

Domestic Violence in Lesbian Relationships

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SUMMARY. Increasingly, therapists and researchers have focused attention on domestic violence in lesbian relationships. To date, however, most research has described the incidence and types of physical violence and abuse. The present study sought to explore predictors of domestic violence in lesbian relationships. Lesbian participants filled out a survey measuring physical violence and physical aggression as well as relational and personality variables. Results indicated that lesbians do report some degree of domestic violence, characterized more often by physical aggression than by physical violence. Physical aggression was best predicted by fusion, followed by self-esteem and independence. For physical violence, however, control was the most important predictor, followed by

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independence, self-esteem and fusion. Implications and directions for future research are discussed. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Since the 1970s, the battered women's movement has made tremendous strides in analyzing and addressing issues surrounding domestic violence. From a political context in which the problem of battered women was rarely even discussed, a movement of grassroots activism emerged that subsequently spawned an organized national and international movement. Nevertheless, this movement has been limited in some crucial ways. In particular, the issue of domestic violence in lesbian relationships has been almost entirely ignored (Ristock, 1997), both in academic analyses and in the establishment of social services for battered women. Ironically, although many founders of the battered women's movement were lesbians, the issue of battering between women often remains deeply buried, ignored or denied by heterosexual women and lesbians alike (Renzetti, 1988; Suh, 1990).

In an effort to overcome the denial that has long surrounded the issue of lesbian domestic violence, advocates for battered lesbians often concentrate on demonstrating similarities between homosexual and heterosexual domestic violence. In drawing parallels and highlighting similarities to a recognized form of violence, activists legitimize lesbian domestic violence as "real" abuse and validate the experience of its victims (Irvine, 1984; Kaye/Kantrowitz, 1992). However, some researchers and advocates propose that the next step in investigating the specificity of lesbian battering is to delineate its dynamics as a female-female problem in order to define the ways in which this phenomenon challenges our established understandings of domestic violence as a male-female problem (Hammond, 1989; Irvine, 1984). Although Carlson (1992) argues that the similarities between heterosexual and lesbian domestic violence are more significant than the differences, such a conclusion seems premature, given that the intention of much existing research has been precisely to establish such similarities.

This article reviews the existing literature on lesbian battering and provides an overview of the extent of violence reported in lesbian relationships. It generates a research question about the frequency of battering along with several

hypotheses about correlates of battering in lesbian relationships. This study seeks to identify predictors of violence in lesbian relationships based on a survey measuring physical violence and physical aggression as well as relational and personality variables.

LESBIAN BATTERING

The recognition that women batter challenges an analysis of heterosexual domestic violence that links male socialization with violence. Since its inception, the battered women's movement has conceptualized the problem of domestic violence in terms of a male-female phenomenon, linking violent behavior to male gender roles and identifying the ways in which men's violence towards women is not only tolerated but actually encouraged by Western society. Acknowledging that women also perpetrate intimate violence raises new questions that illuminate the partiality of existing theoretical constructions of the problem (Hammond, 1989) and challenges some deeply-rooted cultural beliefs about women (Irvine, 1984).

Hart (1986) defines lesbian battering as "that pattern of violent and coercive behaviors whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs or conduct of her intimate partner or to punish the intimate for resisting the perpetrator's control over her" (p. 173). The scope of lesbian battering encompasses "the pattern of intimidation, coercion, terrorism or violence, the sum of all past acts of violence and the promises of future violence, that achieves enhanced power and control for the perpetrator over her partner" (Hart, 1986, p. 174). Thus the term "lesbian battering," like the broader term "domestic violence," encompasses a range of abuse that may include verbal, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, economic and other forms of violence perpetrated by an individual on her intimate partner.

Frequency of Abuse in Lesbian Relationships

Although lesbian relationships are often presumed to be free from the power dynamics fueled by sexism and misogyny that often plague heterosexual couples (Shapiro, 1991), research does not support this conclusion. Loulan (1987) reports that among lesbians who had experienced abuse (defined in her study as verbal harassment, physical harassment, rape and/or beating) in their adult lives, 13% had been abused by a female friend or lover and 4% by a female mate. Lie and Gentlewarrior (1991) report that in their non-random, self-selected sample of lesbians, 51% reported experiencing some form of

abuse (verbal, emotional, psychological, physical and/or sexual) by a female partner, and 30% reported abusing a female partner.

