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RESEARCH NOTE

Violence in Gay and Lesbian Relationships

Christopher J. Alexander

ABSTRACT. Studies have consistently documented an incidence rate of between 25% and 50% for domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships. These numbers suggest that the gay and lesbian community is dealing with a significant mental health issue, one that is not being adequately addressed. If mental health professionals can be taught ways to assess for domestic violence in their work with sexual minorities, those persons being abused can learn strategies for ensuring their physical safety. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Domestic violence, gay and lesbian couples, gay and lesbian research

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I've been reading and reviewing research on gay and lesbian mental health for a little over a decade. If there is one trend I have noticed, it is the tendency for there to be inconsistency in research findings over time. That is, the results of one study are rarely replicated in subsequent studies. To me, this is less about poor research design and more about sampling errors. Overall, I would say that the research questions or issues being considered in most the studies I have read are quite good. Unfortunately, obtaining a representative sample of gays or lesbians is challenging. Thus, research findings are often based on small sample sizes or very select groups of participants, which make it difficult to generalize the results to broader groups.

I have found two major exceptions to this. The first has been with regard to research on HIV or AIDS. AIDS has been pervasive throughout our nation, with a significant number of those persons affected by the disease seeking services through medical or mental health facilities. It has, therefore, been easier to solicit research involvement from a diverse group of men and women with broad geographic representation.

The second area of exception has been in research on domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships. Although the number of studies addressing this issue have not been as large as those looking at AIDS-related matters, the consistency in the research findings on domestic violence is noteworthy. From a research perspective, this degree of replication affirms that the investigators have generally designed solid studies. The consistency of these results is startling.

The issue of violence in the gay and lesbian community is one that is frequently covered in the gay and lesbian media, as well as the popular press. When the topic comes up, however, it is usually in the context of hate crimes or violence against sexual minorities. Based on a growing number of studies, though, it appears that we need to take a closer look at the violence some gays and lesbians inflict on one another.

Kelly and Warshafsky (1987) surveyed 98 lesbians and gay men about the incidence of physical abuse in their relationships. These researchers found that almost half—forty-seven percent—of their sample reported at least one incident of physical aggression during their most recent relationship. Harms (1995) studied 393 gay and bisexual men living in San Francisco. Harms found that 26% of respondents reported they had used violence in their current or most recent relationship, while 25% reported their partners had.

In a more recent study, Merrill and Wolfe (2000) surveyed 52 gay men between the ages of 25 and 50. The authors noted that forms of severe, recurrent physical abuse were reported by 87% of respondents. As

a result of their partner's physical violence, 79% of the respondents indicated they had suffered at least one injury, though most reported multiple injuries. It is important to note that the men in the Merrill and Wolfe study were obtained through programs that offered domestic violence services. Still, over one-third of their sample reported not knowing where or how to seek help for the abuse they experienced, a reason many cited for staying in the abusive relationship.

If we take a look at other studies of gay and lesbian domestic violence (e.g., Brand & Kidd, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Lie & Gentlewarrier, 1991; Lockhart, White, Causby, & Isaac, 1994; Short, 1996), it can be estimated that the prevalence rate lies between 25% and 50%. This is comparable to studies of violence in heterosexual relationships. Sadly, it appears that we get angry at violence inflicted on our members by non-gay or non-lesbian perpetrators, while we ignore and tolerate the violence occurring within our community.

I have not always paid close attention to the implications of these kinds of findings. Only recently, for example, have I started asking my gay male clients about aggression and violence in their lives. One man with whom I work told me of a relationship he was in many years ago where he was beaten regularly. I remember being horrified at the details of the abuse, and I wanted to ask him why he waited almost two years before disclosing this information to me. I realized that he wasn't withholding information about his life. Rather, I simply had failed to ask the right questions. As I start asking questions about abuse, I am startled at how common this phenomenon is.

The dynamics associated with domestic violence in heterosexual relationships is well documented. Dominance, control, powerlessness, and stress are themes often cited in domestic violence literature. Much has been written about the stress associated with being gay or lesbian, and in many respects, being coupled can add to this. One's visibility as a sexual minority increases when one is in a relationship with a member of the same sex. LaSala (2000) found that gay male couples who were out to their parents experienced less stress than those who did not disclose this information. If a gay or lesbian couple feels isolated, or if they do not have emotional support outside their relationship, it appears there is a risk for acting this out on one another.

Merrill and Wolfe (2000) write of the importance of domestic violence education and agencies for gays and lesbians. Unfortunately, many larger cities do not have these kinds of services, and we can only imagine how isolated gay and lesbian couples in rural communities can sometimes feel. Each of the studies I have read on gay and lesbian do-

mestic violence noted how reluctant sexual minorities are to report abuse to local authorities. Compounding this difficulty is the lack of training among police officers, medical professionals, and mental health workers on assessing same-sex domestic violence.

As with substance use, there are issues that affect the gay and lesbian community that we would prefer not to examine. Yet, if one-quarter or more of gay men and lesbians are being physically abused in their own relationships, we have a mental health situation that cannot be ignored. One way of dealing with this issue is for those of us who provide mental health services to gays and lesbians to start asking the right questions. Once we have a better understanding of the ways domestic violence affects the lives of those with whom we work, we can then empower them with resources and skills for protecting themselves.

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