

Exploring Violence and Abuse in Gay Male Relationships

J. Michael Cruz

Texas Woman's University, Denton

Juanita M. Firestone

The University of Texas at San Antonio

The purpose of this study was to examine gay male relationships where domestic violence was present. Qualitative data for this endeavor were collected by conducting in-depth interviews over an 8-month period with 25 men who self-identified both as homosexual and as victims or perpetrators of domestic violence. Implications are made throughout this piece for further research and analysis regarding gay male domestic violence. Findings include the prominent similarities between heterosexual domestic violence and the perceptions of abuse experienced by the respondents in this study with respect to definitions of the situation, actual experiences and reasons for remaining in abusive relationships. Additionally, the need for both family-based and community-based support services are documented.

Domestic violence as it occurs in same-sex male relationships¹ lacks sufficient research and analysis. Intimate violence has been identified as a problem in the gay community (Ammerman & Hersen, 1991; Bartolomeo, 1990; Gelles, 1997; Island & Letellier, 1991a; Island & Letellier, 1991b; Kirby, 1994; Renzetti & Miley, 1996; Szymanski, 1991; Tuller, 1994; Zuniga, 1995), however, "Domestic violence with gay male relationships is not a well-documented phenomenon..." and "is considerably more widespread than the gay community would dare to admit" (Kirby, 1994, p. 46; see Tessina, 1989, for an exception). While no national database exists for actual numbers of victims or perpetrators of gay-male domestic violence, it has been estimated that between 350,000 and 650,000 gay men in the United States are victims of domestic violence perpetrated by their partners (Island & Letellier, 1991a). However, as pointed out by Renzetti (1997), to date, none of the studies of partner abuse in gay male and lesbian relationships has been able to measure an accurate prevalence. Research does show that abuse in same-sex relationships is well known, does not appear to occur only infrequently or in isolated cases, and seems to follow the same cycle of violence found in heterosexual abuse (see Renzetti, 1997, for a review of this research).

Importantly, the issue of domestic violence has been named the third largest health problem facing gay men today, next to AIDS and substance abuse (Singer & Deschamps, 1994). The purpose of this study was to examine gay male relationships where domestic violence was present. Qualitative data for this endeavor were collected by conducting

in-depth interviews over an 8-month period with 25 men who self-identified both as homosexual and as victims and/or perpetrators of domestic violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A small body of literature does exist with respect to domestic violence in homosexual male relationships. Typically, these appear in community newspapers and books written for the gay and lesbian community (Silverstein & Picano, 1992). Island and Letellier (1991a) outline an organizational framework for theory development of gay male domestic violence. Harris and Cook (1994) conducted a study examining the reactions of college students to stories of family violence. Three types of scenarios were presented, one in which a woman beat her heterosexual husband; another in which a man beat his heterosexual wife and a third in which a gay man beat his same-sex partner. The findings are that "...suggestions of negative attitudes toward homosexuals [were present], most notably the fact that the battered gay partner was the least liked of the three victims. . . On the rating of whether the victim should leave the batterer, subjects most strongly said that the gay partner should, perhaps because the relationship was seen to be less permanent than the marriage bond in the other two cases" (Harris & Cook, 1994, p. 54).

In examining the issue of domestic violence in gay relationships, we use the perspective of symbolic interaction, specifically, negative symbolic interaction (see, for example, Denzin, 1984).

Denzin (1984) links intimate violence directly to negative interactions. Thus, the violent man (or individual) is never free of negative emotion, nor are his victims, because they are bound together in a structure of negative experience (see also Hepburn, 1973, p. 427). This negative interaction structure includes the use of emotional and physical force to regain the sense of intimacy, closeness, and "we-ness" that characterizes all primary groups and which was lost as violence escalated. Denzin (1984) cites several stages through which family violence moves:

... denial of the violence; pleasure derived from violence; the building of mutual hostility between spouses and other family members; the development of misunderstandings; jealousy, especially sexual; increased violence and either eventual collapse of the relationship or the resolution of violence into an unsteady, yet somewhat stable state of recurring violence (pp. 490-491).

Several family characteristics have been associated with family violence, and these characteristics seem equally applicable to homosexual as well as heterosexual families (see Gelles & Strauss, 1988). For example, time spent together is such a trait. Because we spend so much time around the person we live with, we tend to develop a deep intimate involvement and a knowledge base, which may lead to more sensitivity when it comes to insults, failures, etc. Additionally, such factors as inequality with regard to income and household duties can result in tensions, as do similar stresses from the outside world. These may be particularly problematic if they are associated with status inconsistencies (Gelles & Strauss, 1988, pp. 78-88). Thus, if internal or external stresses make the perpetrator feel inadequate compared to his own self-image, he may choose a violent means of reestablishing dominance.