A study of sexual coercion in gay and lesbian relationships found that 31% of lesbians reported being the victims of forced sex perpetrated by their current or most recent partner (Waterman, Dawson, & Bologna, 1989). Sarantakos (1996) found that 17% of gays and lesbians reported violence in their relationships. Brand and Kidd (1986), in a frequently cited study, found that within heterosexual dating relationships 19% of women reported physical abuse, compared to 5% who reported physical abuse in lesbian dating relationships. However, on other measures no significant differences were found: 25% of lesbians and 27% of heterosexual women reported physical abuse in committed relationships, while 7% of lesbians and 9% of heterosexual women reported completed rape in dating relationships.

There are no reliable statistics on the actual number of lesbians who are battered each year (Carlson, 1992; Hammond, 1986; Ristock, 1991), and researchers disagree on how commonly lesbian domestic violence occurs. Although most workers within the movement estimate that battering takes place approximately as often in lesbian relationships as it does in heterosexual relationships (Carlson, 1992; S. K., 1988; Ventura, 1995), some researchers have argued that domestic violence occurs less often in lesbian relationships than among their heterosexual counterparts (Morrow & Hawxhurst, 1989). Few actual estimates of the number of battered lesbians are available, although Nealon (1992) places the number at 50,000 to 100,000 a year, and The Family Violence Project, a counseling and legal advocacy organization in San Francisco, estimates "conservatively" that one in five lesbians is battered (Ventura, 1995). Regardless of the accuracy of particular statistics, it is clear that violence does occur within some and possibly many lesbian relationships (Ristock, 1991). Thus, our research question asks:

RQ: How frequent is physical violence in lesbian relationships in a non-clinical population?

Reasons for Violence in Lesbian Relationships

Although some causes of lesbian battering may be similar to those responsible for heterosexual battering, researchers also suggest the need to identify differences in the dynamics of power responsible for violence between women. Lesbians lack the culturally assigned power available to men, and their oppression—particularly the effects of internalized misogyny and homophobia—may be more significant than power in accounting for lesbian battering (Kelly, 1986; Ristock, 1991). The intersection of external and internalized forms of

misogyny and homophobia may combine to present a multifaceted challenge to the survival and flourishing of lesbian relationships.

Control. In order to understand why an individual might resort to violence against her intimate partner, it is crucial to examine what is accomplished through such behavior. Individuals who repeatedly choose violent behavior often believe at some level that it is an effective means of achieving a desired outcome. As researchers have suggested in the case of heterosexual battering, violence is most frequently employed as a tactic for achieving "interpersonal power" or control over one's partner (Carlson, 1992; Dutton & Starzomski, 1997; Edgington, 1989; Lie & Gentlewarrier, 1991; Morrow & Hawxhurst, 1989; Ristock, 1991; Ventura, 1995; Zensky, 1988). Dependency has been found to be correlated with abuse (Alvi & Selbee, 1997; Ellis & Dekeseredy, 1989), and some researchers report that perceived loss of power or control may also lead to increased violence (Allen & Straus, 1980; Phillips, 1988).

The alienation and isolation imposed by internalized and external oppression may construct loss of control—and the need to reclaim it—as a central concern for lesbians (Schilit, Lie, Bush, Montagne, & Reyes, 1991). Lesbians may be denied control over numerous aspects of their lives. If a lesbian is open about her sexual orientation, she may lose her family, friends, children, job, housing, and any number of other privileges she previously took for granted. She may be unable to control others' attitudes towards her or to limit the kinds of discrimination she faces as a result. Yet if she remains "in the closet" she is also denied control, subject to continuous self-monitoring and considerable added stress in an ongoing effort to conceal her identity and her intimate relationships from the eyes of others. Given the degree of control removed from lesbians in other areas of their lives, it is hardly surprising that they may feel a strong need to exercise authority in those areas where it remains within their power to do so (Burch, 1987). Based on this suggestion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Lesbians who report a greater need for control will report more frequent use of violent tactics in conflicts with their partners.

Fusion. The concept of "merging" or "fusion" has been used to explain the genesis of both intimacy and conflict in lesbian relationships. Initially characterized as pathological (Krestan & Bepko, 1980), the phenomenon of fusion has more recently been discussed as an adaptive response to a hostile environment (Mencher, 1997; Rotenberg, 1989). In this light, fusion can be seen as a mode of resistance to the dominant culture's attempts to negate or sever the bonds of love between two women.

