficult time obtaining employment congruent with their education, this is a possible explanation of greater rates of lesbian violence. It was not possible to test this hypothesis with these data. However, status inconsistency and its relationship to same-sex domestic violence is an interesting research question.

Another factor worth exploring relative to greater lesbian violence is the relationship between relationship violence and alcohol abuse. Schilit et al. (1990) suggests that there is a significant association between alcohol abuse and lesbian relationship violence. It appears that lesbians have higher rates of alcohol abuse than either gays or heterosexuals (Blume, 1985). This is further confirmed by findings from a national study suggesting that lesbians have higher rates of alcohol abuse than heterosexual women (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994), and that substance abuse is an important predictor of physical violence in relationships (Renzetti, 1992). Renzetti has suggested, however, that the path between substance abuse and relationship violence might be mediated by dependency. Lesbians, feeling dependent, might drink to feel more assertive and powerful. This loosening of inhibition around power issues might, in turn, lead to relationship violence. While not a focus of this analysis, the data reported here did not support a significant relationship between alcohol use and either victimization ($r = -.04$, *ns*) or perpetration ($r = -.03$, *ns*).

As mentioned earlier, lesbians had a lower average score than gays on the Kinsey sexual orientation continuum. One compelling question is whether or not one's orientation affiliation might impact relationship violence. Therapists suggest examining identity issues, since perpetrators often feel negative about being gay (Byrne, 1996). Combining this with past research suggesting that fusion and withdrawal among lesbians influences relationship violence, an interesting question is how the strength of one's lesbian identity would predict fusion. It makes intuitive sense that fusion and withdrawal might occur in relationships of greater uncertainty; and greater certainty regarding sexual orientation identity results in a less withdrawn—and perhaps, less violent—relationship. These are also issues for future research.

Another explanatory variable is past experiences with abuse including families of orientation and past heterosexual relationships. Lesbian and gay perpetrators report experiencing physical and sexual abuse in their families of origin (Farley, 1996) as do lesbian

victims (Lie et al., 1991). Lesbian victims also report prior abuse in other relationships including marriages (Bradford et al., 1994; Lie et al., 1991). While past relationship history is an important variable, data was not collected to assess this relationship. Furthermore, having a history of exposure to violence is not unique to lesbians and therefore, cannot account for the higher victimization and perpetration rates reported by lesbians.

Another psychological variable mentioned in the literature is personality traits, specifically, borderline and narcissistic personality disorders (Coleman, 1994). Since lesbians do not have a "monopoly" on psychopathological conditions, this factor may account for some instances of lesbian violence but cannot account for the *higher* rates of physical abuse experienced by lesbians.

A final consideration is possible differences in the use of violence. Differences in using violence as self-defense vs. initiation is an important distinction. Since the focus was on rates of violence, collected data did not differentiate between violence perpetrated as a means of self-defense or initiated as acts of violence. Establishing whether or not gender differences exist in the use of violence is an important research question.

Limitations of this study require a cautious interpretation of the results. While this sample is larger than most comparative samples in the literature, the non-random nature prevents generalizing results to the gay and lesbian community as a whole. Further, this all-White sample is also highly educated. Little is known about the experiences of gays and lesbians of color and the lower class. Other research on physical abuse suggests that lesbians of color are more likely than White lesbians to be physically abused as adults (Bradford et al., 1994).

Documenting relationship violence has not been a priority for the lesbian (Lockhart et al., 1994) or gay communities (Elliot, 1996) for a variety of reasons. Lesbian perpetrators and gay victims do not fit gendered definitions of domestic violence. These definitions are used by feminist theories that focus on sociopolitical explanations such as the oppression of women by power-privileged men (Merrill, 1996). Other reasons for ignoring same-sex violence include a reluctance to provide evidence to homophobic outsiders of dysfunctional lesbian and gay relationships and the almost exclusive focus of the gay male community on the AIDS crisis (Elliot, 1996).

The academic community also shares some of the blame for ignoring same-sex domestic violence. Researchers who study domestic violence have forgotten that "family" is inclusive regardless of sexual orientation (Allen & Demo, 1995). The paucity of research on same-sex domestic violence may also be due, in part, to a reluctance to challenge feminist theoretical frameworks in a way that would allow the incorporation of male victims and female perpetrators. While Island and Letellier (1991) have suggested that domestic violence is not a gender issue because of the prevalence of same-sex violence, the disproportionate number of heterosexual women abused by men suggests otherwise. Therefore, any theory of domestic violence needs to take into account sociopolitical factors deemed important by feminist theories as well as psychological (Merrill, 1996) and relational factors such as over-dependency and relationship fusion.

Implications of findings reported here include a need to move beyond theories that use gendered definitions of victim and perpetrator. Furthermore, it is clear that researchers need more insight into lesbian relationship dynamics in order to account for any differences between lesbians and gay men. Renzetti's findings and the experiences of therapists working with lesbian couples suggests that encouraging lesbians to develop more open systems might prevent over-dependency and subsequent relationship violence. Of course, eliminating the need for closed systems, or homophobia, is also an important priority. Future work must continue to document violence rates as well as develop explanatory models that incorporate factors unique to the lesbian and gay communities.

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