Goode (1971) argues that the particular structure of each family is fairly rigid with regard to the roles contained within it. Family relations often become strained if the members of

the family begin to feel as though they are contributing in excess, e.g., contributing love, money and respect of the others present. Thus, "one or more members begins to feel a sense of anger and frustration, of being cheated by the exchanges in which they engage" (Goode, 1971, p. 632). Furthermore, because the people involved within this unit are usually already emotionally close, they know each other's weaknesses and have learned how to successfully hurt one another (Goode, 1971, pp. 624-632).

Hepburn (1973) like Goode (1971) addresses factors that facilitate the initiation of family violence. These factors include the acceptance of violence as legitimate to use against another person, the successful use of violence in the past, overuse of intoxicants, whether or not an audience is present, and the cost of failure.

Gelles (1993) also highlights the wide variety of activities and interactions which occur with family members as well as the intensity of involvement when family members interact. The zero-sum aspect of these activities can lead to a perception of a winner and a loser. For example, selecting a television show: One person will get his or her way and watch the show of choice, while the other will not. (If the issue is as simplistic as this, neither negotiation nor compromise is present.) Thus, a winner and a loser are present in certain situations and decisions. Age and sex differences, as well as stress resulting from ascribed roles, may provide the basis for influencing the winner. Perceptions of winning (or losing) can then, in turn, impact one's self-concept and feelings of self-esteem.

GAY MALE RELATIONSHIPS

While some have suggested that same-sex couples may be less prone to domestic violence because partners are more likely on an equal footing with respect to gender, Bohan (1996) notes that "...in fact some gay and lesbian individuals have the same dysfunctional coping styles and the same relational deficits as do some heterosexual individuals" (p. 183).

When the problem of gay male domestic violence is alluded to in the social science literature, the fact that socialization is the same for most gay men as for most heterosexual men is emphasized. The male sex role as dictated by our society has several dimensions. The display of certain emotions like "fear, tenderness, trust, love, and weakness is discouraged" (Franklin, 1988, p. 63; Rofes, 1996). These are attributes associated with being feminine, and men are socialized to not exhibit these types of characteristics. Most men typically go through a similar socialization process, therefore homosexual men are no different than heterosexual men, in this regard.

Another aspect of the male sex role focuses on respect. A male is socialized to desire to be respected, and to earn respect through economic success. Men are also taught to display an air of confidence, to be self-reliant, and to be strong. The last aspect of the male sex role is one which involves being violent and daring. An important part of the male socialization process is the casual use of violence. "Some...men with a problem of being abusive have been taught, perhaps through sports or the military, to react to problems violently" (Tessina, 1989, p. 104). Franklin (1988) concurs with this and states, "aggression and violence in male sports beginning with Little League and extending through high school and into professional leagues is unabashedly supported, encouraged, and often demanded by parents, coaches, and spectators" (p. 65). Island and Letellier (1991a) conclude that it is almost impossible to grow up as a nonviolent male in this society because of the influences of the TV, movies, sports, advertising and the military on male socialization (p. 50).

Studies on violence in intimate relationships suggest that some forms of power, particularly those related to one's relative status in the relationship, are related to frequency and severity of abuse (Byrne, 1996; Coleman, 1994; Smith, 1990). In heterosexual relationships, the male is typically the partner with higher status, and abuse is more likely when the male partner considers himself less powerful than his female partner or perceives his power as declining (Gondolf, 1988). While there are no similar studies with respect to gay relationships, Renzetti (1992) found that among lesbian couples, the greater the batterer's dependency and the greater the target's inclination for independence, the greater the frequency and the number of types of abuse. Batterers, whether gay or heterosexual, have been profiled as having negative self-concepts and low self-esteem, which lead to high dependency needs (see Byrne, 1996; Coleman, 1994; Walker, 1989). This process is likely to be exacerbated by the combination of male sex role socialization and homophobia, which are inherent in society. As pointed out by Renzetti (1997), homophobia can be internalized to produce negative self-esteem, and may also be used as a weapon of abuse when the abuser threatens to "out" or expose the target's sexual preference.

HOMOPHOBIA AND VIOLENCE

The literature on gay men discusses the problem of internalized homophobia as an unhealthy mental state affecting many in the gay community. To clarify, "Internalized homophobia refers to the direction of societal negative attitudes toward the self" (Meyer, 1995, p. 40). Franklin (1988) believes there are specific dynamics to the roles men play in our society that include the establishment of sufficient distance from femininity; the need to be looked up to and respected; the requirements of being tough, confident and self-reliant; and the aura of aggression and violence, all of which contribute to internalized homophobia (pp. 63-65).