Krestan and Bepko (1980) borrowed and adapted the term "fusion" to describe an interpersonal dynamic they observed regularly in lesbian relationships. Fusion was defined in its original context as "the person's state of embeddedness in, of undifferentiation within, the relational context" (Karpel, 1976, p. 67). Krestan and Bepko viewed fusion as dysfunctional, as it created an "intense anxiety over any desire for separateness or autonomy within the relationship" (Krestan & Bepko, 1980, p. 277). A more recent interpretation, however, views fusion as a strategy for maintaining a couple's boundaries amid constant threats to the integrity of the relationship (Causby, Lockhart, White, & Greene, 1995; Mencher, 1997). Rotenberg (1989) argues that the predominantly negative evaluation of merger behavior is a result of a male model of individual development that values separation over connection. Moreover, she suggests that this negative evaluation must be reexamined in the context of the oppression lesbians suffer within a homophobic society.

As an adaptive response to a hostile environment, fusion internally reinforces and protects the boundaries that are continually exposed to external threat. This alternative model suggests that rather than succumbing to pressure to end their relationship, or to an attitude of disregard that demeans it or minimizes its significance, lesbian couples affirm the seriousness of their connection by forging an even stronger bond. Faced with a lack of control over other aspects of their lives, they may vigorously exert control over the one area that still seems within their power, moving closer together for mutual affirmation and protection in the face of a homophobic world (Rotenberg, 1989).

To recognize the possible adaptive function of fusion, however, is not to deny its more problematic consequences. Lesbian fusion may foster an expectation of sympathy and sameness that is bound to be frustrated in the course of a relationship. If maintenance of the relationship depends upon, or seems to depend upon, a fierce drawing together of two into one, then any experience of difference or distance between partners may be immediately perceived as a threat (McCandlish, 1982). If all of one's emotional energy is devoted to defying societal expectations and maintaining a relationship in the face of overwhelming odds (Krestan & Bepko, 1980), then any perceived external or internal threat to that relationship may arouse desperation and even panic, provoking determined, defiant, or angry acts of resistance. Lindenbaum (1985) describes the "destructive nature" of such responses, characterizing the emotion they evoke as a "murderous rage."

Although intensity of emotion does not cause violent behavior—most people experience intense emotions at times, and most do not become violent as a result—such feelings of panic and rage create an exigency for which the use of violence is one possible response. The literature on conflict in lesbian relationships, while rarely explicit about the possibility of violence, often em-

ploys a vocabulary of vehement emotion. For example, Pearlman (1987) argues that ambivalence about and fear of female power combine with complications arising from mother-daughter relationships to create "an interconnected group of ideas that can explain what seems to be a rage-in-waiting between women" (p. 323). Based on this, hypothesis 2 proposed the following:

H2: Lesbians who report higher levels of fusion will report more frequent use of violent tactics in conflicts with their partners.

Dependency. The need to achieve a balance between separateness and connection has been identified as a fundamental task in a variety of interpersonal relationships (Hess & Handel, 1959; Levinger, 1977; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978). The literature on heterosexual battering indicates that issues of dependency are often risk factors for spousal abuse. For example, the separation or imminent separation of heterosexual partners increases the risk of domestic violence against women (Sevier, 1997). Among lesbian couples, Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) found that reciprocal dependency was a particularly important measure of relationship quality. Peplau et al. (1978) identify two primary value orientations toward pair bonding in lesbian couples, noting that differences in these orientations can lead to conflict over independence versus dependence in lesbian relationships.

Renzetti (1992) argues that the degree of dependence on a relationship and on one's intimate partner provides one clue to the dynamics of abuse. Based on a survey of 100 women who identified themselves as victims of lesbian battering, Renzetti's (1992) analysis indicates that "the greater the respondents' desire to be independent and the greater their partners' dependency, the more likely the batterer was to inflict more types of abuse with greater frequency" (p. 34). In addition, data from her interviews with 40 of the subjects linked struggles over dependency and autonomy with incidents of battering.

Renzetti's focus on dependency as a correlate of abuse challenges a common assumption that it is the more powerful partner who is more likely to inflict abuse. In analyses of male violence, feminists have argued that men's relative power over women—a power granted them by patriarchal ideology and enforced by male privilege—creates a continuum between the more subtle means of reinforcing male dominance and the explicit use of violence as a means of controlling women. With regard to heterosexual battering, then, the license society grants men to exercise control over women makes violence an effective tool of male domination. In contrast, Renzetti's analysis indicates that the use of violence in lesbian relationships is not simply a strategy employed by the more powerful partner to gain compliance from the weaker, and that the relationship between power and violence may be more complex and

contradictory than originally thought. Hence, hypothesis 3 in this study proposed the following:

H3: Lesbians who report more frequent use of violent tactics in conflicts with their partners will report a higher level of dependency as a personality trait.

Self-esteem. Within the domestic violence literature, anecdotal accounts as well as social scientific studies suggest that low self-esteem and a negative self-image are among the qualities that characterize both perpetrators and victims of heterosexual domestic violence (Crall, 1986; Okun, 1986). The jealousy and possessiveness that are frequently linked to battering behavior are associated with problems of low self-esteem and negative self-concept (Bagley & Young, 1987; Jezl, Molitor, & Wright, 1996; Walker, 1989; White & Mullen, 1989). Some researchers (Renzetti, 1992; Kaufman Kantor & Straus, 1987) suggest that the correlation between alcohol abuse and domestic violence might be explicable through the common factor of self-esteem, where those with low self-esteem and a sense of powerlessness drink and become abusive as a means of gaining control over their partner.

Similarly, a study by Coleman (1990) focused on the relationship between status inconsistency—the discrepancy between one's achieved and ascribed status—and abuse. Coleman found that greater status inconsistency led to an increased risk of violence. Her findings suggest that if status inconsistency leads to lower self-esteem, battering behavior may serve as a means of overcoming feelings of inadequacy and loss of control. Hence, hypothesis 4 in this study proposed the following:

H4: Lesbians who report more frequent use of violent tactics in conflicts with their partners will report a lower level of self-esteem as a personality trait.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

Participants in the current study were self-identified lesbians who attended a large regional women's music festival held in the Southeast in 1989. Of 400 questionnaires distributed, 284 were returned, for a response rate of 70%. Each respondent was currently, or had been during the previous six months, involved in a lesbian relationship. Respondents were all female, predominantly

Caucasian, and ranged in age from 21 to 60. The present study is part of a larger study examining lesbian relationships (see Causby et al., 1995; Lockhart, White, Causby, & Isaac, 1994). Each woman completed a survey about the nature of her relationship and her experiences with violence and aggression. The survey was completed anonymously and took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Measurement Instruments

The following variables were measured: conflict resolution tactics, fusion, control, independence and self-esteem. Copies of the instrument are available from the author.

Conflict resolution tactics. Two subscales of Straus' (1979) Conflict Tactics Scale were used to measure the nature and extent of physical aggression and physical violence used to resolve conflict. This portion of the Conflict Tactics Scale contains 11 items, and respondents used a Likert scale of 0 (never) to 6 (more than 20 times a year) to respond to how often each tactic was used as a means of conflict resolution in the past year. Higher scores indicate more frequent use of particular conflict resolution tactics. The items comprising the physical aggression subscale have been described as mild forms of physical abuse (e.g., throwing an object at a partner, pushing, shoving or slapping), and reliability was .90. The physical violence subscale carries high risk for the victim and includes kicking, hitting and beating, as well as threatening to use a knife or gun. The reliability for the violence subscale was .96.

Fusion. Fusion was measured by 14 items, seven items repeated for self and partner. On a 5-point Likert-type scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always), each respondent was asked how often she [her partner] felt the need to share recreational and social activities, felt the need to do everything together, felt the need for independent time with friends, insisted on sharing professional services, made regular phone calls to partner while at work, insisted on sharing money and clothing, and attempted mind reading as a form of communication. The reliability of these subscales was .89 for self-fusion and .90 for partner fusion, with higher scores indicating greater fusion.

Independence. Lesbians in the sample were asked to describe themselves by using a list of six personality traits reflecting independence. The 5-point Likert-type items included traits such as independent, passive and submissive. The reliability of this subscale was .82, with a higher score indicating greater independence.

Control. Items on this scale evaluated the subjects' reported need for control. The six 5-point Likert-type items included traits such as controlling and

harsh. The reliability of this subscale was .83, with a higher score indicating greater need for control.

Self-esteem. Hudson's (1982) Index of Self-Esteem was designed to measure the degree or severity of a respondent's problem with self-esteem. The 25 Likert-type items included statements such as "I feel that people would not like me if they really knew me well," "I feel that I bore people," and "I feel I get pushed around more than others." The reliability was good ($\alpha = .93$). A higher score on self-esteem indicates that the respondent has greater difficulty with or lower self-esteem.