McWhirter and Mattison (1982) state that while antigay attitudes permeate American society, they seem to have an extreme affect on the homosexual community. The issues of ignorance, prejudice, oppression and homophobia are dealt with in every same-sex relationship (see also Robes, 1996). Furthermore, the authors believe that most gay men are either unaware of these issues, or are unaware of how profoundly they are affected by them, specifically their own homophobia or self-oppression (McWhirter & Mattison, 1982, p. 87). Silverstein and Picano (1992) extend internalized homophobia and self-oppression to include hostility toward the partner (p. 57). As emphasized by Moore and Bundy (1983) internalized, self-deprecating messages are likely to result in depression, despair, and/or other forms of self-destructive behavior. Bohan (1996) states that problems in openly portraying a gay identity might exacerbate violence through internalized homophobia (p. 183).

Stress to fulfill some preconceived notion of a masculine role in the relationship might be another manifestation of internalized homophobia. Prince and Arias (1994) cite findings of personality traits of batterers who are characterized as, "having low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy and inferiority" (p. 126). Furthermore, they state these men often have a strong need for power and control; ascribe to traditional sex-roles; are extremely rigid and oversocialized; and maintain a dogma of strength and dominance that is central to their self-concepts as men.

As noted previously, homophobia can also be used as a tool of violence. In a homophobic society the threat to publicly "out" a partner can be a powerful means of control. While the

negative consequences can include the loss of a job or the support of family or friends, there is no legal recourse for the target (Renzetti, 1992). This aspect of the problem can be intensified with the presence of HIV or AIDS. Letellier (1996) argues that AIDS may increase the difficulty victims of abuse have in trying to leave their batterers because they may be completely dependent on their partner for support and care. On the other hand, if the abuser has AIDS, the target may feel such intense guilt for either leaving, or for not having AIDS, that he has difficulty exiting the relationship.

CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

Intergenerational transmission, or the cycle of violence, is used to help understand why such behavior occurs in intimate relationships (see, for example, Pagelow, 1984, and Utech, 1994). Pagelow (1984) begins by defining it as the notion that interpersonal violence is "bequeathed" from one generation to the next (p. 223). Thus the fact that children learn those behaviors and associated attitudes from their parents or models becomes the key to understanding the problem (Utech, 1994, p. 126).

Pagelow (1984) states that some evidence has been offered in support of the theory stating that abused children will most likely become spousally abusive adults, but the information is not conclusive, especially with regard to whether the abused child will become the perpetrator or the victim. In particular, Coleman (1994) and Renzetti (1992) found that intergenerational transmission was not a significant predictor of abuse in gay relationships. In either case, this concept may also prove helpful in understanding intimate violence in gay relationships.

While much of the information relating to the terms family and family violence has clearly focused on the relationships where those involved are of the opposite sex, it seems likely that homosexual relationships would endure as many of the same problems associated with domestic violence as do their heterosexual counterparts. In addition to those problems that are the same, internalized homophobia may exacerbate the context in which family violence occurs for gay couples. The objective of this research is to analyze the problems that homosexual men encounter at home and in the community when they are involved in a relationship where intimate violence is present.

METHODS

This study was conducted in a large metropolitan area in the southwestern United States. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 respondents. This method of data collection is pertinent for gaining sociological insight in the social phenomenon of domestic violence in same-sex male relationships, and for a better understanding of the issues surrounding men in same-sex unions who are faced with the dilemma of interpersonal violence within their relationships. This study was exploratory and designed to discover heretofore undiscovered knowledge rather than to test any specific hypotheses.

THE SAMPLING PROCESS

At the onset of the research project, two social contact persons introduced one of the authors to potential respondents. One was a counselor for a local AIDS Resource Center, and the

other was a member of the Gay/Lesbian Alliance and was associated with the Domestic Violence Project. Different contacts were established by becoming an active member of the Gay/Lesbian Alliance and by contacting different social service agencies in the gay community. Participation as a panelist as part of the Domestic Violence Project during a monthly meeting of the Gay/Lesbian Alliance also provided contacts. In many instances, after initial contacts were made with respondents, they introduced other potential respondents in the community who had experienced domestic violence with same-sex relationships. Thus, the respondents themselves became contact persons. This kind of strategy provides a nonprobability-based snowball sample (Berg, 1995).

A description of this study was provided to agencies such as a legal hospice, various AIDS organizations, a therapist, the local gay church, and other such organizations asking for help in making the study known to potential respondents. Additionally, some contacts were made at a health club and through a personal friendship network.

The criteria used in the selection of the sample were twofold: (1) respondents were chosen for their past experiences with interpersonal violence in a same-sex relationship, (2) the respondents were at least 23 years of age. Age 23 was selected because personal experience and consultations with counseling faculty in a university social work program suggested that that age was old enough for respondents to both have come to terms with their homosexuality and to have formed experience in relationship(s). The upper-age limit of 45 was an artifact of the snowball-sampling process.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

All respondents self-identified as gay when asked if they were gay or bisexual. Four stated they had been in a heterosexual marriage previously, but had since come to terms with their homosexuality. Respondents' lifestyles varied with respect to the degree of self-identification as gay. Thus, an analysis of various interview sites revealed that some of the respondents' homes were replete with gay "touches" (i.e., homoerotic art, symbols of the gay community such as the rainbow flag, the pink triangle, etc.) while others were void of any visible gay-identifying objects or symbols.²

Age of respondents ranged from 23 to 45. Racial and ethnic identity of respondents was not obtained. On average respondents had 4.24 siblings and about half of them had one or both parents living in the same state where this research was conducted.

Because the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) have had such a dramatic impact on the gay community, the HIV status of the respondents was obtained. All of the respondents stated they had been tested for the HIV virus. Fourteen of the respondents indicated they were HIV negative, while 11 indicated their HIV status as positive.

The educational attainment of respondents ranged from an 11th grade education to postgraduate credit hours. Employment status ranged from unemployed/disabled to full employment. The former were typically men who were HIV-positive and were diagnosed with AIDS. Specific occupations ranged from clerical jobs to business professionals. One man owned his own business.

Twelve respondents grew up in self-identified violent families, and two persons reported having personally experienced violence. Information related to previous experience with counseling or a therapeutic relationship with an individual was not obtained from the respondents.

All of the respondents, except for two, reported their violent or abusive relationships had been terminated. The length of time from the termination varied from 9 months to 10 years. The length of time spent in the abusive relationship varied from 10 months to 10 years.

Victimization status of the respondents proved to be interesting. While only one person initially identified himself as a perpetrator, he also identified himself as a victim during the interview process. While all other respondents (24) initially identified themselves as victims, many of them suggested culpability in provoking violence, thus becoming perpetrators as well as victims. Because we had no clear distinction between victims and perpetrators, perhaps due to the small sample size, we were unable to classify responses based on victimization status. No information about prior treatment history was collected, as the focus of the interviews was on the stories the respondents wanted to tell.

INTERVIEW PROCESS

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do you define domestic violence? How do you define abuse?
2. Describe the kind of domestic violence or abuse you have encountered in a same-sex relationship.
3. Why do you think these forms of domestic violence or abuse occur in same-sex relationships?

Frequent probes through the use of follow-up questions and comments were used to illicit more in-depth responses about the problems faced and issues encountered as a gay male confronted with interpersonal domestic violence.

The actual formal interview (which occurred both before and after the informal visits) was recorded on tape and ranged from 1-hour to a 4-hour visit. These followed a specific interview guide. Interviews were conducted in the home of the respondent, in the home of one of the researchers, and in various public places, such as coffeehouses and delicatessens. These sites were suitable and conducive to the interview process, as well as having been mutually agreed upon by one of the authors and the respondents. The atmosphere at these sites was typically relaxed and conversations flowed freely. The interviews that were conducted at the homes of the respondents were invaluable because they allowed observations of the respondent in an informal, comfortable setting.

Informal discussions with respondents ranged from 3 to 4 hours. The topics of the conversations ranged from issues relating to homosexuality, issues of domestic violence, the respondents' theories of male socialization and the effects it had on same-sex relationships, to the impact of AIDS on the gay/lesbian community. Conversations were not recorded if the respondents indicated statements were off the record.

At the time of the interviews all respondents were guaranteed confidentiality. To accomplish this, precautions were taken in the presentation of the data. In order for the voices of the respondents to be heard without being identified, quotes are the result of using composite cases (see Sjoberg & Nett, 1968). This method involves combining like quotes from two or more respondents.

The data were collected over an 8-month period—September 1995 through May 1996. All of the respondents were guaranteed confidentiality and were assured that one of the researchers would be the only person collecting the data for this project, transcribing the

interview tapes, analyzing the data, and writing the findings and conclusions. Consent was obtained from all respondents to tape-record as well as to take notes during the interviews through the use of formal consent forms. The form informed the respondents that the interviews were confidential and voluntary.