Analyses

Data were analyzed using frequencies, correlations and stepwise multiple regressions. The level of significance was set at $p \leq .05$. Reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) were computed for all composite scales, and all scales were unidimensional (according to factor analyses). The zero order correlation matrix is presented in Table 1.

RESULTS

The research question asked about the levels of reported physical aggression and physical violence in a non-clinical lesbian population. Results are presented in Table 2, indicating moderate reported levels of physical aggression and low levels of physical violence. Thus, reports of physical aggression were much more common than reports of physical violence.

Interestingly, about half of respondents reported some physical aggression in their relationships. These conflict tactics were, in fact, relatively common. It is also important to recognize the range of reported frequency of physical ag-

TABLE 1. Correlation Matrix for Predictors with Violence Variables

	Physical Aggression	Physical Violence
Control	.14*	.26***
Independence	.14*	.23***
Self-Esteem	.19**	.14*
Fusion	.25***	.16**
Partner's Fusion	.25***	.08

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

TABLE 2. Reported Frequencies of Physical Aggression and Physical Violence

Physical Aggression	%	n	M	SD
Threatened to hit or throw something at partner	16.2	46	.45	1.23
Threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something	35.9	102	.83	1.38
Pushed, grabbed, or shoved partner	23.9	68	.51	1.14
Slapped partner	8.5	24	.16	.67
Threw something at partner	11.3	32	.23	.76
Total reporting no physical aggression in relationship	53.9	153		
Physical Violence	%	n	M	SD
Kicked, bit, or hit partner with fist	7.8	22	.16	.69
Tried to hit partner with something	4.9	14	.09	.49
Hit partner with something	6.7	19	.11	.52
Beat up partner	1.8	5	.06	.48
Threatened partner with knife or gun	2.1	6	.05	.45
Shot or cut partner with gun/knife	1.4	4	.05	.45
Total reporting no physical violence in relationship	85.9	244		

gression (18-36%). Over one-third of participants reported that they or a partner threw, smashed or hit something in the past year, and one-quarter pushed, grabbed or shoved their partner. Less common among physical aggression indicators were slapping or throwing something at a partner. Just over half of all respondents (54%) reported no incidents of physical aggression in their relationships in the past year.

For physical violence, however, reports were significantly lower overall, as might be expected. The levels of physical violence can best be described as low or rare. There were few reports, for example, of hitting a partner. The lowest frequency of reports was for threatening with a gun or knife, beating up, or shooting/cutting a partner. A high percentage (86%) of respondents did not report any physical violence in their relationship in the past year.

Hypotheses 1-4 predicted relationships between personality and relational variables and the physical aggression and physical violence conflict resolution tactics, and these were mostly supported. These correlations are presented in Table 1. Hypothesis 1 was supported, indicating that lesbians with a greater need for control reported more frequent use of violent conflict tactics. Interestingly, control was more strongly related to physical violence than physical ag-

gression. Hypothesis 2 was also supported, indicating that lesbians who reported higher levels of fusion also reported more frequent use of violent conflict tactics. In contrast to control, fusion was more strongly related to physical aggression than physical violence. Moreover, the degree of fusion reported for oneself and one's partner equally predicted physical aggression, but not physical violence. Hypothesis 3 was not supported because the relation between independence and violence was not in the predicted direction. That is, lesbians in this study who were higher in independence (not higher in dependence, as predicted) reported greater use of both physical aggression and physical violence conflict tactics. Hypothesis 4 was supported, with lesbians lower in self-esteem reporting more violent conflict tactics. Interestingly, self-esteem was more strongly related to physical aggression than physical violence.

The patterns of the results led to interesting questions about what might predict physical violence and physical aggression in lesbians. To further explore the relationships among the variables, stepwise multiple regressions were conducted. The predictor variables included fusion (self and partner), independence, control, and self-esteem. The first regression predicted physical aggression, while the second predicted physical violence.

Regression predicting physical aggression. Three variables were found to predict physical aggression in lesbian relationships. First, fusion entered the model ($F(1, 244) = 17.37, p < .0001, \text{Adj. R Square} = .06; \text{beta} = .25, t = 4.13; p < .001$). Second, self-esteem entered the model ($F = 12.79, p < .0001, \text{R-Square change} = .03; \text{beta} = .28, t = 4.24; p < .001$). Third, independence entered the model ($F = 14.23, p < .0001, \text{R-Square change} = .05; \text{beta} = .26, t = 3.95; p < .001$). The final model accounted for 14% of the variance in use of physical aggression, and control and partner's fusion were not significant. Thus, participants who were higher in fusion, had lower self-esteem and were more independent were more likely to report physical aggression in their relationships.