FINDINGS

Lillian Rubin's (1976) *World's of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family* provided the guide for organizing our findings. Her techniques included an examination of the information based on specific issues or themes. She then quotes from interviews so as to provide the reader with a comprehension of how the respondents have defined their life situations. These data describe the personal perceptions of the gay men who have experienced family violence in their romantic relationships with other men, and represent their definitions of the situation. Therefore, we organized our findings around the themes relevant to the literature on domestic violence, and present them in the words of our respondents.

DEFINITION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OR ABUSE

The first major finding that emerged from the data was the extent to which respondents focused on power and control when defining violence and abuse. By way of illustration, examples of how respondents defined violence included:

... an imbalance in the delegation of power in the relationship. One partner seems, in a domestic violence situation, to have a...an...extreme need to control the other person.

... abusive, emotional and physical attacks. These might be even nonviolent sick manipulations, or control. Control games that go on. Hitting and bruising and overall fighting. Fist fighting.

exactly as you would in a heterosexual relationship...physical, mental and verbal abuse. It's far deeper than just physical abuse. Just abusive, verbally. It can be physical at times, or just not...

Most did not define violence and abuse as separate concepts. One respondent reported:

Violence and abuse, to me, it's pretty close to the same thing. I've seen it in one of my relationships and between my parents. Whenever I've seen violence it's been abuse too. So it's the same thing, to me.

Another participant said:

Abuse encompasses domestic violence. Violence would be more physical and more exaggerated [emotionally]. Abuse certainly includes more understated or manipulative or controlling experience. Abuse would be mental and physical...and violence, I would pretty much say, is physical.

A couple of responses clearly reflected the use of insider family knowledge as expressed in the literature:

Verbal abuse, that's when you know somebody for a long time, for a lot of years, then you know them like a clock and you take the things that would hurt them the worst and crank it out, just really pump the hell out of it. Argumentative.

There was a lot of verbal abuse and emotional abuse. I mean he was...in his violent moods he would degrade me, tell me I was stupid or I was nothing but a...faggot and he was always belittling me [and] my family. Family is very important to me. See, he knew what buttons to push and he'd push them.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OR ABUSE EXPERIENCED

Questions regarding details of a specific violent or abusive episode were posed, and responses indicated a variety of experiences. Once again the focus was on control over the partner who is the target of the abuse. Respondents reported experiencing physical abuse, verbal abuse, emotional abuse, and mental abuse. This coincides with the literature on gay men's domestic violence found in the media targeting this population (Bartolomeo, 1990; Island & Letellier, 1991a; Island & Letellier, 1991b; Kirby, 1994; Letellier, 1994a; Letellier, 1994b; McCoy, 1995; Moore & Bundy, 1983), and also reflects the types of violence described by Gelles (1987) and Gelles and Strauss (1988) in the social science literature written about heterosexual relationships.

When asked about the type of violence or abuse encountered in the relationship, one respondent told about having been at a party where he kissed someone else on the cheek, sending his partner into a jealous rage:

And my lover was extremely jealous, dragged me into the bedroom by my leg and proceeded to beat the [crap] out of me.

Another respondent said:

Mostly it was emotional and kind of controlling, manipulative things. There were three specific instances when it became physical violence and that was enough.

Others described abusive experiences in this way:

Very controlling. I can't have friends. If I have a friend, even if it's male or female, it induces a fight because if I spend more than an hour away from the house, other than work, I'm abandoning him...can't have friends. I can't go out and do things with friends that would be completely platonic, [because] he automatically assumes and accuses me of having an affair... Physical violence, hitting, pulling hair, scratching. Then of course the verbal abuse, shrieking at the top of the lungs, profanity, and damage of property, broken mirrors, broken pictures, scratched paint, flattened tires, broken windshields...a lot of physical [violence]...the last relationship, gosh we've locked each other out of the house. My lover would get upset and beat his head into the wall.

Verbal abuse patterns often reflected the insider knowledge associated with family membership.

Well, there was a lot of verbal [abuse] you know. A lot of belittling, a lot of damage to one's self-esteem, one's ego. There was some physical...There were fights, but mostly verbal or emotional types...the belittling, to the point where you start to wonder or question yourself.

Additionally, one respondent stated:

...And if there wasn't enough money around the house and he couldn't see that his drinking and doing drugs was the reason, then there was another fight and that was verbally as well as physically. And this got to where it was a couple of times a month...I mean a lot of trips to the emergency room.

One respondent stated that he often brought work consisting of personnel files home. His partner would peruse the information in the files and use that as a type of insider knowledge:

...he would see that if two people who had similar positions, one might make more than the other. Well, if we were ever in a situation where they're both there, he'd bring that up [to the individuals].