Regression predicting physical violence. Four variables were found to predict physical violence in lesbian relationships. First, control entered the model ($F(1, 244) = 20.61, p < .0001, \text{Adj. R Square} = .07; \text{beta} = .23, t = 3.98; p < .001$). Second, independence entered the model ($F = 17.50, p < .0001, \text{R-Square change} = .04; \text{beta} = .32, t = 5.03; p < .001$). Third, self-esteem entered the model ($F = 16.75, p < .0001, \text{R-Square change} = .04; \text{beta} = .23, t = 3.49; p < .001$). Finally, fusion entered the model ($F = 14.98, p < .0001, \text{R-Square change} = .03; \text{beta} = .17, t = 2.86; p < .01$). The final model accounted for nearly 19% of the variance in use of physical violence, and partner's fusion was not significant (although $p = .055$). Thus, participants who were higher in fusion, had lower self-esteem, were more independent and

more controlling were more likely to report physical violence in their lesbian relationships.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to explore the issue of domestic violence in lesbian relationships. Heterosexual domestic violence has received increasing attention in the past two decades, but much less is known about violence between women. The few studies that have examined lesbian violence have not added much to our understanding of why lesbians batter and what types of lesbian relationships are most likely to use violent conflict tactics. These studies have rarely focused on identifying the personality or relational variables that lead to an increased risk of violence. Moreover, most existing research has not examined the prevalence of physical aggression versus physical violence in incidents of lesbian battering.

Results indicate clearly that lesbians experience (or report) more physical aggression (46%) than physical violence (14%). That finding, that less violence than physical aggression exists, is not surprising. A more interesting but considerably more complicated question is how these figures compare with reports from other samples. Based on these data, lesbians report a degree of physical violence in their relationships similar to that reported by heterosexual women. For example, Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz (1980) reported that 12.6% of heterosexual couples had experienced severe domestic violence, which included kicking, biting, hitting with a fist, or assault using a knife or gun. Kelly and Warshafsky (1987), using a version of the Conflict Tactics Scale with a sample of gay men and lesbians, found that a comparable 47% had used physical aggression in their relationships, although they found a much lower reported frequency (3%) of physically violent tactics. In their study, women were found to have less physically aggressive partners than did men.

There are, however, serious limitations in comparing the incidence of abuse across studies due to variabilities in measurement. The range of reported incidents of domestic violence among heterosexual couples stretches from 7% to 90% depending on the definition of abuse, type of sample used, and accuracy of reporting (Lie & Gentlewarrior, 1991). Moreover, the Conflict Tactics Scale assumes all physical aggression and violence to be of the same character, preventing participants or researchers from making a crucial distinction between battering and self-defensive behavior (Renzetti, 1989). Thus, some of what appear as instances of abuse in these data might better be classified as self-defensive behavior or retaliatory aggression (Renzetti, 1992). With these cautions in mind, our own study does seem to replicate the findings of earlier studies by

Brand and Kidd (1986), Carlson (1992), and Elliott (1996) that suggest no significant differences between lesbians and heterosexual women in the likelihood of experiencing physical abuse in the context of a committed relationship. Brand and Kidd (1986) did find that male partners in heterosexual relationships committed a greater total number of abusive acts than female partners in lesbian relationships, due largely to their higher incidence of attempted rape and of physical abuse in dating (as opposed to committed) relationships. Our findings also confirm the assertions of Brand and Kidd (1986) and Morrow and Hawxhurst (1989) that lesbians employ the same types of physical aggression and physical violence that are found in heterosexual relationships.

The patterns of correlations with indicators of violence are much as expected (except for independence), though they varied in strength (see Table 1). For physical aggression, the strongest associations were with fusion and self-esteem. That is, participants who reported more physical aggression in their relationships were higher in fusion and lower in self-esteem. For physical violence, the strongest associations were with control and independence, such that participants who reported more physical violence in their relationships had greater need for control and were more independent.

The only relationship that was not as predicted was for independence. Previous research suggests that greater dependency could lead to problems that might escalate into physical violence. In the present study, however, participants higher (not lower) in independence were more likely to report physical aggression or violence in their relationships. Perhaps independence (as measured in this study) equates more with increased resources. A woman who feels she can leave the relationship might be more likely to act impulsively, using extreme measures without regard for consequences. In contrast, an individual who feels greater dependence on her partner might hesitate before embarking on a course of action with such potentially destructive consequences for the relationship. Another possible explanation for this finding is that both independence and physical violence represent violations of traditional female gender role expectations; neither is considered a traditionally "feminine" behavior. Therefore, it may be that women who express greater independence are generally less bound by gender role expectations and so are more likely to violate the norm that prohibits women from using violence as a means of self-expression or control. Finally, it is possible that because the instrument measuring independence included items such as passive and submissive, independence as measured in this study reflects a tendency to respond with action rather than inaction when one is angry, disappointed, or hurt. In this case, the findings linking independence with abusive behavior would be more predictable.

The results for the regressions were some of the most interesting in the study. The models were able to account for nearly 20% of the variance in physical aggression and physical violence. Interestingly, the order (and thus the importance) of the predictor variables differed for the two outcomes. That is, physical aggression and physical violence are predicted by the same kinds of personality and relational variables; however, the relative importance of those variables differs. Specifically, for physical aggression, fusion was the most important variable, followed by self-esteem and independence. For physical violence, however, control was most important, followed by independence, self-esteem and finally fusion.

How do two very similar clusters of predictors yield the different outcomes of physical violence and physical aggression? One possibility is that the degree of adherence or conformity to gender roles may play a role in accounting for the differences. The behaviors encompassed by the "physical aggression" designation are more indirect expressions of anger, and as such represent a less severe violation of female socialization. Behaviors such as using verbal threats, smashing things, pushing, grabbing, shoving or slapping another person represent a type of uncontrolled emotional outburst that may not be considered entirely acceptable "feminine" behavior. However, neither does this kind of dramatic acting out cross over into the forbidden realm of the masculine. Notably, within the category of physical aggression, attempts to physically harm one's partner occur significantly less often than more indirect expressions of anger that may result in harm to property but not to persons.

In contrast, the same set of predictor variables manifested in a woman who feels less bound by traditional gender roles might cross over into the realm of physical violence. More than the vehement expression of emotion that physical aggression seems to represent, the behaviors encompassed by this category involve attempts to inflict direct physical pain or injury. Such behaviors directly and flagrantly violate the bounds of women's socialization. The difference between expressing feelings versus inflicting harm also makes sense when the relative importance of the predictors is examined. In a relationship characterized by a high degree of fusion, in which the partners are deeply enmeshed, that which harms one member of the pair bond might well be experienced as harming both. Thus, an emotional outburst that communicates feelings or garners attention without causing bodily harm might be the response of choice for a partner whose goal is to reestablish the state of merger. In contrast, a relationship in which control is a predominant concern might well foster a response that imposes physical constraints on the partner when other, more subtle or less coercive means of control have failed. These are but a few possible explanations for the disparate outcomes produced by these

similar variable clusters. Further research is needed to identify additional variables that might influence the outcomes of physical aggression and violence.

Implications

For therapists working with lesbian individuals or couples, these findings have several important implications. First, they suggest that the view of fusion as a problem behavior and the perception of fusion as an adaptive response to a hostile environment may *both* be correct. Based on the findings here, one might conclude that the same fierceness and determination that serve to maintain relationships in the face of external threats may have more troublesome consequences when the threat emerges from within the relationship. Thus, when one partner perceives the other behaving in a manner that causes distance between them, she may respond with a harshness and even hostility intended, ironically, to keep the relationship intact. For the therapist working with such an individual or couple, it would be useful to explore the kinds of external threats that may initially have evoked this response, and the ways the response may have become generalized to all situations perceived as threatening to the relationship. It is particularly helpful to assist clients in exploring what they hope to accomplish through aggressive or violent behavior, and to what degree such behavior has actually been effective in achieving these ends.

Second, based on these data, low self-esteem is clearly a key factor in abusive behavior, although this finding may appear counterintuitive. Abusive individuals are often perceived as having high self-esteem, viewing themselves as superior while regarding their victims as inferior or worthless. The finding that low self-esteem is related to a greater incidence of physical aggression and violence is useful for therapists both in identifying risk factors and in understanding the dynamics of abuse. Understanding how high fusion and low self-esteem might interact in abusive behavior provides a starting point for therapists and clients to examine how relational conflict escalates into physical aggression or violence through associations between threats to security, self-doubt, anger, loss, and fear. Rather than needing to persuade an abuser that her partner is worthy of respect, therapists may find that greater change is achieved by addressing the abuser's own lack of self-respect.