REASONS FOR SAME-SEX VIOLENCE OR ABUSE

The third major finding deals with reported reasons that men would abuse their same-sex partners. Responses to the question, "Why do you think these forms of domestic violence or abuse occur in same-sex relationships?" relate issues of internalized homophobia (Meyer, 1995), control (Prince & Arias, 1994; Hendricks-Matthews, 1992) jealousy and insecurity, money (Berger, 1990), drugs or alcohol (Levine & Rosich, 1996), and inter-generational transmission of physical violence as learned behavior (Gelles & Cornell, 1990; Tolman & Bennett, 1990). For example, one respondent alluded to internalized homophobia as addressed by Meyer (1995) and stated:

Well, the main reason is because in a gay, in a same-sex relationship there's so many other pressures that the straight community does not realize. The ridicule, the discrimination, the bias that we face just identifying ourselves as gay men in gay relationships... Also, not only that, but when you're in a relationship with another gay man, ...you're also having to deal with the emotional baggage that they bring to the relationship. The problems that they've had growing up and coming out, coming to grips with their homosexuality and sometimes you've got so many emotions...

With respect to jealousy and insecurity, one person replied:

Yeah, he's insecure about everything. He's insecure about me. I think insecurity has a lot to do with it and...Insecurities got him a lot. Well, I guess, not just insecurity, but.. jealousy.

One respondent concluded, as did Hamberger, Feurbach, and Borman (1990) that, at times, men do not know how to relate to one another:

Because men don't know how to deal with each other, they don't know how to talk to each other on a respectful, understanding level. I think one or both parties are unable to communicate. I think, and this is strange, that the only reason two men are really together is sex. Or it starts out to be the sex and then it falls into a comfortable pattern and they don't want to break the pattern. I can't truly notice or see love between two men. I can't see that. I think that men just use men for whatever they want and that's where the violence starts, because they don't really care about each other.

Another described a similar experience based on use of control:

Men are conditioned to be the ones who are in charge of a relationship and the ones who make all the calls. And so when you get two men in a relationship together, they both expect that power and I think a lot of men don't know any other way to get that power except to hit whomever they're with. Too much testosterone! He's a control freak about me. It's

just an unhealthy need to want to control another human being for whatever, you know, the perpetrator's reasons are.

Money and/or drug and alcohol abuse can exacerbate relationship problems. Our respondents also described these problems:

I'd say alcohol. Alcohol plays a big factor and then maybe there's underlying reasons of personal problems. I think anything, be it alcohol, drugs, anything that alters your way of thinking at all, is a contributing factor to domestic violence.

Strains from finances were also mentioned:

He is constantly aggravated and bitching about money. Financial strains put a lot of stress on our relationship.

Finally, the theme of intergenerational transmission of violence as a learned behavior recurred during the interviews. Quotes from two individuals are illustrative:

I think that if we're talking about men, I think that there's a societal approval of men being violent with each other. I think there's violence in same-sex relationships for the same reasons that there are in heterosexual relationships, you know? The perpetrator learns violence in his household...when he's growing up that carries over with him into his own relationships...you were brought up in that environment so you think that's the way it's done.

And:

I think it has to do something with...it's your upbringing. I think to a point, you're taught by your parents. And in my opinion, they teach you these skills and you're around this environment and you're learning this. And I think you tend to do the same things in your relationship. And you see how your father treated your mother and I think in a sense it works out that way.

Lastly, all respondents reported the perceived need for formal assistance and support for the gay community. Suggestions ranged from money and a safe house, to counseling, and then to more education and a dissemination of information to the persons involved about domestic violence and the options available to those in need. Respondents said some sort of public assistance is needed and their thoughts are illustrated by the following two quotes documenting the exact types of social support:

Awareness. I believe that as a community people need to educate themselves as to what same-sex violence is...and I think armed with that kind of education people should try to reach out to the victim and let [him] know that they do not need to stay in the relationship...I think counseling is a very good idea. Therapy of some sort...I think they need a shelter of some kind. They need some kind of financial aid set-up...when you don't have any place to go and you don't have any place to stay it's hard to leave somebody.

Another said:

Some place where people would be comfortable enough to go and discuss their personal lives and to see what's going on. Having a comfort zone. Some place they can go and work these things out. Like a center.

CONCLUSION

One of the most important goals in this study was to learn the respondents' definitions of abuse and domestic violence rather than beginning with definitions imposed by researchers.

Our findings indicate similarities between social science literature documenting heterosexual domestic violence and the abuse experienced by the respondents participating in this study. While similarities were far more prevalent than comments focusing on internalized homophobia, male sex role behaviors seem to interact with homophobia to produce contextual differences within the cycles of violence experienced by our sample.

The types of domestic violence and abuse experienced by the respondents in this study mirror the experiences endured by women in the heterosexual community who are living in abusive relationships. We found strong similarities in their definitions and those reported by heterosexuals involved in these types of relationships (see Gelles & Strauss, 1988). Respondents' beliefs about why domestic violence or abuse occurs in same-sex relationships are also similar to earlier studies focusing on heterosexual relationships. In addition, issues of control and power (Prince & Arias, 1994; Hendricks-Matthews, 1992); alcohol and drug abuse (Levine & Rosich, 1996); and intergenerational transmission of violence (Gelles & Cornell, 1990; Tolman & Bennett, 1990) were all reported by respondents in this sample.

Based upon the recommendations of the respondents and the literature existing on gay male domestic violence, a call for further research and analysis is in order. Because few research studies in the area of gay male domestic violence exist, and those that exist are typically based on anecdotal accounts of violence and abuse experienced rather than on empirical research, this study fills an important breach in the available literature.

Respondents believed that agencies should be more sensitive to issues relating to gay male abuse. Specifically, respondents and social scientists (see Short, 1996) call for social service providers to be made sensitive to the needs of all groups within the population being served. Thus, services designed only to address the needs of heterosexual families may not fully address the needs of gay couples. Respondents taking part in this project stated a desire for support services such as a safe house for gay men, counseling services with trained professionals who can deal effectively with the special dynamics of same-sex male relationships, and funding from the federal government to aid in maintaining these social support services.

Additionally, Gelles (1987) calls for clinical practices to be based on scientific research to insure as broad an application as possible. Those taking part in this study believed it was important for researchers, as well as those who had previous experience with violence in gay male relationships to share information and to educate those who might need to be enlightened.

Finally, as is the case in abusive heterosexual relationships, stronger family ties between persons in the gay community and their families of origin could provide much needed support. Many men involved in this study believed they had no place to seek refuge and no one to talk to regarding their life situations. Because a jealous, controlling, and abusive significant other typically isolated his victim from friends, immediate family is the most prominent source of hope for a victim of domestic violence. Unfortunately, family ties may already be strained or severed due to prevailing homophobia and/or isolation created by the abuser. Thus, dealing with homophobia may be the necessary first step in providing support for targets of abuse in gay male relationships.

Clearly our findings both fill a gap in the existing literature and highlight the need for more such studies. Gaining real understanding of abusive relationships depends on developing an awareness of the similarities and differences in experiences based on the structural context in which the abuse takes place. Gay males may describe their abuse similarly to heterosexual targets, but are also aware of their positions as gay men in a homophobic

society. Using their own words to gain an understanding of their experiences helps provide the contextual basis for making meaningful comparisons to the experiences of other groups. Such comparisons may eventually provide the basis for creating meaningful programs and policies which benefit members of all groups, not just members of the majority.

NOTES

¹The terms same-sex male relationships, gay male relationships, and homosexual male relationships will be used interchangeably.

²While these descriptions highlight the natural settings in which interviews took place, analysis of respondents' statements revealed no discernable connection between the decor of the homes and victimization status.

REFERENCES

- Ammerman, R. T., & Hersen, M. (Eds.) (1991). *Case studies in family violence*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Bartolomeo, N. (1990). Domestic violence: A serious problem lacking in resources. *Washington Blade*, July 27 (7).
- Berg, B. L. (1995). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. (Second ed.) Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Berger, R. M. (1990). Men together: Understanding the gay couple. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 19, 31-49.
- Bohan, J. S. (1996). *Psychology and sexual orientation: Coming to terms*. New York: Routledge.
- Byrne, D. (1996). Clinical models for the treatment of gay male perpetrator of domestic violence. In C. Renzetti and C. H. Miley (Eds.), *Violence in gay and lesbian domestic partnerships* (pp. 107-116). New York: Harrington Park.
- Coleman, V. E. (1994). Lesbian battering: The relationship between personality and the perpetration of violence. *Violence and Victims*, 9, 139-152.
- Denzin, N. K. (1984). Toward a phenomenology of domestic, family violence. *American Journal of Sociology*, 90, 483-512.
- Franklin II, C. W. (1988). *Men and society*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Gelles, R. J. (1997). *Intimate violence in families*. (Third ed.) Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Gelles, R. J. (1987). *Family violence*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Gelles, R. J. (1993). Through a sociological lens: Social structure and family violence. In R. J. Gelles and D. R. Loseke (Eds.), *Current controversies on family violence* (pp.31-46). Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Gelles, R. J., & Cornell, C. P. (1990). *Intimate violence in families*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Gelles, R. J., & Strauss, M. A. (1988). *Intimate violence*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Gondolf, E. W. (1988). *Research on men who batter: An overview, bibliography and resource guide*. Bradenton, FL: Human Services Institute.
- Goode, W. J. (1971). Force and violence in the family. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 33, 624-636.