Third, the finding that lesbians who report greater independence are more likely to report aggression and violence in their relationships may assist therapists in a number of ways. As suggested previously, it is possible that in this study the construct of independence reflected greater resources, and thus less regard for the consequences of aggressive or violent behavior. Alternatively, the characteristic measured here may suggest a tendency to take action to

shape one's environment and other people in order to bring about desired consequences. In either case, therapists can assist clients in examining their own views about the role of independence and interdependence in intimate relationships. In particular, clients might reflect on how a sense of independence influences their expectations of their partner and of the relationship, identifying both positive and negative outcomes. Where independence represents the ability to take an active rather than passive role in addressing relational problems, therapists may help clients envision a wider range of possible responses, developing action plans that nurture rather than fracture a couple's bond.

Finally, the element of control was found to influence the incidence of physical violence, suggesting a point of intersection with studies of heterosexual domestic violence in which control is a compelling factor. As discussed earlier, however, relational control may take on a special significance among members of an oppressed minority group who are so often denied control in other areas of their lives. Therapists must be aware of the reasons control may become an overriding concern for some lesbian clients, and clients may benefit from identifying areas in their lives in which they feel the greatest and the least sense of control. Therapists may assist clients in developing a greater internal locus of control in other areas, while also considering the unwanted consequences of trying to control their partner's behavior. Finally, therapists who perceive excessively controlling behavior in one or both members of a couple, particularly if accompanied by the presence of other risk factors, may want to ask direct questions about a couple's modes of argument and their means of conflict resolution.

Limitations

Results from the present study should be interpreted with a few limitations in mind. First, reports are from only one perspective; that is, these are not couple data (not paired as such) and differences in the partners' perceptions may exist. However, the psychological and relational variables reported in the present study may best be seen from an individual perspective. The fusion measure, for example, is a good addition because it provides views of both self and other in the relationship. There is always a possibility of social desirability bias in responses, but it would be difficult to ascertain whether participants might over- or underreport domestic violence in their relationships.

Because this data is approximately ten years old, it is possible that the prevalence and types of domestic violence have changed during that time. However, it remains very difficult to gather detailed data from a nonclinical lesbian population, and good sampling and measurement should help balance time-related changes. Perhaps more importantly, this sample may not be representa-

tive of lesbians as a group. Specifically, it may overrepresent lesbians who attend visible woman-identified functions. Additionally, this particular event took place in the Southeast and participants paid a fee to attend. Thus, the lesbians in this sample are likely to disproportionately represent middle- or upper-middle class Caucasian women from the southeastern United States. Finally, not all variables were measured in the present study.

Future Research

Although this study adds to current understandings of the nature of domestic violence in lesbian relationships, there are other areas yet to be examined. Future research could include additional variables such as status and power differences, means of resolving violent disputes, availability of social support and disclosure of homosexuality. It would be particularly helpful to know what kinds of couples sought and benefited from any type of third party intervention, including counseling. It is also possible that a more systemic approach to domestic violence (a couple's perspective) might be beneficial. One study of heterosexual adolescents found 66% of adolescents in relationships with violence were mutual batterers (Gray & Foshee, 1997); it is possible that some lesbians, too, are in a system of mutual violence. Thus, we should also look more closely at how couples deal with violence.

Another important area for future research is the investigation of when and how conflict in intimate lesbian relationships escalates into physical aggression and/or violence, and when it remains in the realm of discussion or argument. By identifying instances in which couples resolve conflict through non-violent means and comparing these to incidents in which one or both partners employ physically aggressive or violent tactics, we may begin to isolate cognitive and emotional patterns of response that lead to abusive behavior. If we are able to identify how these patterns differ in violent and non-violent episodes of conflict, we may learn how to intervene earlier and more effectively in order to redirect abusive outbursts into more productive channels.

A final suggestion for future investigations is that the nature of some of the variables examined here, especially fusion, might best be seen in a longitudinal study. Predicting long-term violent outcomes would be highly beneficial, so that at-risk couples might be identified early on and interventions developed to reduce the potential for violence. The present study adds to what we know about lesbian relationships and domestic violence, but further research is urgently needed in this area.

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