- Hamberger, L. K., Feurbach, S. P., & Borman, R. J. (1990). Detecting the wife batterer. *Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality*, September, 32-39.
- Harris, R. J., & Cook, C. A. (1994). Attributions about spouse abuse: It matters who the batterers and victims are. *Sex Roles*, 30, 553-565.
- Hendricks-Matthews, M. (1992). Family physicians and violence: Looking back, looking ahead. *American Family Physician*, 45, 2033-2035.
- Hepburn, J. R. (1973). Violent behavior in interpersonal relationships. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 14, 419-429.
- Island, D., & Letellier, P. (1991a). *Men who beat the men who love them*. Binghamton, NY: The Hawthorne Press.
- Island, D., & Letellier, P. (1991b). *The scourge of domestic violence*. Gaybook, 11. San Francisco, CA: Rainbow Ventures.
- Kirby, N. (1994). Love hurts. *Attitude*, 1, 46-50.
- Letellier, P. (1996). Twin epidemics: domestic violence and HIV infection among gay and bisexual men. In C. M. Renzetti and C. H. Miley (Eds.), *Violence in gay and lesbian domestic partnerships* (pp. 69-81). New York: Harrington Park.
- Letellier, P. (1994a). Gay and bisexual male domestic violence victimization: Challenges to feminist theory and responses to violence. *Violence and Victims*, 9, 95-106.
- Letellier, P. (1994b). Identifying and treating battered gay men. *San Francisco Medicine*, April, 16-19.
- Levine, F. J., & Rosich, K. J. (1996). *Social causes of violence: Crafting a science agenda*. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.
- McCoy, J. (1995). Domestic violence among gay and lesbian families an unexplored issue. *Dallas Voice*, August 4, 7-8.
- McWhirter, D. P., & Mattison, A. M. (1982). Psychotherapy for gay male couples. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 7, 79-91.
- Meyer, I. H. (1995). Minority stress and mental health in gay men. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 36, 38-56.
- Moore, E., & Bundy, A. (1983). Battery between gay men: An exploratory study of domestic violence in the San Francisco gay men's community. Social Work Masters Research Project, San Francisco State University, Department of Social Work.
- Pagelow, M. D. (1984). *Family violence*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Prince, J. E., & Arias, I. (1994). The role of perceived control and the desirability of control among abusive and nonabusive husbands. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 22, 126-134.
- Renzetti, C. M. (1997). Violence in lesbian and gay relationships. In L. L. O'Toole & J. R. Schiffman (Eds.), *Gender Violence: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 285-293). New York: New York University Press.
- Renzetti, C. M. (1992). *Violent betrayal: Partner abuse in lesbian relationships*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Renzetti, C. M., & Miley, C. H. (Eds.) (1996). *Violence in gay and lesbian domestic partnerships*. New York: Harrington Park.
- Rofes, E. (1996). *Reviving the tribe: Sexuality and culture in the ongoing epidemic*. Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press.
- Rubin, L. B. (1976). *Worlds of pain: Life in the working class family*. New York: Basic Books.
- Short, B. J. (1996). *Provision of services to gay male victims of domestic violence*. Master's thesis, University of Minnesota, School of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology.

- Silverstein, C., & Picano, F. (1992). *The new joy of gay sex*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Singer, B. L., & Deschamps, D. (Eds.) (1994). *Gay and lesbian stats*. New York: The New York Press.
- Sjoberg, G., & Net, R. (1968). *A methodology for social research*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Smith, M. (1990). Sociodemographic risk factors in wife abuse: Results from a survey of Toronto women. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 15(1), 39-58.
- Szymanski, M. (1991). Battered husbands: Domestic violence in gay relationships. *Genre*, 32-73.
- Tessina, T. (1989). *Gay relationships*. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher.
- Tolman, R. M., & Bennett, L. W. (1990). A review of quantitative research on men who batter. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 5, 87-118.
- Tuller, D. (1994). When gays batter their partners. *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 3, A1-A8.
- Utech, M. R. (1994). *Violence, abuse and neglect: The American home*. Dix Hills, NY: General Hall.
- Walker, L.W. (1989). *Terrifying love*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Zuniga, J. (1995). Gay couples not immune from domestic violence, figures show. *Dallas Voice*, November 24, 10-11.

Offprints. Requests for offprints should be directed to J. Michael Cruz, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Texas Woman's University, P.O. Box 425887, Denton, TX 76204-5887.

Copyright of Violence & Victims is the property of Springer Publishing Company, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.